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Empowering the Geopolitical EU

in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans

DELIVERABLE

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Economic convergence and brain drain in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership

WORK PACKAGE
WP 2

LEAD BENEFICIARY
Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies

SUBMISSION DATE
31 May 2026

DELIVERABLE FACT SHEET - PUBLIC

Economic convergence and brain drain in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership

Deliverable number	Deliverable 2.2.
Title of the deliverable	Economic convergence and brain drain in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership
Project name	Empowering the Geopolitical EU in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans
Project acronym	GEO-POWER-EU
Grant agreement No	101132692
Call identifier	HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01
Granting authority	European Research Executive Agency (REA)
Work package	WP 2
Lead beneficiary	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies
Due date	31 May 2026
Submission date	23 June
Dissemination level	Public
Type	Report
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Licence	Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)
DOI	https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21008412

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BACKGROUND

About GEO-POWER-EU

GEO-POWER-EU aims to empower the EU to manage security threats in its Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans amidst a deteriorating geopolitical environment. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilizing new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors.

To achieve this, GEO-POWER-EU's work plan is built on six specific objectives: proposing adaptations to the EU Enlargement policy to reflect new realities; examining the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and providing policy recommendations for its reform; assessing the influence of other geopolitical actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, in these regions; offering strategic foresight on the prospects of geopolitical competition in these areas; exploring ways to enhance the EU's ability to contain military threats from beyond its borders; and proposing a comprehensive, multidimensional EU strategy to guide relations with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.

The project's research aims to advance beyond the current state of the art by developing a new conceptual and policy framework using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methodologically, GEO-POWER-EU leverages cutting-edge expertise from various disciplines, implementing a multi-stage plan grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach. This approach involves systematic engagement of researchers from third institutions, decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens—including those from the regions under analysis—throughout the project cycle.

More about the project: **geo-power.eu**

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Glossary, Abbreviations and Acronyms

CATI	Computer-assisted telephone interviewing
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
WB	Western Balkans

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Executive Summary

This comparative report provides a comparative analysis of economic convergence and emigration across specific Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries, drawing on ten focus group discussions and a multi-country survey conducted within the framework of the GEO-POWER-EU project.

It shows that emigration is widely perceived as a structural, normalized, and rational response to persistent economic constraints, institutional weaknesses, and limited professional prospects. While at an individual level skilled emigration offers higher income, stability, and "emotional peace" for emigrants, it generates significant long-term costs (brain drain) for their countries of origin, including loss of labor, institutional weakening, demographic decline, and social fragmentation. These effects, in turn, further reinforce migration pressures, creating a vicious circle that is difficult to break. This process is also gendered: women are often less able to migrate and tend to face weaker economic and social outcomes in the countries of origin. Despite contextual differences – most notably the war in Ukraine – the underlying drivers and consequences are remarkably consistent across countries.

Effective responses require coordinated economic, institutional, and social reforms, with a key role for the EU, through faster accession, support for crucial structural reforms, and increased investment in infrastructure and public services. The resulting boost to economic convergence and the improved socioeconomic climate should reduce emigration incentives, while lower brain drain would in turn accelerate economic convergence and help break the vicious circle of emigration and stagnation.

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Introduction and Background

Economic convergence has been touted as a leading motivation for accession to the European Union. Ideally, EU membership, but also the accession process itself, should enable candidate countries to close the gap in living standards with EU member states, through a mixture of greater access to EU structural funds, strengthened trade relations, improved legislation, and other benefits. Recent studies support this view. Scenario analysis by Jovanovic and Necev (2026) suggests that full EU membership could raise GDP growth in the Western Balkans by around 2 percentage points per year and significantly shorten the time needed to reach EU levels across various economic and social outcomes. For example, Albania's GDP per capita convergence horizon would fall from 30 to 20 years, while Serbia's poverty convergence horizon would decline from 77 to 38 years.

At the same time, EU membership constitutes a double-edged sword in terms of brain drain: while the prospect of becoming citizens of an EU member state could reduce high-skilled emigration, the experience of previous enlargement waves suggests that the opening of the EU labor market after membership tends to increase it in the short term. In the medium to long term, however, the tide turns. Virtually all of the new EU Member States from Central and Eastern Europe that joined the EU in 2004 and were net emigration countries before accession became net immigration countries after some time: Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia. Of the 2004 wave, only Latvia remains a net emigration country, while Czechia, Slovenia, Hungary, Malta and Cyprus were net immigration countries even before accession (Figure 1).

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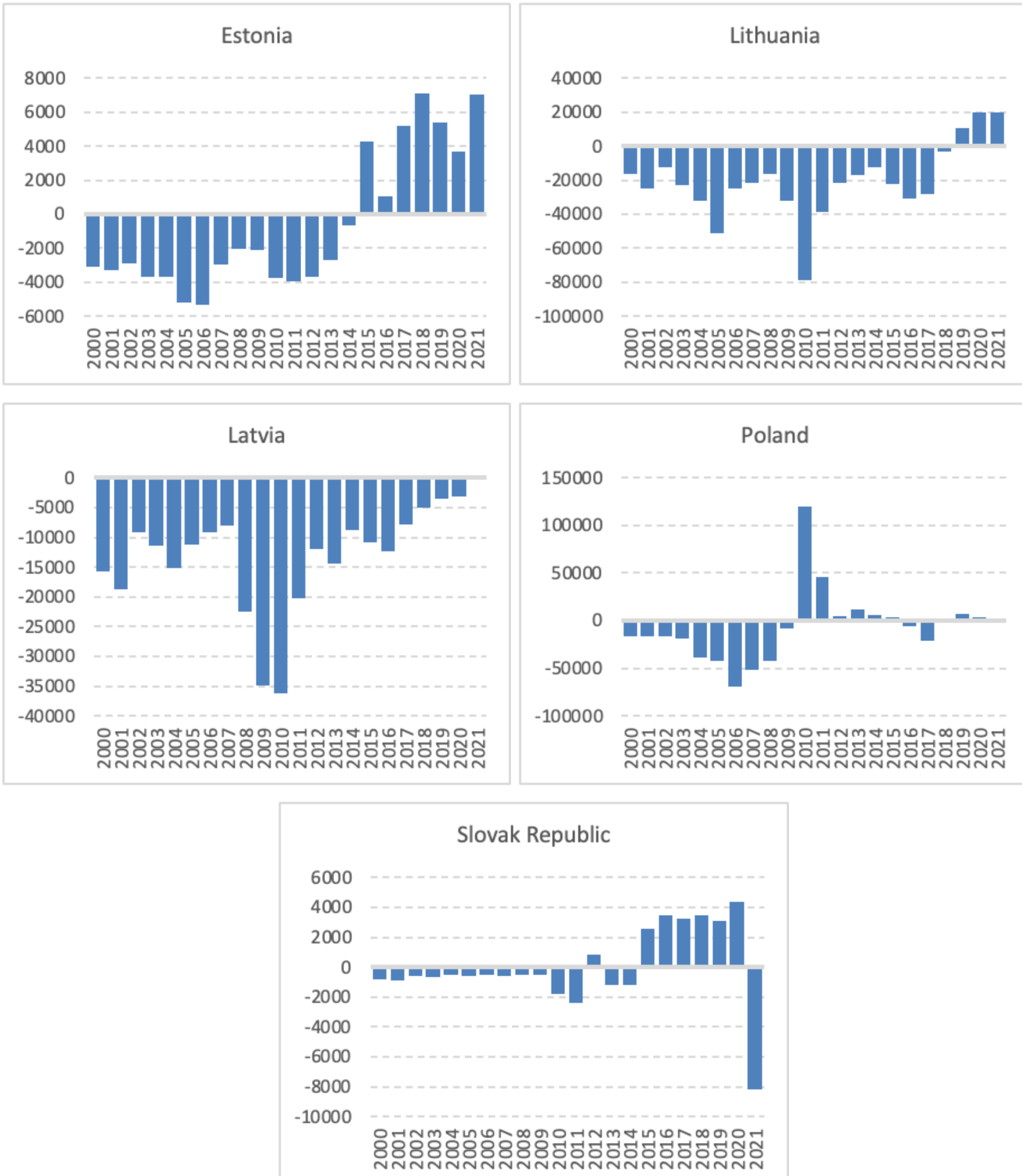
Figure 1: Net migration in countries that joined the EU in 2004 and were net emigration countries before accession (number of people)



Source: World Bank.

