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## **Return of Labour Migrants to Serbia: Realistic Expectations or Wishful Thinking?\***

**Abstract:** Serbia has traditionally been a country with a high emigration rate. Numerous administrative obstacles and slow economic reforms have discouraged migrants from returning and making business investments. Over the last few years there has been a noticeable effort to provide concrete assistance, introduce benefits and reliefs and stimulate return migrations, particularly of entrepreneurs and highly educated persons, by means of different strategies, legal acts, and the establishment of government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Our decade-long research on migrations has primarily focused on the so-called Gastarbeiter, as well as their descendants. We have conducted research on migrants from North-eastern Serbia, which is one of the biggest emigration zones in the country, and field research was also conducted in Vienna, the city with the most numerous Serbian diaspora in Europe, a specific population which, due to the geographic proximity between Serbia and Austria, often engages in cross-border movement and is transnationally active. As regards the studied population, return migrations to Serbia and economic investment in the country's development are unlikely and certainly insufficient. In this paper, we will look at the classification of returnees as at their motives for a possible return, but also at the numerous reasons for staying in the host country.

**Key words:** return migrations, guest worker (Gastarbeiter), classification of returnees, transnational activity, north-eastern Serbia, Vienna

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## Introduction

Basically, Serbia is traditionally an emigrant country with a long history of emigration and its wide territorial dispersion. The mass economic labour migration of people with low and medium level education in the second half of the 20th century was joined, in the last two decades, by the emigration of young people with high level of education<sup>2</sup> (i.e., brain drain).

Although researchers point out negative demographic and therefore adverse economic consequences of external migration processes (Stanković 2014, 99),<sup>3</sup> it should be noted that there were also positive effects, primarily as a result of foreign currency remittances which led, in the first place, to the improvement of the financial situation of families in the country (since most of the remittances were used for meeting personal and family needs) and the country's balance of payments.<sup>4</sup>

There are no accurate data on the number and structure of the Serbian diaspora<sup>5</sup> and other types of Serbian emigrants. Data on Serbian nationals who work

<sup>2</sup> The 2011 Census recorded more than 41 thousand or 15.7% of individuals with high or higher education working abroad, although the number is assumed to be even higher. This percentage includes 11% of people with master's degree, and 6.9% with a doctorate degree (Rašević 2016, 44).

<sup>3</sup> The destructive demographic effect is reflected in depopulation, negative natural growth, population aging, which is coupled with negative economic effects due to the prolonged economic crisis and transition.

<sup>4</sup> According to the World Bank data, the share of remittances in Serbia in 2020 was 7.3%, which due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic is less than in previous years, such as in 2010 when it was 9.8%. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/serbia>.

“Serbia is among the countries with a very high amount of remittances from abroad. The World Bank estimates that in 2019, about 4.2 billion dollars arrived in our country from the diaspora, which is more than seven percent of GDP. That year, the amount of money sent by guest workers, or received as foreign pensions, was greater than the money invested in factories and other businesses by all foreign investors.” Available at: <https://bizportal.rs/finansije/milijarde-evra-iz-dijasore-pospesuju-domacu-ekonomiju-svaki-cetvrti-evro-dolazi-iz-nemacke-ali-stizu-i-dolari-iz-sad/>

<sup>5</sup> There are different contemporary opinions about the concept of diaspora and how to define it. Some sociological studies broadly define diaspora as “citizens of Serbian ethnic origin and/or nationality, who live abroad, whether they are migrants themselves or descendants of earlier migrants” (Bobić 2009, 362). On the other hand, Marija Krstić, analysing various definitions of the term “diaspora” in contemporary literature, concludes that the term is broad and loose and that it is not possible to clearly define it because there is no single model of diaspora according to which communities in dispersion would be determined, and therefore its analytical use is disputable (Krstić 2011, 296, 302).

and live abroad are incomplete and insufficient, and therefore population censuses represent one of the main sources of statistical information on territorial origin and socio-demographic characteristics of Serbian emigration (Predojević-Despić and Penev 2016, 333).

Over the past ten years, there have been significant efforts, in accordance with EU recommendations and standards, to monitor and manage migration through various strategies<sup>6</sup>, legal acts<sup>7</sup> and programmes, as well as by establishing governmental and non-governmental organisations, to provide substantial help and support to migrants, and to introduce relief measures and encourage return migration, especially of entrepreneurs and persons with high education, while a large number of public policies are dedicated to returnees under the Re-admission Agreement, concluded between the Republic of Serbia and the EU in 2007 (see Bobić and Babović 2013; Bobić et al. 2016). In recent years, special attention has been paid to the economic aspects of migration.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, we will deal with a special aspect of migration movements – return to the country of origin. First, we will mention the most important theories on return migration, followed by some basic statistical data on returnees to

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Gabriel Sheffer specifies three criteria for defining *diaspora*: 1. preservation and development of the collective identity of the members of the diaspora; 2. organisation of its members independent of organisations in the country of origin and the country of destination and 3. significant connection with the country of origin – real contacts such as visiting the country of origin or only symbolic connection (Sheffer 1986, according to Vesković Anđelković 2019, 660–661). In this context, the special properties of the diaspora, as a temporal, multigenerational community aware of the country of origin as the basis of its identity, are emphasized, with the desire to preserve the country of origin and to help it prosper (Vesković Anđelković 2019, 662).

<sup>6</sup> The main impetus for the government's serious engagement in relation to migration is found in the 2009 *Migration Management Strategy (Official Gazette of the RS, no. 59/2009)* (Bobić and Babović 2013, 224), and in the 2009 *Law on Diaspora and Serbs in the Region (Official Gazette of the RS, no. 88/2009)*. The main goal of the 2011 *Strategy of Preserving and Strengthening Connections Between the Homeland and the Diaspora and the Homeland and Serbs in the Region* is restoring the confidence of the diaspora in the homeland, but also strengthening the awareness of the population of Serbia about the importance of the diaspora and networking (Pavlov et al. 2012, 20).

