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LABOUR MIGRATION: CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY FOR THE DEMOGRAPHIC FUTURE AND ECONOMIC STABILITY OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE

РАДНЕ МИГРАЦИЈЕ: ИЗАЗОВ ИЛИ ПРИЛИКА ДЕМОГРАФСKE БУДУЋНОСТИ И ЕКОНОМСKE СТАБИЛНОСТИ ЈУГОИСТОЧНЕ ЕВРОПЕ

Summary: *The focus of this paper is the role of labor migration in addressing the demographic and economic challenges of Southeast Europe. Low birth rates, an aging population, and high levels of emigration have resulted in labor shortages and pressure on public systems. By analyzing demographic data and examining the experience of the Visegrád Group, the paper places special emphasis on the need to develop comprehensive economic migration strategies, strengthen institutional capacities, and improve the integration of foreign workers. Special attention is also given to regional cooperation and alignment with EU and international standards. Labor migration represents an opportunity for population rejuvenation, filling labor shortages, and boosting productivity—provided that appropriate legal and social inclusion frameworks are in place.*

Keywords: Labor migration, demographic challenges, Southeast Europe, migrant integration, economic stability

JEL classification: J11, J14, J15

Резиме: Фокус истраживања овог рада је улога радних миграција у процесу ублажавања демографских и економских изазова Југоисточне Европе. Ниска стопа наталитета, старење становништва, као и висок степен емиграције резултирају недостатком потребне радне снаге и притиском на јавне системе. Анализом демографских података, те сагледавањем искустава Вишеградске групе, рад посебан акценат ставља на потребу развоја свеобухватних стратегија економских миграција, јачање институционалних капацитета, те побољшање интеграције страних радника. Посебна пажња је усмјерена ка регионалној сарадњи, те усклађености са ЕУ и међународним стандардима. Радне миграције представљају прилику за подмлађивање популације, попуњавање дефицитарних радних мјеста и раст продуктивности, уз предуслов адекватне правне и социјалне инклузије.

Кључне ријечи: Радне миграције, демографски изазови, Југоисточна Европа, интеграција миграната, економска стабилност

JEL класификација: J11, J14, J15

INTRODUCTION

The countries of Southeast Europe face numerous challenges that have a negative impact on population dynamics in the region. Inefficient governance structures, combined with high levels of corruption and the passive implementation of policies aimed at aligning education systems with labor market needs, have led to persistently high unemployment rates, particularly among the younger population. The lack of adequate mechanisms for developing job-relevant skills further exacerbates the situation, especially as the average age of the population continues to rise—placing additional strain on already fragile pension systems.

The complexity of the demographic challenges is also reflected in the fact that none of the Southeast European countries have achieved a fertility rate of 2.1 in the past decade, which is necessary for simple population replacement. Consequently, the region is experiencing population decline. Poor economic conditions, the prevalence of the informal economy, and various forms of workplace discrimination and exploitation are further delaying the age at which people start families. Negative natural population growth and a shrinking number of newborns are contributing to a shortage of labor, limiting the ability to fill vacant jobs. In this context, labor migration presents an opportunity for economic stability and a potential solution to the region's demographic problems.

For the purposes of this paper, Southeast Europe is defined as including the following countries: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo* (United Nations 1999). Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper seeks to address the current

demographic and migration-related challenges facing the region; identify the opportunities and obstacles in the process of successful labor migration; assess whether a functional regional framework for labor migration exists; and offer recommendations necessary for creating an attractive labor environment. A broader perspective also includes the successful integration of labor migrants into local societies, with family reunification offering a pathway to rejuvenating the population of Southeast Europe—bringing with it numerous economic and social benefits.

In line with the above, the hypothesis of this paper is as follows: “The process of labor migration creates positive demographic changes in the countries of Southeast Europe.”. The subject of the research has been addressed through the collection of data from relevant international databases – the World Bank, the European Commission, the European Union Statistical Database, the United Nations – as well as from national statistical databases of Southeast European countries. The time frame of the analysis covers the period from 1960 to 2024, with the aim of examining demographic change trends and the factors influencing them.

