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Sustainability and foreign workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Addressing labor shortages and concerns over UN 2030 Agenda

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Abstract

This article examines the integration challenges faced by foreign workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on qualitative data from 16 workers across various professions. It addresses how these workers perceive integration policies and the legal, bureaucratic, social, and cultural barriers they encounter. With a significant outflow of skilled labor from Bosnia, foreign workers play a crucial role in filling the workforce gaps. The European Migration Network predicts a need for 45 million qualified workers in Western Europe, including Bosnia, by 2030, prompting a high emigration rate from the Western Balkans, which, in turn, will increase the demand for foreign labor. This will, in turn, make it more complex for BiH to fulfill its commitment to the Agenda 2030, as set forth by the United Nations in 2015, through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A low birth rate contributes to the increasing need to increase the labor force, which may ultimately result in social engineering. Although the number of foreign workers in Bosnia has increased, they experience limited access to integration programs and face social isolation and administrative hurdles, which this article analyzes and aims to emphasize better integration policies. Future studies can explore the social acceptance of foreign workers by the locals in Bosnia.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canton Sarajevo, Emigration, Foreign workers, Integration policies, Agenda 2030, UN SDGs, Global Goals

1. Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter referred to as BiH or Bosnia), once considered a country "immune" to foreign workers, is now experiencing an increase in their number.[1] This happens simultaneously with population emigration and a decrease in the birth rate, which concerns the country's demographic situation and leads to the demand for foreign workers[2] [1]. Contemporary migration in Bosnia can be divided into three distinct waves.

[1] For this study, a foreign worker is a person who does not possess the nationality of Bosnia, the country of residence.
[2] Contemporary migration in Bosnia can be divided into three distinct waves. The first wave occurred when Bosnia was part of the former Yugoslavia (1945–1990), with economic factors driving emigration as the demand for labor in more developed European economies increased. The second wave took place during the Bosnian War (1992–1995) when around a quarter of the population was forced to flee, making the Bosnian diaspora one of the largest in Europe compared to the population size. The third wave emerged in the post-conflict period, starting after 2000.

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The European Migration Network (EMN) predicted that Western European countries will need 35 million new skilled laborers for economic development by 2030 [2, p. 90], which will probably trigger new emigration waves from the Western Balkans. In 2023, 11.2 million non-EU citizens worked in the European Union (EU), making up 5.7% of the 196.8 million working-age population [3].

Bosnia is no exception in the emigration trend in the Western Balkans, but it also experiences demographic challenges such as a declining and aging population, income differences, and political instabilities[3] [4], which have amplified the demand for a foreign workforce[4] [5]. According to research conducted in 2021 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on a sample of 5,000 individuals aged 18 to 30 in Bosnia, 47% of young people are considering leaving the country. Of these, 23% are considering temporarily leaving, while 24% are considering permanent relocation. The study highlights that young people in Bosnia are dissatisfied with their standard of living and quality of life. Additionally, they lack trust in public institutions and do not believe that the authorities are genuinely concerned about their interests.

The increased number of foreign workers shows Bosnia is no longer only a transit country for international migration to the EU but also a destination for work. At the same time, the increase in foreign labor has increased security concerns, especially after the 2015 migrant crisis, which reshaped the public discourse on migration [6]. Nevertheless, this article does not address the security question that arises whenever the question of migration is raised, which is already a question of its own importance. Instead, it is interested in the foreign nationals who work and live in Bosnia and the legal, bureaucratic, social, and cultural barriers they encounter.

Although the position of foreign workers in the Bosnian labor market has become an important topic, research on the existing problems and issues related to this segment remains limited. This leads to partial social integration, as there are limited or no integration programs and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures. These challenges result in problems such as social isolation, vulnerability to exploitation, and difficulty in establishing contact with the local population due to the lack of integration efforts. It is essential to address these issues if foreign workers are to be protected, and one must create conditions that can help attract qualified human capital, as the labor market in Bosnia is experiencing increasing demand.

The central question of this article is whether foreign workers will be integrated into the social and legal framework of Bosnia or will they remain temporary workers with limited rights. Integrating foreign workers into the labor market is crucial, as is ensuring that they receive the same protections as domestic workers. The absence of integration programs can lead to an increase in the social isolation of foreign workers, posing a security risk.

This article focuses on some of the central features of the position of foreign workers in Bosnia, namely their citizenship status, prospects of obtaining long-term residence permits, and their legal status in the scope of immigration and labor laws, as well as prescribed targets 1.2 of SDG 1 (No Poverty), 3.8 of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 5.1 of SDG 5 (Gender Equality), 8.5 of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10.2 of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), 11.3 of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 16.2 of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and 17.16 and 17.18 of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

[3] These factors have contributed to an estimated annual population decline of around 25,000 people between 2013 and 2020.

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The aim was not only to analyze the legal framework but also to understand the perceptions of foreign workers, which in turn enabled an understanding of the problems in the integration process. However, the article also examines today's foreign workers in Bosnia with the understanding that the demand for foreign workers is growing. However, the Bosnian experience of using foreign workers dates back to the socialist period of the former Yugoslavia, when the number of foreign workers was relatively small in Bosnia. Some workers' descendants have become naturalized citizens, making integration possible in recent years. Thus, foreign workers are not a novelty for Bosnia and the rest of the Western Balkan countries, but there has been an increase in their number compared to the previous years.[5] One of the most important but insufficiently researched issues is the ethnic and demographic impact of foreign employees in Bosnia, especially those who plan to stay in the long term and pursue the naturalization process. In smaller countries like Bosnia, changes in population dynamics are more acutely felt, and some perceive the increasing presence of foreign workers as a threat to the existing demographic and ethnic balance in the country. That is why opposition to foreign workers is not only an economic issue but also an issue of identity and stability in society.

The trend of increasing foreign workers means that the status of foreign workers in Bosnia can no longer be ignored. Bosnia issued 2,449 work permits in 2023[6] [7], and the quota for 2024 was 6,073 [7], which is a noticeable increase but far below the Trade Union's estimate of 30,000 workers needed to fill labor shortages in the construction, trade, hospitality, and education sectors [8]. In 2023, Bosnia's largest groups of foreign workers came from the Republic of Turkey, the Republic of Serbia, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, and the Republic of India. The most significant increases compared to the previous year were observed among citizens of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, and the People's Republic of Bangladesh. These statistics underscore the increasing demand for foreign workers to ensure economic stability in Bosnia, as well as the necessity for integration programs to support long-term residents. Moreover, one option for overcoming labor shortages is to adopt the positive practices of EU member states, as a country aiming to become a Member State, as further discussed in this article [9].

In this sense, importing foreign workers is a short-term solution to the labor shortage and a long-term requirement for the country's economic sustainability. Foreign workers play a crucial role in filling gaps in the Bosnian labor market, particularly as Bosnia faces an aging population and a persistent outflow of its local workforce. The question, however, is whether foreign labor management fits into the social, cultural, and political factors that define the future of Bosnia. As the number of foreign workers increases, it will be crucial to integrate them into Bosnia's society and legal systems to support sustainable development and ensure human rights for all individuals under its jurisdiction, without discrimination.

