

## **YOUTH, MIGRATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

The basic demographic characteristics of one society are tightly related to the youth's potential as the core for any future social development. The prospects in Balkan countries are jeopardized by low fertility and continued migration which intensified in the last decades. Migration in the past was generated by wars, political instability, and a lack of economic prospects. Today, a vast part of the region is integrated into the EU, and the rest is with clear aspirations to integrate in the near future. However, some open questions as dysfunctional political systems, corruption, not having a rule of law, and economic instability are some of the main reasons for future migration. A significant factor of migration is related to the possibility of continuation of education from high school to university level.

This article is focused on the general motivation for migration in the Balkan countries, with a focus on Macedonian society. Two surveys are presented as an empirical basis for further analyses. The results reflect the general situation in the eastern and central regions of the Republic of N. Macedonia. Longitudinal aspects are

included, comparing the data generated in 2014, 2018, 2022, and 2023. Additionally, the official statistics confirm the thesis and create a broader picture of the correlative relations between educational motivation and migration trends.

**Keywords:** *migration, education, demography, Balkan, Macedonia.*

## **Introduction**

The demographic potential of one country, region, or town, is the main precondition for the creation of politics and the projection of any future development (economic, political, health, etc.). Therefore, the general tendencies of demographic depopulation are related to low fertility rates and mechanical migration. Even the membership of some countries within the ex-communist East European bloc that are a part of the EU and NATO, did not offer the expected results for economic growth. On the contrary, the open borders offered the possibility for the citizens of countries such as Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania, to migrate easily to some of these more developed countries of the West. This situation is very similar for the rest of the region and the Republic of N. Macedonia.<sup>1</sup> Alongside the main driving factor for youth migration related to the economic parameters, a moving force for migration of populations between the ages of 15 to 25 years old is education, especially on a secondary and university level. Many believe the existing possibilities for education in these Eastern European countries are not sufficient, and very often youth are studying abroad. The motivation is related to the perceptions of higher quality educational programs, as well as opportunities for socialization and travel. There is also significant interest in possibilities of future integration through permanent migration (Browne, 2017).<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the analyses of higher education systems in the region are very significant for the determination of key factors of educational youth migration.

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<sup>1</sup> From the trend of migration of youth population categories from the age of 18 to 35 are not excluded and highly developed countries as Denmark, Germany, Nederland, Italy, Norway, Sweden, or Slovenia (Cortina, Taran and Raphael (ed.), 2014). Some estimates are that by 2050, due to low fertility rate and migration the countries of the EU will lose 70 million. Therefore, the immigration strategies for attracting the population to migrate toward the Union, are factor which can modified the bad trends (Muenz, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Some estimates are that this type of youth migration is optimal and is only 10 % of highly educated youth in developing countries (Docquier, 2014).

The diversity of the South-Eastern European region reflects the differences and specifics in the higher educational systems. The basic division of the region is into two parts - countries that are members of the European Union, and non-member countries, united in the region of Western Balkans. But, on the other side, excluding Greece, there are many similarities, mainly in the historical traditions of transformation of the Educational Systems and society in general, from one-party systems in the 1990s and streaming toward democracy. In the 2000s, in all of the Western Balkans countries, Bologna-related reforms of higher education took place, including changes in legislation and, less often, changes in funding arrangements, as well as changes in curricula. Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Montenegro joined the Bologna process in 2003, and Kosovo, due to its formal status regarding its independence, is a complex matter (Vukasovic, 2012). Therefore, the processes of reforms in Higher Education are moving with different dynamics. Zagaga notes that there is clear progress in higher education quality and research initiatives, but the general opinion that the quantification of educational institutions, in the first row of private ones, leads towards fragmentalization, and a decrease in quality. The regional view is almost identical when we are converging on the illusive relation between so-called policy makers and researchers, especially in their cooperation in higher educational reforms. He also noted that besides domestic politics, Higher education systems and their regulation have experienced profound changes as a result of policies designed at the supranational level (e.g. the Bologna Process; the European Commission; in some cases the OECD and the World Bank) (Zagaga, 2013).

### **Demography and migration in the Balkans**

Since 1990s the wider region of the Balkan countries had significant stagnation and fall in their population (Table 1). This was due to the significant political and economic instability as a result of the social transformation and Balkan wars. The population fall is equally distributed to lower fertility levels and permanent migration influx toward the western more developed countries.

