



The Western Balkan region faces a significant demographic challenge marked by a decline in population due to youth emigration and low birth rates. In recent decades, 30–50 per cent of the populations of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia have migrated abroad, particularly to the EU countries. This trend poses serious risks to the region's societal resilience and future stability.

Economic factors such as unemployment and limited opportunities are major drivers for youth emigration. In addition, political instability, corruption, and dissatisfaction with the state of democracy are increasing as push factors for the youth.

The youth lack motivation to engage in politics as they perceive being unable to make a difference in their home countries. At worst, this leads to passivity, which reduces political pressure for reforms.

To address these challenges, inclusive governance that actively involves young people in decision-making processes is crucial. Additionally, more balanced migration policies are needed to mitigate the adverse impacts on both the Western Balkans and the EU. This would ensure sustainable economic and democratic development and safeguard against undue external influence.

**Brain drain, weak democracy, and limited prospects for the future.**

**Case studies on youth migration in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.**

Edited by Jelena Simić

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# Introduction

**THE SIX WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES (WB6)** – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia – have a longstanding history of migration. Due to massive emigration rates and declining fertility rates, Western Balkan countries are rapidly losing their population, being among the top 20 countries in the world with the highest population decline.<sup>1</sup> From 1990 to 2021, the population of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia combined has shrunk from 19.9 million to 17.4 million.

In an era marked by globalization, youth migration has emerged as a significant phenomenon with far-reaching implications for countries sending and receiving migrants. The decisions of young people to leave their home countries in search of better opportunities abroad is influenced by various factors including economic, social, and political conditions.

Within the context of Western Balkan countries, which are in different stages of transition and development, it is crucial to further understand the relationship between youth migration and democracy because it has direct implications for the future of the region. It is estimated that the region will lose around 1 million youth in the next decade. The fact that most people emigrating are young, educated, and highly skilled poses a serious threat to the region's development.<sup>2</sup> This report provides a comprehensive examination of youth emigration trends and their relationship with democratic conditions in three Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia.

The report consists of three individual case studies written by local experts working in political think tanks. The case studies explore migration through three different dimensions. Firstly, through the analysis of migration statistics and previous literature, the case studies measure previous and current emigration trends and provide a foundational understanding of the quantity and scale of the phenomena in each country.

Secondly, utilizing established indexes and empirical data, the case studies evaluate the state of democracy in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. Factors such as political participation, institutional trust, and the rule of law are considered. Assessment of the democratic conditions serves as a backdrop for understanding the broader socio-political environment within which youth emigration occurs.

Thirdly, by correlating emigration patterns with democratic indicators and youth perceptions, the case studies aim to shed light on the extent to which the socio-political condition of the youth influences their decision to migrate. In the case studies of Albania and North Macedonia, the authors have conducted new surveys on youth perceptions related to the state of democracy and how it affects their desire to leave. In the case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the authors rely on previous research, owing to its extensiveness. This analysis of emigration patterns, democratic indicators, and youth perceptions uncovers a potential causal relationship and highlights areas where democratic deficiencies may increase emigration pressures.

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<sup>1</sup> DevelopmentAid 2022 <sup>2</sup> OECD 2022

We hope that these findings will inform policymakers, civil society actors, and international stakeholders in designing targeted interventions aimed at addressing the root causes of youth emigration and fostering more inclusive societies and robust democracies in the whole Western Balkan region.

# Case Study Albania

## Unemployment and labour market shortages as the main push factor for the youth

**Ledjon Shahini, Director**  
**Klajdi Priska, Expert on youth**  
**Gemal Stafa Foundation**

### Youth and migration in Albania

**YOUNG PEOPLE**, aged 15 to 29, are an important resource for the future of Albania as well as the Western Balkans (WB6), as the region is undergoing a political and economic transition and striving towards EU membership. With a population of nearly 2.9 million, Albania has one of the youngest populations in Europe that has seen significant change during the last 30 years. In 1994, when Eurostat first reported data for Albania, half of the population was under 27.6 years old. For the European Union, (EU) the median age was 38.7.

In 2022, Albania ranked third in European countries with the youngest populations, after Turkey and Iceland. The median age of the Albanian population is 38.2 years, which is slightly less than the EU average (44.4).<sup>3</sup> The drop and aging in Albania's population over the last three decades is due to a declining birth rate and large-scale migration.<sup>4</sup> The modern history of emigration begins only in the 1990s with the fall of the communist regime and the opening of borders which were previously closed.<sup>5</sup>

Although Albanian migration has been a dynamic process during the last three decades, its intensity and characteristics have changed in each one. Migration during the first period of 1990-2000 was intense and in the year 2000, it was estimated that 800,000 Albanians were living and working abroad, mostly in Greece and Italy. This emigration was spontaneous, irregular, and consisted of young males who wanted to work and escape the economic and political chaos of the transition period. Towards the end of this decade, the legalization of work permits, first in Italy and then in Greece, enabled many migrants to normalize their situation and bring family members to their country of residence.<sup>6</sup>

In the second decade of emigration, years 2000-2010, the outflow of Albanians continued, but with a slightly lower intensity. This slowdown in emigration was due to a large number already leaving in the 1990s, meaning the pool of potential migrants was temporarily partially depleted. Albania's economic performance also improved slightly after the chaotic period of the 1990s, which contributed to less emigration. Greece and Italy

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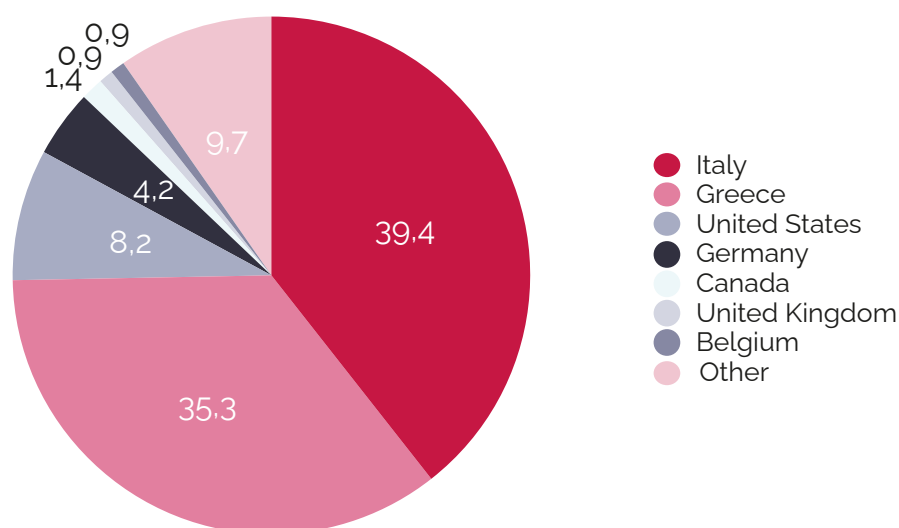
<sup>3</sup> Eurostat 2023 <sup>4</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2022 <sup>5</sup> World Bank 2011 <sup>6</sup> Barjaba 2000

continued to be the main countries of choice as families and social networks channeled migrants to already established destinations.

A rapid process of settlement and integration took place, facilitated by social similarities with host populations. This reduced prejudice against Albanian immigrants and improved their labour market status. Compared to the frenetic exodus of the 1990s, flows in the 2000s were lower in scale and largely legal in nature. Meanwhile, destinations became more diversified and included other European countries, particularly the United Kingdom, as well as North American countries.<sup>7</sup>

According to World Bank data, within two decades, that is until 2010, Albania produced a 'stock' of 1,117,300 migrants, equal to 38.8% of its resident population.<sup>8</sup> Italy is the most popular destination with about 40% of Albanian immigrants, while Greece ranks second with about 35%. The United States of America (8.2%) and Germany, which for 2020 counted for 4.2%<sup>9</sup> are the most popular countries otherwise.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Albanian migrants among destinations (%), 2020.**

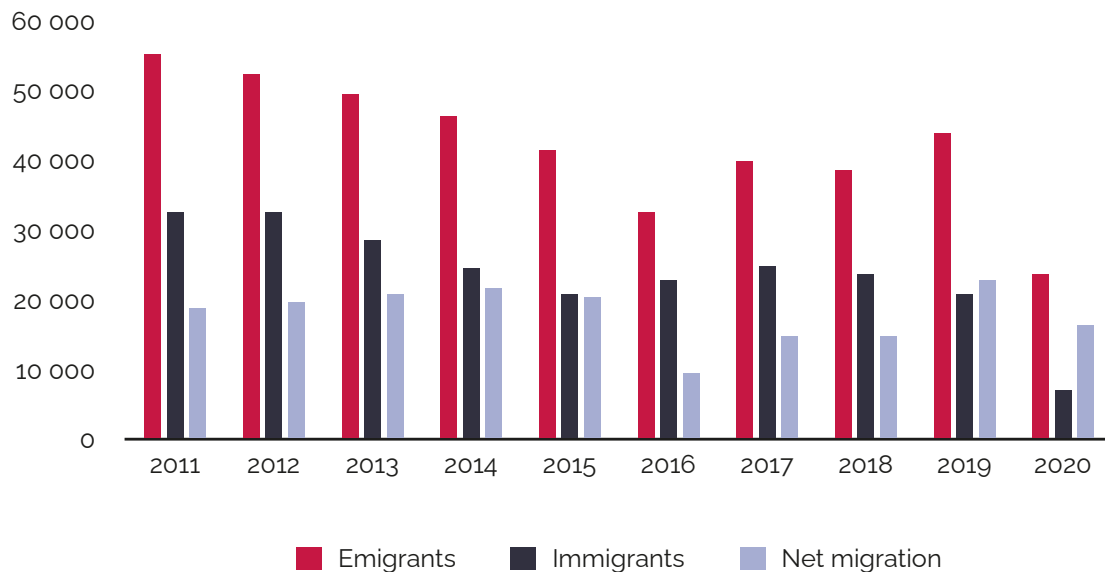


Source: INSTAT, 2022.

During the third decade, from 2010 onwards, Germany became a main destination. This wave of migration has been characterized by a revival of intensity and new destinations.

<sup>7</sup> King 2003 <sup>8</sup> World Bank 2011 <sup>9</sup> INSTAT 2022

**Figure 2. Immigrants, Migrants, and Net Migration in Albania, 2011–2020.**



Source: INSTAT, 2022.

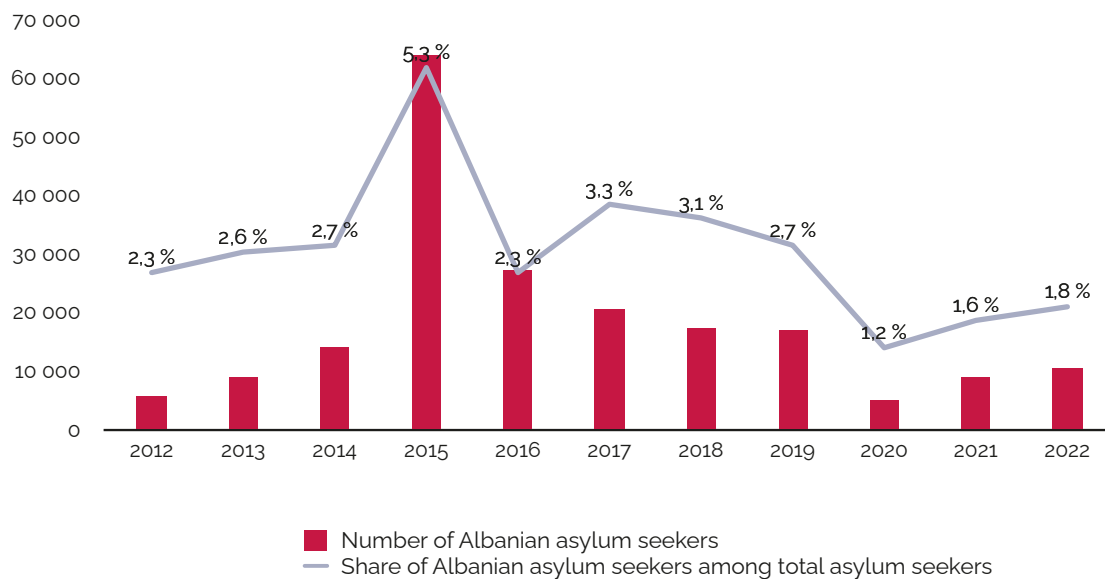
These recent flows peaked in the middle of the decade when around 66,000 Albanians were registered as asylum seekers in several EU countries, accounting for 5.3% of the total asylum seekers in the EU.

Albanians took advantage of the perceived opportunities during the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, which opened new migration routes across the Western Balkans. Although most of these Albanian asylum seekers were refused asylum, some of them stayed in Germany due to new German regulations for the Western Balkans allowing them to change their status from asylum seekers to labour migrants. Between 2010 and 2019, Albanians submitted approximately 196,000 asylum applications. In 2022 alone, approximately 11,000 requests were filed.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Walsh & Oriishi 2023



**Figure 3. Albanian asylum seekers in EU countries, 2012–2022.**



Source: Eurostat, 2022.

