

Propensity to emigrate from Kosovo following visa liberalization: implications for the workforce



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Executive summary

In the last decade, emigration rate from the Western Balkans towards the European Union increased by 10%, resulting in the fact that 20% of the region's population lives outside their countries of origin. With the exception of Kosovo, visa liberalization has enabled other countries in the region to move freely in the Schengen area of the European Union since 2009–2010. Kosovo citizens are finally moving visa-free as of January 1, 2024, after the European Commission's decision on visa liberalization for Kosovo.

The data show that in the first year after visa liberalization for other Western Balkan countries, the emigration rate was not particularly high, reaching a maximum of 2.9% of a country's population. However, the propensity to emigrate, with the exception of Montenegro, has become much more emphasized in the entire Western Balkans after 2015. This is also accompanied by a high demand and more lenient criteria for foreign workers by EU countries. In 2010–2022, about 23% of Albania's population emigrated and obtained a residence permit for the first time in the European Union; followed by about 15% of the population of Kosovo, 11% of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 10% of the population of North Macedonia, 6% of the population of Serbia, and 4% of the population of Montenegro followed the same emigration route.

Visa liberalization found Kosovo in a different dynamic than other states in the region at the time they were offered free movement into the EU. Between 2012 and 2022, over 338 thousand citizens emigrated from Kosovo. A total of 41,553 citizens emigrated in 2022 alone and in this year the active workforce decreased by 21,571 people, while the inactive workforce also decreased by

14,698 people. If we do not have an activation of the inactive labor force, which is quite high, then the current replacement of the missing workforce by foreign immigrants, such as those from Bangladesh, Turkey, Nepal, etc., is insufficient. In 2022, the 2,979 foreign nationals who immigrated to Kosovo for employment reasons replaced less than 14% of the active workforce who were no longer part of the labor market. Similarly, in 2023, the number of foreign nationals granted a temporary residence permit in Kosovo was only 5,570, of which 2,778 were for employment reasons.

In December 2023, GAP Institute conducted a survey to measure citizens' propensity to emigrate in the first part of 2024. Survey results show that about 28% of Kosovo citizens over 18 plan to emigrate in this period. This figure turns out to be lower than the measurements made earlier by different organizations, such as in 2007 (over 30%), 2012 (34%), 2014 (43%), and 2018 (59%). The age group under 24 is the category most likely to emigrate (33.4%). Based on the evidence from previous years, although this propensity to emigrate in 2024 is not expected to be attained within the year, it still shows that the propensity to emigrate remains high. Visa liberalization may have an additional effect in this regard compared to previous years, when no more than 4.1% of Kosovo's population emigrated within a year.

The sectors expected to be most affected by employees' departure in the short and medium term are the construction sector (18.7%), accommodation and food service activities (18.7%), trade (18.1%), and production (12.9%). These also represent the sectors with the highest number of employees and where employee productivity is high, but wages remain low. From desk review of literature on the experiences of other countries and the degree of replacement of employees from certain sectors who have emigrated with employees from other countries, in case a significant part of the population of working age who are not currently looking for work is not activated, in these sectors a more pronounced increase in wages is expected compared to other sectors. In 2023, it is observed that wages changed in the labor market in Kosovo, where about 27.4% of respondent employees reported increases.

About 45% of respondents were formally employed in 2023 (39.3% in the private sector and 5.8% in the public sector). Economic reasons seem to prevail among other reasons to emigrate. Over 20% of people who plan to emigrate are in the income bracket of EUR 301–450, while 32.9% reported no income at all in the last month. Most citizens who plan to emigrate have completed secondary education only (57.7%). Primary destinations for citizens who plan to emigrate are Germany with 71.4%; followed by Switzerland with 11.7%; and Austria with 5.3%.

Introduction

In recent years, Kosovo and other countries of the Western Balkans are facing a high emigration rate. The movement of this wave of emigration is transforming the demographic structure of these countries. This is depriving them of a significant part of the workforce, affecting the public finance sector, and reducing quality of life levels. This also has implications for these countries' long-term economic development prospects.¹ One of the most direct challenges of emigration is the change in the structure of the workforce. This change has an impact on the economy of the countries of origin. Besides its impact on the labor market and the demographic structure within the Western Balkans, emigration also introduces a complex relationship with the economic and social structure of the EU.²

In December 2009, the EU allowed a visa-free travel for citizens of Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia; at the end of 2010, this was extended to Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.³ Kosovo is the last country in the region whose citizens can travel visa-free to the EU from January 1, 2024.⁴ Kosovo has a long history of citizens leaving their homeland which has evolved through different stages.⁵ Although in the first years of visa liberalization in the region, no visible impact on the workforce movement was observed, this visa liberalization finds Kosovo in circumstances where the workforce is already emigrating on a significant scale.⁶

According to KAS data, in the 2012–2022 period, 338,068 people or 18.8% of the population of Kosovo emigrated from Kosovo. In the same period, 91,806 people immigrated to Kosovo, which means that the net migration for these years is 246,262 people. The highest number of Kosovo citizens left in 2015, with 74,434 people recorded leaving Kosovo. The same year also marked the largest number of returnees, when 18,862 people returned to Kosovo. Net migration this year remains the highest in a decade, with a negative balance of 55,572 people.⁷ The departure of Kosovans in this period contributed to the deepening of the migration crisis in the European Union. This departure was characterized as an illegal movement of the population. As such, it was carried out through land routes connecting Kosovo with western Europe. Germany alone declared that over 20 thousand Kosovans had reached German territory in the first quarter of 2015. The reasons for this movement were mainly collective pessimism caused by the harsh economic situation in the country and political instability.⁸ Incorrect information that Germany would grant asylum-seeking applications during these months, the facilitation of border crossing between Serbia and Hungary due to a change in the asylum law in the EU legislation, were some of the factors that influenced this departure of Kosovo citizens towards the EU.⁹

1 Małgorzata, Walerych. [The economic effects of emigration: a literature review](#). 2020; Icoski, Marjan. [Toward a New Youth Brain-drain Paradigm in the Western Balkans](#), GMF, 2022.

2 Ibid.

Note: In any instance where the European Union is mentioned in this report, it will also refer to countries such as Switzerland and Norway. These countries are not part of the EU but part of the Schengen Area allowing free travel for outside visitors.

3 European Commission. [Questions and Answers – Fifth report on the EU visa-free regime with Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries](#), 2022

4 European Commission. [Migration and Home Affairs](#).

5 Kotorri, Mrika. [An Investigation into Economic Migration with Special Reference to Kosova](#), 2011

6 World Bank, [Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020](#)

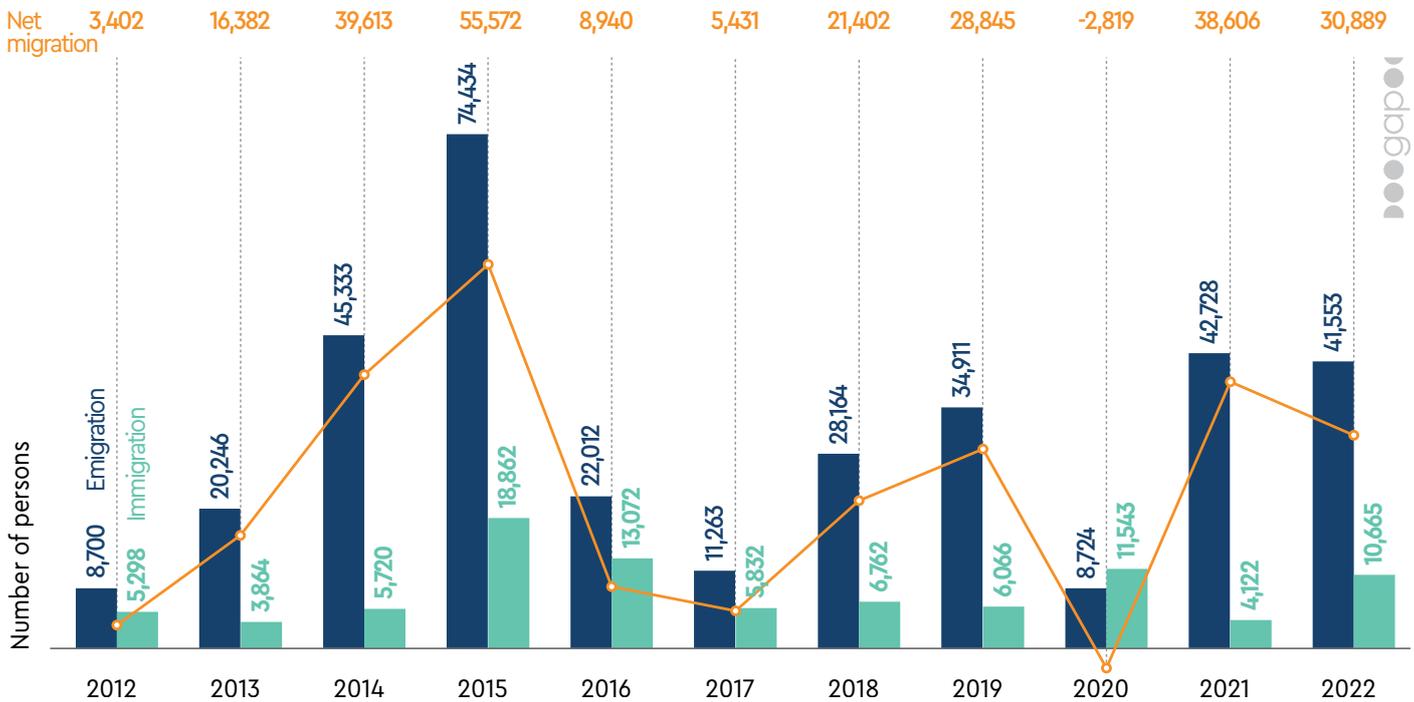
7 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Population Assessment Reports, 2012–2022.

