Regional Migration

Mobility & Cooperation Frameworks in the Western Balkans

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Acronyms

- **CEFTA** – Central European Free Trade Agreement
- **CFSP** – Common Foreign and Security Policy (EU)
- **CRM** – Common Regional Market
- **CSO** – Civil Society Organization
- **DCAM** – Department for Citizenship, Asylum and Migration (Kosovo)
- **EMN** – European Migration Network
- **ERISEE** – Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
- **EU** – European Union
- **GAM** – Government Authority on Migration (Kosovo)
- **GCM** – Global Compact for Migration (United Nations)
- **ICT** – Information and Communication Technology
- **ID** – Identity Document
- **ILO** – International Labour Organization
- **IOM** – International Organization for Migration
- **IRIS** – International Recruitment Integrity System
- **KAS** – Kosovo Agency of Statistics
- **LGAP** – Law on General Administrative Procedure (Kosovo)
- **MARRI** – Migration, Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative
- **MONSTAT** – Statistical Office of Montenegro
- **NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization
- **RCC** – Regional Cooperation Council
- **SAA** – Stabilisation and Association Agreement
- **UN** – United Nations
- **VET** – Vocational Education and Training
- **WB6** – Western Balkans Six (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia)
- **WB** – World Bank

1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Countries of the Western Balkans have made initial steps toward enhancing regional cooperation but still face challenges in fully achieving it. Although initiatives like the Berlin Process and its key components, like Comon Regional Market (CRM) and the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans aim to advance regional integration, economic development, and adherence to EU standards, limited human capital mobility continues to undermine these efforts. To attain the goals of these agendas, the Western Balkans need to develop better relations, intensify collaboration, and initiate joint connectivity projects, including alignment of procedures for easier mobility.

Western Balkan countries have committed to enhancing regional cooperation under the Berlin Process, particularly through the Regional Mobility Agenda. This agenda promotes the free movement of professionals, streamlined recognition of qualifications, reduced administrative barriers, and stronger cross-border collaboration. By advancing this agenda, the region has an opportunity to unlock the full potential of its labour market, driving economic growth, regional stability, and integration with the European Union. While the Western Balkans countries have undertaken structural reforms to boost economic growth and move towards European living standards, the slow progress and significant development gap push citizens to seek better opportunities beyond the region, respectively within the EU.

Migration and mobility are critical drivers of economic growth and social stability in the Western Balkans. Yet, despite their potential, the region faces persistent challenges in fully harnessing these benefits. The 2024 World Bank Western Balkans Economic Report states that 'nearly one in four people from the region live abroad, making the Western Balkans one of the world's largest sources of emigrants per capita'.[1] This emigration rate, particularly among young talents, poses a significant development challenge for the region. It is also evident that no country in the region can address the labour market shortages and the skills gap alone. While these ease labour market pressures and lower unemployment, they exacerbate skills gaps, limiting local business growth and deterring potential investors due to inadequate skills.

These challenges stem from fragmented policies, inconsistent labour standards, and varied regulatory frameworks that create a complex, often restrictive environment for cross-border employment. This restrictiveness stifles not only economic growth but also accelerates the emigration of skilled professionals to more accessible labour markets, resulting in a "brain drain" that intensifies skill shortages, especially in critical sectors like healthcare, engineering, and IT. Without targeted intervention, this trend will likely continue, undermining the region's economic prospects and hindering its pathway to deeper EU integration.

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[1] World Bank, Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.27, Spring 2025, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099042325021511545/pdf/P506742-7e63000a-aafd-40a5-8b97-fffe2a1cc12f.pdf

To achieve the development goals of Western Balkans countries, it is necessary to shift current trends. The WB countries must recruit and retain a more skilled labour force to ensure capacities for investments. For instance, in 2024, Kosovo issued 2,854 work permits, mainly to workers from neighbouring countries like Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia. This increase in intra-regional migration shows potential for economic integration. However, significant obstacles still hinder effective labour migration, preventing the region from fully benefiting from the advantages of regional mobility.

Numerous barriers hinder workforce mobility in the region, including insufficient data on mobility patterns, limited alignment of regional governmental policies, varying mobility levels between countries, and inadequate efforts to facilitate movement. Institutional capacity and public awareness about labour mobility are also limited. Public institutions, respectively Employment agencies, often lack the necessary resources, training, and frameworks to manage labour mobility effectively. These gaps result in missed opportunities to align skills with cross-border market needs and reduces the region's potential to retain its workforce.

