Central and Eastern European Migration Review
Received: 8 December 2023, Accepted: 19 December 2023
Vol. 12, No. 2, 2023, pp. 5–14
doi: 10.54667/ceemr.2023.27

— SPECIAL SECTION —

Editorial Introduction: New Trends in Migration in the Western Balkans

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This editorial introduction sets the scene for the special section of 6 papers on new migration trends in the Western Balkans. The paper is in 2 parts. The first reviews the history and geography of migration from the 6 countries of the region (WB6). The 5 successor states of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) have a similar migration profile, shaped by postwar labour migration to Germany, Austria and Switzerland, whilst Albania's mass migration is more recent – since 1990 – and directed mainly to Italy and Greece. Whilst labour migrations dominated the 1960s and 1970s (the 1990s in Albania) and refugee movements accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia, recent migration trends are more diverse, including especially highly educated young people and students, as well as transit migrants from the Middle East and other source countries. Most WB6 countries have policies to manage their migrations and mobilise return and the diasporas for development but, in practice, these measures are not effective. The second part of this introductory paper provides an integrated overview of the 6 papers, sequenced in a way that moves from the general (covering the region as a whole) to the particular situations of individual countries regarding such topics as the changing profile of migration, student migration, return migration and gender perspectives.

Keywords: Western Balkans, migration, labour market, drivers of migration, migration policy

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Introduction

This special section focuses attention on a part of the Central and Eastern European region (defined in its widest sense as those European countries lying to the east of the former Iron Curtain) which has received scant attention in the pages of this journal thus far.[1] The Western Balkans are conventionally listed as the following 6 countries (denoted WB6): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.[2] The last 5 of this list are now-independent entities of the former Yugoslavia, whereas Albania has been independent since 1912.

The 6 papers which follow were first presented at an international conference on 'Migration, Development and Diaspora in the Western Balkans', held in Tirana, Albania, on 27–28 October 2021. They represent a selection from the more than 30 presentations made at the conference. The conference was financially supported by the Western Balkans Fund and the EU's Central European Initiative and was organised as part of an ongoing research collaboration between the Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) in Tirana and the Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR), University of Sussex, UK.

The Western Balkan countries have a long history of emigration, resulting in substantial diasporas. The migration takes many forms: labour migration, high-skilled and student migration, forced migration and displacement, transit migration and return migration (King and Oruč 2019: 1). According to Oruč (2022), the first major outflows occurred between 1880 and 1921, directed especially to the United States. Around the same time, the fall of the Ottoman Empire led to a significant migration of Muslims from the WB region to Turkey. Emigration continued more sporadically during the interwar period. After World War II, Yugoslavia signed bilateral labour recruitment agreements with several Western European countries in need of foreign workers for factory and construction jobs. Yugoslavia was unique as the only state-socialist regime in Europe to sponsor labour migration at this time. Hence, large-scale migration flows took place in the 1960s and 1970s, especially to Germany, Switzerland and Austria, countries where there were labour shortages and which were also geographically close to Yugoslavia. Albania, meanwhile, was locked in isolation under the communist leadership of Enver Hoxha; here, emigration was banned until the early 1990s, when Albanians burst out of their hitherto closed borders (King 2003). Also in the 1990s, the break-up of Yugoslavia resulted in mass migration, displacement and refugee flows; for instance, around 25 per cent of Bosnia's population sought refuge abroad during 1992–1995 (Oruč 2022).

In contrast to the earlier, male-dominated labour migrations, emigration from the 1990s onwards took on a more family-oriented character, helped by provisions in some host countries for family reunification. Nowadays, youth migration, student migration and brain drain constitute the characteristic and sensitive issues confronting national and regional policy-makers. According to a large-N survey conducted in 2018 with WB youth aged 14–29, one third of the respondents had strong aspirations to migrate. In response to the question 'How strong is your desire to move to another country for more than 6 months?', the percentages who checked either 'strong' or 'very strong' were 43 for Albania, 35 for North Macedonia, 34 for Kosovo, 30 for Serbia, 27 for Bosnia and Herzegovina and 26 for Montenegro. The figures for Croatia and Slovenia, also covered by the survey, were 18 and 11 respectively (Lavrič 2020: 20).

