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The European Politics of Brain Drain:

A Fast or Slow-Burning Crisis?

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The European Politics of Brain Drain: A Fast or Slow-Burning Crisis?¹

Jacob A. Hasselbalch

Abstract

This qualitative multi-method study maps the politics of brain drain at the level of the European Union and follows the evolution of the issue over the last four parliamentary periods. By utilizing a novel combination of interviews with a content and network analysis of parliamentary questions, the article demonstrates how the politics of brain drain travel from the domestic level to the European through frames that connect the issue to problems and solutions at the Union-level. After presenting a statistical overview of intra-EU mobility flows, I conclude that the politics of brain drain are not adequately captured or addressed in the official numbers. Instead, I turn to discourse in order to analyze the prevailing interpretations of brain drain, why it occurs, and what to do about it. The analysis reveals that the uncertainty, controversy, and open-endedness of brain drain as an intra-European phenomenon lends itself well to multiple framings by actors in pursuit of preconceived political ends. This creates a space of opportunities within the Commission between laissez-faire and interventionist responses that vary in terms of the economic assumptions and political preferences brought to bear on the issue. Although the current balance is weighted in favor of a supply-side, employability logic towards brain drain, there is evidence of a schism within the Commission that presents an opportunity to productively engage with other understandings of the issue in pursuit of best practices.

Keywords: brain drain, European Union, labor mobility, parliamentary questions, skills, migration

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Introduction

Most discussions about brain drain in the context of the European Union (EU) concern the drain of skilled labor from other countries to the EU or from the EU to other countries – brains entering and exiting Europe, in other words. Formally speaking, brain drain cannot occur within the Single Market (that is, from one EU country to another), because the Single Market, by definition (if not entirely yet by design) draws on a common pool of labor shared by all Member States. The free movement of workers, enshrined in EU law, is one of the four freedoms enjoyed by all EU citizens. An internal market with a mobile workforce cannot, in principle, experience brain drain.

In the foreword to a report on European brain drain versus brain gain, this founding myth of European labor mobility is presented thus (Schellinger, 2015):

In the European Union there is a tale and it goes like this: In some member states the economy is on the upswing and unemployment is low, in others the economy is in a downturn and unemployment is high. As the European Union guarantees free movement for persons, labor market mobility provides for the necessary adjustment. If there are no jobs in one country, workers will relocate to another with better employment prospects. Once their 'home economy' is on the upbeat trend again, they will return and – bring with them the experiences acquired abroad. The functioning of the Eurozone is ensured, national economies benefit, and people are in work. And everyone lives happily ever after.

Labor mobility is sold as a win-win deal for Member States, based on an understanding of classical economic theory that sees labor migration as unambiguously good (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2009, p. 12). When labor is free to migrate, it seeks its highest reward, raising both the welfare of migrant workers and welfare in the aggregate. But political realities often get in the way of this narrative. Even if we discount political realities, a more sophisticated economic analysis would remain sensitive to a number of intervening factors that play a part in determining where migratory outcomes fall between the extremes of best-case and worst-case scenarios (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2009, p. 13):


- Best-case scenario: A worker leaves a country where his skills are in excess supply and takes up work appropriate to those skills at a higher wage in a country with excess demand

in that area, remits a proportion of the income, and subsequently returns to the source country with higher skills and productivity to a higher-paying job.

- Worst-case scenario: Young employed workers with critical skills but low wages leave to take up unskilled – but higher-paying – work in high-unemployment, high-wage economies, adding to pressure on already disadvantaged groups while suffering skill erosion themselves.

The academic literature on brain drain developed in the context of studies on global economic imbalances between developing and developed countries – brain drain designates the international transfer of human capital in the form of long-term migration of highly-skilled individuals from less-developed countries to more-developed ones (Beine, Docquier and Rapoport, 2008). This reflects a tendency for human capital to agglomerate where it is already abundant in what some have called a ‘global race for talent’, which is also playing out within the boundaries of the European Union (Münz, 2014). The politics of intra-EU labor mobility require a delicate balancing act between fostering more movement between countries while ensuring fair outcomes for all. Fair outcomes would entail seeing more of the best-case scenarios and less of the worst-case ones.

There are distributional effects and externalities, both positive and negative, that mediate migratory outcomes between the extremes of best and worst-case scenarios (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2009, p. 12). Regarding distributional effects, workers in receiving countries will find themselves in direct competition with immigrant labor, while employers of immigrant labor will benefit. This picture is reversed in sending countries, where remaining workers will benefit and employers lose out. Regarding externalities, some examples include the loss of returns on public investment in education, labor shortages in critical sectors, and brain drain in sending countries. In the receiving countries, pressure on the disadvantaged increases and working conditions may be undermined, exacerbating trends towards inequality. Because of these externalities and distributional effects – in the face of EU law that makes restricting flows difficult or illegal – immigration is often one of the most contentious areas of domestic political debate in EU countries (Schmidt, 2017).



The complexity of factors that impact on the success of EU-internal labor mobility means that different migratory outcomes co-exist side-by-side and surely span the entire spectrum from best to worst cases. The statistical picture (which I turn to in more detail in the next section) gives no clear conclusion as to the balance between the two. We are, however, left with a clear sense that there are two different kinds of brain drain playing out within the Single Market: a slower-moving, long-term flow of Eastern workers draining West, and a faster-moving, short-term flow of Southern workers draining North. The Eastern drain is caused primarily by differences in wages and working conditions – the Southern drain by the financial crisis and austerity politics. The different forms of brain drain coupled with the uncertain statistical picture has provided a degree of freedom for politicians and interest groups to variously emphasize the benefits or drawbacks of European labor mobility in pursuit of preconceived political ends. A key question is whether brain drain is framed as a fast-burning or slow-burning crisis, and what forms of knowledge and responses each of these conceptualizations call for (Tsingou, 2014; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2016, 2017)?

To challenge the fundamental freedom of labor mobility is to run completely against the grain of what counts as acceptable and legitimate political discourse at the EU-level and to expose yourself to charges of nationalism and populism. The legal and institutional setup of the Single Market makes it entirely unsurprising that brain drain is a taboo issue among EU policymakers. Yet, some EU Member States are increasingly voicing their concerns over brain drain, also at the European level. It is an important task to anyone with a stake or interest in the political economy of the European Union to find out why that is and what to do about it. The aim of this article is not to assess whether or not certain EU countries, sectors, or regions are experiencing brain drain – rather, the aim is to map the political conversation on brain drain at the EU level. The purpose of doing this is to complement the statistical picture of brain drain with a more political picture that illuminates the contentious themes, issues, and concerns that drive policy debates on the matter in Brussels and abroad – regardless of what the statistics say. We know something of the statistical side, but very little has been done to collect and systematize knowledge about the political treatment of brain drain at the EU-level. As an increasingly topical issue in European political economy, it is important that this oversight is addressed.

The statistical picture of brain drain

It is useful to start an investigation into the European politics of brain drain by surveying what we know and the different ways in which brain drain is made knowable. Several different statistics are monitored and reports compiled at the European level by Commission personnel – the one most relevant to brain drain is the Annual Report on Intra-EU Labour Mobility, published since 2014 by the Directorate-General for Employment (DG EMPL). These reports rely heavily on the EU Labour Force Survey.

In its latest version, from 2016, we learn that 11.3 million movers account for all intra-EU migration. 8.5 million of those are employed or looking for work, equaling 3.6% of the EU's working-age population (Fries-Tersch, Tugran and Bradley, 2016). Out of the 8.5 million workers, only half (4.4 million) are recent movers, meaning those who have moved in the last ten years. To these amounts, we can also add 1.3 million cross-border workers (workers living in their home state but working in another) and 2.0 million posted workers (workers employed in their home state but carrying out temporary work in another). Because posted workers are temporary and cross-border workers still reside in their home countries, they cannot be understood as contributing directly to brain drain. Taken in the aggregate, European labor mobility cannot be seen as very substantial, especially in comparison to mobility within the United States, which is ten times higher in terms of both stocks and flows (Barslund and Busse, 2016). This should be kept in mind in any discussion about brain drain in Europe. But that does not preclude that some substantial impacts do occur on the level of a specific country, region, or sector.

The overall pattern of labor mobility in the EU has remained very consistent: 98% of mobile workers live in EU-15 countries (the 'old' Member States) and only 2% in EU-13 countries (the 'new' Member States that joined after the 2004 accession) (Fries-Tersch, Tugran and Bradley, 2016). The main countries of residence of working-age movers are Germany (2.7 million), the United Kingdom (2.1 million), Spain (1.4 million), Italy (1.1 million), France and Switzerland (950,000 each). These six countries receive 75% of intra-EU labor mobility. Regarding the main sending countries, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Romania together make up more than half of all movers. All movers tend to be younger and higher-

educated than the national averages (Canetta, Fries-Tersch and Mabilia, 2014). The movement of highly-educated people increased sharply after the crisis from 29% of recent working-age movers in 2008 to 44% in 2015 (Fries-Tersch, Tugran and Bradley, 2016). In 2014, about half of EU-15 movers were highly educated compared to 24% of EU-13 movers – about half of EU-13 movers have medium levels of education (Fries-Tersch and Mabilia, 2015).

These absolute numbers cannot tell us much about which countries might be experiencing brain drain, but the 2014 Annual Report on Labour Mobility, in focusing on movements of the young and highly-educated, hits closer to the mark. When we look at outflows (as a percentage over the total population) in the last ten years of active workers between the ages of 15-34, the five countries with the highest emigration rates are Romania (9%), Lithuania (7.2%), Slovakia (6.5%), Latvia (6.2%), and Poland (6.2%) (Canetta, Fries-Tersch and Mabilia, 2014). These countries (with the exception of Slovakia) are also the countries with the highest overall rate of recent active EU movers (10% for Romania and Lithuania, 7% for Latvia, 5% for Poland).

These numbers would suggest that brain drain is primarily an Eastern phenomenon, but the 2015 Annual Report on Labour Mobility (Fries-Tersch and Mabilia, 2015) distinguishes between two different forms of movement: East-West migration and South-North migration. It identifies a decline in East-West migration and an increase in South-North migration when comparing data from 2008 and 2013. This is especially driven by decreases in inflows and increases in outflows in Italy and Spain. In many other important destination countries, similar trends of decreasing Eastern and increasing Southern migration can also be seen. These flows capture the effect of the Eurozone crisis years, where the Southern countries were much harder hit than the Eastern ones, leading to large outflows of young and highly educated citizens.

