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MIGRATION OUT OF NECESSITY OR SUFFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY OF CIRCULAR MIGRANTS FROM SERBIA²

Abstract: The concept of circular migration, much like the broader concept of migration itself, is highly diverse in its content and lacks a single, universally accepted definition. Scholars emphasize various facets, often linking it to temporary or return migration. While circular migration is not new notion in academic discussions, it has recently gained attention among policymakers, who now see it as a long-awaited solution to demographic and economic challenges. In political and public discourse, circular migration is often framed through the developmental lens of a “triple-win” model: individuals gain personal and professional opportunities; developed countries address labor shortages; and developing nations benefit from exporting surplus labor and strengthening global competitiveness through the return of citizens. This promising narrative has also reached Serbia. In this context, we explored key questions: what types of migration practices can be found among circular migrants, and do they engage in circular migration out of economic necessity or sufficiency? In order to elaborate on these questions, qualitative research was conducted with circular migrants originating from three medium-sized Serbian cities – Čačak, Užice, and Smederevo – as part of the Population Development Facility Programme, a joint initiative by the UNDP and the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography. This study aims to shed light on the motivation behind their decisions to leave and return, as well as on their circular migration practices. The concept of circular migration employed in this research is defined by two key dimensions: (1) engagement in temporary or permanent employment abroad, and (2) regular returns to Serbia for periods of residence. The research results indicate that, while the benefits of circular migration for participants are undisputed, the group is polarized in terms of their motives,

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patterns of movement, and practices abroad. Moreover, many circular migrants face various forms of exploitation, which often go unnoticed by proponents of the triple-win narrative.

Keywords: Circular Migrants, Triple-win, Dual Labor Market, Serbia

Migracije iz nužne ili dovoljnosti: Studija slučaja cirkularnih migranata iz Srbije

Apstrakt: Koncept cirkularnih migracija, uostalom kao i širi pojam migracija, sadržinski je vrlo šarenolik i ne poznaje jedinstvenu definiciju. Autori u prvi plan stavljaju različite aspekte ovog fenomena, dovodeći ga u različite odnose sa privremenim ili povratnim migracijama. Iako cirkularne migracije nisu nov pojam u akademskim krugovima, relativno je novo oduševljenje donosioca odluka njime, koji su ga proglasili za dugo traženo rešenje demografskih i ekonomskih izazova. Naime, u političkom i javnom diskursu se na cirkularne migracije gleda kroz razvojnu perspektivu „trostruke dobiti“: pojedincima se daje mogućnost da se usavršavaju na ličnom i profesionalnom planu, u razvijenim zemljama popunjavaju se deficitarna radna mesta i zadovoljava potreba za radnom snagom, dok zemlje u razvoju mogu da izvezu višak radne snage, ali i da kroz povratak svojih građana jačaju konkurentske prednosti na globalnom tržištu. Narativ koji odiše optimizmom nije zaobišao ni Srbiju. Stoga je bilo važno odgovoriti na istraživačka pitanja: koje vrste migracionih praksi se mogu naći među cirkularnim migrantima i da li se oni upuštaju u cirkularne migracije iz ekonomske nužnosti ili dovoljnosti. Da bismo istražili ova pitanja, sprovedeno je kvalitativno istraživanje sa cirkularnim migrantima iz tri grada srednje veličine – Čačka, Užica i Smedereva – kao deo projekta Fonda za razvoj stanovništva, zajedničke inicijative UNDP-a i Ministarstva za brigu o porodici i demografiju. Koncept cirkularnih migracija koji se koristi u ovom istraživanju definisan je preko dve ključne dimenzije oslanja na ove dve važne dimenzije: (1) privremeno ili stalno radno angažovanje u inostranstvu i (2) redovni povraci u Srbiju gde se živi određeno vreme. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na to da, iako su koristi cirkularne migracije za učesnike neosporne, grupa je polarizovana u pogledu svojih motiva, obrazaca kretanja i praksi u inostranstvu. Štaviše, mnogi cirkularni migranti se suočavaju sa različitim oblicima eksploatacije, što često prolazi nezapaženo od strane zagovornika narativa o trostrukoj dobitku.

Ključne reči: cirkularni migranti, trostruka dobitka, dualno tržište rada, Srbija

Introduction

Population movement is recognized as one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary society. Therefore, the beginning of the XXI century is often referred to as the “age of migration” (Castles & Miller, 2009).

