

"In, Out and In Between": Migration, Demographic Change, Belonging, and Social Transformation in Southeastern Europe

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Introduction

Migration has long been one of the defining features of Southeast Europe. Few regions in Europe have been as profoundly influenced by the interplay of internal, interregional, transnational, and translocal movements as Southeast Europe. These dynamics of “in, out, and in between” have left an indelible mark on the region’s history, society, and culture.

These processes have a long historical trajectory. Large-scale population movements, including the Migration Period and the Slavic migrations, as well as population displacements associated with Ottoman expansion and rule, repeatedly transformed the region’s demographic and cultural landscape. Pastoral mobility, seasonal and long-term labour migration, and, from the nineteenth century onwards, mass emigration to the Americas became important features of social and economic life. The dissolution of empires and the formation of nation-states brought further population exchanges, expulsions, and forced displacement, while the twentieth century saw additional movements resulting from war, border changes, state-building, and economic transformation. Against this longer history of mobility, the socialist and, particularly, the post-socialist periods marked a new phase in the region’s migration history.

The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s constituted a particularly significant turning point. The wars profoundly affected several successor states—most notably Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo/a, but also Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia—producing large-scale refugee movements, forced displacement, “ethnic cleansing”, and genocide. These conflicts not only reshaped the demographic and social landscape of the region but also generated new diasporas and continue to influence migration trajectories, return processes, and patterns of belonging. Their legacies remain deeply embedded in contemporary societies, while divergent memories and competing narratives of the past continue to shape political

discourse and interethnic relations, affecting both local dynamics and the experiences of displaced populations and returnees.

These legacies intersect with the broader political, economic, and legal transformations that have reshaped Southeast Europe since the end of state socialism. Post-socialist restructuring and processes of European integration created new mobility regimes across the region. EU accession brought not only economic and political transformation but also new legal frameworks governing the movement and residence of people, access to labour markets, and cross-border mobility. At the same time, European integration has differentiated Southeast Europe into distinct zones of mobility and border regimes. EU member states have become integrated into the Union's framework of free movement, while the countries of the Western Balkans have remained outside the EU, subject to different forms of border control, visa regimes, and restrictions on labour mobility. European integration has thus not simply opened borders; it has also redrawn them, creating new opportunities for mobility while simultaneously producing differentiated and, for those seeking protection along the so-called Balkan route, often highly restrictive and violent regimes of movement across the region.

These transformations have contributed to profound and uneven demographic and socioeconomic changes across Southeast Europe. Many rural regions and smaller towns have experienced significant population decline, population ageing, and the erosion of public infrastructure and services. Long-term outmigration, particularly from the Western Balkans, has transformed local communities, reshaped labour markets, and altered patterns of family life and social reproduction. Migration is therefore not merely a response to broader social and economic change; it has become a major force driving transformation in its own right. Questions of regional development, demographic sustainability, social cohesion, and economic restructuring are deeply intertwined with migration processes and their long-term effects.

Yet it would be misleading to portray Southeast Europe solely as a region of emigration. One of the most important developments of recent decades has been the increasing complexity of migration patterns throughout the region. While many countries continue to experience substantial population losses through emigration, they have simultaneously become destinations for various forms of immigration, of return and circular migration. Rather than viewing migration as a unidirectional movement, recent scholarship has highlighted the emergence of interconnected mobility systems in which emigration, return, transit, and immigration coexist and interact. However, Southeast Europe is embedded in various border regimes that have significant impacts on people's mobility. In particular, the rigid border regimes in the Western Balkan countries restrict the freedom of movement for many people and influence the ways in which migration occurs in the region. These border regimes also affect interconnected mobility by complicating or redirecting the interaction between different forms of migration—such as emigration, return, transit, and immigration.

