



Migration Profile

SERBIA

A. Executive Summary

The Republic of Serbia is one of the six countries resulting from the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.ⁱ It is not currently part of the Schengen Area.ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, the EU has set a deadline of 2025 for Serbia and Montenegro's accession if they fulfil the required reforms.ⁱⁱⁱ

Immigration to Serbia mainly originates from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Germany.^{iv} Movements from these countries have a long history because of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.^v Serbia has recently become an important transit country for people heading to Europe via the Western Balkan route^{vi} and receives refugees mainly from Turkey, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran.^{vii} Likewise, Serbia has one of the highest numbers of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Europe, with 211,740 registered in 2022.^{viii}

Regarding Serbia's emigration, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, and Switzerland are the main destination countries.^{ix} Emigrants search for better job stability and salary conditions.^x

Serbia is an economy transitioning from a planned to a market system and has undergone significant transformations in its productive structure over the last two decades.^{xi} These reforms have been related to the liberalisation of the price system, a trade reform, and the privatisation of small and medium-sized enterprises.^{xii} In 2020, Serbia's economy was mainly supported by the service (51.2%), industry (24%) and agriculture (6%) sectors.^{xiii}

In 2021 Serbia's GDP amounted to \$63,068,134.60^{xiv} with an annual growth rate of 7.4%, having a solid recovery after the Coronavirus pandemic. However, several domestic and international factors have caused an economic slowdown, and in 2022 growth is forecast at 3.2%.^{xv} In 2020 Foreign investment (FDI) net inflows represented 6.5% of the country's GDP.^{xvi} The inflation rate has increased by 14% in 2022 and has adversely affected the incomes of the poor and vulnerable populations.^{xvii}

In the medium term, the Serbian economy is expected to slow down and return to pre-pandemic growth levels.^{xviii}

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

The Republic of Serbia is located in the Balkan Peninsula and has a total surface of 88.499 sq. km.^{xix} It is divided into 29 districts.^{xx} The country also has two provinces with a special regime: Kosovo and Metohija in the south,^{xxi} which has declared unilateral independence, and the autonomous province of Vojvodina in the north.^{xxii}

Serbia has a decreasing population of 6,871,547, with a low birth rate and a constant emigration rate. The population comprises Serb 83.3%, Hungarian 3.5%, Romani 2.1%, Bosnyak 2%, other 5.7%, and undeclared or unknown 3.4%^{xxiii}.

The country's official language is Serbian, with Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian-speaking minorities in the north and Albanians in the south.^{xxiv}

Regarding religious affiliation, 84.6% are Orthodox Christian, 3% are Muslim, and 5% are Catholic.^{xxv}

II. International and Internal Migration

In 2020, 823,011 immigrants were registered in Serbia.^{xxvi} The central countries of origin were Bosnia and Herzegovina (41.62%), Croatia (35.08%), Montenegro (8.82%), North Macedonia (5.79%), and Germany (2%).^{xxvii} The leading age group was between 45-64 years old.^{xxviii}

The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the subsequent Balkan Wars caused a large-scale displacement in the region.^{xxix xxx} In this respect, Bosnia and Herzegovina was devastated in economic, social, and political terms after the war.^{xxxi} Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia took in about 40% of the people fleeing Bosnia and Herzegovina.^{xxxii}

Currently, Bosnia is suffering from economic stagnation, low foreign investment, and high unemployment among the young population, and it has become the primary emigrant sender to Serbia.^{xxxiii} Since 2002, the Croatian population has had the status of a national minority in Serbia.^{xxxiv}

In addition, in 2011-2019, there was an increasing trend in immigration to Serbia, especially from the People's Republic of China, Romania, and Russia.^{xxxv} The leading causes were related to family reasons, employment, and education.^{xxxvi} Immigrant women are mainly employed in occupations related to trade and services (21.3%), as experts and artists (18.1%) and in elementary disciplines (13.4%).^{xxxvii} Men are mainly employed in crafts and related work (19.01%) and service occupations (13.09%).^{xxxviii}

Regarding integration, immigrants can access the labour market in the same way as the native population.^{xxxix} However, newly arrived immigrants confront difficulties in improving their professional skills and careers. While migrant pupils have the same educational rights as the native population.^{xl} Since 2017, language support in primary and secondary schools has been promoted for immigrant children.^{xli} Regarding health, documented immigrants have access to all services, but undocumented migrants have conditional and discretionary access.

