

Policy Brief

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Circular Migration: Does Serbia Have a Solution?¹

Circular migration represents an innovative response to the challenges of demographic decline and population outflow in Serbia. This migration model allows the country to harness the benefits of migration, transfer knowledge and capital from abroad, thus contributing to its economic development. However, circular migrants face specific challenges due to frequent changes in their place of residence, requiring tailored services and support. Managing circular migration requires careful consideration to meet their needs and create favourable conditions for their return with new skills and experiences, thus strengthening Serbia's competitive advantages in the global market. Based on these assumptions, this policy brief provides recommendations for enhancing support for circular migrants, thereby contributing to Serbia's economic and social development. The brief analyses the significance and effectiveness of two key platforms – the eGovernment portal and the Returning Point – in supporting circular migrants and returnees to Serbia. Through a detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis, challenges and potential solutions related to the use of these portals are explored. Additionally, user satisfaction is considered, their specific needs are examined, and potential improvements are proposed.

Circular Migration and the Specific Needs of Circular Migrants

In an era of ever-increasing globalisation, demographic challenges are becoming more pronounced in Serbia. Over the past decade, Serbia has lost nearly half a million inhabitants. This decline in the population during this period is a result of both unfavourable differences between the number of births and deaths and significant emigration. Emigration has multiple adverse effects, both directly due to the investment Serbia has made in their education and indirectly due to missed opportunities for future growth. Furthermore, significant losses stem from the severing of social and familial ties with the homeland because of leaving behind family and friends, reducing social capital, and the like. On the one hand, negative natural population growth is a phenomenon of the modern age, and it is a situation that would be very difficult to change. On the other hand, migrations, which are becoming increasingly important due to easier departures from the country, both administratively and logistically, can still be managed. Despite the challenges posed by population outflow, Serbia has the opportunity to leverage the benefits of migration and direct them toward its economic and social development. This path requires systematic and efficient management but can contribute to the revitalisation of the country and the preservation of its resources for future generations.

Circular migrations offer an opportunity to manage migrations in an innovative and efficient way by harnessing the most positive aspects of migration while avoiding the negatives. Circular migrations represent repeated and legally authorised migrations of an individual from their home country to foreign countries. This form of migration is gaining increasing importance, especially in countries like Serbia, situated on the periphery of one of the most developed regions in the world. They enable a reversal of the population outflow trend, thereby contributing to the transfer of knowledge, experience, and capital from abroad and influencing the country's further development. By allowing its citizens to temporarily go abroad for education, work, or training, Serbia can create favourable conditions for their return with new skills and knowledge. Therefore, circular migrations not

¹ The data presented in this analysis are based on a study of the [Assessment of the Quality of Support for Circular Migrants in Serbia](#). Within this analysis, data were collected using two methods. Desk research involved an analysis of the content of the eGovernment portal and the Returning Point portal. The focus was on the analysis of the availability and quality of services provided to circular migrants. In addition to desk research, the study also included an analysis of the satisfaction of circular migrants with the services provided by these two portals. This was carried out through the public dissemination of a survey completed by circular migrants, with the aim of gathering information about their experience and opinions regarding the services available to circular migrants on these two portals. Responses were collected during December 2022 and January 2023, and a total of 77 questionnaires were completed. Due to the broader range of services intended for circular migrants and returnees, a slightly greater emphasis was placed on the analysis of the Returning Point portal.

only provide individuals with opportunities for personal and professional growth but also strengthen Serbia's competitive advantages in the global market.

Due to the specific lifestyle of circular migrants, who never permanently leave their place of residence, it is clear that the challenges and problems they face differ from those experienced by return migrants. Circular migrants often change their place of residence, creating the need for a specialised approach to services. Frequent relocations can result in time and resource losses when dealing with administrative and bureaucratic procedures, such as submitting applications or obtaining and delivering documentation. Furthermore, many services that circular migrants require should be available online or outside the standard working hours of institutions. A significant challenge for circular migrants is resolving their legal status, as well as addressing taxation and social services issues, among others. Unlike returnees, who have permanently returned to the country after a longer or shorter stay abroad and can more easily resolve these problems, circular migrants face serious obstacles. Therefore, the list of complications that a circular migrant can encounter in logistical, financial, or administrative terms is significantly longer than that faced by returnees. The unique lifestyle of circular migrants requires institutions to carefully consider how to provide support to this group of residents to meet their needs to the greatest extent possible.