Emigration rates of most Member States increased in the years from 2008 to 2013, especially in Hungary, Portugal, Cyprus, and Ireland (Fries-Tersch and Mabilia, 2015). Although the emigration rate of some Eastern countries such as Romania, Lithuania, and Latvia decreased in those years, they were still among the countries with the highest emigration rates for nationals as a percentage of their total population. All EU-28 countries

(except Denmark, Malta, and Iceland) saw net outflows of their nationals in 2013. In many countries, immigration inflows from other Member States, European Free Trade Area countries, or third countries offset the outflow of their own nationals, but this was not the case in the Southern European countries (except for Italy), the Baltic countries, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia.

The overall statistical picture does support a notion of two distinct migratory flows of European labour: a steady flow of mostly medium-skilled Eastern workers moving West over a longer duration of time, and a more sudden flow of highly-skilled Southern workers moving North during the Eurozone crisis years. Based on this, we should expect a risk of brain drain either in Eastern or Southern countries, but the flows from each region are driven by different factors. The longer-term, steady Eastern flow can be explained by differences in wages and working conditions (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2009), while the sudden Southern flow was a direct consequence of the rapidly rising unemployment levels witnessed during the Eurozone crisis (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2012). We can label the Eastern flow a 'slow drain' and the Southern flow a 'fast drain'.


There is good evidence that migrants from both the East and South are overqualified for the jobs they take up in their destination countries (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2009, p. 25; Tijdens and Klaveren, 2012; Fries-Tersch, Tugran and Bradley, 2016). This is more so the case for EU-13 movers than for EU-15 movers. If high-skilled labor from the East does find appropriate levels of employment in the West, there are still risks of negative externalities. For example, recent attempts at quantifying the impact of the enlargement on cross-border collaboration in scientific research demonstrates that the flow of high-skilled researchers to EU-15 countries may reduce both the potential for knowledge spillover between countries and the convergence of human and technological capital within Europe (Doria Arrieta, Pammolli and Petersen, 2017).

This brings up a key question that the statistics have attempted, and failed, to completely answer: are the negative externalities of brain drain offset by brain gain or brain circulation? Studies differ on their answers to this question. The 2016 Annual Report on intra-EU Labour Mobility notes that return mobility to EU-13 countries in the aggregate has remained stable since 2009, although there are large fluctuations from country to country, some seeing

significant increases in return mobility, others seeing decreases (Fries-Tersch, Tugran and Bradley, 2016). Roughly 600,000 movers return from another EU country to their home country per year – 250,000 of those to EU-13 countries and 350,000 to EU-15. The economic crisis did not affect these numbers significantly for the EU-13, but return mobility did decrease sharply for some EU-15 countries (Ireland, Portugal, and Italy). Returnees tend to be higher educated than movers in general and national averages, and with 600,000 returnees compared to yearly outflows of 870,000 at the EU level, we should expect return mobility to alleviate brain drain to some extent.

Whether or not that is actually the case depends on the labor market situation of returnees. Some studies support the notion that returnees enjoy a premium on their time abroad once they come home and bring with them new skills and competences (Martin and Radu, 2012; Zaiceva and Zimmermann, 2016). But other studies say it is not so clear. Because especially EU-13 movers tend to be overqualified for their jobs abroad, some return mobility will not result in upgraded human capital at home or offset the risks of brain drain (Hazans, 2012). Such brain waste or downskilling can also lead to marginalization at home if highly qualified citizens who have worked in low-skilled (but higher-paying) work abroad are then unable to find high-skilled work at home (Kaczmarczyk, 2015). In general, the statistics on skills-mismatches in European labor mobility varies substantially across countries and it is difficult to draw any general conclusions from the data (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2012, pp. 27–29).

The discussion on the statistical overview of intra-EU labor mobility and the risks of brain drain should make clear that this is a complicated and multifaceted issue. Nearly all studies on the phenomenon bring up the significant methodological issues that prevent any clear conclusions (Barslund and Busse, 2016; Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt 2012). Simply relying on data concerning emigration rates, for example, can obscure national and sectoral specificities that may ameliorate the picture. For instance, the high emigration flows from Spain and Poland are due mainly to the departure of non-national or non-EU immigrants (in the Spanish case) or are simply reducing the oversupply of labor (in the Polish case) (Schellinger, 2015). Some are calling this brain ‘overflow’ rather than ‘drain’, when domestic labor markets cannot absorb the full amount of highly-educated individuals.



There are also second-order effects that are difficult to capture in statistical snapshots. A study on the German medical sector notes that large highly qualified emigration flows might lead to the emergence of a brain drain chain reaction when acute labor shortages cause employers to attract skilled workers from lower-income EU countries, where new labor shortages in those countries will cause employers there to attract skilled workers from non-EU countries (Teney and Siemsen, 2015). Another argument concerning brain gain states that if the prospects of emigrating are higher abroad, it may incentivize more people to educate themselves at home, theoretically balancing out some of those who leave with a more highly educated workforce at home (Beine, Docquier and Rapoport, 2008).

Rather than disentangle these multiple obstacles to statistically representing brain drain, I choose to engage directly with the politics of brain drain. From the statistics, we can take away an appreciation for two different kinds of flows: a fast, crisis-driven flow from the South and a slow, wage-driven flow from the East. We can also conclude that the risks of brain drain are certainly present in both Southern and Eastern countries, but these risks are very sensitive to national economic and political conditions. Finally, the question of skills looms large over brain drain, both in terms of conditions on sending and receiving country labor markets. Until now, there have been very few attempts to bring together the politics of both intra-European migratory flows of skilled labor under a common analytical framework investigating brain drain. In the next section, I discuss why this is an undertaking that requires deeper interpretive sensitivity than we can muster in the statistical treatment of European labor mobility.

The European politics of brain drain

The statistical picture of brain drain cannot account for the politics of brain drain. When the statistical picture leaves room for doubt and interpretation, it becomes susceptible to framing. There are several reasons why the statistics cannot fully reflect the European politics of brain drain:

1. *The statistics still leave too many things unknown.* Bilateral mobility flows have only been published by Eurostat since 2015, and even then only with a time lag of two years and

with many blanks in the data (Barslund and Busse, 2016). There is no long-term data that would allow an analysis of trends. We also know very little about the educational levels of migrants, their careers, and forms of employment. This is because the statistics cannot track individual movements, which creates significant lacks and uncertainties in the data. There are always obligations to register in destination countries when taking up work abroad, but not always obligations to de-register in your home country. And it is an open question as to the extent to which either of these obligations tend to be honored by movers. The aggregate nature of the statistics can also mask specific impacts on countries, regions, and sectors.

2. *The statistics do not reflect popular mood or sentiment.* Citizens across Europe are more likely to get their ‘facts’ on European labor mobility from sources other than official EU statistical reports. Brexit makes this abundantly clear. Cultural concerns about national identity and immigration are easily manipulated and exploited through popular, political and media discourses (Hobolt, 2016; Schmidt, 2017). These concerns and manipulations have shown themselves to be remarkably resilient to the material reality of labor mobility. Because of point 1 above, experts do not speak with sufficient authority on the topic of brain drain, and it is easy for politicians to stir up a brain drain controversy.
3. *The statistics are not easily translated into policy proposals.* There are no straightforward solutions provided through any statistical evaluation of brain drain. Different policy actors presented with the same data will reach vastly different conclusions and policy positions. For example, communications from the European Commission have consistently found that the scale of migration is too low to constitute a risk of brain drain in sending countries.² Employer organizations consistently argue that skills mismatches are the cause of brain drain and better education and training is the solution, and trade unions consistently argue that stronger social protection systems and workers’ rights is the solution (Schellinger

² See for example the memos, press releases, and speeches circulated in the wake of the first Employment and Social Developments in Europe report in 2011: MEMO-11-916, IP-11-1552, SPEECH-12-76. Later communications such as MEMO-13-384, MEMO-14-541, and SPEECH-14-115 state that any risks of brain drain are offset by remittances, return migration, and decreases in unemployment levels, although they do recognize risks to particular sectors such as health.

2015; also supported by interview data). Brain drain, like so many other controversial issues, is easily framed so as to cohere with preconceived political goals.

Because of these three characteristics of the brain drain phenomenon (uncertainty, controversy, and open-endedness), it makes for a rich political topic that is highly open to multiple interpretations and contestations. When looking at the political effects of labor mobility, scholars have focused more attention on the flows of EU-13 movers following the 2004 enlargement than the flows of movers from Southern Europe during the Eurozone crisis. Such work has addressed both the determinants and outcomes of Eastern migration after the enlargement with respect to integration (Marques, 2010), welfare systems (Kureková, 2013), cohesion policy (Farole, Rodríguez-Pose and Storper, 2011), and education structure (Huber and Bock-Schappelwein, 2014). Studies on flows from Southern Europe tend to be subsumed to larger-scale questions on Eurozone governance in the wake of the crisis, in particular to questions of austerity (Barslund et al., 2014; Schellinger, 2015; Herr, Priewe and Watt, 2017).

More recent works are now starting to investigate notions of ‘fair mobility’, recognizing that for European mobility to lead to win-win outcomes, policymakers have to take seriously the allegations of social dumping (when workers from country A are employed in country B according to wages and conditions of country B, thereby outcompeting labor in country A) on one hand and complaints about brain drain on the other (Andor, 2015; Barslund and Busse, 2016; Dhéret and Ghimis, 2016). The taboo of questioning the win-win of intra-European labor mobility is starting to break, especially following Brexit and the rise of populist politics (Hobolt, 2016; Farrell and Newman, 2017; Schmidt, 2017; Watt and Andor, 2017). This makes it a timely and important endeavor to provide a thorough mapping of the European politics of brain drain. In the next sections, I detail how I go about constructing and analyzing such a map.

Data and methods

Any research attempting to map the European politics of brain drain will have to overcome the following challenges:

1. Brain drain is understood by political participants to have multiple different causes and consequences, and the statistics provide no clear-cut answers. This allows multiple different narratives to co-exist side-by-side and provides ample opportunity for contentious political engagements.
2. In part because of the above, political interaction on brain drain relates to several different policy initiatives. In my conversations with interviewees, all of the following policy areas were brought forward, even in the same conversation: mobility, skills, cohesion, research, vocational and educational training, higher education, development, macroeconomic policy, etc. Limiting the analysis to just one of these areas would artificially restrict the possible interpretations that drive the politics of brain drain.
3. Political interaction also spans several years. As the coming analysis will show, the first mention of brain drain at the EU level was in the 1990s. Attention to the issue has since grown tremendously, especially during the Eurozone crisis years. A full account of the politics of brain drain should address this historical dimension to understand how and why we got to where we are today.
4. Political interaction connects domestic-level politics to EU-level politics. The pains of brain drain are felt within Member States, often within particular regions of states. This means that concerted efforts must be made to identify, flag, and frame domestic problems of brain drain in a manner that brings it to the attention of EU-level policymakers, telling them why they should care and what they should do about it. When these efforts fail (as they often do), brain drain remains under the radar.