2. Literature review

In 2025, Bosnia marks the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which ended the most devastating war in Europe since World War II, in which genocide and crimes against humanity were committed, among other crimes. For over three decades, Bosnia has been the subject of extensive research and the focus of numerous studies by scholars, addressing its governance, state-building efforts, and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, some contemporary issues and challenges facing Bosnia, such as the increasing number of foreign workers, have been under-researched, despite the large number of papers. This article aims to fill this gap. Numerous studies have focused on Bosnia's political system, which is characterized by the federal and

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decentralized political system created by the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). In his 2013 book *Multinational Federalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Soeren Keil focuses on "imposed federalism" and the international community's role in institution-building [10]. Bosnia's DPA is implemented through the Office of the High Representative (OHR), which is at the center of the controversy regarding the country's democratization process. Some authors, including Roberto Belloni and Jasmina Ramović, identified that OHR interventions have more entrenched political deadlock than facilitated progress [11]. Compounding these issues is the ethnic veto, which Hamza Preljević and Mirza Ljubović explain. This veto prevents action and prolongs necessary changes, thus threatening EU integration [12]. Melek Aylin Özoflu and Bora Besgul are concerned with the problem of democratization in divided societies and how ethno-nationalist elites manipulate institutional weaknesses to consolidate their power [13]. This debate about international interventionism and local ownership in Bosnia remains at the heart of the literature, and authors like Adis Merdžanović have questioned whether such interventions can promote reform or undermine local ownership [14].

The edited volume *Foreign Policy of Bosnia and Herzegovina Since Independence* by Jasmin Hasić and Dženeta Karabegović examines Bosnian foreign policy over the past 25 years, focusing on the post-war period, its Euro-Atlantic integration, bilateral relations with other countries, and international organizations and agencies of weak states [15]. While this work highlights the complexity of aligning domestic and international priorities, studies of Bosnia's aspirations for NATO and the EU highlight persistent obstacles, such as political fragmentation and opposition from Republika Srpska [16]. The EU's conditionality mechanism has not led to significant changes due to opposition from national political elites [17-23]. Thus, progress on the "5+2 agenda" – the roadmap for EU integration and the closure of the OHR – has been more declarative. Other factors that have emerged from the literature on Bosnia's post-war development include economic hardship, youth emigration, and systemic corruption [24]. These problems have aggravated Bosnia's domestic politics, particularly regarding its memberships in the EU and NATO. Additionally, authors such as Lea Milovich and Marinus Ossewaarde addressed the reform of the public administration system [25].

Recent studies have expanded the discussion to encompass non-traditional security challenges, including migration, the influence of external actors, and their overall impact on Bosnia. In his work on the post-2015 migrant crisis, Kenan Hodžić concluded that Bosnia still lacks a coherent migration policy, resulting in a conflict between security interests and a humanitarian approach to addressing the crisis [6]. However, research into Russian and Chinese engagement in Bosnia, including investments and diplomatic initiatives, reveals how these actors complicate the country's efforts to join the EU and NATO, which are key aspirations in the country's foreign policy and strategic documents [26], [27]. Issues of transitional justice and reconciliation remain essential. Faruk Tekşen evaluates the role of the war crimes tribunal in promoting social cohesion, while other scholars examine the impact of social movements and local initiatives on post-conflict recovery [28]. Dženeta Karabegović examines the impact of the Bosnian diaspora on political and social processes in Bosnia, illustrating how international connections shape local realities [29]. Nick Williams extends this by assessing the economic impacts of the diaspora population, particularly on development investment, and the importance of policies that promote this investment more [30].

Literature is abundant on various topics and subjects, but the issue of foreign workers in Bosnia has not been extensively researched. This gap is essential, as Bosnia is experiencing an increasing number of imported workers who require a thorough legal, social, and cultural analysis of their integration. This is a significant drawback of the current literature, which this article seeks to address by establishing the importance of future research, as well as ensuring the country's priorities around the Global Goals are actually put to work and produce positive effects on the whole population and foreigners who reside in Bosnia.

3. Methodology

This article utilizes a comprehensive in-country data collection approach, focusing on Sarajevo Canton, Bosnia. The purposive sampling targeted foreign workers who were non-citizens of Bosnia, investigating major issues and concerns related to their integration.

Some of the particularities of the barriers to integration are discussed in the article, including discrimination, social support, healthcare, and pension contributions. It explained how these factors influence the life career plans and the social inclusion of foreign workers. Furthermore, the article examines the experiences and perspectives of foreign workers on social relations, acceptance, and policy, and the integration of foreign workers appears to have a significant impact on society. This article examines the sufficiency and adequacy of integration policies, as well as the implications of integrating foreign workers into Bosnian society.

The participants' demographic profile is diverse. Most interviewees (62.5%) are between 20 and 39 years old, with a gender distribution of 62.5% men and 37.5% women. Regarding religion, 56.25% declare themselves as Muslims, 18.75% as Christians, 18.75% have no religious affiliation, and 6.25% declare themselves agnostic. The sample is diverse in terms of nationality, with 37.5% from Turkey and the rest from Germany, Serbia, Iran, Syria, the USA, Italy, Brazil, Slovakia, Austria, and the Netherlands. Most participants (93.75%) are from countries unaffected by war, and 93.75% did not seek asylum, indicating a relatively stable migratory origin of the foreign workers participating in this study.

The length of stay in Bosnia varies among participants. The largest group (50%) has lived in Bosnia for 11 to 20 years, 31.25% have lived there for 1 to 5 years, and 18.75% have lived there for 6 to 10 years. Ten interviewees (62.5%) have permanent residence. Regarding family, 62.5% are married, 31.25% are single, and 6.25% are divorced. Regarding children, 50% have one child, 43.75% have none, and 6.25% have two. Regarding education, 12.5% of interviewees hold a high school degree, 25% hold a bachelor's degree, 37.5% hold a master's degree, and 25% have a doctorate. Their professional backgrounds encompass a diverse range of fields, including tourism, banking, law, education, business ownership, retail, project management, marketing, hospitality (waitstaff and chefs), and security.

As for knowledge of the language, 56.25% of the interviewees speak Bosnian fluently, 18.75% are beginners, and 25% have not learned Bosnian. The majority (62.5%) felt adapting to local customs and language was relatively easy, although 31.25% experienced difficulties. Most participants had a negative view of economic conditions, rating employment, wages, and working conditions as poor. Only a small number (6.25%) consider these conditions favorable. Regarding the legal and administrative procedures for foreign workers, 43.75% of interviewees consider them inadequate, 37.5% consider them partially effective, and 18.75% believe that these procedures meet the needs of foreign workers.

As a case study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 foreign workers across various sectors in the Sarajevo Canton. Snowball sampling was also used to identify interviewees, which is particularly useful in this type of research, as the researcher had limited networks among foreign workers in Bosnia [31]. According to ethical research norms, the interviews were conducted in Arabic, Bosnian, Turkish, and English between September and November 2024, and were anonymized to protect the individuals' identities. However, this presents a research constraint, as foreign workers who spoke neither Arabic, Bosnian, English, nor Turkish were omitted from the study.

