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The economic dimension of migration: Kosovo from 2015 to 2020

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This article investigates the link between economic development and emigration from Kosovo between 2015 and 2020. The wider contexts to this study include the empirical and theoretical debates on migration as both an individual choice and a social decision. The recent history of emigration from Kosovo is analysed to understand how the past has influenced present migration patterns. This work aims to unpick the threads connecting economic development, the labour market, educational disparities, unemployment, and EU integration. Demographics, economics, and the political relationship between Kosovo and the EU have all affected emigration trends in Kosovo. In particular, this article examines the brain drain phenomenon and economic stability as two variables that permanently influence one another.

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Introduction

Migration is one of the most significant aspects of globalization. Migrants can be defined as people who change their country of residence for a particular time, as one main definition by the World Bank (World Bank Group, 2018). People choose or are forced to cross international borders for reasons that include: work opportunities, high poverty rates in their country of residence, war or conflict, and climate change (Brander et al., 2020). According to the European Committee on Migration, “the term ‘migrants’ is used ... to refer, depending on the context, to emigrants, returning migrants, immigrants, refugees, displaced persons and persons of immigrant background and/or members of ethnic minority populations that have been created through immigration” (European Committee on Migration, 2002). According to Passerini et al. (2007) migration represents mobility and a set of relations between cultures, peoples, and identities. In addition to the benefits that migrants bring to both destination country and sending country, in recent decades migration has also involved various UN and international agencies wishing to protect migrants from human rights abuses and human trafficking. Concerns include inferior pay compared to destination country citizens, slave working conditions, human trafficking, and risks to women and children (UNODC, 2018).

The 2020 World Migration Report estimated ~281 million migrants constituting 3.6% of the global population. The impact of globalization is noticeable, with an increase of 128 million migrants since 1990 (McAuliffe and Khadria, 2020). The European Union (EU) holds 86 million migrants according to the same report, with 37.1 million more migrants than in 1990 (UN DESA, 2019).

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) migration is closely related to economic, social, demographic, political, and technological changes in both sending and destination countries. Although migrants usually target higher-income countries, the reasons for migration are diverse. For some sending countries, their people migrate for economic, political, trade, or cultural reasons, while for countries such as Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan, the high rate of migration is caused by long-term conflict (UN DESA, 2019). The most common reason for migration is a lack of employment in the sending country, coupled with greater labour demand and higher wages in the destination country. Nearly two-thirds of the estimated 281 million migrants in 2020 were labour migrants, motivated by a desire to find work (UN DESA, 2019).

This article takes Kosovo as a case study to identify the patterns linking economic development, stability, and migration trends. The impact of social history, the mismatched relationship between the educational system and labour market demands, high unemployment and demographic composition, and current migration trends (caused by the inertia characterizing the Kosovo–EU relationship) are investigated. This article also analyses the relationship between migration and the brain drain phenomenon to explain the ‘vicious circle’ of economic development and migration. A mixed-method analysis of the combined statistical data on migration between 2015 and 2020 is performed and examined alongside existing research on the historic impact of socio-political circumstances on migration trends. Although the social change in Kosovo is accelerated due to globalization, and migration motives have changed from being a collective decision or highly influenced by the family and society, towards an individual rational choice to maximize the utility of opportunity gaps between sending and destination countries. This migration pattern is one of the main arguments of Neoclassical theory at the macro level defined by Haris and Todaro’s theory and a part of the functionalist approach on migration (Haris, Todaro, 1970) as the data in Kosovo show that migration is still