On-demand services: What do the eGovernment and Returning Point portals currently offer to circular migrants?

The eGovernment portal, serving as a centralised platform for electronic services in the Republic of Serbia, is, to some extent, useful for circular migrants but is not sufficiently tailored to their needs. This portal provides information and services for all citizens, businesses, and institutions. However, one section of the portal is specifically aimed at individuals who wish to return to Serbia. This section offers information on several different topics relevant to people considering returning to Serbia, including networking with other returnees, resolving legal status and document issuance, health insurance arrangements, continuing education, and resolving housing issues. Within these areas, basic information is provided to circular migrants, which is crucial for their potential short-term or long-term return to Serbia. However, detailed guidance on addressing specific problems they may encounter upon return is not provided. In some areas, instead of providing appropriate information, links to the Returning Point portal appear. Therefore, at this moment, the information provided is not sufficiently detailed, and circular migrants cannot obtain precise answers to many of the questions that concern them.

However, unlike the eGovernment portal, which is broadly directed at all citizens, there is no doubt that the Returning Point provides significantly more specialised and tailored services that directly meet the needs of circular migrants. As such, it currently carries out several initiatives that facilitate returning to Serbia. Perhaps the most significant program initiated by the Returning Point is *Carta Serbica*, a program designed for individuals of Serbian origin who do not have Serbian citizenship but wish to live in Serbia for a longer or shorter period. The Returning Point has also developed two guides with very useful information on employment, the education system, school and university enrolment, personal documents issuance, and many other topics: *The Guide to Measures to Support the Development of an Innovative Economy* and *Guide for Repatriates*. Additionally, one of the services offered by the Returning Point is a mentoring program that strengthens the social capital of mentored returnees and circular migrants. Using a very precise form, circular migrants and returnees are connected with mentors who can contribute most effectively to their more successful reintegration. Through these and other services provided by the Returning Point, returning to Serbia after a long stay abroad is significantly facilitated, thus contributing to better leveraging the benefits of circular migrations and encouraging returns to Serbia.

Voice of Circular Migrants: Experiences with the eGovernment and Returning Point Portals

Circular migrants and returnees themselves attest the deficiencies in the services provided by the eGovernment portal. Circular migrants who have used the eGovernment portal expressed the need for its expansion and improvement of the information and services available on the platform. Respondents, among all the information provided by this portal, categorised into three groups – Socioeconomic, Communal Information, and Science and Technical-Technological Information – rated the highest information related to broader communal aspects. These encompass a wide range of topics, from tourism offerings, cultural-historical heritage, and sports activities to more serious subjects such as environmental protection, pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education, and security. However, the need for additional information is particularly noticeable in areas such as employment, real estate, conditions for starting a business, and tax regulations (socioeconomic information group). Additionally, circular migrants have shown an interest in the implementation of additional services, such as electronic voting in elections and the option for electronic delivery of various certificates through the portal. These findings highlight a significant gap between the needs of circular migrants and what institutions in Serbia are currently prepared to provide, emphasising the importance of offering more extensive and tailored services to better meet their specific needs and support the process of circular migration.

Despite the various services provided by the Returning Point to its users, respondents expressed some reservations about their quality. Among all the information that the Returning Point provides, respondents rated information related to science and technical-technological development the highest, including information about agriculture, research and development, transportation infrastructure, energy security, patents, and intellectual property, as well as the opportunities for IT sector development in Serbia. However, even in the case of this group of information, just slightly over 40% of the surveyed circular migrants reported being satisfied. Even less satisfaction was expressed regarding information related to socioeconomic aspects. One of the reasons for satisfaction with the services provided by the Returning Point not being higher might be the higher expectations of circular migrants, given that this organisation is dedicated precisely to meeting their needs. It's worth considering that respondents who used the services of both portals still rated the Returning Point higher than eGovernment. Although the Returning Point, as an organisation that serves as a link between circular migrants and the state, has addressed many critical issues for circular migrants and made progress for those wanting to return to Serbia, there is a need for further improvement in the quality of services.

