



Depopulation in the Western Balkans

EUROPE IN
THE WORLD

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#balkans
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• Introduction

Over the last thirty years, the countries in the Western Balkans have lost a significant percentage of their populations. Whether in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania or Kosovo, all countries are suffering from a population decline, to lesser or greater extents¹.

In most cases, this depopulation trend is due to a twofold negative natural and migratory balance. This trend is showing no signs of slowing and could, according to population prospects, continue into the next few decades. This could **put further strain on the development of a region that is becoming poorer and seeing its young people and**

workforce moving abroad. It could even be compounded as the hope of joining the European Union grows.

Conducting a count of residents in these countries remains an arduous task. Censuses are carried out infrequently and regularly occur following political struggles concerning the respective balance between the different ethnic and national communities².

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¹ The Western Balkans region is made up of six countries: North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (all official candidates for EU accession) and Kosovo (potential candidate). Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence in February 2008 though this has not yet been recognised by five EU Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain).

² In the past, censuses in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been invalidated by international bodies because they included expatriates in the country's population, and not solely persons residing in the country, regardless of their status or nationality.

I • A birth rate in decline

I A FERTILITY RATE THAT DOES NOT GUARANTEE DEMOGRAPHIC RENEWAL

In the second half of the 20th century, the population of the Balkans (including Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Greece, which are currently EU Member States) grew sharply as a result of a very high birth rate (3.2 children per woman on average in 1960). The number of inhabitants in the entire region rose from 45 million in 1945 to more than 55.4 million in 1960 and to 69 million in 1980³.

If we consider specifically the countries of the Western Balkans, the population rose between 1950 and 1980 from 1.25 to 2.9 million in Albania, from 2.7 to 4.2 million in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 0.8 to 1.6 million in Kosovo, from 1.25 to 1.9 million in North Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), from 0.4 to 0.5 million in Montenegro and from 6 to 7.8 million in Serbia⁴. Since then, however, there has been a total reversal of this trend, due to both the surge in emigration (see below) and the collapse of the birth rate. Today, the Western Balkans have a population of roughly 18 million inhabitants.

None of these six countries passes the threshold of 2.1 children per woman which is necessary for demographic renewal in countries with an adequate level of health: the fertility rate in the region is only 1.5 on average - a level similar to the EU average but lower than that in several Central and Eastern European countries. In 2021, the fertility rate was 1.44 in North Macedonia, 1.31

in Albania, 1.52 in Serbia and 1.76 in Montenegro. In 2019 it was 1.55 in Kosovo⁵. The situation is not set to improve significantly in the coming decade⁶.

Across the region, the natural balance, i.e. the difference between the number of births and the number of deaths, is negative, which contributes to population decline. Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Albania all recorded higher crude death rates than crude birth rates in 2021. In the same year, Bosnia and Herzegovina (8.4 births for 1000 inhabitants) and Serbia (8.9‰) were the only countries in the region to record crude birth rates below the EU-27 average (9.1‰)⁷. The natural balance is also negative in most EU Member States and has been on average at an EU level since 2012.

I A PROFILE SIMILAR TO SOUTHERN EU MEMBER STATES

The Western Balkans have very quickly become part of this “demographic winter” (a concept put forward by professor Gérard-François Dumont) which affects most of Europe and even the planet.

The situation started to decline following the conflicts at the end of the 20th century. In Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, the war (1992-1995) had a profound impact on the country's population, as more than 100,000 people died. In 1995, as the Dayton Agreement put an end to the hostilities, half of the country's 4.1 million inhabitants

3 *Atlas géopolitique des Balkans. Un autre visage de l'Europe*, Amaël Cattaruzza et Pierre Sintès, Editions Autrement, Collection Atlas Autrement, second édition (2016). https://www.numilog.com/LIVRES/ISBN/9782746742680.Livre?utm_source=PDF-excerpt

4 World population in graphs, French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED). https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/graphs-maps/population_graphs/ Statistical sources: United Nations, World Population Prospects. <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

5 These Eurostat data is not available for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Eurostat. Enlargement countries – population statistics (May 2023). https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_population_statistics

6 According to the United Nations' population prospects, in 2050 the fertility rate is set to stand at 1.47 in Albania; 1.45 in Bosnia and Herzegovina; 1.55 in Kosovo; 1.51 in North Macedonia; 1.64 in Montenegro and 1.58 in Serbia. World population in graphs, French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), see above.