These developments have contributed to the growing importance of transnational and translocal perspectives in migration research. Migration is no longer understood merely as a movement from one place to another but as a process through which enduring connections are established and maintained across borders. Families, economic activities, political engagements, and cultural practices frequently span multiple localities and national contexts. Migrants often remain deeply embedded in social worlds that connect places of origin and destination, creating networks that influence both sending and receiving societies. Such transnational and translocal fields have become central to understanding contemporary Southeast Europe and its position within wider European and global mobility regimes.

Building on these dynamics, the role of remittances emerges as a key factor in shaping transnational spaces across Southeast Europe. While tangible remittances, such as financial transfers, remain vital for many households and local economies, migration also facilitates the exchange of intangible remittances, including ideas, knowledge, skills, values, and social practices. These social and cultural remittances circulate alongside people and capital, contributing to broader processes of social transformation. They influence family relations, gender roles, generational expectations, consumption patterns, political attitudes, and visions of the future. Migration thus functions not only as a mechanism of economic redistribution but also as a powerful channel through which social and cultural change is negotiated and enacted.

Recent developments further demonstrate the growing diversification of migration patterns across the region. Return migration, lifestyle migration, retirement migration, labour migration in the care and service sectors, and immigration from countries outside Southeast Europe have become increasingly visible phenomena. This diversification is mirrored in the contributions to this special issue, which examine changing forms of migration across different historical periods and social contexts. In particular, the growing presence of different forms of immigration challenges established assumptions about the region as primarily a “source of migrants” and points to the emergence of new migration destinations within Southeast Europe itself. These developments also raise important questions concerning integration, belonging, ageing, care, labour markets, and the future of communities affected by decades of demographic decline.

The contributions assembled in this special issue engage with these multiple dimensions of migration and mobility. Collectively, they illustrate the diversity of contemporary migration research by drawing on a wide range of disciplinary traditions and methodological approaches. Historical demography, archival research, visual and memory studies, ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative interviews, document analysis, and conceptual reflection all contribute to a more nuanced understanding of migration processes in Southeast Europe.

At the same time, the anthropological approaches represented in this issue draw particular attention to the experiences and practices of those who migrate, return, stay behind, or receive newcomers. Rather than focusing primarily on states, migration regimes, legal frameworks, or demographic trends, they ask how people navigate and make sense of rapidly changing circumstances and how they respond to the opportunities and constraints created by broader political, economic, and social transformations. Such an actor-centred perspective brings questions of agency to the fore: migrants and their families do not simply respond to externally imposed conditions, but actively negotiate, adapt to, appropriate, and sometimes circumvent institutional regulations and social expectations. They develop strategies for dealing with bureaucratic obstacles, maintain relationships across borders, mobilise social networks and resources, and reshape the spaces in which they live. An ethnographic perspective can thus reveal forms of agency and everyday practice that remain less visible when migration is approached primarily through institutional categories or aggregate data.

This perspective also draws attention to the fact that migration is not a uniform or linear process. The same structural conditions may generate very different responses, depending on people’s resources, aspirations, social relations, and previous experiences of mobility. Decisions to leave, stay, return, or move elsewhere are embedded in changing family relationships, local social worlds, economic calculations, and ideas about belonging and the future. Looking at migration from the perspective of everyday practice therefore allows us to move beyond a simple distinction between migrants and non-migrants, or between places of

origin and destination, and instead to examine the diverse ways in which mobility and immobility are produced and negotiated. The articles brought together in this special issue address these themes from different temporal, geographical, and disciplinary perspectives. While they focus on diverse forms of mobility and migration, several common concerns emerge, particularly with regard to the consequences of depopulation, the dynamics of return and immigration, and the ways in which migration reshapes belonging, memory, and social life in Southeast Europe.

