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Southeast European Demographic Overview II.
Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia

Délkelet-európai demográfiai körkép II.
Albánia, Bosznia-Hercegovina, Koszovó, Montenegró és Észak-Macedónia

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Abstract: The countries of Southeast Europe are facing severe demographic challenges. Falling birth rates, high levels of emigration, and a lack of a comprehensive family support system are leading to a rapid decline in population. All these factors are particularly true for the Western Balkan countries. We continue our analysis on Southeast Europe's demographic situation with an overview of the trends in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

Keywords: demography, depopulation, emigration, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia

Összefoglalás: *Délkelet-Európa országai súlyos demográfiai kihívásokkal néznek szembe. A csökkenő születésszám, nagyfokú kivándorlás és az átfogó családtámogatási rendszer hiánya a népesség gyors csökkenését eredményezi. Mindez fokozottan igaz a Nyugat-Balkán országaira. Délkelet-európai demográfiai elemzésünket Albánia, Bosznia-Hercegovina, Koszovó, Montenegró és Észak-Macedónia trendjeinek áttekintésével folytatjuk.*

Kulcsszavak: *demográfia, elnéptelenedés, kivándorlás, Albánia, Bosznia-Hercegovina, Koszovó, Montenegró, Észak-Macedónia*

Introduction

The Western Balkan countries are threatened by depopulation. Although demographic trends in the region, with declining birth rates and aging societies, are in line with the trends in the European Union (EU), they are even higher than the EU average. The problem is exacerbated by the high level of emigration to Western Europe, suggesting deep economic and structural problems. Thus, while the Western EU Member States can compensate for their poor level of birth rates, this is not the case in the Southeast European countries. Moreover, the process is accelerated by the German legislation encouraging labour outflows from certain Western Balkan countries, as major EU Member States are facing labour shortages, for which a cheap but skilled Southeast European labour force is one of the solutions. Emigration is taking place at such a scale that the countries of the Western Balkans will soon be facing labour shortages, which will further hamper the performance of the economy, intensifying all the demographic challenges described above.

Continuing the Southeast European demographic overview, we examine the demographic situation of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. It should be noted that the analysis is complicated by the

fact that, instead of determining the size of the population, defining the proportion of ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia is more important in the statistics than specifying other demographic indicators. The politicization of the issue thus delays the censuses in order to preserve the ethnic and political status quo in the respective countries.

Albania

In terms of demographic trends in Europe, Albania is a latecomer: the country entered the last stage of *'demographic transition'* – going from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality – only in 2001 at the latest. The reason for this is that among the Western Balkan countries, until the collapse of Communism, Albania was an outlier not only in historical but also in demographic terms. Since then, it has been facing the challenges of other Balkan countries, including declining birth rates, an aging society, and emigration.

According to the Institute of Statistics (*Instituti i Statistikës*, INSTAT), Albania currently has a population of 2.83 million people, which is 0.6 percent less than in 2020. However, it is more meaningful to compare it to the 1999 figure, when the country's population was the largest, with 3.4 million people, which shows a 16 percent decline in just 20 years. The Albanian population is still relatively young (the median age is 37.6 years), and the proportion of the elderly is low, but following current trends, this may soon change. While at the peak of the Albanian population boom in 1958, the fertility rate was 6.5, by 2020 this rate had dropped to 1.34, the lowest number ever measured. Although the number of live births still exceeds the number of deaths, this is only due to the exceptionally high number of births, although a decrease can be observed here as well: while the number of live births in 2020 (28,075) is 1.7 percent lower than in the previous year, the number of deaths (27,065) is 26 percent higher than in 2019. Therefore, the Albanian trends in terms of fertility and aging are in line with demographic trends in both the Western Balkans and in Europe.

