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Germany Calling

How Emigration is Changing the Western Balkans

BY ANJA TROELENBERG AND FRANZISKA TSCHINDERLE

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Preface and Introduction

Migration policy tipped the scale in multiple elections in 2024. In the European elections, in the three federal state parliamentary elections and the local elections in Germany, and in the National Council election in neighbouring Austria: in all of these, migration emerged as a major campaign issue, for parties all across the political spectrum. Antiliberal parties, like Germany's AfD and BSW, benefited substantially from this, and it even resulted in a shift to the right in Austria.

This past May, the European Council adopted the European Pact on Migration and Asylum,^[1] which is aimed at improving the efficiency of migration management. Discussions are currently underway in Brussels on concrete measures for a more restrictive common European migration and asylum policy.^[2] In a fear-stoking discourse on migration, Europe's conservative parties are letting right-wing populists to shove them towards an increasingly radical isolationist policy. A case in point: in October, the European People's Party, the European parliamentary group of the centre-right (MEPs from the CDU and CSU are members) supported a motion by the extreme right-wing Europe of Sovereign Nations group (AfD MEPs are members) calling for increased funding for «physical barriers» on the EU's external borders and the set-up of «return hubs» outside those borders.^[3]

Skilled immigration vs. asylum-seeking – an obsolete dichotomy?

In the discussions about improving migration management, there are some key points that are not receiving the attention they deserve. For instance, Germany's long dependence on labour migration, as well as those of other EU countries and, these days, of some countries in non-EU Europe as well. The division of migrants into skilled immigrants, who are welcome here, and refugees, who are overburdening our resources, seems oddly out of touch with a reality in which artificial bureaucratic barriers are preventing people from integrating into the workforce. Foreign workers are contributing substantially to the alleviation of Germany's skills shortage in several areas, and it is thanks to them that the catering and construction industries and medical and nursing care sectors are still up and running. Yet bureaucratic hurdles continue to hinder a swift entry into employment by many people who

1 See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/eu-migration-asylum-reform-pact>, 24.10.2024

2 See <https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/phoenix-parlament/eu-parlament-zur-steuerung-der-migration/phoenix/Y3JpZDovL3Bob2VuaXguZGUvNDYzOTI4Mg>, 23.10.2024

3 See <https://x.com/onethuthree/status/1849458547223830605>, Thu Nguyen, 24.10.2024

are ready and willing to work. Professionals who work in this area are adamant in their view that over-management is forcing migrants and asylum seekers into the social security systems. The reason why migrants are not drawing on their own strengths to make their own living is that they are not permitted to do so; work permits are tied to residence status.^[4] The high level of language skills required to start work in fields where such proficiency is not absolutely necessary is another obstacle to a rapid move into employment. Ulrich Kober, a migration expert from the Bertelsmann Stiftung, sees a need for action on visas, digitization, naturalization and dealing with diversity.^[5]

Emigration from the Western Balkan countries – one of the region's greatest challenges

Another aspect receiving short shrift in the debates in Germany is that of the impacts of emigration on the countries of origin. This paper is devoted to the flow of migrants out of the countries of the Western Balkans. The WB6,^[6] as they are known, have historically been countries of emigration and have large diaspora communities in Western Europe. Although surrounded by the EU geographically, none of them have seen the prospect of EU membership, explicitly acknowledged in 2003, become reality. Instead, they are seeing and experiencing large-scale emigration.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation has been active in the Western Balkan region for 30 years and now has three offices there: the Sarajevo office is the base for activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, the Belgrade office is active in Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, and the Tirana office is responsible for activities in Albania. The region's greatest policy challenges are the unstable and adverse conditions, which leave many people with no reasonable medium-term expectation of a satisfying quality of life for themselves or their children. Political life in the Western Balkans continues to be characterised by authoritarian, and in many cases corrupt, structures in the political, economic and media spheres, a situation often summed up with the term «state capture». Oppositional forces, critical voices from the civil population and free media are frequently the targets of repression. There is rising dissatisfaction, including among the less-politically engaged population groups, with the inadequate social security, education and health systems. The

4 Olaf Jansen, head of the foreigners authority for the Federal State of Brandenburg in „Grenzen der Zuwanderung«, a documentary film by Olaf Sundermeyer, rbb24, Reportage 23.10.24

5 <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/topics/latest-news/2023/march/germany-falls-behind-in-international-competition-for-top-talent>

6 The «Western Balkans» is a political umbrella term for the six countries in Southeast Europe that are not yet part of the EU but have membership aspirations: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

brain-drain has become a labour drain, as people of a wide range of ages and qualification levels leave the country.

This research dossier was written by Anja Troelenberg and Franziska Tschinderle, both based in Tirana, Albania, who are frequent travellers within the Western Balkans in their roles as journalists and freelance writers. We wish to express our sincere gratitude to them here for their research.

In «Germany Calling», they have been able to answer numerous questions about emigration from the region: Who is leaving the Western Balkans and how many of them are there? How many of them are coming to Germany, and what migration pathways are they using to do so? What impacts, risks and opportunities does their departure create for the countries they are leaving behind? Which segments of the German economy are benefiting, and where are occupation-specific workforce gaps being created in the Western Balkan countries? The result is an interesting publication that we can strongly recommend.

Berlin, November 2024

Katja Giebel

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1 Emigration from the Western Balkan Countries

The Western Balkan states (WB6)^[7] have traditionally been countries of emigration, and they have large diaspora communities in Western Europe. Many migrants from Albania are concentrated in Italy and Greece, whereas those from the other Western Balkan countries, formally parts of Yugoslavia, tend to live in Austria, Germany or Switzerland, though there are also many in Scandinavia.

While emigration and the factors that drive it do figure in the migration debates going on in the receiving countries, there is very little discussion there about emigration's impacts on the sending countries.

As candidates for accession to the EU, the countries of the Western Balkans are continually urged to effect reforms. Yet how are they to carry out such reforms when the well-educated and trained people are leaving the country? The states benefiting from this emigration are the same states, Germany among them, that are demanding the reforms.

A heated debate about migration is currently underway in Germany. One which often ignores the reality that it is skilled and less-skilled workers from abroad who are keeping the country's construction industry and the health system up and running.

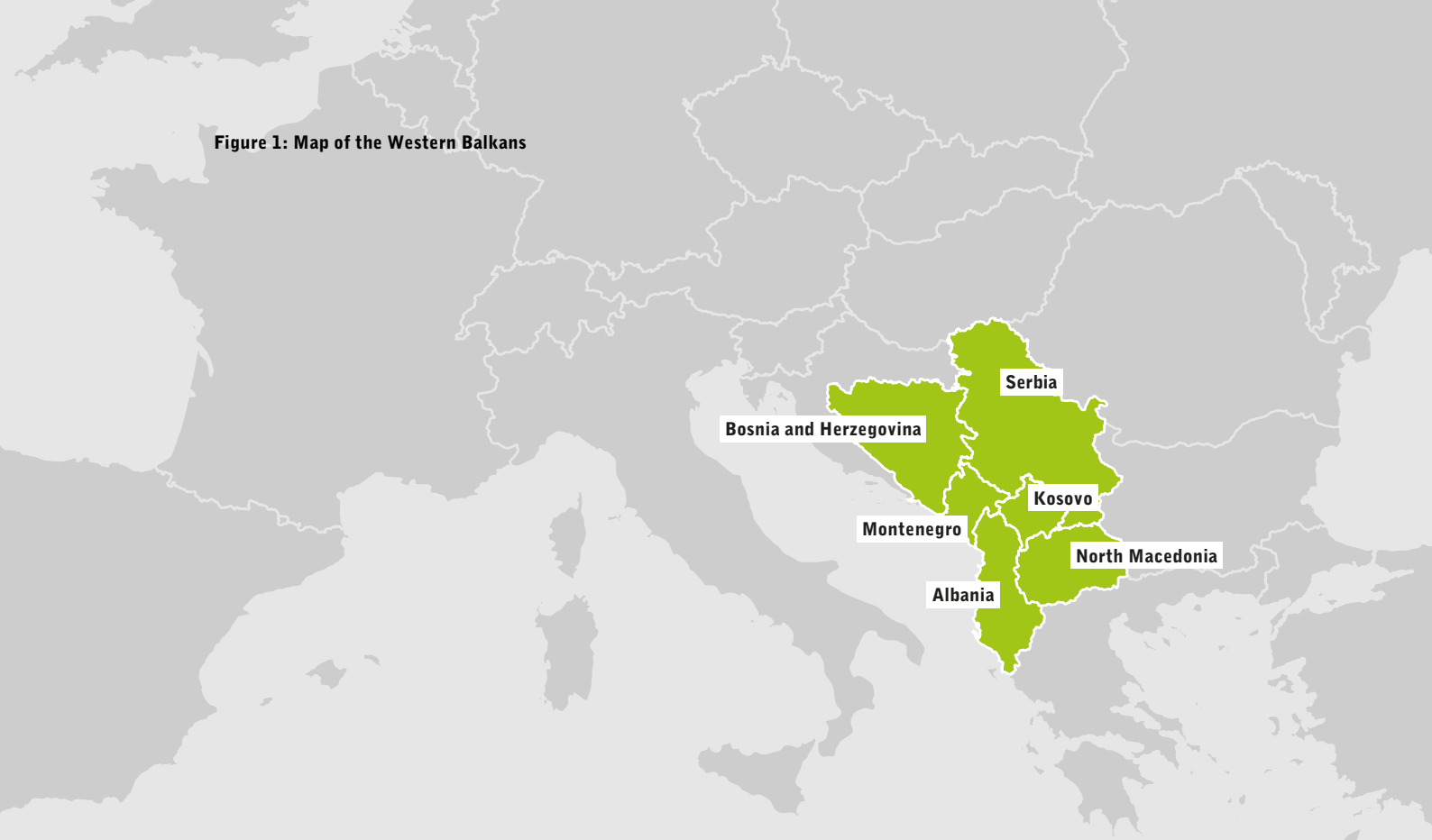
Western Europe is not alone in struggling with a skills shortage, the Western Balkans are as well. It is most obvious in the construction industry, the wholesale and retail trade sector and the health sector, but it is also apparent in the tourism sector and the catering industry. For years now, Western Balkan countries have been bringing in workers from Nepal and Bangladesh, while their own populations head out to do seasonal work in the better paid German or Austrian catering sector.