According to Ivan Čipin, who is using various aging indicators, Croatia is among the 10 oldest nations in the world. A constant yearly increase in the number of people aged 65 and over and a decrease in the working-age population hide some potential economic and social problems. Besides its low fertility rate, Croatia is also facing continuing migration trends, especially of

young and highly educated population<sup>3</sup> (Čipin, 2017). The low fertility rate of 1,5 and the negative demographic trends project that in the next few decades Croatia can lose an additional 16 % of its population. According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, the net migration rose from 1,472 in 2009 to 22,451 in 2016 when a total of 36,436 persons emigrated, but levels of emigration from Croatia are higher than official statistics suggest, perhaps double or even triple (Lórinzné Bencze, 2020). Additionally, the situation in Bulgaria by many researchers is described as catastrophic. In the last three decades, only the country lost 16 % of its population. In recent years the country has ranked last in Europe. At the beginning of the 1990s, the natural increase rate was of the order of -2 %, and reached -6 % in 2016 (Ilieva, 2017). The rapid changes in fertility and mortality rates have led to intense demographic aging in Serbia. In recent years, less than 70,000 babies were born in Serbia annually, while the highest birth rate was around 150,000 children in the first half of the 1950s. The decrease in the fertility rate and the lower number of childbirths resulted in significant population aging. By 2018, Serbia made it to the top ten of the countries with the highest median age. Additionally, the tradition of emigration is also present in Serbia. Since the 1990s and the great influx of refugees due to the Balkan wars, recent trends have shown an increase in emigration (Ördögh, 2020).

**Table 1 Population of Balkan countries by The World Bank (The World Bank, 2023).**

	1990	2000	2010	2020
<b>Albania</b>	3 286 542	3 089 027	2 913 021	2 837 849
<b>Macedonia</b>	2 044 174	2 026 350	2 055 004	2 072 531
<b>Serbia</b>	7 586 000	7 516 346	7 291 436	6 899 126
<b>Montenegro</b>	606 372	604 950	619 428	621 306
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	4 494 310	4 179 350	3 811 088	3 318 407
<b>Croatia</b>	4 777 368	4 468 302	4 295 427	4 047 680
<b>Slovenia</b>	1 998 161	1 988 925	2 048 583	2 102 419
<b>Bulgaria</b>	8 718 289	8 170 172	7 395 599	6 934 015
<b>Kosovo</b>	1 862 000	1 700 000	1 775 680	1 790 133

<sup>3</sup> As in the other countries in the region, migration trends in Croatia are not equally territorially distributed. For example, the northern rural regions of the country are under stronger and continues emigrational pressure (Pokos, 2017).

The tradition of economic migration from these Southeast European regions was further supplemented by the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslav federation, political instability, poor economic policy related to the questionable privatization of social capital, wars, and in general, bad economic parameters. Hence, for many authors, undoubtedly, the primary factor for the intensification of migration, especially among the young population categories, is the high level of unemployment and poverty. Additional individual variables that influence migration are gender, age, level of education, number of members in the family, and family status (Malaj and Malaj, 2017). Besides the partial integration of some Balkan countries in the EU, in the last decade, united under the micro-regional denomination “Western Balkans”, the rest of the countries are sucked in the membership waiting room with small odds for faster international prospects. This influence for permanent growth of Euroscepticism, as in the EU countries, influences public opinion within the candidate states in the region<sup>4</sup> (Sydoruc, Yakymchuk, and Avhustiok, 2022). The lack of a clear and stable road for integration only increases the possibilities for further migration from this region toward Western European countries.

Since 1990, the number of migrants from the Western Balkans has doubled to almost 3.8 million in 2019. According to World Bank data, 47% of Bosnians, 45% of Montenegrins, 41% of Albanians, 30% of Kosovars, Macedonians, and Serbs live abroad (Oruč, 2022). According to the Balkan Barometer for 2017, at the level of Southeast Europe, 27% of the population defined their socio-economic status as below average, with a high 35% of the citizens of Albania and 33% of the citizens of Serbia (Balkan Barometer, 2017). In 2022 this percentage slightly decreases and is 22 %, with 27 % in Albania and 23 % in Montenegro (Balkan Barometer, 2022). At the same time, in 2017, 45% of the citizens in the region were considering migrating and working outside the country, or that is 50% of the citizens of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or 45% of the citizens of Macedonia (Balkan Barometer, 2017). In 2022, 39 % of the citizens in the region were considering migrating and working outside the country. The highest levels for potential migration were in Kosovo with 59 %,

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of EU integrations is related to some aspects of security, but mainly concentrated on economic parameters of overall social prosperity. For Katuninec and Diener this is related to the concept of “Welfare State”. For them “*the process of European integration from the beginning has been led by the idea of the need to strike a balance between the economic and social dimensions. Increasing the living standards and working conditions of employees was the common goal of all its members*” (Katuninec and Diener, 2021). In this sense, the enlargement crisis is produced by increasing euroscepticism is no else, than product of the crisis of “the welfare state”.

and Albania<sup>5</sup> with 42 % (Balkan Barometer, 2022). The estimates are that by 2019 the level of emigration in the region was significant with the trend to continue in the population decline (Silviu, 2020)<sup>6</sup>. In a study of students of Medicine in Bosnia and Herzegovina 61, 2 % are thinking of leaving the country and while 16, 1 % search for permanent work abroad (Šeherčehajić and Ramić, 2022). Even though depopulation is a negative factor for further social and economic development, the diaspora from the Western Balkans, through migrants' remittances, is an important resource for the development of their home countries (Oruč, 2022).

