

“Vrati se kući” – But Who’s Left to Come Home to? Aging, Absence, and the Myth of Return in Bosnia and Herzegovina

2026-06-09|by: Azra Dizdarević

How transnational care and demographic change complicate narratives of return in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This year, in my small hometown in Bosnia and Herzegovina, my grandfather sat me down with a thick plastic binder in his hands. Inside it were his house deed, car papers, a list of bank accounts, and a small envelope *za crne dane* he said – for dark days. He has been preparing, methodically, for the inevitable. Cancer had given him the awareness of an ending, but not its date. I nodded as he explained each document, but what I really saw was absence, the space left by the people who should have been here instead of me.

My uncle, his life lost at twenty-four.

My grandmother, gone just a few months earlier.

My father, two decades and an ocean away in Canada.

I was the stand-in witness to a family that had scattered across wars, borders, and time zones. On my mother’s side of the family, the pattern repeats in Croatia. A few years earlier, she arrived in Zagreb the morning her father died, after his first and only night in a care home. My grandmother, ill herself, could no longer lift or feed him. After a carousel of short-term caregivers, there were no options left. Since then, caring for my grandmother has been a logistical choreography of flights, favours, and guilt. Between Canada and Croatia, my mother and aunt manage her care through WhatsApp calls and flight schedules, improvising an entire welfare system out of love and exhaustion.

These patterns are common. Research on transnational caregiving shows that family members in host countries routinely provide emotional, financial, and practical support to ageing relatives back home, navigating gaps that state systems leave open.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, media accounts describe many older residents living alone while children work abroad. Where public infrastructure fails, families absorb the cost, even across time zones. Yet this everyday reality sits uneasily alongside public calls for return, which rarely account for how care, ageing, and family life are actually managed across borders.

When I first saw the *Vrati se kući* campaign – billboards across BiH cities launched by Pokret Snaga Domovine, with two young people, children, and the tagline *Draga dijasporo, vratite se da zajedno gradimo domovinu!* – it felt both intimate and hollow. Intimate because the appeal is to family, but hollow because the family in the image as young, intact, and present is precisely what decades of emigration and loss have unmade. The campaign pictures the homecoming without picturing who is left to come home to.



Image source: Pokret Snaga Domovine, “Vrati se kući” campaign (2024), official website.

Come home. This dream of *vratiti se kući* collides with a harsh reality: Bosnia and Herzegovina is ageing and has undergone one of the sharpest population declines in Europe since the early 1990s, driven first by the war, and every since then persistent emigration and negative natural growth. Estimates suggest the country has lost more than a third of its population since 1991.

Today, the population stands at just over three million, with a median age in the mid-forties. Approximately twenty percent of residents are aged sixty-five or older, a proportion that continues to rise as fewer young adults remain and fertility rates stay low. The last full census was conducted in 2013, but expert analyses consistently point to the same convergence of forces: continued emigration, low fertility, and demographic contraction.

Public discourse frequently implies that return migration can stabilize demographic decline. Yet much of this assumption rests on anecdote rather than evidence. Recent reporting shows that in 2024, some dozens of families returned to the Tuzla Canton from abroad. However, highlight that systematic data on diaspora populations returning remain limited, and permanent emigration still far outpaces return. Other qualitative research has found that return does not necessarily restore a sense of home; belonging is negotiated through family ties, emotional attachment, and access to care, often under difficult economic and institutional conditions.

In the absence of robust return flows, the weight of aging falls disproportionately on those who never left, or families who return only temporarily for funerals, holidays, and moments of crisis. Emptying schools, pensioners waiting for children who live in another time zone, and care coordinated from afar are the everyday reality beneath Bosnia and Herzegovina's demographic anxiety.

Return campaigns that measure success in bodies counted back across the border will keep missing what is already happening: care managed from abroad, belonging maintained through visits, remittances and WhatsApp calls, attachment that does not require permanent resettlement to be real. *Vrati se kući* is a slogan, not a plan.

A more meaningful response would begin by recognising that for many families, engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina already takes the form of transnational care rather than permanent relocation. Instead of framing return solely as resettlement, public policy could focus on reducing the friction that makes cross-border care so difficult: improving access to reliable local elder services, simplifying administrative procedures for those who move back and forth, and ensuring that social protections are not lost when lives span more than one country.