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In the meantime, the frustration caused by the prolonged accession process and the persisting gap in living standards has also exacerbated the loss of high-skilled professionals, especially youth, across candidate countries. This form of migration is commonly referred to as brain drain, an umbrella term for the "permanent emigration of skilled individuals from their home regions to seek better opportunities elsewhere" (European Commission, 2023, 1). Studies have argued that brain drain is driven by a combination of economic, professional, institutional and social factors. These range from low standards of living to limited prospects for professional growth (Beine et al. 2011), dissatisfaction with societal norms and political institutions (Chen et al. 2023) and an overall inability to see a future for oneself and one's current or future family in the country of origin (Topalovic & Hampel 2021). Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming) reaches a similar conclusion, finding that migration intentions are shaped not only by unemployment and income, but also by life satisfaction, expectations for the future, satisfaction with public services and trust in institutions.

The effects of brain drain are similarly mixed as well as context- and actor-dependent: while usually incurring economic benefits, emigrants often struggle to adapt to their country of arrival, and their departure poses various challenges for their family members and personal circles in the country of origin at the micro level, as well as for the economy and society at the macro level. Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming) also highlights these broader effects, arguing that persistent emigration, demographic decline, labour market weaknesses, skills shortages and slow EU convergence can reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle that threatens long-term development.

EU candidate countries have experienced massive emigration since the collapse of socialism in the early 1990s, due to a combination of fraught socioeconomic transitions, military conflicts, border-opening, and, more recently, better opportunities not only in Western Europe but also in neighboring countries joining the EU in or after 2004. Population lost to net emigration ranges from several percentages in Montenegro to somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population of countries such as Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina (United Nations 2024), not to mention the ongoing (and difficult to measure) massive war-related displacement in Ukraine. In fact, emigration has generally been so high in these countries that all have experienced total population losses over the past three decades, even as the natural population balance remains positive (more births than deaths) or has reversed only recently (Fidanovski 2024; Toth 2025, 5). These concerns are exacerbated by high emigration intentions among the population that has so far remained (GEO-POWER-EU Survey, 2025, 33), with between 14% and

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28% of citizens in eight selected Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries indicating that they are considering leaving. For the Western Balkan countries, in a more long-term perspective, this constitutes a continuation - yet generally much larger in scale - of historical emigration patterns towards Central and Western Europe dating back to the Cold War but also well into past centuries and imperial eras.

The considerable lack of convergence with EU standards in most policy areas is one of the key drivers of emigration intentions and decisions (Baltag & Romanyshyn 2024; European Commission 2025; Jovanovic & Necev 2026; Jovanovic et al., forthcoming). Economically, candidate countries have been closing the gap, albeit at an extremely slow pace. While it is customary for less developed economies to grow faster, the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries have been growing a lot slower than post-socialist EU Member Countries, which have benefitted benefited from (several times) larger access to EU structural funds and barrier-free trade (Jovanovic & Fidanovski 2024). Compared to the EU average for GDP per capita in purchasing power parity terms, the countries covered in this report stand at only 28% to 54% of the EU average (Figure 2). If the trends from the previous five years continue, some of the counties would need more than 100 years to reach the EU average for GDP per capita (Jovanovic & Necev 2026).

A major obstacle remains the persistence of the transitional growth model of low taxes, a cheap labor force, and high foreign investment, which no longer fits these countries' development trajectory. This model has failed to generate enough high-value-added activities, technological upgrading or good-quality jobs. FDI has been concentrated predominantly in low-value-added activities, reinforcing existing production structures rather than transforming them. This limits productivity growth, keeps wages far below EU levels, and increases emigration pressures (Jovanovic & Necev 2026; Jovanovic et al., forthcoming).

Importantly, the convergence of future new Member States with EU levels carries considerable potential also for existing Member States, whose combined GDP could grow by between 8% and 24% by 2035 in certain successful enlargement scenarios (Fernandes et al. 2025), thanks to improved trade links and investment conditions.

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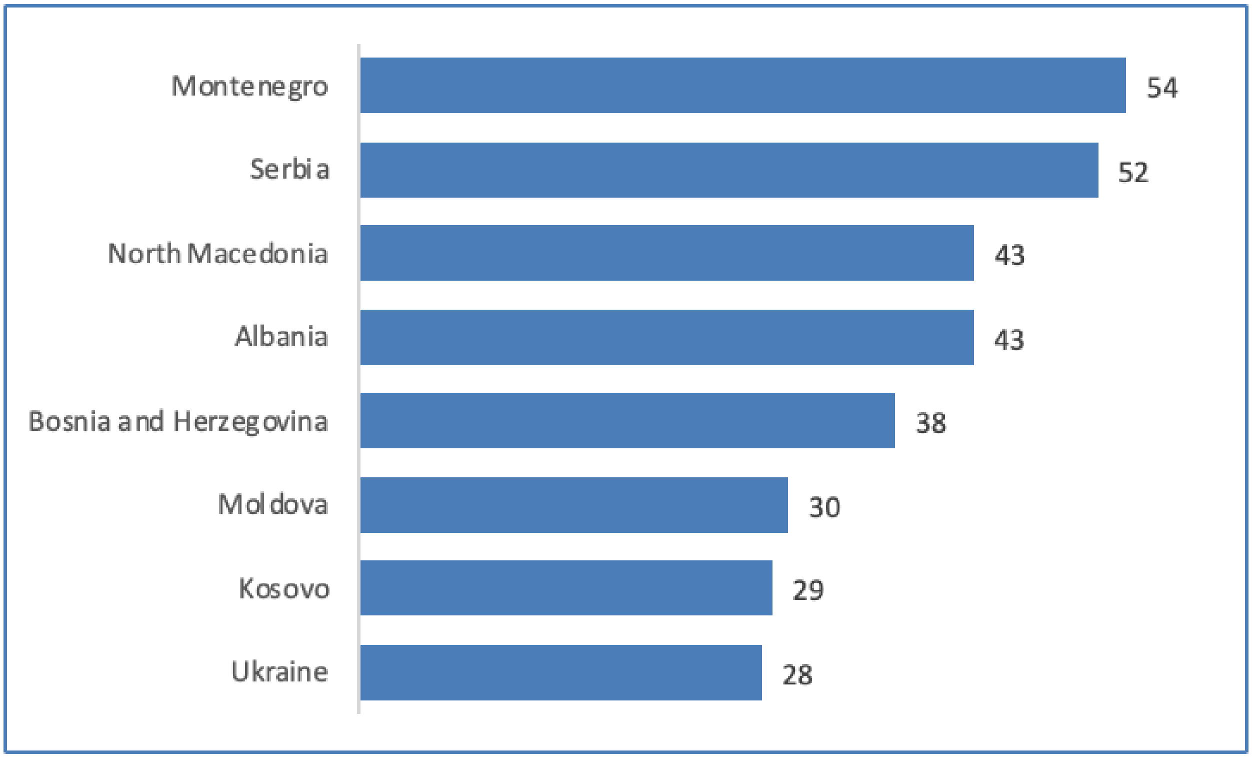
Figure 2: GDP per capita, in PPS, % of EU average (2025)



Source: wiiw Annual Database.