<sup>7</sup> The *Law on Migration Management (Official Gazette of the RS, no. 107/2012)* was adopted in 2012 as a kind of umbrella law for other laws and by-laws because it defines different forms of migration and envisages competences and procedures for their regulation, adhering to EU definitions (Bobić and Babović 2013, 224).

<sup>8</sup> The *Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2021–2027* is an important document (*Official Gazette of the RS, no. 21/2020*). Available at: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/21/1>

Serbia. Then, based on our field research on migration, which focused on labour migrants (guest workers), we will propose a classification of returnees to Serbia based on the known typology of returnees, and state their motives for returning, as well as their reasons for staying in the receiving countries.

### Contemporary Theoretical Approaches to Return Migration

Although return migration has been the subject of intensive consideration in various migration theories since the 1980s, Oded Stark points out that a lot has been written about the reasons for migrating, but not so much about the reasons for the return of migrants to their country of origin (Stark 2019, 104). Jean-Pierre Cassarino believes that it is necessary to make a typology of returnees and establish who returns, when and why (Cassarino 2004, 254).

The return of migrants was treated differently depending on the theoretical paradigm through which it was considered: assimilationist, multicultural or transnational (Čapo Žmegač 2010, 15). The first two migration paradigms disregarded the subject of return, either because they viewed migrants from the perspective of the receiving country for which it was important to integrate/assimilate migrants as soon as possible, or because they viewed immigrants through an ethnic pluralism that implies that the homeland is a symbolic resource for building and maintaining their identity and where, thanks to intensive mutual contacts, immigrants in the receiving country live in a kind of cultural and ethnic isolation, transferring their socio-cultural experiences from the homeland to the receiving country and fantasising about return (Čapo Žmegač 2010, 17–18). The assimilationist and multicultural paradigms were strongly influenced by methodological nationalism, in which the authors approached various migration-related topics from the national perspective, ignoring everything that is not within the boundaries of the nation state or “national interest” (Čapo Žmegač 2010, 19–21). According to Jasna Čapo, only the transnational paradigm has shown the shortcomings of the previous approaches to return migration, since it viewed emigrants primarily in relation to their country of origin. The concept of transnationalism recognises the connection, intensive ties and common practices of emigrants and non-migrants – people who continue to live in the emigrants’ country of origin, showing that there are constant circular “here and there” movements, overcoming the borders of nation states (Čapo Žmegač 2010, 21–22). According to the transnational paradigm, the return of migrants is a reversible action, not a one-way process that necessarily implies the permanent settlement in one territory and the severing of all ties with the previous one (Čapo Žmegač 2010, 23).

Can return migrants be seen as a social group with shared experiences, similar patterns of behaviour and some kind of collective identity? According to Krešimir Peračković, if we look at migrants as a social group in terms of *locus*, then “the collective-identification dimension of the group of returning migrants integrates all their identities and experiences into specific sociocultural characteristics, which are largely determined by the migrant-returnee experience” (Peračković 2006, 481–482).

In terms of migrant experience, the behaviour, motives and desires of migrants to return have generally been considered through *macro- and micro-economic migration theories*.

Jean-Pierre Cassarino analysed the return within several major macroeconomic theories, establishing differences in approach, as well as some opposing elements in these theories (Cassarino 2004), while De Haas and Fokkema, based on their research, concluded that theoretical approaches did not always have to be mutually exclusive, but could complement each other depending on the intentions and motives of migrants to return (De Haas and Fokkema 2011).

- *Neoclassical Economics* (NE) represents migration as an attempt by individuals to maximise their utility by moving to places where they can be more productive. The idea that there is a negative correlation between destination country integration and origin country orientation also fits within assimilationist theories on immigrant integration. In that sense, the return of migrants is seen as a failure in achieving the set goals.
- *New Economics of Labour Migration* (NELM) sees their return as a logical outcome of the planned family strategy of temporary labour migrants. The central idea of NELM is that households send out best-suited individuals to gain an income elsewhere. The projected return is likely to be postponed for sustained or indefinite periods. Migrants will only return once they have succeeded to amass, save, and remit enough financial or human capital in order to realise their investment plans. It is important for them to show their success and enjoy it in their homeland, which is why most of the investments and remittances went to their homeland in an effort to prepare the conditions for their return.
- *Structural Approach* takes into account the broader context of socio-economic trends and institutional factors in the country of origin, which influence the decision to return. The “locality” (i.e. local context in migrants’ origin countries) has a great influence on the impact of return migrants. At the same time, the Structural Approach stresses the centre-periphery dichotomy in terms of the opposition between the developed, post-industrial societies and the traditional societies of the returnees’ country of origin, due to which there are numerous obstacles that prevent a significant impact of returnees on the country’s economic development.
- *Transnationalism and Social Network Theory*. Transnational theory seeks to shed light on the importance of continuous connections that migrants maintain between the country of destination and the country of origin. In this context, return is seen as a part of circular movements. The network of family, kinship and friendship ties that migrants nurture in their country of origin, to which they

remain tied on the basis of ethnicity and family, plays an important role. According to transnationalists, returnees prepare their reintegration at home through periodical and regular visits to their home countries.

And while macro-economic theories focused on the behaviour of migrants, assuming the existence of previous intentions, micro-economic approaches focused on the motives and intentions of individuals, as well as on contextual factors.

Oded Stark specifies 12 reasons for return, emphasizing that they can overlap and are never a simple dichotomy between success and failure, voluntary and imposed, planned and exogenously mandated, etc. (Stark 2019, 105, 120).

Brigitte Waldorf (Waldorf 1995) researched the motives for return of guest workers from Germany, originating from South and South-East Europe. Her basic hypothesis was that intentions to return did not have to match the observed behaviour of migrants<sup>9</sup>, which was the hypothesis of most previous studies. She identified three determinants that influenced intentions to return: personal attributes (ethnicity, gender, and marital status); residential and job satisfaction in the receiving country; and a temporal dimension and years prior to retirement. She concluded that there was a correlation between residential and job satisfaction and the duration of stay, since the higher level of satisfaction reduced the desire to return and postponed return, while the influence of personal was of the least importance for return intentions. (Waldorf 1995, 134).