Strengthening community-based care infrastructure within Bosnia and Herzegovina would not only support older residents, but also ease the informal burden currently carried by families abroad. Such measures would not guarantee large-scale return, nor reverse demographic decline. But they would

acknowledge how people actually live, stretched across states yet bound by responsibility.

Ageing Societies and Immigration in Southeast Europe – Real Challenges and Imagined Threats

Öffentliche Jahreshauptversammlung der Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft

Roundtable: Ageing Societies and Immigration in Southeast Europe – Real Challenges and Imagined Threats

As part of the *Öffentliche Jahreshauptversammlung der Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft*, a roundtable discussion entitled “**Ageing Societies and Immigration in Southeast Europe – Real Challenges and Imagined Threats**” will take place.

The discussion will explore demographic change, migration dynamics, and the social and political implications of ageing populations in Southeast Europe. Bringing together leading scholars and experts, the roundtable will address both the structural realities and the public narratives surrounding immigration in the region.

Speakers

Prof. Dr. Florian Bieber, Center for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz

Aynur Kanafina, Regional Programme Specialist on Population and Development, UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Prof. Dr. Eva Fodor, Professor of Gender Studies, Central European University, Vienna/Budapest

Prof. Dr. Maja Gerovska Mitev, Professor of Social Policy, University of Skopje

Chair

Prof. Dr. Ulf Brunnbauer, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg

Date and Venue

- **28 February 2026, 10:00 AM**
- **Altes Finanzamt, Room 319, Landshuter Str. 4, 93047 Regensburg**
- **Online participation via Zoom available**

Please register via the following link:

<https://www.sogde.org/de/formulare/jahreshauptversammlung-2026/>

Further information about the event is available [here](#).

Within the context of our project, a new publication by Anita Wohlmann and Ulla Kriebnernegg, titled **“Gesundes Alter. Age Studies und Public Health Humanities,”** has been published in the edited volume *Kunst – Kultur – Gesundheit*, edited by Solveig Lena Hansen and Henning Schmidt-Semisch.

The chapter addresses questions of healthy ageing from the perspective of Age Studies and the Public Health Humanities, highlighting the importance of cultural, social, and artistic approaches to health in later life. By bringing together insights from humanities-based ageing research and public health debates, the authors argue for a broader, more inclusive understanding of “healthy ageing” that goes beyond biomedical models.

Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, the contribution situates ageing within cultural narratives, artistic practices, and societal frameworks, and reflects on how these dimensions shape experiences of health, care, and vulnerability in older age. In doing so, the chapter explicitly engages with and advances the aims of our project, demonstrating how humanities perspectives can meaningfully contribute to public health research and practice.

The full text is available [here](#).

Biram Hrvatsku: Managing (Re)Migration in Times of Demographic Anxiety

2026-03-05|by: Jaqueline Mrella (University of Graz)

As Croatia confronts population loss, ageing, and regional decline, return migration has re-emerged as a powerful political promise. *Biram Hrvatsku* captures both the appeal of this promise and the doubts surrounding its demographic impact.

Croatia has long been confronted with a demographic dilemma. Demographer Ivo Nejašmić has warned that, without substantial change, the country’s population could regress to levels last seen a century ago. He frames population decline as an existential challenge rather than a routine policy problem. This language of urgency, which sometimes borders on the dramatic, encapsulates a broader sense of demographic anxiety that is increasingly shaping political debates in Croatia. Population decline, ageing, and regional imbalance are not sudden developments, but rather the cumulative result of long-term demographic, economic, and political processes. These include sustained emigration, uneven development, and labour market insecurity.

Against this backdrop, the Croatian government has repeatedly turned to migration policy as a tool of demographic management. With the launch of *Biram Hrvatsku* (“I choose Croatia”) in 2021, a return-migration programme administered by the Croatian Employment Service (*Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje*, HZZ), the promise of a policy response to demographic decline appeared to materialise. Framed as part of a broader set of labour mobility measures, the *Biram Hrvatsku* programme is comparatively generous by Croatian standards. It offers financial incentives of up to €27,000 to individuals willing to return from abroad or relocate internally to designated underdeveloped and depopulating regions. The programme’s official aim is to “strengthen economic activity in economically and demographically weakened areas” and to “encourage the return of an active working population”.

