

# How is COVID-19 reshaping temporary and circular labour migration: Serbia and North Macedonia perspectives

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused migrant workers worldwide to face numerous and specific challenges. This study aims to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic and its societal impact have influenced temporary and circular migrants from Serbia and North Macedonia. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 50 participants to gain a deeper understanding of their challenges and migration practices. Temporary circular labour migration from Serbia and North Macedonia are most intensive towards EU countries, which are geographically close and well-connected by traffic, and with which migrants have well-established migration ties. The results show that after the outbreak of the pandemic, respondents faced termination of employment contracts, reduced working hours and earnings. Most of the respondents returned and only a few found formal employment in the country of origin. Job-related impacts of COVID-19 on respondents are determined by temporary residence, a form of employment and the employment sector. Temporary and circular migrant workers from Serbia and North Macedonia involved in the essential sectors in EU countries are less likely to be severely affected by the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results suggest that temporary and circular migration schemes should be improved after the pandemic, in a way that is sustainable even in times of sudden changes. In that regard, in addition to considering the needs of the labour markets of countries of origin and destination, the needs and the rights of migrants, should be prioritized in common solutions.

**Keywords:** *labour migration, temporary migrants, circular migrants, COVID-19, Western Balkans*

## Rezumat. Cum reorganizează COVID-19 migrația temporară și circulară a forței de muncă: perspectiva Serbiei și a Macedoniei de Nord

Pandemia de Covid-19 a cauzat forței de muncă migrante din întreaga lume provocări numeroase și specifice. Acest studiu își propune să determine cum pandemia de Covid-19 și impactul ei social au influențat migrația temporară și circulară din Serbia și Macedonia de Nord. Au fost efectuate interviuri semi-structurate, detaliate, cu 50 de participanți, pentru a înțelege mai bine obiceiurile de migrație și problemele întâmpinate. Migrația circulară și temporară a forței de muncă din Serbia și Macedonia de Nord se producere preponderent către statele UE, state apropiate din punct de vedere geografic, cu care există conexiuni de transport, și cu care migrații au deja legături foarte bine stabilite. Rezultatele arată că după izbucnirea pandemiei, respondenții s-au confruntat cu încetarea contractelor de muncă, reducerea orelor de lucru și a veniturilor. Majoritatea respondenților s-au întors și doar câțiva și-au găsit de lucru oficial în țara de origine. Impactul Covid-19 asupra locurilor de muncă ale respondenților este determinat ținând cont de reședința temporară, tip de activitate, și sectorul de activitate. Pentru migrații temporari și circulari din Serbia și Macedonia de Nord care lucrează în sectoare esențiale din state UE, riscul de a fi afectați sever de impactul economic al pandemiei Covid-19 este mai mic. Rezultatele sugerează că schemele de migrație temporară și circulară ar trebui îmbunătățite după pandemie, astfel încât să devină sustenabile chiar și în perioadele cu schimbări bruște. În acest sens, soluțiile comune ar trebui să pună țină cont de nevoile pieței forței de muncă din statele emitente și receptoare, precum și de nevoile și drepturile migraților.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *migrația forței de muncă, migrații temporari, migrație circulară, COVID-19, Balcanii de Vest*

## Introduction

Nowadays, migration patterns are becoming more complex, they include diverse dynamics of temporary movements, while the conditions in which they take place are increasingly heterogeneous (Constant, 2020; Kahanec & Zimmerman, 2010; Hugo, 2009). Labour emigration is a long-term phenomenon in Western Balkan countries. North Macedonia with two other Western Balkan countries - Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, were among the top 20 countries of emigration worldwide in 2019. Their emigration rates range from 25 to 35 per cent (IOM, 2019). Temporary and circular migration from Serbia and North Macedonia was

intense, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They increased again in the early 2010s after EU visa liberalisation, and especially in the last few years (Arandarenko, 2020; Krasteva et al., 2018; Predojević-Despić & Penev, 2016; Janeska et al., 2016). Both countries have experience in labour mobility and mediation of employment abroad since the transition period via posting workers abroad through bilateral agreements, establishing long-lasting cooperation with particular receiving countries etc. More recently, private employment agencies are also intermediaries in foreign employment. However, the greatest part of temporary and circular migrants acquires jobs abroad through migration networks and personal

contacts, and their departure and return are usually either not registered at all or are not publicly available.

