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IMMIGRATION BETWEEN NEEDS AND FEARS – ATTITUDES OF SERBIAN CITIZENS TOWARD IMMIGRANTS

Abstract: This paper aims to examine the attitudes of the Serbian population toward immigration in the context of depopulation and labor shortages, which are becoming more significant problems. Depopulation in Serbia, as well as throughout Europe, represents one of the most pressing problems of contemporary society. According to the latest census in 2022, Serbia has entered the final stage of population aging, which, along with low fertility rates observed since 1970, brings about many social issues. Additionally, there is a noticeable emigration rate of young, working-aged people, which affects the narrowing of this group, which is crucial for revitalizing society and the population. The problem arising from this unfavorable population trend, aside from the issue of its renewal, is the lack of workforce. This first became evident in manual labor jobs and those in lower social positions, and now there is an increasing number of foreigners occupying such roles in Serbia. It is expected that similar trends will emerge in all sectors of employment. Developed countries in Western Europe and the United States have responded to depopulation and the threat of labor shortages by developing migration policies that encourage immigration, primarily from countries that form the geopolitical semi-periphery. This raises the question of the justification and feasibility of such policies in Serbia. Aside from various other challenges, such as the attractiveness of Serbia to foreigners, there is also the question of the readiness of the Serbian population to integrate foreigners. Encouraged by this, we will analyze several dimensions of attitudes towards migrants, such as feelings of the economic and symbolic threat posed by immigrants, and willingness to allow different types of immigrants into the country, and preferred criteria for accepting migrants. For this purpose, we will use data from the 9th, 10th, and 11th rounds of the European Social Survey.

Keywords: immigration, integration, attitudes, European Social Survey

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Imigracije između potreba i strahova – Stavovi građana Srbije prema imigrantima

Apstrakt: Osnovni cilj rada je analiza stavova stanovništva Srbije prema imigracijama i to u kontekstu sve izraženije depopulacije i nedostatka radne snage. Depopulacija u Srbiji, ali i u Evropi, predstavlja jedan od najvažnijih problema u ovom trenutku. Srbija se, prema poslednjem popisu stanovništva iz 2022. godine, nalazi u završnoj fazi starenja stanovništva, što, uz niske stope fertiliteta zabeležene još od 1970. godine, pokreće mnoga važna pitanja. Dodatno, Srbija se suočava i sa izraženom emigracijom mladih, koji čine značajan udeo radno sposobnog stanovništva, što dalje utiče na smanjenje ove kategorije koja je ključna za revitalizaciju ukupnog stanovništva. Nepovoljno kretanje stanovništva ne utiče samo na obnavljanje stanovništva, već ima značajne i dalekosežne posledice na tržište rada u vidu nedostatka radne snage. Takve posledice su najvidljivije u nedostatku kvalifikovanih i niskokvalifikovanih kadrova i sve češćem okretanju ka uvozu inostrane radne snage. Razvijene zemlje Zapadne Evrope i SAD odgovorile su na depopulaciju i nedostatak radne snage kreiranjem migracionih politika koje podstiču imigraciju, pre svega iz zemalja koje čine geopolitičku poluperiferiju. U skladu sa tim, postavlja se pitanje opravdanosti i izvodljivosti takve politike u Srbiji. Pored raznih izazova, poput privlačnosti Srbije strancima, postavlja se i pitanje spremnosti stanovništva u Srbiji da prihvati strance. Podstaknuti ovim pitanjem, u radu ćemo analizirati nekoliko dimenzija odnosa domaćeg stanovništva prema imigrantima. Biće analizirana osećanja ekonomske i simboličke pretnje koju predstavljaju imigranti i spremnost da se omogući dolazak različitih tipova imigranata (iste ili slične, kao i različite etničke/rasne grupe). Analiza će biti zasnovana na podacima 9, 10. i 11. runde Evropskog društvenog istraživanja.

Ključne reči: imigracije, integracija, stavovi, Evropsko društveno istraživanje

Introduction

This article aims to present the attitudes of the domestic population toward potential immigration to Serbia. Analysing data collected from population censuses, we conclude that Serbia is a country experiencing a significant decline in its population due to a long-standing low birth rate combined with a high mortality rate. We must also add the negative migration balance, which has contributed to Serbia's accelerated population decline. Moreover, such demographic trends lead to an increasingly unfavourable age structure, which affects the shrinking of the fertile population segment and the labour force. Therefore, shortly—alongside the projected population decrease of approximately 1.4 million by the middle of this century (Nikitović, 2022)—and without effective population poli-

cies, we can expect labour shortages that will further lead to economic and social challenges for our country.