Nevertheless, despite the introduction of such measures, Croatia’s population continues to shrink and age, becoming increasingly imbalanced regionally. The government’s messaging, exemplified by the promotional *Biram Hrvatsku* poster featuring a map of Croatia and national colors, frames return migration as a patriotic choice. It is against this backdrop that the programme emerged, and it is these developments that have shaped how it has been interpreted, debated, and contested in public discourse.



***Biram Hrvatsku* as a Policy Response to Depopulation and Demographic Governance**

Biram Hrvatsku, launched in December 2021, is part of Croatia's efforts to counter demographic decline and address regional disparities by offering targeted mobility incentives. The programme's title carries symbolic weight, appealing to both national belonging and individual agency. It invites potential returnees and internal migrants to 'choose' Croatia over a continued life abroad or residence in more developed domestic regions.

The programme is institutionally embedded in Croatia's labour market and demographic policy framework, and cannot be understood in isolation from the broader politicisation of demography in Croatia since the mid-2010s. Since then, demography has been elevated from a social policy concern to a central field of political intervention. Following a series of ministries related to migration and returns in the 1990s, demographic governance was gradually consolidated at the national level, culminating in the creation of a Ministry for Demography and Immigration in 2024. Earlier milestones included the establishment of the Council for Demographic Revitalisation in 2017, under the leadership of Prime Minister Andrej Plenković. This move signalled an attempt to centralise demographic coordination in response to deteriorating population statistics.

The adoption of Croatia's first Demographic Revitalisation Strategy (2023–033) further entrenched demographic decline as a long-term governance issue, explicitly identifying return migration as a component of demographic recovery. In this context, *Biram Hrvatsku* has repeatedly been presented in official communications as an example of active demographic governance.

Unlike earlier diaspora appeals, which were primarily framed in terms of patriotic duty or cultural belonging, *Biram Hrvatsku* links participation directly to verifiable economic activity and measurable contributions to local labour markets. The initiative primarily targets the working-age population, with international returnees required to demonstrate at least twelve months of employment or education abroad within the two years preceding their application. Upon return, they must register as unemployed and engage in self-employment. By contrast, internal migrants are required to relocate from more developed to less developed counties while participating in self-employment support schemes. In both cases, participation is subject to strict conditions, including a mandatory twenty-four-month commitment and a legal obligation to repay funds in cases of non-compliance.

Numbers and Expectations

Data provided by the HZZ stated that by December 2025 a number of 1112 participants were active in the *Biram Hrvatsku* programme. According to data on 1,049 active participants provided to the author in mid-June 2025, most of the beneficiaries were international returnees, while internal migrants accounted for only a small proportion of cases. The age distribution of participants reflects the

programme's focus on economically active age groups, with the majority of beneficiaries being between thirty and forty-nine years of age. Geographically, returnees tended to settle in counties with stronger labour markets, such as Zagreb County, Osijek-Baranja, and Split-Dalmatia, rather than exclusively in the most depopulated or peripheral regions. Further analysis of sectoral data suggests that many beneficiaries found employment in construction, manufacturing and technical professions, with knowledge-intensive sectors playing a more limited role.

These figures contradict the implicit expectations associated with *Biram Hrvatsku* in political discourse. Return migrants are often seen as agents of demographic renewal, economic revitalisation and social change. In this sense, the programme operates as both a policy instrument and a carrier of demographic narratives that present return migration as a partial solution to population decline and ageing.

In the Media

Public debate around *Biram Hrvatsku* is most visible in the media, where the programme is consistently embedded in broader narratives of demographic crisis, census shocks and political responsibility. Rather than being treated as a technocratic labour market intervention, the media largely frames the measure as a response to alarming demographic indicators and as a test case for the state's capacity to counter depopulation.

Between 2022 and 2025, Croatian newspapers and online portals repeatedly assessed *Biram Hrvatsku* in terms of its numerical adequacy. Headlines emphasised the difference between initial political announcements, which often promised several thousand returnees, and the comparatively small number of beneficiaries. Terms such as "*fijasko*" or "*kap u moru*" ('a drop in the ocean') were used to convey demographic insignificance.

A defining feature of this media discourse is the prominent role assigned to demographic experts. Journalists frequently consult demographers such as Anđelko Akrap and Stjepan Šterc in order to evaluate the programme's effectiveness and contextualise its outcomes within broader population trends. Akrap, for instance, has been quoted dismissing the financial incentives as demographically negligible, arguing that one-time grants cannot meaningfully alter migration decisions shaped by structural factors. In these interventions, demographic expertise acts as a counterweight to government narratives. Expert voices are mobilised to emphasise demographic realities and question the logic of symbolic policy responses to structural decline.

