

THE NEW GLOBAL CONTEXT OF MIGRATION: DEMOGRAPHY OF THE FUTURE AND THE VISION OF FULL EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract: This study presents a detailed examination of contemporary migration trends in the Western Balkans, with particular focus on the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia. Its primary purpose is to analyze the demographic structure, age and gender distribution, and citizenship composition of migrants, while identifying the economic, social, institutional, and geographic factors influencing mobility in the region. The study aims to provide insights into the implications of labor migration for domestic labor markets, regional development, and the management of human capital. Employing a retrospective observational methodology, the research relies on official statistical data provided by national agencies, including the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, covering the most recent years with available data. Descriptive statistical methods were applied to assess totals, age and gender distributions, and to compare trends between citizens returning from abroad and foreign nationals, with particular attention to working-age populations. The results reveal that young and middle-aged adults constitute the majority of migration flows in both countries, with male foreign immigrants predominating in Serbia, whereas returning citizens in North Macedonia show a more balanced gender distribution. Migration patterns are driven by limited professional opportunities, regional disparities, labor market segmentation, governance quality, social attitudes, and geographic factors, including rural depopulation and local economic structures. The study highlights the persistent risk of brain drain, particularly among skilled professionals, alongside potential benefits of human capital mobility, such as knowledge transfer and network development. Conclusions emphasize the need for holistic demographic and migration policies that integrate economic, social, and institutional considerations, ensuring both the quantity and quality of employment, promoting retention of skilled workers, and fostering equitable professional opportunities. Recommendations include the implementation of targeted strategies to mitigate adverse effects of emigration, enhancement of institutional and governance frameworks, and the strategic use of international mobility to support regional economic growth and social stability. Additional insights underline the importance of future research incorporating longitudinal and qualitative approaches to capture personal, cultural, and socio-economic motivations behind migration, which can inform evidence-based policy interventions and labor market planning. Overall, the study provides a solid foundation for proactive policymaking and long-term strategies designed to balance mobility with sustainable economic development and social cohesion across the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Human mobility patterns, labor mobility, demographic trends, brain drain, socioeconomic factors, Western Balkans.

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Human migration has been a central aspect of societal development throughout history. The process began around 8000 BCE with the spread of agriculture from Southwest Asia into Europe, intensified during the Middle Ages along Eurasian trade routes such as the “Silk Road,” and expanded further following the discovery of the Americas in the 16th century (FAO-IPPC, 2016). In recent decades, international migration has accelerated, with the number of migrants rising from approximately 77 million in 1960 to around 244 million by 2015, increasingly concentrated in high-income countries (Batalova, 2023).

The Western Balkans countries have historically been significant source countries for labour emigration. Even during the Cold War, citizens of Yugoslavia enjoyed relative freedom of movement compared to other communist states, and labour emigration continued. The conflicts and ethnic tensions of the 1990s further reinforced migratory networks throughout Europe, creating enduring population shifts and shaping contemporary migration patterns (Kupiszewski, Kicinger, Kupiszewska, & Flinterman, 2009).

The Western Balkans countries have experienced significant emigration waves in recent decades. After World War II, three major waves shaped regional migration patterns. The first occurred in the early 1960s, driven by high unemployment in Yugoslavia and open migration policies in European countries. By the mid-1970s, around 1.1 million mostly young and low-skilled workers had left Yugoslavia, primarily moving to Germany, forming large diaspora communities. The second wave, during the 1990s, was largely forced, triggered by the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, while the third ongoing wave, since 2010, has been motivated by economic and democratic challenges, the global financial crisis, and favorable EU

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migration policies, including visa liberalization. These combined emigration trends, along with low fertility rates, have contributed to population decline and aging in these countries. Since 1990, populations have dropped by approximately 9% in Serbia, 10% in North Macedonia, 24% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 37% in Albania. The number of emigrants has doubled over this period, reaching 4.6 million by 2019, representing up to 45% of the resident population in some of these countries (except Serbia, 14%) (Icoski, 2022).