For a long time, Albanian emigration trends did not have the same characteristics as other Western Balkan countries. In the surrounding states the guest worker system maintained together with Western European countries was active; in contrast, Albanians living in Enver Hoxha's authoritarian regime were completely locked out. In 1991, this gap disappeared, and between 1991 and 2011, the primary cause of Albanian population decline was emigration in several major waves. Between 2001 and 2011, according to INSTAT, 482,000 Albanians left the country, followed by an additional half a million people in the past decade; it is estimated that today more than one and a half million Albanians live abroad,[1] which is a

1 The exact number of Albanians living abroad is difficult to determine due to the phenomenon of 'circular migration', but it can be stated that the figure of net migration is persistently positive.

significant number especially given that the country has no past of war that would have resulted in this extensive diaspora. The problem of emigration is exacerbated by the fact that it is the young, skilled workforce that is most likely to consider this possibility today. According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Youth Network, 90 percent of young people are serious about emigration, referring to education, job opportunities, or just *'having a normal life'*. The biggest problems in the country include a high level of corruption and unemployment, while the quality of education is said to be 'bad' or 'very bad' by respondents. 90 percent of Albanian migrants live in Europe, the rest live in the United States (8%). Italy (40%) and Greece (37%) are listed in the first place as destinations of emigration, due to geographical proximity and similarities in culture and lifestyle.

Considering that Albania cannot compensate for the high rate of emigration and that the country does not have an extensive family support system to encourage having children, INSTAT estimates that the country's population will shrink to 2.4 million people by 2050 and 2.1 million people by 2060. At the same time, an important advantage of Albania is that the population is still relatively young, so by taking appropriate economic and social measures and creating jobs, the rapid population decline could be reduced.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Three decades after the Bosnian war, the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is significantly declining and aging, due to persistently low birth rates and high levels of emigration. Between 1992 and 1995, during the war, BiH lost nearly a quarter of the country's population, mainly due to emigration and displacement, and although part of the population returned, this could only mitigate the decline. Among other things, the demographic crisis is a sign of general despair in the country: according to the Balkan Barometer in 2021, 61 percent of the population is dissatisfied with the economic situation, which is the highest rate in the region (which is 46% on average).

Determining the exact number of the population was already a challenge in Yugoslavia, which has only intensified in Bosnia, as all three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs) have an interest in increasing the proportion of their own ethnicity. The first and still the only census[2] in Bosnia was therefore held in 2013, 22 years after the last Yugoslav census. In 2013, the country's population was 3.5 million, a significant decrease from the 1991 figure of 4.4 million. In fact, according to some experts, this is an overestimated figure, with the real number of the population at 3.3 million. Looking at the 2013 data, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) is the larger of the two entities, with 2.2 million inhabitants, while the Republika Srpska (RS) has 1.2 million, and the Brčko District has 84,000

2 Republika Srpska does not accept the results of the census, as its methodology was not approved by all three statistical offices in the country.

inhabitants. The data on ethnic composition are even more important: Bosniaks make up 50.11 percent of the population (43.5% in 1991), Serbs 30.78 percent (31.2%), and Croats 15.43 percent (17.4%). While the ratio of the constituent peoples did not change significantly, their allocation altered drastically, resulting in nearly (but not completely) ethnically homogenous blocks.

One of the reasons for the significant population loss is the steadily declining fertility rate (1.25), which is one of the lowest in the world. Although the number of births after the war still exceeded the number of deaths, this did not mean a 'baby boom' because the birth rate experienced after the war was in line with its gradually decreasing trend. During the war, it was officially estimated that 100,000 people lost their lives, and 2.2 million people became refugees. The current decline in population is true for all ethnicities, and although fertility rates broken down by entity level are not reported, comparing the 1991 and 2013 censuses shows that the population of both the FBiH and the RS is declining. In 1991, the population of the FBiH was 2.7 million, that of the RS was 1.6 million, while in 2013 2.2 million lived in BiH and 1.2 million in RS.

In 2019, Bosnia recorded 1.7 million emigrants, while today roughly 2 million Bosnians might live outside the country, which is more than 55 percent of the country's current population. Among the countries of emigration, Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Switzerland are the primary destinations, but due to the war, most migrants still live in Croatia (370,000) and Serbia (340,000). Like Serbia, the BiH Labour and Employment Agency has a project partnership agreement with Germany to call for nurses and medical school staff from Bosnia, which also contributes to the outflow of skilled labour, mainly affecting the younger generations. The problem of emigration is exacerbated by the fact that there is no significant immigration into the country, net migration is permanently positive.

Given the current trends, the population could shrink to 2.7 million by 2050, a nearly 40 percent decline from the pre-war figure. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a migration hinterland or a comprehensive family support system that would encourage having children. This is due, on the one hand, to the specificities of the decision-making system, as family policy issues are only dealt with at the level of the entities; on the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina is in an even worse economic situation than its neighbours.