Circular migration, the specific form of migration which is the main interest of this paper, is not a new concept in academic circles. As Skeldon demonstrates, there is extensive research dating back many years on circular internal migration, which is defined as a short-term back-and-forth movement between villages and cities (Skeldon, 2012). However, taking into account that the entire spectrum of mobility in mainstream science has been reduced to international migration, movements that did not involve permanent migration across national borders received little attention. By recognizing solely “permanent” migrants as being the “true” ones, the dominant migration paradigm effectively extracted mobility from the migration itself (Dawson, 2016; Hui, 2016) and relegated circular migrants to the periphery of important research topics³.

Several concurrent developments have contributed to the growing visibility and significance of circular migration. On the one hand, technological revolutions, transportation improvements, globalization, and innovations in communication have undoubtedly led to increased mobility and changes in movement patterns. On the other hand, the rise of transnational approaches and the emergence of the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2016) have shifted academic attention toward previously marginalized, non-standard forms of movement. Last but not least, circular migration was “discovered” and promoted by public policymakers who found in it a long-sought solution to the demographic and economic challenges. Rather than simply being the age of migration, the contemporary era might be more aptly characterized as an era of *super-* (Sirkeci & Yüceşahin, 2020, p. 328) or even *hyper-*mobility (Salazar, 2019, p. 18).

Circular migration is examined in the paper in the specific context of Serbia, a traditional emigration country whose proximity to the developed European region facilitates circular movements. The data were obtained from a qualitative study conducted with circular migrants coming from three medium-sized cities in Serbia: Čačak, Užice, and Smederevo. It was initiated and funded by the UNDP and the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography through the Population Development Facility Programme. This research aims to understand the particular characteristics of the local environment that encourage people to decide to engage in circular migration. Setting aside the role of the local community in deciding on mobility for further extensive analysis, my primary focus here will be twofold: to capture the variety of circular migration practices and to examine whether these movements are motivated by economic necessity or by opportunity.

3 For a more detailed analysis on relationship between migration and mobility, see Poletić Čosić, 2023.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of circular migration, much like the broader concept of migration itself, is highly diverse in its content and lacks a single definition. Scholars emphasize various facets of circular migration, often confusing it with temporary or return migration (Skeldon, 2012). Although the terms overlap, they are not identical, which makes interchangeable use problematic. According to The European Migration Network, temporary migration is limited to a single back-and-forth movement, with a time-bound stay in the country of destination (UNECE, 2016, p. 3). Circular migration is regarded as a type of temporary migration in which the temporary stay in a destination country is repeated. Similarly, circular migration also overlaps with the concept of return migration, as returning is a significant part of the circular movement, with the key difference being that return migrants have come back to stay, whereas circular migrants have returned in order to leave again. Hence, temporary and return migrations are understood more linearly and statically when compared to circular migration, whose essence lies in the mobility of the actors involved.

Triandafyllidou (2013a) in her study identifies four key dimensions in defining circular migration. The first being space. It is undeniable that circular movements also exist within the same country. However, most studies focus on international movements. Therefore, circular migration involves crossing international borders. The second dimension is time. As previously stated, circular migration involves stays of a limited duration. It is not about movements that span several years or a decade. The third dimension, the *differentia specifica* of circular migrations, is repetition. For mobility to qualify as circular mobility, the immigrant must have moved at least twice back and forth between the country of origin and the country of destination (Vertovec, 2007). And the last, equally important dimension, is scope. Circular migration is not limited to employment alone; rather, it encompasses a broader range of economic activities, including trade, investment, financial survival, higher earnings, socio-economic mobility, and improved working conditions. People who move to visit relatives or for tourist purposes are not circular migrants. So, for Triandafyllidou, "Circular migration is defined (...) as international, temporary, repeated migration for economic reasons" (Triandafyllidou, 2013a, p.13).