The data for the European Union does not include the United Kingdom. In 2022, the migration of Albanian citizens to the UK attracted substantial attention when 16,000 Albanians crossed the English Channel in small boats and claimed asylum. Although decreasing significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Albanians submit the second-most asylum applications in the UK. Syria submits the most with 4,000 applications per million inhabitants, and Albania 2,300 applications per million inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> After 2014, over 74% of Albanian asylum seekers in the EU have been young people aged under 34, and one third of these are minors.<sup>12</sup>

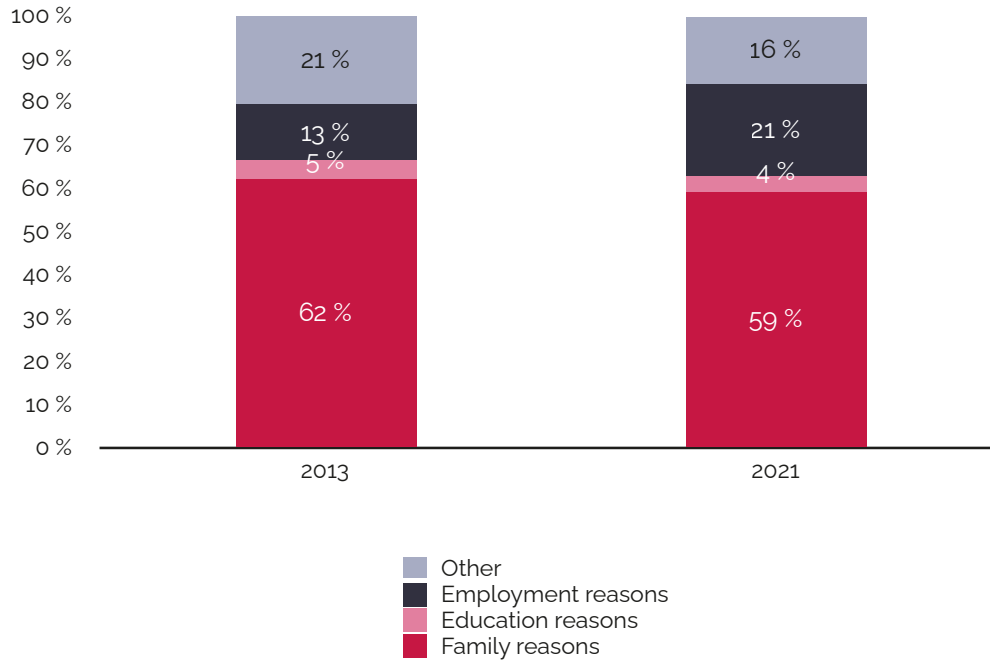
Apart from the “illegal migration” as asylum seekers, Albania has high rates of legal migration as well. More than 230,000 citizens of the Western Balkans and Turkey were issued with first residence permits in 2021, of which 23% were citizens of Albania, 19% from Serbia, 14% from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 9% from Kosovo, 6% from North Macedonia, and 1% from Montenegro.

Greece, Italy, and Germany together accounted for 94% of Albanians holding valid residence permits in the EU at the end of 2021. Almost 58% of Albanian migrants hold a valid residence permit from Italy, 18.5% from Greece and 8.2% from Germany<sup>13</sup>.

In 2021, among first resident permits granted, more than half (59%) were for family reasons, down from 62% in 2013; 21% were for employment, up from 13% in 2013; and 4% for education, down from 5% in 2013.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Home Office Immigration Statistics United Kingdom 2023 <sup>12</sup> Eurostat 2022 <sup>13</sup> Eurostat Enlargement Countries Database 2023 <sup>14</sup> Eurostat 2022

**Figure 4. First residence permits issued within the EU by reason for issue, 2013 and 2021 (%).**

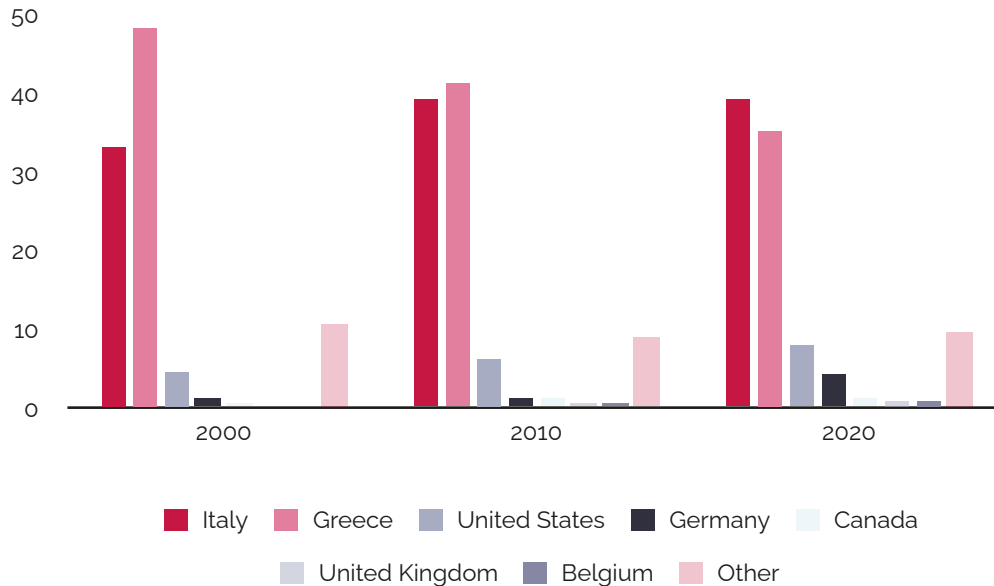


Source: Eurostat, 2022.

Overall, in the last decade, the previous stock of 1,117,300 migrants have been bolstered by 132,511 Albanians, making a total of 1,250,451, which is approximately 44% of the current population living in Albania. Potential migration remains high, especially among young people. This means that a significant percentage of the Albanian population living inside the country would like, or actually intend, to migrate in the future.

The flow of returning migrants to Albania has generally been limited, driven only by the economic crisis in Greece, and less in Italy. Since 2000, the growth rate of the number of Albanian migrants in Greece has decreased rapidly and was even negative during 2010-2020. The total number of Albanian immigrants in Greece has therefore shrunk and for the year 2020, Greece had the second most Albanian migrants. Even in the case of Italy and the USA, the annual growth rate of the number of migrants has been constantly decreasing, reaching around 3% during the period 2015-2020. On the other hand, the number of Albanian migrants in Germany has increased, especially after 2015, rapidly increasing at an annual rate of 35%, making it currently the most popular target for Albanian migrants.

**Figure 5. Distribution of Albanian migrants according to main destinations (%), 2000–2020.**



Source: INSTAT, 2022.

## Youth Challenges in Albania

Amidst an ongoing political and economic transformation of its society, Albanian youth face a variety of challenges that stand in the way of the opportunities that the EU integration perspective and related reforms are expected to provide. Affected by the 2008 global financial crisis, the economy of Albania has been slow to recover, which has led to soaring youth unemployment and a scarcity of job opportunities. Educational systems have been slow to adapt to the changing labour market, leaving Albanian youth with an inadequate set of skills and making it harder to enter the job market. Weak incentives to stay in the country have made migration a popular option, resulting in a brain drain. In addition, poorly performing political institutions and endemic corruption have long bred cynicism and alienation among citizens.<sup>15</sup>

## Youth Unemployment

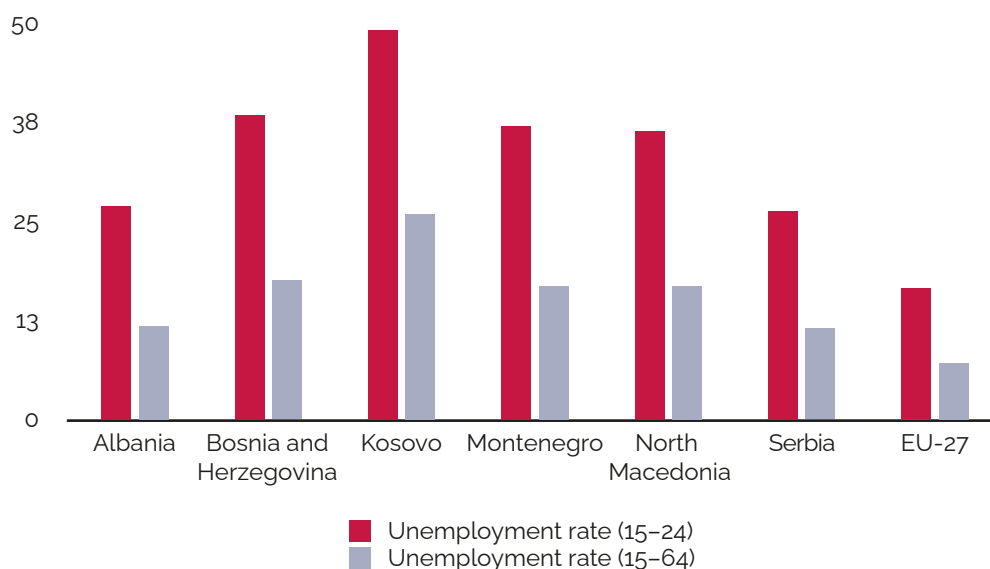
The economic situation of the youth in Albania, as well as the whole Western Balkan region, has been a problem for years. Better paying jobs, good education, and additional training are therefore often sought abroad. Various studies underline that the main issues for youth in Albania are unemployment combined with a high percentage wanting to leave the country.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Lilyanova 2017 <sup>16</sup> Young Bled Strategic Forum 2021

As in many EU countries, high youth unemployment in Albania reflects the difficulties labour markets are experiencing. The entire region is still struggling with the aftershocks of the 2008 financial crisis and the high youth employment and inactivity limit prospects for economic growth and affect the quality of labour supply now and in the future.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the whole Western Balkans region, the active population totals around 11 million with about 7 million active in the labour market, leaving 4 million inactive. The inactivity rate of the whole population is 32% in Albania, which is way below that of Kosovo (60%) but substantially higher than the EU countries. Among young people, inactivity is even higher, as is youth unemployment. The ratio of the overall employment rate to the youth employment rate is almost two to one (Figure 6). However, the employment rate of the youth in Albania (26%) does not differ that much from the EU average (33%).

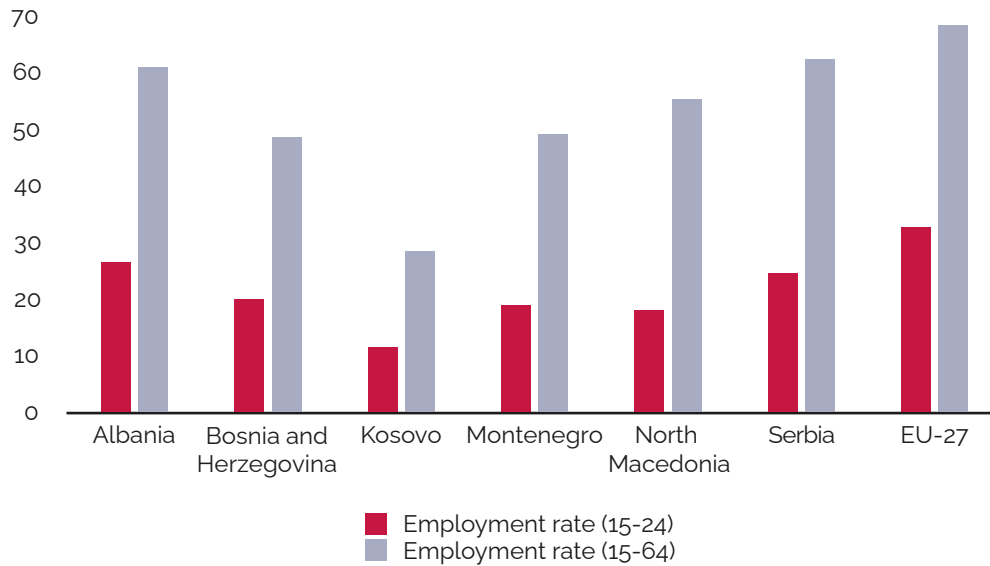
**Figure 6. Unemployment rates of 15–64 and 15–24 age groups in the Western Balkans and EU, 2021 (%).**



Source: European Training Foundation, 2021.

Youth unemployment is more responsive to the business cycle because young people are more concentrated in certain economic sectors, and a disproportionate number hold part-time jobs and temporary contracts. As such, they are also more affected by periods of economic crisis and are often among the first to lose their jobs. While some of this can be attributed to the fact that a large proportion of young people are in education, the low employment rate also reflects a high number of young people in the country who are inactive or unemployed. There is also a gender gap in employment with young women's activity rates falling behind, as it is mainly women staying at home with children.

**Figure 7. Employment rate of 15–64 and 15–24 age groups in the Western Balkans and EU, 2021 (%).**

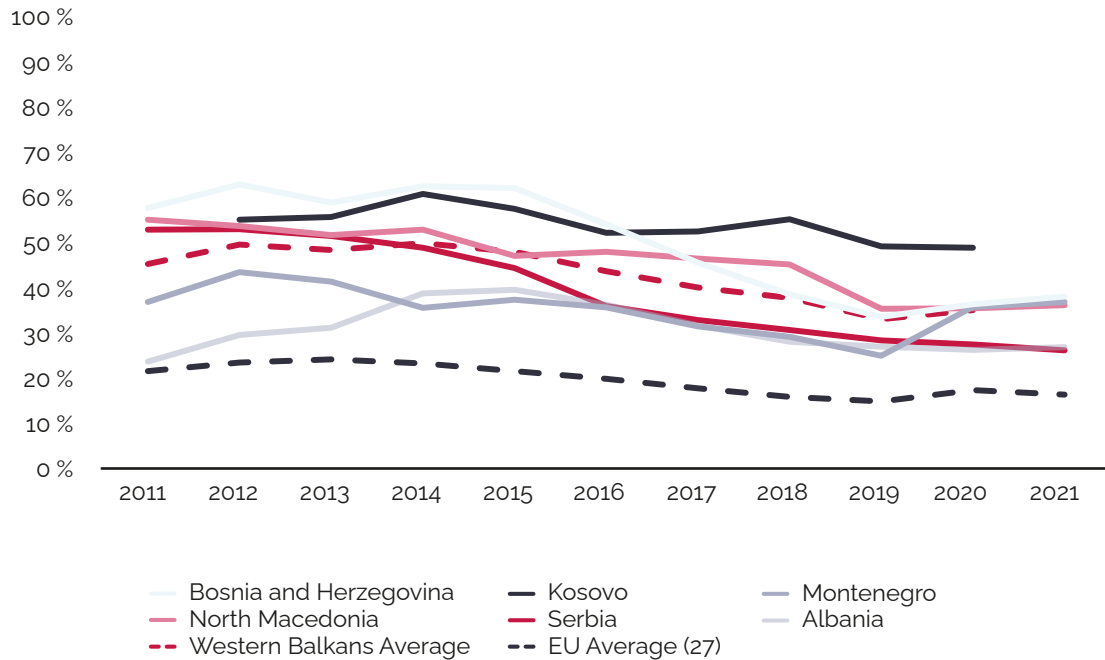


Source: European Training Foundation, 2021.

A study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans in 2021 shows that there is a strong relationship between the overall employment rate and the youth employment rate.<sup>18</sup> According to the study's regression analysis, about three quarters of the variation in youth employment can be explained as a function of overall employment, thus indicating that part of the solution to youth unemployment is overall economic growth. Long-run structural factors play a large role in explaining differences in the youth labour markets in each economy, suggesting a need for transformative youth employment policies.

Youth unemployment rates in the region have remained elevated compared to the EU-27 average. Albanian youth unemployment (27.1%) ranks among the lowest in the Western Balkans, together with Serbia, with the highest youth unemployment rates in Kosovo. As the economic environment has been less favorable since 2019, the unemployment rate rose in almost all WB countries as well as the EU-27.

