

# PRO DOMO

## DOCTOR'S DISORDERS



EDITORIAL BY  
ANDRÁS HIRSCHLER

According to official statistics, Hungarian labor is the least mobile in the entire Central-European region. A somewhat surprising fact, as historical evidence presents early Hungarians as a brave and adventurous people who, throughout the centuries, moved in, out and across continents driven by climate change, the urge to conquer new territories, or the need to leave territories conquered by others. A series of lost wars, oppression by foreign powers and rigid social class structures have changed this attitude. Today's Hungarians would not leave their habitat unless violence, desperation, or the hope for a better life forced them to do so.

In the 20th century, over a million Hungarians left their homeland. The last wave of emigration followed the 1956 uprising, when almost 200,000 people left. Since 2004, the year when Hungary joined the EU and the Community's labor market opened up (almost fully) for Hungarian job-seekers, only some 70–80,000 people, a fraction of the local unemployed, have set out to look for a new job in the EU-15.

\*\*\*

Obviously, the least mobile are the socially underprivileged, the rural population. In a job market inundated by masses of job-seekers from the Third World, unskilled or semi-skilled Hungarians, without proper knowledge of local languages, do not stand much chance. They know if they find a job, they may earn more than at home, yet only a few would risk leaving Hungary and giving up the security of the home terrain. It is the highly skilled that are welcome with open arms, and in most cases, attractive salaries in the more developed world, whether in Europe or over the Atlantic.

As for attractive salaries, it is not too difficult to outdo Hungarian wages. In most professions, except perhaps banking and other financial sectors, young graduates earn a fraction of their Western colleagues. The monthly salary of an assistant professor with a PhD is less than EUR 500, half of the amount that a kitchen maid makes at a family B&B in Austria. A Hungarian medical doctor, after six or seven years of solid training at university, would earn about HUF 80,000 (less than EUR 300) net a month, roughly equal to the pay of a street sweeper.

\*\*\*

The gaping difference between earnings in Western and Eastern European countries is a legacy of the communist past. Until the political regime change in 1989, Hungary maintained a peculiar form of welfare: there was practically no unemployment, no income tax, no depressing rents. Food, transport, health care, education and other communal services were free of charge or extremely cheap. In turn, people accepted restrictions on democracy, crushingly low wages and a limited form of consumerism. Seven years have been enough to harmonize our legal systems with the EU, but not enough to level salaries. Although the wage difference has narrowed considerably in the financial sector and, to a lesser extent, in some branches of manufacturing and business services in the past few years, publicly financed professions – teachers, doctors, army and police personnel, etc. – have remained severely underpaid.

\*\*\*

On May 1, 2011, Germany and Austria lifted all restrictions on the movement of workers from the eight Central European member states which joined the EU in 2004.

Government officials are somewhat divided about the possible consequences. Dr. Sándor Czompa, the state secretary in charge of labor issues does not envisage serious problems: "Hungarians were already able to take up jobs in other member states after 2004, and reports showed no massive outflow of workers."

Others cautiously warn that opening up the German and Austrian labor markets may lead to a shortage of young skilled workers. Regions along the Austrian-Hungarian border may also absorb a larger number of Hungarian commuters particularly in industrial jobs (mechanics, welders, fitters) and catering. The chemical industry, engineering and electronics manufacturing may also be affected if skilled workers leave *en masse*.

\*\*\*

Most alarming, however, is the situation in the health sector. In Germany alone, currently there are 12,000 vacant medical jobs, while in Hungary there is already a perceptible lack of family doctors and hospital specialists, such as traumatologists, neurosurgeons and anesthesiologists.

"In a few years, there will not be enough doctors in the country to care for the sick," warns Magor Papp, president of the Hungarian Resident Association. Each year, the number of doctors leaving the country is 50 pct more than the number of fresh graduates. Half of the 700 medical students leaving university this year are planning to take a job in a foreign country.

Repeated calls to raise salaries in the public health sector have been thwarted by the government, claiming that doctors and nurses get additional income in the form of 'gratitude money' – "payments made by a patient to a doctor for services available free of charge under the prevailing health care system" (J. Kornai), which usually remains invisible to the taxman. The government hopes to replace fleeing doctors and nurses with Hungarian-speaking professionals from Hungary's neighbors. With salaries remaining at the current level, the odds are not too promising. As a spokesman of the Hungarian Medical Chamber remarked in a recent press report: "We can't get anyone from Romania, Croatia, Slovakia, not even from the Ukraine. At best, we may have well-trained doctors from the poorer countries of Africa."

\*\*\*

Mobility seems to be a luxury for the higher classes. It is always the most capable, the best educated, the most audacious that will leave the country in the hope of a better career and higher standards of living. The less mobile, those who are here to stay, may have reason to worry if anyone at all has remained in this country to take care of their malaise and disorders. ■