This issue is not new, nor is it unique to Serbia. Following the second demographic transition, which began and concluded in the developed Western countries and then spread to the former socialist bloc, birth rates have been continuously declining, life expectancy has been increasing, and mortality rates have risen due to the natural population ageing. As a result, the population is decreasing across all European countries and parts of North America and some Asian nations. Additionally, changes in lifestyles and the growing share of highly educated individuals have influenced the occupational structure of the population. Native-born citizens increasingly seek highly paid and prestigious jobs, leading to a labour shortage, particularly in manual and lower-skilled occupations. However, due to accelerated depopulation, even those currently desirable jobs may remain vacant, resulting in slowed economic growth and hindered technological advancement. In response to these challenges, Western countries have adopted two main strategies: first, investing in the quality of their domestic population (in their education and manual skills) to offset numerical decline, and second, developing population policies with a strong focus on immigration, aimed at attracting labour from developing countries. A significant challenge in this context is the attitude of local populations toward immigrants. Various fears emerge — from unfounded concerns about job competition and economic security, to difficulties with integrating culturally, adapting to new value systems, needs, and lifestyles. These attitudes are particularly pronounced toward refugees and asylum seekers, who have settled in large numbers across Western Europe over the past decade (Hellwig & Sinno, 2016). Since 2015, when refugees from the Middle East began arriving in Serbia, even if only as a transit country, fear of their presence became evident. Motivated by this, our researchers have addressed this topic on several occasions, as evidenced by available reports and academic papers (Bjekić et al., 2020; Cesid, 2019; Petrović & Pešić, 2017; TNS Medium Galup, 2017).

Considering the experience of developed countries and using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), this study will examine the attitudes of the local population in Serbia toward the possibility of large-scale immigration. The focus will be on the potential gap between the absolute need to encourage immigration, due to the risks posed by excessive population ageing and labour shortages, and the willingness of Serbian citizens to accept newcomers and create a favourable climate for their integration. In the analysis, we will draw on Integrated Threat Theory, emphasizing the types of prejudice that are assumed to be widespread among the population.

Theoretical Framework

Migration is not a new phenomenon—it is as old as humanity. Throughout history, the directions of migration flows and their motives have changed. As migration movements have intensified over the past three decades³, scholars have increasingly focused on various aspects of this process. As a result, several theories have been developed to better understand population movements, examining motivations, consequences, potential benefits, and costs, both for individuals and for societies. These theories also address the relationships between the native population and newly settled groups within a given country. This last aspect can play a crucial role in the integration of migrant populations, which has become one of the key objectives of modern migration policies in democratic societies.

The increased immigration to Europe, particularly from the Middle East, which occurred in 2015 and 2016, has generated intense debate about the integration of newcomers, changes in the characteristics of European societies, and the potential challenges immigrants may pose to host populations. As a result, academic interest in public attitudes toward immigrants and minority groups in this region has significantly increased (Davidov et al., 2020; FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). Research findings indicate that negative attitudes toward immigrants are either on the rise or have remained persistently high. The findings also suggest that many Europeans view immigration as a potential threat to social stability, traditions, and norms. As a result, support has grown for political parties that promote anti-immigration policies (Davidov et al., 2020). This further indicates a noticeable antagonism toward immigrant groups.

Theoretical approaches, which were used for understanding the attitudes of native populations toward immigrants, stem from various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and increasingly, multidisciplinary research. Given the historical tendency toward antagonism between groups, the predominant theories focus on perceived threats from immigrants. Several theoretical models emerged in the late 20th century to explain attitudes toward migrants. For instance, Bobo (1988) and others examined realistic threats like competition over jobs and resources. Sears, Esses, and Sidanius focused on symbolic beliefs and symbolic threats, relating to perceived threats to cultural norms and values. At the same time, Eagly, Stangor, and others highlighted the underestimated role of negative

3 According to United Nations data, there were approximately 304 million international migrants in 2024, which means that this number has doubled since 1991, when it stood at 154 million. Looking at population shares, in the last decade of the 20th century, the migrant population made up 2.9% of the global population, whereas now that share has increased to 3.7% (UN, 2025).

stereotypes in shaping prejudice (according to Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25). However, much of this research was conducted in isolation, with each scholar exploring only one aspect of the broader issue. In response, motivated by anti-immigrant sentiments in European societies and the USA, Stephan and Stephan wanted to offer a theory that could describe phenomena of antagonism toward people who immigrate. So, they developed an integrated threat theory that combines these perspectives — realistic, symbolic, and intergroup anxiety — into a single, more comprehensive framework. This model has proven to be more broadly applicable than most previous approaches. Because several theoretical perspectives on stereotypes are incorporated and thus may lead to prejudices, which are the main problem in accepting others, the theory has been applied to understanding the statements and feelings of people toward immigrants in different societies. The theory suggests that four basic types of perceived threat may lead to prejudice.

