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A Place to Call Home?

Addressing Foreign Nationals' Challenges to Entering, Residing and Working in Serbia



Living in a foreign country means gaining exposure to diverse cultural perspectives, as well as sharing personal and professional contributions across the world. Although the prospects of embarking in international adventures are appealing to many, there are several practical obstacles that may prevent a foreigner from travelling internationally and settling abroad. More specifically, foreign citizens' journey to entering, residing and working in Serbia can be disrupted by different obstacles, mainly concerning the availability of clear and accessible information on travelling and living in Serbia on institutional websites. While responsible authorities acknowledge these issues and claim to be making significant efforts to improve services,¹ remaining obstacles can still negatively influence foreign nationals' decision to move to Serbia. These challenges in attracting foreign workers could also have negative effects on Serbia's growing economy, an awareness that urges policymakers not only to continue improving successful reforms, but also to address remaining weaknesses.

¹ As explained during an interview with an officer from the Ministry of Interior.

The need to attract foreigners is deemed as a priority given that Serbia is traversing an economic growth phase, with GDP projected to increase between 3% and 4% in the next years,² and at the same time dealing with a rapidly ageing population.³ This evidence seems to motivate the Government as well, with high officials highlighting the need to import as much labour as possible from other regions of the world in the coming years.⁴ Welcoming foreigners, however, can go far beyond economic progress, and initiate a process of mutual exchange of resources, good practices, skills and diverse cultural perspectives between Serbia and the rest of the globe. Ultimately, in a world faced by unprecedented environmental, geopolitical and economic crises, building international connections is one of the ways forward.

² World Bank. (2024). *The World Bank In Serbia – Overview*, Retrieved October 7, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/serbia/overview#3>

³ United Nations Development Programme. (2020). *Why population in Serbia keeps declining?* UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/serbia/stories/why-population-serbia-keeps-declining>

⁴ Radio 021. (2024, May 16). *Vučić: Moraćemo da uvozimo radnu snagu iz svih delova sveta što je više moguće*. Vesti Novi Sad | Novosadski Informativni Portal 021, Retrieved October 7, 2024 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/375651/Vucic-Moracemo-da-uvozimo-radnu-snagu-iz-svih-delova-sveta-sto-je-vise-moguće.html>

From the Start: a Challenging Departure on the eGovernment Portal

From the very first visit, the Government's online services for foreigners present certain accessibility limitations. The eConsulate service, available from the eGovernment portal,⁵ offers innovative tools to foreigners, such as the possibility to book an appointment online to speak with the diplomatic missions of the Republic of Serbia from their home countries.⁶ However, these options are advertised unevenly. For example, the Serbian Embassy in Australia⁷ and the Serbian Embassy in Kenya⁸ feature no link to register for an appointment on eConsulate, while the Serbian Embassy in Germany⁹ presents a clear appointment booking option. It is important to note that the scheduling service was initially designed for Serbian citizens abroad, and not to directly target foreign nationals.¹⁰ The limited accessibility of services offered on eGovernment for foreigners reveals that these services need not simply to exist to be effective, but that clear communication is the key to fully achieve their purpose. Further expanding the accessibility and citizens' awareness regarding these services is a step towards ensuring a smoother transition for foreigners to Serbia.

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The second service available for foreigners can be found on eForeigner, where Serbian nationals can register a foreigner who is coming to Serbia and whom they are hosting. However, this option comes with practical shortcomings too. On the one hand, the address provided was not accessible through the link shared on the eGovernment portal.¹¹ On the other hand, it can be reached through searching for keywords such as 'eForeigner Serbia' on major search engines like Google¹². This inconsistency can mean that some users are smoothly able to access the service relying on Google, while others can face some confusion when approaching the service from the eGovernment portal. The mentioned discrepancy highlights the need for continuous technical updates and improvements to guarantee that public digital platforms function seamlessly and meet the needs of all. Ultimately, this is a prerequisite to ensure that services are fully user-centric and that they inspire a sense of trust and efficiency for both citizens and foreign nationals in Serbia.

