Conference report: Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe: Political, Social, and Cultural Narratives of Demographic Change

2026-11-04|**by:** Andi Balla

Final project conference, 10 to 12 September 2026, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

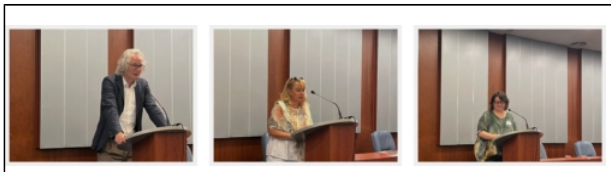
Report by Andi Balla (IOS Regensburg)

Southeastern Europe is home to some of the fastest-shrinking and fastest-aging populations in the world, and public debate in the region has long met these changes with alarm. Since 2023, the project *Transforming Anxieties of Ageing in Southeastern Europe*, which receives funding from the German Volkswagen Foundation, has studied where those anxieties come from, how they are narrated and what policy impact they have. In September this year, the project brought scholars, policy makers and practitioners to Sofia to take stock of and discuss what it has found. The project’s final conference, held at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” from 10 to 12 September 2026, was organized by Galina Goncharova, the principal investigator of the project’s Bulgarian team.

The event brought together the project’s partner teams from the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg (Germany), Sofia University, the Center for Southeast European Studies and the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care (CIRAC) at the University of Graz (Austria), and the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute in Budapest, along with invited speakers from across the region and beyond. Over two days, eighteen presentations in five panels, two keynote lectures and a round table approached demographic change and aging in Southeastern Europe from historical, sociological, demographic and cultural angles, and the round table looked at the policy implications. The five panels mirrored the project’s five research clusters. A visit to a cultural center for older people in Sofia closed the program on the third day. Like the project as a whole, the conference was also funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Sonya Karabeliova, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University, opened the conference, highlighting the importance of the topic by referring to the demographic challenges Bulgaria is currently facing. **Ulf Brunnbauer** (IOS Regensburg), the project coordinator, gave a short history of

the project, explained why the demographic history of Southeastern Europe makes the region a distinctive case and introduced the partner institutions. He presented the conference as a chance to reflect on the project's results ahead of a joint book. **Galina Goncharova** (Sofia University) described the conference as linking demographic questions with individual experiences of aging, and encouraged participants not to miss a single session.



From the opening ceremony. From left to right: Ulf Brunnbauer (IOS), Sonya Karabeliova (Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University), and Galina Goncharova (Sofia University).

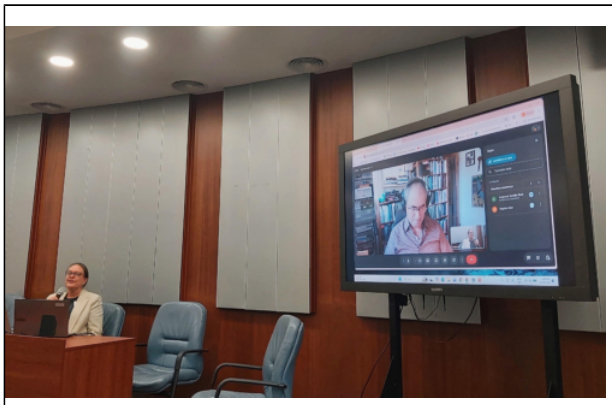
The first panel, chaired by **Sara Žerić Đulović** (IOS Regensburg), turned to socialist legacies and ambivalent transitions. **Inxhi Brisku** (Sofia University) traced the development of social protection and old-age pensions in Albania from the monarchy into the early years of the communist regime. He stressed that during communism, pensions were framed not as an entitlement but as a gift from the party. Workers in heavy industry were privileged. **Andi Balla** (IOS Regensburg) presented the findings of his doctoral dissertation, written within the project, on Albanian demographic debates since 1980. In each era a single demographic indicator overshadowed the rest in public discourse, from births and population growth under socialism to emigration after 1991. Aging, present all along in debates on intergenerational relations within households and on care homes, has now become a dominant concern, as Albania grows old before it grows affluent. The dissertation traces these shifts through archival research, newspapers from the 1980s and 1990s, oral history interviews, a corpus of Albanian films and a systematic content analysis of contemporary media. **Ulf Brunnbauer** (IOS Regensburg) examined socialist Yugoslavia, focusing on actors who transformed the experience of old age. Large surveys and expert research shaped the debate, and the media, freer than elsewhere in socialist Europe, promoted active aging and intergenerational solidarity. He pointed to the vast gap between the richest and poorest parts of the federation, from Slovenia to Kosovo. Self-management, the Yugoslav model of socialism that placed enterprises under workers' councils and gave the republics and provinces wide autonomy, was in his view better at producing ideas than at implementing them. **Botakoz Kassymbekova** (University of Zurich), who joined online, presented part of her new monograph on aging after Stalinism. She employed a bottom-up approach, based on letters, diaries and memoirs of older Soviet citizens. She showed how older people searched for coherence in their life stories, in a state that treated a life without duties as parasitic. One of the important results of the discussion after the presentations was the need to explore the subject positions available to older

