POLICY PROPOSALS TO INCREASE LABOUR MOBILITY BETWEEN SERBIA AND THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES











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I CONTEXT

1. Strategic and Legislative Framework for Engaging Foreigners in Serbia

Considering the depopulation in Serbia, the ageing population, and the emigration of Serbian citizens to European Union (EU) countries, Serbia is already facing a crisis of labour shortages in certain sectors, a situation expected to deepen in the coming decades. It is estimated that, within the next decade, the Serbian labour market will lack between 80,000 and 100,000 workers. The Strategy on Economic Migrations states that Serbia is experiencing a shortage of qualified labour force in numerous sectors, negatively impacting productivity and further economic growth. This includes areas such as engineering, information technology, healthcare, and similar. Consequently, decision-makers have initiated policies to attract foreign investments and foreign workers to fill vacant positions.

Serbia only began strategically addressing economic migrations in 2021 by adopting the Economic Migration Strategy 2021–2027, which serves as a model of good practice in the Western Balkans. While all countries in the Western Balkans manage migrations, only Serbia strategically addresses economic migrations, anticipating measures and activities that facilitate the integration of foreigners into the local labour market to contribute to the economic growth of the domestic economy. The overarching goal of the Strategy is to create an economic and social environment that slows the emigration of the working-age population while strengthening ties with the diaspora, encouraging return and circular migrations, and attracting foreigners with diverse educational backgrounds. In this way, migration is recognised through strategic documents as a potential positive phenomenon that can be harnessed for economic development. Under Specific Objective 2: Improving Living and Working Conditions in the Economic and Social Sector, Measure 5 states that: Development of Programmes for Attracting and Integrating Foreigners with Various Educational Profiles into the Labour Market is envisaged, which includes various incentives for foreigners to work and start businesses in Serbia.

According to the Law on Foreigners and the Law on Employment of Foreigners, the employment of foreigners is contingent upon the foreigner: a) possessing a long-stay visa for employment purposes for those countries subject to visa requirements,

b) holding a temporary or permanent residency permit in Serbia, and
c) having a work permit in Serbia with stipulated exceptions. Article 18 of the
Law on Foreigners regulates three types of visas: a) airport transit visa (Visa
A), b) short-stay visa (Visa C), and c) long-stay visa (Visa D). Only the
long-stay visa, according to Article 22, grants the right to employment in
Serbia¹. If the basis for issuing the visa is employment, since 2020, obtaining
this visa automatically entails receiving a residence and work permit in the
Republic of Serbia.

¹ Except in exceptional cases where a short-stay visa may provide this.





² For more information, see the Law on Employment of Foreigners, Article 3. Other grounds for obtaining temporary residence may include, among other things, family reunification, property ownership, humanitarian residence, studying, engaging in work for copyright purposes, etc. However, if the visa is issued for another reason, the employer must also submit a request for a work permit to the National Employment Service, allowing for the parallel processing of the visa and work permit applications. If a foreigner does not require a visa to enter Serbia, they must apply for a so-called unified permit before commencing work, which will be discussed further in this analysis. If the foreigner has already received approval for temporary or permanent residency in Serbia on another basis², they acquire the right to work without the issuance of a unified permit. Additionally, the Law on Employment of Foreigners stipulates that citizens of the EU, as well as family members of EU citizens, have the right to free access to the labour market in Serbia without work permits, provided they do not become an unreasonable burden on the social welfare system and ensure sufficient means for their own and their family's subsistence.

Significant improvements in the process of granting work permits for foreigners in Serbia have come with the introduction of the so-called unified permit for residence and work, which began to be implemented in February 2024. Until this point, the approval for temporary residence in Serbia and the work permit were two separate administrative procedures, involving two different authorities: the Ministry of Internal Affairs for temporary residence and the National Employment Service for the work permit. This meant that each authority had distinct timelines for issuing permits, leading to longer waiting times for case resolution. From February 2024, amendments to the Law on Foreigners have introduced a procedure for issuing the unified permit that consolidates these permits. The application for the unified permit is submitted electronically by the employer on behalf of the foreigner (the prospective employee) through the Unified Foreigners Portal³. The competent authority for decision-making is the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with the obligation to involve the National Employment Service, while the total timeframe for issuance is only 15 days. To simplify the process of engaging foreigners, the Foreigners Portal and the e-Foreigner service have been developed, fully digitising the application process for visas, unified permits, or the registration of foreign residency.

