

Challenges of integration and protection of socio-economic rights of foreigners in Montenegro

Analysis of the legal framework and
recommendations for public policy

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I. Introduction

In recent years, Montenegro has increasingly emerged as a migration hub that functions both as a key transit route and, for a growing number of foreign nationals, as an attractive destination. The steady inflow of migrant workers from the countries of the region and beyond, together with the large numbers of people displaced by conflict, has reshaped the country's demographic and socio-economic landscape, making foreigners a substantial share of the total population.

The purpose of this public policy document is to examine the implementation of socio-economic rights for vulnerable categories of foreign nationals, with a view to identifying the gap between formally guaranteed rights and their realization in practice. The methodology is based on an analysis of the existing legislative and strategic framework, administrative practice, and data collected through direct cooperation with service providers and civil society.

Montenegro's existing legislative and constitutional framework nominally guarantees foreign nationals a broad range of rights and equal treatment with domestic citizens, in line with relevant EU directives and standards. However, in practice, implementation is hindered by various administrative and technical barriers across all areas examined.

Despite a comprehensive legal framework, foreigners in Montenegro face several obstacles when regulating their residence, including administrative burdens, slow procedures, and frequent regulatory changes—with new rules strictly conditioning residence on actual employment, regular tax payments, and strict adherence to deadlines. Institutional fragmentation, data silos, and language barriers further hinder vulnerable groups of foreigners from accessing adequate and timely support within the social and child protection system. Poor practical implementation of legal rights leads to structural flaws, such as a lack of permanent state-owned housing and a social housing framework unaligned with the actual needs of individuals under international protection. Furthermore, the lack of local support and active involvement of local municipalities in creating sustainable housing and integration policies hampers the long-term integration of these groups.

In the Montenegrin labor market, there is a clear interplay between an inefficient administrative structure and the informal employment of foreign workers, resulting in a twofold detriment—undermining state fiscal interests and exploiting workers. The institutional framework fails at prevention, as slow procedures and the lack of real-time data sharing allow employers to easily bypass legal obligations, such as registering employees within 24 hours¹. Nearly 3,000 detected irregularities in 2025² confirm that undeclared work, the absence of employment contracts, and the denial of basic rights (such as paid overtime and timely wages) are not isolated incidents, but a systemic issue.

¹ Article 70 of the Law on Foreigners stipulates that the employer is obliged to, within 24 hours from the date of issuance of the permit for temporary residence and work for the purpose of employment, conclude an employment contract with the foreigner and register him for mandatory social insurance, in accordance with labor regulations.

² Report of the Labor Inspection for 2025

Although access to the education system is legally guaranteed on equal terms, the integration of foreign students is hindered by language barriers, a shortage of interpreters, and administrative hurdles related to diploma recognition and residence permits.

A lack of information and poor inter-institutional coordination make it difficult to access healthcare, particularly for undocumented migrants and nationals of countries without bilateral social security agreements.

A key bottleneck in the reception and integration system is the fragmentation and incompatibility of IT systems between the Ministry of Interior and other administrative or local authorities. This results in a lack of centralized data, delays cross-departmental exchange, and impedes effective policy planning and implementation.

In such a fragmented system, civil society organizations play a crucial role as key partners of the state. Their field expertise, trust among vulnerable populations, and direct support services serve as a vital link in overcoming linguistic and administrative barriers.

This document provides recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional capacity for integrating foreign nationals. The recommendations focus on enhancing the strategic integration framework, improving inter-agency coordination, digitalizing administrative procedures, facilitating access to public services, strengthening labor rights protection, fostering a more active role for local governments, developing integration mechanisms, and building capacity and sustainability within civil society.

II. Essence of the Analysis

Trends:

- Montenegro is increasingly positioning itself as a key transit route, as well as an attractive final destination for foreign nationals seeking economic and personal opportunities.

Legal Framework:

- Although Montenegro's legal framework guarantees a wide range of rights to foreigners, exercising these rights in practice is hindered by numerous bureaucratic and technical barriers.

Institutional Capacity and Coordination:

- A primary obstacle to fulfilling foreigners' rights is the lack of interoperability among government IT systems, alongside administrative slowness. This leads to data fragmentation and underscores the need for stronger integration between national and local authorities.

Data Fragmentation:

- The absence of a centralized, integrated registry for foreign nationals—along with a lack of detailed socio-economic data—makes it difficult to track integration progress and status changes, thereby impeding effective migration policy design and management.

