



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Serbia social briefing:**  
**Serbia as an aging and empty land**  
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# Serbia as an aging and empty land

## Abstract

*This article gives an insight into deeply worrying demographic situation in Serbia and its impact on economic and social conditions. Although the seriousness of this topic exceeds the scope of given overview, both the key reason is explained as well the recommendation of the first steps needed for improving the situation indicated.*

## Discouraging statistics

As in the rest of Europe, the population in Serbia is also declining and aging. According to the Serbian Bureau of Statistics, the estimated population in the Republic of Serbia at the end of 2020 was 6,899,126. The trend of depopulation has continued, which means that the population growth rate, compared to the previous year, is negative and amounts to -6.7%.<sup>1</sup> The psychological threshold of seven million inhabitants has been broken and now, even to the general public, is clear that the demographic situation in the country is very serious. Moreover, from 2011 to 2020, the number of inhabitants in the Republic of Serbia decreased on the basis of birth rate/ number of deaths sum (natural population growth) for 384 858 people. In 2020 alone it decreased for 55,158 inhabitants (the number is increasing every year in the given period). At the national level, natural population growth is -8%. The situation is particularly worrying in the three southern statistical regions, which are even worse than the national average. In fact, the only three municipalities with positive natural population growth are Preševo 1.4%, Novi Pazar 4.4% and Tutin 7.0%.<sup>2</sup> These are Muslim-majority municipalities whose population mostly identifies as Bosniak and has the status of a national minority.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, in Serbian municipalities in occupied Kosovo and Metohija, the natural population growth among the Serb population is positive.<sup>4</sup>

There are no signs of reversing the negative trend. In 2020, 23,599 marriages were made in the Republic of Serbia, which is a decrease of 33.6% compared to the previous year. One

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<sup>1</sup> Serbian Bureau of Statistics: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/vesti/20210701-procenjen-broj-stanovnika-2020/?s=1801>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/Pdf/G20211180.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Given to the fact that the total number of Muslims in Serbia is not so big, it is around 2 %, it is not very likely that Muslims will become majority of Serbia's population no matter to their relatively high natural growth rate.

<sup>4</sup> We have to take this data with a grain of salt because it is not official data but newspaper reports, but in any case the situation with the birth rate is better than in the rest of Serbia.

should have in mind that such a decline was caused by the COVID 19 pandemic because people have been delaying weddings in order to organize big wedding celebrations when the pandemic ends (big wedding celebrations are an important part of Serbian culture). However, the average number of marriages in Serbia in the period from 2011 to 2019 is between 35 and 36 thousand yearly, which is not enough for the natural reproduction of the population.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, according to the data of the Worldmeters website the fertility rate in Serbia is 1.46, which is far from necessary for sustainable population growth.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of migration is also problematic both on the issue of internal and external migration. Internally, the Belgrade region and the Region of Northern Serbia (Vojvodina) had a positive migration balance, while the region of Šumadija, Western Serbia, Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia had a negative migration balance in 2020. The average age of people who changed their place of residence is 34.7 years.<sup>7</sup> These data indicate that the population of Serbia is geographically contracting by moving to larger centers due to job search, better education, or better medical services and accessibility. This data is also confirmed by the Worldmeters website, which shows that the share of the urban population in Serbia is increasing by approximately 0.2% annually.

Of course, a much bigger problem is external migration, meaning the emigration of the population. It is difficult to determine the exact number of people who left Serbia because the most of them do not change their place of residence, although they do not effectively live in Serbia. Thanks to flexible visa regimes, many of them work short-term jobs and return to Serbia periodically. Rough estimates say that about 500,000 people left Serbia from 2008-2019<sup>8</sup> or about 50,000 people a year on average<sup>9</sup>. Their destinations mainly are: Germany and Scandinavia – for work in the medical, transportation sector and the “handyman” sector; Russia and post-Soviet countries for construction workers; China for ESL teaching (although these jobs are usually done remotely).

Within the emigration, specific group of people represent young and well-educated people traveling around the world in search of a better education. In that respect, many students use *Erasmus programs* to visit Western Europe and *Work and travel* to visit the USA.

