


Case Study: Bosnia and Herzegovina,  
Montenegro, Croatia, and Serbia

# **The Balkan Quadrilateral: Voter Migration and the Boundaries of Voter Register**

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# Why voter migration is no longer a technical issue

Voter migration and cross-border voting in the Western Balkans have long been viewed as technical issues related to the accuracy of voter registers, residence records, or voter registration procedures. However, experiences from the past decade demonstrate that these phenomena carry much broader political and institutional implications. Organized voter migration, meaning the coordinated registration of residence or mobilization of voters outside their actual place of residence for the purpose of influencing electoral outcomes, has increasingly become a factor in political crises, interstate disputes, and the erosion of trust in electoral processes.

Organized voter migration encompasses various forms of politically motivated movement of voters between electoral districts or across national borders. These include the registration of fictitious residences, the mobilization of diaspora voters for specific elections and cross-border voting that may be formally legal but politically controversial. While such practices are not unique to the Western Balkans, they have acquired particular political significance in the region due to its specific historical and institutional context.

The dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s led to the emergence of new states and new citizenship regimes, often based on different approaches to regulating the legal relationship between individuals and the state. At the same time, a large regional diaspora was formed, and dual citizenship became widespread. Today, a significant number of citizens across the region hold the citizenship of more than one country or maintain strong political and social ties with states in which they do not reside. In this context, the distinction between the resident electorate and a politically mobilized diaspora has become increasingly blurred.

An additional layer of complexity stems from the fact that countries in the region maintain significantly different citizenship regimes and approaches to voting rights. While some states encourage diaspora participation in political processes and allow citizenship acquisition without permanent residence, others seek to restrict such practices in order to protect demographic and political stability. Although the regulation of citizenship is unquestionably a sovereign right of every state, the absence of dialogue, cooperation, and information-sharing on unresolved issues complicates trust-building efforts and undermines good neighbor relations. As a result, differing legal frameworks, combined with insufficient exchange of administrative data between states, create opportunities for political disputes and manipulation.

For these reasons, voter migration in the region can no longer be viewed solely as a matter of technical management of electoral registers. It has at least three interconnected dimensions. The first concerns electoral integrity and public trust in democratic processes. The second relates to bilateral relations between states, as issues of citizenship and voting rights frequently become part of political and diplomatic disputes and affect good neighborly relations. The third dimension is linked to the process of European integration, as the European framework for electoral integrity increasingly emphasizes transparent voter registers, a clear connection between voting rights and residence, and mechanisms to prevent multiple voting.

# Methodological approach and limitations of the analysis

This analysis is designed as a case study aimed at identifying and explaining structural patterns related to citizenship regimes, voting rights, and voter migration in selected countries of the region. Its purpose is not to provide a comprehensive overview of all Western Balkan states, nor to serve as primary empirical research based on fieldwork or systematic data collection. Rather, through selected cases, it seeks to illustrate different institutional and political models that shape electoral registers and cross-border political participation.

The analysis is based on a review of current legal frameworks, official documents and institutional reports, reports produced by international organizations, findings from civil society organizations, as well as publicly available media reports and documented cases that have generated significant political and social attention across the region. Given the limited availability of systematized regional databases and the relatively small number of academic studies addressing these issues in the contemporary regional context<sup>1</sup>, this approach enables an analytical mapping of key trends, political disputes, and institutional challenges associated with voter migration and the integrity of voter registers.

Rather than providing an exhaustive regional survey, the analysis focuses on selected cases that represent different regulatory models and political approaches to citizenship, residence, and voting rights in the region. Particular attention is given to contexts in which cross-border ties, dual citizenship, and voter migration have a direct impact on electoral processes and political relations between states. In this regard, the selected cases illustrate how citizenship policies shaped in the context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia continue to generate legal and political tensions among Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, and Serbia.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Aleksandar Ivković, *Organized Voter Migration in the Western Balkans* (German Marshall Fund / ReThink.CEE Fellowship, 2025), one of the few recent regional overviews that systematically addresses voter migration, residence registration, and the integrity of voter registers in the Western Balkan countries.

# Citizenship regimes and voting rights in the region

Different citizenship and voting rights regimes across the Western Balkans represent one of the key structural factors shaping voter migration and cross-border voting. Although all countries in the region formally operate on similar democratic principles, their approaches to citizenship, diaspora engagement, and voting rights differ significantly. These differences stem from the specific historical, political, and demographic circumstances that emerged following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, but they also have tangible political consequences in contemporary electoral practice.