Their model consists of four groups of threats:

1. Realistic threats “are threats to the very existence of the ingroup (e.g. through warfare), threats to the political and economic power of the ingroup, and threats to the physical or material well-being of the ingroup or its members (e.g. their health)” (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25)⁴.
2. Symbolic threats “primarily involve perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes. Symbolic threats are threats to the worldview of the group. These threats arise in part because the ingroup believes in the moral rightness of the system of value” (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25)⁵.
3. Intergroup anxiety is a feeling of being personally threatened during interactions with out-group members (Simonovits, 2016). Namely, people feel personally threatened in intergroup interactions because they are concerned about negative outcomes for the self, such as being embarrassed, rejected, or ridiculed.

4 This theory can be understood at the material, economic, and political level, and its focus is on competition over material and economic group interests. This concept is closely related to welfare chauvinism, as both concepts focus on the perceived competition of scarce resources (such as labour market positions and social services), and the majority's perception is that outsiders, e.g., immigrants, threaten these resources. Also, concept of realistic threats has its origins in realistic group conflict theory. This theory was primarily concerned with competition for scarce resource, such as territory, wealth or natural resources (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25).

5 Some of the most prominent theories of prejudice in social psychology deal with these threats – symbolic racism and modern racism, ambivalence-amplification theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 26).

4. Negative stereotyping “are expectations of how a member of an out-group will behave and often related to feelings of threat and fear” (Verkuyten, 1997 according to: Simonovits, 2016, p. 55). An important distinction between perceived threats and negative stereotypes, on the one hand, and intergroup anxiety, on the other, is that the former are generally understood at the group level, whereas the latter is primarily viewed as an individual-level experience (Simonovits, 2016).

In the integrated theory, these four threats are used to predict attitudes toward outgroups, and we will apply them to the investigation of attitudes of the domestic population in Serbia toward potential immigrations. Threats, which we discussed, lead to prejudice as negative affect associated with outgroups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 27). The definition of affect includes emotions and evaluations, and we can apply it to understanding allowing immigrants by domestic groups. By this theory, we would like to add that the determinants of immigrant support are shaped by the identity of the target group. Immigrant groups are associated with different sorts of threats in popular discourse, in statements made by politicians, and in the coverage of media outlets (Ivars-Flaten, 2007). Individuals who perceive that performance in a particular area – be it the economy, culture, security, or crime – is poor will react negatively to immigrant groups associated with threats in that sphere. So, investigations show that the public associates different types of immigrants with different threats, and security fears affect attitudes toward immigrants with different cultures and religions (Muslim in West Europe), while economic concerns affect views toward immigrants from countries with the same culture and religions, for example, immigrants from East Europe in the West (Hellwig & Sinno, 2016). Also, several studies conducted in Europe have shown that the size of the immigrant population is positively correlated with anti-immigrant sentiment. “That is: the larger the relative size of the immigrant population, the more pronounced the negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration” (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2020, p. 3).

Social and Economic Consequences of Depopulation in Serbia

Regarding population decline, Serbia does not lag behind broader demographic trends in Europe. Despite the undeniably different course

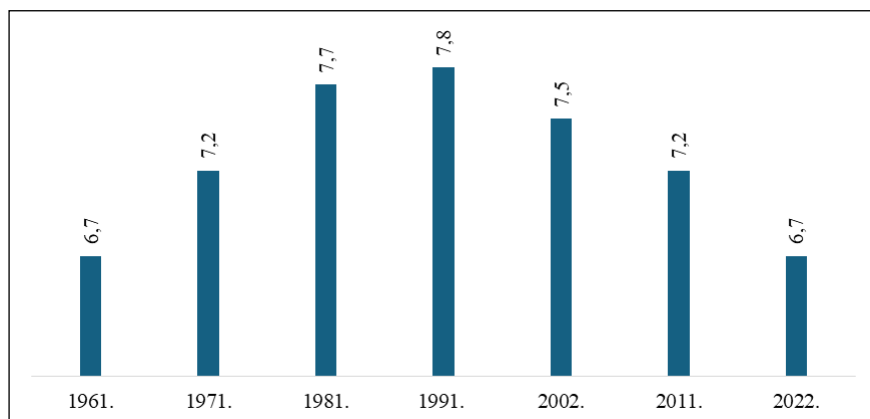
of the second demographic transition, which raises the question of whether Serbian society has truly undergone it or followed a different course (Bobić, 2010; Petrović, 2011), demographic statistics show a rapid population decrease in the country. Namely, Serbia's population continuously grew from the end of World War II until the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century. However, since 1991, a population decline has been recorded, as evidenced by data from the 2002, 2011, and 2022 censuses and annual demographic statistics. According to official estimates, Serbia's population is decreasing at a steady rate, by about 300,000 people between each census. This has led to the fact that the estimated population after the 2022 census was 6,690,887 (RZS, 2022), while some authors claim that the number is even lower (Nikitović, 2022).