Socially, EU candidate countries post a mixed record. While some positive legacies from the socialist era, such as broad education and health coverage, remain, the quality of basic public services falls far short of EU standards. Poverty is much higher than the EU average, and in many candidate countries, is either not declining or is declining only very slowly, leaving them close to a century away from EU levels. In stark contrast to socialist times, female employment and labor force participation now lag significantly behind EU levels and are even diverging from them in most of the candidate countries (Jovanovic and Necev, 2026).

The rule of law remains a general weakness across candidate countries (European Commission 2025) and constitutes a key driver of the sense of a lack of meritocracy and thus of dissatisfaction with the quality of life (GEO-POWER-EU survey, 2025). Finally, in terms of political convergence, candidate countries show some diversity, with Western Balkan countries generally

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conducting free and fair elections and allowing moderate freedoms of media and association, while Eastern Partnership countries tend to perform worse but are making faster progress.

Taken together, limited and slow convergence in most policy areas poses a major emigration incentive, particularly given the geographical and frequent cultural proximity of EU member countries, which provide a much wider range of opportunities for a satisfactory quality of life.

This report provides a comprehensive, integrated, and comparative analysis of the perceived causes and effects of brain drain across five EU candidate countries: three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia) and two in the Eastern Partnership (Ukraine and Moldova). It draws on five country-specific focus group reports prepared by consortium members of the GEO-POWER-EU project and the GEO-POWER-EU survey (2025), integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth. The survey preceded and helped inform the focus group discussions. The report combines this with our previous related work on this issue, to give more depth. This joint report responds to the following four research questions:

● To what extent is brain drain about economic opportunities, and to what about overall quality of life, institutions, public services, professional prospects and cultural factors?

● How does brain drain impact convergence efforts?

● What are the key reasons for the persistent gaps in living standards with EU member states and does migration and brain drain contribute to that?

● What can domestic policy makers as well as the EU do to accelerate convergence and limit the damage from brain drain?

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Methodology

This report focuses on a deeper qualitative exploration of complex policy challenges through two sources of evidence: focus group discussions and the GEO-POWER-EU public opinion survey. The methodology applied is rooted in GEO-POWER-EU's interdisciplinary approach, with qualitative insights from focus group dynamics offering layered and deeper understanding of the broader picture of citizens' views provided by the public opinion survey.

Focus groups were selected as a method due to their capacity to capture socially constructed meanings and to facilitate interactive discussions through which participants can articulate, negotiate, and challenge viewpoints (Morgan 1997). This approach was deemed particularly appropriate for examining complex policy issues, such as convergence and brain drain, where perceptions are shaped by institutional roles, socio-economic conditions, and local governance contexts. Focus groups allow participants' interpretations and lived experiences to surface through dialogue, complementing the project's strategic focus on measuring both external influence and internal orientation.

The research was conducted across five countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine. These countries were selected based on their diverse positions in relation to EU integration processes and their shared challenges concerning convergence and brain drain. The analysis is based on ten focus groups (two per country) conducted in late 2025 in the capital city with a duration of 75-90 minutes each. Participants were recruited by phone, email, as well as through snowball recruitment, and without inducements. While an effort was made to ensure gender balance, some focus groups included more female participants. Each country tackled the following target audiences, respectively:

- A youth group (primarily aged 18–24)
- A group of unemployed or underemployed skilled individuals

Group sizes ranged from 16–24 participants for the two focus group discussions combined, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which included 11 participants, due to recruitment constraints. Unemployed individuals were generally easier to recruit and thus more numerous

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than underemployed ones, but each country included at least one underemployed participant. Table 1 below summarises the profile of all focus group participants. Special care was taken to ensure equitable gender representation, with women constituting between 36% of participants in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 68% in Ukraine, and 60% overall across all groups.

Table 1: Number and demographic profile of focus group participants

Country	Total participants (across the two focus groups)	Male	Female	Youth	Underemployed skilled
Albania	16	5	11	8	8
Bosnia & Herzegovina	11	7	4	5	6
Moldova	22	7	15	12	10
Serbia	19	10	9	10	9
Ukraine	19	6	13	12	7
Total	**87**	**35**	**52**	**47**	**40**

The focus group discussions followed a standardized English-language guide (with local translations and minor content adaptations). The discussions were structured into three sections. The first section (10 minutes long) tackled the overall situation in the country, including perceived EU membership prospects and impacts. The second and core section (70 minutes long) addressed the perceived causes, effects, and potential policy responses to brain drain, including specific statements intended to stimulate a livelier discussion and which participants were asked to agree or disagree with and provide justifications. Participants included students, graduates, unemployed individuals, and skilled professionals across sectors (e.g. IT, healthcare, education, engineering). Each session was moderated by a convener and a rapporteur from the local consortium partner. All focus groups were conducted in the local language, apart from the focus group taking place in Albania, where there was no local partner and the focus group was conducted by the South-East European Research Centre (SEERC).

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Prior to data collection, a training session was conducted in September–October 2025 in order to cover the project's methodological framework, focus group moderation techniques, ethical procedures, and use of the reporting template. All partners taking part in this task were handed a guide which included questions and suggested prompts. All focus groups were conducted either in person or online, depending on local conditions. In Ukraine both focus groups were conducted online due to the ongoing Russian full-scale invasion. Discussions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Where necessary, transcripts were translated into English to ensure consistency in analysis across country cases.

The focus groups utilised the obtained ethics approval and related documents by the University of Peloponnese for conducting ethically approved research within the framework of the project. All activities complied with GDPR and the GEO-POWER-EU Ethics and Data Management Plan. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, data protection provisions, and their rights (including voluntary participation and withdrawal).

The focus groups were guided by the findings of the public opinion survey conducted by the GEO-POWER-EU project in June 2025 (GEO-POWER-EU Survey, 2025). The survey covered nine countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It included a minimum of 1000 respondents per country with the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method and based on local translations of a standardized English-language questionnaire. The questionnaire covered several topics, including satisfaction with developments in the country, economic conditions, migration intentions, attitudes towards the EU and NATO, perceptions of external actors, and political orientations. The country and topical coverage were broader than the scope of this Report; only material matching the scope of the focus groups is included here.