Different models of citizenship and political belonging characterize the countries of the region. While some states encourage transnational ties with their diasporas and allow voting rights without permanent residence, others seek to restrict such practices in order to preserve the stability of the electorate and prevent political influence by voters who do not reside within their territory. These differences in citizenship and voting rights regimes create opportunities for abuse, political disputes, and various forms of voter migration.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina** has a distinctive institutional framework deriving from the constitutional order established by the Dayton Peace Agreement. Voting rights are primarily based on citizenship and inclusion in the voter register rather than residence. The passive voter registration system, introduced in 2006, provides for the automatic registration of adult citizens in the Central Voter Register. The electoral system enables diaspora participation through a special registration process for out-of-country voting, either by mail or through diplomatic and consular missions.

Allowing the country's large diaspora to exercise voting rights, even outside their pre-war place of residence and including in local elections, was conceived as a partial attempt to mitigate the consequences of the war and ethnic cleansing. The share of overseas voters who exercised this right was highest in the first post-war elections in 1996, but it declined in every subsequent election cycle and has represented a relatively small proportion of the electorate since the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the Central Voter Register, operating under the passive registration system, grew to more than 3.2 million registered voters in a country whose estimated population is lower than that figure, creating additional opportunities for manipulation.<sup>3</sup>

This institutional framework is further complicated by the widespread prevalence of dual citizenship throughout the region. According to available data, nearly 180,000 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina acquired Serbian citizenship<sup>4</sup> between 2011 and 2022, while Croatian registry data indicate that more than 32,000 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained Croatian

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<sup>2</sup> Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Izvještaj o provođenju Općih izbora 2022. godine (*Report on the Conduct of the 2022 General Elections*). Available at: [https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/CIK/God-Izvjestaji/2022/izvjestaj\\_o\\_provodjenju\\_opcih\\_izbora\\_2022-bos.pdf](https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/CIK/God-Izvjestaji/2022/izvjestaj_o_provodjenju_opcih_izbora_2022-bos.pdf) Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Odluka o zaključivanju Centralnog biračkog spiska sa stanjem na dan 06.10.2024. godine u 24.00 sati (*Decision on the Closure of the Central Voter Register as of 6 October 2024 at 24:00*). Available at: <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/mCGMGdntM0k=> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>4</sup> N.V., „Čak 180 hiljada građana BiH je u 11 godina dobilo državljanstvo Srbije: Evo kako RS 'gura' Vučića" (*As Many as 180,000 Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina Obtained Serbian Citizenship in 11 Years: Here Is How Republika Srpska 'Boosts' Vucic*), Klix.ba, 13 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/cak-180-hiljada-gradjana-bih-je-u-11-godina-dobilo-drzavljanstvo-srbije-evo-kako-rs-gura-vucica/231213032> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

citizenship<sup>5</sup> over the past fourteen years. According to statements by Croatian Member of the European Parliament Zeljana Zovko, approximately 1.1 million citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina hold Croatian passports. Serbian Minister of the Interior Ivica Dacic stated that more than 590,000 Bosnian Serbs have obtained Serbian passports<sup>6</sup> since 1997. The combination of passive voter registration, a large number of citizens living abroad, and the widespread existence of dual citizenship makes the management of electoral registers in Bosnia and Herzegovina a particularly sensitive political issue.

Following its restoration of independence in 2006, Montenegro established a relatively restrictive citizenship regime, largely based on the concept of a stable, clearly defined electorate. Under the Constitution of Montenegro, voting rights are granted to every adult citizen who has residence in Montenegro, directly linking suffrage to the principle of residency. Unlike some other countries in the region, Montenegro's system does not provide special mechanisms for diaspora participation in elections. Citizens living abroad may vote only if they maintain registered residence in Montenegro and cast their ballots at a polling station within the country.

As a general rule, Montenegrin citizenship law does not permit dual citizenship, except in limited cases provided for by bilateral agreements or special decisions of the state. Following the restoration of independence, access to dual citizenship was restricted, and exemption from the requirement to renounce previous citizenship as a condition for acquiring Montenegrin citizenship is granted only in exceptional circumstances. Adult Montenegrin citizens who voluntarily acquire the citizenship of another state after 3 June 2006 generally lose their Montenegrin citizenship automatically by operation of law. This means that individuals who subsequently acquire and retain both citizenships do so in contravention of Montenegro's current legal framework. This approach reflects the political and demographic sensitivity of citizenship issues in a small state with a relatively limited electorate.