Furthermore, there are not specialised health services for migrants' needs.^{xlii} Nevertheless, Serbia has a solid legal framework against discrimination.^{xliii}

Finally, internal migration is rural-to-urban mainly due to the intensive urbanisation, industrialisation, and de-agrarisation processes.^{xliv} In 2021, 49,067 immigrants from other cities were registered, and the regions that received the most immigrants were Northern Serbia, Boegradski region, Beogradska oblast, and Vojvodine.^{xlv} The average age of persons who changed residence was 35 for men and 34.5 for women. From the economic activity point of view, 61.4% of migrants are dependents, 30.9% are active, and 7.7% have a personal income.^{xlvi}

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

In 2020, Serbia registered 1,003,962 emigrants. Emigration was mainly female (50.44%),^{xlvii} and the central destination countries in that year were Germany (19.9%), Austria (17.7%), France (9.7%), Italy (8.7%), and Switzerland (6.6%), followed by Hungary and Croatia.^{xlviii} Young people are most likely to emigrate (71%),^{xlix} and those between 20-29 years old are most willing to do so.^l In this sense, youth mobility is usually linked to brain drain. In the *Human Flight and Brain Drain Index 2022*, Serbia stands at a score of 6 out of 10.^{li} Therefore, the Serbian population that emigrates is characterised by having a high educational level, being unemployed, and a high likelihood for emigration.^{lii} This phenomenon is seen as something positive by the destination countries and as an opportunity for Serbia due to the transfer of knowledge, skills, and money of expats and returnees.^{liii}

The main factors that explain emigration from Serbia are related to its population idea of a 'blocked future', the issue of entering the EU, job insecurity,^{liv} low wages, and economic instability.^{lv} Likewise, the main destination countries' geographical proximity, along with transportation improvements, have facilitated short-term and circular migration.^{lvi} In this sense, the flexibility in issuing visas and the readmission agreements with the EU have reduced the flow.^{lvii}

In addition, the average and median real-wage levels in most New Member States (NMS) increased steadily throughout most of this decade, while, in Serbia, they remained stagnant. Germany, Austria, and Switzerland would be more likely to hire Serbian workers, which is also a pull factor for Serbian emigration.^{lviii}

IV. Forced Migrants (Internally Displaced Persons, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Climate Displaced People)

In 2021, 314 refugees arrived, and 223 asylum applications were registered in Serbia.^{lix} 53.62% were men, and 46.38% were women.^{lx} The leading countries of origin were Turkey (31.21%), Libya (14.65%), Syria (14.33%), Afghanistan (8.60%), and Iran (6.05%).^{lxi} The leading age group was 18-59 years old.^{lxii} In 2022, 1086 refugees and 282 asylum applications have been registered so far,^{lxiii} while 16,723 new arrivals were recorded in the governmental centres in August 2022. Additionally, it is worth noting the significant number of Ukrainian refugees that have transit and arrived into the country in 2022. About 22,019 refugees from Ukraine

have been recorded in Serbia and Kosovo since the conflict began, of whom 1,060 received Temporary Protection or other similar national protections. Lastly, in April 2022 about 6,000 Ukrainian refugees were recorded in the Serbian reception centres.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, more than 550,000 people moved to Serbia in search of refuge.^{lxiv} Currently, 17,334 refugees are registered from Croatia and 7,996 from Bosnia and Herzegovina.^{lxv}

In 2015 Europe experienced the most significant displacement of refugees, asylum seekers, vulnerable persons, and economic migrants since World War II.^{lxvi} In this context, the Balkan Route became one of the main routes to Europe.^{lxvii} Since mid-2018, the transit corridors across Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Serbia, as well as through Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, have become some of the busiest mixed migration routes in the Western Balkans.^{lxviii lxix}

In Serbia, there are two types of accommodation centres for displaced people. Reception Centres and Asylum Centres.^{lxx} In the former, people who are going to apply for asylum in Serbia wait until they are transferred to one of the seven Asylum Centres located in Banja Koviljača, Bogovađa, Tutin, Sjenica, Krnjača, Vranje, Obrenovac.^{lxxi} In 2021 a significant part of displaced people accommodated in the Reception centres had no legal status because they were not interested in staying in Serbia or applying for asylum.^{lxxii}

Individuals with refugee status are entitled to primary health care, psychological assistance (necessary for some people after the trauma caused by war), social protection related to basic needs, and housing.^{lxxiii} However, refugees in Serbia face difficulties related to discrimination,^{lxxiv} and forced mobilisation. They are also not entitled to citizenship. Furthermore, they have not had an adequate legal protection system and limited access to the labour market.^{lxxv}

Finally, Serbia has one of the highest IDP rates in Europe, with 211,740 registered in 2022.^{lxxvi} Few IDPs are willing to return to their places of origin due to insecurity, lack of rights protection mechanisms, restricted access to public services and lack of economic opportunities.^{lxxvii} IDPs include Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. In addition, 34 IDPs caused by floods were recorded in 2021.^{lxxviii}

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

Serbia was ranked Tier 2 in the 2021 *US Trafficking in Person Report* mainly because the government did not fulfil the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA's) minimum conditions to reduce the problem. Still, it is making significant efforts compared to previous years.^{lxxix} Human trafficking has been criminalised since 2003.^{lxxx} The main measure taken was the increase of investment in the Centre for Protection of Trafficking Victims (CPTV), attending witness safety with different awareness-raising projects.^{lxxxi} Nevertheless, efforts were not proactive enough and presented weaknesses in several aspects, like identification, particularly the detection of migratory flows and persons in the sex trade.