While digitalisation allows for more flexible engagement of foreigners, control mechanisms to protect the domestic market have been introduced. Specifically, for an employer to hire or engage a foreigner, they must conduct a labour market test. This involves obtaining consent from the National Employment Service to confirm that there are no candidates in domestic records who meet the criteria for the specific job. Article 16a of the Law on Employment of Foreigners regulates the labour market test conducted by the National Employment Service at the request of the employer. This test is an integral part of the application for the unified permit and is submitted electronically via the e-Foreigner portal. Furthermore, if the employer has submitted a request to engage a foreigner, they are prohibited from dismissing domestic employees within 90 days of the application due to technological, economic, or organisational changes in the positions where the foreigner is sought.



³ At the link https://welcometoserbia.gov.rs/

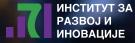




Seasonal workers, particularly in agriculture, have been afforded simplified engagement without the issuance of a work permit. The Law on Employment of Foreigners stipulates in Article 17 that for seasonal work, a foreigner must meet the following conditions: a) they must have regulated residency, b) they must have a signed employment contract with the employer, and c) the employer must specify the arrangements for accommodation and meals. Additionally, the Law on Seasonal Employment in Certain Activities (which more closely regulates the engagement of seasonal workers in agriculture) states in Article 3 that foreign nationals working in seasonal agricultural jobs during their stay in the Republic of Serbia are not subject to special conditions for the employment of foreigners. In practice, this means that employers can engage seasonal foreign workers in agriculture through the electronic Seasonal Workers Portal⁴, provided these foreigners have registered residency in Serbia, or have been issued a unique foreign registration number.

⁴ At the link https://www.sezonskiradnici.gov.rs/









2. Trends in Labour Migration from Serbia

⁵ Multilayered Nature of Depopulation in Serbia – New Trends and Prospects, 2022, V. Nikitović, Human Development Report, UNDP

⁶ Book of the Census, Census 2011 – Serbia in the Process

of External Migrations, 2014, V. Stanković, Republic

Statistical Office

Serbia is traditionally a country of emigration⁵. In a ranking of 50 countries with the highest emigration rates, Serbia is placed 31st.⁶ Although precise data on the number of residents leaving Serbia annually do not exist, attempts to estimate this number can be found in numerous papers, where it is stated that the number of emigrants ranges from 15,000 to 60,000. Based on the 2022 Census, the Republic Statistical Office has published an official estimate indicating that between 25,000 and 27,000 people have net emigrated from Serbia each year from 2011 to 2022.

Eurostat data indicate that at the end of 2018, the number of individuals from the Republic of Serbia with residence permits in various EU countries totalled 491,199. This figure represented a decrease of 1.6% compared to 2008. In 2018 alone, 52,049 individuals from the Republic of Serbia obtained a residence permit for the first time in the EU (new residents), nearly 12,000 more than in 2017. The most common reason for Serbian citizens residing abroad is work, with over 166,000 individuals migrating for this reason, and they typically stay abroad for an average of 12 years.





The most popular destinations for Serbian emigrants working abroad are Austria (22.5%) and Germany (17.9%), although there is a trend of decreasing shares in these countries. The first generation of external migrants predominantly moved to Germany, where nearly half (46%) of all migrants were employed. A decade later, a significant decrease in migration to Germany was recorded, while simultaneously, the shares of migrants to Switzerland and other European countries increased, with 18.8% of Serbian migrants working in these countries in 2011. During all censuses, the shares of migrants to non-European countries were at relatively stable levels without large fluctuations. During the 1990s, significant changes were recorded only in migration to "unknown" countries, primarily due to the impact of the beginning of the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed.

A significant portion of Serbia's external migrants historically migrated to the countries of the Western Balkans, particularly the former countries of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The 2011 Census recorded nearly 20,000 Serbian citizens working in one of the Western Balkan countries, without detailing the structure of these migrants. However, it does provide an overview of which regions of Serbia are most frequently involved in migration to the countries of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Migrants from the Southern and Eastern Serbia regions constitute the majority of migrants to Italy, Austria, and North Macedonia.