**Figure 8. Unemployment rates of 15–24 age groups in the Western Balkans and EU, 2011–2021 (%).**



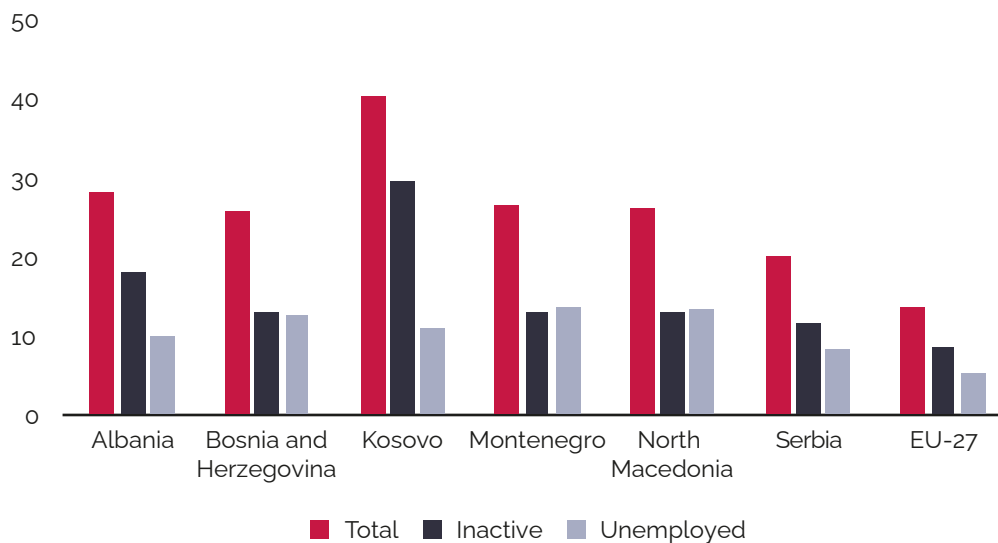
Source: European Training Foundation 2022.

Youth unemployment combined with limited access to education and training can have a big impact, reducing future earnings, and increasing risks of future unemployment and poverty. Young people in neither employment nor education or training (NEET) run the risk of falling out of the labour market entirely, falling below the poverty line and being unable to effectively re-enter the labour market.<sup>19</sup> This affects individuals as well as the overall economy.

The Western Balkans Labour Market Trends report from 2017<sup>20</sup> highlights that youth, women, and the low-educated are among the worst affected labour market participants and have high inactivity rates. Nearly 25% of the region's young people are inactive, meaning they are not in employment, education, or training, while in the EU, it is 13.7%.<sup>21</sup> Albania has a much higher proportion (28%) of NEETs and is ranked second after Kosovo, as shown in Figure 9.

<sup>19</sup> Council of the European Union 2020 <sup>20</sup> Produced by the World Bank and the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (WIIW) <sup>21</sup> World Bank Regular Economic Report 2021

**Figure 9. NEETs (aged 15–29) by labour market status, 2020 (%).**



Source: European Training Foundation, 2021.

Women are a greater proportion of the inactive population than men, especially in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The relatively high level of inactivity can be related to a reliance on remittances as well as to the widespread informal economy, both of which decrease employment incentives, especially among women.<sup>22</sup>

Unemployment is also linked to educational systems. There is a discrepancy between the academic programs and courses being offered and the knowledge and skills needed in the labour market.<sup>23</sup> For example, many young people remain unemployed despite holding a university degree. They are also often forced to accept jobs below their qualification levels. This applies to 40% of tertiary graduates in Albania.<sup>24</sup>

## Youth Attitudes

Population decline in Albania is a complex process, including low birth rates, low immigration, and high emigration. Young people are more mobile and disproportionately represented among migrants.

The desire to migrate is higher among young people in their 20s, the most educated, and those who are employed with medium to high incomes.<sup>25</sup> This can be explained by better employment opportunities and the overall higher labour market standards of more developed countries like Germany and the USA. However, the desire to migrate is also increasingly related to dissatisfaction among youth with the politics in Albania.

There is a high correlation between migration and education. The emigration rate of those with higher education levels is greater than the overall rate. The most active age group, 20–44-year-olds, represents 46.3% of the migrant population, while for the resi-

<sup>22</sup> Regional Cooperation Council (RYCO) 2019 <sup>23</sup> Connecting Youth 2021 <sup>24</sup> European Training Foundation 2021 <sup>25</sup> Gëdeshi and King 2018

dent population, that number is 35.1%.<sup>26</sup> Albania is among the countries with the highest emigration levels of highly educated people in the world.<sup>27</sup>

The study conducted by King and Gëdeshi (2020)<sup>28</sup> revealed that 79% of the 1650 students interviewed in different Albanian universities expressed the desire to emigrate. The level of education also correlates with the chosen destination countries. The most educated people expressed an intention to emigrate to countries like Germany and USA while those with a lower level of education and skills continue to orientate towards traditional destinations such as Greece and Italy, where they hope to find less skilled work. Low skilled job opportunities are usually found informally with the help of family and social networks already there.

According to a survey from 2021<sup>29</sup>, 50% of Albanian citizens are still considering leaving the country (83% expressed the desire to leave, and 49% seriously considered such a decision). This is the highest number in the region, and Albania is the only country in the Balkans where the number of people willing to leave is higher than those willing to stay. Only 46% expressed their willingness to stay in the country, with the main reasons being dissatisfaction with economic developments, low standards of living, and the lack of career prospects.

At the aggregate level, Albania shows few signs, after almost three decades of large-scale migration, of the transition of the migration cycle from a country of net migration to a country of net immigration.<sup>30</sup> Economic factors and the large income gap with European and North American countries are not the only influencing factors.

According to the data from the EVS survey<sup>31</sup>, people in general, and potential migrants in particular, are dissatisfied with economic opportunities, the education system, health care, pension system, civil service, justice, and political system.<sup>32</sup> These are some of the main factors that have influenced the migration of the youth population in the last decade:

- Economic opportunities: The lack of economic opportunities is one of the main reasons why young people are leaving Albania. The country has a high unemployment rate and wages are low. This makes it difficult for young people to find good jobs and build a future for themselves in Albania.
- Unemployment: Albania has a high unemployment rate, especially among young people. This means that many young people are unable to find jobs in Albania, which pushes them to migrate to other countries in search of work.
- Educational opportunities. The Albanian education system is not as good as it could be. This makes it difficult for young people to get the skills they need to make a good living. As a result, many young people are choosing to leave Albania to pursue education in other countries.
- Albania is a relatively deprived country with limited opportunities for young people. There are few good schools, few jobs, and few opportunities for advancement. This makes it difficult for young people to achieve their goals, which pushes them to migrate to other countries in search of a better life.

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**26** INSTAT 2020c **27** FDI Intelligence 2023 **28** King and Gëdeshi 2020b **29** Balkan Barometer **30** Cesareo 2017. **31** Gëdeshi and King 2018 **32** Gëdeshi 2021



- Political instability and corruption: Albania has a history of political turmoil and in recent decades, the country has been plagued by corruption and organized crime. This can be a major source of insecurity for young people, who may feel that they have no future in Albania. As a result, many young people are choosing to leave the country in search of a more stable environment.

## Youth migration and democracy

In terms of overall democracy, Albania has made significant progress during recent decades. There have been regular, free, and fair elections since 1991 and there is, although not perfect, a vibrant civil society and independent media. Corruption and organized crime remain, however, the leading reasons for the insufficient level of democracy. Albania is a major transit point for drugs and human trafficking, which contributes to insecurity and instability in its society.

Recent years have been characterized by political polarization, corruption, weak rule of law and lack of trust in political institutions. These challenges undermine the public confidence in the democratic process and hinder progress towards strengthening democratic governance.

Different indexes have assessed the state of democracy in Albania. The Economist Intelligence Unit<sup>33</sup> ranks Albania as a "flawed democracy" which is the second-best category. With an overall score of 6.41 points out of 10, Albania performed best in civil liberties (7.35 points) and worst in political participation (5 points). Ranked globally 64th, Albania is the best performing country in the Western Balkans. Freedom House<sup>34</sup> ranks Albania as "partly free" with a total score of 67/100. Their report pinpoints highly polarized political parties that are often organized around leading personalities, corruption, and bribery. As a positive development, in Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2023 report, Albania's corruption rate improved due to a number of high-profile indictments and convictions of former officials by the Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK). In addition to improving its overall democracy score, SPAK has taken a proactive role in promoting the fight against corruption and organized crime, indicating that, to some extent, there is political willingness to address the issue.

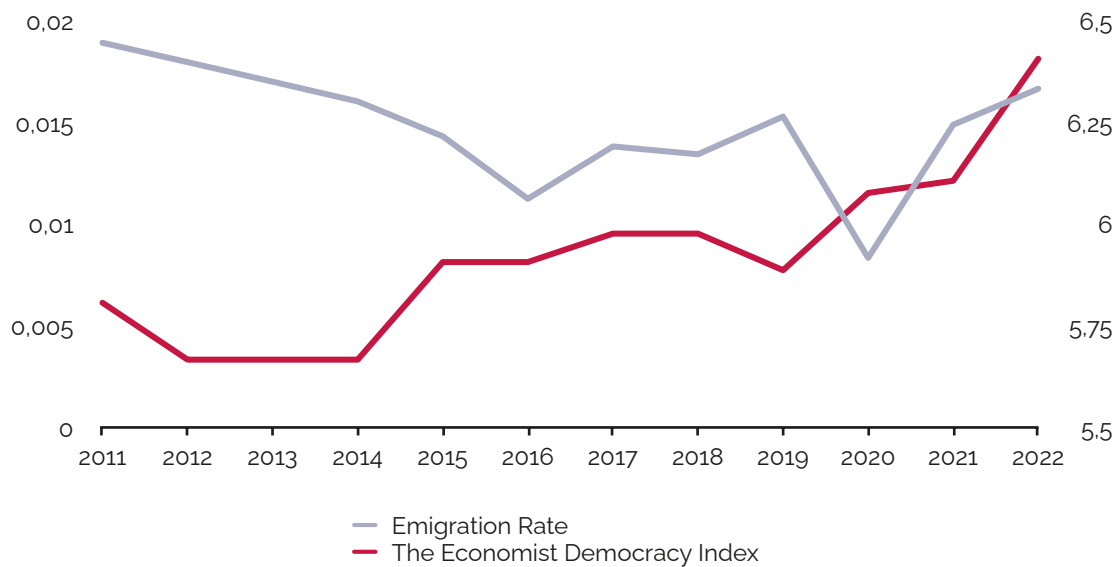
Political institutions are vital for overall development and economic prosperity. Therefore, it is crucial to understand what factors affect the quality of institutions. Studies point to a positive correlation between institutional quality and typical migration rates.<sup>35</sup> The number of immigrants from less developed countries residing in wealthier, more developed ones has significantly increased during the past few decades. At the same time, the standard of institutions in developing countries has also improved, which signals a positive correlation.

In Albania's case, the correlation is hard to assess as the data on democracy related indexes has only been evaluated since 2011. Assessing the data on migration is also problematic as Albanian residents are not systematically registered upon leaving the country and there are very few incentives for them to register their departure with local authorities in new countries. However, some indirect methods make it possible to estimate the number of individuals who have migrated from Albania.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Democracy Index 2022 34 Freedom House State of Democracy 2023 35 Frédéric Docquier and Hillel Rapoport 2011 36 Migration in Albania 2017

**Figure 10. Democracy and migration rate over time in Albania, 2023.**



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, INSTAT, Author's calculations, 2023.

From the available data for the period 2011-2022, as shown in Figure 10, there is no clear relationship or correlation between the democracy index and migration rate (number of migrants over the total population).

However previous studies show that, depending on the characteristics of migrants, the destination country, and whether migrants continue to feel a strong connection and sense of belonging to their home country which encourages them to still influence the political process, migration can have a positive or negative impact on home-country institutions in a variety of ways. In general, cross-country studies suggest that migration has a favorable impact on the standard of institutions back home. However, induced democratization from outside can only take place if the host nation adopts policies that permit migrants to integrate and take part in social and economic activities, allowing them to pick up new values and norms that can be communicated to their home country.<sup>37</sup>

The supply side of the quality of institutions, the demand for (higher) quality institutions, as well as the relationship between the two, can be impacted by migration to the home country through a variety of channels. On the supply side, the availability of people who are suitably qualified has a significant impact on the overall quality of institutions. At the same time, if the most qualified people leave the country, one outcome might be that corrupt regimes continue to exist, and political instability fails to decrease.

The decision to migrate can be "self-selected" in many ways. Migrants usually positively self-select themselves based on their educational background and this is the primary reason why migration is likely to have a negative impact on the standard of political institutions. Additionally, it is usually the most educated people who are politically engaged and contribute to, for example, public policy discussion.

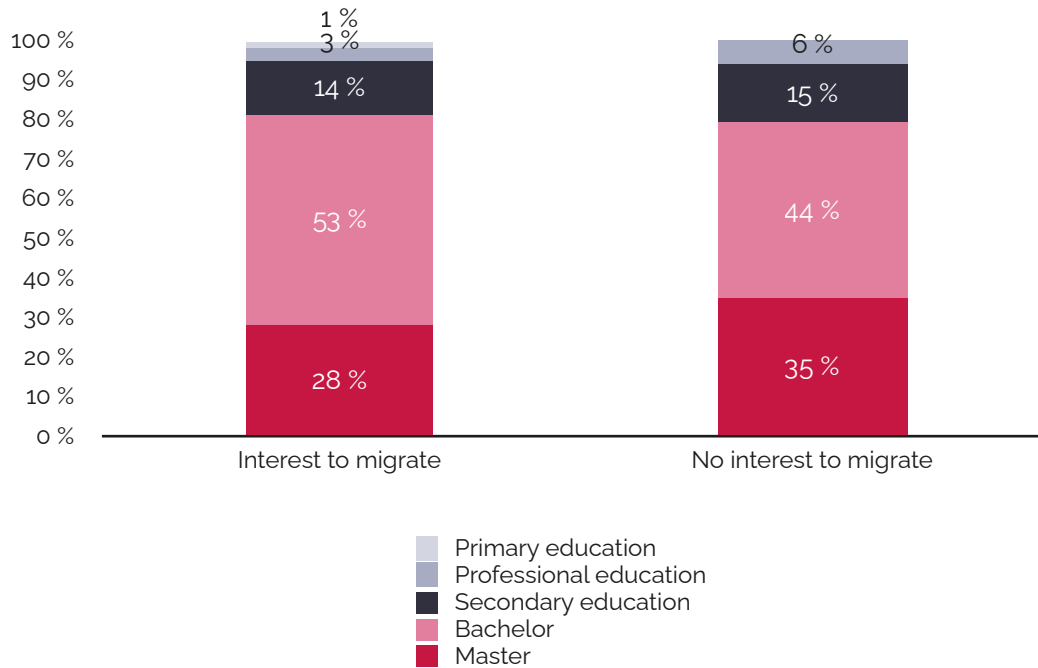
In addition to data from official sources, to better comprehend and be able to assess the relationship between youth migration and democracy in Albania, we conducted an

<sup>37</sup> Lodigiani 2016

online survey on the impact of youth migration on democracy. The main goal was to collect and analyze data on young Albanians, focusing on the democratic values and reasons behind the intent to migrate. A representative survey of the youth population of Albania, aged 15 to 29 years, was conducted in Google Forms, and shared through the internet (on different NGO websites). The survey yielded 173 respondents after a careful process of removing invalid responses. Although the sample is relatively small for the youth population of Albania (661,365 young people aged 15-29), it gives some indications of their attitudes. The survey was conducted in May-June 2023.