Furthermore, by applying a comparative method among Southeast European countries, the research seeks to identify similarities and differences in demographic trends, regulations related to the management of labor migration, and their alignment with the EU legal framework and international standards. The methodological approach also includes a comparative analysis with the Visegrád Group countries, in order to better understand the complexity of labor migration processes, the opportunities and challenges posed by this phenomenon, and the ways in which Southeast European countries can better prepare for it.

1. DEFINITION OF TERMS

In order to provide a clearer understanding of the content and analysis, the following key terms used in this paper are defined:

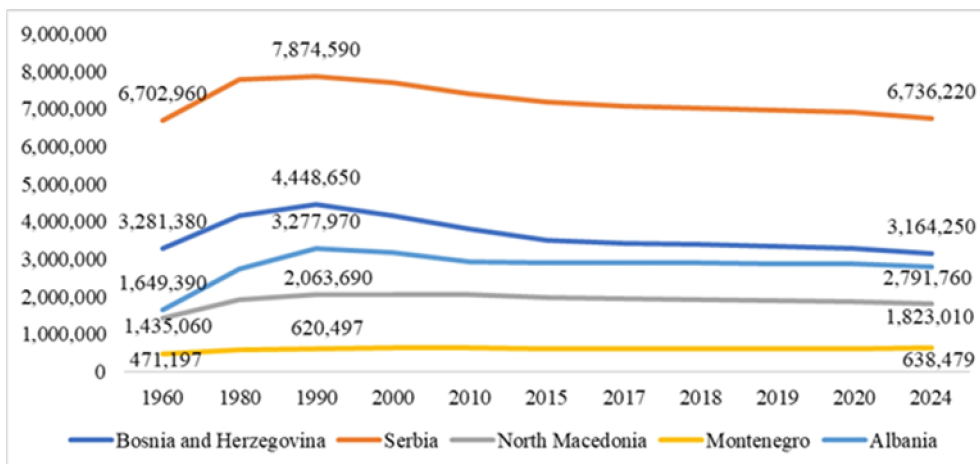
- **Labor Migration** – Refers to the movement of individuals for the purpose of performing paid work in the receiving country, whether it is internal migration (within a single country) or international migration (cross-border movement). It can be temporary or permanent and includes both voluntary and forced forms of economically motivated migration.
- **Demographic Changes** – Refers to long-term changes in the population structure of a country or region, including birth rate, mortality, age structure, fertility rate, life expectancy, and migration.
- **Fertility** – The average number of children a woman would bear during her reproductive period. A fertility rate of 2.1 is considered necessary for the simple reproduction of the population.
- **Migrant Integration** – A complex and two-way process of incorporating migrants into the host country's society. It includes economic, social, cultural, and legal dimensions, such as access to the labor market, education, healthcare, and rights.
- **Discrimination** – Refers to unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on their personal characteristics such as national or ethnic origin, gender, religion, language, skin color, or migrant status. In the context of labor migration, discrimination is most commonly reflected in limited access to employment, denial of rights, or exposure to unfavorable working conditions.
- **Xenophobia** – Denotes fear, intolerance, or hostility toward foreigners, migrants, or individuals perceived as "others" in society.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE

The countries of Southeast Europe are undergoing significant demographic transformations. The long-term demographic trend in this region is characterized by a declining total population, which is confirmed by the demographic growth rate in 2024 being below the global population growth rate (0.87%) (Worldometer 2025). This negative trend in overall population dynamics is further exacerbated by other factors such as accelerated population aging, negative natural population growth, and the mass emigration of young and educated individuals. These processes reflect broader European

trends, but their presence in the region is particularly pronounced due to historical conflicts, institutional weaknesses, and a prolonged economic transition.