Today, structural challenges in the region—such as labour shortages, declining rural populations, and limited professional opportunities for young adults—continue to drive emigration, particularly among skilled workers (Silovska Nikolova, 2023). National strategies have been implemented to retain talent; however, their practical impact remains limited, leaving many young professionals to seek opportunities abroad. Regional migration patterns indicate that the emigration of qualified young professionals is not limited to North Macedonia. Neighboring countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia (Kosovo) have also experienced an increasing number of young professionals, particularly in the healthcare sector, seeking employment abroad. Limited opportunities for professional development in their home countries often drive these outflows, while the perceived higher salaries and living standards abroad further motivate migration, even though young professionals may not fully assess the actual benefits they will gain (Kacani, Trunk, Qorraj, & Shaqiri, 2025).

The question arises whether the accession of Western Balkan states to the European Union will trigger similar migration patterns as observed after the EU entry of Central European countries, when Bulgarians and Romanians moved westward in large numbers (Jashari & Elezi, 2014). Current examples, such as the high demand for skilled tourism workers in Croatia and the Adriatic coast of Montenegro, illustrate that labour mobility will likely continue to be a defining feature of the region. Employment policies, temporary contracts, and structural measures aimed at reducing unemployment among youth, women, and vulnerable groups are being implemented, yet their effectiveness remains uncertain (Jashari & Elezi, 2014).

Understanding historical and contemporary migration trends in the Western Balkans is therefore crucial for anticipating future labour market needs and designing policies that balance mobility, economic development, and social stability. This research provides a foundation for exploring the determinants of migration, the dynamics of labour mobility, and the implications of brain drain for regional development, particularly in the context of ongoing EU integration and post-communist economic transformation.

This research is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the materials and methods, describing the use of secondary statistical sources from Serbia and North Macedonia, the focus on working-age populations, and the descriptive analytical approach. Section 3 details the results, including demographic characteristics, age, sex, and citizenship of immigrants. Section 4 discusses the findings in relation to theoretical frameworks, socio-economic factors, and regional migration trends. Finally, Section 5 provides conclusions, policy implications, and recommendations for future research, emphasizing the interaction between labor mobility, economic development, and social stability in the Western Balkans.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on secondary sources of information, including official statistical data from national institutions in Serbia and North Macedonia, covering the most recent years available. For Serbia, immigration data by age, sex, and municipality were obtained from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2023). For North Macedonia, similar data including both citizens returning from abroad and foreign nationals were collected from the Migration Statistics publication by the State Statistical Office (2021).

The study focuses on immigrants aged 0–64, with particular attention to working-age groups (15–64). Data were categorized by age groups and sex, and totals were calculated for both citizens and foreigners. Comparative tables were constructed to facilitate the analysis of migration flows between the two countries.

Data analysis involved descriptive statistical methods, including totals, distributions by age and sex, and comparisons between citizens and foreign nationals. No experimental procedures were applied, and all data were publicly available. The study follows a retrospective observational approach, allowing for a clear presentation of recent immigration trends in the Western Balkans.

3. RESULTS

In 2023, the Republic of Serbia recorded a total of 19,181 foreign immigrants aged 15–34 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). The largest share of immigrants was in the 30–34 age group (7,592), followed closely by the 25–29 age group (7,057) and the 20–24 age group (3,384). The 15–19 age group accounted for the smallest share, with 1,148 immigrants. Across all age categories, males (14,134) outnumbered females (5,047), representing 62–66% of immigrants depending on the age group. This predominance of males indicates that labor-oriented migration continued to dominate in Serbia, particularly in sectors traditionally employing more men, such as construction and manufacturing. The highest numbers observed in the 30–34 age group suggest that recent migrants were primarily young adults in the early stages of their professional careers.

