

Problems of demographic security in the Balkans

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The wave of censuses conducted at the beginning of this decade in the Balkan countries raised several questions and revealed highly alarming demographic, as well as systemic, trends in a region that has always been of great importance for Europe's security. The census, which in well-regulated systems is a routine bureaucratic procedure necessary for assessing the existing population and organizing state policy, has in these countries become a major political issue. In multi-ethnic states such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, it represents a matter of direct political confrontation and control and is closely linked to conflicts among ethnic communities and their struggle for status and power. In other countries, the problem lies in the introduction of new methodologies through which governments attempt to conceal the massive decline in population numbers, a decline that implies not only a loss of prestige among the population but also a weakening of security due to the lack of people to defend the country. We also employ the concept of demographic security, which refers to the many deserted areas of the Balkan countries that appear to invite the settlement of non-European populations. After analyzing the causes of depopulation – including corruption, emigration to EU countries which have labor shortages, and the acceptance of ideologies and value systems that undermine vitality – we focus on the consequences, such as population aging (the median age in Greece is 46.5), the impossibility of sustainable reproduction, the shortage of people to care for the elderly, and the need for pension system reform. There are also potential geopolitical consequences, including the possibility of settlement by other races and religions, Turkey's expansion into the Balkans, rising crime, and the destabilization of the European hinterland.

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The concept of *demographic security* began to appear in literature several decades ago in connection with processes taking place in the Middle East (Botev, 2024). In the meantime, despite controversy

surrounding it and resistance from the mainstream academic community, it has become increasingly prominent because it accurately captures one of the fundamental problems that every state and community must confront – especially in an era marked by a radical decline in fertility and population aging across much of the so-called developed world, as well as growing inequality in birth rates, which has generated new waves of migration and numerous associated challenges.

The concept of demographic security has thus become an important instrument of contemporary geopolitics and state planning. In a broader sense, it should be situated, alongside geopolitics and the science of general security, within the conceptual and analytical toolkit of the intellectual domain that Michel Foucault labeled biopolitics in the 1970s. He proposed and partially elaborated this concept in a series of lectures concerned with ways of governing and managing populations within specific territories. Using contemporary terminology, he demonstrated how populations are securitized and how states had, in fact, been doing so since the nineteenth century.

Foucault himself introduced the term in *The History of Sexuality*, and, as Adams notes, he never fully or systematically developed it (Adams, 2017, 1). He devoted the greatest attention to the topic in three lecture series delivered between 1975 and 1979 (*Society Must Be Defended*; *Security, Territory, Population*; *The Birth of Biopolitics*). The final series focuses primarily on the renewal of liberal economic thought after World War II, with biopolitics addressed mainly in the opening lectures. A particularly important passage appears in the first lecture, where Foucault states: «I thought I could do a course on biopolitics this year. I will try to show how the central core of all the problems that I am presently trying to identify is what is called population. Consequently, this is the basis on which something like biopolitics could be formed» (Foucault, 2008, 27). This is followed by his well-known reflections on the status of population within the regime of *raison d'état* and on the ways in which liberalism reshapes economic truths and redefines the relationship to population. He concludes by asserting that only through an understanding of the regime of liberalism can one fully grasp what biopolitics is (Ibid).

This rather reductionist and ideologically motivated treatment of biopolitics was later supplemented by other authors from their own perspectives, and it can be argued that the idea of biopolitics and biopower – as a system of population management and the implementation of targeted state, corporate, social, and ideological policies toward populations – has not only gained practical relevance but has also become an indispensable analytical instrument for understanding key processes within states, as well as the relationships among the state, the economy, security, and their underlying social and biological foundations (Rentea, 2017). Adams refers to this as the administration of life and population, whose goal is to maintain, increase, and organize life itself. The instruments include the promotion of reproduction, control over birth and mortality rates, health and longevity policies, and population regulation and control in the broadest sense (Adams, 2017, 2).

Essentially, Foucault was concerned with the transition from state action as sovereign legal authority, externally regulating the framework of subjects' behavior, to a form of governance resembling a cameralist view of the economy¹, in which the state assumes responsibility for the condition of the population: its development, health, reproductive capacities, vaccination, sexual life, ecological conditions, genetic material, and its preservation or enhancement. In short, this marks a shift from sovereign power to disciplinary power, and ultimately to biopower: that is, an examination of how «living bodies are mobilized for political needs and how political strategies relate to living bodies and beings as biological entities» (Wakabayashi).