Most of the countries of the Western Balkans have had a prospect of EU accession since 2001, but the euphoria about an upcoming EU accession – like that seen in several other East European countries between 2004 and 2007, or most recently that of Croatia in 2013 – has long since faded away.

With the EU's enlargement policy stalled, the will to reform in candidate countries is dwindling. In Serbia, a tendency towards increasingly autocracy is apparent, one that is

7 The «Western Balkans» is a political umbrella term encompassing the countries in Southeast Europe that are not yet part of the EU but have membership aspirations: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Figure 1: Map of the Western Balkans



now manifest in a pro-Russia, pro-China foreign policy orientation and in restrictions on press freedom. In Albania, the ruling socialist party, led by Prime Minister Edi Rama, can take decisions unilaterally, with parliamentarianism suffering as a result.

Vetoes from individual EU member states are another factor slowing reform. Greece and Bulgaria delayed the launch of accession negotiations with North Macedonia for years; in Albania's case, France and the Netherlands were the ones with a foot on the brakes. That Kosovo, alone of the Western Balkan countries, does not have candidacy status is due to the refusal of five EU countries to recognise it as a sovereign state.

However, although the Western Balkan countries do not (yet) belong to Europe in the political sense, large percentages of their citizens have been living in EU countries for years now. The number of people born in a Western Balkan country who live in another country has doubled since 1990; in 2019, then numbered almost 3.8 million.^[8] To put this in perspective: around 18 million people now live in the combined territories of the Western Balkan states, making region's population comparable to that of North Rhine-Westphalia. Montenegro's population is now about the same size as the city of Stuttgart's, and the population of Serbia, the largest country in the region, is about twice the size of Berlin's. Thus, the exodus of hundreds of thousands of people within just a few years poses major challenges for these countries.

8 Auswanderung aus den Westbalkanstaaten (Bpb), <https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/laenderprofile/505174/auswanderung-aus-den-westbalkanstaaten>

The most recent «Balkan Barometer» survey indicates that the countries will undergo further dramatic population losses in the coming years: 44 percent of respondents answered «yes» when asked whether they would consider living and working abroad.^[9]

Several studies have investigated the principal drivers of emigration.^[10] While the main factors driving emigration in the 1990s were the wars in former Yugoslavia and, in Albania's case, the anarchy that followed the collapse of the communist regime, today it is primarily corruption, low wages and inadequate social security systems that people cite when asked about reasons for leaving. The standard of life in the region lags behind that of the EU, and the cost of living is rising dramatically, above all in the capitals.

For many years, citizens of Western Balkan states who wanted to become long-term residents in a country in Western Europe had only two options: entering the country irregularly or applying for asylum. More recently, efforts to facilitate access to the German labour market have made a move of this kind easier. A legislative provision known as the Western Balkans regulation (see Section 2, below), which came into effect in 2016, is an excellent case in point.

Official statistics show the number of people from Western Balkan countries living in Germany rising from 683,915 in 2009 to 878,470 in 2018. That is an increase of about 28 percent.^[11] The sectors employing the most workers from Western Balkan countries are the construction sector (95,902 employees), the manufacturing sector (66,994 employees) and the trade sector (63,097).^[12]

Increasingly, German business see the immigration of foreign workers as an opportunity. The German labour market is dependent on labour from abroad and will remain so for the long term. Many young people in the Balkans have heard about this and are considering leaving their countries of origin. Recognition of this as a problem on the part of the governments in the region is also on the rise.

9 The annual «Balkan-Barometer» survey is seen as producing the most important representation of public opinion for the West Balkans, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/168/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2023>

10 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2015): Jugendliche in Südosteuropa – Lost in Transition (study), <https://www.fes.de/studie-jugendliche-in-suedosteuropa>. Erleichterte Arbeitsmigration aus privilegierten Drittstaaten. Westbalkanregelung und „Best-Friends-Regelung« im Vergleich, p. 45 ff, <https://minor-kontor.de/erleichterte-arbeitsmigration-aus-privilegierten-drittstaaten>. OECD (2022): Labour Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits. Western Balkans Regional Poll (2024), <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full>

11 See, p. 24, https://minor-kontor.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Minor_FE_WP-BeschV_2020.pdf

12 Employment of Kosovans in Germany and Kosovo (October 2024), p. 11, https://www.institutigap.org/documents/93900_Employment%20of%20Kosovars%20in%20Germany%20and%20Kosovo.pdf

What new initiatives are there to facilitate a move to Germany by people from the Balkans? How many people are leaving the region? How significant is Germany's role as a destination country? What impacts is migration having on the countries of origin? We take a close look at these questions in the sections below.

Figure 2: The young leave their homeland, the old stay.



2 The Western Balkans Regulation (WBR)

The «Western Balkans regulation»^[13] (WBR) is a tool introduced by Germany's Federal Government in 2016. Under this regulation, citizens of the Western Balkan countries can take up employment in Germany irrespective of their occupational qualifications. People taking jobs under this regulation face significantly lower bureaucratic hurdles: they are not required to take language classes, nor do they need to provide proof of their qualifications or occupational experience. All they need to be eligible for a work visa under the WBR is a binding offer of employment.

Due to strong demand among German companies for WBR workers, the regulation, originally a temporary measure, was extended indefinitely in 2020, and the cap on the number of approvals that the Federal Employment Agency can grant per year was raised from 25,000 to 50,000. The WBR work visa has become a very popular pathway for labour migration to Germany. Angela Merkel once called it a «prototype for arrangements with other countries».

As of 1 June 2024, employers can file e-applications for advance approval, which substantially accelerates the process. This saves a lot of time for prospective employees in the Balkans, as it means that they have confirmation that their contract is in line with the German standard before they start the visa application process.

2.1 Seek jobs not asylum

The WBR has its origins in asylum policy. «The regulation was introduced as a management tool aimed at reducing the number of asylum applications,» says Johannes Remy, a political scientist at «Minor», a non-profit that runs projects relating to marginalised groups in the labour market. Remy contributed to a Minor working paper on the WBR.^[14]

In 2014, the flood of refugees from the Middle East and West Africa made the Western Balkans into a major region of transit. Germany received a total of 441,899 asylum applications in 2015. Although the largest share of these were filed by people fleeing the war in Syria, a good portion of them were from people from the Western Balkans, including many

13 The West Balkan Regulation is laid down in section 26(2) of the German Ordinance on the Employment of Foreigners (BeschV).

14 Erleichterte Arbeitsmigration aus privilegierten Drittstaaten. Westbalkanregelung und «Best-Friends-Regelung» im Vergleich, <https://minor-kontor.de/erleichterte-arbeitsmigration-aus-privilegierten-drittstaaten>

from the Romani minority^[15] there. In fact, twenty-seven percent of the (first-time) asylum applications received by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in 2015 were from people from Western Balkan states,^[16] in absolute terms, that is just over 120,000 people.^[17]

To put those figures in perspective: in 2012, only a little over 17,000 asylum applications were received from people from the Western Balkans. The increase was due in part to the fact that the Balkans had become a transit region for refugees, but also to Germany's high profile at that time as a country said to be ready and willing to accept refugees. «This created an incentive for many inhabitants of Western Balkan countries to apply for asylum in the EU as well,» notes a study by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development commissioned by the German development agency GIZ.^[18] The incentive seems to have been particularly strong among Albanians: Albanian and Kosovo citizens accounted for the second and third largest percentages of first-time asylum applications in 2015; the only larger group of applicants was that of Syrian citizens.

The BAMF was overwhelmed by the influx of asylum applications, and that so many were from countries with extremely low rates of successful applications only made the work seem more onerous. A large majority of the applications were rejected. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia had already been declared safe countries of origin in 2014. The other Western Balkan states would join them on that list in 2015. The message was clear: «Don't even bother to apply for asylum. It won't be granted».

The Federal Government's announcement of its intention to add the Western Balkan states to the list of safe countries of origin drew criticism from some political parties, including the SPD and the Greens, but also the Left Party (die Linke). This mattered, because such a change requires a legislative amendment. The Greens ended up supporting the change in the Bundesrat, but they did so on the condition that action be taken to facilitate access to the labour market for people from the Western Balkans. And thus, the Western Balkans

15 The socio-economic situation of the Romani people can be considered critical in all countries of the West Balkans. Their access to housing, the health system and education is severely limited. They have worse chances on the employment market than the majority population. Thus, they have an «above-average risk of poverty», as the following study points out: Berlin Institut (2017), Beschäftigung und Migration in der Region Westbalkan, https://www.berlin-institut.org/fileadmin/Redaktion/Publikationen/PDF/BI_BeschaeftigungUndMigrationInDerRegionWestbalkan_2017.pdf

16 Creating legal pathways to reduce irregular migration? https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Migration_fair_gestalten/IB_Creating_Legal_Pathways_to_Reduce_Irregular_Migration_MSG_2018.PDF

17 BAMF (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) (2018): Antrags-, Entscheidungs- und Bestandsstatistik: Westbalkanstaaten.

18 Berlin-Institut (Berlin Institute for Employment Research) (2017): Beschäftigung und Migration in der Region Westbalkan, p. 19, https://www.berlin-institut.org/fileadmin/Redaktion/Publikationen/PDF/BI_BeschaeftigungUndMigrationInDerRegionWestbalkan_2017.pdf

regulation (WBR) was born. It was, at heart, an attempt to «reduce the load on the asylum system by liberalising labour migration», in the words of the Berlin Institute for Employment Research.^[19]

2.2 WBR vs. «Skilled immigration»

The WBR opens access to the labour market to workers who do not have formally recognised skills or occupational qualifications, unlike the scheme under Germany's Skilled Immigration Act (Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz). This means that employers have greater flexibility to hire workers based on their practical skills, regardless of whether their qualifications have been recognised in Germany.

An example: a mason from Belgrade wants to work at a construction site in Cologne. To enter the country with the official status of a skilled worker, he will have to prove that the vocational training he completed in Serbia is equivalent to the training provided to masons in Germany. Holger Kolb of the Berlin office of the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR), an independent, interdisciplinary expert group that provides action-oriented advice to policymakers, explains it like this: Whether someone is a skilled worker «has nothing to do with whether that person has a university degree or practices a skilled trade. A neurosurgeon, a baker or an auto mechanic – it makes no difference: they are all skilled workers. What matters is that they can show that they hold an academic or occupational qualification recognised as equivalent to the corresponding German qualification».