A more coordinated and robust approach is essential to dismantling these barriers. In this context, civil society organizations may play a pivotal role in advocating for mobility agreements and facilitating effective cross-border cooperation. For example, establishing a network of regional CSOs can provide policy support, run advocacy campaigns and offer information services on labour mobility rules and procedures. This network may enhance the regional cooperation framework and create a more informed and empowered workforce. It also strengthens the capacity of the relevant national public authorities in the WB6 to manage regional mobility, including the preparation of a mobility guide and the enhancement of information services for labour migrants regarding their rights and obligations.

This analysis is prepared under the project "Empowering Vulnerable Women through Social Mentoring", implemented by the Women Business Association to advance social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Its purpose is to assess labour market needs and regional mobility opportunities in the Western Balkans, with emphasis on Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. By aligning with regional cooperation frameworks such as the RCC's Common Regional Market and the Berlin Process, the analysis supports the creation of sector-specific studies, country employment guides, and practical tools that enable vulnerable groups, especially women, to access cross-border labour opportunities. In doing so, it promotes safe, informed, and inclusive regional migration as both an economic and social empowerment strategy.

The following main findings summarize the most critical insights of the analysis, focusing on labour market needs and regional migration mobility in the Western Balkans:

- Labour markets in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro face structural shortages in construction, healthcare, agriculture, tourism, and ICT;
- Demographic decline and emigration have reduced the available workforce, particularly among young and skilled workers, creating urgent gaps;
- A persistent skills mismatch exists, as education and vocational training are not aligned with labour market demand;

- Bilateral labour agreements provide a framework for cross-border employment but remain limited in scope and weak in implementation;
- Regional initiatives such as the RCC Common Regional Market and the Berlin Process have advanced mutual recognition of qualifications, especially in priority sectors, but progress is uneven;
- Informal mobility flows (seasonal and short-term, especially between Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro) are increasing, while formal pathways are underdeveloped;
- Employers prefer recruiting regionally due to cultural and linguistic proximity, yet mechanisms for ethical recruitment and protection of workers' rights remain insufficient.

2 LABOUR MARKET NEEDS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Labour markets across the Western Balkans are facing persistent shortages, particularly in sectors such as construction, healthcare, agriculture, tourism, and information technology. These shortages are structural in nature and stem largely from demographic decline and high levels of emigration, which have reduced the pool of available workers, especially among youth and skilled professionals. Employers in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro report growing difficulties in filling vacancies, even for low-skilled occupations, due to the combined effects of outward migration and weak retention capacity.

In parallel, the mismatch between education and vocational training systems and the actual demands of the labour market continues to widen. This skills gap prevents businesses from responding effectively to sectoral growth and international competitiveness. Consequently, the labour market situation is increasingly pressing governments to design measures that facilitate legal access to foreign labour, strengthen vocational alignment, and explore regional mobility as a complementary solution.

2.1 REGIONAL MIGRATION MOBILITY AND COOPERATION FRAMEWORKS

Regional migration mobility has emerged as an important policy lever to address these shortages. While bilateral labour agreements exist among Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, they remain limited in scope and often under-implemented. Nevertheless, they provide an initial framework for the facilitation of legal cross-border employment.

At the same time, regional initiatives such as the Common Regional Market under the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Berlin Process have created momentum for the mutual recognition of professional qualifications in priority sectors, particularly construction, healthcare, and ICT. This process is critical to ensuring that workers can circulate more easily within the region and that employers can respond to urgent labour needs.

Despite these developments, implementation across the region remains uneven, and administrative procedures are often complex, discouraging workers and employers from relying on formal pathways. Informal mobility, particularly seasonal and short-term movement of workers between Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, has therefore grown in significance. Employers often prefer recruiting regionally due to cultural and linguistic similarities, yet this occurs in the absence of fully developed policy instruments for ethical recruitment and the protection of migrant workers' rights. As a result, regional mobility holds clear potential to alleviate shortages and support economic integration, but it requires stronger institutional mechanisms, simplified recognition processes, and robust safeguards to ensure that it delivers fair and sustainable outcomes.

