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Addressing the Urgent Challenge of Youth Migration in Kosovo

Author: Anđelija Vučinić

Supervisor: Ramadan Ilazi



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Introduction

Youth migration has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing Kosovo today, with far-reaching implications for the country's economic development, social stability, and political future. As young Kosovars increasingly seek better opportunities abroad, the nation faces a potential crisis of human capital loss, often referred to as "brain drain." This phenomenon threatens to undermine Kosovo's long-term prospects by depleting its most dynamic and innovative demographic group—its youth. The exodus of young people is driven by a complex interplay of economic, political, social, and educational factors, each of which plays a significant role in shaping the decisions of Kosovo's young population to migrate.

The central argument of this paper is that addressing youth migration is not only critical for Kosovo's immediate stability but also for its future as a thriving, self-sustaining nation. The migration of young people is symptomatic of deeper structural issues within the country, including high unemployment, political instability, inadequate social services, and an education system that fails to meet the aspirations of the youth. These challenges are compounded by the slow progress of Kosovo's European integration process, which further diminishes the optimism of young Kosovars about their future prospects within the country.

For the government of Kosovo, the urgency of addressing youth migration cannot be overstated. Immediate and comprehensive action is required to create an environment that encourages young people to stay and contribute to their homeland. This involves not only addressing the root causes of migration but also actively working to attract returnees and engage the diaspora in the country's development. The government must focus on expanding economic opportunities, particularly through job creation and support for entrepreneurship, enhancing the quality of education and vocational training, and improving overall living conditions to make Kosovo a more attractive place for its youth.

This paper is organized into several key sections that collectively provide a comprehensive analysis of youth migration in Kosovo and offer actionable recommendations. The first section examines the current trends in youth migration, highlighting the scale of the problem and the primary destinations of young Kosovars. The second section delves into the driving forces behind this migration, analyzing the economic, political, social, and educational factors that compel young people to leave. The third section explores the profound impact of youth migration on Kosovo's

communities, including changes in social structures, family

dynamics, and local development. The fourth section provides a comparative analysis of how other Western Balkan countries are addressing youth migration and draws lessons for Kosovo, while also discussing the role of the European Union in supporting Kosovo's efforts. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings and offers a forward-looking perspective on how Kosovo can effectively tackle youth migration through targeted policies and strategic partnerships.

The Exodus of Kosovo's Youth—A Critical Socioeconomic Challenge

Kosovo is currently witnessing a significant trend in youth migration, with a substantial portion of its young population seeking opportunities abroad. This trend is primarily driven by the pursuit of better job prospects, advanced education, and an overall improved quality of life. The movement of young people from Kosovo is not an isolated phenomenon but rather part of a broader global pattern where individuals from economically challenged regions migrate to countries offering greater stability and opportunities.

Recent statistics reveal a striking reality: nearly 30% of Kosovo's population aged 18 to 30 has migrated to other countries in recent years. This mass exodus highlights the significant challenges Kosovo faces in retaining its young talent. The motivations behind this migration are multifaceted, but they converge on a common goal—the desire to secure a more promising future that seems unattainable within Kosovo's current socio-economic framework.

The preferred destinations for young Kosovars are predominantly European Union countries, with Germany and Switzerland being the most popular choices. These countries are attractive due to their robust job markets, higher education opportunities, and generally superior living standards. While there is also a noticeable trend of Kosovars moving to the United States, drawn by its prestigious educational institutions and diverse job market, Europe remains the primary destination for most migrants.

Economic conditions in Kosovo play a pivotal role in driving this migration trend. The high unemployment rates, especially among the youth, limited job opportunities, and comparatively lower wages make the prospect of staying in Kosovo less appealing. In contrast, Western countries offer

higher salaries, stable job markets, and better living standards, making migration an attractive option for those seeking financial stability and career advancement.

The education system in Kosovo, despite recent improvements, also contributes significantly to the migration of young people. Many young Kosovars perceive foreign universities as providing superior educational opportunities, which they believe will lead to better career prospects. This perception is not just about acquiring a degree but about gaining access to opportunities that are more difficult to attain within Kosovo. The allure of studying abroad is strengthened by the belief that it offers a pathway to a brighter future, one that is perceived as being more secure and prosperous compared to what is available locally.

