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Introduction

North Macedonia faces one of the highest youth emigration rates in the Western Balkans, while also undergoing demographic decline and population aging, as is the case in much of Europe. This structural demographic shift raises fundamental questions about the country's future development trajectory. Policy responses have made strides toward becoming more forward-looking by integrating Foresight methodologies into migration governance and policymaking (Ashkapova and Zulfiu, 2025). Still, these measures have not materially altered patterns of youth emigration or demographic decline, as they remain insufficiently aligned with the underlying structural drivers.

According to the 2021 Census, North Macedonia has a population of 1,836,713 citizens (State Statistical Office, 2021). At the same time, international migration statistics indicate that 534,616 citizens of North Macedonia were living abroad in 2024,

representing a 10.17 percent increase compared to 2020, when the number was 485,263 (Statbase, 2026). These figures illustrate the scale of emigration and its growing implications for the country's long-term development.

Demographic trends are increasingly alarming. The average age of the population rose from 32.3 years in 2000 to 41.8 years in 2024, reflecting rapid population aging (State Statistical Office, 2026). The share of the population aged 65 and over continues to grow, while the proportion of younger generations declines. Crucially, in addition to low fertility rates, a significant factor driving this demographic contraction is sustained emigration and low immigration.

These developments raise an important question: how do young people in North Macedonia imagine their futures, and what shapes their decisions to stay, leave, or return? Migration governance cannot be effective as long as it treats youth migration in a vacuum and fails to address the systemic challenges young people face when envisioning their future selves. Through interviews and Foresight workshops with young people, what surfaced was the necessity of broader demographic and governance transformations.

Young people show a critical distinction: while individual migration futures are diverse, uncertain, and contingent, there is a striking convergence in how they define desirable collective futures and policy priorities. Building on this insight, the essay argues that migration governance should shift from attempts to influence individual decisions toward addressing shared structural conditions, ranging from governance quality and labor market opportunities to environmental factors and digital public services.

The analysis proceeds in three interconnected layers linked with the Migration Policy cycle. First, it examines how migration imaginaries are shaped by environmental and socio-economic conditions. Second, it explores how these conditions translate into expectations of governance, particularly regarding meritocracy, digitalization, and participation. Third, it situates these findings within an anticipatory governance framework, arguing for a shift toward co-productive and future-oriented migration policy design.

Migration Governance and Youth Perspective

The Resolution on Migration Policy of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021–2025 marked an important step toward a more structured and evidence-based approach to migration governance. It introduced five strategic areas, including institutional development, data systems, regular and irregular migration, and partnerships. It also opened space for more forward-looking approaches, including foresight-based policymaking.

At the same time, broader research consistently shows that, besides personal aspirations, youth migration intentions are shaped by labor market conditions, public services, and governance quality (Milasi, 2020). This highlights the need to move beyond narrow policy approaches focused solely on migration flows. Young people's migration decisions are shaped less by mobility itself than by the conditions that make mobility necessary or desirable. Youth in North Macedonia suggest that migration policy should not focus exclusively on retention or return, but rather on improving the structural conditions that shape everyday life.

These aspects resonate with broader regional research on youth perspectives in the Western Balkans. Studies show that young people across the region share similar concerns related to employment opportunities, governance quality, and trust in institutions, as well as a strong desire for more meaningful participation in shaping their societies. While individual aspirations vary, there is a consistent pattern of alignment in how young people define desirable futures and policy priorities, particularly in relation to fairness, transparency, and opportunities for mobility (Fiket, Pudar Draško, and Anđelković 2026).

Looking ahead, the Migration Resolution 2026–2030 represents an opportunity to adopt a more integrated and anticipatory approach. Rather than treating migration as a sectoral issue, the approach should adopt a broader perspective.

Expanding Migration Governance

Currently, migration governance in North Macedonia is overly narrow. Young people clearly link their mobility decisions

and push factors to issues typically treated as separate policy domains. Concerns over environmental quality, deforestation, river pollution, and particularly air pollution, are increasingly shaping the migration decisions of Macedonian youth. Poor air quality is not only a public health concern but also a factor influencing whether young people choose to leave the country.

Economic opportunities and employment play a significant role as well. At the same time, migration governance must also consider the integration of incoming skilled workers. As North Macedonia seeks to address labor shortages and remain competitive, attracting and integrating foreign talent becomes an essential component of migration policy.

These dynamics highlight the need for a cross-sectoral approach that connects migration with environmental policy, labor markets, education, and governance reforms.

From Personal Futures to Collective Visions

Interviews and participatory workshops with young people revealed an important distinction: youth do not experience migration as a simple choice between staying and leaving. Instead, migration is embedded in broader life trajectories and shaped by evolving opportunities and constraints. At the individual level, migration futures are diverse and often ambivalent. Some young people see mobility as temporary and reversible, intended to gain education or experience abroad. Others anticipate longer-term departure, particularly in response to limited career opportunities or perceived unfairness in the system. Some express a preference to remain, though often conditionally. Despite this diversity, a different pattern emerges when young people reflect collectively. When discussing shared futures, their perspectives become more aligned and converge around key structural challenges and priorities.