At the same time, despite its restrictive citizenship regime, Montenegro has an exceptionally high number of registered voters relative to its demographic structure. With a population of approximately 633,000, including a substantial number of foreign residents, the voter register lists around 550,000 registered voters, significantly exceeding the estimated number of adult citizens and indicating serious deficiencies in record-keeping.<sup>7</sup> Changes in the composition of the electorate are frequently viewed in political discourse as a potential source of political destabilization. As a result, the relationship among citizenship, residence, and voting rights remains a central issue in electoral integrity in the country.

**Croatia** is an example of a model that institutionally incorporates the diaspora into the political system. The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia guarantees universal suffrage to all citizens over the age of 18, regardless of whether they have residence in the country. Citizens living abroad participate in parliamentary elections through a special electoral constituency for the diaspora, with the number of representatives elected by the diaspora limited to three following electoral reforms. Voting by citizens residing outside Croatia is organized through diplomatic and consular missions, while voting rights are fundamentally linked to citizenship.

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<sup>5</sup> „Hrvatsku putovnicu posjeduje 1,1 milijuna gradana BiH – Bošnjaci i Srbi brojniji ‘hrvatski državljani’ od bh Hrvata“ (*1.1 Million Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina Hold Croatian Passports – Bosniaks and Serbs Outnumber Bosnian Croats Among ‘Croatian Citizens’*), Republika Info, 15 December 2024. Available at: <https://republika.info.com/hrvatsku-putovnicu-posjeduje-11-milijuna-gradana-bih-bosnjaci-i-srbi-brojniji-hrvatski-drzavljan-od-bh-hrvata/> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>6</sup> „Ivica Dačić: Više od 590.000 Srba iz BiH dobilo srpski pasoš od 1997. godine“ (*Ivica Dacic: More Than 590,000 Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina Have Received Serbian Passports Since 1997*), Tanjug.rs, 7 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.tanjug.rs/srbija/politika/92707/ivica-dacic-vise-od-590000-srba-iz-bih-dobilo-srpski-pasos-od-1997godine/vest> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Dan, „Po popisu nas je manje, ali nas u biračkom spisku ne fali“ (*According to the Census There Are Fewer of Us, but There Is No Shortage of Us on the Voter Register*), RTNK, 9 February 2024. Available at: <https://rtnk.me/drustvo/po-popisu-nas-je-manje-ali-nas-u-birackom-spisku-ne-fali/> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

This model represents a compromise between the political inclusion of the diaspora and limiting its influence on overall electoral outcomes. A particular feature of the Croatian system is that a large number of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina hold Croatian citizenship, as a result of a long-standing policy of granting citizenship to members of the Croatian people living outside the state. In this way, the political community formally extends beyond the country's territory, which periodically sparks debates over the role of the diaspora in elections.

At the same time, Croatia significantly reformed its residence registration and voter registration systems over the past decade in order to reduce irregularities in voter records and improve the reliability of the electoral register. Despite these reforms, questions regarding the accuracy of the voter register continue to arise periodically in the political sphere. During a debate in the Croatian Parliament in March 2026, it was stated that, at the end of September 2025, the register contained 3,609,130 voters, approximately 400,000 more than the number of adult residents recorded in the 2021 census.<sup>8</sup> This discrepancy is explained by the structure of the electorate, which includes a significant number of individuals who maintain registered residence in Croatia but in fact reside abroad, including more recent emigrants, citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina with registered residence in Croatia, and a portion of the Serbian minority who fled Croatia during the wars of the 1990s and now predominantly live in Serbia.

**Serbia** has developed a relatively expansive citizenship model that enables members of the Serbian people living outside the state's territory to acquire citizenship of the Republic of Serbia without a requirement of permanent residence in the country and without renouncing their previous citizenship. This approach is based on the concept of a transnational political community and the maintenance of political and cultural ties with Serbs throughout the region, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Under Serbia's legal framework, voting rights derive from citizenship, while participation in elections requires prior registration in the voter register. Serbian citizens living abroad may exercise their voting rights if they register in advance to vote through diplomatic and consular missions or at a designated polling station abroad.

At the same time, Serbia broadly permits dual citizenship, meaning that a significant number of citizens of neighboring countries may hold Serbian citizenship without losing the citizenship of the state in which they reside. Data on newly admitted Serbian citizens illustrate the scale of the transnational political community this model creates. According to data from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, more than 300,000 individuals acquired Serbian citizenship between 2012 and 2023, including around 180,000 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, approximately 31,000 from Montenegro, and about 21,000 from Croatia.<sup>9</sup> Such an institutional framework expands the circle of citizens who can formally participate in the political life of the state, while also prompting political debates about the relationship between citizenship, residence, and actual political participation in elections.