Unpacking the Drivers of Youth Migration from Kosovo

Kosovo, a country with a rich history and vibrant culture, is currently experiencing a significant outflow of its youth. This trend is not merely a statistical anomaly but a critical challenge that threatens to undermine the country's long-term stability and development. The migration of young Kosovars is driven by a complex interplay of economic, political, social, and educational factors that collectively shape their aspirations and decisions. Understanding these driving forces is essential for crafting effective policies to address this pressing issue.

One of the most compelling reasons behind the exodus of Kosovo's youth is the lack of attractive job opportunities and competitive wages within the country. Despite some growth in various sectors, the reality for many young Kosovars is a challenging job market, characterized by high unemployment rates, especially among graduates. Youth unemployment in Kosovo is significantly higher than the national average, making it difficult for young people to secure meaningful employment that matches their qualifications and aspirations. This scarcity of opportunities at home contrasts sharply with the prospects available abroad. Western European countries and the United States, in particular, offer considerably higher

salaries, more robust job markets, and better career prospects. For many young Kosovars, the promise of financial stability and a higher standard of living abroad outweighs the challenges of migration, making it an attractive option for those eager to build a stable and prosperous future.

Political instability and deteriorating social conditions in Kosovo further exacerbate the situation, driving young people to seek security and stability elsewhere. Since gaining independence in 2008, Kosovo has faced persistent political turbulence, marked by corruption, ineffective governance, and frequent crises. This environment of uncertainty fosters a pervasive sense of disillusionment among the youth, who often perceive their country's future as uncertain and precarious. Additionally, inadequate public services and infrastructure—such as unreliable public transport, insufficient healthcare, and underdeveloped recreational facilities—contribute to a lower quality of life. These deficiencies stand in stark contrast to the well-developed social services and stable political environments found in many Western countries, making the prospect of migration even more appealing to those seeking better living conditions.

The education system in Kosovo, while showing signs of improvement, is another critical factor driving youth migration. Many young Kosovars are drawn to the perceived superior educational opportunities available abroad. Foreign universities are often seen as offering advanced research facilities, diverse academic programs, and internationally recognized qualifications—attributes that are hard to find in local institutions. The outdated curricula and limited resources in Kosovo's education system further contribute to the perception that local education is insufficient to meet the demands of a competitive global job market. As a result, many young people are motivated to pursue their studies abroad, where they believe they can unlock doors to better career opportunities and a more prosperous future.

Family ties and the presence of a substantial diaspora community also play a significant role in the migration decisions of young Kosovars. With a diaspora spread across Europe, North America, and Australia, many young people are influenced by the prospect of joining relatives who have already established themselves abroad. The existing diaspora network

provides crucial support, such as job connections, accommodation, and cultural integration, which makes the transition to a new country smoother and less daunting. This sense of familiarity and safety that family connections abroad offer can be a powerful pull factor, encouraging young people to leave Kosovo in search of a better life.

The slow and uncertain progress of Kosovo's European Union integration process is another critical factor contributing to youth migration. The lengthy and complex process of meeting EU standards, coupled with ongoing political and economic challenges, has led to a sense of stagnation and frustration among the youth. For many young Kosovars, the lack of clear progress towards EU membership diminishes their optimism about the country's future. They view EU countries as offering better opportunities, stability, and a higher quality of life, making the idea of living in a country that is already part of the EU far more attractive than waiting for Kosovo's accession—a prospect that often seems uncertain and distant.

The economic effects of youth migration on Kosovo are profound and far-reaching. The loss of skilled and educated young people, often referred to as a "brain drain," can lead to a significant shortage of qualified professionals in critical fields such as healthcare, engineering, and technology. This drain on human capital stifles innovation and economic development, as the country loses the potential contributions of its brightest minds. Furthermore, the departure of young people can slow down economic growth. As the workforce shrinks and ages, productivity declines, and there are fewer people to drive innovation and growth. For Kosovo, this could mean slower economic development and reduced opportunities for economic diversification, further entrenching the challenges that drive migration in the first place.

The political stability of Kosovo is also at risk due to high levels of youth migration. The government faces significant challenges in addressing the causes of emigration, such as the lack of job opportunities and political instability, while also trying to leverage the benefits of remittances and return migration. Crafting policies that encourage the retention of young talent and attract returnees is complex and requires a comprehensive

and strategic approach. Moreover, a population that is largely dissatisfied with the economic and social conditions is more prone to unrest and instability. The growing influence of a large diaspora, which can shape both domestic and international political landscapes, adds another layer of complexity to Kosovo's political challenges.