8 Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO), [Mass exodus from Kosovo: How a struggling state loses its citizens](#). 2015

9 Ibid.

In the following years, with a special emphasis from 2018, regular emigration to EU countries exceeded irregular migration in previous years.¹⁰ In 2022, according to the latest data, 41,553 citizens emigrated Kosovo, while 10,665 immigrated to Kosovo. Net migration in 2022 was 30,889 citizens.

Figure 1. Migration in Kosovo 2012 – 2022



Source: KAS

Labor emigration affects most countries of the world and ranks high on international, regional, and national policy agendas.¹¹ When citizens who are part of the workforce leave their country, they cause a decline in the supply side of the labor market.¹² How this decrease in labor supply affects the economy of a country represents an enormous challenge for the governments of the countries of origin of emigrants. This is reflected in various cases of countries that have faced high emigration levels.¹³

According to studies, the effects brought by citizen's emigration on the labor market in the local (sending) economy are numerous. In the short term, worker's emigration creates a shortage on the labor market. This affects the increase in wages for the remaining workers with similar skills to those who emigrated. If many physicians emigrate from a country, the demand for physicians who have not emigrated increases, and their wages also increase. However, for some occupations that complement others, emigration can lead to lower wages. Specifically, with fewer physicians in the health sector, the demand for medical technicians falls. This may lead to a decrease in wages for this category. In the long run, if the most educated, productive, and entrepreneurial people emigrate from the country, the overall productivity in the economy decreases, resulting in an overall drop in wages in the country. Such an effect was documented in Italy. Similarly, if the workforce is an intensive factor in production in sectors experiencing high emigration rates, this may influence the economic structure to gradually shift to sectors where capital or machines are a key factor in production.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ministry of Interior, [Light Migration Profile](#), 2021

¹¹ International Labor Organization. [International labor migration](#), 2010

¹² Louka T. Katseli et al. [Effects of migration on sending countries: What do we know?](#)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Elsner, Benjamin. [Does emigration increase the wages of non-emigrants in sending countries?](#)

In the case of Mexico, which is one of the main sources of international migrants, emigration has had an enormous impact on the country's economic structure.¹⁵ The large flows of emigration have reduced the workforce size in the country and as a result, in terms of wages, it is estimated that a 10% decrease in the workforce in Mexico has led to an increase in the average wage of that group of workers by about 4%.¹⁶ However, the impact varied between different education level groups, with low-skilled workers, despite high emigration rates, experiencing relative wage decline.¹⁷ Other studies show that some countries facing high emigration rates, such as Yemen and Pakistan, experienced increased wages in sectors most fragile of emigration.¹⁸ In Pakistan, the mass exodus from the construction sector resulted in high wage increases in that sector.¹⁹ Similarly, in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, the high rate of emigration, while leading to an increase in wages, adversely affected the economic development of these countries. This reduced productivity in this region.²⁰

In Lithuania, most emigrants were in the 20–30 age group. The increase in wages in the country for people who had not emigrated happened precisely in this category, and not for the older age groups. Emigration from this country has led to an increase in young people's wages of up to 15%. The same upward propensity for wages in the local economy only for categories with the same characteristics as the population that emigrated is also observed in Poland. Wages increased only for citizens with average skills, and not for those with high or low skills. The impact on wages for such categories in the domestic workforce is usually largely affected by the number of immigrants replacing those who emigrated, which may offset the effect.²¹ Certainly, emigration can also have a positive effect on local economies in cases where emigrants transfer acquired knowledge, invest in establishing businesses, etc.

Through this report, GAP Institute aims to analyze how the significant emigration of Kosovo citizens affects its labor market by evaluating the developments in Kosovo's workforce, by calculating the current figures of emigration of Kosovans and reviewing the findings of research on the impact of emigration on the economies of countries in the region that have experienced high emigration rates. In addition to the desk literature review, the key data include the results of the public opinion survey conducted by GAP Institute during December 2023 with regards to the plans and propensity of Kosovo citizens to emigrate following visa liberalization, as well as data from national statistics agencies of EU countries and Western Balkan countries, which GAP has collected through requests for access to public data.

15 14.6% from 1980–2000. Ibid.

16 Aguila, E , et al. [Migration's Effects on Origin and Destination Countries](#). 2012

17 Ibid.

18 Beth J. Asch. [Emigration and Its Effects on the Sending Country](#)

19 Ibid.

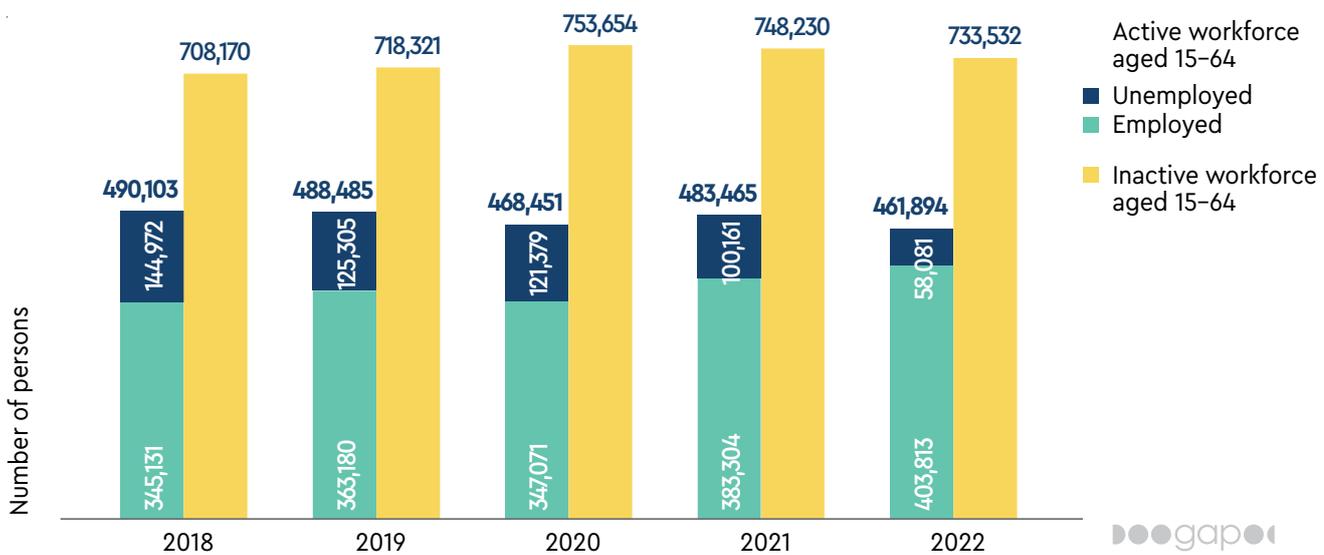
20 Empirical analysis suggests that in 2012, cumulative real GDP growth would have been on average 7 percentage points higher in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe without emigration during 1995–2012. This includes Turkey, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Moldova, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine. IMF: [Regional Economic Outlook: CESEE](#)

21 Elsner, Benjamin. [Does emigration increase the wages of non-emigrants in sending countries?](#)

Kosovo's current labor market

Despite economic growth and an improved business environment, labor market indicators in Kosovo are among the weakest in the region and in Europe. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the unemployment rate in Kosovo is 11.8%, the labor force participation rate is only 38.5%, compared to 61.5% of the population who belong to the working age but are economically inactive.²² Accordingly, from a total of 1,195,426 people of working age, only 461,894 are active in the labor force (403,813 employed, and 58,081 unemployed) and 733,532 are economically inactive. World Bank reports show employment growth in Kosovo is restricted due to the insufficient human capital base and the uneducated and insufficiently skilled workforce.²³

Figure 2. Active and inactive workforce in Kosovo



Source: ASK

Inactive labor force participation exceeds active labor force participation every year (2018–2022). The active workforce includes the employed and the unemployed.²⁴ By comparing the recent trend, there are movements in the total labor force participation. Consequently, solely according to the difference between 2021 and 2022, it is calculated that:

- The active workforce has decreased by 21,571 people
- The inactive workforce has decreased by 14,698 people

This reduction in the inactive workforce does not translate in an increase in the active workforce. Although changes in the workforce are influenced by diverse social, economic, and demographic factors, emigration remains quite a challenging issue in terms of such shifts in Kosovo's workforce.