Of the 173 respondents, 80% expressed the desire to move out of Albania. Of those respondents who expressed the interest to migrate, 81% have finished tertiary education (bachelors or masters). This figure is consistent with Balkan Barometer and reflects the high figures when it comes to brain drain.

**Figure 11. Educational background of questionnaire respondents (%).**



Source: Author's questionnaire data, 2023.

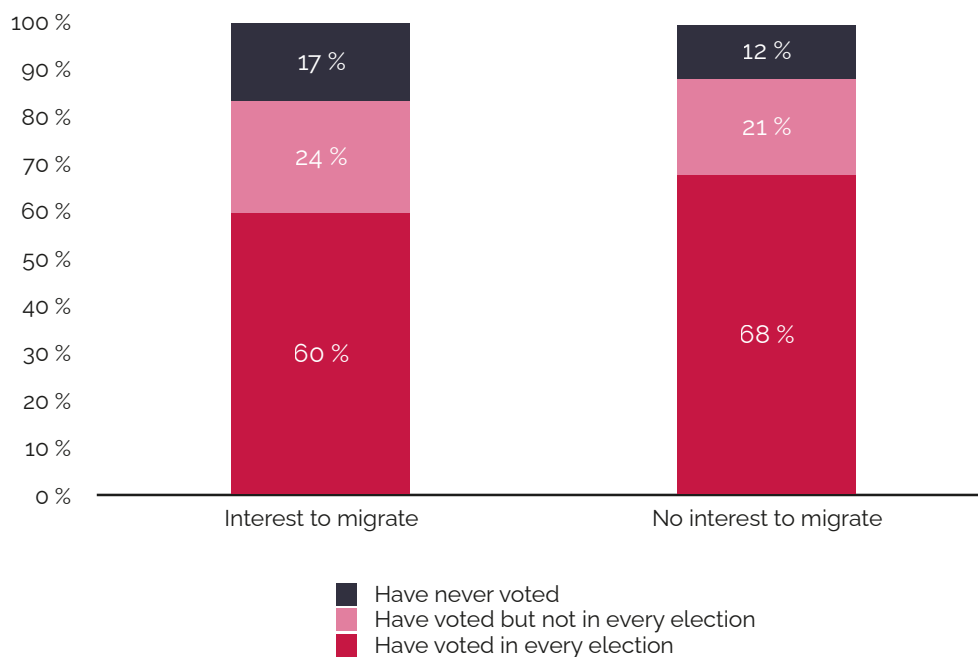
The interest in migrating is also related to a significant increase in the demand for some educational backgrounds such as medicine, nursing, and information communication technology (ICT), since these are the professions most desired in developed countries.

91.5% of medical students, 83% of nursing students, and 84.4% of informatics students expressed the interest to migrate. The common trend of potential migration, especially for some groups of students in certain fields, is a concern and should attract the attention of policymakers as it could increase shortages in the upper segments of some

much-needed professions in Albania. The number of doctors, nurses, and midwives per 100,000 inhabitants in Albania is much lower compared to the EU average (384 doctors in 2016). In 2000, Albania had 140 doctors per 100,000 inhabitants, in 2016 there were 120, and this indicator fell to 110 doctors in 2020.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, if a sufficiently high percentage of people who made such investments – educating themselves in the above-mentioned fields – ultimately remain in their home country due to successful politics and measures taken, effects on the skill distribution could decrease the detrimental consequences of skilled migration on political institutions.<sup>39</sup> However, on the demand side, a decision to leave might alter and decrease the motivation to “voice” (i.e., vote or advocate for change). In the case of Albania, our questionnaire data shows that a higher percentage (16.55%) of the people who have expressed interest to migrate have never voted in local and central elections compared to those who have not expressed interest to migrate (11.76%). Furthermore, only 59.7% of the people who intend to migrate have voted in all possible elections compared to 67.65% of the people who do not want to migrate.

**Figure 12. Participation in the elections processes (%).**



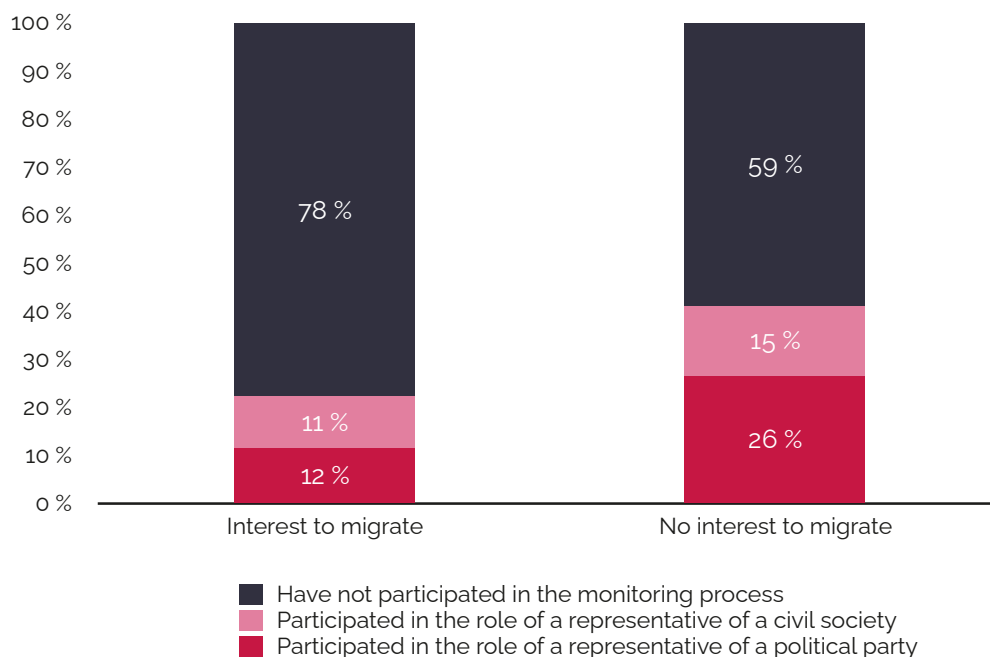
Source: Author’s questionnaire data, 2023.

Interestingly, 77% of young people who have expressed the interest to migrate think that the right to vote in electoral processes is a very important tool of democracy (compared to 72% of those who have not expressed an interest to migrate) but they still boast less participation in the voting processes.

<sup>38</sup> King and Gëdeshi 2020 <sup>39</sup> Docquier and Rapoport 2011

In addition, young people with an interest in migrating do not engage in the monitoring of electoral processes as much as young people who have no interest in migrating, as shown in Figure 13. At the same time, a majority young people with an interest in migrating (51.9%) think that the electoral processes in Albania are not free and democratic, compared to only 32.3% of the young people who have no interest in migrating.

**Figure 13. Participation in the monitoring of electoral processes (%).**

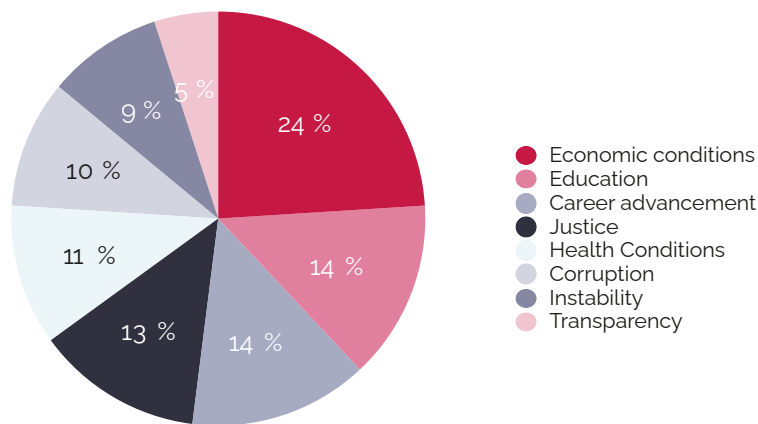


Source: Author's questionnaire data, 2023.

When asked about perception of the level of corruption on a scale 1 to 10 (1 being no corruption at all and 10 complete corruption), 43% of young people with an interest in migrating responded that, in Albania, the level of corruption is 10 (compared to just 8.8% in young people with no interest in migrating). Furthermore, almost 60% of youth with an interest in migrating think that the political regime should undergo major or complete change, compared to 41% of the young people with no interest in migrating.

Even though young people with the intent to migrate feel that the level of corruption is alarming, and that the political regime should change, they showed little interest in the political and socio-economic life of the country, especially compared to those not planning to migrate. When facing malpractice in social or political life, those intending to migrate were more likely to report it. 24% have sent at least one complaint to citizens platforms and expressed their dissatisfaction in the provision of public services. Among those not intending to migrate, the number was 16%. Similarly, 5% have reported corruption on similar platforms, compared to none of those who do not intend to leave the country.

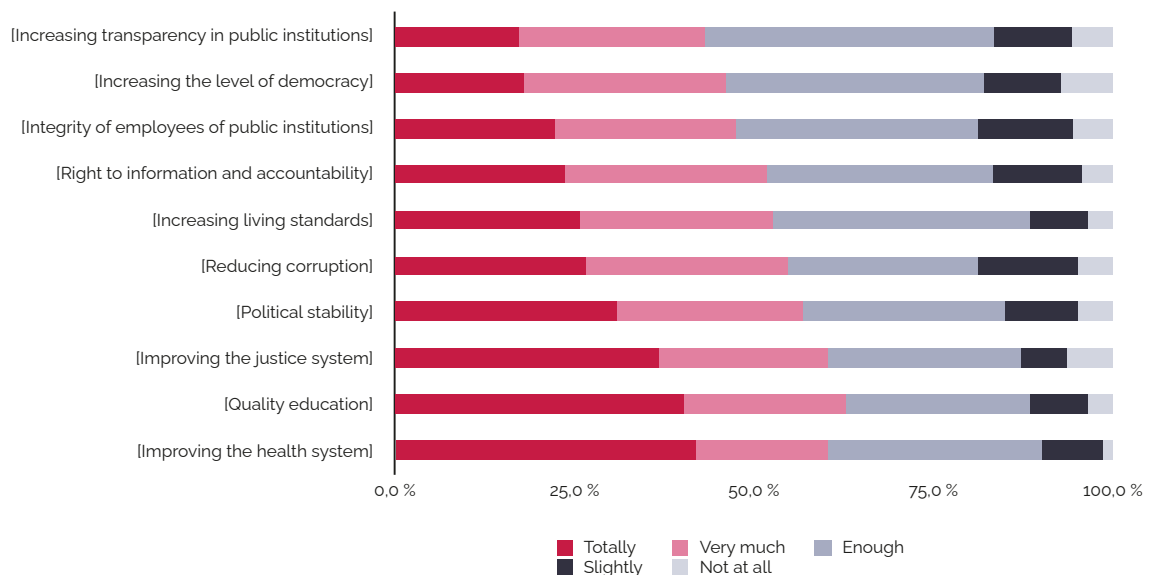
**Figure 14. Push factors of youth migration in Albania (%).**



Source: Author's questionnaire data, 2023.

The questionnaire data is in line with other studies on the reasons why young people leave Albania. The main reasons continue to be economic conditions with 24%, followed by education (14%). The level of corruption and instability are among the top ten reasons and amount to 10% and 9% of the responses, respectively.

**Figure 15. Pull factors of youth migration in Albania (%)**



Source: Author's questionnaire data, 2023.

A better healthcare system, quality of education, justice system, political stability, and corruption are all push factors that make young people want to leave the country. 42% of the respondents expressed that they would be extremely willing to leave Albania if the host country offered a better healthcare system and 19% would be willing. For other push factors, the data shows that 31% of the respondents would be influenced totally by political stability and 27% would be influenced totally by corruption.

Altogether, the responses show that the youth lack motivation to participate in the decision-making processes and have very little interest in improving the situation they currently live in. There was also clearly a positive correlation between concern with social injustice, living standards, corruption, and the intent to migrate. As in other societies with high levels of corruption, low motivation among youth to participate in political life might derive from their lack of belief that their efforts would have an actual impact, rather than their unwillingness to live in a fairer society. Whatever the reasons might be, this might decrease the political pressure for reforms and hence lead to lower quality in institutions. It is of utmost importance to take this into account at all levels of decision making.

## Solutions and Recommendations

To avert depopulation and promote sustainable development, Albania must put forth solutions to retain the youth population of the country and furthermore contribute to circular migration. These solutions can consist of:

**IMPROVING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES:** Enhancing job prospects and creating a favourable business environment are crucial for retaining young talent. The government should prioritize economic reforms, attract foreign investment, promote entrepreneurship, and provide support for startups. This can be achieved through targeted incentives, vocational training programs, and fostering innovation hubs.

**STRENGTHENING EDUCATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT:** Investing in education is vital to equip the youth with the skills needed for the job market. Ensuring access to quality education, vocational training, and lifelong learning opportunities is essential. Aligning educational programs with industry needs, promoting internships, and establishing partnerships between educational institutions and businesses can enhance employability.