Ageing, Care, and the Uneven Geographies of Mobility

International retirement migration has emerged as an increasingly important field of research, drawing attention to the ways ageing, mobility, and access to care are shaped by transnational inequalities. In *“It helps for our pensions over here”: International retirement migration to the Northeastern Bulgarian countryside*, **Desislava Pileva** and **Ivaylo Markov** examine this phenomenon in the context of rural Bulgaria. Situating the concept within rural Bulgaria, the authors broaden its understanding beyond related concepts such as *lifestyle migration*, *privileged migration*, *later-life migration*, *ageing abroad*, *retirement abroad*, and *transnational ageing*. They point to changes in both the geography and social profile of retirement migrants: Bulgaria, particularly its rural areas, has become a new destination, while migrants increasingly represent a heterogeneous group whose decisions are shaped not only by the pursuit of a desirable lifestyle, but also by economic circumstances, insecurity, and the precarity of pension status. The case thus challenges the widespread image of retirement migration as a predominantly lifestyle-driven form of mobility. Instead, it highlights how decisions about where to grow old are often embedded in wider structures of economic inequality and uneven access to resources.

The authors connect this form of migration with changing spatial patterns, particularly *counterurbanisation* and the settlement of rural areas, challenging the assumption that international retirees are primarily associated with attractive urban or tourist destinations. Their use of semi-structured interviews, adapted to the individual experiences, life stories, and professional biographies of the interviewees, similarly emphasizes individual life trajectories and the ways migrants themselves understand their experiences of relocation and life in the rural Bulgarian context.

The focus on later-life mobility is further developed by **Julie Vullnetari** in *Albania: A place to happily grow old in? International retirement migration, and changing landscapes of ageing and care in later life*. While Pileva and Markov focus primarily on the spatial and socioeconomic dimensions of *international retirement migration*, Vullnetari shifts attention towards ageing, vulnerability, and care, examining what happens after migration when individuals develop needs for different forms of care and support.

Focusing on the growing presence of Italian retirees in Albania, Vullnetari examines international retirement migration within a country undergoing profound political, economic, social, and environmental transformations. A central issue is the condition and capacities of the Albanian care system, considered both in relation to international retirees and the domestic older population. This raises questions about inequalities in access to care and the relationship between the needs of international retirees and those of the local population. By connecting migration with ageing and care, the article therefore highlights consequences that extend beyond migrants themselves and affect local social, institutional, and economic structures.

The article also points to the need for further interdisciplinary research, including research on people who previously migrated as labour migrants and return to Albania upon retirement. Such return migrants bring expectations concerning the availability and level of care based on their previous experiences of living and working abroad. This raises broader questions about entitlement to care, the ways such entitlements are shaped through migration experiences, and how different forms of mobility and ageing intersect within the same national care system.

Taken together, the two studies demonstrate how migration continues to shape lives well beyond the working years. By examining retirement migration, ageing, and care in Bulgaria and Albania, they reveal how later-life mobility is embedded in wider structures of inequality, demographic change, and uneven development. Both contributions move beyond individual motivations to explore the broader social consequences of migration, highlighting how mobility, ageing, and care are intertwined with the transformation of local communities, welfare systems, and rural regions in Southeast Europe.

A different perspective on contemporary mobility is offered by **Artan Krasniqi** and **Agnesa Haxhiu** in their contribution on *Filipina migrant women in Kosova: Navigating the challenges of dual discrimination* where they examine the experiences of Filipina care workers in Kosovo/a. Their article draws attention to emerging migration corridors that connect Southeast Europe to labour markets and migration systems extending far beyond the region itself. The arrival of women from the Philippines to work in private households and care settings illustrates how processes of ageing, changing family structures, and the growing demand for care labour are creating new forms of immigration in societies traditionally associated with emigration. By focusing on migrant women employed in largely invisible and highly gendered forms of domestic and care work, the authors reveal the inequalities and vulnerabilities that accompany these new mobility patterns. Their analysis highlights experiences of dual discrimination linked to gender and migrant status, while also drawing attention to the often-overlooked labour that sustains households and care arrangements. More broadly, the article demonstrates how Southeast Europe is increasingly becoming integrated into global care chains and emerging transnational labour markets, thereby challenging established understandings of the region primarily as a space of departure.

