The Key Role of the Young Generation for the Consolidation of South East Europe

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Study Group Information

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The Young Generation in the Western Balkans: Demographic Perspective

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This paper briefly sketches three topics on the young population in the Western Balkans (WB) from a demographic perspective: the issues in determining its size and demographic structure due to outdated or incomplete data sources, recent change in migration patterns inducing new types of youth mobility, and future trends based on the adjusted UN population projections.

Data Issues – How to Determine the Size of Young Population in the Western Balkans?

As there is no consensus when it comes to the delineations of youth, we defined it as the population aged 15-34 in this paper, thus aiming to include all possible transitions over the course of life that are relevant for youth migration in the context of WB. The similar approach was chosen in the recent EU funded project on migration of youth in the region of Danube countries (YOUMIG). This is relevant for the considerations in this paper in the way that migration impact is central for the changes in size and demographic structure of the youth. The selected age bracket covers the "Generation Y" or "Millennials" usually described as the generation of choices, communication and individualism. Those factors are assumed to be crucial for changing migration patterns of today's youth comparing to those of previous generations (Fassmann et al., 2018).

Demographic data related to countries in the region of WB still heavily depend on a single source – the traditional census of population. Accordingly, population estimates based on distant census years regularly underestimate the effect of international migration in case of net emigration countries as those in the region (Nikitović, 2022, p. 169). Given that the highest share of migrants typically relates to those younger than 40, with peaks in the age 20-34 (see Figure 1), it is particularly challenging to get reliable estimate of the

size of young population in this region, which will be demonstrated by comparisons of the data based on different census years. This will be demonstrated by comparisons between two data sources of the age structure of populations in Slovenia, Croatia and North Macedonia in the 2021 census and the estimate based on the 2010 census round by two relevant international agencies – UN and Eurostat (Figures 2-4). The most recent census round was held only in North Macedonia of all the WB populations, while Croatia and Slovenia, both of which historically and socioeconomically deeply tied with WB, were chosen as the contrasting examples of migration patterns in the recent period.
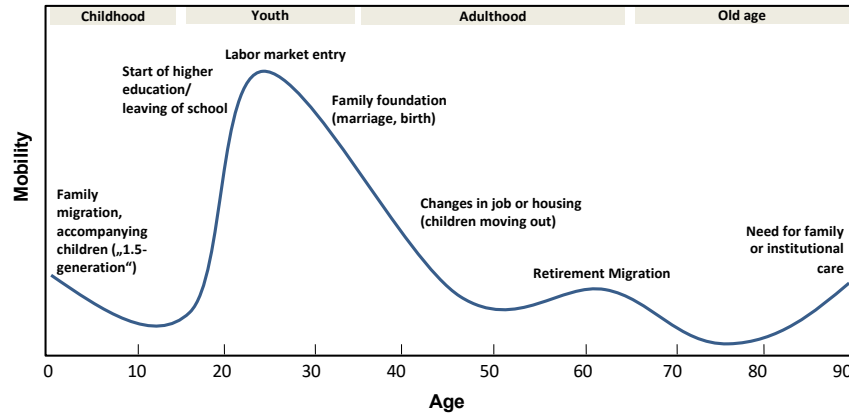

Figure 1: Idealized model of age-specific migration (Source: Fassmann et al., 2018: 27)

The most recent update of the United Nations' *World Population Prospects* (WPP 2019) was made on the basis of the 2010 population census round. The Eurostat's counterpart for the EU members – Europop 2019, was also relied on the previous census round but on much closer one in case of Slovenia, where the census is register based unlike Croatia. The deviations of the estimates from the census results are mainly resulted from two unforeseeable factors – migration and COVID-19. Other possible sources of deviations are negligible as both estimates were based on most recent data on change in fertility and mortality patterns in these countries except for the unexpected pandemic impact. Given that this unexpected exogen source of change in mortality has typically hit the oldest population (Goldstein, Lee, 2020), all three figures suggest that the pandemic effect on deviation in pop-

ulation estimates (overestimation) is markedly lower than the effect of un-predicted migration change – underestimation for Croatia and North Macedonia, and overestimation for Slovenia. This finding is in line with known differences between Slovenia as a net immigration country, and Croatia and North Macedonia as net emigration states. Also, this is clear evidence that the impact of migration is the most important for the changes in size and structure of young population.