Within the active workforce, men participation is significantly higher than that of women, with a total of 329,469 (71%) men being active in the workforce compared to 132,425 (29%) women. Such gender dominance is observed among both employed and unemployed. The difference is also significant in men's and women's inactive participation in the workforce. Hereby, we have 264,056 (36%)

²² Kosovo Agency of Statistics, [Labor Market](#).

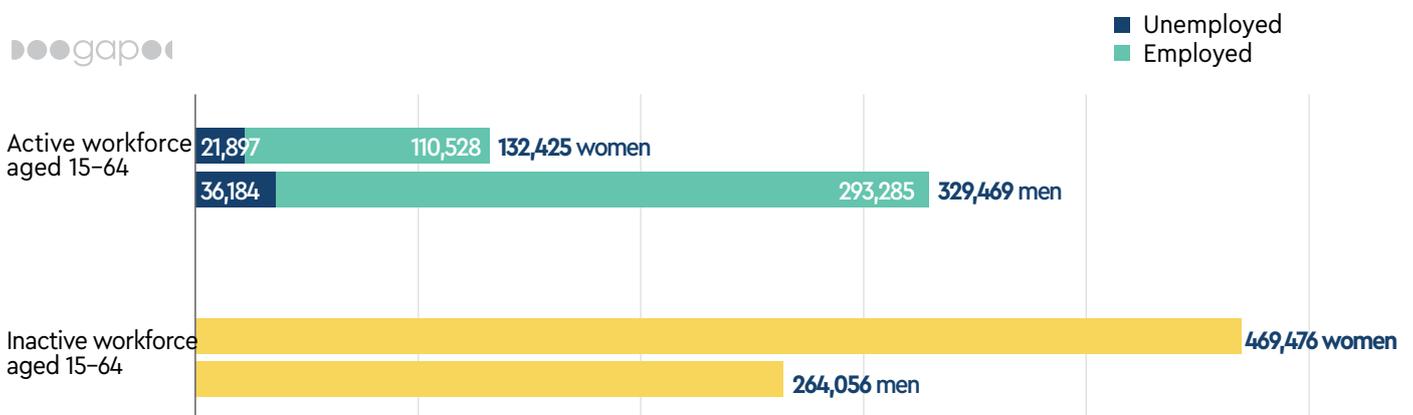
²³ European Commission. [IPA II 2014-2020, Kosovo, Employment and Education](#).

²⁴ Kosovo Agency of Statistics. [Labor Market, 2022](#)

men and 469,476 (64%) women. Inactivity suggests that these people are still in education/training, or simply not looking for a job.

A 'positive impact' of migration on the domestic economy is thought to be the reduction of the number of inactive persons on the labor market. Faced with labor shortages, businesses raise wages, offer additional flexibility in working hours, etc. In Kosovo, the impact may be even more emphasized on women, who have an incredibly low active participation rate on the labor market. Data shows that in 2012–2019, the emigration of Western Balkans citizens changed the participation in the labor force in these countries, affecting the increase in the activity rate in the labor force by 4.5 percentage points. This was primarily due to an increase in women's participation at the regional level in the active workforce. A higher than average increase was recorded in Montenegro (8 percentage points), Serbia (6.6 percentage points), and Albania (4.9 percentage points), while in other countries it increased by 2 percentage points or less.²⁵

Figure 3. Active and inactive workforce in Kosovo by sex



Source: ASK

The economic sectors in which employment is concentrated highlight another significant factor of the Kosovo labor market. Manufacturing has overtaken construction as the second largest employer, employing 12% of those currently employed. Construction employs 11%, followed by education with 10% and public administration with 7%.²⁶ Based on the survey results, detailed below, emigration will have a large impact on the construction sector, where 18.7% of employees intend to emigrate, as well as on the production sector, where 12.9% intend to leave.

World Bank data shows that the labor shortage crisis is one of the most noted concerns in the Western Balkans.²⁷ The high numbers of emigration from Kosovo (41,553 in 2022) and the high negative migration balance, together with the shrinking of the active workforce, are quite challenging factors for Kosovo. Assuming that the active workforce, predominantly young people, will leave Kosovo, this could create a gap in the labor market that will be extremely difficult to fill. For years, in an effort to narrow the gap created by emigration, Kosovan businesses have tried to attract foreign workers both inside and outside the Western Balkans region.²⁸

²⁵ World Bank. [Western Balkans Labor Market Trends](#), 2020

²⁶ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. [The Big Picture: A Progressive Economic Agenda for Kosovo](#), 2021

²⁷ World Bank. [Western Balkans Regular Economic Report; Towards Sustainable Growth](#), 2023

²⁸ International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Visa Liberalization: Kosovo's Golden Opportunity](#), 2023

Immigrants with residence permits in Kosovo do not solve the problem of labor shortage. According to the latest (January-November 2023) data of the Kosovo Ministry of Interior, the number of foreign persons granted temporary residence permits in Kosovo was 5,570, of which 2,778 were for reasons of employment. In the previous year, the number of residence permits was 6,244, of which 2,979 were for employment purposes (for detailed data for 2021–2023, see Tables 3.1 and 3.2 in the appendices). The majority of immigrants in Kosovo come from surrounding countries such as Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia. They also come from countries outside the region such as Turkey, Bangladesh, and other Asian countries. Currently, these immigrants, compared to the number of Kosovans emigrating to EU countries, are quite small in number. They cannot replace the missing part of the workforce on the labor market.

Table 1. Temporary residence permits for foreign nationals in Kosovo (2023)

2023	Total	Family Reunion	Employment	Education	Humanitarian	Other
Turkey	1,503	33	896	203	46	5
Serbia	1,156	560	416	167	1	12
Albania	1,009	563	414	23	1	8
North Macedonia	548	338	195	11	0	4
Bangladesh	168	2	166	0	0	0
USA	144	43	91	10	0	0
Montenegro	102	56	35	11	0	0
Germany	101	38	57	3	0	3
Philippines	67	3	64	0	0	0
Switzerland	55	42	13	0	0	0
Great Britain	39	15	24	0	0	0
Italy	39	7	31	1	0	0
Jordan	38	4	26	0	8	0
Ukraine	36	5	9	0	22	0
Poland	34	2	32	0	0	0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	30	20	9	1	0	0
Thailand	28	0	28	0	0	0
France	27	16	10	1	0	0
Nepal	25	0	25	0	0	0
Other	421	464	237	6	32	2
Total	5,570	2,211	2,778	437	110	34

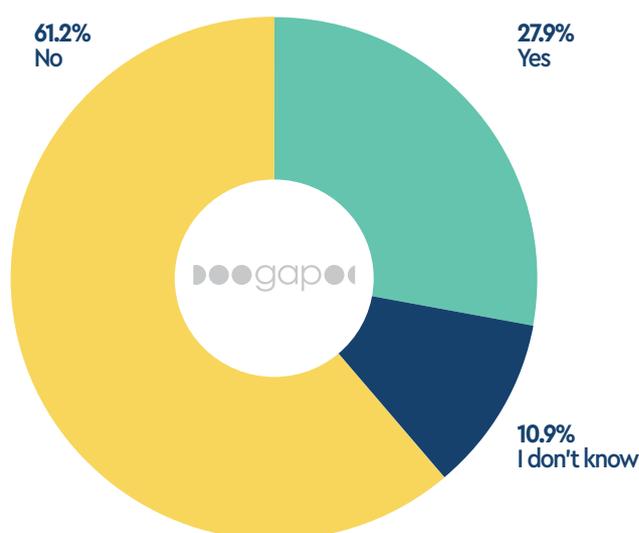
Source: Ministry of Interior

Propensity of Kosovo citizens to emigrate in 2024

To measure the migration propensity of citizens, GAP Institute conducted a public opinion survey at the country level,²⁹ – in the 38 municipalities of Kosovo – using the “stratified random sampling” technique. As part of this research, 1,066 respondents over 18 years old were surveyed, reflecting the ethnic structure in Kosovo, and the research has a confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of +/- 3%. Field research was conducted from December 14 to 21, 2023.