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⁵ The eGovernment portal is a comprehensive government platform allowing Serbian citizens and foreign nationals to access public services. Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *eUprava: eGovernment Portal of the Republic of Serbia*. Retrieved October 7, 2024, <https://euprava.gov.rs/>

⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *eConsulate Portal*. Retrieved October 7, 2024, <https://ekonzulat.gov.rs/>

⁷ Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Australia. (n.d.). *Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Australia*. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <http://canberra.mfa.gov.rs/index.php>

⁸ Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in the Republic of Kenya. (n.d.). *Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in the Republic of Kenya*. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <http://nairobi.mfa.gov.rs/index.php>

⁹ Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in the Federal Republic of Germany. (n.d.). *Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in the Federal Republic of Germany*. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <http://berlin.mfa.gov.rs/index.php>

¹⁰ As explained during an interview with an officer from the Ministry of Interior.

¹¹ Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *eForeigner Portal*. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://livinginserbia.gov.rs/>

¹² Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). eForeigner. EUprava. Retrieved October 9, 2024, from <https://cms.test-uzda.gov.rs/usluge/4675>

Good practices from the EU: Rapid Progress on User Centric eService Delivery in Malta

Malta has achieved progress regarding digital service delivery. These advancements have been so important that the European Commission's *eGovernment Benchmark 2024 Insight Report* ranks Malta as the top digital government provider in the EU.¹³ Malta scored positively on each of the four dimensions of the Commission's Benchmark: transparency, user centricity, key IT enablers, and cross-border services. The country especially excels in the 'user centricity' indicator, with a score of 99 out of 100. Malta's excellence in this area finds a concrete materialisation in the eServices portal,¹⁴ where citizens and foreign nationals can access a variety of services, including filing visa or residence applications. When foreigners enter the portal's section dedicated to visa and residence applications, they are welcomed by a digital assistant that provides prompts on commonly-asked questions. Moreover, users can reach out to human agents through dedicated email addresses and phone numbers. Additionally, service users can provide feedback through the 'Rate the Public Service' tool, a graphically appealing evaluation system with the possibility to express overall satisfaction as well as leave detailed comments. In summary, Malta is not simply offering high-quality services to users, but this case could be taken as an example, and spark good practices across other EU countries, as well as candidate countries like Serbia.

Travelling on uneven roads: challenges and opportunities of the Welcome to Serbia Website

Welcome to Serbia is a website aiming to present the most important information foreign nationals need to prepare for their entrance and stay in Serbia, and it can be accessed through the eGovernment portal or through internet research. However, two parallel versions of the website are currently active, with the risk of creating confusion for foreigners from the very beginning of their journey of entering and living in Serbia. The first version¹⁵ offers basic services such as connecting users to the e-applications for visa, residence and work permits. The second¹⁶ is a trial version with additional information, including the cost of living in Serbia, education in Serbia, and an overview of visa categories and application requirements. While the comprehensiveness and depth of information on the second version better aids foreign nationals, this website is not easily accessible, as users are directed by default to the first version when searching for the keyword 'Welcome to Serbia' on major search engines like Google. This parallelism of sources of information could push users to seek information through secondary sources which may not always be reliable and may even discourage people wanting to settle in Serbia to use them.

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13 Capgemini, Sogeti, IDC, & Politecnico di Milano. (2024). *EGovernment Benchmark 2024 Insight Report*. European Commission. <https://doi.org/10.2759/0684>

14 Government of Malta. (n.d.). *Your Online Guide to Government Services*. Servizz.gov. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://www.servizz.gov.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>

15 Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *Welcome to Serbia homepage*. Welcome to Serbia. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://welcometosrbia.gov.rs/home>

16 Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *Home*. Welcome to Serbia Homepage. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://welcometosrbia.test-uzda.gov.rs/home>

Additionally, a closer look to the services and information offered through the default Welcome to Serbia website uncovers that some key features could be improved. More specifically, the tool ‘My Entry / Visa / Residence Guide’¹⁷ provides an overview of what visa is needed based on the information entered by users, such as their nationality. However, it does not display the benefits and achievements of the Open Balkan initiative¹⁸ when choosing ‘North Macedonia’ or ‘Albania’ as ‘nationality’, which may generate confusion for the citizens of the Open Balkan countries.¹⁹ Additionally, information in the FAQ section²⁰ is disorganized, lacking sub-headings with specific information concerning different groups of foreign nationals, such as those requiring a visa and those who can stay in Serbia for up to 90 or 30 days within a six-month period without it.²¹ Such discrepancies illuminate the need to adequately and equally adapt services to different foreign nationals, which would allow them to fully and easily understand their possibilities to enter and reside in Serbia.