highly motivated by high unemployment, poverty and immigrant restrictions, which are highly ignored by functionalist theory, the migration motives and pattern in Kosovo is still best defined by Oded Stark and David Bloom’s New Economy theory on labour migration (Stark, 1991).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that although, in the case of Kosovo, migration trends are still strongly affected by the household or the family, the changes undergone by Kosovo in the last two decades—especially the societal transition from the collective family to more cellular families—have diluted the impact of larger families on migration. By examining the brain drain effect, this article claims that, although migration for socio-economic issues continues to be a leading cause of migration, the departure of highly skilled and well-educated people shows that reasons for migration have become more personal, as individuals pursue better living conditions to match their value in the labour market. However, according to de Haas (2021) if we define the functionalist “push and pull” theory as “most people migrate in expectation of finding better opportunities at the destination” it is only a general assumption and it fails to provide reasons for migration and, patterns of social differences and nature of migration processes, patterns or motives of migration, such as structural inequality and the impact of society and family in migration deployment. Thus, according to Stark, although individuals are engaged in migration, their decision to migrate can be undertaken influenced by other person or group of people such as family; there is more to migration than wage differentials because the labour market would have been equal and fair on the first place it would not have produced wage inequalities, thus there would be no motives for migration on the basis of wage differentials (Stark, 1991).

The historical context of migration and human rights in Kosovo

The history of Kosovo has significantly influenced migration, affecting the socio-political development and transition of Kosovo before and after the declaration of independence. Between 1969 and 2011, approximately 703,978 Kosovars emigrated, while in 2017, net migration was estimated at 833,739 (KAS, 2018). Factors behind migration constantly shift due to as global development evolves. Research has confirmed that both regular and irregular forms of emigration from Kosovo have increased, especially for reasons of employment, education, or family reunion (BPRG, 2020).

Kosovo is a good Western Balkan location for studying different forms of migration. The historical background for emigration from Kosovo is directly related to the human rights context before and during the 1990s, and the socio-political development of the state-building and transitional process since 1999. The status of Kosovo in Former Yugoslavia has had a large impact on migration. Kosovo had been the least developed Yugoslav province, which in the 1970s saw Kosovo Albanians migrate to North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia Herzegovina seeking jobs and better living conditions. During the 1980s and 1990s, Kosovar Albanian emigrants headed increasingly for destination countries in Europe. This change of direction was influenced by the eruption of ethnic tensions accompanying the breakup of Yugoslavia (Dimova, 2007). Another aspect of emigration from Kosovo during the Yugoslav Federation—especially in the late 1980s and 1990s—was the persecution and expulsion of Albanian civilians, including the expropriation of their property. In *The Road to Independence for Kosovo. A Chronicle of the Ahtisaari Plan*, Henry H. Perritt, Jr. writes “Serbian policy toward the ‘Albanian problem’ was to

cleanse Kosovo of as many Albanians as possible, to make their lives in Kosovo so miserable that they would be eager to emigrate” (Perritt, 2009). Proof of this was the gentlemen’s agreement reached between the former President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito and the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mehmet Fuat Köprülü, in the early 1950s. The deal was for the expulsion of the Albanian population from Kosovo to Turkey, which led to over 400,000 Kosovar Albanians being expelled to Turkey from 1950 to 1966 (Daskalovski, 2003). Meanwhile, the Serbian government continued with its campaign of settling Serbian families in Kosovo, encouraging them to move to Kosovo from other parts of Yugoslavia to maintain an ethnic balance (Perritt, 2009). This form of institutionally organized pressure—through the use of force, persecution, harassment, and expropriation—had its main objective to sustain the proportion of the Serbian population in Kosovo. It was considered necessary given that the Albanian population enjoyed the highest birth rate in Europe, and was perceived as a threat to the Serbian population, who had migrated to other Yugoslav centres due to the underdevelopment of Kosovo and low living standards (Dahinden, 2005). Discrimination against the Albanian population in Kosovo and Yugoslavia made it more difficult for Albanians to find jobs and secure their subsistence. This ethnic persecution led to the Kosovar Albanian student demonstrations of 1981—described by Misha Glenny as “the shock in the system”—when students at the University of Prishtina demanded better conditions and UN intervention to record human rights violations against Kosovar Albanians. The response was a political crackdown (Glenny, 2000).