Alongside this sceptical framing, media outlets also feature individual success stories of returnees who have set up businesses with the help of *Biram Hrvatsku*. These reports focus primarily on

entrepreneurial returnees, presenting them as evidence that targeted incentives can facilitate reintegration at an individual level. However, even these positive cases are often accompanied by ambivalent commentary. Journalists tend to acknowledge individual success while simultaneously questioning its broader demographic significance, juxtaposing personal narratives with aggregate migration figures or expert assessments

Conclusion

Biram Hrvatsku cannot be understood as either a purely symbolic gesture or a comprehensive demographic solution. The programme combines a symbolic dimension with modest yet tangible support for those already considering returning, while being limited by the structural conditions that continue to drive emigration. In this sense, *Biram Hrvatsku* occupies an ambiguous position between symbolic politics and strategic policy intervention.

The establishment of diaspora ministries and associated organisations is often more about projecting an image of political commitment than producing immediate demographic effects. *Biram Hrvatsku* can be viewed similarly, as it reassures both domestic audiences and the diaspora that return migration is politically important, even though broader structural reforms remain limited. Public perception of the programme therefore highlights an enduring tension between political promises and demographic realities – a tension that continues to shape migration debates well beyond the Croatian case.

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New Guest Article in DW News by Ulf Brunnbauer

12 November 2025 | Deutsche Welle News

Low birth rates and high emigration: Southeast Europe is facing a severe demographic challenge. In a recent guest article for DW News, Ulf Brunnbauer explains why many government responses amount to mere political showmanship and ultimately worsen the situation. He also identifies alternative avenues for improvement—including some that remain taboo for many, such as greater openness to immigration from non-EU countries.

The full essay is available [online](#) (in German).

New Publication by Ulf Brunnbauer

4 November 2025

We are pleased to announce that Ulf Brunnbauer's article "*Demographers as Desk Perpetrators? Population Experts and Serbia's Kosovo Obsession in the 1980s and Thereafter*" has recently been published in *Contemporary European History* (First View, 2025).

The article investigates the role of Yugoslav/Serbian demographers in the political climate leading up to the Yugoslav Wars, showing how demographic research became deeply entangled with nationalist narratives and territorial claims. By analysing the work of influential population experts—above all Miloš Macura—and the institutions he established, Brunnbauer traces the radicalisation of demographic thinking in the 1980s. Concepts such as the "demographic threat" posed by Albanians and Bosnian Muslims, or claims of "genocide" against Serbs, were propagated through demographic discourse that increasingly linked ethnicity, fertility, and territory.

Based on expert literature, policy documents, archival sources, and international debates on demography and development, the study demonstrates how demographic arguments were widely circulated in public and political spheres, shaping collective consciousness and helping prepare the ideological ground for conflict.

The full text is available [here](#).

Public Discussion: “Who Cares for Regensburg? Care Workers from Southeastern Europe Share Their Stories”

21 October 2025, Regensburg

On 21 October 2025, the [Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies \(IOS\)](#) and the [Evangelisches Bildungswerk Regensburg \(EBW\)](#) jointly hosted the public discussion “Who Cares for Regensburg? Care Workers from Southeastern Europe Share Their Stories.” The event, held in German, highlighted the indispensable yet often invisible contributions of care workers from Southeastern Europe to Regensburg’s hospitals, elder-care facilities, and home-care services.

As part of the Volkswagen Foundation-funded IOS research project *Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe*, the evening began with anonymised interview excerpts presented by Dr. Kathleen Randýsek Beger, coordinator of the project. These narratives offered authentic insights into the motivations, working conditions, and emotional challenges of migrant caregivers—including homesickness, loneliness, and uncertainty. At the same time, many interviewees expressed deep pride and compassion, emphasising how meaningful it is to offer older adults not only professional support but also a sense of home, stability, and dignity in the final stage of life.