Chart 1. Demographic Profile of Southeast Europe from 1960 to 2024

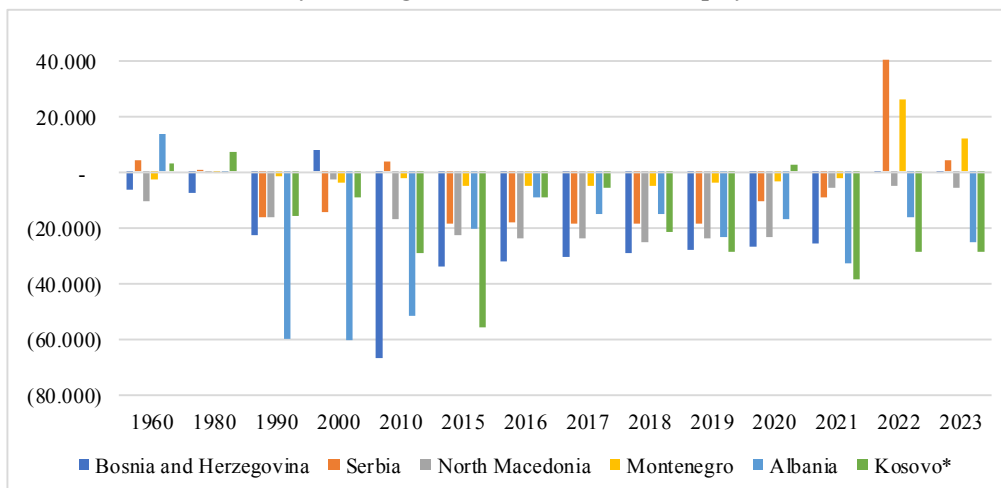


Source: World Population Review 2025

Since the early 1990s, most countries of the Western Balkans have experienced a continuous decline in population. In 2022, the fertility rate in all six Southeast European countries remained below the population replacement level of 2.1, with the lowest rate recorded in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1.3) (World Bank 2025). This natural decline has been further worsened by high mortality rates, particularly in rural and remote areas with limited access to healthcare. Additionally, all countries in the region have seen a continuous rise in the population aged 65 and over. Since the 1960s, this segment of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia has grown from 548,765 (in 1960) to 2,168,837 in 2023 (World Bank 2025). Such demographic shifts exert pressure on healthcare and pension systems, which are increasingly unsustainable due to limited financial resources. In all Southeast European countries, the pension system remains centered on the intergenerational solidarity model, with insufficient utilization of private pension insurance schemes. Given the declining number of working-age individuals—who must support a growing number of retirees—the economic and fiscal stability of these states is under serious threat.

The complexity of the demographic challenges is further underscored by the large number of emigrants, particularly young and educated professionals seeking better career opportunities, most often in Western Europe. This brain drain not only reduces the labor force but also negatively impacts the long-term development of human capital and economic innovation.

Chart 2. Overview of Net Migration in Southeast Europe from 1960 to 2023



Source: World Bank. 2025.

Between 1960 and 2023, most countries in the region experienced a general trend of negative net migration—that is, more people left the region than entered it. Positive net migration was recorded only in the past two years in Serbia, due to the influx of Chinese workers, and in Montenegro, due to the increasing number of work permits issued to seasonal laborers.

In addition to significant international migration, internal migration has also drawn attention, as it significantly alters the demographic landscape of the region. A long-standing trend of rural depopulation is evident, with people leaving villages and rural areas in favor of urban centers, which offer better access to education, employment opportunities, and healthcare services.

United Nations projections suggest that the countries of the region will continue to experience population decline until 2060 and beyond, unless strategic measures are taken to reverse the trend. Expectations indicate that Bosnia and Herzegovina could lose 1.4 million people by 2080 compared to 2025, which amounts to nearly one-third of its population (United Nations 2025). The situation is no better in the rest of the region, where projections also show continued population decline. These forecasts highlight the urgent need to adopt comprehensive demographic and migration strategies with a strong regional focus.

