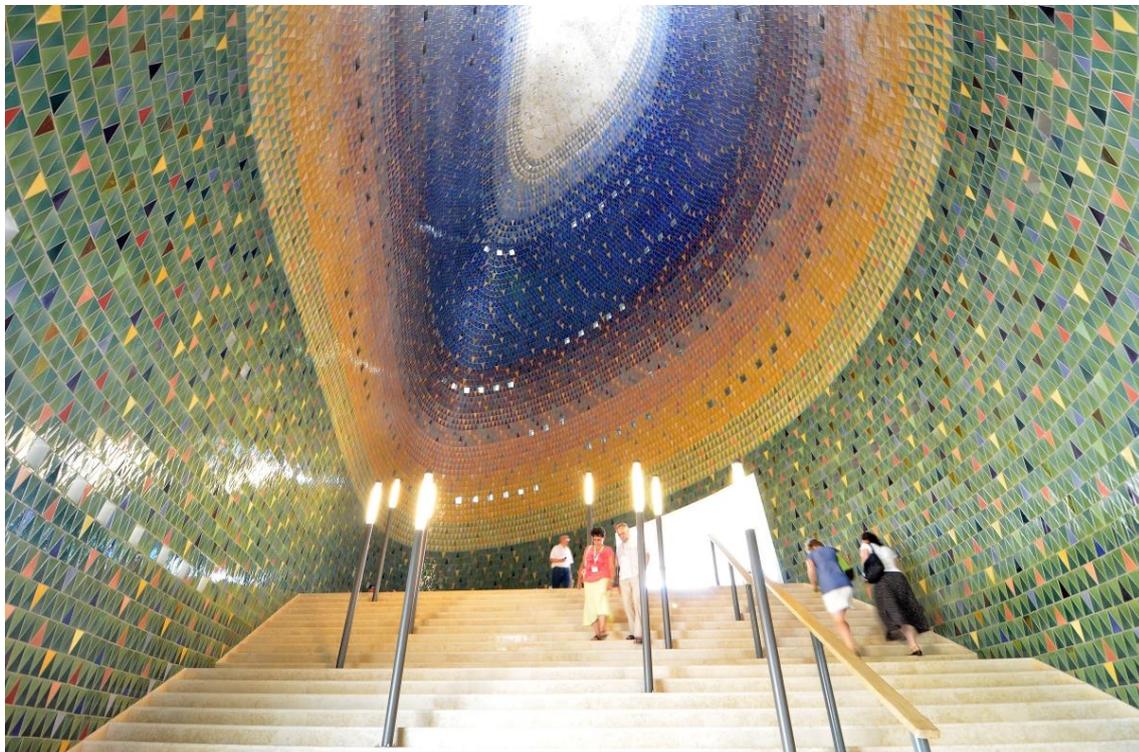


Reversing the brain drain from Eastern Europe may require a bit of counter-intuitive intervention. Instead of supporting the best brains from Eastern Europe to work in Western Europe, why not do the opposite? In this opinion piece, Gergely Buday, an academic in Eastern Hungary, shares his views on the best use of European funding to build expertise on the regions that need it most in Europe.



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Brain-drain reversal requires counter-intuitive support measures



Make scientists based in less advanced regions magnets of competency gleaned via international collaboration

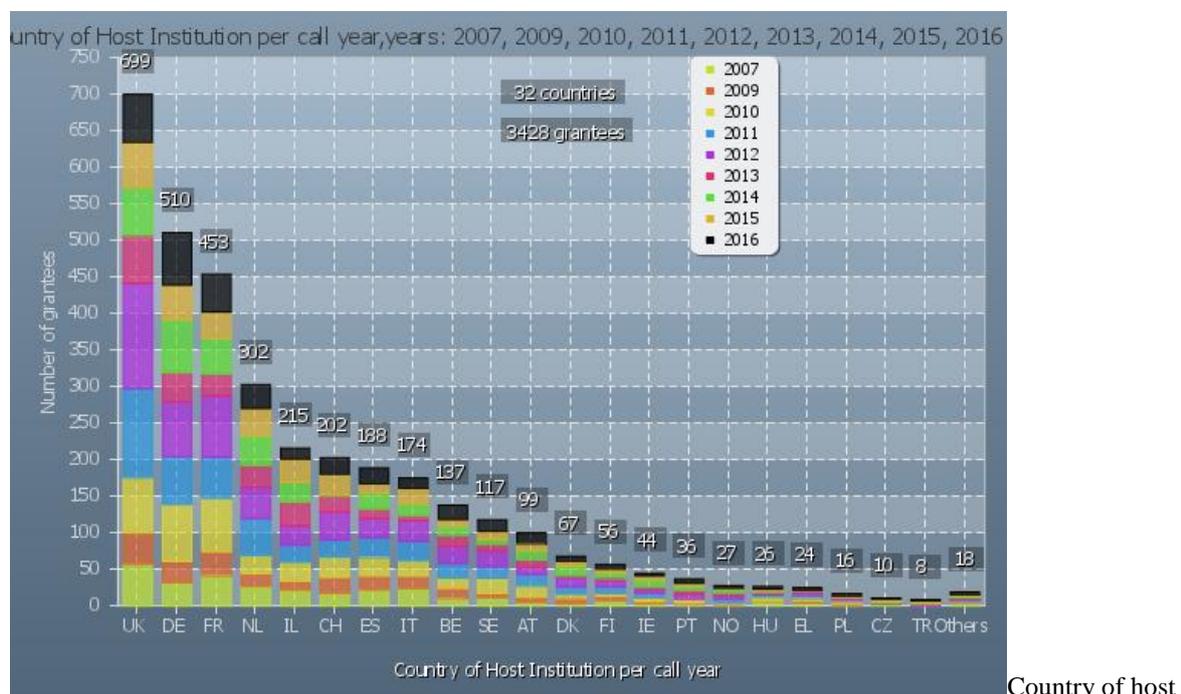
Too often what academics and policy makers in the EU mean by scientists mobility is to support researchers to move from Eastern or Southern Europe to Northern and Western Europe. Unfortunately, university jobs in the second and third tier cities in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe are currently not competitive enough to attract international brains. Better salaries, more research funding are required. But who is going to pay?