Language Barriers:

- Language barriers, a shortage of interpreters, and insufficient access to information prevent foreigners from understanding their rights and initiating formal procedures to protect them.

Foreign Workers:

- A growing number of foreign workers encounter delays in receiving timely information and processing their documentation. Resolving this requires systemic institutional strengthening—through integrated digital records and specialized teams—rather than mere regulatory changes.

Civil Society Organizations:

- Civil society organizations serve as an indispensable partner in the integration process. Their field expertise, strong trust among vulnerable populations, and direct support services prevent the system from becoming closed off and inaccessible to migrants.

III. Key Baseline Indicators

Key migration trends and analytical findings (comparative overview) are presented in the table below:

Migration Category	Baseline (2021–2023)	Status in 2025	Key Findings & Trend Dynamics
Labour Migration	20,580 permits issued (2021)	40,567 permits issued (2025)	• Record surge of over 97% compared to 2021. • Number of permits practically doubled compared to 2020 (19,354). • Upward trend continues in 2026, with 14,778 permits issued by June 1. • Predominantly nationals of Turkey (10,346), Serbia (8,148), and Russia (7,429).
Irregular Migration	5,314 registered migrants (2023); 5,465 (2022)	3,165 registered migrants (2025)	• Steady decline and stabilization of migratory pressure. • 3,153 individuals registered during 2024. • Of the total in 2025, the vast majority were processed inland (2,761), compared to 404 at the border. • Main countries of origin: Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.
Asylum Seekers / Applicants for International Protection	4,998 expressed intentions (2023)	2,761 expressed intentions with the police (2025)	• There is a pronounced downward trend. • In 2024, 2,970 foreigners expressed their intention (a decrease of about 40% compared to 2023).

IV. Methodology and Document Structure

This policy document aims to provide an objective overview of access to social and economic rights for vulnerable groups of foreign nationals in Montenegro. To ensure high reliability and comprehensiveness, the research combines normative analysis with empirical field assessment, highlighting the clear gap between proclaimed legal guarantees and their actual implementation in practice.

A multi-layered methodological approach was utilized for data collection and analysis, encompassing:

- **Normative analysis of relevant national laws, secondary legislation, and strategic documents governing the status and rights of foreigners;**
- **Evaluation of official institutional reports, available statistical data, and other public government documents;**
- **Written correspondence and data exchange with competent public institutions to obtain up-to-date and precise records;**
- **Direct interviews with key migration policy stakeholders;**
- **Knowledge and experience sharing with civil society organizations that offer direct support to foreign workers, applicants for international protection, and other categories of foreigners.**

The first section of the document presents an overview of migration trends and structures in the country, focusing particularly on institutional coordination challenges, data management issues, and the fragmentation of official registries on foreigners. The second section is dedicated to a sectoral analysis of the realization of foreign nationals' rights, addressing legal residence status, adequate housing, inclusive education, health and social protection, and labor market integration. The final chapter summarizes the key research findings and offers concrete public policy recommendations aimed at transforming the immigration system into a modern, integrative model.

V. Migration Trends in Montenegro

Over the last three years, Montenegro has emerged as a distinctive migration hub, serving simultaneously as a transit route and a final destination for foreign workers. In 2025, work permit issuance reached an all-time high with a record 40,567 approved applications—a surge of over 97% compared to 2021. The foreign labor force originates from 107 countries, predominantly led by citizens of Turkey (10,346 workers), Serbia (8,148), and Russia (7,429). Concurrently, over 1,000 foreign company founders (mostly Turkish nationals) were identified within the system with zero reported fiscal turnover.

In contrast to the expansion of economic migration, pressure from irregular transit movements has steadily declined. Registered migrants dropped from 5,314 in 2023 to 3,153 in 2024, stabilizing at 3,165 individuals in 2025—of whom 2,761 were processed inland and 404 at the border. The majority of registered transit migrants originate from Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Pursuant to the Law on International and Temporary Protection of Foreigners, 2,761 individuals formally declared their intention to seek asylum to the police, continuing the downward trend from 2024 when 2,970 intentions were registered³.

Simultaneously, Montenegro remains profoundly impacted by conflict-driven humanitarian migration. Throughout 2025, 119,872 Ukrainian nationals were recorded entering the country, while 125,389 exits were registered, maintaining a high baseline population under temporary and international protection⁴.