people under the specific conditions of state socialism.

The afternoon panel on demographic and expert discourses was chaired by **Ivana Spirovska** (University of Graz). **Denitsa Nencheva** (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) showed how gerontology in late socialist Bulgaria, which was strongly influenced by Soviet gerontology, made longevity its focus, studying the lifestyles of long-livers and mapping them across the country. Already during socialism, Bulgarian gerontologists called upon older people to age "actively", with particular emphasis on physical exercise. **Kristijan Fidanovski** (Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies) made the case for "progressive pronatalism". Starting from population aging and the gap between the number of children people say they want and the number they have, he argued that the details of family policy matter and that progressive actors have so far left the issue to right-wing and nationalist voices, although pronatalism could just as well be a progressive cause. **Mariya Tsolova** (Sofia University) used SHARE data on people aged 50 and over in 26 European countries to show that self-perceived health follows inequality, which weighs more on how people judge their health than a country's overall wealth. Individual education is a very strong predictor as well. She also pointed to a substantial gender difference, as women on average report worse health than men. **Orsolya Udvari** and **Attila Melegh** (Hungarian Demographic Research Institute) approached the Hungarian case from two angles. Melegh, who leads the project's comparative study of media discourse in Albania, Hungary, North Macedonia and Romania, showed that Hungarian discourse links aging mostly to the economy and struggles to treat it as a social issue. The comparison also brought out national differences: Albanian discourse, for example, ties aging to emigration, while the Hungarian one is concerned with immigration. Udvari's expert interviews framed demographic aging as a social problem tied to a care crisis, with little room for longevity as a success story. The panel presentations made clear that the silences in a discourse are as important as what is said.

The first day closed with an online keynote by **Stephen Katz** (Trent University), introduced by **Ulla Kriebernegg** (University of Graz) as one of the founding voices of critical gerontology. Katz examined how population aging came to be told as a crisis. Writing on the subject typically opens with an alarming statement about costs, backed by dense demographic data, while grouping people by age breeds stereotypes. Dependency ratios, he noted, leave out the unpaid work of older people, much of it done by women. He traced this way of thinking to the early modern state, which linked population with power as statistics developed alongside it, and followed it into today's image of a war between generations, the caricature of the greedy baby boomer and the spread of Western models of old age to the Global South. As alternatives that could foreground more inclusive visions of aging, he pointed to posthumanist, environmental and Indigenous perspectives, paraphrasing Donna Haraway's call to "make kin, not population", and to approaching aging as a matter of care. Studying aging, he

concluded, is an occasion for optimism.



Keynote speech by Stephen Katz (Trent University), chaired by Ulla Kriebernegg (University of Graz).

The second day opened with the third panel, on cross-cultural pathways and life stories of aging and care, chaired by **Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl** (University of Graz). **Stefania Gabrovska** (Sofia University) examined narratives of worth among older Bulgarians and asked whether a person can be fulfilled without being productive. From her interviews, she identified two main tropes used by old people to speak about their experience: useful and empty time. She also highlighted that older people in Bulgaria she interviewed struggled to come to terms with being dependent. Dependency, she argued, is the human condition. **Kristine Krause** (University of Amsterdam), who is one of the principal investigators of another aging project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, looked at the historical sentiments of transnational care for older adults in an unequal Europe, where care moves from wealthier to poorer countries and becomes a market. Drawing on ethnographic observations in care homes in Poland, she described these institutions as “space-time envelopes.” **Galina Goncharova** (Sofia University) and **Anna-Christina Kainradl** (University of Graz) presented their joint paper with **Saša Nedeljković** (University of Belgrade), who could not attend. Based on interviews from two of the project’s clusters in five countries, it explored intergenerational care and what older adults consider good aging. Intersecting care, aging and migration, they challenged entrenched notions of care homes as places of decline and highlighted the importance of experiential knowledge.