Kosovo

Albeit having the youngest population in Europe, Kosovo will soon experience the same negative demographic trends as the rest of Southeast Europe. In the past, statistics about the ethnic composition of Kosovo were politically tempered, and boycotts were not unusual. The first post-war census, conducted in 2011, for example, was boycotted by the majority of the Serbian and Roma communities. Thus, statistical data should be assessed with caution.

Similarly to its neighbours, demographic indicators in the past served the purpose of fuelling – and to some extent, justifying – nationalism. Notably, the (changing) ethnic composition of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo has always been a highly politicized issue. The post-World War II period marked the population growth of Albanians and, in parallel, the outflux of Serbs and Montenegrins from the territory of Kosovo. The main reason for the latter was internal emigration towards the economically developed (northern) parts of Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, given the continued existence of the rural-traditional family form among Albanians, their fertility rates remained above the 2.1 reproduction rate up until 1991. According to the 1981 Yugoslav census, out of the 1.9 million inhabitants of Kosovo, 77.5 percent were Albanians, 13.2 percent declared themselves to be Serbs, while other minorities (i.e. Turks, Bosniaks, Gorani, and Roma) composed roughly 10 percent of the population. As of today, based on estimates from the 2011 census, the total population of Kosovo is 1.78 million, out of which Albanians make up 93 percent and Serbs 1.5 percent.

The number of Albanian and Serb refugees during and after the Kosovo war (1998–1999) is also politicized. Most of them, however, have returned to their homeland or were relocated within Kosovo; the armed conflict thus did not result in a significant change in demographics but rather contributed to ethnic homogenisation.

Kosovo, where the median age is 29.06, has by far the youngest population on the continent. The reason for this "enviable" fact is twofold: firstly, until the early 1990s, high birth rates characterized Kosovo Albanians, and secondly, baby boom years followed the armed conflict at the beginning of the new millennium. The shrinking of the population, however, is not just the outcome of emigration; population decline has already begun, and this tendency is more advanced in the Kosovo Serb community. In terms of declining demographic trends, Kosovo is no exception in the region, it is only experiencing a slight delay compared to its neighbours. Kosovo's population, according to the estimates of the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (ASK), could reach a historic low of 1.49 million by 2061.

Economy-driven emigration is not an unknown or new phenomenon for Kosovo, either. According to the World Bank, 30 percent of Kosovars[3] live abroad; the size of the Kosovo Albanian diaspora is estimated to be around 700,000, Europe and North America combined. In Europe, the main destinations include Sweden, the Netherlands, France, and the German-speaking countries (Germany 218,000, Switzerland 111,000, and Austria 25,000 in 2018). The period of 2013–2016 also saw a rise of asylum applications for Kosovars in the EU: in this four-year period, approximately 230,000 Kosovars applied for asylum. Furthermore, a survey from 2016 highlights that one out of two Kosovars wishes to emigrate to Western Europe. These data show that emigration is still a defining demographic and social problem for the young country. Nevertheless, Kosovo is heavily reliant on remittances, as these are responsible for around 13 percent of the GDP annually.

In terms of family allowances, the state does not provide families or mothers with additional financial support during or after maternity leave.

3 Under the term Kosovars, citizens of Kosovo are understood, including all ethnic communities.

Montenegro

Even as the smallest post-Yugoslav republic, Montenegro is facing the same demographic problems as its neighbours. The politicization of demographics has nevertheless resulted in putting less emphasis on issues posed by an aging population, declining fertility rates, and emigration.

The country is currently in a slightly better position in terms of demographics than the rest of the region (with the exception of Kosovo). Montenegro, with its 620,000 inhabitants, is the only country in Southeast Europe where the largest ethnic group does not make up the absolute majority of the population. According to the latest census from 2011, 45 percent of inhabitants identified as Montenegrins, 28.7 percent as Serbs, 8.65 percent as Bosniaks, and 4.9 percent as Albanians. Compared to the former Yugoslav republics, it still has a steadier population and a higher fertility rate (1.77). It should be noted, however, that the fertility rate started to decline in the 1980s, marking an approximate 15-year delay compared to Serbia. According to Eurostat estimates, the total population could decrease to a historic low of 580,000 by 2050 – a considerable drop considering the size of Montenegro.