A panel discussion followed, featuring:

Silvia Berthold, Head of the Care Department, Senior Citizens’ Office, City of Regensburg

Daniela Hartl-Göthner, Deputy Head of Nursing Management, Hospital “Barmherzige Brüder”
Regensburg

Prof. Dr. Annette Meussling-Sentpali, Professor of Nursing Science, Ostbayerische Technische
Hochschule (OTH) Regensburg (Regensburg University of Applied Sciences)

The discussion was originally scheduled to be moderated by Dr. Carsten Lenk, Managing Director of the EBW, who was unfortunately unable to attend. Prof. Dr. Ulf Brunnbauer, Director of the IOS and leader of the project *Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe*, kindly took over the moderation.

Daniela Hartl-Göthner pointed out that international recruitment for care workers has become highly professionalised and increasingly global. Today, most newly recruited caregivers in Regensburg and across Germany come from countries such as Tunisia, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These recruitment pathways are organised through structured international programmes such as [Triple Win](#), intended to benefit the destination country (Germany), the countries of origin, and the migrant workers

themselves, while helping address Germany’s growing need for skilled care personnel.



The discussion round: Ulf Brunnbauer, Annette Meussling-Sentpali, Silvia Berthold, Daniela Hartl-Göthner (L to R)

Copyright: IOS/Kurz

Prof. Ulf Brunnbauer noted the disconnect between public migration debates and Germany’s real labour needs, emphasising that while political attention often fixates on irregular migration, the care sector depends fundamentally on legal labour migration. He also stressed that regions hostile to immigration only worsen their own care shortages, while many sending countries—particularly in Southeastern Europe, with Serbia even withdrawing from the Triple Win programme—struggle with demographic decline and cannot easily spare trained nursing staff.

Both Silvia Berthold and Prof. Meussling-Sentpali emphasised that many migrant caregivers initially struggle with the German language and require structured support to acquire it. Research has shown that some older residents feel uneasy or excluded when caregivers speak in their native language rather than German. At the same time, the panel stressed that caregivers from different parts of the world bring invaluable strengths to Germany’s increasingly diverse society. Their cultural and linguistic backgrounds help ensure that hospitals and care homes can respond to the needs of residents with a wide range of migration histories, reflecting the reality of a heterogeneous population.

Together with contributions from the audience, the panel explored how migration continues to reshape the local care sector, what support structures are needed to ensure fair working conditions and long-term retention, and how care work can be organised sustainably in an ageing society.

These developments mirror broader national and European trends, where Germany’s reliance on foreign care workers stands in contrast to the demographic decline in many sending countries. As discussed by the panel, migrant caregivers remain essential to sustaining care provision in Regensburg and its surrounding region.

The importance of these discussions was also reflected in media coverage from several regional and church-affiliated outlets, which reported on the event and its key themes (in German):

Wer pflegt Regensburg? Gesprächsabend rückt übersehene Pflegekräfte aus Südosteuropa in den Fokus

Wer pflegt das ergraute Europa?

Pflegenotstand droht: Deutschland hängt von ausländischen Fachkräften ab

Konkurrenz um Pflegekräfte aus Ost- und Südosteuropa wird größer

Pflege in Regensburg: Zwischen Perspektivlosigkeit und Sprachbarrieren

Through this cooperation between EBW and IOS, the event created a much-needed public forum for acknowledging the essential contributions of migrant caregivers and discussing what is required to secure dignified, sustainable care in an increasingly diverse and ageing society.

SEE Aging Graz 2025

25 to 27 September 2025, University of Graz

An international conference dedicated to “Transforming Representations of Aging in Southeast European Literature and Film” was held at the University of Graz, Austria, from 25 to 27 September 2025.

The conference was organized by **Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl** and **Tatjana Petzer** from the Department of Slavic Studies and **Ulla Kriebener** from the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care (CIRAC) within the framework of the project *Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe*, which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.





The Organizing Committee: Ulla Kriebeneegg, Tatjana Petzer (1st/2nd from left) and Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (1st right) with
Dean of Studies Margit Reitbauer (2nd from right)

The aim of the conference was, on the one hand, to discuss how cultural representations of aging and old age have evolved over time through literature, film, theater, and visual arts, and, on the other hand, to examine the transformative potential of those representations in shaping individual attitudes, cultural mindsets, and social practices. The conference centered, in line with the project, on Southeast European literatures and film, particularly the South Slavic (Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Slovenian) as well as Albanian and Romanian contexts. Within nine panel sessions, twenty-five speakers presented their research on aging and old age as connected to various topics, from education, social change, gender, queerness, memory, tradition, and care to transhumanism and the digital transformation. Members of the *Transforming Anxieties of Ageing* project team served as panel chairs and discussants and, with their diverse disciplinary backgrounds, fostered interdisciplinary exchange.