“More than half of the young people who were interviewed felt that Kosovo was going in the wrong direction in 2020 (52%), an increase of 20 percentage points (pp) compared to 2018 findings, while one in four felt that the situation in the country was stagnating (24%). Moreover, the lack of job opportunities (81%), poverty or poor economic situation (68%), and nepotism/corruption (42%) remained the top three challenges for young people in Kosovo. Another 20% referred to the general political situation and 17% mentioned the low quality of education. While these problems were also voiced as top issues in 2018, an increased ratio of young people mentioned the lack of job opportunities (an increase of 21 percentage points (pp)) and poverty or a poor economic situation (an increase of 19 pp) in 2020. At the same time, qualitative findings clearly showed that regardless of ethnicity, age, or gender, focus group participants agreed that unemployment was the number one challenge for youth in Kosovo. The mismatch between labour market needs and the profiles of new graduates, as well as nepotism in recruitment processes, were also stressed as prominent issues. The complexity and severity of issues that youth in Kosovo cope with were also reflected in findings on 1All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999). 2Also referred to as Youth Study throughout the report. Youth Challenges and Perspectives in Kosovo 10 Page mental well-being. Three in four young people in Kosovo (77%) expressed slight to extreme concerns about coping with stress, and 83% felt that physical and mental health were essential in their life. Focus groups also revealed that mental health problems are often perceived as not sufficiently addressed and acknowledged in Kosovo. Aspirations to migrate were still a widespread phenomenon in 2020 in Kosovo, with 53% of young people declaring that they are definitely or likely to consider emigration. On the plus side, this is lower than the 58% share in the 2018 survey. However, a higher percentage of young people declared to definitely consider migration in 2020 (32%) more than in 2018 (27%). Findings further revealed that the

lack of job opportunities (67%), the lack of personal perspective (45%), as well as the general unfavourable economic situation (39%) were perceived as root causes for over half of the young people who considered leaving Kosovo in the next three years.”¹

The Far-Reaching Impact of Youth Migration on Kosovo's Communities

The migration of young people from Kosovo has profound and multifaceted effects on the communities they leave behind. This exodus not only alters the demographic makeup of these communities but also has deep social, economic, and political repercussions. Understanding these impacts is crucial for addressing the broader consequences of youth migration and for developing strategies that can mitigate its negative effects.

One of the most immediate and visible impacts of youth migration is the shift in the social structure of the communities. As young people leave, the demographic profile of the remaining population skews increasingly older. This demographic shift can significantly alter community dynamics, as the vibrancy and energy typically brought by younger generations begin to wane. The absence of youth reduces the vitality of local cultural and social life, leading to a gradual erosion of community traditions and innovations that are often driven by the younger population. Over time, this can result in a community that is less dynamic, less engaged, and more susceptible to social stagnation.

The impact of youth migration on families is equally profound, often leading to both emotional and financial stress. The departure of family members, particularly young adults, can create significant emotional strain as families grapple with the challenges of maintaining connections across long distances. While remittances sent by those who have migrated can alleviate some financial pressures, they cannot fully compensate for the emotional toll of separation. This strain can weaken family bonds and disrupt the traditional support systems that are vital for the well-being of both individuals and communities.

Community services and infrastructure also suffer as a result of youth migration. The departure of young people can lead to a decline in demand

for services such as schools, local businesses, and recreational facilities. With fewer young people to serve, these institutions may struggle to maintain their sustainability, leading to reduced quality and availability of services for those who remain. The shrinking workforce further exacerbates this issue, as local businesses may find it increasingly difficult to operate without the energy and labor provided by a younger population. This decline in community services can have a cascading effect, leading to a deterioration in the overall quality of life within these communities.

Youth migration has a complex impact on local development. On one hand, the outflow of young people can create gaps that might spur local initiatives aimed at retaining or attracting talent. Communities may become more proactive in developing strategies to keep their youth engaged and invested in their future within Kosovo. On the other hand, if the migration is substantial and continuous, it can lead to stagnation, as the loss of human capital and creative energy slows down local development efforts. The challenge lies in finding ways to harness the potential positive effects of this migration while mitigating its more detrimental consequences.