The apex of radical biopolitics emerged in totalitarian regimes, most notably in Nazi Germany, which systematized a racist form of biopolitics grounded in eugenics and the elimination of so-called superfluous lives, based on ideas that had previously developed in the Anglo-American world within the evolutionary paradigm. Following the collapse of these regimes, biopolitics was largely reintegrated into the more restrained framework of liberalism, with an emphasis on

¹ In contemporary economic theory, this tradition is being revived and advocated by thinkers associated with The Other Canon movement. For more information, see their website (<https://othercanon.org/>) and the work of its founder, Eric Reinert, on Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi (Reinert, 2009).

encouraging individuals to care for themselves in accordance with corporate and state biopolitical norms².

In any case, the status of the population – its size, quality, health, distribution, education, capacities, degree of homogeneity, value base, and motivation for the defense and development of the state – constitutes a fundamental concern of both biopolitics and demographic security.

The central hypothesis of this paper is that, due to inadequate biopolitical governance, corruption, and the neglect of basic biopolitical practices necessary for the survival of a given space, the Balkan countries, through both their own responsibility and that of the European Union, are facing a severe, long-term, and worsening demographic crisis. This crisis, in turn, opens up serious long-term security challenges for both the Balkan states themselves and the countries of the Union. The Balkans thus illustrate the absence of even elementary biopolitical practices aimed at population survival, let alone more advanced approaches concerned with population quality, genetic material, and comprehensive improvement, such as those discussed in works and reflections of colleagues from Ukraine (Zhyvko et al., 2021).

Despite wars, emigration, and internal migration, the Balkans experienced steady demographic growth throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century. The onset of the demographic transition becomes visible in the census of 1971 and 1981 (Čipin et al., 2020, 231, 249, Nikitović, 2016, 28-31³) while in the following decades

² In recent decades, there has been a renewed shift in this field. Modern bioethics and biotechnology have raised numerous questions and prompted the development of new policies and regulations concerning birth and death, including artificial insemination, surrogacy, genetic modification, abortion policies, state recommendations regarding the termination of pregnancies affected by Down syndrome, euthanasia and assisted suicide, and changes in the legal and medical definitions of the moment of death. All these developments significantly challenge the previous discursive, conceptual, and legal frameworks surrounding life and death and constitute one of the most contested areas within Western societies. Many observers fear that these trends represent a return to controversial eugenic practices.

³ Slovenia, Croatia and central Serbia excluding Kosovo had stabilized their population at the level of simple reproduction already around mid-century, only to see these rates fall to 1.7 to 1.9 in the 1960s with the transition to an industrial soci-

population decline, aging, and overall demographic loss emerged as serious challenges. The Albanian population was the last in the region to enter the demographic transition, and it appears that the arrival of KFOR, or the NATO presence in Kosovo – which has for decades perceived itself as a community of shared values – represented a key framework within which Albanians in Kosovo and North Macedonia began to reduce fertility rates. In Albania itself, the process of economic transition further contributed to this trend.

A series of censuses conducted at the beginning of the last decade (2022-2024) highlighted several problems, the most fundamental of which is serious doubt regarding the reliability of the collected and published data. In several countries, disputes over census results have emerged among different segments of the population themselves, while in others few people simply believe that the actual population corresponds to the officially reported figures⁴.

The source of this distrust lies in the fact that the census, instead of functioning as a conventional instrument of state administration and official statistics, has become a high-level political issue. In multi-ethnic societies, census results are used as the basis for the (re)distribution of political, institutional, and economic power among different communities. The two most striking examples of this dynamic are Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, each constituent people effectively maintains its own demographic data, and Serbs and Croats do not recognize the results of the census conducted by institutions in Sara-

ety. Higher rates remained for some time in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia.

⁴ There are also differing opinions. For example, my colleague at the institute, the well-known economist and demographer Goran Nikolić, argues that the data for Serbia and most countries without significant interethnic tensions are not excessively unrealistic. He supports this view by comparing fertility trends with the current state of the population (Interview with Nikolić, 22 December 2025). He also defended the new census methodology, in which the number of registered individuals is subsequently supplemented using other sources, such as police records or data on those who pay housing bills but did not participate in the census. However, in some countries, such as North Macedonia, the number of individuals added in this way reaches up to a third of the originally registered population, which raises serious doubts.

jevo, which they perceive as being under the control of the Bosniak political and administrative establishment. The most recent census was conducted in 2013, and Serbs and Croats refused to accept its results as legitimate, arguing that Bosniak authorities employed a controversial methodology that included individuals who actually reside abroad – particularly in the case of the Brčko District. This approach produced, for the first time, a result indicating an absolute Bosniak majority of 50.14 percent. Serbs and Croats declared the census irrelevant, and the political status quo was preserved based on previously accepted figures.