De Haas and others also focused on migrants' intentions to return, considering that insufficient attention has been paid to that aspect. In particular, they analysed the relationship between Neoclassical and New Economic theories of labour migration, establishing that their empirical findings did not fully support either of these theories. In fact, socio-cultural integration in the receiving country has a negative effect on the desire to return, but structural reasons, such as business success and the creation of economic and social ties in the receiving country, are not decisive, and successful migrants may very well desire to return to their homeland. Their conclusion was that "there is no uniform process of (return) migration and that the competing theories might be complementary in explaining return migration intentions and behaviours occurring between and within specific migrant groups and within specific origin and destination contexts" (De Haas, Fokkema and Fihri 2015, 427).

Many points out that return is more often motivated by social than by economic reasons (Callea 1984, 63; Dumon 1986, 121; Cassarino 2004, 260). Although there is never only one reason for return, most researchers note that the economic and political situation in the country of origin, or even in the local en-

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<sup>9</sup> For example, there is a desire to return, but the decision and return are constantly postponed and the migrants remain in the receiving country, which was often the case with guest workers. Another example is that there is no desire to return, but it occurs due to deportation or some other reason that prevents migrants from staying in the receiving country.

vironment from which they came, often play a decisive role in deciding whether to return (Callea 1984, 64–65).

Francesco Cerase (Cerase 1974) was one of the first to elaborate on *the types of return migrants*, and a little later, the studies of various researchers completed his considerations and deepened the various aspects and motives of return migration, the re-adjustment of migrants in the homeland, and their influence in the life of the homeland community.

Some researchers addressed the problems of re-acculturation of returnees, that is, the psychological and social aspects of re-adaptation to life in the homeland, which could be considered on three levels: individual, family and social. Returnees could be faced with difficulties of reintegration, at both social and professional levels. It was determined that for many people this process was more difficult and painful than the process of primary acculturation in a foreign environment, that alienation from the environment in the country of origin, lack of information about changed circumstances in the homeland and insufficient preparation for return are surprisingly common, while disappointments are proportionally greater than satisfaction due to return. This phenomenon was referred to as “reverse cultural shock”. If we add the potential impossibility to find an adequate job upon return, for some people all these problems become too difficult to overcome, so they decide to re-emigrate (Gmelch 1980; Lepore 1986; Dumon 1986; Sussman 2000; Cohen and Gold 1997; Cassarino 2004; Tannenbaum 2007).

### Some Basic Information about Serbian Returnees

In Serbia, monitoring of returnees from work abroad is not systematic and is mentioned only in the 1981, 1991 and 2011 Population Censuses (Stanković 2014, 94). The 1981 and 1991 Censuses recorded individuals who worked abroad, while the 2011 Census also recorded their family members, which contributed to the perception of an increased number of returnees (Bobić et al. 2016, 32).

Returning from work abroad was dominant in two periods: 1971–1980 and 2001–2011. After the oil crisis, restrictive immigration policies were introduced in Western European countries, due to which the share of returnees to Serbia in that period was high (1971–1980) – 21%. However, the return of labour migrants is significantly higher in the 21st century in which 30% of migrants returned from 2001 to 2011, which is understandable since a significant number of them ended their working life abroad, due to which they returned to Serbia, at least temporarily (Stanković 2014, 83). Returnees without education make up 18.6%; returnees with completed eight-year primary education make up

22.4%; those with completed secondary school make up 39.8%; while those with completed higher education make up 18.9% in the Population Census 2011 (Stanković 2014, 84–85). As regards the age of returnees, most of them are older than 55 years, while as regards economic activity, the majority of returnees are economically inactive (Bobić et al. 2016, 35). Returnees are predominantly men (56.9%) (Stanković 2014, 88), while women prefer to stay abroad because of their children and grandchildren who live there, even when their husbands return to their homeland (Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016b, 520).

“Child returnee migrants” is a category that is always considered as part of the return of parents (Dumon 1986, 123). Many children in Serbia were left with relatives in their country of origin when their parents emigrated (bilocal families). They grew up and were socialised in Serbia, and joined their parents in their late teenage years. This phenomenon was particularly widespread in 1990s when parents, due to the generally unfavourable political and economic situation in Serbia, tried to subsequently provide their children with a stay in the receiving countries. However, some of them were unable to easily adapt to life abroad, missed the familiar environment in which they had grown up, their peers, previous lifestyle, and therefore, after several years spent abroad, decided to return to Serbia and find a job or start a business as small entrepreneurs (Antonijević 2013, 257).

On the other hand, descendants of migrants who were born abroad usually stay there to live and work, and it is not very likely that they will return to Serbia. In fact, they cannot even be considered as returnee migrants since most of them were not even born in Serbia.<sup>10</sup> In Austria, most of them are labelled as “persons with a migration background”.<sup>11</sup> This is also confirmed by our research on descendants, i.e., the third and fourth generations of Serbian emigrants in Vienna.<sup>12</sup> They love Serbia; they like to visit the land of their ancestors; they

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<sup>10</sup> Individuals from the category of persons with a migration background cannot be considered returnees because they “in fact immigrate to the country of their ancestors, and do not return to the country of their birth or former life” (Čapo Žmegač 2010, 14). Susanne Wessendorf researched the cases of the descendants of the first-generation of migrants immigrating to the country of origin of their ancestors, calling them *root migrants* and concluded that expectations had not been fulfilled for many of them because they had an idealised image of the country of their ancestors’ origin (Wessendorf 2007).

<sup>11</sup> In Austria, persons with a migration background are those whose parents were both born abroad. Persons with only one parent born in Austria do not have a migration background according to this definition. The country of birth of the mother is decisive for the assignment of the country of origin (see *Statistical Yearbook Migration & Integration 2022*, at [www.statistik.at/fileadmin/announcement/2022/07/20220725MigrationIntegration2022EN.pdf](http://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/announcement/2022/07/20220725MigrationIntegration2022EN.pdf)).