For Mizikaci and Baumgartl, in the current and projected cases in Eastern Europe, the majority of countries are at risk as “higher education export” countries, sending students and academic staff abroad rather than “importing” foreign students or staff, and this trend is increasing each year (Mizikaci and Baumgartl, 2007). According to the research of the Balkan Regional Platform for Youth Participation and Dialogue, most of the young people in the region of the Western Balkan countries travel outside the country once or twice a year, mostly on trips, holidays with family, or for training or educational programs. 60% believe that in their countries, young people are not offered enough opportunities for a quality life. The better life in other countries, according to this research, is due to greater opportunities to find good employment, greater opportunities for career advancement, better formal and non-formal education opportunities, as well as better incomes. Most young people would like to permanently move to one of the EU member states, and the reason for possibly leaving the country is sought most often because of employment opportunities according to the qualifications that young people possess and the better standard of living (Popović and Gligorović, 2016).

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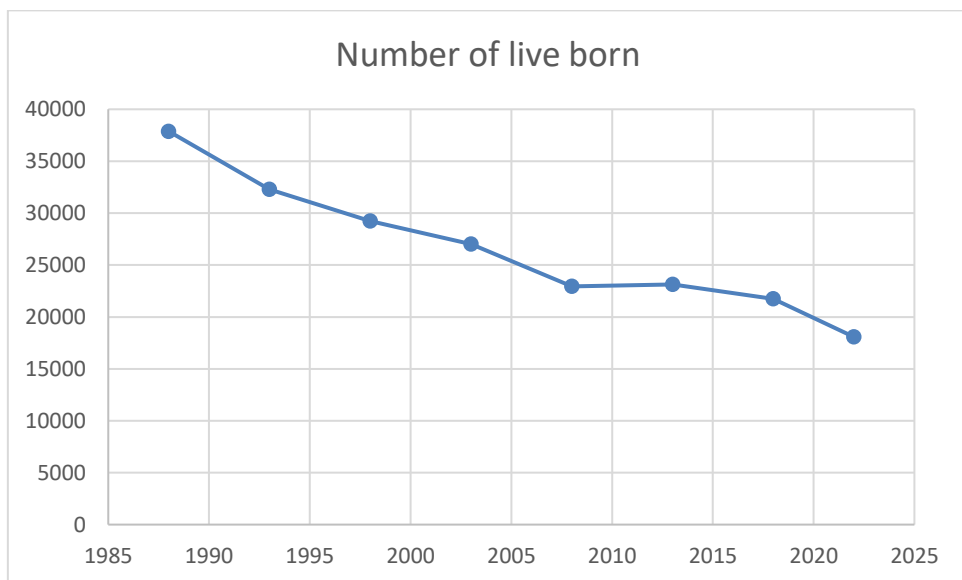
<sup>5</sup> The perception of migration in some countries, such as Albania, defers dependent of the economic development of the regions (prefectures). The prefectures with relatively lower developments are Kuks, Dibr, and Elbasan (Nurja, 2020), and the migration from those regions is higher.

<sup>6</sup> Albania lost 41,9 % or 1,207,032 citizens, with projection until 2050 to lose an additional 15,8%, Bosnia and Herzegovina lost 50,1 % or 1,653,056 citizens, with projection until 2050 to lose additional 18,2 %, Montenegro lost 24,4 % or 153,009 citizens, with projection until 2050 to lose additional 6,2 %, the Republic of N. Macedonia lost 31,6 % or 658,264 citizens, with projection until 2050 to lose additional 10,9 %, and Serbia lost 7,1 % or 147,593 citizens, with projection until 2050 to lose additional 6,7 % (Silviu, 2020).