The main findings of the survey regarding the citizens' propensity to emigrate in the first quarter of 2024 show that 27.9% of citizens plan to emigrate to the Schengen area (January-March), 61.2% have no plans to emigrate in this period, and 10.9% of them have no specific plans to emigrate at all. As per gender breakdown, about 30% of men have plans to emigrate in January-March 2024, compared to 26% of women.³⁰ This figure appears to be lower than the previous measurements in 2007 (over 30%), 2012 (34%), 2014 (43%) and 2018 (59%).³¹ While based on previous years records it is unlikely that the 27.9% of citizens claiming to emigrate early in 2024 will do so by the end of 2024, this finding still indicates a high emigration propensity.³² Even in years when Kosovo citizens' propensity to emigrate was high, such as in 2015, when the largest number of people who emigrated within the year was recorded, no more than 4.1% of the population had emigrated that year. However, compared to previous years, the difference in 2024 is addition of visa liberalization. This allows citizens free movement and greater opportunities to communicate with potential employers in foreign countries. Furthermore, a significant proportion of citizens have already emigrated (more than 338 thousand by 2022) which explains this lower propensity to emigrate.

Figure 4. Kosovo citizens planning to emigrate in Q1 2024 (from 1,066 people surveyed)



²⁹ Conducted by UBO Consulting, a professional opinion research company, contracted for this purpose.

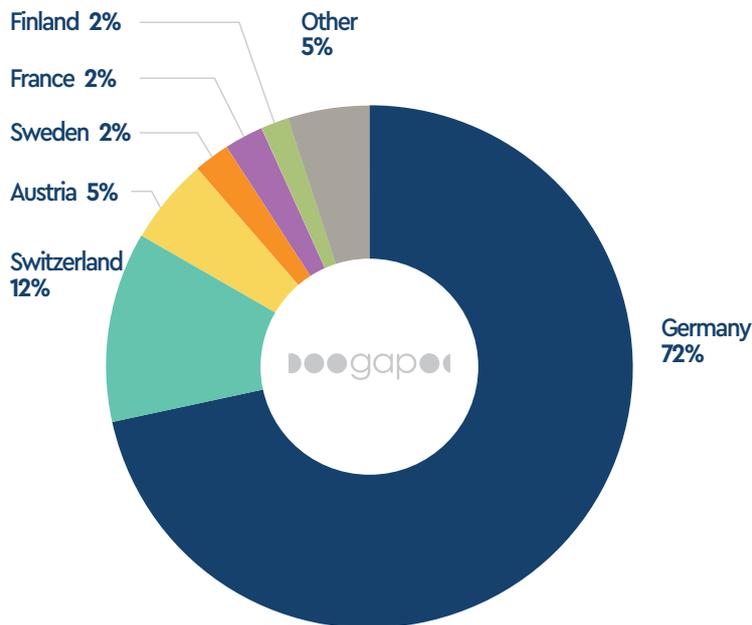
³⁰ About 11% of men do not know whether they will emigrate or not, compared to 10% of women.

³¹ Kotorri, Mrika. [An Investigation into Economic Migration with Special Reference to Kosova](#), p. 5-8, 2011; GLPS, [Migration 2.0, Who are the Kosovars most willing to migrate to EU countries? – An Empirical perspective](#), 2015; Beqiri, Theranda. et al., [Propensity of Youth to Migrate: Evidence from Kosovo](#), 2022.

³² Ibid.

For citizens who declared that they have plans to emigrate in Q1 2024, the main destinations are Germany with 71.4%; followed by Switzerland with 11.7%; and Austria with 5.3%.

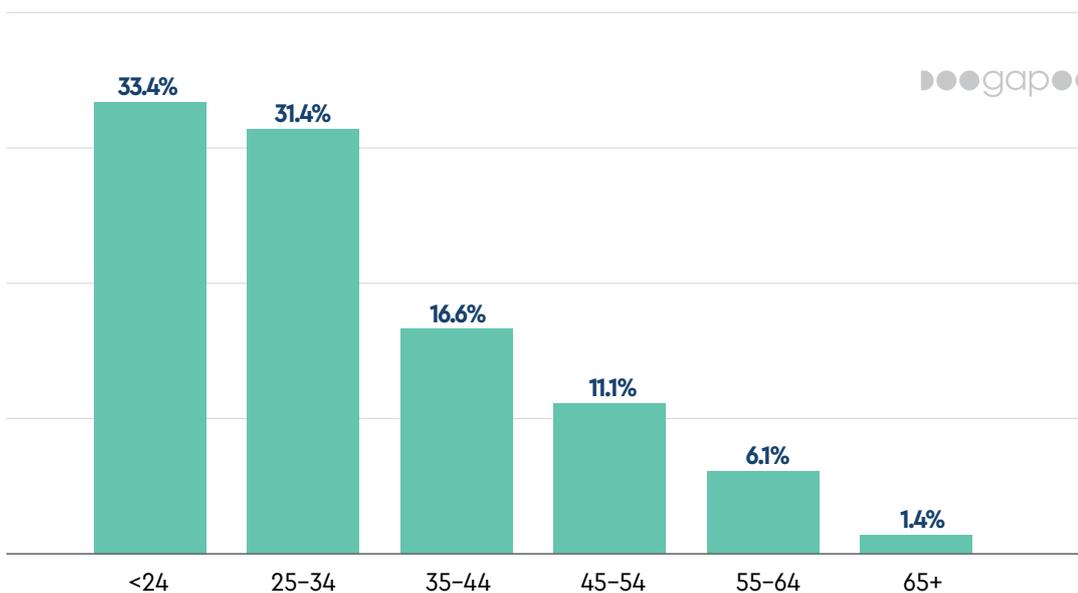
Figure 5. Main destinations for citizens planning to emigrate



A total of 28.2% of citizens listed better employment opportunities as the main reason that prompted them to plan to emigrate after the liberalization of visas, followed by the improvement of the quality of life for themselves and their families (education, health, security, etc.) with 26.3%, higher wages with 22.4%, career development with 14.1%, and family creation or family reunion with 9%.

Most of the citizens who declare to have emigration plans are young. Of those who plan to emigrate in Q1 2024, 33.4% belong to the age group below 24 years. This is followed by about 31.4% of those aged 25–34 years.

Figure 6. Age groups of citizens planning to emigrate

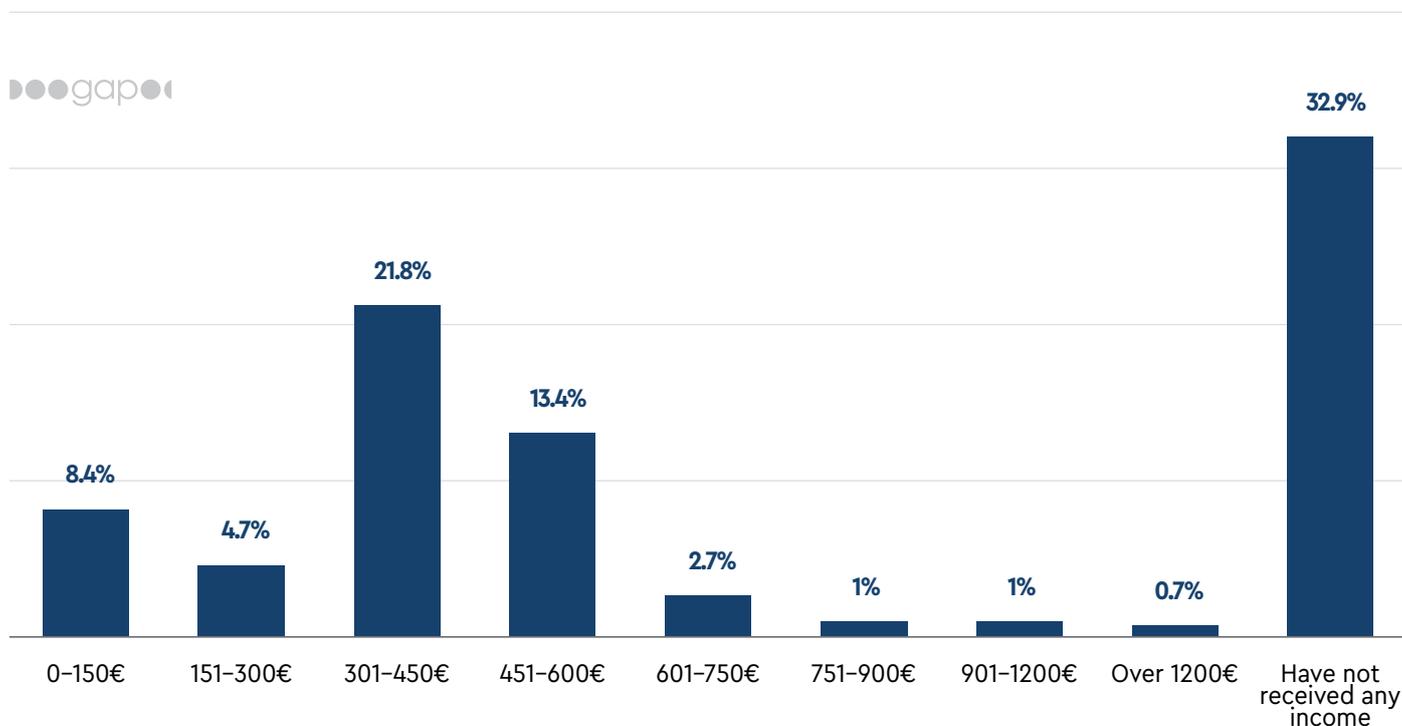


As for the education and qualifications of people who plan to emigrate, students dominate with 41%, followed by people who have completed bachelor's studies with 31%, and people who have completed secondary education with 30.5%. People who have no plans to emigrate include 80% of those without education at all. This is followed by those who have completed only a few years of primary school at 78.9%.