The large-scale influx of labor into construction, hospitality, and tourism—coupled with the lack of comprehensive, interconnected residence registries—severely hampers migration policy planning. The primary challenge lies in integrated data gaps and disconnected records among the Ministry of the Interior, the Tax Administration, the Labor Inspectorate, and other key migration stakeholders. This fragmented system directly undermines rapid verification of actual business operations and employment legality, posing a long-term obstacle to evidence-based policy making. Ultimately, state strategies must look beyond restrictive measures, border control, and irregular migration suppression; they must focus primarily on developing inclusive integration policies for foreigners who have chosen Montenegro as the permanent sphere of their personal and economic interests.

VI. Challenges of Institutional Coordination and Data Management on Foreigners

Effective record-keeping and the systematic collection of comprehensive data on foreign nationals form the cornerstone of sound migration policy and targeted support for vulnerable groups. Conversely, data gaps create systemic vulnerabilities due to the absence of standardized migration definitions, data on motives for arrival, and tracking of migration dynamics. The primary bottleneck lies in the lack of interoperability between IT systems and databases of the Ministry of the Interior, the Health Insurance Fund, and other relevant entities, with the Central Population Registry failing to recognize foreigners under international protection altogether. Without harmonized data, measuring progress or allocating budgetary resources effectively becomes impossible.

When databases are disconnected, foreigners under international or temporary protection often remain “invisible” to the social welfare system. Without compatible systems across the Ministry of the Interior, the Employment Agency, and Social Work Centers, navigating the path to exercising one’s rights becomes an administrative labyrinth. Be-

³ Report on the work of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with the organizational unit of the Ministry responsible for police affairs for 2025, February 2026

⁴ Report on the work of the Coordination Body for Supervision of the Implementation of the Decision on Granting Temporary Protection to Persons from Ukraine, February 2026

yond inadequate record-keeping, foreign nationals encounter severe communication barriers due to the lack of a clear, standardized, and centralized grievance mechanism. Information regarding rights is often inaccessible, compound by a chronic shortage of qualified translators, interpreters, and cultural mediators, which severely hampers access to justice and protection from discrimination. Furthermore, frontline officers lack continuous training in human rights-based approaches, particularly concerning vulnerable populations and non-discrimination based on sexual orientation.

In this institutional vacuum, civil society organizations play a crucial role as the primary point of contact and bridge between foreigners and the state—providing legal, psychosocial, and humanitarian assistance, as well as specialized services such as SOS lines and shelters for women and children. However, while preventing complete marginalization, NGO operations are chronically destabilized by a lack of sustainable, multi-year funding.

In conclusion, although Montenegro possesses a well-formulated legal framework governing foreigners, actual access to and realization of rights on the ground depend heavily on enabling factors. Laws remain ineffective without accurate beneficiary data, timely information outreach, adequate institutional capacity, and multi-agency support. To build a functioning system, current fragmentation must be overcome through coordinated collaboration between national and local authorities directly serving foreigners. Ultimately, successful integration hinges on continuously reinforcing partnerships with non-governmental organizations; the state must treat the civil sector as a permanent strategic partner whose field expertise, trust among vulnerable populations, and direct support services are irreplaceable links in preventing an insular and inaccessible system.

VII. Access to Rights

VII.I. Residence and Freedom of Movement

The legal framework governing the entry, residence, and employment of foreign nationals in Montenegro is grounded in the Law on Foreigners⁵, which stipulates the conditions and procedures for issuing temporary residence and work permits, the rights and obligations of foreign nationals, as well as the grounds for permit expiration or revocation. All permit applications are adjudicated by the Ministry of the Interior through its regional directorates, following a thorough verification process to establish compliance with legal requirements.

With the entry into force of the latest amendments to the Law on Foreigners in early 2026⁶, the focus has shifted from formal compliance to verifying the actual basis of residence and employment in Montenegro. This legislative response by the Government directly addresses the sudden influx of foreign workers and companies, particularly the practice of establishing shell (“paper”) companies with no real business activities solely to secure temporary residence. The new regulations prevent obtaining residence through a registered company unless it demonstrates genuine economic activity, reg-

⁵ Law on Foreigners (“Official Gazette of Montenegro”, No. 012/18 dated 23.02.2018, 003/19 dated 15.01.2019, 086/22 dated 03.08.2022, 077/24 dated 05.08.2024, 003/26 dated 09.01.2026, 033/26 from 10.03.2026)

⁶ Law on Amendments to the Law on Aliens (“Official Gazette of Montenegro”, No. 003/26 of 09.01.2026)

ularly settles tax liabilities, and employs national citizens. Additionally, criteria for residence based on real estate ownership have been tightened by establishing a minimum tax assessment threshold of €150,000 determined by local authorities, thereby eliminating the acquisition of low-value properties purely for residence purposes.