3. LABOUR MIGRATION AS A DRIVER OF POSITIVE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Labour migration, as a significant social phenomenon, represents a strategic response to negative demographic changes. Accelerated population aging, accompanied by low birth rates, is reducing the domestic labor force. Through the integration of foreign labor, efforts are being made to maintain the productivity of national economies and ensure fiscal balance (Radeljić 2021). From an economic perspective, labor migration is significant both from the standpoint of supply and demand. On the supply side, foreign workers fill vacant positions in the labor market. This is especially important in the case of shortage occupations and jobs that are unattractive to the local population (UN DESA 2024). On the demand side, foreign labor stimulates domestic consumption, and by taxing their incomes, the tax base needed to support public services is maintained. Furthermore, the domestic economy benefits from the innovation potential brought by migrants through their skills and qualifications. This is particularly relevant in Southeast Europe, given the mismatch between the skills of the domestic labor force and the needs of the labor market (Ivlevs 2019). In recent times, there has been a growing presence of labor shortages in the construction, agriculture, and healthcare sectors.

Immigration provides an opportunity to mitigate the effects of population aging by increasing the share of the working-age population, facilitating family reunification of labor migrants, and to some extent improving the birth rate. By bringing in families or forming new households, the goal is to rejuvenate and renew the local population. It is important to understand that this will not produce short-term effects, but from a long-term perspective, there is a basis for creating a more balanced age structure (UN DESA 2024). Economically, the employment of foreign workers contributes to the increase of public revenues through income taxation and contributions to pension and health insurance systems. In this way, fiscal pressure caused by the growing elderly population is reduced. Foreign workers also bring entrepreneurial spirit with them, and with adequate support, they launch their own businesses and create new jobs (UN DESA 2024).

4. CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING FOREIGN WORKERS INTO SOCIETY

A successful migration policy is fundamentally based on the successful integration of foreign workers into the local community. If the integration process is not properly established, the potential benefits of migration—for both migrants and host societies—cannot be fully realized. Given the complexity of the process, which includes economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions, coordinated efforts by government institutions, civil society, and employers are essential.

For successful integration, it is necessary to (UN DESA 2024):

- *Ensure access to the labor market*

Employment opportunities represent the first and most important step toward successful integration. Stable employment provides financial independence for foreign workers and enhances their social inclusion. Local society benefits from increased economic productivity.

However, this process can be challenging when migrants face legal and administrative barriers

to employment, language obstacles, or discrimination. To mitigate these effects, active labor market policies should be continuously implemented, including language courses and support in job searching and placement.

- *Promote social and cultural inclusion*

Beyond employment based on skills and qualifications, it is essential to support the inclusion of labor migrants into the local social fabric. This includes ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, and social services. All state actors are expected to take an active stance against discrimination and to promote mutual understanding. Integration is not a one-way process; local communities must also become more inclusive and adaptive. At the same time, foreign workers are expected to respect local institutions, laws, and norms. By adopting and implementing inclusive policies, social cohesion can be strengthened and marginalization and segregation minimized.

- *Provide education and language learning*

One of the key prerequisites for successful integration is knowledge of the local language. Without adequate language skills, migrants face limited access to education, employment, and public services. Therefore, host countries should offer language education systems for both adults and children. Integration policies must also ensure that migrant children can access the local education system without significant barriers. Additionally, systems for recognizing prior educational qualifications and providing vocational training programs should be established, allowing migrants to access suitable employment rather than remaining confined to low-paying jobs.

- *Strengthen legal protection and civic participation*

It is vital to protect migrants from exploitation and any form of workplace discrimination. The state must ensure fair treatment for all. Legal clarity regarding residence and work permits is fundamental for stability and long-term planning—for both migrants and employers. Furthermore, civic engagement, such as voting rights in local elections and participation in community institutions, strengthens the sense of belonging and contributes to democratic inclusion.

- *Minimize the impact of discrimination and xenophobia*

Foreign workers often face prejudice, stereotypes, or xenophobia, especially during periods of political instability or economic crisis. To reduce these negative impacts, active engagement is needed from governments and civil society through media, public discussions, and education to prevent the spread of misinformation. In this context, it is also necessary to strengthen anti-discrimination legislation.

