



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

The Paradox of Large Scale Emigration for Economic Reasons from the Western Balkans

Matoshi, Ruzhdi and Mulaj, Isa

30 March 2021

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/107848/>
MPRA Paper No. 107848, posted 22 May 2021 00:25 UTC

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350471146>

THE PARADOX OF LARGE SCALE EMIGRATION FOR ECONOMIC REASONS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

Conference Paper · March 2021

CITATIONS

0

2 authors:



Ruzhdi Matoshi

University for Business and Technology, Prishtina, Kosovo.

15 PUBLICATIONS 1 CITATION

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Isa Mulaj

Institute for Economic Policy Research and Analyses

16 PUBLICATIONS 80 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



protect environmental [View project](#)



Conference Paper [View project](#)

UDK: 314.15-029:33(497-15)"20"

Ruzhdi MATOSHI * & ISA MULAJ *

THE PARADOX OF LARGE SCALE EMIGRATION FOR ECONOMIC REASONS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

Abstract: Emigration from economic hardships has always been a phenomenon and it will be in the future. The search for a better life and economic welfare is also one of the main pushing factors. Among many others, emigration for security reasons is a necessity. This was exactly the primary cause of mass emigration from the Western Balkans during the civil wars of 1990s. As the war affected areas in this part of Europe were reconstructed and better living conditions than before emerged, mass emigrations towards western European countries resurged after the outbreak of civil war elsewhere – in Syria, by using the massive flow of refugees from the Middle East as an opportunity to migrate with them. This became apparent especially in Kosovo, Albania, and Northern Macedonia since 2014 onwards.



Unlike the Syrian refugees fleeing for their own security, the overwhelming majority of emigrants from the Western Balkans are listed as economic asylum seekers. Yet, back to their home countries which currently are peaceful, the living conditions of the emigrants are relatively good and considerably much easier than ever before, but they still chose to emigrate for their uncertain economic perspective to the Western Europe. Much of them after emigration

find their economic life even harder than in their home country they left, and that

* Lecturer at the UBT Prishtina, Republic of Kosovo; e-mail: rmatoshi@ubt-uni.net, matoshi.r@gmail.com

* Senior Researcher at the Institute for Economic Policy Research and Analyses Prishtina, Republic of Kosovo; e-mail: isa.mulaj@gmail.com

still does not serve as a lesson to many more of their countrymen whose main ambition is to emigrate. Although their main public complaint is the economic reason, this paper finds that they mostly emigrate from social injustice, bad governance, and inefficient or selective rule of law, nepotism and discriminatory group interests, and high level of corruption behavior. After all, leaving the economic reasons aside, the emigrants want to live in the countries where the system has the rule of law that applies fairly, efficiently and treats them better. Many emigrants are even selling their property or diminishing their actual economic welfare at home just to search for a more relaxed life for themselves and their family members in the West.

Keywords: Western Balkans, emigration, economic asylum seekers, living conditions.

Introduction

Human migrations have been a phenomenon since ancient times. They were caused by push and pull factors. In early stages of human development, migrations occurred in search of resources and more suitable locations to make a living. This depended on environmental conditions. At later stages, the decision to migrate from push factors arose from social, political and security reasons such as conflicts, wars, prosecution, invasions, forced migrations, human rights violations, which are still go on. Natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, droughts, and floods have often made large areas and civilizations either disappear or force the people to migrate.

During the last century, people emigrated from the Western Balkans to elsewhere in large numbers, mainly from dramatic events such as conflicts, wars and genocide. The most notable period was during the Balkan Wars, WWII, and the 1990s in the course of disintegration, civil wars and ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia. The last decade of the 20th century saw mass murder, deportation and atrocities in different parts of Yugoslavia, which were considered to be the worst since WWII, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Between 130 000 to 140 000 people lost their life. About 2.4 million people became refugees with an additional 2 million internally displaced.³⁸⁵ Much of the displaced persons could not return to their previous dwelling places due to material damages and insecurity. More than 600 000 people migrated to other European countries in the 1990s as asylum seekers for security and in search of better perspective. At the same time, it is estimated that over 1 million have left Albania, despite not being subject to