The amendments also significantly heighten employer accountability. Employers are required to conclude an employment contract with the foreign worker and register them for mandatory social security within 24 hours of permit issuance. If the employee fails to report for work, the employer must notify the competent ministry within three days to cancel the permit. A key procedural enhancement is the option for electronic application filing for temporary residence and work permits. Documentation is submitted digitally in scanned format, and administrative fees are processed electronically. However, the requirement remains for foreign nationals to report in person within 10 days of entry to collect biometric data (photograph, fingerprints, and digital signature). The rationale behind these stricter regulations lies in restoring order to immigration policy, safeguarding state fiscal interests, curbing the shadow economy, and encouraging employers to prioritize hiring through the Employment Agency of Montenegro.

As part of aligning Montenegrin legislation with the EU *acquis* during the accession process, the Government of Montenegro adopted a Policy Report⁷ proposing a more advanced system of issuing a single permit for temporary residence and work. Under this proposal, the Ministry of the Interior will remain the issuing authority, contingent upon mandatory prior approval from the Employment Agency. The introduction of a single permit, coupled with streamlined electronic data exchange among competent state bodies, serves as a primary mechanism for preventing irregular migration, strengthening labor market oversight, and ensuring compliance by both foreign workers and employers.

Despite a comprehensive and tightened legal framework, foreign nationals in Montenegro continue to face practical obstacles when regulating their residence status. Key challenges include administrative burdens, slow institutional procedures, insufficient real-time inter-agency data sharing, and high financial thresholds requiring proof of genuine business operations and substantial investment. Certain rights and obligations for beneficiaries of international protection remain purely theoretical and unrealizable in practice—such as entitlement to public transport reimbursement, access to Montenegrin citizenship, or compliance with residential address registration requirements. Furthermore, border or transit-zone processing and detention of asylum seekers remain unfeasible in practice due to a lack of proper infrastructure and adequate staffing capacity.

⁷ Information on the need to introduce a new system for issuing residence and work permits for foreigners from July 23, 2026 <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/e1d4a6b5-7114-46f5-8f9b-fd32365d4092>

VII.II. Right to Housing

Housing policy, as a vital component of public policy, serves as a direct indicator of the state's commitment to its citizens and its degree of care in addressing their basic needs. Since vulnerable groups deprived of this right are ever-present in society, the concept of social housing was developed—providing adequate accommodation to individuals and households unable to resolve their housing status independently due to social, economic, or other factors.

However, the implementation of this concept in Montenegro faces significant regulatory and institutional hurdles, with key challenges stemming from the statutory framework and the role assigned to local self-governments. The Law on Social Housing does not include foreign nationals within its scope of beneficiaries, except under rare exemptions for temporary or permanent residents with former status as displaced or internally displaced persons. Furthermore, the Law obligates local self-government units to adopt annual local social housing programs fully aligned with the national policy of the Government of Montenegro⁸.

Despite this statutory planning obligation, the role of municipalities in integration and housing provision on the ground has remained largely marginalized. The legal framework fails to grant local governments concrete powers or operational mechanisms in key interconnected domains—housing, employment, and social protection. This creates a paradox: while the Law obligates municipalities to plan social housing locally, the actual burden of integration and accommodation falls entirely on central state authorities and international organizations, rather than recognizing and empowering municipalities as primary stakeholders working directly with beneficiaries.

Montenegro possesses a normative framework guaranteeing the right to housing for various categories of foreign nationals, with a specific focus on vulnerable groups such as applicants for international protection, refugees, and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection⁹. To ensure adequate reception, the state developed primary accommodation capacity—with strategic planning documents of the Ministry of the Interior gradually expanding the initial baseline of 164 beds (adding an additional 60, followed by another 120 beds), primarily relying on the Asylum Seekers Center in Spuž and the Božaj Reception Center.

⁸ Law on Social Housing ("Official Gazette of Montenegro", No. 035/13 dated 23.07.2013, 084/24 dated 06.09.2024, 121/25 dated 21.10.2025, 012/26 dated 06.02.2026, 033/26 dated 10.03.2026).

