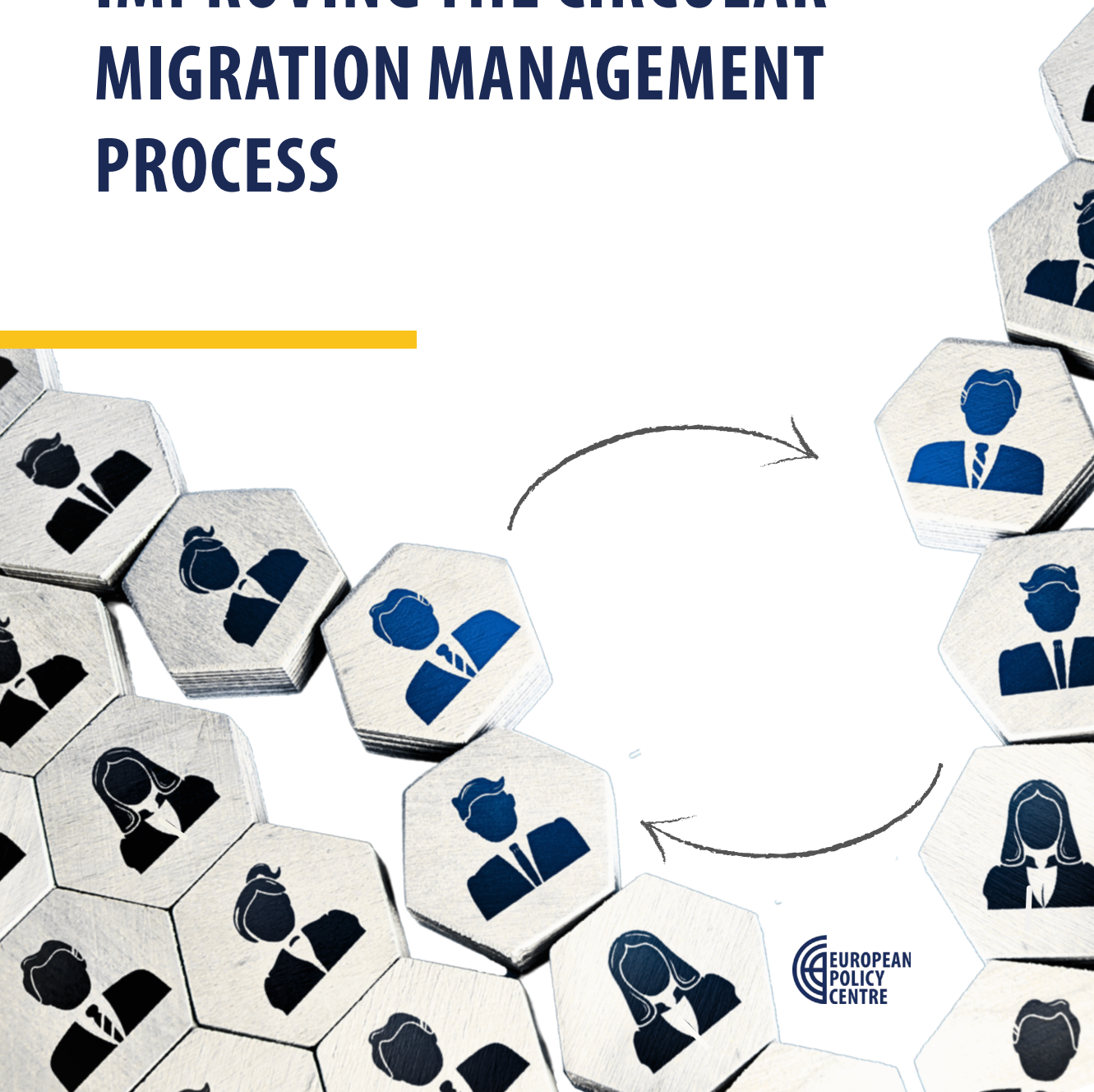


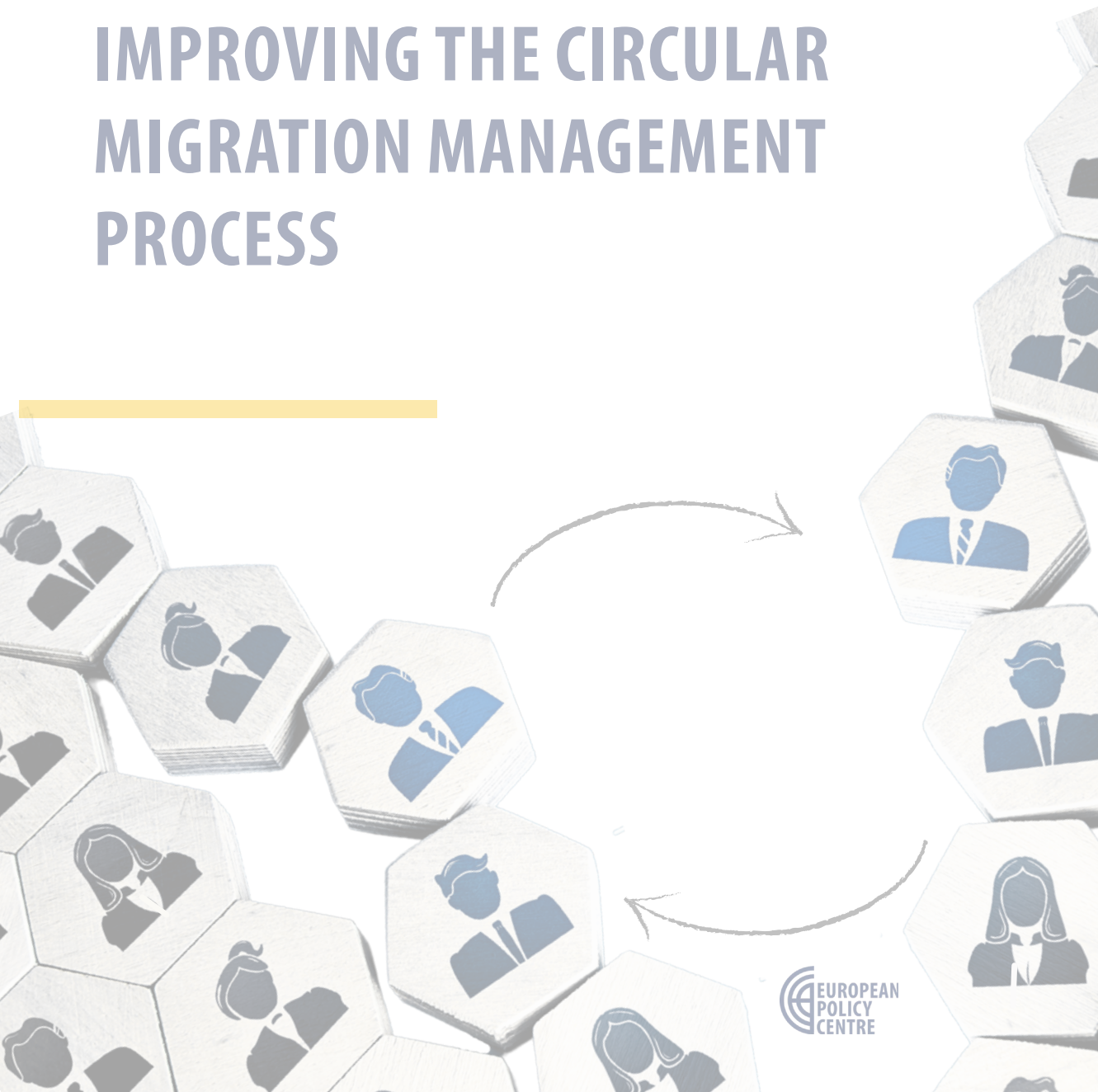
CIRCULAR MIGRATION BEFORE DEPOPULATION!
**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
IMPROVING THE CIRCULAR
MIGRATION MANAGEMENT
PROCESS**





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INTRODUCTION

The low rates of natural population growth combined with emigration surpassing immigration pose challenges for the domestic labor market and the overall economy. While Serbia has been grappling with economic emigrations since the 1960s, recent times have witnessed new patterns in line with global trends: among the more educated population, there are so-called circular migrations, involving repeated legal migrations of the same individual between two or more countries. Simultaneously, thanks to new technologies, it is possible to work from Serbia for a foreign employer, which has a positive impact on the return of Serbian citizens to their country of origin.

