

Migration Transition and Migration Governance in Serbia: Beyond Demographic Determinism

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Population decline, ageing and labour-force contraction have placed migration at the centre of public-policy debates in Serbia. Yet migration is still too often discussed through a narrow demographic lens: either as a threat that should be contained, or as an instrument for compensating for low fertility, population decline and labour shortages. Both views are misleading. Migration is not a demographic tap that governments can simply open or close. It is embedded in labour markets, development trajectories, education systems, inequalities and global economic relations. The main argument of this contribution is therefore simple: effective migration governance cannot be designed on the basis of demographic determinism.

The discussion is conceptual. It draws on migration-transition theory, the aspirations-capabilities approach and the literature on migration-policy failure, placing Serbia in a broader comparative perspective. Three widespread assumptions are reconsidered: that international migration has reached unprecedented levels; that poverty and demographic pressure automatically generate emigration; and that immigration can “solve” population ageing.

The first misconception concerns why people migrate. The push-pull narrative suggests that people leave poor, rapidly growing societies and move towards richer countries with labour shortages. Reality is more complex. International migration requires resources, information, education, networks and realistic opportunities. The poorest are often the least capable of moving internationally. As countries develop, migration can initially increase because people acquire both stronger aspirations and greater capabilities to move. This is why middle-income societies are frequently characterised by high emigration, while further development may gradually reduce emigration and increase immigration ([de Haas, 2010, 2021](#)). Serbia and the wider Western Balkans fit this pattern better than the push-pull model. Population decline has not prevented high emigration, while labour shortages have begun to generate immigration. The relevant question is therefore not whether Serbia is an emigration or an immigration country, but how rapidly it is moving towards a migration regime in which both processes coexist ([Reljanović, 2023](#)).

A second misconception is that migration can be treated as a demographic substitute for fertility. Immigration can slow population decline and alleviate labour shortages, but it cannot preserve the previous age structure. The United Nations replacement-migration exercise made this distinction clear. For Germany, the estimated annual net migration required to maintain population size over 1995–2050 was about 324,000, while keeping the 1995 potential support ratio would have required roughly 3.4 million migrants per year ([United Nations, 2001](#)). The latter is not a realistic policy scenario but an illustration of the arithmetic of ageing. Migrants age as well. Immigration should therefore be regarded as one component of adaptation to population ageing, rather than as a mechanism capable of offsetting it, particularly in the case of Serbia ([Nikitović et al., 2024](#)).

A third misconception is the idea of an unprecedented ‘migration explosion’. The share of international migrants in the world population remains relatively modest; the more important transformation concerns the geography and diversification of flows ([Czaika & de Haas, 2014](#)). New destinations have emerged and former emigration countries have become immigration countries.

Serbia is part of this transformation. The country is likely to experience growing demand for foreign labour in care, construction, transport, hospitality, agriculture and other labour-intensive sectors ([Reljanović et al., 2024](#); [Božić & Raković, 2025](#)). This creates an obvious contradiction: societies may be politically uncomfortable with immigration while their economies increasingly depend on it.

The contradiction is particularly visible in attitudes towards lower-skilled migration. Highly qualified migrants are usually welcomed, whereas lower-skilled workers are often portrayed as undesirable. Yet precisely the occupations with lower pay, difficult working conditions and low social status often face the most severe labour shortages. Domestic workers are reluctant to accept such jobs, employers recruit abroad, and governments simultaneously attempt to demonstrate that migration is under control. The result is often a gap between political rhetoric and economic practice.

This brings us to the central problem of migration governance. Castles ([2004](#)) argued that migration policies frequently fail because governments try to regulate processes generated by wider social dynamics and conflicting interests. De Haas ([2023](#)) describes a related migration trilemma: governments seek political control over migration, economies demand migrant labour, and liberal democracies are expected to protect migrants' rights. These goals cannot always be fully achieved simultaneously. Restrictive rhetoric may therefore coexist with labour recruitment, temporary migration schemes and tolerance of irregular practices that satisfy labour demand while placing migrants in a weaker position. Temporary migration is illustrative: what is presented as temporary often becomes permanent because labour demand and human lives do not follow administrative categories.

For Serbia, this tension is already becoming visible. Recruitment of foreign workers is increasingly mediated through private agencies, while the state risks reacting to labour-market demand rather than strategically governing it. If migration policy is effectively outsourced to employers and intermediaries, the formal appearance of control can coexist with a real loss of regulatory capacity. Migration policy therefore cannot be separated from labour policy.

The policy implications are broader than migration policy in the narrow sense. First, Serbia should accept that it is entering a migration transition and develop institutions appropriate to a country that will simultaneously experience emigration, return migration and immigration. Second, immigration should complement, not substitute for policies aimed at increasing labour-force participation, facilitating earlier labour-market entry of young people, extending working lives in accordance with improvements in health and longevity, raising productivity and improving working conditions. Third, the state should regulate recruitment more effectively, monitor private employment intermediaries and guarantee that migrant workers enjoy labour and social rights comparable to those of domestic workers.

This last point is particularly important. The treatment of migrants ultimately reflects the treatment of workers in general. If socially necessary occupations are poorly paid, insecure and deprived of dignity, migrant labour will simply be used to fill positions that domestic workers refuse under existing conditions. That may solve an immediate labour shortage, but not the underlying problem. Conversely, if wages, security, working conditions and social status improve, such jobs become more attractive to both domestic and foreign workers ([de Haas, 2023](#)). In that sense, one of the most effective migration policies may begin outside migration policy itself.

The same applies to the wider demographic debate. Fertility, mortality, ageing and migration are routinely discussed as separate policy domains, although they are interconnected through labour markets, welfare institutions, family strategies and economic development. Migration should therefore not be asked to 'solve' Serbia's demographic decline. A more realistic objective is to govern mobility in a way that is consistent with economic realities, protects the rights of all workers and supports social cohesion. The central choice is not between migration and no migration, but between managing the transition with adequate institutions and allowing labour-market pressures, political rhetoric and private interests to shape it by default.

Data availability statement

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