⁹ Law on International and Temporary Protection of Foreigners ("Official Gazette of Montenegro", No. 002/17 of 10.01.2017, 003/19 of 15.01.2019, 077/24 of 05.08.2024)

Despite these statutory guarantees and invested resources, serious systemic and practical barriers persist regarding access to adequate housing. Crucially, no state-owned housing units are designated for beneficiaries of international protection, leaving individuals waiting for accommodation upon receiving status until an apartment can be found¹⁰. While this gap was temporarily bridged through UNHCR financial aid, that support excluded utility expenses, placing a substantial burden on social assistance recipients. Upon the expiration of the two-year subsidized housing period, protected persons face a severe risk of homelessness, as no national or local mechanisms exist to extend social housing entitlements or provide rental subsidies.

A particularly critical concern within the social protection system is the placement of unaccompanied minors and migrant children who, due to a total lack of specialized facilities, are housed at the Public Institution Center “Ljubović”. This practice is deeply inadequate, as the institution is ill-equipped for the long-term care of children with unregulated status, nor are there clear repatriation procedures to their countries of origin—heightening the risk of secondary migration and children disappearing from the system.

In conclusion, although Montenegro has invested significant resources in improving its accommodation capacities, restructuring reception authorities, developing new reception strategies, and strengthening human resources through recruitment and training, a substantial gap remains between legally guaranteed rights and their practical implementation in housing. To ensure a functional asylum system in line with the EU acquis and Chapter 24 requirements, it is essential to amend the Law on Social Housing, provide permanent state-owned housing units, integrate the electronic registries of the Ministry of the Interior, establish specialized institutions for unaccompanied minors, and systematically involve local self-government units in designing and implementing sustainable housing and integration policies.

VII. III. Education

Montenegro’s legal framework—encompassed within its legislation on preschool, primary, secondary, and higher education, the Law on Foreigners, the Law on International and Temporary Protection of Foreigners, and the Law on Recognition of Foreign Educational Qualifications—is comprehensively structured and provides full opportunities for foreign nationals to exercise their right to education on equal terms with Montenegrin citizens. Despite this normatively guaranteed access and inclusive policy framework, a sudden influx of foreign children and youth has posed significant operational and infrastructural challenges to the education system across all schooling levels.

In preschool institutions, key challenges stem from severe overcrowding in groups, shortage of physical space and personnel, as well as insufficient teacher training in intercultural education and overcoming language barriers with children and parents. An additional burden is the risk of statelessness affecting vulnerable children without established nationality, which hinders their early socialization and institutional integration.

¹⁰ Rulebook on accommodation conditions and the manner of providing accommodation for asylum seekers and foreigners under subsidiary protection (“Official Gazette of Montenegro”, No. 105/20 of 29.10.2020)

In primary schools, the main issues include capacity overstretch and the formation of oversized classes in coastal and urban municipalities, driven by an influx of foreign students, particularly from war-affected Ukraine. Furthermore, pronounced language barriers, a lack of systemically organized language instruction support, and uneven access to psychological and pedagogical services remain persistent hurdles.

At the secondary education level, major obstacles include inadequate proficiency in the language of instruction—which directly impacts students' ability to master complex academic content—and a chronic shortage of qualified subject teachers in fields such as mathematics and physics. There is also inconsistent practice in delivering supplementary language support and a lack of systemic coordination for full inclusion and student monitoring.

For Ukrainian children under temporary protection residing in Montenegro for three years, a recent legislative amendment mandates compulsory enrollment in Montenegrin primary schools. This positions instruction under the national curriculum as the primary vehicle for integration, despite many children continuing to attend online classes following the Ukrainian national curriculum¹¹.

At higher education institutions, a primary issue is the lack of degree programs taught in foreign languages, mentorship support, and specialized services for international students, which limits institutional assistance almost exclusively to basic administrative functions. Furthermore, foreign students face administrative hurdles during diploma recognition procedures and complex processes for regulating temporary residence without institutional support from their respective faculties. Limited capacity in pupil and student dormitories forces the majority of foreign students into costly private accommodation, while the total absence of multilingual information, regulations, and orientation materials in dormitories presents an additional barrier to their adaptation.

Enhancing equal access to education, removing administrative barriers, strengthening psychological and social support, fostering inclusive school and extracurricular activities, and actively involving parents are crucial steps to ensuring the successful integration of foreign-born students into Montenegro's education system.

