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Between Return and Permanence: Circular Migration in Southeast Europe

Abstract

This article examines migration patterns in Southeast Europe, with a particular focus on circular labour migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia. Facing labour shortages across both low-skilled and high-skilled sectors, Slovenia has increasingly relied on migrants from the Balkans to fill these gaps. However, the persistent outflow of workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina has had detrimental effects on Bosnia's economy and society, exacerbating brain drain and demographic shifts. To address these challenges in third countries, the European Union has been promoting a circular migration model over the past three decades. While this model theoretically offers benefits to both countries by reducing brain drain and meeting labour demands, its practical effectiveness remains uncertain. This article analyses the impact of circular migration policy in Slovenia by examining migration statistics and assessing whether circular migration functions as intended in practice.

Keywords

circular migration, labour migrants, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia

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1. Introduction

Slovenia attracts a significant number of labour migrants from the Balkans, making it a country shaped not only by the emigration of its own citizens but also by the immigration of citizens from neighbouring states. Over the past two decades, the inflow of foreign nationals has exceeded the outflow, while, conversely, more Slovenian citizens have emigrated than returned (SURS). This pattern is not new: already in the 1960s, Slovenia recruited workers from other parts of Yugoslavia, and this trend has continued even after the dissolution of the former state. Today, the majority of labour migrants come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, accounting for around 40% of all migrants, followed by Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Croatia (SURS).

Slovenia's geographical and cultural proximity to these countries, together with its relatively stable economy and persistent demand for additional labour, act as strong pull factors. At the same time, the broader orientation of EU migration policies and the pressures of the 2015 refugee crisis, which tested Slovenia's institutional capacities, suggest that the Slovenian government increasingly frames migration within a circular migration paradigm. While the Slovenian economy relies heavily on migrant labour to sustain growth, the large-scale outflow from Bosnia and Herzegovina has negative repercussions for that country's economy and society, exacerbating both demographic challenges and brain drain. In this context, a circular migration model is often seen as a potential solution – one that could mitigate brain drain while enabling migrants to contribute to the Slovenian labour market and eventually return home.

This article examines the dynamics of circular migration, highlighting both its advantages and limitations. First, we draw on existing theoretical debates on labour migration, with particular attention to the Slovenian academic context. Second, we review the institutional framework for circular migration in Slovenia. Finally, we analyse official migration statistics to assess whether the circular migration model is functioning in practice, focusing specifically on Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia. Following Geddes (2015, 573), who notes that “one proxy for temporary [and circular] migration is the registration of residence permits”, we investigate the number of permanent and temporary residence permits issued to Bosnian nationals over the past fifteen years. On this basis, we assess the extent to which circular migration operates in practice. We argue that circular migration can be an effective model only if properly implemented and supported by favourable conditions in both

sending and receiving countries – namely, a functioning economy and political stability in the country of origin, which are essential for return migration to occur.

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2. Overview of Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides a concise yet elaborated overview of theoretical developments in migration research, situating the present study within the broader field. Migration has always been part of human history; however, contemporary forms of mobility are shaped by processes of globalisation and are markedly different from earlier movements. Traditionally, migration was primarily associated with the search for employment and improved economic status, or it was classified as forced migration driven by political or religious persecution (Hammar & Tamas 1997). Today, the concept encompasses highly diverse forms of mobility across shifting geographical, economic, and political contexts. Emphasis is now placed on diversity, interconnectedness, and the multiplicity of motivations. Migration can thus be understood as “a modern form of mobility and a dynamic set of relations between spaces, cultures, people and identifications” (Passerini et al. 2010, 3).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a significant theoretical shift occurred with the emergence of the “new economics of labor migration” (Stark 1991). This school of thought challenged the earlier neoclassical approach, which had treated migration primarily as an outcome of individual rational choice in response to wage differentials between countries. By contrast, the new economics of labour migration adopts a household and family perspective, where migration decisions are made collectively to diversify income sources, reduce risk, and achieve greater security (de Haas 2008, 34–39). This explains migration even in contexts where higher earnings abroad are uncertain. Moreover, this framework recognises the enduring role of migrants’ remittances and the continuing ties to their communities of origin, thereby stressing the developmental potential of migration for sending societies.

In parallel, theories of transnationalism have gained prominence, particularly since the 1990s. Transnationalism highlights the ways migrants sustain multiple linkages – economic, social, political, and cultural – across national borders. Technological advancements, cheaper travel, and accessible telecommunications have made it far easier for migrants to maintain close connections with their home societies while integrating into host contexts. Migrants can thus live “transnational lives”, sustaining their original identities and attachments while simultaneously

adapting to new cultural environments (de Haas 2008, 34–39). These transnational perspectives are crucial for understanding contemporary circular migration, where repeated back-and-forth movement blurs the traditional boundaries between temporary and permanent settlement.