Practical cooperation between countries and organizations dealing with migration is regulated within the framework of numerous regional and international initiatives, as well as through bilateral agreements between states in the form of migration cooperation partnerships. With regard to migration, a considerable number of initiatives exist, though most have traditionally focused on areas such as migration management, asylum policies, border control, and readmission. However, due to changing migration trends, recent years have seen the emergence of initiatives that specifically address regular migration and mobility. Some of these initiatives include:

2.1.1 Regional Initiatives

The Berlin Process[2] – The Berlin Process is an intergovernmental initiative launched in 2014 by Germany with the aim of supporting the European integration of the Western Balkans through enhanced regional cooperation and closer alignment with European Union standards. At its core, the process provides a platform for political dialogue, fosters economic cooperation, and promotes concrete projects in areas such as infrastructure connectivity, energy, education, and the mobility of young people and workers. The Berlin Process involves not only the Western Balkan countries but also EU Member States and international institutions, including the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

One of its most significant pillars is the advancement of the Regional Mobility Agenda, which seeks to facilitate the free movement of people across the region. This includes harmonizing labour market policies, mutually recognizing professional qualifications, removing administrative barriers, and strengthening cross-border employment cooperation. Through the Common Regional Market (CRM), a key component of the Berlin Process, the Western Balkan countries have committed to creating a functional space in which citizens and workers can move more freely, thereby building a more integrated and competitive market.

In this sense, the Berlin Process is not only a political initiative but also a practical framework for addressing common challenges such as youth emigration, shortages of skilled labour, and uneven economic development. By promoting regional mobility,

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[2] About Berlin Process, https://www.berlinprocess.de/#about-berlin-process

it helps curb "brain drain," improves the matching of labour market supply and demand, and prepares the region for fuller integration into the EU single market.

Within the framework of the Berlin Process and the CRM, several key agreements on regional mobility have been reached in the Western Balkans. These agreements are the result of efforts to establish a more integrated space for free movement of people and mutual recognition of qualifications, thereby aligning the region more closely with EU standards. The main agreements include: The Agreement on Free Movement with Identity Cards; Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors, Dentists, and Architects and Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications,

Kosovo has actively participated in the negotiation and ratification of these agreements. However, their practical implementation largely depends on regional political will and the resolution of ongoing political disputes, particularly with Serbia. For Kosovo, full implementation would significantly improve regional mobility, increase opportunities for regional employment, and facilitate the recognition of the skills and diplomas of its citizens.

The Agreement on recognition of professional qualifications derived from the Common Regional Market[3], agreed by the Western Balkans 6 on November 10, 2020, during the Berlin Process Summit held in Sofia, to enhance economic cooperation in the region, based on the EU rules and standards, to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region and to bring the region closer to the EU markets. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and Central European Free Trade Agreement Secretariat (CEFTA) are leading regional organisations facilitating the implementation of the CRM Action Plan 2021-2024, including mobility agreements.

Key areas of the CRM Action Plan are: Regional trade area (free movement of people, goods, services, capital; regional digital area, regional investment area, and regional industrial and innovation area.

Freedom of movement is one of the key policy areas of the CRM aimed at enabling the Western Balkans to implement one of the four freedoms of the EU single market. It is a significant step forward to removing barriers to mobility of people in the region, enabling approximately 18 million people to move freely within the region, also removing barriers to mobility of professionals, students, researchers and professors.

As part of the regional trade area, several agreements were reached, such as: agreement on movement with ID Card, Agreement on recognition of higher education diplomas and agreement on recognition of professional qualifications for 7 professions.

The Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications followed the model of European Union (EU) framework for automatic recognition of professional qualifications. In EU there is a system of automatic recognition of professional

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[3] Common Regional Market: A Path to a Stronger Western Balkans Six, https://www.rcc.int/pages/143/common-regional-market

qualifications for seven sectoral professions: nurses, midwives, doctors, dentists, pharmacists, architects and veterinary surgeons. This framework is regulated with the Directive 2005/36/EC . As stipulated in the Directive; to work in another EU country, professionals must apply to the authority that oversees their profession in that country for the recognition of their qualifications.

To benefit from automatic recognition, professionals must obtain a diploma that complies with minimum training requirements under the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications (2005/36/EC) as well as any other certificates listed in Annex V with regard to the profession in question. If only an academic diploma has been obtained, but not the respective accompanying certificates as listed in Annex V, there is no possibility of automatic recognition under Directive 2005/36/EC.

The agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors, Dentists and Architects based on EU rules, which significantly advance the mobility of students, academics and professionals in the Western Balkans, was signed on 3 November 2022 in Berlin. The Agreement on recognition of four additional professions was signed on 23 October in Tirana.

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)[4] – Established in 2008, the RCC is a regional organization mandated to promote cooperation and development across South-East Europe. It plays a leading role in advancing sustainable development, regional economic integration, labour mobility, and digital transformation. Its membership includes 47 states, international organizations, and development partners. Within the framework of the Berlin Process, the RCC has been central in implementing the Common Regional Market (CRM) for the Western Balkans. Through this work, it has facilitated three landmark agreements designed to remove barriers to mobility for over 18 million citizens of the region: (1) the agreement on free movement using identity cards; (2) the agreement on recognition of higher education diplomas; and (3) the agreement on mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Together, these agreements represent a major step toward building an integrated regional space.