Figure 2: Total population of Croatia in 2021 by five-year age groups according to projections by UN and Eurostat and the 2021 Census (Sources: United Nations 2019; Eurostat database, 2022; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022)

According to the United Nations' most recent update of the World Population Prospects, there were almost 17.5 million people living in WB in 2020, of which 26% were those aged 15-34 – indicating to younger population on average than the one in the EU-27 (the share of youth was 22.9%). Though, the share of youth across the region varies markedly reflecting differences between countries in the onset and course of demographic transition (Nikitović, 2016). The highest share refers to Kosovo – the youngest European population, and Albania, and the lowest to Serbia excluding Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), whilst the shares for North Macedonia and Montenegro lie in between. Serbia and BH coincide with Croatia, or the EU-27 average according to this indicator (Table 1 see page no. 15).

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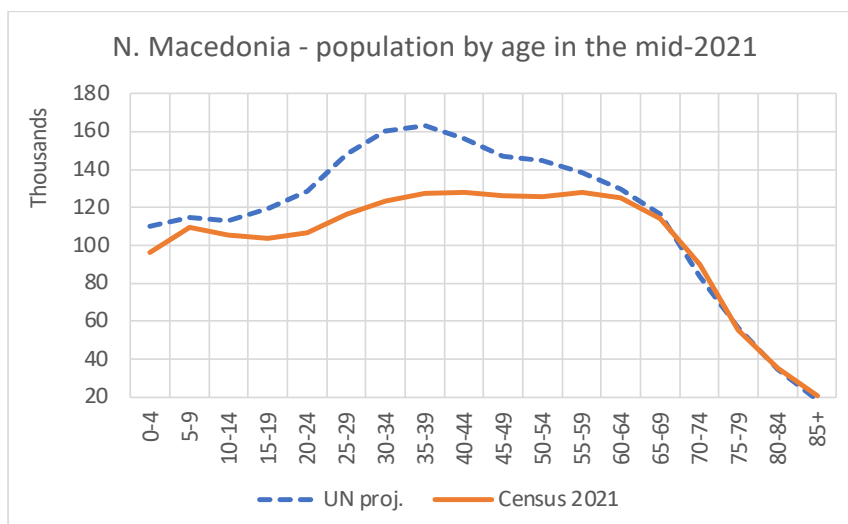
Figure 3: Total population of North Macedonia in 2021 by five-year age groups according to the UN projection and the 2021 Census (Note: There is no Europop 2019 estimate as it only includes the EU members. Sources: United Nations, 2019; Central Bureau of Statistics of North Macedonia, 2022)
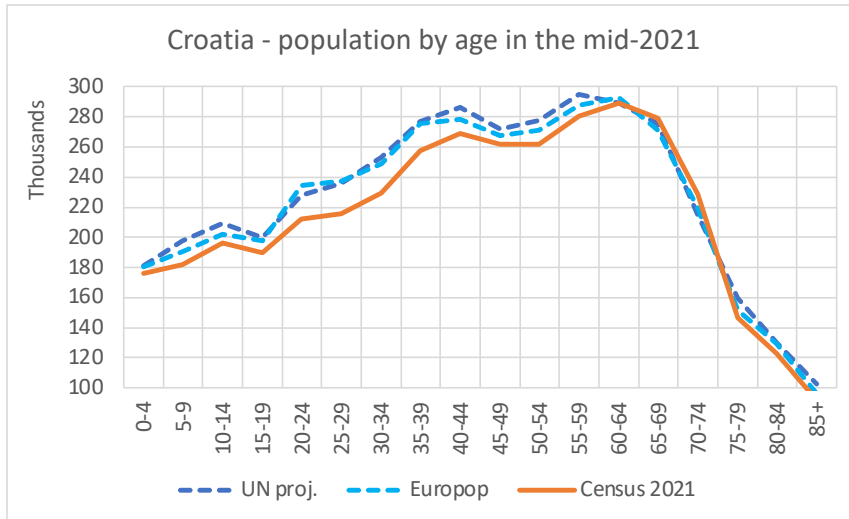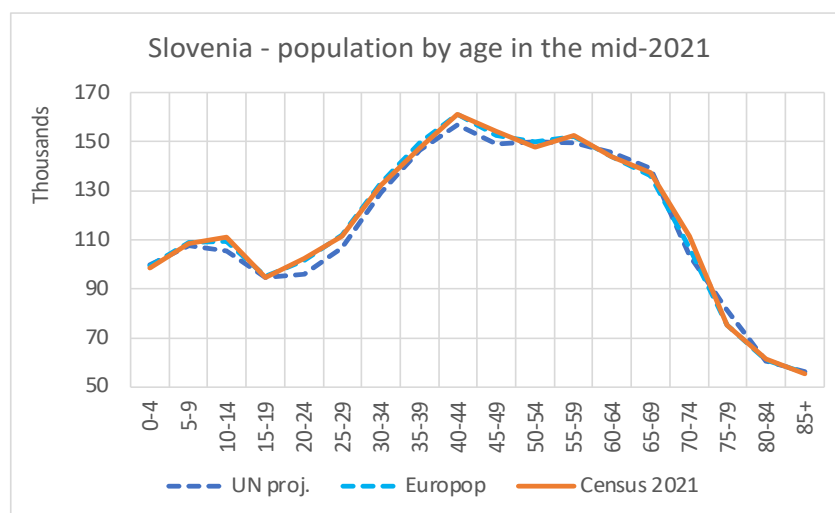