In North Macedonia, which since the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, and especially during the government of Zoran Zaev, has embarked on a path toward federalization, or more precisely toward a consociational model of democracy in which Macedonians and Albanians would enjoy equal status, census results at both the national and local levels determine the official status of the Albanian language and other associated prerogatives. Similar cases can be found elsewhere in the region, one of the most prominent being Vukovar in Croatia. Following the 2011 census, in which the Serb population reached the threshold required for the official use of its own script, bilingual signs in Cyrillic were installed. These were subsequently removed by Croatian radical nationalists using hammers, with police refusing to intervene. In the subsequent census, the officially recorded number of Serbs declined (or was presented as such), resulting in the loss of their right to the public use of their language and script, and thereby removing the issue from the political agenda.

A census was conducted in Macedonia in 2011, but its results were never published due to interethnic tensions and the need to preserve the ruling coalition. The next census was carried out in 2021 and published the following year (Илић, 2022; *Понис* 2021, 2022). Only 1395 million citizens were physically enumerated, after which new methodologies were introduced. These added an additional 440.000 individuals, and also 258.932 persons who had been living abroad for more than a year and who self-registered via an online application. Notably, more than two thirds of this latter group were Albanians. Although local demographers suggested that the maximum population was approximately 1.6 million, official statistics reported a total

of 1.836 million, a figure whose origin remains unclear. Moreover, as much as 8 percent of the total population consists of residents whose ethno-national affiliation was not determined because they were added administratively.

The censuses conducted in Bulgaria and the related issue of the status of various Muslim minorities in that country fall into a similar category. Another important aspect concerns the artificial inflation of total population figures in order to obscure the pace of demographic decline. This practice conceals the real situation from the public, thereby limiting dissatisfaction and concern over unresolved problems associated with demographic decline. At the same time, it masks from neighboring states and other interested actors the extent to which a country is becoming weaker, more vulnerable, and less capable of defending itself and its resources. It is often claimed that China has historically employed similar strategies to deter potential aggressors, but the statistic data from imperial China are subject of great controversies (Deng, 2003, 2, 9). Anyway, there are other examples of the states falsifying intentionally its census data. A classic example is the Soviet census of 1937, which showed a much smaller population than expected. Following a political decision, the results were hidden, the census takers were arrested, and a new census was organized, which gave «better» results. (Tolts, 1995). The other case is China from the Great Leap Forward period, 1958-1961 (Deng, 2003, 14), but one can find the allegations and even proves for India, Nigeria, Spain, Lebanon, Uzbekistan etc.

In Bulgaria, for example, there is also concern that the decline of the Christian Bulgarian population and the growth of Muslim minorities could lead to increased demands for federalization of the state. Such a development could, in turn, provide incentives for Turkey, with its population of around 90 million, to encourage Muslim communities to seek greater rights, and potentially, in the future, some form of secessionism. Members of the Ataka party, which at one point also participated in government, built much of their political agenda and public support around this narrative.

Recent developments in Montenegro, with its much smaller population of approximately 650.000 inhabitants, illustrate a possible pattern of such dynamics. In this context, we examine events related to

an incident that occurred at the end of October 2025 in Podgorica. According to the most recent census, the smallest Balkan state has only around half a million domicile residents, representing a decline of approximately 100.000 over the past decade. According to official figures, however, this decrease has been offset by the arrival of foreigners in almost equal numbers, although their legal and social status remains highly ambiguous. For instance, the census recorded only 1.800 Turkish citizens as permanent residents. At the same time, around 13.000 individuals of Turkish origin were registered as holders of temporary residence permits, while estimates suggest that their actual number in Montenegro is significantly higher⁵.

Following the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016 and the subsequent designation by the AKP of Fethullah Gülen and members of his Hizmet movement as primary enemies of the state, many members of this community fled the country. A significant number settled in the Balkans, with Albania initially serving as a primary destination. Montenegro soon became an attractive alternative, prompting onward migration from neighboring states. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing presence of Turkish nationals in Montenegro became increasingly visible. This newly formed community largely consisted of hard-working and entrepreneurial individuals who arrived with substantial capital and began investing in the old towns of Budva and Kotor, in Herceg Novi, and increasingly in the capital, Podgorica. At the time of the census, it was already suggested that their number was around 30.000, but many were reportedly unwilling to be officially registered. Numerous field accounts indicate that they simply did not open their doors to census enumerators or otherwise avoided participation.