Those planning to emigrate are 36.6% private sector employees; 34.5% intermittently employed; and 31.6% unemployed but looking for a job. In contrast, retirees are most likely to stay in the country, with 90.1% declaring they have no plans to emigrate. This is followed by those employed in the public sector, with 72.8% not inclined to emigrate.

According to survey data, 32.9% of citizens with emigration plans belong to the group that did not bring in any income at all in December, followed by 21.8% who made EUR 301–450, and 13.4% with personal monthly incomes of EUR 451–600.³³

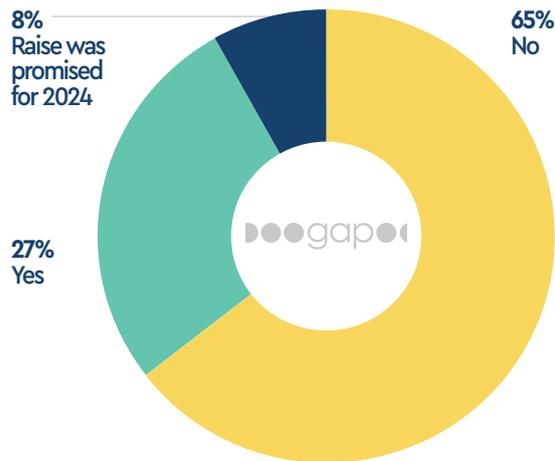
Figure 7. Monthly income of citizens with emigration plans



About 27.4% of employed respondents had an increase in wages during 2023, compared to 64.5% who did not receive a raise in the same period. Meanwhile, 8.1% of them say they were promised wage increase in 2024. Businesses responding by increasing wages for employees is one of the measures that positively affects the reduction of the propensity to emigrate, since the findings of GAP Institute show that economic reasons remain among the key indicators in making the decision to emigrate. Additionally, in the public sector, the increase in wages through the adoption of the Law on Salaries in the Public Sector in 2023, and the additional increase in wages through the increase in the wage coefficient in 2024, may have a positive effect on reducing the propensity of public sector employees to emigrate.

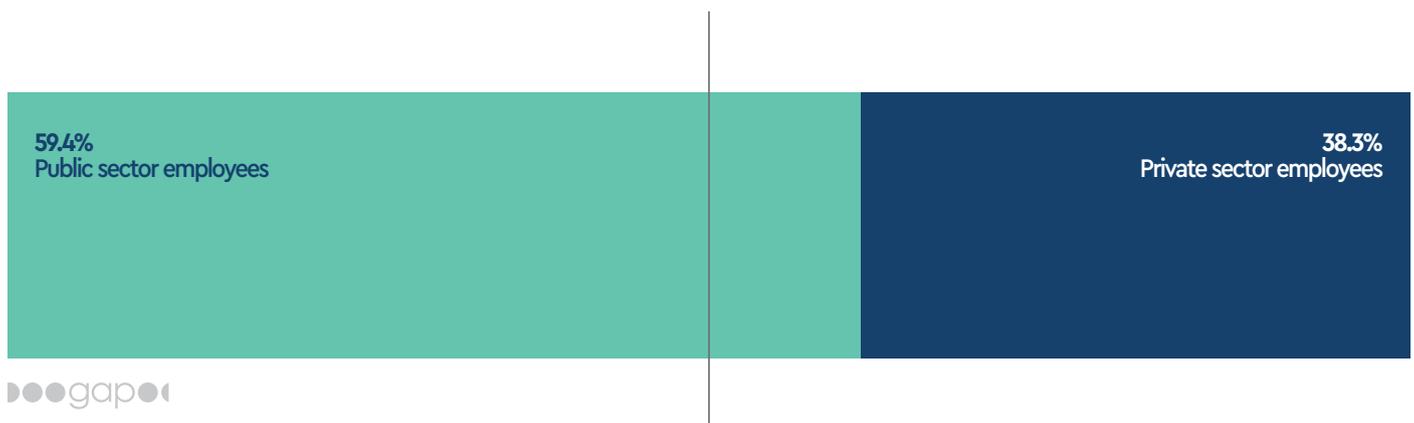
³³ In these categories, people who refused to answer account to 13.4%.

Figure 8. Difference/increase in employees' wages in 2023



Of the total citizens who declared to have had an increase in wages in 2023, 38.3% are employed in the public sector and 59% in the private sector. Of the people who said they were promised wage increase in 2024, 25% are employed in the public sector and 55% are employed in the private sector.³⁴

Figure 9. Wage increases for employees in 2023 in the public and private sector



Most of the citizens who said they would emigrate in Q1 2024, more precisely 18.7% of them, work in the construction sector; 18.7% in the hospitality and gastronomy sector; followed by 18.1% who work in the wholesale and retail trade sector. To a lesser extent, respondents who plan to emigrate are from the agriculture, forestry, and fishing sector with 2.6%, and transportation with 3.2%.

By comparing the data on the number of employees and the productivity of the sectors where they work, it turns out that the propensity to emigrate will mostly affect the wholesale and retail trade sector, which has nearly 79 thousand employees, the construction sector accounting for about 45 thousand employees, and the hospitality and gastronomy sector with over 31 thousand employees. These also represent the sectors with the highest number of employees and where employee productivity is high, but wages remain low. In 2022, the average gross wage in the most affected sectors was lower than the average wage in the country. Specifically, in the gastronomy sector the average gross wage was EUR 323, in construction EUR 444, in trade EUR 449, in

³⁴ The rest are intermittently employed or self-employed.

manufacturing EUR 409, etc. Some of the sectors that will be least affected by emigration are the agriculture, forestry, and fishing sectors. These sectors have the highest productivity of all sectors, but from which only 2.6% declare that will emigrate. In the meantime, some other significant sectors such as education and health will be affected to a lesser extent where about 7% have declared plans to emigrate.

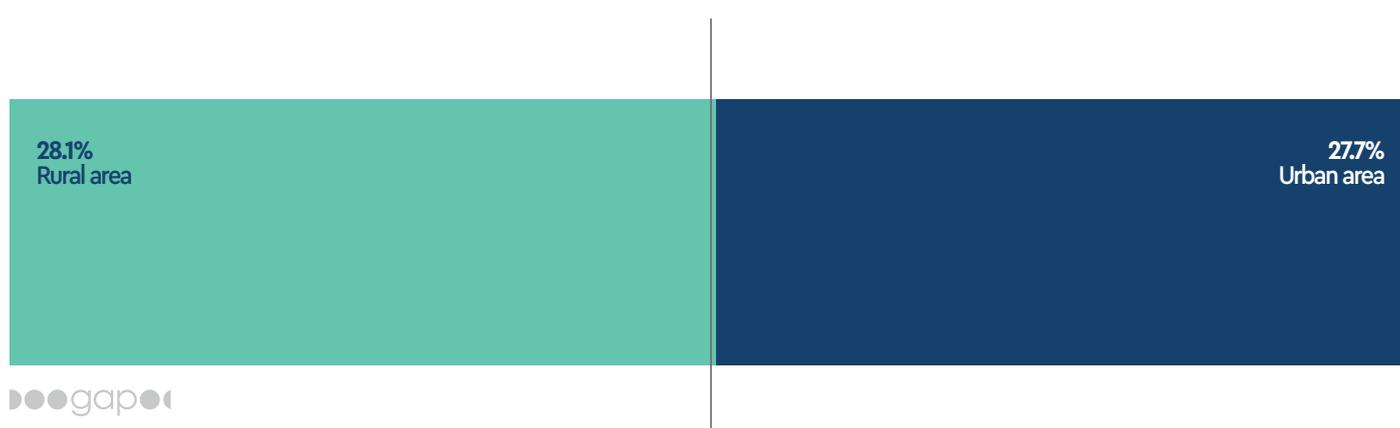
Table 2. Propensity to emigrate, by key economic sectors

Sector	Employees in 2022	Productivity (in Euro) ³⁵	% that will emigrate ³⁶	Did you get a raise in 2023?
Bujqësi, pylltari dhe peshkim	9,110	72,187	2.6%	15.8%
Prodhim	36,250	32,481	12.9%	22.4%
Ndërtimtari	45,015	16,912	18.7%	23.5%
Tregti me shumicë dhe pakicë	78,804	16,223	18.1%	18.1%
Aktivite hotelerie dhe shërbimesh ushqimi	31,542	10,427	18.7%	21.5%
Transport dhe depozitim	18,041	12,538	3.2%	20%
Informim dhe komunikim	10,089	17,669	6.5%	20.5%
Arsim	44,226	6,197	7.1%	58.7%
Aktivitetet e shëndetit njerëzor dhe punës sociale	25,607	7,215	7.1%	48%
Aktivite të shërbimeve tjera	11,795	2,414	5.1%	34.6%

Source: KAS

Of the citizens living in urban areas, about 27.7% of them will emigrate in the first quarter of 2024. While the percentage of those who live in rural areas and who plan to emigrate is 28.1%.