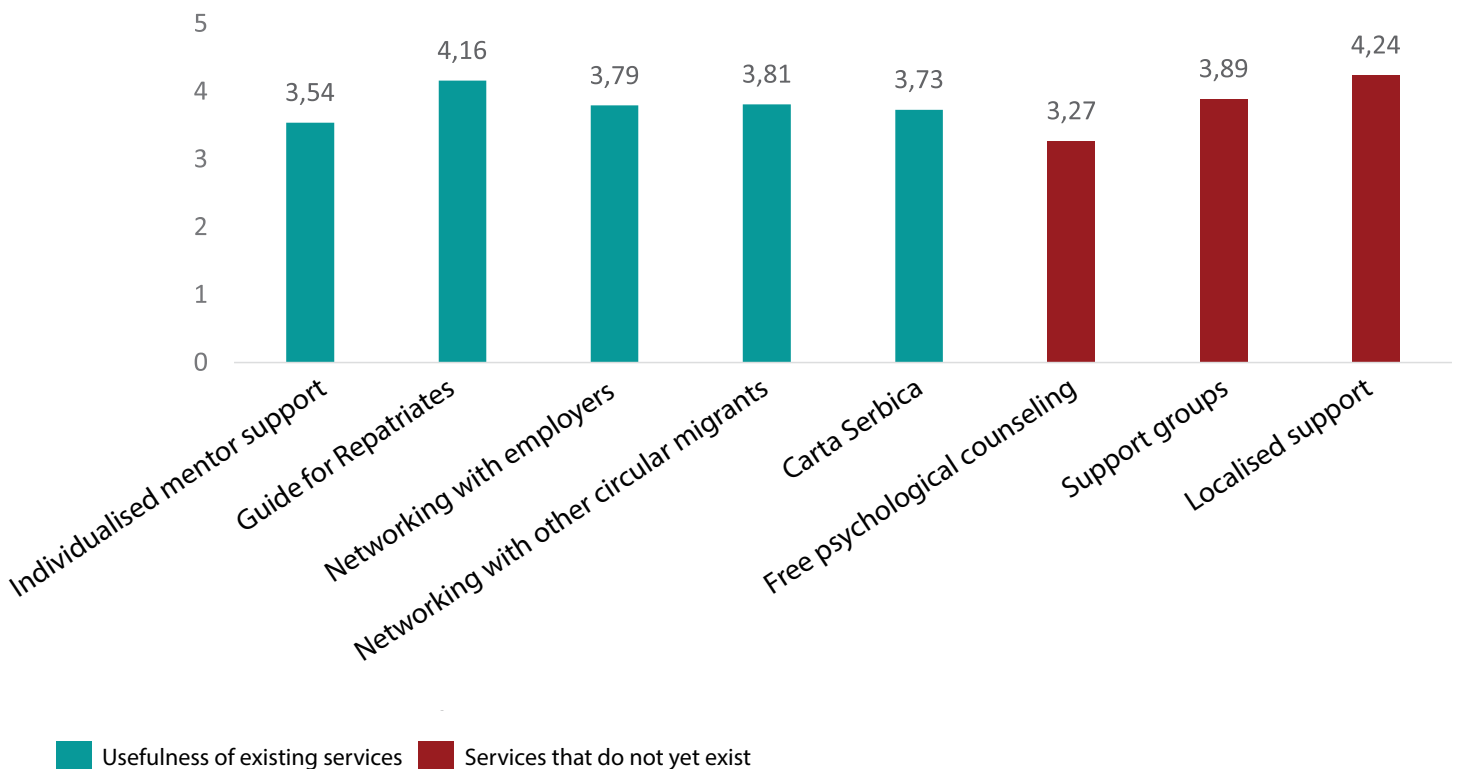
Furthermore, the range of services offered by the Returning Point to circular migrants is not sufficiently wide. The utility of existing services is evaluated very similarly to the potential services. Among the proposed services, circular migrants expect the most utility from local support because it would provide them with access to relevant information and resources specific to the local context,