While economic factors remain central in shaping migration, they cannot fully explain contemporary patterns. Theories of migration must also account for the heterogeneity of migrant populations. In the context of intensified global mobility, migrants cannot be treated as a unified category; rather, they are a mixed and differentiated group with diverse backgrounds, aspirations, and experiences (Cukut Krilić 2009, 31). Moreover, Boyd and Grieco (2003) remind us that focusing only on the structural causes of migration risks overlooking the agency of migrants and the importance of social and personal factors. Individual life circumstances – such as educational opportunities, family obligations, social values, and personal goals – play a crucial role in shaping both the decision to migrate and the outcomes of migration.

Building on this theoretical background, the present article adopts the new economics of labour migration and the transnationalism perspective as its central frameworks. This combination allows us to conceptualise circular migration not merely as a labour market adjustment mechanism, but as a process deeply embedded in family strategies, social networks, and transnational ties. At the same time, we recognise the structural constraints shaped by national and EU-level migration policies. This framework is particularly suited for analysing the case of Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia, who often migrate as part of household strategies, sustain strong transnational connections, and are directly affected by shifting institutional frameworks that enable or hinder the possibility of circular migration.

The article also builds on existing literature on migration from Southeast Europe. As Božić and Kuti (2016) note, research on the former Yugoslav region has often prioritised migration flows and post-socialist transitions, while migrant networks have received less systematic attention. Recent scholarship, however, has increasingly focused on migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ćudić et al. 2023; Savić-Bojanović & Jevtić 2022; Dimova & Wolff 2015; Babić 2013). A key contribution is Emirhafizović et al. (2013), who edited a comprehensive volume analysing Bosnian migration to destinations including the United States, Norway, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and Slovenia.

Research on Bosnian immigrants and their descendants in Slovenia has also been substantial. Silva Mežnarić's (1986) pioneering study "*Bošnaci*": *A kuda idu Slovenci nedeljom* ["Bosnians": And Where Do Slo-

venians Go on Sundays] was the first to systematically address Bosnian internal migrants in Slovenia. More recently, Ješe Perković (2024) has examined transnational social spaces and Bosnian descendants in Slovenia. Considerable attention has also been given to legal status and citizenship issues, especially following the “erasure”, when approximately 28,000 individuals were removed from the register of permanent residents and reclassified as foreigners (Mandlc & Učakar 2011). Ješe Perković and Učakar (2017) further explored shifting public perceptions of labour migrants during the 2008–2015 economic crisis, noting how attitudes shifted from largely negative to more sympathetic after widespread labour abuses were revealed.

Nevertheless, further research is urgently needed on labour migrants from third countries to the EU. Such research is necessary not only to better understand their lived realities but also to inform more coherent and equitable migration policies.

3. Temporary and Circular Migration: Concepts and Debates

In this chapter, we define temporary and circular migration and review competing perspectives on these concepts. Although the term circular migration is often considered a contemporary phenomenon, it has been in use for decades. As early as 1982, Graeme Hugo employed the term to describe internal migration within Indonesia (Rannveig Agunias & Newland 2007, 2). Over time, circular migration has been used to describe various migration patterns; however, in recent years, it has become most commonly associated with temporary worker programmes.

There are distinct differences between temporary and circular migration. As Geddes (2015, 573) explains, “temporary migration is time-limited (although the scope of the temporariness can vary), while circular migration creates the possibility of entry and re-entry (although most member states do not have legal and policy frameworks for circular migration)”. The European Migration Network (EMN 2011, 14) defines temporary migration as “migration for a specific motivation and/or purpose with the intention that, afterwards, there will be a return to country of origin or onward movement”. The EMN Glossary also notes that, “with regard to the development of EU policy, this may be seen in the context of *inter alia* circular migration and seasonal workers” (EMN 2011, 14). Circular migration is defined as “a repetition of legal migration by the same person between two or more countries”,

with examples provided in the Commission Communication on circular migration and mobility partnerships between the European Union and third countries (EMN 2011, 14). There has been considerable difficulty in distinguishing circular migration from temporary migration. At a minimum, it is essential to recognize that circular migration, or mobility, is a broad concept encompassing all forms of repeated cross-border movements – whether organized or spontaneous – occurring over varying time spans, with the potential to generate positive developmental outcomes (Geddes 2015, 573).

3.1 The Triple Win Narrative

Advocates¹ of circular migration, particularly within EU institutions, highlight its supposed triple win potential. First, sending countries are thought to avoid brain drain because migrants eventually return home, often with enhanced skills and resources. Second, receiving countries benefit by securing a flexible labour force for the period needed, without long-term responsibilities such as pensions, healthcare, or family reunification. Third, migrants themselves are expected to gain access to better wages, new skills, and opportunities to send remittances home, while retaining the possibility of return. Advocates further argue that circular and temporary migration schemes may reduce irregular migration by creating legal, regulated avenues for mobility.