Within the normative framework, two additional dimensions merit closer examination. The first dimension concerns legality. According to the European Migration Network, circular migration is defined as "a repetition of legal migrations by the same person between two or more countries" (UNECE, 2016, p. 3). This dimension can be misleading particularly

when regarded in the context of Serbia. A large number of circular departures abroad are neither fully legal nor entirely illegal but fall somewhere in between. For this reason, Kubal introduced the concept of semi-legality into migration studies (Kubal, 2013). This concept serves to highlight various “in-between” statuses and to avoid resorting to the notion of illegality whenever ambiguities arise regarding someone’s legal status. Semi-legality can be understood as a set of interactions between migrants and the law, showing that legal status is not a binary (legal–illegal) category, but is rather constituted as a continuum. Viewing legal status through the lens of semi-legality contributes to the de-stigmatization of circular migrants, who travel legally but undertake informal and unregistered economic activities. It also offers valuable insights into the motives and decision-making processes of individuals from countries that maintain special migration arrangements with traditional immigration regions.

The last dimension emphasized by international institutions, bodies, and agencies is the level of regulation. A general distinction is made between two forms: one characterized by organized and regulated movement – such as labour migration governed by bilateral agreements between specific countries, posting of workers or formally organized academic programs – and the other understood as “spontaneous”, naturally occurring, and largely unregulated cross-border mobility. European Commission documents (Triandafyllidou, 2013a, p. 5) conceptualize circular migration primarily as a form of organized mobility scheme, rather than as a series of individual decisions. If the focus were placed exclusively on regulated movements, the perspective would once again be drastically narrowed, and the numerous independent movements of workers would be overlooked.

By relying on the aforementioned dimensions of legality and regulation, both political and public discourses commonly frame circular migration through the developmental lens of a triple-win perspective. This perspective emphasizes that circular migration not only provides individuals with opportunities for personal and professional advancement but also benefits both countries of origin and destination. Developed countries, thanks to circular migrants, can fill labour shortages and meet their workforce demands, while developing countries can export surplus labour and, through the return of their citizens, strengthen their competitive advantages in the global market.

However, such a developmental approach tends to overlook the important structural factors – most notably, the segmentation of the labour market. As the theory of the dual labour market suggests in highly developed economies, the labour market is divided into two segments: the primary, consisting of secure, well-paid, and high-status jobs with ad-

vancement potential, and the secondary, comprising insecure, low-paid, and low-prestige positions (Piore, 1979). Since the local population often avoids “dirty, dangerous, and difficult” jobs, employers turn to migrant labour, thereby initiating and sustaining migratory flows (Massey, 2001; 2003). A significant number of migrants are employed in low-skilled, low-paid jobs such as farm labour, construction, cleaning, or the care sector. These positions typically offer no opportunities for skill development, training, or even basic language learning in the destination country. By contrast, they face de-skilling and de-professionalization, accepting jobs below their qualifications to gain access to employment (Triandafyllidou, 2013b). Sometimes, circular migration is not a matter of desirable lifestyle, but a way to combat economic deprivation.

By synthesizing the descriptive categories used in literature, two key characteristics of circular migration emerge. The first being bilocality – the existence of two parallel centres of life activities between which migrants alternate (Hugo, 2009; Skeldon, 2010). The second is heterogeneity – circular migrants are not a uniform group, but vary significantly in terms of their socioeconomic background, migration motives, legal statuses, and employment arrangements (Triandafyllidou, 2013a). Reducing its complexity to a single category fails to capture the full scope of the phenomenon.

Contextual Framework

Serbia's geopolitical reality is shaped by its position of a semi-peripheral country with a moderate level of development, situated on the outskirts of one of the world's most developed regions, which actively promotes emigration from the country (Bobić & Babović, 2013). Migration trends are further bolstered by visa facilitation and readmission agreements that were signed in 2007 between the EU and Serbia, which simplified visa procedures for certain categories of citizens. However, a major turning point took place in 2009, when visa liberalization allowed Serbian citizens to travel freely within the Schengen area without requiring a visa for short stays (Arandarenko, 2021). For a substantial number of Serbian citizens, traveling to the EU is legal, while their economic activities are informal and not correctly registered⁴ (Meszmann, 2022).

4 In his report based on primary data, Meszmann (2022) demonstrated how various agencies, including registered, informal, and even illegal intermediaries, send workers from Serbia to the EU on a seasonal basis. These types of workers typically work outside the regulations of the country in which they are located, making this type of migration highly vulnerable to exploitation and challenging to track.