A complementary perspective on the changing geography of care is offered by **Kalie Kërpaçi** and **Michael Sauer** in their contribution on *Albanian and Kosovan healthcare migration. Motives for emigrating to Germany*. While Krasniqi and Haxhiu examine the arrival of migrant women into care work in Kosovo/a, Kërpaçi and Sauer focus on the emigration of doctors and nurses from healthcare systems already facing considerable structural difficulties. Based on interviews, they identify a combination of economic and professional factors—including low wages, unemployment, poor working conditions, limited career prospects, and inadequate infrastructure—as important drivers of emigration. At the same time, the interviewees emphasize corruption, favouritism, insufficient investment, and a perceived lack of political will to reform the healthcare system, while political uncertainty further reinforces the sense of insecurity in Kosovo/a. The contribution thus draws attention to the importance of institutional trust and to the uneven relationship between centre and periphery: despite the difficulties healthcare professionals may encounter in Germany, the outflow from Albania and Kosovo/a remains considerable. By bringing *brain drain* into the discussion, the authors highlight a further dimension of the relationship between migration, ageing, and care: while Southeast European societies increasingly receive migrant care

workers, they simultaneously lose qualified healthcare professionals, potentially weakening the very care infrastructures on which their ageing populations depend.

Together, these studies point towards an increasing diversification of migration processes in Southeast Europe. They demonstrate that the region can no longer be understood primarily as a space of emigration. While the outmigration of healthcare professionals from Albania and Kosovo/a continues to shape local labour markets and welfare systems, Southeast Europe is simultaneously emerging as a destination for new forms of migration, including international retirement migration and the arrival of migrant care workers. These developments reflect the growing integration of the region into transnational circuits of mobility, labour, and care. At the same time, the contributions reveal the unequal geographies that underpin these processes: ageing populations, labour shortages, and expanding care needs create demand for migrant labour, while the continued emigration of skilled professionals may further strain already fragile healthcare and welfare infrastructures. Collectively, the articles demonstrate how migration is reshaping not only individual lives but also the social, economic, and institutional foundations of contemporary Southeast European societies.

The Politics of Belonging and the Production of Identity

Migration research has long relied on categories such as *ethnicity*, *minority return*, or *homeland return* to describe patterns of migration and belonging. Yet such categories are not neutral descriptors of social reality. Rather, they emerge within specific academic, political, and institutional contexts that shape how identities are understood, classified, and acted upon.

In *Bordering and bounding identity: Rethinking the notion of 'minority return'*, **Ruth Vollmer** and **Sabina Engelberth** critically examine how ethnic identity and belonging have been conceptualized in research on “minority return” in the post-conflict Western Balkans. Drawing on both a review of the literature and 76 interviews with returnees in Albania, Kosovo/a, and North Macedonia, they challenge understandings of ethnicity as a stable and self-evident category. Instead, the authors show that ethnic identifications are situational and relational, becoming more or less relevant depending on specific social and institutional contexts. In doing so, they question approaches that closely associate territory, ethnicity, and return, and argue for a more open understanding of return as a process through which belonging, identity, and relationships to place are continuously negotiated.

Migration, Depopulation, and the Future of Peripheral Areas

A third thematic cluster brings together contributions that examine the relationship between migration, depopulation, and the future of peripheral regions in Southeast Europe. Despite their different geographical and methodological foci, these studies address a common question: how do states, local communities, and migrants themselves respond to the long-term consequences of outmigration, demographic decline, and regional marginalisation? Collectively, they illustrate that migration is not merely a consequence of uneven development but also contributes to shaping the social, economic, and political trajectories of entire regions.