The differences in citizenship and voting rights regimes across the region demonstrate that political belonging is not regulated uniformly. While Serbia and Croatia have developed models that facilitate strong political ties with their diasporas, Bosnia and Herzegovina operates within a complex post-conflict institutional framework, and Montenegro seeks to limit the influence of a transnational electorate through a more restrictive citizenship policy. At the same time, administrative cooperation among countries in the region in the areas of citizenship records,

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<sup>8</sup> Izvješće o broju birača upisanih u registar birača i broju birača po izbornim jedinicama za III. tromjesečje 2025. (*Report on the Number of Voters Registered in the Voter Register and the Number of Voters by Electoral Constituencies for the Third Quarter of 2025*). Available at: <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/sjednice-sabora/izvjesce-o-broju-biraca-upisanih-u-registar-biraca-i-broju-biraca-po-izbornim-4?t=158599&tid=214178> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Slavković, „Glasovi iz Republike Srpske: Stara igra, nova runda“ (*Votes from Republika Srpska: An Old Game, a New Round*), NIN, 18 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/42139/glasovi-iz-republike-srpske-na-izborima-u-srbiji> Accessed: 19 May 2026.

residence registration, and voter registers remains limited. The lack of systematic data exchange makes it more difficult to verify residence and the status of voters holding citizenship in multiple states, further complicating the management of electoral registers. All of this creates conditions in which certain individuals may be able to exercise voting rights in two or more countries, opening the possibility of serious electoral manipulation and external political influence on electoral processes.

## Patterns of voter migration in the region

The phenomenon of voter migration in the Western Balkans is best understood through specific electoral disputes and political crises that have emerged across different countries of the region over the past decade. Although institutional frameworks vary, similar patterns appear in practice: manipulation of residence registration for electoral purposes, political mobilization of voters from neighboring countries and diaspora communities, and disputes concerning the accuracy of voter registers. In some cases, these issues have led to serious political crises, challenges to election results, and prolonged institutional deadlock.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, voter migration is particularly evident in politically sensitive local communities, where a relatively small number of votes can determine the outcome of an election. The most prominent examples are the local elections in Srebrenica and Bratunac, where electoral processes have for years been accompanied by intensive political mobilization of voters from the diaspora and neighboring countries.

During certain election cycles, public allegations were made regarding so-called “busing-in” practices, involving the organized transportation of voters by bus from neighboring countries in order to vote in local elections. At the same time, cases were recorded of formal changes of residence shortly before elections, with voters being registered at addresses in these municipalities in order to become eligible to vote, sometimes within a very short timeframe that allowed the use of unconfirmed voting ballots.

Issues related to voter migration have not been confined to the local level. During elections for the President of Republika Srpska, numerous reports of electoral manipulation were recorded, including allegations of the organized arrival of voters from Serbia,<sup>10</sup> voting by deceased persons,<sup>11</sup> and forged signatures. As a result of identified irregularities, the electoral process was annulled at 136 polling stations,<sup>12</sup> representing one of the rare cases of such extensive election annulments in the region.

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<sup>10</sup> „Nebojša Vukanović za portal Radiosarajevo.ba: ‘Opozicija jedino gubi u graničnom pojasu sa Srbijom’” (*Nebojša Vukanovic for Radiosarajevo.ba: ‘The Opposition Only Loses in the Border Area with Serbia’*), Radiosarajevo.ba, 24 November 2025. Available at: <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/nebojsa-vukanovic-za-portal-radiosarajevoba-opozicija-jedino-gubi-u-granicnom-pojasu-sa-srbijom/615369> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Dragan Maksimović, „Izborna drama u RS: Masovno vaskrsenje mrtvih” (*Election Drama in Republika Srpska: The Mass Resurrection of the Dead*), Deutsche Welle, 10 December 2025. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/bs/izborna-drama-u-rs-od-pokojnika-do-pukovnika/a-75086402> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>12</sup> Kemal Zorlak, „CIK BiH poništio prijevremene izbore za predsjednika RS-a na 136 biračkih mjesta” (*The Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina Annuls Early Presidential Elections in Republika Srpska at 136 Polling Stations*), Anadolu Agency, 25 December 2025. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/politika/cik-bih-poni%C5%Altio-prijevremane-izbore-za-predsjednika-rs-a-na-136-bira%C4%8Dkih-mjesta/3780012> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

Regional public debates frequently cite the case of Milorad Dodik as an illustrative example. His participation in local elections in Serbia, while simultaneously maintaining political activity and residence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, raised questions about the relationship between residence, citizenship, and the exercise of voting rights in the countries of the region. These controversies further highlighted the limited mechanisms for interstate data exchange and the uneven oversight of voter records among Western Balkan countries.<sup>13</sup>