7 It should also be noted that, despite major progress, infant mortality rates (the number of deaths of children aged under one for 1000 live births) in the Western Balkans remain higher than the average rate in the UE-27 (3.2‰), except in Montenegro (1.4‰). This rate is still particularly high in Albania (10.3‰) and in Kosovo (8.7‰). Social Infrastructure in the Western Balkans, Council of Europe Development Bank. https://coebank.org/media/documents/Social_Infrastructure_in_the_Western_Balkans.pdf

were no longer living in the homes they had occupied in 1991, either having fled abroad or been displaced within the country. Only some of those exiled returned after the war. The brain drain continued and even gathered pace⁸.

Other factors contributed to the region's population decline, in particular its social and economic difficulties⁹. "It could be argued that the low fertility rate is somewhat related to an extremely rapid participation in what could be called "modernity" as well as a lack of confidence in the future", commented professor Gérard-François Dumont¹⁰. The very low per capita GDP and growth rates provide few prospects for young people seeking employment or housing, or those wanting to start a family.

On a demographic level, the Western Balkans no longer stand out from Southern EU Member States, where the average birth rate is less than 1.5 children per woman (1.4 in Greece, 1.3 in Portugal, 1.2 in Italy and Spain). "It's not that women don't want to have children. It's that most of them are now studying for longer and want a career", explains professor Gilles Pison. "In the Balkans, as in Southern European countries, young mothers are pressured by their friends and family to stop working"¹¹. In addition, **family policies are very limited in the region**, parental leave is much less generous than in Northern European countries and childcare facilities are seriously lacking.

This is compounded by **many young adults emigrating**, in search of a better life and higher salaries (see below). "Added together, two technical situations explain the depopulation related to the negative natural balance", says Gérard-François Dumont.

"Firstly, a low fertility rate and secondly the fact that emigration concerns many young people who leave for other European countries or sometimes the USA and who are unlikely to have children in their country of origin, which tends to exacerbate the drop in birth rates".

I THE SPECIFIC CASE OF KOSOVO

One country, Kosovo, continues to be the exception: there are more births than deaths and therefore the natural balance is positive. **More than one quarter of the population is aged under fifteen**, as a result of women having many children in the past (more than five on average fifty years ago). As a result, the age pyramid, which is very close to that of India on another scale, includes a very low percentage of elderly inhabitants and a high number of young adults.

Despite this, Kosovo is beginning to follow the trend observed in the other countries of the Western Balkans. Its fertility rate has fallen considerably and is now just slightly above the EU average. The population, which had begun to rise again following the war of 1998-1999, has hardly grown since 2013 and has even fallen slightly in recent years (-0.7% between 2020 and 2021) due to a rise in the crude mortality rate. According to the United Nation's population prospects, the population may stabilise and then fall after 2050.

8 *Démographie : les Balkans à l'heure du grand exode*, Vie publique, RF, 3 February 2020. <https://www.vie-publique.fr/parole-dexpert/271119-demographie-les-balkans-lheure-du-grand-exode>

9 Average per capita GDP was €6,740 (2020) in Montenegro, €5,170 (2018) in North Macedonia, €4,610 (2020) in Albania, €7,780 (2021) in Serbia, €4,580 (2017) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and €3,740 (2018) in Kosovo. Average per capita GDP was €29,910 in 2020 in the EU. Eurostat, *Basic figures on the Western Balkans and Turkey*, factsheets, 2022 edition 2022. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4031688/14589427/KS-05-22-089-EN-N.pdf/35508d49-956b-9f20-2c47-1b38636e38b6>

10 Interview with the author, May 2023. Geographer, demographer, chair of the journal "Population et Avenir", Gérard-François Dumont is professor at the Sorbonne. He has recently published *Géographie des populations* with publishing house Armand Colin.

