DRAGANA MRVOŠ

WITHIN THE TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELD: IN-BETWEEN SPACE, IDENTITY, AND AGENCY AMONG YOUNG SERBIAN AND CROATIAN MIGRANTS

Dragana Mrvoš

Within the Transnational Social Field: In-Between Space, Identity, and Agency Among Young Serbian and Croatian Migrants

Belgrade, 2026

Book Series SQUARE

Edited by:
Jelena Vasiljević

Title:
Within the Transnational Social Field:
In-Between Space, Identity, and Agency Among Young Serbian and Croatian Migrants

Author:
Dragana Mrvoš

Publishers:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe

Proofreader:
Lucy Stevens

Cover design:
Nikola Stevanović

Typesetting:
Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

Place and year of publication:
Belgrade, 2026

ISBN:
978-86-6190-044-0

Replicate:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Production run:
50 copies

This publication was created within the Regional Fellowship Program, implemented by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, in partnership with the Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS and the Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, with the support of the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, Erste Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.
The views expressed in the text represent the views of the authors.

Within the Transnational Social Field: In-Between Space, Identity, and Agency Among Young Serbian and Croatian Migrants

Summary

Sustained emigration is among the most powerful forces reshaping demographic and socio-economic landscapes in Serbia and Croatia today. Estimates suggest that between 1990 and 2017, approximately 708,804 citizens left Serbia, accompanied by a continuous negative population growth (with the mortality rate far exceeding natality and resulting in excessive aging). In particular, Serbia currently has almost the same number of young people (15 to 34) and senior persons (65 and over)[1]. School enrollment in Serbia (the number of pupils) decreased by 100,000 from 2008 to 2020, while high school enrollments declined by 13-23% across the region (Jurić 2026, 7).

[1] The number of young people (15 to 34 years old) in Serbia fell from 1,989,093 in 2002 to 1,449,196 in 2022, while the number of people over 65 increased from 1,240,505 in 2002 to 1,468,855 in 2022.

Croatia, unlike other countries in the Western Balkans, officially joined the European Union in 2013 and fully integrated into the main EU frameworks (the Eurozone and the Schengen Area) in 2023. Despite these advancements, Croatia also saw a decrease in population: from 4.7 million in 1991 to 3.8 million in 2021. Although there was persistent emigration during the twentieth century (when Serbia and Croatia were part of Yugoslavia), since 1990, migration has unfolded within a different, evolving structural context compared to earlier times (Valenta et al., 2024, 511).

Between 1960 and 1980, the majority of emigrants engaged in temporary economic migration to the northern and western parts of Europe through the so-called "guest worker" schemes (which sought skilled and semi-skilled labor during post-WW2 industrialization). More recent population movements in the region, from the 1990s onwards, predominantly involve highly educated professionals, scientists, researchers, and technicians. The database provided by Filipović (2012) shows that there are 7,000 Serbian scientists with PhDs working and living abroad. The largest number of PhD holders are in the United States (2,400, or about 39%), where they work at universities (40%) and in business (44%). The migration of highly educated individuals, particularly young people, exhausts local capacity to demand improved institutions, drains the local supply of competent staff for the public and private sectors, and reduces the incentive to exercise a core democratic right – to vote (Radonjić and Bobić 2020, 13).

Persistent emigration of young and skilled workers, combined with low fertility rates and rapid population ageing, generates a self-reinforcing cycle in which weak institutions drive emigration, eroding the workforce, tax base, and institutional capacity (Jurić 2026, 11). In a recent analytical report, Jurić (2026) illustrates how improved institutions, return migration, and regulated labor inflows might slow population loss. Still, the complexities of transnational networks, connections to the country of origin, and the characteristics of young Serbian and Croatian migrants warrant further examination for several reasons.

First, if the concept of diaspora identity as purely national or ethnic (a primordial understanding of diaspora) is rejected, mi-

grants can be "both here and there," and their belonging is essentially transnational (a constructivist understanding), which raises more questions about their engagement and identities beyond a single nation-state.