Lastly, the Welcome to Serbia platform faces challenges due to coordination issues among the various public institutions responsible for managing it. The website is the result of an interdepartmental cooperation process, and the contributing institutions range from the Ministry of Interior as the leading one, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all the way to the employment and security services.²² In addition, the postal service and tax administration systems are expected to be included in the process.²³ This complex structure leads in practice to inefficiencies, for example concerning the availability of clear and updated information for all institutional actors and the time required for finalising the application procedures. Ensuring

interdepartmental efficiencies and synergies remain paramount for smooth user experience and further success of the Welcome to Serbia initiative.

The evidence so far presented paves the way to bettering public services for foreign nationals coming to Serbia. Achieving improvements is certainly not a simple process, but rather a complex one, that requires time and resources.

Beyond Arrival: Developments on the Practicalities of Living and Working in Serbia

Parallel to having an informative function, Welcome to Serbia is intended to guide users to apply for visa and residence applications through an online form.²⁴ However, this guidance consists only of basic tips on application preparation with users being hardly in focus. For example, while each step of the form features a ‘more information’ icon to clarify what data users need to provide, it does not offer templates for the documents that users need to upload. In addition, while the form provides a support email, it only appears on the bottom of the homepage of the form, with no reference to it after users have entered the application flow. Moreover, the form does not offer a phone number or a chat bot for users to reach out in case they encounter any difficulties and there is no possibility for users to provide feedback on the form’s functioning. Providing a diverse range of support tools may be especially valuable to foreign nationals, especially to those belonging to vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities or the elderly. In practical terms, the lack of more user focused guidance during the application process may lead to difficulties in completing each application step correctly and diminish the portals’ purpose.

The form on the website does not offer a phone number or a chat bot for users to reach out in case they encounter any difficulties and there is no possibility for users to provide feedback on the form’s functioning.

17 Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.-a). *Discovery tool*. Welcome to Serbia. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://welcometoserbia.gov.rs/discovery-tool>

18 Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *The aim and purpose of Open Balkan*. EUPrava. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://euprava.gov.rs/openbalkan/english>

19 Besides not informing citizens fully about the Open Balkan initiative, there are some contradictions between the provisions set by this agreement and the information provided on the Welcome to Serbia website. For example, the Open Balkan agreement enables “a citizen of a Contracting Party to stay in the territory of the Receiving Party for up to two years”, while the Welcome to Serbia website allows for a permanence of ‘up to 36 months’, when a citizen is granted temporary residence. See the Open Balkan agreement [here](#).

20 Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.-c). *Help*. Welcome to Serbia. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://welcometoserbia.gov.rs/help>

21 This category of nationals who can stay up to 90 days without a visa includes citizens of the United States, Canada, Australia, Turkey, EU, and Western Balkan countries, as well as a significant number of Asian and Latin America nationals. Chinese and Russian citizens can stay up to 30 days without a visa.

22 As explained during an interview with an officer from the Ministry of Interior.

23 Ibid.

24 Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *Welcome to Serbia homepage*. Welcome to Serbia. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://welcometoserbia.gov.rs/home>

International mobility of the workforce is limited due to domestic policies and administrative burden, and Serbia has taken additional measures in the direction of facilitating this process. With the exception of Albanian and North Macedonian citizens who enjoy the right to access Serbia's labour market in a simplified manner,²⁵ other foreign nationals need a permit to find employment in Serbia.²⁶ When a visa is granted on the basis of employment, no further application or procedure is needed, and work permit is automatically granted for a defined period.²⁷ In all other cases, a single permit application—for both temporary residence and work—is necessary and can be completed on the Welcome to Serbia website. The latest version of the single permit was introduced in February 2024 through the Law on Amendments to the Law on Foreigners.²⁸ The rationale behind the law was to create a 'one-stop shop' for foreigners interested in finding a job in Serbia, which allows them to work, but also facilitates visa and residence applications. In particular, the platform assesses users' visa requirements, and, once the assessment is completed, it directs foreigners to the single permit application. Ultimately, these developments showcase the awareness of public authorities in Serbia to ensure a smoother and more empowering user journey for foreigners, but the recent introduction of these enablers calls for scrutiny of their practical gains.