In **Montenegro**, voter migration most commonly arises in the context of political disputes concerning residence and the accuracy of the voter register. Due to the relatively small electorate and the frequent occurrence of closely contested elections, changes in the composition of the electorate often become the subject of political controversy. Analyses conducted by non-governmental organizations indicate that political debates surrounding the voter register in Montenegro are regularly linked to suspicions of fictitious residence registrations and insufficient oversight of residence reporting. Such allegations are particularly common in border areas and local communities where a relatively small number of votes can determine the outcome of an election.

One illustrative example of the cross-border dimension of voter register issues occurred during the 2021 elections in the municipality of Nikšić, where analyses presented to the public revealed that nearly 1,000 voters were simultaneously registered in the voter rolls of both Montenegro and Serbia, contrary to the applicable legal framework.<sup>14</sup> Similar findings were reported in Herceg Novi in 2021, where civil society organizations published analyses indicating that more than 10% of the total electorate was registered in residence records and voter registers of neighboring countries, namely Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of Montenegro, such findings carry additional political significance because the country is a small state with a relatively limited electorate, where even minor changes in the number of voters can have a decisive impact on election outcomes. In the 2024 local elections in Podgorica, Montenegro's largest city, the margin between political blocs was less than 3,000 votes, while in the highly polarized parliamentary elections of 2020, the difference between the governing coalition and the opposition was fewer than 7,000 votes. In smaller municipalities, the margins are even narrower. In such a context, even a relatively limited number of disputed or improperly registered voters can have a disproportionate political effect.

The issue of voter migration has been further politicized amid broader debates over the possible introduction of dual citizenship arrangements between Montenegro and Serbia. Critics of such initiatives warn that liberalizing citizenship rules could significantly alter the structure of the electorate in a country with a relatively small number of voters, while supporters of such reforms emphasize the rights of the diaspora and the regional mobility of the population. As a result, questions related to voter registers, residence, and citizenship in Montenegro regularly evolve from administrative matters into some of the most important issues affecting electoral integrity and institutional stability.

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<sup>13</sup> Andelija Stojković, „Dodik glasao na lokalnim izborima u Beogradu” (*Dodik Votes in Local Elections in Belgrade*), Anadolu Agency, 4 March 2018. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/dodik-glasao-na-lokalnim-izborima-u-beogradu-/1079424> Accessed: 19 May 2026.

<sup>14</sup> Beta, „Najviši funkcioneri RS, Dodik i Stevandić, glasali na lokalnim izborima u Beogradu” (*Top Republika Srpska Officials Dodik and Stevandić Vote in Local Elections in Belgrade*), Danas, 2 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/najvisi-funkcioneri-rs-dodik-i-stevandic-glasali-na-lokalnim-izborima-u-beogradu/> Accessed: 19 May 2026.  
Bojan Bugarin, Crnogorsko državljanstvo i prebivalište: Kako doći do ažurnog biračkog spiska (*Montenegrin Citizenship and Residence: How to Achieve an Up-to-Date Voter Register*), CEMI, Podgorica, June 2021. Available at: <https://cemi.org.me/storage/uploads/pq91cFZOyKaM5Y7AhidsZDrHwF8HOzZnQsahJIS.pdf>  
See also: „Vujović: Skoro hiljadu birača iz Nikšića upisano i u birački spisak Srbije” (*Vujović: Nearly One Thousand Voters from Nikšić Are Also Registered on Serbia's Voter Register*), CDM, 16 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.cdm.me/politika/vujovic-skoro-hiljadu-biraca-iz-niksica-upisano-i-u-biracki-spisak-srbije/> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>15</sup> „CEMI: U Herceg Novom preko 2.500 birača iz drugih država” (*CEMI: More Than 2,500 Voters from Other Countries Registered in Herceg Novi*), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 13 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31201473.html> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

Over the past decade, **Croatia** has implemented one of the most extensive reforms to voter registration and residence records in the region, in response to long-standing concerns about the accuracy of voter registers. Public debates in the early 2010s frequently highlighted the large number of voters registered at addresses where they did not actually reside, as well as cases in which dozens of voters were registered at a single address.

In response to these problems, new laws on voter registration and residence were adopted, followed by extensive administrative checks of citizens' actual places of residence. During these reviews, registered residences were systematically verified and deregistration procedures were initiated for individuals who were not actually living at their declared addresses.