Three themes stand out.

First, *governance quality and meritocracy are seen as essential.* Transparent recruitment processes, reduced political influence, and stronger institutions are consistently identified as prerequisites for staying or returning. Concerns about political

influence in employment, weak institutional accountability, and limited merit-based advancement appeared regardless of whether participants imagined staying, leaving, or eventually returning. As one participant said: "I don't want to become a member of a political party to get employed," reflecting a broader perception that opportunities are often shaped by personal or political connections rather than qualifications.

Second, *digital public services* are closely linked to trust. Young people associate accessible and transparent digital systems with reduced corruption and improved state effectiveness. Digitalization is not merely a technical modernization process, but a mechanism for reducing corruption, improving transparency, and limiting dependence on informal networks. One participant explained that "administrative procedures should be dealt with online… you shouldn't need personal connections…" directly linking digital governance to fairness and accessibility. Digitalization is therefore seen as a driver of governance transformation rather than merely a technical reform.

Third, *participation matters*. Some young people advocated for stronger local engagement and direct dialogue with institutions; others emphasized digital participation platforms; and some underlined the role of formal education in strengthening civic engagement. One participant stressed that institutions should "go and ask us, young people, directly," while others highlighted the importance of more accessible online participation mechanisms. Despite these differences, there was a shared perception that youth perspectives remain insufficiently incorporated into policymaking. This aligns with broader evidence from North Macedonia, which shows that while youth express interest in engagement, they often perceive limited opportunities for meaningful socio-political participation (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023).

Policy Directions

To respond effectively to these challenges, migration governance should move toward a more integrated and forward-looking model.

First, youth participation should be institutionalized through a combination of local, digital, and educational mechanisms. Young people's voices underscore the relevance of anticipatory governance as a framework for addressing migration in contexts of uncertainty and change. Importantly, integrating youth perspectives into these processes enhances both the legitimacy and the quality of policy outcomes. Youth imaginaries provide valuable insights into emerging trends, potential risks, and opportunities that may not be captured through traditional data sources. Participation should not be ad hoc but embedded in policy processes.

Second, anticipatory methods should be integrated into migration policymaking. Scenario-building and anticipatory approaches can help policymakers navigate uncertainty and consider multiple possible futures. At the same time, continued anticipatory governance requires institutional innovation. This includes creating formal mechanisms for participation, ensuring feedback loops between policymakers and participants, and allocating resources for sustained engagement.

Third, digital public service reform should be recognized as a tool of migration policy. Improving accessibility, transparency, and efficiency can strengthen trust and reduce incentives for emigration. Access to digital services not only contributes to system equity; it directly helps circular migrants and transnationals exercise their rights.

Finally, structural reforms should address governance quality, labor market opportunities, and education systems. Migration outcomes cannot be improved without tackling these underlying factors.

Conclusion

Youth migration in North Macedonia reflects both the diversity of individual futures and convergence in collective expectations. Recognizing this distinction allows policymakers to shift from influencing individual decisions to addressing shared structural conditions.

By integrating youth perspectives, strengthening governance, and adopting a cross-sectoral, anticipatory approach,

migration policy can become more inclusive, credible, and future-oriented. Such an approach is essential for managing migration and shaping sustainable futures in North Macedonia.

Young people are neither disengaged nor indifferent. On the contrary, they demonstrate a clear and unwavering understanding of what needs to change. While their personal trajectories range from temporary mobility to long-term emigration or conditional staying, their expectations of governance, fairness, and opportunity are remarkably aligned. Moving forward, migration governance in North Macedonia must be reframed as part of a broader socio-economic and political transformation. Addressing issues such as meritocracy, digital governance, environmental quality, and market opportunities is essential not only for the country's development and for improving the quality of life, but also, importantly, for shaping migration outcomes. At the same time, the integration of incoming skilled workers should be understood as part of the same governance agenda. As demographic pressures intensify, the country's ability to attract, integrate, and retain talent, both domestic and foreign, will become increasingly important.

Crucially, the voices of the youth reinforce the relevance of anticipatory governance as a framework for addressing migration in contexts of uncertainty and change. By anticipating, policymakers can move beyond reactive approaches and engage with multiple possible futures. This allows for a more strategic orientation, in which policies are designed to prepare for emerging trends and risks, as well as respond to current challenges.

Importantly, integrating youth perspectives into these processes enhances both the legitimacy and the quality of policy outcomes. *Youth imaginaries are not merely beneficiaries of policy, but contributors to its design and direction*. For this reason, creating formal, sustained mechanisms for participation is necessary to ensure that engagement is consequential rather than symbolic. Ultimately, the challenge for North Macedonia is to manage migration and to shape the conditions that enable young people to envision viable and desirable futures within the country.

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