Commonly cited structural push factors of emigration, such as the unemployment rate or GDP *per capita*, are not the most decisive in explaining outward migration from Serbia. Between 2015 and 2019 – a period marked by economic growth and rising employment in Serbia – migration flows to the European Union increased significantly. This trend suggests that emigration is not primarily driven by absolute poverty or unemployment, but rather by a pronounced duality and structural limitations in the Serbian labour market that cause a shortage of quality jobs, and a high income inequality. A significant portion of the Serbian workforce remains confined to insecure, informal, or poorly paid jobs that offer limited or no opportunities for career advancement. These conditions contribute more strongly to emigration readiness than the general unemployment rate and the individuals' employment status (Arandarenko, 2021, p. 19). Another significant structural factor is the persistent and substantial wage gap between Serbia and EU countries. This disparity had only widened as a result of wage stagnation linked to fiscal consolidation policies implemented during the same period. These combined push factors have contributed to a steady outflow of workers, particularly those with medium skill levels. In fact, in recent years, the emigration of medium-skilled workers has increased relative to other skill groups, resulting in a skill structure among Serbian migrants to the EU that remains similar to, or in some cases even less favorable than, that of the resident population (Arandarenko & Aleksić, 2024).

In addition to the aforementioned structural characteristics, the demographic challenges that Serbia is struggling with are also pivotal in this matter. It is one of the countries with the highest depopulation rate in the world, which occurs as a result of the low fertility rate, typical for industrialized countries, combined with a high emigration rate, which is often seen in low- and middle-income countries (Lutz & Gailey, 2022). Countries with a long tradition of emigration have a large diaspora and strong migrant networks that stimulate and facilitate all subsequent movements. According to the United Nations estimates from 2019, the total number of Serbian emigrants was about 950,000 at that point, which represents about 14% of the country's resident population (Arandarenko, 2022, p. 100). Arandarenko's analysis further reveals that the overall picture of a sudden increase in the gross outflow of migrants from Serbia to the European Union in the mentioned period from 2015 to 2019 cannot be understood if one does not take into account the fact that in the same period, stocks⁵

5 The number of migrants from Serbia to the EU.

grew slowly, while flows⁶ more than doubled (Arandarenko, 2022). Therefore, net emigration from Serbia is significantly lower than is usually reported in the media due to the increasing share of short-term, temporary, and circular migrations, even to traditional countries of emigration, such as Germany (Nikitović, 2022).

Contrary to the media narratives on migration that convey pessimistic forecasts about the alarming level of permanent emigration of highly educated citizens, which, therefore, should be stopped, the political discourse is saturated with ideas from migration governance advocates that promote circular migration. Since circular migration is highly valued from a developmental perspective, migration management is seen as a strategy that can positively influence economic and demographic outcomes, offering far better results than simply preventing emigration. “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, and thereby contribute to its economic development.” (Milinković, 2023, p. 1). Although Serbia’s normative framework lacks a clear definition of circular migration (FREN, 2023), it is evident that, when public policymakers do distinguish it from return migration, they primarily associate the former with the regulated mobility of highly educated individuals⁷. The findings presented in the following pages will demonstrate why such a view of reality is unfruitful from a heuristic perspective.

Research Method

The study aims to examine the motivation of circular migrants to leave their country and local communities, while also continually returning to them. Its main focus is on understanding the characteristics of the local environment that both “push” individuals into circular movement, and simultaneously draw them back.

Circular migrants are defined as individuals who work abroad, either temporarily or on a more permanent basis but maintain strong ties with

6 The inflow of migrants from Serbia to the EU in one year.

7 For example, The Strategy for the Management of Economic Migration 2021–2027, while acknowledging the importance of circular migrants, fails to define the term. In the document, circular migration is conflated with return migration, and all proposed measures and activities are inappropriately tailored to the latter (FREN, 2023).

their local communities in Serbia. The concept is operationalized through two dimensions:

1. Individuals who work abroad temporarily or seasonally and regularly return to Serbia, where they reside for several weeks or months, and
2. Whose most recent departure abroad occurred no more than one year ago.

To ensure diversity within the group, no limitations were imposed regarding the type of work they performed or the legal status of their stay abroad. Such an approach allows for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon that holds particular relevance for the Republic of Serbia.