The result of these reforms was a significant reduction in the number of registered voters. The total number of voters on the register decreased by approximately 750,000. Of these, approximately 412,000 voters were recorded as residing abroad, while an additional 340,000 were removed from the register due to invalid identification documents.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, between 2012 and 2017, approximately 270,000 citizens were removed from residence records after it was determined that they did not actually live at their registered addresses.<sup>17</sup>

These measures significantly reduced the gap between the number of registered voters and the number of adult residents, as well as the potential for manipulation through fictitious residences. Although political debates over the role of the diaspora periodically arise, the Croatian example demonstrates that administrative reforms can substantially reduce problems related to voter migration and inaccurate voter registers. This does not mean that political controversies surrounding diaspora voting rights and residence-related issues in Croatia have disappeared entirely. Rather, it indicates that administrative mechanisms for oversight and record-keeping are more developed than in much of the rest of the region.

Voter migration and the political mobilization of voters from neighboring countries are also visible in local elections in politically sensitive areas of **Serbia**. Public debates and reports by civil society organizations frequently point to practices involving the organized arrival of voters from Republika Srpska to participate in elections in Serbia.

Particular attention was drawn to the Belgrade elections in December 2023, when election observation organizations highlighted unusual changes in the voter register and the possible organized transportation of voters from other countries. Although the overall change in the number of registered voters was not large, analyses pointed to unusual patterns of change at specific polling stations. Public allegations also emerged regarding the registration of large numbers of voters at the same addresses and administrative changes of residence in the period immediately preceding the elections. According to preliminary findings by non-governmental organizations, observers reported cases of organized voter transportation, supervised voting, or other irregularities indicating possible voter identity manipulation at 71 polling stations in Belgrade on election day, representing approximately 14% of the polling stations observed in the capital.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Kristina Buljubašić, „Konačno uvođenje reda: Broj birača smanjen je za 750.000!“ (*Order Finally Introduced: The Number of Voters Reduced by 750,000!*), *Dnevnik.hr*, 4 January 2013. Available at: <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/konacno-uvodjenje-reda-broj-biraca-smanjen-je-za-750-000---269125.html?amp-article> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>17</sup> “Ne smije biti diskriminacije kod odjava prebivališta” (*There Must Be No Discrimination in Residence Deregistration Procedures*), *GONG*, 1 June 2017. Available at: <https://gong.hr/2017/06/01/ne-smije-biti-diskriminacije-kod-odjava-prebivalis/> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>18</sup> CRTA, CRTA's Preliminary Findings on Organized Voter Migration Ahead of the Elections in Serbia on 17 December 2023, 22 December 2023. Available at: <https://crt.rs/preliminarni-nalazi-o-organizovanoj-migraciji-biraca/>. Accessed: 25 March 2026.

These developments triggered serious post-election political disputes, mass opposition protests, and significant international attention.<sup>19</sup> In its preliminary findings, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission also referred to allegations of organized voter transportation and possible residence-related manipulation, and assessed that such practices could undermine public confidence in the electoral process.<sup>20</sup>

The controversies following the 2023 elections in Belgrade also raised broader questions regarding trust in the voter register and the mechanisms for verifying residence in Serbia. The elections were followed by intensive domestic and international debates on the accuracy and transparency of the voter register, including several ODIHR opinions on amendments to Serbia's Law on the Unified Voter Register. ODIHR reiterated its long-standing recommendations on the transparency and accuracy of the voter register, the need for independent audits of voter lists, and concerns about political balance and confidence in voter registration oversight mechanisms.

Although the institutional and political contexts of the countries in the region differ, the cases presented point to several common patterns. In all of the countries examined, issues related to voter registers and residence extend beyond the technical administration of elections and raise broader questions concerning electoral integrity, interstate political relations, and the functioning of democratic institutions within the context of European integration.

## **Voter migration between democracy, regional relations, and European integration**

Voter migration in the Western Balkans has consequences that extend beyond individual elections and local political disputes. Issues related to residence, citizenship, and voting rights in the region often become part of a broader political dynamic that simultaneously affects the quality of democratic processes within states, relations between neighboring countries, and perceptions of political stability in the context of European integration.

In practice, electoral issues frequently evolve into bilateral political disputes. Allegations of organized voter transportation, abuse of dual citizenship, or the political mobilization of diaspora communities regularly appear in debates among political actors and governments across the region. In recent years, such controversies have been particularly visible in relations between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, concerning the political role of voters who hold citizenship in multiple countries and participate in electoral processes outside the state in which they actually reside. Similar debates also periodically emerge in political relations between Montenegro and Serbia, and between Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In such circumstances, electoral disputes cease to be exclusively domestic political issues and become part of a broader regional political dynamic.