<sup>12</sup> We have conducted research studies about migrant’s descendants through the following projects: “Research of knowledge and preservation of intangible cultural heritage



speaking Serbian; they are aware of their ethnic identity; they maintain contact with relatives and friends in Serbia; they use information technology to actively watch the events of entertainment, sports and other; they are active in expatriate clubs, especially in folklore dance groups; but they value highly the fact that they were born and live in Austria, which is why they do not consider living in Serbia. Practically, Austria is their country of origin while Serbia is the receiving country (see Antonijević et al. 2021). Carl Schierup, in his paper from the early 1980s, predicted that the descendants of migrants who had an idea to come to live in Serbia would encounter a potential stumbling block in deciding on immigration. In fact, traditionally emigrant countries, such as Serbia, have remained on the periphery to this day and are less developed than all those countries where the first generations went to work. Therefore, if their descendants, born and socialised in the Western European countries with a better standard of living, decide to emigrate to the homeland of their ancestors, they would need to be ready to live in worse conditions (see Schierup 1981, 137).

### Temporary Labour Migrants in the Focus of Our Research

Our more than ten-year migration research focused primarily on the temporary<sup>13</sup> workers abroad, as well as their descendants.<sup>14</sup> The reason for this lies in the fact that the so-called guest workers, as a special type of migrants, poorly educat-

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among youth in Serbia and the diaspora" (2019), "Attitude towards identity: Research on the status of the third and fourth generations of Serbian migrants in Vienna" (2019) and "Aspects of integration of the third and fourth generations of Serbian migrants in Austria" (2020). The research methodology included the technique of non-probability sampling by using open-ended questionnaires, unstructured conversations with research subjects, and the snowball sampling method (see Antonijević et al. 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Temporary migrations are those that imply the future return of migrants to their country of origin, in a longer or shorter period of time, usually after the goals have been achieved (Peračković 2006, 477). Christian Dustmann, on the other hand, defines permanent migrations as those in which migrants stay in the country of destination until retirement, while temporary migrations are those in which migrants return before retirement, pointing out that they behave rather differently (Dustmann 1996, 224).

<sup>14</sup> There are different opinions on the issues of migrant generations. The second generation consists of the first generation of children who were born in host countries. However, the question arises as to which generation consists of children born in Serbia who later joined their parents abroad and continued their education there. We think they could also be considered the second generation. It is not always clear who makes up the third generation, although it is usually considered that these are children born abroad who are today labelled as "people with a migrant background". Yet, according to our knowledge based on field research, there is also a "leap", that is, the first generation's grandchildren, who were born and lived with their parents in Serbia, now

ed and poorly qualified, destined to hard manual labour in the receiving countries, did not attract anthropological scientific attention in Serbia for a long time.

Therefore, we decided to study the cultural identity and socio-economic life of emigrants who, from the early 1970s onwards, were leaving Serbia to work in the countries of Western Europe, mostly in Germany, Austria and France. “The largest number of them were former farmers and skilled industrial workers, that is, a manual workforce whose spontaneous and mass departure caused a number of adverse consequences in the country, above all the devastation of rural settlements in Serbia” (Stanković 2014, 9). Often, there was the so-called “chain migration”, when relatives, friends and neighbours from the same village went to work abroad, and in that case the already existing social ties, acquaintances and networks were of great importance in the process of deciding to emigrate and later, during the process of finding one’s way in emigration (Meyer 2001, 93). Practically, that migrant wave has not stopped even to the present day, although with occasional oscillations, and neither did the need of highly developed countries for workers who would perform the jobs avoided or refused by the local population<sup>15</sup> (see Castles 2006).

We conducted research on labour migrants through 7 projects from 2010 to 2020, although none of the projects focused only on the return of migrants. It was, however, a frequent and inevitable topic in our interviews, which provided the foundation for analysing the typology of returnees in this paper, based on the thematic analysis of the collected material (see Antonijević 2011; Antonijević et al. 2011; Antonijević 2013). The field work methodology included semi-structured interviews and unstructured conversations with respondents of both sexes and of different ages. Interviews were most often conducted with middle-aged and older people who still worked or were retired. During the last two research years, we worked with the younger generation of emigrants. The obtained material was subjected to qualitative, interpretative and narrative-thematic analysis.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of territory, we investigated migrant workers from north-eastern Serbia, which is one of the oldest and largest emigration zones in our country (Predojević-Despić 2011, 2; Predojević-Despić and Penev 2016, 336). More precisely, we researched in the villages and towns of the Braničevo District (figure 1), where the share of people working abroad makes up 21% of the total population, while in some municipalities the share of the population working and staying abroad makes up as much as a third of their residents (Stanković 2014, 27–28).

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emigrate where their grandparents worked. They could probably be considered as the third generation (see King and Christou 2010; Ivanović 2012; Antonijević et al. 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Today it is referred to as *circular migration* of unskilled seasonal workforce (see Vertovec 2007).

<sup>16</sup> See more about projects, research topics, field work and theoretical-methodological approach in Antonijević et al. 2021.

We also conducted several field visits in Vienna, which is home to the largest Serbian diaspora in Europe.<sup>17</sup> Compared to emigrants in other European countries, this large diaspora community<sup>18</sup> is specific for its intensive cross-border activity due to the relative proximity between Serbia and Austria. In addition to holidays and annual leaves, they often go to their native places on weekends where they actively participate in family obligations, celebrations, wider social contacts, agricultural work, construction work around their houses, etc. Apart from sending remittances, they used to invest much more in the communal needs of their villages, while today they are more focused on donations to churches and on religious gatherings and ceremonies. Some of them are politically active in both countries and intensively maintain various



Figure 1. Braničevo District on the map of Serbia

symbolic and cultural ties with the homeland, either by direct presence and involvement or by using modern information technologies. Based on their activities, they could be characterised as transnational actors, although they had behaved in that way for years before the transnational paradigm became a

<sup>17</sup> Austria is the dominant and most attractive destination for emigrants from Serbia, with the share of Serbs (21.8%), Vlachs (36.5%), Gorani (27.5%) and Roma (36.3%) (Stanković 2014, 54).

