

...

The food industry and the processing industry survived the 1990s, and the University of Szeged– Hungary’s second largest–strengthened its position as an important educational centre. Technology-oriented sectors, ICT, life sciences and laser technology, are also present, as are shared-service centers. Hungary’s EU accession in 2004 brought significant amounts of subsidies to the region, supporting thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises and public institutions. Negative demographic processes were more or less counterbalanced by a positive internal migration rate, while international net migration rates oscillated around zero. Data from 2016 suggest that this trend is changing: significant net immigration (847 emigrants, 2,035 immigrants and 490 returnees) was registered in Szeged. At the same time, the local population projection shows that within two decades Szeged may lose 2-6% of its population due to emigration and the related decrease in the number of births. Immigration to Szeged is shaped by an influx from neighbouring Serbia and Romania, where a large share of the population is ethnic Hungarian on the one hand, and foreign students studying at the University of Szeged (around 2,000 persons), on the other. Around 6,000 Serbian-born, and around 3,000 Romanian-born persons live in the city, adding up to 5.6% of the population – however, most of them are Hungarian speakers who are not really perceived as ‘immigrants’. Emigration is also significant: after EU accession and especially after 2009, an increase of outbound youth migration was recorded, mainly to the United Kingdom, Germany and Austria. With some years of delay, the number of returnees has also started to rise.

Mostly due to the presence of non-European students at the university, locals are aware of the ‘immigration phenomenon’, and if they see a young person with non-European physical characteristics, they usually identify them as university students. This has been helpful in creating a generally positive attitude towards young immigrants in Szeged, as their arrival is perceived as beneficial to the city. However, several interviewees pointed out that foreign students usually remain isolated from mainstream society and they rarely stay in Szeged after completing their studies. Internal migration is also important, as many young students come from other parts of Hungary and Szeged youth also migrate within the country, mostly to the capital, Budapest. Internal migration is often seen as a first stage of international migration. The basic motivations for leaving are hopes of better wages, while decisions of return are largely for emotional reasons (elderly family members, starting a family).

The integration of non-Hungarian speakers to the labour market is difficult, and frequently returnees also face administrative and informational difficulties. Without fluent Hungarian only top jobs are available; on the other end of the scale, seasonal agricultural jobs around the city are often taken by workers coming from Romania and Ukraine. Emigration is seen as general in all social groups. Local institutional actors agree that higher wages attract young people from Szeged to Budapest, Western Hungary or foreign countries. Their assessment of this, however, varies. Some interviewees pointed out that they find emigration a natural consequence of wage gaps and the freedom of movement, even if they would prefer to keep Szeged youth at home to contribute to the city’s development. Others would like to create opportunities for remote work, with employers based abroad. An especially problematic area is health care, where, according to several interviewees, the lack of professionals is almost critical. Young, ethnic Hungarian immigrants from northern Serbia generally were positive about Szeged which they found more developed than their home regions. Most of them are here for education: encouraged by their parents to study in Hungary. Bonds are strong with the family left on the other side of the border: a young interviewee spends every weekend in his hometown with his girlfriend, who remains in Serbia. Young emigrants, on the contrary, become more detached from their families. Many families find it too expensive to pay for university studies abroad, hence an Erasmus semester only is more usual than obtaining a full degree. Still, after graduation, many young people leave Szeged. In their self-representation, the economic dimension is strong, but they also emphasise goals like adventure or personal and career development. Regarding administration, interviewees and focus group participants agreed that officials should be trained about migration-specific issues. These mainly relate to practical information on social security, civil and business registers and taxation. It was pointed out that staff responsible for nursery schools at the municipality, who are in direct contact with young immigrant parents and their children, could play a role in making ties more personal with administrative employees. Szeged’s in-betweenness comes from an underdeveloped institutional framework for immigrant integration (compared to Graz) and a considerable but not massive emigration (compared to Sf. Gheorghe). In a city with such prospects, the local council is more inclined to adopt policies aimed at immigration, due to the fact that immigrants are already there, and they are more present in the daily life of the city than emigrants, whose return cannot really be influenced by the municipality.