Therefore, it is very difficult to estimate the size and structural characteristics of return, temporary, especially short-term, labour migration. Among the more important reasons are inconsistent definitions of temporary migration or even their absence. Furthermore, the national data production systems are still set up according to the long-term/permanent migration pattern (UNECE, 2016; Constant & Massey, 2002). However, in recent times, an increasing body of literature and research has provided a better understanding of the characteristics of these processes, revealing that temporary and circular migration is not a negligible part of international movements (Constant, 2020).

Temporary and circular labour migration from Serbia and North Macedonia are most intensive towards EU countries, which have traditionally been the most important destination countries for the population from the Western Balkans, and with which they have well-established migration ties. They are also geographically close, well-connected by traffic (Predojević-Despić & Penev, 2016), and the social and material costs of migration have been significantly reduced thanks to innovations in communication and information technologies. Although there are some differences between the analysed countries, Germany is the dominant traditional destination country. Along with the increase in temporary migration, there is a shortening of stays in destination countries, as well as changes in the preference of destination countries (Arandarenko, 2020; Şoşea et al., 2018; Predojević-Despić & Penev, 2016). The number of emigrants has decreased significantly in traditional EU destination countries and increased significantly in most new EU members. The non-European countries, such as China, or the Gulf countries where temporary visas are practically the only option for work-related residence (Czaika & Villares Varela, 2012), are increasingly important destinations for migrants from Serbia and North Macedonia. Additionally, there is an increase in economic labour mobility in the WB region. However, analyses show that working in new destination countries brings relatively modest positive net wage gains to Serbian citizens, family members mainly remain in the country of origin, and for now, there are no indications that they are considering permanent residence options in the countries of destination (Arandarenko, 2020).

Compared to initial economic migration, the motives for return, repeat, or circular migration are less well known (Constant, 2020). The economic and employment motives of labour migration stand out as essential. These are economic uncertainty,

poverty, and unemployment of low-income groups (Datta, 2004), differences in earnings, unemployment rates (Zaiceva & Zimmermann, 2008), lack of suitable employment, dissatisfaction with economic and social conditions (Kushnirovich, 2010). High unemployment and low wages are also underlying economic reasons for the long-term and continuous growth of the labour emigration abroad from Serbia and North Macedonia. Despite the significant decrease in the unemployment rate in the last decade, it remains high 10.3% in Serbia (SORS, 2020) and very high 17.3% for North Macedonia (SSO, 2020a) in 2019. Besides unemployment, the earnings amount also affects migration flows from these countries. Namely, in Serbia in 2018, 2.6% of employees earned a monthly salary of less than 250 euros, while for 38.2% of employees the salary was in the range of 250-380 euros (SORS, 2019). In addition, the significant share of employees in North Macedonia (about 43% in 2019) had a monthly net salary ranging from 230 to 300 euros (SSO, 2020b).

Opportunities to enter the labour market as well as job availability significantly affect the choice of the destination country of labour migrants (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2018). Analyses also show that in the last few years, the reasons for the significant increase in migration flows from Serbia to the EU are more on the side of demand factors in destination countries, rather than on increased supply due to unfavourable trends in the Serbian labour market (Arandarenko, 2020). The same can be said for North Macedonia. Namely, in the same period, although with smaller differences, both countries recorded steady employment and GDP growth, more favourable labour market indicators, and slightly lower youth unemployment.