The WBR enables workers to skip this step. All the mason needs is an offer of employment. He does not have to prove that he can speak German or submit a CV or any evidence of his abilities. He is permitted to enter the country «irrespective of qualification» – to use the phrase of the German authorities.

The pros: the mason from Serbia who applies under the WBR gets his visa sooner and with less red tape. There is less paperwork for his employer. This pathway can be especially advantageous in the case of temporary migration, e.g. for seasonal agricultural work. And it could be a good option for our mason, as well, assuming he only wants work in Germany for a few months and then go home to his family in Serbia.

The cons: The mason does not receive the same type of visa that is issued to qualified skilled workers; his is «only» a work visa. Not because masons cannot be recognised as qualified skilled workers (they certainly can) but because this particular mason did not go

19 IAB-Forum (2017): Westbalkanregelung: Arbeit statt Asyl?, <https://www.iab-forum.de/westbalkanregelung-arbeit-statt-asyl/#:~:text=Zwischen%202014%20und%202015%20ist,von%2062.000%20auf%20151.000%20gestiegen.>

through the process to have his qualification recognised as equivalent to the German standard.

Will this make a difference for his career going forward? Yes, it will, according to Holger Kolb of the SVR: «Companies really like this regulation because it does not demand much of them. From the employee perspective though, it is not always the best option. And that is why the unions look askance at it.»

Kolb provides another example: Two plasterers from Montenegro want to accept job offers in Germany. They have had the same vocational training, and they will be doing the same work on the construction site. One of them applies for and receives a work visa quickly and easily via the WBR. The other has the equivalency of his qualification recognised and enters the country on a visa for a qualified skilled worker. «The worker with the WBR visa is tied more firmly to his employer and does not have the same opportunities to apply for a higher paying job», says Kolb.

Skilled workers whose qualifications have been formally recognised come under provisions on family reunification, and there are economic advantages for them as well. They are also eligible for a settlement permit (permanent residence permit) after only three years, rather than five. Moreover, some wage-scale categories and professional development offerings are open only to recognised skilled workers. «People who have taken the steps to obtain formal recognition are better positioned on the job market. Those who come via the regulation often have only a certificate attesting that they held the job», says Kolb.

2.3 The «middle» pathway» is often forgotten

Kolb acknowledges that the WBR pathway is attractive «because it's so easy» but recommends investing the time and resources to acquire recognition, as this pays off down the road in opportunities for career growth. All the more so, he points out, because there is a «middle pathway» that tends to get lost in the debate.

As a rule, when full recognition as a qualified skilled worker is refused (because the applicant lacks certain specific skills, for instance, or because their training did not cover certain content), the applicant receives what is often called a «notice of deficits» (Defizit-bescheid), which is a notice identifying certain theoretical or practical skills that they lack, but that are required for full recognition. These deficits can be remedied through additional post-qualification measures. This means that a nurse, for instance, could take a job as a nurse's aide and fulfil the missing requirements for qualification through a further training scheme. Through this pathway, the nurse does end up with the status of a qualified skilled worker, just not right away. If the nurse's qualification is not equivalent or her German language skills are not sufficient, she will have no real prospect of integration unless she takes this middle path on her own initiative. It is important to point out here that being

able to speak the language well enough to communicate is often the cornerstone of a satisfactory employment relationship that is not burdened with unnecessary misunderstanding.

In the last analysis, whether someone is a «qualified skilled worker» is less a question of their occupation per se or their practical experience than one of whether they took the steps to obtain formal recognition of their qualification (whether it is a university degree or a VET certificate).

«This pathway may be more arduous, but it delivers better opportunities in the medium and long term», says Holger Kolb. The WBR pathway clearly involves less effort for companies, though, and also for employees who only want to work in Germany for a limited time and are not interested in building a future for themselves there.

Since 1 March 2024, Germany has also had another tool aimed at opening the labour market to foreign workers: visas for «professionally experienced workers». To be eligible for one of these visas, a worker must hold a qualification recognised by their country of origin, but German recognition of the qualification is not necessary. Like the WBR work visas, these visas require the applicant to have a job offer in hand. In this case though, the offer must guarantee that the worker will either be paid according to a collective wage agreement or receive a salary of or above a minimum amount set by law, which is not required under the WBR. At about 3,400 EUR (gross wages) per month, the level of the current minimum salary well below that typical for some of the occupations for which there are formal VET qualifications in Germany.

Summing up, there are four legal pathways for labour migration from the Western Balkans to Germany. The high road, so to speak, is the pathway leading directly to full recognition as a skilled worker. Next is a pathway involving a detour from the high road, the middle pathway of partial recognition and remediation of specific skills deficits through post-qualification measures in Germany. The third pathway, one introduced only a few months ago, is obtaining a work visa for a skilled worker with practical occupational experience. The fourth is the pathway involving the fewest bureaucratic hurdles, an application under the Western Balkans regulation.

2.4 Who and which sectors are using the Western Balkans regulation?

The WBR has not resulted in an increase in the number of people drawing unemployment or other benefits from the German social systems. This pathway is used predominantly by men, who account for 87 percent of visas issued under the WBR. These are findings of a study conducted by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) for the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.^[20] Why so many more men than women? «One reason might be the strong demand for labour in the construction sector and other male-dominated occupations in the manufacturing industries», according to the IAB report.^[21]

The construction industry is the sector in which the largest percentage (44 percent) of workers with WBR work visas have taken jobs. This is a diverse sector, with jobs ranging from floor installation to plastering and wallpapering on to electrical, gas and water line installation. The hotel and catering industry comes in second place, with 13 percent, followed by the health and social services sector (11 percent). Other typical areas for employment under the WBR are building cleaning and janitorial services, gardening and landscaping, and seasonal harvesting. These are areas in which there are jobs that involve what are considered semi-skilled tasks, tasks that can be performed by workers without a VET qualification. A driver's license, experience with machines and construction materials and the ability to stand up to the physical demands of the work are more important. For these jobs, a «working language» is necessary, rather than proficiency in German.

The age distribution of the population of WBR visa recipients also reflects a clear tendency: 21 percent were aged 26–29 when their visa was issued; 43 percent aged 30–39 and 27 percent were in the 40–49 age range. Only 9 percent went to people over the age of 50.^[22]

20 The study analysed the process of labour market integration of 36,050 labour migrants who came to German to take up employment via the Western Balkans regulation in 2016 and 2017. https://www.bmas.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/Forschungsberichte/fb544-evaluierung-der-west-balkanregelung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2 See p. 4 for the English language abstract.

21 Ibid., p. 38.

22 Ibid., p. 38.

2.5 Every fourth German work visa issued to a Western Balkan national

The Western Balkans regulation is seen as a popular emigration pathway. The number of visas does not reflect the full demand: only every third person who filed an application between 2015 and 2017 ended up with a visa.

The figures for 2023 present a similar picture. Kosovo accounted for the largest share of WBR visas issued, with nearly 14,000 approvals, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina with 11,380 approvals. North Macedonia ranked third (11,258). Montenegrins accounted for the fewest visas under the WBR (1715). Again, these figures encompass only those issued to persons coming to Germany under the WBR.

Unsurprisingly, the total numbers of Western Balkan citizens working in Germany, meaning both those with visas issued under the WBR and those with visas issued under some other provision, is on the rise. The numbers of approvals issued worldwide is revealing: the Federal Employment Agency issued a total of 383,622 approvals for the employment of non-EU citizens in 2023, a significantly increase over the figure for 2022 (283,534).

In a ranking of countries by the number of German employment approvals issued to their citizens, first and second place go to Turkey and India respectively (with 34,877 and 29,666 approvals). Third place, though, goes to Kosovo (22,915 approvals to citizens of a country's whose population is smaller than that of Berlin), followed by three other Western Balkan countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (19,190), Albania (16,941) and Serbia (16,756).

Collectively, the six Western Balkan countries account for 100,000 of the approvals issued by the Federal Employment Agency in 2023 for a work visa in Germany. That represents almost one in four of all visas issued that year.

2.6 Interim conclusion

As the brief description of the situations in the individual countries of the Western Balkans below makes clear, the economic sectors that are benefiting from the Western Balkans regulation (WBR) in Germany are the same sectors that are struggling with a skills shortage in the Western Balkans. This suggests that facilitating access to the German labour market is not resolving the skills shortage so much as relocating it to the Western Balkans.

The shortage of skilled workers is not the only problem. The flow of workers out of the Western Balkans is giving rise to a host of other challenges as well: the shifting demographics are increasing the burden on pension systems and health systems, and the loss of

skilled workers is hindering economic growth and innovation. Moreover, the departure of politically engaged and democratically minded people undermines social cohesion and enables nationalistic narratives to flourish.

Within a very short period, emigration evolved from a relatively unimportant issue to one of the most critical problems confronting the region. Even just a few years ago, the job shortage was a major theme in debate in the political arena and the media, whereas now, the labour shortage is a key issue that has an increasing impact on political decision-making. With the media full of reports warning of the long-term impacts of the labour shortage, Western Balkan politicians have recently begun to criticise the economically powerful receiving countries, blaming the problem on them.

While the effects of labour emigration are plain to see and there is no shortage of discussion about the issue, data is fairly scarce on the ground when it comes to information on the emigrants themselves – their ages, genders, and levels and types of education, for instance. Most of the little data that is available was collected in non-comprehensive surveys conducted by international organisations, making a comprehensive analysis problematic. Moreover, migration is often temporary and/or circular, rather than linear and long-term. Many migrants return to their home countries regularly, rendering their classification as long-term emigrants problematic.

There are limits on the extent to which the influence of German immigration policy on the flow of migrants out of the Western Balkans can be measured, as emigration is always influenced by several different factors, some rooted in the country of origin and others emanating from the destination country («push and pull factors»). Cultural and social networks – whether they evolved over the course of decades or centuries or are more recent in origin – can influence the choice of destination country just as strongly as the latest tools created to further immigration policy aims.

In Section 3, we sketch out the situation in relation to emigration in the individual countries of the region and describe public opinion and sentiments on the issue there. As we do so, we address the following questions: Who is leaving the country and why? What impacts is the outflow of migrants having? How could one characterise public debate on the issue and what measures are being taken?

Figure 3: Gjermane means Germany and stands for quality in Albania.