This optimistic framing, however, tends to privilege macroeconomic outcomes while neglecting the lived experiences of migrants and their families. Early debates in the latter half of the twentieth century, especially those concerning highly educated migrants, already highlighted the tension between the developmental potential of mobility and the risks of brain drain. The current emphasis on circularity reframes this tension in a policy-friendly way, but longstanding concerns about exploitation and integration remain unresolved.

3.2 EU Policy Context

For circular migration to function effectively, EU and member state institutions stress the need for appropriate governance mechanisms. The European Commission (2007) promotes policies that combine incentives for circulation with support for reintegration. Key measures include multiple-entry visas or employment permits to allow repeat mobility, alongside assistance for returnees in their country of origin – such as job placement services or support for entrepreneurship.

The European Migration Network (EMN 2011, 33) identified four key objectives underlying EU attention to temporary and circular migration:

1. supporting economic progress in the member state (e.g. by addressing labour shortages, contributing to the knowledge society, etc.);
2. promoting the development of third countries, including mitigating brain drain and stimulating brain gain;
3. ensuring a livelihood strategy and the integration of migrants; and
4. the return of migrants.

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As Zimmermann (2014) argues, enabling a high level of mobility within the circular migration context achieves the best effects, as workers move for work and usually do not stay in the target country if they cannot find a job. Conversely, enforcing restrictions and stringent conditions for re-entry into the country, which is the normal legislative framework and practice of most developed countries in relation to temporary migration, often contributes to attempts at illegal entry, residence, and work, as well as to migrants' unwillingness to return to their country of origin after their legal work permit expires.

Would-be circular migrants who cannot easily move in and out of the host country are also more likely to bring family members with them when they migrate, since migrants can no longer be sure that they will be able to return home to see their family (Zimmemann 2014).

3.3 Critiques and Historical Parallels

Critics of circular migration policy point to the past experiences of guest-worker policies and long-term social consequences, such as German *Gastarbeiter* (engl. guest-worker) system in the 1960s, when workers were recruited and sent back on the employer's demand. They highlight a significant resemblance to the guest-worker migration policies of the 1950s and 1960s – a form of migration that, for many migrants, ultimately became permanent rather than temporary (Castles 2006; Medica 2010). This model is defined by partial social inclusion and citizenship exclusion (Medica 2010, 40). Its main characteristic is that migrant workers are included in certain spheres of social life (especially the labour market) but have no access to others (citizenship, political participation, etc.). Migration is perceived as a temporary phenomenon that should end with the migrants returning to their country of origin

(Medica 2010, 40). Moreover, the temporary nature of circular migration discourages employers from investing in the human capital, skills, and knowledge of these workers. Many migrants often take a downward step in their careers by performing jobs for which they are over-qualified.

“Germany, like other Western European countries, was trying to import labour but not people” (Castles 2006, 742). However, Germany could not prevent the reunion of workers with their family members in the host country (Castles 2006, 743). As Medica (2011) points out, it became evident that the guest-worker migration policy in Germany had been outlived, and the emerging multicultural image became a response to the challenges posed by the need for different cultures to cohabit in society.

Despite previous experiences with the guest-worker model, political interest in both temporary and circular migration has increased over the past three decades. In 2014, an EU-level agreement was reached on a directive regulating the rights of temporary migrants employed as seasonal workers (Geddes 2015, 573). This directive applies to sectors such as agriculture, horticulture, and tourism, where migration tends to be seasonal and temporary yet also circular, as workers may return year after year. It establishes regulations regarding the entry and residence of migrant seasonal workers and upholds the principle of equal treatment in areas such as working conditions, wages, health and safety, and holiday entitlement (Geddes 2015, 573). However, it excludes issues such as access to unemployment benefits, which fall outside the scope of temporary, seasonal migration.

3.4 Bilateral Agreements and Their Effectiveness

Several bilateral agreements between EU countries and third countries have attempted to implement circular migration in practice:

1. Germany-Western Balkans Agreement: allows workers in the health sector from the Western Balkans to work in Germany temporarily, but many do not return.
2. Spain-Morocco Seasonal Work Program: some Moroccan agricultural workers have participated in circular migration, but enforcement is difficult.
3. Slovenia-Bosnia and Herzegovina Agreement: aimed at promoting temporary labour migration, but evidence suggests many Bosnian workers stay rather than circulate. (Geddes 2015, 573)

As Rannveig Agunias and Newland (2007) underscore, research consistently demonstrates that many migrants, including members of the diaspora, express a desire and intention to return to their countries of origin, either temporarily or permanently. However, various factors often impede their ability to fulfil this intention. The aspiration to return, whether temporary or permanent, does not always translate into actual mobility. For some migrants, the cost of returning may be prohibitive, or they may fear losing their jobs, while certain temporary migrants risk losing their residency status. Others may perceive a lack of professional or business opportunities in their country of origin, making return less appealing. Furthermore, some migrants establish strong social and economic ties in their host country, reducing their interest in returning home except for occasional visits. Due to all these factors, the effectiveness of bilateral agreements in promoting circularity remains questionable.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the case of the Slovenia - Bosnia and Herzegovina Agreement to assess whether circular migration has functioned as intended. We argue that while circular migration is presented as an optimal triple win model, its success depends on the interplay between policy design, structural conditions in both sending and receiving countries, and the agency of migrants themselves.