In this paper, my focus is twofold: (1) to map out the range and diversity of circular migration practices, and (2) to explore whether these movements are driven by economic sufficiency or economic necessity. Given the qualitative nature and limited scope of the research, it is essential to note that the aim is not to provide an exhaustive overview of all types of circular movements or to comprehend the phenomenon in its entirety. However, thanks to a broadly defined concept, this approach enables the inclusion of groups that are very difficult to follow statistically, as semi-legal circular migrants. By moving beyond administrative and bureaucratic categories – often uncritically taken as relevant frameworks even in academic studies – this approach enables a deeper understanding of the variety of circular migration practices. Despite its limitations, a notable contribution of qualitative methodology to migration studies is that it allows for the exploration of migration in its processual nature, highlights the agency of actors at all stages of migration, and facilitates a deeper understanding of the interplay between structure and actors (Poleti Ćosić, 2022).

Data were collected during the fall and winter of 2023/24 through semi-structured interviews in three medium-sized cities in Serbia: Čačak, Užice, and Smederevo. The final sample included 24 circular migrants, of whom 14 were men and 10 were women. Since other socio-demographic data, such as age or level of education, were not collected systematically but appear sporadically in the transcripts, a more detailed description of the sample cannot be provided.

The conducted interviews were transcribed, which was followed by a descriptive thematic analysis. Data were processed using MAXQDA software for qualitative analysis. A hybrid model was employed in the study, which involved supplementing pre-prepared thematic schemes with the ones derived from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Migration patterns

The resulting sample consists of a very heterogeneous group whose members differ in terms of their migration practices, which are defined here as specific patterns of departure and stay abroad.

In most cases, our interviewees undertook their migratory movements between Serbia and EU countries or between Serbia and the United States. Among the mentioned European destinations are the following: Croatia, Germany, Switzerland, Montenegro, Hungary, Slovenia, France, Norway, as well as Russia and Turkey. Except for one participant, who spends most of his time in Norway due to having legal employment there and returns to Serbia whenever possible, all other interviewees have their lives situated in Serbia and go abroad in order to work, when needed.

Most of the surveyed migrants had previous migration experience, which is a solid proof of their tendency towards mobility. It is also highly indicative that migration was initiated either through migration networks – friends or acquaintances who provided initial information and support in the early stages – or through actors belonging to the migration industry, such as various intermediary agencies⁸.

In terms of the legality of their statuses, the interviewees were divided into two groups: the ones with a legal migration status, and those living abroad in a semi-legality. The group with valid work permits, in addition to individuals in scarce occupations, includes respondents employed in the United States, all of whom are from Čačak and gained their first work experience there through the Work and Travel program. This group also includes migrants working on ships or oil platforms, for example in Ghana, who are not tied to any specific local context and do not participate in local labor markets. They belong to the group of rotational workers, as they have contracts that are repeated in regular, cyclical intervals. Simultaneously, they operate within transnational migration spaces. Last but not least, the group also encompasses individuals holding Croatian passports (ex-refugees)⁹.

8 The migration industry is a concept that includes various actors and organizations (e.g. migrant recruitment and employment agency, lawyers, agents, smugglers and other intermediaries) through which migration is facilitated, organized and accelerated (Castles & Miller, 2009).

9 Citizens of Serbia often hold Croatian passports because they were born in the Republic of Croatia, which was part of the former Yugoslavia. Their life trajectories usually include experiences of being refugees, a direct result of the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The second group consists of interviewees who choose EU countries as their destinations, taking advantage of the possibility to enter legally but work without a working permit. They limit their stays to 90 days – the duration of a legal tourist visa. Interestingly, some of them are fully aware that they are breaking the law, and as a result, they feel extremely uncomfortable while abroad. Their fear of local authorities is so grave that some women imposed strict limits on their movements, striving to remain invisible and avoid attracting any attention:

“And in Germany, literally, that’s undeclared work. And simply, by 8 p.m., you have to be at home. That means no walks, no going out, because it’s a risk – above all for them – since it’s strictly punishable there.” (a female migrant from Čačak)

On the other hand, some interviewees are not even aware that they are violating any regulations:

“The last time I was in Slovenia (...) in the theatre (...) I stayed for three months. I usually stay for three months; when I go, I go every six months. I stay that long because that’s all we’re allowed.” (a female migrant from Čačak)

Their strong belief that, if they respect the 90-day limit, any real barriers to economic activity abroad is removed, helps them feel comfortable with their circular migration practices.