To overcome these challenges, I rely on an approach that combines interviews with a content analysis of the historical record of parliamentary questions that mention brain drain. This two-pronged approach has several benefits. Concerning the first challenge, interviews and content analysis both remain sensitive to multiple interpretations and narratives surrounding brain drain. Concerning the second challenge, I allow the relevant policy areas to emerge out of the analysis rather than define them from the outset. Concerning the third

challenge, the historical record of parliamentary questions provides an opportunity to observe changes in discourse over time. And concerning the fourth challenge, both parliamentary questions and interviews give a deeper insight into how interest groups and policymakers approach brain drain strategically by framing it in ways that provide traction in the policy environment. As a qualitative multi-method approach, the combination of two different data sources and methods increases robustness through a complementary mobilization of various types of evidence (Lamont and Swidler, 2014).

Parliamentary questions

In legislative studies, parliamentary questions have been understood as harboring useful information about the preferences and behavior of members of parliament, as well as how they view their roles and responsibilities (Raunio, 1996; Martin, 2011). In the aggregate, the analysis of such questions can tell us more about the functioning and position of parliaments within the wider political and institutional system (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011) and the interaction with media (Santen, Helfer and Aelst, 2015). Studies on parliamentary questions at the EU-level stress their potential for linking the electorates of MEPs to European issues and exercising executive and regulatory scrutiny (Proksch and Slapin, 2011; Auel and Raunio, 2014). Because MEPs are sensitive both to domestic-level issues and to the political inclinations of their respective groups, they provide useful data on how brain drain is brought from the domestic level to the EU-level and framed politically. The Parliament is also more sensitive to popular concerns and sentiments than the other European institutions, which makes it a good place to study the politicization of issues such as mobility.

Parliamentary questions are structured in such a way that they tell us much about EP-Commission relations (and EP-Council, to a lesser degree) (Egeberg, Trondal and Vestlund, 2014). There are three different types of parliamentary questions: questions for oral answer, questions for Question Time, and written questions. Questions for oral answer are dealt with during plenary sittings and included in records of the debate; questions for Question Time are also dealt with in plenary sittings during specific time slots reserved for questions; and written questions are submitted to the Commission or Council and answered within three to six

weeks. All three types of questions and their related answers are electronically archived on the website of the European Parliament and are easily searchable.

I compiled a dataset of questions and answers through a simple keyword search on "brain drain", looking for any mentions of the term in any part of the question or answer, including both question titles and the actual body of text. The vast majority of questions in the dataset are written questions. Some documents (fewer than ten) that turned up in the search results and were retained in the dataset did not contain the actual words 'brain drain', but were still related to the issue and must have been responding to metadata entries. Very few questions (fewer than five) were discarded as they were not relevant to the European politics of brain drain (for example, questions on emigration patterns of Russian nuclear scientists). Table 1 displays the number of questions found during each parliamentary period from 1999 onwards, clearly indicating the increasing topicality of the issue over time.

TABLE 1. Number of parliamentary questions mentioning brain drain

Parliamentary period	1999-2004	2004-2009	2009-2014	2014-2019	Total
Number of questions	5	26	43	31	105

I imported the entire text of questions and answers into the Discourse Network Analyzer (DNA) software (Leifeld, 2013a). The DNA program is a qualitative content analysis tool with network export facilities. I analyzed the imported text files for statements showing the different ways brain drain was framed as a problem and the solutions offered to the problem. The problem and solution dichotomy makes sense in the question and answer format of parliamentary questions, and remains sufficiently sensitive to the multiple prevailing interpretations. Statements were coded with the name and organization of the speaker and analyzed according to the schemes displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

TABLE 2. Problems – How is brain drain defined as a problem?

Problem codes	Definition
<i>Austerity</i>	Austerity measures in response to the crisis are exacerbating brain drain
<i>Competitiveness</i>	Brain drain is hurting the competitive edge of European companies or universities
<i>Development</i>	The EU is draining skilled workers from developing countries outside the EU
<i>Eastern drain</i>	Workers in East European countries are leaving for the West in large numbers
<i>Economic crisis</i>	Brain drain caused and exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis
<i>R&D</i>	Under-investment in research infrastructure, research funding, innovation
<i>Shortages</i>	There is a lack of qualified personnel in a specific sector
<i>Skills and training</i>	Vocational training and education facilities or conditions are inadequate, skills mismatches
<i>Southern drain</i>	Workers in South European countries are leaving for the North in large numbers
<i>Third country emigration</i>	Human capital is leaving the EU for third countries (typically EU scientists going to the US)
<i>Working conditions</i>	Comparatively poor wages, working conditions, and rights are causing people to emigrate from their home countries

Table 2 displays the coding scheme used to analyze those statements about brain drain that define it as a problem. This set of statements applies mostly to MEP discourse, as they are the actors raising brain drain as an issue. Vice versa, Table 3 displays the coding scheme used to analyze the statements that offer solutions to problems of brain drain. This set applies mostly to discourse from the EU institutions, in particular from the different Commissioners. Having said that, both MEPs and Commissioners did offer their own interpretations as to both problems and solutions, and in some of the ways that questions were framed, solutions were implicitly suggested. Both the problem and solution coding schemes were developed iteratively and in conversation with the interview data to ensure that codes captured crucial material while remaining mutually exclusive yet collectively exhaustive.

TABLE 3. Solutions – How are questions about brain drain answered?

Solution codes	Definition
<i>Austerity</i>	Countries should focus on restoring economic and financial stability as well as sound public finances
<i>Circular migration</i>	Brain drain is temporary, skilled workers will return home, remittances
<i>Cohesion policy</i>	Brain drain should be addressed through the use of the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, etc.
<i>Development</i>	Development programs and cooperation to invest in public services, health, infrastructure in developing countries
<i>Increase mobility</i>	Cross-border mobility is a fundamental right, increased intra-EU mobility can address brain drain and labor shortages (EURES)
<i>Job creation</i>	Create more jobs in sending countries, Youth Guarantee, Youth Employment Initiative, etc.
<i>Member States</i>	This is a member-state issue, and it is primarily their responsibility to resolve it, the European Semester
<i>Private sector</i>	The role of the private sector should be increased to address brain drain
<i>R&D</i>	Invest more in research infrastructure, research funding, innovation
<i>Refutation</i>	The existence of a brain drain problem is refuted on the grounds of evidence to the contrary
<i>Restrict mobility</i>	Intra-European mobility must be decreased to combat brain drain in sending countries and social dumping in receiving ones
<i>Skills and training</i>	Reforming education and training systems, upskilling, re-skilling
<i>Working conditions</i>	Improve pay and career prospects in sending countries, labor market reforms, social rights and security

The DNA software exports a matrix of coded statements that can be interpreted as a two-mode network that draws a link between an actor and a concept when that actor mentions it. Time points are given by dates of the posted questions and answers. From this two-mode network, one-mode concept networks can be computed such that a tie is drawn between two concepts when an actor mentions both. The weight of the tie is increased when other actors also mention both concepts or when the same actor does it again in a different text. When all ties have been drawn for a given period, a network emerges that can be interpreted as a

graphical visualization of the discourse. Central nodes are figure more frequently in the discourse and thick ties depict bundles of concepts that are often used together.

The software has been applied to a number of different policy debates in various settings, including climate change in the U.S. (Fisher, Waggle and Leifeld, 2012; Fisher, Leifeld and Iwaki, 2013), German pension politics (Leifeld, 2013b, 2016), software patents in the EU (Leifeld and Haunss, 2012), the independence of regulatory agencies (Ingold, Varone and Stokman, 2013), and policy change after school shootings (Hurka and Nebel, 2013).

By analyzing discourse networks, I do not mean to reduce the policy debate to an artifact of social network analysis in order to predict and generalize. Rather, I aim to open up the debate by providing an additional entry point for research and making the underlying relational and discursive structures more tangible as objects of study that can enter into a productive dialogue with other methods of analysis (Buch-Hansen, 2014). Controversies such as brain drain are 'reduction-resistant' (Venturini, 2010, p. 262) and are best explored through plural approaches that make complexity legible (Whatmore, 2009; Venturini, 2012; Marres, 2015).

Interviews

Coding parliamentary questions is a good way to get a bird's-eye view of the political conversation around brain drain as it evolves over time. But to gain a deeper insight into how brain drain is constructed and negotiated politically, interviews with key policy actors provide more detail and a different angle of attack. Table 4 provides an anonymized overview of interviewees by ranks, organizations, and dates interviewed. The Commission services represented by the interviewees include the Directorate-Generals for Employment (DG EMPL – the majority of interviewees were from here); Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship, and SMEs (DG GROW); Communications Networks, Content & Technology (DG CONNECT); and Education and Culture (DG EAC). Interviewees were identified through desk research and referrals. I sought a balance between think tanks, trade union representatives, employer organizations, and Commission personnel.

TABLE 4. Overview of interviewees by rank, organization, and dates interviewed

Rank	Organization	Date interviewed	Code
Senior Adviser	BusinessEurope	13 March 2017	B1
Research Fellow	Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)	09 March 2017	T1
Researcher	Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)	09 March 2017	T2
Member	ETUC Youth Committee	07 April 2017	U1
Member	ETUC Youth Committee	18 May 2017	U2
Member	ETUC Youth Committee	17 May 2017	U3
Senior Policy Adviser	EuroChambres	10 March 2017	B2
Senior Adviser	EuroCommerce	09 March 2017	B3
Director	European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (UEAPME)	15 March 2017	B4
Economic Data Analyst	European Commission	16 May 2017	E1
Policy Officer	European Commission	15 May 2017	E2
Former Commissioner	European Commission	23 May 2017	E3
Director	European Commission	16 May 2017	E4
Director	European Commission	19 May 2017	E5
Head of Unit	European Commission	18 May 2017	E6
Deputy Head of Unit	European Commission	15 May 2017	E7
Senior Expert	European Commission	15 May 2017	E8
Policy Officer	European Commission	16 May 2017	E9
Policy Assistant	European Commission	16 May 2017	E10
Deputy Head of Unit	European Commission	19 May 2017	E11
Deputy Head of Unit	European Commission	19 May 2017	E12
Senior Policy Analyst	European Policy Centre (EPC)	08 March 2017	T3

Advisor	European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)	10 March 2017	U4
Advisor	European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)	10 March 2017	U5
Senior Researcher	European Trade Union Institute (ETUI)	17 March 2017	U6
Senior Researcher	European Trade Union Institute (ETUI)	08 March 2017	U7
Political Advisor	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats	22 May 2017	P1

The interviews were not recorded to allow interviewees to speak more freely and at ease. Instead, I took extensive notes during the interviews and reflected on the content of each interview in field memos that were written immediately afterward. There is a balance between detailed records and more detailed off-the-record information when interviewing (Harvey, 2011). I opted for the latter to boost the potential for generating novel insights, and because detailed and carefully phrased records already exist in the form of parliamentary questions. Off-the-record interviews are a stronger complement to the parliamentary questions. I cite interviews in the analysis by referring to the codes given in the last column.