Figure 4: Total population of Slovenia in 2021 by 5-year age groups according to projections by UN and Eurostat and the 2021 Census (Sources: United Nations 2019; Eurostat, 2022; Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2022)

Countries / Territories	Population density (inh./ sq. km)		Total population		Share of the youth		Human Development Index (HDI)		
	UN	Adjusted	UN	Adjusted	UN	Adjusted	HDI	quartile	world rank
Albania	100.1	88.5	2,877,800	2,544,852	30.3	28.6	0.795	high	69
Bosnia and Herzegovina	64.1	57.1	3,280,815	2,924,088	23.9	21.8	0.780	high	73
Kosovo *(UNSCR 1244/99)*	165.7	164.9	1,803,704	1,795,032	33.0	31.5			
Montenegro	45.5	43.2	628,062	596,732	26.2	25.7	0.829	very high	48
North Macedonia	81.0	71.4	2,083,380	1,836,327	28.1	25.0	0.774	high	82
Serbia excl. Kosovo	88.1	86.1	6,824,935	6,671,592	23.0	22.3	0.806*	very high	64
Western Balkans	**84.2**	**78.8**	**17,498,696**	**16,368,623**	**26.0**	**24.8**			
Slovenia	*103.6*	*103.6*	*2,100,126*		*21.3*		*0.917*	*very high*	*22*
Croatia	*69.1*	*69.1*	*3,908,336*		*23.0*		*0.851*	*very high*	*43*
EU-27	*105.9*	*105.9*	*447,269,340*		*22.9*				

Table 1: Estimates of the population in the Western Balkans – UN based and adjusted for migration impact (Note: Estimates for Kosovo (UNSCR 1244/99) and Serbia excl. Kosovo were separately calculated as the United Nations' estimates for Serbia include Kosovo. (Sources: United Nations 2019; Eurostat, 2022; national statistical offices; Author's calculation)

However, if we assume that the pattern of deviations of the UN population estimates for N. Macedonia and Croatia holds in a similar way for other populations in WB where the 2020 census round still has not been held, their total population and especially the youth might be smaller than the UN estimates suggest. Accordingly, we adjusted these estimates, assuming that Albania, Kosovo and BH would follow the pattern of deviation calculated for North Macedonia, and Montenegro and Serbia the pattern for Croatia, given the similarities and differences between the countries in recent demographic and migration trends. The adjusted estimate for WB indicates that the current real size of total population in the region might be smaller by 1.1 million than the estimated by the UN. Similarly, the real share of youth might be considerably lower (Table 1). The main reason would be the underestimation of out-migration from WB, which mainly hits the youth.

Unlike the share of youth, all populations in the region lag behind most European countries in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI). Although Montenegro and Serbia belong to the quartile of very high HDI, both countries are ranked well below the average of 0.898 for countries in this group. Other populations in the WB are positioned even lower, entering only the quartile of high HDI (UNDP, 2020). The region can be considered to be much closer to countries from West Asia and Central America than to its own continent in terms of human development. Two of the three indices

making HDI are particularly relevant for the youth – education index and GNI index. Both induced the WB to be placed very low in terms of HDI comparing to European context, suggesting that gap as a main driver of strong emigration from the region. This implication opens the next section of the paper.

Changing Patterns of Recent Migration Inflows from the Western Balkans in Europe

The addressed data issues in relation to migration from/to WB pointed to the alternative source of data – administrative statistics of residence permits by the Eurostat. It offers a good proxy for estimating changes in migration flows between WB and the EU, as it covers the major European destinations for WB migrants and has the least missing data comparing to other official statistics on migration. In addition, simple indicators based on this source enable making inferences on the intrinsic changes in recent migration patterns across the region.