Analysing statistical data collected through population censuses from the second half of the last century onward, we observe that the 2011 census recorded the same number of inhabitants as the 1971 census, and that according to the 2022 census, approximately the same number of people live in Serbia as in 1961 (Chart 1). We can conclude that in the last decade, the population has declined at the same rate as it increased during the inter-census period between 1961 and 1971. Analogously, considering that the 1953 census recorded 6,162,326 inhabitants in Serbia (excluding Kosovo and Metohija) (RZS, 2022), we can assume that in the next ten years—until the next census—this number will decline even faster than the previously estimated rate of 300,000 per decade. Accordingly, the next census, scheduled for 2031, is expected to show half a million fewer people. If this trend continues, we can conclude that Serbia will exceed the projected population decline for the region of –15% (UN, 2019). This aligns with projections for Serbia's population by the middle of this century according to the so-called baseline scenario of population dynamics⁶, which estimates a reduction of 1.4 million people, or 21% (Nikitović, 2022, p. 68). This means that, in demographic terms, Serbia will be in a much worse position than most European countries.

6 There are three scenarios for the future population dynamics in Serbia:

- a) The baseline scenario, which appears to be the most likely for the future, and does not take into account any population policies;
- b) The high fertility scenario, which is considered unlikely and assumes the very successful implementation of population policies aimed at increasing birth rates; and
- c) The zero-migration scenario represents an imaginary future in which the migration balance equals zero (Nikitović, 2022, p. 65).

Chart 1. Population Change in Serbia According to Census Data from 1961 to 2022⁷ (in millions)



Source: RZS, 2022.

When assessing the population decline, primary consideration is given to the natural processes of population renewal—births and deaths—while migration movements are left uncertain. However, since Serbia has recorded a negative migration balance for an extended period, this component is significant for estimating the future population size and age structure. According to the data presented in the Migration Profile for 2023, over half a million (573,952) Serbian citizens had obtained residence permits in a European country by the end of 2022 (KIRS, 2024)⁸. If we also consider those who moved outside Europe, a significant portion of Serbian citizens were living and working abroad that year. Namely, migration accounted for an estimated 15% to 26% of Serbia's depopulation between the 2002 and 2011 census years (Nikitović, 2022; Nikitović, 2019),

⁷ The population figures presented in the graph refer only to the population of Serbia, excluding Kosovo and Metohija, due to the lack of accurate data for the southern Serbian province. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (RZS) has not produced demographic statistics for Kosovo and Metohija since 1998, and all data related to the period between 1990 and 1997 are considered imprecise (Penev, 2002). Therefore, the graph displays the population recorded in each census year, with the population of Kosovo and Metohija subtracted.

⁸ Monitoring emigration represents a particularly complex issue. Domestic records do not allow for comprehensive or precise insights into the size and characteristics of the emigrant population, and the statistics of foreign countries to which emigrants from the Republic of Serbia traditionally gravitate are often neither accessible nor accurate. When compiling the Migration Profile, data from Eurostat are used, which EU member states publish on the number of immigrants in the current year (KIRS, 2024). Data from other countries is not available.

and this trend has continued since. The only brief period when Serbia recorded a positive migration balance was during the internal displacement of people caused by the regional conflicts following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the late 20th century. However, while this positively affected the number of inhabitants, it did not improve the age structure and, consequently, did not impact birth rates positively. This is because the incoming population was significantly older than those leaving the country. The younger individuals who initially arrived with older family members mostly moved on to Western European countries (Lukic & Nikitovic, 2004). Therefore, since the baseline scenario predicts Serbia will lose 1.4 million people in the next three decades, it is based on the assumption of zero net migration, making it unlikely that a larger population decline in Serbia is expected (Nikitović, 2022).