Victims of human traffickers were domestic and foreign, mainly from Albania, Cameroon, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Mali, Nigeria, North Macedonia, and Pakistan.^{lxxxii} Conversely, Serbian women are subjected to sexual work in nearby countries and Austria, Germany, Italy, and Turkey.^{lxxxiii} Male immigrants are mainly employed as forced labour in the construction industry in European countries and the United Arab Emirates.^{lxxxiv} About children, particularly from the Roma population, are subjected to sex trafficking, forced labour, forced begging and petty crimes in Serbia. This situation also affects migrants and refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia who are transiting through or left stranded in Serbia.

Likewise, the penalties range from two to 12 years of imprisonment for offences involving an adult victim and three to 12 for those involving a child victim.^{lxxxv} However, despite the application of the law to criminalise sex and labour trafficking, no information was collected on the length of sentences.

In recent years, Serbia has focused on training both police and state agencies domestically, in collaboration with international organisations, to promote and coordinate spaces for proactive monitoring of the problem. Separate working specialised groups on trafficking and smuggling are operating with different technological and investigative tools. This way, the government assisted 158 trafficking-related cases through INTERPOL and 233 cases through EUROPOL.^{lxxxvi}

VI. National Legal Framework

The Law on Migration Management ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 107/12) and The General Administrative Procedure Act (2016) define different forms of migration, their regulation, and the migration policy implementation.^{lxxxvii}

The Law on Foreigners ("Official Gazette of RS", nos. 24/18 and 31/19) sets forth the conditions for entry, movement, stay and return of foreigners, same as the competence and tasks of public administration authorities of the Republic of Serbia regarding these issues.^{lxxxviii}

The Law on Employment of Foreigners ("Official Gazette of RS", nos. 128/14, 113/17, 50/18 and 31/19), which regulates conditions and procedures for the employment of foreigners in the Republic of Serbia. Foreigners shall enjoy equal rights and responsibilities concerning labour, employment and self-employment as their nationals, provided that the conditions have been met by the law.^{lxxxix}

The Law on Border Control ("Official Gazette of RS", nos. 24/18) regulates border control, police powers in exercising border control, and cooperation among public administration authorities in charge of integrated border management.^{xc}

The Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 24/18). Serbia recognises the need for international protection through the status of "subsidiary protection" and "refugee" once the Asylum Office has made the first decisions.^{xcⁱ} Subsidiary protection status is valid for one extendable year, and refugee status is indefinite.^{xcⁱⁱ}

Article 338 of the Criminal Code criminalized human trafficking since 2005, and its amendments in 2009 reinforce it.^{xcⁱⁱⁱ}

Finally, the following strategic documents address migration governance: The Economic Migration Strategy 2021-2022 (enacted in 2018); The National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons for the period 2015- 2020 (“Official Gazette of RS”, no. 62/15); and the Strategy of Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Human Beings, especially Women and Children and Protection of Victims 2017-2022 (“Official Gazette of RS”, no. 77/17).^{xciv}

VII. Main Actors

The State

Since their arrival at the Serbian borders, foreigners interact with diverse state entities. The Border Police Directorate (Ministry of the Interior) oversees the provision of border surveillance and security to airports and waterways. It also manages immigration checkpoints and fights cross-border crime and human trafficking.^{xcv} In addition, through the Asylum Office, it is in charge of managing the arrival of applicants for international protection.^{xcvi} For its part, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs oversees international cooperation, European integration, and participation regarding mixed migration flows.^{xcvii} It is also responsible for monitoring and managing economic migration and for supporting the Coordinating Body for Monitoring Economic Migration Flows and the Republic Council for Employment.^{xcviii}

Furthermore, The Ministry of Family, Welfare, and Demography stipulates demographic public policies on family planning and development and organises internal migration and international cooperation (besides the Ministry of Labour).^{xcix} The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration collects and analyses relevant data for migration management. It also establishes a system for collecting, organising, and distributing such data, weighs priority objectives for migration policy, undertakes measures for its implementation, and coordinates the state bodies that work on migration issues.^c Finally, the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue protects and promotes HR and aims to establish ties between minorities and their countries of origin. It also designs anti-discrimination policies and collaborates with analytical and normative work on employment and economic migration.^{ci}