Following the displacements and refugee flows of the 1990s, the WB region has more recently become a major transit zone for refugees coming from the Middle East, South Asia and parts of Africa. In 2015–2016, during the refugee crisis triggered by the conflict in Syria, almost 1 million people routed through the Western Balkans in their attempt to find sanctuary in the EU. Some of the routes followed through the region have perpetuated or become modified in the years since then. After a lull in the late 2010s, numbers have escalated in very recent years and increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants have become 'stranded' in the WB countries, unable to progress further north and unwilling or unable to turn back (Oruč 2022).[3]

As a result of the historically layered phases of migration referred to above, the WB countries have generated large emigrant and diaspora populations. Table 1 gives one set of relevant figures sourced from the World Bank's *Migration and Remittances Factbook* (World Bank 2016). The table shows the 'stock' of emigrants for each WB6 country expressed as a percentage of the resident population for the source country. Data for Croatia and Slovenia are included in the table since these countries are the remaining successor states to the former Yugoslavia and are now EU members, Slovenia since 2004, Croatia since 2013. Taking the WB6 countries, the combined stock of emigrants stands at 5.7 million or 31 per cent of the aggregated WB6 population of 18.3 million.[4]

Table 1. Population and emigration stock figures: WB6 plus Croatia and Slovenia

Country	Population in millions	Stock of emigrants	
		'000	%
Albania	2.9	1,264	43.6
Bosnia-Herzegovina	3.8	1,700	44.5
Kosovo	1.8	550	30.3
Montenegro	0.6	282	45.4
North Macedonia	2.1	626	30.2
Serbia	7.1	1,293	18.0
Croatia	4.2	888	20.9
Slovenia	2.1	171	8.3

Source: World Bank (2016).

Note: % figures are the stocks expressed as a ratio to total population.

OECD (2022) data document in more detail the geography of emigration from the WB6 countries. Table 2 sets out, for each WB country, the five main destination countries based on migrant stock figures for 2015/16. For Albania, Italy and Greece are the 2 main destinations, as they always have been since the early 1990s and the onset of Albanian mass emigration in the post-communist era. Albania thus exhibits a very different emigration geography compared to the other WB countries. For the latter, all part of the former Yugoslavia and therefore part of the labour migration agreements of the 1960s and 1970s, Germany heads the list in every case, followed by a variety of other country combinations, often including Austria and Switzerland.

Thus, after 3 decades since the start of the post-socialism period and the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, international migration remains one of the 'hot' issues in the region due to its size, intensity, diversity and socio-economic consequences. Reflecting their structurally weak position on the economic and geographic periphery of Europe, the WB countries are amongst the very few in Europe which have consistently registered net emigration and continue to do so. In summing up the key diagnostic features of the WB6 and their problematic relationship with migration, we can do no better than to draw on insights from the OECD's (2022) study on *Labour Migration in the Western Balkans*, which provides arguably the best, most thorough and up-to-date analysis of the migratory phenomenon in this region.

Table 2. Main destination countries for WB6 migrants, 2015/16

Country of origin	Country of destination	Number of emigrants	% of stock of emigrants
Albania	Italy	481,106	43
	Greece	394,986	35
	USA	95,725	8
	Germany	63,981	6
	UK	28,747	3
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Germany	171,729	20
	Austria	162,019	19
	USA	111,922	13
	Slovenia	102,846	12
	Sweden	58,110	7
Kosovo	Germany	219,763	62
	Austria	31,215	9
	Italy	29,704	8
	UK	22,093	6
	Slovenia	16,164	5
Montenegro	Germany	18,725	33
	USA	16,612	29
	Italy	2,946	5
	Slovenia	2,848	5
	Switzerland	2,475	4
North Macedonia	Germany	92,427	22
	Italy	75,914	18
	Switzerland	59,927	14
	Turkey	43,402	10
	Austria	38,961	9
Serbia	Germany	188,977	27
	Austria	137,057	19
	France	81,307	11
	Switzerland	61,047	9
	Hungary	44,625	6

Source: OECD (2022: 27–28), drawing on OECD database on immigrants in OECD and non-OECD countries.