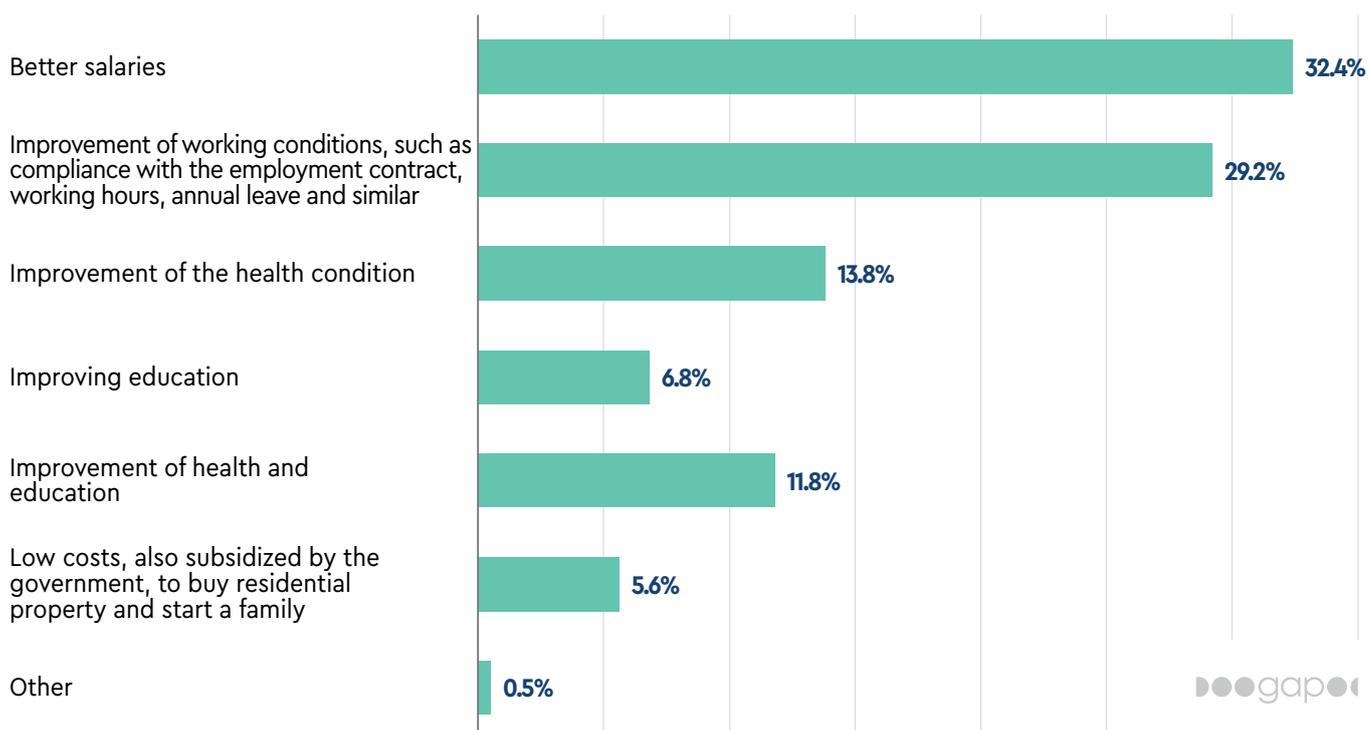
Figure 10. Breakdown of citizens with emigration plans by urban/rural background



According to the survey data, some of the key factors that would discourage citizens from emigrating and instead stay in Kosovo are better wages (32.4%), improved working conditions, such as compliance with employment contracts, working hours, annual leave and similar (29.2%), improvement in health conditions (13.8%), etc.

³⁵ Labor productivity in Kosovo was calculated using KAS data on GDP and employment

³⁶ Calculation based on GAP Institute survey

Figure 11. Factors that would discourage citizens from emigrating

Labor demand in EU countries

The freedom of movement of workers is one of the fundamental pillars of economic integration in the EU. This also includes the free mobility of capital, goods, and services.³⁷ Free labor mobility constitutes one of the most sensitive, and often challenged, freedoms' in the EU.³⁸ In Europe, a combination of factors such as longer life expectancy and decreasing birth rates has caused an ongoing decline in the workforce. According to some United Nations forecasts, there will be 95 million fewer working-age (15–64) people in Europe in 2050 than in 2020.³⁹ Potential responses such as using technology to replace workers (automation) and encouraging births will not prevent the labor crisis, and as a result, Europe will have to encourage immigration from other countries, and/or outsource jobs.⁴⁰

Labor shortages exist in various sectors and occupations at all skill levels. According to a European Commission report, the lack of a workforce will be observed in sectors that require skills, but also in low-skill sectors. The most affected sectors in 2022 were construction, healthcare, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), and ICT (Information and Communication Technology).⁴¹ Consequently, the European Commission promotes targeted migration of non-European citizens, to reduce the lack workforce shortages in certain sectors.⁴²

37 Kahanec, Martin. [Labor mobility in an enlarged European Union](#). International Handbook on the Economics of Migration. 2013

38 Ibid.

39 Kennz, Charles. Yang, George. [Can Africa Help Europe Avoid Its Looming Aging Crisis?](#). Center for Global Development. 2021

40 Ibid.

41 European Commission. [Commission report finds labor and skills shortages persist and looks at possible ways to tackle them](#). 2023

42 Ibid.

EU Member States also offer the so-called 'Blue Card' allowing skilled persons from outside the European Union to obtain work and residence permits in EU states if they prove that they have high (university) qualifications.⁴³ In an effort to encourage immigration, EU states have adopted various policies. One such state is Germany, which introduced various legal pathways to attract foreign labor, manage its demographic decline, and reduce irregular migration. In 2015, Germany opened the labor market to the six Western Balkan countries in response to the new regulation, also known as the Western Balkans Regulation (WBRR),⁴⁴ which did not require any particular skill or qualification, and therefore invited both categories of workers – skilled and unskilled – to the German labor market on the basis of a valid job offer.⁴⁵

These regulations have caused emigration from the Western Balkan countries to increase by 120% in 2019 compared to 2010. The trend of emigration has increased even before the COVID-19 pandemic, especially since 2015.⁴⁶ More than 25% of the population born in the Western Balkans (Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) lives outside this region. Among these states, Kosovo ranks second in terms of citizens living abroad.⁴⁷

Kosovan's emigration history is long, complex, and still challenging for the country. Over the years, Kosovo citizens have primarily emigrated to Germany, Switzerland, and Austria.⁴⁸ There are 542 thousand Kosovo immigrants in Germany.⁴⁹ This is due to emigration to Germany which started in the 1960s and continues to this date.⁵⁰ The latest data from the federal statistical offices of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, and Croatia show that in 2022, the net migration of Kosovans to Germany was equivalent to 17,383; in Switzerland 1,735; in Austria 751, in Belgium 349; and in Croatia 912 (for complete data on immigration and emigration of Kosovans in these countries during 2019 – 2022 see Tables 1; 1.2; 1.3; 1.4; and 1.5 in the appendices).