### Demographic indicators and youth migration from the Republic of N. Macedonia

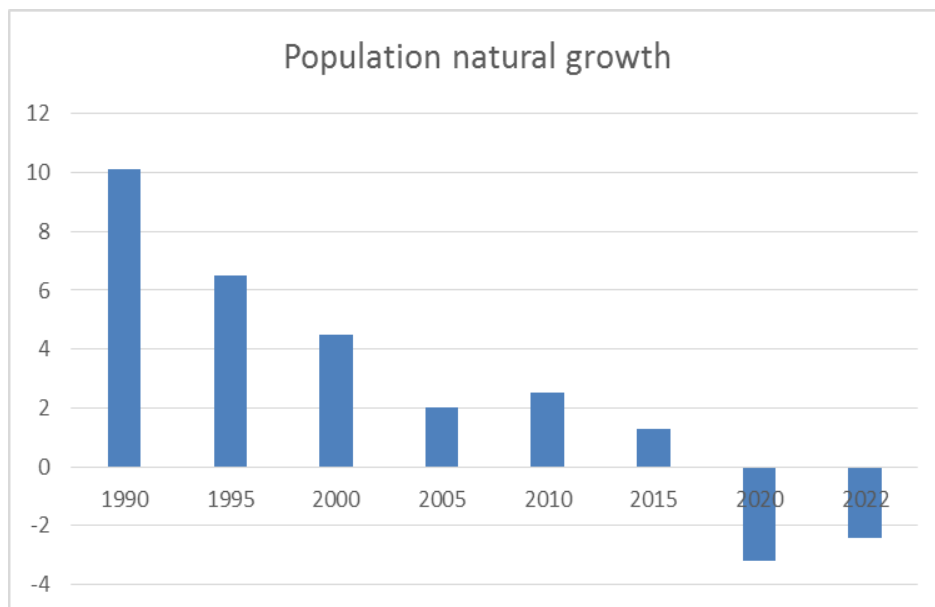
The basic demographic picture for the Republic of N. Macedonia is equally based on the indicators related to the birth rate, demographic potential, and mechanical circulation of the population related to migration within, but primarily outside the country. Basic demographic data in the last three decades indicate a declining trend in live births (Figure 1). The figures are dramatic if we take into account that this number is less than half. If in 1988 the number of live births is 37 879, in 2022 this number is only 18 073, with a clear trend for numbers declining in the future. We can notice similar tendencies within the population natural growth index, which since 2019 even entered into negative values (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1 State Agency for Statistics of Republic of N. Macedonia



<sup>7</sup> Permanent emigration mainly includes the young population and young married couples, which caused a continuous increase in the number of children born abroad. Available data show that as of 2020, the share of children born abroad compared to live births in the country reached more than 25% (Lozanoska, Janeska & Djambaska, 2022).

Figure 2 State Agency for Statistics of the Republic of N. Macedonia



The trends for population migration within the wider region of South-Eastern Europe are mirrored in the case of the Republic of N. Macedonia. However, it is a problem to determine the exact number of emigration from the country. According to official statistical sources, 11,380 people emigrated from Macedonia in the period from 1994 to 2013. While other international organizations estimate that approximately 20% - 30% (450,000 - 630,000) of the total population had emigrated from Macedonia by 2013, most of these individuals being young people (The Economist, 2017).<sup>8</sup> Additionally, only in the period from 2012-2016, 113,975 individuals left Macedonia to go to OECD countries (Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and the United States), which is 5.5% of the total population that left the country for 5 years (Naumovski, 2021).

According to the nature of emigration, it can be structured into three categories: first, permanent migration of families or family reunification, second, temporary or circular economic emigration (employment) or temporary migration due to educational purposes, training or visiting family members, and

<sup>8</sup> According to the analysis of official statistical data, in the Republic of Macedonia there are no drastic differences between emigration and immigration, neither according to regional representation, nor according to gender, age, marital status, etc. (Sotiroski and Hristoski, 2014). However, such data are far from the real picture and factual situation.



third, Illegal departure of the country or seeking protection in third countries (Bornarova and Janevska, 2012).<sup>9</sup>

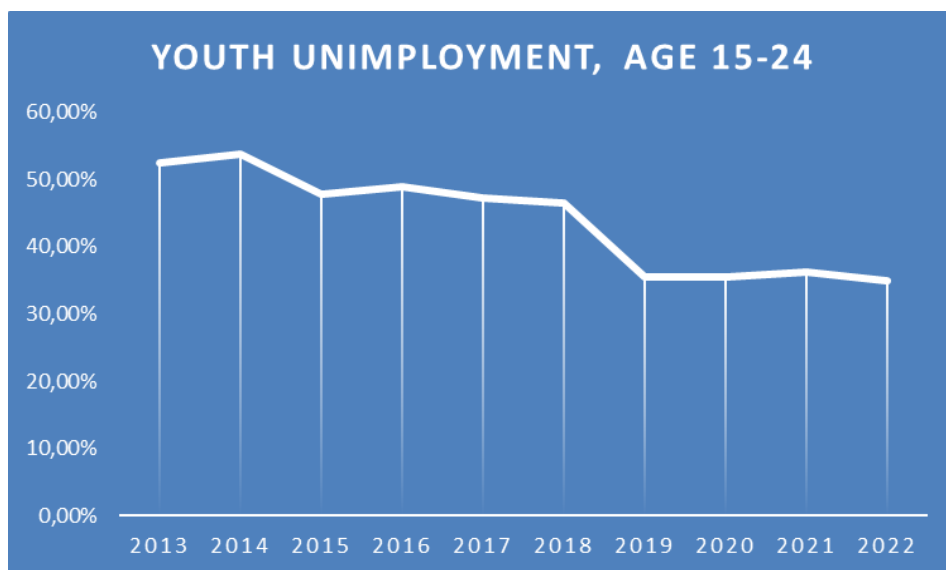
According to the research carried out by Dinkovski and Markovska-Simoska, regional trends are mirrored among young people in the Republic of Macedonia. As many as 69% of students stated that they would like to work outside the country, and the main reason is based on economic assumptions for better employment and higher incomes (Dinkovski and Markovska-Simoska, 2018). According to research conducted by the Institute for Sociological and Political and Legal Research, if they had the opportunity to study abroad, 48.8% of young people would like to study in one of the EU member states, and 25.2% in the USA. Indicatively, according to the same research, young people prefer to work in the state administration, as opposed to the private sector (Topuzovska Latkovik et al., 2013). It is precisely the weak development of the private sector, as opposed to the state's clientelism and expectation that seems to be a key factor for the additional creation of motivational factors for the migration of young people outside the state.