- The waves of labour migration in past decades have created a *distinctive geography of the WB diaspora*, mainly in close-by EU and OECD countries (Germany, Italy, Greece, Austria, Switzerland) but also further afield (especially the USA). Emigration to neighbouring EU countries Croatia and Slovenia has been increasing in recent years, reprising earlier patterns of internal migration within Yugoslavia.
- Migration from the WB6 countries is shaped by a *mix of push and pull factors* operating at different scales, from a personal motivation to macro-structural economic, social and political forces. Amongst the key drivers are high unemployment, low wages, weak educational/training systems and outcomes, poor social-security measures, an ineffective health service, a weak climate for business development and endemic corruption. Table 3 sets out some of these indicators.

Table 3. Key socio-economic indicators, WB6 and comparators, 2019–20

	AL	BiH	KS	NMK	MNE	SRB	WB6	CEE	EU	OECD
Unemployment %	12	17	26	18	16	9	16	6	7	7
Youth unemployment %	27	34	50	36	25	27	33	12	17	13
Labour productivity '000 USD *per capita*	30	44	nd	45	50	44	43	69	94	94
94% Tertiary educated	18	11	12	18	22	22	17	27	28	
Women empowerment index score	75	46	25	53	71	62	52		80	

Notes: CEE = Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia. Youth unemployment: ages 15–24. Labour productivity is measured in USD at PPP. Tertiary educated = % working-age population with completed tertiary education. Women empowerment index score is a composite index measuring the gender employment gap, share of women in middle and senior management, the female labour-force participation rate, the share of women in full-time employment and the female unemployment rate.

Source: OECD (2022: 63, 68, 79).

- On average, more than half of WB6 migrants abroad are employed in *mid-level jobs*; for men, mainly in construction and related trades and blue-collar manufacturing jobs; for women, domestic cleaning, care work, sales assistants and associate health professionals. The labour-market outcomes have improved slightly over time but WB6 migrant workers remain more vulnerable to insecure situations and unemployment during recessions and the Covid-19 pandemic. WB6 migrant women are more disadvantaged than men. Across the board, WB6 migrants are often over-qualified for the jobs they can access. Around half of those with a tertiary-level qualification work in low- and medium-skilled jobs and hence experience de-skilling.
- *Remittances* correspond to approximately 10 per cent of GDP across the WB6 in 2019, the highest being Kosovo, 16 per cent. However, remittances' contribution to national GDP has been higher in the past – up to 22 per cent in Albania in the early–mid 1990s. Most WB migrants use informal channels to transfer remittances. Whilst remittances have been effective in lifting many households out of poverty, they have mainly been used for consumption purposes and not invested in economic activities that could drive self-sustaining development.
- *Students* from the WB6 countries have shown a sharply increasing desire to pursue their studies abroad, the upward trend in mobility being interrupted temporarily by the Covid-19 pandemic. Germany and Italy are the most popular destination countries for study abroad.
- Knowledge about *return migration* is generally lacking and policy on return is limited to receiving returnees from EU countries under readmission agreements. Concrete measures on the economic and social reintegration of voluntary and 'assisted' (often non-voluntary) returning migrants are in place or planned in most WB countries but are weak in their implementation.
- All WB6 governments have drafted and developed multi-annual *migration strategies*, with varying objectives and funding levels and with generally low degrees of effectiveness. Unstable governments and the difficulties of inter-departmental and cross-ministry coordination have been key obstacles to implementation. Monitoring and evaluating policies are rare.
- Likewise, *diaspora investment and knowledge transfer policies* have been developed in most WB countries but, often, there is a lack of effective frameworks and mechanisms to fully exploit this potential. Lack of trust in the government and public institutions (such as the police and legal and justice systems) is a major obstacle to diaspora involvement in homeland co-development initiatives. Return and circular migration can result in knowledge transfer but a lack of strong policies and of survey data make it difficult, once again, to evaluate the extent to which this actually takes place.