5. SOUTHEAST EUROPE – THE CURRENT FRAMEWORK FOR LABOUR MIGRATION AND THE WAY FORWARD

Effective management of labour migration requires harmonized policies, legal alignment with European Union standards, and proactive, coordinated cooperation among various institutions. In this context—and considering the labor shortages faced by Southeast European countries—it is of crucial importance to establish strategic frameworks and institutional responses to address the complex issue of labour migration. All Southeast European countries, with the exception of Kosovo*, hold EU candidate status (European Parliament 2025). The EU integration process itself provides a framework for aligning national migration policies with European standards.

To create an attractive environment for the arrival of foreign workers, the key negotiation chapters include: Chapter 2 (freedom of movement for workers), Chapter 19 (social policy and employment), Chapter 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights), Chapter 24 (justice, freedom and security), Chapter 26 (education and culture), and Chapter 28 (consumer and health protection). These chapters directly affect the rights of foreign workers and the obligations of host countries. Montenegro has opened all negotiation chapters, with one temporarily closed, while most other countries are still in the early stages of alignment (European Commission 2025).

The implementation of necessary reforms is lagging behind due to weak institutional coordination, limited administrative capacities, political instability, and a lack of financial resources. A strategic regional approach is needed to improve labour migration management through integrated

national migration policies with clearly defined objectives. Efforts must also be directed at strengthening regional cooperation through multilateral platforms, and enhancing the capacities of institutions responsible for labour migration and integration.

Understanding the specific nature of labour migration in each Southeast European country is the foundation for developing effective migration policies. Each country has unique migration trends, shaped by socio-economic conditions, labor market needs, political stability, and the level of engagement with its diaspora (DeHaan and Elbasani 2022).

5.1. Labour Migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the countries with the largest diaspora in the world relative to its population. It is estimated that around two million citizens live outside the country's borders (European Commission 2025). Labour migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily characterized by the emigration of the working-age population and educated professionals, driven by high unemployment rates—particularly among youth—low wages, and limited career development opportunities.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of foreign workers, especially in the construction, trade, and care sectors, with most coming from Turkey and Serbia. Between 2014 and 2023, an average of approximately 11,000 temporary residence permits were issued annually (Ministry of Security of BiH 2023).

To create adequate conditions for managing migration flows, the state adopted the Strategy on Migration and Asylum 2021–2025, which primarily addresses general migration issues—especially transit flows through the country—and the need to strengthen institutions responsible for border control and internal security. However, the segment of labour migration has been deprioritized and is not the main focus of the strategy. As a result, the legal framework for long-term integration and institutional support for labour migrants remains underdeveloped.

Considering that, in the second half of 2024, around 70,000 workers were lacking across all economic sectors (Federalna.ba 2024), Bosnia and Herzegovina will need to prioritize the issue of labour migration in the coming period. This also includes protecting fundamental rights, ensuring freedom of expression, and establishing a functional market economy to create an attractive environment for foreign workers. Accelerating the education reform process—based on competencies—is also of great importance, as it would foster the development of new skills that can support the economy.

5.2. Labour Migration in Serbia

Serbia is the only country in the region that has adopted a strategy on economic migration for the period 2021–2027, with a particular focus on managing labour migration by improving living conditions to reduce the emigration of the working-age population. Furthermore, the strategy aims to develop a legal framework for attracting foreign workers with diverse expertise, while also encouraging circular migration. Procedures for obtaining work permits have been simplified to meet the growing demand in sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, and manufacturing. In this regard, the most recent amendments to the Law on Foreigners (2023) allow for temporary residence permits of up to three years for foreign nationals.