The survey material used in this report has been incorporated both in its own right (i.e. in informing the analysis) and as a foundation for developing the guide for the focus group discussions in the first place, given the survey preceded the focus groups by several months. First and foremost, the emergence of economic considerations as central to citizens' emigration intentions and/or decisions has informed the considerable focus on economic causes, effects, and policy responses to brain drain in the focus group guide, as well as vindicating the joint treatment of economic convergence and brain drain as co-dependent phenomena in this report. Second, the relative commonality of the key findings between the five countries (with the

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partial exception of Ukraine) informed the mostly standardized approach taken to the five focus groups. Finally, the specific drivers (economic and otherwise) identified in the survey as most important in emigration intentions and decisions, ranging from dissatisfaction with basic public services such as healthcare and education to a perceived lack of political rights, fed into the thematic areas captured by the focus groups and the specific prompts and/or questions posed.

Overall, the mixed-method approach adopted in this report combines the two input types: focus groups provide lived experience and narrative depth, while survey data provides cross-country comparability.

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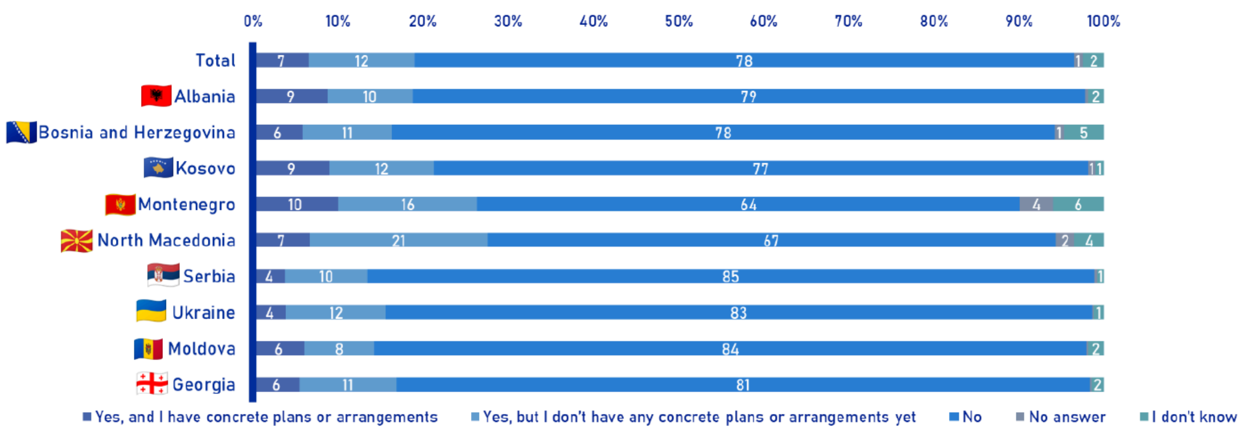
Overview of Brain Drain Perceptions

The GEO-POWER-EU survey (2025) results show that emigration intentions remain substantial in the economies analysed here. While most respondents do not plan immediate emigration, a sizable minority are considering leaving within the next two years, ranging from 14% in Moldova and Serbia to 28% in North Macedonia, with the average for the whole region being 19% (Figure 3). Intentions to migrate are generally lower among women – 20.5% of the men included in the survey expressed this intention, and 17.5% of the women. This is standard in the literature on migration (see for example Jovanovic et al., forthcoming).

Figure 3. Share of people considering moving abroad (in %)



Source: GEO-POWER-EU survey.

Note: The survey question was: "Are you considering moving abroad in the next two years?" The total number of respondents was 9,011. Each country sample includes 1,000 respondents, except Moldova, where the sample includes 1,011 respondents. Results are expressed as shares of total respondents, in %.

Focus group respondents in the five countries view brain drain as a common phenomenon and a normalised consequence of dissatisfaction with one's quality of life, expressing a degree of awareness of the challenges posed by brain drain to the countries left behind but also some integration difficulties for those who have emigrated. These open attitudes to emigration are

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corroborated by the considerable emigration intentions captured by the survey results, with some respondents reporting specific steps undertaken in this direction.

Across all countries, brain drain is understood as structural and largely normalized. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, migration is described as "a completely normal process… a struggle on the market between countries, and we are brutally losing." This framing mostly removes individual agency and depicts brain drain as a logical response to unfavorable systemic conditions.

In Moldova, participants define brain drain as "the loss of human potential," emphasizing that "highly educated individuals increasingly contribute to the development of other countries." Another participant warned that the country could be left with "only unskilled or poorly skilled labor." This shows that citizens recognize the negative impact of brain drain on their countries. Yet, as mentioned above, respondents do not express a lot of hostile sentiment towards those who have emigrated, possibly because, as indicated by the survey results, a sizable share of citizens are themselves considering emigrating in the future. A sense of solidarity thus emerges between emigrants and those left behind, united by their disillusionment with the system.

In Serbia, migration is embedded in everyday life: "everyone knows someone who has left." This creates a self-reinforcing dynamic where leaving becomes expected, further contributing to the normalization of the phenomenon. Similarly, Moldovan participants note that young people plan departure "immediately after finishing school", which is mirrored in the survey results across the five countries.

In Albania, participants describe migration as both aspiration and necessity: "it's not just a choice—it's something you *have to* consider [emphasis in the original]." However, respondents have also shown ambivalence in their assessment of the effects of brain drain on those who have emigrated. In Albania, migration is believed to offer "a better life," but also "loneliness, depression and detachment." In Moldova, one participant remarked that "emotionally, both sides suffer", referring to the impact of severed family connections and friendships.

In Ukraine, this tension is even more extreme. On the one hand, one participant opined: "We are simply tired of this instability… abroad, people find emotional peace." Another added, however, that "you don't know whether it makes sense to save money… everything is uncertain", highlighting that emigration carries its own risks.

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Thus, a relatively uniform pattern across countries is that of understating “pull” factors in the countries of arrival and focusing more on the “push” factors from the countries of origin. Migration is therefore framed not as a consequence of ambition, in which case it would only attract certain profiles of citizens, but more as a way for common people to ensure their survival, predictability and a better life in response to difficult and stagnant living conditions at home.

At times, participants also broaden the concept of brain drain, effectively equating it with emigration. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, respondents stress that brain drain includes the departure of “craftsmen and service workers,” not only high-skilled graduates. Serbia reflects similar patterns, indicating systemic labor outflow rather than elite-only emigration.

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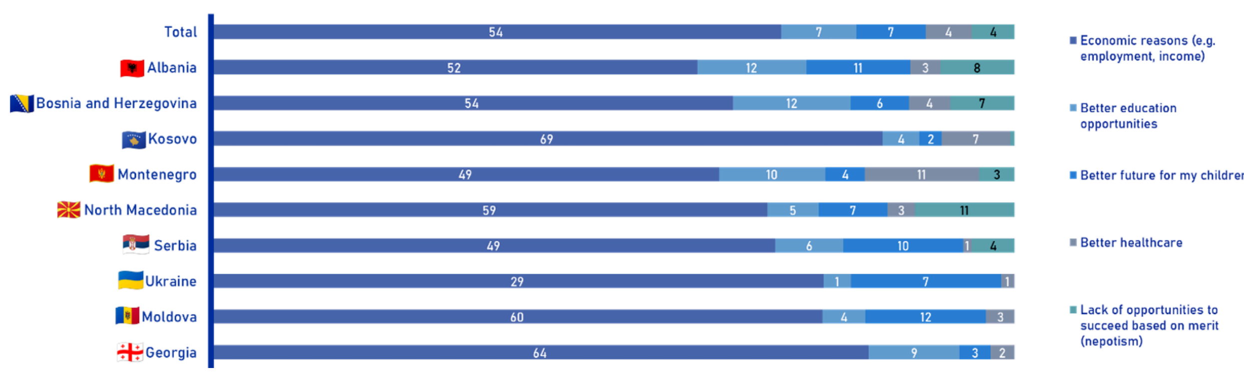
Perceived Causes of Brain Drain

Economic Conditions and Material Constraints

The GEO-POWER-EU survey (2025) shows that economic reasons dominate emigration intentions across the region. Among respondents considering moving abroad, 54% cite employment or income as their first-mentioned reason, far ahead of education opportunities and a better future for children, both at 7%. Economic motives are especially prominent in Kosovo and Georgia, where they account for around two-thirds of first-mentioned reasons. Ukraine stands out, with a much lower share of 29%, reflecting the specific context of war and instability. Other reasons, such as education, healthcare and lack of merit-based opportunities remain relevant in several countries, especially Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Among women, better education opportunities and a better future for children stand out as reasons that are cited more often than among men.