The Economic Migration Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021–2027 was adopted in 2020, along with its accompanying Action Plan. This is the first public document that addresses this area and attempts to provide state measures aimed at slowing down emigration and attracting returnees. The adoption of this strategy inspired our project, and one of our initial goals was to assess the Action Plan of the Strategy.

The Assessment of the Action Plan was published at the midpoint of its implementation cycle so that its findings could be utilized in the preparation of a new plan. Its aim was to systematically analyze the Action Plan for the implementation of the Economic Migration Strategy and, based on that analysis, objectively assess, and inform policymakers and decision-makers about the results achieved in the ongoing implementation of the Strategy. Additionally, it aimed to provide recommendations for potential corrective measures going forward.

The second goal of the project was to familiarize ourselves with the comparative experiences of European countries regarding economic migrations. Specifically, this involved examining the legislative framework regulating this area, assessing whether it is more advanced compared to the domestic one, exploring how roles in addressing these issues are distributed among the state, civil sector, and other stakeholders (private sector, academic community, media), and investigating the measures implemented by the state to encourage the return of emigrants to their country of origin.

Comparative experiences demonstrate that the existence of organizations dedicated to supporting returnees, considering aspects such as their return, economic activity in their home country, as well as scientific and professional careers, significantly influences migration decisions. Therefore, a segment of our project was focused on assessing the support available to circular migrants through programs on the Returning Point and eGovernment portals. Additionally, our aim was to provide recommendations suggesting directions for enhancing existing services or establishing new ones for circular migrants. This aspect of the project addressed the question of to what extent these two portals encourage and facilitate the process of circular migrations through the various forms of support they offer.

One of the project's objectives was also to engage the local level in the discourse on circular migrations. By enhancing the capabilities of several civil society organizations chosen for their ability to represent diverse regions in our country, we empowered local stakeholders to address the issue of economic migration more actively. The ultimate goal is for the selected civil society organizations to evolve into Regional Centers of Excellence for economic migrations in the future. This transformation would enable them to actively participate in constructive dialogues on migration-related public policies and contribute to the development of optimal solutions for the regions they represent.

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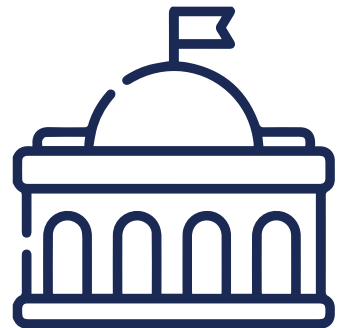
RECOMMENDATIONS

BASED ON RESEARCH RESULTS

1

The state plays a significant role in establishing the strategic framework related to migration.

The government has adopted the Economic Migration Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-2027 and the Action Plan that expires in 2023. The measures adopted are primarily motivated by concerns about the phenomenon of so-called “brain drain” and aim to encourage the return of highly educated individuals to Serbia. However, data shows that individuals with a high school education are leaving Serbia more frequently, and the new versions of the strategy should take this fact into account.



2

It is necessary to adopt a systematic approach to economic migrations and secure the long-term commitment of state authorities to this issue by integrating it into development policies. The position of the economic migration issue should be considered from the perspective of Serbia's development policy, and this should be consistently communicated to all relevant stakeholders. In close connection with this, and as a supporting factor, findings from comparative practices suggest that sustainable results in temporary migrations can be achieved only through their consistent and harmonious integration into a comprehensive migration policy.