**ENHANCING YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT:** Empowering young people to participate in decision-making processes is crucial. Recently, through the law on youth, the government has established youth councils in every municipality to provide a platform for young voices. Hence, it is crucial that they become functional and backed by proper funding. Encouraging youth involvement in local governance, political parties, and civil society organisations will foster a sense of ownership and active citizenship.

**ADDRESSING CORRUPTION AND ENSURING GOOD GOVERNANCE:** Tackling corruption and ensuring transparency and accountability are vital for building trust in institutions. Strengthening the rule of law, judicial independence, and anti-corruption measures are necessary steps. Implementing mechanisms for citizen engagement in governance and policy-making processes can help restore faith in the democratic system.

Youth Policies in Albania need certain enhancements. Albania has implemented some youth policies such as the National Youth Strategy and programs supporting entrepreneurship and employment. However, these initiatives need further improvements. The institutions should:

- **Expand Access to Affordable Housing:** Affordable housing programs specifically targeted towards young people can address one of the major challenges they face. Providing financial assistance, promoting cooperative housing models, and developing affordable rental options can help young individuals establish stable lives in Albania.
- **Strengthen Social Safety Nets:** Enhancing social protection programs, including unemployment benefits, and healthcare coverage can provide a safety net for young people during transitions or economic downturns. This ensures their well-being and reduces uncertainty associated with staying in the country.

**THE IMPACT OF THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS ON YOUTH MIGRATION:** Progress in the EU enlargement process can have a positive impact on youth migration. The prospect of EU membership brings economic opportunities, improved governance standards, and enhanced political stability. It can also lead to increased investment and market access. The accession process should be transparent and inclusive, addressing key areas like rule of law, corruption, and democratic reforms. A clear roadmap and tangible benefits can motivate young people to stay in Albania and actively contribute to the country's development.

To address youth migration effectively, Albania would benefit from support and collaboration with the European Union. The EU can provide:

- **Economic Assistance and Investment:** EU funds and investment programs can bolster economic development in Albania, particularly in sectors with high youth employment potential. The EU should provide financial support, facilitate trade, and encourage European businesses to invest in Albania.
- **Capacity Building and Exchange Programs:** Collaborative initiatives that promote knowledge sharing, skill development, and cross-cultural exchanges between Albanian and EU youth can broaden horizons and create networking opportunities. Scholarships, vocational training programs, and youth mobility schemes can facilitate such exchanges.



# Case Study

# Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Political instability stimulates youth emigration

**Neira Kujović, Project Manager**  
**Hamza Pecar, Project Coordinator**  
**Forum of Left Initiative**

### Introduction

**SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT** of the current political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in the Dayton Peace Agreement signed in 1995, the country has faced various phases in terms of political and societal development. Immediately after the war ended, a strong international military and civil presence allowed the hope for a better future to spread across the country.

The optimism among the international representatives in BiH is embodied mainly in the Office of the High Representative (OHR)<sup>40</sup> and their Bonn Powers.<sup>41</sup> The hope that Bosnia and Herzegovina could be a functional state, which will one day become a member of the European Union, was also felt among ordinary citizens. Newly established political parties gained support and with every election, citizens expected change and improvements in their lives.

With the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina was established as a democracy for the first time. However, in reality, the political culture of citizens and the political accountability of the decision-makers was insufficient to create a well-functioning democracy. Hence, the first aim was to increase citizen awareness and engagement in political processes beyond merely elections. Secondly, the aim was to legally reduce opportunities for political stakeholders to continue negative political practices, mainly characterized by nepotism, economic, and political corruption, and the lack of the rule of law.

The expected change came very slowly and with the increasing global trend of migration, citizens became aware that their living standards would not significantly improve in the near future. This was especially the case among young people who did not have the tools and knowledge to actively engage in the political processes and request change.

Due to high youth unemployment and wages not sufficient to make a living, young people were forced to look for opportunities abroad for a better future for themselves

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<sup>40</sup> The purpose of the OHR and the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina is to oversee the civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. <sup>41</sup> The Bonn Powers further empower the High Representative to adopt binding decisions and remove public officials from office.

and their families. The increase in ethnonationalist rhetoric and political instability since 2006 further emphasized mass emigration.<sup>42</sup>

The following chapters will further elaborate the root causes of young people leaving the country and present statistics on the main destinations. The chapters discuss the repercussions of migration for the democratic development of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its possible future implications. We also provide some recommendations on how to decrease youth migration as well as attract those who have left to come back.

## Migration overview

Migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and even broader the Western Balkans region, especially to Western European countries, is not a new phenomenon. The reasons have, however, varied considerably throughout the years.

Most migration was related to the change in leadership and unwillingness to obey new rulers – dating back to 15th century Croats fleeing the arrival of the Ottoman Empire and the emigration of Muslims upon Bosnia's annexation by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19th century. The emigration trend also continued in Socialist Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1990 and was characterized by labour migration. Low-educated manual workers from the Western Balkans were needed to support the economic boom in Europe, mainly in Germany. Between 1948 and 1991, almost 730,000 people left Bosnia and Herzegovina, initially for work, but later migrating for good. Some people also left for political reasons, as certain freedoms and private ownership were rather restricted during the socialist period.<sup>43</sup>

The largest migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina came during the Bosnian war, 1992 – 1995, and resulted in more than one million people leaving the country. Once the war ended, some people returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina while others either stayed in the countries they fled to or moved further to their end-destination countries.

Another wave of migration that has continued up until today, began quite soon after the war ended in 1995. A significant number of those who had fled the war returned to the country. The rights of refugees were also acknowledged in the Dayton Peace Agreement<sup>44</sup>.

The need to rebuild homes and infrastructure was heavily supported internationally and with the external funds, there was hope that people were willing to build their future

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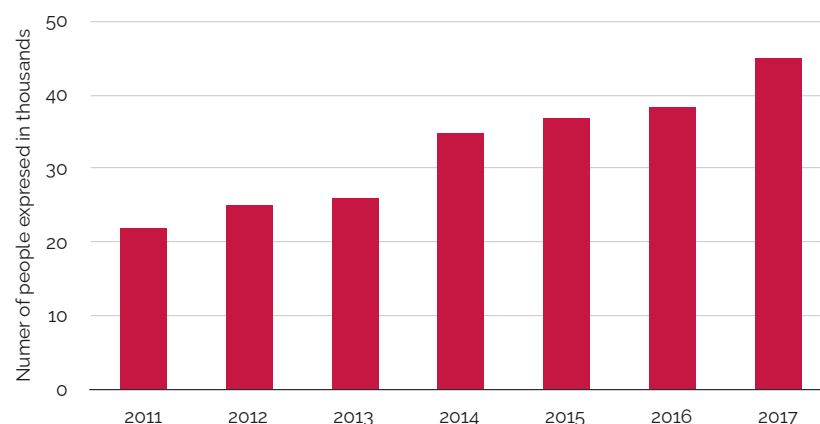
**42** In 2016, discussions on constitutional reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina were sparked by the Venice Commission's finding of discrimination in the country's constitution, supported by U.S. diplomatic efforts. Proposed reforms included an individual presidency, a stronger prime minister, and empowering parliament. Bosnian leaders committed to strengthening the state government and simplifying parliamentary and presidential functions. Lord Paddy Ashdown was succeeded by Christian Schwarz-Schilling as High Representative, shifting focus to local ownership and closing the Office of High Representative (OHR) through constitutional reform. Schwarz-Schilling proposed a transparent "constitutional convention" to engage the public and challenge ethno-nationalist dominance. Despite German support, EU hesitation and the Croatian Democratic Union's withdrawal led to the collapse of the initiative by summer 2007, citing concerns over international influence and potential disruptions to ongoing police reform talks. **43** Alma Pabrić 2002 **44** Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement "Agreement of refugees and displaced people" dealt with the rights of the refugees, enforcing their freedom to return, and protecting them from discrimination and prosecution.

in Bosnia and Herzegovina again. However, the emigration continued, resulting in more than 92,000, mainly young people, leaving between 1996 and 2001.<sup>45</sup>

Germany, Croatia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Italy, France, and Austria were the main destinations between 1945 and 2001. Besides European countries, around 210,000 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina moved to the USA, Australia, and Canada during and shortly after the war. Around 817,000 Bosnians still live in the neighboring Western Balkan countries.<sup>46</sup>

The visa liberation of 2010 further contributed to migrations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as citizens were now able to travel to Schengen countries without a visa. Visiting friends and families became easier and so did experiencing EU living standards. International Migration Statistics by the OECD (Figure 16) show that the number of immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina in OECD countries has been rising since 2011.

**Figure 16. Yearly number of immigrants from BiH to OECD countries, 2011–2017.**



Source: International Migration Statistics, OECD.

The growth can also be observed from the yearly number of first residence permits issued to EU-27 countries and Lichtenstein, Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland (Table 1) which reached their peak just before the COVID-19 pandemic and have been constant since.

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<sup>45</sup> Human Development Report 2002 <sup>46</sup> Human Development Report 2002

**Table 1. Number of first residence permits issued to BiH citizens in EU-27 countries, Lichtenstein, Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland.**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total new permits	4,771	4,453	7,005	13,990	26,244	29,180	18,181	18,946

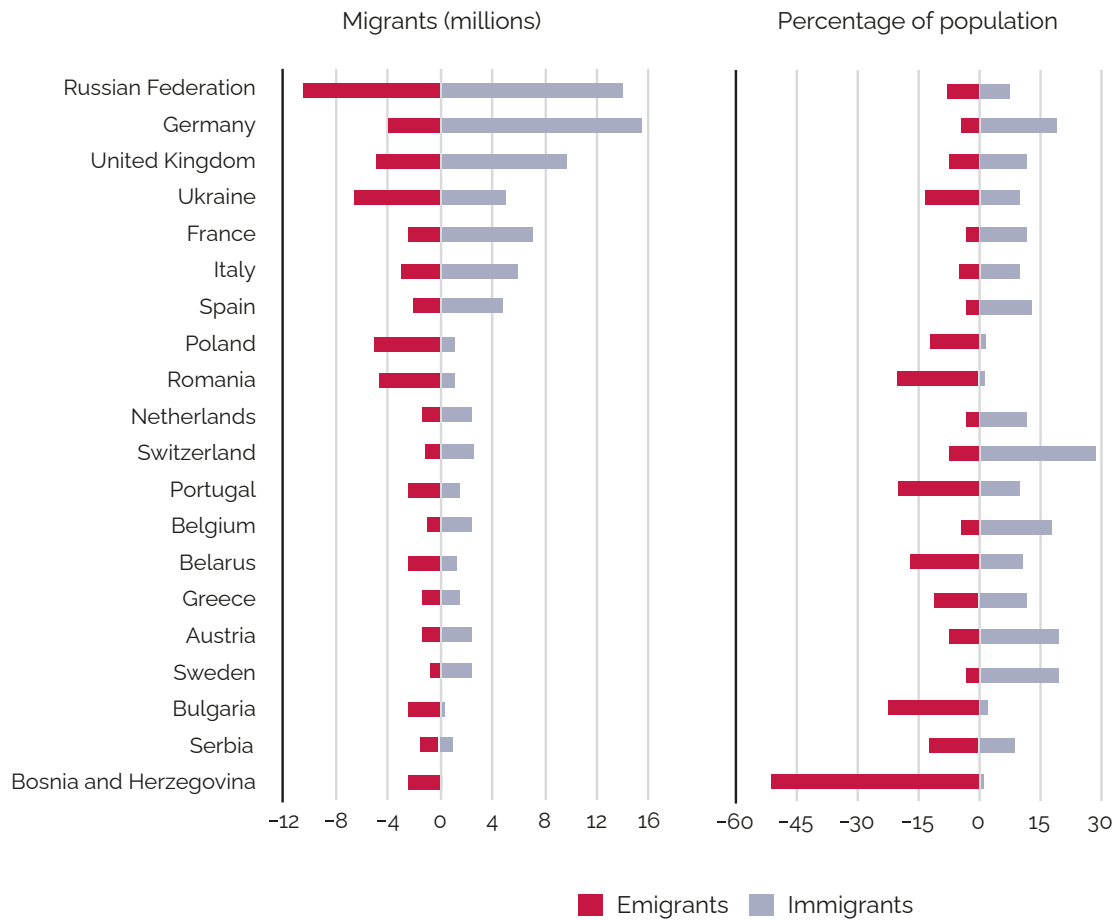
In the case of EU countries, there is a trend where some countries are becoming more popular destinations for citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while others are experiencing declines. The numbers in Table 1 above present new permits issued, in addition to the numbers of people who have already emigrated. For example, the most significant increase has been observed in Slovenia, where the total number of residence permits issued until 2021 was 43,817, rising to 93,666 in 2021. Additionally, it is noteworthy to mention Croatia, with 5,502 permits issued in 2013 decreasing increasing to 35,149 in 2021. Conversely, the most substantial decline has been in Italy, where the number decreased from 30,074 in 2012 to 19,994 in 2021.

These changes can be explained by different factors. An almost non-existent language barrier is one of the main reasons why BiH citizens are migrating to Croatia and Slovenia. Additionally, Slovenia signed an Employment Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina, easing the recruitment of BiH citizens. Ethnically Croat<sup>47</sup> citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina have the right to Croatian dual citizenship. Since Croatia became a member of the EU in 2013, Bosnian Croats have extensively used the opportunity to emigrate to Croatia, as well as other EU countries. Many Bosnians working for Slovenian and Croatian companies are outsourced to various EU countries where they can earn higher incomes compared to their compatriots in Slovenia and Croatia.

According to the UN World Migration report from 2022 (Graph 2), Bosnia and Herzegovina has the largest share of emigrants among its citizens, many of whom left during the break-up of Yugoslavia. The graph demonstrates that although the BiH migration is relatively small in number, by the percentage of the population, it is by far the biggest; more than 50% of the country's population lives abroad. For reference, since 1995, 79% of researchers from the area of engineering, 81% of MSc graduates, and 75% of PhDs in technical sciences have emigrated from Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ethnic Croats form 15 % of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on official State statistics from the 2013 census. <sup>48</sup> Institut za razvoj mladih KULT 2017

**Figure 17. Top 20 European migrant countries, 2020.**



Source: World Migration Report 2022, International Organisation for Migration, UN.