Changes in population size also affect its demographic structure. The trend of low birth rates in Serbia, which since 1970 has been insufficient even for simple generational replacement (Nikitović, 2019), combined with the emigration of predominantly young people, has drastically changed the population's age structure. According to census data, the Serbian population is ageing moderately. In contrast, the average age recorded in the 2011 census was 42.5 years; the 2022 census shows the average age of Serbia's population at 43.9 years. What is more concerning is the increasing proportion of elderly people (65+) and the middle-aged population (15–64), alongside a decreasing share of children and youth (0–14) (RZS, 2022)⁹. Over time, an even greater disparity among these age groups is expected, along with a decline in the number of middle-generation individuals, especially women of fertile age. This will further cause a sharper decline in birth rates and lead to socio-economic problems. Primarily, the workforce problem stands out as it will become urgent due to the shrinking labour contingent. According to data collected through the Labour Force Survey in the last quarter of 2024 (RZS, 2025), as much as 43.7% of citizens are outside the labour force, where, besides students and pupils, there is an increasing share of elderly people. As this older age group grows, there is expected to be more dependent elderly people, which will further burden the working-age population economically and due to the need for additional care. Regarding the workforce, the quality issue should not be forgotten regarding technological progress. Given Serbia's low investment in science and relatively underdeveloped policies for

9 The share of the population aged 65 and over was 22.1%, representing an increase of 4.7% from 2011. The share of the middle-aged population was 63.5% according to the 2022 census, representing a 4.8% increase from 2011. The share of the youngest population was 14.4% in the 2022 census, marking a decrease of 9.5% compared to the 2011 census (RZS, 2022).

cooperation with the scientific diaspora, we can expect significant lagging behind developed Western countries.

Considering the negative demographic picture and awareness of the necessary scientific and technological progress, several strategies and action plans have been adopted in Serbia since the start of this millennium; however, their consistent implementation is questionable. The constant revision and adoption of new documents also evidence this. Regarding population policies aimed at natural population change, it can be said that even if the desirable birth rate of 1.8 children per woman is reached, generational replacement will not occur (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). Another way to increase the population, following the example of developed countries that have faced similar problems, could be to encourage immigration policies. Namely, the decision to change place of residence is made mainly by young, working-age people, so their permanent settlement could positively impact Serbia's population's age and labour structure. The idea of a positive impact of immigration on our population is not new (Nikitović, 2010), but it has been shown that its feasibility is very low. The reasons lie in weakly motivating population policies and insufficient openness of our population towards other peoples and cultures, which is also the topic of this paper.

Methods

This paper uses data from the European Social Survey (ESS), specifically from the 9th (conducted 2018/2019), 10th (conducted 2020/2021), and 11th rounds (conducted 2023/2024), in which Serbia participated. The sample sizes for Serbia in these rounds were as follows: 9th round – 2,043 respondents; 10th round – 1,530 respondents; and 11th round – 1,563 respondents. Serbia has been included in this research starting from round nine. The sample framework of the ESS includes all persons who are 15 years old and older (no upper age limit) living in private households in Serbia, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, or language. The individuals are selected through strict chance selection in every phase of the design.

Results and Discussion

In our data analysis for this study, we will first examine respondents' attitudes toward accepting immigrants who belong to the same ethnic groups, as well as their attitudes toward accepting immigrants who bring

a different cultural context. We hypothesize that, similar to findings in Western European countries (Hellwig & Sinno, 2016), there will be greater resistance to integrating ethnically different groups compared to populations belonging to the same or culturally similar ethnic groups. As shown in Table 1, nearly half of the respondents from Serbia believe that many should be allowed to come and live in Serbia. Additionally, 31,3% of participants expressed that some immigrants from the same racial or ethnic background should be allowed to come and live in Serbia. Combining these two groups, we can see that over 70% of Serbian residents exhibit a favourable attitude towards the immigration of individuals from their own racial or ethnic group. Moreover, the fact that fewer than 10% of respondents oppose all immigration highlights the predominantly positive view of immigrants from the same racial or ethnic background. At the same time, we can see that the share of respondents with positive attitudes towards immigration is increasing.