3

It is necessary to clearly define the category of circular migrations. Since this definition is not provided in the relevant normative framework, it can be expected that different actors, at different levels, in different ways, and at different periods, approach the concept of circular migrations, its understanding, operationalization, and application. In many activities and measures, the emphasis is on returnees rather than circular migrants. Therefore, the recommendation is towards a greater emphasis on supporting the employment integration of circular migrants.

4

The economic situation in the country is the most crucial factor in attracting migrants. The overall economic situation, ease of finding employment, and decent working conditions are the primary factors attracting circular migrants, but they also contribute to people leaving the country.

5

The quality of public services in healthcare, education, and balancing family and work life also influences the decision to return to the home country. Returnees typically come with enhanced human or financial capital, making the general standard of living an essential factor in their decision to return. It is crucial for them to easily resolve administrative matters for themselves and their family members, especially if they have been absent from the country for an extended period (e.g., residence permit). Digitization can simplify a significant portion of procedures related to various public services. Key information for relocation should be quickly and easily accessible, preferably in one place.



6

Psychological support plays an important role in facilitating the return to the country of origin. Assistance is needed right from the beginning and can be provided through opportunities to connect with individuals who have gone through similar experiences, free psychological counselling, and the like.

7

Maintaining a connection with the diaspora facilitates the return of emigrants to the country. Serbian language courses for children of emigrants, the organization of cultural events, and other activities aimed at preserving ties with the homeland will facilitate the return to the country.

8

There is a need to strengthen and develop institutional capacities for monitoring and improving the quality of data on economic migrations. Despite some noticeable progress in this area, such as the establishment of the Working Group for the implementation and monitoring of the Economic Migration Strategy and Action Plan for the period 2021–2023, and despite a high level of awareness of the necessity for precise statistical monitoring of economic migrations, more work is needed to monitor migration balances and movements. This is an exceptionally complex task, and the complex numbers of migration flows are often inadequately interpreted, thereby hindering the understanding of migration phenomena in general and economic migrations as a subcategory in particular. There is no easy solution to all practical problems in registering emigrants and migration movements, so strengthening the capacities of the Statistical Office and developing a quality methodology based on an understanding of the need for the inclusion and combination of different sources and information is essential. Ensuring comprehensive monitoring of migration flows through their intersection is an absolute priority to gain a reliable representation of the scope and trends of emigration from Serbia and immigration into Serbia.

9

Establishing and continuously improving the knowledge base on economic migrations in the Republic of Serbia is necessary.

There is a strong need for a thoughtful and systematic approach to creating and sharing knowledge about circular and return migrations, serving as a repository of valid and valuable learned lessons and best practices. The foundation for this undoubtedly lies in (1) establishing a regular, updated, synchronized statistical database to monitor migration flows in the Republic of Serbia and (2) empowering the Coordination Body to continuously implement and monitor activities outlined in the Strategy, Action Plan 2021–2023, and plans that will be adopted. The Coordination Body should have systemic capacity to monitor and improve the complete process of economic migration management, which involves not only coordination (essentially the integration of activities entrusted to individual stakeholders) but also the overall process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling actors, activities, and information flows related to economic migrations. Such institutional centralization supports the constructive harmonization of procedures and activities conducted under the auspices of various bearers, contributes to the targeted strengthening of competencies for



managing economic migrations within the state administration, enables the consistent implementation of public policies that have implications on the economic migration process, supports effective communication with all stakeholders, both state bodies and other external entities, and strengthens comprehensive reporting on the complex topic of economic migrations.

10

Empowering Migration Service Centers. These centers were established within the National Employment Service, with seven migration service centers located in Belgrade, Niš, Novi Pazar, Novi Sad, Kraljevo, Kruševac, and Bor. It is necessary to strengthen them in terms of the scope of their work, the expertise of the engaged human resources, the development of consistent and harmonized procedures for their work, technical equipment, and information-communication capacities proportionate to their role in informing potential and actual migrants. The formation of new positions, such as the position of Advisor in migration centers, has the potential to qualitatively improve the process of economic migration management.



11

Civil society organizations can play a crucial role in the circular migration management process.