The second reason for examining transnational ties is closely related to the definition of the political sphere, as well as the functioning of the transnational social field and engagement with the home country. Recent studies indicate that 54.3% of youth in Croatia and 38% of youth in Serbia are not interested in politics (Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš, 2017; Stojanović, Ivković, Kaličanin, 2023, cited in Đorđević 2024, 2). Moreover, research in these countries shows that young people are distrustful of politicians and political parties (e.g., 83% in Serbia) and dissatisfied with the state of democracy (e.g., 58% in Croatia) (Đorđević 2024, 2). If young people from Serbia and Croatia believe that formal politics is too corrupt, they may want to use transnational and informal political channels to shift from "bad politics" to politics that matter. Based on a mixed-method approach, combining surveys with interviews and primary and secondary analyses, this study focused on the following set of questions:

1. What are the dominant socio-demographic characteristics of young emigrants (those Croatia- and Serbia-born and the descendants of Croatian and Serbian migrants in the US)?
2. What is the kind, volume, and depth of intersection between the activities and networks of migrants and those who have remained in their home country?
3. How is it possible to create and maintain a transnational social field where members of the same group live in different locations?
4. What potential effects do transnational practices and networks have on pre-existing power structures, identities, and social organization in homelands?

During the first stage of data collection, from January to late February 2026, I gathered 32 online survey responses from Serbian and Croatian citizens aged 18 to 35, including dual nationals with experience living, working, or studying in the United States. The survey consists of five sections (eligibility, socio-demographic issues, migration experience, social attitudes, and transnational ties) and a total of 45 questions, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Despite a relatively low response rate, I obtained significant insights about the targeted population.[2] and further explored transnational ties, reasons for migrating, and social attitudes and political participation through open interviews with eight migrants. Informants were geographically dispersed throughout the US, including Utah, Wisconsin, Illinois, South Carolina, Missouri, Virginia, Florida, and New York City. Six participants were female, and two were male. I used snowball sampling to find potential informants, including connections from key informant interviews[3], social media connections, and peer-to-peer contacts. All interviews were conducted online, facilitated, and transcribed via Zoom, with a duration between 37 minutes and one hour and 45 minutes. The project and research procedures were outlined in the Oral Consent Form, which was reviewed in detail before conducting interviews, and required every participant to consent to voluntary participation. In addition to primary data collection, I made a comprehensive review of the existing literature and other empirical studies of transnational social fields, as reviewed below.

[2] The first four questions served to ensure that the eligibility criteria were met. Only if the respondents confirmed they were between 18 and 35 years old, of Serbian or Croatian citizenship (or dual Serbian-US/Croatian-US), and that they lived, studied, or worked in the US, as well as confirming for how long, could they proceed to the following section. Otherwise, they would be informed they are not eligible for participation.

[3] Key informants included Jovan Filipović, author of *Management of a Diaspora Virtual University as a Complex Organization: Serbian Diaspora Virtual University: An Emerging Leadership of a Nation*, and Lura Pollozhani, researcher and coeditor of a comprehensive survey of Gen Z Political Attitudes at the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz.

Transnational social fields

Starting in the late twentieth century, scholarship moved beyond the "brain drain/gain" dichotomy to emphasize brain circulation, transnationalism, and network societies as temporary, work-related settlements. Levitt, P. (1998) and Levitt, P. and Lamba-Nieves (2011) studied "social remittances," while Kessler, C., and Rother, S. (2016) showed that migrants can affect the democratization process in their home countries. Pfutze, T. (2008) and Pérez-Armendáriz, C., & Crow, D. (2010) described how international migrants spread attitudes and behaviors acquired in democratic host countries to their less democratic home countries, and Jimenez (2019) added that local conditions mediate the effects of political change in migrants' origin countries. Crucially, the transnational perspective has allowed for a more in-depth theoretical approach to the relationship between movement and identity, both domestic and international. It has also exposed the biases of methodological nationalism in understanding society as a national container. At the same time, the concepts of transnational social spaces (Pries, Faist) and transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller) have emerged as a means to capture "new social and spatial arrangements in human life in general" (a transnational social space can extend across geographical spaces of multiple nation-states)[4] (Kuti 2012, 122).

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, 1009) define (transnational) social fields as "*a set of multiple intertwined networks of social ties through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed.*" In the transnational perspective, the concepts of emigration and return do not refer to one-way mobility occurring at a single point in time. Consequently, the realities of simultaneity and living in several countries reconceptualize the boundaries of social life (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004: 1028–1029). In this case, transmigrants reconfigure the idea of allegiance and belonging to a singular nation-state.

[4] Pries (2005, 2008a, 2008b) developed a typology of transnational social/societal spaces that includes three ideal types: transnational everyday life, transnational organizations, and transnational institutions (Kuti 2012, 123).