11 Interview with the author, May 2023. Professor emeritus at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, Gilles Pison is Advisor to the Director of the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED). He has recently published *Atlas de la population mondiale* with publishing house Autrement.

While the situation in Kosovo is interesting, the change has been fast in most of the Balkans, including for example Bosnia and Herzegovina. Surprisingly, **these countries**

with such different political, economic and religious pasts are now seeing their demographics converge.

II • Emigration steadily on the rise

I COUNTRIES LOSING THEIR WORKFORCES

On a demographic level, the Western Balkan's natural balance is similar to the European Union average. The two regions differ in terms of net migration (the difference between the number of immigrants and the number of emigrants). Net migration not only fails to offset the greater number of deaths than births, as in many EU countries, but is also significantly negative in all countries of the Western Balkans. Between 2012 and 2018 some 155,000 inhabitants of the region emigrated on average each year to a country of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and these departures are constantly on the rise. While some of these emigrants subsequently returned to their countries of origin, most of them decided to remain abroad¹².

Emigration is an old tradition in the mountain regions of the Balkans, that was already documented in the Ottoman era¹³. The Yugoslav socialist regime actively encouraged this trend, giving almost total freedom to travel and live elsewhere in the country or abroad and from the early 1950s signed migration agreements with Turkey and a later with the Federal Republic of Germany, a prime destination for many of these emigrants that was endorsed by the State. In the wake of the conflicts of the 1990s which gave rise to major outflows, particularly to Germany and Switzerland, though many Albanians emigrated to Italy, the economic difficulties related to the post-communist

transition triggered mass emigration from the region. These flows remain very high today, due to a lack of appealing prospects.

The issue is not purely quantitative. **This emigration affects a highly skilled population in particular**, seeking better living conditions. This results in what is known as a brain drain¹⁴. Net migration is negative in the six countries of the Western Balkans, significantly so in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. Following years of isolation under Enver Hoxha's regime, many Albanians started to leave their country in the 1990s, moving in particular to neighbouring States. This emigration has again reached high levels in recent years, to the extent that **Albania currently has one of the largest diasporas in the world** in terms of the percentage of the population living in the country of origin¹⁵. Around 1.4 million Albanians are said to currently live outside the country, which has a population of 2.8 million¹⁶.

¹² Between 2015 and 2020, annual net emigration from the region to the rest of the world stood at roughly 135,000. Council of Europe Development Bank - Social Infrastructure in the Western Balkans. Increasing the region's economic resilience, enhancing human capital and counteracting the effects of brain drain. https://coebank.org/media/documents/Social_Infrastructure_in_the_Western_Balkans.pdf

¹³ *Démographie : les Balkans à l'heure du grand exode*, Vie publique, RF, see above.

¹⁴ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Youth Policy in the Western Balkans' (20.1.2022). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022IE0778&>

¹⁵ Euronews. *Is emigration bleeding the economic life out of Albania*, 12 January 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/12/is-emigration-bleeding-the-economic-life-out-of-albania>

¹⁶ *Tapping into the Albanian Scientific Diaspora*, 4 October 2019. International Organization for Migration (IOM). <https://www.iom.int/news/tapping-albanian-scientific-diaspora>

I SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REASONS

The reasons behind this wave of emigration are first and foremost economic: the region's growth rates are low, there is mass structural unemployment and very few prospects for development¹⁷.

In addition to the hope of finding higher wages and a better standard of living, many young people state their difficulties accessing quality education and having their qualifications put to good use, as well as the lack of investment in healthcare services. More than 70% plan to move abroad according to a poll conducted in 2020 by the Regional Cooperation Council. Many of them (more than 30% in Montenegro, more than 40% in Kosovo and in Serbia and more than 50% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and in Albania) go so far as saying they wish to live and work abroad for the next twenty years or more¹⁸.

This is compounded by political reasons related to the poor quality of institutions, persistent governance issues and endemic corruption. According to the 2020 Balkan Barometer, some 63% of inhabitants in the region do not trust their governments and 66% do not trust their judicial or law enforcement institutions¹⁹. The European Commission has clearly condemned this situation in its annual reports on enlargement²⁰.