Thematic analysis was applied as the primary strategy for categorizing the qualitative data from the in-depth interviews. Participants' perspectives, accounts, and comments were analyzed using systematic coding and searching for recurring patterns. This process provided significant insights and the comprehensive information required to accomplish the research intent, shedding light on precise actions to be undertaken to achieve the identified targets under the relevant SDGs [32].

4. Demographic shifts and labor market challenges in Bosnia

The labor market in Bosnia presents several significant economic challenges, including an imbalance in labor supply, education, and financial demand within the country. However, structural problems remain deeply rooted and have been exacerbated by slow economic growth and a decline in the working-age population, primarily

due to aging and emigration. An analysis of data from 2005 to 2023 shows that the population naturally declines over time, and the mortality rate has increased since the 2000s. In 2023, there were 35,471 deaths and 26,451 births, which gave a negative growth rate of -9,020. In addition, by analyzing data on population growth rates for 2005-2023, a total of 710,002 deaths and 584,575 births is reported, resulting in a negative growth rate of -125,427 [33]. The population's emigration also adds importance, for which no official statistics on actual numbers exist. However, unofficial data suggests that there are 600,000 inhabitants or citizens/nationals. Left Bosnia from 2013 to 2023 [34].

Demographic changes, rather than employment opportunities, are the primary factors driving the evolution of the Bosnian labor market. The two main factors are the increasing percentage of the population over 60 years old and the continuous process of emigration of the population under 40 years old, i.e., the working population. This demographic decline exacerbates the existing unemployment problem and shortage of human resources, underscoring the need for strategic actions to address changes in labor market distribution. One such action is to search for qualified employees outside the territory of Bosnia. Consequently, over the last several decades, there has been an increasing reliance on foreign workers to meet key economic needs, thereby altering the nature of work in the country. Foreign workers would benefit from policies that integrate them into society and the labor market under Target 10.2 of Goal 10 on reduced inequalities.

Table 1. Comparison of proposed and issued work permits in BiH (2014–2023) [35]

YEAR	BiH (Proposed)	Federation of BiH (Proposed)	Republika Srpska (Proposed)	Brčko District BiH (Proposed)	BiH (Issued)	Federation of BiH (Issued)	Republika Srpska (Issued)	Brčko District BiH (Issued)
2014	1949	950	800	199	2197	1370	634	193
2015	1886	890	800	196	2465	1497	818	150
2016	1581	885	600	96	2628	1605	890	133
2017	1691	995	600	95	2593	1682	769	142
2018	1590	900	600	90	2822	1806	881	135
2019	1570	880	600	90	3183	2010	1042	131
2020	1560	880	600	80	2586	1623	863	100
2021	1340	660	600	80	2775	1721	917	137
2022	3340	1850	1400	90	3780	2076	1447	257
2023	3995	2435	1400	160	4586	2301	1969	316

Several trends can be detected by examining Bosnia's proposed and issued work permits from 2014 to 2023. During this period, proposed allocations for work permits remained stable, ranging between 1,340 and 1,949 from 2014 to 2021. However, the numbers increased in 2022 and 2023 to 3,340 and 3,995 proposals, respectively. The total number of work permits in Bosnia has also gradually increased over the years, reaching a peak of 4,586 in 2023. These data points to the fulfillment of several SDGs: target 1.2 of SDG 1 (No Poverty) and target 8.5 of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The statistics may look grim at first glance from the perspective of the domestic labor force. However, since domestic workers often emigrate in large numbers, vacancies arise for foreign workers who are compelled, mostly by their life circumstances, to leave their countries of origin. In today's globalized world, we can expect a rising trend of foreign work, which has been the case so far, as examined and demonstrated in the above table, except during the COVID-19 period.

Proposed work permits for the Federation of BiH increased from 950 in 2014 to 995 in 2017, fluctuated between 880 and 900 from 2018 to 2021, and then increased to 1,850 in 2022 and 2,435 in 2023. Allocations peaked at 2,301 in 2023, up from 1,370 in 2014, indicating a greater need for foreign workers. In Republika Srpska, allocations remained practically unchanged between 2014 and 2021, with 600 proposed permits, although the number increased to 800 in 2014 and 2015. However, there was a significant increase in 2022 and 2023 when the proposed quota for issuing work permits was 1,400. The number of work permits in the Republika Srpska

increased from 634 in 2014 to 1,969 in 2023. Proposed allocations in the Brčko District had higher fluctuations, with 199 in 2014, 80 in 2020-2021, 90 in 2022, and 160 in 2023. The number of work permits issued in the Brčko District increased from 193 in 2014 to 316 in 2023.

Table 2. Comparison of issued work permits by country of origin in Bosnia (2014–2023)[7]

No.	Nationality	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
1	Serbia	642	701	752	679	733	798	653	622	661	624	6,865
2	Turkey	319	353	322	378	331	418	289	334	861	801	4,406
3	China	288	238	171	130	147	176	129	124	169	241	1,813
4	Croatia	237	214	197	162	170	166	149	193	169	164	1,821
5	Italy	81	109	128	98	110	95	86	82	-	-	789
6	Kuwait	52	75	118	110	114	122	119	122	137	123	1,092
7	Syria	24	46	77	95	94	114	99	87	91	93	820
8	Montenegro	69	74	62	60	73	92	70	88	102	123	813
9	Saudi Arabia	26	54	63	65	87	110	84	108	97	89	783
10	Russia	45	49	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	94
11	Egypt	-	-	53	88	116	123	87	68	-	-	535
12	UAE	-	-	55	68	66	73	63	92	-	-	417
13	Nepal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	78	401	479
14	Pakistan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	22	125	147
15	Bangladesh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	123	394	517
16	India	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	122	246	368
17	Slovenia	52	59	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	111
18	Other Countries	362	493	630	660	781	896	758	855	1,148	1,162	7,745
Total		2,197	2,465	2,628	2,593	2,822	3,183	2,586	2,775	3,780	4,586	29,615

Foreign workers are now in Bosnia due to increasing internationalization and globalization. Workers are mainly from Serbia, Turkey, South Asia, and the Middle East. However, among them, Serbia remains the primary source of foreign workers, with 6,865 permits issued between 2014 and 2023, demonstrating a strong connection between the two countries. Serbia remains the primary source of foreign workers, with 6,865 permits issued between 2014 and 2023. Annual figures for Serbian citizens vary between 642 and 798 permits, indicating a stable demand for labor from neighboring Bosnia. Turkey follows with 4,406 work permits issued during that period. Turkey's share increased significantly from 334 work permits in 2021 to 861 in 2022, reflecting a peak in demand for Turkish labor, especially in the construction, trade, and services sectors. South Asian nationals, including Nepalese, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and Indians, became the most sought-after workers in the construction and tourism sectors, with Nepal alone receiving 401 permits in 2023. At the same time, Middle Eastern countries became a source of labor supply, as employment in Bosnia attracted Kuwaitis and Saudis to fill labor shortages in various sectors.