As this community became more firmly established over time, it began to develop additional types of economic activity beyond the service sector and to import labor from its areas of origin. This labor force consisted primarily of Kurds and Azeris from rural regions,

⁵ It should be noted that there are already around 6.000 Germans, mostly retirees, who have purchased apartments in Bar and other areas. This means that their number exceeds that of the Croats, who are an authentic indigenous minority in Montenegro. And, on the fashionable Luštica Peninsula, the largest group of residents is registered as Russian-speaking.

who were employed in less skilled occupations. According to available data, Turkish companies had already come to account for roughly one fifth of all economic activity in Montenegro, while approximately one fifth of all flights to and from Montenegro are related to Turkey (Đurković, 2025). This underscored the substantial significance of this new population group⁶.

When an incident occurred in the Podgorica neighborhood of Zabjelo, in which several members of this new community stabbed a local young guy who attempted to protect girls from their inappropriate behavior, the so-called Turkish factor was, for the first time, discussed more seriously, primarily in the context of moral panic. Public demonstrations followed, the government temporarily suspended the visa-free regime with Turkey (which was restored two months later), and several Turkish-owned bars were vandalized. Some local politicians, notably Vladislav Dajković, began to claim that there were as many as 100.000 Turks in the country, which would amount to roughly one sixth of the total population and potentially make them the third-largest ethnic community. Such a community, it was argued, could then demand specific political rights, political representation, education for children in their own language, and even the introduction of Turkish as an official language of the state.

Following the intervention of the Turkish Foreign minister, tensions subsided. Some data suggest that around 9.000 Turkish nationals left Montenegro because of these developments. Nevertheless, the question remains regarding the future of a country with an official fertility rate of 1.5, continued high levels of emigration to Europe and Serbia, and large areas – particularly in the northern municipalities – that are almost completely depopulated. In such circumstances, a relatively homogeneous community numbering several hundred thousand people could, with sufficient capital, rapidly gain decisive control

⁶ Simultaneous cooperation at the state level should also be noted. After 2020, the Turkish Diyanet received the official right to directly participate in the appointment of a mufti for the territory of Montenegro. There was also discussion of opening joint embassies of the two states in third countries. More recently, an agreement on cooperation between the health systems was signed, under which the Montenegro Health Fund began referring patients requiring more complex operations to Turkey.

over the country, or at least over significant parts of it. Montenegro in this fragile condition thus serves as a clear example of the broader problem of demographic security and several of its key dimensions and indicators.

Because of this sense of vulnerability, which also has strong identity-based foundations, Montenegro refuses to introduce or recognize the category of dual citizenship, despite the fact that a significant number of its citizens undoubtedly also hold citizenship of other states, such as Serbia, Albania, or Croatia⁷. The issue of citizenship also arises as a potential challenge in Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. Estimates of the number of citizens of North Macedonia who have also obtained Bulgarian passports reach as high as 200.000. Bulgaria currently refuses to provide precise statistics on this matter, although it is well known that many ministers and members of parliament in North Macedonia hold Bulgarian passports in order to travel freely and enjoy other benefits within the European Union. On this basis, however, Bulgarian subjects who do not recognize the Macedonian language or a distinct Macedonian identity have begun to demand certain forms of influence and rights for "their citizens" in North Macedonia, under the framework of the country's European integration process.

At this point, it is necessary to introduce the concept of *demographic security*. According to the Montevideo criteria, a population – that is, one that is sufficient in size, stable, and sustainable – constitutes one of the key conditions for the recognition and, ultimately, the survival of a state. In an era in which the securitization of public policy is expanding into almost all areas of social life, it becomes clear why demographic security, understood in terms of the quantity, quality, and homogeneity of a country's population must be addressed as a primary concern.

Approximately a decade ago, two Croatian scholars wrote about trends in demographic security in Southeast Europe (Malnar & Malnar, 2015), at which point the term itself entered broader academic

⁷ This also includes the current prime minister, Spajić, who was initially unable to run in the presidential elections because it was revealed that he held Serbian citizenship; he later renounced it.

usage. The issue is not merely one of security aspects related to population dynamics, but rather of demographic security as a distinct analytical category. In their study, Ukrainian researchers identify as many as fourteen different attempts to define the concept of demographic security (Zhyvko et al., 2021, 12-13), although most definitions focus primarily on the preservation of the population's quantitative and qualitative parameters. This raises the question of what demographic security entails and where the term originates.

The term itself began to appear in the late 1970s, mainly in connection with security debates in the turbulent Middle East. Botev (2024) provides an extensive and insightful overview of modern historical approaches that link population movements to security concerns in a broader sense. His analysis encompasses mercantilist thought, Malthusianism, the French demographic preoccupation following the defeat of 1871, and a similar German response after the First World War, which ultimately contributed to the rise of Nazism. As Botev notes, Nazi policy was fundamentally grounded in a security-oriented approach to population issues in the broadest sense, including eugenics.