Having set out this general thematic background to migration processes in the WB region, we now turn to a summary of the papers.

Overview of the papers

Exemplifying a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the papers are presented in a sequence that moves from the general to the specific.

The first paper, by *Sanja Cukut Krilić and Simona Zavratnik*, is wide-ranging geographically, linking the WB region to Slovenia and to Europe via the so-called 'Balkan route' taken by migrants and refugees.[5] The paper has two interlinked themes: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the already vulnerable situation of people on the move; and the specific cases of agricultural and posted workers, subject to border control and management within and beyond the EU at a time of health crisis. Posted workers are defined as workers sent by their employers to work in another EU member state. Covid controls exacerbated the already difficult situation of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants, whose mobility was halted by being trapped in poor conditions in reception centres in countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia or subject to 'pushback' by the frontier controls enacted at the multiple borders within and beyond the Balkans. For migrant workers, the situation was more contradictory: they, too, were subject to the blockages to movement necessarily imposed by countries as part of their pandemic control policies, suffering both pushback and 'pullback' (prevented from returning to their home countries). On the other hand, many were 'needed' as essential workers for agriculture (harvesting, packing, processing and transporting food products) and to work in labour-shortage sectors such as construction and maintenance (including many posted workers). As an example, the authors reveal how many of the posted workers sent by Slovenia to work elsewhere were third-country nationals from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. Given the timing of the research for this paper, the methods for data-gathering were transposed to the virtual social worlds inhabited by migrants and professionals working in the field. Key sources were blog posts, social-media discussion groups and online expert interviews.

Very different is the methodological approach of the second paper: a gravity-model analysis of the pattern of migration of health professionals from the WB countries to Europe, by *Isilda Mara*. The study covers the period 2000–2019 and shows, unsurprisingly, that earnings differentials are strong drivers of the high net outmigration of doctors from the WB5 countries (Kosovo is excluded because of lacking data).[6] Also important are policy changes in destination countries, especially Germany, which is the major recruiting country for WB doctors. Hence the mobility of medical professionals is both supply- and demand-driven but based on inequality, which can become cumulative. There is a global excess demand for doctors which is set to double between 2020 and 2030 due to a combination of population growth and population ageing (including the ageing of the population of doctors). Through global competition for highly qualified labour, the wealthier countries seek to plug their own shortages of medical expertise by bringing in foreign-trained doctors and nurses. In this scenario of inequality, Mara describes a kind of cascading effect. Health professionals from the EU15 (now EU14 following Brexit) move to Switzerland, Norway, the USA and Canada, to be replaced by doctors from the CEE and WB countries. Whilst, at an individual level, doctors from the WB countries benefit from higher salaries, better career prospects and improved working conditions by moving abroad, at a macro level the WB countries lose out on 2 fronts. First, they are subsidising the supply of doctors for the richer destination countries by paying for their upbringing and training. Second, the health sectors of the WB countries are denuded of the professionals they need. Mara's model suggests that reducing the income gap for medical doctors between sending and receiving countries by 10 per cent would reduce the emigration by 6.5 per cent.

For the third article, by *Adnan Efendić, Melika Husić-Mehmedović and Lejla Turulja*, we move to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and a mixed-methodology paper which combines non-linear econometric modelling

of emigration intentions with qualitative interviews to a variety of respondents (residents of BiH, emigrants and returnees of various ages and skill levels). The quantitative data input into the modelling consist of nationally representative survey data collected during the period 2006–2010 plus the latest survey round for 2019, the idea being to empirically analyse intentions to emigrate from BiH focusing on a range of determinants – individual, household, regional and socio-economic and political – over a decade-long time-span. Taking the most recent survey data (2019), 34 per cent of respondents say that they want to emigrate permanently and 24 per cent for a temporary stay abroad, while 22 per cent have no plans to emigrate and the remainder are undecided. Intentions to migrate are highest amongst young adults and those who are highly educated.[7] Whilst these figures are broadly constant across the two survey periods, what changes is the reasoning behind these intentions. In 2019 the socio-economic and political environment of BiH acts as the most powerful influence over the intention to migrate; in the earlier surveys, individual-scale factors were determinant. The qualitative interviews confirm the increased importance of this structural push factor. The policy implications are clear: efforts should be made to improve the economy, the labour market and, above all, the political culture in order to damp down emigration intentions, especially among the young and more-educated segments of the population who are vital for the country's future prosperity and stability. These recommendations are all the more salient given BiH's current demographic scenario of a declining and ageing population.