The employment of foreign workers between 2014 and 2023 varied across different sectors, with some industries declining while others increasing. The construction sector experienced the highest growth rates of all the sectors, while the work permits rose from 86 in 2014 to 1368 in 2023 due to infrastructural development

[7] Ministry of Security of BiH. (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, & 2023). BiH Migration Profile 2014; BiH Migration Profile 2015; BiH Migration Profile 2016; BiH Migration Profile 2017; BiH Migration Profile 2018; BiH Migration Profile 2019; BiH Migration Profile 2020; BiH Migration Profile 2021; BiH Migration Profile 2022; & BiH Migration Profile 2023.

and a lack of skilled human resources. This increase can be attributed to the higher number of infrastructure projects, the higher demand for foreigners in Bosnia, and the emigration of skilled construction labor to EU member states. Similarly, the manufacturing industry has seen high permit rates over the years and is growing in the 2020s. Wholesale and retail trade and vehicle repair remain the most common sectors employing foreign workers. However, there are oscillations in these numbers compared to the numbers in 2024 compared to previous years. The gradual fall in permits issued is attributed to low demand or oversupply in industries such as education and health services. On the other hand, the hospitality and tourism industries are gradually expanding because of the expansion of tourist attractions in Bosnia. Moreover, other subsectors, like real estate and technical services, also posted support from foreign workers and stable performance. Overall, the issued work permits guarantee that foreign workers are treated fairly and are given access to health and pension insurance, housing, access to justice, fair wages, protection from discrimination, alleviation of poverty, contributing to the fulfillment of undertaken responsibilities of Goals 1, 3, 8, 5, 10, 11, 16 and 17.

The level of education of foreign workers provides a picture of their diversity of skills, which indicates a change in market demands. Between 2014 and 2018, foreign workers with higher education consistently made up the largest share of foreign workers, with the highest percentage in 2018 at 49%. However, this share gradually declined in the following years, amounting to 27 percent in 2023, while the share of workers with secondary education remained almost constant, varying between 26 and 31 percent. At the same time, there was a significant increase in the share of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, which rose from around 8% to 10% in earlier years to 24% in 2023, indicating increased demand for labor in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and trade.

The gender disparity exists in the labor market in Bosnia, which reflects the increase in the demand for labor in sectors that are considered to be male-dominated. It becomes clear that men receive most of the work permits year after year. For example, 1,697 men applied for permits compared to only 500 women who applied for the same permits in 2014. This trend has continued year after year, with men receiving the most significant number of permits each year. By 2023, the number of work permits issued to men had increased to 4,186, while women received only 400. This particular statistic, when scrutinized from the perspective of target 5.1 of Goal 5, does not look promising. However, we must consider the circumstances that led to the statistics being reported. Namely, as industries that experience a chronic lack of workforce are those where men have traditionally been dominant, the gap does not appear as discouraging anymore. By all means, women should not, and there is no evidence to support it either, be discriminated against in obtaining work permits.

Labor market dynamics in Bosnia show that the growth in demand for foreign labor has both positive and negative aspects. The problems of demographic decline and emigration create significant pressure on the internal labor market; however, migrant workers are necessary to fill important job vacancies and contribute to the country's sustainable development in times of fragile balance across industries.

5. Brief overview of Bosnia's legal framework related to foreign workers

Bosnia's legal framework for foreign workers ensures fairness in legal affairs through a constitutional division of jurisdiction. The regulation of foreigners' status is a state interest, and most relevant provisions are set at the state level. The most pertinent general legal document dealing with the general status of foreigners is the *Law on Foreigners of BiH*, which regulates entry procedures, visa regime, travel documents, types of residence, and surveillance measures.[8] This law aligns with several EU directives on the legal status of foreigners.[9] Bosnia, as

[8] Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina, No. 88/2015, 34/2021, 63/2023), hereinafter LFBIH. The Law on Asylum is also highly relevant to determining foreigners' asylum status. However, this article focuses on the LFBIH because it is a more general law dealing with foreigners' general status.

[9] For example, Directive 2019/1155 on Establishment of Codification of Visa Community, Directive 2016/399 on Codification on Schengen Borders, Directive 2016/801 on Conditions of Entrance and Residence of citizens of other countries for research, studies, voluntary work, exchange or educational projects and jobs au pair, Directive 2021/1883 on conditions for entrance and residence of other country citizens for employment of highly qualifies workers and others.

a country not a member of the EU, is not under an obligation to apply the EU's legal framework related to foreign workers, nor the schemes for attracting skilled workers, such as the "Blue Card" scheme. However, as a candidate country, it is under an obligation to gradually align its national laws with EU legislation, including that related to the employment of foreign workers.

This law defines "foreigner" as an individual who is not a citizen of Bosnia.[10] It is based on two key principles: non-discrimination and respect for the rule of law. Non-discrimination prohibits unequal treatment based on gender, race, language, religion, or social origin, which helps ensure equal rights and enforce equal duties, especially in integration.[11]

The law also outlines conditions for the entry and stay of foreign persons, including provisions for visas and residence permits. Three types of visas are prescribed: the airport transit visa (Visa A), the short-term visa (Visa B), and the long-term stay visa (Visa C). The law regulates the conditions for their achievement, the relevant documents and authorities for issuing them, and the conditions for their annulment.[12] Additionally, four types of residence are recognized: visa residence, non-visa residence, temporary residence, and permanent residence. Whereas visa residence is based on the visa granted to the foreigner for the validity indicated in the visa, visa-free residence is based on the foreigner's nationality with a visa-free regime with Bosnia. However, within the framework of a visa-free regime, a foreigner can stay in the country for a maximum of 90 days within a 180-day period.

Temporary residence is permitted for several reasons, including family reunification, education, humanitarian reasons, employment, and other justified reasons.[13] The Law regulates the conditions for each type of stay and the evidence that must be provided with the application. For this article's purposes, emphasis is placed on work with and without a work permit and the work of highly qualified workers. Work permits are required for foreigners seeking paid employment in Bosnia. Prospective employers submit applications to the relevant authorities in the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska, or the Brčko District. Following the migration policy and the state of the labor market, these permits are issued for a period of one year only, and the number is regulated by quotas established by the Council of Ministers. However, there are exceptions to these quotas, which are permitted under specific conditions, such as seasonal employment or the hiring of qualified workers.[14]

Seasonal workers are a special group under the Law on Foreigners, as they obtain temporary residence permits to work during the season and hold temporary contracts. This residence permit can be issued for a period of 90 to 180 days within a 12-month period.[15]

Temporary residence may also be granted for work without a work permit in certain circumstances, such as the employment of highly qualified individuals, the transfer of personnel within the same company, scientific purposes, and where certificates serve as substitutes for permits.[16] This means highly skilled workers can legally work and live in Bosnia under strict conditions through the so-called "Blue Card", initially issued for up to 24 months. Qualifications involve an open announcement of an employment opportunity in a job vacancy, publicized in Bosnia, and proof that no local citizen is qualified to perform the job. The candidates should be educated, have higher degree certificates, and have at least five years of practice in the related field. While the

[10] Article 6 (a) LFBIH.
[11] Articles 9 and 10 LFBIH.
[12] Articles 28 to 40 LFBIH.
[13] Article 48 LFBIH.
[14] Compared with the practice of the EU, the most recent amendments to the Croatian Law on Foreigners (No. 133/20, 114/22, 151/22 and 40/2025), which many describe as the most flexible in the Region. That characteristic emerged as a result of the EU's flows and Croatia's labor force needs. The most relevant novelties are related to the work permit. Until this Law, they have been given for one year for a specific worker, working for a specific employer. Should the contract be terminated before one year, the work permit will also be terminated. With the new Law, the work permit would not be terminated, allowing the worker to continue searching for a job and re-employment. Additionally, the duration of the temporary residence permit has been extended to three years. That kind of approach may serve as a positive example to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it brings flexibility to employment and enhances the living standard of foreign workers.
[15] Article 69 (1-5) LFBIH.
[16] Article 71 LFBH.