Nevertheless, there is still a need to establish a more comprehensive integration policy to retain and adequately support foreign labor. This is particularly important considering that Serbia faces a dual dynamic of emigration and immigration. On one hand, highly educated youth are leaving the country in search of better opportunities—with more than one million emigrants registered in 2020 (Integral Human Development 2025). On the other hand, Serbia is becoming an attractive destination for workers from the region, Asia, Eastern Europe, and other parts of the world. In 2022 and 2023, the highest number of temporary residence permits was issued to citizens of the Russian Federation, and there has also been an increase in the arrival of Chinese and Turkish nationals (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration RS 2023).

Regarding work permits, the majority issued between 2019 and 2023 went to Chinese nationals (36,036), and over 80% of all work permits were issued to men (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration RS 2023). Despite the recorded immigration, it is important to highlight that Serbia has

been experiencing a labor shortage for several years. According to the latest projections, the country will face a labor deficit of between 80,000 and 100,000 workers after 2030 (Nikolić et al. 2018).

To make the most of both domestic and foreign labor capacities, it is essential to strengthen a competency-based employment system and further align national requirements with Chapter 2 of the EU acquis, which addresses the free movement of workers (European Commission 2024).

5.3. Labour Migration in Montenegro

Montenegro has not been spared from large-scale emigration. According to estimates from the International Organization for Migration, nearly one-third of the population lives abroad (IOM 2025). Although this is a significant number for a small country like Montenegro, strong ties with the diaspora have not been established, limiting the potential to harness the economic and social capital of Montenegrins living abroad.

Due to its seasonal economy, Montenegro is exposed to fluctuating labor demands, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Flexible labor migration policies have been introduced, and the country is working to ease the process of bringing in foreign workers through the signing of bilateral agreements with countries of origin. Despite a rise in the number of temporary work permits issued in recent years, the country still faces challenges in protecting the rights of foreign workers, ensuring access to healthcare, and providing accommodation for seasonal workers.

Labour migration is addressed within the general Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro for the period 2021–2025, but there is no specific policy document dedicated solely to economic migration. Considering that the Montenegrin Employers' Association forecasts a labor shortage by 2030, and that the Ministry of Tourism already highlighted in 2023 the need for 4,000 to 5,000 seasonal workers (Montenegro Business 2023), the issue of labour migration is becoming increasingly important for the country.

5.4. Labour Migration in North Macedonia

North Macedonia is experiencing a high level of emigration, particularly among young professionals and skilled workers. According to UN data from 2019, the country had nearly 660,000 registered emigrants. Emigration is primarily directed toward Turkey and EU countries (Integral Human Development 2025). A moderate influx of labor from neighboring countries has been used to partially offset the effects of the brain drain.

A decline in the labor force is evident across all sectors, with agriculture, construction, and healthcare being the most affected. Between 2020 and 2022, 100,000 workers left the labor market (BalkanInsight 2023). The government is making efforts to implement reintegration programs for returnees and to strengthen diaspora ties in support of domestic development. However, targeted policies to attract and retain foreign workers are necessary to adequately address labor market shortages.

To establish a suitable framework for managing migration, North Macedonia adopted the Migration Strategy for the period 2021–2025. The adoption of this strategic document is important for addressing both national and regional demographic and development challenges. The urgency of the issue is also reflected in the fact that North Macedonia faces an annual shortage of 10,000 workers, which it is attempting to cover through the import of foreign labor (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso 2023).

5.5. Labour Migration in Albania

Albania has one of the highest emigration rates in Europe (King and Vullnetari 2010). The government estimated that in 2020, 1.68 million people had emigrated, accounting for more than 50% of the total population (Integral Human Development 2025). In recent years, there has been noticeable progress toward importing labor, particularly in the construction and services sectors.

Through amendments to the Law on Foreigners and the establishment of bilateral cooperation with the Philippines, Albania is working to secure 40,000 foreign workers. Negotiations have also been initiated with Indonesia (Albanian Times 2025). The government needs to develop an effective economic migration policy aimed at creating a positive impact on the country's socio-economic development.

However, progress remains limited by high levels of corruption, an inadequately functioning judiciary, the absence of full fundamental freedoms, and the widespread presence of the informal economy (European Commission 2024).