Analysis

I analyze the evolution of the European politics of brain drain over three stages defined with reference to the parliamentary periods given in Table 1. Stage 1 deals with the time period from 1999-2009 – the Prodi Commission (1999-2004) and the first Barroso Commission (2004-2009). Because there are only five questions asked about brain drain during the Prodi Commission, I merge this into Barroso I for expediency. Stage 2 runs from 2009-2014 (the second Barroso Commission). Separating Barroso I and II allows me to more closely map the effects of the Eurozone crisis (2009-2014) on the politics of brain drain, as these periods closely map on to each other. It also provides a better balance in terms of the amount of questions analyzed in each stage. Stage 3 from 2014-2019 (the Juncker Commission) is ongoing at the time of writing, and it shows that brain drain is still topical, even though the worst of the Eurozone crisis has passed for the time being. Each stage combines data from

the coding of parliamentary questions with interview data to provide a full account of the European politics of brain drain.

The six discourse network diagrams presented in the following were drawn in the Visone software (Brandes and Wagner, 2004). They are laid out according to degree centrality (concepts towards the center of the diagrams are mentioned more often) and thicker edge weights indicate stronger ties (concepts that are mentioned together more often). I deleted nodes mentioned fewer than three to five times in each diagram to increase legibility, retaining the codes that more strongly indicate the nature of the discourse during each stage and making their ties to each other more visible. Each stage contains two discourse networks: one for MEP questions and one for Commission and Council answers.

Stage 1: 1999-2009

The first stage of the analysis spans the years from 1999-2009, encompassing the Prodi Commission and the first Barroso Commission. As there were only five mentions of brain drain in the parliamentary questions during the Prodi Commission, I have included them alongside the first Barroso Commission. Because most of the interaction here is over a decade old, the analysis of this stage relies primarily on the parliamentary questions rather than interviews.

Figure 1 depicts the discourse network of MEP questions posed in this period. The most immediately apparent insight is that brain drain was discussed primarily as a problem of brains entering and exiting the Union, not as an intra-EU affair. We see this in the central placement of the 'Development' node and the second-most central 'Third country emigration' node.

The 'Development' node covers questions relating mostly to the impact of European development initiatives on the emigration of high-skilled labor from African and Asian developing countries. For example, Nirj Deva of the European People's Party (EPP) noted in 2008 (Written Question E-4120/08) that the Cotonou Agreement only allocated EU funds for primary education in developing countries, which does nothing to stem the tide of migrants leaving for better education opportunities abroad. Many of the questions also pertain to labor shortages in the health sector of African countries struggling with the HIV/AIDS epidemic (partly denoted by the 'Shortages' node). For example, Kader Arif of the Party of European

Socialists (PES) asked the Council (Written Question E-0524/07) whether any health policies in the area of development were being considered that would provide long-term solutions to the problem of lacking health workers in developing countries, particularly African countries where the number of health workers emigrating each year exceeds the number of newly-trained staff.

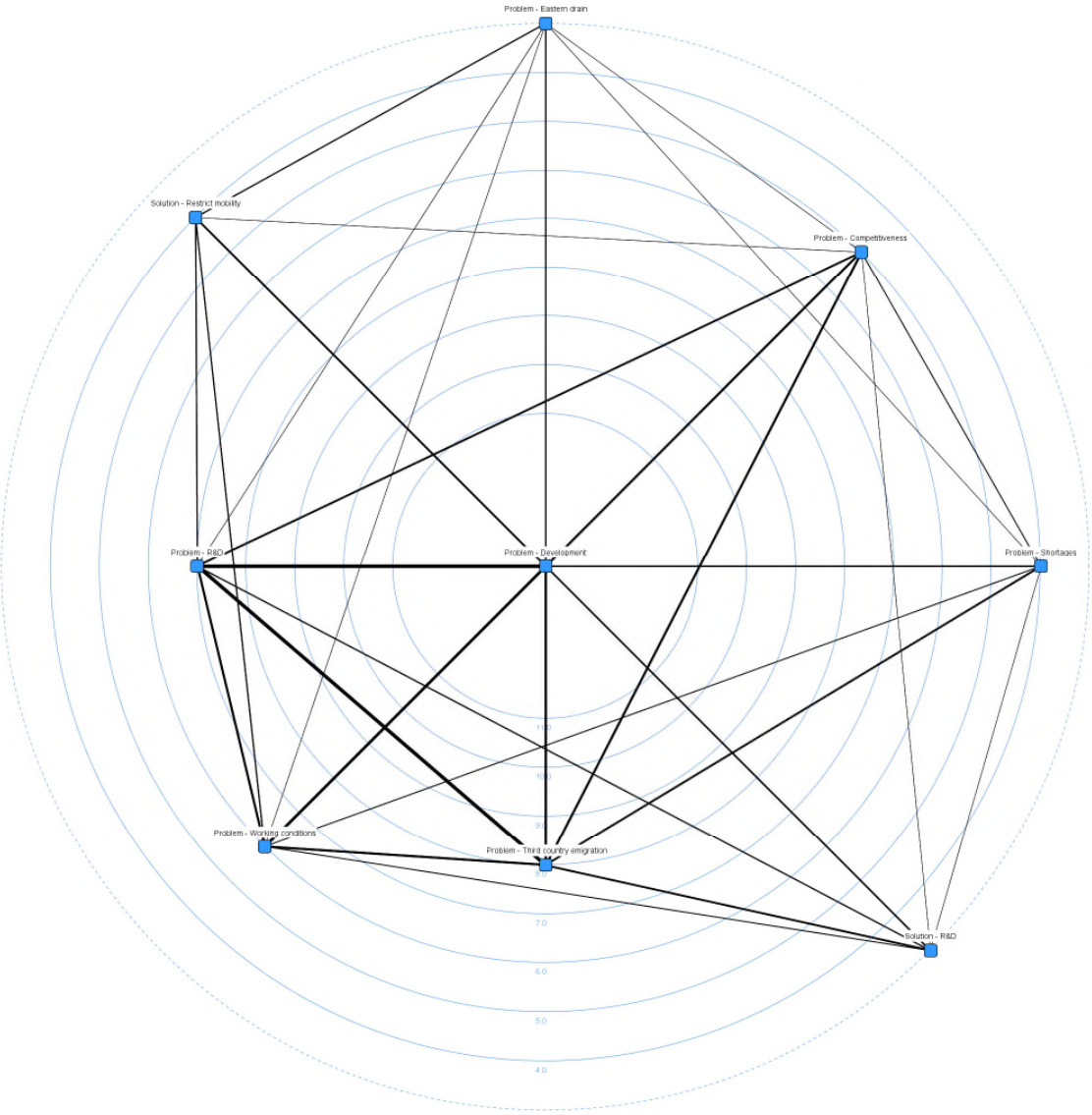


FIGURE 1. Discourse network of MEP brain drain questions: 1999-2009

Where the 'Development' node reflects concern with the EU draining from developing countries to the Single Market, the 'Third country emigration' node reflects concern with drains from the Single Market to other countries, primarily the U.S. This means that neither of the two most frequently asked questions in Stage 1 concerned intra-EU brain drain, which is surprising given that the period covers the years immediately following the 2004 enlargement. Concerns with third country emigration mostly concern the loss of European scientists to American universities and the related impact on the competitiveness of European research, innovation, and economy. For example, Brice Hortefeux of the EPP asked in 2003 (Written Question E-1248/03) how the Commission plans to address the statistic that 75% of European PhD students trained in the U.S. have no intention to return. These questions are closely related to the 'Problem - R&D' node, featuring frequent comparisons between low European spending on research and development and high American spending and also to the 'Working conditions' node, which covers comparisons between European and American working conditions and wages for researchers.

There are only three mentions of an Eastern brain drain in Stage 1 (E-0264/05, E-3941/06, and H-0700/06), and all are commenting on the potential risks of large scale emigration of skilled workers as the transitional measures are eased out following the 2004 enlargement. It is still too early at this stage to see any political repercussions of an Eastern drain, even if workers have already started moving.

Figure 2 depicts the answers given by the Commission and Council to questions posed in Stage 1. In response to the development problems identified by MEPs, the Commission defends the benefits of labor mobility through the concept of 'circular migration'. The argument goes, as illustrated by António Vitorino, Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs in the Prodi Commission in his response to Written Question E-2986/03, as follows:

In some cases, the costs of brain-drain seem to be more than compensated by other benefits for the sending country, such as remittances, transfer of know-how and the development of closer commercial links through the presence of natural persons. Policies that clearly define temporary status and encourage return are key measures to prevent possible negative effects.

This line is also followed during the first Barroso Commission where the standard response to development problems was to 'turn brain drain into "brain gain" (through circular migration and return programmes' (Commissioner for Development Louis Michel in answer to Written Question E-3333/06).

