Europe’s other migration crisis

“Poroshenko, zelensky, Poroshenko, Zelensky…” chants the teller, sing-song, over the flutter of papers. It is shortly before midnight on Sunday in the Ukrainian embassy in Warsaw. Representatives of the country’s presidential candidates are gathered around a conference table to count first-round votes from citizens living here in neighbouring Poland. From a pile in the centre a staffer peels out the long ballot slips—there were 39 candidates—and hands each to his boss who reads out the vote and passes it to the appropriate delegate, who adds it to his or her stack. The piles for Petro Poroshenko, the incumbent, and Volodymyr Zelensky, his comedian-turned-politician challenger, are the largest.

The scene captures something of Ukraine’s resilience. Unlike some former Soviet states it is a democracy, albeit a deeply flawed one. It remains keen on the Europeanist course set during the pro-eu, Maidan protests in 2013-2014, despite Russian military incursions and the annexation of Crimea since then. Ukrainians enjoy the freedom, boosted by a visa liberalisation in 2017, to travel to the eu and hundreds of thousands have exercised this right in the past five years. Most went to Poland, attracted by its proximity, its cultural-linguistic similarities and its booming economy. On March 31st thousands of them queued up at the embassy in Warsaw, and consulates in Gdansk and Krakow, to cast their votes: a paragon of trans-European democracy.

Yet democracy and European convergence demand more than five-yearly elections. They also require the rule of law, transparency and strong institutions. And here Ukraine is struggling. Corruption is endemic and oligarchs still dominate politics. Disappointment at the slow pace of progress has driven much of the emigration. From about 220,000 in 2013, the number of Ukrainians living in Poland is now around 1.5m, though estimates vary. Compared with previous waves of Ukrainian emigrants, this one is less seasonal but also younger, more multilingual and better-educated. More than a third of recent leavers have university degrees.

Anhelina Prymak moved to Poland in 2013 to study European affairs. Corruption in universities is a major factor for emigrant students like her; bribes-for-grades are so rife in Ukraine that the overall cost of studying can be similar on both sides of the border. Now she works for a Polish think-tank. Likewise Sasha Iwaniuk, a politicial scientist and novelist from Kiev, found her university in Ukraine parochial and corrupt, so moved her phdstudies to Lublin. Many entrepreneurs have moved to Poland, along with thousands of it professionals who often see it as a stepping stone to Germany or beyond. “Students and businesspeople are leaving,” despairs Ms Iwaniuk. “It’s a catastrophe in terms of demography. The country is losing the people who can change it.”

Natalia Panchenko, a Maidan protester now living in Warsaw, agrees: “The ones leaving are those who could push for changes.” But precisely those people—often young and without partners, children or homes anchoring them to Ukraine—say they do not intend to return until the situation there improves. At least they can invest some of their reformist energies in their adoptive country. For example, a number of Ukrainians attended protests against the constitutional abuses of Poland’s governing Law and Justice (pis) party. Igor Isajew, a Ukrainian journalist, was propelled into Citizens of Poland, an anti-pis movement, in 2016 by government restrictions on the media. “I’m optimistic that Poland will vote out pis,” he says. Others contribute outside of party politics. As part of beta Polska, a pro-eucampaign, Ms Prymak is helping to run educational simulations of the European Parliament for pupils and voters around Poland. “People really engage!” she enthuses, recalling a teacher who overheard her discussing the initiative in a café and invited beta to her school on the spot.

For Ukrainians in Poland, read also Romanians in Spain, Poles in Britain and Lithuanians in Germany. Free movement, cheap flights, the rise of English and the internationalisation of universities have made it easier than ever for Europeans to up sticks. Those who do so tend to be disproportionately young and well-educated, and are becoming more so. They are by definition mobile and thus alive to the benefits of European integration. They tend to gravitate from Europe’s eastern and southern periphery towards its core. Brussels, the eu’s capital, is the supreme example; the destination of choice for many who know and care the most about the eu. On sunny evenings café terraces outside the European Parliament teem with bright young officials, politicians and advisers from across the continent, mingling with others who (predominantly) share their European expertise and enthusiasms. “One of the unintended consequences of building up European institutions is that many of the best-informed, most pro-European people have left national capitals for Brussels,” observes Timothy Garton Ash, a historian at Oxford University.

## **The lure of the centre**

eu politicians at least travel home to their constituencies. And social media sites make it easier than ever for emigrants to remain active in the politics and societies of their countries of origin; they can vote in national elections, though most of them do not. But it is plain that their centripetal movement carries with it some of the modernising vim that, staying put, might propel those countries faster in the same direction. An imf study in 2016 found a “significant negative association” between the rate of high-skill emigration from eastern European countries in 2000 and improvements in their quality of government 14 years later.

The knock-on effects of recent waves of emigration will take at least as long to be felt fully. But they are already visible in some places. Mr Garton Ash points to countries like Poland, where the departure of highly informed, pro-European natives can be felt in the tone of national debates. “The Europeans have, as it were, gone to Europe.”