Figure 4. First-mentioned reasons for considering moving abroad, top five (% of respondents considering moving abroad)



Source: GEO-POWER-EU survey.
Note: The survey question was: "What are the main reasons for considering moving abroad?" Respondents could provide multiple answers. The figure shows only the top five first-mentioned reasons. Results are expressed as shares of respondents who are considering moving abroad.

Funded by the European Union

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The focus group discussions also confirm that economic drivers dominate across the five countries, ranging from more fundamental challenges such as unemployment, underemployment and low salaries to more specific concerns such as job insecurity and poor or slow career progression. In Moldova, participants emphasize “low salaries and excessively high prices.” In Albania, respondents observe that “with the same money, you buy less” compared to EU countries. While prices (when taken in isolation) are generally lower in EU candidate countries than in member states, the clearly inferior purchasing power once wage differentials are taken into account seems to have created an impression of multilayered economic strain.

In Serbia, even highly educated individuals face insecurity. One participant noted: “I have a degree, but no stability.” Another highlighted housing costs as a major barrier to independence. In countries where the share of highly-educated citizens has grown rapidly, even though economies have not always developed in a way that accommodates this structural shift, many highly-skilled workers feel left behind. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the perception of straightforward brain drain decisions has recurred among respondents, as “low wages and limited opportunities” are contrasted with perceived stability abroad.

Ukraine represents an extreme case, where the already-observed economic constraints elsewhere are amplified further and compounded by the scarcity of basic necessities. A participant explained: “Wages are quite low (…), it only covers basic needs.” Another mentioned that “people look toward international companies, where salaries are higher… so they increasingly consider foreign labor markets”. A third Ukrainian participant added that war-related disruptions—such as power outages—make economic life unpredictable. The lack of “salary security, reliable contracts, and predictable living conditions” was also lamented in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Overall, a unique insight from the focus groups that eludes the aggregate findings in the survey is that, across all countries, respondents stress that economic issues are about more than income; instead, they reflect a lack of predictability and long-term security. This is consistent with Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming), which also finds that dissatisfaction with overall economic conditions and quality of life, dissatisfaction with public services, sometimes even as simple as public transportation, as well as negative expectations about the future are among the key drivers of migration intentions. This was exemplified in Moldova, where participants spoke of a "Soviet mentality" among company managers, where "the more intelligent you are [as a worker], the more mediocre you are paid", in explicit contrast to the West, where the law is

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allegedly always respected, and hard work yields a predictable life. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one respondent said they wished their country was more like the EU, where "AI is [allegedly] implemented in the economy and economic flows, while here it's taboo. [And then] Western European countries invest in GDP by increasing labor productivity, which is not a topic at all in our country". Underlying structural challenges are arguably the hardest for governments to address, but their salience among respondents points to the antiquation of national growth models. These often result in poor work-life balance and economic precarity amidst short-term employment (often by foreign-owned companies) and massive job turnover – phenomena that are much less salient in EU Member States.

Institutions, Governance, and Quality of Life

Institutional weaknesses have emerged as equally central. In Serbia, one respondent stated: "whoever has money or connections can handle everything". In Bosnia and Herzegovina, several participants described clientelist party-based employment systems, particularly in smaller cities and rural areas ("people looking for work have no options unless they are in Sarajevo").

In Albania, corruption is described as "second nature." In Moldova, respondents contrast domestic systems with EU countries, where "the law is [seen to be] strictly enforced and people know they are respected." This highlights the emotional dimension of systemic injustice, which is difficult to capture through survey analysis but significantly informs emigration decisions. At the same time, much of the responsibility was also located at the individual level. As an Albanian respondent put it, "fighting corruption is not an individual fight. You have to speak up and come together and so on and so forth as a society. But being an individualistic society means that whenever you see the opportunity, just go. But it's not that you get frustrated by the corruption, because you are part of the corruption." This comment underscores the perverse incentives and asymmetrical consequences of corruption, where those who are willing to break the rules are rewarded at the expense of those who are not.

In Ukraine, institutional distrust is heightened by war. One participant stated: "it is impossible to plan even the next day." Another emphasized frustration with corruption and lack of accountability. This frustration was echoed in Moldova, where participants idolized countries such as Germany, where "the law is [seen as being] strictly enforced and people know they are respected". These sentiments highlight the mutually reinforcing nature of economic and institutional drivers of brain drain under conditions of scarcity, as preferential treatment by

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government institutions, which might otherwise be dismissed as a mere nuisance, turns into an existential obstacle in exceptional circumstances such as war.

Quality of life is closely linked to governance. Serbian participants highlighted poor healthcare access and intolerable air pollution. In Albania, one respondent, reflecting on a family of acquaintances who have recently left the country, expressed a multilayered expectation of a better life, predicting that "they will have a better education for their kids, they will have better labor policies, and feel more safe in terms of, if something happened to them". However, there was no uniform view of EU accession as a panacea for quality of life deficiencies. In fact, one respondent remarked how "in Romania or Bulgaria, for example, the living conditions are similar to Albania, there is not much difference. So, they have had this cycle. They have entered the EU, people have migrated, and now they are starting to turn back after 10 [more than 20] years."

Results from the GEO-POWER-EU survey paint a complex picture in this regard. The share of respondents citing nepotism as their top reason for considering emigrating was in single digits in all five countries; however, in two countries (Albania at 28% and Bosnia and Herzegovina at 26%) it was the third most likely reason to be included on a list of five key motivations. Education opportunities showed similar variation, as they were cited as a top-5 reason by about a quarter of respondents in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina but only 4% in Ukraine. These countries were the polar opposites also in terms of the healthcare results (cited by about a fifth in the former two but only by 1% in Ukraine). A better future for one's children was, however, more universally mentioned, with double-digit figures in all five countries and close to a third of respondents in Serbia.

These findings are consistent with existing studies on this issue. The study on human capital and mobility in the Western Balkans by Jovanovic et al., (forthcoming) also finds that migration intentions are not driven by economic factors alone. Dissatisfaction with public services, weak trust in institutions and broader dissatisfaction with living conditions are also important drivers of migration intentions, confirming that governance failures matter not only directly, but also through their effects on citizens' confidence that a decent future can be built at home.

Professional Development, Social Norms, and Cultural Drivers

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Participants consistently highlight a lack of professional opportunities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the system “offers education but not opportunities”, with the latter often being reserved for those with connections to political parties regardless of merit. In Moldova, graduates face barriers due to lack of experience.