4. Slovenian Legal Framework for Circular Migration

Slovenia, as a newly independent state in 1991, faced the challenge of establishing its own legal and institutional framework for managing immigration. Over the years, its policies have been shaped by EU accession, Schengen Area integration, and broader geopolitical and economic trends.

Following independence, Slovenia enacted the 1991 Citizenship Act, which posed significant challenges for non-Slovenian residents of the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats. One of the most contentious issues during this period was the Erased crisis of 1992. In 1999, the Slovenian National Assembly adopted a resolution on immigration policy, which set out policy guidelines, and the Aliens Act, which provided the legal basis for implementing immigration controls and residency regulations. Together, these marked Slovenia's first formal attempt to regulate immigration and residence permits.

Prior to EU accession in 2004, Slovenia's migration policies were primarily focused on controlling permanent immigration. However, EU accession necessitated the alignment of its immigration policies with European standards. The country began harmonising its frameworks with EU policies that encouraged managed migration and labour mobility. Slovenia officially joined the Schengen Area in 2007, eliminating internal border controls while reinforcing external EU borders. The adoption of the 2011 Foreigners Act facilitated work permits for third-country nationals by simplifying visa and residence permit procedures for both EU and third-country nationals, thereby laying the groundwork for circular migration schemes.

In the 2010s, the Economic Migration Strategy 2010–2020 (Evropska migracijska mreža, 2018) partly regulated the integration of third-country nationals into the labour market. Its objectives, aligned with the Slovenian Development Strategy (2005), were to:

1. offset the decline of the working-age population and address short-term labour market imbalances through immigration;
2. attract migrants who enhance innovation, entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and human capital;
3. enable Slovene workers to gain experience abroad while limiting brain drain by promoting the circulation of experts.

In 2015, further facilitation of work mobility was introduced into Slovenian legislation. On 1 September 2015, the Employment, Self-Employment, and Work of Foreigners Act (ZZSDT) came into force, implementing a “single permit” system. Prior to this reform, Slovenian legislation prescribed three distinct types of work permits, only one of which – namely, the “permanent work permit” – allowed a foreign worker to transition into long-term immigration. This permit was directly linked to a permanent residence permit (Malačič 2010, 92). The other two permits – the employment permit and the permit for seasonal work (commonly referred to as the “work permit”) – were more closely associated with circular migration. Both were valid for only one year and required renewal.

The introduction of the single permit enables third-country nationals to enter Slovenia and obtain residence, employment, and work authorization through a streamlined process. Applicants now benefit from a simplified procedure at the administrative unit, following the one-stop-shop principle. As a result, foreign nationals seeking employment, self-employment, or work in Slovenia no longer need to acquire two separate permits. The single permit consolidates and replaces the resi-

dence permit (previously issued by administrative units) and the work permit (formerly issued by the Employment Service of Slovenia).

Owing to historical ties and the needs of the Slovenian economy, a bilateral Agreement on the Employment of Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia was signed between the two countries in 2012 (Law on the Ratification ... 2012). The agreement established a legal framework for regulating labour migration between the two countries. Effective since 1 March 2013, the agreement aligns with the EU's focus on circular migration and aims to promote ethical recruitment practices, mitigate brain drain, and eliminate administrative barriers to the employment of Bosnian citizens in Slovenia. Furthermore, it seeks to safeguard migrant workers' rights while reinforcing the expectation that they will return voluntarily to Bosnia and Herzegovina upon the expiration of their work permits.

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The key characteristics of this agreement include:

1. Facilitation of Employment – enabling Bosnian workers to access employment opportunities in Slovenia under regulated conditions, ensuring compliance with Slovenian labour laws.
2. Employer Sponsorship Requirement – Slovenian employers must apply for work permits on behalf of Bosnian workers, ensuring that employment is arranged before migration occurs.
3. Temporary and Circular Migration Focus – promoting temporary labour migration, with an emphasis on short-term and circular migration patterns rather than permanent settlement.
4. Regulated Work Permit System – work permits issued under this agreement are job- and employer-specific, meaning workers are tied to a particular employer for the duration of their contract.
5. Worker Protection Measures – provisions to prevent labour exploitation, ensuring that Bosnian workers receive fair wages and working conditions in line with Slovenian labour laws.
6. Administrative Cooperation – mechanisms for collaboration between Slovenian and Bosnian authorities to oversee implementation, monitor compliance, and resolve any issues.

This agreement reflects broader European trends of managed labour migration while maintaining a temporary migration model. However, its effectiveness in achieving true circular migration remains a subject of debate. In the following chapter, we examine whether the agreement effectively facilitates circular migration and encourages migrants to return to their home country.