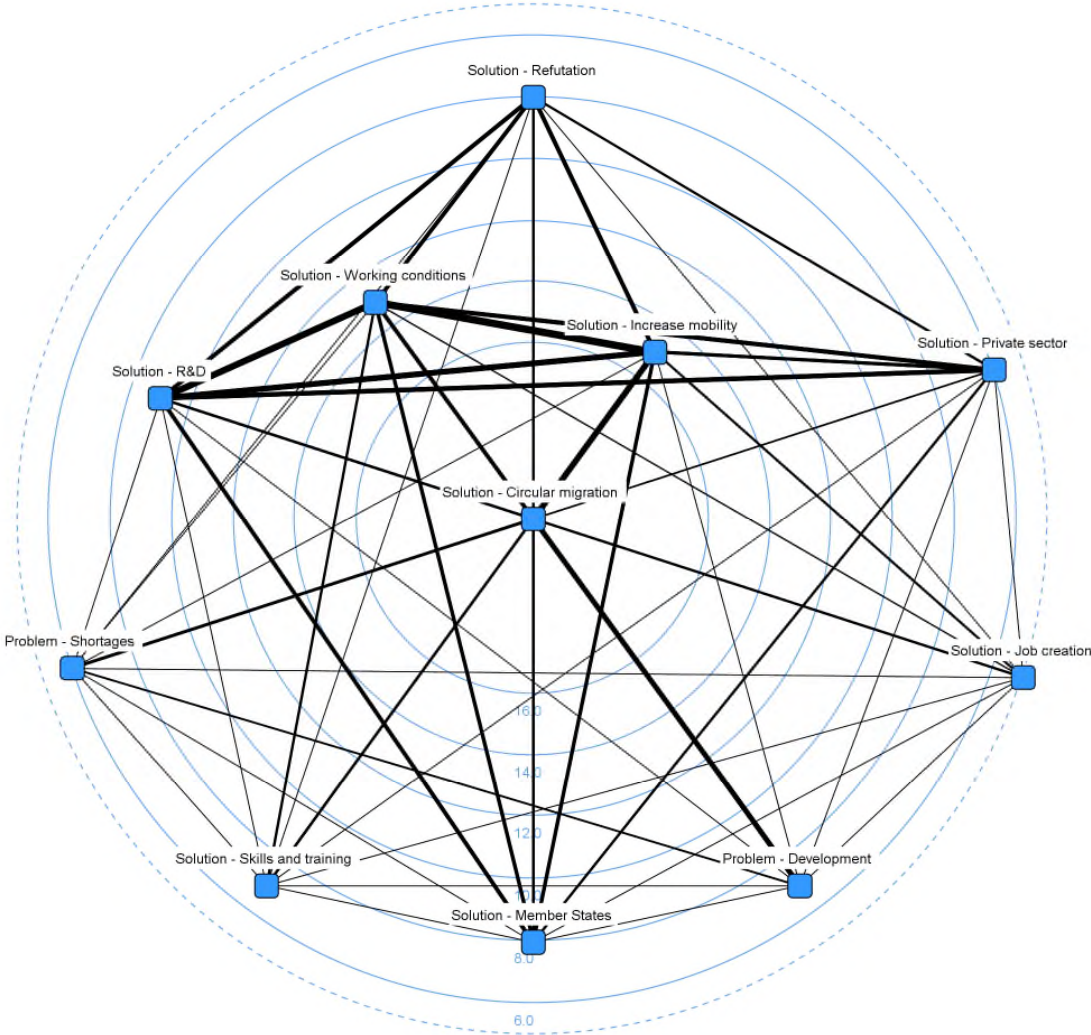


FIGURE 2. Discourse network of Commission/Council brain drain answers: 1999-2009

While migrants from developing countries are encouraged to return through circular migration arguments, the Commission response to questions of European research competitiveness is to increase mobility and encourage internationalization of researchers:

'The framework programme aims to make European research more attractive and to create more mobility for researchers. That is to be boosted by the People Programme, dedicated to structuring the mobility, training and career development of researchers throughout Europe. This is essential to help create a single labour market of researchers' (Commissioner for Research Janez Potočnik in reply to question H-0084/06).

There is no recognition that brain drain exists for European researchers within the Single Market – instead, mobility is integral to creating attractive work environments and careers in research. This is to be supported by increasing both public and private sector spending on R&D. The cluster of tightly integrated nodes in the top half of Figure 2 represent these arguments (R&D, working conditions, increase mobility, private sector).

We can summarize the first stage of brain drain politics as encouraging migrants from developing countries to send remittances and return home with new skills, but encouraging European researchers to circulate within the Single Market while upgrading their working conditions through investments in R&D. Some MEPs did bring up the notion that investments in developing countries are equally important for creating sustainable, long-term solutions to brain drain, but these arguments tended to be met by encouraging migrants to circulate and return. Although some programs entailing investments in the health sectors of developing countries were also brought forward, there is a much clearer and more interlinked discourse in support of raising investments and working conditions for European researchers. This marks a clear split in Commission discourse when confronted with two types of brain drain, one exiting the Union and one entering it.

When it comes to the few questions on Eastern drain, there is an illuminating exchange between Ján Figel, Commissioner for Education, Training & Culture, and MEP Justas Vincas Paleckis (PES) (H-0700/06). Paleckis wants to know whether the Commission will consider establishing a special fund to compensate new Member States that are sending specialists and qualified workers to the old Member States. Figel's response shows the split in Commission thinking that will come to define the European politics of brain drain in future years. After reasserting the sanctity of free movement, he makes two points: first, Eastern workers often stay for a limited time only, send remittances, and return home with new skills – this is the circular migration argument. Second, although some workers are draining from

East to West, highly educated workers in the West are leaving for the U.S. due to wage differentials: 'The problem of brain-drain, insofar as it exists, seems more linked to the salary differential between the country of origin and destination countries than to the quality of the education systems in migrants' countries of origin'. The answer to this problem, he says, lies in the good use of structural funds to ensure growth, job creation, and convergence to eradicate wage differences.

These two answers imply contradictory logics of action: circulation implies doing nothing (as in the case of developing countries), but wage differentials imply using the structural funds to invest (as in the case of third country emigration). The solutions to the problems of brains entering and exiting the Union are mirrored in the approach to intra-EU drain, where they exist side-by-side but with no clear preference, yet, for one or the other. Their juxtaposition creates a space of opportunities for EU action that spans laissez-faire to interventionist policies.

Stage 2: 2009-2014

The second stage begins with the Barroso II Commission in 2009. The enlargement is five years in the past and the financial crisis, soon to become the Eurozone debt crisis, is unfolding. Figure 3 depicts the discourse network of MEP questions asked during this stage.

Compared to Stage 1, the picture has changed completely. Considerations of brains entering or exiting the Union are relegated to the periphery – everything now is about youth unemployment in Europe. The 'Youth unemployment' node is very closely connected to the nodes on 'Economic crisis', 'Southern drain', and 'Problem - R&D'. As an example of a question illustrating this discourse, consider this intervention from Ioannis A. Tsoukalas of the EPP (Written Question E-007955/12):

The financial crisis in the EU has led many well-educated people to leave their country because of unemployment and the unavailability of well-paid jobs. Countries such as Greece have educated and trained their citizens at the expense of the state, yet because of the crisis are losing their most valuable asset: their skilled and qualified people. Recent reports show that not only young workers but also highly-skilled academics (the educators of generations to come) are leaving en masse. As a result of this massive brain drain, the return on investment from educating the workforce is very small for the countries hit hardest by the crisis, and hence there is very little incentive to invest in academic institutions.

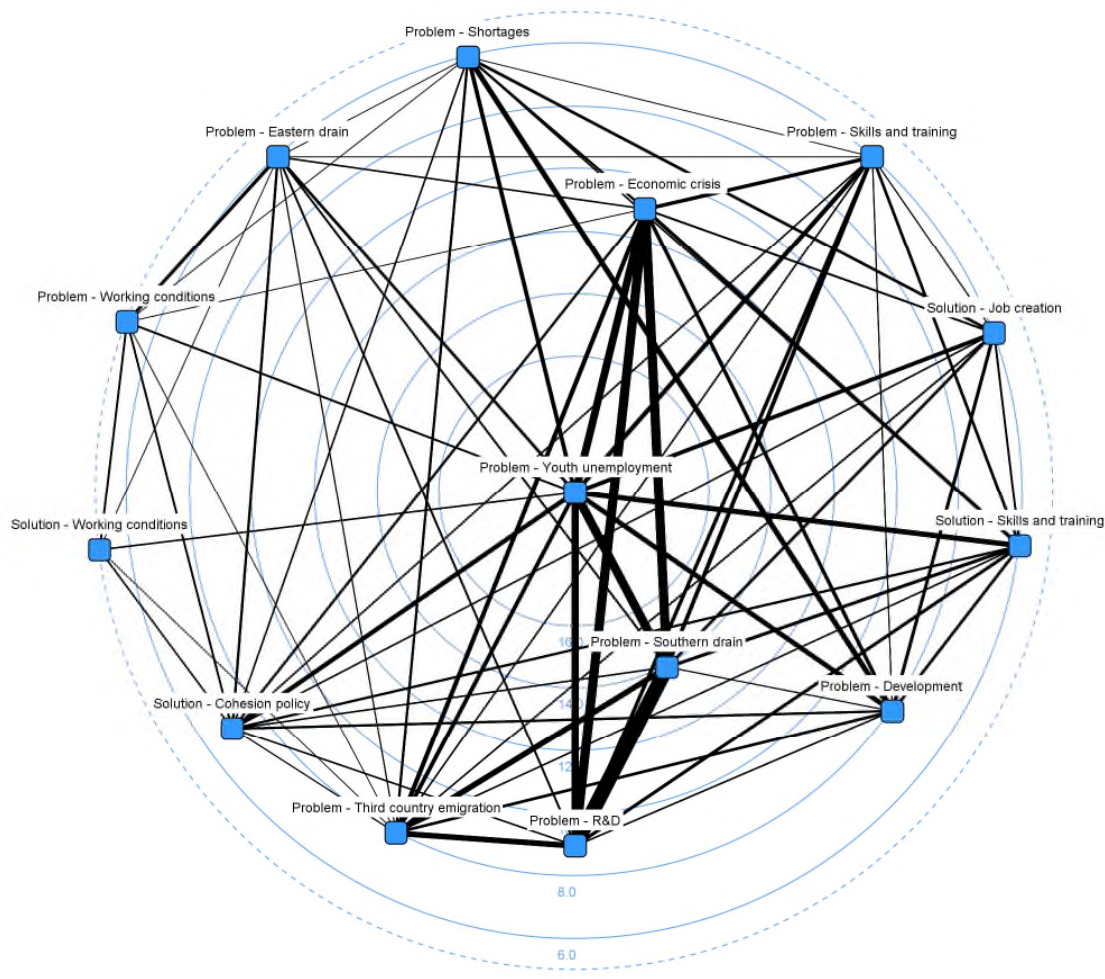



FIGURE 3. Discourse network of MEP brain drain questions: 2009-2014

During Stage 2, there is a clear understanding in the Parliament that brain drain primarily has to do with the flight of highly educated young people from Southern to Northern Europe as a consequence of high unemployment caused by the crisis. The Eastern drain is a more peripheral issue during this stage, and it is not strongly linked to the ‘Youth unemployment’ or ‘Economic crisis’ nodes. This supports research stating that Eastern countries were not particularly hard hit by the crisis compared to the Southern ones, with comparatively much smaller effects on migration patterns from the East, which are still driven by longer-running differences in wages and working conditions rather than short-term shocks to the labor markets (Galgóczy, Leschke and Watt, 2012; Barslund, Busse and Schwarzwälder, 2015;



Zaiceva and Zimmermann, 2016). That R&D figures relatively prominently in Stage 2 implies a connection to the Stage 1 questions that also brought up low levels of investment in Southern Europe – some MEPs may have seen an opportunity to frame these questions in a new light when already-identified problems are exacerbated by the crisis.