Blue Card is portable, it binds the worker to the job and the employer for which they obtained the card, and they cannot easily switch employers during the card's validity.[17]

The law also addresses the circumstances under which a foreign national can work without a work permit.[18] Such situations include permanent residence, refugee or temporary protection, temporary residence for family reunification, temporary residence based on marriage or common-law marriage with a Bosnian citizen, or a temporary residence permit for the education of a person with the status of a regular pupil or student when performing work of a temporary nature. Work is permitted without requiring an additional work permit, provided it complies with the country's existing legal framework.

Further, provisions related to permanent residence are defined, including criteria and procedures for granting permanent residence status. These provisions provide long-term security for foreigners who qualify for such residence status while protecting against possible abuses of the provisions. The law also includes measures on how foreigners should be accompanied out of the country and shielded from exploitation, which shows that the government is committed to reasonable legislation of business and human rights.

Laws at the entity level complement the state-level framework, with legislation in the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska, and Brčko District regulating the conditions for the employment of foreign workers.[19] These laws outline the procedures for issuing work permits, including their issuance and renewal, as well as the details of the procedure, and specify the penalties to be imposed on those who violate them. However, differences remain, particularly regarding fines for violations of employment laws. For example, in the Republika Srpska, the range of penalties is from 500 to 50,000 KM; in the Federation of BiH, from 2,000 to 10,000 KM; and in the Brčko District, the fine ranges from 5,000 to 15,000 KM. This type of disparity within a single legal regime can create confusion and must be addressed to maintain legal certainty and fairness. This evident discrepancy in the punitive measures should be avoided in the amendments of these laws, taken that they are applicable within the territory of one state, and differences as such may cause legal uncertainty, especially if taken in conjunction with target 16.3 of SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, which emphasizes the grave need to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

Regarding international labor law frameworks, BiH has demonstrated a strong commitment to international labor standards through its ratification of 83 International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions and one Protocol. The country has ratified all 10 of the ILO's fundamental conventions and all 4 governance conventions. Of the 83 conventions and 1 protocol ratified, 65 are currently in force, while 10 conventions and 0 protocols have been denounced, and 9 instruments have been abrogated. No new ratifications have occurred in the past 12 months [36].

Furthermore, the constitutional structure of BiH, particularly the fact that its Constitution is part of a peace agreement aimed primarily at ending the war (specifically Annex IV of the General Framework Agreement for Peace - GFAP), grants constitutional status to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (EConvHR) under Article 2, Paragraph 2 of the Constitution. In addition, Annex I of the Constitution enumerates 15 human rights treaties, including significant labor-related agreements such as the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families [37].

Given the positive practices observed in EU member states, one potential improvement to Bosnia's legal framework could be the introduction of a national version of the "Blue Card" scheme. Such a scheme would attract skilled workers to sectors with insufficient labor, addressing skill shortages in a more structured and

[17] Article 72 LFBIH.
[18] Article 78 LFBH.
[19] Law on Employment of Foreigners of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Official Gazette of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 111/12), Law on Employment of Foreigners and Apatrids of Republika Srpska (Official Gazette of Republika Srpska, 117/11), Law on Employment of Foreigners of Brčko District BH (Official Gazette of Brčko District, 15/09, 19/09, 20/10).

efficient manner. This could help Bosnia better align its labor policies with EU standards and improve outcomes in sectors requiring highly qualified workers.

6. The status of foreign workers in the EU and its Member States

One of Bosnia's primary foreign policy objectives is to achieve EU membership. This ambition is accompanied by the need to harmonize the country's laws with EU legislation, which Bosnia is obliged to do under Article 70 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). Some of the EU's legislative solutions and the practices of Member States regarding foreign workers can serve as good practices for Bosnia, a country that is ambitious to join the EU.

EU citizens enjoy freedom of movement under EU law, whereas the EU-level and specific national policies and legislation regulate access to the EU labor market for non-EU citizens. The EU has developed several directives to establish an extensive framework for using third-country nationals in the labor market. However, the member states preserved divergent rules and policies on entry, residence, and labor market access [38, p. 335]. Thus, the access of non-EU citizens to the labor market is mainly impacted by state-level decision-making.

One of the EU-level legislative initiatives is the EU *Blue Card* (Directive 2009/50/EC and the revised Directive 2021/1883) [39] [40], which facilitates third-country nationals' access to work, residence, and family reunification. However, member states regulate certain aspects, including payment thresholds, which results in inconsistencies in the implementation of the system. Germany is a positive example, as it sets a relatively lower salary threshold for applicants to the EU Blue Card while granting access to social benefits such as healthcare, unemployment insurance, and pensions [41, p. 66]. In contrast, Italy applies restrictive quota systems that limit the number of work permits issued annually. Although the EU Blue Card is also available in Italy, the number of Blue Card users is relatively low, partly due to higher salary thresholds [42, p. 46].

The *Single Permit Directive* (Directive 2011/98/EU and Directive 2024/1233) enables third-country nationals to apply for a single permit that entitles them to work and reside in a Member State. The single permit gives third-country nationals the same treatment as a comparable Union citizen in terms of social security and tax advantages [43], [44]. However, differences related to duration of validity, possibility of renewal, access to social security, and ease of access can vary between member states.

Other directives address specific needs, such as the *Seasonal Workers Directive* (2014/36/EU), which permits the admission of non-EU nationals for employment purposes in sectors like agriculture and tourism [45, p. 60]. The *Intra-Corporate Transfer Directive* (2014/66/EU) regulates the temporary transfer of non-EU nationals working within multinational corporations [46]. However, while these frameworks exist, member states can still exercise a considerable degree of autonomy; therefore, various systems have developed.

Due to the country's growing labor shortage, Germany introduced the *Skilled Workers Immigration Act* (Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz) in 2000 to simplify the recruitment of skilled workers from outside the EU in high-demand sectors [41, p. 66]. Austria and France have developed their own tailored programs, such as the Austrian *"Red-White-Red"* card and the French *"Talent Passport* [41, p. 48]*."*

One of the key issues concerns the position of family members of third-country nationals in the EU, where significant differences in the regulation of family reunification and residence exist among Member States. The *Family Reunification Directive* (Directive 2003/86/EC) [47] establishes general principles for family reunification but allows Member States to impose additional conditions, such as income requirements, standard accommodation, and timeframes [48, p. 376].