43 European Commission. [EU Blue Card, Essential Information](#).

44 The regulation is provided under section 26.2 (§26.2) of the Employment Regulation (Beschäftigungsverordnung). Jessica. Bither, Astrid. Ziebarth. [Creating legal pathways to reduce irregular migration? What we can learn from Germany's "Western Balkan Regulation."](#) Migration Strategy Group on International Cooperation and Development. 2018

45 GAP Institute, [The emigration of Kosovo's labor force to Germany](#). 2020

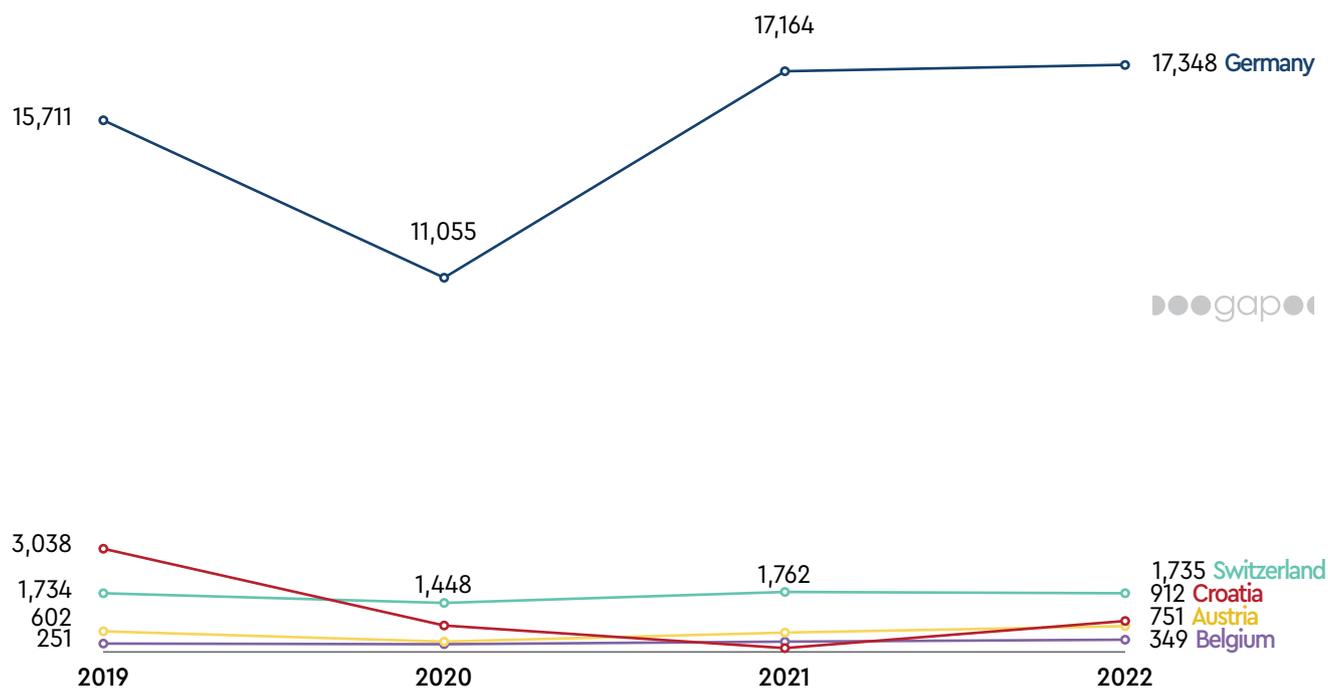
46 OECD, [Labour Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits](#). 2022

47 Ibid.

48 OECD, [Labour Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits](#), p.25, 2022.

49 GAP Institute. [Migration of Kosovans to Germany: A Statistical Analysis](#). 2023

50 Ibid.

Figure 12. Net migration of Kosovans to EU (2019 – 2022)

Source: National Statistical Offices of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, and Croatia

Emigration from the Western Balkans after visa liberalization

Every year, the European Union accepts 2 million to 2.5 million immigrants from countries outside the EU.⁵¹ In 2022, the average age of Europe's population was 45.4 years, while the average age of the immigrant population was 36.6 years.⁵² According to the latest data, 23.8 million non-European nationals currently live in the European Union, constituting 5.3% of the total population.⁵³

The European Union, in 2022, issued 3.7 million first permits to citizens outside the European Union.⁵⁴ At the same time, this represents the highest figure since 2009. Employment is the main reason behind such residence permits, followed by family reunions. According to Eurostat data, from the countries of the Western Balkans, EU residence permits for Albanian citizens issued in 2022 represent the highest figure, a total of 76,491; followed by Serbia with 69,428; Bosnia and Herzegovina with 47,870; North Macedonia with 27,647; Kosovo with 23,036; and Montenegro with 3,835 residence permits issued for the first time in the EU.⁵⁵

In the period 2010–2022, in EU countries, 652,993 first permits were granted to Albanian citizens, equivalent to 22.76% of Albania's population. Only in recent years, namely in the period 2018–2022, the total number of residence-permits for Albanian citizens was calculated at 290,916 or 44% of the total from 2010–2022. The main destinations are Italy, Greece, and Germany (see Table 2.2 in the appendices).

51 According to the latest data, in 2021, 2.3 million non-EU nationals immigrated to the EU. Eurostat. [Migration and migrant population statistics](#)

52 Ibid.

53 In absolute terms, the countries with the largest number of non-EU nationals living in them are Germany (10.9 million), Spain (5.4 million), France (5.3 million), and Italy (5 million). Ibid.

54 Germany clearly dominates with the largest number of permits issued in 2022, with 538,690 permits. Ibid.

55 Eurostat. [First permits by reason, length of validity and citizenship](#). 2022.

For the same period, 477,634 Serbians were issued residence permits in EU countries. The largest concentration is evident in the years 2018–2022 with a total of 268,059 permits, or 56% of the total (see Table 2.4 in the appendices). The main destinations for Serbian citizens were Germany and Croatia.

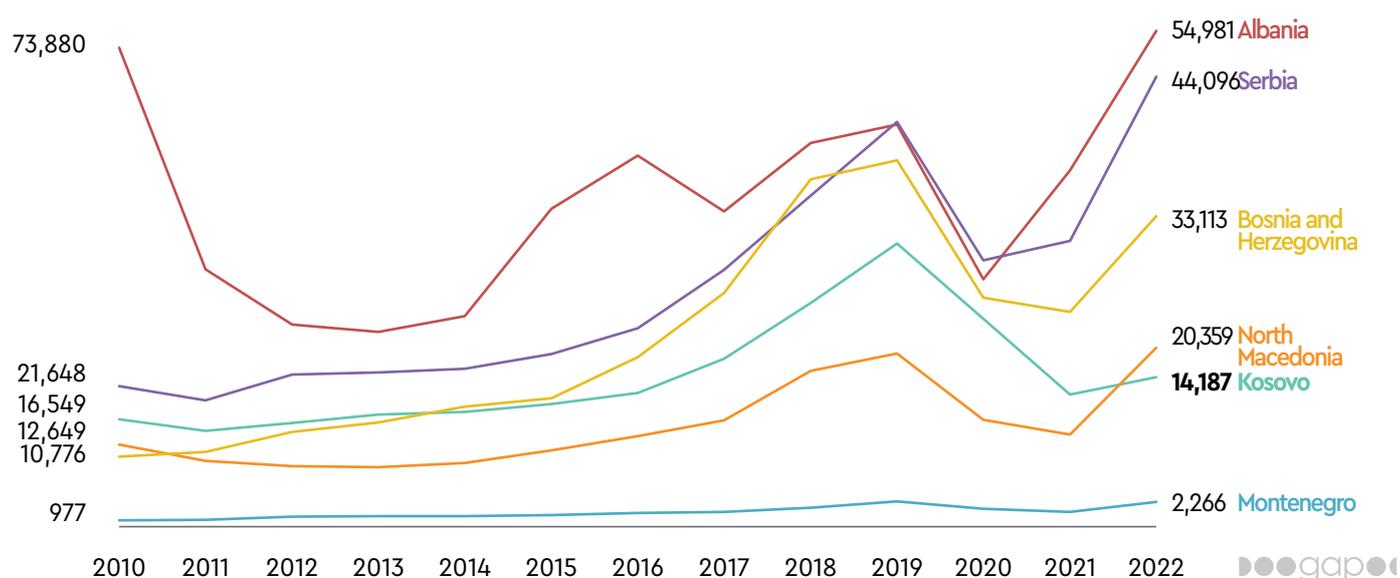
For citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, EU countries issued 379,853 residence permits in 2010–2022. The highest growth trend was observed from 2018 to 2022. According to official Eurostat data, in this period 226,337 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were issued residence permits. This is 59.5% more than in 2010. The main destinations were Germany, Slovenia, and Croatia (see Table 2.6 in the appendices).

The number of first permits in the EU countries granted to citizens of North Macedonia in the period 2010–2022 reached 202,504. Similar to the trend in other countries of the region, there has been an increase in recent years. Only for the period 2018–2022, 109,157 residence permits were issued, or 53.9% of the total from 2010. The main destinations were Germany and Croatia (see Table 2.3 in the appendices).

Kosovo, the last country in the Western Balkans to be granted free movement without visas in the Schengen area, is still challenged by the high number of emigrants. Since 2010, 301,624 Kosovans have been granted first residence permits from EU countries. The largest number of residence-permits, 153,708 or 50% of the total, was recorded in 2018–2022. The main destinations for this period were Germany and Slovenia (see Table 2.1 in the appendices).

Montenegro is the country with the smallest number of citizens granted residence permits by EU countries, with only 28,492 residence permits. Of them, 15,768 or 55% were issued in 2018–2022. The main destinations were Germany and Croatia (see Table 2.5 in the appendices).