The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)[5] – While CEFTA's primary focus is trade, it has also contributed to easing the movement of people for economic purposes. Within the CRM agenda under the Berlin Process, CEFTA has supported the standardisation of procedures and helped create conditions for greater labour mobility.

The Budapest Process[6] – Launched in 1993, this initiative serves as a platform for exchanging experiences and knowledge on migration management between European and Asian countries. It is a consultative forum that today includes 53 member states, 7 observer states, and 9 international organisations. Its aim is to

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[4] Read more at: https://www.rcc.int/
[5] Read more at: https://cefta.int/
[6] Read more at: https://www.budapestprocess.org/

promote a sustainable and comprehensive system for regular migration. Kosovo is not yet a full member but regularly participates in its activities.

The Prague Process[7] – Initiated under the Czech EU Presidency in April 2009, the Prague Process is a targeted dialogue on migration that promotes migration partnerships between EU Member States, the Western Balkans, Central Asia, Turkey, and others. It currently includes 47 states, with Kosovo participating under a footnote reference. Member states have agreed to strengthen cooperation in migration management, develop balanced and pragmatic migration partnerships, and uphold the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees.

MARRI[8] – The Migration, Asylum, and Refugees Regional Initiative – MARRI is a unique regional structure uniting six Western Balkan states (Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia). Its mandate is to foster regional cooperation and a harmonised approach among participating states in the fields of migration, asylum, border management, human trafficking, visa regimes, and refugee integration. Its overarching objective is to ensure well-managed freedom of movement in the Western Balkans, contributing to regional stability and sustainable development.

2.1.2 European Initiatives

The European Pact on Migration and Asylum[9] – Recently adopted by the EU, this Pact seeks to regulate migration and asylum more effectively at the EU level. It foresees partnerships with countries of origin and transit to promote regular migration channels and effective returns. The Western Balkans, including Kosovo, are considered priority partners for bilateral migration and mobility agreements under this Pact. One of its pillars emphasises international partnerships and the promotion of regular and safe migration corridors. To operationalise this, the European Commission has proposed two instruments: Talent Partnerships and the EU Talent Pool.

Talent Partnerships [10] – Announced under the new Pact, Talent Partnerships are designed to create safe and legal pathways for economic migration to the EU. They combine policy and financial support to foster mutually beneficial mobility between the EU and partner countries. These partnerships aim to better match EU labour market needs with available skills, offering opportunities for students, graduates, and skilled workers to study, train, and work in the EU. Agreements have already been launched with countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. While the Western Balkans are not yet formally included, they are considered strong candidates given their potential and geographic proximity.

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[7] Read more at: https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/

[8] Read more at: https://marri-rc.org.mk/

[9] Read more at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

[10] Read more about Talent Partnerships: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-resettlement/talent-partnerships_en

The EU Talent Pool[11] – Proposed by the European Commission in November 2023, this initiative seeks to establish an EU-wide platform to facilitate international recruitment in sectors facing acute labour shortages. The Talent Pool will connect EU employers with jobseekers from non-EU countries, simplify recognition of qualifications, and promote mobility for both students and workers. Given the persistent labour shortages in Europe—where over 4.5 million non-EU citizens were employed in 2022—the platform is intended to:

- Facilitate recruitment in shortage occupations;
- Streamline international recruitment procedures;
- Expand employer access to a wider pool of skills and talent;
- Provide clear information on legal migration and recruitment procedures;
- Guarantee fair recruitment and employment standards

European Migration Network (EMN)[12] – is an EU-level network of migration and asylum experts providing comparative knowledge and policy-relevant analysis across Member States. Among the Western Balkan countries, Montenegro currently participates as an observer.

2.1.3 Global Initiatives

Global Compact for Migration (GCM)[13] – Adopted by the United Nations in 2018, the GCM represents a global consensus on how migration should be governed. It sets out clear objectives to create regular pathways for economic migration, safeguard the rights of migrants, and foster partnerships between countries of origin and destination. The Compact's purpose is to improve migration governance by promoting a balanced and sustainable approach that addresses the needs of migrants, host communities, and states of origin and destination alike.