VII. IV. Healthcare

Montenegro has a relatively well-developed legal framework guaranteeing foreign nationals the right to healthcare based on their legal status. Under the Law on Healthcare¹², foreigners are entitled to medical care in accordance with national legislation and international agreements, while healthcare institutions are obligated to provide emergency medical assistance to everyone. Foreigners with granted temporary or permanent residence are entitled to mandatory health insurance through the Health Insurance Fund of Montenegro. Furthermore, the Montenegrin healthcare system has developed specific mechanisms for vulnerable categories of foreigners, primarily beneficiaries of international and temporary protection.

¹¹ Report on the work of the Coordination Body for Supervision of the Implementation of the Decision on Granting Temporary Protection to Persons from Ukraine – February 2026

¹² Article 13 and 14 of the Law on Health Care ("Official Gazette of Montenegro", No. 091/25 dated 06.08.2025, 121/25 dated 21.10.2025, 031/26 dated 06.03.2026)

For individuals granted temporary protection, the Health Insurance Fund is required to establish their status as insured persons upon submission of an application and a personal identification document, thereby ensuring access to necessary medical assistance and services¹³. Similarly, applicants for international protection acquire the right to registration with the Fund independently or through the Reception Center¹⁴, while recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection enjoy full equality of rights with Montenegrin citizens.

An additional condition stipulates that an individual cannot be insured if they hold active insurance status in another state. In practice, this creates complications for citizens of countries with which Montenegro has not concluded a bilateral social security agreement, such as the Russian Federation, from which a significant number of residents originate. To obtain insured status, a Russian citizen—even if employed by a Montenegrin company—must submit official confirmation of deregistration from insurance in their home country; failing this, they must personally bear treatment costs according to the healthcare institution's official fee schedule.

Migrants with unregulated residence status are in the most precarious position, as they lack access to mandatory health insurance and are entitled exclusively to emergency care. Access to services becomes particularly constrained and precarious during administrative transitions between different residence grounds or while awaiting document renewal.

Although the legal framework is formally established, its practical implementation is burdened by operational deficiencies that significantly impede foreigners' access to healthcare. Due to the absence of standardized protocols and insufficient awareness among healthcare professionals regarding the specific rights of different categories of foreigners, patients in practice often receive contradictory information, face unfounded rejections, or are inefficiently referred from one institution to another. This environment transforms the system into a reactive mechanism where complex issues are not addressed systematically, but rather through temporary and forced ad hoc decisions by individuals or institutions. These obstacles are further compounded by language barriers and the absence of organized interpretation services, making basic communication with doctors regarding chronic illnesses, psychological support, or pediatric health needs exceedingly difficult. Foreigners' overall uncertainty concerning the scope and content of their healthcare entitlements directly stems from this information gap, unfamiliarity with Montenegro's complex administration, and frequent changes in legal status.

Although Montenegro possesses a developed legal framework guaranteeing healthcare access to foreigners based on status, statutory provisions alone are insufficient for the effective exercise of rights. In practice, foreign nationals encounter administrative hurdles, lack of information, and poor inter-institutional coordination. The most vulnerable groups remain migrants with unregulated status and nationals of countries without

¹³ Article 6, paragraphs 2 and 3, Law on Compulsory Health Insurance ("Official Gazette of Montenegro", No. 145/21 of 31.12.2021, 048/24 of 24.05.2024, 098/26 of 09.07.2026, 114/26 of 03.08.2026)

¹⁴ Rulebook on the manner of registration of a foreigner seeking international protection and a foreigner under temporary protection in the records of the Health Insurance Fund of Montenegro (Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 162/2025); Rulebook on amending the Rulebook on the manner of registration of a foreigner seeking international protection and a foreigner under temporary protection in the records of the Health Insurance Fund of Montenegro (Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 10/2026)

bilateral social security agreements. Addressing these issues requires strengthening coordination among the Health Insurance Fund, the Ministry of Health, and healthcare institutions, alongside providing language support and establishing clearer procedures during legal status transitions.

VII. V. Social Protection

The social and child protection system in Montenegro faces significant challenges in addressing the needs of foreign nationals, primarily due to fragmented and decentralized records maintained separately by various state institutions. Because collected data is not integrated into a unified statistical database, and Centers for Social Work do not maintain separate registries or disaggregate foreign beneficiaries by service usage, an information gap arises that hinders thorough analysis, rational resource allocation, and evidence-based policy making. Consequently, there is a clear need to improve mechanisms for regular aggregated data exchange among centers across the northern, southern, and central regions to gain a comprehensive understanding of vulnerable groups' needs and prevent gaps or duplication in support.