Migrants from the Šumadija and Western Serbia regions make up the majority of those moving to Switzerland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Vojvodina region is oriented towards Hungary and Croatia, while migrants from the Belgrade region typically look beyond the Western Balkans, emigrating to the USA or Canada.

Daily migrations can also serve as a good indicator of the openness of the labour market in the Western Balkans. In the Republic of Serbia, according to the results of the 2022 Census, a total of 795,000 workers migrate daily from their place of residence for work, but only 2,858 of these workers migrate abroad. The population in border areas can take advantage of job opportunities in neighbouring countries. The Open Balkans initiative even allows for such engagement without work permits. However, the small proportion of migrants heading abroad highlights the challenges of working outside the country. Most daily migrants primarily move to other settlements within the same municipality (50%) or the same region (29%). Of the 2,858 daily migrants to foreign countries, 59% are from the Vojvodina region, while 37% are from the Sumadija and Western Serbia regions, primarily due to their proximity to EU countries. In contrast, only 4% of daily migrants are from the Southern and Eastern Serbia regions, indicating that North Macedonia and Bulgaria, as the two closest countries to this region, are not attractive destinations for our workers. Additionally, the majority of these workers are men (approximately 60% across all regions).







3. Trends in Labour Migration to Serbia

Unlike the data on emigration, which is often based on estimates, immigration statistics for Serbia are more precise, primarily due to the obligations that the Republic of Serbia has undertaken in the process of visa liberalisation and the methods used to monitor the immigrant population in Serbia⁷. However, tracking labour migration remains a challenge. As outlined in previous sections of the analysis, depending on their country of origin, foreigners have different conditions for working in the Republic of Serbia: a) they must possess a long-stay visa if they come from visa-requiring countries, b) they must have a temporary or permanent residence permit, c) they must have a work permit unless exempted by regulations, d) they should have approval for free access to the labour market if they come from member countries of the Open Balkans, or e) they can freely access the labour market if they come from EU member states.

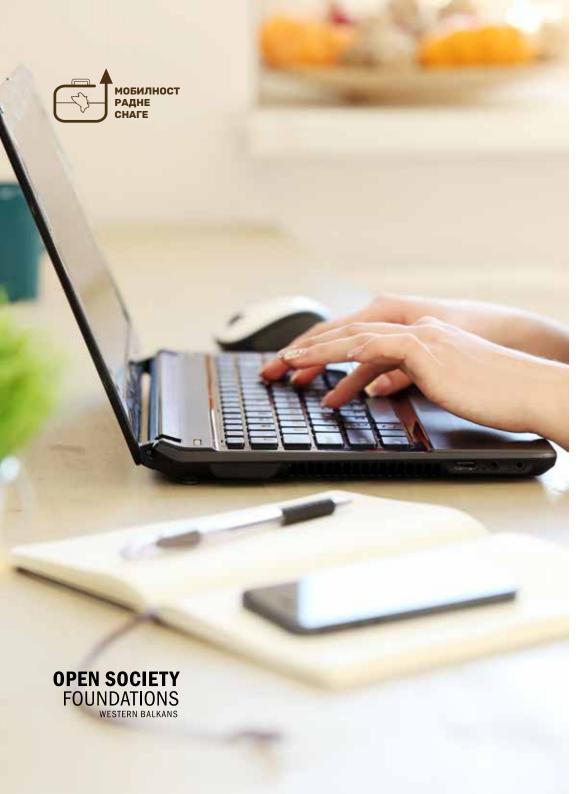
From 2010 to 2023, Serbia issued a total of 178,879 visas, with a record 29,442 issued in 2023. Official data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs show that after a small number of visas were issued in 2020 and 2021 due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the number of visas issued began to rise sharply from 2022 onwards. In 2022, 21,841 visas were issued, while in 2023, this number increased to 29,442. The highest number of visas were granted to citizens of the People's Republic of China (35%), India (13%), and Egypt (6%). There has been a growing trend in the issuance of visas for citizens from these countries in recent years, indicating a likely correlation with labour migration.