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<sup>19</sup> Milica Stojanović, "European Parliament Urges International Investigation Into Serbian Election Fraud Claims", *Balkan Insight*, 8 February 2024. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/08/european-parliament-urges-international-investigation-about-serbian-elections/bi/>. Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>20</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, Republic of Serbia, Early Parliamentary Elections, 17 December 2023: Final Report, 28 February 2024. Available at: [https://odhr.osce.org/sites/default/files/t/documents/1/3/563505\\_0.pdf](https://odhr.osce.org/sites/default/files/t/documents/1/3/563505_0.pdf). Accessed: 25 March 2026.

At the same time, voter migration has direct implications for the quality of democratic processes within the countries of the region. Doubts regarding the accuracy of voter registers, the registration of fictitious residences, or the political mobilization of voters who do not actually reside in a given electoral district can seriously undermine public confidence in the electoral process. Similar conclusions have been reached in recent regional analyses, which indicate that organized voter migration and residence-related manipulation can further erode trust in the accuracy of voter registers and the integrity of elections, particularly in political systems characterized by weak institutional oversight and high levels of political polarization.<sup>21</sup> In countries with relatively small electorates, or in local communities where a relatively small number of votes can determine the outcome of an election, such practices can have an especially significant political impact. Electoral disputes linked to voter migration frequently result in challenges to election results, prolonged political conflicts, or institutional deadlock, further weakening confidence in democratic institutions.

These issues also have an important dimension in the context of the European integration of the Western Balkan countries. The European Union increasingly emphasizes the importance of electoral integrity, transparent voter registers, and reliable residence records as key elements of democratic governance. Within the European legal framework, particular importance is attached to the principle that a voter should be able to vote only once in the same election, which requires effective mechanisms for data exchange between states and reliable voter records. Council Directive 93/109/EC, which governs the exercise of voting rights in elections to the European Parliament by EU citizens residing in another Member State, established a mechanism to prevent multiple voting in the same election. Although the Directive applies exclusively to elections to the European Parliament, it also reflects the broader importance that the European framework places on transparent voter records, a clear link between residence and the exercise of voting rights, and on administrative cooperation between states to safeguard electoral integrity.

Within the broader European legal space, the concept of habitual residence, meaning the place where a person actually and continuously lives and with which they maintain their closest personal ties,<sup>22</sup> is gaining increasing importance. Originating in private international law, this concept is already used in several areas of EU law, including social protection,<sup>23</sup> while related concepts are also applied in tax regimes through the criterion of the center of vital interests. Although Member States retain considerable autonomy in regulating their electoral systems, there is a growing tendency within the European institutional and legal framework to ensure that voter registers accurately reflect the population's demographic structure and that administrative systems provide effective mechanisms for verifying residence.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, the experience of European Union Member States demonstrates that problems associated with voter migration are not limited to countries undergoing democratic transition. In some Member States, such as Hungary, organized changes of residence within electoral districts and the mobilization of voters from neighboring countries have been the subject of criticism by international observers and civil society organizations. These cases illustrate that the integrity of voter registers is a broader European challenge. As a result, the European Union is increasingly

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<sup>21</sup> Aleksandar Ivković, *Organized Voter Migration in the Western Balkans*, German Marshall Fund / ReThink.CEE Fellowship, 2025, particularly the sections addressing the impact of organized voter migration on confidence in voter registers and electoral integrity.

<sup>22</sup> Venice Commission, *Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters*, revised edition, Council of Europe, 2025. Available at: [https://www.venice.coe.int/files/Code%20de%20conduite\\_GBR%202025\\_WEB\\_A5.pdf](https://www.venice.coe.int/files/Code%20de%20conduite_GBR%202025_WEB_A5.pdf). Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>23</sup> Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 on the Coordination of Social Security Systems, OJ L 166, 30 April 2004. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2004:166:0001:0123:en:PDF>. Accessed: 25 March 2026.

<sup>24</sup> Directive (EU) 2025/1788 of the European Parliament and of the Council, OJ L, 2025. Available at: [<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2025/1788/oj/eng>](<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2025/1788/oj/eng>). Accessed: 25 March 2026.

encouraging administrative cooperation and data exchange between member states to reduce opportunities for voter registration fraud and multiple voting.