The inclusion of remittances in the analysis of return migration is significant (Cantore & Cali, 2015; Constant & Massey, 2002). Serbia and North Macedonia rely heavily on remittances in supporting households (Krasteva et al., 2018). The movement of remittance inflows further emphasises the importance of economic factors of emigration from the analysed two countries. The high inflow of remittances also shows the strong connection between migrants and their families in the country of origin. The role of social networks, especially of family, but also friends, acquaintances, and agents (including smugglers) is very important because they mediate between migrants and communities and influence the context in which migration decisions are made (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019: 21), as well as the length of stay abroad (Bauer & Gang, 1998). The less integrated in socioeconomic terms show higher return rates, which can be partially explained by the realisation of the earnings planned before migration (Constant, 2020).

Non-economic motives and migration policies are also drivers of return and repeat migration. Shorter stays abroad, as well as insufficient knowledge of the language of the destination country (Constant & Massey, 2002) also contribute to an increase in return probabilities. The family in the country of origin is a significant stimulus for return, but also for re-migration (Constant, 2020; Constant & Massey, 2002). Travel visa policies significantly reduce circulation, while the abolition of visa requirements leads to their sharp increase (Czaika & de Haas, 2017). Creating conditions for monitoring, encouraging, and supporting circular and return migration is one of the goals of the Economic Migration Strategy of Serbia 2021-2027, and it is also addressed in the Economic Reform Programme 2020-2022. However, although the documents generally mention different types of migrants, the envisaged measures and the institutions to which they relate imply that low-skilled temporary and circular migrants are neglected. The Resolution on the Migration Policy of the Republic of Macedonia 2015-2020 also does not pinpoint measures for these types of migrants. Also, migrants' knowledge and perceptions of migration policies and the possible opportunities they can achieve through migration also significantly influence the choice of the destination country, so understanding the broader context in which migration decisions are made is crucial (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant reduction in the volume of migration flows (OECD, 2020). Migrant workers, although they make up a significant part of the labour force in most economically developed countries, even in essential occupations, and especially in the group of cleaners, drivers, nurses and labourers in construction, face complex challenges, and significantly higher job losses compared to the domicile population (OECD, 2020a; Moroz et al. 2020; Garrote-Sanchez et al., 2020; Fasani & Mazza, 2020). Furthermore, previous research has shown that employers selectively omit immigrants during an economic downfall (Dustmann et al. 2010). Job loss, in addition to major economic problems for migrants and their families, often in their countries of origin, has resulted in difficulties in providing accommodation, social and health care, lack of support due to poorly developed networks of contacts (OECD, 2020; Guadagno, 2020 Kluge et al., 2020), as well as the inability to collect salaries (Fine et al., 2020). These problems are even more pronounced among vulnerable migrant groups such as undocumented migrant workers (OECD, 2020). The difficulties are more noticeable and significantly more complex for temporary migrants, as well as their employers (Matusz & Aivaliotou,

2020). Additional problems for them arose due to travel restrictions. The vast majority of migrants who had to or wanted to return to their country of origin faced major obstacles (Moroz et al. 2020; Guadagno, 2020; Popescu, 2020). Moreover, one of the first and rare surveys showed that a large number of temporary migrants believe that there will be no opportunities for employments abroad in the near future (WB, 2020a).

The first months of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that quite a large number of workers from the Western Balkans was abroad for temporary or seasonal work. All Western Balkan countries have organised special flights or otherwise helped their citizens to return home during the lockdown. Data from the border police in Serbia shows that in March and April 2020, more than 400,000 of its citizens entered the country, and it is estimated that the number for North Macedonia is between 10 and 20 thousand (Stojančev, 2020). In addition, a significant part of them remained in the receiving countries and began to return home at the end of June, when favourable conditions were created.