Through their lifeways and daily routines, family ties, emotional bonds, and sense of responsibility, transmigrants stay engaged with their homeland, creating new forms of identities and solidarities.

Understanding identity and migration

The question of whether migrants assimilate the prevailing cultural norms in their destination country was premised on the assumption that immigrants rarely return to their home country. In this regard, assimilationist or multicultural perspectives fall short in capturing the evolving dynamics and progressive function of international migration, characterized by the circulation of migrants.

As contemporary transportation and communication systems allow immigrants to sustain more frequent and instant contact with their homelands, brain circulation, network societies, and simultaneous connections to two or more societies become more common than the "brain drain/gain" dichotomy suggests. In this vein, Schiller et al. (1995, 48) defined transmigrants as "immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state." Below are excerpts from interviews with Serbian and Croatian migrants that convey the evolving nature of migrants' identity:

> Dual Identity as "Third Nationality"
> *In the United States, I am perceived as a "super Serbian" due to my cultural background, while in Serbia and Bosnia, I am called "Amerikanka"* [the American] *because I wasn't born and raised there. This double-edged sword position means that I am considered an outsider in both contexts despite having deep connections to each. So in that sense, my identity is neither fully American nor fully Serbian. Rather, it is a sort of "third nationality" experience.*
> Excerpt from an interview with a second-generation Serbian-American in the Chicagoland area.

Not fully one or the other

"Not fully Croatian, not fully American. I don't fully belong to either, but in a way that gives me the ability to see both sides from a different angle. I have a view on both that neither side has. In Croatia, they don't have the American perspective. I do try to draw on both and accept that I am both, and that I am never going to be one or the other fully."

Excerpt from an interview with a second-generation Croatian-American in Virginia.

Here and there

"The United States will be a station where money is made, but my life will be in Serbia. I will be both here and there. I would not like to raise my children in the US; if you don't have someone here, having a family is impossible. Everyone is in business 24/7; every minute is worth a dollar. As for my family and children, I hope they will grow up in Serbia, but have other options, including the US. So, I plan to have several options in life."

Excerpt from an interview with a Serbian migrant in Utah.

Identities naturally span more than one place

"Dual nationality reflects the reality that life doesn't always stay within one country. I'm Serbian, and after living in the United States for 13 years, my life has been shaped by both places. People maintain ties to their home country while also building a life somewhere else. For migrants, especially, that can be meaningful because it acknowledges both parts of their life: their roots and the place where they are creating their future. People's identities can naturally span more than one place."

Excerpt from an interview with a returnee to Serbia.

Understanding politics and migration

Migration has established evolving identities, but migrants can also contribute, both positively and negatively, to changes in the global economic and political order. Transnational migrants can influence the politics of their countries of residence in various ways: sometimes by promoting private education and healthcare (as they are able to afford them for their families), and other times by fueling social justice movements and anti-imperialist struggles.

The concept of transnationalism also recognizes the connections and shared practices of migrants – those who have emigrated – and non-migrants – those who continue to live in the emigrants' country of origin. These types of cross-border interpersonal relationships can be important for the development of migrants' place of origin and for their integration in the destination country (Carling 2008, 1452).

When asked how often they communicate with friends and family in their home country, 81.8% of young migrants from Serbia and Croatia who live, work, and study in the United States responded once a week or more. When asked how often they visit their home country, 40.9% responded once a year, and 27.3% stated twice a year or more, implying a continuing connection with their homelands. Most informants also confirmed a strong emotional attachment to their country of origin (86.3%, 7-10 on the Likert 0-10 scale).

While the majority of informants is not involved with any organisations connecting their country of origin and the United States, including government-sponsored initiatives, churches, academic societies, humanitarian organisations, and professional associations, they maintain transnational practices and networks (a sustained dual attachment) through personal ties (family, friends, colleagues), as well as financial ties by sending remittances (50% of respondents send money in various frequencies, 45.5% send money monthly, twice a year, or more).

If it is true that citizens who are dissatisfied but feel they can influence political decisions through political action can be prompted to act, and *vice versa*, low confidence that the political

and economic systems can be changed may be associated with a lack of engagement through formal political channels. For example, young migrants are not confident that the political system in the United States allows people like them to influence politics (18.2% say they have no influence "at all," while 31.8% say they have "very little influence"). Personal confidence in one's ability to participate in politics was also low (21.7% very unconfident, 17.4% unconfident, and 34.8% neutral). Only a minority (under 30%) felt confident or very confident. At the same time, a significant percentage of respondents are unsatisfied with the present state of the economy and democracy in the US.[5] Beyond formal politics, I focus on the dynamics of advice-giving and opinion-sharing, as well as whose perspectives are valued in cross-border relationships.