Non-EU citizens face various challenges in the EU labor market. Language barriers often impede progress, as certain countries' legislation defines requirements for fluency in local languages when granting work permits. Even when non-EU workers use English or another non-local language in employment, the requirement to be fluent in the local language can be an additional burden [49, p. 519]. Another challenge is the lengthy recognition of qualifications obtained outside the EU. Even non-EU citizens can be required to complete additional courses.

Certain professions, such as healthcare, law, and engineering, may have strict national licensing requirements, which can sometimes delay or prevent non-EU nationals from accessing the EU labor market [49, p. 519].

The EU's *Long-Term Residence Directive* (2003/109/EC) provides some mobility for third-country nationals after five years of consecutive legal residency, but newcomers are more restricted [50]. This restricted mobility affects careers and escalates inequalities in the treatment of Member States [51, p. 208].

Even if the EU legislative framework has been adopted, the application of directives and the status of non-EU workers are still heterogeneous. National systems differ significantly in employment, residence, and social benefits conditions, resulting in critical labor shortages in many sectors.

To improve these systems, several options exist. For instance, a unified framework for recognizing foreign qualifications could create a more predictable pathway for filling skill shortages. Additionally, the requirements for local language proficiency, particularly for workers who do not use the local language in their jobs, may need to be reassessed to reduce unnecessary barriers. Lastly, more flexible rules for family reunification could help improve workers' job stability and retention, as restrictive policies can discourage workers from staying in their positions.

7. Foreign workers in Bosnia: Case study of Sarajevo Canton

Bosnia is a decentralized country, consisting of the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska, and Brčko District. The Federation is further divided into ten cantons, with Sarajevo Canton being one of the most prominent, both politically and culturally. However, Sarajevo Canton, like much of Bosnia, faces significant challenges, including a shortage of skilled workers. This shortage is not unique to the region but is a nationwide issue. Due to the region's strategic importance, Sarajevo serves as a vital case study for examining the integration experiences of foreign citizens, drawing on insights from interviews with 16 foreign residents.

As the demand for foreign workers increases, understanding the challenges they face in the integration process becomes critical. Work plays a central role in the lives of individuals, and for many foreigners, securing employment in Bosnia is a significant step in their journey. The experiences shared by interviewees reveal the varied paths foreigners take to enter the Bosnian labor market, particularly through the case study of those residing and working in the Sarajevo Canton. Some, like Interviewees 1, 5, 7, and 12, pursued entrepreneurship as a means to access employment opportunities, while others, such as Interviewees 6, 7, 9, and 11, emphasized the importance of networking in a labor market that offers limited openings. Additionally, many secured jobs through international organizations, multinational companies, and recruitment agencies, as noted by Interviewees 2, 3, 13, and 16. For others, traditional methods such as online job portals were sufficient, as highlighted by Interviewees 4 and 8. Meanwhile, Interviewee 14 found employment after graduating in Bosnia. Despite these diverse routes, structural challenges persist, as discussed by Interviewees 1 and 12, who highlighted the difficulties foreign workers face in transitioning to new jobs or exploring better opportunities, thereby underscoring the constraints of the Bosnian labor market compared to other countries, such as Germany or Austria.

Interviewees indicate varying levels of understanding among foreign workers in Bosnia about their rights. For instance, Interviewee 1 considers his knowledge 'partially,' while Interviewee 2 says he is 'most partially informed. Interviewee 8's awareness is evolving, yet she views rights reactively. Interviewee 6 notes that knowledge is hindered because many foreign workers cannot locate their embassies in Sarajevo, despite the growing number of foreign workers from these countries. Embassies primarily help their citizens abroad, and many foreign workers in Bosnia lack this support. Conversely, Interviewees 3 and 9 are well-informed about their rights, whereas Interviewees 14 and 15 remain uncertain. Interviewee 13 highlights issues that foreign workers face, such as the inability to vote in local elections, unlike in some Nordic countries, where they can vote after receiving permanent residency. Many interviewees believe that not knowing the local language and the country's political system limits foreign workers' ability to claim their rights, even when they have been

violated. Educated Interviewees believe the rights of less-educated workers are especially vulnerable. With the increasing number of foreign workers, inspection supervision must be improved to prevent exploitation and avoid unfavorable working conditions.

Healthcare management challenges foreign workers due to the fragmented and costly nature of systems. Many prefer private healthcare for convenience; Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, and 13 use only private services. Interviewee 3 emphasizes the importance of private insurance in Bosnia due to issues with government services. Interviewee 4 uses public healthcare but notes variations across entities and cantons, with Sarajevo Canton as the best. Interviewee 6 prefers private care but also uses public services. Interviewee 7 mainly uses public healthcare but resorts to private when necessary. Interviewee 8 opts for private care for routine visits and public services for emergencies. Interviewee 11 relies on public healthcare due to limited finances. Interviewee 12 travels to Turkey in the event of major health problems. Interviewee 14 complains about the lack of organizational structure in the Bosnian healthcare system, which is often inefficient and tends to favor private hospitals. Most interviewees also mentioned language barriers, which are an additional problem and often deter foreign workers from using the public health service.

There are differences in the responses to pension contributions, which only underscore the challenging aspects of international pension schemes. Some interviewees have doubts about whether they are recognized in their home countries. For instance, Interviewees 1, 4, 9, 11, and 13 have no precise information. Interviewee 13 explains how Bosnia and Austria's systems proved to be a struggle, with a special focus on the problems with handling contributions internationally. This is due to a broader incompatibility problem that threatens expatriate benefit loss. On the other hand, Interviewees 2, 5, 7, 8, and 10 affirm their payments but doubt their acknowledgment. Interviewee 7 says that even if they contribute to Bosnia, they never get appreciated at home. Interviewee 8 complicates the matter by identifying their residence as Bosnia. On a positive note, Interviewees 5, 14, and 15 have a positive attitude about the appreciation of their work. Interviewee 16 discusses pensions in the Netherlands, precisely the possibility of losing pensions for non-working years, despite having a job status that shields against recognition problems. This demonstrates that it is possible to overcome general difficulties connected with expatriates' employment through specific conditions.

The problems of foreign workers' integration are evident and concern the following aspects, as mentioned by the interviewees: bureaucracy, language, and culture. Structural barriers, including excessively long waiting periods to obtain work permits, cause significant stress and confusion, as evidenced by Interviewee 11's six-month wait. Interviewee 12 states that dysfunction among staff and political interference in government institutions exacerbate these problems. Communication issues became apparent as the primary concern. Interviewee 9 expressed concerns about adjusting to the new environment. Interviewee 16 mentioned that some policies had to be translated into international languages. Several challenges are exacerbated by a scarcity of Bosnian language classes, as highlighted by Interviewee 14. Moreover, Interviewee 7 states that due to the stereotype that Bosnia is a country with low wages, many foreign workers are deterred, which attracts less qualified foreigners to work in Bosnia. Interviewee 2 also notes that social security complications are relocation issues, especially when transferring from one country to another. However, some interviewees reported that integration was easier for them. Interviewee 8 reported slight cultural differences, and Interviewee 13 attributed that to their origin in southern Austria and their familiarity with the region.