Starting from specific challenges that the COVID-19 outbreak poses for temporary migrants, as well as for migrants who have returned home as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (WB, 2020b) this paper examines temporary circular labour migration from Serbia and North Macedonia. This research contributes to the current understanding of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on temporary and circular labour migration. Moreover, this paper advances this field by formulating recommendations that can contribute to the more efficient management of temporary and circular labour migration, given the vulnerability of this migrant group.

## Data and methods

The necessity to attain a detailed and deep understanding of common challenges and problems faced by temporary and circular labour migrants due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak required the adoption of a qualitative research approach. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the target migrant population which constituted the basis of our empirical data. This approach was chosen given its possibility to present respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions regarding researched issues, while enabling clarification of answers and keeping validity and variability in the sample group of varied personal histories (Barriball & While, 1994).

The questionnaire consisted of several questions guided by the aim of understanding the processes of temporary and circular migration from Serbia and North Macedonia and how it is affected by the

COVID-19 pandemic and its societal consequences. The first part contained socio-demographic data (age, sex, marital status, number of children, years of education, and profession) on migrants, which might affect their migration experience. Due to the specific epidemiological situation, the interviews were conducted by phone (cellular or Viber call). This method imposed a limitation on the number of response categories in closed-ended questions, but encouraged respondents' participation and provided long oral responses to the open-ended questions in a close dialogue between researchers and respondents (Mc Guirk & O'Neill, 2016).

The research started in May 2020, which allowed some time distance from the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe in mid-March 2020 and would provide a perspective on the change of migration experience, and migration intentions after this period. The interviews were led by researchers in both countries (Serbia and North Macedonia) and they lasted around 30 minutes. Researchers pre-arranged interview time in order to schedule an interview at the best time. In the search for 'information-rich cases', stratified purposive sampling and the snowball technique were used, where an invitation to participate was made according to migration experience and migrant category, as well as to the profession (target participants were temporary and circular labour migrants from Serbia and North Macedonia working

in different sectors of the economy). Recruitment occurred until saturation emerged and we reached the point of no new themes and data.

The data was collected by the method of note-keeping with verbatim noting selected spoken words. The ID numbers were added to the material, and content analysis and thematic analysis as described by Taylor-Powel & Renner (2003) were utilised to analyse the data, where key themes were marked prior to the conclusion. Quotations about central issues were selected to explain and better understand the views of research participants about their practices and policies that affected them. The selection of particular verbatim quotations was made according to similar experiences or points of view in the groups of research participants. Respondents were called again at the end of 2020 to get new information about their country of living and working status.

## Results and discussion

The research included 30 temporary and circular labour migrants from Serbia and 20 from North Macedonia, aged between 20 and 59. The majority of the participants are married. The most common education in the sample is secondary education. In North Macedonia, most of the respondents (75%) are men while for Serbia the sample is more sex balanced (Table 1).

**Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of participants in Serbia (S) and North Macedonia (NM)**

		20-29		30-39		40-49		50-59		Total
		S	NM	S	NM	S	NM	S	NM	
Age	Total	3	8	9	4	12	5	6	3	50
Sex	Male	-	6	4	3	7	4	4	2	30
	Female	3	2	5	1	5	1	2	1	20
Marital status	Single	3	8	3	-	1	1	-	-	16
	Married	-	-	6	4	10	4	4	3	31
	Divorced	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	3
	Widowed	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Highest educational attainment	Low education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Medium education	3	3	3	1	10	4	5	3	32
	High education	-	5	6	3	2	1	1	-	18
Sectors of the economy	Manufacturing	-	3	1	-	-	-	-	-	4
	Accommodation and food service activities	1	1	4	2	3	1	1	1	14
	Transportation and storage	-	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	8
	Construction	-	-	1	-	5	2	1	-	9
	Arts, entertainment, and recreation	2	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	4
	Education	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	2
	Other services	-	2	1	1	1	1	3	-	9

Out of destination countries of temporary and circular migrant workers from Serbia and North Macedonia, Germany is the most represented. Other

countries of destination for both cases are Austria, Italy, Switzerland, as well as Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Montenegro, Slovenia, and the United Arab

Emirates for Serbian and Sweden, France, USA, the Netherlands and the Equatorial Guinea for Macedonian migrant workers. Furthermore, there were respondents who work as a cruise ship crew or in other professions where jobs are performed in different locations.