Our project has demonstrated instances of good practices where the civil sector serves as a significant partner to the state in the management of circular migration. If the majority of activities were solely entrusted to the state, there arises a question of whether such an approach would yield positive results, especially in a situation marked by significant regional differences in economic development, as is the case with Serbia. At the same time, if the initiative were solely handed over to civil society organizations, there would be a lack of strategic thinking at the state level, important for developing the legislative framework and implementing accompanying measures. Therefore, we believe that collaboration between the state and the civil sector is of paramount importance for the success of initiatives in the field of circular migrations.

12

Creating and supporting organizations with the aim of providing assistance to returnees planning to come back to Serbia for business ventures, academic pursuits, or professional careers.

The Returning Point serves as a successful modus operandi to establish a bridge of trust between the diaspora and Serbia through networking and various programs. Similar organizations can be found in comparative analyses (Ireland, for example - The return of business). In Serbia, these organizations can contribute to the development of a knowledge-based

society rooted in the exchange of knowledge and experience. Circular migrations facilitate the emergence of transnational networks that can provide potential migrants with information about job opportunities in the destination country while also offering insights into human resources in the home country. Building such networks holds significant benefits for employers, serving as a secure platform for recruiting a known and reliable group of workers within a related social network, based on criteria important to employers.

13

Measures and activities already implemented in the domain of encouraging material and non-material investments from the diaspora should be more specifically coordinated and integrated. This includes, among other things, the continuation of creating investment guides, establishing conditions for optimizing the diaspora's potential through formal channels of remittances, increasing the impact of remittances on development, and enhancing the engagement of the diaspora at the local level.

14

It is necessary to develop new activities in the field of creating programs to retain human capacities in deficit occupations. Support should be provided to professional associations and organizations that gather workers from deficit occupations to open communication channels and establish connections, enabling the circular movement of workers from these categories according to the needs of the Republic of Serbia.



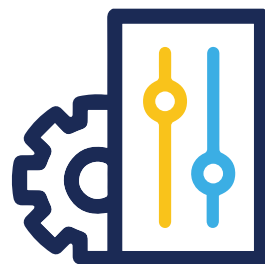
15

The coordination of various bodies implementing activities aimed at strengthening the capacity to manage return and circular migrations should be imperative. Currently, there is a significant effort by various bodies to enhance the capacity to manage return and circular migrations. Essentially, these bodies undertake compatible, similar, and sometimes parallel activities, establishing contacts with relevant stakeholders. Any activity involving a large number of stakeholders, even if they are all or predominantly government bodies, introduces complexity and poses a challenge in coordinating and harmonizing activities. Coordination is the keyword for incorporating the concept of economic migration into development policies. Economic migrations are a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, so the expertise found in various organizations should be utilized to apply the best available knowledge at any given time. Another recommendation is for greater horizontal integration of measures and activities in economic migration management, thus avoiding duplication. There is also a recommendation for better coordination between the economic market, labor market, social and migration policies, and the development of activities that will specifically address

low-skilled and medium-skilled labor, impoverished workers, people in rural and declining areas, as well as other groups characterized as vulnerable and underprivileged, who are inclined towards jobs in deficit occupations. The operationalization of these measures should be further developed to extend beyond mere facilitation.

16

Support the development of a knowledge-based economy through the return of a highly educated workforce and experts from abroad. Developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation is an integral element of the Strategy, particularly Specific Goal 2. Significant progress in attracting highly educated individuals can be achieved through the activities of the Science Fund. The Science Fund has significant potential for promoting circular migrations through programs facilitating scientific collaboration between Serbian science and the diaspora. The Fund's programs can lead to substantial advancements in the transfer of knowledge between research organizations in Serbia and the diaspora, which can be crucial in mitigating the negative consequences of brain drain. It also contributes to building relationships between the home country and the diaspora through the flow of information and knowledge from the diaspora to the home country, creating favorable impacts on the labor market by offering new opportunities for scientific collaboration.