3 The Countries of Origin

3.1 Albania – Students, stay here!

It is the summer of 2023, and medical students, wearing white coats and carrying megaphones, are demonstrating in front of the building of the Medical Faculty in Tirana. Their ire is directed at Edi Rama, Albania's prime minister. This is the campus of the largest public university for the training of future doctors and nurses in the country. Provided they keep their grades up, students pay only about 400 euros a year in tuition; the state pays the other costs for their training.

Walking through the halls and across the campus, one encounters a lot of young people who want to move to Western Europe after finishing their studies. But Rama, whose Socialist Party rules with an absolute majority, has put a spoke into the wheel of this younger generation. «The state of Albania cannot finance the German health system»,^[23] said Rama in a speech in March 2023. He also asked the question: «How is it that the taxpayers are supposed to pay for the education of students who are going to take off for Germany as soon as they get their diplomas?»

Retroactive tuition fees for those who leave

Rama's cabinet was proposing radical legislation of a kind unprecedented in the Western Balkans. It was approved by the Albanian parliament, in which Rama's Socialist Party (PS) holds the majority, in September 2024, following a Constitutional Court review.^[24]

Under the new law, medical students have to continue to live in Albania for three years after completing their studies. Anyone leaving before the end of that period will have to reimburse the state for the costs of their training. It is not yet known how high the retroactive tuition fees are going to be, but it is believed that they may run as high as 15,000 euros.

The number of medical doctors relative to population in Albania is one the lowest in Europe.^[25] The shortage is primarily felt in rural areas: though its capital, Tirana, is bursting at

23 «Nuk mundet dot Shqipëria të financojë sistemin shëndetësor gjerman», <https://www.reporter.al/2023/03/29/shendetesia-shqiptare-lengon-nga-eksodi-i-pandalshem-i-mjekeve>

24 <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/20/albania-adopts-law-deterring-medical-students-from-emigrating-after-graduation>

25 See Federal Statistical Office, https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Countries-Regions/International-Statistics/Data-Topic/Tables/BasicData_Physicians.html

the seams, Albania's villages are shrinking and aging. Edi Rama is now appealing to young, freshly trained doctors to live up to their «humanitarian and patriotic responsibility».^[26]

How many people have emigrated?

People are leaving Albania on a scale not seen anywhere else in the region. Once upon a time, emigration, or rather, defection was punishable by law in Albania: from 1944 to 1991, Albania was ruled by a Stalinist dictatorship which did not allow any freedom of movement to its citizens. At the time, Albania was known as «Europe's North Korea». The exodus of Albanian citizens following the fall of the regime was unparalleled: reports of their total numbers vary from one source to another, which is hardly surprising in view of the general breakdown of government authority in 1997 in the chaos that erupted when hundreds of thousands of Albanians lost savings and property upon the collapse of a number of huge fraudulent pyramid savings schemes.^[27]

Based on the limited data available, Ilir Gëdeshi, the director of the Center for Economic and Social Studies in Tirana and an expert on migration, believes that about 1.6 million people have left Albania since the start of the 1990s. That number is about half of the total population back then.

Although Switzerland and Germany have long been popular destinations for ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, until relatively recently, people leaving the Republic of Albania tended to go across the border into Italy and Greece. This changed with the 2008 financial crisis and the introduction of visa-free travel within the Schengen region in 2009. The lack of jobs in Greece and Italy in the wake of the financial crisis brought an estimated 150,000 Albanians back to Albania,^[28] and in the intervening years, Germany has become a popular destination for the younger generation of emigrants. Half of the Albanians who left their country between 2009 and 2018 went to Germany, according to Ilir Gëdeshi. The wave of departures came to a peak in 2015, when 53,805 Albanians applied for asylum in Germany.^[29]

26 See his speech in December 2023, <https://kryeministria.al/newsroom/nis-zbatimi-i-programit-te-kredive-te-favorshme-per-shtepi-per-familjet-e-reja-te-mjekeve-ushtarakeve-dhe-punonjesve-te-policise-se-shtetit>

27 DER SPIEGEL 12/1997, Selbstmord einer Nation, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/selbstmord-einer-nation-a-113d983f-0002-0001-0000-000008680244>

28 OECD report, p.23, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/af3db4f9-en.pdf?expires=1725876844&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=23CF86BDF00DFD3FAD1783F8883D3134>

29 Bertelsmann-Stiftung report, p. 10, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Migration_fair_gestalten/IB_Creating_Legal_Pathways_to_Reduce_Irregular_Migration_MSG_2018.PDF

Another 197,730 applied for residence permits in an EU country between 2020 and 2022.^[30] This figure is higher than that for any other Western Balkan country. And the outflux had many Albanians wondering: how many people are still here?

Accordingly, the whole country was on the edge of their seats in the summer of 2024, awaiting the results from the first national census conducted since 2011. The Democratic Party of Albania (PD), the country's largest opposition party, put its own spin on the issue, claiming that «over a million people» had left the country since Edi Rama took office in 2013, for instance.^[31] The figure was ultimately corrected: the population of 2.8 million in 2011 had «only» fallen to 2.4 million in 2023. According to the most recent Balkan Barometer survey, one in two people in Albania would consider living and working abroad.^[32]

Albanian tourism sector booming – but who is serving the guests?

Albania's cabinet is trying to persuade young people to stay in the country through incentives like state-subsidised no-interest home-construction loans for people in certain occupations,^[33] including police officers, doctors and soldiers. The salaries of medical specialists and civil service employees have also been raised.

The politicians have their work cut out for them, though: rents are skyrocketing in Albania's capital, Tirana, which is now home to more than a third of the country's population. Inflation is not the only driver of this upward trend though: a great deal of drug money is laundered in Albania's construction sector: over 1.2 billion euros between 2016 and 2018 alone, according to an estimate by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI TOC).^[34]

Tourism is both a curse and a blessing for Albania. A blessing because the number of people visiting the country is skyrocketing, thanks to campaigns on social media like Instagram and TikTok. In a record-breaking 2023, over ten million people travelled to Albania, 35% more than had in previous years. A curse, because it is becoming increasingly clear that

30 Eurostat Statistics, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst__custom_8782239/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=f7908040-135c-40ae-ae03-9d4be21b7430

31 See: speech by Sali Berisha, 2.06.024, <https://pd.al/censusi-berisha-popullata-jo-vetem-ne-periferi-por-as-ne-tirane-dhe-durres-nuk-eshte-kurre-ajo-qe-pretendohet-ne-vitet-2014-2022-kane-ikur-nga-shqiperia-me-shume-se-1-mln-shqiptare>

32 Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2023, p.66, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/168/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2023>

33 See the government's official website, <https://kryeministria.al/newsroom/nis-zbatimi-i-programit-te-kredive-te-favorshme-per-shtepi-per-familjet-e-reja-te-mjekeve-ushtarakeve-dhe-punonjesve-te-policise-se-shtetit>

34 See Korruption in Albania: Wie man mit Hochhäusern Geld wäscht, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/welt/osteuropa/politik/albanien-korruption-100.html>

Figure 4: Building of the University of Medicine in Tirana.



Albania is facing a long-term shortage of service personnel that will discourage tourists from returning. Tourists are still streaming into the country now, but the young people needed in the hospitality sector as a result are leaving it in droves. This may sound familiar to many readers in Germany: there too, cafés and restaurants are frantically seeking new personnel, including in heavily touristed areas.

The Rama-led government is pushing large-scale infrastructure projects – motorways, railway lines, tunnels, airports – and there is no shortage of interested investors. In March 2024, for instance, Jared Kushner (Donald Trump's son-in-law), announced his interest in building a luxury resort near the port town of Vlora, right in the middle of a protected landscape.^[35] Yet hotel owners in the southern part of the country are already bemoaning how difficult it is to hire new staff, let alone keep them. This, despite stories of cooks being offered salaries in the range of 1,000–3,000 euros. These days, seasonal workers from Nepal and Bangladesh are increasingly common in these sectors. The labour shortage in this sector poses a serious challenge for Albania. Tourism has the potential to become the country's biggest economic sector, but a lack of experienced personnel in the catering sector brings with it the risk that visitors will come once but never again. This also helps explain why beach bars and hotels are willing to pay higher and higher salaries.

3.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina – Win-win-lose

Around 2.2 million people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) were forcibly displaced during the Bosnian War (1992–1995), around 1.3 million of them fled to another country. By 2007, records showed only about a million of these displaced persons as having returned to their former place of residence.^[36]

Complex administrative structures and nationalist narratives

The Dayton Accords brought a welcome end to the armed conflict in 1995, but they also institutionalised ethnic divisions and created a set of complex political and administrative structures. For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina was (and still is) divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska. Both entities have their own government and their own legislature, and the FBiH is divided internally into 10 cantons. The authority and powers of the central government are very limited. Its head of state is a three-person presidency, which is made up of one representative of each

35 See: Trumps Schwiegersohn greift nach einem der schönsten Deltas am Mittelmeer, <https://www.republik.ch/2024/05/07/trumps-schwiegersohn-greift-nach-einem-der-schoensten-deltas-am-mittelmeer>

36 Alin Chindea; Magdalena Majkowska-Tomkin; Isabel Pastor: Bosnia and Herzegovina. Migration Profile, in: International Organization for Migration (IOM) Report, October 2007, p.40, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mp_bosnia_herzegovina_2007.pdf, 11.9.2024.

of the three largest ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. The complex distribution of power slows political decision-making and impedes urgently needed reforms, as enacting legislation often requires consensus among the three ethnic groups.

Nationalist narratives continue to dominate public discourse, and some politicians are unflagging in their efforts to add torque to the spiral of escalation. Politicians like Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, who has been calling for years for the secession of «his» entity, which has a large Bosnian Serb majority. Dodik's rhetoric grew harsher in the spring of 2024, when the UN General Assembly took up a motion for a resolution designating an international day of commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide. Dodik opposed the resolution, continuing to deny that the killings in Srebrenica were an act of genocide. In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces led by General Ratko Mladić attacked and seized control of the town (at that time, a «safe area» under UN protection) and abducted and murdered more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys. 11 July 2025 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre.

Ethnic tensions and dysfunctional political structures are major factors not only in decisions to emigrate but also for the sluggish EU accession process. Political stalemates among the ethnic groups are preventing the country from meeting the EU's criteria or, more precisely, from instituting the relevant reforms. At the same time, the EU's efforts to maintain the status quo inevitably result in the stabilisation of corrupt rulers, which, in turn, weakens public confidence in the progress of the accession process. Thus, a widely shared sense of hopelessness and frustration are on the list of top reasons for leaving the country, in addition to low wages and weak healthcare and social services systems.