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The validity period of the single permit was originally set at 12 months, but it was extended to 36 months through the aforementioned Law amendments. Moreover, employers can hire a larger number of employees through a single procedure (up to 50), with the requirement to provide them with a final employment contract before the issuing of the permit, which adds predictability to the single permit application process.

Moreover, while the overall procedure welcomes foreign workers to Serbia, it keeps a focus on the interests of Serbian citizens. This is, for example, achieved through a labour market test. Such tests, designed to assess whether there are qualified unemployed Serbian citizens who could work before hiring a foreigner, should serve the purpose of reducing the domestic unemployment first and foremost. Though these measures may seem to thwart the proclaimed intention of welcoming foreigners, the position the latter group holds in this process is also evolving and improving. For instance, the validity period of the single permit was originally set at 12 months, but it was extended to 36 months through the aforementioned Law amendments. Moreover, employers can hire a larger number of employees through a single procedure (up to 50), with the requirement to provide them with a final employment contract before the issuing of the permit, which adds predictability to the single permit application process. Ultimately, the policies aimed at attracting foreign workers in Serbia are delicately balancing between prioritising domestic employment and accommodating the evolving role of foreign labour, subtly highlighting the complexities in defining and meeting domestic interests or broader economic growth intentions.

25 Government of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *The aim and purpose of Open Balkan*. EUprava. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://euprava.gov.rs/openbalkan/english>

26 National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia. (n.d.). *Employment of foreigners in the Republic of Serbia*. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://www.nsz.gov.rs/nsz/employment-of-foreigners-in-the-republic-of-serbia/11181>

27 A work visa is a D visa type issued for the purpose of work. This visa allows individuals to stay and work in Serbia for a maximum period of 180 days, in which case a person does not need to obtain a work permit. If one wants to stay longer and continue with the same employment, application for a single permit for temporary residence and work is necessary, see more information here, on the trial version of the Welcome to Serbia website.

28 The Law on Foreigners, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 24/2018, 31/2019, 62/2023, <https://pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2018/24/1/reg>

Good Practices from the EU: Skilled Immigration Act and Further Development of Skilled Immigration Act from Germany

Every migrant can bring different skills and professional contributions to a foreign country. With this awareness in mind, Germany has introduced the Skilled Immigration Act in 2020, followed by the Further Development of Skilled Immigration Act in 2024.²⁹ In other words, as Federal Labor Minister Hubertus Heil explained, “with the Skilled Immigration Act, [Germany is] laying the foundation for a modern immigration country that not only accepts qualified immigration, but also wants it”.³⁰ These new laws greatly simplify the visa and residence application process for specific groups of professionally and academically skilled workers, including IT and healthcare specialists, as well as entrepreneurs. On the one hand, these regulations allow for a regulated migration flow that can respond to Germany’s job market needs. On the other hand, they recognised the professional competences of certain groups of workers, motivating them to settle in Germany and enrich the country with their expertise. Looking at Serbia, assessing the state of the job market and incentivising the migration of professionals critical to Serbia’s needs could benefit in planning or redesigning policies related to foreign workers in the future.

Moving closer to address the highlighted challenges will not only enable a smoother journey for foreign citizens when moving to Serbia but will also open opportunities for more collaboration and diversification domestically.

A Journey of Barriers and Breakthroughs: What Are the Ways Forward?