Albanian students and the academic elite became the target of persecution, or “*eliticide*”, defined by Denis Gratz as the “systemic elimination of leading figures of a society or a group” (Gratz, 2011). Many were consequently forced to leave Kosovo. The highest level of emigration from Kosovo was recorded between 1998 and 1999, due to the ethnic cleansing and human atrocities committed against the Kosovar Albanians by Serbian and Yugoslav military, police, and paramilitary forces. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 600,000 people left Kosovo between 24 March and 19 April 1999 heading mainly to Albania and other bordering countries (Wilkson, 1999). The EU, the US, Canada, Australia, and others accepted some refugees to relieve the burden on Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, who were not economically prepared to accommodate the number of refugees from Kosovo (Medecins Sans Frontiers, 1999).

UN Security Council resolution 1244 was adopted on 10 June 1999, leading to 600,000 Kosovar Albanians returning home to Kosovo in the first 3 weeks after the end of the war. Despite appeals from NATO and the UNHCR, this marked one of the fastest refugee returns in history (Wilkson, 1999). However, according to a World Bank report on migration causes in Kosovo in 2011 writes that the resolution of the conflict after 1999 did not incentivize many migrants to return. The main push factor for Kosovars remained labour migration, with resulting remittances. By World Bank estimates, an economic situation characterized by the highest unemployment rates in Europe saw Kosovo maintain the highest emigration rates in Eastern Europe from 1989 to 2003 (World Bank, 2011).

The theoretical debate on migration: the shift from social to individual-based migration

Among the first theories that explain migration is the neoclassical theory, which considers socioeconomic factors as the main reasons for migration. In particular, differences in employment, wages, demand, and the labour market are among the reasons

that push individuals to search for places that offer better conditions. According to John Harris and Michael Todaro, the decision for migration is made at the level of the individual, from countries with low labour demand and low pay towards regions with high labour demand and high wages (Harris and Todaro, 1970). Moreover, this theory considers migrant individuals to be rational actors who migrate mainly for labour purposes due to social changes, and market and economic equilibrium. Migration according to the Neo-classical theory of the functionalist approach occurs when there are no obstacles to the movement of people, where migration is a change of location due to the social and global changes that affect the lives of people seeking new living locations to maximize their earnings. Contrastingly, Stark maintains that migration behaviour is conditioned by larger social entities and the interactions within them (Stark and Bloom, 1985). The New Economic labour migration theory opposes the neoclassical approach that migration is triggered by an economic comparison between costs and benefits. The New Economic model understands international migration to be the result of wage differences between countries; accordingly, the decision to migrate is not the sole choice of individuals but rather a collective decision to maximize income and employment opportunities while spreading the risk (Taylor, 1999). The neoclassical approach—which aligns with Sjaastad’s theory of migration between urban and rural areas—is criticized by Kurekova, who states that it has “mechanically reduced migration determinants, ignoring market imperfections, homogenizing migrants and migrant societies and being ahistorical and static” (Kurekova, 2011). Moreover, Oded Stark considers that the Neo-Classical theory fails to take into account the psychological and emotional aspects of migration, as well as the impact of migration on those left behind.

This article takes Kosovo as a case study to analyse migration trends via elements of neoclassical theory such as wages and income differentials. However, migration behaviour has historically been understood via New Economic theory, which takes into consideration the traditional elements that characterize Kosovar society, especially the primacy of society over the individual. Regardless of the financial benefit from remittances in Kosovo which according to the World Bank Report on “Migration and Economic Development in Kosovo” are the largest source of economic finance, supporting the livelihoods of Kosovars facing the highest unemployment rates in Europe (World Bank, 2011) due to the changes experienced in Kosovar society in the last two decades, the prevalence of individualism over collectivism is now visible. The reasons for migration have changed. For example, previously, socio-economic factors prevailed, where impoverished collective families saw individuals “responsible for cost returns” migrate to higher-income countries. In contrast, over the last two decades, young people have begun to migrate for educational reasons. Although the 2009 World Bank migration survey stated that the number of educational migrants was <10%, visa applications for study increased from 367 to 994 between 2013 and 2018 (EUROSTAT, 2021a, 2021b).