The scope and nature of benefits accessed by foreign nationals directly depend on their legal status. Persons in transit or with unregulated status primarily rely on essential emergency services such as temporary accommodation, emergency healthcare, and humanitarian aid. Conversely, for foreign nationals with long-term status, the focus shifts to psychosocial support and regular cash benefits within the social and child protection system—including family financial support, one-off cash assistance, child allowances, and birth grants.

With the growing influx of foreign nationals settling in Montenegro, demand for social services, housing support, and financial assistance will inevitably rise. This necessitates establishing continuous monitoring and evaluation of migration trends to enable timely system adaptation and responsive policy design.

The practical exercise of rights under social and child protection is hindered by multiple factors. Foreigners often exhibit apprehension and mistrust toward state authorities due to negative experiences in their origin countries and fear of deportation. Furthermore, they encounter information gaps, complex administrative procedures, a shortage of interpreters and multilingual information materials, and difficulties obtaining required documentation from their home countries.

To effectively respond to increasing demands and foreign population inflows, Montenegro's social and child protection system must address institutional fragmentation through data centralization and regional inter-agency networking, while simultaneously eliminating language and administrative barriers that prevent adequate and timely support for vulnerable groups.

VII. VI. Access to the Labor Market

The growing presence of foreign workers in Montenegro has become increasingly evident, driven by a combination of economic factors, geopolitical developments, and flexible migration policies. Since 2020, the number of issued work permits has risen sharply: 19,354 permits were issued in 2020, 20,580 in 2021, increasing to 29,319 in 2022, and 38,943 in 2023. In 2024, 38,019 permits were issued, reaching a record peak of 40,567 in 2025. This effectively represents a doubling of issued work permits between 2020 and 2025. Between the beginning of 2026 and June 1, an additional 14,778 permits were issued.

Foreign nationals primarily address labor shortages in construction—a sector with high demand exceeding domestic workforce capacity—followed by tourism (hospitality and food services) and trade (retail, warehousing, and logistics). Beyond employment in construction and tourism, a significant number of foreign nationals operate their own businesses. In Montenegro, 34,897 companies have at least one foreign founder. The largest numbers of foreign workers originate from Türkiye, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Azerbaijan, and Albania, among others.

Although Montenegro nominally guarantees a broad scope of rights to foreign nationals through its statutory framework, they encounter numerous practical, bureaucratic, and technical barriers. Trade unions in Montenegro highlight that foreign workers frequently face violations of fundamental labor rights, including undeclared work, excessive working hours, lower wages, and inadequate working conditions.

The largest number of registered irregularities in the informal employment of foreigners pertained to: employment of foreigners without a previously obtained residence and work permit or a work registration certificate; performing work without a concluded employment contract and failure to register for mandatory social insurance; failure to issue a written decision on the schedule of working hours or shift arrangements; failure to determine the schedule of weekly rest; overtime work; delays in wage payments and failure to deliver salary pay slips to employees; and employment of minors in violation of the provisions of the Labor Law. The problem of informal employment is most pronounced during the summer tourist season, when there is an increased number of employers operating with seasonal work permits across various sectors serving tourism (hospitality, trade, tourist and other services, as well as construction)¹⁵.

Cases of illegal employment of minors have also been recorded, particularly during the summer tourist season when a larger number of minors are engaged. These illegalities pertained to child labor without a weekly rest period of two consecutive days, night work, overtime work, work without parental consent, and work without a medical report from the competent health authority confirming the minor's fitness to perform the duties outlined in the employment contract.

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<https://wapi.gov.me/download-preview/6bf09889-0fdc-4416-bd2c-af86fa714efd?version=1.0>

The rapid growth in the number of foreigners entering the labor market complicates the control of the legality of their residence and work, while the current permit issuance system does not enable sufficient data exchange between institutions. At the proposal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Government adopted the Information Note on the need to introduce a new system for issuing residence and work permits for foreigners. This system entails amendments to the Law on Foreigners and the Law on Border Control, the adoption of a special law on the employment and self-employment of foreigners¹⁶, as well as the integration of information systems and data exchange among state authorities.

Montenegro has a well-established legislative framework that guarantees all rights and equal treatment to foreign workers. However, in practice, the exercise of these rights is often limited by institutional and administrative barriers. On the other hand, the steady and strong growth in the number of issued permits confirms that Montenegro is an attractive country for work, highlighting the necessity to further strengthen integration and oversight policies in the coming period.