After the Second World War, the Western world largely shifted its focus toward reducing global population growth. In this context, Botev recalls Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, the reports of the Club of Rome, and the well-known Kissinger Memorandum, NSSM200 of 1974, which identified thirteen countries in which population growth was to be curbed in order to facilitate access to energy resources and rare materials.

In 1979, Wilt defended a dissertation that employed the term demographic security in connection with internal divisions in Iraq (Wilt, 1979, cited in Botev, 2024, 50). Subsequent events following the removal of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of Iraq confirmed the significant potential for internal conflict that Wilt had identified at the time.

After the Cold War, the RAND Corporation addressed these issues through a series of influential and, in retrospect, highly prescient reports and analyses produced within the framework of the *Population Matters* project (Nichiporuk, 2000). For understandable reasons, however, the use of the term expanded most rapidly in Russia in the

mid-1990s. At that time, Russia was experiencing a profound transitional crisis in which earlier state concern for population, integral to communist biopolitics, collapsed. Health care systems deteriorated, poverty expanded, alcoholism and drug addiction increased, and fertility, birth rates, and life expectancy declined sharply. At the same time, even after the dissolution of the USSR, Russia retained the world's largest territorial expanse, with an insufficient population to inhabit and secure it, alongside growing corporate and other states' interests in the resources of Siberia.

Several states have since incorporated the concept of demographic security into their official legislation, policies, and strategic documents. Belarus was the first to do so in 2002, introducing the term into its legal framework and subsequently into national security strategies and programs (2007-2010). Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia followed. In 2021, Russia adopted a Presidential Decree on National Security that explicitly includes the concept of demographic security (Указ, 2021; Малышкина, 2024, 457). The term has thus not only become firmly established within contemporary academic discourse but has also been explicitly adopted by several states in the formulation of security challenges and in the design of policies and measures intended to address them.

Liberal and politically correct theorists tend to view this term with skepticism and often criticize it (Huysmans, 2006; Bigo, 2002; Lynn Doty, 2003). Nevertheless, aware of the inevitability of the issues it addresses, they attempt to offer alternative formulations, concepts, and interpretative frameworks, such as «human capital», «demographic capital» or «demographic resilience». These approaches, rather than insisting on the preservation of the domicile population at all costs, emphasize preparing the state for population change and replacement, with the aim of «avoiding calls for patriarchalism and ethno-nationalism».

What, then, does the term *demographic security* itself denote? First and foremost, it presupposes the existence of a population – that is, a population of sufficient size to independently sustain and control a given territory or state. The late Serbian Patriarch Pavle, commenting on demographic trends in Kosovo and on insufficient fertility in Serbia, invoked a traditional folkloric saying: «The meadows belong

to those who have sheep». In other words, space belongs to those who possess a population large and resilient enough to control it. For this reason, particularly in peripheral zones of contact and competition between different religions and civilizations, demographic trends are of crucial importance. The cases of Kosovo, Lebanon, and similar contexts illustrate how uneven demographic development can lead to conflicts and wars over control of territory and resources. Accordingly, a basic principle of demographic security is the need to ensure sufficient reproduction of the population to maintain control over space. If a territory is abandoned or depopulated, others will inevitably seek to occupy it. The adage that nature abhors a vacuum can thus be readily applied to the demographic control of space. Demographic security is closely linked to economic, ecological, social, food, cultural, and other forms of security (Zhyvko et al., 2021, 12).

In addition to population size and the capacity for self-reproduction⁸, the quality of the population is also significant, as are its internal cohesion, homogeneity, and various other characteristics. Issues of demographic security therefore encompass a wide range of factors, including population aging and its social, political, fiscal, and security consequences (such as increased spending on health care and pensions and reduced investment in education, infrastructure, and defense); the deterioration of interethnic and interreligious relations, including the emergence of no-go zones under the pressure of large numbers of immigrants whom the domiciled population fails to integrate; separatism; terrorism; physical and verbal conflicts between population groups; the rise of ethnically motivated crime; increasing xenophobia and extremism; and the potential outbreak of civil wars

⁸ Colleagues from Ukraine also emphasize the preservation of the population's gene pool in a given area as an aspect of demographic security. Their list of key elements includes: «The loss of the ability of the state and society to ensure a type of reproduction that contributes to the natural growth of the population, the formation of an optimal sex and age structure, the strengthening of citizens' health and the extension of active life, the establishment of rational internal and external migration flows, and the preservation of family values; this prompts us to discuss the loss of a state's human capital, the demographic crisis, and the challenges to the demographic security of society and the state, as well as to actively seek solutions to this situation» (Zhyvko et al., 2021, 12).