Migration causes and motives: unemployment, the labour market, and education

This article is focused on economic and socio-political factors and, in particular, how both factors often combine to encourage emigration. The reasons for migration are rooted in the country of origin and the destination country. Favourable and unfavourable circumstances in the country of origin and destination country encourage individuals to migrate to a new location with better economic, socio-political, or environmental factors (Dubey and Mallah, 2015). Economic migration is related to

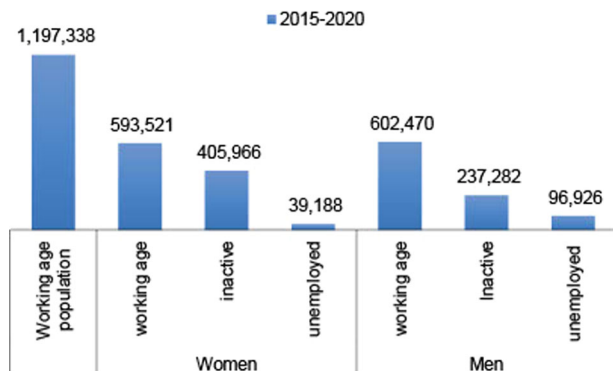


Fig. 1 Average of unused labour force 2015—Q1 2020. Source: Processed data, obtained from the Labour Force Surveys of the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS) of 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and Q1 2020.

poor economic conditions and scarce employment opportunities in the sending country. Pull factors in the destination country include higher wages and labour market demand. Push factors in the country of origin include the social, economic, and political environment, as well as unemployment, and the overall level of poverty. Migration can be understood as a search for new ways to survive. Apart from employment, pull factors are usually related to better general opportunities, including industrial and technological development in the destination country, as well as the opportunity to obtain a higher quality education (Hagen-Zanker, 2008).

Socio-economic factors are considered to be the main drivers behind emigration from Kosovo, especially the high unemployment rate (including youth unemployment), low minimum and average salaries, more people on the high poverty line, low access to education and health, corruption, and nepotism (NDI, 2019). Migration has influenced social identity, as the Diaspora comes to play an important role in the socio-economic development of Kosovo (BPRG, 2020).

Socio-political factors such as political instability, security, infrastructure, and inferior services contribute to dissatisfaction among Kosovars—particularly the youth—encouraging migration. An additional migration driver has been the increased desire among Kosovars to emulate EU standards around human rights, gender equality, and economic, social and cultural rights. Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, but also the poorest. While 53 per cent of the population are under 25 years old (UNDP, 2019), youth unemployment in Kosovo remained at 46.9% in Q3 2020, which is 31.8% higher than youth unemployment in the EU (EUROSTAT, EUROSTAT, 2021a). Numerous factors have contributed to the high unemployment rate, compounding the impact of the 1998–99 war that left Kosovo with a shattered economy and severely damaged infrastructure.

Before and during the 1990s, migration trends were understood through the prism of the rising conflict in former Yugoslavia, the violation of the basic human rights of Kosovar Albanians, ethnic discrimination (e.g. the dismissal of all Albanian civil servants from public administration at the beginning of the 1990s), and the rise of extreme poverty. Between 2015 and 2020, despite migration reasons remaining broadly the same, some of the underlying factors affecting migration changed.

In 2020, Kosovo's population was ~1.8 million, with a GDP per capita of 4.145 USD.

Although economic growth over the last decade was the highest among World Bank Group member countries, it was insufficient to reduce unemployment and provide stable quality jobs (World Bank, 2021). The average unemployment among youths (15–24) between 2015 and 2019 was 53.5%.

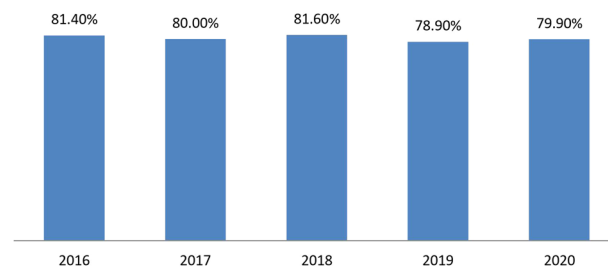


Fig. 2 Percentage of inactive women in the labour market over the years (2016–2020). Source: Data obtained from the Labour Force Surveys of the Kosovo Agency of Statistics of 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and Q1 2020.