In 2018, the Republic of North Macedonia recorded a total of 2,455 immigrants, comprising 1,346 citizens returning from abroad and 1,109 foreign nationals. The largest shares of immigrants were in the 15–29 and 30–64 age groups. Among foreign immigrants, males outnumbered females, while the gender distribution among returning citizens was more balanced. In 2019, a total of 2,591 immigrants were recorded, including 1,417 citizens and 1,174 foreigners, showing a similar distribution by age and sex as in 2018. These figures suggest a trend of young professional migration from North Macedonia, whereas the relatively balanced gender composition among returning citizens may reflect additional motivations, such as family reunification or education-related returns.

Comparing the two countries, Serbia experienced substantially higher numbers of foreign immigrants than North Macedonia, highlighting differences in migration attractiveness and labor market opportunities. In both countries, the working-age population (15–64) constituted the vast majority of immigrants, emphasizing the economic drivers behind migration. The consistent age and gender patterns observed over multiple years indicate that migration flows in the Western Balkans were stable and largely predictable, providing useful insights for policymakers aiming to address labor market shortages and plan for social services.

The tables below present detailed data on immigrants by age, sex, and citizenship status for both Serbia and North Macedonia, highlighting key demographic characteristics and providing a basis for further discussion on regional labor mobility and brain drain phenomena.

Table 1: Immigration of foreigners in the Republic of Serbia by municipality, sex, and age groups in 2023

Republic of Serbia	2023			
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34
Age groups				
Total	1,148 (100%)	3,384 (100%)	7,057 (100%)	7,592 (100%)
Male	717 (62%)	2,238 (66%)	4,326 (61%)	4,853 (64%)
Female	431 (38%)	1,146 (34%)	2,731 (39%)	2,739 (36%)

Source: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/1811010103?languageCode=sr-Cyrl>

Table 2: Immigration to the Republic of North Macedonia by citizenship, sex, and age groups

Republic of North Macedonia	Group	Sex	Age 0–14	Age 15–29	Age 30–64
2018	Total	Women	87	568	635
		Men	76	632	814
	Citizens	Women	-	40	141
		Men	-	19	115
	Foreigners	Women	87	528	494
		Men	76	613	699
2019	Total	Women	64	678	578
		Men	64	796	877
	Citizens	Women	-	31	115
		Men	-	15	133
	Foreigners	Women	64	647	463
		Men	64	781	744

Source: https://www.stat.gov.mk/publikacii/2021/Gender%202021.WEB.pdf?utm_source.com

4. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of immigration flows in Serbia and North Macedonia revealed distinct patterns in terms of age, gender, and citizenship status, highlighting the predominance of young and middle-aged adults among recent migrants. In Serbia, foreign immigrants were predominantly male, with males representing 61–66% across age groups. The largest shares of immigrants were observed in the 25–29 (37%) and 30–34 (40%) age groups, while the 15–19 age group accounted for only 6% of total immigrants, indicating that migration is concentrated among young adults in the early stages of their careers. In North Macedonia, the majority of foreign immigrants were also young and middle-aged, with notable differences between citizens returning from abroad and foreign nationals: returning citizens showed a more balanced gender distribution, whereas foreign nationals were predominantly male. The 15–29 age group constituted the largest proportion of migrants in both 2018 and 2019, representing roughly 45–50% of total immigrants, while older adults (30–64) made up around 35–40%. These patterns reflect the mobility of the working-age population in both countries and align with broader regional trends observed in the Western Balkans, where economic, professional, and social opportunities strongly influence migration decisions. Overall, the demographic composition of migrants suggests that labor mobility is concentrated among individuals in their most economically productive years, emphasizing the role of migration in shaping both domestic labor markets and broader societal structures.