Table 2 shows the annual ratio between the total migration inflows and migrant stock of Serbian citizens in the EU (including EFTA) in the 2011-2020 period, i.e. between the total first permits issued to them during a year and all valid permits to this citizenship on 31 December of the same year. The flow-to stock ratio for the EU-27 average tripled during the period. However, this rise has been induced mainly by new member states, with their ratios surpassing 25%, while in all old member states, except Germany and Sweden, the ratio is below 5%. In most countries, except in Austria, Switzerland, France, and Italy (almost all traditional destinations for Serbian citizens), the ratio increased between 2011 and 2019, implying the shortening of expected stay of new migrants. In new member states including Germany, the ratio increased by even two to six times. These trends partially reflect the maturity of destinations – old destinations have larger stocks and consequently lower flow-to-stock ratio, while the opposite is true for new destinations. However, much faster growth of the ratio in newer destinations and Germany suggests that the dominant reasons for migration to them might be different compared with old destinations. Table 3 shows the index for Albania, suggesting similar trends in the 2011-2019 period as in Serbia.

GEO (Labels) \ TIME	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.10	0.12	
European Union - 28 countries (2013-2020)										
Belgium	0.19	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.12	0.10	0.10	0.11	0.09	0.10
Bulgaria	0.38	0.39	0.44	0.19	0.18	0.19	0.25	0.31	0.24	0.14
Czechia	0.07	0.13	0.13	0.10	0.23	0.28	0.20	0.39	0.65	0.19
Denmark										
Germany (until 1990 former territory of the FRG)	0.01	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.09	
Estonia	0.19	0.25	0.32	0.25	0.42	0.29	0.48	0.29	0.23	0.26
Ireland	0.16	0.15	0.18	0.25	0.30	0.38	0.30	0.26	0.25	0.11
Greece	0.07	0.06	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.07	0.07	
Spain	0.12	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.12	0.11	0.11	0.12	0.11
France	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
Croatia			0.28	0.30	0.14	0.20	0.27	0.82	1.04	0.66
Italy	0.07	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.02
Cyprus	0.16	0.16	0.23	0.27	0.32	0.29	0.27	0.25	0.21	0.20
Latvia	0.43	0.55	0.08	0.50	0.53	0.13	0.58	0.42	0.30	0.31
Lithuania	0.50	0.25	0.43	0.29	0.29	0.24	0.26	0.40	0.70	0.62
Luxembourg	0.04	0.08	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.10	0.07
Hungary	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.27	0.27	0.29	0.58	0.69	0.34	0.27
Malta	0.25	0.34	0.31	0.42	0.43	0.38	0.47	0.38	0.28	0.07
Netherlands	0.45	0.42	0.17	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.14	0.14	0.15	0.11
Austria	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03
Poland	0.23	0.15	0.71	0.65	0.67	0.50	0.61	0.66	0.72	0.78
Portugal	0.12	0.29	0.23	0.15	0.19	0.14	0.20	0.17	0.18	0.16
Romania	0.17	0.20	0.22	0.23	0.20	0.22	0.30	0.34	0.35	0.15
Slovenia	0.18	0.16	0.15	0.14	0.17	0.20	0.23	0.29	0.25	0.13
Slovakia	0.14	0.15	0.15	0.18	0.26	0.29	0.41	0.36	0.27	0.15
Finland	0.40	0.29	0.22	0.18	0.29	0.33	0.25	0.19	0.12	0.37
Sweden	0.14	0.17	0.14	0.15	0.14	0.15	0.17	0.18	0.15	
Iceland	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.11	0.12	0.21	0.25	0.17	0.15	
Liechtenstein			0.04	0.04	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.11	
Norway	0.38	0.45	0.38	0.37	0.40	0.36	0.33	0.19	0.17	0.12
Switzerland		0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02	
United Kingdom		1.10	2.16	0.46	0.52	0.45	0.41	0.33		
Total	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.10	0.11	0.13

Table 2: Flow-to-stock ratio for Serbian citizens residing in the EU-27 including EFTA countries (Source: Eurostat, 2022)

The differences in reasons for migration between old and new EU destinations and the rising share of temporary over long-term (and eventually permanent) migration from WB could be understood in light of the concept called 'New economics of labor migration' as developed by Stark and Bloom (1985). This approach considers migration of a person as part of their household utility maximization strategy and as typically temporary or circular phenomenon. Contrary to that, migration is implicitly seen as permanent, usually lifetime decision of a person based on pre-calculated positive net present value of migration according to the 'Neoclassical theory of migration'. Does the reasons for migration happen to change as flow-to-stock ratio indicates, we can check in Table 4 showing the statistics on the reasons for the issuance of first-time residence permits to the migrants from WB.