In 2023, a total of 81,710 foreigners resided in Serbia, with the majority (56%) due to employment. In certain cases, a temporary residence permit can automatically grant foreigners the right to work in Serbia, while in others, it is issued alongside a work permit. Data from the Ministry of Interior Affairs show that 45,112 temporary residence permits were issued for the first time in 2023, while a total of 81,710 permits were active at the same time. When examining only the permits issued in 2023, the majority were granted to citizens of the Russian Federation (24,068). Notably, 59% of temporary residence permits were issued based on employment, and 30% were granted for family reunification.

In previous years, citizens of Western Balkan countries constituted a very small share of the temporary residence permits issued in Serbia. Specifically, from 2010 until the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, as well as Croatia and Bulgaria, frequently appeared among the top ten countries with the highest number of issued temporary residence permits. Some of these permits (as in the case of North Macedonia) may have been potentially replaced in 2022 or 2023 by permits allowing access to Serbia's free labour market due to the establishment of the Open Balkans initiative. However, the data clearly show that Serbia relies more on labour from "distant" countries than from its neighbouring countries.

⁷ Analysis of Immigration to the Republic of Serbia, 2021, Institute for Development and Innovation







In 2023, the National Employment Service issued a total of 52,178 work permits. Data indicates that the number of issued work permits has been continuously rising, except for 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest number of work permits in 2023 was issued to citizens of the Russian Federation (39%) and the People's Republic of China (20%).

In the first seven months following the introduction of the unified permit, a total of 14,693 unique permits for foreigners were issued. The unified permit, which combines work and residence permits, came into effect on 1 February 2024, and the results of this streamlined process are yet to be fully observed. The largest number of unique permits was granted to citizens of the Russian Federation (46%), followed by the People's Republic of China (18%) and India (9%). Of the total number of unique permits issued, only 243 were granted to citizens of Western Balkan countries, while an additional 174 thought approval for free access to the labour market based on the Open Balkans initiative. In this context, the highest number of unique permits was issued to citizens of North Macedonia (39%), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (31%), Montenegro (31%), and only 9% to Albania.





4. Results of the Consultative Process

The results of the consultative process indicate a significant potential for increasing labour mobility, particularly in the area of seasonal labour in the Western Balkans. In this context, although there are no official statistics, it is observed in practice that residents of Albania are directed towards Montenegro and North Macedonia, residents of North Macedonia towards Serbia, while the population of Serbia tends to head to Montenegro during the tourist season. While Serbia has digitalised and streamlined its procedures for employing workers, especially seasonal workers, this cannot be said for other countries in the Western Balkans. Focus should be placed on Montenegro, where a large number of seasonal workers are directed during the summer season. Additionally, efforts should be made to improve the conditions for seasonal workers. Field experiences suggest that there is a need to build better infrastructure, especially in border areas, which would facilitate easier mobility for workers. Discussions with experts highlighted the needs of workers in border regions for more straightforward border crossing procedures or better-organised transportation (by rail). Furthermore, infrastructural issues were raised, such as the lack of border crossings, which forces workers to travel too far to reach the nearest border crossing, even when potential jobs are "just across the street." There is also a deficiency in road and rail infrastructure that would ease workers' mobility.







RECOMMENDATION 1: INITIATE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF ECONOMIC MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The countries of the Western Balkans should strategically address economic migration, either by adopting a specific strategy or by expanding the scope of existing migration management strategies. Viewing the Western Balkans as a whole, these economies have faced—and continue to face—significant emigration, which, coupled with low fertility rates, negatively impacts the domestic labour supply. On the other hand, in the context of increasing competitiveness in the global labour market, human capital is becoming the region's most important resource. Population migrations can be a source of progress, innovation, and sustainable development, and it is essential to harness these positive effects while managing migration to achieve a "win-win" effect. Currently, only Serbia has a strategy for managing economic migration, implementing various measures and activities aimed at slowing the departure of its working-age population, strengthening ties with the diaspora, encouraging return and circular migration, and attracting foreigners with diverse educational backgrounds. Following this example of good practice, the other countries in the Western Balkans should initiate the management of economic migration through a dedicated strategic document or through

general migration management strategies, to ensure sustainable growth and development in the coming decades.