The political and developmental consequences of youth migration are significant and far-reaching. Large-scale migration can contribute to political instability, as the exodus of young people may fuel dissatisfaction and a sense of disenfranchisement among those who remain. This discontent can manifest in increased political activism or unrest, placing additional pressure on policymakers to address the root causes of migration. Furthermore, the loss of young people, who are often the drivers of change and innovation, can impede national development efforts. Without the input of a motivated and skilled youth population, progress in critical areas such as technology, education, and entrepreneurship may slow, hindering the country's overall development trajectory.

The migration of youth also affects Kosovo's international relations. The diaspora can serve as a bridge between Kosovo and other countries, fostering economic and cultural ties that can be beneficial for the nation. However, if not managed well, this migration can lead to tensions related to migration policies and international cooperation. The presence of a large diaspora also introduces complexities in diplomatic relations, as the interests of the diaspora and the home country may not always align.

Thus, Kosovo must navigate these relationships carefully to maximize the benefits while minimizing potential conflicts.

In response to the challenges posed by youth migration, Kosovo needs to implement targeted policies aimed at encouraging retention and attracting young people back. This can include creating more job opportunities, improving living conditions, and investing in education and training programs tailored to the needs and aspirations of the youth. Additionally, engaging with the diaspora to leverage their skills, experience, and connections can be a strategic approach to mitigating the negative impacts of youth migration. By fostering a sense of belonging and opportunity, both at home and abroad, Kosovo can work towards reversing the trend of youth migration and ensuring a more stable and prosperous future for its communities.

Comparative Analysis of Youth Migration in the Western Balkans

Youth migration is not a challenge unique to Kosovo; it is a pressing issue that affects the entire Western Balkans. Understanding how other countries in the region are addressing this problem offers valuable insights that could inform Kosovo's approach to mitigating the outflow of its young population. Across the Western Balkans, countries such as Albania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are also grappling with high rates of youth emigration, driven by economic hardships, political instability, and a lack of opportunities. The allure of more stable and prosperous lives in Western Europe is a powerful pull factor, and the experiences of these countries provide important lessons for Kosovo.

In Albania, the government has implemented policies aimed at boosting economic opportunities and improving living conditions to curb youth migration. These initiatives include creating job opportunities through incentives for startups and investments in key sectors like technology and tourism. By focusing on economic development, Albania seeks to create a more attractive environment for its youth, reducing the need for them to seek opportunities abroad.

North Macedonia has taken a different approach, emphasizing educational reform and vocational training to better align the skills of young people with market demands. The government has introduced

programs to support young entrepreneurs and small businesses, recognizing that entrepreneurship can be a powerful tool for retaining young talent. By equipping youth with the skills needed for the modern job market and supporting their entrepreneurial ambitions, North Macedonia aims to reduce the outflow of its young population.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has focused on improving governance and reducing corruption as part of its strategy to address youth migration. Additionally, the country has invested in infrastructure and public services to make Bosnia and Herzegovina a more attractive place for young people to live and work. By tackling the root causes of dissatisfaction, such as poor governance and inadequate public services, Bosnia and Herzegovina seeks to create a more conducive environment for its youth to thrive domestically.

Each of these countries demonstrates that a multifaceted approach involving economic development, education, and good governance is crucial in addressing youth migration. These strategies offer valuable lessons for Kosovo, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive and integrated response to the challenges posed by youth emigration.

The European Union (EU) plays a significant role in shaping the responses to youth migration in Kosovo. The EU views youth migration from Kosovo with both concern and a sense of opportunity. While the EU recognizes the challenges posed by this migration, it also sees it as a critical factor in its engagement with the region. The EU's approach to addressing youth migration involves encouraging Kosovo to improve its economic and social conditions, thereby creating an environment where young people see a future for themselves at home.

To support Kosovo in these efforts, the EU offers various programs and funding mechanisms aimed at fostering economic development and educational improvement. These initiatives often focus on enhancing educational systems, supporting job creation, and promoting good governance. By addressing the root causes of migration, such as unemployment and a lack of opportunities, the EU aims to help Kosovo build a more stable and prosperous society that can retain its young talent.

For Kosovo to effectively tackle youth migration, several key policies could be implemented. Expanding job opportunities through investments in diverse sectors such as technology, green energy, and creative

industries can create new avenues for employment. This, coupled with incentives for startups and small businesses, can play a crucial role in providing employment opportunities for young people. Enhancing the quality of education and aligning vocational training programs with market needs is another critical step. By equipping young people with the skills necessary for the modern job market, Kosovo can improve their employability and reduce the push factors driving migration.