According to labour market indicators for 2015 to Q1 2020, ~66.76% of working-age Kosovars were unemployed or inactive. Between 2015 and 2020, ~37% of the working-age population were out of the labour market (Krasniqi, 2021) (Fig. 1).

The most concerning labour market indicator was the high number of inactive women, which only fell by 1.5% between 2016 and 2020. In real numbers, the number of inactive women actually rose (KAS 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and Q1 2020) (Fig. 2).

Apart from high rates of unemployment (Fig. 3) and inactivity, the labour market in Kosovo is characterized by high gender inequality. In Q1 2020, 44% of men were employed compared to 14.1% of women (KAS, 2020). Women are nearly 66% less likely to be employed than men in Kosovo, an indicator of traditional gender stereotyping in the labour market (Fig. 4). Moreover, due to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment increased in 2020. Consequently, the number of registered unemployed also rose drastically. According to the Employment Agency of Kosovo, between March and October 2020, 81,911 job seekers registered for the first time, illustrating the impact of the pandemic on the labour market (EARK, 2020) (Fig. 5).

The high unemployment and inactivity rates in Kosovo over the last decade drove emigration between 2015 and 2020.

Migration trends 2015–2020

Migration trends from Kosovo between 2015–2020 were driven by several factors, particularly the high unemployment rate, low employment opportunities, high levels of institutional corruption and nepotism, poor living conditions, increasing levels of poverty, and inadequate standards of health and education, all of which remained unaddressed by the state. Young people, disillusioned by ongoing labour market irregularities including the violation of workers' human rights, saw better life opportunities in EU countries and beyond (BPRG, 2020).

The population census of 2011 showed that ~30% of Kosovars live abroad. According to official data, between 2011 and 2017, more than 180,000 Kosovars emigrated, and between 2013–2017 around 170,000 departed via both regular and irregular migration (Government Authority for Migration, 2018) (Fig. 6). According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 220,000 Kosovars emigrated over the last decade. Emigration was highest in 2015 when 75,000 left in one year (Fig. 6). Migration decreased in succeeding years, although 2018 was an outlier with 28,000 emigrants departing, mainly seeking employment in Germany, Slovenia, and Croatia according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo. By 2019, it was estimated that 1.96% of Kosovars lived abroad, including legal and illegal migrants (KAS, 2019).

Between 2014 and 2015, according to institutional data in Kosovo, 100,000 Kosovars emigrated for EU countries, discouraged by the political and economic situation in Kosovo post the 2014 elections. Over 2014–15, there was a large increase in Kosovar asylum seekers to the EU, from ~38,000 to 73,000, although in

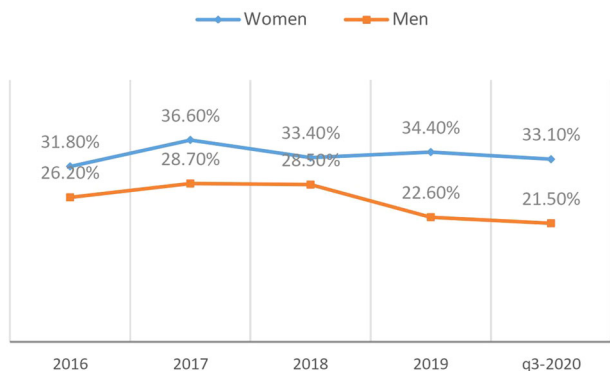


Fig. 3 Unemployment rate in Kosovo 2016–2020. Source: KAS: Labour Force Survey: 2016–Q3-2020.



Fig. 4 Unemployment rate Q3-2020 by age and gender. Source: KAS—Labour Force Survey q3-2020.

2019 this number dropped steeply (EUROSTAT, 2021a, 2021b). One main reason for this was the change in asylum policy by EU member states, which categorized Western Balkan countries as “safe” for returnees. Accordingly, in 2014 and 2015, almost 17,000 people returned to Kosovo (EU Commission, 2015), while according to official statistics of KAS, the number of repatriated was approximately 24,000 (Fig. 6).