– developments against which David Betz (2024) has warned in the European context. Additional concerns include significant imbalances between male and female population cohorts, the deterioration of general physical health (manifested in unhealthy lifestyles, alcoholism, drug addiction, and obesity), declining mental health (including gambling and other forms of addiction), and inadequate educational outcomes.

In this context, it is also necessary to emphasize that the diffusion of anti-vitalist and anti-family value systems such as radical feminism or radical ecologism of Paul Ehrlich's kind, through education, popular culture, and social media represents an increasingly important source of demographic decline and a threat to the demographic security of nations and states. As a rule, researchers in this field tend to avoid addressing this issue because of its political sensitivity, a pattern that can be illustrated by the case of the Balkan countries. For example, survey data indicating that as many as one quarter of the female student population in Novi Sad do not envision themselves as future mothers point to a serious erosion of the value foundations underpinning a country's demographic security (Рашичевић, 2006).

The Balkan region is of exceptional geostrategic importance, as it is situated between the demographically dynamic states of the MENA region and the principal destination countries for migration (Malnar & Malnar, 2015, 81), such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and other parts of the old, affluent Europe characterized by low fertility rates and aging populations. During the major migration crisis of 2015 and in the years that followed, the main migrant routes passed through this region, and even today a significant number of irregular migrants continue to enter via Montenegro, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina on their way to Western Europe. From this perspective, one might expect that, as in previous centuries, European capitals would perceive this region as a vulnerable frontier and seek to strengthen it as a protective buffer for European space in all respects, including demographically. However, the opposite has occurred.

Led primarily by Germany, Western Europe has become the principal extractor of human capital from the Balkans, and a major driver of brain drain. This process has accelerated the depopulation of the

region and has seriously undermined its demographic security, thereby indirectly threatening the security of Western and Central Europe as well. It appears that only Hungary and the V4 countries have demonstrated a sustained interest in helping the Balkans understand and preserve the principles of demographic security. Malnar and Malnar (2015, 72) note that between 2000 and 2009 Europe received approximately 15 million immigrants, surpassing the United States in this regard. Southeast Europe thus became an important reservoir of emigrants, supplying Western Europe with labor to meet its labor needs and contribute to population renewal.

Germany even implemented specific programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in cooperation with local employment agencies, jointly recruiting workers for the German labor market, which has long been characterized by a persistent demand for labor from Eastern Europe. At the time, Serbia was already experiencing labor shortages in certain sectors; nevertheless, its state employment office continued to supply workers to Germany. It has also been observed that in several Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, students as young as fifteen deliberately enroll in medical secondary schools and begin learning German in anticipation of future emigration. The scope of German labor recruitment even extended to contract soldiers and railway workers, in some cases without requiring prior knowledge of the German language.

Since 2015, Germany has further facilitated access to its labor market for citizens of the Balkans by simplifying procedures for obtaining work visas. It currently issues approximately 50.000 work visas annually to individuals from the region, a category that doesn't include highly specialized intellectual professions (Szymanska, 2022, 6)⁹.

⁹ In September 2017, the institute I was leading was visited by a group of young CDU MPs and activists. When I asked them how they planned to address the issues of immigration and labor market gaps, they replied: «Our people are unwilling to accept non-European immigrants, and we will stop this practice. We will compensate for the shortage of necessary labor, as long as possible, by sourcing it from the Balkans and Eastern Europe». They are indeed pursuing this approach, creating significant problems for the Balkan countries, which also bear the cost of educating personnel who ultimately migrate to Germany and other destination countries.

Since the 1970s, Balkan countries have been undergoing a demographic transition similar to that experienced by other European societies, with the Albanian population entering this phase last, primarily during the 1990s and 2000s. However, the wars of the 1990s, economic transition, and the massive outflow of population to Western Europe, and increasingly to China and the Gulf states, have dramatically accelerated aging and depopulation processes. As a result, some Balkan countries have already reached population decline levels that were previously projected for 2035 or even 2050 (Armas & Németh, 2021, 5). These countries are characterized by poverty levels that encourage emigration, combined with fertility rates that align with, or fall below, the broader European average.

Analyses conducted over the past decade have already described a «demographic collapse» in the Balkans (Malnar & Malnar, 2015, 71), and Wankiewicz (2025) aptly titled her work *The Vanishing Balkans*. It is therefore evident that the region is experiencing a profound demographic crisis, which gives rise to significant challenges for both demographic and overall security.