It may appear as counter-intuitive, but allocating part of the EU funds to support scientists working in less developed regions of Europe would be the best way to help driving these regions forward. That way scientists can gain know-how and increase competitiveness locally by frequently visiting leading research centers and by attending conferences internationally.

Brain drain

Today, 79.1% of ERC grants go to Western European labs. Only 1.5% are allocated to Eastern European countries and 12,3% to Southern Europe, according to [ERC Statistics 2007-2016](#). It is all too easy to jump to conclusion on the basis of these figures. Researchers in these countries may appear to lack excellence. The reality is much more mundane. It is very difficult for scientists in these countries to keep with the forefront of research without adequate funding for travel, books and research equipment. They easily become [isolated from the rest of the scientific community](#).

Statistics also show that a number of scientists who are originally from Eastern Europe now work in Western European countries. This is in line with the free movement principle of the European Union, in relation to people, goods and money. Currently, it appears that Eastern European researchers are primarily moving West and so does research funding.



institution for ERC grants allocation.

The brain drain is the subject of many academic publications, including Vena Nedeljkovic's [Brain Drain in the European Union: Facts and Figures](#) and Luiza Ionescu's bachelor thesis at Aarhus University [Emigration from Eastern Europe with a Focus on Brain Drain](#). The former writes: "The negative effects of brain drain are not only economic but also social. The economy of a country in which brain drain is observed may suffer from decline in productivity, lack of innovation and decrease in highly-skilled human capital. All those factors may result in economic slowdown, higher unemployment rates and increase in the number of overqualified workers."

Regional development through science

In addition to supporting free movement, the European Union previously pledged to support the development of regions who are less advanced economically, to help reach economic convergence with more advanced countries. László Faragó, researcher at Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Institute for Regional Studies in Pécs, Hungary, recently published paper on the [changes of EU spatial policy](#), which brings this question to a larger perspective. He writes: "The current cohesion policy is much more

focused on the general objectives fixed by the strong Member States and strengthening of supra-national governance than on regional policy."

As a result, some countries have to live with the consequences of having little national support for research and academia. As Faragó writes: "In terms of the funding received by cohesion countries, it is highly unfavourable that the emphasis is on developed areas and metropolitan regions, while the task of decreasing domestic regional disparities tends to become an exclusive responsibility of national governments."

Faragó warns against some of the negative consequences of the current approach. "The EU's continuing promotion of the optimal utilisation of the endogenous resources of its regions (place-based approach) will likely foster the predominance of core regions and vast economic concentrations and the further decline of peripheral areas." And this is contrary to the objectives of the Single European Act and the Lisbon Treaty.

Eastern block on the fringes of Europe

This is a serious a problem. Particularly because research and higher education falls within the competence of Member States. Further regional development, I believe, lies in greater support for research and academia. The trouble is, currently, in Hungary like in many other Eastern European countries, university salaries are not competitive. As a result, scientific and academic careers do not attract young people.

Part of this problem, according to Faragó, stems from the fact that the Eastern bloc integrated to the European Union as a periphery. The spatial policy has changed since the integration. Previously, the Union supported the development of chosen regions and countries using the structural and cohesion funds.

In the last 15 years there were two important changes. First, instead of redistribution based on solidarity, growth and job creation become a focus for every region; less developed regions therefore receive less support. In the academic sector there are grants for large groups but there is less funding for individual researchers.

Second, regionalism has been devalued. Member States have become stronger on handling regional differences. At the same time, they moved the emphasis from regions to cities; especially metropolitan regions. Indeed, at the turn of the century the slogan "regions' Europe" became "regions' and cities' Europe", and it is even more real to talk about "metropolises' Europe." The territorial cohesion mentioned in the basic and the Lisbon treaty is less and less emphatical. This strengthens the drive for academics to move to Western research institutions.

Strategic risk for lesser cities

According to members of the EU-funded [ESPON ET2050 project](#), developing second and third tier cities have numerous advantages. Namely, it would foster the highest regional growth both in the 15 older and the 12 newer Member States. And we would use the regional capital the best while avoiding the negative effects of over-concentration. In a recent ESPON ET2050 report, Zoltán Gál and Gábor Lux raise the attention that in the Central Eastern European region there is a [strategic risk](#), as second and third tier cities are missing or weak.

Faragó argues that the migration from the peripheric regions can be mitigated only when job creation, salaries grow as well in parallel. There are many EU projects to support poor regions but they are not planned to support individual researchers just entering a scientific field. The question is: so what can the EU do about this? The solution could be

in directly supporting academics in less developed regions. This can be achieved through grants designed to make staying in those regions more appealing and supporting their short-term mobility in Europe.

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