One of the main reasons for youth migration is the relatively high level of unemployment. As we can notice from Figure 3, youth unemployment in the Republic of N. Macedonia in the last decade is decreasing. But, this is mainly due to the high intensity of youth emigration. Yet, 34, 91 % of youth unemployment (up to 24 years old) are much below the European Union average.

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<sup>9</sup> The data suggest two broad emigration trends: one after the declaration of independence in 1991 and the other after the fall of the Schengen wall in 2009. Visa liberalization, together with the acquisition of Bulgarian passports by citizens of North Macedonia, has provided broader access to EU labor markets and given an impetus to longer-term Macedonian emigration in the period since 2007. Data from Bulgaria's Committee on Bulgarian Citizenship estimate that over 90 000 citizens of North Macedonia obtained a Bulgarian passport between 2002 and 2019 (Petreski, 2021).

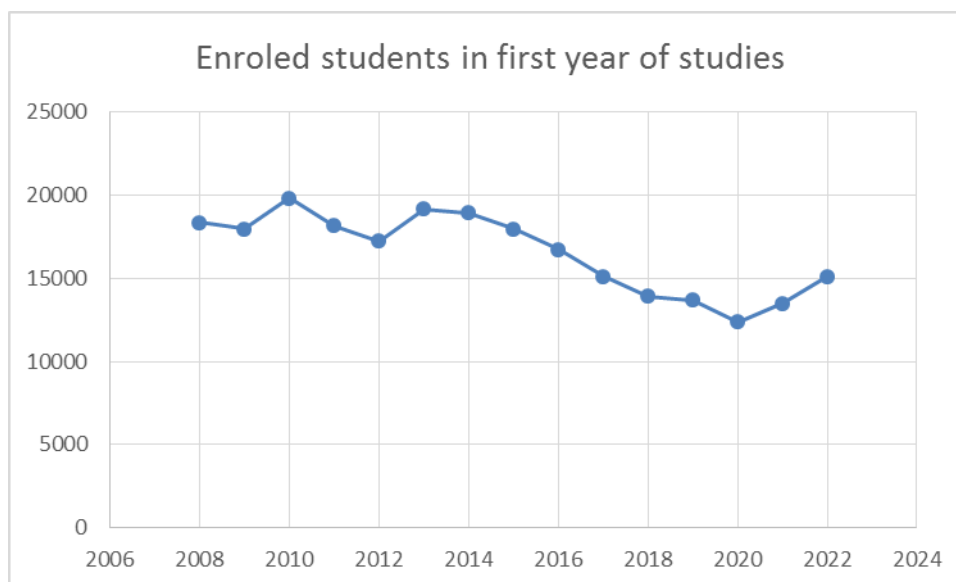
Figure 3 **Youth unemployment rate from 2013 to 2022 (North Macedonia: Youth unemployment rate from 2003 to 2022)**



Following the basic demographic indicators and relevant data, we are assuming that negative trends of natural growth and a decrease in the general population, will influence strongly on significant reduction of the number of enrolled students at the university level. But this is not quite the case. In Figure 4 we can notice that the number of the students is relatively high, with small tendency of stagnation or falling trends. But if we take into consideration that the number of Macedonian students which are studying abroad has been increasing in the last five years, the figures are showing different trends.<sup>10</sup> Also, we should take into consideration that the students enrolled in first year are included, and a significant number of students are already active, reassigning the year, or are changing faculties or study programs.

<sup>10</sup> For example, by the statement of the Ambassador of Republic of Slovenia in Republic of N. Macedonia, in the beginning of 2023 there were 1443 active students (Nikolov, 2023). But those figures are much higher, if we take in consideration that only in the study year of 2022/2023, 1 516 students from Macedonia started the first year of studies on all universities in Slovenia (Jancevska, 2023).