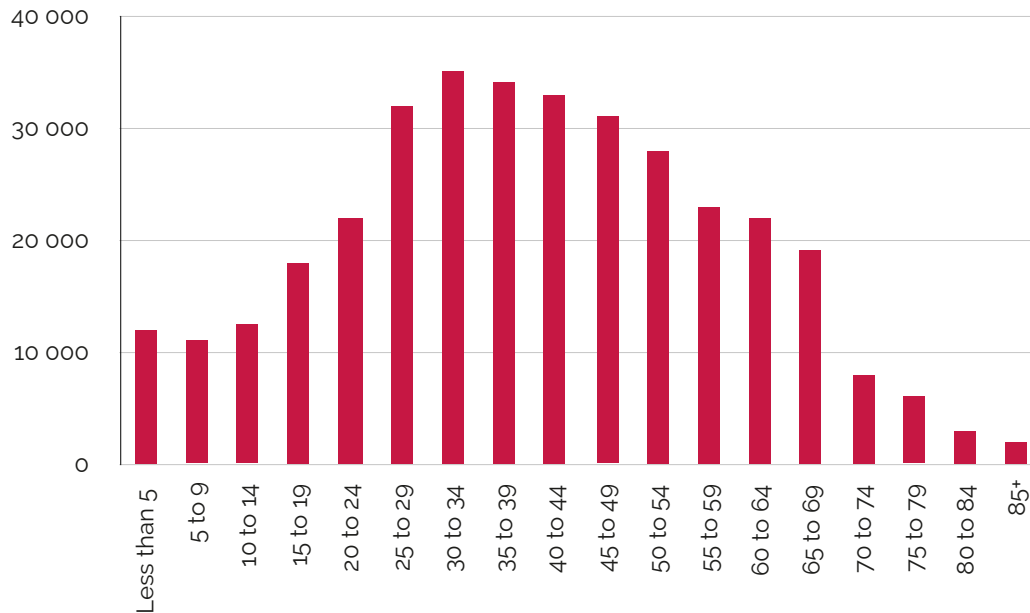
## BiH youth leaving the country: facts and attitudes

Young people are important for societal development, especially in terms of innovations and a strong workforce that is pushing economic development. Therefore, seeing youth leaving the country means that in the long run, economic development will decrease, and social services will also degrade. Currently the ratio between workers and pensioners in Bosnia and Herzegovina is 1.27:1 which in the long run is unsustainable and will lead to further decreases in the standard of living. Proper functioning of the pension fund would require a ratio of 3:1.

As most people remain residents of the country upon migrating, Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions do not provide reliable data of people leaving the country. However, the World Bank<sup>49</sup> lists that the bulk (over 50%) of emigrants from BiH across the EU-15 countries were under 39 years old.

<sup>49</sup> World Bank, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (WIIW) 2018

**Figure 18. Age structure of BiH emigrants to selected EU countries, persons, 2018.**



Source: Western Balkan Labour Market Trends, World Bank.

Based on the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report<sup>50</sup> from 2018, Bosnia and Herzegovina ranks 103rd out of 137 countries based on its average competitiveness index. In addition to this, there are three other relevant indexes that might explain why youth are leaving the country:

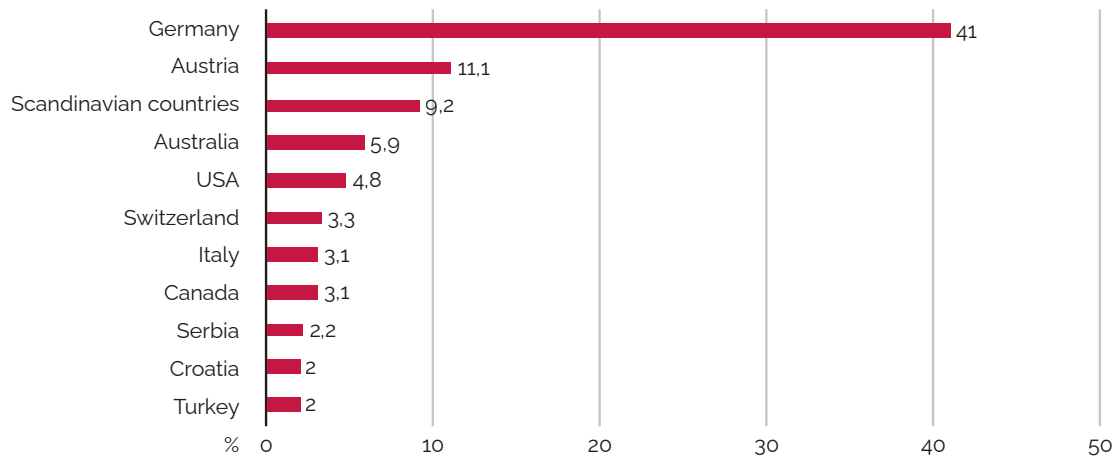
- Institutions: Placed 126 out of 137
- Labour market efficiency: Placed 123 out of 137
- Higher education and training: Placed 91 out of 137

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) conducted comprehensive youth studies in 10 countries of Southeast Europe in 2018, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. These studies conducted in BiH in 2014 and 2018 enable reflecting on whether there has been any change in attitudes among the youth.

According to the 2014 FES Youth Study, nearly half of young people (49.2%) stated that they desire to leave the country, however, there was also a significant percentage of youth with no migration aspirations (37.9%). Migration motives are economic and existential in nature: improvement of living standard (67.8%), followed by easier employment (14.6%), and escape from adverse situations in BiH (6.8%). Germany is among the leading preferred migration countries.

<sup>50</sup> The Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) captures the microeconomic and macroeconomic foundations of national competitiveness, meaning institutions, policies, and other factors that determine the level of productivity of a country.

**Figure 19. Preferred migration destination of those willing to migrate.**



Source: FES Youth Study, 2014.

Four years later, the FES Youth Study in 2018 brought new results that were somewhat expected but also show the rising gap between those who want to migrate and those who do not. The study shows that the majority of young people, to a lesser or greater degree, (61.8%) wanted to move to another country. This number rose compared to 2014, however, the percentage of young people that did not intend to emigrate remained stable and even increased slightly (2014: 37.9%, 2018: 38.2%).

Similar figures were found by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA 2021)<sup>51</sup> in Bosnia and Herzegovina, confirming that almost 47% of the youth considered leaving BiH permanently or temporarily. Due to the large sample size of the survey, reliable data and conclusions can be drawn related to the demographic structure of BiH youth willing to leave. There is no significant difference in attitudes between rural and urban respondents. However, there is a difference between male and female respondents, with 24.8% of male respondents expressing willingness to migrate compared to 22.1% of women.

A UNFPA study also shows that the younger the person, the more willing they are to leave the country. An increase in education level also lowers migration intent. A significant difference was also reported between the employed and unemployed. Only 40% of the full-time employed wanted to leave the country, with the figure being almost 59% in the unemployed.

In the FES study, the motives for leaving were almost the same as in 2014: improvement in standard of living (47.6%), better employment opportunities (20.8%), higher salaries (16.8%) and better education (7.7%). The previously mentioned Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report from 2018 also found low standards of living and employment possibilities as the main drivers for the youth wanting to leave, placing Bosnia and Herzegovina 131st in quality of education system, 135th in capacity to retain talent, and 136th in the capacity to attract talent, out of 137 countries.

51 UNFPA 2021

The youth unemployment rate has dropped in BiH in recent years but remains relatively high at roughly 26%. Youth are also the most likely to be in the NEET group. However, that number decreased to 20% in 2019, compared to 25% in 2009. The rural population is more present in the NEET group. In 2009, the percentage of the rural population classified as NEET was 28% and decreased to 22% by 2019, while in urban population, it was 20% in 2009 and decreased to 18%.<sup>52</sup>

Although the informal economy is declining, it remains a factor driving young people to leave the country. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, informal businesses often operate without registration or tax payments, failing to provide social security benefits for both youth and employers. Therefore, this leads to misconduct and exploitative practices by the employer towards their employees. Currently, almost one in three (30.5%) employees work in the informal economy. It especially affects the 15–30-year-old age group. The highest informal employment rates are reported in the agriculture sector (over 50%), followed by information, manufacturing, and finance.

The data from the UNFPA research shows that around 10% of those between 25 and 29 years old had some experience of going abroad for learning or training purposes. Such a low percentage implies that young people are either reluctant to move abroad for educational purposes, or they are simply not aware of the possibilities. Of those who do leave, only a small amount return, as they most often move to more developed and democratic countries.

Circular migration has been recognized as a favorable solution to reduce the overall harmful societal consequences of youth leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina. A rather worrying fact is, however, that almost 60% of the youth who expressed the desire to leave the country would stay in the destination country for more than 20 years.<sup>53</sup> As Youth Study Bosnia-Herzegovina 2018/2019 FES research shows that the two main drivers for leaving are a better standard of living and better employment possibilities, it can be assumed that if development in Bosnia and Herzegovina increases, people might be more willing to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Due to the strong engagement of international organisations such as UNFPA, USAID, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the research<sup>54</sup> they have provided, there is deep insight into the perceptions and attitudes of the youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last 8 to 10 years. The youth do not consider the country's prospects very positive, which will certainly have long-term consequences in economic, societal, and political life. The effects on democracy development and other aspects of political life are further explored in the following chapter.

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<sup>52</sup> World Bank Group 2018 <sup>53</sup> Turčilo et al. 2019 <sup>54</sup> Ibid (UNFPA, USAID, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, WBO)



## Effects of youth migration on democracy development

The above-mentioned studies show that the main driver for the youth's desire to migrate is the improvement of the standard of living and better employment possibilities. However, the underlying cause for these two drivers is the political crisis originating from 2006 that hinders serious economic development and domestic and foreign direct investments.

Bosnia and Herzegovina does not achieve the economic GDP growth target of 5–10% per year, which would lead to a significant rise in GDP per capita.<sup>55</sup> For BiH, in 2021, this would be 17,492 USD, while in Croatia, it is 34,543 USD. Bosnia and Herzegovina has higher GDP growth than the EU average, but it will not be enough to catch up with the living standard in the near future.

Corruption, human rights, and erosion of trust in official institutions contribute to the main reasons why the country is not in better economic shape. Regarding corruption, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been in constant decline since 2012, with scores decreasing from 42 (out of 100) to 34 in 2022, now being the worst country in this regard in the Western Balkans.<sup>56</sup>

The Human Development Index 2021/2022, developed by the UN, indicates where the country is heading when it comes to overall societal development. While all the EU countries have very high human development, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and North Macedonia only fall into the category of countries with high human development.<sup>57</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina has showed an improvement since 2015, but not enough for it to be classified as a country with a very high human development index.

Lastly, both the Freedom House Index and the Economist's Democracy Development Index consider Bosnia and Herzegovina a hybrid regime, way below full and flawed democracies, but above authoritarian regimes. The decreasing level of democracy is due to the rule of three autarchic, ethnonationalist leaders, which has led to a communitarian model of democracy. This has been enabled through populist mobilization and has led to an establishment of three parallel ethnic societies in one state.<sup>58</sup> These different indexes show that Bosnian politics have not succeeded in responding to the country's challenges. This has also affected how the youth perceive institutions and politics in the country.

All the above-mentioned youth studies capture high levels of distrust in institutions, politicians, and politics in general, among the country's younger population. Voting in elections is one of the rare ways in which the youth are showing some political engagement, while protests or other subject-oriented actions are not popular. The link between the state of democracy and the youth is best captured by the FES BiH Youth Study from 2018: "The combination of democratic transition, isolated political elites and lagging economic development result in a distinctive pattern of political behavior characterized by abstinence from politics as a form of protest and revolt against a political system that does not seem to care about their future".

This revolt and protest ultimately also result in the youth leaving the country and has further consequences for democratic development. Contrary to the public perception and media narrative that the youth do not vote in elections, youth studies illustrate that the percentage of youth that either had voted or would vote is between 60 and 70%.

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<sup>55</sup> Open Database, World Bank <sup>56</sup> Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2022

<sup>57</sup> Human Development Index, United Nations Development Programme 2022 <sup>58</sup> Freedom House 2023

This is, in fact, higher than the average voter turnout in BiH as a whole, which has not been above 60% since the year 2000 and keeps decreasing.

But what truly matters in the years to come is in what way the demographic transition affects democratic development. Study of this phenomenon started quite recently, after the 9/11 attacks and was fueled by Arab Spring. The research indicates that with a vibrant and young population, countries can develop twofold – either to conflicts, which was the case in several African countries where youth has been exploited for the benefits of some authoritarian regimes, or to youth taking an active role in an uprising, requesting democratic change and breaking the autocratic regimes, as was the case during Arab Spring.<sup>59</sup> An aging population can influence a state's ability to transition. However, this is not always so straightforward, as aging societies in Europe have recently showed political tendencies to support authoritarian leaders.

There are also two scenarios (one positive and one negative) of how the democratic development in Bosnia and Herzegovina might look. In the case of youth migration continuing, it will become obvious that overall voter turnout will decrease, which will additionally call into question the legitimacy of the elected representatives, especially those presenting themselves as guardians of specific ethnic groups with only between 20-30% of the overall support from these constituencies.

Usually, the youth tend to have more progressive and innovative ideas that might affect the overall development of the country positively. Hence, there are serious negative consequences on politics as well as the economy if the youth leave the country. For example, in politics, the aging population tends to value topics that are related to pension and healthcare. For youth, economy, inequality, environment, and education tend to be more relevant.

Whether the youth plan to emigrate for good, or could imagine returning at some point, is of crucial importance to BiH society and might determine whether the country develops in a negative or positive way. It is also important to note that leading politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not actively tackling the issue of the youth leaving. This is mainly for short-term economic reasons as, since 2010, remittances from expats amount to around 12% of BiH GDP yearly. This is ten times more than foreign direct investments in BiH. The remittances coming back to BiH increase consumption and thereby tax income, out of which political elites personally profit due to corruption. Therefore, if the issue of youth migration is not tackled, long-term economic and democratic consequences for the country will be fatal.<sup>60</sup>

## Solutions and recommendations

Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to struggle with youth emigration, as do most of the Western Balkan countries. Besides the fact that migration is a phenomenon that the country is, in a way, used to, the scale of current migration in combination with an aging society pose a serious threat to the social, economic, and democratic development of the country.

One thing is certain: the emigration from Bosnia and Herzegovina, mostly to the EU countries, cannot be completely stopped, nor should that be the aim. Throughout history, migration has happened regardless of the region's economic and societal development.

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<sup>59</sup> Weber 2013, Wilson and Dyson 2017 <sup>60</sup> World Bank Open Data

However, the current scale of migration is not sustainable for the country and some suggestions of how to tackle it are detailed below.