³⁸⁵ Watkins, Clem (2003), *The Balkans*, New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc.

armed conflict like in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo.³⁸⁶ In the neighboring North Macedonia, between 1990 and 2010, a total of 447,138 persons had left the country, representing around 22% of the country's total population.³⁸⁷

With the rebuilding of infrastructure in war affected areas of former Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in particular, and support for development by various UN and foreign governmental agencies, the refugees gradually begun to return in their home countries. Peace was established and political stability established. Seeking a better perspective, a large number of internally displaced people moved from rural into urban areas. However, after a long time of peace and economic recovery, emigration in large numbers resumed during 2014-15. The primary incentive came from massive waves of immigrants from the Middle East, namely from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan who were heading towards the Western European countries. That was the opportunity which many from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia used to emigrate, but not for the same or similar reasons. The EU had also to make a distinction between the immigrants from the Western Balkans and the Middle East. The former migrated for security while the latter as economic asylum seekers. Were economic conditions really the cause as a push factor?

The year 2014 marked the beginning of an era of increased use of smartphones, thus enabling better and easier access to various available information and communication across the globe. This made many people from the Balkans realize that the life and economic perspective is easier and better in the West. Much of them initially tried to emigrate through legal ways by requesting tourist and working permission visa, or as part to rejoin the family, especially from Kosovo where the visa liberalizations to the EU countries has not yet happened. With long queues at foreign embassies, they took the opportunity to emigrate illegally together with the flood of refugees from the Middle East. Many citizens from Albania and North Macedonia used this opportunity as well.

Theories on the causes of emigrations

In modern times, migrations in search of better life, especially after World War One, occurred mainly from Europe, Asia, and Africa to America and Australia. After 1945, Europe itself became a destination for emigrants as it was in need for labor force. The largest pool of workers came from Southeastern Europe and Turkey, which in Germany became known *gastarbeiter* or guest workers. In this

³⁸⁶ European Environment Agency (2010), "Driving forces that shape environmental futures in the Western Balkans", Part II, Copenhagen: EEA.

³⁸⁷ Bornarova, Suzana and Janeska, Verica (2012), "Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe: The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Final Country Report, prepared for the European Commission.

respect, migrations from economically poorer to more advanced countries was viewed a permanent phenomenon caused by the demand for labor in the latter as a pull factor.³⁸⁸ The emigrants upon being integrated into labor market and working begin to earn incomes, which they may use to satisfy their needs, or save a part of them for spending in their own country of origin. In many cases, this applies to individual as well as large number of migrants, but not to those who have migrated permanently, are well integrated into host country and do not maintain any presence in the country from which they left.

As capitalism became global and the world economy more integrated, the search for space, raw materials, market, and labor became more intensive. This in turn followed not only labor mobility but also migration of unemployed people towards more developed locations. The companies on the other hand expanded their activities in the vicinity of regions with raw materials and labor force.³⁸⁹ At home, developed countries have mainly absorbed a part of international migration from their former colonies or where their investment, ideological, political and cultural relations were based. People are more likely to emigrate to the countries where there is already a sort of their native community or have relatives. However, in cases of deteriorated situation in their home country, they are more likely to emigrate selectively, and this prompts more emigration at one or certain circumstances.³⁹⁰

The EU has become a large recipient of immigrants, and that probably is acting as an attractive destination. The group of immigrants, however, are diverse by their skills, thus lower skilled workers who often move illegally, are more likely to be returned either by the EU countries individually, or sometimes with a ban not to travel in EU area for several years. Sometimes, the return of masses is arranged with the country of origin through reforms and support programs. Controlled or arranged return is made to avoid the risk of social tensions for the rejected asylum seekers who have entered a foreign country irregularly. This arranged return does not apply often and the governments of developed countries pursue the deportation amid criticism and provocation of xenophobia by their own people towards the immigrants.³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ Piore, Michael J. (1979), *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor in Industrial Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁸⁹ Massey, Douglas S. (1986), "The settlement process among Mexican migrants to the United States", *American Sociological Review* 51: 670-685.