TIME GEO (Labels)	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)										
European Union - 28 countries (2013-2020)										
Belgium	0.12	0.11	0.11	0.12	0.13	0.13	0.16	0.15	0.14	0.13
Bulgaria	0.33	0.50	0.38	0.22	0.21	0.44	0.24	0.36	0.36	0.20
Czechia		0.18	0.14	0.14	0.31	0.37	0.30	0.36	0.50	0.19
Denmark										
Germany (until 1990 former territory of the FRG)										0.26
Estonia	0.50	0.60	0.33	0.43	0.24	0.42	0.17	0.11	0.25	0.18
Ireland	0.10	0.11	0.19	0.14	0.27	0.21	0.17	0.24	0.25	0.17
Greece	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.07	0.08	0.04	0.04	0.04	
Spain	0.10	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.15	0.16	0.16	0.16	0.21
France			0.17	0.21	0.25	0.26	0.25	0.23	0.22	0.14
Croatia			0.56	0.49	0.29	0.29	1.12	1.22	1.08	0.72
Italy	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.03
Cyprus					0.23	0.20	0.35	0.42	0.31	0.17
Latvia	0.44	0.30	0.40	0.10	0.57	0.09	0.50	0.15	0.27	0.37
Lithuania	0.12	0.38	0.45	0.34	0.39	0.19	0.43	0.31	0.36	0.17
Luxembourg	0.05		0.15	0.12	0.19	0.18	0.18		0.24	0.19
Hungary			0.76	0.64	0.71	0.56	0.45	0.61	0.46	0.33
Malta										
Netherlands			0.26	0.26	0.25	0.27	0.27	0.24	0.27	0.17
Austria	0.17	0.18	0.14	0.15	0.19	0.19	0.18	0.16	0.16	0.13
Poland	0.23	0.26	0.37	0.31		0.28	0.50	0.77	0.53	0.63
Portugal	0.16	0.08	0.12	0.26	0.29	0.26	0.17	0.18	0.15	0.28
Romania	0.18	0.19	0.24	0.21	0.26	0.22	0.26	0.27	0.25	0.24
Slovenia	0.14	0.30	0.19	0.26	0.21	0.26	0.22	0.41	0.52	0.32
Slovakia	0.19									
Finland										0.26
Sweden	0.30	0.33	0.22	0.30	0.38	0.41	0.21	0.30	0.33	
Iceland	0.18	0.09	0.40	0.50	0.42	0.68	0.43	0.38	0.25	
Liechtenstein				0.00	0.75	0.17	0.55	0.50	0.17	
Norway	0.42	0.45	0.34	0.36	0.50	0.43	0.45	0.30	0.29	0.20
Switzerland		0.10	0.13	0.10	0.16	0.18	0.18	0.16	0.14	
United Kingdom										
Total	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.07	0.05

Table 3: Flow-to-stock ratio for Albanian citizens residing in the EU-27 including EFTA countries (Source: Eurostat, 2022)

First residence permit	Family reasons			Education reasons			Remunerated activities reasons			Other		
Year	2011	2015	2019	2011	2015	2019	2011	2015	2019	2011	2015	2019
Serbia excl. Kosovo	41.5	49.3	26.6	11.9	8.6	3.8	24.0	24.4	51.6	22.7	17.8	18.0
Albania	61.3	57.8	48.1	3.8	3.1	3.8	25.5	4.6	20.9	9.5	34.5	27.2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50.0	52.0	28.8	7.5	10.1	3.5	31.3	28.1	62.9	11.2	9.8	4.8
North Macedonia	56.4	70.4	39.8	7.3	6.8	4.0	17.5	11.0	40.4	26.7	11.8	15.8
Montenegro	46.8	50.5	31.3	19.3	16.8	8.8	11.7	13.1	34.9	22.2	19.6	25.0
Kosovo (UNSCR 1244/99)	63.9	72.5	42.8	3.5	3.5	2.1	9.7	4.5	36.8	23.0	19.6	18.4

Table 4: First residence permits according to reason (Source: Eurostat, 2022)

Family reunion was the most frequent reason in all WB populations in 2011. Yet, there is a clear declining trend in this reason across the whole region during the period, while its share in the total first-time residence permits drop to just about 25% in 2019 in Serbia and BH. Concurrently, the permits for the reason of work doubled to tripled depending on country, except in Albania. Table 5 provides deeper insight in the change of the ratio between

these two types of first permits issued to Serbian citizens in the EU (including EFTA) in the 2011-2020 period.