Table 1. Allow many/few immigrants
of same race/ethnic group as majority (in %)

	9 th round 2018/2019	10 th round 2020/2022	11 th round 2023/2024
Allow many to come and live here	39.4	41.4	45.7
Allow some	30.9	31.6	31.3
Allow a few	17.8	21.2	16.3
Allow none	11.9	5.8	6.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

In addition to the fact that such findings are expected across all societies, it is essential to note that Serbia is a country that has already experienced the settlement of population groups of the same ethnic origin. According to the 2001 Census, nearly half a million refugees (451,980), mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, were coming to the Republic of Serbia. To this, we should add around 200,000 individuals who arrived from Kosovo and Metohija after the 1999 NATO attack and the expulsion of the Serbian population from the southern province. Furthermore, there is a significant number of students from neighbouring countries studying at our universities. Therefore, Serbia has a long-standing tradition of receiving people of the same ethnic origin, and as a result, the population has remained largely open to the integration of this type of immigrant. Accordingly, the data we obtained, indicating a high willingness among our population to accept newcomers who belong to the same ethnic group, did not come as a surprise.

However, when it comes to attitudes toward immigrants of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, the picture changes significantly, as shown in Table 2. Worse results, in terms of more pronounced anti-immigrant attitudes, are expected given the fact that Serbia has traditionally been a country of emigration. Only recently, with the onset of the migrant crisis and the opening of the Balkan route in 2015, have the citizens of our country begun to gain experience in receiving immigrants not only of different ethnic origins but also from entirely different cultural and normative systems. Therefore, it is unsurprising that 23,8% of Serbian residents believe that many should be allowed to come and live in Serbia. At the same time, more than 30% of respondents think that some should be allowed to come, which does not differ significantly from their views on immigrants of the same racial or ethnic background. On the other hand, the latest findings show that one in five respondents in Serbia expresses strong anti-immigrant attitudes toward these newcomers, confirming the results of research conducted six years ago.

Table 2. Allow many/few immigrants
of different race/ethnic group from majority (in %)

	9 th round 2018/2019	10 th round 2020/2022	11 th round 2023/2024
Allow many to come and live here	21.4	27.3	23.8
Allow some	31.0	31.7	32.1
Allow a few	27.0	28.7	24.9
Allow none	20.7	12.3	19.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

In contrast to earlier findings, this trend is not linear. The tenth wave of the survey showed a decline in anti-immigrant attitudes, which can be understood, on the one hand, as a result of the gradual decrease in the number of refugees from the Middle East in Serbia, and on the other hand, their accommodation in reception centres, which restored the original appearance of cities and thereby reduced the sense of insecurity among the local population. However, the most recent data indicate a renewed increase in negative attitudes, returning to previously recorded levels. The arrival of Russian nationals¹⁰, which undeniably¹¹ led to a rise in

10 According to data from the Commissariat for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, more than half of the immigrant population in 2023 (51.1%) were Russians (KIRS, 2024:9). One of the first impressions among the population of Serbia, primarily in Belgrade, is that Russians are driving up rental and real estate purchase prices (Nova, 2022).

11 It is interesting that when forming attitudes toward the Russian population, their positive impact on the country's economy is completely overlooked. Namely, during 2021, Russians opened 11,081 companies in Serbia (Business and Finance, 2024).

prices, primarily of real estate, but also services, has rekindled antagonism toward the immigrant population in Serbia.

In addition to the increased number of Russians and Ukrainians in Serbia in recent years, due to the labour shortage in the country and the concessions made by the Serbian government toward foreigners, especially entrepreneurs willing to invest here, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of workers immigrating from non-European countries. The most significant numbers come from China, Turkey, India, Nepal, and various African nations. According to data from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the majority of them (58.9%) cite employment as the main reason for coming to Serbia, followed by family reunification, education, and other reasons (KIRS, 2024, p. 12). While immigrants from Russia and Ukraine largely continue to work for the same companies they were employed with in their home countries (primarily in the IT sector), others are mainly engaged in construction, restaurants, and food delivery services.

The data we collected through our research indicate that Serbian citizens hold highly negative attitudes toward people coming from poor countries, which we believe is a consequence of the symbolic threat previously discussed. Namely, the data that we present in Table 3 shows that 23% of respondents in Serbia would not allow anyone from poor non-European countries to immigrate. At the same time, 27.5%—presumably cosmopolitan-minded individuals aware of the domestic labour shortage—would allow only a small number of immigrants to enter. The data also show that 28.6% would accept only some immigrants, while 20.9% would gladly welcome a larger number of newcomers. The same trend as in the previous case was recorded—there was a decline in anti-immigrant beliefs in 2020, coinciding with a decrease in the influx of migrants from the Middle East. However, with the recent increase in the number of workers from African countries, there has been a renewed rise in negative attitudes, which we can see in the results in 2023.