According to the data of the City Municipality of Vienna, at the beginning of 2021, the most numerous group of foreign origin in Vienna were citizens of Serbian origin (<https://www.wien.gv.at/english/social/integration/facts-figures/population-migration.html>), who also made up the third largest group of foreign origin in Austria (<https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/announcement/2022/07/20220725MigrationIntegration2022EN.pdf>). Accessed on 30 September 2022.

<sup>18</sup> According to Marija Krstić, temporary workers abroad *are* the diaspora since they remain loyal to their country of origin, they are its citizens, they cherish and maintain ties with their families and local communities, and help their families through remittances, but also help their compatriots by employing them in auxiliary jobs, and improve the balance of payments of the country of origin (Krstić 2011, 307).

dominant theoretical framework in the interpretation of the behaviour of some migrants.<sup>19</sup>

However, we would rather characterise the activities of labour migrants from Serbia in Austria through the paradigm of *trans-locality* (Appadurai 2000, 192). The paradigm of trans-locality is complementary to transnationalism, but avoids its limitations, since it is primarily based on informal social networks, activities and practices that rest on “strong” ties, since they rely on kinship, friendship and neighbourhood relations and the support of some known people from local areas (regions, cities, villages or neighbourhoods) with which their ties are strongest and where social networks are densest. Serbian emigrants in Vienna are connected on the basis of ethnicity, common homeland and intra-group solidarity.

These ties constitute a strong cohesive factor in the diaspora, connecting different people and groups into communities of similar people, which is an important component of their collective identity and *translocal subjectivity*, understood as a concept that reflects the importance of locality as a source of sense and identity for migrants (Cassarino 2004; Conradson and McKay 2007; Halilovich 2012). We would, therefore, agree with the opinion of Hariz Halilović that translocality, rather than transnationality, better explains the social morphology and lived realities of migrant groups.

So, investigating various topics through our projects (see Antonijević et al. 2021), we also touched on return migration. The return to the homeland is inherent to the very phenomenon of guest worker – an assumed transitory phenomenon, as was believed both in the countries of reception and in the countries of emigration. However, as time went on, as the reasons for extending their stay abroad accumulated, followed by family reunification, their life turned into *permanent temporariness* (see Dumon 1986; Čapo Žmegač 2005). As they themselves say, reaching the originally set goals entailed the desire for new acquisitions, greatly exceeding the initial plans. Furthermore, the fact is that it is more difficult to accumulate sufficient financial assets during shorter durations in the host country (Dustmann 1996, 241). So it happened that the vast majority of the so-called guest workers and their families actually settled permanently in the receiving countries, and the return to the homeland became a nostalgic “wishful thinking” narrative that some authors described as a *myth or fantasy about return*, which is an expression that signifies a constant desire to return and its persistent postponement. While this behaviour of migrants, accompanied by socio-cultural integration in the country of destination, was pointed out as an argument by the assimilationist or Neoclassical economic theory, this expression was subjected to criticism in the transnational paradigm, since the emphasis was no longer placed on the postponed final return

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<sup>19</sup> While noting the similarities to long-standing forms of migrant connection to homelands, the new approach underscores the numerous ways how, and the reasons why, today’s linkages are different or more intense than earlier forms (Vertovec 2002, 4).

to the homeland, but on permanent arrivals and departures as a form of periodic returns<sup>20</sup> (see, for example, Callea 1984; Klimt 2000; Ganga 2006; Čapo Žmegač 2010; Čapo 2012; Antonijević 2013).

Hence, return should be seen as a process that is a heterogeneous phenomenon with different stages: from thinking about return, through deciding to return, preparing for return and returning, and reintegrating into the community of origin, all the way to potential reversion in the process (see Čapo Žmegač 2010, 25; Peračković 2006, 490).

### Classification of Labour Migrants – Returnees to Serbia

As part of known theoretical frameworks on return migration and based on our above-mentioned field research, we will consider the classification of returnees, their motives for returning to Serbia, as well as the reasons for staying in the receiving countries without the desire to return.

As Dumon noted a long time ago, if the problem of returnees is considered, it is usually looked at what economic and social contribution can returnees give to the country or to the local community, and rarely an individual approach to their personal motives and problems is considered (Dumon 1986, 115; see also de Haas et al. 2015, 416). In our research, we focused precisely on that *individual approach* to their remigration, based partly to their motives and partly to their behaviour.

So, generally speaking, Serbian guestworkers, who return to country, put family reasons first, followed by retirement, nostalgia, health problems, difficulties related to staying and working abroad, adequate job opportunities in the homeland, etc.

Using, in part, Cerase's (Cerese 1974) classification of return migrants, based on our field researches and qualitative analyses, most of our labour migrants could be found in the following types of returnees.

#### *Return of Failure*

Cerese attributes the return due to failure to those who failed to adapt to the conditions of life abroad. The experience of emigration often brings them the feeling of fear, loneliness and trouble, and therefore their life at home, with their

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<sup>20</sup> Despite the undoubted importance of the transnational paradigm, which shed light on the constant relations of emigrants with the homeland and the local community of origin, the fact is that, during our field research, we heard many times from the respondents that they wanted to return to their homeland permanently, but that it was constantly postponed, which gave ground to many authors to declare this attitude of the migrants of other nationalities as well a "myth of return" (see Safran 1991).

family and friends, begins to look like a real blessing, which encourages their decision to return (Cerese 1974, 249, 250, 254). In the same way, *Neoclassical economics* sees return as a failure to achieve the set goals (see Cassarino 2004, 255; de Haas et al. 2015, 416).

Our findings are somewhat different. Although there are certainly unsuccessful migrants who have returned, we find out that the large number of unsuccessful migrants do not want to return to their homeland precisely because they do not want to admit their failure in front of the local community (Antonijević 2013, 256–257; see also Gmelch 1980, 141–142). In addition, in Vienna, we have seen our retired migrants who live on the edge of poverty but are not returning to their homeland because they do not have the means to return home and live there, while in Austria they receive some minimal social assistance that sustains them (Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016a, 124). According to the bitter words of one of our interlocutors, “they are waiting for the undertaker to bring them back home” (Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016a, 132).