5. Circular Migration in Practice: From Bosnia and Herzegovina to Slovenia and Back

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Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) share a long history of migration, shaped by their common past within Yugoslavia and by evolving labour and political dynamics. During the period of socialist Yugoslavia, Slovenia, as the most economically developed republic, attracted many labour migrants from Bosnia and other southern republics. Many Bosnians moved to Slovenia in search of better employment opportunities, particularly in industries such as construction, manufacturing, and mining. Today, BiH remains one of the main sources of migrant labour in Slovenia, particularly in low-wage sectors.

In this chapter, we analyse official statistical data on labour migration from BiH to Slovenia. As Geddes (2015, 573) notes, “one proxy for temporary [and circular] migration is the registration of residence permits.” To assess whether circular migration has been implemented in practice, we examine the number of permanent and temporary residence permits issued by the Slovenian government to Bosnian nationals over a fifteen-year period. We collected data from two primary sources: the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) and the Migration Directorate at the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia (MNZ). These sources provide official records on labour migration trends, including the issuance and renewal of residence and work permits.

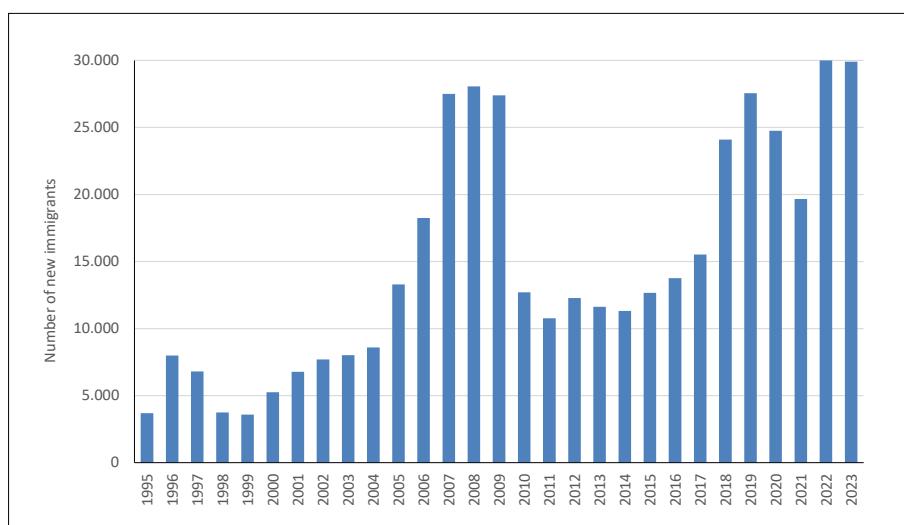
Given the limited availability of official statistical data from BiH, we were unable to obtain comprehensive data on emigration from BiH. However, to supplement our analysis, we incorporated secondary data from various sources, including the Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Commission country reports, European Migration Network and the International Labour Organization. These sources provided valuable insights into emigration patterns from BiH, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of labour migration flows between the two countries. To ensure the reliability and validity of our findings, we employed a comparative approach, cross-referencing data from multiple sources where possible. Additionally, we considered potential limitations related to data collection methodologies and reporting discrepancies among institutions. This methodological approach enables a more nuanced interpretation of labour migration dynamics within the Slovenian and broader European context.

In analysing official data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS), we selected a fifteen-year period from 2008 to 2023.

This timeframe was chosen to capture significant economic fluctuations, beginning with the onset of the 2008 financial crisis – which had profound effects on Slovenia and Europe – and concluding with the economic downturn and high inflation rates following the COVID-19 crisis. While some analyses conducted by SURS do not cover this exact period, they nonetheless provide a valuable representation of migration trends in Slovenia. Additionally, the Migration Directorate (MNZ) has been collecting data since its establishment in 2007, though some data for the initial years are incomplete.

To gain a broader understanding of immigration trends in Slovenia, we first examine the number of new immigrants over three decades. Since gaining independence, Slovenia has primarily functioned as a receiving country. As depicted in Chart 1, the number of immigrant foreign nationals steadily increased from 1995 until 2009. However, the economic crisis that severely impacted the Slovenian economy in 2009, coupled with a prolonged political crisis, led to a substantial decline in immigration over the following seven years. Subsequently, immigration numbers began to recover gradually, reaching levels comparable to those observed in 2007–2008, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the number of immigrants reached the highest level in independent Slovenia. These trends underscore the sensitivity of migration flows to economic cycles and broader socio-political conditions.