GEO (Labels)	TIME	Work/family reunion ratio									
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	0.56	0.52	0.50	0.54	0.49	0.73	1.28	1.76	2.08	
European Union - 28 countries (2013-2020)			0.50	0.54	0.49	0.73	1.27	1.75	2.08	
Belgium	0.09	0.15	0.13	0.15	0.16	0.20	0.28	0.32	0.20	0.22
Bulgaria	0.21	0.42	0.29	0.35	1.38	0.10	2.38	1.01	1.71	1.58
Czechia	0.22	2.12	1.89	1.97	2.59	3.05	3.84	11.31	15.63	6.00
Denmark	0.91	0.88	0.76	1.10	0.82	0.79	1.80	0.88	0.92	0.84
Germany	0.35	0.34	0.29	0.38	0.15	0.53	0.83	0.74	0.62	0.12
Estonia		1.00			1.00	1.00	0.57	2.00	0.40	1.00
Ireland	3.25	2.43	3.00	1.71	1.40	2.31	2.00	1.18	0.64	1.83
Greece	0.45	0.34	0.43	0.37	0.41	0.49	0.42	0.38	0.54	0.63
Spain	0.49	0.52	0.52	0.42	0.83	0.41	0.54	0.60	0.73	0.60
France	0.29	0.28	0.24	0.26	0.24	0.21	0.26	0.29	0.34	0.45
Croatia			0.22	0.20	0.36	1.13	3.01	20.48	22.54	17.75
Italy	0.93	1.10	1.11	0.71	0.45	0.41	0.28	0.42	0.48	0.21
Cyprus	2.28	2.10	1.50	1.29	0.73	1.03	0.45	1.07	0.68	1.22
Latvia	0.50	2.00		1.50	2.33	1.00	0.75	1.17	5.00	2.67
Lithuania	1.00	0.00	1.00		3.00	1.00		9.00	12.67	28.50
Luxembourg	0.18	0.09	0.36	0.13	0.18	0.16	0.23	0.38	0.39	0.51
Hungary	1.73	3.73	2.86	3.00	4.26	5.64	19.40	19.56	35.81	22.04
Malta	6.94	13.62	2.88	4.32	4.00	5.50	9.42	7.44	8.45	4.41
Netherlands	0.46	0.46	0.49	0.57	0.64	0.73	0.68	0.64	0.51	0.44
Austria	0.07	0.10	0.12	0.13	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.11	0.14	0.08
Poland	3.54	2.90	18.18	86.20		39.18	14.14	11.83	9.14	34.29
Portugal	0.75	0.85	0.87	0.67	1.43	1.75	0.62	0.55	1.00	1.19
Romania	0.78	0.63	0.44	0.70	0.42	0.57	1.42	3.08	4.59	1.41
Slovenia	3.17	2.04	2.28	3.06	3.73	4.94	5.52	6.79	5.70	2.47
Slovakia	4.74	2.98	1.15	1.80	2.01	2.33	9.59	9.74	12.90	8.48
Finland	0.91	1.64	1.50	1.32	2.03	3.30	2.04	1.04	2.55	2.69
Sweden	0.26	0.21	0.27	0.23	0.31	0.23	0.28	0.37	0.33	
Iceland	1.14	0.80	2.14	2.25	1.80	0.54	1.29	1.05	1.25	
Liechtenstein			0.00	0.00	0.21	0.11	0.10	0.00	0.05	
Norway	1.25	1.52	1.07	0.99	1.43	1.39	1.28	1.55	1.01	1.35
Switzerland		0.17	0.12	0.00	0.17	0.21	0.24	0.26	0.00	
United Kingdom	1.02	1.68	1.45	1.33	1.02	1.07	0.65	0.70		

Table 5: Work/family reunion ratio for migrants from Serbia excluding Kosovo* (Source: Eurostat, 2022)

Working permits are far more frequent in new EU member states, while family-related permits are the dominant category for Serbian migrants in old

member states. Generally, older destinations show stagnating or slightly declining total inflow, and their work-to-family ratio is below 0.5 (green numbers in Tables 5 and 6), suggesting that the family reunion reasons dominate. Similar to the previous indicator, Germany is the exception from the rule, with strong rise in the first-time work permits since 2016. This coincided with the introduction of the "Western Balkans regulation" by Germany in January 2016, which notably simplified the procedure for WB migrants without professional qualifications to work in this country. However, the ratio for Germany is still well below the EU average in 2019.

This trend in rising of working permits over family-related residence permits is noticeable across WB countries, although to somewhat lower extent than in Serbia. The only exception refers to the population in Kosovo, where this process seems to be just beginning (Table 6).

Despite the multiple increase in flows and stocks of migrants from WB in the new EU member states during the last decade the potential of these countries for attracting permanent immigration remains very limited. This is induced from both sides. There is no proactive policy towards permanent immigration in these countries, except for foreign nationals who belong to their own ethnicity. New EU member states are not largely recognized as desirable long-term destinations for potential migrants from WB, with partial exception of Slovenia due to its long historical and cultural ties with the region.