In Serbia, even PhD-level individuals report insecurity (“no permanent job, no health insurance”), reflecting once again the structural issues around underemployment and the mismatch between the high share of highly-skilled workers and underdeveloped economies which continue to require more low-skilled labor. In Ukraine, respondents similarly stress the lack of demand for skilled labor: “there are no conditions for professional development.”

Educational migration is critical, not least due to its multiplier value. One Ukrainian participant noted that students who study abroad “see the difference… and stay”, depicting how even emigration decisions originally intended as short-term can morph into permanence in the face of perceived gaps in systemic opportunities. In Moldova, one participant remarked that “young people often choose to work for the country that educated and rewarded them”, referring mainly to people who left for Romania for education and ended up staying, rather than “feeling undervalued” at home.

Finally, social norms reinforce migration. In Moldova, the decision to leave is often part of a family strategy: “when a family does not have enough money, people are forced to leave”, with the emigration of individual family members often leading to family unification in the country of arrival. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, participants reflected on how social media reinforces aspirations for life abroad. Importantly, insights from social media content posted by personal acquaintances might resonate much more strongly than content from celebrity influencers. In Serbia, the “increasing visibility of migration within personal networks” was similarly cited as an emigration driver. Social norms were also discussed in terms of participants’ perceived incompatibility between their own values and the societal consensus. Bosnian participants pointedly referred to “cultural stagnation” and a “lifestyle deficit”.

These professional, social and cultural drivers should not be read as purely individual preferences or lifestyle choices. They are shaped by the broader economic and social context in which people live: weak labour demand for skilled workers, limited career structures, low wages, poor public services and the slow pace of convergence with EU living standards. In this

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sense, even aspirations for education abroad, different social norms or a more fulfilling professional life are deeply connected to the lack of development opportunities at home.

It is difficult to make claims in this regard based on the survey results, given its bottom-up design where respondents were allowed to choose their own reasons for considering emigrating (and predominantly cited material or at least more palpable concerns). The previously-discussed and rather dominant "better future for my children" option could, however, be seen as at least partly driven by unappealing social norms. Additionally, a "lack of respect for my rights" was cited as the fourth most salient reason in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (by 27% and 18% of respondents, respectively), but it did not feature among the top five reasons in the remaining three countries.

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Perceived Effects of Brain Drain

Economic and Institutional Impacts

Across countries, participants emphasize the loss of skilled labor. In Serbia, the danger of “the state invest[ing] in someone and then that person leav[ing]” was emphasized, with participants also highlighting the undue strain brain drain places on depleted workforces, where workers who stay often have to compensate for the capital loss from those who have left. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, participants also refer to loss of “intellectual power.” In Moldova, participants warn of a future with limited skilled labor. In Ukraine, the consequences are described as existential: “without intellectuals, [economic and social] systems will not work.” In Albania, one participant lamented “not having young minds around with their energy, sense of innovation, needs to explore new opportunities, [older people] just get stuck to one business model”, focusing particularly on the perceived negative impacts in the tourism sector.

Overall, participants show an awareness of the disproportionate harm of skilled emigration as a negative value multiplier for societies, emphasizing in particular the poor return on the considerable government investment in the education of such individuals. It is, of course, possible that the stronger concerns about skilled emigration than other types of emigration reflect the (typically higher-educated) profile of the focus group participants themselves, rather than a more profound understanding of the role of this skill profile for economies and societies.

Related literature based on quantitative estimates confirms that these concerns are not only perceived, but economically substantial. Estimates from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy are that youth emigration costs the Western Balkans around EUR 3.1 bn per year in foregone potential GDP, rising to around EUR 5.5 bn once education-related costs are included. The annual cost is estimated at around EUR 900 mn in lost value added in Serbia alone, rising to up to EUR 2.1 bn when education costs are included (WFD, 2019). This reinforces the view that brain drain is not only a loss of individual talent, but a broader constraint on productivity, public-service capacity and long-term convergence.

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Demographic and Long-Term Structural Consequences

Depopulation is widely observed, posing various implications in terms of human capital loss. In Albania, villages are described as empty; in Serbia, "villages are [perceived to be] dying out." Moldovan participants warn that migration threatens pensions ("there will be no one left to contribute"), echoing the realization in Bosnia and Herzegovina that "we will now have to import labor". Participants thus tend to show an awareness of the long-term socioeconomic implications of demographic phenomena beyond their own direct lived experience of observing population decline in the short term. This awareness is often somewhat specific, as one respondent in Albania lamented that "[people] just go away and only a few people stay here so I will have to deal with the elderly, the pensions, the security so I have an extra burden because my brother has gone to live abroad and he's contributing to this other country". Importantly, however, participants tend to locate the responsibility for this unfavorable reality in the system rather than in those who emigrate, with the same respondent stating that "you can decide what to do with your lives".

The macroeconometric model developed in Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming) reinforces this interpretation. The model shows that migration, population dynamics and growth are closely intertwined: emigration reduces the working-age population and weakens growth potential, while low growth and limited opportunities in turn reinforce emigration pressures. In the current setting, this creates a negative feedback loop of emigration, population decline and weak growth. Under the baseline scenario, in which current trends continue, GDP growth in the Western Balkans remains modest, at around 3.1% to 3.7% per year, population decline continues in five of the six economies, with projected losses of between 8% and 17% by 2040, and net emigration persists. However, the same model also shows that this loop is not unavoidable. A positive growth shock can reduce emigration pressures, slow population decline and support higher growth, gradually turning the negative cycle into a more positive one. EU accession plays a particularly important role in this respect. Under the full EU membership scenario, GDP growth rises to around 5% to 6% per year, population decline slows across the region, and by 2040 the population gains relative to the baseline range from around 11,000 people in Montenegro to around 110,000 in Serbia. Net migration also improves in all economies, with Serbia even shifting to net immigration by 2040.

Social, Family, and Individual Effects

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While previous quotes have shown that long-term emigration of individual family members without eventual family reunification abroad is perceived as decreasingly common, family separation nonetheless remains a major concern. In Moldova and Ukraine, it was remarked that children often grow up without parents. One Ukrainian respondent described migration as creating "deep emotional exhaustion" among both the family members who leave and those who remain. The complexity and contradictions of brain drain choices were captured in an interesting fashion by one Bosnian participant, who remarked that "[people are either] leaving Bosnia and crying for Bosnia, or staying in Bosnia and crying for Europe".

In line with the previously discussed tendency for participants not to apportion blame towards those who have left, participants clearly acknowledge the tradeoffs involved. A Ukrainian example highlights a highly educated individual working as a cleaner abroad and being anxious about leaving her family behind but also feeling "happy… because she is tired of uncertainty". The contrast between "loneliness, depression and detachment from family networks abroad" as opposed to the "rich social life and family connections at home" was highlighted in Albania, suggesting again that participants tend to sympathize with some of the negative effects of brain drain on the departing individuals, rather than foregrounding the effects of their departure on the country of origin. Another Albanian participant cited the increasing ease of managing family relations amidst brain drain, reflecting on how "today, we have the opportunity to fly from London to Tirana. If he [my brother] lives in London, I live in Tirana, my parents live in another town, and I go once a month. My brother comes here once a month", further adding to participants' general impression of brain drain as something normal and manageable. In a similar vein, Serbian participants have cited the positive effect of remittances as well as professional and cultural links to the diaspora.