The fourth panel, chaired by **Ulla Kriebernegg** (University of Graz), dealt with public narratives and their politicization. **Sanja Klempić Bogadi** (Institute for Migration Research, Zagreb) showed how demographic revitalization has become a central political narrative in Croatia. Public debate frames emigration as demographic loss, immigration as both an economic necessity and a threat to Croatian identity, and the return of ethnic Croatian emigrants and their descendants as desirable renewal. Aging is told mainly through vulnerability, dependence and pressure on public systems, overlooking the diversity of older people’s lives. Demography has become heavily politicized in Croatia because it is

linked with questions of national identity. **Róbert Iván Gál** (Hungarian Demographic Research Institute) asked "Who is actually dependent?" Looking at transfers between age groups in Europe, he showed that children receive far more than older people if interfamilial transfers are added to the picture. The notion that older people are the main beneficiaries of social and financial support is a cliché, and the fear of a "creeping gerontocracy" is out of place. Transfers to older people are more easily socialized and, therefore, more visible. **Ivana Spirovska** and **Florian Bieber** (University of Graz) analyzed Serbian media discourses on aging and demographic threats, paying attention to what the media leave unsaid. They started with a 19th-century adage that "at the end, all Serbs will have a place under one plum tree." What their discourse analysis reveals is that media coverage rejects immigration as a solution, places the burden of having more children on women and frames aging exclusively as a crisis. Yet overall, the media debate on demography is subdued, reflecting the government's hesitancy to foreground an issue where it cannot achieve much.



Keynote speech by Daniela Koleva, "Ageing and Its Sciences".

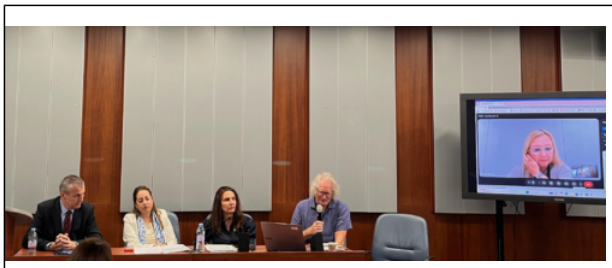
The final panel, chaired by Galina Goncharova, turned to cultural representations of age and aging. **Adriana Teodorescu** (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca) followed the cultural imaginary of aging in contemporary Romania. From her analysis of media, she pointed to widespread gerontophobia which many people have internalized. Old people are described as a collective burden and are scapegoated. Yet in private contexts, older people are more likely to be presented as providers of care. She also stressed the ambiguities of longevity discourse in which the body becomes a life-long project turning inequality into a matter of lifestyle. **Nevena Dimitrova** (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) discussed similar issues, but in relation to the representation of old age in socialist Bulgaria. She focused on aging femininity, analyzing representations in the then-leading women's issues magazine, *Zhenata dnes*. She contrasted the absence of older women on the magazine's pages with a recent artistic intervention which presented the naked body of an aged, well-known Bulgarian actress. **Dagmar Gramshammer-**

Hohl (University of Graz) turned toward literature to examine how eminent Southeast European writers speak about aging. From the analysis of novels such as *Zsömle odavan* (Zsömle is gone) by the Hungarian Nobel laureate László Krasznahorkai or Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov's much acclaimed *Vremeubezhishte* (Time Shelter), she concluded that aging is "unshown" in a process of literary erasure which reflects societal erasure. **Boryana Angelova-Igova** (National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski") traced how the female athlete's body moves from admiration to body horror as ageism and prejudice set in. Drawing on examples from Bulgaria, Serbia and Turkey, she discussed the ambiguities of public excitement about the achievements of "old" female athletes.

After that**, Daniela Koleva** (Sofia University) gave the second keynote, "Ageing and Its Sciences", introduced by Ulf Brunnbauer. Koleva, who is one of Bulgaria's best-known historians and one of the founders of oral history in Bulgaria, currently works on a book about the development of gerontology in socialist Bulgaria. Starting from the long-standing complaint that gerontology is fragmented among biologists, physicians and sociologists, she sketched the different models by which knowledge about aging was produced in Bulgaria. The country's many centenarians drew fascination and study, medicine absorbed the gerontology center and steered it toward disease, demographers watched the indicators, and sociologists turned to the aging individual in the 1980s. The field remained poorly institutionalized and after 1992, gerontology all but disappeared. When EU funding brought it back, there were hardly any gerontologists left in the country.