International organisations

Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, expanded its operations outside the EU, launching a new activity in Serbia in 2021. Along with Albania and Montenegro, Serbia hosts a fully-fledged Frontex operation with 44 standing officers policing people smuggling, human trafficking, drugs, vehicles, and weapon trafficking.^{cii} Moreover, the IOM established a mission in Serbia in 1992, and in 2001 the country became an official member.^{ciii} IOM activities in the country have increased and include post-emergency humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support, anti-trafficking training, support in voluntary return and solutions for IDPs and refugees, as well as capacity building in labour migration and development.^{civ} The Ministry of the Interior and the Commissariat for Refugees collaborate with the IOM, providing regulatory and management innovations, respecting European standards, and using Serbian legislation to transform migration into a force for the economic and social development of the country.^{cv}

For its part, the regional representation of UNHCR (South-Eastern Europe) has had a small presence in Belgrade since 1976 and has covered Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia since the early 1990s. It coordinates the work of the Office for the Western Balkans.^{cvi} In 1991 the UNHCR began its most significant and most complex operation, deploying a plan to protect some 3.5 million people in the region.^{cvi} The agency offers solutions to protracted conflicts and their forced displacement, improves the capacity of the region's asylum systems, and delivers essential documents to people at risk of statelessness.^{cvi}

Lastly, UNICEF works with the early development, protection, and rights monitoring of children in Serbia.^{cix}

NGOs and Other organisations

Working in the north-western Balkans, Save the Children focuses on the most vulnerable children who are at risk of exploitation, rape, and trafficking.^{cx} SC supports governments in establishing mechanisms to prosecute cases of abuse and exploitation^{cx} and cares for refugee children by providing them with education, protection, emotional support, and safe spaces.^{cxii}

Refugee Aid Serbia helps refugees and displaced people.^{cxiii} It works in the project The Support for Local Response to Refugee Crisis in the municipalities of Lajkovac, Tutin, Sjenica, Sid, Subotica, Dimitrovgrad, Presevo, and Miksaliste. It provides psychological assistance, language training and job placement workshops.^{cxiv}

The Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance work focuses on the refugee population, providing them with legal assistance, access to Serbia's legal procedures, and food.^{cxv}

The work of the Belgrade Human Rights Centre focuses on assisting asylum seekers, providing them with legal assistance and regularly monitoring the centres where they are accommodated to monitor the degree of respect for the human rights of asylum seekers.^{cxvi}

The International Rescue Committee provides refugees with information on shelter options and asylum, psychological support, food, and climate-appropriate clothing. It currently focuses on working with unaccompanied and separated children in Serbia.^{cxvii}

Finally, Red Cross Serbia, organised in two provincial bodies (Vojvodina and Kosovo, and Metohija) and 183 organisations in towns and municipalities, implement activities in more than 60 programs offering help through 800 employees and 60,000 volunteers in the country.^{cxviii}

The Catholic Church

Caritas in Serbia assists and supports people exiled from their homes and the large number of refugees resulting from the civil war in the Balkan region,^{cxix} and has been involved in economic revival through the local purchase of materials to generate new employment opportunities. Caritas Serbia's social programmes have targeted refugees and internally displaced persons from Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and the local population with social needs.

Since 2015, Caritas launched a project to help refugees from the Middle East who pass through Serbia on their way to EU countries.^{cxx} They provide them with hot meals, hygiene, and psychosocial assistance.^{cxxi} Furthermore, it has developed many innovative activities to improve the daily lives of refugees, including laundry services for refugees residing in the reception centres in Krnjaca and Presevo.^{cxxii} The Reception centre in Bujanovac organises English classes for refugees and migrants.^{cxxiii} In the asylum centre in Krnjača, Caritas organises English classes and animation activities for children and adults.^{cxxiv}

Jesuit Refugee Service promotes, through its Integration Housing Programme, protection projects for displaced people and unaccompanied children who are victims of violence, exploitation, smuggling and potential victims of human trafficking and criminal abuse.^{cxxv} In addition, it works directly with the Serbian government and NGOs to promote proper integration into the services of the Protection System, creating a meaningful pathway to effective advocacy and assistance.^{cxxvi}

Likewise, the Order of Malta's activities in Serbia is focused on providing hot meals and donating food, clothing and necessities to needy families and institutions for the poor. They have also offered numerous ambulances and modern medical equipment to public and private hospitals.

The two main projects the Order's Embassy in Serbia is working on are "A hot meal in a cold winter", which supports the "Children's Shelter", where many minors, often victims of human trafficking, find refuge.^{cxxvii} The second project is "Make a wish to the Order of Malta", a fundraising initiative enabling children with serious illnesses to receive delicate and costly surgeries.^{cxxviii}

Following the pandemic crisis caused by Covid-19, the Order of Malta in Serbia has intensified activities such as donating lung ventilators, reusable masks, disinfectants, disposable gloves, and other personal protective equipment to hospitals.^{cxxix}

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