³⁹⁰ Massey, Douglas S., Arango, Joaquin., Hugo, Graeme., Kouaouci, Ali., Pellegrino, Adela., and Taylor, J. Edward (1993), "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal", *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 431-466.

³⁹¹ Harris, Nigel (2007), "The economics and politics of the free movement of people", in *Migration without borders: Essays on the free movement of people*, Antoine Pécoud and Paul de Guchteneire eds., Paris: UNESCO, pp. 33-50.

One of the criteria of EU policies along free movement of goods is also the free movement of people, but only among member states and some in the process to join the block. That makes it “Europe without borders”, but the borders do apply to the rest of the world. Migration from the poorer countries of Europe are seen as a threat to hosting developed countries, and more from the poorer countries of other countries. The threat perception is based on illegal activities by the immigrants such as smuggling, organized crime, terrorism and illegal human trafficking, among others. Another worry expressed by the developed societies is that large immigration poses a threat in demographic development and emerging of clashes between different immigrant communities. These tendencies of uncontrolled and large scale migrations have given rise to nationalism of host countries which is at the forefront of opposing the migration. Stricter control of borders is not proved to prevent migration but rather encourage illegal immigration through alternative channels. Cutting off or making the immigrants ineligible to social benefits has also been counterproductive as it results more in the chances of dealing with criminal and other illegal activities, which would be a burden for the governments of host countries to cope with.³⁹²

One of the most debated topic in the theory of emigration from developing towards developed countries, has been the so-called “brain drain” which expressed concerned that poor countries are getting poorer in human resources as their skilled workers, professionals and experts are emigrating to richer countries for higher pay. It came as a result of decreased work in labor-intensive sectors in developed economies and faster development of technology along with knowledge-based economy. Brain drain was true until globalization and information technology intensified and overwhelmed the world. Under growing impact of globalization and technological development, professionals no longer are eager or desperate to search a better place abroad for working conditions. Although migrant professionals might have a nostalgia for the country or university abroad where they studied, they now find themselves in good position in their country of origin through international transfer of economic, research projects, technological and scientific contributions. They also become more reintegrated in their country of origin by engaging in national and transnational activities.³⁹³ For similar reasons, many professionals from development countries emigrate temporarily to work in different poor countries, which is part of a global labor mobility whenever it is

³⁹² Kunz, Jan and Leinonen, Mari (2007), “Europe without borders: rhetoric, reality or Utopia?”, in *Migration without borders: Essays on the free movement of people*, Antoine Pécoud and Paul de Guchteneire eds., Paris: UNESCO, pp. 137-160.

³⁹³ Portes, Alejandro (2008), “Migration and Development: A Conceptual Review of the Evidence”, in *Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South*, Castles, Stephen and Wise, Raúl Delgado eds., Geneva: International Organization for Migration, pp. 17-41.

available or applies. Therefore, the brain drain theory has considerably been altered and it does not have the meaning it had some forty or fifty years ago. Instead, those who are still migrating in massive irregular ways from poor countries are mainly less educated and unskilled workers, excluding extraordinary migrations occurring from wars and natural disasters.

As mentioned in introductory part of this article, the recent waves of mass migrations to the EU emerged from the Middle East for known causes. They had begun since the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) but reached a larger scale after the Syrian Civil War (2011). These events had produced millions of refugees who initially sought to move into nearer countries or safe zones, then from 2014 onwards began migrating in massive waves towards the EU countries. As they passed through the Balkans, many people from Albania, North Macedonia sought either to join them or migrate on their own with the same requirements as refugees but for a different declared reason, and that was, poor economic conditions. Did they really emigrate for economic reasons, and why did they used the opportunity for irregular emigration along and at the same time with the Middle Eastern people to the same destination – the EU countries?