About 50,000 departures every year

At the end of the Bosnian war, 3.7 million people lived in BiH. Post-war returnees had the population rising for a while, taking it to 4.2 million in 2005. It has been shrinking ever since though. Today, the country's population is only 3.2 million.^[37]

This loss of a million inhabitants amounts to a 24 percent population decrease in two decades. Year after year, an estimated 50,000 people leave the country.^[38] In 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina's diaspora, measured in terms of the percentage of a country's native born population living, was the second biggest in the world in 2020 according to a report in Forbes Magazine; one third of the people entitled to BiH citizenship by birth are now living

37 Statista: Bosnien und Herzegowina: Gesamtbevölkerung von 1950 bis 2023 und Prognosen bis 2050, 19.07.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/383927/umfrage/gesamtbevoelkerung-von-bosnien-und-herzegowina>, 11.09.2024.

38 Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine: Prezentacija analize stanja stanovništva i projekcija stanovništva za period 2020 - 2070. u Bosni i Hercegovini, 08.12.2020, <https://bhas.gov.ba/News/Read/42>, 11.09.2024.

elsewhere.^[39] It should be noted, though, that the last census was conducted in 2013, so much the information available is based on extrapolation and estimates.

There is no end to this trend in sight. There are still many people, primarily young people, who plan to leave the country: results of a 2021 survey by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) indicated that about 47 percent of the 18–29 age group in BiH, or 269,066 young people, are considering temporary or permanent migration abroad due to dissatisfaction caused by the shortage of jobs, the low quality of public services and the corruption endemic in the country.^[40]

The UNFPA's projections show the BiH population continuing to shrink, indicating that another 500,000 people will have left their BiH homeland by 2050.^[41] Other projections suggest that the population will have shrunk to 1.6 million by 2070.^[42]

As the population grows smaller, the average age of inhabitants is expected to increase, rising from 42 to 54 by 2070, while the total number of children, adolescents and people of working age is expected to fall to one third of its 2020 level.^[43] These changing demographics bring huge challenges for the country's pension and health systems: by 2031, the country will have 800,000 pensioners to provide for. That is 13.5 percent increase over the 2022 figure.^[44]

Waning resistance to nationalism

Emigration is widely recognised as a major problem in BiH. Newspapers like the Sarajevo Times regularly report on the young people heading for Germany on one-way tickets and businesses that are unable to find new personnel.^[45]

39 Forbes Magazine (Katharina Buchholz): The World's Biggest Diasporas, 11.11.2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katharinabuchholz/2022/11/11/the-worlds-biggest-diasporas-infographic/?sh=4604b8f4bde4>, 11.09.2024.

40 UNFPA: Survey on Youth Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 08.2021, p.11 and 59, https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/youth_emigration_survey_in_bih_eng_final_1.pdf, 11.09.2024.

41 DW (Marion Kraske): Bosnians flee corruption and hopelessness, 18.12.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/bosnians-flee-corruption-and-hopelessness/a-64110355>, 11.09.2024.

42 Reuters (Daria Sito-Sucic), Bosnia Losing Many Young People to Emigration over Poor Education, Work prospects, in: Reuters, www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnia-losing-many-young-people-emigration-over-poor-education-work-prospects-2021-11-24, 11.09.2024.

43 UNFPA: The effects of population changes on the provisions of public services in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 10.11.2022, p.5, <https://ba.unfpa.org/en/publications/effects-population-changes-provision-public-services-bosnia-and-herzegovina>, 11.09.2024.

44 Ibid.

45 Sarajevo Times, 14.05.2024, <https://sarajevotimes.com/bosnia-and-herzegovina-loses-one-city-every-year-4>, 11.09.2024.

Figure 5: View over Sarajevo.



Political observers and civil society organisations have also drawn attention to the fact that it is primarily democratically minded people who are leaving the country. This raises another concern: as people who hold liberal, democratic values leave the country, resistance to nationalism and the abuse of power there is waning.^[46]

Speaking at the UN General Assembly in September 2023, Željko Komšić, a member of the BiH presidency, criticised the targeted efforts on the part of larger countries to lure highly qualified professionals away from BiH, charging these countries with recruiting the most highly qualified of its citizens with the aim of exploiting their abilities for their own benefit and thus weakening the potential and capacities of smaller countries.^[47]

Understaffed hospitals

The shortage of qualified skilled workers is particularly evident in the health sector, but also in the construction and IT sectors. Around 300 highly qualified doctors left the country in 2016, according to the BiH medical association. The shortage of medical personnel was a problem during the corona pandemic, as understaffed hospitals struggled with the rising numbers of patients – drawing media attention in Germany as well as locally at the time. Mirko Šerbedžija of the Union of Nurses and Technicians of the Republika Srpska told the German broadcaster MDR that the burden of nursing care in the country is falling almost solely on the shoulders of workers in the 50–60 age group. Nearly the entire generation of nurses born in the 1980s and '90s have left the country according to Šerbedžija.^[48]

In January 2024, the BiH Council of Ministers approved a programme of economic reform encompassing measures to improve conditions on the labour market and redistribute the tax burden to be more favourable to businesses.^[49]

Almost 470,000 BiH citizens currently live in the European Union, more of them in Germany (226,137) than in any other single country.^[50] Germany was one of the most popular cross-border destinations for refugees from the Bosnian civil war in the early 1990s, which

46 DW (Marion Kraske): Bosnians flee corruption and hopelessness, 18.12.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/bosnians-flee-corruption-and-hopelessness/a-64110355>, 11.09.2024.

47 UN News, At UN Assembly, Bosnia and Herzegovina slams <foreign influence> on its institutions, 20.09.2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1141152>, 11.09.2024.

48 MDR (Ulrike Schult): Wirbt Deutschland zu viel Pflegepersonal aus Bosnien ab?, 01.02.2022, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/welt/osteuropa/land-leute/pflegenotstand-fachkraefte-bosnien-abwerbung-brain-drain-100.html>, 11.09.2024.

49 BiH: Economic Reform Program of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024-2026, XX.01.2024, <http://www.dep.gov.ba/naslovna/?id=2854>, 11.09.2024

50 Statista: Bosnien und Herzegowina: Anzahl der bosnischen Staatsbürger in den Mitgliedstaaten der Europäischen Union (EU) im Jahr 2023, 16.04.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/871670/umfrage/bosnier-in-den-laendern-der-eu>, 11.09.2024.

was due to family ties to Yugoslavian guest workers who moved there under a bilateral labour recruitment agreement in the 1960s.

These days, superior employment opportunities also contribute to Germany's popularity as a destination country. The Skilled Immigration Act and the Western Balkans regulation have made it easier for migrant workers to access to the labour market for years. Moreover, the development agency GIZ has been recruiting nurses in BiH through its Triple Win programme. The aim of this programme is to alleviate the skills shortage in Germany and promote the fair employment of skilled workers and their long-term integration in Germany – although whether their country of origin benefiting to the same extent is open to question, given that the programme encourages the departure the countries few and urgently needed nurses.

3.3 Kosovo – Role of the diaspora

People entering Kosovo by car in the summer of 2024 did not have to pay the usual five-euro fee for automobile insurance, instead a certificate was simply handed to them at the border. Those who asked were told that it was «from the cabinet». This was a tactical move by Prime Minister Albin Kurti, who likes his job and has his eye on the parliamentary election in February 2025. Kurti has the diaspora to thank for his victory in 2020: diaspora voters largely supported his left-wing nationalist party, Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) in that election. In October 2024, Kurti made campaign appearances in several German cities, including Munich, Cologne and Stuttgart.

Diaspora: financial and political clout

Kosovo's territory is only half the size of the federal state of Hesse, but it has one of Europe's largest diasporas relative to its population. An estimated 1.2 million native-born Kosovans now live outside the country's borders, meaning that the diaspora population approaches that of the country itself, 1.5 million.^[51] A large percentage of the diaspora lives in Germany. The number of Kosovo citizens making their home there doubled between 2010 and 2023, rising from 291,000 to 594,000.^[52] And the numbers will continue to rise in the coming years, according to a study by the GAP Institute, a Kosovo think-tank that studies at economic issues. The GAP Institute's projections are based on a survey

51 The latest census was published in July 2024, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/blog/the-preliminary-data-of-the-census-of-population-family-economies-and-housing-in-kosovo-are-published>

52 Employment of Kosovars in Germany and Kosovo (October 2024), https://www.institutigap.org/documents/93900_Employment%20of%20Kosovars%20in%20Germany%20and%20Kosovo.pdf

conducted in December 2023.^[53] In it, 28 percent of respondents reported that they wanted to emigrate from Kosovo within the first three months of 2024. The majority of them named Germany as their destination country.^[54]

The «Schatzis» – to borrow a common, if somewhat tongue-in-cheek, nickname for members of the German-speaking diaspora – have been sending money back to relatives in Kosovo regularly since the war ended in 1999, but they also stimulate the economy by coming to visit every summer. Hotels and restaurants profit from this and so, to no small degree, do businesses in the wedding trade: catering services, florists, photographers, and so on. Thus, the diaspora both replaces the welfare state and acts as a sort of unofficial economic sector.

Kosovo's cabinet wants the diaspora to come home, and not just for a holiday. In July 2024, Kurti presented a new programme called «Window for the Diaspora». It is aimed at making it easier for members of the diaspora to set up businesses in Kosovo by providing attractive loans. «Our emigrants will also bring skills, knowledge and the work culture from the countries where they currently live, which is important for the country's economy», said Kosovo's PM.^[55] Kurti also noted that many apartments in the capital are standing vacant, because emigrants from Kosovo had been investing in real estate in their homeland. Kurti sees this as evidence that many emigrants had never given up the dream of returning one day. He is counting on a phenomenon that researchers call «brain circulation».^[56] The idea is that not all impacts of emigration have to be negative: the countries of the Western Balkans can profit from the newly acquired skills and networks of returnees.

How many people have left?