An article in *Politique Internationale* illustrates young people's aspiration to leave the region²¹. According to a recent survey, "83.7% of students in North Macedonia want to leave their country, 8.3% would "hesitate" and only 7.9% are determined to stay". Another survey conducted in Serbia

in the autumn of 2018 found that "34% of young people aged between 18 and 34 hope to emigrate". In 2018, 367,000 Albanian citizens (14% of the country's total population) entered the "Green Card lottery" in a bid to obtain a permanent resident card for the United States. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, "170,000 people", i.e. almost 10% of the total population, left the country between 2013 and 2017. Those leaving the Western Balkans move for the most part to the EU - mainly Germany, far ahead of Italy, Slovenia and Austria - and to a lesser extent to the USA (less than 5% of flows). France hosts relatively few people from the Western Balkans; in 2021 only 1.3% of immigrants living in France were born in Serbia, 0.5% in Albania and 0.2% in Bosnia and Herzegovina²².

Emigration is not always frowned upon by these countries, who potentially benefit from these flows. *The Gastarbeiter* (the German term for "guest workers", which entered the Serbo-Croatian language to define all emigrants) regularly send money to their families. The departure of young graduates and the surplus labour force also reduces labour market pressures and as a result mitigates social and political tensions. Some leaders view emigration as a means of curbing protest movements, as those who leave are no longer there to criticise the powers that be.

¹⁷ Council of Europe Development Bank - Social Infrastructure in the Western Balkans. Increasing the region's economic resilience, enhancing human capital and counteracting the effects of brain drain (see above).

¹⁸ Miran Lavrič, Smiljka Tomanović and Mirna Jusić, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019 (2018/2019) <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>

¹⁹ Balkan Barometer 2020: Public Opinion Survey. <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/95/balkan-barometer-2020-public-opinion-survey>

²⁰ Communication from the European Commission on EU Enlargement Policy (12.10.2022). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:620c31ce-4b01-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

²¹ *Balkans : la catastrophe démographique*, Autumn 2019, by Jean-Arnault Dérens, editor of *Le Courrier des Balkans*, and Laurent Geslin, journalist and geographer, specialist on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, *Politique Internationale*. <https://politiqueinternationale.com/revue/n165/article/balkans-la-catastrophe-demographique>

²² French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). <https://www.insee.fr/en/accueil>

I A SITUATION EXACERBATED BY THE PROSPECT OF JOINING THE EU

With the exception of Kosovo, the countries of the **Western Balkans enjoy a visa exemption for short stays within the Schengen area**. Citizens of these countries are therefore free to travel to the area for a maximum stay of three months per year, without the authorisation to work.

In the event of joining the EU, their citizens would enjoy freedom of movement within the Single Market. This would no doubt increase the number of departures, at least initially, as was the case in 2004 in Poland and the Czech Republic, whose citizens were also

seeking easier living conditions and higher wages. In recent years, however, the economic situation has improved in these new EU Member States, prompting some of their citizens to return as well as emigration from certain neighbouring countries.

The “Western Balkans route” is one of the main routes used by many migrants from the Middle East, Asia and Africa to enter the EU. Following record levels in 2015, the number of arrivals in the EU declined for a few years and then began to rise again from 2019. The EU-27 have adopted a set of measures to address the situation²³.

III • A demographic trend with far-reaching implications

I A DECLINING AND AGEING POPULATION

With a low birth rate and a growing emigration trend, the Western Balkans is ultimately **running the risk of a demographic disaster**. Between 2011 and 2022, the number of inhabitants fell almost everywhere: -0.3% in Montenegro (-0.03% per year on average); -3.9% in Albania (-0.4% per year on average); -6.3% in Serbia (-0.6% per year on average); -10.7% in North Macedonia (-1.0% per year on average). In addition, the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina fell by 9.1% between 2011 and 2019 (latest available data), resulting in an average annual decline of -1.1%. Kosovo is the only exception: from 2011 to 2021 (latest available data), the population increased by 0.2% (+0.02% per year on average). In the EU, the population increased by 1.5% over the period from 2011 to 2022, reflecting an annual average of 0.1%²⁴.