Figure 4 **Enrolled students in undergraduate studies in faculties and high professional schools (State Agency for Statistics of Republic of N. Macedonia)**



## Youth, Migration and Higher Education in Central and Eastern Regions of Republic of N. Macedonia

### *Methodology*

Two surveys were conducted in 2022 and 2023 in four regions (Eastern, North-Eastern, Vardar and South-Eastern region) in Republic of N. Macedonia. The first survey (Survey 1)<sup>11</sup> was conducted in 2022 on a sample of 308 young people between ages 15 to 35. The survey questions addressed youth perceptions on migration issues. The data will have longitudinal aspects incorporating comparison with results of researches conducted on the same questionary in 2014 and 2018 (Stojanovski and Denkova, 2018; Stojanovski, 2020). The second survey (Survey 2)<sup>12</sup> was conducted in 2023 on a sample of 1093 high school students from the third and fourth year of studies. This

<sup>11</sup> 43 % of the respondents are male, while 57 % are female. 75, 3 % declared they are living in urban areas and 23, 7 % in rural areas. 62 % are ages between 15 and 18, 26, 6 % between 19 and 24 years old and 11, 4 % on age between 25 and 35 (Survey 1).

<sup>12</sup> 51.5% of the respondents are from the third year, while 48.1% are from the fourth year. 75.1% of the respondents live in cities or urban areas, while 24.5% live in a village or rural environment. 94.% of the respondents are of Macedonian ethnicity, 2.2% Albanian, 0.7% Turkish, 1.3% Vlach and 0.5% Serbian. 92.9% declared themselves to be Christian, 4.3% Muslim and 2.2% decided for another (Survey 2).

research was conducted in 20 high schools, in 14 towns in previously mentioned regions of the Republic of N. Macedonia. This research has been focused on issues related to educational-based high school youth migration and the motivation of high school students to continue their education at the university level. The results are compared with research results produced on the same methodology and conducted in 2018 (Stojanovski, Denkova, and Marolov, 2018; Stojanovski, Koceva Lazarova, and Todorova, 2020).

### ***Results and Discussions***

From the research results we can notice that most young people would like to leave, considering migrating, and working outside the country (Survey 1). The percentage which is a product of the youth perceptions in the regions under the survey is higher than the national average (Balkan Barometer, 2022) and is 58, 4 %. Yet, the general tendency for decreasing the perceptions of emigrating abroad is visible in these regions (Table 2; Figure 5). The results show that though going abroad for work is the primary factor contributing to individuals leaving their home country, it has shown a decrease in recent years; falling from 57 % in 2014, to 31, 5 % in 2022. While tourism as motivation for traveling abroad increases, from 15, 5 % to 20, 8 % (Table 3).

**Table 2 Would you like to leave to another country?**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>No Data</b>
<b>2014</b>	77,3 %	9,7 %	11,1 %	1,9 %
<b>2018</b>	76,8 %	5,7 %	15,8 %	1,7 %
<b>2022</b>	58,4 %	11, 7 %	28,6 %	1,3 %

Figure 5 **Would you like to leave in another country?**

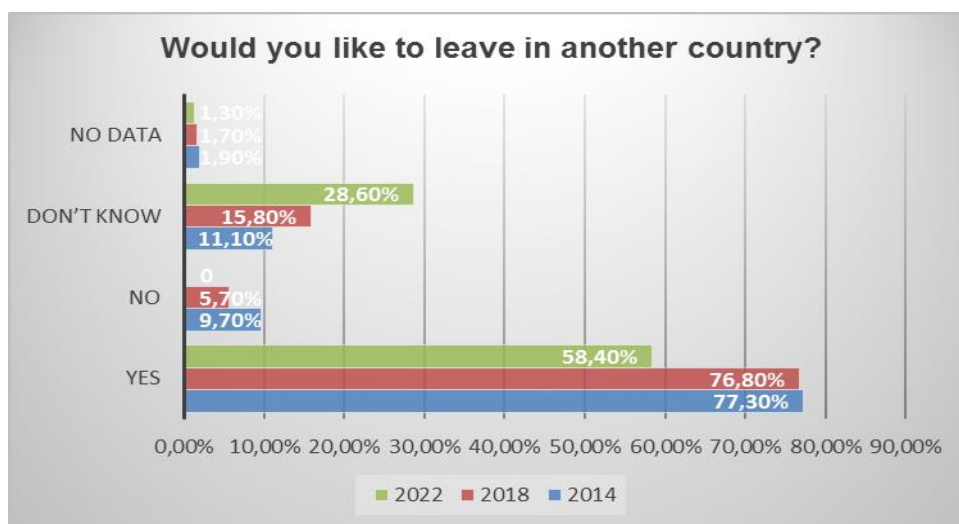


Table 3 **Why would you like to leave to another country?**

	For touristic travel	For studying	For building professional or sport career	To work	Other	No Data
<b>2014</b>	15, 5 %	7, 7 %	14 %	57 %	1 %	4, 8 %
<b>2018</b>	12, 4 %	18, 8 %	12, 8 %	41, 6 %	4 %	10, 4 %
<b>2022</b>	20, 8 %	14, 9 %	13, 6 %	31, 5 %	8, 4 %	10, 7 %