17

Further alignment of the education system with the needs of the labor market and innovation is necessary. Regarding the alignment of enrollment policies with the needs of the labor market, the recommendation is to coordinate the activities of all stakeholders who can influence the further alignment of the educational system with the needs of the economy. In terms of building mechanisms for collaboration between science and the economy, by introducing incentive measures to increase investment in research and development, as well as increasing the number of researchers, patents, and technical solutions, the recommendation is to connect the activities of various institutions that impact the implementation of this measure and its activities – in the fields of education, science, and the economy (Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Finance, Chamber of Commerce, Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans' and Social Affairs, Innovation Fund, Science Fund). This recommendation also applies to the measure of developing special programs and projects for the return of a highly educated workforce. It is also recommended to support the activities and further development of career centers within higher education institutions and universities and to connect the activities of various institutions that influence the implementation of this measure and its activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

for the South Region of Serbia



1

It is necessary to enhance awareness within the broader local community about the concept of circular migration and its implications.

2

Preferably, support local self-government units in implementing activities that would strengthen capacities and develop mechanisms for achieving functional coordination between Migration Councils established in local self-government units.

3

Reevaluate the effectiveness of the work of local offices for cooperation with the diaspora and assess the functionality of the current diaspora database as the basis for the future development of this institutional framework.

4

Develop a sustainable institutional solution for cooperation with the diaspora at the local level. Establish local offices or bodies responsible for cooperation with the diaspora or strengthen existing ones.

5

Support local communities in mapping, creating, and updating databases on emigration, as well as defining forms of cooperation with the diaspora.

6

Financially support projects aimed at connecting the diaspora and local communities.

7

Investigate how circular and return migrations affect Serbia's economy and explore how their potential can be utilized for economic development.

8

Engage the private sector in assessing the impact of labor migration on their businesses and involve them in the process of creating migration and development policies.

9

Improve working conditions in sectors from which most workers go abroad (textile industry, metal industry, hospitality, transportation services). Protect the labor and social rights of workers while abroad, enable their smooth return, and support their reintegration, i.e., transfer of knowledge and experience to companies in Serbia.

10

Identify returnee entrepreneurs, examine which sectors are brain gained, and utilize their knowledge and experience in Serbia. Remove identified obstacles and promote best practices.

11

Stimulate collaboration between entrepreneurs from the diaspora and Serbia by supporting projects they have expressed interest in. Projects may include joint financing provided by the diaspora, the local community, and the donor community to create new jobs and markets, facilitating mentorship and knowledge transfer, which the diaspora possesses and represents its most valuable potential.

12

Promote state incentives and other benefits of cooperation between entrepreneurs from Serbia and the diaspora, as well as the advantages of doing business in Serbia, such as simple and inexpensive company establishment procedures, lower operating costs, the availability of a qualified workforce, state incentives for entrepreneurs, especially for employing returnees and circular migrants, and existing examples of successful collaboration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

for the West Region of Serbia



1

Strengthen the capacities of public institutions in the region to transparently inform, encourage, and support measures for circular migration management.

2

Enhance vertical and horizontal connections and cross-sectoral collaboration among key stakeholders dealing with migration issues to create a stimulating environment and synergy in interventions and measures (responsible bodies, legislation, strategic framework, financial framework, implementation, and monitoring of measure effects).

3

Improve support for local self-government units in implementing activities aimed at developing mechanisms for establishing and functioning Migration Councils at the local level, as well as responding to demographic trends at the local level.

4

Institutions at the national and local levels need to coordinate efforts in dealing with all types of migrations because they mutually encourage each other (e.g., internal migrations from rural to urban areas create preconditions for circular migrations as the “ties to one’s heritage” weaken).

5

Develop stimulating and innovative measures and programs to support local-level employment based on the specific needs of citizens and the potential of the area, aiming to reduce circular migrations caused by economic reasons. For instance, programs supporting diaspora and returnee investment, rural and ecotourism, and the development of social services focused on the elderly population—especially in rural areas—can employ the local workforce and create conditions for the return of retired people from other countries. Additionally, promote craftsmanship and provide support for retraining to ensure self-employment and/or supply the necessary workforce to the domestic economy.