Interviewees generally have a positive outlook on integrating into Bosnian society, citing the population's friendliness. The interviewees mentioned cultural proximity: Interviewee 1 noted Bosniaks and Turks, while Interviewee 3 observed that regionals adapt better. For Bosnians, for instance, Interviewee 8 said they received her warmly as a Brazilian. Interviewee 12 considers cultural differences, whereas Interviewee 16 considers Bosnian culture easy to adjust to. Interviewees 11 and 13 state that openness and similar cultures are the reasons for their success, while Interviewee 14 mostly agrees but also mentions that they primarily communicate with their compatriots. Although there may be differences in experiences due to variations in background and networks, most foreign workers believe they can successfully integrate into Bosnian society. Nonetheless,

Bosnia gives a warm reception to most of them, but many of the Interviewees are discontented with the ambiguous government policy in place, as Interviewee 1 observes that there is no existing policy or an integration program on the absorption of international workers.

Most interviewees have varying perceptions of the integration process into Bosnian society based on their experiences. However, they all consider themselves accepted to some expect and value social contact. Interviewee 3 considers himself quite integrated, having lived in Bosnia for 12 years. Interviewee 12, after spending more than 10 years in Bosnia, believes that foreigners will never be ultimately 'local.' Interviewee 14 has lived in Bosnia for almost 20 years and is practically well-integrated. Some of them, like Interviewee 5, are unsure of what integration means, while Interviewee 10 feels at home in Bosnia, just as he does in his home country, Turkey. All of them sustain both native and international clients or coworkers. Interviewees 3 and 8 also argue that making friends at the local place and social acceptance are critical factors in overcoming culture shock. Interviewee 1 appeared to have spent time with the Turkish and Bosnian people. Interviewee 6, who initially avoided contact with the locals, is now quite friendly. Social lives vary among individuals, as demonstrated by the differing social circles of the interviewees. For instance, Interviewee 12 maintains friendships with both Bosnian and Turkish communities, while Interviewee 15 primarily interacts with local individuals.

Numerous interviewees reported positive experiences related to their social interactions. Interviewee 2 expressed enjoyment in meeting colleagues, and Interviewee 7 felt a sense of belonging to Bosnian culture. Interviewee 12 reported being fluent in the Bosnian language and culture, and stated that they had not encountered many professional issues.

At the same time, some interviewees complain about difficulties, including cultural differences and language barriers. Interviewee 1 perceives less contact with Serbian and Croatian people and more with Bosniak people, and Interviewee 8 blames Bosnia's social conservatism for the isolation of foreign workers. While Interviewees 9 and 10 mention language as a challenge, Interviewee 11 notes that people tend to associate with those from similar cultural backgrounds, which reduces interaction. On the other hand, Interviewee 16 further embodies the local culture by explaining it to foreigners, which demonstrates a positive approach towards cultural exchange. Interviewees 6, 7, and 13 stated that knowing the local language gives one confidence and social interactivity. Although several interviewees can report positive experiences, the problems persist. However, there is no agreement about the Bosnian-friendly approach to foreign workers. Interviewees 1, 3, and 8 state that Bosnians are friendly, particularly in Sarajevo, and Interviewee 13 claimed that such an open reception fosters understanding. Other participants, for instance, Interviewee 10, regard small cities as hostile towards foreign workers. Interviewee 7 is concerned that openness may depend on the nationality of the foreigner in question.

Bosnia's growing population of foreign workers is a double-edged sword, which the interviewees see as an opportunity and a threat. A few of them, such as Interviewees 1, 2, 7, 13, and 14, pointed out the positive aspects of providing labor and supporting small businesses. However, there was concern about the demographic changes that may follow and the continuous influx of foreign workers, citing examples where, for the sake of foreign workers, many EU member states have witnessed demographic, if not cultural, shifts. Interviewee 12 added that he comes from a country with a similar culture to Bosnia, but that he increasingly witnesses foreign workers who culturally do not fit in with Bosnian society, and that such a group especially needs an integration program. Interviewee 8 was concerned that the arrival of foreign workers unfamiliar with Bosnian culture may also create a problem for foreign workers who do not significantly deviate from Bosnian culture, as they may make a generally negative image of foreign workers, which will ultimately reflect on all groups. Interviewees 6, 9, 10, and 15 acknowledged that they are aware that their presence can be perceived as foreign nationals taking jobs from the local population, which could ultimately lead to social rejection of foreign workers and create social tensions.

As for the influence of foreign workers on Bosnia's ethnic and demographic profile, Interviewees are divided. Some of the Interviewees, 1, 2, and 12, argue that the number of foreign workers is insufficient to change the demographic structure and record temporary shifts in construction and tourism only. Interviewee 12 also pointed out that most of them are Turkish, and that this diversity does not significantly skew the Bosnian population. However, Interviewees 7, 9, and 16 acknowledged that foreign workers have consequences for local people, especially in small towns, and that this influence may intensify with the increasing number of workers. Interviewee 16 noted that ethnic tensions might be aggravated if foreign workers are of Arab or Russian origin, but, in general, they are harmless. They can assist in solving problems related to labor shortages and contribute to economic development, but their impact on demographics is not significant. Therefore, integration into the culture is the key to minimizing tensions.

All interviewees believe that foreign workers make a positive contribution to the Bosnian economy, both now and in the future. They claim that these initiatives will have positive impacts, including increased local consumption, higher tax revenues, and enhanced business support. Interviewees 2 and 3 mention that foreign workers provide manpower and spend their wages to boost the domestic economy. Interviewee 4 also added that their tax helps strengthen the economy. Interviewee 6 notes that foreign workers add value to small and large companies. They are essential for addressing Bosnia's labor deficits, especially in the construction sector, where human resources are often sourced from countries like Turkey. Interviewees 11 and 12 claim that foreign workers set the sectoral pace and build the infrastructure. Some said they could contribute to solving problems such as low pay and the income divide with the other EU countries. Interviewee 13 also believes that with the general improvements in the system, foreign workers can enhance the quality of life and well-being of citizens, ultimately contributing to long-term development in Bosnia.

The interviewees suggest changes for integrating foreign workers in Bosnia, including simplifying administrative procedures, language and cultural classes, and increasing state support for foreign investors. Interviewees 1 and 2 believe that permits to work and reside in the country should be made easier to compete with countries such as Croatia, which offer better wages and a more comprehensive social security system. Interviewees 3 and 13 both argue that there should be a clear policy and stable conditions to attract foreign workers. Interviewee 11 also supports the promotion of such a context, such as the French integration system. Interviewee 6 states that there should be free access to language lessons and social practices. Interviewee 7 emphasizes the importance of education in combating discrimination and fostering effective communication. Improving the bureaucracy, increasing the level of training, and creating a more welcoming environment will benefit both foreign workers and the country's economy and social fabric in Bosnia.