### **Job-related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Job-related impacts of COVID-19 are basically determined by the way the migrants' status and stay in the destination country are regulated, the duration of the stay abroad, the way the employment status is regulated, as well as the sector in which the economic activity is realised. The findings obtained from the interviews conducted in Serbia and North Macedonia correspond to the results of the research on job-related impacts of COVID-19 on labour migration, conducted by relevant international organisations (Moroz et al. 2020; Guadagno, 2020; ILO, 2020; OECD, 2020). They show that in the receiving countries, foreigners with temporary or some form of extended employment are the first to lose their jobs, especially in the sectors most affected by the pandemic. According to Baert et al. (2015), there is a protection of the domestic labour force and a more favourable position of migrants with a regulated long-term stay, particularly during economic crises (Dustmann et al., 2010).

The temporary residence character of most respondents is confirmed by the information on their stay and employment status in the country of destination, as well as the fact that most of them stayed abroad without family members. Only 20% of respondents from each country has permanent or extended residence permit while 2 persons from North Macedonia have a student visa. The length of stay is most often associated with the type of employment contract, and newly arrived immigrants more often work on the basis of temporary contracts (OECD/EU, 2018), which is confirmed by our findings. Having lower firing costs than workers on permanent contracts, fixed-term workers are the first ones to be laid off when negative shocks hit the firm or the sector (Blanchard & Landier 2002). The largest number of respondents (47% for Serbia and 65% for North Macedonia) work abroad on the basis of a formal contract with the employer on temporary or seasonal work. Migrant workers who are in an irregular situation or illegally employed are much more represented in Serbia than in North Macedonia (10 to one). The fluidity of such status as stated by Lukić (2016) is seen from the fact that they have entered foreign countries with tourist visas or in some other way and did not further regulate their work status.

The differences by country could be partly explained by the differences in earlier patterns of labour migration and the greater importance of Germany and Austria as destination countries for emigrants from Serbia, which also prompted the more intensive development of migrant ties.

"I don't see a chance to leave legally, because it's hard to get work visas. It takes a lot of time and money to get a visa and find the right employer in Germany." (26SM)

"I have a permanent residence permit, but I would not apply for German citizenship because it requires giving up Macedonian and Bulgarian citizenship." (2NMM)

All respondents immediately before or at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak had some work engagements abroad. At the time of the interview, about 70% of respondents from both countries returned to the country of origin. Of these, two of three returned because their temporary employment contract had been terminated, or due to the reduced number of working hours and reduced earnings in terms of limited economic activity in the sector. Every fifth left their jobs because of the insecurity in the receiving countries and due to the closure of borders imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Others were on vacation in the country of origin and could not come back later or waited for favourable conditions to be created to return and work abroad although in uncertainty regarding their future employment abroad. Due to the closed borders, but also due to the fact that the EU extended her stay for more than 3 months, one respondent continued her stay for almost two months and worked illegally all the time as a care worker. Three truck drivers from North Macedonia found a temporary job in the country they found themselves in and provided basic subsistence until returning to the home country, and two truck drivers after the first lockdown continued the work on international lines, but in a reduced volume at the employer in Serbia.

