

The Great Return Initiative : In Search of Global Skillsets

(Zuzana Palovic)

"Sometimes people need to leave home in order to grow; in order to expand their horizons and to learn. But they often also have to return, as Odysseus returned to his beloved Ithaca in Homer's famous poem The Odyssey."

In the beginning of the 21st century, Europe opened its borders to the countries from behind the former Iron Curtain. Since then, over 100 million citizens gained the freedom to move West without a visa. It also triggered an East-West exodus that experts coined 'a continent moving West' (Drinkwater et al., 2010; Black et al., 2010).

But, 15 years into the phenomenon a new pattern has emerged, showcasing circular and cyclical migration flows in line with global migration trends (King, 2002). What is more, from time-travelers to culture-shifters, these young guns are proving that return is not just a possibility, but an opportunity for very rapid and vertical career growth back home.

This offers a significant departure from the past, where migration was artificially contained for four decades in the Central Eastern Europe (CEE) context. The Cold War and the erection of the Iron Curtain, saw almost no contact between the two hemispheres for over 40 years (Kahanec and Zimmermann, 2009). This meant social networks were isolated, which limited access to new knowledge and information, as did the strict state censorship over media and education (Palovic, 2017).

Tacit knowledge and corporeal co-presence: the value of the unsaid and the unwritten

Populations of the former Eastern Europe forged strong ties as a survival mechanism. These resulted in redundant knowledge transfer as the same information was circulated between family, neighbors and colleagues, again and again. Sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) argued that it is weak social ties that facilitate access to 'new' information, necessary for catalyzing innovation and ultimately paradigm shifts in old ways of knowing (Kuhn, 2012).

The breakthrough research of economist Michael Polanyi (1967) escalated this line of enquiry by claiming that "we know more than we can say". In other words, not everything that is known can be articulated. Today, his theory of tacit knowledge is renowned outside the scientific community and tacit knowledge is referred to as 'know-how' in most industries (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

In a nutshell, contact between people, industries and even countries is needed to bring forth innovation. It is said that human beings learn best by watching other humans do things. This can pertain to learning processes, like how to hunt animals better, or how to engineer bridges or execute business. It also applies to the intangible world of ideas, values and even wisdom (Palovic, 2018).

CEE countries, like Romania, Moldova and Slovakia were not present on the international market. These populations had no exposure to free enterprise, as all private assets were collectivized, while they had no access to sell on the international market. Today, knowledge and skill gaps remain, despite the EU enlargement. The entire post-communist-bloc region suffers from a lack of conceptual and practical knowledge in how-to-do business (Balaz and Williams, 2004).

No need to re-invent the wheel: taking a quantum leap for a better CEE

Growth is not always a linear, step by step process and why should it be? Just because the old European member states have had forty more years of trading on the international market, does not mean that Romania, Moldova and Slovakia will always remain behind.

Growth can also happen in quantum leaps, and this is possible when people champion new ideas that challenge the path dependency of tried and tested, but often laggard thought and administrative processes (Yang et al., 2009).

The quickest way to improve our region is to transplant the best international practices and knowledge into the CEE. The great transitions of the 20th century, including the collapse of the old Empires and the emergence of new nations, the ideological experimentation with communism, the arrival of democracy and the return to Europe via EU accession, have made Romania and Slovakia very adaptable indeed.

However, it is important to not get stuck in just copying and pasting ideas. There are differences across environments, just as there are differences across mindsets. Not everything that works abroad can function with the same efficiency in the CEE. When we bring something from the outside-in, we have to adapt the idea to fit our native context.

By understanding the coding schemes of two contexts, returnees help to expand boundaries and unite geographically removed regions (Wenger, 1998). In effect, they are human pipelines that act as 'knowledge brokers' and 'boundary spanners', connecting East and West, through the dissemination of competitive knowledge and know-how (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981; Williams and Balaz, 2008; Klagge and Klein-Hitpab, 2010).

From Plato to the European Enlightenment: knowledge transfer across civilizations

Since the beginning of time, humans have moved across land and water in search of something. From food to shelter, from safety to procreation, but also for the sake of knowledge and learning. In the ancient past, Egypt was a sought-after bastion of knowledge (Thomas, 2004). Many of the great Greek thinkers we celebrate today, including Hippocrates, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato, journeyed across the Mediterranean to study in Egyptian centers of learning (Palovic, 2018).

When these Greek scholars migrated back to Europe, they carried in their bodies and minds new forms of knowledge that they eventually re-seeded in their home country. In doing so, they kick started the golden era of Greek thought, the precedent to European philosophy as we know it.

Centuries later, the European renaissance and scientific revolution were spurred by a very similar knowledge exchange across civilizations. This great transmission was made possible by Arab scholars teaching Europeans about astronomy, mathematics and physics as well as discussing secular thought, art and philosophy in the Middle Ages (Hofmann, 2011).

The returning European scholars established new learning centers to further disseminate their knowledge. These schools have become some of the world's leading academic institutions of the modern era, including the University of Oxford and the University of Paris (Sorbonne).

The 21st century's New Argonauts: China, Taiwan, India

The pioneering work of Anne Saxenian (2006) proved just how relevant international migration is to inter-civilization knowledge transfer. In her research on Taiwanese high skilled migrants, she demonstrated the growth potential by connecting two previously removed regions. As the 'new Argonauts' shuttled back and forth between their homeland and the Silicon Valley, they gave rise to a new industrial sector. *Hsinchu Science Park* was the first of three R&D centers, that now generate an annual revenue of over \$84 billion.

Inevitably, the political climate of the source country can also influence the propensity to return. Saxenian (2005) found that Iranians and Vietnamese out-migrants were less inclined to engage in with their homeland, than Taiwanese or Indians, in response to the political situation in their home countries.

Governmental initiatives are critical in strengthening these efforts by leveraging expat social networks and knowledge transfer. Countries such as China and India which have traditionally

suffered from brain drain, have taken note. Currently there are tens of millions of Indians and Chinese living, studying and working in Western Europe and North America. Numerous initiatives are in place that encourage the young and talented human capital to go and study abroad, through various scholarship schemes, under the contractual agreement to return for a minimum of two-years.

Eastern Europe: The Untapped Potential of the Complete Migration Cycle

The Western world is the cradle of democracy but also free enterprise. By living and working in Western Europe and North America, Eastern Europeans gain exposure to new values and habits, like entrepreneurialism and individualism. They experience democratic ideals such as civic engagement, while witnessing positive examples of self-empowerment by interacting with individuals who accept that they are responsible for their own lives, but also that of society.

This know-how is critical, in the context of the great transition from ‘object to subject’, or more recently ‘collective to individual’ consciousness, currently taking place in Central Eastern Europe (Palovic, 2018).

It is undeniable that returnees are both a practical and strategic added-value to local labor markets. From international languages to expertise know-how and intercultural communication, returnees bring back enriched skillsets, but more importantly new mindsets (Palovic, 2018).

More confident in themselves and their abilities, they are not afraid to take on responsibility, because they realize their power and the ability to act with agency. Competent and optimistic, they bring back a certain *horsepower* that is well received in business, especially businesses looking to scale up globally.

However, there are stark differences between the ways ‘Eastern Europeans’ and ‘Asians’ integrate newly acquired western knowledge as a result of the complete migration cycle. Compared to Asia, countries like Slovakia, Moldova and Romania exhibit shortcomings that can be attributed to socio-historical reasons, including communist legacy pollution. Therefore, the research framework of this project is an effective tool of correcting the gap and increasing the effectiveness of return, creating a new blueprint for Europe to match that of Asia.

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