The conference concluded with the policy-oriented round table "Ageing Regionally: Regimes of Value and Policy Futures", chaired by Galina Goncharova and Ulf Brunnbauer. The round table asked how policy making relates to demographic change in Southeastern Europe and, specifically, how context-sensitive policies on aging can be supported. Speaking online, **Zornitsa Roussinova**, President of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria, stressed that demographic trends affect every sector of society, even though demographic policy has rarely topped the government's agenda. Recently, Bulgarian policies in the realm of aging have been guided by the model of intergenerational justice. She also stressed the importance of addressing regional disparities and improving access to public services. **Zlatina Naydenova** (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy), who heads the department responsible for demographic issues in the ministry, described population aging trends in Bulgaria. Combined with low fertility and high mortality by EU standards, it amounts to a challenge to all social systems that calls for joint action across education, health and the economy. She outlined Bulgaria's national demographic strategies, from the first for 2006–2020 to the updated one for 2012–2030 that replaced it early. One of the strategy's key priorities is to create favorable conditions for active aging. **Željko Blagojević** (United Nations Funds for Population Activity/UNFPA, Sarajevo) recalled the older concept of "demographic security" and UNFPA's shift toward "demographic resilience", which centers on human capital. The UNFPA gave it a regional platform at a first ministerial conference in Sofia in

2021 and a second one in Skopje last year. He stressed that “money does not buy children.” Instead, UNFPA encourages governments to invest in healthy aging and care. As a low-cost, but effective best practice model, Blagojević singled out the network of healthy aging centers in Bosnia-Herzegovina that were established with support from the UNFPA. In his assessment, local governments are more ready to invest in older people but often lack the means to do so. **Lora Lyubenova** (Alzheimer Bulgaria) presented her volunteer-based association, which works with students and young people, runs information and prevention campaigns and cooperates with academia, including research on ageism. However, the enthusiasm of volunteers cannot make up for failures of public policy: Bulgaria still lacks a national register of people with dementia, and even in Sofia there is no day care center for people suffering from it.



Roundtable discussion “Ageing Regionally: Regimes of Value and Policy Futures”. From left to right: Željko Blagojević (United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, Sarajevo), Lora Lyubenova (Alzheimer Bulgaria), Zlatina Naydenova (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy), and Zornitsa Roussinova (President of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria).

Overall, the contributions showed how persistently aging is framed as a crisis across the region, in socialist expertise as much as in today’s media and policy debates. Emigration and immigration are told in very different ways from country to country, the burden of reversing decline is placed mainly on women, and the social side of aging, from care to longevity as a success, remains at the margins of public debate. On the other hand, the work of activists, experts and the occasional politician showcases the potential for more inclusive, transformative approaches, centered around the idea of caring communities. These findings will feed into the project’s joint book.



The "Srebarna Esen" (Silver Autumn) Club with Zoya Paprikova-Krutilin.

On Saturday, participants visited the "Srebarna Esen" (Silver Autumn) Club in central Sofia, a club for older people with interests in music, literature and the arts. It was founded by art historian **Zoya Paprikova-Krutilin**, who gave the lecture, and continues the charitable work of her late mother, Donka Paprikova, whose society runs a hospice alongside the club to offer dignity to those in need. The visit began with a documentary on the center's origins, and participants received literature on how the hospice and club are run. Club members performed classical music, and the day ended with snacks and drinks in the garden. It was a touching close to the conference and reminded the participants of something Velislava Delcheva, the Ombudsman of Bulgaria, wrote in her letter to the conference participants: "Older people are not a burden on society. They are the people who built it."

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

2026-06-17|**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 ever 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, 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

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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 Kriebernegg, 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.



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***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 Kriebernegg** 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 Kriebernegg, 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 Kriebernegg (left) and Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (right) with members of the AGE-C project team

More impressions from the conference:






Anxieties of Ageing
in Southeastern Europe
Political, Social, and
Cultural Narratives of
Demographic Change


Anxieties of Ageing
in Southeastern Europe
Political, Social, and
Cultural Narratives of
Demographic Change


We work for
tomorrow


We work for
tomorrow










THANK YOU
We work for
tomorrow


THANK YOU
We work for
tomorrow






Transforming Representations of Aging in
Southeast European Literature and Film
We work for
tomorrow



(all images © University of Graz)

The conference was funded by:





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 Hatidze’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.