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/e1d4a6b5-7114-46f5-8f9b-fd32365d4092>

VIII. Conclusion

In recent years, Montenegro has increasingly positioned itself as a specific migration hub, serving simultaneously as a key transit route and an attractive final destination for a growing number of foreign nationals. Although the country possesses a formally established and developed legislative framework that nominally guarantees foreigners a wide range of rights, actual access to these rights in practice remains unsatisfactory. Despite significant resources invested in expanding accommodation capacity, restructuring competent authorities, and training staff, a gap persists between legal guarantees and their practical implementation.

Actual access to rights is severely constrained by bureaucratic hurdles, institutional inefficiency, language barriers, and the incompatibility of IT systems. For the system to become fully functional and aligned with European Union standards and the requirements of Chapter 24, national strategies must not focus solely on restrictive measures, border control, and combating irregular migration. On the contrary, they must primarily aim to develop inclusive integration policies tailored for foreigners who have chosen Montenegro as the center of their personal and economic interests.

IX. Recommendations

Improving the Strategic Framework for Integration

- **Shift Towards Sustainable Integration:** Shift the focus of state strategies from exclusively restrictive measures and border control to the development of inclusive, long-term integration policies for foreigners who have a permanent sphere of personal and economic interest in Montenegro.
- **Modernizing Legislation on Employment and Residence:** Adopt special regulations on the employment and self-employment of foreigners, and amend the Law on Social Housing to provide foreigners under protection with systemic access to housing and mitigate the risk of homelessness.

Enhancing Institutional Coordination and Digitalizing Administrative Procedures

- **Introducing a Single Permit and Interdepartmental Electronic Data Exchange:** Establish a system for issuing a single permit for temporary residence and work, coupled with mandatory real-time database integration among the Ministry of Interior, the Employment Agency, the Tax Administration, the Labor Inspectorate, and other competent institutions to ensure more efficient control and prevent fictitious business operations and rights violations of foreign workers.
- **Interconnection of Health and Social Databases:** Harmonize the IT systems of the Ministry of Interior and the Health Insurance Fund to enable foreigners in transitional statuses (and citizens of countries without bilateral social security agreements) unhindered access to health insurance.
- **Upgrading and Fully Activating the IISSS:** Upgrade and fully activate the existing Integrated Social Welfare Information System (IISSS) so that all social work centers uniformly and mandatorily record foreigners and the services they utilize. Regular data exchange at both regional and national levels must be established to accurately identify the needs of foreigners and efficiently plan resources.

Facilitating Access to Public Services

- **Removing Language and Information Barriers:** Ensure the systematic engagement of translators and interpreters, provision of multilingual information materials, and clear protocols across healthcare, educational, and social welfare institutions. Simplify procedures for exercising rights to eliminate information vacuums and prevent the denial of services to patients or beneficiaries.
- **Systemic Language and Educational Support:** Introduce mandatory and organized language instruction for children and youth at all levels of schooling, provide intercultural training for staff, and develop foreign-language study programs alongside university mentorship initiatives.

Enhancing Worker Rights Protection

- **Intensified Labor Inspection Supervision:** Strengthen field inspections (particularly during the summer season) to combat undeclared work, overtime violations, wage non-payment, and the illegal employment of minors.
- **Balancing Control and Facilitation:** Tighten anti-abuse measures while reducing bureaucratic obstacles and expediting permit issuance procedures for fully compliant foreign workers and businesses.

Active Role for Local Self-Governments and Development of Integration Mechanisms

- **Systemic Inclusion and Empowerment of Municipalities:** Expand the role of local self-government units in foreign integration by assigning concrete responsibilities, financial resources, and operational mechanisms for local housing, employment, and social protection programs—ensuring the integration burden does not rest solely on the central government.

Supporting Civil Society Capacity and Sustainability

- **Enhancing Institutional Partnerships:** Establish a long-term funding model for direct civil sector support services, guaranteeing permanent and uninterrupted availability of field-based legal, humanitarian, and protective assistance.

The implementation of these recommendations will transition Montenegro's migration policy from a reactive, administratively burdened model toward a stable, sustainable, and inclusive migration management system. This will strengthen legal certainty and the rule of law by curbing the shadow economy, preventing abuses, and safeguarding worker rights more effectively. Furthermore, it will enable better public resource management, data-driven policy design, and streamlined procedures, while protecting vulnerable foreign populations and reinforcing partnerships among state bodies, local governments, and civil society.

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