Kosovo is Europe's youngest state in more ways than one. The country declared its independence in 2008, unilaterally seceding from Serbia, of which it had been an autonomous province since back in the Yugoslav period. It is also the youngest country in terms of the average age of its population, which is 34, ten years younger than the average age of the EU population.^[57]

53 Propensity to emigrate from Kosovo following visa liberalization (January 2024), https://www.institutigap.org/documents/64525_Visa%20liberalization.pdf

54 Ibid, p. 12.

55 Speech by Albin Kurti, July 2024, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/blog/the-diaspora-investments-window-is-launched>

56 Erleichterte Arbeitsmigration aus privilegierten Drittstaaten. Westbalkanregelung und «Best-Friends-Regelung» im Vergleich, p.46 ff, <https://minor-kontor.de/erleichterte-arbeitsmigration-aus-privilegierten-drittstaaten>

57 Eurostat, EU median age increased by 2.3 years since 2013, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/de/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240215-1#:~:text=On%201%20January%202023%2C%20the,the%20other%20half%20was%20younger.>

Figure 6: Bill Clinton Boulevard in Pristina.



However: Kosovo's population is growing older too: in 2011, the average age was still 29. Over the years from 2012 through 2022, 338,000 Kosovo citizens emigrated, according to the GAP Institute.^[58] That corresponds to 18 percent of the entire population. In the last two years alone, almost 78,000 people left the country. The bulk of them were heading to the European Union. A total of 122,643 Kosovo citizens have applied to an EU state for a residence permit since 2020. More than half of those applications went to Germany (62,985).^[59]

The long road to visa-free travel

Half of Kosovo's inhabitants were forced to flee their homes during the Kosovo War (1998-99). Kosovo Albanians had already started leaving for political reasons back in the 1980s, when Slobodan Milošević had Kosovo stripped of its autonomous status and launched a wave of ethnically motivated dismissals of state employees. Most of those displaced during the war (about 600,000 of a total of 850,000) returned to Kosovo after the NATO bombing campaign ended in June 1999.^[60]

The younger generations in post-war Kosovo lacked a privilege that their older compatriots had been able to enjoy during the Yugoslav era: visa-free travel. It is only since 1 January 2024 that Kosovans have been allowed to enter the EU Schengen Area without a visa. Kosovo was thus the last country in the Balkans to come under a visa-free regime. This end to the country's isolation sparked joy, but also concerns. Will the new visa free regime make the brain drain flow even faster? It has made it easier for young Kosovans to find jobs abroad, as they can now travel directly to the location of the potential employer for an interview. Until 2024, travel of that kind was often associated with months of delay and painfully tedious red tape.

What is happening on the labour market?

What are the impacts of emigration on the economy in Kosovo? This question has been the focus of intensive study at the GAP Institute (mentioned above) for years. Anisa Zogaj, a member of the institute's staff, worked on a new report on emigration to Germany released by the think tank in October 2024.^[61]

58 Propensity to emigrate from Kosovo following visa liberalization (January 2024), p.3, https://www.institutigap.org/documents/64525_Visa%20liberalization.pdf

59 Followed by Slovenia (18,991), Croatia (11,507) and Italy (7,094) See Eurostat statistics: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst__custom_8782239/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=f7908040-135c-40ae-ae03-9d4be21b7430

60 Migration of Kosovars to Germany (Gap Institut), p. 4, https://www.institutigap.org/documents/72594_Migration%20to%20Germany.pdf

61 Employment of Kosovars in Germany and Kosovo (October 2024), https://www.institutigap.org/documents/93900_Employment%20of%20Kosovars%20in%20Germany%20and%20Kosovo.pdf

«The [Western Balkan] regulation had significant effects on migration patterns in Kosovo and is the subject of considerable debate in the country,» says Zogaj. Kosovo citizens apply for and receive more visas under the regulation than any other country in the region. Zogaj says the regulation appeals above all to workers in the construction, catering and trade sectors, noting that these are the sectors with the highest employment rates and productivity in Kosovo.

Zogaj also notes that the Kurti Government has not yet presented a clear strategy to deal with this problem, concluding: «While the Government is aware that emigration constitutes a problem, it has not yet implemented any major reforms or measures to improve the opportunities for employment in the country, strengthen the education system or lift the standard of health care sufficiently to encourage people to remain in the country.»

One thing the Kurti cabinet has done was to increase the amount of the child allowance.^[62] However, the current amount, 20 euros per month per child, that parents receive in Kosovo can hardly compare with the amounts paid out in countries like Germany.

Some see positive aspects to emigration

Unlike the case in Albania, not everyone in Kosovo sees emigration in a purely negative light. Some argue as follows: the small country's economy is not providing enough jobs for the large numbers of young workers. Every year, more nurses and doctors complete their training than the employment market can absorb. It is specialists who are in short supply in the health sector. And this is not due to emigration per se, but to a lack of sufficient opportunities for advance training, or rather, there is a general need for an education system better tailored to the needs of the labour market.

In the short term, emigration is resulting in better wages and working conditions for employees in Kosovo. More and more people are leaving for Germany, so employers are trying harder to get them to stay. The Gap Institute conducted a study on this too: almost 27% of their survey respondents reporting receiving a salary raise in 2023.

This will not, on its own, put an end to the shortage of skilled workers. Kosovo has an official unemployment rate of 11.8 percent. However, a large percentage of Kosovo's working-age (15-64) population is economically inactive. Specifically, 60 percent: meaning that more than one out of two members of the working age population. These people are not reflected in the unemployment rate because they are not seeking employment. Some are stay-at-home wives. But some are families receiving money from relatives in the diaspora.

62 <https://www.koha.net/de/arberi/426487/qeveria-i-rrit-shtesat-per-femijet-vendimi-shihet-si-kalkulim-parazgjedhor>

Figure 7: Bridge to Kotor Old Town.



The diaspora is thus replacing the welfare state, but it is also enabling people who are urgently needed on the labour market to decide they would rather stay home instead.

Interestingly, the high outflow of migrants might disrupt the gender-work gap in Kosovo. In the future, finding a job will be easier for women who have previously not been part of the labour market. In their desperation for new personnel, companies are more willing than ever to offer flexible working hours.

3.4 Montenegro – Equilibrium through immigration

Unexpectedly, there is some good news out of Montenegro: the preliminary results of the most recent census indicate that the population has grown by two percent, despite the continuing low birthrate: 633,158 people lived in Montenegro in 2023, compared to the 625,266 reported by the 2011 census. The growth is reportedly due to an increasing flow of migrants into the country: Montenegro has over 96,000 foreign-born residents, including 26,000 Russian and 9,752 Ukrainian citizens.^[63]

Immigration as a new trend

The final results of the census are now available in full. Originally planned for 2021, the census was postponed several times due to political challenges relating to the questions on ethnic and religious affiliation on the questionnaire. In a politically tense environment, census data could be used to influence the balance of power.^[64]

The inflow of migrants is a new trend in Montenegro, however. In the past, the country has always been considered a country of emigration. According to reports in the local media, 140,000 Montenegro's citizens left the country over the past 25 years. That is roughly equivalent to the number of people born in Montenegro in one year.^[65]

The OECD estimates that about 18,200 people left Montenegro permanently or temporarily for another OECD country between 2012 and 2016. The total number of emigrants per year varied over that period, ranging from around 2,300 in 2012 and 2013 to almost three

63 Balkan Insight: Montenegro's Population Rise Linked to Influx of Foreigners, Demographers Say, 26.01.2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/26/montenegros-population-rise-linked-to-influx-of-foreigners-demographers-say>, 27.09.2024.

64 Initially, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that delayed the census taking, followed by political instability in the form of the fall of two governments after the 2020 elections. The opposition Democratic Party of Socialists (DPA), in particular, expressed concerns about the transparency and fairness of the census process and called for changes to ensure that the results could be trusted.

65 In 25 years, 140,000 citizens left MNE, 20.01.2023, <https://www.cdm.me/english/in-25-years-140000-citizens-left-mne>, 27.09.2024.

times that in 2015 (6,500). However, 9,600 returnees were also registered in the same five-year period.^[66]

About a third of the people who identify as ethnic Montenegrins live outside of the country. Many of these still live in the Western Balkans though, about 20,000 of them in Serbia.^[67] Many of these are young people are lured away by the prospect of better training and job opportunities, primarily to the Serbian capital, Belgrade. Montenegro and Serbia share a common past in Yugoslavia and, after its breakup, in the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Montenegro did not declare independence from Serbia until 2006, and a significant portion (30 percent) of the population continues to identify as Serbian.^[68]

Population expected to decline despite inflow of migrants

More than half of respondents in a survey by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation reported a desire to emigrate – around 28 percent reported a strong desire to do so and another 25 percent a moderate desire. The study also found a correlation between education status and the desire to emigrate: over a third of the respondents pursuing a master's or PhD degree reported a strong or very strong desire to leave Montenegro.^[69]

Projections from other sources as well point to an upcoming decline in Montenegro's population despite the recent inflow of migrants. The population is expected to drop to about half a million by 2050, which would mean a loss of about 100,000 people compared to the 2024 population.^[70]

The main driver of the emigration is the difficulty of finding employment.^[71] The unemployment rate came in at around 14 percent in 2023.^[72] Youth unemployment was almost twice

66 WFD: Cost of Youth Emigration (Montenegro), May 2022, https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/wfd-web-brochure-montenegro_final.pdf, 27.09.2024.

67 Census 2022 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia): Population by ethnicity and sex, 27.04.2023, <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3104020101?languageCode=en-US>, 27.09.2024.

68 Balkan Insight: Montenegro's Population Rise Linked to Influx of Foreigners, Demographers Say, 26.01.2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/26/montenegros-population-rise-linked-to-influx-of-foreigners-demographers-say>, 27.09.2024.

69 FES: Youth Study Montenegro 2018/2019, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15267.pdf>, p. 64, 27.09.2024.

70 Statista: Montenegro: Gesamtbevölkerung von 1950 bis 2023 und Prognosen bis 2050, 12.08.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/412847/umfrage/gesamtbevoelkerung-von-montenegro>, 27.09.2024.

71 WFD: Cost of Youth Emigration (Montenegro), May 2022, p.13, https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/wfd-web-brochure-montenegro_final.pdf, 27.09.2024.

72 Statista: Montenegro: Arbeitslosenquote von 1991 bis 2023 und Prognosen bis 2025, 12.01.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/412899/umfrage/arbeitslosenquote-in-montenegro>, 27.09.2024.

that rate, though, at 27 percent.^[73] Societal tensions are running high in the country: with pro-Russian and pro-European forces struggling over the country's future course. In 2023, [pro-European] Milo Đukanović, who had led the country as PM or president for decades, was voted out. Since a cabinet reshuffle in July 2024, Milojko Spajić has headed a coalition government in which pro-European, pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties are all represented.