The migration of young and middle-aged professionals can be seen not only as a response to market dynamics but also as a strategic mechanism for optimizing human capital and expanding employment opportunities. There exists a vast pool of underutilized social resources – technological, scientific, educational, organizational, cultural, and psychological – that, if mobilized effectively, could dramatically increase the availability of jobs. In a globalized labor market, conventional nation-centered approaches to employment are often insufficient; what is needed is a human-centered, worldwide perspective that recognizes the central role of employment in promoting economic well-being (Jacobs & Slaus, 2011). Furthermore, demographic trends in many developed regions indicate stagnation or decline of the working-age population, highlighting the increasing importance of mobilizing available talent – including through migration – to achieve full employment. In the Western Balkans, for instance, the substantial inflow of young immigrants to countries such as Serbia (aged 25–34) and the predominance of male migrants (61–66 %) illustrate how labor mobility can contribute to better utilization of human capital and help realize broader employment goals on both regional and global scales.

According to data from the National Employment Service, a total of 34,573 work permits were issued in 2022 to foreigners with temporary residence in Serbia. This figure represents a 5.5-fold increase compared to 2015, with a consistent annual growth rate of around 30%. In terms of educational attainment, most work permits were granted to individuals with levels III, IV, VII-1, and I of vocational qualifications. This indicates that migrants in Serbia are predominantly employed in the secondary sector, consistent with the segmented labor market theory. According to Nikolić (2023), the situation is expected to become

more challenging in the coming years, as unemployment is projected to approach the natural rate of unemployment—essentially, full employment—by the end of this decade. Such labor market conditions imply accelerated wage growth, potentially exceeding productivity growth, which could, in turn, slow down GDP expansion (Nikolić, 2023).

Conversely, the more balanced gender distribution among returning citizens in North Macedonia may reflect a wider variety of migration motivations, including family reunification, professional development, temporary labor mobility, and education-related travel. Such distinctions underscore the importance of considering both economic and social factors when analyzing migration flows in the region.

Economic, institutional, and governance factors appear to play a central role in shaping migration patterns. The neoclassical theory of migration emphasizes potential economic gains as the primary driver, while institutional theory highlights the influence of governance quality and institutional frameworks on individual migration decisions (Molnar, Ostojić, & Jovanović, 2024). Limited prospects for improving living standards, low wages, regional disparities, and perceived corruption act as additional push factors, encouraging migration even among highly skilled populations. The Western Balkans serve not only as countries of origin but also as a key transit region for migrants heading toward the European Union. Their geographic position between East and West, combined with visa-free regimes with the EU, has facilitated relatively rapid and low-cost migration flows (Zečević, 2022). During recent migration waves, the majority of migrants were young, many traveling with family, and originated primarily from conflict-affected countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Push factors such as armed conflict, generalized insecurity, and limited access to basic services, along with pull factors like safety, employment opportunities, and better living standards in destination countries, continue to shape migration behavior. These dynamics illustrate that migration patterns in the Western Balkans are influenced not only by domestic socio-economic conditions but also by broader regional and international factors, including EU policies and geopolitical developments.

These observations are consistent with the migration hump hypothesis, which suggests that emigration initially rises with economic development, reflecting both structural labor market shifts and individual aspirations, before stabilizing as domestic opportunities expand and socio-economic conditions improve (Buettner & Muenz, 2020).

Cultural, social, and geographic dimensions further contextualize these trends. Media discourse often frames migration metaphorically, representing it as a “flooding crisis” or other natural disaster-related imagery, which can influence public perceptions and, indirectly, individual decision-making processes (Gorchev, 2022). In North Macedonia, the hilly and mountainous terrain shapes the rural economy and labor market, contributing to the emigration of skilled professionals seeking better career prospects abroad (Blazhevski, 2021), (Silovska Nikolova, 2023). Social attitudes, cultural frameworks, and regional identity, particularly within the South Slavic linguistic area, also inform how migration is perceived and experienced, affecting both the propensity to migrate and the reception of migrants within local communities (Muhić, Blaženović, & Hadžiahmetović Jurida, 2025).