This mixed picture of the social effects of migration is corroborated by other studies as well. As Jovanovic et al., (forthcoming) argue, the Western Balkan diaspora is vast and economically important, with remittances amounting to around 7% to 17% of GDP, helping many households cope with weak labour markets and low incomes at home. Yet the same study also stresses that these benefits do not offset the longer-term costs in terms of lower growth, weaker productivity, strained public services and reduced social cohesion, especially as more emigrants begin to see return as unlikely and their country of origin as "a place to visit" rather than a place to build a future. Circular and return migration are still limited in the region, while policies for return and reintegration remain weak or non-existent. This explains why participants can

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recognise the benefits of remittances and diaspora links while still seeing migration as socially painful and developmentally costly.

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Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Across the five countries, brain drain is a structural and deeply embedded phenomenon. Based on both the focus groups and the public opinion survey, despite contextual differences, the underlying dynamics are consistent: migration emerges as a rational response to systemic conditions contemplated by a non-negligible share of the populations. These conditions include weak economic prospects, low wages, slow growth, limited professional opportunities, poor public services, institutional weaknesses, corruption, and the persistent lack of convergence with EU living standards. Citizens therefore tend to see emigration not simply as an individual choice, but as a response to stagnation and limited prospects at home. At the same time, they identify governments as the culprits for it as well as the necessary sources of future solutions, with assistance from the EU. The four key recommendations below are informed by the five focus groups, the GEO-POWER-EU survey and our own and others' previous work on these issues, primarily Jovanovic and Necev (2026) and Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming). They are also situated in the broader context of the political economies of the five countries and the EU accession process. The recommendations focus primarily on reducing brain drain by addressing the push factors that encourage people to leave, such as low living standards, weak job prospects, poor public services and limited trust in institutions. They therefore deal mainly with the domestic conditions needed to make staying a more attractive option. Recommendations on how to benefit more from migration itself – including circular migration, return migration and stronger links with the diaspora – are discussed in more detail in Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming).

1. **Raise incomes and create better jobs through a new economic model.** Governments should move beyond the low-tax, low-wage and low-value-added model by expanding public investment in infrastructure and the green transition, investing more in public services, supporting productive domestic firms through industrial and innovation policies, and focusing on higher-quality FDI.

   Focus group participants emphasize higher wages, stable jobs, and improved labor market access as the most effective retention tools, which is fully echoed by the survey

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results, where economic factors are universally dominant. Since underemployed individuals were the target group for one of the sets of focus groups, reforming countries' outdated growth models emerges as a key economic policy recommendation, as the availability of skilled jobs has not kept pace with growing shares of highly-educated citizens across EU candidate countries. This finding hits at the core of policy debates around dismantling the low-tax regimes established in post-socialist countries during the transition of the 1990s, which have served their purpose and currently tend to curb human capital growth as countries remain locked in the proverbial middle-income trap (Jovanovic et al. 2025). Escaping this vicious circle is only possible by equipping the economies of candidate countries with a sufficient dose of human capital (see next recommendation) to produce final goods and services of solid quality that would be competitive in domestic, regional, and international markets.

Importantly, expanding the capacity for industrial policy, i.e. various forms of state aid channeled towards stimulating specific aspects of the ongoing green and digital transition, is a key trend also across Europe and was identified as a top priority in the seminal Draghi report two years ago (Draghi, 2024). As industrial policy requires considerable public spending, with its accompanying political costs, the EU is uniquely placed to advance its expansion, both by serving by example and by rewarding policy measures in this direction through its conditionality mechanisms.

On the other hand, interestingly, many of the focus group insights, especially in Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina, generated recommendations in the direction of market-friendly policy solutions and limited government interference, likely reflecting dissatisfaction with government institutions and a loss of faith in their abilities to channel fruitful economic reform.

Some more concrete recommendations **for domestic policy makers**, are:

- support wage and income growth, by raising minimum wages, public sector wages, social benefits and pensions, while also supporting productivity growth, through appropriate industrial policies. Of all the measures proposed here, this is among the most direct and easiest to implement, and is likely to have a strong impact, as it addresses the main driver of migration: low living standards and poor living

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conditions. This is especially important given that wages in the region remain far below EU levels and that higher wages are central to reducing emigration pressures.

- develop an active industrial policy focused on sectors with higher value-added potential, including green technologies, digital services, advanced manufacturing and modern business services;
- support productive domestic firms through innovation grants, technology adoption, digitalisation support, easier access to finance and links with universities and research institutions;
- focus FDI attraction policies on higher-quality companies, prioritising investors that bring technology, skills, supplier linkages and decent working conditions, rather than relying mainly on low labour costs;
- expand public investment in transport, railways, energy grids, renewable energy, energy efficiency and digital infrastructure, where convergence gaps remain large;

For the EU, the priority should be to:

- use EU conditionality not only to require fiscal discipline and regulatory alignment, but also to reward credible industrial, innovation and regional development policies;
- help governments prepare and implement large investment projects, since weak planning, procurement and administrative capacity remain major bottlenecks;
- support the integration of domestic firms into EU value chains, especially through the Single Market, the Common Regional Market and targeted support for SMEs;
- treat faster income convergence as part of the enlargement strategy itself, not as something that should happen only after accession.

2. **Improve overall quality of life through better public services and working conditions.** Governments should raise the quality of education and healthcare, increase social spending, strengthen workers' rights, and provide better support for women, young people and rural areas.

   Focus group participants call for raising the quality of education to EU standards and improving basic public services. Investment in infrastructure and the environment is also perceived as critical. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of such reforms in smaller cities and rural areas, which are also disproportionately affected by brain drain. While not as salient as economic and governance concerns, education featured in

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one form or another in all five focus group discussions, indicating high participant awareness of human capital as a long-term driver of quality of life and dissatisfaction with current government policies and achievements in this regard. Education, as well as health and the environment, have emerged in past research as areas where Western Balkan candidate countries are converging with EU levels at the slowest pace, or even diverging from them altogether (Jovanovic & Necev 2026). At the same time, governments should also consider more immediately feasible solutions (lower-hanging fruits) to labor market mismatches, including improving vocational and later-life (re)training as well as recognizing informal and foreign-acquired qualifications.

Some participants, most notably in Albania, also focused rather prominently on working conditions and the insufficient opportunities for remote work as well as weak unionization and protection of workers' rights. This aspect, coupled by other work-family reconciliation policies, have been especially raised by female focus group participants and can be expected to particularly benefit women, thus also contributing to alleviating gender inequalities.

Some more concrete recommendations, on the grounds of the discussions in Jovanovic and Necev (2026) and Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming), **for domestic policy makers**, are:

- invest more in education and healthcare, not only through higher spending, but also through better management, quality standards, staff retention and fairer access across regions. This is particularly important in the long run, as better education and healthcare are central to improving human capital, raising quality of life and making staying in the region more attractive;
- increase spending on poverty reduction and social protection, especially through better-targeted and more adequate support for low-income households, children and vulnerable groups;
- improve working conditions by strengthening labour inspection, reducing informality, supporting collective bargaining and making workers' rights more enforceable in practice;
- expand access to affordable childcare and long-term care, as this would reduce the gender employment gap and make it easier for women to enter and remain in formal employment;

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- strengthen active labour market policies, especially for women, young people, the low-educated and the long-term unemployed, through better matching, reskilling, start-up support and stronger public employment services;
- address the urban-rural service gap by improving transport links, schools, healthcare, childcare, digital access and local employment opportunities in smaller towns and rural areas;

For the EU, the priority should be to:

- make social convergence a more central part of the accession process, not only a secondary issue after market reforms and rule-of-law reforms;
- provide more pre-accession funding for education, healthcare, childcare, care infrastructure, environmental protection and local public services;
- support reforms that reduce the gender employment gap, especially affordable childcare, care services, formalisation incentives and activation measures for women;
- help modernise public employment services and labour market intelligence systems, so that training and activation programmes respond better to real labour-market needs;
- support local and regional development projects, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, where weak services and limited opportunities are among the main drivers of emigration.