The document provides guidance for national policies and international cooperation in areas such as: migration data collection, the identification and protection of migrants in vulnerable situations, the promotion of regular migration and mobility channels, the reduction of factors compelling people to migrate, and enhanced cooperation on return and reintegration. While not legally binding, the GCM constitutes a political framework with 23 concrete objectives aimed at better managing regular migration while reducing irregular and unsafe movements. The objectives include:

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[11] The European Commission, Commission proposes new measures on skills and talent to help address critical labour shortages, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5740
[12] European Commission, "About the European Migration Network (EMN)," Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/about-emn_en
[13] United Nations, "Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration," adopted December 19, 2018, https://www.un.org/en/migration2022/global-compact-for-migration

Objectives for safe, orderly and regular migration[14]

1. Collecting and using accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies.
2. Minimising adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin.
3. Providing accurate and timely information at all stages of migration.
4. Ensuring legal identity for all migrants, including birth registration and documentation.
5. Enhancing the availability and flexibility of regular migration pathways.
6. Facilitating fair and ethical recruitment and ensuring decent working conditions.
7. Addressing and reducing migrants' vulnerabilities.
8. Saving lives and establishing coordinated international responses for migrants in distress.
9. Strengthening border management in an integrated, secure, and coordinated manner.
10. Preventing, combatting, and eradicating trafficking in persons in the context of international migration.
11. Managing borders in a safe, orderly, and regular manner.
12. Empowering migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development.
13. Promoting full inclusion and social cohesion of migrants in host societies.
14. Eliminating all forms of discrimination and promoting evidence-based, humane public discourse.
15. Providing migrants with access to basic services.
16. Empowering migrants to realise their full potential in all aspects of life.
17. Ending the use of detention as a tool for migration management.
18. Investing in skills development and recognising qualifications acquired abroad.
19. Creating conditions for safe and dignified return, as well as sustainable reintegration.
20. Strengthening international cooperation on return and readmission.
21. Promoting safe, affordable, and accessible remittance transfers.
22. Building capacities for sustainable migration and development through international cooperation.
23. Strengthening international cooperation and global governance of migration.

In the context of regular migration and mobility, the most relevant objectives are: 1, 3, 5, 6, 12, 13, 18, 21, 22, and 23.

IRIS (International Recruitment Integrity System)[15] – is a global initiative created by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to promote the ethical recruitment of

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[14] United Nations General Assembly, "Resolution A/RES/73/195 – Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration," UNGA, December 19, 2018, https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/73/195
[15] IRIS: Ethical Recruitment, https://iris.iom.int/

migrant workers. It is referenced under Objective 6 of the Global Compact for Migration. The goal of IRIS is to ensure that international recruitment is fair for all stakeholders: migrant workers, employers, recruiters, and countries of origin and destination. This is achieved by:

- Promoting respect for migrant workers' rights;
- Increasing transparency and accountability in recruitment processes;
- Advancing the principle that employers should bear recruitment costs;
- Strengthening public policies, regulations, and enforcement mechanisms.

3 INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS AND POLICY INSTRUMENTS

Key actors in migration and mobility governance in the Western Balkans extend well beyond migration authorities alone. They include ministries of labour, education, internal affairs, finance, foreign affairs, and economic development; national employment agencies; chambers of commerce; business associations; and professional bodies. Vocational training institutions, universities, and statistical agencies also play a central role in aligning labour supply with demand and generating the evidence base for mobility policies. At the regional level, bodies such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), CEFTA, and ERISEE (Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe) coordinate mobility and recognition processes, while the European Union provides guidance through Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) and the EU enlargement framework. Policy instruments include bilateral labour agreements, national employment and migration strategies, vocational education and training (VET) frameworks, social dialogue mechanisms, and legislative acts harmonised with EU directives. Despite this complex architecture, weak inter-institutional coordination and overlapping mandates continue to hinder efficiency.

Albania – The Ministry of Interior is the lead authority for migration policy, implemented primarily through the Directorate of Migration and Anti-Trafficking. Within this structure, the Technical Secretariat for Migration (established in 2020) is tasked with developing and coordinating implementation of migration policy. The Migration Strategy 2024–2030 foresees two additional coordination levels: the Technical Migration Committee (established in 2020), which brings together a wide range of institutions for broader policy coordination, and the Steering Group on Migration (established in 2021), chaired by the Deputy Minister of Interior, with participation from line ministries at deputy minister level. This body is a consultative forum responsible for monitoring progress in implementing the National Strategy on Migration and Action Plan, while improving coordination mechanisms. In addition, the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the National Employment and Skills Agency, the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Qualifications and the Institute of Statistics play critical roles in shaping labour mobility policies, matching skills with labour market needs, and ensuring evidence-based planning.