Resurge of mass emigrations from the Western Balkans, 2014 onwards

Emigration from Southeastern Europe, Western Balkans respectively, to the Western and Northern European countries have a history after WWII. Regardless in what numbers, emigration went on gradually, except during the 1990s as a result of bloody disintegration of former Yugoslavia, and in Albania after the fall of communism and riots in 1997. They had a cause to be addressed to, and that was, insecurity at home and in search of better life in developed countries. That was considered as the primary push factor, which obviously corresponded to the events in their home countries. After a decade and a half of stabilization, there was no any major cause of mass irregular emigration or in large scale. So, why did many people from Albania and Kosovo leave in 2014-2015? First, let us have a look at the figures of Eurostat.

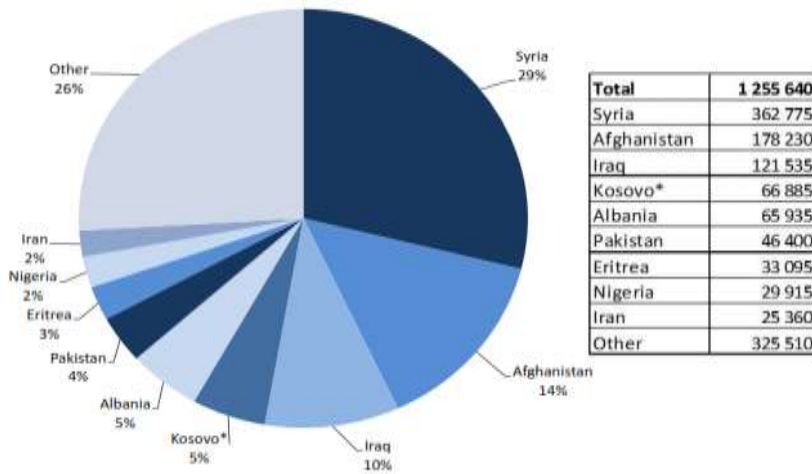


Figure 1: Asylum seekers in the EU member states by country of origin, as of 2015

Source: Eurostat (2016), “Asylum in the EU Member States”, 44/2016 - 4 March 2016, Luxembourg: Eurostat Press Office, p. 3.

In absolute terms, the largest number of asylum seekers in the EU member states were from Syria, to be followed by Afghanistan and Iraq. Next came Kosovo, but given her relative small number of total population (around 1.78 million) at the time, this made the highest share of emigrants and asylum seekers per capita in the world. The same can be said for asylum seekers from Albania whose share was slightly lower from a total population of over 2.8 million. Taken together, irregular emigrants from Albania and Kosovo taken together surpassed in absolute figures those from Iraq to the EU. The EU countries in which they emigrated and applied for asylum, were those already hosting Albanian communities such as Germany, Austria, Belgium. Most emigrants from Albania followed a different route in their largest part through Italy, which traditionally was the primary country of destination. This is line with theoretical expectation that people are more likely to emigrate towards countries where there is a community of their own ethnicity. Before we discuss what made them leave, despite their all declared in host countries as economic asylum seekers, let us look at the route of Kosovo Albanian emigrants.



Figure 2: Asylum applications by nationality in Hungary

Source: International Organization for Migration, available at: <http://www.iom.hu/migration-issues-hungary>, visited in December 2020.

Hungary was not the final destination of emigrants but rather a transit to other EU countries. In any case, unable to go further, the emigrants applied for asylum with a hope that they would be able to move elsewhere to Western or Northern Europe in the near future. The striking feature is that in 2014, Kosovo emigrants made half of total among those who applied for asylum in Hungary. In figures, that meant a total of 21,453 Kosovars, far larger than Afghans (8,796) and Syrians (6,857). This wave of mass migration from Kosovo begun in March 2014 and continued through 2015, disappointed by the government, inefficient rule of law, allegations for rampant corruption and unaccountable institutions. Although no empirical study or survey has been undertaken to analyze the cause of such irregular migration which was in large numbers since 1999, the quick and simple answer to the media by those who were leaving, was: “There is no perspective here [in Kosovo].” Despite that they were uncertain what was to await them during the journey or in the destination they wanted to arrive, they thought that just leaving is a better option. It should be noted that economic reasons which they blamed as a cause to make them emigrate, were inspired to them when they were witnessing many of their countrymen who emigrated irregularly and after some time either found a job or simply managed to be and live abroad. After a while, many of those irregular emigrants who managed to find a work abroad, return to Kosovo with expensive cars. This generated a feeling among local population in Kosovo that moving to the Western developed countries at any cost and through whatever ways, brings about immediate welfare as witnessed, among others, by expensive cars. The only thing not known or told was that the overwhelming majority of those cars were rent a car or bought by credit. Upon spending the holidays with expensive cars in Kosovo to show the public how “rich” they have quickly become, after going back to their host country, they had to return the car they have rented or need to work