### *Conservative Returnees*

They are those who have remained foreigners in the country of immigration, maintaining strong ties to the homeland and fixating on the idea of returning home as soon as they have enough funds to buy land or build a new house, which “means that the immigrant evaluates his success and achievement by the criteria of his society of origin”. Upon their return, they usually continue to engage in agriculture, tied to traditional models of thinking and behaviour, with no desire to change the social context they had left before migrating (Cerese 1974, 250, 254, 256). The returnees with whom we spoke in the field can be recognised to belong to a large number of the first-generation guest workers, who returned mainly after oil crises in 1973. Upon their return they engaged in agriculture. They rarely differ from other peasants in the way they run their farms. Some of them regret having returned too soon (see Antonijević et al. 2011, 1002–1007).

According to our findings, there are complex reasons why nowadays there are almost no “conservative returnees” in Serbia – those who return to their villages and to their farms to cultivate them. On the one hand, the majority of them remained with their families in the receiving countries. On the other hand, one of important reasons is that none of them wants to return to agriculture (Antonijević 2013, 255–256; Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016a, 131) and this seems to be a general pattern of the returnees also of other nationalities (see, for example, Gmelch 1980, 149; Colton 1993, 878–879). “Escape from agriculture” is an expression that refers not only to the economic but also to the social-psychological dimension of such an attitude (Stanković 2014, 9). Most

guest workers from Serbia (or ex Yugoslavia), at some point, escaped from poverty and life in the countryside. In the receiving countries, they acquired different life and business habits as working and not as agricultural class, as urban and no longer rural population. Although many have expanded their properties, bought modern agricultural machinery and tools and built big houses, it turns out that this is no longer a sufficient reason to return to their homeland and work in the countryside. Moreover, upon their return, some settle in cities and not in the villages from which they originate.

### *Return after Retirement*

As Cerase pointed out, “retired returnees look upon their return as the beginning of the last stage of their life” (Cerase 1974, 257). This is the most common form of return migration to Serbia and implies the desire to spend the last stage of life in the homeland “with one’s own people”. These are mostly returnees with the most positive feelings and attitudes towards their homeland. They were brought back to their homeland by the desire to be with their children and grandchildren who had remained in Serbia, by their nostalgic feelings, by the desire to show their success to their compatriots, but also the fact that life in Serbia is financially more comfortable with foreign pensions. Regarding to *New Economics of Labour Migration Theory*, these are the returnees who had seen their return as a logical outcome of the planned family strategy of temporary labour migrants, a valid approach since, in addition to the desire to return, they devoted enough time to preparing for return, and investing the saved funds in houses and family needs in the homeland (Cassarino 2004, 271). In our opinion, this type of return migrants, although satisfied with their life in the receiving countries, have never integrated enough to want to stay abroad. Although they spent their entire working life until retirement as the so-called guest workers, they remained culturally, emotionally and psychologically tied to their country of origin. They often never learned well the language of the country in which they worked. After returning, they generally do not engage in agriculture, although they do help other family members in the household. As one of our interlocutors simply says: “when you return, you live your life here”.

### *Innovative Returnees*

The assumption of those kind of returnee was that he could have acted as a carrier of social change (Cerase 1974, 258), but this type of returnees is still rare in Serbia. Although they would undoubtedly be the most socially beneficial, most developing countries, such as Serbia, have little success in attracting

the diaspora to directly invest in large-scale private entrepreneurship (Newland and Tanaka 2010, 1). Although the inflow of remittances to Serbia is extremely large, it is estimated that only about 3% of the total amount is invested in private business (Rašević 2016, 57).

Based on our experience, we would agree with the opinion expressed long time ago “that there is a myth that returnees help the economic development of their countries” (Cases Mendez and Cabezas Moro 1976, 142). This especially applies to low- and medium-skilled returnees who, even when they decide to invest, which is rare, are afraid of the investment risk and most frequently opt for starting a small service business (see Ivanović 2012, 294–295; Antonijević 2013, 166–167). Therefore, we would characterise them as *necessity entrepreneurs* (term used by Newland and Tanaka 2010), who start small businesses because they cannot find other opportunities on the labour market, since they have a lower level of social and economic capital. They mostly support themselves and a few others who are employed in such a small company; however, they do reduce unemployment in their local environment. Nevertheless, this type of entrepreneurship has value for entrepreneurs and their employees, but does not affect the wider economic development of the country (Newland and Tanaka 2010, 1; Pavlov et al. 2013, 268).<sup>21</sup>

In our fieldwork during 2012, we encountered an example of a successful small business in which almost the entire village was engaged. This was in Smoljinac, a village in the Municipality of Požarevac, in north-eastern Serbia. The village has a little less than 2,000 inhabitants and nearly half of them work abroad. In every second house, someone is an entrepreneur, has his or her own business and employs at least two people from the village. They manufacture various products: prefabricated objects, metal and aluminium fences, wooden and PVC carpentry, furniture, building blocks, decorative concrete elements, etc. They act in a socially responsible way by donating funds to support sports and culture, and the development of villages and schools in order to provide children and young people with the best possible living conditions to prevent them from emigrating. However, an important fact is that 90% of companies in the village were founded with money earned abroad, by the parents or grandparents who are/were guest workers (Antonijević 2013, 210–213).

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<sup>21</sup> However, in eastern and north-eastern Serbia, an area with a large number of emigrants, there are several examples of successful small entrepreneurs who, after working abroad, recently returned to their homeland and started various types of businesses – from catering and manufacturing to offering various consultancy and transport services ([https://www.raris.org/2016-06-22-23-38-42/arhiva-2021/655-predstavljamo-15-usp-esnih-primer-a-investicija-dijas-pore-u-istocnu-srbiju](https://www.raris.org/2016-06-22-23-38-42/arhiva-2021/655-predstavljamo-15-usp-esnih-prимерa-investicija-dijas-pore-u-istocnu-srbiju)).