"Since I lost my job, I quickly lost my health insurance and had to make an emergency return home." (10NMF)

"All of us who were foreigners and who worked as waiters were the first to be fired." (8NMM)

"Whether I will be able to return or not, I don't know. It's hanging in the air. I have no answer. I'm on vacation now. Supposedly, after some time you can take unpaid leave... It is completely uncertain." (13SM)

In the period when the interview was conducted, from the respondents who returned to the countries of origin, 80% of respondents from Serbia and 62% of respondents from North Macedonia were unemployed. While half of the unemployed return migrants are registered with the National Employment Service in Serbia, only one-third is

registered in North Macedonia. Respondents who did not register generally do not see the benefit of it and do not have the strength and time for strict, frequent, and complex administrative procedures when applying. A few respondents stated that they did not register because they expect to leave the country again. One person from Serbia stated that he did not register as unemployed hoping that the state will help freelance artists. Upon returning to the countries of origin, only a very small number of returned respondents found permanent or temporary jobs (10% in Serbia and 15% in North Macedonia).

"I am registered as unemployed but I work occasionally. I have been at the Employment Bureau for 16 years and they have never offered me a job and they recently punished me because I could not come on time to apply. I have lost all hope, will and faith in the institutions and the employment system." (14SM)

"Although I lost my job in Germany, here in North Macedonia I work in the agriculture. We have our own agricultural production." (7NMM)

Of the participants in the receiving countries the largest number were employed on a part-time basis and did not know how much longer they will work, one person was unemployed, while one respondent was on paid leave due to reduced workload. The research shows that the financial position worsened for all migrants who returned to the countries of origin but with some differences. Namely, for more than half of the respondents, it got worse because they lost their jobs abroad and were not able to find a new job in Serbia and North Macedonia. Out of respondents from Serbia who did not return home, only one continued to work unhindered. Others continued to work with a temporary suspension of work, followed by a return to work with a significant reduction in earnings and workload.

Of respondents from North Macedonia, of those who did not return to the country, only one lost his job, while most of the others who did not lose their job have Bulgarian passports. The importance of having dual citizenship proved to be essential also for respondents who were in the country at the beginning of the epidemic. The ability to combine working online and in-person, as well as going and working temporarily in the destination country during and immediately after the first lockdown, significantly helped them mitigate the negative consequences during the first wave of the pandemic.

As the main negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic respondents point to contracts terminated before their expiration which resulted in an income reduction, temporary work stoppages, but also significantly lower workload. However, many of them, especially the respondents from Serbia who repeated their stay abroad more often, believe that

regardless of the length of their stay, the time spent working temporarily abroad was still financially useful to them, because upon their return they had the means to live for at least a few months. Those who at the time of the interview have not experienced more serious deterioration of their financial situation are respondents whose spouses had permanent employment in the country of origin. Young people compensated for their impaired financial situation by returning to live with their parents.

"Honestly yes, because I ran out of income. I had to go back to my parents and depend on them." (10NMF)

"I had the right to receive a certain amount of money, as a form of severance pay, after 10 years of working in the company if I left the job. I was counting on it in 2-3 years. Now I don't know what will happen." (9SF)

Some respondents, especially those employed on cruise ships, state that it is very positive that they were partially paid during the forced stay on the ship in the port, which was often not stipulated in the contract. On the other hand, some employers took advantage of the situation during the lockdown and did not pay full salaries to their employees, and other obligations specified in the contract in case of isolation, i.e., the full amount of funds received from the destination country to help workers.

Migrants are often overrepresented in sectors severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Guadagno, 2020; Fasani and Mazza, 2020; OECD, 2020). Most respondents from Serbia and North Macedonia worked in sectors that were initially affected by the pandemic, thus putting their workers at high risk of unemployment. Namely, about half of the respondents in both countries worked in the sectors for accommodation and food service activities and transportation and storage. As to the number of employees, the sector of construction follows, mainly due to respondents from Serbia, while relatively smaller is the number of employees in the manufacturing sector, as well as in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector. Other sectors that engaged migrants were activities of households as employers, financial and insurance activities, information and communication, and human health and social work activities.