Whether to remain in Bosnia or migrate to the EU depends on the individual's situation, available employment opportunities, and concerns regarding safety and security. Interviewees 1, 7, and 15 opt to stay, citing satisfaction with their lives and concerns about the challenges that accompany relocation. Interviewee 16 has a Bosnian mentality, despite living in EU countries with better living conditions. On the other hand, Interviewees 2, 8, and 10 would consider moving for job opportunities, especially Interviewee 8, who stated that it would be easy to find a job in the EU. Interviewee 12 might return if conditions improve; Interviewee 6 discusses the challenges of returning to conflict areas, such as Syria. Some have yet to decide, such as Interviewees 3 and 10, while Interviewee 14 intends to live in Bosnia but is unsure for how long. Interviewees 1 and 12 may return if their economic situation forces them to do so, while Interviewee 3 plans to live in Bosnia for the rest of their lives. Some cannot go back, as Interviewee 6 from Syria mentioned, because the situation is too unsafe, and they prefer security in Bosnia to their homeland. Therefore, foreign workers' decisions about staying in Bosnia, returning to their home country, or moving to an EU member state are not uniform but depend on economic, personal, and security factors. Some remain temporarily in BiH, while others have decided to stay despite their problems in Bosnia.

The Interviewees on Bosnian citizenship show different views, ranging from those who would like to be naturalized citizens to those who would like to have the option of dual citizenship, and those who would not

choose Bosnian citizenship. Interviewee 8 valued dual citizenship for its benefits, including European passports and the ability to reside without obstacles to citizenship. On the other hand, Interviewees 3, 4, 7, and 9 sought Bosnian citizenship for reasons of belonging and civic engagement. Interviewees 11 and 12 highlighted practical advantages such as access to social assistance and exemption from EU visa requirements. Interviewee 13 preferred the Bosnian lifestyle over the benefits of citizenship.

8. Conclusion

Demographic problems in Bosnia have an impact on the country's labor market. The problem is the continuous and massive loss of population through immigration to EU countries, combined with the persistently low birth rate. This downward trend is expected to continue due to the demand for workers in the EU and because current birth rate policies do not significantly impact population growth. Given this, Bosnia must create an environment conducive to reversing this decline, which includes focusing on all administrative levels (the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska, and the Brčko District) on policies that encourage higher birth rates and create better living conditions to promote population retention. As for foreign workers, these crucial efforts would directly address the previously mentioned target 16.3 of SDG 16 and 17.18, which highlights the identified gap in capacity-building support for developing countries.

These demographic shifts have consistently increased the number of foreign workers, prompting employers to request an increase in the quota, as the country is currently short of 30,000 foreign workers. However, state institutions must consider this because an increase in the quota may have negative implications. According to data from September 2024, 324,712 unemployed people were registered in Bosnia, but many of them are not actively seeking employment. Some Bosnian citizens work for themselves, have undeclared work, or find work in other countries and receive unemployment health insurance. This situation distorts the unemployment conditions in Bosnia and affects the health system. Unemployment still persists among many registered individuals, necessitating retraining and workforce integration through education and the creation of new employment opportunities that align with market needs. Therefore, before increasing the quota for foreign workers, adequate measures should be taken to fully utilize the unemployed resources and reduce the burden on health and social systems.

Traditionally, Bosnia has employed workers from neighboring countries, such as Serbia and Croatia. However, in recent years, there has been a significant influx of workers from various countries, suggesting that employers are capitalizing on domestic economic difficulties to find inexpensive labor. Increasing the quota for foreign workers could have negative consequences for Bosnia. The influx of foreign workers, especially from low-income countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, could further depress wage levels and increase dissatisfaction among domestic workers, thus increasing the number of Bosnian emigrants to the EU. Therefore, with limited market reforms and being among the least competitive economies in Europe, it is easier for employers to look for foreign labor than to create a better environment for domestic workers.

Nonetheless, the number of foreign workers in Bosnia is increasing each year, and integration can be described as a multifaceted process with its potential and potential issues observed. The foreign workforce is thus employed in Bosnia through various approaches, including entrepreneurship, networking, recruitment agencies, online platforms, and job search. However, they have numerous problems, including accommodation to the organizational environment, language, administrative, and legal issues that may limit their integration. Despite this, workers are quickly integrated into the Bosnian climate due to the friendly reception from the locals. However, several policy issues remain unanswered, including a lack of clear integration policies, problems with the health system, and questions concerning the recognition of pension rights – these are the primary deficits that threaten their future and their position in the economy. Foreign workers play a crucial role in addressing the shortage of employees, driving economic growth, and supporting key sectors such as construction, hotels, and catering. However, language, legal system, and social security issues are still not addressed in facilitating their integration.

To address labor shortage problems, Bosnia must streamline permits and procedures and establish clear and consistent policies to enhance the country's comparative advantages in attracting skilled human capital. Developing integration programs is becoming increasingly crucial as foreign workers come from many countries and cultures, some of which are as unfamiliar to Bosnia as Bosnia is to them. Language and cultural programs can be given priority in the following manner: offering affordable and targeted language courses for foreign workers, as well as cultural orientation programs. Access to health services should also be enhanced, with clear instructions on the health rights of foreign employees. Most foreign workers consult private practitioners because they are dissatisfied with the public system and face language barriers. Despite their complaints, they have little experience with the public healthcare system. The social security system requires further development, including improvements in pension cooperation with significant countries, a reduction in bureaucracy, and a decrease in the use of the shadow economy.

Social integration should be supported by programs that facilitate the integration of foreign workers with the local population through workshops and networking, as well as counteract discrimination against foreigners through informational campaigns. Additionally, foreign workers may consider establishing a union for legal representation to mitigate the effects of language barriers, as well as the influence of a few embassies and perceptions of exploitation. Bosnian institutions would have to oblige to these requests because the number of foreign workers and thus their interests would not be negligible, and out of adherence to target 17.16 of SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals, which asks for enhancing global partnership for sustainable development complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the SDGs in all countries, particularly developing countries. Finally, Bosnia must create a coherent *national integration plan* for foreign workers. The lack of integration programs can also create long-term security challenges, as violent extremism is sometimes linked to failures in integration. Bosnia can collaborate with international organizations and countries that have established effective practices in managing foreign workers, such as those in the EU, to ensure that these practices align with global standards and further enhance these efforts.

Positive examples presented in the most recent novelties of Croatian Law on Foreigners, which are result of the flows in EU and its labor force needs may be followed as a positive example in BiH, particularly in the flow of foreigners, their residence permit duration, work permit transferability to another worker, which in a whole improve their life and work standard. Finally, attention must never be deferred from the Global Goals which all UN Member States are assigned, with No Poverty, Decent Work, and Economic Growth, Reduced Inequalities, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, Partnerships for the Goals bearing the highest priority of adherence and fulfillment in this extensively elaborated global and national issue.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

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Author contribution

Hamza Preljević conceptualized and led the research project, contributing primarily to its political analysis. Ena Kazić-Çakar and Kenan Ademović examined the domestic legal framework governing the status of foreign workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mirza Ljubović collaborated with Hamza Preljević in analyzing the current

status and position of foreign workers in the country. Hana Šarkinović-Köse conducted the literature review. Harun Halilović contributed by analyzing the relevant EU legal framework and identifying good practices applicable to Bosnia and Herzegovina. All authors were involved in data collection and interviews.

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