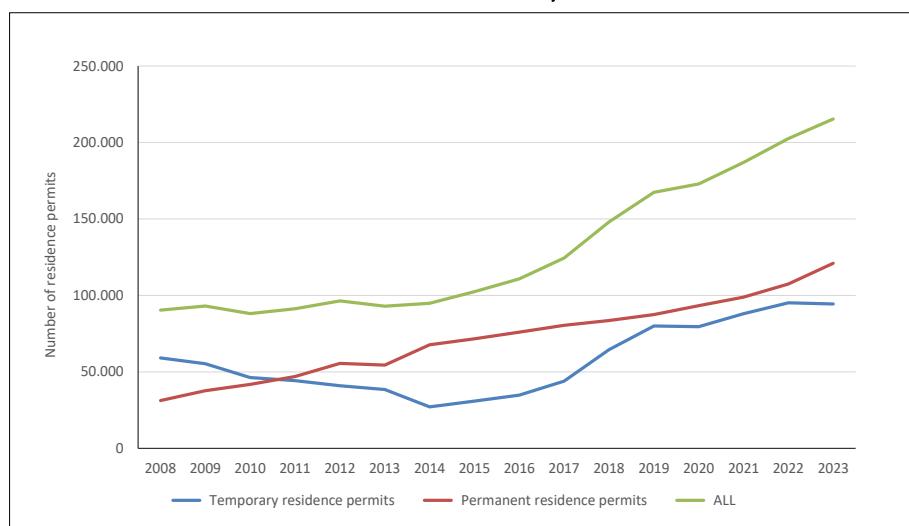
Chart 1: Number of immigrant foreign nationals in Slovenia per year, 1995–2023



Source: SURS.

Chart 2 presents data on permanent and temporary residence permits issued to third-country nationals in Slovenia as of 31 December each year from 2008 to 2023. In 2008, there were 59,174 third-country nationals holding temporary residence permits and 31,245 with permanent residence permits. The unstable economic conditions in the early 2010s negatively affected the labour market. By 2011, the number of permanent residence permits had surpassed that of temporary residence permits. The data indicate a significant decline in the issuance of temporary residence permits during the economic crisis (2013–2015), with numbers dropping by half. In 2013, the Bilateral Agreement on the Employment of Workers between Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Law on the Ratification ... 2012) came into force. Given that this agreement promotes a circular migration model, an increase in the number of temporary residence permits would have been expected in the following years. However, this increase did not occur immediately; it was in 2017 that the number of temporary residence permits began to rise. In 2013, also the EU visa-liberalisation regime for Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania was implemented, and a single permit system was introduced into Slovenian legislation in 2015, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Hence, migration flows increased, and the overall number of residence permits issued has been steadily increasing ever since.

Chart 2: Number of permanent and temporary residence permits for citizens of third countries in Slovenia on 31 December, 2008–2023

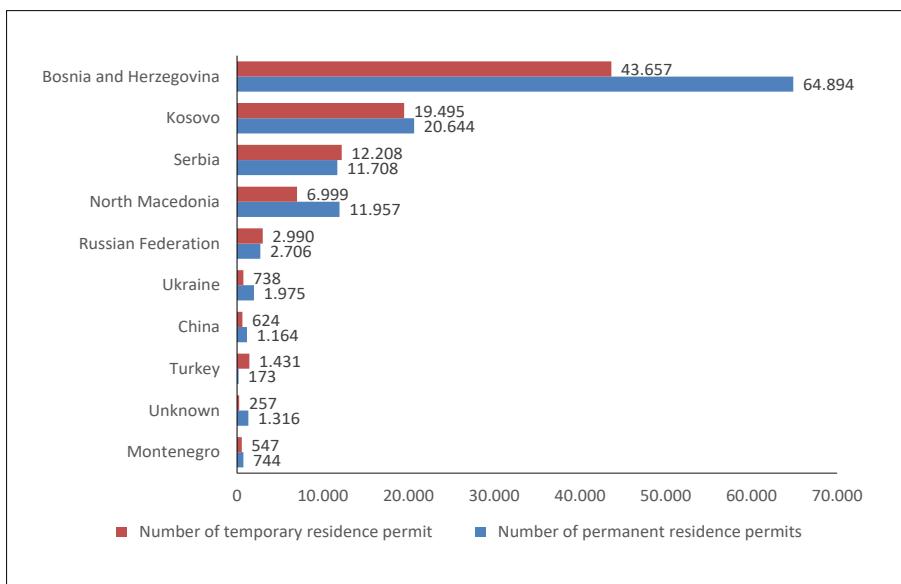


Source: MNZ.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary residence permits increased by 10% to 88,005, while permanent residence permits rose by 6% to 98,925, compared with the previous year. By 2023, the number of permanent residence permits had risen to 121,032, while temporary residence permits reached 94,359. Notably, around half of these permits were issued to Bosnian nationals (see Chart 3).

According to data from the Migration Directorate (MNZ), nationals of BiH have represented the largest group of labour migrants in Slovenia since its independence. As shown in Chart 3, Bosnian nationals remain the most numerous group holding residence permits in Slovenia. It is important to note that official statistics on labour migration do not account for undocumented workers, meaning the actual number of Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia is likely higher.