A major obstacle to addressing these issues effectively is the inadequacy, incompleteness, and sometimes dubious or even false nature of the statistical data available. Although these countries are under the supervision of Brussels and the EU, whose membership they aspire to, the inability of states and their statistical offices to provide accurate, reliable data on population size, distribution, and characteristics reflects poorly on the state of reforms. Scholars including Botev (2024, 45), Malnar and Malnar (2015, 74), Armas and Németh (2021, 4, 6, 8), Szymanska (2022, 161, 179), and Wankiewicz (2025, 1) all emphasize the unreliability, poor quality, and contentious nature of the censuses and demographic data in the region, confirming the observations made at the beginning of this article.

Another key challenge for demographic security in former communist countries, including those in the Balkans, is the extreme concentration of population in metropolitan areas. Countries like Romania are rare exceptions, having multiple urban centers developing alongside the capital. In most cases, however, population is heavily centralized around the capital or a dominant metropolitan area. For instance, in Hungary, Budapest has roughly 2 million inhabitants, while the second-largest city, Debrecen, has only about 200.000.

In the Balkan states, this trend is particularly pronounced. Populations are increasingly converging in Tirana, Pristina, and Skopje. In Croatia, people migrate from Slavonia toward Zagreb, although Istria, Dubrovnik, and Dalmatia have maintained their populations. Former Krajina areas, once predominantly Serb, have largely emptied, leaving significant gaps in Croatia's territorial population. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, population concentration occurs primarily in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, while regions such as Herzegovina remain sparsely populated and continue to depopulate. Republika Srpska, officially the most sparsely populated area in the Balkans, faces pressing questions regarding its demographic sustainability and broader security.

In Montenegro, the population flows toward Podgorica and the coastal areas, leaving large portions of the north underpopulated. As previously noted, the settlement of 11-14% foreigners within a short period, combined with a domicile population of only about half a million, renders this region particularly vulnerable from a demographic security perspective. Malnar and Malnar (2015, 64) note that even a foreign population of 10% can be sufficient to trigger serious internal conflicts and destabilization.

Serbia is also an extreme example of economic and population centralization, which increasingly threatens the demographic security of the Banat and Eastern Serbia regions. Data indicate that almost 70% of the country's GDP is generated within the 100-kilometer corridor between Novi Sad and Belgrade, which, with the airport in the middle, is evolving into a large metropolitan area. Consequently, population continues to concentrate in this corridor, with both domestic residents from other regions and foreigners settling there. In the past, authorities recognized this issue and even attempted administrative and economic decentralization to preserve populations in other areas. Today, however, the topic has largely disappeared from public discourse, and there is no active strategy – unlike in some other countries – to prevent further concentration and the depopulation of endangered areas. In some municipalities, not a single child is born per year. A similar situation exists across the border in Bulgaria, so that Eastern Serbia and Western Bulgaria, including the exceptionally fertile and water-rich regions around Stara Planina, together form a vast, underpopulated space. Some

areas of Serbia have lost up to a fifth of their population in just ten years¹⁰.

Among the reasons for outmigration, the OECD observed in a 2022 study (Wankiewicz, 2025, 5) factors such as poor education, lagging top universities compared with other countries, deteriorating healthcare systems with declining numbers of qualified doctors and medical personnel, an increasingly dysfunctional judiciary, incompetent political elites, endemic corruption, and an overall poor business environment. Another critical factor is the lack of regions that could serve to renew the population, as the Dinaric areas in the southwestern Balkans used to do.

Efforts by Western leaders to use the Balkans as a testing ground for the return or relocation of migrants further endanger demographic security. For instance, during the election presidential debate on HRT for his first mandate, Croatian President Milanović recalled that Angela Merkel requested Croatia to accept around 100.000 migrants from Syria as a form of triage field. As a precondition for the Feasibility Study for starting SAA negotiations in 2005, Serbia had to accept a controversial readmission agreement, which included not only its own migrants. In 2023, Albania signed a contentious agreement with Italy to host asylum seekers while Italy examined their applications in centers on Albanian territory. Meanwhile, Germany and other EU countries actively recruit craftsmen, drivers, IT specialists, health workers, doctors, and students at the Balkans, while promoting ideologies that undermine natural fertility, encourage non-European migration, and indirectly weaken demographic self-sufficiency.