According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS), migration trends in Kosovo continued into 2019, when 1.96% of the resident population emigrated regardless of motive. Based on “Population Assessment for 2018” estimates, the number of legal and illegal emigrants in 2019 was 34,911. The majority of migrants were legal, leaving for a family reunion, long-term study, marriage, or employment reasons (KAS, 2019).

Official statistics listed the main destination countries as Germany (39% of total migrants), Switzerland (23%), Italy (7%), Austria (7%), Sweden (7%), and other countries (17%) (KAS, 2018).

The official data on migration and repatriation trends for Kosovo between 2012 and 2017 showed that the gap between emigrants and returnees increased significantly in 2015 and 2017 when a wave of migration was triggered in Kosovo (Fig. 6). The research found that these trends have a direct correlation with Kosovo’s signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2015, which—in principle—allows citizens of the signatory country to move freely in the Schengen Area without a visa. For Kosovo, this was a long-awaited moment. However, after the SAA agreement, EU countries were reluctant to grant the visa waiver to Kosovar citizens, fearing an influx of labour migrants due to high unemployment rates in Kosovo. In response, a wave of illegal migration erupted among a mostly young population of 1.8 million population, disappointed by EU intransigence and frightened of being isolated. In past and present, the overriding factor encouraging emigration from Kosovo has been the effect of migration remittances. In 2017, remittances

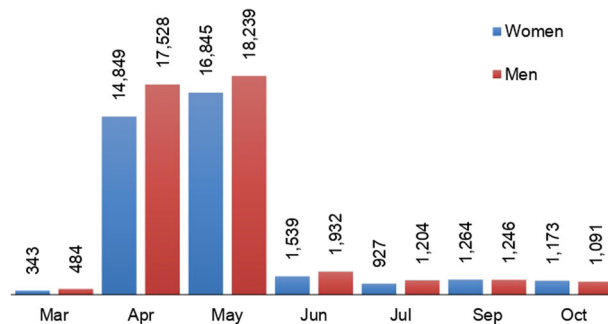


Fig. 5 The Number of new jobseekers registered in Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK)—March–October 2020. Source: Data from the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK).

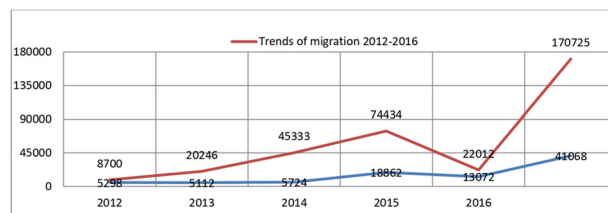


Fig. 6 Trend of repatriation in Kosovo 2012–2016 and trends of migration 2012–2016. Source: KAS and Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo.

reached 759.2 million EUR, representing the second-largest category of income, with an annual increase of 9.9% (CBRK, 2018). In 2018, income from remittances increased to 800.5 million (a 5.4% annual increase) (CBRK, 2019), while in 2019 the value of remittances was 6.4% higher than in 2018. In 2020 remittances increased by 980.1 million EUR. This 15.1% increase was the largest to date (CBRK, 2020) despite the impact of COVID-19 on countries where the Kosovar Diaspora was concentrated (especially Germany and Switzerland, which account for 42.3% of remittances to Kosovo) (CBRK, 2021).

The brain drain and EU double standards

The impact of globalization and the integration of Western Balkan states into the EU—in particular the integration process for Kosovo—have deeply influenced domestic economies and social attitudes towards migration in societies affected by the “brain drain” effect. The contractual relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans—both collectively but also with individual countries post-SAA and Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VLD) evaluation by the EU—is a major determinant of migration policy and practice in Kosovo. The contradiction between the EU’s strategy to integrate the Western Balkans and the reluctant stance of EU countries to allow visa waiver for Kosovo has generated massive flows of migrants into EU countries. The SAA stipulates that, upon fulfilment of EU criteria, a country will be “granted” visa-free status. Despite this, as of 2021, Kosovo remains the only WBG country with positive feedback from the EC where the SAA has not been implemented.