Chart 3: Top ten third countries whose nationals held the highest number of valid permanent and temporary residence permits in Slovenia on 31 December 2023



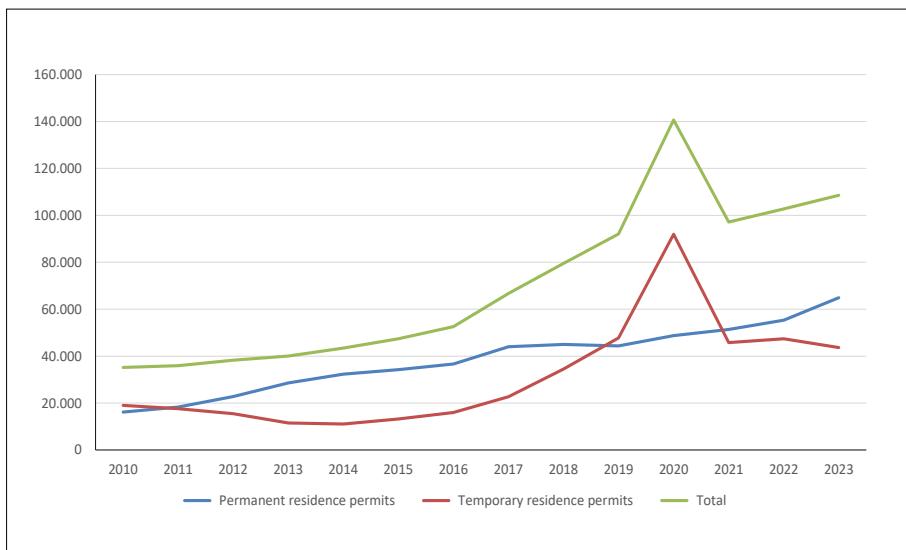
Source: MNZ.

Chart 4 illustrates the number of valid permanent and temporary residence permits issued to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia from 2010 to 2023, recorded on the last day of each year (31 December). The data is presented in three categories: permanent residence permits (blue line), temporary residence permits (red line), and the total number of permits (green line).

The trend indicates a steady increase in the total number of residence permits over the years, with a particularly sharp rise observed between 2017 and 2019. This upward trajectory was primarily driven by the increase in temporary residence permits, which peaked significantly in 2020 before experiencing a substantial decline in 2021. This fluctuation was likely the result of COVID-19 policy restrictions, which prompted Bosnian nationals to apply in greater numbers for temporary residence permits in order to facilitate freer movement despite institutional barriers.

Conversely, the number of permanent residence permits has shown a more stable and gradual increase throughout the observed period. From 2010 to 2023, the number of permanent residence permits consistently grew, suggesting a long-term integration trend among Bosnian nationals residing in Slovenia.

Chart 4: Number of valid temporary and permanent residence permits on the last day of each year (as of December 31) from 2010 to 2023, issued to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: MNZ.

Over the years, the number of permanent residence permits has consistently exceeded that of temporary permits. Notably, in the past three years, the issuance of temporary residence permits has stagnated. However, both types of residence permits remain at a high level, indicating that some workers return home while others stay for longer periods. A significant number of migrant workers who remain in the host country

for an extended time aspire not only to work but also to settle there permanently. Many bring their families to join them and often assist friends in securing employment (Ješe Perković 2024). The reasons for not returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina have yet to be thoroughly researched. However, based on other case studies (Zimmermann 2014), it can be assumed that key factors include the country's poor economic conditions and the migrants' partial integration into the host society. As they become more embedded in the host society, their inclination toward circular migration diminishes, and they increasingly opt for permanent residence.

There is no official data on the number of Bosnian labour migrants who return home or engage in circular migration. However, reports from the Agency for Work and Employment of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Commission's Country Report (2023) indicate a significant outflow of people from BiH and a growing shortage of workers in key sectors. Despite this, unemployment in BiH remains around 12%. The Bosnian labour market is very specific, as it is strongly influenced by remittances and undeclared work. The size of the undeclared economy is estimated at 30% of GDP (Pasovic & Efendic 2018), while over 20% of the labour force is believed to participate in the undeclared economy (Williams & Efendic 2020). As Williams and Efendic (2021, 486) write, "the main characteristics of the labour market in BiH are a very low activity rate, which is about half of the EU average (around 40%), and high unemployment rates, especially for young people."

According to the SEE Jobs Gateway Database (2023), the labour force participation rate among the working-age population was nearly 60% in 2023. Although it has been steadily increasing, women's participation in the labour market remains significantly lower than that of men. Similarly, the labour market participation rate of young people (aged 15–24) remains relatively low, at approximately 30%. The overall employment rate also remains low, at 47% in 2023, while the unemployment rate stood at 13% in the same year.

The circular migration model appears only partially effective for Bosnian workers, as economic and political instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with weak state institutions, discourages return migration. Given the long history of migration between Slovenia and BiH, a large Bosnian community has developed in Slovenia, providing newcomers with a social network and safety net. This network offers information, practical guidance, and financial assistance to Bosnians seeking employment in Slovenia, facilitating their integration into the host society while making return migration more difficult (Ješe Perković 2004).