Brain drain constitutes another critical aspect of migration in the region. While it may generate positive economic effects in certain contexts, such as the transfer of knowledge or capital accumulation, it can also lead to negative externalities, particularly in low-income regions where the outflow of skilled individuals limits domestic capacity and innovation (Mohamed, Amer, & Fattah, 2024), (Jovcheska, 2024). In North Macedonia, where approximately 20% of young people perceive corruption as a significant barrier to professional advancement, migration is often viewed as the most viable pathway to career development and economic stability (Blazhevski, 2021). The 2021 national census further highlighted the magnitude of this issue, showing that the country’s population had decreased by around 200,000 compared to the 2002 census, with migration, rather than natural demographic factors like declining birth rates, identified as the main driver of this decline (Samardžiev, 2022), (Taravari, Rexhepi, & Asani, 2025). These findings illustrate how structural, institutional, and demographic challenges intersect with individual aspirations to shape migration behavior and influence broader socio-economic trends.

Despite the insights provided, this study has certain limitations. The analysis relies primarily on official statistics, which may not fully capture informal or undocumented migration flows. Additionally, longitudinal and qualitative data on migrants’ decision-making processes were not available, restricting the ability to fully understand personal, cultural, and socio-economic motivations behind migration. Incorporating such data in future research could yield a more comprehensive understanding of migration dynamics, enabling more effective policy interventions and labor market planning.

Overall, the findings indicate that young and middle-aged adults constitute the core of migration flows in both Serbia and North Macedonia. Economic opportunities, institutional quality, labor market demands, social perceptions, geographic conditions, and educational factors collectively shape migration

patterns. These insights have significant implications for workforce planning, rural development strategies, and policy formulation aimed at mitigating negative effects of migration while leveraging the benefits of human capital mobility across the region. Understanding the interaction between economic, social, and institutional drivers of migration is essential for developing sustainable approaches that address both the challenges and opportunities presented by international mobility.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study provides a comprehensive analysis of recent migration trends in Serbia and North Macedonia, focusing on the demographic composition, gender distribution, and citizenship status of migrants. The findings indicate that young and middle-aged adults constitute the majority of migration flows in both countries, reflecting the mobility of the working-age population and the central role of economic and professional opportunities in shaping migration decisions. In Serbia, the predominance of male foreign migrants highlights the influence of labor market segmentation, whereas the more balanced gender distribution among returning citizens in North Macedonia suggests a broader spectrum of migration motivations, including family reunification, professional development, and education-related mobility.

Economic, institutional, and social factors collectively influence migration patterns. Limited prospects for improving living standards, low wages, regional disparities, and perceived corruption act as significant push factors, while institutional quality and governance frameworks affect the decision-making processes of potential migrants. Geographic and social conditions, including rural depopulation and the structural characteristics of labor markets, further shape migration dynamics, contributing to the emigration of skilled individuals from areas with limited economic opportunities. Additionally, media discourse and cultural frameworks influence public perceptions of migration, which may indirectly affect individual migration behavior.

The implications of these findings are complex. Policymakers must consider not only the quantity of employment opportunities but also the quality of work and the alignment of job structures with labor market needs. Efforts to mitigate the negative effects of migration, such as brain drain, should focus on creating sustainable professional opportunities, improving institutional and governance quality, and fostering conditions that encourage retention of skilled workers. At the same time, the potential benefits of human capital mobility, including knowledge transfer and the development of international networks, should be leveraged for regional development.

In conclusion, effective demographic and migration policy requires a holistic approach that integrates economic, social, and institutional dimensions. Sustainable strategies should aim to balance labor market expansion with decent working conditions, equitable access to professional opportunities, and the retention of human capital. By addressing these interconnected factors, Western Balkan countries can better manage migration dynamics, reduce negative externalities, and harness the potential of international mobility for economic and social development. Future research should continue to explore the interplay of these determinants, incorporating longitudinal and qualitative data to deepen understanding of migration behavior and inform evidence-based policy interventions.

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