Other statistics are worrying. Life expectancy at birth fell between 2011 and 2021 for both men and women in the Western Balkans²⁵. Moreover, all these countries suffered a population decline between 2019 and 2021. This decline appears to be getting worse across the region. Between 2021 and 2050, the number of inhabitants is projected to fall from 2.8 million to 2.4 million in Albania, from 3.2 million to 2.7 million in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 2.1 million to 1.9 million in North Macedonia, from 628,000 to 586,000 in Montenegro and from 7.2 million to 5.7 million in Serbia (according to the United Nations’ population prospects). The population is set to remain relatively stable in Kosovo at around 1.6 million, before falling significantly from 2050²⁶.

Falling fertility, emigration of people mostly of working and child-bearing age, immigration of mostly newly retired people: all these

²³ These measures include the EU action plan concerning the Western Balkans and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/western-balkans-route/>

²⁴ Eurostat. Enlargement countries – population statistics (May 2023), see above

²⁵ According to Eurostat, the sharpest drop was recorded in Montenegro, where life expectancy for men fell from 73.3 to 70.8 and for women from 78.8 to 77.0. Albania also recorded a considerable drop in life expectancy between 2013 and 2021, falling from 76.0 to 73.6 for men and from 80.1 to 77.7 for women. Between 2011 and 2021, life expectancy for men fell from 73.1 to 71.1 years and from 77.2 to 75.5 for women in North Macedonia while in Serbia it fell from 72.0 to 70.0 for men and from 77.2 to 75.7 for women. No data was available for Bosnia and Herzegovina. For Kosovo, the latest data is from 2016 (75.9 years for men, 81.6 years for women). In comparison, in the EU, life expectancy for men increased slightly by 0.2 years between 2011 and 2021, rising from 77.0 to 77.2. Conversely, life expectancy for women fell by -0.2 years, from 83.1 to 82.9 years.

²⁶ World population in graphs, French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), see above.

factors are leading to a rapid ageing of the population in the Western Balkans. It is, for example, worth considering the median age (which splits the population into two equal parts). It is only 33 years in Kosovo and 39 years in Albania (two countries that remain relatively young in demographic terms as there was a long-standing high fertility rate). It is, however, 40 years in North Macedonia and in Montenegro, 43 years in Bosnia and Herzegovina and even 44 years in Serbia - a level similar to that in the EU.

In 2022, persons aged under fifteen only accounted for 14.3% of the total population in Serbia, 16.5% in Albania, 17.0% in North Macedonia and 17.9% in Montenegro (compared to 24% in Kosovo in 2020)²⁷. “These countries will very soon join the EU Member States with the oldest demographics which are in the South, namely Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece. This ageing raises the same challenges for the Western Balkans in terms of living standards and access to healthcare”, comments Gilles Pison²⁸.

I BRAIN DRAIN AND ECONOMIC IMPOVERISHMENT

In the region, as is the case elsewhere, the growing proportion of elderly citizens is a considerable burden on public finances: the working population is falling while the breakdown of the age pyramid increases expenditure on pensions and healthcare²⁹. The social welfare systems are ill-equipped to cope with the ageing of the population and family solidarity will not suffice to meet requirements. Entire areas have been deserted and, due to a lack of funding, certain

basic public services are no longer provided or sufficiently so³⁰.

The “demographic winter” is also a loss of long-term opportunities for these countries. There is a risk of their development slowing, which would impact their productivity, competitiveness and ability to innovate. **The emigration of many healthcare professionals (including doctors and nurses) and other highly skilled citizens is a matter of major concern in the region.** The labour shortage is already keenly felt in various sectors. The situation is all the more alarming as the Western Balkans is already significantly lagging behind the EU in economic terms.

These difficulties affect the six countries of the Western Balkans to varying degrees. After experiencing an upturn at the end of the 1990s (which had itself followed a collapse due to the war), Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen its population plummet in the last twenty years. Around 500,000 people emigrated in the last ten years and certain business sectors are seriously lacking a workforce³¹. Serbia has lost more than half a million inhabitants since 2011 and could, according to population prospects, lose a further 1.5 million by 2050³².