From the conducted research, we can notice that the percentage of young people who are oriented towards permanent emigration from the country is decreasing slightly, from 17, 4 % in 2014, to 14, 3 % in 2022. But if we have the facts of those who are undecided, then we can generate the opposite conclusion, or at the very least raise some doubt (Table 4).

**Table 4 After a longer stay in another country, would you return to Macedonia?**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>No Data</b>
<b>2014</b>	50, 2 %	17, 4 %	28 %	4, 3 %
<b>2018</b>	40, 3 %	15, 8 %	41, 9 %	2 %
<b>2022</b>	48, 4 %	14, 3 %	35, 7 %	1, 6 %

The most popular destinations for young people in the regions under study are Germany, USA and Switzerland. In the last survey, interest in Switzerland is noticeably decreasing, but there is also a slight increase in interest in migrating to Italy (Table 5).

**Table 5 In which of the countries you see your possibility to work or permanent emigration?**

	<b>2014</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2022</b>
<b>USA</b>	30, 4 %	16, 8 %	20, 8 %
<b>Germany</b>	30, 9 %	24, 5 %	20, 5 %
<b>UK</b>	7, 2 %	5 %	5, 2 %
<b>Scandinavian countries</b>	9, 2 %	4, 4 %	4, 5 %
<b>Italy</b>	2, 9 %	2 %	7, 8 %
<b>UAE (Dubai), Qatar</b>	7, 7 %	3, 4 %	4, 5 %
<b>Afghanistan/Iraq</b>	1 %	0, 3 %	1 %
<b>Switzerland</b>	/	22, 1 %	12, 3 %
<b>Nether from the offered countries</b>	3, 9 %	1, 3 %	1 %
<b>Other</b>	4, 3 %	3 %	8, 4 %
<b>No Data</b>	2, 4 %	17, 1 %	14 %

In the Survey 2 different questions were included, mainly related to perceptions of high school students on the next level of higher education. From the results we can notice that most high school students are planning to continue their education process at universities. Compared to 2018, when 63, 2 % were planning to continue with education, in 2023 we have increase to 66, 7 %. With the increase in the success of high school students, the possibility of them deciding to study also increases. Thus, among excellent students, they would study for sure as much as 87, 3 % in 2018, and 83 % in 2023. 23.1% of those who would not continue their education at one of the universities have the possibility of leaving the country and going abroad. With lower success (grade average), the possibility of leaving the country for reasons not related to continuing education increases (excellent 9%, wary good 17.7%, good 18.5%, sufficient 33.3%).

As in the region and the wider trends in Macedonia, we can notice that the most popular are state universities. We can assume that this preference of state universities can increase, because of its accessibility and better reputation, or quality. But comparing the data generated in 2018 with 2023 it's noticeable that the perceptions of studying abroad are almost doubled and study in the country decreases (Table 6). The last notion is an additional serious indicator that the educational migration is one of the main drivers for brain drain processes.

Taking into account the results from 2023, it is indicative that there is a possibility, in a short period of time, one out of four high school students who will not study, will leave the country. Also, there is a tendency to increase migration factors associated with continuing education outside the country. On this basis, more than 20% of the total number of young people from the regions that were the subject of the research could leave the country. In absolute numbers, potentially, only from the last generation of high school graduates, out of a little over 3,500 registered for the state high school graduation, about 900 young people from the eastern and central parts of Macedonia could leave the country. Although it is a temporary emigration, it can easily be transformed into a permanent one. Of additional concern is the fact that these high school students are mostly high achievers. Adding to those figures that more than 25 %, because of preference for the University "St. Cyril's and Methodius" in Skopje (UKIM), can move to live in the state capital, the regions, at least temporarily, can lose more than half of its young population.

From the research, if we make a comparison, we can notice that the social status of the respondents has been increasing for the last 5 years (2018 to 2023) and it has a slight effect on the possibility of choosing education, in the direction of increasing the preference for studying outside the country. In addition, if the parents have a higher education, the possibility of high school students choosing one of the foreign universities increases.