Table 3. Allow many/few immigrants
from poorer countries outside Europe (in %)

	9 th round 2018/2019	10 th round 2020/2022	11 th round 2023/2024
Allow many to come and live here	19.5	24.7	20.9
Allow some	27.3	31.6	28.6
Allow a few	27.1	30.5	27.5
Allow none	26.1	13.2	23.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

The reasons for the skepticism of our country's population toward immigration, especially of people from poorer countries, can be understood by examining the components of the integrated threat theory. This dimension was operationalized using the following three questions "Would you say it is generally bad or good for country's economy that people come to live here from other countries?", "Would you say that country's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?" and "Is country made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?". These questions are measured on a ten-point scale, where 0 indicates a strong anti-immigrant orientation, and 10 represents a strong favor for foreign citizens moving to Serbia and their impact on various aspects of life in Serbia. Results are presented in the Table 4.

Table 4. Attitudes towards immigrants

	9 th round 2018/2019		10 th round 2020/2022		11 th round 2023/2024	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Immigration bad or good for country's economy*	4.05	2.959	4.47	2.965	4.64	2.966
Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants**	4.86	3.137	5.24	3.067	4.89	2.991
Immigrants make country worse or better place to live***	4.72	3.025	5.23	3.055	4.77	2.868

*0 – Bad for the economy, 10 – Good for the economy; ** 0 – Cultural life undermined, 10 – Cultural life enriched;

*** 0 – Worse place to live, 10 – Better place to live

When analysing the average values related to different types of perceived threats, it is clear that anti-immigrant sentiments have been present throughout all the years examined. The lowest average values were recorded concerning realistic threats, specifically its economic component, which was the focus of measurement in this case. Therefore, we cannot say that the Serbian population is primarily sceptical about immigration due to fear of losing national identity, changes in ethnic structure, or shifts in societal values¹²—reasons often cited in the everyday discourse of populist political parties. The main issue lies in the fear for one's own liveli-

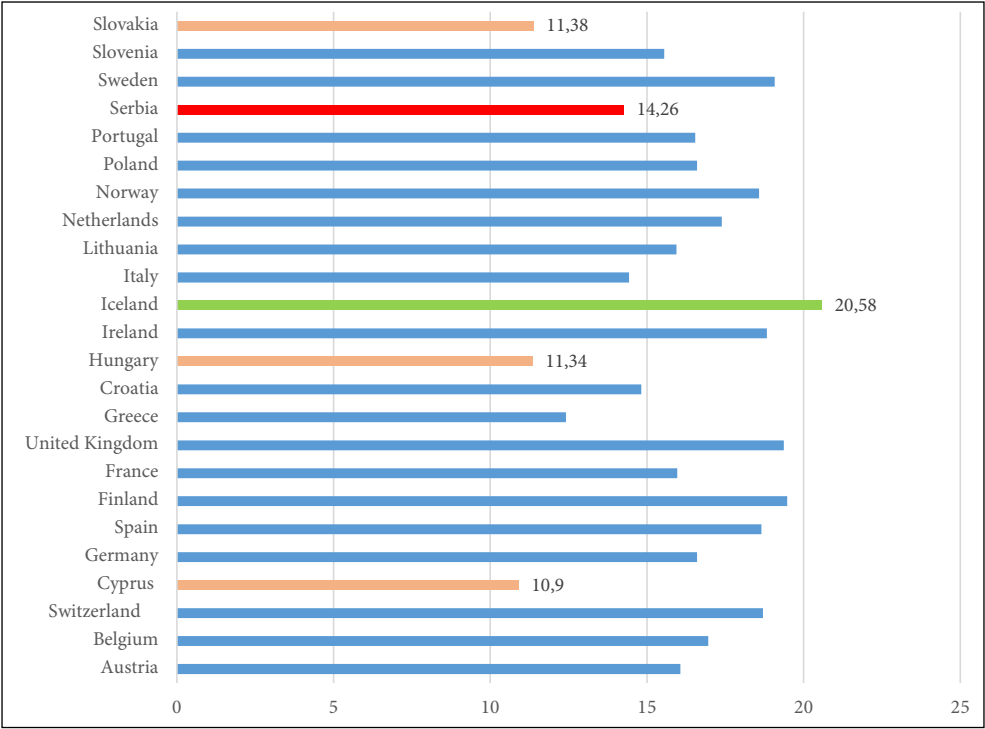
12 The fear that immigrants may negatively affect the quality of life and cultural identity is also present, though it is expressed to a somewhat lesser extent than concerns related to economic threats. Overall, the average values across all examined years and dimensions hover around 5. However, unlike the perception of economic threat, which has shown a slight decline, attitudes regarding the impact of immigrants on quality of life and cultural identity have not followed a linear trend. Initially, negative beliefs about the influence of immigrants on these aspects declined, but recent research in-

hood, particularly regarding the sufficiency of material resources for both the local population and newcomers.

