Economic woes spark Lithuania brain drain

In his family’s Soviet-era apartment, Robertas Yla is getting ready to say goodbye. His bag is packed with gifts but the mood is sombre and subdued. His mother tries not to cry. This was just a brief visit to his homeland. His home for the last ten years with his wife and children has been Dublin, Ireland.

I couldn’t imagine that I would stay in Lithuania and work for nothing and support my family. Normally I’d pay a lot for pampers and everything, like for nappies and all the food for babies is so expensive there, you know.

In 2010 a record 80 000 Lithuanians emigrated. In 2011 another 54 300 left the country. It sounds small but that was 1.5 % of the population, and 60 % of those leaving were aged between 15 and 34. Lithuania’s economy has been as slow-moving as the frozen river Neris in the capital Vilnius. GDP shrank by a staggering 15 % in 2009. Unemployment leapt above 17 % last year. However, the optimistic Prime Minister says that there are numerous projects now drawing educated Lithuanians back home. For example, the Lithuanian club in London is helping bring people back to work in Lithuania - because they have a good education, they have good expertise from working in some global companies, and they are coming back and bringing what is very much needed in Lithuanian development.

Indeed, an unscientific straw poll in a nearby coffee shop revealed mixed opinions: ‘I want to do something big and I don’t see how I can do it here’.

Others were less pessimistic:
‘I love my country actually and I don’t think there is a better life in the other countries than in Lithuania’.

There are positives to emigration: better qualifications; vital international experience. Lithuanians overseas sent over 1.5 billion dollars home to their families in 2010. There is no getting away from the downsides. The latest economic data are actually rather good; the outlook for Lithuania is promising. But a full recovery will take a considerable time. And Robertas and tens of thousands of Lithuania’s brightest and best are simply not prepared to wait.