Economic and political instability, together with low job opportunities at home, are some of the main push factors encouraging the educated and highly skilled to emigrate. In the meantime, the increase of legal forms of migration (linked to family reunions and education) show that pull factors within EU countries seeking qualified Western Balkan workers have made enforcement efforts by Kosovar migration monitors more difficult.

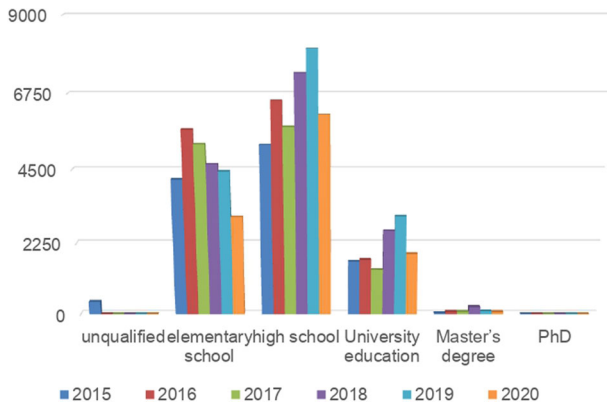


Fig. 7 Job vacancies according to qualifications. Source: Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015–2020.

Table 1 Unemployment by profession 2020.

	Men	women	total
Manager	679	709	1388
Professional	5166	7919	13,085
Technical professionals and associates	8188	5870	14,058
Office workers and assistants	4441	3535	6856
Sale and services	9056	9892	18,948
Workers in agriculture, forestry and fisheries	3022	1064	4086
Employees of craft and similar professions	17,998	3981	21,979
Operators and installers in factories and machines	2312	251	2563
Elementary Professions	43,527	42,490	86,017
Total	93,279	75,701	168,980

Source: KAS—Labour Force Survey 2020.

Figure 7 shows that according to the Employment Agency of Kosovo (EAK), the majority of registered unemployed were from elementary occupational backgrounds, while about 20% of unemployed in 2020 had either managerial or professional backgrounds (Table 1). In 2020, the number of jobseekers exceeded the 1978 job vacancies requiring degree-level qualifications by 178.9% (Fig. 7). According to this data, over 94% of degree holders (including Masters’ and PhDs) were unemployed (EARK, 2015–2020) (Fig. 7).

The phenomenon of migration by qualified workers from developing countries has been called the “brain drain”. It can also be understood as a loss of university-educated human capital due to a lack of innovation within the home labour market. Sociological theory understands the brain drain as a phenomenon affected by capital fluctuations, as well as pull factors such as better quality of life, security, and employment opportunities in destination countries. Recent studies have also shown that, apart from EU integration, the Western Balkan brain drain is caused by a surplus of skilled workers, in professions that the labour market could not accommodate. This is caused by a lack of coordination between the labour market and the education system, which contributes to graduate unemployment. The lack of cooperation between academic institutions and the private sector has led to educated and qualified workers being seen for their quantity rather than their quality. This deficiency in coordination steepens the imbalance between the supply of qualified workers and labour market demand. In particular, there are too many graduates in economics and law, and too few in IT.

The brain drain in Kosovo is particularly seen among health workers, which has harmed the Kosovar health system. KAS figures state that 100,000 Kosovars emigrated in 2014 and 2015 (KAS, 2018) By 2018, it was estimated that about 854,198 Kosovo citizens lived abroad, mainly in Germany and Switzerland (MIA, 2018) According to the KAS report of 2019 there are 3555 doctors in Kosovo, an estimated ratio of 2.5 doctors per 1000 citizens. According to both the Chamber of Doctors and the Chamber of Nurses, in a country where the density of doctors and nurses per capita is almost the lowest among Council of Europe states (of which Kosovo is not yet a member), one doctor emigrates every two days, and two nurses emigrate every day. This level of migration has emptied medical centres of their qualified staff and deprived patients of medical care. It has also harmed the economy, reflected in wasted education spending and the cost to the taxpayer—to train one doctor costs nearly 100,000 EUR. Kosovo, with a population of 1.8 million, has seen medical centres close in cities such as Peja and Gjakova due to the medical brain drain. Compared to other Western Balkan countries, Albania has 1.2 doctors per 1000 people, Turkey 1.8 per 1000, and Bosnia Herzegovina 2 per 1000. Meanwhile, Germany has 4.2 doctors per 1000 and Sweden 5.4 per 1000 (World Bank Data, 2019).