On the other hand, the growing awareness among Serbia’s population regarding the country’s demographic challenges, which point to a labour shortage, has contributed to a gradual decline in fears over the economic consequences of immigration. In other words, it has become evident that without the immigration of foreign workers, both financial and social stability would be at risk. As a result, the average values related to the sense of economic threat have been decreasing over time¹³.

To understand the extent to which the population of Serbia is oriented against immigration, we compared their feelings of threats with those in other countries that participated in the ESS, which is presented in Chart 2. For that purpose, we created an index of anti-immigrant ori-

Chart 2. Index of anti-immigrant orientation, mean and standard deviation



indicates a resurgence of such concerns. The average values for all analyzed dimensions have once again dropped below 5.

13 Although they remain below 5, which indicates that the sense of economic threat among our population still exists.

entation based on the three previously mentioned statements¹⁴. A one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals significant differences in attitudes towards immigration among the analyzed countries¹⁵. Tukey's test indicates that the most negative perceptions of immigration are found in Cyprus, Hungary, and Slovakia, with no statistically significant difference between these three countries. Following these are Greece, Serbia, Italy, and Croatia, which also show negative attitudes, albeit to a lesser extent. In contrast, Finland and Iceland exhibit the most positive attitudes toward immigration.

According to the presented data, in countries with a larger immigrant population, such as Germany and France, a significantly smaller percentage of respondents express strong anti-immigrant attitudes toward immigrants of different races or ethnic backgrounds. For example, results from the 11th round of the European Social Survey (ESS) show that only 3.7% of respondents in Germany believe that no one should be allowed to come and live in the country, while this percentage is 6.5% in France. These findings contradict both theoretical and empirical research suggesting that a larger immigrant population is positively associated with an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment (see Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2020). However, it is worth noting that these countries have traditionally been immigrant-receiving nations, and their populations have become accustomed to people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, prolonged negative demographic trends in these countries have led their populations to recognise and accept the importance of immigrants for the labour market. Their experience supports the expectation that anti-immigrant attitudes among Serbian citizens may decline in the future. Serbia is new to immigration, but it is a country facing long-term negative natural population growth and continuous population ageing. Therefore, migration emerges as one of the optimal solutions for preventing further negative trends, not only in demographics but also in the economy and society as a whole.

Conclusion

The prolonged birth rate crisis, decades of negative natural population growth, and negative migration balance have resulted in Serbia losing over 30,000 people annually, equivalent to the size of a small town in the

14 The analysis indicated that the scale shows reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.874. The scale ranges from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum value of 30.

15 Brown-Forsythe=274.376, sig=.000.

country. The consequences are numerous: from continuous population aging, depopulation of villages and even towns, especially in the eastern and central parts of Serbia, to labor shortages that would have been unimaginable at the beginning of this century. Therefore, depopulation has become a real issue for responsible decision-makers and the entire population. It is a problem that threatens to hinder the country's social and economic progress.

Responses to this situation vary, from the development of policies focused on childbirth and family support to the creation of favourable migration policies aimed at encouraging return migration and enabling the immigration of people who wish to settle in Serbia. At first, this idea seemed very radical and even unimaginable. However, following the "migrant crisis" of 2015/16, which saw a massive influx of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, the nature of migration flows in Serbia began to change significantly. Serbia is no longer just a country of emigration, but has become a country of transit migration, with the potential to become a final destination. This shift has imposed the need to change existing strategies for addressing the issue of irregular migration and to develop new integration policies.

The real problem remains the persistent anti-immigration attitudes among the Serbian population. According to research findings, Serbian citizens are still not ready to accept the integration of migrants, especially those belonging to different ethnic groups, which implies the introduction of new cultural patterns and a necessary shift in everyday discourse. Even after the arrival of wealthier populations from Russia and Ukraine, the presented data show that there was no increase in the perception of realistic threats. This outcome can be understood in light of the strong national orientation that persists among the Serbian population, which reinforces concerns about preserving national identity. It is also linked to Serbia's short history of immigration. Therefore, despite an increased awareness of the problems posed by low birth rates and population decline, Serbian citizens still exhibit fear toward the influx of culturally different populations. When it comes to immigration, Serbia can thus be characterised as a society caught between a real need and a clearly expressed fear.

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