According to their own testimony, the circular migrants in the sample are employed in three categories of occupations:

1. Low- and medium-skilled manual occupations. This group includes men working in transportation (truck drivers), the hospitality sector (waiters and cooks), service industries (such as pool maintenance), and construction, as well as women employed in care and domestic work (including elder care, childcare, cleaning, and household cooking). This is also the largest group in the sample.
2. Mid-level vocational occupations. This group consists of medical technicians and tourism workers (such as tour operators).
3. High-skilled professional occupations. The third group encompasses professionals from the energy sector, creative industries (theater and film professionals), management and organizational professionals (a communication skills coach), and sports and recreation professionals (a basketball coach).

The level of qualification required for these jobs does not always align with the actual educational level of the migrants. Some individuals have experienced deprofessionalization while working abroad – for example, our sample includes a female technologist working in the informal care sector.

It is also important to note that these three occupational categories, based on required qualifications, do not always align with categories of legal status. Although individuals employed in lower-skilled positions on the secondary labor market are more frequently engaged in informal work, higher qualifications do not necessarily guarantee formal employment contracts or legal residency – some respondents working in the primary labor market also lack proper documentation or secure legal status. Although authors usually create specific classifications by combining the following two categories: the legality of status and the level of skills of the migrants involved (Triandafyllidou, 2013b), the resulting classification appears unhelpful in our context.

Motivation

Undeniably, the primary motive for engaging in circular migration is financial gain. In two-thirds of the interviews, respondents cited financial reasons as the primary driving force behind their decisions. Only four interviewed migrants emphasized that money played absolutely no role in their decision-making – and all four were young at the time when they left the country for the first time.

The sample is divided into two polarized groups, distinguished by the degree of necessity that prompted their migration to take place. On one side are the respondents for whom financial benefits were significant but who were not driven by existential insecurity – instead, they aimed to diversify their sources of income:

“At the time, I was buying an apartment and needed money for the down payment – that was my main motivation. My financial situation did improve, then it got depleted.” (a male migrant from Čačak)

“The difference in salary was huge. But I didn’t go there just to earn some money or to save up. I went there to be able to live a normal life, to work on myself, and to make sure that when I returned, I could support my daughter’s education... So that was, let’s say, the main goal. But I didn’t go there just to work and sleep – I went there to live.” (a female migrant from Čačak)

On the other side are those persons who sought work abroad out of financial necessity, in order to support their basic survival:

“Well, to be honest, I was really deep in debt. My mother and father passed away too early. I was left all alone with a child. At the time, he was in his first year of high school. So, as a single mother, I had to provide everything... I just couldn’t manage. I was working in a factory, then I quit because they didn’t acknowledge my injury report. I told them they were thieves. My boss told me I was lying, that nothing had happened to me. But I had wit-

nesses – a weight fell on my head from the scaffolding. From three meters high, three kilos. A weight. So then I quit and decided to sue them. During the trial, I was supported by the Center for Social Work. But what can you do with that... I was getting nine thousand dinars, and what can I say, I had to leave. Really, I was sinking deeper and deeper into debt. I even experienced – I'm not ashamed to say it – having the electricity turned off.” (a female migrant from Smederevo)

Other characteristics of the local labor market are also crucial for understanding decisions related to circular migration. These include hiring based on informal connections or political affiliation, low wages, exploitation by employers, unpaid overtime work, inhumane working conditions, delayed payments, and the inability to take sick leave. For the respondents, going abroad is, therefore, not just a way to find employment. It is also a means of escaping the humiliation they experience on a daily basis in the domestic labor market. As a result, migration is often viewed as a means to regain dignity.

Although working abroad contributed to the improvement of their material situation, and for some highly educated respondents career progress and skill improvement were possible and available to them, testimonies about labor exploitation abroad were not rare. Migrants participating in formal work arrangements complained about working in less favorable (night) shifts, which then led to the psychological destabilization of the interviewee. Migrants employed in the informal sector shared experiences in which their employers refused to pay them the agreed-upon wages or provide the promised return tickets so that they could go home. The work arrangements that most often succumb to exploitation are live-in positions, where women move into and reside with the families for whom they informally provide care work:

“Well, it's a good feeling when someone trusts you, and they were planning to hire me on a regular basis – every three months. But... well... there are certain things I can't accept. I didn't go because I was starving. I went because I have to help my grandsons who are at university – two of them. Just imagine, for dinner, they ask me if I want one roll or two. A plain roll – just bread. I don't eat dry bread here, so why would I eat it there?” (a female migrant from Čačak)

Moreover, the political situation in the country and systemic shortcomings are also critical “push” factors for circular migration. Although two-thirds of interviewees denied that systemic circumstances influenced their decision to emigrate when asked directly, their narratives reveal that numerous political and social issues indeed have shaped their choices. They cite systemic corruption, political clientelism, nepotism, the unre-

dictability of the system, insecurity, and a lack of personal freedom as being important reasons for seeking employment abroad.