5.6. Labour Migration in Kosovo*

A significant outflow of the population due to high unemployment and political instability characterizes the territory of Kosovo*. Between 2021 and 2022 alone, 110,000 people left the territory after obtaining work permits. Official estimates indicate that by the end of 2022, nearly 950,000 people were living outside the borders of Kosovo*, which accounts for almost 54% of the total population (Ministry of Internal Affairs Kosovo* 2023). This process accelerated following the liberalization of the visa regime with the EU at the beginning of 2024 and is expected to continue in the coming period (Kosovo* Online 2023).

To mitigate the negative demographic changes, migration-related reforms have been initiated with the aim of making the territory more attractive to the labor force. However, for this process to be effective, it is necessary to strengthen institutional mechanisms focused on legal migration and integration. Furthermore, in order to create an attractive environment, it is essential to combat corruption at all levels of government, ensure the protection of fundamental rights, and establish mechanisms for safeguarding non-majority communities in the territory of Kosovo* (European Commission 2024).

6. THE VISEGRÁD GROUP – A REGIONAL EXAMPLE OF SIGNIFICANT LABOUR MIGRATION

To understand how Southeast European countries can improve labour migration management, the experiences of the Visegrád Group countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) have been analyzed. This analysis highlights both the challenges and opportunities in the area of labour migration, which can lead to positive demographic changes and help the region preserve and enhance economic productivity.

Poland is one of the most active EU countries in leveraging labour migration. Facing rapid population aging and an outflow of domestic labor, the government has launched efforts to attract foreign workers, primarily from Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia. By adjusting procedures for expedited work permits and simplifying visa regimes, the country has seen significant migrant inflows. In 2021 alone, nearly 800,000 residence permits were issued—accounting for over 30% of all permits issued in the EU (Eurostat 2025). Poland's experience demonstrates that bilateral labor agreements, institutional readiness, and public-private sector coordination can turn migration into an economic advantage. Through the active implementation of such measures, a positive balance has been struck between the costs of bringing in foreign labor and the benefits to the local population and state. However, Poland currently faces institutional limitations in accommodating and integrating large numbers of migrants. Further efforts are needed to ensure quality education and healthcare services for foreign workers and to prevent exploitation in any form. In order to further tailor migration policies, statistical systems must be developed to collect data on migrants and their movements (Bojarczuk 2023).

The Czech Republic, facing labor shortages in key sectors such as manufacturing, introduced the "Ukraine Regime" (European Commission 2022), which simplifies visa and work permit procedures for selected nationalities. This policy is aimed at providing language support and orientation programs to better integrate workers into society. Despite positive economic outcomes, efforts to improve legal protection and the inclusion of foreign workers continue. Recent amendments to the Law on Foreigners established a new economic migration system (Blahoutová 2013), which offers more flexibility in managing labor migration. The aim is to focus on attracting highly qualified foreign workers, while lower-skilled labor may be engaged through circular migration programs. Although significant progress has been made in the area of economic migration, issues remain in terms of political inclusion, strengthening healthcare systems, and the recognition of foreign academic credentials (Blahoutová 2013).

Due to political sensitivity and public concerns regarding integration, Slovakia has taken a more cautious approach to labor migration. Negative demographic trends have pushed the government to relax restrictions, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, IT, and construction. Slovakia's slow response in adapting labour migration policies illustrates how missed opportunities can exacerbate

labor shortages and increase demographic pressure. Unlike other Visegrád countries, Slovakia only adopted a strategic document on foreign worker integration in 2014 (European Commission 2025). Although migrant inflows—especially from Ukraine amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict—are occurring, migrants face conditions where equal rights with locals are not guaranteed. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen systems that ensure integration through equal rights, especially regarding employment based on qualifications and skills (European Commission 2025).

