

Health care

Flight of the white coats

Why Balkan doctors emigrate

HEALTH-CARE systems everywhere are buckling because of covid-19. In south-east Europe, rising infection rates are hammering systems that were already run-down. Balkan doctors and nurses have been emigrating for years. The main reason is that conditions at home are poor. Pay is low, graft is rife and hospitals are often run by venal political appointees. Jobs in western Europe seem cushy by comparison.

In Bucharest, Romania's capital, 27 people died when a nightclub caught fire in 2015, but four months later the toll had risen to 64. Many had been killed by hospital infections attributable to corruption. Disinfectants had been so diluted that they had virtually turned to water. In a new documentary about the scandal, Vlad Voiculescu, briefly Romania's minister of health, says that since taking the top job he has realised that everything underneath him "is rotten...corrupt, demotivated. They don't give a fuck about anything out there."

One consequence is that nearly 5,000 Romanians now work for England's National Health Service. But Mr Voiculescu could have been speaking for the entire region. In 2019 there were 50,000 citizens of the six non-EU Balkan countries working in Germany's health-care system, two-thirds of them Bosnians and Serbs. In spring, when the pandemic struck and borders closed, Austria laid on special transport to bring in hundreds of Bulgarian, Croatian and Romanian health workers.

Balkan tabloids sometimes claim there will soon be no more doctors and nurses left in their countries. But the story is not as simple as that. Romania actually has 21% more doctors than it did a decade ago, while in Bulgaria the numbers are stable. Since 2013 almost 6,000 Bosnian nurses have gone to work in Germany on just one official scheme, yet more than 7,500 nurses back home are unemployed.

In the past few decades more people in the Balkans have been studying medicine than ever before, not least because it is a good way to land a well-paid job abroad. There are not enough jobs for those who stay behind, however, and those that exist are often unattractive. In Romania few doctors want to work in remote regions or be general practitioners, who are badly paid.

Some local medical training is poor. Serbian colleges churn out nurses with patchy knowledge. Gorica Djokic, a leader of Serbia's doctors' union, says that some



who "can't tell if a patient is asleep or in a coma" are employed in hospitals to make up for those who have gone abroad. As for doctors, she identifies two problems that are common across the region. Those most likely to emigrate do so at the beginning of their careers or are sought-after specialists. The average age of doctors who stay in Serbia, she says, is 55.

To stanch the flow of emigrants, health services have raised doctors' wages. In Romania they have tripled in the past few years. Alexandru Radu, aged 22, is a fourth-year medical student. When he thought he would be paid only a couple of hundred euros a month in his first job, he "100%" planned to go abroad. Now, with a chance to earn €1,000 a month in his home country when he graduates, he says: "I really want to stay here." ■

Azerbaijan's ghost towns

Bitterness prevails

BAKU

It will be hard to soften the hatred between Azeris and Armenians

THERE IS PLENTY of farmland in Fuzuli, one of Azerbaijan's districts that ring the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. But there is nothing to harvest. Where wheat and grapes once grew, unexploded rockets sprout from the ground at odd angles, reminders of the vicious fighting that tore through the area in the autumn. The charred hulks of tanks remain. A cratered road snakes through a wasteland of villages and towns abandoned after an earlier bout of violence three decades ago. Thousands of landmines lurk underground.

Farther north in Agdam, once an Azeri city of 40,000 people, Aide Huseynova, a pensioner, snaps photos of a ruined 19th-century mosque. She escaped from Agdam in 1993, during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, fleeing before an Armenian offensive. About 1m people, most of them Azeris, were displaced in the fighting. Now, for the first time since then, she is back. Yet there is nothing left for her to see, bar a sea of rubble and crumbling walls that stretches for miles in every direction, looking like the aftermath of a nuclear attack. The mosque is the only building left standing. "My heart aches," says Mrs Huseynova. "I don't want to see it at all."

In a campaign that lasted over six weeks and ended with a ceasefire on November 9th, Azerbaijan recovered the seven districts, including Fuzuli and Agdam, that Armenian forces had occupied since the 1990s. (Most of Nagorno-Karabakh, still populated almost exclusively by Armenians, remains in the separatists' hands.) At least 5,000 people were killed in the recent fighting. Human-rights groups have called on both sides to investigate reports of war crimes, including videos that appear to show executions and other atrocities committed by Azerbaijani troops.

The devastation inflicted on Azeri towns during the 27 years under Armenian control will be hard to undo. The Armenian separatists who ran Nagorno-Karabakh used the districts once occupied by Azeris as a buffer zone and a future bargaining chip, making many of them uninhabitable. Buildings were bulldozed. Looters took anything the former residents had left behind. Some put the cost of reviving these ghost cities at as much as \$15bn, though Azerbaijan's government has yet to make an estimate. It could take seven years to demine the districts, says Hikmet Hajiyev, an aide of Azerbaijan's president.

Many Azeri refugees from the disputed enclave are destitute, while Azerbaijan's upper class prospers because of plentiful oil. In a shabby block of flats on the edge of Baku, the capital, Aliyev Karim Hasimoglu, a former metal-worker from Fuzuli, shares a single room with four relations. He says he wants to live long enough to rebury a brother, who died in the first Karabakh war, in their ancestral village. He has spent the past 25 years in the same room; 20 other refugee families live on the same floor. Three communal bathrooms serve about 100 people. Paint peels from the walls, pipes leak and cigarette butts litter the staircases. Mr Hajiyev says his government spends \$1bn a year on the refugees, but many say that is not enough.

Mrs Huseynova says she had Armenian neighbours before the war, but would curse them if she saw them again. "As an Azerbaijani citizen from Agdam, I don't want to live next to them." ■