In terms of solutions, the MEPs show no clear preference for any one particular treatment and the menu of remedies spans job creation, skills and training, working conditions, and cohesion policy. The dynamic is mostly one of asking the Commission what they intend to do about the mounting problems. The split between cohesion policy as a solution on one hand and skills and training on the other echoes the division identified in stage 1 between circular migration and investment. Both of these divisions differ in where they place the burden for addressing the identified challenges: either it is a question about the supply of labor or the demand for labor. Training and circulation imply that when workers are skilled and mobile, labor will reallocate itself and the crisis will pass. But the arguments concerning cohesion policy or investment in R&D or in the health systems of developing countries follow a contradictory logic. Here it is a question about the demand side and addressing structural differences in economies through intervention. One does not necessarily rule out the other, but they entail different courses of action.

Looking at Figure 4, we find this division mirrored in Commission/Council responses, but with a clear preference towards supply-side thinking: the central placement of the ‘Increase mobility’ and ‘Skills and training’ nodes reveal this. The mobility argument in Stage 2 is that labor shortages, unemployment, and mismatches can be alleviated by encouraging people to move to a different Member State, meaning encouraging the movement from the high-unemployment South to the low-unemployment North. One of the tools for doing so is EURES, the European Job Mobility Portal, which is a network between the Commission and the public employment services of the Member States for matching jobseekers and employers across national boundaries. Especially the 2012 initiative ‘Your First EURES Job’ was specifically targeted towards young people as a response to the youth unemployment crisis. Labor mobility was seen as an ‘adjustment mechanism’ to alleviate economic shocks and a win-win proposition for both the South and North.

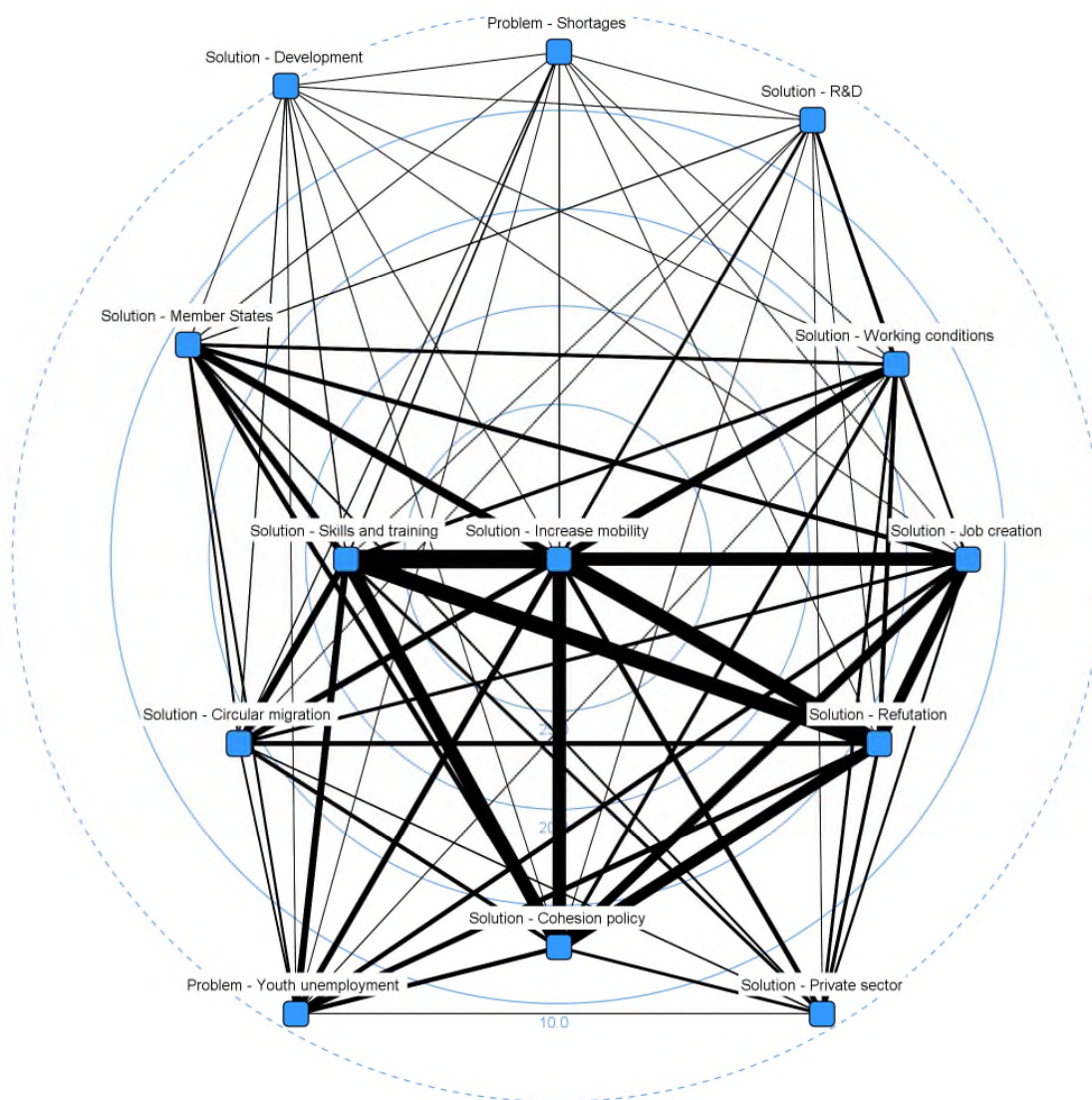


FIGURE 4. Discourse network of Commission/Council brain drain answers: 2009-2014

The mobility argument places the burden for addressing unemployment squarely on the shoulders of the unemployed, and this is bolstered by the ‘Skills and training’ argument. Part of the ‘Skills and training’ arguments were directly connected to increasing mobility, for example by using the Skills Panorama to identify skills mismatches and using the Professional Qualifications Directive to ensure cross-border recognition of skills (see Commissioner for Employment László Andor’s responses to Written Question E-006509/12). Transitions from school-to-work were also a central topic, partly through aligning education systems with labor market needs and developing practical training in companies (traineeships). The link from

here to the 'Job creation' node is explained by the Youth Guarantee program, which is a logical extrapolation of the emphasis on skills and training. The Guarantee was a commitment by all Member States to provide all youth under the age of 25 an offer of a job, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. It was funded by Member States and topped up by the European Social Fund and €6 billion Youth Unemployment Initiative.

On the surface, the Youth Guarantee shows how the strict separation between demand-side and supply-side interventions breaks down in complex policy environments where compromise, consensus, and working solutions are quickly needed. While the Guarantee is partly addressed at boosting the employability of workers, it is backed by cohesion policy funding to stimulate the crisis-stricken economies and create jobs. But when looking into the arguments covered by the 'Cohesion policy' node, nearly all of them concern the use of structural funds to reform and invest in national education and training systems and ease the transition of youth into labor markets. It is hard to read this as anything other than a continuation of the employability, supply-side logic that would see the crisis overcome by making youth more skilled and mobile. Missing from this logic are considerations of Eurozone governance, debt, and the structural macroeconomic differences plaguing the cohesion of the Union and the economies of the indebted South (Blyth, 2015).

Interview data supports the notion that the solution to unemployment during the crisis years was characterized by a consensus on using mobility to alleviate the shock.³ Brain drain considerations were secondary to the more immediate challenges of reducing unemployment levels and ensuring fiscal stability in the South: mobility contributed to solving both of those problems, and the expectation was that circular and return migration would upgrade human capital and productivity in the South after the crisis passed. Politically, this was understood as a center-right consensus, even within the Commission – theoretically, it was informed by neoliberal economics and the notion of optimal currency areas.⁴ Some interviewees referred to the idea of using labor mobility to alleviate economic shocks as 'textbook economics', which suggests the hegemony of this line of thinking.⁵

³ Interview E1, E3, E6, and P1.

⁴ Interview E3 and P1.

⁵ Interview E6 and E11.

Encouraging labor mobility during the crisis was one part of the remedy, but it was closely connected to the austerity doctrine. In the absence of a common Eurozone budget and limited scope for monetary policy, the only option for returning to fiscal stability was for the crisis-stricken countries to cut spending. The institutional setup of the Eurozone and the current budgetary rules make it impossible for Member States to carry out counter-cyclical policies such as stimulating their economies through spending or cutting interest rates on their own. This was the rationale underlying the TINA ('There is no alternative') arguments in support of austerity that were frequently communicated by DG ECFIN (Economic and Financial Affairs). Stronger intervention by the European Central Bank, as was suggested by center-left political groups, was not seriously considered, because labor mobility was seen as a sufficient corrective to the shock.⁶ Some characterized this as a 'German perspective' that held up American levels of labor mobility as the target – something that will be difficult to achieve in a Union of 24 languages and diverse social systems.⁷

Naturally, there was resistance to this center-right consensus from other parts of the political spectrum and certain Member States. Some people were quick to point out that relying overly much on mobility as a corrective would impair the ability of the crisis-stricken countries to recover and rebuild; Portugal and Ireland, for example, never accepted the notion that sending people abroad was complementary to a recovery at home.⁸ There was also the concern that if the best-educated leave, then you risk the future sustainability of pension systems and welfare states.⁹ The Youth Guarantee can be seen as a corrective to this, but whether it was up to the task or sufficiently ambitious was a matter of debate. Other criticisms called for an enlarged role for EU structural funds and cohesion policy to address the macroeconomic differences between Member States. When Portugal and Spain joined the Union in 1986, there was a massive expansion of the structural funds on the understanding that an ambitious program of investments was required to accelerate macroeconomic

⁶ Interview P1.

⁷ Interview E3.

⁸ Interview E3.