## **Domestically**

In the political landscape, decision makers need to show the youth that they are concretely investing effort and money to increase trust in institutions. This means that all the current harmful political behavior, including corruption, unaccountability towards the electorate, acceptance of injustice in everyday life, and bad practices in criminal proceedings need to be abolished, condemned, and regarded as something retrograde. Only then the youth can start rebuilding their trust in the decisionmakers and overall political processes.

Decisionmakers need to also invest in the improvement of the economic situation of the youth. This has to be done in close cooperation with the existing employers, for example, providing them with strong financial and administrative incentives to hire young people. Incentives should not only focus on youth employment, but also in securing an income that is sufficient for a decent life. Currently, there are some incentives provided by different institutions, but they are not a sustainable solution, as most employers would rather use the funds for short-term employment. To make the funds beneficial for the youth, they should focus on improving young people's skills and capacities in the specific job, instead of just providing them with a minimum wage.

Regarding the economic empowerment of youth, the institutions need to foster youth entrepreneurship. Institutions could provide capital, or possibilities to raise capital, by taking the risks of failed businesses themselves. This would generate innovative ideas and lower the threshold for young people to start businesses.

To benefit from migration, besides the remittances, the institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina should create conditions that would allow people to return to the country – circular migration. Returning could be encouraged by identifying the main concerns and tackling them with financial and administrative incentives. Usually, the main factors preventing people from returning are related to low quality of healthcare and education for their children. Investing in these areas would not only benefit migration, but the whole society as well.

It is also crucial to support youth exchange, thereby allowing young people to see their possibilities beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, this support has to be constructed in a way that simultaneously obliges returning and bringing the best ideas to the country from abroad. By binding this support to entrepreneurship, the domestic, economic, social, and political environment could be improved.

In addition to political efforts, it is important to change the public perception on migration. Currently, the general perception is that only those not invested in their own and their children's futures are willing to stay in the country. Public campaigns focusing on the country's future might help in discouraging migration.

## **Abroad**

It is important to develop deeper ties with migrants in addition to the usual connections made during pre-election campaigns. Centers and spokespersons of migrants' communities should be engaged in regular dialogue with the institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This could also help with mapping their needs and creating a clear strategy for their return.

Institutions and employers should also further promote Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country that is suitable for remote work. Various administrative and infrastructural hurdles should be removed which would incentivize the returns of those who have left the country but are able to work remotely. These efforts could go beyond just BiH citizens and should be applied to foreigners as well.

It is also crucial to stop further agreements with other EU countries easing migration from BiH. These agreements target workers from BiH and further contribute to the brain drain, especially since they are targeting highly skilled youth. Even though many European societies depend on migration to manage their aging populations, there should be more discussion on the EU level on how this should be done without disproportionately harming the countries of origin.

# Case Study North Macedonia

## Democratic shortcomings have driven young people abroad

**Katerina Kasovska, Programme Manager**  
**Jasmina Angelova, Project Coordinator**  
**Progres Institute for Social Democracy**

### Introduction

**NORTH MACEDONIA** is historically known as a country of emigrants. Emigration has been discussed most often from an economic perspective where emphasis has been placed on unemployment, low wages, and poverty. Recently, especially when it comes to the emigration of young people, there has been a shift towards analyzing the matter from a wider perspective. Hence, it is not only about finding a job abroad and higher wages but generally a higher standard of living, including a better socio-economic and political environment.

### Migration overview

The total number of Macedonian citizens living abroad has been rising constantly during the last decade and in 2020, it reached 694,000<sup>61</sup>, which is almost 30 % of the population. With around one-third of the population living outside of North Macedonia (according to data from destination countries), the country has one of the highest emigration rates in the world. The largest group of those who emigrate are young people (aged 15–29)<sup>62</sup> and North Macedonia is in the top five countries with the highest brain drain in Europe.<sup>63</sup>

The determinants of migration in the current context of North Macedonia relate mostly to the country's recent socioeconomic development. Unemployment rates are still high, and long-term unemployment is persistent, especially among young people. Although there has been an improvement in the labour market in the last few years, and the unemployment rate is declining from year to year (13% unemployment rate in 2023); the youth unemployment rate (ages 15–29) is 25.4 %.<sup>64</sup> Unemployment among the most highly educated has also been on the rise, partially due to the overall increase in higher education.

Higher salaries and better living standards are both reasons to emigrate from North Macedonia, but also inside the country as well. The same reasons that are driving people abroad are contributing to migration from other parts of the country to the capital city of Skopje. Hence, issues like little respect or regard for certain professions and types of

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<sup>61</sup> Atlas of migration 2023 (2020 data is the latest available) <sup>62</sup> Resolution on Migration Policy of The Republic of North Macedonia 2021–2025 <sup>63</sup> Global Economy 2023 <sup>64</sup> State Statistical Office

work, as well as limited opportunities for career development, are resulting in “intellectual migration” inside the country as well as “intellectual emigration” abroad.

One of the main contributors to emigration from North Macedonia – as well as other countries in the region – are the favorable migration policies in receiving countries, especially in some EU countries, such as Germany, that directly and significantly benefit from Western Balkan workers resolving their own labour shortages. These favorable policies largely shape the volume, as well as the structure, of the emigrating population as they target mostly highly educated people and talent. Economist Federico Fubini has estimated that Eastern European and Western Balkan countries brought over 200 billion euros into the German economy alone between 2009 and 2017.<sup>65</sup>

The figure that approximately 700,000 citizens have moved abroad in the last decade, or that almost one in four residents has left, is commonly accepted. It is also widely accepted that this is a serious problem, not only for authorities and policymakers, but for the whole society. Yet, interestingly, with such numbers of citizens living abroad, the country-relevant institutions do not collect reliable data about those who have emigrated (numbers, type of migrations, destinations) and most data is provided by international organisations. The overall lack of data for evidence-based policy making is a wider issue and one of the main challenges in North Macedonia, partly due to the absence of regular census data as well as limited and outdated inter- and intra-institutional information change.<sup>66</sup> In addition to this, only a small number of the citizens leaving officially declare their temporary and permanent residence abroad. For reference, between 2005 and 2017, the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia registered only 12,558 citizens who emigrated, while according to the UN Emigration Stock Statistics, 693,900 Macedonian citizens live abroad<sup>67</sup>.

**Table 2: Immigrants from North Macedonia (migrant stock) in European and other receiving countries.**

Receiving countries	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020
European receiving countries	136 000	186 000	216 000	247 000	n.d.
Other receiving countries	323 000	341 000	347 000	411 000	n.d.
Percentage distribution					
European receiving countries	29,6	35,3	38,4	37,5	n.d.
Other receiving countries	70,4	67,7	61,6	62,5	n.d.
<b>Total</b>	<b>459 000</b>	<b>527 000</b>	<b>563 000</b>	<b>658 000</b>	<b>693 900</b>

Source: Migration in North Macedonia: A country Profile 2021. International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Carragher 2021. <sup>66</sup> IOM Strategy for North Macedonia (2022-2025) 2022 <sup>67</sup> Numbers based on the data of receiving countries are often the only way to get somewhat relevant data on the emigration patterns of North Macedonia.

## Youth in North Macedonia

As the entire Western Balkan region faces challenges with shrinking populations, there are plenty of analyses that explore the push factors, particularly for youth migration. Understanding common push factors that the whole region shares, as well as country-specific ones, is crucial for the future development of Western Balkan countries. Country-specific approaches and policy measures are needed, as well as regional efforts.

Demographic changes greatly affect migration patterns. For example, according to the 2002 census, there were 480,828 young people aged 15-29 in North Macedonia, making up 24% of the total population. The only census done since was in 2021, which showed a decline: 326,733 young people, accounting for 18% of the overall population.<sup>68</sup> Compared to other age groups, young people are most affected by the population decline. Although, in general, there are several reasons for population decline, for the youth, the leading cause is by far emigration.

The characteristics of youth migrants have also changed throughout the decades. Migration by semi-skilled or unskilled workers is more often temporary (e.g., seasonal agriculture or construction workers)<sup>69</sup> and was more common 20 to 30 years ago. Now, the percentage of highly skilled and educated young people emigrating is higher and also more permanent in nature.<sup>70</sup>

Regarding unemployment in North Macedonia, which is still cited as the main motive for emigration, the unemployment rate in 2022 was 14.3%<sup>71</sup> which, compared to 2011 when it was 35%, shows a huge improvement in the labour market. What remains concerning is the fact that 93.4% of the unemployed are functionally illiterate, meaning their skills do not match the labour market's needs.<sup>72</sup>

## Youth perceptions

To understand the root causes of the emigration of young people and what – beyond the economic incentives – drives them to search for a better life outside North Macedonia, we need to look at the youth's views on the socio-political situation in the country and how they feel about their place in society. A Westminster Foundation for Democracy's study about youth socio-political participation in North Macedonia (2021, representative sample) showed that 58% of young people would move out of the country if given the opportunity. More than half of the respondents (57%) expressed rarely or never following the political developments in the country and showed no interest in politics in general<sup>73</sup> Voting seemed to be the preferred form of political participation. In the last parliamentary elections in 2020, 74.7% of the respondents voted. However, the parliamentary elections were clearly an exception as 53% regularly voted in elections and additional 26% voted only sometimes.<sup>74</sup>

The youth in North Macedonia consider corruption to be one of the country's biggest challenges, and 4 out of 10 young people would leave the country mainly because of

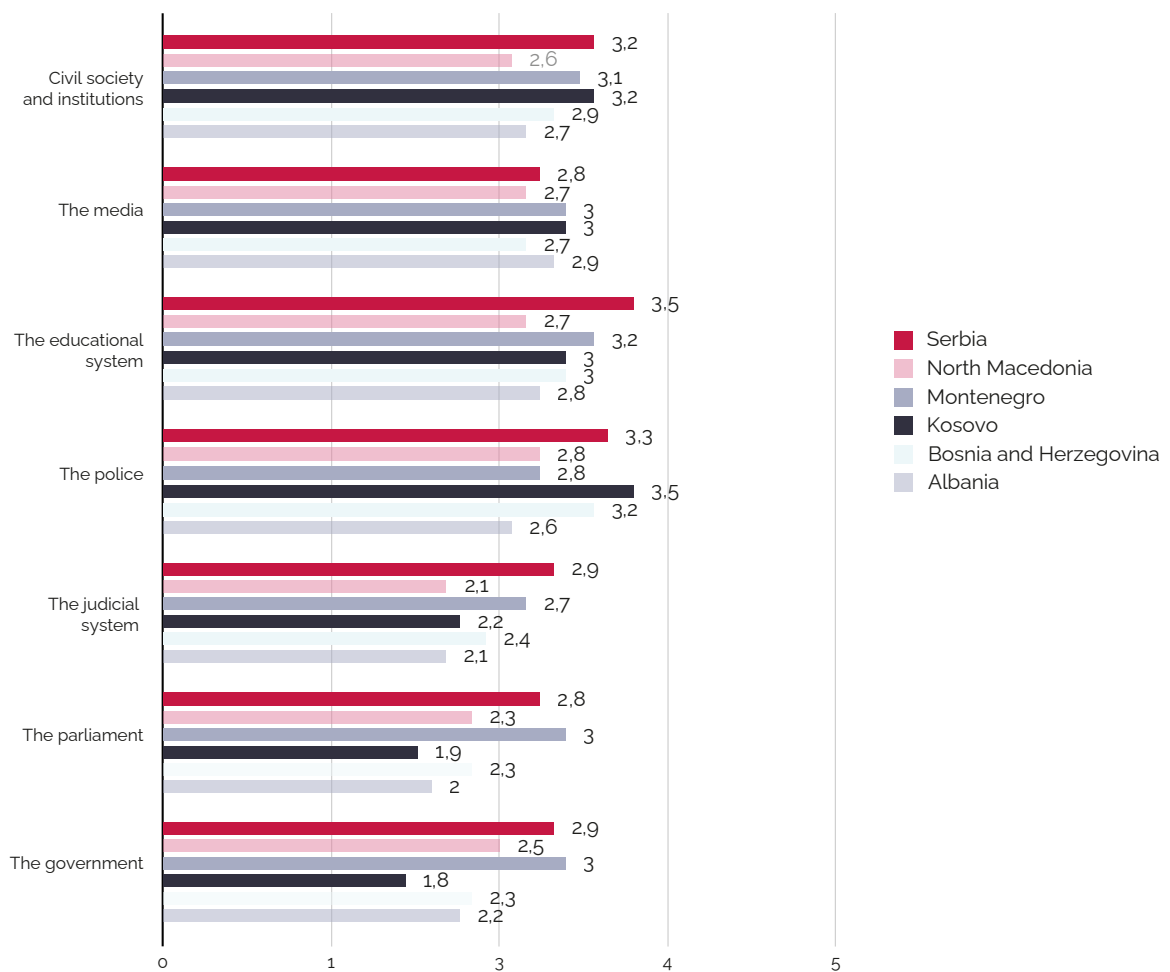
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<sup>68</sup> Census data from the State Statistical Office 2002, 2021 <sup>69</sup> Christiaensen, Gonzalez and Robalino 2019 <sup>70</sup> IOM 2021 <sup>71</sup> Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia <sup>72</sup> DTZ 2022 <sup>73</sup> Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2021 <sup>74</sup> Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2021

the level of corruption.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, one in three young people named corruption as the main motivation to join in and contribute to anti-corruption actions. Yet, 4% stated that this situation forces them to become part of the chain of corruption.<sup>76</sup> This indicates that the youth might feel they are giving up their values if taking part in political or social activities. Hence, it is understandable that the threshold to take part in the aforementioned activities is relatively high.

Young people are also largely dissatisfied with public institutions in North Macedonia (Figure 20). On a scale from 1 to 5, young people's satisfaction was below 3 for all institutions. Not surprisingly, the judicial system received the least satisfaction with an average score of 2.1 and the police the highest with 2.8. These numbers correspond with other studies that show citizens of Western Balkan countries having significantly less confidence in their national governments than their counterparts in OECD-EU and OECD countries in general.<sup>77</sup> In the case of North Macedonia, trust in the government has decreased tremendously, by 15% since 2007, while in the OECD countries it has remained the same.

**Figure 20. Young People's Satisfaction in Public Institutions, on a scale 1-5.**



Source: Gallup World Poll, 2019 (database).