Findings suggest that ideas are remitted by young migrants in a grassroots way, particularly between migrants and non-migrants in the origin countries, revealing how diaspora can contribute to social change by providing a comparative perspective and showing "it's not like that everywhere."

> R1: *I don't participate in formal politics in Croatia, such as voting, because I don't live there. This aligns with my mom's thinking that it is not fair to push a certain agenda when you don't live there. Although we have a citizenship, we don't want to be hypocritical. However, when I am in Croatia, I speak up when something concerns me and communicate how I feel. Through my actions, I try to show where I stand. Often when I'm there in the summer, I buy trash bags and gloves and go clean the beach. People passing by usually say, "Well done," or offer to help.*

[5] This research shows that 13% are very dissatisfied and 39.1% dissatisfied with the present state of the economy in the United States. Regarding the state of democracy in the US, 13% are very dissatisfied, 17.4% are dissatisfied, and 56.5% are neutral/unsure.

R2: *Diaspora members often feel too removed to have a meaningful say in Serbian affairs. People in Serbia face problems daily, while the diaspora only hears updates every three to four days from family. So, living in the US can create survival mode and an "out of sight, out of mind" distance, reducing a sense of agency. However, although diaspora can be "a voice of change" (showing alternatives exist), it is not necessarily "the voice for change" (leading reforms).*

R3: *Every day, things happen, and people just say, "It is how it is; that is the system." I noticed this attitude even among the youth: that's what the system is like, so work within it (they make it work with what they have). For example, in a village where we lived in Croatia, a road was being built that my family had issues with because it linked nothing. It was clearly in someone's interest just to build it. It was not in the interest of the people, because it goes around the villages, cutting them off completely. We wrote to people in the government, and they basically said, "Ok. No." And the road is still there. Nobody was a big fan of the road, but the attitude was that politicians would do what they want to do, regardless of what we say about it. We were the only ones trying to do something.*

While those who remain in Serbia and Croatia may be resigned to accepting "this is the system," the diaspora can point out alternatives, which they often did in the interviews. Nonetheless, there is a notable asymmetry in cross-cultural knowledge and curiosity between Serbian/Croatian and American contexts, showing how people's perceptions of others and themselves are shaped by historical colonial structures. Insights from this study, as shown in the following examples, imply that US knowledge and cultural frameworks are often seen as default, while perspectives from Serbian/Croatian migrants are often overlooked.

R4: *Children in the Balkans have substantial knowledge about international affairs, including America, because it is taught in their schools. I was impressed by how much children in Serbia and Bosnia knew about America. In contrast, Americans typically have "zero reference to begin from" when I mention a Serbian background. Their internal process involves first trying to locate Serbia on a mental map, then questioning whether they know anything about the country, and finally wondering if they know anyone of Serbian origin. If they can identify someone they know, the connection is "automatically linked to food and drink," or, for older individuals who remember the 1990s wars, negative connotations from news coverage.*

R5: *I have some friends in Croatia who do agree with my views, and they tend to label me as "Amerikanka" to imply "she does not know what she is talking about," which I find a little offensive. However, I get a lot of questions, "What do you think about, for example, our education system… given that you come from outside." The reverse never happens in America.*

R6: *My friends in Serbia cannot wait for me to come back from the US and hear new stories about my experiences, which broaden their perspectives. Americans, on the other hand, are not as eager to learn about us, and they always mix up Serbia with Siberia and Syria. Americans, in my experience, don't show much interest in Serbia, or they simply don't need to learn anything about us – except on International Day, when they can try Serbian cuisine and view our flag. We did this on campus in Missouri, but that's just one day.*

Conclusion

Unlike the emigrants from Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s, who largely engaged in the so-called "guest worker" schemes, contemporary migratory flows include a significant number of highly educated youth and others seeking better training, careers, and living prospects. Most highly educated global migrants relocate to OECD countries, which harms democracy in their home countries. Furthermore, as a substantial share of the labor force is exiting, and as the population ages, Croatia and Serbia are facing an acute labor-force shortage. Consequently, more than 120,000 permits were issued in 2022 to labor migrants from non-EU countries employed in Croatia's tourism or construction sectors. Serbia has also received a significant number of immigrants from Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Sri Lanka (KIRK 2024, 10).