Migration trends are in line with other countries of Southeast Europe. The main driving force behind emigration has always been the economic perspective; the UN-imposed embargo on Yugoslavia in the 1990s also contributed to emigration from Montenegro. In parallel, the country experienced an influx of Serbs, Bosniaks, and Albanians from the war-torn parts of Yugoslavia during the 1990s. According to the estimates of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), roughly 3,600 nationals leave the country annually. Almost 60 percent of them emigrate to Germany (in 2019, more than 22,000 Montenegrins resided in the country), while the US and other German-speaking countries are also considered to be top destinations. Additionally, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy has found that 70 percent of young, skilled people would leave Montenegro, signalling that emigration trends would only increase in the future.

Apart from the guest worker *(gastarbajter)* culture, emigration to economically developed parts of Yugoslavia, most notably to Serbia and its agricultural areas, characterize Montenegro's external migration patterns. The better economic outlook in Serbia, its proximity, and the similarities in culture and language make a smooth integration possible. As a result, almost 40,000 inhabitants of Serbia identified as Montenegrins in the 2011 Serbian census. In March 2021, Prime minister Zdravko Krivokapić even raised the possibility of introducing dual citizenship, the main beneficiaries of which would be Montenegrins from Serbia. It would, however, only serve as a hotbed for nationalism-led political feuds.

Immigration, on the other hand, is relatively limited and cannot make up for the emigration losses. The citizens of neighbouring countries (Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) usually come to Montenegro for a fixed period of time,

as seasonal workers. In the meantime, internal migration in Montenegro from the mountainous north to the coastline is also significant and is also driven by economic factors.

The mixture of an aging population and emigration has already put the Montenegrin social sector under pressure. As the number of retirees grows, the burden on the pension system will increase. Like elsewhere in the region, the emphasis is placed on providing social benefits to families. The responsible body for social and family support is the Ministry for Social and Labour Affairs *(Ministarstvo rada i socijalnog staranja)*, while the basics of the support system are outlined in the Law on Social and Child Protection.

North Macedonia

Out of the Southeast European region, North Macedonia's demographic situation is the biggest mystery. As the last census was conducted back in 2002, we only have rough and oftentimes contradictory estimates from the last two decades regarding basic demographic indicators. After many failed attempts and delays[4], a new census was conducted in September 2021, with the results expected to be published in March 2022. The ethnic composition between Macedonians and Albanians still seems to be more important than facing the problems of a declining population and emigration.

The size of the population is also based on estimates. The last census (2002) indicated that the country had 2.02 million inhabitants, out of which 64 percent were Macedonians and 25 percent were Albanians. This number stands at 2.08 million today (2021), but experts warn that the population can be as low as 1.5 million. The unofficial consensus among experts is that the population of North Macedonia nowadays lies between 1.6-1.8 million people. Importantly, all ethnic groups are facing the same trends; there is no significant difference between Macedonians and Albanians in this regard. Additionally, the demographics of North Macedonia's Albanian population show similarities to Kosovo Albanians: the once high birth rates already started to sharply decline at the beginning of the 1990s.

The lack of official data from the last twenty years questions the reliability of the fertility rate, too. As of 2021, this indicator stands at 1.34, but if the size of the population was lower (as indicated by experts), this number would be slightly higher. The decline in fertility rates, similarly to the former Yugoslav countries, started relatively early among Macedonians, in the 1970s, who were followed by the Muslim and the predominantly rural communities of Albanians, Turks,

4 Both Macedonian and Albanian political parties accused each other of tampering with the statistics in hopes of boosting the share of their respective ethnicity in the total population. Although the 2011 census was carried out, the results have never been published.

and Torbeši approximately two decades later. This demographic trend was accelerated by the Yugoslav industrialisation of former agricultural spaces and, more importantly, by the widespread access to education.

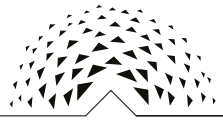
North Macedonia is facing serious migration issues. The capital city region of Skopje is responsible for the internal migration, especially attracting labour force from the Eastern parts of the country. The main reason behind a sharply declining population is undoubtedly mass emigration, which is fuelled by economic factors. The OECD estimates that within the period of 2012-2016, approximately 23,000 people left the country every year, mainly young and skilled citizens. Immigration to the country, on the other hand, is basically non-existent.