3. **Make institutions more functional, transparent and merit-based.** Governments should improve the efficiency of state institutions, reduce clientelism, strengthen anti-corruption reforms, and ensure that access to jobs, public services and opportunities depends on skills and performance rather than party links or personal connections. The EU should support this through clear, attainable reform milestones, technical support and credible rewards during the accession process.

   Focus group participants repeatedly linked emigration to the perception that public institutions do not work fairly, efficiently or predictably. Party-based employment, unequal access to services, weak communication with citizens and limited transparency all contribute to the sense that opportunities are reserved for those with connections rather than those with skills.

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The priority should therefore be broader than anti-corruption alone. Governments should improve the functioning of public administration, make recruitment and promotion more merit-based, simplify procedures, improve access to information, and make public institutions more responsive to citizens' concerns. These reforms are also necessary for the success of other policy areas, since better economic, social and labour-market policies require institutions that can design, implement and enforce them.

At the same time, meritocracy and anti-corruption reforms remain essential. These measures are important in their own right but also in terms of boosting institutional trust and enabling the success of reforms in other sectors. In fact, many focus group participants, most notably in Serbia and Moldova, advocated for stricter EU conditionality even if it delays EU accession in the short term in exchange for achieving more merit-based systems of governance in the long term.

While less dominant than economic concerns in the survey results, frustration with corruption featured quite saliently in the focus group discussions, especially in Serbia, where several participants were adamant that economic improvements alone would be insufficient in encouraging citizens to stay if not accompanied by institutional reform and its enforcement. Serbian participants also highlighted the lack of communication between the government and citizens – both in the form of insufficient government receptivity to citizen concerns as well as inadequate information channels for educational and professional growth opportunities.

More fundamental systemic reform was also discussed, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where several participants raised constitutional revisions as a precondition for any meaningful reform agenda. Inevitably, Ukraine emerged as a sui generis case where continued militarisation was identified by most participants as a necessary foundation for further socioeconomic development in the face of an existential security threat. This was contemplated within a more pessimistic scenario of a protracted frozen conflict with Russia, as a military-technological nexus, which however poses many challenges for the development of human capital and merit-based societies.

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Some concrete recommendations, on the grounds of the discussions in Jovanovic and Necev (2026), **for domestic policy makers**, are:

- strengthen the independence, resources and accountability of oversight bodies, anti-corruption agencies, audit institutions and judicial councils, with visible results especially in high-level cases;
- make public-sector recruitment, promotion and pay more transparent;
- simplify administrative procedures and expand digital public services, so that citizens and firms depend less on personal contacts and discretionary decisions;
- improve public procurement and public investment management through open data and stronger audits;

For the EU, the priority should be to:

- support independent oversight bodies and anti-corruption institutions through technical assistance and closer operational links with relevant EU institutions and networks. This is a relatively low-hanging fruit for the EU, which remains underused at the moment, but could have a sizeable effect by strengthening institutions that are central for fighting corruption and restoring public trust;
- support digitalisation of public administration, public procurement and court systems, as these reforms can reduce discretion and make institutions more predictable;

- monitor not only the adoption of laws and strategies, but also implementation, enforcement and citizens' trust in institutions.

4. **Accelerate EU accession and frontload the benefits of membership.** The EU should speed up accession where possible, and where this is not immediately feasible, provide earlier access to key benefits of membership, particularly EU funds and the Single Market. Pre-accession brain drain is higher in the five target countries than in past EU candidates, so providing young people – a key pro-EU constituency – with opportunities for a future at home is key both for living standard convergence and for EU accession. The key is to push for convergence in as many areas as possible during the accession process rather than upon accession, as brain drain will otherwise only exacerbate, slowing convergence further.

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At the same time, as one Serbian participant put it, EU accession might make brain drain more reversible and thus less harmful to the local economy ("If we joined the European Union, the circulation of people would become easier and simpler, and people would not be running away from this country anymore. Instead, they would simply leave and then return"). Some of the countries which joined the EU in 2004 have indeed seen some return migration in recent years, albeit on a relatively small scale (White 2022). Moreover, of the 10 countries that joined the EU in 2004, only Latvia is still a net emigration country, while all others have been (slightly) net immigration in most recent years.

The central tool at the EU's disposal for accelerating convergence is composed of its pre-accession support funds. While the EU Growth Plan has served as a welcome financial boost amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical crises, its size has so far largely amounted to an inflation correction on IPA funds, rather than a meaningful increase in financial commitment (Jovanovic 2024). Bolder steps in this direction, including by redirecting a larger portion of the funds from governmental to non-governmental actors, could have a considerable impact on convergence, as well as a non-negligible indirect impact on the EU's own future economic prospects.

Some concrete recommendations, on the grounds of the discussions in Jovanovic and Necev (2026), **for domestic policy makers**, are:

- treat EU accession not only as a legal process, but as a convergence process, with clear national targets for closing gaps with the EU across key economic, social and institutional outcomes;
- align Reform Agendas, national development strategies and sectoral reforms more explicitly with the accession process;
- strengthen administrative capacity for accession negotiations, EU legal alignment and implementation, especially in areas where gradual access to EU benefits could become possible;
- prepare credible negotiating positions for gradual access to EU budget funds and parts of the Single Market before full membership, while making clear that these should be steps towards accession, not substitutes for it;

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- communicate the benefits and obligations of EU accession more clearly to citizens, especially young people, so that the accession process remains credible and politically visible.

For the EU, the priority should be to:

- accelerate accession where possible, and as much as possible, so that the credibility of enlargement is restored;
- provide earlier and larger access to EU funds, including cohesion-style support, before full membership, because EU budget transfers have the strongest potential to accelerate convergence;
- gradually integrate candidate countries into selected parts of the Single Market easing trade as much as possible by alleviating non-tariff measures;
- expand access to EU programmes related to science and research, such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe and labour-mobility schemes, with strong knowledge-transfer components;
- channel more support directly to municipalities, universities, social partners, civil society, especially where central governments have weak implementation capacity;

Importantly, despite accession setbacks, citizens largely continue to believe in the transformative potential of the EU. Thus, if EU officials maintain a merit-based accession process, citizens' pro-EU attitudes will continue to exercise pressure for reform on policymakers. Crucially, however, palpable progress towards membership and ideally the imminent accession of at least some candidate countries will be needed to sustain these dynamics. Overall, this report has provided a unique methodological blend of up-to-date and carefully calibrated insights into citizens' perceptions of the trends, causes, and effects around the pivotal societal trend of brain drain. As argued in the recommendations above, curbing brain drain and facilitating convergence requires comprehensive and sustained reforms across economic, institutional, and social domains.

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