significantly easing their adaptation and enabling their successful reintegration. In addition to localised support, circular migrants see a certain level of utility in opportunities for involvement in support groups and in free psychological counselling aimed at circular and return migrants due to the highly specific issues they face upon returning to the country. While there are highly rated services, there is a need to expand the offering to better meet the user needs.

Circular Migrants in Focus: A Path towards Better Support

A sufficiently strong and dedicated systemic support for circular migrants, both from the state and civil sector, is still lacking, primarily in terms of simplifying administrative procedures. Over the past decades, the attention of relevant institutions has been much more focused on preventing emigration, neglecting the potential of return and circular migrations. The focus was on combating the negative effects of depopulation while ignoring the fact that adequate migration management can have a very positive effect on the economic and demographic landscape and yield significantly better results than simply preventing emigration, which is difficult to stop or slow down. By promoting circular migrations and the idea that they can replace permanent departure, Serbia not only retains its population but also enriches its social capital, knowledge, and skills of its citizens. With improved access to circular migrations and the provision of currently insufficient systemic support, the adverse effects of emigration and negative natural population growth can be significantly reduced.

Graph 1: Average utility rating of certain existing and potential support forms, on a scale from 1 to 5



Among many other necessary steps to encourage circular migrations, with the aim of effectively supporting them and improving the current state of play, it is crucial to consider a series of actions and recommendations that can be implemented to facilitate these processes and improve the existing services provided by the eGovernment and Returning Point portals. Here are some key suggestions for improvement:

- **Expand the scope of information and improve information quality:** The eGovernment and Returning Point portals should broaden their information offerings, focusing on topics most relevant to circular migrants. This includes areas such as employment, housing, education, and legal services. Furthermore, the information provided should be more detailed.
- **Enhance information accessibility:** Given that some circular migrants may not speak the Serbian language, the eGovernment and Returning Point portals should provide information in English to make it more accessible to a wider user base.
- **Adapt to the needs of circular migrants:** Both portals are currently more focused on return migrants – individuals who plan to permanently return to Serbia. Considering that the needs of circular migrants differ to some extent from those of returnees, it would be necessary to enrich them with information specific to circular migrants.
- **Better connect circular migrants with local resources:** The portals should provide information about local resources, including organisations that support circular migrants, communities, and events that promote return and circular migrations.
- **Monitor needs and listen to feedback:** Implementing the system for collecting feedback from circular migrants can help the portals continuously improve services and better meet their needs.
- **Reorganise the structure of the Returning Point portal:** The Returning Point currently contains a wealth of information that is inadequately organised. It should be considered to better categorise similar information into common sections, especially in the Guide for Repatriates section.
- **Further digitalise public administration:** While the eGovernment portal already enables the electronic acquisition of certain documents, the process of obtaining documents should be further digitalised to allow circular migrants access to electronic services without physical presence.
- **Work on further networking of circular migrants:** While informal groups already exist, the experiences of circular migrants show that there is still significant room for improvement. Primarily, there is a need to deepen activities in the domain of business networking.

Serbia is facing serious demographic challenges, but circular migrations offer a key to preserving and improving the country's economic and demographic outlook. While the eGovernment and Returning Point portals are of crucial importance in providing information and services to circular migrants, the existing services on these platforms are not adequately tailored to their specific needs. To achieve the positive effects of these migrations and leverage the advantages for Serbia's prosperity, it is necessary to address the needs of this population group systematically and continuously. This is a crucial step towards creating a sustainable and prosperous society that attracts and retains talented citizens, thus contributing to the country's future development.

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