Tracking the emigration of ethnic Macedonians, however, proves to be challenging. People from the historic territory of Macedonia, shared between Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Greece, and Albania, started emigration as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Hence, in the case of the second and third generations of Macedonians, it might not be clear if their ancestors were from the modern territory of North Macedonia or from different parts of the broader historic region (e.g. from Thessaloniki). Furthermore, the data collected by Macedonian organisations in the US, Europe, and Australia only count people with Macedonian origins (i.e. of Macedonian heritage) in their statistics, rather than the citizens of North Macedonia. The United Macedonian Diaspora (UMD), for example, claims that 750,000 Macedonians reside in North America, 600,000 in Europe, as well as up to 300,000 in Australia. The Government of North Macedonia, in its National Strategy for Cooperation with the Diaspora argued that there are approximately 700,000 Macedonians outside the country.

North Macedonia has a decentralized family support system, overseen by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy *(Министерство за труд и социјална политика)*. Family allowance is given to parents who pay social security contribution. After the birth of the third child, families receive additional financial support until the child turns ten years old.

Conclusion

All five countries discussed in the analysis, due to their economic situation, have rudimentary family support systems and no significant strategy to encourage childbearing, preventing emigration, or luring labour force home. While the amounts spent on family support in the Southeast European countries of Bulgaria, Croatia, or Romania are in line with the EU average, the countries of the Western Balkans lag far behind due to their economic performances. The phenomenon of emigration is the same as in the countries discussed in the first part of the analysis: it is mainly the young, skilled workforce who leaves the countries for Western Europe in the hope of better living conditions. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that no country has a migration hinterland,



and immigration is negligible, so the net migration balance remains permanently positive. The countries rather tend to look at the profit rate of emigration, with each country relying heavily on remittances.

In the case of Kosovo and Montenegro, the fertility rate is higher than in the rest of the region (although it does not reach 2.1 anywhere), and in Albania and Kosovo the average age of the population is relatively low. However, this is not a cause for optimism, as these countries are only 10-15 years behind the rest of the region. All ethnic groups in the Western Balkans are affected by the same demographic challenges, with Albanian/Muslim communities revealing the negative trends a decade late. With conscious economic and social incentives, these could be turned to an advantage, and the radical population decline could be halted, although this is unlikely, considering the economic indicators. The countries of the Western Balkans are at a risk of depopulation due to the declining birth rates and the high levels of emigration.

Annex

Table 1.
Total population of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, 1989–2021 (Eurostat–World Bank, 2021).

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia[5]
1989	3 169 386	4 461 498	1 827 000	606 571	1 873 109
2000	3 058 497	3 753 085	1 700 000	604 950	2 031 112
2008	2 958 266	3 843 846	1 747 383	616 969	2 048 619
2009	2 936 355	3 843 998	1 761 474	618 294	2 052 722
2010	2 918 674	3 844 046	2 208 107	619 001	2 052 722
2011	2 907 361	3 843 183	1 794 180	619 850	2 057 284
2012	2 903 008	3 839 265	1 780 021	620 308	2 059 794
2013	2 897 770	3 835 645	1 815 606	620 893	2 062 294
2014	2 892 394	3 830 911	1 820 631	621 521	2 065 769
2015	2 885 796	3 825 334	1 804 944	622 099	2 069 172
2016	2 875 592	3 515 982	1 771 604	622 218	2 071 278
2017	2 876 591	3 509 728	1 783 531	622 387	2 073 702
2018	2 870 324	3 500 295	1 798 506	622 359	2 075 301
2019	2 862 427	3 492 018	1 795 666	622 182	2 077 132
2020	2 845 955	n/d	1 782 115	621 873	2 076 255
2021	2 829 741	n/d	n/d	620 739	2 068 808

5 The last census in North Macedonia was held in 2002, the numbers are only estimates.

Table 2.
Total fertility rates of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, 2008–2019 (Eurostat–World Bank, 2021).

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia
2008	1.58	1.30	n/d	1.89	1.47
2009	1.63	1.31	n/d	1.98	1.52
2010	1.63	1.31	n/d	1.7	1.56
2011	1.65	1.31	n/d	1.65	1.46
2012	1.71	1.31	n/d	1.72	1.51
2013	1.73	1.30	n/d	1.73	1.49
2014	1.73	1.30	n/d	1.75	1.52
2015	1.59	1.29	n/d	1.74	1.5
2016	1.54	1.28	1.66	1.79	1.5
2017	1.48	1.27	1.65	1.78	1.43
2018	1.37	1.26	1.61	1.76	1.42
2019	n/d	1.25	1.55	1.77	1.34