many years to pay the credit for it. In any case, this deception worked to encourage many people to leave the country on the grounds of finding a better welfare. A large number headed through Serbia and ended up in prison camps in Hungary. They thought this to be a transition to an awaited better future elsewhere in the EU countries.

Despite warnings by the EU countries, media and irregular emigrants from prison camps, the wave of Kosovo citizens continued to leave the country during 2015. The second pie chart from Figure 2 shows the share of asylum seekers from Kosovo in Hungary to be 15% of the total or much lower than of Syrians (39%) and Afghanis (27%). However, this time, Kosovo asylum seekers were larger in number (24,454) than they were in 2014 (21,453) where they accounted for 50% of total asylum seekers. So they kept leaving more, as more refugees from the Syria and Afghanistan arrived in the same route to Hungary. This might have not been a coincidence, but they sought it as an opportunity which is also the main cause of emigration. The rest of pie charts in Figure 2 for 2016 and 2017 do not show any share of Kosovo citizens, but it is more important to know what happened to majority of them who emigrated during 2014-2015. Figure below gives an overall picture, which follows discussion by numbers.

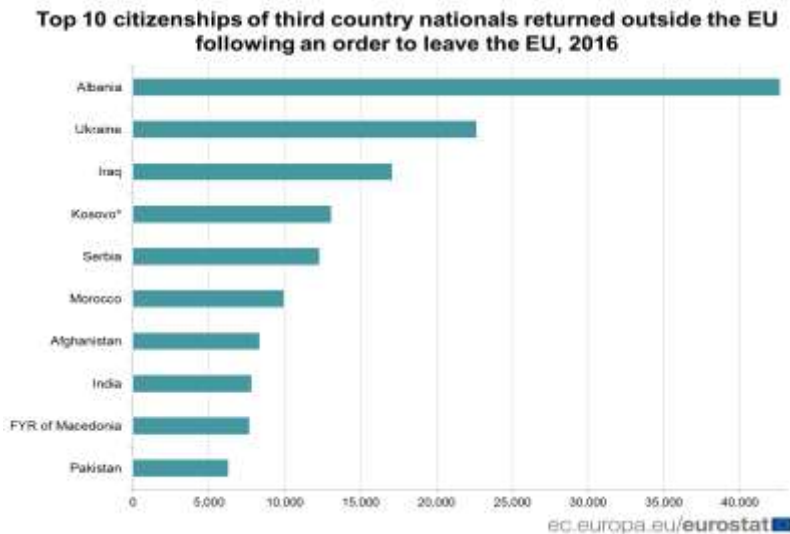


Figure 3: Returned immigrants in 2016

Source: Eurostat (2017), “Almost e quarter of million non-EU citizens returned in 2016”, 26/07/2017, Luxembourg: Eurostat Press Office.

The year 2016 became popular in the EU as “immigration crisis”, which culminated in the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from EU through a referendum vote on June 23. It matches the theory that host countries are concerned

about massive influx of immigrants for a variety of reasons already mentioned in the previous section of this article. The Figure 3 was published a month later after Brexit or on July 27, with an order to irregular immigrant to leave the EU. This wave of immigration crisis gave more rise to Euroscepticism and the right wing populism of Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, whose country became like a gate of massive immigrants to the EU.

The largest number of immigrant ordered to leave the EU were the citizens from Albania (42,600) or almost one in five of total, then Ukraine (22,600), Iraq (17,100), Kosovo (13,000), Serbia (12,200) and Morocco (9,900). We have not considered smaller scale of emigration and return beyond 2016 as the focus was on unexpected emigration in massive numbers during 2014-2015 and immediate order to leave in 2016. Many of those who made it out of Hungary further to the West, had relatives or friends who came to pick them up and guarantee for their shelter. Many others, however, did not have this fate and were deported to their own country of citizenship. They also lost a part of their incomes and ended up worse off in their home country.