The conference program was enriched by a reading performance by students of Slavic Studies at the University of Graz. They read excerpts from Georgi Gospodinov's latest book *Death and the Gardener*

(2024) and Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2008). A highlight of the first conference day was the screening of an author reading with Slavenka Drakulić who, in a talk with Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl and Tatjana Petzer, discussed how her writing reflects and critiques the society we live in, closing with an excerpt from her recent short story collection *What We Do Not Talk About* (2024).

Conference attendees and guests had successful days of inspiring exchange, networking, and furthering aging studies in the Southeast European context. The organizers were especially happy about the participation of team members of the AGE-C project (*Age and Gender in European Cinema*), also funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.





Ulla Kriebnernegg (left) and Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (right) with members of the AGE-C project team

More impressions from the conference:













(all images © University of Graz)

The conference was funded by:



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Demographic Anxieties in *Honeyland*: Survival, Loneliness, and Perspective in the Balkans

2025-11-18 | by: Peter Wagener

Between abandoned villages, restless youth, and the pull of migration, the film *Honeyland* reflects the anxieties of a Balkan present where tradition, survival, and the search for perspective collide.

Perspektiva, perspektiva...

Stvarnost nam je crno-bela, a budućnost siva.[1]

Perspective, perspective...

Our reality is black and white, and the future is gray.

The last Macedonian-made film to receive international attention (and two Oscar nominations)—*Honeyland*—tells the story of Hatidže Muratova, a wild beekeeper in her mid-50s who accompanies her 86-year-old mother on her deathbed in an abandoned village in the Macedonian

mountains. A traditional way of beekeeping, where half of all honey is always left for the bees themselves, provides the film's moral framework. The simple, routine life (not to say ritualised life) is turned upside down by the unexpected arrival of a nomadic family, who settles in the village one day, trying to survive with their farming skills. The interplay between economic pressures and the tragedies and beauties of life in the abandoned Macedonian mountains is a leitmotif throughout the documentary. Brief scenes of aeroplanes far above Hatidže's head add a 'glocal' character to it.



Portrait of Hatidže Muratova, the lead actress in *Honeyland*

In stark contrast to the aesthetically bright, even hopeful, tone of *Honeyland* is the current, dark reality in North Macedonia. On the night of 16 March 2025, a catastrophe occurred in the small town of Kočani when a fire broke out in a nightclub, in which at least 63 young people lost their lives. Almost 200 more were injured. After the catastrophe, the grief often mixed with anger and despair. In Štip, a university town not far from Kočani, schoolchildren and students gathered to commemorate the victims shortly after. One student held a sign that read: 'Either we move away or we burn alive'. The sentence captured in a moment what many young people in the Balkans feel: a lack of perspective. I claim this lens allows a broader reading of what should be understood under 'Demographic Anxieties' than the usual fear of fertility decline in the context of rising nationalism.

Let's for a moment say that 'Demographic Anxieties' is a catch-all term. What or who should be defined as the problems or issues causing this anxiety? For conservatives, the answer is usually grounded in the condemnation of a 'progressive, valueless and rootless agenda', influenced by individualised, family-alienated concepts of society, as well as multiculturalist approaches that include the increase of migration in their world view. Progressives might try to identify various forms of pronatalist policies as

indicators of demographic policy that are more harmful than future-oriented, due to their ethno-nationalist character. When it comes to demographics, the Gretchen question remains asking: What needs to be analysed, so that it can be recognised as a problem and finally combated? *Honeyland* makes us reflect on this question through the eyes of the last wild beekeeper of her village, which is no more—trying to see the inevitability of demographic changes accompanying time, while at the same moment being confronted with the struggles it brings. That is the lesson of *Honeyland*.

Hatidže's cyclical way of life, grounded and tied to nature, represents a disappearing reality in (not only) the Western world, which is increasingly driven by the logic of attention economics and different forms of economic exploitation. The arrival of the nomadic family, while initially hopeful, soon reveals the pressure of the present: their attempt to replicate Hatidže's beekeeping fails as they bend to the demands of profit and overproduction. The consequences are the loss of their bees, their household, and eventually their decision to leave again. The message being that survival alone is not enough when embedded in unsustainable systems.