## Key findings – survey

For the purposes of this publication, we conducted an online survey. It should not be considered and presented as a public opinion survey (since the sample was not nationally representative), yet the results provide some indications on youth perceptions and their views of the state of democracy and how it functions in the country. The survey was conducted online, and there were 308 respondents. It was shared publicly on social media, intended for respondents aged 18-35, and was completed on a voluntary basis. The majority of respondents (just over 90%) were from urban areas. Our survey results are in line with the trends already evident from previous studies. Hence, we will present only the figures relevant to the subject of this publication.

46.5% of respondents expressed their desire to move out of North Macedonia. As expected, the main reason was low wages, with 28.3%. Other reasons mentioned were lack of respect for all citizens' rights, corruption, partisanship, and non-functioning democracy.

To better understand the diversity of push factors, we wanted to compare the attitudes of those who have already moved away and those who have not. The percentage of respondents who had already moved away was quite small at 4.2%. However, their answers differed significantly, suggesting that there is a correlation between the low state of democracy, the trust in democratic institutions, and moving abroad.

When asked if they think that North Macedonia is a democratic country, more than half of the respondents, 52.9% answered with partially yes. This implies that young people recognize some lacking elements in the institutions and society of North Macedonia that contribute to the country not being a completely functional democracy. A high number of respondents (87.3%) believe that every vote in elections is important. For the youth, voting is one of the main ways to engage in democratic processes, and trust in elections is significantly higher than trust in other institutions.

The youth that had already moved away had significantly less trust in the democratic system of the country, with none of them trusting the democracy compared to 10.39% of those wanting to move out, both numbers being alarming low. When asked to assess, on a scale from 1 to 5, the degree of corruption, the average score from those who already moved away was 4.83, and 3.93 for those who would like to. Similarly, the degree of nepotism and partisanship in society (4.67 for both) was higher for those who had already moved away (3.9 and 4.22). Interestingly, partisanship of society received the highest scores in the questionnaire, making it the issue the youth feel most negatively about.

The youth's low level of trust can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the fact that young people recognize the shortcomings means that they are very aware of the problems the country is facing. In other words, the youth are well-educated or informed about the different aspects of democracy and how it should look in developed societies. Secondly, being aware of the not-so-flattering reality means that the youth is also aware of the possibilities, and if given an opportunity to make positive changes and improvements, the youth population can be the driver of strengthening democracy in North Macedonia. As reference, 91% of the respondents believed that North Macedonia should be a part of the European Union. Even though support for the EU is always higher among young people, this a positive sign in a country like North Macedonia which has seen declining support in recent years.

## Democracy in North Macedonia and youth migrations

When it comes to democracy, North Macedonia is classified in global indexes as a flawed democracy or a hybrid/transitional regime, falling into the second-best category in almost every index.<sup>78</sup> Indexes point out that, although the national governance is democratic, what seriously hampers the institutions performing their tasks is the polarization between the government and opposition.

Elections, although free, are marked by a lack of transparency. The civic space is vibrant compared to many other Western Balkan countries but lacks funding. There is also diverse media in the country, but it continues to be strongly influenced by political and business interests. Although there have been some efforts regarding corruption, rule of law and reforming the judiciary, the positive developments have more or less stagnated.<sup>79</sup>

Different preconditions make up a functioning democracy. As related to abovementioned measures and the position of the youth in North Macedonia, we find it important to focus on participation, freedom, and responsiveness. It is clear that a well-functioning democracy will not force people to leave the country, or desire to.

Participation implies the obligation of every democratic state to provide all its citizens with increased formal rights of political participation. Through this participation, citizens influence the decision-making process: they vote, organize, gather, protest and lobby for their interests.<sup>80</sup> In general, in North Macedonia, the right to participate in the political activities of political and civil society is guaranteed and enabled for citizens.

However, when it comes to young people, they are largely absent from the political processes in North Macedonia. Even though political parties often refer to youth as a driver of social flows, in practice, this is not encouraged or enabled.<sup>81</sup> For example, the youth were absent in the 2020 parliamentary elections, both in terms of their participation in the lists for MPs, and in terms of their representation in election programs.

According to Daymond and Morlino (2005), freedom is deeply intertwined with the quality of democracy as a whole and consists of three types of rights: political, civil, and social (or socio-economic). Responsiveness is measured by the extent to which citizens are satisfied with the performance of democracy, and therefore legitimize it. In other words, as the authors point out, responsiveness means the ability of institutions and authorities to respond positively to any legitimate request or need of the citizens.

As the latest International Republican Institute's National Survey for North Macedonia (2023) shows, the continuous decline in democracy is an indication that the system in the country does not address all the needs and demands of the citizens. This is especially true among young people, who, in general, form the age group that is the least satisfied with the political and social situation of the country. It is therefore safe to conclude that democracy in North Macedonia is clearly not performing adequately and not giving the expected results.

As in most of the region, in North Macedonia, those who wanted to leave the country were less satisfied with governing institutions compared to those planning to stay. There is also a positive correlation between concern with social injustice and corruption and the intent to migrate.

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<sup>78</sup> I.e. economist Intelligence Unit and Freedom House <sup>79</sup> Freedom House Nations in Transit 2023

<sup>80</sup> Neziri 2023 <sup>81</sup> Atanasova 2021

As a historically rooted and sensitive topic in the Western Balkans, youth brain drain is often politicized and influenced by the political situation in each country. Thus far, none of the governments have properly recognized and tackled the problem at the political or policy level.

Migration can have important implications for domestic institutions and politics. The emigration of capable and the most educated people may cause a loss of governance capacity in a country like North Macedonia where institutions are already weak to begin with. Additionally, emigration is likely to decrease political pressure, which diminishes incentives for the established political elite to reform. In the long run, this might lead to increased corruption and reduce overall government effectiveness.

Hence, it is important to understand whether the decline of democracy is the reason why young people emigrate, or whether the emigration of young people has already partially caused the decline and hindered further democratic development. All abovementioned studies and analyses somewhat suggest a correlation between youth migration and democracy. Increasing democracy certainly would not harm the youth nor the rest of society.

## Solutions and recommendations

We have tried to show in this study that socio-political motives for emigration are not non-existent or unnoticed. However, it remains challenging to accurately measure the causal relationship between overall level of democracy and youth emigration. Additionally, very little is discussed about the socio-political motives or influence of the democratic conditions in the country to those who emigrate, and vice versa, how much youth emigration further influences the democratic situation and conditions in the country.

Considering our and previous studies, that 58% of young people would like to move out of the country, combined with the recent trends of emigration, we may expect that the rate of youth emigration will rise in the upcoming years. Understandably, the loss of human capital may have severe implications for the country's future.

The high rates of youth migration and the increasing trend of the ageing population<sup>82</sup> will have inevitably negative consequences for the development of the country at all levels in the long run. Youth migration deprives the country of its most skilled and capable people, but also those with the most potential. These are the people who are most likely to be involved in politics, business, and civil society. Their emigration means that North Macedonia is losing out not only on potential economic growth (and everything included) but also on the potential for the promotion of democracy and its performance and improving living conditions in general.

On a political level, when young people see no future for themselves in their home country, they may become more likely to engage in protests or support radical non-democratic political options. This can destabilize the country and make it more difficult to maintain a functioning democracy. When young people see that their best option is to leave, it can be discouraging and makes them less likely to participate in the social and political process in a positive manner.

Although the public consider young people apathetic and uninterested, this should not be taken without reservation. All the above data and analyses show that young people

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<sup>82</sup> Eurostat

are aware of the situations, recognize shortcomings in the functioning of institutions and the whole society, and would like to be involved in social and political processes. For example, the relatively high turnout among young people in the elections says that they are practicing their democratic right and thus, in some way, showing democratic capacity. Yet, the State Election Commission does not have election turnout figures by age group, and the turnout of young people in elections would be an indicator of their participation in political processes and one of the easiest measurable dimensions of democracy.

Although the economic and socio-political push factors for youth emigration are deeply intertwined, it is noticeable that motives go far beyond jobs and salaries. Young people, with all the modern opportunities in front of them, also search for a decent life in an enabling environment that allows them to grow and advance in every sense.

Policymaking regarding emigration depends a lot on what authorities want to do with emigration and emigrants. Do they want to keep young people at home, or do they want them to be mobile, to acquire experiences and skills abroad, and even more, to acquire capital that they would later invest in the domestic economy? In North Macedonia, the rhetoric has so far been that the huge emigration of young people is a serious problem for society, hence the goal has been to reduce it. However, it is very clear to all that emigration cannot be stopped completely. Hence, our recommendations are general in nature and suggest measures that refer to democratic conditions found to be related to youth migration.

The first pre-condition for effective and evidence-based migration policy responses is to collect and prepare statistics on emigrants: where did they emigrate to, is it temporary or permanent, and what their status in the host country is. This is important for the creation of policies and obtaining a positive outcome from emigration in the long run, on the other hand, confirming that the state takes care of its citizens.

Bearing in mind that economic and socio-political motives are intertwined, the creation of jobs, a positive business climate, and an increase in wages (accordingly) would be the first thing that authorities should deal with. Improving the quality of education, aligning it with the needs of the labour market, and increasing opportunities for advancement through different European and global projects that are accessible to the youth should all be looked at.

A general improvement in the democratic climate may reduce the trend of migration. A real and open fight against corruption might make young people think twice when it comes to emigration. There are young people who want to move out but have not taken concrete steps to do so. That means a large percentage of young people who only desire to move away can have their decision influenced.

If young people were to be given space, to be essentially involved in policy-making processes, at least in the parts that relate to them directly, and consulted on a systemic level, the situation would be different. A real commitment to youth issues needs to be seen. For example, the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020) is a huge step forward, but the National Youth Council of Macedonia's report (2023) shows that unfortunately, three years after the adoption of the law, a large portion of the anticipated mechanisms for youth participation and youth services are not yet implemented.

All of this means creating a more democratic and inclusive society where everyone feels like they have positive prospects. To achieve this, politicians and authorities need to map citizens' needs and be responsive towards them and transparent in the processes.

Becoming a well-functioning democracy will certainly take time but increases young people's desire to stay.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The case studies presented in this report shed light on the complex dynamics surrounding youth emigration and democratic conditions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. Across all three countries, young people's perceptions of their home countries are characterized by a complex interplay of economic, social, and political factors, deeply influencing their decisions regarding emigration.

In Albania, a significant proportion, over 50%, expresses a desire to emigrate. Their desire is primarily driven by economic factors such as high unemployment rates and low wages. Despite some progress in democratic reforms, including measures to tackle high-level corruption, youth in Albania continue to express concern regarding the rule of law, clientelism, and political polarization. These challenges have contributed to a sense of dissatisfaction with public institutions, governance, and decision-making processes in general.

Different research reveals a concerning trend in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a considerable proportion of young people express a desire to leave the country. Limited economic prospects and dissatisfaction with the political reality, characterized by nepotism and ethno-nationalistic rhetoric, serve as primary push factors for youth emigration. Declining levels of institutional trust and widespread perceptions of corruption further exacerbate the challenges faced by the youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, seriously hindering meaningful democratic participation.

Similarly, youth emigration trends in North Macedonia align with those observed in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with over 56% of the youth expressing the desire to leave the country and move abroad. Economic stagnation and dissatisfaction with politics contribute to a sense of frustration among the youth and has affected their decision making. The youth also feel that their voice does not matter, nor that they can make a difference. While the country has made significant strides in democratic reforms and the political landscape is quite plural, young people continue to be concerned about transparency, accountability, and the effective functioning of democratic institutions. Many young people do not consider North Macedonia a fully democratic country.

The case studies highlight unique challenges faced by young people in each country, influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-political factors. Understanding the nuances is crucial for developing targeted interventions to address youth emigration and the strengthening of democracy. Hence, the following recommendations, derived from the common core insights of the case studies, provide strategies to address the complex issues surrounding youth emigration and democratic conditions across the region.

- **ENHANCING DATA COLLECTION ON EMIGRATION PATTERNS.** Improving institutional statistics and enhancing data collection is crucial for creating evidence-based policy responses. Governments should invest in robust data collection mechanisms that track emigration trends, destination countries, demographic profiles of emigrants, and the reasons behind their departure. This data could help policymakers to better

understand the drivers of youth emigration, identify vulnerable populations, and design targeted interventions to address the underlying challenges. Collaborative efforts with international organisations and research institutions can strengthen data collection capacities and facilitate knowledge sharing across borders. In finding solutions, a regional approach should be taken, as the issue of youth emigration affects the whole Western Balkans region.

- **STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE.** To address the root causes of youth emigration and foster sustainable development, governments should prioritize the strengthening of democratic governance frameworks. This includes enhancing transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, as well as promoting political pluralism and citizen participation. Initiatives aimed at improving public trust in institutions and reducing corruption are essential for creating an enabling environment that encourages young people to stay and actively engage in their societies.
- **FOSTERING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PROCESSES.** Governments should prioritize efforts to foster youth participation in political process, ensuring that young people have meaningful opportunities to engage in decision-making and governance. This includes creating structures for youth representation in political institutions, supporting youth-led initiatives and organisations, and providing platforms for dialogue and consultation between young people and policymakers. Empowering young people to actively contribute to shaping their societies can lead to more inclusive and responsive governance structures.
- **ENGAGING DIASPORA AND ENCOURAGING RETURN.** Governments in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia should actively engage with their diaspora communities abroad, utilizing their skills, resources, and networks to contribute to the development of their home countries. Efforts should be made to create platforms for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and investment opportunities that incentivize diaspora members to give back to their countries of origin. Additionally, policies aimed at encouraging the return of emigrants should be implemented, providing incentives such as job opportunities, entrepreneurship support, and favourable living conditions. Promoting the countries' remote-working possibilities could also attract people to return.
- **ALIGNING EDUCATION WITH LABOUR MARKET NEEDS.** Educational systems in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia should be updated to better align with the needs of the labour market. This includes updating curricula, expanding vocational training programs, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities that equip young people with the skills and knowledge required for employment and entrepreneurship. Collaboration between educational institutions, businesses, and government institutions is crucial for ensuring that education leads to meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities.
- **ADDRESSING THE POLICIES OF RECEIVING COUNTRIES.** Governments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia should advocate for policy changes in

receiving countries to ensure that migration policies do not exacerbate brain drain from countries in the Western Balkans. This should include collaborating with EU countries to develop mutually beneficial migration policies that support both sending and receiving nations.

By investing in the above-mentioned measures, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, as well as Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia, can address the complex challenges associated with youth emigration, promote sustainable development, and create opportunities for young people to thrive in their home countries.



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