It is necessary to establish coordination of strategic documents related to economic migration management at the level of Western Balkan countries. With around 17 million inhabitants and only about a third of the population of working age (15 to 65 years), the labour market in the Western Balkans is relatively small compared to most economies in the EU. Therefore, to enhance competitiveness in both the European and global labour markets, institutional cooperation among relevant actors responsible for managing "national" labour markets in the surrounding countries should be established, focusing on the strategic alignment of policies in this domain. The labour markets in this region are too small to compete with each other. It has been demonstrated that investors and migrants view this region as a whole; thus, states should work together to attract them and achieve positive effects on the economies of the entire region. Regional initiatives such as the Open Balkans and the Berlin Process should assist in this endeavour.







RECOMMENDATION 2: SUPPORT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO ENGAGE MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH ECONOMIC MIGRATION

Develop measures to support local governments in better managing and utilising the potential of migrants for local economic development. The analysis indicates that local governments have adopted local migration management plans and established local migration councils. However, these primarily focus on "transit" migrants and do not stipulate any measures and activities for integrating migrants into the local workforce. Additionally, local employment policies do not contain measures that could utilise foreign workers within the migrant population to fill vacant positions in local labour markets. Such measures could range from maintaining better statistics on the skills of the migrant population residing in the local government area to enhancing the capacity of migrants through retraining for jobs in deficient occupations at the local level. Given that numerous analyses have highlighted deficiencies in capacity - both human and financial – at the local level, it is necessary to incorporate measures to support local governments within the Economic Migration Strategy or Employment Strategy. These measures should motivate decision-makers in local governments to introduce initiatives for better management of economic migration and the engagement of foreign workers from the available migrant population.







Establish regional alignment of strategic documents among local governments in the domain of economic migration management. Numerous studies indicate a lack of capacity among local government units, especially considering the significant variation in their sizes. For example, there are currently 174 local government units in Serbia, including 29 cities (including Belgrade) and 145 municipalities, distributed across four statistical regions. If we consider only the local self-governments in central Serbia, there are 144 units, comprising 28 cities and 116 municipalities. According to population criteria, the average local self-government unit in Serbia has around 46,000 residents. However, most units have populations ranging from 10,000 to 50,000. About one-fifth of municipalities (23%) have fewer than 10,000 residents, while only 17% have over 50,000 residents. These differences in capacity can significantly impact the implementation of strategic documents. Moreover, local labour markets do not recognise the administrative boundaries of municipalities, making inter-city migration for work very common. According to the 2022 census, as many as 233,665 workers migrate daily between municipalities within the same area. This suggests that "local" employment policies should be formulated at the district or regional level rather than just at the local government level. Therefore, this analysis recommends that strategic documents in the area of economic migration management should be coordinated and developed at the regional level. This collaboration could take the form of periodic meetings of representatives from local migration councils across all local self-governments in the region, focusing on coordinating measures for the integration and employment of migrants. Cooperation could also be achieved through the formal adoption of a joint action plan for managing migrants or employment.

Table 1. NUMBER OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS BY POPULATION SIZE

	up to 5,000 citizens	5,001–10,000	10,001–20,000	20,001–50,000	50,001-100,000	100,000+ citizens	TOTAL
NUMBER OF MUNICIPALITY	2	25	47	41	1	0	116
NUMBER OF CITIES	0	0	0	6	9	13 (City of Belgrade 1+ milion)	28
NUMBER OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS	2	25	47	47	10	13	114

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, estimates of the population by municipality, excluding local self-governments in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija







RECOMMENDATION 3: SIMPLIFY THE PROCEDURES FOR ENGAGING SEASONAL WORKERS IN CERTAIN WB COUNTRIES

It is needed first to conduct a detailed analysis of mapping seasonal workers and the characteristics of seasonal employment for each country in the Western Balkans and then to simplify the procedures for engaging those seasonal workers who will have the greatest impact on regional welfare. According to the International Labour Organization, seasonal work is a type of temporary employment linked to specific periods of the year or sectors experiencing a significant increase in workload. Different sectors may exhibit seasonal characteristics in various economies, predominantly in agriculture or tourism. What characterises most seasonal workers is that they are low-skilled, and often include migrants from less developed countries. In the Western Balkans, agriculture and tourism are the two sectors most frequently highlighted for seasonal workforce engagement. While all countries have demands for workers during specific seasons, Montenegro stands out for its needs in the tourism sector, whereas Serbia is notable for its agricultural sector requirements.