When considering circular migration, it is essential to understand that the motives for leaving and the motives for returning represent a duality—two sides of the same coin. The factors that encourage respondents to remain engaged in circular movements are predominantly tied to emotional and cultural connections with local communities and a sense of belonging. Family, friendships, known lifestyles, and informal support networks play a crucial role in keeping people rooted in Serbia. Additionally, the challenges of adaptation deter migrants from considering permanent settlements abroad. Many describe persistent culture shock and an inability to adjust to values such as gender equality, sexual freedoms, multiculturalism, rigid bureaucratic systems, or work-life imbalance. Younger migrants tend to adapt more easily, especially when they are exposed to the language and culture in a working environment. In contrast, migrants engaged in informal employment – especially women in the care sector working within Serbian-speaking households – often experience profound struggles:

“I don’t know the language. I never leave the house except to go to the store or take out the trash. Someone helps me with the shopping – I barely manage. I spend most of my time with the older woman I care for, and I rarely go out. I live with her all the time (...) I go there only because I have to.” (Female migrant from Čačak)

While it is true that some migrants from Serbia engage in circular migration to pursue upskilling and professional development, it is equally important to recognize that there are individuals who live in conditions far removed from the promised triple-win perspective.

Conclusion

Circular migration remains a significant yet insufficiently researched concept in the context of Serbia.

The findings point to notable gender and age diversity within the sample of circular labour migrants. It shows that it is no longer just men, the traditional breadwinners of the family. Additionally, those seeking employment abroad are not only of working age; it becomes clear that among them are also many individuals nearing, or who are already in retirement. Furthermore, the participants in the circular migrants group vary in terms of qualifications they possess, and the positions they hold in the labour market. One of the key insights is that these two structural characteristics do not necessarily overlap. Beyond the mismatch between individuals’

qualifications and the jobs they perform abroad, there is also no strict correlation between job type and migration status. While it is true that those in lower-skilled positions in the secondary labour market more frequently partake in semi-legal or informal work arrangements, this is not the only scenario. Not all respondents working in the primary labour market own formal employment contracts or valid work visas. All aforesaid is particularly true for workers in the cultural sector, who often hold precarious jobs.

The data reveal a stark division within the circular migrant sample, shaped by their motives for migration. The socio-economic position of an individual is reflected as a “driving force” for entering circular migration and indirectly determines patterns of mobility, practices while abroad, and individual experiences. On one side are the respondents who sought employment abroad out of financial necessity. These are individuals who had to find a way to diversify their income in order to be able to provide for the basic survival of themselves and their families. Most of them have experienced various forms of injustice in the Serbian labour market – such as undeclared work, unpaid wages, workplace injuries, termination during medical leave, and other forms of exploitation. Unable to meet their existential needs through domestic employment, they end up turning to migration. On the other side are the respondents who migrated from a position of sufficiency. While financial considerations also played a role in their decision-making process, they were not the crucial factor. These individuals chose to enter foreign labour markets either out of curiosity and a desire for exploration in their youth, or for travel and career aspirations later in life.

Circular migrations from Serbia cannot be equated with the movements of digital nomads or creative industry workers, for whom mobility is a highly valued lifestyle and personal choice. In only a small number of cases in our sample does circularity serve as a pathway to improved livelihoods or career advancement – typically among a handful of highly skilled migrants who use it to further their professional development. In contrast, circular migration from Serbia is primarily shaped by structural conditions rather than identity questions.

If the state genuinely seeks to ensure that circular migration delivers benefits for all participants, as the triple-win perspective predicts, it is to move beyond rhetorical support and take concrete steps to institutionalize and protect migrants. This includes establishing a clear definition of circular migration, providing its citizens with support and protection against potential labour exploitation abroad, and formally recognizing circular migrants within policies and legal frameworks. For now, circular migration appears to serve as an externalization of the dysfunctions inherent in Serbia’s economic and political structures.

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