Moreover, the majority of Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia are low-skilled workers, for whom frequent movement between the home and host countries presents greater challenges. This underscores a broader issue: circular migration is not a universally applicable model across all countries and workforce categories.

6. Conclusion

Slovenia has relied on migrant labour since the 1960s, first through internal migration within Yugoslavia and later through external migration. Throughout this period, Bosnia and Herzegovina has consistently served as the principal source of workers. This long-standing migration trend has been shaped by multiple factors: Slovenia's comparatively robust economy, persistent shortages of low-skilled labour, political and economic instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider Balkan region, and the geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity between the two countries. While such migration has supported Slovenia's labour market needs, it has simultaneously had adverse effects on Bosnia and Herzegovina, contributing to economic stagnation, demographic decline, and social transformation. These challenges have often been framed as potentially mitigable through the model of circular migration.

In alignment with the EU's migration policy discourse, Slovenia has formally adopted a circular migration framework through a bilateral agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina signed in 2012. This agreement emphasises the importance of return and the circulation of workers, thereby institutionalising the idea that migration should not result in permanent settlement. The model reflects the broader EU narrative of circular migration as a triple win: ensuring labour supply for member states, promoting development in sending countries by offsetting brain drain, and enabling migrants to benefit from both wage differentials and skills acquisition.

Our analysis of official migration statistics provides a more nuanced picture. Over a fifteen-year period, we examined the number of temporary and permanent residence permits issued to Bosnian nationals in Slovenia. The data reveal a simultaneous increase in both categories: temporary permits suggest significant short-term labour mobility, while rising permanent permits demonstrate that many workers choose to remain long-term and integrate into Slovenian society. This outcome reflects broader structural conditions: ongoing instability and limited opportunities in Bosnia and Herzegovina reduce the attractiveness of

return, while relatively stable employment prospects and cultural proximity encourage settlement in Slovenia.

These findings highlight the tension between circular migration as a policy narrative and migration as a social reality. The EU promotes circular migration because it symbolically reconciles divergent policy objectives: addressing labour shortages, avoiding permanent settlement, and fostering development in sending countries. Yet, in practice, the structural preconditions required for genuine circulation – flexible re-entry regimes, reintegration support in the country of origin, and a stable domestic economy – are seldom fulfilled. As a result, circular migration schemes often reproduce the dynamics of past guest-worker programmes, facilitating initial entry but ultimately leading to settlement rather than circulation.

The effectiveness of circular migration also varies by skill level. Highly educated migrants are better positioned to engage in circularity, as they possess greater mobility, adaptability, and access to higher-paying opportunities. Low-skilled migrants, by contrast, often face structural barriers: employers are reluctant to invest in their training or integration, and their labour market mobility remains limited. Consequently, circular migration schemes may deepen existing inequalities if they are not accompanied by measures that recognise and support the diversity of migrant experiences.

In light of these dynamics, migration governance must go beyond economic calculations. While labour market needs are central, migration policies should prioritise the social, economic, and human dimensions of mobility. For Slovenia and other EU member states the challenge is to design frameworks that balance the promotion of voluntary circular migration with robust integration mechanisms for those who remain. This requires policies that ensure fair working conditions, access to social rights, and meaningful reintegration support, while also fostering long-term stability and development in sending countries. Only under such conditions can circular migration move from being a largely rhetorical policy device to a viable and sustainable form of mobility.

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Notes

¹ The main advocates of the positive effects of temporary and circular migration are the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission or state institutions.

Med vrnitvijo in naselitvijo: krožne migracije v jugovzhodni Evropi

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Izvleček

Članek obravnava migracijske vzorce v jugovzhodni Evropi, s posebnim poudarkom na krožnih delovnih migracijah iz Bosne in Hercegovine v Slovenijo. Ker se Slovenija sooča s kroničnim pomanjkanjem delovne sile tako med manj kot med visoko usposobljenimi delavci, se vse bolj opira na migrante z območja Zahodnega Balkana, vendar pa trajen odliv delavcev iz Bosne in Hercegovine negativno vpliva na tamkajšnje gospodarstvo in družbo, saj poglablja beg možganov in pospešuje neugodne demografske trende. Da bi se soočila s temi izzivi, Evropska unija že zadnjih trideset let spodbuja model krožnih migracij. Čeprav ta model teoretično prinaša obojestranske koristi, saj hkrati zmanjšuje izgubo človeškega kapitala in zadovoljuje potrebe po delovni sili, ostaja njegova dejanska učinkovitost vprašljiva. Članek zato analizira vpliv politike krožnih migracij v Sloveniji s pomočjo statističnih podatkov in ocenjuje, v kolikšni meri se cilji krožnih migracij uresničujejo v praksi.

Ključne besede

krožne migracije, delovni migranti, Bosna in Hercegovina, Slovenija