Conclusions and policy implications

The mass emigrations of 2014-2015 from Kosovo, Albania and partially North Macedonia were and still are not necessarily related to economic conditions at their home country, despite being declared abroad by the immigrants themselves as being so. True, when they emigrate in massive ways, they certainly find themselves in hopeless economic situation in any country they arrive. In this way, much of them end up worse off in the short-run than in the home country from which they emigrated. The mass return of these emigrants in 2016 from the EU countries was a warning that economic life and perspective is not significantly easier abroad as they initially thought.

Although this article maintains that economic reasons are not the primary cause of emigration from the Western Balkans, it should be reminded that the feeling of potential insecurity has not vanished. The past experience certainly offers a lot of lessons in this respect, especially in the last decade of the 20th century. Much of the population has either been an eyewitness of, or is very familiar with, what happened. Faced with fragile democracies and ethnic hatreds which despite the progress made in reconciliation, and the fear of potential conflicts, can be considered the main but not widely accepted motive of emigration; they are worried more about future security rather than emigrating on what they publicly claim to be pure economic grounds. After all, they want a better environment in which the rule of law offers them more freedom and being happy rather than just more material gains and consumption.

Brain drain theory, so much explored and criticized in the literature of emigration for impoverishing poorer countries, has significantly fallen as occurrence and phenomenon. Globalization plaid a role by offering local people

the things such as technology, internet and knowledge they have had not access to before. However, the key to reversing the drain brain has not been only the mobility of experts and international education institutions, but also the requirements of governments and universities in the developed world that the students upon completion of their studies be returned to their country of origin. That is why the recent waves of emigration are largely made of less educated people. Professionals and experts emigrate on individual bases and through legal procedures, and that for a short period of time or employment as they are more integrated in the globalization by their expertise, regardless where they might be located or moved to.

Reviewers (Recenzentes)

Prof. Dr. Juliana Zaharia

Prof. Dr. Irina Chudoska - Blazhevska

References

- Bornarova, Suzana and Janeska, Verica (2012), "Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe: The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Final Country Report, prepared for the European Commission.
- European Environment Agency (2010), "Driving forces that shape environmental futures in the Western Balkans", Part II, Copenhagen: EEA.
- Eurostat (2016), "Asylum in the EU Member States", 44/2016 - 4 March 2016, Luxembourg: Eurostat Press Office.
- Eurostat (2017), "Almost a quarter of million non-EU citizens returned in 2016", 26/07/2017, Luxembourg: Eurostat Press Office.
- Harris, Nigel (2007), "The economics and politics of the free movement of people", in *Migration without borders: Essays on the free movement of people*, Antoine Pécoud and Paul de Guchteneire eds., Paris: UNESCO, pp. 33-50.
- International Organization for Migration, available at: <http://www.iom.hu/migration-issues-hungary>, visited in December 2020.
- Kunz, Jan and Leinonen, Mari (2007), "Europe without borders: rhetoric, reality or Utopia?", in *Migration without borders: Essays on the free movement of people*, Antoine Pécoud and Paul de Guchteneire eds., Paris: UNESCO, pp. 137-16-0.
- Massey, Douglas S. (1986), "The settlement process among Mexican migrants to the United States", *American Sociological Review* 51: 670-685.
- Massey, Douglas S., Arango, Joaquin., Hugo, Graeme., Kouaouci, Ali., Pellegrino, Adela., and Taylor, J. Edward (1993), "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal", *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 431-466.
- Piore, Michael J. (1979), *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor in Industrial Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Portes, Alejandro (2008), "Migration and Development: A Conceptual Review of the Evidence", in *Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South*, Castles, Stephen and Wise, Raúl Delgado eds., Geneva: International Organization for Migration, pp. 17-41.
- Watkins, Clem (2003), *The Balkans*, New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc.

Copyright of *Vizione* is the property of Intellectual Association Democratic Club and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.