I A SITUATION THAT REQUIRES DECISIVE ACTION

Leaders will have to act urgently if they want to reverse the trend, for example by adopting family policies to assist young households, increasing expenditure allocated to education and health, improving job prospects and facilitating access to credit and housing³³.

²⁷ Eurostat. Enlargement countries – population statistics (May 2023), see above.

²⁸ Interview with the author, May 2023, see above.

²⁹ Lettre d'Europe du Sud-Est, January 2020. Direction générale du Trésor (French Treasury), January 2020. <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/6f0c7705-3c2e-4ff0-859c-c3256c656302/files/0bbaeeb9-a36f-405b-b0da-0a9af45de3dc>

³⁰ *Balkans : la catastrophe démographique*, Autumn 2019, by Jean-Arnault Dérens, editor of *Le Courrier des Balkans*, and Laurent Geslin, journalist and geographer, specialist on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, *Politique Internationale*, see above.

³¹ *La saignée démographique qui vide la Bosnie-Herzégovine*, *Le Courrier des Balkans*, 5 September 2022. <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/La-saignee-demographique-qui-vide-la-Bosnie-Herzegovine>
Bosnia is becoming depopulated - What to do about it? <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/15/bosnia-is-becoming-depopulated-what-to-do-about-it/>

³² *Recensement en Serbie : le déclin démographique s'accélère*, *Le Courrier des Balkans*, 2 May 2023. <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Recensement-en-Serbie-le-declin-demographique-s-accelere>

³³ In North Macedonia, around one third of married couples have no children, and the fertility rate hit one of the lowest levels worldwide in 2020 (1.31) before rising again in 2021. *Macédoine du Nord : catastrophe démographique, inaction publique*, 31 August 2022, *Le Courrier des Balkans*. <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Macedoine-du-Nord-catastrophe-demographique-inaction-publique>

Yet few seem to have understood the extent of the medium- and long-term implications of this trend.

Nevertheless, some countries have started to take action. Serbia is attempting to attract foreign investments in the country with major tax incentives. Montenegro is working on improving emigration databases and its cooperation with EU countries with a view to gaining a better understanding of the reasons behind this trend. The European Commission is also working on the issue. In 2020 it presented an Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans which focuses on the green economy and the digital economy. Endowed with €9 billion, this plan could pro-

vide significant impetus for major economic change in the region³⁴.

With a view to joining the EU, it will also be necessary to introduce clear legal rules, improve the operation of democratic institutions, step up the independence of the judiciary and combat corruption and patronage. “The rule of law and good governance remain top priorities”, reminded the German foreign minister Heiko Maas in October 2020³⁵. On this point in particular, there is much left to do to fall in step with European standards in order to avoid young people in particular from being tempted to move abroad to escape poor governance and instability and to seek new prospects.

• Conclusion

Experiencing both a falling birth rate and rampant emigration, the Western Balkans are facing a major population decline. This trend is further heightened by the freedom of movement made possible by visa exemptions and could be exacerbated as the hope of joining the EU moves forward.

This situation is reversible, however. In 2001, before their country joined the EU, three quarters of young Romanians wanted to leave. Today, two thirds want to stay. The situation could change completely in the Western Balkans if the necessary reforms are conducted successfully and if the economy provides sufficient employment and hopes for development to stem the brain drain.

The hope of joining the EU should in the meantime encourage the Western Balkans to comply with statistical accounting, headcount and census rules. It could also foster the free movement of ideas, the sharing of best practices and a modernisation of lifestyles. This would bring the populations of the region and the EU closer together. •

³⁴ *Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*, 6 October 2020. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/economic-and-investment-plan-western-balkans_en

³⁵ Opening Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the Conference “Young People, Migration and the Demographic Challenge in the Western Balkans” held on 28 October during the German presidency of the Council of the EU. <https://www.eu2020.de/eu2020-en/news/reden/speech-heiko-maas-western-balkans-conference-youth-migration-demographics/2410496>

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