<u>Kosovo</u> – Migration and mobility governance is coordinated primarily by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, through the Department for Citizenship, Asylum and Migration (DCAM) and the Government Authority for Migration (GAM), which are responsible for drafting strategies, managing migration databases, and aligning national legislation with EU standards. GAM has established thematic working groups on labour mobility, to support evidence-based policymaking. The Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers, through the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo plays a critical role in employment promotion, labour market integration, and mobility partnerships, including counselling services and skills-matching initiatives. The Civil Registration Agency (CRA) is responsible for residence and personal data, while the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS) provides essential demographic and labour market data. Other relevant stakeholders include the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, which oversees vocational education and higher education policies; the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce and sectoral business associations, which link private sector needs with mobility policies; and the Office of the Prime Minister's Strategic Planning Office, which ensures policy coherence with government-wide priorities and EU integration processes. This Office also coordinates the implementation of the National Development Strategy 2030, which treats migration as a horizontal issue and is built around four pillars, two of which are directly relevant: the development of human capital, and social cohesion and inclusion. Collectively, these institutions form the backbone of Kosovo's efforts to promote safe and regular labour mobility, strengthen regional cooperation, and respond effectively to labour market shortages.

<u>Montenegro</u> – Migration governance is led by the Ministry of Interior, through its Directorate for Administrative Affairs, Citizenship, and Foreigners, which oversees asylum, integration, readmission, and reintegration. Since 2021, an inter-institutional working group chaired by the Ministry has been mandated to coordinate implementation, monitoring, and reporting on the Migration Strategy. Data on migration are collected by the Ministry of Interior but remain only partially accessible to the public. Regular monthly, quarterly, and annual reports are prepared for the inter-institutional working group. Beyond migration authorities, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Employment Agency of Montenegro, the Statistical Office (MONSTAT), and the Chamber of Economy of Montenegro are key institutions in linking mobility with employment, skills development, and private sector demand.

<u>North Macedonia</u> – The Ministry of Interior, specifically the Department for Border Affairs and Migration, is the principal institution responsible for migration management. Strategic migration policymaking is coordinated through an inter-ministerial group, established whenever a migration strategy or related planning document is developed. This group includes representatives from the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Labour and Social Policy, Education and Science, Justice, Economy, Health, and the Secretariat for European Affairs. Migration data are housed within the Ministry of Interior in an integrated database, though not publicly accessible. The State Statistical Office maintains disaggregated data on immigration and emigration by country of origin/destination, sex, age, and

region. In addition, the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia, the Ministry of Economy, and higher education institutions are central to addressing skills needs, labour market mismatches, and mobility partnerships.

4 KEY BARRIERS TO REGIONAL LABOUR MOBILITY

Despite progress in establishing regional frameworks and bilateral agreements, significant barriers continue to constrain the full potential of labour mobility in the Western Balkans. These barriers can be grouped into four main categories: institutional, legal and regulatory, socio-economic, and political. Addressing them requires coordinated reforms at both national and regional levels, as well as stronger alignment with EU standards.

Public institutions tasked with migration and labour mobility often operate with limited human, technical, and financial capacities. Employment agencies lack adequate staff training, modern digital systems, and cross-border cooperation mechanisms, resulting in fragmented service provision. Weak inter-institutional coordination within countries further complicates the implementation of regional mobility agreements. The absence of interoperable data systems also undermines evidence-based policymaking, monitoring of mobility trends, and matching of skills with labour market needs.

Although several agreements on mutual recognition of qualifications have been signed under the Berlin Process and the Common Regional Market, implementation remains slow and inconsistent. Administrative procedures for recognition are often complex, lengthy, and costly, discouraging both workers and employers. Vocational qualifications, which are essential for medium- and low-skilled workers, are still largely excluded from recognition frameworks, perpetuating skills mismatches across borders. Divergent labour laws, social security systems, and taxation regimes add further complexity, limiting the portability of rights and benefits for mobile workers.

Labour markets in the Western Balkans are characterised by high unemployment, particularly among youth and women, alongside persistent skills shortages in key sectors. Employers frequently resort to informal recruitment, particularly for seasonal or short-term work, which undermines job security and worker protection. Public awareness of legal mobility options is limited, and many citizens lack access to accurate information about rights, obligations, and procedures. Vulnerable groups—including women, rural populations, and low-skilled workers—face additional barriers due to discrimination, unequal access to training, and weak support services.

