

The role of recruiting agencies in labour mobility – the case of Bulgaria

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INTRODUCTION

This briefing presents initial results from the analysis of the qualitative data gathered in Bulgaria during the fieldwork in the first half of 2017. It focuses on the recruiting practices of public and private agencies dealing with international labour mediation. We use 12 expert interviews conducted in Bulgaria as a country traditionally sending workers abroad but having less than 10 years of institutional participation in EU mobility networks. We interviewed experts on different levels of the organizational hierarchy, as well as owners of private agencies. Most were women in mid and late career stages.

FINDINGS

Formal recruiters manage a very limited sector of labour mobility out of the country - about 2%. They function in competition with other mobility channels such as informal contacts with relatives and friends, unregistered recruiters using unofficial Internet sites, tourist companies or direct contacts with employers used by those mastering foreign languages and having the right skills. The interviewed experts overwhelmingly considered that they protect migrants' rights much better than the informal channels.

'At least we guarantee that this employer exists, that we have been in contact with him and that he will not deceive them and will provide a legal employment contract. While we all know that there are many advertisements on the Internet that are require advance payment from job seekers without then providing a real contract...'
(manager in a public agency).

The state and private agencies have different practices of labour mediation. The official discourse of those working as EURES advisors and other mediators in the public agencies was dominated by 'professionalism'. The interviewees explained in length that they offered sound advice by well trained professionals and relied on the wide professional network of EURES offices in other European countries and a wider pool of vacancies. The experts from the private agencies underlined their efforts to better match the demands of potential employers with the skills of potential candidates and that they have a more 'understanding' attitude offering more human and individualized help to people about to make the 'frightening' step.

'We have EURES advisors, EURES assistants, psychologists, lawyers... We provide real professional help before people leave... And then if anything goes wrong, we can always get in contact with the EURES office in the other country'

(expert in a public agency)

'We have a direct relationship with the particular employer and the particular worker. In the Labour Offices there is no individual approach to each candidate, like a conveyor belt. People are not given detailed explanations ... and they leave with quite different expectations and then come back dissatisfied... We know how stressful a trip abroad can be... We not only are giving information and advising them about the work, we are also kind of helping them psychologically too'

(expert in a private agency)



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The interviewed experts saw both positive and negative consequences of emigration and had an ambiguous attitude towards the policy of encouraging labour mobility in Europe. The representatives of both public and private agencies shared the opinion that it had a positive impact for migrants personally and employers abroad, but negative for migrant families and the home labour market.

'I think it's good and useful for everybody to at least try out what it is working abroad even for a shorter period of time because they can learn a lot about it ... in the sense, work abroad is based on completely different principles, and as I said, the pay is better in times... Most people are affected positively and come back with a good impression.'

(manager of a private agency)

'Nobody leaves if happy at home... I can understand them but still the social relations suffer, children suffer ... Generations of children who grow up in grandparents' care... the effect is very large, very deep and very unpleasant. '

(mediator in a private agency)

'...The policy should create conditions here so that young people in particular stay here and give their knowledge here, not to work abroad... I do not want much ... to make it even easier to go out because [our country] will be left without specialists'

(expert in a public agency)

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Debates on EU mobility policies are focused on regulations for labor migration in the receiving countries and how best to attract and retain highly skilled workers in the context of global competition for skills and population ageing. More attention should be focused on the policies and practices of European labor mediation in the sending countries. The analysis of the qualitative interviews of mediators in public and private agencies in the four countries sending migrants suggests the following steps:

- Information campaigns about the added value of labor mobility for all countries involved, both sending and receiving mobile workers
- Training and networking among experts in the field, particularly for the EURES councilors and managers of state employment agencies in the new member states such as Bulgaria and Romania but also in the countries such as Italy and Spain who are 'new' countries of departure
- Improved cooperation between public and private agencies in supporting labor migrants, protecting their rights and helping them reconcile their family responsibilities.