Among the most popular destination countries for doctors and health workers emigrating from the Balkans is Germany, due to the overwhelmingly improved working conditions and wages. The Dean of the Medical Faculty at the University of Prishtina described how medical students take private German language courses in preparation for post-graduation emigration (Ahmetxhekaj, 2019). This migratory trend of doctors and nurses influenced Germany’s 2015 decision to open the labour market to six WBG countries in parallel with a tough new policy against asylum seekers. This provided a route for skilled migrants to avoid illegal or irregular migration by accessing programs to allow them to benefit from labour shortages in Germany. This has reduced human capital in Kosovo causing significant depletions in key professions. It is feared that Kosovo’s population will continue to shrink.

Compared to other Western Balkan states, Albania is the fourth highest in terms of high skilled workers emigrating. Starting with the massive migration after the fall of communism, the trend has not slowed subsequently. The Economist places Albania first on the list of Western Balkan countries, with migration at 29%, compared to Bosnia Herzegovina at 20%, and North Macedonia at 18%. In comparison, destination countries have benefited from migration, receiving skilled workers who fill gaps in the labour market, with spending on training unnecessary. Demand is high and spread across the labour market, in particular for doctors, engineers, and IT specialists, as well as low-skilled workers required for menial or dangerous roles The Economist (2020).

Conclusions

Migration is many things. It can be an individual decision to change the country of residence. It can be the social impact of a mass movement of people to other countries for economic purposes. A complex process, migration speaks to the regional and global changes impacting the lives of individuals and wider society. Migration trends in Kosovo are characterized by individual or collective decisions to pursue improved living conditions and escape high poverty rates. Such pull and push factors encourage emigration to high-income countries experiencing labour shortages. Emigration has different impacts on sending country and destination country.

Observing the economics of emigration from Kosovo over recent decades suggests that the main reasons for emigration were

high poverty rates and human rights violations. Both of these causes aggravated the living conditions for ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, already suffering because of ethnic discrimination by the state. However, migration trends in Kosovo between 2015 and 2020 show that push factors not only influenced society but also individual decisions. This is explained by the large youth population in Kosovo, low opportunities, and high unemployment. Moreover, the high percentage of unemployed educated people in Kosovo explains the migration peaks of 2015 and 2017. The SAA and VLD oblige Kosovo to better “manage” migration by monitoring numbers, enforcing migration law, and policing borders. Despite these obligations, as long as half of young people in Europe’s youngest population cannot find work, Kosovars will continue leaving. Contemporaneously, while Kosovars are denied the visa waiver for political reasons, individual EU countries have opened legal migration pathways for highly skilled Western Balkan migrants, intensifying the brain drain in vital sectors such as health and IT.

Migration trends reflect the disconnect between education and labour market demands, characterized by the imbalance between the numbers of new graduates and employers’ capacity to absorb them into the workforce. As long as Kosovo remains the only Western Balkan country excluded from EU visa waiver, unemployed Kosovar youth will continue illegal migration, which highlights the absurdity of the EU’s counterproductive strategy of isolating Kosovo.

In conclusion, the doors of the EU remain (predominantly) closed to unqualified Kosovars. EU countries experiencing shortages in key professional sectors, including doctors and nurses, have welcomed suitably qualified Kosovars. The economic impact of selective Kosovar emigration to the EU has led to a health care crisis at home. Although unemployment remains the principle migratory push factor, the emigration of educated Kosovars has caused the most severe economic consequences, exacerbated by the dysfunction of the EU’s selective approach towards the citizens of Kosovo.

Data availability

All data analysed are included in the paper.

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Additional information

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