Unresolved political disputes, especially between Kosovo and Serbia, continue to hinder the full implementation of regional agreements. Political tensions reduce trust between institutions, delay the ratification of agreements, and discourage cross-border initiatives. A lack of consistent political will at both the national and regional level slows down reforms, leaving many commitments under the Berlin Process and RCC agenda only partially fulfilled. Without depoliticised implementation and

sustained dialogue, the region risks undermining its own commitments to mobility and EU integration.

The persistence of these barriers not only hampers labour market efficiency and competitiveness but also undermines the credibility of the Western Balkans' commitment to regional cooperation. Freedom of movement and the recognition of qualifications are core components of the EU single market. Demonstrating tangible progress in these areas will therefore be critical for advancing accession negotiations and for benefiting from the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Removing barriers to mobility would also help reduce outward migration pressures, strengthen people-to-people ties, and foster inclusive economic growth in line with EU values and standards.

5 EMPHASIZING PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF REGIONAL MOBILITY

Regional mobility, particularly under the Common Regional Market (CRM) framework, offers not only economic but also social and political benefits for the Western Balkans. Full implementation of the CRM agreements, such as free movement with ID cards, mutual recognition of higher education diplomas, and professional qualifications, would allow over 18 million people to move freely across the region. This translates into direct labour market benefits, such as:

- Filling shortages in construction, tourism, agriculture, ICT, and healthcare, sectors where all WB6 countries face structural deficits;

- Enhancing productivity and investment attraction through easier circulation of skills and knowledge;

- Reducing reliance on irregular channels by offering safe and legal pathways for workers, which lowers the risks of informality and exploitation;

- Lowering recruitment costs for employers due to linguistic and cultural proximity, while fostering faster workplace integration.

In this sense, regional mobility is a practical and cost-effective alternative to extra-regional migration, offering employers and workers tangible solutions to immediate needs.

5.1 RISKS OF NON-IMPLEMENTATION: WHAT COUNTRIES STAND TO LOSE

If CRM commitments are not fully implemented, Western Balkan countries risk missing significant economic opportunities. According to the World Bank, full CRM implementation could raise the region's GDP by up to 6.7%. Without this, countries will continue to face:

- Persistent brain drain, as workers seek opportunities in the EU rather than within the region;

- Fragmented labour markets, which limit competitiveness and deter investment;

- Weakening of EU accession credibility, since freedom of movement and qualification recognition are core EU principles;

- Reduced bargaining power, as countries individually struggle to address shortages instead of leveraging collective strength.

Kosovo, for example, issued 2,854 work permits in 2024 mainly to workers from neighbouring countries. This shows clear potential for regional labour integration, but without CRM, such flows remain ad hoc and fragile.

Strengthening CRM Monitoring and Accountability

A critical challenge for the Common Regional Market (CRM) is ensuring that mobility agreements do not remain on paper but translate into tangible outcomes. To close the implementation gap, stronger monitoring and accountability mechanisms are needed:

Regional Monitoring Framework

- Establish an RCC–CEFTA joint monitoring authority with a clear mandate to track progress on CRM implementation, publish annual scorecards, and benchmark performance across the WB6.

- Introduce binding technical working groups for labour mobility, recognition of qualifications, and social security portability.

Transparency and Public Reporting

- Require governments to submit regular progress reports on CRM mobility measures, which are consolidated and published by RCC.

- Develop a regional dashboard accessible to the public, showcasing progress on agreements (e.g. number of qualifications recognized, ID card usage, mobility flows).

Independent Oversight and Civil Society Engagement

- Empower CSOs and research institutes to independently monitor the implementation of CRM mobility agreements, including by conducting worker surveys and reporting challenges from the ground.

- Establish CSO consultative councils linked to the RCC to ensure citizen voices and labour market realities inform decision-making.

EU-linked Incentives

- Tie CRM monitoring to the EU Growth Plan by linking access to EU funding with measurable progress on mobility targets.

- Use peer review mechanisms (similar to EU accession monitoring) to encourage compliance and peer accountability.

By embedding such mechanisms, the region can move from political declarations to measurable results, ensuring that CRM delivers concrete benefits for workers, businesses, and societies alike.

Social Impact and Cohesion Dimensions

Beyond economics, regional mobility is a social cohesion tool. Facilitated movement strengthens people-to-people ties, reduces political tensions, and supports cultural exchange. It allows for:

- Empowerment of vulnerable groups (women, youth, low-skilled workers) through safe and informed access to regional labour markets;

- Reduction of social tensions by addressing labour market shortages without overburdening single states;

- Greater regional solidarity, where mobility is perceived not as "brain drain" but as mutual skill-sharing that benefits both sending and receiving countries;

- Community stability, since legal mobility reduces the risks of informality, exploitation, and social exclusion.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) can be pivotal in this dimension, by providing information, counselling, and cross-border advocacy, they help ensure mobility frameworks are accessible, inclusive, and socially cohesive.