If put in the context of the push-pull concept of migration drivers, the shift towards rising share of work migrations and the emergence of new destinations for migrants from WB can be understood as a link in the chain of migration change that takes place in the EU. The recovery of economy in the EU after the 2008 recession induced the demand for labour, most strongly in Germany as the economic locomotive of the EU. This was intensified by the retirement of large baby-boom cohorts coupled with ever smaller young generations entering labour market. The sources of needed labour were found in new EU member states as their nationals face no restrictions in access to jobs in western labour markets unlike the third countries nationals. The new member states responded to the resulting severe labour shortages by introducing policies of importing temporary labour force from low-wage

European regions, especially from Ukraine, but also from the WB. Thus, workers inside the EU move from East to West, while their places are filled by third country nationals from the rim of the EU. However, immigration of WB workers to Western countries, most of which are traditional destinations, still takes place, but mainly through family permits rather than through work permits thanks to the large diasporas of WB countries.

GEO (Labels) | TIME	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.13	0.13	0.15
European Union - 28 countries (2013-2020)		0.00	0.17	0.10	0.92	0.30	0.75	0.33	0.56	1.63
Belgium	0.10	0.63	0.36	0.30	0.25	0.35	1.00	1.76	3.01	1.38
Bulgaria	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.19	0.05	0.04	0.36	0.35
Czechia	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.33	0.70	0.50	0.42	0.09
Denmark										
Germany		0.50	0.67	0.75	0.67				17.00	0.00
Estonia	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.67	0.00	1.00	0.33
Ireland										
Greece	0.13	0.12	0.15	0.13	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.10	0.11	0.11
Spain			0.02	0.06	0.04	0.09	1.01	13.09	30.74	34.78
France	0.25	0.22	0.22	0.15	0.07	0.06	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.03
Croatia										
Italy										
Cyprus										
Latvia	0.22	0.08	0.28	0.20	0.20	0.21	0.17	0.21	0.19	0.15
Lithuania	2.65	5.31						5.50	3.86	4.36
Luxembourg							0.17			2.00
Hungary	0.05	0.03	0.09	0.07	0.03	0.03	0.13	0.02	0.13	0.20
Malta	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03
Netherlands	2.00	0.29	0.00			9.50	27.93	13.36	14.43	53.00
Austria								0.00	0.00	
Poland										
Portugal	0.30		0.28	0.19	0.23	0.35	0.97	3.14	2.63	1.31
Romania		0.60				0.44	0.33	0.50	0.47	
Slovenia	0.29	0.16			0.22	0.23	0.50	0.38	0.98	0.98
Slovakia	0.13	0.13	0.10	0.13	0.14	0.16	0.21	0.31	0.34	
Finland					0.00			0.17	0.25	
Sweden					0.05	0.07	0.06	0.00	0.00	
Iceland	0.00	0.18	0.14	0.13	0.18	0.09	0.15	0.26	0.45	0.41
Liechtenstein		0.04	0.04	0.00	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.00	
Norway	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.07	1.11	0.13	0.05	0.10		
Switzerland		0.30	0.07	0.00	0.16	0.18	0.22	0.34	0.00	
United Kingdom	1.14	2.00	1.33	0.63	0.50	1.17	0.80	0.40		

Table 6: Work/family reunion ratio for migrants from Kosovo* (Source: Eurostat, 2022)

These recent trends initiated by the increasing demand for workers in Germany and other Western countries suggest that the nature of migration in the WB might be changing – from long-term, usually permanent emigration to a more flexible pattern of short- to medium-term migration and circular mobility of population. This finding should be acknowledged when defining migration strategies across WB countries as it emphasizes the need for specific policy measures that would target both potential and current migrants, most of whom are young. The measures have to be grounded on the argument that people who move from the country should no longer be perceived as a definite loss of population and human capital but rather as the population that should be actively counted on in the future of the region.

What Are the Prospects up to 2060?

Table 7 shows the medium variant of the most recent United Nations' population projections (WP 2019) for WB adjusted for the effect of migration underestimation (as outlined in the first section) and the estimated COVID-19 impact. The decline in total population of WB will most probably label the next decades, reducing the total population by a quarter in just four decades. This will be the case even in Kosovo – the youngest European population.

	Total	0-14	15-34	35-54	55-64	65+	80+
2020	16,368,623	2,692,620	4,055,840	4,291,576	2,269,720	3,058,869	642,579
2025	15,978,597	2,543,341	3,842,651	4,185,167	2,118,573	3,288,864	615,667
2030	15,536,048	2,333,264	3,680,419	4,033,190	2,018,261	3,470,914	753,084
2035	15,016,680	2,151,643	3,491,580	3,885,713	1,985,505	3,502,240	898,423
2040	14,464,786	1,996,006	3,306,951	3,706,882	1,940,406	3,514,541	985,219
2045	13,930,967	1,890,038	3,109,359	3,525,309	1,896,622	3,509,638	1,051,668
2050	13,421,849	1,818,260	2,868,252	3,392,217	1,823,615	3,519,507	1,065,746
2055	12,927,616	1,749,630	2,672,532	3,229,128	1,750,960	3,525,366	1,102,792
2060	12,418,362	1,668,471	2,509,642	3,067,805	1,671,402	3,501,043	1,124,390

Table 7: Total population and broad age groups in the Western Balkans (2020-2060) according to the most probable future (Source: Author's calculation based on United Nations, 2019)

Apart from below replacement fertility, the main cause of such an outcome lies in high net emigration, which primarily affects the young population.