⁹ Interview P1 and E11.

convergence. Due to concerns about the cost of doing so, a similar expansion of structural funds did not follow the Eastern enlargement.¹⁰

The issue of brain drain during the crisis years drives two points home: the EU-level treatment of brain drain is inseparable from the policy response to the Eurozone crisis – and the policy response to the Eurozone crisis displays the inseparability of political preferences and economic assumptions. The low scale of EU labor mobility makes it possible to maintain assumptions of circular migration as a driver of convergence. Doing so makes it possible to maintain political preferences against fiscal transfers and counter-cyclical policies. There is a coherence here in terms of fast versus slow-moving brain drain trends and policy responses. The crisis required a fast response (mobility plus austerity) that worked within the set institutional and logical limits of the bureaucracy, and this co-produced (shaped and was shaped by) a fast drain of skilled Southern migrants moving north. The slower-moving Eastern trend allows greater scope for exploring the tensions within the Commission between contending political preferences and economic assumptions, which I look more closely at in the next section.

Stage 3: 2014-2019

In Stage 3, we have put the worst of the crisis years behind us, but the EU has not emerged entirely unscathed. Following the 2016 Brexit vote, labor mobility has only become increasingly contentious. According to many interviewees, it is in these most recent years that brain drain has featured most intensely in debates and communications between the EU institutions – something corroborated by the increasing number of parliamentary questions bringing up the issue. Brain drain is just one aspect of labor mobility's 'dark side'; other sides include welfare tourism and social dumping, topics that are the mirror image of brain drain reflected in the receiving countries. The ascendance of all three of these issues alongside the Brexit vote suggests that the taboo of questioning the win-win proposition of labor mobility has been broken in the EU.

Figure 5 displays the discourse network of MEP brain drain questions during Stage 3. The network, unlike the others, is not organized around any central node. Instead, we can discern

¹⁰ Interview E11.

two different sets of interlinked nodes representing two different discourses: one is an axis comprised of the Southern drain, economic crisis, and austerity problem nodes, and the other is an axis comprised of the Eastern drain, working conditions, and shortages problem nodes. The first set is a continuation of the discussion observed during Stage 2, but now with less emphasis on youth and more emphasis on questioning the austerity remedy (Southern MEPs were in no position to challenge austerity earlier, but now the consensus is eroding). The second set shows that it is only recently that Eastern Europe has gotten more vocal in calling attention to the negative externalities of labor mobility.

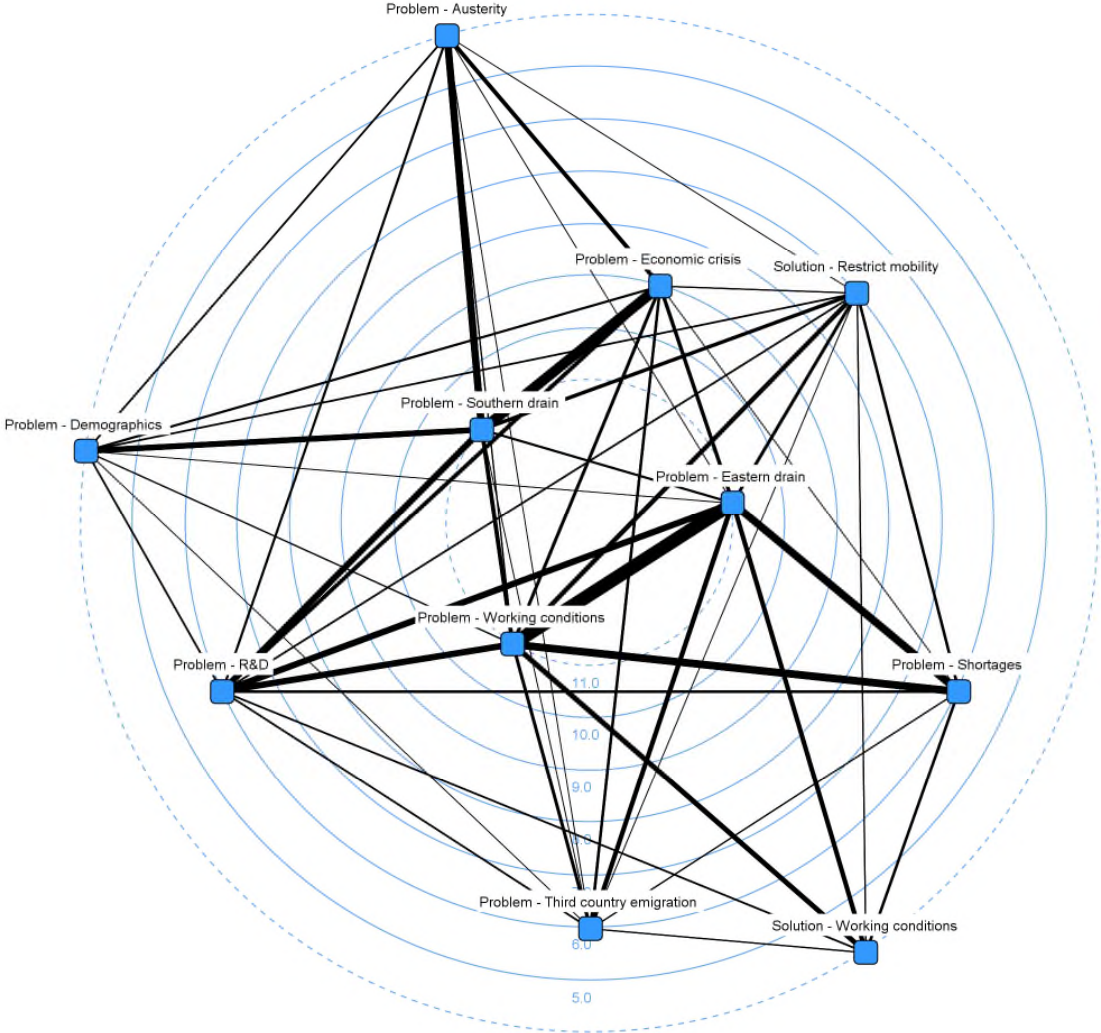



FIGURE 5. Discourse network of MEP brain drain questions: 2014-2019



We can also observe that the Southern and Eastern drains are understood as distinct problems in MEP discourse: the Southern one as exacerbated by the economic crisis and austerity and the Eastern one as driven by the gap in wages and working conditions. Labor shortages are also more frequently identified in the East, particularly in the area of health. Problems of R&D spending and demographics are connected to both the East and the South, but demographics are more frequently mentioned in connection to the Southern drain. After the immediate shock of the crisis years, MEPs are now looking further into the future and concerning themselves with questions of long-term sustainability and convergence.

When we look at Commission/Council responses, depicted in Figure 6, a continuation in thinking from the second Barroso Commission to the Juncker Commission can be identified. The calls to increase European labor mobility remain the most dominant argument, and this node is tightly interlinked with the ‘Cohesion policy’ and ‘Skills and training’ nodes. The only difference is that cohesion policy has swapped places with skills, moving closer into the center of the discourse. When looking into the content of cohesion policy arguments, we find that they are still oriented towards employability and skills. For example, Commissioner for Research Carlos Moedas, in his answers to Written Questions E-010225/15 and E-003247/15, notes that cohesion policy funds are being used by several Member States to fund doctoral training programs. Commissioner for Employment Marianne Thyssen, in her answers to questions E-001947/15, E-008851/15, and E-015052/2015, also notes that cohesion policy funds support investments in education, training, and school-to-work transitions. Brain drain is clearly constituted in terms of supply-side employability policies. This makes it unsurprising that the first official policy action to address intra-EU brain drain finds its home within the New Skills Agenda for Europe. The Skills Agenda contains ten actions aimed at upgrading European human capital in support of employability, growth, and competitiveness. The actions include such initiatives as a Skills Guarantee, a review of the European Qualifications Framework, and a ‘Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition’. On the topic of brain drain, the Communication announcing the Agenda notes that ‘better local interaction between education and training on the one hand and the labor market on the other, supported by targeted investment, can also limit brain drain and help develop, retain and attract the talent needed in specific regions and industries’ (European Commission, 2016a, p. 11). Action

8 in the Communication proposes a further analysis of the issue of brain drain and the sharing of best practices as regards effective ways of tackling the problem.