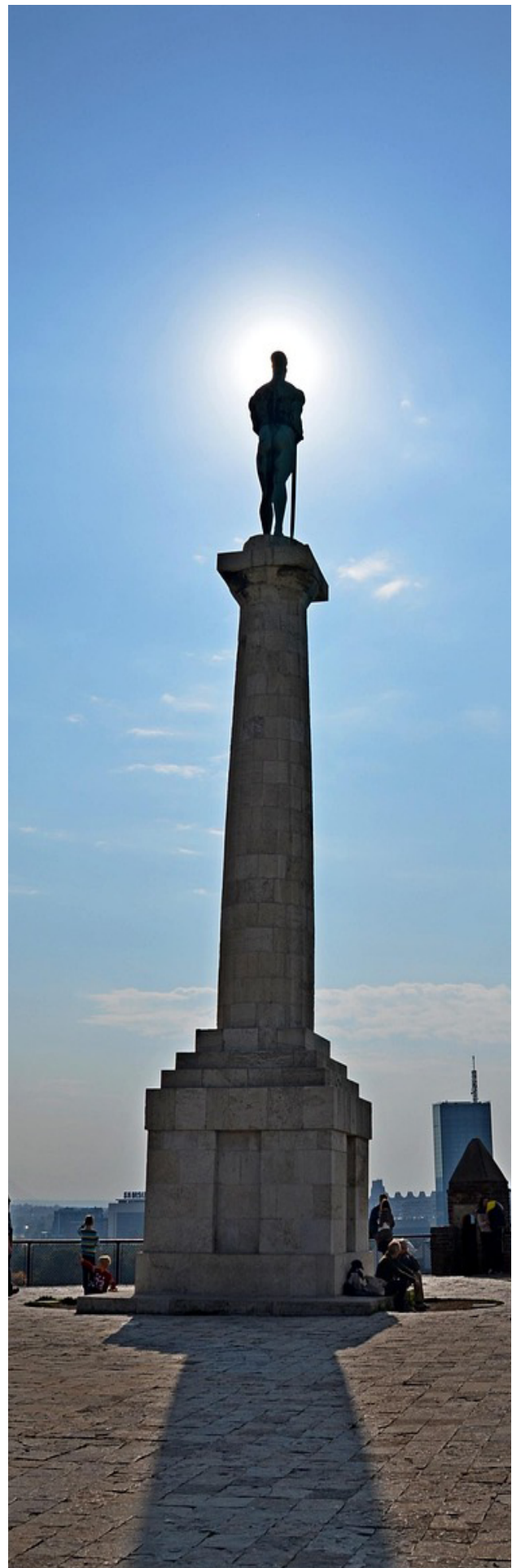
The analysis of Serbia’s services for foreigners, presented in this brief, converges on three lessons. First, it has shown that the success of public services lies not merely in their existence, but in their ability to effectively reach and address the needs of a variety of users. This applies to the eGovernment portal, which features challenges such as the unequal coordination with Serbian embassies and consulates in informing users about services, and to the Welcome to Serbia website, which is currently available in two distinct versions. Secondly, the analysis has uncovered that tailoring services plays a crucial role in effective delivery. While the Welcome to Serbia website already has tools that respond to the situations of different foreign nationals, some issues in adapting information to these diverse audiences persist. Thirdly, it was noticed that periodically reviewing policies can be beneficial to achieve desired policy results, but also broader country goals. The introduction of a single permit for working and residing, and recent changes to the Law on Foreigners in Serbia, is an example of redesigning approaches to attract more foreign workforce; however, it also highlights this is not straightforward as it intertwines with balancing between domestic and foreign labour demand. Overall, moving closer to address the highlighted challenges will not only enable a smoother journey for foreign citizens when moving to Serbia but will also open opportunities for more collaboration and diversification domestically.

²⁹ Federal Government of Germany. (2024, September 17). *The Skilled Immigration Act. Work in Germany*. <https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/en/visa-residence/skilled-immigration-act>

³⁰ Federal Government of Germany. (2024). *Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz | Bundesregierung. Die Bundesregierung Informiert | Startseite*. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/arbeit-und-soziales/fachkraefteeinwanderungsgesetz-2182168>

The evidence so far presented paves the way to bettering public services for foreign nationals coming to Serbia. Achieving improvements is certainly not a simple process, but rather a complex one, that requires time and resources. This brief not only aimed to describe main developments and challenges, but also to move towards solutions through suggesting the following policy recommendations:

- Regarding the eConsulate service, foreign nationals should be offered standardised information and appointment options for any diplomatic or consular mission selected online. This could be achieved, for example, by sharing updated guidelines on service delivery to embassies and consulates.
- Periodic technical checks should be performed on the eGovernment portal to allow seamless access to services, such as the eForeigner.
- Users should have the possibility to access only one, comprehensive version of the Welcome to Serbia website.
- Given the different policies in place towards different countries' nationals, the Government of Serbia should consider providing tailored support as part of the Welcome to Serbia website.
- The online application for visas and residence permits, through the same website, could better serve users by providing more user-friendly explanations, such as step-by-step instructions for filling out documents, and templates for preparing and submitting them.
- This website could also feature additional support tools, including an easily accessible email address, phone number and virtual assistant.
- Finally, the Welcome to Serbia website should facilitate users' feedback, for example by featuring a dedicated form where users can rate their experience and identify what could be further improved.



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