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In recent years, Serbia has adopted a Law on Simplified Employment in Certain Activities, significantly streamlining the engagement procedures for seasonal workers in agriculture, whether domestic or foreign. The characteristics of seasonal worker engagement in this sector involve farmers facing demands for a large number of workers over periods ranging from several days to a few weeks. Data shows that farmers, on average, hire between 50 and 100 workers during peak seasons. Consequently, it has become necessary to develop a daily system for worker engagement, especially considering that the work of these individuals largely depends on climatic conditions on specific days. On the other hand, in sectors like tourism, the characteristics of seasonal worker engagement may not be identical to those in agriculture. Workers are engaged for periods spanning several months rather than just a few days, raising questions about whether a similar system can be applied across all sectors or job types within sectors.



Therefore, it is necessary to first carry out a detailed analysis of seasonal work in each country in the Western Balkans. This analysis should: a) map sectors with predominantly seasonal characteristics in a given country; b) describe the characteristics of seasonal worker engagement in these sectors; c) identify the structure of seasonal workers in terms of their country of origin, aiming to map those sectors/countries where the majority of workers come from the Western Balkans region. Based on this analysis, concrete recommendations should be developed to simplify procedures in those countries and sectors where it is assessed that the effects on the overall development of the Western Balkans region will be significant. Previous analyses indicate that simplified procedures for engaging seasonal workers in tourism in Montenegro, as well as in agriculture in North Macedonia or Albania, could have positive effects on the entire region.







RECOMMENDATION 4: ESTABLISH REGIONAL COORDINATION FOR SEASONAL WORKER ENGAGEMENT POLICIES AND INTRODUCE A "REGIONAL SEASONAL WORKER" DATABASE

Considering that the regional seasonal workforce in the Western Balkans is almost invisible to the governments of these countries, the primary recommendation is to establish a database of regional seasonal workers. This database would serve as a source of data for further, more detailed analyses and the development of specific measures aimed at these workers. There are known examples of "permanent seasonal workers" who move around the region from country to country, taking on various seasonal jobs in an attempt to "fill up" their household budgets. These workers are often employed in the grey economy, which does not provide them with the rights guaranteed to employees in terms of social, health, and pension insurance. Therefore, this analysis recommends first establishing a regional database of seasonal workers that will provide governments in the region with sufficient data to analyse the structure, characteristics, and needs of these workers. This aims to develop specific measures that also enhance the rights of these workers. Decision-makers at the regional level need to be involved in the creation of this analysis and the implementation of policies, as piecemeal solutions are likely to lead to suboptimal results.







RECOMMENDATION 5: IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE IN BORDER AREAS TO ENHANCE WORKER MOBILITY

It is necessary to ensure better connectivity between border places, which involves greater investment in road and railway infrastructure, the establishment of more "specialised" border crossings for daily migrants in border regions, and the introduction of regular transport services. The results of the consultative process have shown that residents in border areas often have to travel several dozen kilometres to the nearest border crossing, even when potential jobs are located just "across the border." This is likely one of the reasons why very few people from border areas choose to commute daily to work in neighbouring countries. The 2022 census indicates that only 2,858 residents of Serbia cross the border daily to work in one of the neighbouring countries. The largest number of these individuals is located in the Vojvodina Region (59%), followed by the Šumadija and Western Serbia Region (37%), with the fewest daily migrants to neighbouring countries in the Southern and Eastern Serbia Region (4%). Improved connectivity in border areas can primarily be achieved through increased investment in both road and railway infrastructure, as well as the introduction of regular transport services between border locations. An additional suggestion is to establish more border crossings specifically designed for the passage of daily migrants in these regions.

⁸ The Belgrade region has no daily migrants to other countries.





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