In recent years, initiatives have been launched across the region to establish mechanisms for the exchange of data on voters and residence records among Western Balkan countries, with the aim of preventing multiple voting and abuses of voter registers.<sup>25</sup> Such proposals generally involve administrative cooperation between state authorities and the exchange of basic data that would make it possible to verify whether the same individual is simultaneously exercising voting rights in more than one country. However, most of these initiatives have remained at the level of political announcements and expert recommendations. The countries of the region have generally shown little willingness to exchange data on citizens and voters with one another.

For the Western Balkan countries, these issues carry additional political significance because electoral integrity is one of the fundamental standards of democratic governance on which the European Union is based. Free and fair elections, reliable voter registers, and clear rules regarding residence are not merely technical aspects of an electoral system, but essential conditions for the democratic legitimacy of government.

The accession of Western Balkan countries to the European Union without first addressing these issues risks that existing weaknesses in voter register management could become “Europeanized.” In a context of free movement of people and capital, alongside differing citizenship regimes among Member States, problems related to cross-border voter migration could become more complex and harder to detect, with potential implications for confidence in electoral processes at the broader European level. Ultimately, if Montenegro were to become an EU member in the near future without resolving these issues, questions could arise as to whether citizens of non-EU countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, through existing citizenship and residence ties, could directly influence the election of Montenegro’s representatives to the European Parliament, or effectively have representatives of their own there.

For this reason, the European Commission regularly emphasizes in its progress reports the importance of transparent voter registers, reliable residence records, and effective mechanisms for preventing electoral manipulation. Countries that cannot consistently ensure these standards may find it difficult to credibly demonstrate readiness for membership in a political community founded on the rule of law and democratic accountability. Consequently, issues related to voter migration and the integrity of voter registers are not merely domestic administrative matters, but also an important test of the democratic maturity of countries aspiring to join the European Union.

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<sup>25</sup> Miloš Rudović, “Inicijativa iz Crne Gore da Brisel stane na kraj ‘seobama birača’ u regionu” (*“Montenegro’s Initiative for Brussels to Put an End to Regional ‘Voter Migrations’”*), Radio Free Europe, 12 December 2026. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/inicijativa-biraci-seoba-glasanje-bih-srbija-crna-gora/33620804.html> Accessed: 25 March 2026.

# Concluding observations

The experiences of the Western Balkan countries demonstrate that issues of citizenship, residence, and voting rights can no longer be viewed solely as technical or administrative matters. Different models of diaspora inclusion, inconsistent citizenship and residence records, and limited interstate cooperation in the management of voter registers create opportunities for political disputes, challenges to electoral integrity, and additional strain on regional relations.

At the same time, there is no single model for regulating these issues that would be applicable to all countries in the region.

Different historical, demographic, and political contexts have led to the development of different approaches to the relationship between citizenship, residence, and voting rights. Nevertheless, regional experience suggests that the long-term stability of electoral processes depends to a large extent on the reliability of voter registers, the transparency of residence records, and clear rules governing the exercise of voting rights in a cross-border context.

# Possible directions for institutional action

The accuracy and transparency of voter registers are increasingly being viewed as matters of democratic integrity, institutional trust, and regional stability. The need to improve the accuracy of voter lists, increase the transparency of residence records, and establish clear mechanisms for auditing voter registers has already been recognized in recommendations issued by international organizations, including ODIHR and the European Commission, for several countries in the region. In recent years, ODIHR has repeatedly highlighted the need for systematic and transparent audits of voter registers, stronger verification of residence records, and greater institutional trust in voter registration processes.

In this context, one possible avenue for future development would be to more firmly integrate issues related to the integrity of voter registers and residence records into the framework of European Union accession negotiations, particularly within chapters concerning the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration. Given increasingly intensive population mobility and the complex citizenship regimes that exist across the region, these issues have the potential to become a broader European challenge in the future. The question of voter migration and the integrity of voter registers is already emerging in wider regional analyses, which warn that unresolved issues related to residence, multiple registrations, and limited interstate cooperation could pose an additional challenge in the context of the future accession of Western Balkan countries to the European Union.

In addition, the countries of the region could consider developing more sustainable mechanisms for mutual administrative cooperation in the areas of residence records and voter registers, while fully respecting data protection standards and national legal frameworks. Experience to date has shown that the absence of institutional cooperation and data exchange leaves considerable room for political disputes, challenges to election results, and the long-term erosion of trust in electoral processes.

At the same time, it is important that debates concerning voter registers and residence records do not remain solely the subject of day-to-day political disputes, but are instead conducted through an inclusive and institutional dialogue involving state institutions, the expert community, civil society, and international partners. The long-term sustainability of reforms in this area depends primarily on trust in institutions and on the ability of states to ensure transparent, credible, and politically impartial electoral processes.