5.2 PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO OVERCOME BARRIERS

Barriers to mobility such as fragmented implementation, complex recognition procedures, lack of information, and political hesitancy, can be addressed through practical, evidence-based measures:

- Streamline recognition of qualifications

- Expand CRM agreements to cover vocational and medium-skilled professions, not just high-skilled ones;

- Develop interoperable digital recognition platforms to simplify and speed up procedures;

- Strengthen institutional capacity;

- Equip employment agencies (e.g., EARK in Kosovo) with resources and training to manage mobility services;

- Establish inter-ministerial mobility coordination bodies in each WB6 country;

- Promote ethical recruitment and fair work;

- Apply the IRIS standard for ethical recruitment to reduce risks of exploitation;

- Ensure social security portability across the region;

- Enhance public awareness and trust;

- Develop regional mobility guides and local-level information sessions to raise awareness of legal options;

- Counter negative perceptions of "brain drain" by highlighting the mutual benefits of mobility;

- Leverage CSO networks

- Support CSOs to provide counselling and monitoring of worker rights;

- Encourage cross-border CSO coalitions to advocate for faster CRM implementation and social cohesion policies.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening labour market governance and regional migration mobility should be treated as complementary priorities in the Western Balkans. Addressing persistent skills mismatches requires long-term investment in education and vocational training, combined with flexible mobility arrangements that can respond to immediate labour shortages. Labour mobility is therefore both a necessity and an opportunity for the region: it helps tackle unemployment and emigration pressures while creating structured pathways for safe, regular, and circular migration.

Regional frameworks such as the Common Regional Market (CRM), the Berlin Process, and RCC initiatives, together with bilateral labour agreements, are essential tools for advancing these priorities. Yet, uneven implementation and limited institutional coordination continue to hinder progress. Full implementation of the Berlin Process agreements, reducing administrative barriers, and embedding ethical recruitment standards with stronger worker protections are critical steps. Without these reforms, the region risks stagnation, continued brain drain, and lost economic opportunities. Conversely, successful implementation could boost GDP, foster inclusion, and accelerate the region's path toward EU membership.

Labour mobility also remains a central pillar of EU enlargement policy. According to the World Bank, full implementation of the Common Regional Market (CRM) agenda could increase GDP in the Western Balkans by an estimated 6.7%, while also enhancing competitiveness and reducing emigration pressures. It directly supports the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which foresees gradual integration into the EU Single Market. Beyond economics, mobility agreements foster people-to-people connections, strengthen political dialogue, and contribute to regional stability. Building a functional regional labour market, however, requires political will, robust institutional coordination, and shared commitment to safe, regular, and orderly mobility.

One of the most significant barriers is the recognition of qualifications. Agreements signed under the Berlin Process cover doctors, dentists, architects, civil engineers,

nurses, midwives, pharmacists, and veterinary surgeons, but implementation is inconsistent. Many countries face difficulties aligning curricula with EU Directive 2005/36/EC, while administrative delays undermine effectiveness. Vocational qualifications often lack regional equivalence, limiting opportunities for medium- and low-skilled workers. Expanding recognition to vocational training and introducing interoperable digital platforms would accelerate outcomes and make mobility more inclusive.

To fully unlock the potential of regional labour mobility and cross-border employment, governments in the Western Balkans should prioritize coordinated reforms that make mobility safer, fairer, and more accessible. The following recommendations outline key steps:

- ✓ Strengthen bilateral labour agreements with EU-aligned standards on ethical recruitment, social security portability, and workers' rights.
- ✓ Fully implement Berlin Process agreements, with RCC monitoring progress and supporting coordination among WB6 governments.
- ✓ Invest in digital recognition platforms to streamline procedures and ensure transparency.
- ✓ Establish inter-ministerial coordination bodies in each WB6 country linking migration, employment, and education policies.
- ✓ Expand recognition to vocational qualifications, ensuring inclusivity for low- and medium-skilled workers.
- ✓ Set up a joint CEFTA–RCC implementation authority with binding powers and technical working groups.
- ✓ Integrate mobility into national reform agendas and leverage EU Growth Plan funding for institutional strengthening.
- ✓ Support in establishing a network of regional CSOs can provide policy support, run advocacy campaigns and offer information services on labour mobility rules and procedures.
- ✓ Mainstream gender equality and youth participation across all mobility frameworks.