Whilst the previous paper dealt with intended or potential migration, the next one, by *Russell King and Ilir Gëdeshi*, deals with *actual* migration – that of Albanian students studying abroad. The combination of an online survey (651 respondents) and follow-up interviews (21) reveals the broad characteristics of the phenomenon of Albanian student emigration – why they have left and where they have gone – and the prospects for their return to Albania. Survey results show that there are 3 main reasons for studying abroad: as a step towards an international career; to study at a better-standard university than those in Albania; and family encouragement. The study-abroad students are mainly drawn from professional and business families. Whilst studying abroad they are supported by a mixture of financial means – their families, grants and bursaries as well as part-time work. Germany is the most favoured destination, accounting for more than one quarter of survey respondents, followed by Italy and Turkey. The last of these is seen as a 'cheaper' option (in terms of tuition fees and living costs); it is often selected for undergraduate studies as a prelude to getting a postgraduate scholarship to do further study in Europe or North America. The degree courses chosen reflect a strategy of maximising employment and career chances – hence Business Studies, Economics, Natural Sciences, Maths, Engineering and ICT are favoured over degrees in Humanities or Social Sciences. For the future of the Albanian qualified labour market, the most worrying findings relate to forward plans: more than half of the survey respondents 'do not intend to return to Albania for the foreseeable future'; another 30 per cent will 'only return after spending some time working abroad' (during which, of course, they may change their mind) and only 5 per cent say that they intend to 'return to Albania immediately after graduating'. Reluctance to go back to Albania is explained in terms of low incomes, poor career prospects, low quality of life, nepotism and corruption at all levels of society and the general feeling that 'there is no future for me in Albania'.

The next paper, by *Ruth Vollmer*, stays with Albania but focuses on migrants who *did* return – and specifically on the role of networks in shaping social (im)mobility throughout the migration cycle. Based on 100 qualitative interviews with returned migrants in various locations in Albania, 3 clusters of participants are distilled according to the role that economic motives and social networks played in their migration profiles. The author's focus on networks is inspired by the fact that Albania ranks second-bottom in Europe regarding opportunities for upward social mobility. Hence Vollmer poses the question: to what extent can migration and return unlock the barriers to social-status improvement? Or, on the other hand, are social inequalities reinforced through the cycle of migration and return? The three clusters are initially formulated by reference to literature on the role of economic factors in the original decision to migrate. For the *intrinsically* motivated cluster,

economic factors play a minimal role: the migration is not undertaken specifically for economic reasons, e.g. to support the family with remittances. Albanian students who move abroad to study are the best example of this cluster – a link back to the previous paper. Successful economic integration upon return depends on using the foreign-acquired qualifications – and here family and network effects may be important at this stage of the migration cycle. For the *instrumentally* motivated cluster, migration is undertaken precisely to solve economic problems and achieve economic objectives. Network effects – finding employment and accessing other livelihood resources abroad – are often important. However, the lack of participation in networks can result in irregular migration and informal-sector jobs. Either way, migration can be instrumental in supporting family members back home through remittances and savings. Finally, for the third cluster – *survival*-motivated – the reason to migrate is to escape from severe economic problems. Here, networks can play a key role but in different ways, leading to different social-mobility outcomes.