Some of our interlocutors pointed out various reasons that prevented them from investing in starting a private business. First of all, these are structural and economic problems – the difference between the developed post-industrial countries in which they worked and the predominantly agricultural and less developed environments in their native places was often an insurmountable obstacle to the application of acquired knowledge and skills, as often pointed out in the *Theory of Structural Approach* as centre-periphery dichotomy. Moreover, there were also socio-political and administrative obstacles when returnees did not have the understanding and support of the local authorities, when the local power structures would openly or covertly oppose the business innovations of labour migrants in fear of competition and jeopardising the already established economic and social interests (Antonijević 2013, 139; for economic and power relations see also Cerase 1974, 258–259).

It is also important that for many years neither society nor the state has encouraged migrant workers to return and invest in private business, leaving them without information about what occupations are in short supply and what should be invested in. But it should be pointed out also that our guest workers tended to follow the patterns of wasteful consumption and unproductive investment (huge houses, luxury cars, expensive equipment and furniture) instead of using their savings for some kind of economically profitable behaviour<sup>22</sup> (see for example Antonijević 2013, 171–197). Finally, we should not forget that the guest workers of the first (and even second) generations were poorly educated and low skilled workers without professional knowledge, and therefore they could not be expected to start a successful business in their homeland.

The special innovative role that some returnees attribute to themselves will be here referred to as the “missionary role”. This is usually the role of labour migrants who have lived abroad sufficiently long to become confident about some newly gained knowledge and skills. Some of them tried to teach their compatriots, as they say, to behave in a more functional and profitable way, to pass on the knowledge and experiences they had gained while working abroad, to contribute to a better communal life in the village, but this was often not well received. Their compatriots would react by saying “what are they preaching to us”, while returnees would criticise their compatriots for being conservative, undisciplined, having poor work habits and being lazy. Another reason is the objective, material and economic impossibility of the majority of the local population to keep up with the ways of behaviour and consumption of guest workers. Hence, disappointments and misunderstandings were often mutual (Antonijević et al. 2011; Antonijević 2013).

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<sup>22</sup> Cassarino also mentions very similar forms of behaviour of the returnees of other nationalities as well (Cassarino 2004, 260).

## Why Our Labour Migrants Do Not Want to Return?<sup>23</sup>

The primary reason is the reunification of families in the destination countries due to which migrants lose the motive and meaning of returning where no one is waiting for them in their homes. On the other hand, the reason for not wanting to return home in many cases are damaged family relations and inter-generational conflicts with children and grandchildren who remained in Serbia. Moreover, after several decades of absence, they feel alienated from the home environment and compatriots, some of them have lost the social ties they once had in their native place. These are the most important social reasons for staying in the host country, even when economic reasons lead them to return to Serbia, where they would have more comfortable living conditions in their homes and with foreign pensions.

Among the economic and financial reasons why they stay in the host countries, one should mention secure jobs and income while employed and the numerous loans they take out and need to pay back. Also, pensions upon the termination of employment should be highlighted, as well as social benefits if unemployed, for which they must reside in the country of immigration for a certain number of months during the year. The economic reasons for not returning to their homeland should also include their desire not to engage in agriculture anymore, which they would have to do if they returned to their villages in their active working years.

The majority also mentions excellent and well-organised health services abroad and the convenience of living in urban conditions, compared to their villages in the homeland, which are often far from main roads.

Furthermore, most of them have alienated themselves from the administrative system in Serbia, stating that they are annoyed by corruption, complicated administrative procedures, indiscipline and disorganization, disrespect for other people's time, waiting for hours to receive them in the municipality, health centre or some other place, etc., stressing a good system of administration and communal life in Western countries.

The decision to stay in the receiving country even after retirement is increasingly common among our elderly migrants, which we encountered during our fieldwork in Vienna (Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016b). As Bolzman and associates conclude, return is today the least desirable option for elderly migrants (Bolzman et al. 2006, 1371). Thus, they have become a new and even unexpected population cohort in Western Europe – “guest pensioners” (*Gas-*

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<sup>23</sup> Conclusions are made upon narrative-thematic analysis of material from several field research (see Antonijević 2011; Antonijević et al. 2011; Antonijević 2013; Antonijević and Milosavljević 2016a, 2016b).

*trentner*) (Bolzman et al. 2006, 1359). Some authors believe that the binary distinction underlying the model of temporary labour migrants – return or stay – has been overcome and that today it has given way to a new form of living alternately at two addresses. Instead of permanently returning to their countries of origin, they want to maintain their status and residence in both countries by creating bi-local residence (Bolzman et al. 2006, 1373; Čapo Žmegač 2010, 27). This is why their movements are seasonal, as a rule retired guest workers return to their homes abroad in the winter, which has already been referred to as the *third option* (Bolzman et al. 2006, 1371), and *oscillating or pendulum migration* (Ganga 2006, 1406; Markov 2012, 124).<sup>24</sup> We consider these circular movements of retired migrants as an example of trans-locality, since they are economically inactive, at leisure in both environments, without the desire to influence them, but with the desire to maintain strong ties with their *transnational social spaces* and communities (see Faist 2000).<sup>25</sup>

In the end, the issue of nostalgia also becomes debatable for our diaspora in Vienna: the geographical proximity of Serbia which allows them to often undertake cross-border activities, the comfort of life in the city of Vienna as well as being surrounded by numerous compatriots, leaves an open question – how lonely, isolated, and homesick do they really feel.

All of these reasons have changed their perception of where home is.

## Conclusion

This paper presents some of the most important theories on return migration based on macro– and micro–economic approaches. It also points out that it is not only necessary to analyse the behaviour of returnees from the aspect of economic profitability for the country of origin, but also the intentions and motives of migrants to return, which vary depending on numerous personal and contextual factors. It also stresses the need for an individual approach, since it sheds light on their different motives on the basis of which it is possible to make a typology of returnees, which was done for Serbian returnees on the basis of our findings obtained through several research projects. We also highlighted why our guest workers stay in the countries of immigration, even when they retire.

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<sup>24</sup> Cerase does not have this classification since elderly migration has been observed over the last twenty years as a special phenomenon of the behaviour of retired labour migrants (see for example Bolzman et al. 2006; Warnes and Williams 2006; White 2006).