"The ship companies will be at a loss in the next few years, ...people who worked longer like me, that's a solid amount of money that used to come to their families every month ... almost all of us lost our jobs." (18SM)

"My job depends on gathering permits. All the areas of importance to me have suffered a lot, tourism, catering, air transport." (4SF)

"As a result of the COVID pandemic, my job was terminated and I could not find a job in sports

administration or any other employment with a decent income. During the pandemic, domestic workers had priority in employment.” (19NMM)

Migrants, and especially temporary migrants, are less covered by social protection, including health services, which puts them in a particularly vulnerable situation in times of crisis. (OECD, 2020; Kluge et al., 2020). Initial research by international organisations showed that the receiving countries erred in failing to provide adequate health or social care to the temporary migrant workers in the first months of the pandemic (Moroz et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). The vast majority (80%) of respondents from both countries had health insurance during their stay abroad. Most of them were regulated by contracts with employers (58%) while a small number of respondents provided health insurance independently through insurance in the country of origin or destination. Few respondents from both countries did not have health insurance at all. The specificity for Serbia is that travel health insurance was paid by every fourth respondent, at least at the beginning of the stay in the country of destination. One respondent used the services of an international agreement on the transfer of insurance from one country to another, and pointed out that it took her a year to exercise that right as a result of complicated procedures. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 36% of all respondents, besides the loss of employment, were left without the most significant protection in the pandemic, i.e., without health insurance (regulated by employment contracts). The majority of respondents and mostly all respondents who worked illegally stated that so far, their health and social insurance was not high on the list of priorities, both in the country of origin and destination. However, they stated that in the future, these categories will have a much more important place in planning their work and stay abroad.

“When I left, I was insured for seven days and I made a big mistake there because I was terribly ill. If I go to the doctor, I have to pay for everything and I have no money. He (the employer, author's note) promised everything but did not fulfil it.” (14SM)

The influence of the pandemic on the migrants' employment implicates a decrease in remittances from abroad (WB, 2020b). The largest number of respondents from Serbia (90%) and North Macedonia (55%) stated that in certain ways they were bringing the money to the country of origin either on accounts, in cash or by sending remittances. One-third of all respondents that send remittances stated that they send remittances through the banking system and other official channels. Sometimes respondents combine ways of sending remittances, which means that they use official channels only occasionally for birthdays and

holidays or if it is necessary or urgent to send money to their families.

“From time to time. Sometimes I send, sometimes I send only half, or I wait to collect a larger amount. I have mostly sent by Western Union, but they have a high commission, so I only send when it's urgent.” (8SF)

“I have not sent so far, I worked only for myself, and when in Serbia, I live with my parents. Why give almost 10% of the entire salary on commission to the bank. They take a lot!” (SM29)

Among respondents from Serbia who stated that they do not send remittances are two young migrants who are abroad for a short time, where their earnings are not the main motive for leaving and their parents sometimes supplement their budget. It should be underlined that respondents from North Macedonia who said that they did not send remittances, but who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, brought their savings when they returned to the country of origin.

Most of the returned respondents in Serbia (90%) and North Macedonia (about 70%) stated that they would definitely return to work abroad if they would have the opportunity to find a job or if their existing employment contracts were extended. However, research findings have shown that for the vast majority of respondents who have returned to the country, going abroad again and resuming working circular practices is not feasible for the time being.

The re-talk with the migrants by the end of 2020 aiming to capture the change of their status over time, showed that the current employment status of the Serbian and North Macedonian respondents is diversified. For only 30% and 45% of them respectively it is the same as it was during the first interviews, meaning that they have a temporary employment contract abroad or continued their circular migration work practice. In both countries, about a quarter of respondents reported being unemployed in the country of origin, while the share of respondents who work after returning to the country of origin is 45% for Serbia and 25% for North Macedonia. The largest share of the employed are informally employed and they perform similar jobs that they used to do abroad. The re-contact with the nurse, the caregivers, construction worker and the truck drivers interviewed (11 respondents) confirmed that they were still working in the country of destination (four respondents) or continued their circular migration practice (seven respondents).