The numbers alone do not depict the specificities of migration journeys of either group of migrants (the "push" and "pull" factors), the connections that migrants have with non-migrants in their homelands, and the various ways they engage in the host and home countries. In this regard, a transnational perspective accounts for the many and ongoing links across international borders, as well as for the public identities of young migrants, which are often not defined by a single nation-state. Likewise, an analysis of the relationship between migrants and non-migrants, the engagement in and orientation toward both Serbia/Croatia and the US, reveals numerous forms of connection and informal engagement of transmigrants in their respective countries of origin, including constant personal involvement and regular travel across national state borders, as well as migrant network building and sustaining. This shows that an intentional effort is needed for new policies to properly account for the potential of transmigrants and balance the cultural awareness within the context of the United States as a destination country.

References:

Carling, J. (2008). The human dynamics of migrant transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(8), 1452–1477. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701719097

Glick Schiller, N. Basch. L. and Szanton Blanc, C. (1992). Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration. *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences 645*: 1-24. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.1992.tb33484.x

Glick Schiller, N., Basch, L., and Szanton Blanc, C. (1995). From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration. *Anthropological Quarterly* 68 (1), 48-63.

Filipović, J. (2012). *Management of a Diaspora Virtual University as a Complex Organization. Serbian Diaspora Virtual University: An Emerging Leadership of a Nation.* Lap Lambert Academic Publishing.

Đorđević, A. (2024). „Political Participation and Emotions among Southeast European
Youth: What Matters to Them and What They Strive For?" Book Series SQUARE. Belgrade.

Jurić, T. (2026). *Analytical Report, Western Balkans 2035: Demographic Resilience and Strategic Migration Planning under EU Integration and Isolation Scenarios*. International Centre for Migration Policy Development. Vienna.

Kessler, C. and Rother, S. (2016). *Democratization through Migration? Political Remittances and Participation of Philippine Return Migrants*. New York: Lexington Books.

Kuti, S. (2012). The Concepts of Transnational Social Spaces and Fields in the Study of Migration and Post-Migration Processes. *Migracijske i etničke teme, 28* (2), 119-141.

Levitt, P. (1998). "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion." International Migration Review, 32(4), 926-948.

Levitt, P. and Lamba-Nieves, D. (2011). "Social Remittances Revisited." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 37*(1), 1-22.

Levitt, P. and Glick Schiller, N. (2004) "Conceptualizing simultaneity: a transnational social field perspective on society (1)", *International Migration Review, 38*(3), 1002-1039.

Pérez-Armendáriz, C., & Crow, D. (2010). Do Migrants Remit Democracy? International Migration, Political Beliefs, and Behavior in Mexico. *Comparative Political Studies*, *43*(1), 119–148. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009331733

Radonjić, O. and Bobić, M. (2020). "Brain Drain Losses– A Case Study of Serbia", *International Migration* Vol. 59 (1). doi: 10.1111/imig. 12710

Valenta, M. (2017). A comparative analysis of migration systems and migration policies in the European Union and in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. *Migration and Development*, *6*(3), 428–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2016.1204804

Valenta, M., Jakobsen, J., Gregurović, M., & Župarić-Iljić, D. (2024). Changes in the Croatian migration system: conceptualising the complexities of migrations, 1990-2023. *Labor History, 65*(4), 510–527. https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2023.2280052

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

314.151.3-054.72(=164.41)
314.151.3(=163.42)
314.15

MRVOŠ, Dragana, 1987–
Within the transnational social field: in-between space, identity, and agency among young Serbian and Croatian migrants
[Elektronski izvor] / Dragana Mrvoš. - Belgrade : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory : Regional Center for Advanced
Studies of Humanities – RECAS ; Rijeka : Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe,
2026 (Beograd : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory). - 1 elektronski optički disk (CD-ROM) : tekst ; 12 cm. -
(Book Series Square ; [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade])

Sistemski zahtevi: Nisu navedeni. - Nasl. sa naslovne strane dokumenta. - Tiraž 50. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst. - Bibliografija.

ISBN 978-86-6190-044-0 (IPST)

а) Емигранти, српски б) Емигранти, хрватски в) Миграције

COBISS.SR-ID 198948361