Table 6 **At which type of university would you like to study?**

	<b>Private university in Macedonia</b>	<b>State University in Macedonia</b>	<b>University abroad</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>I don't want to study at a university</b>	<b>No Data</b>
<b>2018</b>	9, 8 %	37, 2 %	13, 7 %	23, 1 %	13, 3 %	2, 9 %
<b>2022</b>	10, 2 %	28, 4 %	22, 3 %	24, 4 %	10 %	4, 8 %

The most popular state universities in the regions under this survey among high school students, are the University “St. Cyril’s and Methodius” in Skopje (UKIM) and Goce Delchev University in Shtip (UGD). Driven by the demand for free market economy principles and within the last decade, technical faculties are becoming far more popular. Looking at the comparing results from 2018 and 2013, we can notice that the biggest preference increase is for the Faculty of Informatics. Yet, Medicine, Law, and Economics are as popular as ever (Table 7).

Regarding the research results in 2023, for studying at private universities, the greatest interest is in Economics (20.2%), Law (19.3%) and Informatics (18.3%), for studying at State Universities is in Informatics (21.4%), Medicine (16.5%), Economics (12.5%) and Law (9.7%), and for studying at Universities outside the country, the greatest interest is in Medicine (20 %), Informatics (19.1 %), Economics (9.8 %) and Law (9.3 %).

Because the prospects for building professional careers in the fields of medicine and informatics are limited in the country, we can assume that even for those who are studying in some Macedonian universities, these choices are motivated by the prospects of the future working force. These students that are studying in this fields will be integrated and accumulated more so into the European market economies.



Table 7 **On which faculty would you like to study?**

	<b>2018</b>	<b>2022</b>
<b>Law</b>	12, 4 %	9, 1 %
<b>Economics</b>	8, 8 %	11, 3 %
<b>Informatics</b>	7, 4 %	17, 5 %
<b>Agriculture</b>	6, 4 %	2, 4 %
<b>Medicine</b>	10, 2 %	13, 6 %
<b>Education</b>	4, 5 %	3, 3 %
<b>Philology</b>	4, 3 %	2, 8 %
<b>Engineering</b>	4, 3 %	2, 5 %
<b>Sports</b>	3, 8 %	1, 6 %
<b>Electro-technical sciences</b>	5, 4 %	2 %
<b>Architecture</b>	5, 1 %	1, 9 %
<b>Other</b>	16, 8 %	19, 8 %
<b>No Data</b>	10, 5 %	8, 1 %

By the research in 2018, on the question what is the main reason for further studying at the university level, the most popular choices are: because the education is a precondition for better future perspectives (34, 8 %), to improve their intellectual capacities (9, 64 %) and obtaining students visa for possible migration abroad (10, 89 %) (Stojanovski, Denkova, and Marolov, 2018). On the same question in 2023, the most preferable are because education is a precondition for better future perspectives (38, 7 %), to improve their intellectual capacities (15, 5 %), for easier future employment (7, 6 %), and obtaining students visa for possible migration abroad (5, 7 %). As we can notice from comparing the data, the rational choices for building future prosperity are dominant. The students are less motivated to use their student status at one of the universities in the Republic of N. Macedonia, as a base for future migration. But, we have to point out that the last notion is also due to increased perceptions of studying abroad as educational-based migration.

The main criteria for high school students in future choosing University, in 2018 are the quality of study programs and the good conditions (17, 8 %), better reputation of the University and the possibility for future easier employment (13, 2 %) and their personal wishes, predispositions and motivation (12, 5 %) (Stojanovski, Denkova, and Marolov, 2018). In 2023, the preferences are staying the same, the quality of study programs and the good conditions (22 %), better reputation of the University and the possibility for future easier employment (13, 5 %) and their personal wishes, predispositions and motivation (22 %). Not recognizing the importance of the low costs, accessibility, and social surroundings as a factor, does not mean that they are not important, but radar dominated by personal motivational factors and rational bases of perceptions for the quality of the higher education institutions of choice.

## **Conclusion**

The biggest problem which marks almost every Balkan country is population downfall and losing the main resource for any future prospects-its young people. Even though some countries, such as Croatia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria, are integrated into the EU, economic and demographic challenges are ever present. The dramatic and sometimes catastrophic population conditions are produced by the fall of natural growth via low fertility rates and strong migratory movements.

The case of the Republic of N. Macedonia is no different. Lack of relevant data it's not an obstacle in locating the negative population trends. Regular, inner, and outside migrations are creating preconditions for depopulation of villages, towns, and all regions. In the central and eastern regions of the country, depopulation is equally driven by educational migration. Passing from high school to university means not just to change the surrounding area and hometown, but also to initiate permanent migration toward the capital of Skopje and foreign countries. Many of the students from the mentioned regions are choosing Bulgaria or Slovenia, in mass, to continue their education, but also as a footstep for future permanent migration. In this sense it seems that the suspicions are justified that educational policies of the open and accessible educational system of Slovenia are not just with pure educational background, but long-term demographic strategies. The demographic challenges of the Balkan countries are present, acute, and seem beyond the point of no return.

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