Hungary's migration policies often emphasize border control and the preservation of cultural identity. The government has allowed selective employment of foreigners, particularly through agency hiring from Southeast Asia. However, its restrictive rhetoric alongside pragmatic economic policies highlights the political complexity of managing labor migration. Despite the potential economic benefits, the lack of a comprehensive integration policy can limit long-term gains. The integration system needs to be adjusted toward skills-based employment, rather than relying solely on foreign workers to fill low-wage vacancies. With continued labor market liberalization, mechanisms must be strengthened to prevent exploitation and to support better integration through language education and social inclusion (Bodor 2024).

In all Visegrád Group countries, integration challenges remain significant. Migrants often work under precarious conditions and lack guaranteed long-term residency rights. The complexity of integration is evident through the exploitation of workers, various forms of discrimination, and fears over loss of national identity due to shrinking local populations. Despite these challenges, the Visegrád countries have made notable strides in migration reforms. Through the signing of bilateral and regional mobility agreements, they have facilitated the entry of foreign labor. Foundations have been laid for providing support both before and after arrival, and, in addition to government bodies, civil society organizations and employer representatives are actively involved in the process.

CONCLUSION

Faced with demographic challenges such as declining birth rates, population aging, and continued emigration, Southeast European countries must take proactive measures to ensure long-term socioeconomic sustainability. Labour migration offers a potential pathway for demographic renewal and economic resilience. This analysis has examined the complexity of labour migration as a social phenomenon that can help mitigate labor shortages, generate fiscal revenue, and ease negative social trends. A comparative analysis with the Visegrád Group has emphasized the importance of actively managing economic migration and timely policy adaptation.

In order to harness the full potential of labor migration, and taking into account the experiences of the Visegrád Group countries, the countries of the region must adopt and actively implement long-term, integrated strategies that include:

- *Comprehensive labour migration policies*

It is necessary to develop economic migration strategies that are integrated with economic, labor market, and demographic planning. These strategies should help identify sector-specific labor market needs, align visa regimes with shortage occupations, and define measures to attract and retain foreign workers.

- *Improving institutional frameworks*

Effective management of labour migration requires functional and transparent institutions. Countries should establish dedicated agencies or departments for labour migration issues and enhance inter-institutional coordination among various government bodies. To ease administrative burdens, a digital platform for permit processing and data exchange should be developed.

- *Strengthening regional cooperation*

Labor market and demographic challenges transcend national borders. In this context, regional cooperation among Southeast European countries can facilitate labor mobility, harmonize standards on workers' rights and conditions, and support the creation of shared databases on migration flows and labor market needs.

- *Integration and rights protection*

When attracting foreign workers, successful integration into the local community is crucial to enabling migrants to realize their full potential in the new environment. Therefore, access to language learning, education, and healthcare must be ensured, alongside consistent efforts to combat discrimination and enforce labor rights protections. Social inclusion should also be supported through civic and cultural initiatives.

▪ *Strengthening diaspora engagement*

While the diaspora is often seen primarily as a source of remittances, it can also be leveraged as a developmental resource. In this context, circular migration programs should be promoted, with appropriate support for diaspora-led investments and entrepreneurship, and inclusion in policymaking processes.

▪ *Improving data analysis and processing systems*

Sound policy must be based on high-quality and timely data. It is essential to allocate resources for labor market research and demographic analysis. A system should be established to monitor the integration outcomes of foreign workers and make such statistics publicly available. By developing robust data collection and analysis systems, Southeast European countries will be able to adapt their migration strategies in a timely manner and respond more effectively to evolving challenges.

The successful integration of labour migration into national development plans should contribute not only to resolving demographic challenges but also to positioning the region as a competitive and inclusive destination for foreign workers. Appropriate measures must be taken, and action initiated before demographic trends become irreversible. Southeast European countries should actively implement strategic frameworks and intensify action plans with clearly defined measures in the area of labour migration. In doing so, they can attract foreign workers who, by filling labor market gaps, contribute to economic growth. Furthermore, highly skilled migrants bring expertise and knowledge that can enhance economic competitiveness—ultimately positioning Southeast Europe more favorably on the global map.

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