6

Continuously improve living conditions in local communities at the local level by enhancing services in the social sector (health, education, sports, etc.) and environmental protection.

7

Enhance the services of Migration Service Centers (MSC) according to the needs of local communities and increase awareness among potential users about their services.

8

Further develop career counselling focused on young people, contributing to better overall youth employment. This is especially important for those with experience in return and circular migrations, on one hand, and for providing the necessary workforce to the Serbian economy on the other.

9

Improve the system for monitoring circular migrations at the local level (e.g., records of missing working staff, mapping the needs of circular migrants, etc.) to better plan and implement local policies aimed at reducing the negative effects of circular migrations.

10

Continue developing measures to support the education of vulnerable population groups (Roma, youth, women, adults, etc.), thereby increasing their chances of employment in the local community or better positioning in the system of circular migrations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

for the North Region of Serbia



1

Inform citizens about circular migration through campaigns, organizing forums, workshops, conferences, and educational activities.

2

Create a comprehensive handbook on circular migrations intended for citizens.

3

Develop informative brochures containing all relevant basic information that is important for circular migrants.

4

Involve civil society organizations in the support processes for circular migrants.

5

Organize training sessions for representatives of institutions and citizens' associations on different methods to support circular migrants.

6

Establish a comprehensive database on circular migrants and their needs upon returning to Serbia.

7

Improve working conditions and increase control over working conditions in specific sectors where a lower number of workers have been identified due to migration abroad.

8

Strengthen investment counselling and support for circular migrants who want to invest their acquired capital and knowledge in Serbia.

9

Connect educational institutions in Serbia with institutions in the countries where circular migrants reside to nurture the culture of return.

10

Collaborate with Migration Councils where they exist, and where they do not exist, advocate for the establishment of such a Council.

11

Provide counselling for those who are potential circular migrants before they become ones, raising awareness about the migration process, expectations, rights, obligations, etc.

12

Encourage the promotion of the development potentials of the districts covered by the document.

The Circular Migration before Depopulation! project, initiated by the Foundation for the Advancement of Economics and the European Policy Centre, aimed to stimulate and encourage an open dialogue among key stakeholders in Serbia on a topic that is insufficiently explored in our country.

During the first year of the project, the emphasis was on research activities. The initial study focused on evaluating the Action Plan 2021-2023 for implementing the Economic Migration Strategy 2020-2027. The goal was to assess the previous results and propose recommendations for the development of the next Action Plan. Through comparative analysis, the research team identified good and bad practices of circular migration management in three European Union countries – Bulgaria, Estonia, and Ireland, through desk research and online interviews with representatives of state institutions, civil society, and the academic sector in these countries. The research tasks on the project were finalized by evaluating the currently available forms of support for circular migrants through the *eGovernment* and *Returning Point* portals.

In the second year of the project, the main objective was to identify and empower local/regional civil society organizations through an extensive training process, transforming them into Regional Centers of Excellence in the field of circular migrations. Since then, their focus has been on involving all relevant stakeholders and circular migrants in a comprehensive dialogue to identify the main challenges hindering circular migration, as well as key issues faced by circular migrants. As a final result of this dialogue across the regions of Serbia, Regional Centers of Excellence developed and advocated for the adoption of Region-Specific Action Documents, which, similar to local action plans, propose concrete measures whose implementation would contribute to the improvement of the overall local environment for circular migrations.

Throughout the two-year implementation of the project, promotional activities ensured its broad visibility and brought the results of research, as well as the challenges, problems, and benefits associated with the lives of circular migrants, closer to a wider audience. In this context, 11 podcast episodes with circular migrants were recorded, two promotional videos and three infographics were published, achieving a total of 500,000 views on social media. Additionally, a brunch with journalists was organized, as well as an event titled *Seeking for youth and talents – Circular Migrations in Serbia*. The team members had five opportunities to appear on national television channels, and the project's results were published in over 20 articles on portals and in print media.