<sup>25</sup> The concept of *transnational spaces* covers diverse phenomena such as transnational small groups, transnational circuits and transnational communities. Each of these is characterized by a primary mechanism of integration: reciprocity in small groups, exchange in circuits and solidarity in communities (Faist 2000, 191).

Serbia is a country with a high rate of unemployment, and economic problems of the country in transition. For example, in the second quarter of 2022, the unemployment rate was 8,9%<sup>26</sup>, the minimum net earnings in June 2022 were 415 euros<sup>27</sup>, while average net earnings in June 2022 were 634 euros<sup>28</sup>. These data clearly indicate the reasons for new emigration waves from Serbia.

The presented analysis shows that the trend of migrants returning to Serbia is still unfavourable and insufficient, and that in most cases it is only wishful thinking among emigrants. “As a semi-peripheral, post-socialist society with difficulties in the process of transformation, Serbia is still not a desirable destination for the return of a significant number of labour migrants, business and highly educated people, and in this sense, immigration does not have a revitalising socio-economic and demographic effect”, as pointed out in one study (Bobić et al. 2016, 8).

It is important to undertake further researches about return migrations to Serbia, and not only of labour migrants but also entrepreneurs and highly educated people, regardless of whether they will return permanently or occasionally. But it will, also, largely depend on the state’s attitude towards the returnees, on the institutional and political framework for migration management. This is why it is important to have a systemic, constant, consistent and applicable strategy for attracting returnees as a possible significant resource in the country’s development.

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<sup>26</sup> See <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-Latn/oblasti/trziste-rada>

<sup>27</sup> See [https://www.ipc.rs/statisticki\\_podaci/2022/minimalna-zarada2022](https://www.ipc.rs/statisticki_podaci/2022/minimalna-zarada2022)

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.cekos.rs/prosečne-neto-zarade-plate-jun-2022-godine>

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*Povratak radnih migranata u Srbiju:  
realna očekivanja ili „wishful thinking“?*

Srbija je tradicionalno emigrantska zemlja. Premda su se tokom proteklih decenija društvene, ekonomske i političke prilike u zemlji menjale, čini se da je odsustvo državne brige za povratnike bila neka vrsta konstante. Brojne birokratsko-administrativne prepreke i spore ekonomske reforme držale su migrante podalje od ideje povratka i poslovnog ulaganja. Poslednjih godina primetan je značajan napor da se kroz različite strategije, zakonska akta, te osnivanja vladinih i nevladinih agencija pruži konkretna pomoć, uvedu olakšice i podstaknu povratne migracije, posebno preduzetnika i visoko obrazovanih osoba. Iako je od 2010. godine zabeležen porast broja povratnika, različita istraživanja pokazuju da Srbija i dalje nije imigraciono privlačna destinacija.

U fokusu naših desetogodišnjih istraživanja migracija bili su, pre svega, tzv. gastarbajteri, odnosno radnici na privremenom radu u inostranstvu, kao i njihovi potomci. To je populacija migranata koja je privlačila najmanje naučne pažnje, ali i društvene brige osim kad je reč o njihovim doznakama koje čine značajan udeo u budžetu Srbije. Istraživali smo migrante poreklom iz severoistočne Srbije, koja predstavlja jednu od najvećih emigracionih zona u našoj zemlji, a teren smo obavljali i u Beču, gradu u kome se nalazi najbrojnija srpska dijaspora u Evropi, specifična po tome što je transnacionalno veoma aktivna. Kada je reč o populaciji koju smo istraživali, povratne migracije u Srbiju i ekonomska ulaganja u njen razvoj malo su verovatna i svakako nedovoljna. U radu ćemo izneti klasifikaciju povratnih radnih migranata, kao i njihove motive za eventualni povratak, ali i razloge za ostanak u zemlji prijema.

*Ključne reči:* povratne migracije, radni migranti, klasifikacija povratnih migranata, transnacionalna aktivnost, severoistočna Srbija, Beč

*Retour des travailleurs migrants en Serbie:  
des attentes réalistes ou du « wishful thinking »?*

La Serbie est traditionnellement un pays d'émigration. Bien qu'au cours des décennies passées les circonstances sociales, économiques et politiques dans

le pays aient changé, il semble que l'absence de préoccupation de l'État pour les migrants de retour était une sorte de constante. De nombreux obstacles bureaucratiques et administratifs et des réformes économiques lentes tenaient les migrants loin de l'idée du retour et de l'investissement entrepreneurial. Ces dernières années des efforts considérables sont faits – sous forme de stratégies variées, des actes législatifs, la fondation des agences gouvernementales et non-gouvernementales – pour offrir une aide concrète, faciliter et encourager des migrations de retour, particulièrement celles des entrepreneurs et des personnes diplômées du supérieur. Bien que depuis 2010 on note une augmentation du nombre de migrants retournés, différentes recherches montrent que la Serbie n'est toujours pas une destination d'immigration attrayante.

Nos recherches longues d'une décennie sur les migrations ont principalement été concentrées sur les *gastarbeiters*, c'est-à-dire des travailleurs temporaires à l'étranger, ainsi que leurs descendants. Cette population de migrants avait jusque là attiré très peu d'attention scientifique, mais également de soins sociaux sauf lorsqu'il s'agissait de leurs contributions financières qui représentent une part considérable dans le budget de la Serbie. Nous avons étudié les migrants originaires de la Serbie du nord-est, une des zones d'émigration dans notre pays, puis l'enquête de terrain a été faite aussi à Vienne, ville habitée par la diaspora serbe la plus nombreuse en Europe, se caractérisant par son activité transnationale intense. Dans la population étudiée les migrations de retour en Serbie et les investissements économiques dans le développement du pays sont peu probables et certainement insuffisants. Dans cet article nous allons offrir une classification des travailleurs migrants de retour, leurs motifs pour un retour éventuel, mais aussi les raisons qui les incitent à rester dans le pays d'accueil.

*Mots clés:* migrations de retour, travailleurs migrants, classification des migrants de retour, activité transnationale, Serbie du nord-est, Vienne

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