It is important to note that the authors referenced here generally do not consider the influence of cultural, educational, or value-based factors on population vitality, including shifts in family values, edu-

¹⁰ Throughout history, different countries have addressed these issues in various ways. In the Soviet Union, for example, there was a system of internal passports, requiring permission to move from one region to another. European countries also imposed various restrictions on internal movement well into the nineteenth century. In Serbia, public administration employees, teachers, judges, and officers were previously required to accept postings anywhere in the country, depending on how their superiors organized the system. State today doesn't use neither liberal measures such as fiscal federalism etc.

cational reform, popular culture, and social networks. While most of the developed world is undergoing a demographic transition, there are exceptions, such as Hungary, Israel, and Russia at certain periods, where clearly defined pro-family policies and legal frameworks have helped maintain or even raise fertility rates. In contrast, the Balkan countries have moved in the opposite direction, a trend reinforced by the imposition of so-called “European values” that today largely neglect efforts to restore fertility and support population growth.

The demographic situation in the Western Balkans has reached a critical stage. In countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, roughly half of the population now lives abroad, while in Albania it is 44%, and in North Macedonia 34%. Between 2013 and 2016, around 200.000 people from Kosovo applied for asylum in EU countries, and in the winter of 2015, approximately 100.000 of them moved *en masse* toward the EU, a phenomenon that remains poorly explained. Fertility declines and population aging in the Western Balkans are proceeding faster than in most EU countries (Szymanska, 2022, 108). The proportion of young people is falling rapidly, while the share of those over 65 is expected to exceed 20%. Albania has already experienced a 21% population decline since 2000, and the situation may be worse than official statistics suggest. The median age in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina now hovers around 44.5 years.

Unlike Hungary, which has a clear demographic policy aimed at boosting fertility and shaping immigration to preserve population structure, Western Balkan states largely lack coherent strategies. Measures are minimal and often symbolic, such as one-time payments for the first, second, and third child, and child allowances for vulnerable families. Serbia attempted to at least partly emulate Hungary, but the subsidized housing program for young families was used by fewer than 600 people (Wankiewicz, 2025, 7).

The so-called Fertility Improvement Strategy in Serbia illustrates the lack of meaningful action (Đurković, 2019). In 2018, instead of developing a new, effective plan, Serbia simply re-adopted its previous Birth Promotion Strategy – essentially the same document that had been in effect during the period of the largest recent fertility decline, expanded by roughly 30% textually. Curiously, the document does not even mention possible role of religious communities in promot-

ing family values and fertility, although Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church and Islamic Religious Community enjoy huge respect among the population. This reflects a profound disconnect between the declared goals of demographic policy and the practical measures needed to preserve the population, underscoring the vulnerability of the region's demographic security.

The cumulative effect of all the trends described is stark: the Western Balkans have already lost at least 2.5 million people in a relatively short period, leaving the total population below 16 million, fewer than Romania. Projections indicate that, if current trends continue, another 3 million may be lost by 2050. Political elites have largely failed to implement meaningful policies to reverse depopulation or incentivize citizens to stay. In fact, short-term political calculations often favor the emigration of dissatisfied citizens, who are perceived as politically inconvenient. The expected trajectory is therefore a combination of continued emigration, declining fertility, population aging, and potentially the introduction of foreign populations to replace the native one, an outcome Renaud Camus has highlighted in his writings on great replacement.

Efforts to attract the diaspora back or to stimulate domestic business investment are minimal. Moreover, Serbia has developed a business model in which foreign companies are granted significantly higher subsidies than domestic entrepreneurs. As a result, instead of fostering business development led by domestic entrepreneurs, who would be long-term committed to their country through family ties, patriotism, and cultural affiliation, foreign corporations enter the market and remain only for as long as subsidies are available. Once these incentives expire, they dismantle their operations and relocate their machinery to another country that offers better or similar subsidies.

Here we have presented only some of the basic demographic trends that indicate the problems of severely endangered demographic security in the Balkans, and especially in the so-called Western Balkans. More detailed analyses¹¹ would reveal even more causes for concern

¹¹ We recommend the numerous short texts and analyses published by economist and demographer Miroslav Zdravković on his portal, Makroekonomija (www.makroekonomija.rs).

that require urgent attention. If we agree with Malnar and Malnar that demographic security is a strategic issue for future national power and fundamental security in Southeast Europe (2015, 83), the outlook is indeed bleak. With low fertility rates, an increasingly aging population, the continued outflow of the fertile population, internal concentration of capital and people in a small number of metropolitan areas, and growing expanses of depopulated territory, these countries appear to be inviting large-scale foreign immigration of populations with different identity characteristics, which, based on the experience of Western Europe, is likely to trigger new waves of security destabilization.

In short, without decisive action, the Western Balkans are facing a perfect storm of demographic decline, social fragmentation, and strategic vulnerability.

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makroekonomija.org). I am grateful to him for providing a wealth of data and insights, as he continuously monitors population statistics and trends across the Balkan countries.

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