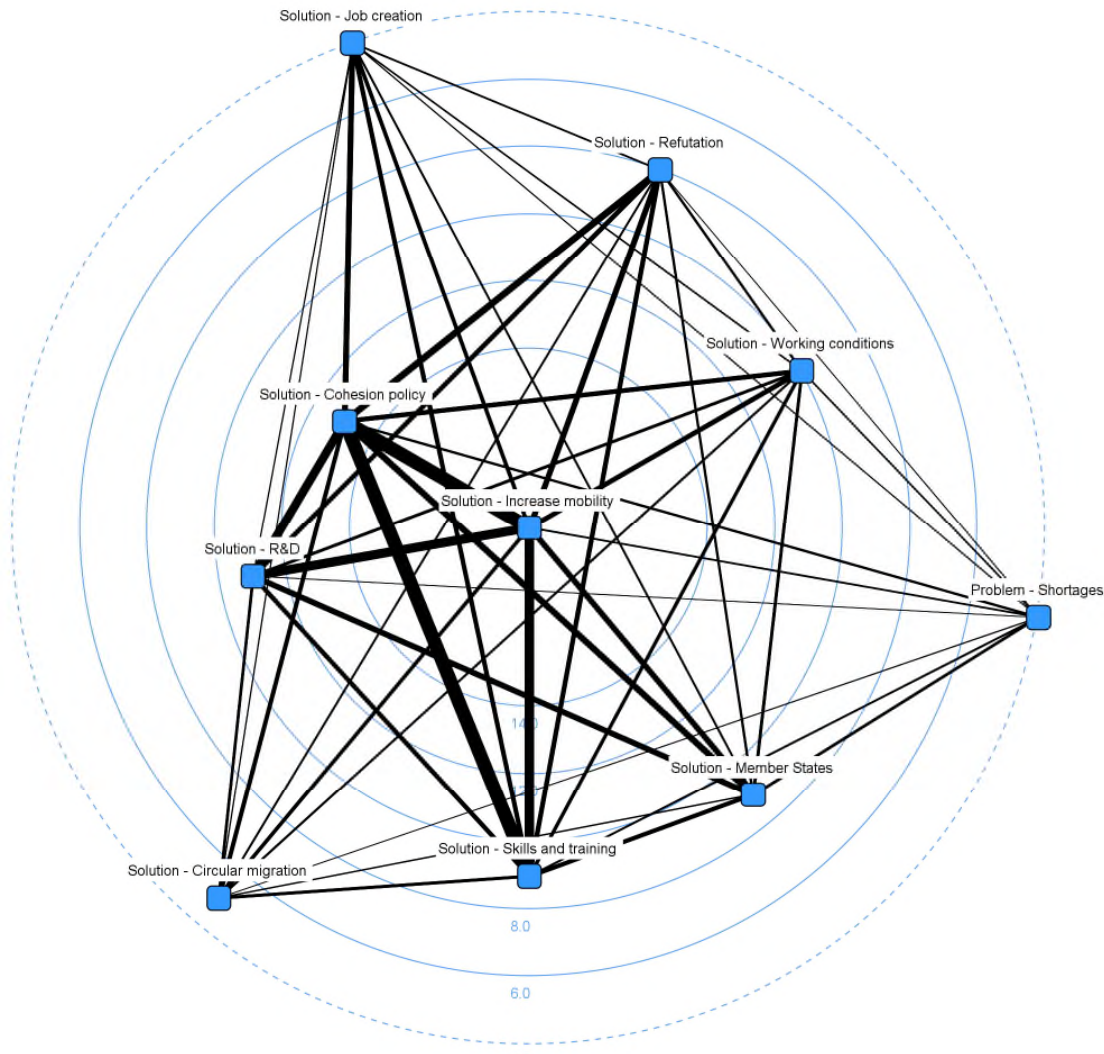


FIGURE 6. Discourse network of Commission/Council brain drain answers: 2014-2019

In the current political climate, brain drain has become entirely subsumed to the question of skills and skills mismatches in particular. According to the Skills Agenda, mismatches in skills are one of the main obstacles in the way of European employability, competitiveness, and growth: ‘Skills gaps and mismatches are striking. Many people work in jobs that do not match their talents. At the same time, 40% of European employers have difficulty finding people with the skills they need to grow and innovate’ (European Commission, 2016a, p. 2).

The connection to brain drain is that a closer link between education systems and the labor market will ensure that graduates quickly find a job. The argument goes that when the supply and demand for skills is mismatched, brain drain occurs. We can also find this argument in the 2015 version of the Employment and Social Developments in Europe report: ‘In addition to global competitive challenges, future EU growth will be under greater pressure due to the steady decline of the working-age population in most EU Member States, which may combine or exacerbate skills mismatch in regional labour markets, often resulting in brain drain’ (European Commission, 2016b, p. 14).

Whether skills mismatches result in brain drain was a question that interviewees disagreed on. Employer organizations are convinced that this is the case,¹¹ and they were joined in that analysis by several Commission staff.¹² The trade union representatives, on the other hand, do not believe skills to be strongly connected to brain drain, finding it a too individualistic take on the problem. Instead, they would highlight the lack of high quality jobs in the sending countries as the main driver, alongside a need for higher wages and better working conditions.¹³ There were several other Commission staff who agreed with this sentiment, saying that the impact of the Skills Agenda on brain drain would be negligible at best and highly uncertain.¹⁴ Upskilling Europeans is certainly not a bad idea, but the limited spending and competence in the area of skills means that macroeconomic factors are much more likely to be in the driving seat. There is no straightforward way of explaining the split in positions on this between different Commission staff – disagreements were observed within the same service and unit.

In light of this internal disagreement, an important question to answer is: why is brain drain addressed within the Skills Agenda? When asked about this, interviewees agreed that it was a top-down command issued on the basis of the political situation in the Baltics, especially Lithuania and Latvia. Emigration and brain drain was described as the most important political area in these countries, on the level of the refugee crisis.¹⁵ Valdis Dombrovskis, the current Latvian Commission Vice-President for the Euro and Social Dialogue, was instrumental in

¹¹ Interview B1, B2, B3, and B4.

¹² Interview E2, E5, E7

¹³ Interview U1, U2, U3, U4, and U5.

¹⁴ Interview E1, E4, E6, E9, E10

¹⁵ Interview E9.

putting this on the agenda at the highest level of the Commission.¹⁶ That it was inserted into the Skills Agenda rather than some other policy seems to be more of an accident of timing and expediency, although we have to note the strong coherence here with the preferences of employer organizations and the longer-running discursive dominance of a mobility and skills logic, already identified in Stage 2.

The fact remains that there are at least three different answers as to which policy area should be addressing brain drain, and the answers depend on who you ask. If you ask employer organizations, the answer is the Skills Agenda specifically, and education and training systems generally. If you ask trade unions, there is more emphasis on the transportability of social security systems, workers' rights, job creation and wages – this places brain drain under the social pillar. If you ask economists and other technical experts (inside or outside the Commission), the answer is cohesion policy and macroeconomic governance of the Eurozone.¹⁷ The range of answers shows the scope for framing brain drain towards preconceived political ends, and the uncertainties and controversies surrounding the issue have precluded experts from asserting ownership of the issue. Because of this, a political mapping and discussion of the evolution of the policy debate, as represented here over three stages, should help policymakers and scholars reflect on the value of checking how economic assumptions and political preferences cohere among involved stakeholders.

Discussion and conclusion

Mobility is the most tangible and most popular of the EU's fundamental freedoms, and it plays an indispensable role in fostering better life opportunities for citizens and economic growth for states. Labor mobility is not very high in the EU, all things considered, and the Commission and other policymakers are right to work towards increasing the stocks and flows of intra-European migration. I want to stress that to map the politics of brain drain is not to argue for a reduction in the freedom of movement. Rather, the study should be seen as a recognition that a serious engagement with the political implications of labor mobility's negative

¹⁶ Interview E1, E9, and E10.

¹⁷ Interview T1, T2, P1, E3, and E11.

externalities is paramount if we want to continue to enjoy European freedom of movement in face of mounting political pressures.

After providing a statistical overview of the state of intra-European labor mobility and the difficulties of assessing brain drain, I conclude that the European politics of brain drain are better approached discursively due to the uncertainty, controversy, and open-endedness of the issue. I conducted the analysis according to a qualitative multi-method logic (Lamont and Swidler, 2014), relying equally on parliamentary questions and interviews, as well as the documentary record of policy initiatives and communications related to brain drain. Such an approach overcomes the four challenges I identified with studying brain drain politics at the European level: multiple interpretations, multiple policy initiatives, interaction on the issue spanning at least two decades, and interactions that connect domestic politics to the EU level.

I analyzed the evolution of brain drain politics over three different stages: 1999-2009, 2009-2014, and 2014-2019. Engagement during the first stage mostly concerned the drain of brains into and out of the EU: skilled workers (mostly African doctors) entering the Union, or researchers leaving for the U.S. Nonetheless, some preliminary interaction over Eastern European drain following the 2004 enlargement did occur, and in the treatment of all three of these types of brain drain, I identified a tension between laissez-faire and interventionist policy responses. The analysis of Stage 2 revolved around youth unemployment and the Eurozone crisis. Here, I reflected on how the center-right consensus on a remedy of mobility plus austerity can be understood as a fast response to a fast-moving crisis that worked within the set parameters of institutional and political logics – but this response also evoked resistance from the center-left, who mobilized around the need for updating EU mechanisms to allow for counter-cyclical policies.

We might initially be surprised that a monumental event such as the Eastern Enlargement did not lead to greater attention within the Parliament to the risks of brain drain already in the first stage analyzed here (1999-2009), but we can answer this puzzle in several ways. First, as discussed in the statistical section, there were no numbers available on which to base criticisms or orient discussions around. More systematic collection and presentation of data did not begin until later, with the biggest milestone perhaps being the publication by the Commission of the first Employment and Social Developments in Europe report in 2011.

Second, some interviewees also suggested that we should expect a time lag from the inclusion of new Member States until they start to assert themselves in higher-level political games due to socialization and learning. The strong standing of several ambitious Eastern politicians in key positions in Juncker's cabinet would go some way to explaining the current recognition of brain drain. Finally, in the years following the Enlargement, Western countries also had the option of threatening to prolong transitional measures if Eastern countries worried too loudly about brain drain. For all of these reasons, we should not be surprised that the politics of brain drain took a while to manifest themselves more centrally.

This split between left and right politics, or Keynesian and neo-liberal economics, is mirrored within the Commission itself. In the Stage 3 treatment of brain drain under the umbrella of the Skills Agenda, this division also has to be navigated. Although the supply-side, employability logic still seems to dominate the Commission's work on brain drain, the interviews revealed that these assumptions were increasingly being questioned by people both inside and outside the Commission. Several interviewees within DG Employment mentioned that there were two schools of thought, or that the service was 'walking on two different legs': that of mobility and cohesion.¹⁸ Mobility proceeds from the assumption that convergence will happen automatically and labor movements are a win-win; but cohesion policy admits that structural differences have to be addressed to ensure those win-win outcomes. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but in the policy imagination and default mindset of interviewees, work often proceeded from an assumption of one or the other and overlaps or complementarities between cohesion and mobility work are seldom sought. The slower-moving Eastern drain provides an opportunity for a productive engagement with the contradictory logics.

There is a different reason why the framing of brain drain as skills mismatch may be wide of the mark. The assumption that more or better education or training will help potential migrants find work in their home countries seems to be contradicted by the statistical conclusion that most Eastern European migrants are already overqualified for the work they carry out abroad (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt, 2009). Increased schooling does tend to help individuals find better work, but the belief that every labor problem on a societal level can be

¹⁸ Interview E3, E4, E11

solved by increased schooling has been strongly questioned – Grubb and Lazerson (2004) refer to the blind faith in this idea as the ‘education gospel’. Aside from this, the Skills Agenda, by emphasizing technical and digital skills, risks missing the potential opportunities in devoting more attention and resources to emotional labor, an area where robots and algorithms will struggle to replace human workers (Gershon, 2017).

Did the Eurozone crisis open the space for policy imagination regarding brain drain or close it down? A fast response required ‘fast’ or ‘hot’ knowledge, with little time to check assumptions and debate alternatives (Tsingou, 2014; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2016, 2017). But the crisis also brought up structural problems of the Eurozone and made them vulnerable to challenges. On the other hand, the supply-side, employability solution to brain drain, which emerged during the crisis, is still the dominant approach today. Governance mechanisms to address the slow-burning aspects of brain drain have not been updated at all. The crisis gave rise to a number of micro-level tools and policies that are but a drop in the ocean compared to the larger-scale structural forces driving the slow-moving drain. The Commission should seize the opportunity to think long-term about the state of labor mobility and brain drain and avoid the temptation to send political signals, such as couching brain drain within the Skills Agenda, that are unlikely to do much to impact the larger-scale macroeconomic drivers of brain drain.

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