This is where the film mirrors today's demographic tensions as well. Rural youth in the Balkans face a familiar choice: do they remain in environments that feel abandoned, or do they try to rebuild a life in urban centres elsewhere? *Honeyland* makes us feel the emotional and intergenerational dimensions of that decision. When the nomadic family moves on and Hatidže is left alone (even after her mother dies), another anxiety comes into view: loneliness—a loneliness not only of individuals, but of place. This is made especially clear in one outstanding scene. During a trip to Skopje's Bit Pazar market, Hatidže tells a merchant: 'There used to be more Albanians. We had 15 in the village. Apart from us, they are all in Turkey'. The exchange is casual, yet it reveals more than just Hatidže's personal memory. It reminds us that demographic shifts are not just numbers, but ruptures in communities.

At the heart of *Honeyland* is Hatidže's relationship with her bedridden mother. Their conversations provide an emotional backbone to the film and reveal how personal decisions are shaped by love, but also by a lack of alternatives. In one of the film's most intimate moments, Hatidže asks her mother:

'When the matchmakers came looking for brides, why didn't you accept anyone'?

The mother answers:

‘I don’t know...’

‘For me, for me. When they asked for me’.

‘I was in agreement. I had given my consent’.

‘Who isn’t?’

‘Your father’.

Hatidže finally says:

‘Even if someone wanted me, I wouldn’t leave here’.

‘Why?’

‘That’s right’.

‘Don’t say that’.

‘Why’?

‘Don’t say that’.

‘What am I supposed to do? I can’t leave you behind’.

‘Of course you could.’ (long pause) ‘You could take me with you. The son-in-law would look after us. Ah my child... Blessed is he who cares. Ah my Hatidže...’

Today, the options of mobility are greater than ever. Between Skopje Airport and Germany, around 2,000 passengers travel back and forth every day. In the movie the aeroplanes remain distant objects of desire.

Across Southeast Europe, young people are facing a dilemma: they are torn between leaving their homes in search of opportunity and staying behind in increasingly unstable or neglected environments. Local struggles intersect with the promises of global mobility. The constant comparison of living standards via social media functions as a global stage for imagining elsewhere, while the socioeconomic reality is often shaped by corruption and institutional fragility. This uncertainty, on the one hand, strengthens the social foundations of belonging (the nation as a quasi-religious element that provides some sense of certainty about identity). On the other hand, young people are deeply engaged online and acutely aware of unequal living standards across Europe. *Honeyland*, set in rural Macedonia, echoes these dynamics and reveals their intergenerational continuity as well as the ruptures that accompany them.

[1] Lyric line from the well-known song *Perspektiva* by the Serbian band S.A.R.S.

Rediscovering the Portrayals of Aging in Albania's 1980s Cinema

2025-09-29 | by: Andi Balla

How 1980s films, now preserved and digitized, have become a resource for researchers and curious viewers alike.



One of the two film opening logos *Kinostudio Shqipëria e re/The New Albania Film Studio* used in the 1980s

Courtesy of the [Albanian Central Film Archive \(AQShF\)](#)

On two neighboring balconies in a Tirana apartment building, a group of retirees share coffee and conversation. Their topic is the state-run retirement home. One of the men already lives there, but he has come to visit his friend Tase, who has no family and lives alone. Tase admits he is considering the institution, though he dislikes its rules. “I’m a horse without reins,” he declares to Kalina, the widowed neighbor next door. Kalina is firm in her opinion of institutional care: “I would never bring such shame to my family,” she says.

This exchange comes from Albert Xholi’s 1987 comedy *Familja ime (My Family)*, which follows Kalina’s story. After the death of her husband, and being childless, she moves in with her nephew’s family in the city, unable to live alone. Her arrival unsettles the household. Kalina takes over the kitchen, insists on managing the cleaning and even meddles in trying to arrange a marriage for the family’s daughter.

These actions provoke tension with her nephew and his wife. Yet the film has a tender arc. Kalina's stubborn presence ultimately becomes a source of love and unity, and she is embraced as the heart of the family.

It's a typically formulaic communist-era Albanian film, but it does tell us about the discussions on institutional elder care at the time. Extended families are expected to take in older adults. Institutional homes are only for those completely alone.

Having recently done a deep dive into the Albanian cinema of the 1980s, I rediscovered several films like *Familja Ime* and a wealth of information on the demographic discourse of the time. It offered a window, albeit skewed by propaganda, on what aging was like in 1980s Albania.