Maria Adamopoulou's contribution *Deserted borderland. Demographic anxieties and the politicization of emigration in northern Greece during the early Cold War* offers a historical perspective on migration, depopulation, and regional inequality in northern Greece, a borderland whose demographic development was deeply intertwined with questions of national security, geopolitical competition, and state-building. The article situates the large-

scale emigration of the 1960s within a longer history of population movements that had profoundly transformed the region throughout the twentieth century. Following the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, northern Greece became a major destination for Greek refugees arriving from Asia Minor, Pontus, and other former Ottoman territories. The region was subsequently shaped by the violence of the Greek Civil War (1946–1949), which left lasting social and demographic scars, particularly in the mountainous border areas. Against the backdrop of the Cold War and Greece's immediate proximity to the socialist states of the Balkans, migration acquired a significance that extended far beyond economic considerations. Policymakers, journalists, and political actors increasingly framed emigration as a threat to national security and territorial stability, warning that the continuous outflow of population could weaken strategically important border regions. Drawing on archival sources and newspaper analysis, Adamopoulou examines how the two major political camps interpreted this “exodus” in markedly different ways: while conservative forces tended to attribute migration to the country's structural poverty and historical circumstances, the Left denounced it as the outcome of failed development policies and social injustice. Yet despite broad political agreement on the strategic importance of these regions, effective measures capable of reversing depopulation remained limited. The article thus reveals the persistent gap between the symbolic and geopolitical significance attributed to peripheral borderlands and the realities of regional development policies, while highlighting the ways in which migration became entangled with competing visions of nation, territory, and modernisation.

A similar tension between political promises and lived realities emerges in **Nebi Bardhoshi's** ethnographic study *On the liminal state and its entanglements with mass migration and rural areas in Albania*. Focusing on the post-socialist period, Bardhoshi examines the profound effects of long-term outmigration on remote mountain regions characterised by demographic decline, infrastructural decay, and shrinking public services. His analysis moves beyond explanations centred solely on economic underdevelopment and introduces the notion of a “politics of failure,” in which repeated promises of rural revitalisation generate expectations and hopes that remain largely unfulfilled. Drawing on anthropological discussions of liminality, uncertainty, and tricksterisation, the article demonstrates how political actors continuously reproduce narratives of future development while concrete interventions remain absent. Migration emerges here not only as a response to structural marginalisation but also as a strategy developed by local populations in the face of chronic uncertainty and unfulfilled expectations.

While both the Greek and Albanian cases foreground the limitations of state interventions, the contribution “*Biram Hrvatsku*”: *Exploring the ‘return migration and development’ nexus in lagging regions in Croatia* by **Caroline Hornstein Tomić, Janine Pinkow-Läpple, and Ana Budimir** offers a more constructive perspective on the relationship between migration and regional development. Their study examines a Croatian government programme designed to encourage return migrants to establish businesses in economically lagging and demographically affected rural areas. Based on interviews with programme participants, the authors explore both the opportunities and the challenges associated with entrepreneurial return migration. The article speaks directly to debates surrounding the return-development nexus by demonstrating how returnees may contribute not only financial resources but also knowledge, skills, professional experiences, and social networks acquired abroad. At the same time, the findings reveal the structural constraints that continue to shape economic activity in peripheral regions, highlighting the complex interplay between individual agency and broader institutional conditions.

Taken together, these contributions illuminate the long-term consequences of migration for peripheral regions while also highlighting the diverse ways in which states, communities, and migrants seek to address demographic decline and economic stagnation. They reveal the tensions between political rhetoric and practical intervention, between hope and disappointment, and between structural constraints and human agency. At a broader theoretical level, they invite us to view migration not only as a symptom of uneven development but also as a potential resource for social and economic transformation. Whether through the circulation of people, capital, knowledge, or aspirations, migration remains deeply implicated in contemporary struggles over the future of peripheral regions across Southeast Europe.