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<sup>5</sup> Serbian Bureau of Statistics: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/stanovnistvo/zakljuceni-i-razvedeni-brakovi/>

<sup>6</sup> Worldmeters: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/serbia-population/>

<sup>7</sup> Serbian Bureau of Statistics: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/Pdf/G20211189.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Danas daily newspaper: <https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/za-11-godina-iz-srbije-se-odselilo-500-000-ljudi/>

<sup>9</sup> RTS: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3679307/srbiju-lane- napustilo-50000-ljudi-sta-stvarno-stoji-iza-tih-brojki.html>

However, it should be emphasized that the negative migration balance decreased during the pandemic because people believed that they would be best at home during the crisis, but travel restrictions also had its impact.

### **Economic consequences**

Labor market data are very important in the political and economic life of Serbia. According to the latest data for the second quarter of the current year, unemployment rate is 11.1%. But, there is certain paradox – at the same time, Serbia is suffering from high unemployment and labor shortages. There is a noticeable lack of all low-skilled workers and drivers who went abroad to work for higher wages. The same stands for certain branches of healthcare. The main reason lies in the fact that due to the poor wage/price ratio, a certain part of the labor force does not accept the mentioned low-skilled jobs.<sup>10</sup>

This creates bottlenecks for the economy. For that reason, some entrepreneurs and the Government of Serbia are actively seeking to import the labor force. Workers from Ukraine and Azerbaijan are increasingly doing manual work in agriculture. Construction workers come from Turkey or even Iran, while more and more Kazakhs and Uzbeks are doing courier and food delivery work. The exact number of foreign workers in Serbia is unknown as they often work illegally. To tell the truth, the government is working to improve work permit issuing capacities.

To solve these problems and encourage labor migration, the Serbian government, together with North Macedonia and Albania as their counterparts, has launched the Open Balkans project. This will allow an influx of workers into Serbia who are willing to accept lower wages. It is assumed that workers from neighboring countries will still fit in easier than workers from distant countries.

### **Social impact**

The usual explanation for the bad demographic situation in Serbia are economic reasons. Still, there are many countries much poorer and less stable than Serbia: African countries, the Philippines, etc. that have positive demographic trends. It is the most likely that the crux of the

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<sup>10</sup> The average net salary, it is just over 500 Euros while the price of the average market basket is 650 Euros. <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/trziste-rada/>

Serbian demographic problem lies in the cultural shock that shook society during and after the transition to neoliberalism. Families and youth have lost the traditional support mechanisms that existed in the socialist system. On the other hand, they have accepted the consumer ideology of the West. The availability of information and the ease of travel have made it easier for young people to decide to leave the country. At the same time, given disfunctionality of the home political and economic system discourages them to return.

There are many stakeholders in Serbian society run campaigns that encourage the emigration of the youth. For instance, certain private university ran an advertising campaign with billboards that said „graduate and run away from here”. After a couple of weeks and a public outrage the campaign was canceled. Many media outlets are also subtly campaigning to encourage the emigration of young people. This is done in a very sophisticated way: the media tendentiously disseminate news about bad social phenomena in Serbia and transmit positive experiences of people who have emigrated. In that way, they suggest that everything will be better if only one leaves Serbia.

However, the most dangerous phenomenon is the creation of the so-called “clubman/woman identity”. IDJ Music Company created a new music genre, a version of Trap music which in its lyrics endorses egoistic, selfish, and hedonistic lifestyle, by promoting promiscuous and depraved behavior. At the same time, they ridicule values such as marriage and child-raising. This company is owned by an extremely pro-Western United Media group.

As a final result, the youth in Serbia is divided. Some really want to leave and never come back. Others want to leave to make money and return to Serbia, while the rest want to stay at all costs. The second and third of these groups have a negative attitude towards migration (even if some of them are migrants themselves) and are afraid of “population replacement” in Serbia. They have a negative view towards the influx of migrants to Serbia, especially those from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other countries that may be associated with extreme Islamism.

In order to reverse the negative population flows, the state must provide these patriotic-minded youth with the conditions to stay or return. The key conditions for this are affordable housing and the opportunity of employment regardless of membership in a (ruling) political party.

## **Conclusion**

The demographic situation in Serbia is devastating with no visible signs of improvement in the near future. One of the prevailing reasons for this situation are the culture shock (caused by the neoliberal transition) and the difficult economic situation of ordinary people in Serbia. Youth is leaving the country due to poor wage/price ratios, inaccessible housing, dysfunctional economic and political system, as well as propaganda advocating for emigration. To reverse the trend, the government must provide conditions for staying and returning, which are primarily affordable housing and easier access to better-paid jobs.