Other examples include popular classics like Piro Milkani's comedies *Zonja nga qyteti* (*The Lady from the City*, 1976) and its sequel, *Një shoqe nga fshati* (*A Comrade from the Village*, 1981), which address questions of age-related gendered portrayals and the desire for internal migration in a country with a deep urban-rural divide; as well as more obscure titles like Besim Kurti's *Fejesa e Blertës* (*Blerta's Engagement*, 1984) and *Djali elastik* (*The Elastic Boy*, 1989), which deal with intergenerational relations and multigenerational households.

Most of Albania's communist-era films were made by state-run *Kinostudio Shqipëria e Re/The New Albania Film Studio*, produced within the strict parameters of socialist realism and designed to reinforce loyalty to the communist regime. But talented directors and actors made it possible for some of these productions to be entertaining as well, making a few of these films very popular to this day. "For amidst the orthodoxy of Kinostudio, there flourished a tremendous amount of creativity," as Bruce Williams puts it.^[1]

Creative filmmakers used the figure of the older adult as a vessel to explore themes of corruption, disillusionment and intergenerational conflict. These portrayals reflected not only official narratives but also the lived tensions of households and communities navigating the final decade of Albanian communism. This is evident in titles like Esat Musliu's *Hije që mbeten pas* (*Shadows that Remain*, 1985), which dramatizes both corruption among older officials and the economic and social strains Albanian society faced in the 1980s.

On screen, the discourse presented older Albanians who were not allowed to fade quietly into retirement. They were expected to keep working, advising, guiding and sacrificing. Many were celebrated as part of the "partisan generation," those who had fought in World War II and built socialism with their bare hands. At the same time, their presence often revealed the cracks in the system, with films also featuring the impatience of younger generations, the weariness of endless sacrifice and the corruption of officials who clung to power too long as we see in films like Muharrem Fejzo's *Binarët* (*The Rails*, 1987) and Rikard Ljarja's *Pesha e kohës* (*The Weight of Time*, 1988) .

Films also frequently juxtaposed the “good father” archetype, honest, modest and sacrificial, with the “bad father,” corrupt, nepotistic or authoritarian. Works like Kristaq Dhamo’s *Apasionata* (*Appassionata*, 1983) and Spartak Pecani’s *Vetmi* (*Loneliness*, 1990) acknowledged systemic corruption but counterbalanced it with virtuous older people, allowing audiences to recognize moral decay without entirely undermining socialist legitimacy.

After communism fell in the 1990s, most of the Kinostudio films were quickly discarded and went into obscurity, along with much of the cultural infrastructure that had produced them. Luckily, a professional effort by the Central Film Archive of Albania has saved them, by digitizing them and making them available to the public for free.

For historians and anthropologists studying Albania, these films can be invaluable. They are not simply works of art in the conventional sense, but cultural artifacts. They can be used as records of how 1980s Albania talked about family, sacrifice and morality.

Though the films are largely propaganda in the way that they reflect what the communist state wanted people to talk about these topics, many featured elements, such as family size and composition, confirm demographic information and pressures that are evident in other sources, such as archival documents and oral history interviews. Thus, the outlines of everyday life do come through in these films. We see the crowded multigenerational households born of housing shortages and the tug-of-war between village traditions and urban aspiration, for example.

For ordinary viewers, however, the rediscovery of these films can be personal. Scroll through the comments beneath one of these movies on YouTube, and the nostalgia is overwhelming. Faced with a curated propaganda view, some commenters praise communism and lament the turbulent transition of the 1990s. For them, it is easier to fondly remember the imposed “harmony” of a totalitarian state through the rose-tinted glasses of Kinostudio, than to recall the food shortages, the dire poverty and the terror of the state security apparatus during 1980s communist rule in Albania.

With that in mind, if you are interested to see some of these films, the full catalogue is available to the public for viewing at the [Albanian Central Film Archive](#), which offers 271 feature films (of which 247 are from the communist era) produced between 1945-2011.

The resulting paper from my own research, “Portrayal of Aging in Albania’s 1980s Films” will be presented at the upcoming conference [SEE Aging Graz 2025. Transforming Representations of Aging in Southeast European Literature and Film](#) in late September.

Bibliography

[1] Williams, B. (2015). It’s a wonderful job: women at work in the cinema of communist Albania. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 6(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2014.992127>