The final paper in the set, by *Janine Pinkow-Läpple*, stays with the theme of return migration but introduces a gender perspective, examining the experience of highly skilled female returnees to Kosovo. Based on detailed narrative interviews with 19 Kosovan women who had returned from their sojourns (usually to study abroad) in Western Europe or North America, the author finds that all the women experienced their stays abroad as liberating and empowering. They used words or phrases like 'transformational', 'insanely different' and 'like comparing salt to sugar'; one expressed surprise at seeing women driving buses. Their experiences of freedom and self-reliance, as well as exposure to different gender norms and behaviours, constitute what Pinkow-Läpple calls 'intangible remittances' – a cognitive resource which is brought back with them when they return to Kosovo. The challenge arises when they try to transfer these intangible remittances, especially their views and plans regarding gender equality. Their attempts are generally fiercely resisted in the various domains of Kosovan society – family, friends, work etc. As a result, around half of the interviewees were contemplating re-emigrating – and some had already done so. Kosovan society remains highly patriarchal and women continue to be subject to imposed stereotypes regarding their roles in family life and society. The context and findings of this paper are highly relevant to other WB countries and, in fact, to many other return migration settings elsewhere in the world (King and Lulle 2020).

Summing up, the 6 papers to follow offer crucial insights into the ongoing dynamics of migration in a cluster of small countries which are strategically positioned culturally, spatially and geopolitically on the doorstep of the EU and which will surely continue to play a key role in the future.

Notes

1. Over the 12 years since the CEEMR was launched, only 3 papers on the Western Balkan countries have been published – and only 1 of them on migration (Parker, Hester, Geegan, Ciunova-Shulenska, Palamidovska-Sterjadovska and Ivanov 2022); the other 2 were on citizenship (Džankić 2017, Krasniqi 2017).
2. The 'Western Balkans' is regarded as a geopolitical neologism created in the early 1990s to refer to those Balkan countries which are not members of the European Union (Oruč 2022: footnote 1).
3. For detailed maps of the different Balkan routes, including links back to source and transit countries, see IOM (2023: 3–4, 9–10). The same source gives the following figures for migrants arriving in the Western Balkans in recent years: 42,892 in 2018, 80,323 in 2019, 103,371 in 2020, 120,513 in 2021 and 192,266 in 2022. Hence, a 60 per cent increase 2021–2022 and a 4.5-times increase 2018–2022. A similar temporal profile but with different statistics (from Frontex on 'detection of irregular arrivals in the Western Balkans') shows an exponential growth, rising from 5,805 in 2018 to 144,148 in 2022 (see Mixed Migration Centre 2023: 16). According to these and other sources, the main sending

countries include Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Morocco – but the importance of each of these countries can vary year by year.

4. The figures discussed here and in Table 1 are not uncontestable. For instance, the European Training Foundation (2022) which uses UN DESA data, estimates the WB total emigrant stock at 4.7 million, equivalent to 25 per cent of the total resident population of the WB6, yet a re-working of the ETF figures suggests an emigrant stock of 5.3 million (see European Training Foundation 2022: 25, 115). Meanwhile, the OECD report on labour migration from the Western Balkans states that 'the more than one in five of the population born in the WB6 live abroad' (OECD 2022: 20) and aggregates the WB6 emigrant stock at 4.8 million (2022: 25). This report also sets out the various data sources for estimating WB emigration stocks – the OECD International Migration Database, the Eurostat Migration and Migrant Population Database and the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) migration statistics – and points out a problem with the Kosovo data: missing in some cases and double-counted under Serbia in others (OECD 2022: 22).
5. Cukut Krilić and Zavratnik trace the Balkan route from Greece to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and, finally, to Italy or further into Europe. There is not 1 single route but many variants which shift over time in response to the perceived permeability of borders: see Pastore (2019).
6. Survey and interview research on the emigration of Albanian doctors by Gëdeshi, King and Ceka (2023) suggests that the motivations to emigrate to Italy, Germany and other richer countries are less about salary *per se* and more to do with working conditions and long-term career prospects.
7. The findings for BiH are consonant with those on the emigration intentions of the populations of Albania (King and Gëdeshi 2020) and North Macedonia (Zulfiu Alili, King and Gëdeshi 2022).

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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How to cite this article: King R., Gëdeshi I. (2023). Editorial Introduction: New Trends in Migration in the Western Balkans. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 12(2): 5–14.