Migrant remittances: no significant impact on economic growth

On the average, 3,320 migrants of working age leave Montenegro every year. This represents 70 million euros of lost gross value added each year. In simplistic terms, each person of working age who leaves Montenegro takes with them 21,561 euros of some potential future gross domestic product. According to a Westminster Foundation of Democracy study, the state invested between 11,000 and 31,000 euros in the education of each of them, depending on their level of education. Further losses arise due to the loss of the gross added value associated with each potential worker, the decrease in overall consumption and lost tax revenues.^[74]

Although remittances made up a significant share of gross domestic product (2022: 11 percent), they do not have a significant impact on economic growth, as this money tends to be spent on private consumption by households rather than invested.^[75]

As it is in other Western Balkan countries, the continuing outflow of migrants is a frequent topic in political debate in Montenegro, where there is a focus on the potential of the diaspora: in recent years, multiple action plans and statutes relating to cooperation with the Montenegrin diaspora have been adopted. As early as 2012, a state «Directorate for Cooperation with Diaspora» was set up specifically to strengthen the relationships between the Montenegrin state and those of its citizens who are living abroad and to promote their involvement in the country's economic and cultural development.

73 Statista: Montenegro: Jugendarbeitslosenquote von 2013 bis 2023, 24.04.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/797781/umfrage/jugendarbeitslosenquote-in-montenegro>, 27.09.2024.

74 WFD: Cost of Youth Emigration (Montenegro), May 2022, p.7, https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/wfd-web-brochure-montenegro_final.pdf, 27.09.2024.

75 Ibid.

Figure 8: A small bookstore in Skopje.



3.5 North Macedonia – Passports from Bulgaria

A new census was conducted in North Macedonia recently (September 2021), as well. Its results report a total population of 2,097,319 people. Only 1,836,713 of these are «resident» however. The other 260,606 (14 percent) are made up of Macedonians who had not been in country over the prior 12 months and of foreigners who had not been in the country for more than 12 months.^[76]

In 2002, the resident population was still 2,022,547, according to the results of the previous census.^[77] Thus, North Macedonia lost more than 10 percent of its population over the past 20 years.

In a pattern familiar from other Western Balkan countries, the population of North Macedonia's capital, Skopje, is rising, while its rural population is shrinking. Skopje has four percent more inhabitants (526,500) than it did in 2002, whereas the population of 60 of the 80 municipalities declined significantly over that period – because of both internal and international migration.^[78]

Ethnic diversity influences migration decisions

Macedonia's total population has a diverse ethnic structure, broken down in the official census results as follows: about 54 percent Macedonian, almost 30 percent Albanian, almost four percent Turkish, about two percent Romani and about one percent Serbian, just under one percent Bosniak and almost 0.5 percent Vlach. This ethnic diversity influences migration decisions, as migrants use transnational networks and existing cultural ties to their destination countries to make migration easier.

For instance, the majority of Macedonian emigrants live in Turkey, followed by Germany and other early EU member states. Serbia is the primary destination for migration to another of the Western Balkan states, though recently, there has also been migration to a few new EU member states (e.g. Croatia and Slovenia) in the Balkans.^[79]

76 Stat.Gov, <https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2022/2.1.22.10Popis-mk-en.pdf>, 06.10.2024.

77 Census 2002 (Republic of Macedonia, State Statistical Office): Census of Population 2002, p.20, <https://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaXIII.pdf>, 06.10.2024.

78 Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Daniel Braun, Davor Pasoski): Die Volkszählung in Nordmazedonien - Instrument für Statistik oder ethnische Fragen?, p.2, 27.04.2022, <https://www.kas.de/de/laender-berichte/detail/-/content/die-volkszaehlung-in-nordmazedonien-instrument-fuer-statistik-oder-ethnische-fragen>, 06.10.2024.

79 ETF: How Migration, Human Capital and the Labour Market Interact in North Macedonia, p.6, March 2021, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/migration_north_macedonia.pdf, 06.10.2024.

Since 2002, Macedonian citizens have been eligible for Bulgarian passports subject to proof of registration with a Bulgarian address. More and more Macedonians have been taking advantage of this possibility since Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, as it then became possible for persons with a Bulgarian passport to live and work in the EU. Bulgaria is now demanding that North Macedonia recognise its Bulgarian minority in its constitution, threatening to block EU accession negotiations once again otherwise. Bulgaria justifies this demand by citing the approximately 100,000 North Macedonians, to whom, according to Bulgarian authorities, Bulgarian passports have been issued. Only a little over 3,000 citizens identified themselves as Bulgarians in North Macedonia's most recent census though.

The flow of migrants out of North Macedonia has accelerated since 1 January 2008, when visa-free entry into EU member states in the Schengen Area was introduced.

North Macedonian emigrants tend to be young; their level of qualification/education varies. Emigrants with higher education tend to live in countries overseas, such as the United States, Canada and Australia, whereas most of the emigrants with a low- to medium-level qualification live in Western European countries. Emigration is particularly common among certain occupational groups – and, above all, among doctors, nurses and midwives.^[80]

The primary drivers of emigration are the high unemployment rate and the superior standard of living in the destination country, but also a desire to be reunited with family members.^[81] The 2023 unemployment rate was around 14.3 percent.^[82] Youth unemployment came in at 27.2 percent.^[83]

Repeated vetoes disappoint pro-EU residents

Factors such as a lack of political stability within the country, political tensions and the stagnating EU accession process may also play a role in migration decisions: Macedonia's early years as an independent state were characterised by significant

80 ETF: How Migration, Human Capital and the Labour Market Interact in North Macedonia, p.6, March 2021, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/migration_north_macedonia.pdf, 06.10.2024.

81 IOM: Migration in North Macedonia: A Country Profile 2021, 2022, p. 37, <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-north-macedonia-country-profile-2021>, 18.10.2024.

82 Statista: Nordmazedonien: Arbeitslosenquote von 1996 bis 2023 und Prognosen bis 2029, 24.04.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/409421/umfrage/arbeitslosenquote-in-mazedonien>, 06.10.2024.

83 Statista: Nordmazedonien: Jugendarbeitslosenquote von 2013 bis 2023, 24.04.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/797779/umfrage/jugendarbeitslosenquote-in-mazedonien>, 06.10.2024.

Macedonian–Albanian ethnic tension, which escalated into armed conflict. A viable political regime was not established until 2001, with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which was intended to ensure appropriate political representation of the Albanian minority. The recognition of Albanian as a second official language in 2019 marked another milestone for minority rights. Although more stable now than in previous decades, inter-ethnic relations remain a key issue in domestic politics and is still a focus of international observers.

In response to pressure from Greece, the Macedonian parliament change the country's name from Macedonia to North Macedonia in 2019. In return, Greece stopped opposing the country's admission to NATO and the EU. The dispute dated back to 1991, when the constituent republic of former Yugoslavia declared its independence and chose to call itself «Macedonia», although there was already a province of that name in northern Greece. The social democratic prime minister Zoran Zaev and his Greek counterpart, Alexis Tsipras, pushed through the compromise, despite objections from nationalists in both countries who felt it threatened their national identity.

Greece is not the only country that has influenced North Macedonia's progress towards EU accession. In 2019, it was France which blocked the launch of accession negotiations with North Macedonia (and Albania). And now Bulgaria has entered the picture, conditioning its approval of accession on the enactment of the constitutional amendment mentioned above. The introduction of a qualified majority in the European Council, such as that discussed in the Heinrich Böll Foundation study «Europa neu gestalten»,^[84] would fill the need for a way around blockages of this kind.

From job shortage to labour shortage

Emigration is an uncomfortable topic in North Macedonia, in part, because until recently the sinking unemployment rate of the past years was still being presented as a policy success. In fact, the discursive shift in public debate, from the job shortage to the labour shortage, testifies to the swiftness with which emigration is changing the country's demographics.^[85]

Due to these changes, North Macedonia now also has a national strategy for migration and development and return and reintegration programmes. These measures have had very little

84 Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Europa neu gestalten. Impulse für die EU-Reformdebatte, June 2024, https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2024-06/boell_europa-neu-gestalten_v01_erweitert-kommentierbar.pdf, 22.10.2024. Two chapters are available in English translations, see: https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2024-11/e-paper_strengthening_the_eus_global_capacity_to_act.pdf, 15.11.2024, and https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2024-10/a-democratic-approach-to-eu-reform_endf.pdf, 15.11.2024.

85 Simonida Kacarska, personal communication, October 2024.

effect thus far, however. The frequency of returns remains low among Macedonian emigrants, which suggests that the skills emigrants acquire while abroad are probably not going to help drive domestic growth.^[86]

Germany has long played an important role for North Macedonia, as its most significant trading and investment partner. It is also the main destination for Macedonian emigrants: 222,000 first and second-generation immigrants from North Macedonia currently live in Germany. According to the German embassy in North Macedonia, the number of visa applications was up by a third in 2022 over 2021– from 6,000 to 9,500.^[87]

The continuing flow of migrants out of the country is also associated with substantial environmental impacts: the long-term depopulation of large parts of the country's territory is associated with an increase in the number of uninhabited settlements. The infrastructure of these abandoned areas often goes unmaintained, and they are not subject to inspections checking for illegal use of land and woodland. The number of illegal dumping sites is also increasing.^[88]

3.6 Serbia – A different approach to the EU

Historically, Serbia has also been seen as a country of emigration, and it, too, has a large diaspora. In 1971, there were around 200,000 citizens Yugoslavia's Socialist Republic of Serbia living abroad; the percentage of the population living outside Serbian borders has risen steadily since then.^[89]

Economic collapse in the 1990s triggered a massive wave of emigration. The transition to a market economy, the Yugoslav wars, especially the Kosovo War, the NATO bombardment, the UN sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro and hyperinflation resulted in a dramatic

86 ETF: How Migration, Human Capital and the Labour Market Interact in North Macedonia, March 2021, p.7, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/migration_north_macedonia.pdf, 06.10.2024.

87 Das Erste: Nordmazedonien: Immer mehr Menschen wandern aus, 17.03.2024, <https://www.daserste.de/information/politik-weltgeschehen/weltspiegel/sendung/nord-mazedonien-abwanderung-100.html>, 18.10.2024.