## Conclusion

Temporary and circular labour migration schemes of migrants from Serbia and Northern Macedonia are largely directed towards EU countries. The countries

of origin analysed are geographically close to them, well-connected by traffic, and since 2010 there has been a visa-free regime for short visits (business or tourist), which facilitated the establishment of short-term circular migration practices. In this way, the dimension of temporariness, as stated by Fasani and Mazza (2020), proved to be important also in the case of circular labour migrants from Serbia and North Macedonia. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market position of the largest number of circular labour migrant respondents from Serbia and North Macedonia is felt in terms of terminated employment contracts, reduced number of working hours and reduced earnings due to limited economic activity in the sector. It is a consequence of their type of stay in the destination country, predominant short-term employment, i.e., work engagement, and at the same time, of the prevalent involvement of migrants in the sectors where they are usually employed, as well as the strong impact of the COVID 19 pandemic. The socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened their vulnerable position in the destination countries, caused the return of the majority of respondents to their countries of origin. Very few respondents managed to find formal employment in their country of origin upon return, and they mostly have occasional jobs in the grey economy, which significantly affects the growth of economic uncertainty. This also contributed to a further increase in distrust of labour market intermediary institutions and pessimism about the possibility of finding legal employment in the country of origin. As a result of the pandemic, only one in ten respondents did not change their employment status in the destination country. Migrants' job losses have negatively affected the flow of remittances, indicating that the consequences of the pandemic have a significant negative impact not only on migrants, but also on household members in the country of origin, who rely heavily on remittances. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected a significant number, especially migrants with unregulated status, to realise that health and social care were not a priority in their choice of work abroad and that they should pay more attention to health care and living condition while staying abroad.

Possession of passports of some of the countries of destination proved to be a security factor for migrants in crisis situations as respondents from both analysed countries pointed out that dual citizenship significantly helped them cope with sudden job loss and other negative situations during the first wave of the pandemic. Research shows that for key workers, such as caregivers, nurses, and drivers, the chances of keeping jobs or of getting job

abroad again at the time of the pandemic were significant, even in informal employment.

Given the results of the research, as well as the significant need for temporary and seasonal workers in EU, for the Western Balkan countries, as emigration areas, it is important to develop temporary labour migration programmes in cooperation with destination countries. That will also provide stimulation for a wider representation of circular migration, which would be sustainable even in times of sudden changes such as the one caused by COVID-19. Great efforts are also needed to improve the rights of temporary migrant workers, as well as to combat fraud throughout the recruitment process. In this sense, providing clear and accessible information to migrants on the possibilities of legal migration, other legal, social and health issues, including their protection and rights is extremely important. It is also necessary to work on sustainable bilateral agreements, as well as on reintegration in the countries of origin. In this way, temporary labour migrants would be provided with greater access to affordable social welfare benefits, pensions, health insurance, etc. It would also allow for an optimal length of stay abroad, so that migrants would be able to acquire and improve their skills or save enough money before returning to their country of origin.

The prolonged pandemic will almost certainly reshape international labour migration flows, particularly temporary and circular ones. It imposes the need to monitor its impacts on certain categories of migrants. The lack of a reliable and regular system for monitoring migration flows, the unavailability of data on the scope and characteristics, but also the impact of migration from the Western Balkan countries are the main challenges that hinder the formulation of indicators for monitoring temporary and circular migration, being reviewed in North Macedonia and in the process of defining in the Draft Action Plan of the Economic Migration Strategy 2021-2027 in Serbia.

The main conclusion is that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have both short-term and long-term effects on international temporary and circular labour migration, and that the continuation of the current migration practices has been called into question. Consequently, there is a strong need to improve the governance of circular migration and find new effective ways to address the challenges of temporary and circular labour migration. Therefore, we suggest future studies to address the same research problem in a different spatial/geographical and societal context, thus providing insights and research evidence to influence the formulation of a proactive policy in the field of temporary and circular labour migration.

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