Accordingly, the decreasing trend in the size of two youngest age groups – children and youth, is expected to be strongest (about 38% each by 2060).

Those projection results suggest that the transition from the current net emigration pattern of WB populations to a net immigration has to be an ultimate goal of policies aimed to improve demographic structure of the region. That would be in line with the 'Migration cycle concept' as developed by Fassmann and Reeger (2012), which supposes that whole Europe will become an immigration continent in decades to come. Current population projections for the EU member states (Europop 2019) implicitly assume the same, predicting a net immigration profile in 15-30 years even in Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania (Eurostat, 2022), whose current migration patterns are pretty much alike those in the Western Balkans' populations.
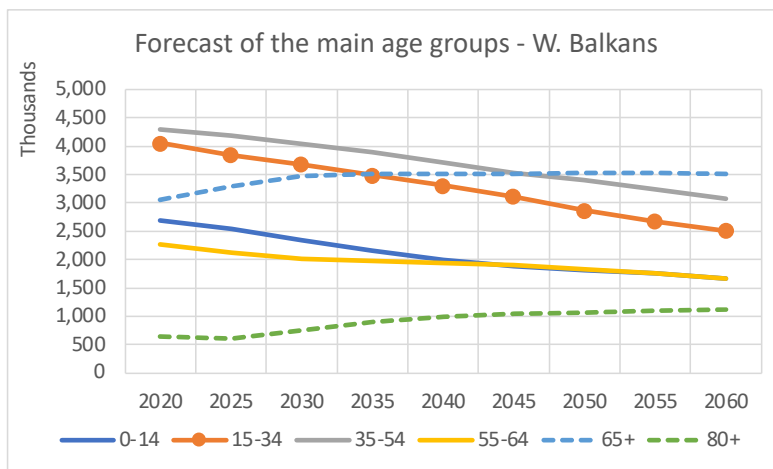

Figure 5: Trajectories of broad age groups in the Western Balkans (2020-2060) according to the most probable future (Source: Author's calculation based on United Nations, 2019)

Main Points with Policy Recommendations

In this paper, the main points refer to:
- the data issues due to outdated or incomplete sources of demographic and migration data in the Western Balkans,
- the strong emigration of the youth in the Western Balkans in the last decade,

- the changing nature of international migration in the region – from the long-term, usually permanent emigration to a more flexible patterns of short- to medium-term mobility,
- the need for improving all three dimensions of the UN's Human Development Index – particularly education and living standard of population and
- reducing net emigration as an immediate policy task and reaching stable net immigration as the ultimate policy goal across the region.

Given the addressed issues, following policy recommendations are ranked according to urgency:

- Although "brain drain" is not negligible in the WB, the main concern of policy makers in this region regarding recent and expected migration outflows from their countries should be focused to reducing the huge wage gap between the sending and receiving countries in lower skilled occupations in high demand in the transport, construction, and health care sectors.
- Improving living standard, the rule of law, political stability, and quality of life as well as giving priority to stimulating own young entrepreneurs over to mainly unsustainable subsidizing of foreign companies across the WB countries could significantly reduce emigration of people of all education levels, and thus induce rise in both human capital and demographic vitality of the region.
- National strategies aimed to improve demographic profiles of their countries, particularly in terms of the share of young population, need to account for strong subnational differentials in human development between centres and periphery, urban and rural areas, and in-migration and out-migration districts.
- Immigration of young people from outside the region as a part of the response to reducing and ageing of the WB societies should be one of short- to medium-term goals in migration strategies of all the WB countries.

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More than twenty years after the end of the war, the Western Balkans still face very difficult challenges and unresolved conflicts. Trust in the politicians who dominated after the war is low. Some of them are accused of kleptocracy, authoritarian behavior and the revival of nationalism.

Hopes are pinned on the younger generation, which is more likely to bring about democratic change and improve regional relations. However, these emigrate in ever greater numbers to Western Europe. The articles in this publication focus primarily on positive role models in the Western Balkans, but also on the obstacles the young generation faces in bringing about positive change.

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