Historical Perspectives: Migration, Demography, and Memory

Two contributions approach migration from distinct historical perspectives, shifting the focus from contemporary mobility to the longer-term social, demographic, and cultural contexts in which patterns of movement and belonging have developed. **Siegfried Gruber** and **Daniel-Armin Đumić**, in their paper *Marriage migrations of women in Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia in comparative perspective*, draw on advances in historical demography to examine marriage migration in nineteenth-century Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo/a. Here, “marriage migration” is understood not in the contemporary sense of cross-border marriage associated with migration and citizenship regimes, but as the spatial dimension of marriage formation: whether women remained in their natal village or moved to another settlement upon marriage. Their comparative analysis reveals striking differences between the regions. While village-endogamous marriage was relatively widespread in the Serbian case, village-exogamous patterns prevailed in Albania and Kosovo/a, including Janjevo. These differences are particularly revealing because they occurred despite broadly comparable principles of household formation and patrilocal residence. The study thus demonstrates how marriage practices could generate different forms and scales of social connectedness in rural communities: while village-endogamy tended to reinforce dense local networks, village-exogamy connected households to wider networks extending beyond the immediate settlement. Historical-demographic approaches of this kind make it possible to compare regions systematically and to uncover forms of social organisation and spatial connectedness that are difficult to grasp through contemporary migration categories.

Vida Bakondy’s contribution *The social life of a migrant photo archive: Jovan Ritopečki’s images of Yugoslav workers in Austria* shifts the perspective from demographic patterns to the ways in which migration has been visually recorded, represented, and subsequently incorporated into cultural memory. Focusing on Yugoslav labour migrants in Austria, the article explores the photographic archive and, in particular, the position of photographers as members of migrant communities. It asks how photographs contributed to the construction of migrant experiences and how these visual records have shaped the archival visibility of Yugoslav migration in Austria. The trajectory from community-based photographic and commemorative practices towards their incorporation into institutional settings of cultural memory points to a broader transformation: experiences that were initially preserved and circulated within migrant communities gradually became part of a wider public history of migration. Photography thus provides a means of tracing the movement from history to memory, while also raising questions about whose experiences become visible, how they are represented, and how the presence of former Yugoslav labour migrants—many of whom remained in Austria—has been incorporated into Austrian cultural memory.

Taken together, the two contributions illustrate the value of historical perspectives for understanding migration beyond contemporary categories: one reconstructs patterns of mobility through demographic evidence, while the other traces how migrant experiences have been preserved and transformed through visual memory.

About the Creation of this Special Issue

This special issue also constitutes Volume 25 of *Ethnologia Balkanica*, the journal of the International Association for Southeast European Anthropology (InASEA). Since its foundation, *Ethnologia Balkanica* has been published primarily in print and subsequently made available online through the Central and Eastern European Online Library (CEEOL). Following a decision of the InASEA Board in 2024, and in response to repeated requests from members of the association, the journal has begun the transition towards a fully digital and open-access format. The present volume is the second issue to appear exclusively in digital form and with open access.

As InASEA currently does not possess the institutional and technical infrastructure required to publish *Ethnologia Balkanica* independently as an online journal, we approached Florian Bieber, Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, to explore the possibility of publishing this volume during the transition period as a special issue of *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*. We are deeply grateful for the generous support and hospitality extended by Florian Bieber and the editorial team of the journal. In accordance with the journal's publication guidelines, the size of the volume was considerably reduced. In return, all contributions included in this special issue underwent a rigorous double-blind peer-review process and are now freely accessible through open access publication.

The origins of this volume lie in the 11th International Conference of the International Association for Southeast European Anthropology (InASEA), held from 19 to 22 September 2024 at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Prishtina. The conference was organised by the Department of Anthropology and brought together scholars from a wide range of disciplinary and regional backgrounds to discuss migration, mobility, and social transformation in Southeast Europe. The local organising committee was chaired by Tahir Latifi. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Prishtina, the members of the organising committee, and all conference participants whose contributions, discussions, and feedback helped shape the intellectual framework of this special issue.

The preparation of this volume has been a collaborative effort extending over almost two years. We are particularly indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and constructive criticism, which substantially improved the individual contributions. Finally, we would like to thank all authors for their patience, commitment, and willingness to engage in multiple rounds of revisions throughout the editorial process. Their contributions reflect the diversity of contemporary migration research in Southeast Europe and made this special issue possible.

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