88 IOM: Migration in North Macedonia: A Country Profile 2021, 2022, p. 87, <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-north-macedonia-country-profile-2021>, 18.10.2024.

89 Penev, Goran (ed.), Stanovništvo i domaćinstva Srbije prema popisu 2002. godine, Belgrad 2006, p.97, as cited in Petar Dragisic: Ein Volk unterwegs. Migranten aus Serbien 1971-2002, in: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte, www.europa.clío-online.de/essay/id/fdae-1524, 11.09.2024.

Figure 9: Crowded tram in Novi Sad.



decline of the economy and high unemployment. Between 1991 and 2001, 500,000 young people left the country.^[90]

Estimates of the size of the diaspora range from 3 to 5 million, though some sources count only Serbian citizens while others also count second and third generations or ethnic Serbs from other former Yugoslavian republics.

Emigration of financial, social and cultural capital

These days, about 51,000 Serbians, primarily young Serbians, leave the country every year.^[91] This outflux and the falling birthrate mean that Serbia is another country undergoing continuous population decline. Demographic projections indicate that the population (estimated at 6.8 million in 2023) could shrink to 5.3–5.8 million by 2050.^[92]

In a Friedrich Ebert Foundation survey, 42.3 percent of Serbian respondents reported that they often or very often consider leaving the country. The percentages of younger respondents who said they had already taken first steps toward emigration were even higher: 63.8 percent for the 20–24 age group and 56.3 percent for the 25–29 age group. Unemployment and poor living conditions were identified as the main drivers of emigration.^[93]

The unemployment rate was around 9.5 percent in Serbia in 2023,^[94] with youth unemployment at 21.5 percent.^[95] Average net income rose to about 590 euros, but poverty remains an urgent problem in Serbian society. According to the World Bank, almost one fourth of

90 Dragana Marjanovic: Labour market transitions of young women and men in the Republic of Serbia, June 2016, in; International Labour Office, Work4Youth publication series, Nr. 36, Geneva, p.1, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_488799.pdf, 11.09.2024.

91 UNDP: Why population in Serbia keeps declining?, 06.02.2020, <https://www.undp.org/serbia/stories/why-population-serbia-keeps-declining>, 11.09.2024.

92 Statista: Serbien: Gesamtbevölkerung von 1950 bis 2023 und Prognosen bis 2050, 12.08.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/368607/umfrage/gesamtbevoelkerung-von-serbien>, 11.09.2024. UNDP: Why population in Serbia keeps declining?, 06.02.2020, <https://www.undp.org/serbia/stories/why-population-serbia-keeps-declining>, 11.09.2024.

93 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Danica Šantić): Leaving Serbia. Aspirations, intentions and drivers of youth migration, 05.2020, p.6, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/16219.pdf>, 11.09.2024.

94 Statista: Serbien: Arbeitslosenquote von 1997 bis 2022 und Prognosen bis 2029, 24.04.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/368654/umfrage/arbeitslosenquote-in-serbien>, 18.10.2024.

95 Statista: Serbien: Jugendarbeitslosenquote von 2013 bis 2023, 24.04.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/797784/umfrage/jugendarbeitslosenquote-in-serbien>, 18.10.2024.

the Serbian population lives below the national poverty level.^[96] Accordingly, remittances remain an important source of income for many Serbians, accounting for almost eight per cent of gross domestic product in 2023.^[97]

Through emigration, the state is incurring significant financial losses through the investment in the education of people who then emigrate to other countries and thus do not contribute to their society of origin. One University of Belgrade study estimated the losses of this kind associated with the emigration of 45,000 people in 2018 at 2.2 billion euros. It is not possible to assign a number to the concomitant loss of cultural, social and innovation capital.^[98]

Emigration of young population groups

The same study found that political instability and corruption play only a subordinate role in the decision to leave the country,^[99] though they could hardly be motivations to remain. Progress in EU accession negotiations, which were launched in 2014, is hindered by the deadlocked dialogue with Kosovo: Serbia continues to refuse to recognise Kosovo as an independent state.^[100] Deficits in the rule of law and the ever more severe restrictions on press freedom pose additional difficulties. Moreover, Serbia continues to reject the idea of joining NATO – instead cultivating demonstratively friendly relations with Russia and China, which have supported Serbia's claims vis-à-vis Kosovo in the UN Security Council.^[101]

The emigration of younger, skilled workers accounts for much of the population movement in the younger age groups. There is consensus in Serbia that their departure will pose great challenges for the country, as is the case elsewhere in the region. The availability of data on

96 World Bank: Poverty Map of Serbia: Understanding Welfare at the Local Level to Make Better Policies, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/serbia/publication/poverty-map-of-serbia>, 11.09.2024. (The data is based on the 2011 census!)

97 Statista: Serbien: Anteil der Rücküberweisungen (inflow) am Bruttoinlandsprodukt (BIP) von 2013 bis 2023, 24.04.2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/700064/umfrage/anteil-der-rueckueberweisungen-inflow-am-bruttoinlandsprodukt-serbiens>, 8.10.2024.

98 Ognjen Radonjić and Mirjana Bobić: Brain Drain Losses – A Case Study of Serbia, in International Migration Vol. 59 (1) 2021, p., <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/imig.12710>, 11.09.2024.

99 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Danica Šantić): Leaving Serbia. Aspirations, intentions and drivers of youth migration, 05.2020, p.8, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/16219.pdf>, 11.09.2024.

100 See also Srđan Milošević: Resolution on the Genocide in Srebrenica: a new boiling point for chauvinism in Serbia, 06.05.2024, <https://rs.boell.org/en/2024/05/06/resolution-genocide-srebrenica-new-boiling-point-chauvinism-serbia>, 18.10.2024.

101 See also Tara Tepavac: Der lange Sommer in 2023: Warum müssen wir über die Proteste in Serbien sprechen?, 16.08.2023, <https://www.boell.de/de/2023/08/16/der-lange-sommer-2023-warum-muessen-wir-ueber-die-proteste-serbien-sprechen>, 18.10.2024.

emigration, in the form of migration statistics, for instance, is poor though, despite the existence of an Office for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

However, reports on the labour shortage in the building industry and in agriculture regularly appear in the local media and workers from India are increasingly common at large construction sites. Emigration really began to generate attention with the release of the results of the 2022 census, which revealed that the country's population had shrunk by around half a million people since the previous census in 2011 (6,647,003 in 2022 vs. 7,186,862 in 2011). Within a single decade, Serbia, once Yugoslavia's largest constituent republic, had lost over 7 percent of its population.

Since the release of the 2022 census results, emigration has been a significant factor in political decision-making in a wide range of fields. When President Aleksandar Vučić announced the reintroduction of compulsory military service for men in September 2024, he noted that the length of service would have to be kept relatively short lest it prompt even more young men to leave the country. The army chief of staff had originally called for conscription for up to four months, now a call-up for 75 days is expected.

4 Conclusion

Emigration from the Western Balkans is not a new phenomenon. The guest-worker movement during the era of the multi-ethnic socialist state of Yugoslavia and later the devastating Balkan wars of the 1990s led to the creation of diaspora communities in both Western Europe and the US. Although the Western Balkans are not (yet) bound up in the EU in the political sense, the region's population groups have long been linked to the countries of the EU through family and language and social ties, whether due to having lived and worked there themselves or because they regularly visit relatives who do so.

Despite the prospects of EU accession and economic recovery, the exodus from the Western Balkans is not winding down. In the past ten years, hundreds of thousands of people have left the region bound for Western Europe. Germany is one of the most popular destination countries.

Some, but by no means all of the drivers of this trend are push factors arising from the countries of origin, like low wages, weak welfare systems and limited economic prospects. There are pull factors at work as well: Germany has positioned itself as a modern immigration country and created conditions attractive for workers through targeted measures, such as the legislation facilitating immigration.

Germany, and German industry in particular, is profiting substantially from the influx of workers to the country, in part because the latter are helping to alleviate the skills shortage. For the migrants, Germany offers better economic prospects, a higher standard of living and social security. For the countries of origin in the Western Balkans, though, the trend is creating substantial challenges. The outflux of workers is now causing a skills shortage there, one that is projected to increase in severity in the coming years.

The emigration of primarily young, educated people is hindering both economic progress and democratisation in the region. Albania is a case in point: its emerging tourism sector is struggling with a substantial shortage of qualified personnel in the hospitality sector, which is impeding the further development of the country as an attractive travel destination. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, it is becoming clear that the emigration of democratically minded citizens is holding back political development, as their departure further fuels authoritarian tendencies. In view of all this, one has to wonder whether it is even possible for the Western Balkan countries to catch up economically and implement political reform in this situation.

Remittances from diaspora communities are of not unalloyed benefit. While they constitute an important source of household income and can sometimes replace the welfare state, they do not contribute to a sustainable economic development of the Western Balkan countries. As the money is often used for consumption rather than productive investments,

Figure 10: Shkodra is considered the «bicycle city» of Albania.



it serves to support the standard of living for the short term but decreases the incentives for investment and active participation in the labour market – as described in relation to Kosovo in Section 3.3, above.

Like Germany's population, Western Balkan populations are shrinking and aging due to falling birthrates. The flow of migrants out of the region is exacerbating this demographic trend, which is associated with increasing burdens on pension schemes and health systems. Emigration has been the subject of growing concerns and criticism in civil society and the political domains since 2020, when the Covid 19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the skills shortage in the health system. People are beginning to ask to what extent countries like Germany are deliberately recruiting highly trained workers, like doctors, from the region, and thus exacerbating an already precarious situation in their countries of origin.

This justified criticism has not been accompanied by much in the way of concrete political action, either addressed towards Western Europe or in the form of effective domestic measures to stop the outflow of migrants. Albania is the exception here. The government under Prime Minister Edi Rama is calling Albania's own population, not Germany, to account there. Specifically, it has put in place a measure intended to ensure that medical school graduates must serve as doctors for three years in Albania before they can emigrate. Increasing wages and improved labour market conditions have not yet been able to slow the outflow of workers.

Labour emigration also creates opportunities for the populations remaining in the Western Balkan states, particularly with respect to the transition from the informal to the formal labour market. The labour shortage could result in an increasing realignment of the formal labour market towards the needs of workers. Researchers expect the improving conditions on the labour market in Kosovo to result in a return of large numbers of women to formal employment, for instance.

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