Encouraging entrepreneurship through grants, mentorship programs, and access to finance is also vital. This approach not only creates jobs but also fosters innovation and economic growth, making Kosovo a more attractive place for young people to build their futures. Additionally, investing in infrastructure, healthcare, and public services can improve the overall quality of life in Kosovo, making it a more appealing place for young people to live and work.

Civil society organizations and municipalities also have a crucial role to play in addressing youth migration. Local governments can implement strategies to boost economic development, such as supporting local businesses, investing in community projects, and creating youth centers that offer job training and career counseling. Civil society organizations can advocate for youth issues, provide support services, and run programs aimed at skill development and entrepreneurship. They can also collaborate with local governments and businesses to create innovative solutions to the challenges of youth migration.

Public-private partnerships are another important avenue for addressing youth migration. Collaborations between public institutions, private companies, and civil society can lead to innovative solutions, such as job creation initiatives and vocational training programs that directly address the root causes of migration. By leveraging the strengths of each sector, these partnerships can create more effective and sustainable solutions to the problem of youth migration.

Conclusion

The issue of youth migration from Kosovo presents significant challenges but also opportunities. The exodus of young people has far-reaching impacts on the economy, politics, and social fabric of the country. This phenomenon mirrors a broader trend across the Western Balkans, where economic instability and a lack of opportunities drive many young people to seek better prospects abroad. However, Kosovo can draw valuable lessons from the approaches taken by neighboring countries and the support offered by the European Union.

Addressing youth migration in Kosovo requires a comprehensive strategy that encompasses economic development, educational reform, support for entrepreneurship, and improvements in living conditions. By focusing on these areas, Kosovo can work towards reducing the outflow of its young people and encouraging their return. The future of Kosovo's development depends on its ability to create a dynamic and supportive environment for its youth, one that offers them the opportunities and quality of life they seek.

Looking ahead, the successful implementation of targeted policies and strategies will be crucial in determining Kosovo's ability to effectively address youth migration. If the country can create a more attractive environment for its young population, it may not only reduce emigration but also harness the potential of returnees and the diaspora. The future outlook will also be influenced by regional dynamics and the EU's continued support for Kosovo's development efforts. Ultimately, the path Kosovo chooses in addressing youth migration will shape its future prosperity and stability.

Recommendations

1 For the Government:

Youth Innovation Vouchers: make a voucher system that funds young entrepreneurs and gives them a chance to start businesses on their own on the local level, reducing the barrier of launching the businesses.

Fellowships for returnees: establish fellowships for young people who came back. This kind of program can support their return to Kosovo, and they can effectively contribute on the local level while giving them financial opportunity.

Improve Living Conditions: invest in infrastructure, healthcare, and public services to enhance the quality of life and make Kosovo more attractive to its young population.

Interactive Career Mapping Tools: create digital tools that will help young people find potential jobs and picture out those opportunities in Kosovo. These tools can recommend and offer job openings, career development, and market shifts.

2 For the EU

Continue Supporting Development Programs: maintain and expand funding for initiatives aimed at improving education, job creation, and governance in Kosovo.

Facilitate Knowledge Exchange: host universities and make seminars that are led by experts from different EU countries to exchange knowledge on developing fields and technologies. All classes and workshops could be directed at empowering young people to build soft skills.

Create Youth Advisory Councils: establish councils where young people can advise local and national governments on policies affecting their future. This ensures their voices shape the country's development strategies.

Create an internship network: cooperate with international companies to provide internships for young people in Kosovo. This let them gain global work experience while residing in Kosovo, improving their skills and job possibilities.

3 For Civil Society:

Run Support Programs: offer career counseling, job training, and entrepreneurship support to empower young people and help them build a future in Kosovo.

Foster Public-Private Partnerships: collaborate with local governments and businesses to create initiatives that address youth migration and support economic development.

Peer-Led Community Design Projects: engage youth in community design and improvement projects where they can propose and implement options for local challenges. This involvement can create a sense of ownership and connection to their communities.

Local “Start-Up Weekends”: organize events where young people can work intensively on entrepreneurial projects, technological solutions, or community initiatives over a weekend. These events can generate new ideas and foster a collaborative spirit.