Figure 13. Trend of first permits in the EU (2010–2022)



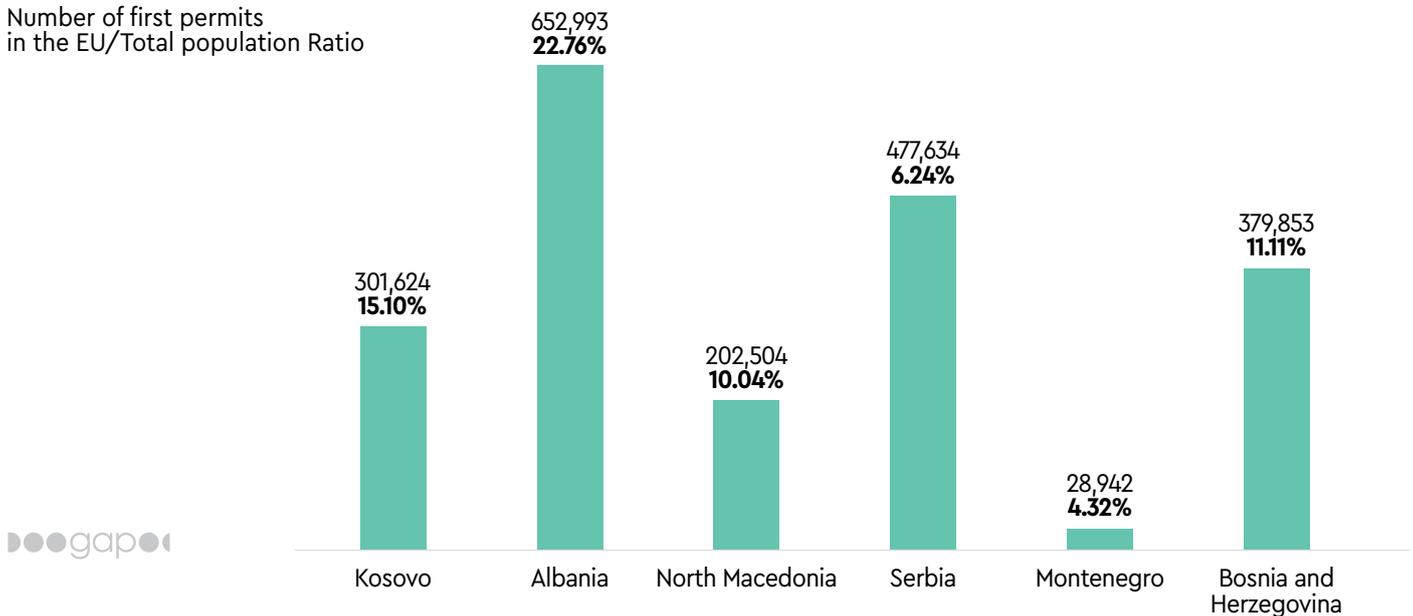
Source: Eurostat

Based on the data of issued residence permits in the destination countries of immigrants originating from the Western Balkans, in relation to the population of the latter, in the period 2010–2022, it appears that 22.7% of the population of

Albania; 15.1% of the population of Kosovo; 11.1% of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina; 10% of the population of North Macedonia; 6.2% of the population of Serbia; and 4.3% of the population of Montenegro have emigrated.

Figure 14. First permits in the EU

Number of first permits
in the EU/Total population Ratio



Source: Eurostat

According to official data, in the first years of visa liberalization for the Western Balkans, there was no evidence of high emigration from the latter.⁵⁶ Since visa liberalization started (2009–2010) until 2014, population mobility towards the Schengen countries was mostly steady. It was 2015 which marked the highest point of emigration from the Western Balkans to EU countries. In addition to Syrian refugees using the Balkan peninsula as a transit route to asylum in EU countries, residents of the Western Balkan region also used the same opportunity to leave their homes this year.⁵⁷ This immigration was mostly illegal. After 2015, EU migration policy reforms regulated citizens' movement towards them, contributing to the illegal migration reduction.⁵⁸

Albanian nationals were less inclined to travel for job seeking purposes before the liberalization of visas with the EU. However, following the visa-liberalization, they were able to travel freely, explore the labor market of their destination, and return without risking their ability to return to Europe for employment in the following months.⁵⁹ Studies show that in the first year of free movement without visas, there were no massive abuses of overstaying outside the time period defined by European Commission regulations.⁶⁰ Moreover, the number of people who have exceeded the time limit for length of stay in the EU does not differ from the previous period before visa liberalization.⁶¹

⁵⁶ European Commission. [Visa policy](#), p.28.

⁵⁷ OECD. [Labour Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits](#), p. 30, 2022.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Dynes, Laurence. [The Impact of EU Visa Liberalization in the Western Balkans](#), 2022

⁶⁰ According to the European Commission regulations for free movement in the Schengen area, the stay must not exceed 90 days within 180 days. European Commission, [Visa liberalization: Commission reports on continued fulfillment of requirements by the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries](#), 2021.

⁶¹ Ikonimi, Luljeta. [The Impact of Visa Liberalization for the Western Balkans: The Case of Albania](#), 2012.

A study published in 2017 shows that 20% of lecturers, assistants, and researchers in North Macedonia applied for jobs abroad.⁶² Similarly, around 300 qualified and employed physicians left Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2016, followed by many more who left immediately after completing their education.⁶³ It is estimated that around EUR 150 thousand is spent on physician education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This means that the state spends more than EUR 50 million per year on physicians who choose to leave their homeland.⁶⁴

Young people and people with a high level of education are more inclined to emigrate and are overrepresented among migrants in destination countries. In 2010, 30–45% of migrants who left Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia had high education levels. This way, Western Balkan countries are more vulnerable to brain drain, especially among young people.⁶⁵ On the other hand, EU countries clearly benefit from this population mobility. Some economists estimate that Germany has benefited about EUR 200 billion during 2009–2016 from the qualifications of the workforce originating from Western Balkans countries.⁶⁶

Role of development policies in mitigating migration propensities

Public policies can significantly influence people's emigration decisions. Many countries concerned with high emigration rates have implemented strategies to encourage their citizens to stay within their borders. For example, the desire to emigrate tends to be lower in countries that allocate a larger share of their budgets to social welfare programs.⁶⁷ Policies that contribute to matching needs with supply tend to reduce emigration since the lack of jobs is a major factor that drives it.⁶⁸ Some of the other measures include the expansion of educational programs, training, and increased household employment opportunities.⁶⁹

Moreover, some countries have adopted policies aimed at retaining individuals with specific skill sets. These include health care workers who are in short supply in countries of origin but also in high demand in destination countries.⁷⁰ To discourage the departure of health workers (physicians and nurses) some governments have proposed a combination of measures that would create more favorable working conditions and greater benefits, but also withhold degrees from recent graduates for a certain period of time.⁷¹ Other policies to combat emigration were the loss of privileges such as pensions for emigrants. Proposals to introduce brain drain taxes and other schemes were promoted in some countries. These schemes created obligations for citizens who were educated at government expense and sought permission to leave the country.⁷²

Most other governments do not intend to discourage emigration but focus on securing benefits for the national economy, particularly through maximizing remittances. Ireland leveraged emigration to "restore" its international credibility

62 Kostić, Marina and Proroković, Dušan. [Place and Meaning of the Visa Liberalization Process and Further Emigration from the Western Balkans](#). pp. 48–64, 2019.

63 Ibid.

64 Vracic, Alida. [The Way Back: Brain Drain and Prosperity in the Western Balkans](#), 2018

65 World Bank. [Western Balkans Labor Market Trends](#), 2020

66 Allison Carragher. [The EU Is a Dishonest Broker on Western Balkan Demographics](#), 2021.

67 OECD. [Interrelations between Public Policies, Migration and Development](#).

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 United Nations, [International Migration Policies: Government Views and Priorities](#)

71 Sagoe, K. [Stopping the Migration of Ghana's Health Workers](#).

72 Ibid.

after facing a high brain drain in the 1990s.⁷³ Through a re-branding fully focused on harnessing the potential of the diaspora for economic development – which was strongly supported by the media, business community, and civil society – Ireland achieved a historic shift towards return and circular migration policies.⁷⁴

Western Balkan countries have used anti-emigration policies targeting unemployment as the most prominent challenge for young people.⁷⁵ Governments are particularly focused on active labor market policy measures for young people from vulnerable groups and on support for youth entrepreneurship and business employment, such as grants, subsidies, internships, retraining, and up-skilling. Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have implemented dual education systems similar to developed European countries.⁷⁶ These states have adopted strategies with documents that contain policy measures to attract mainly investments from the diaspora; to promote circular migration and the return of skilled people from the diaspora; to connect the diasporas; and to create new financial instruments to support diaspora investments (in the form of Diaspora Development Funds, Diaspora Banks, or Diaspora Business Unions).⁷⁷

Despite efforts, Western Balkan countries have failed to invest adequately to target all critical labor market segments. Investments in public education are insufficient, while educational policies are not focused on skills required by modern and technology driven labor markets.⁷⁸ Human resources and technical capacities of public employment services are particularly limited; as the main institutions involved, they are characterized by inconsistency, lack of transparency, and poor cross-sectoral coordination.⁷⁹

One of the main factors that encourage emigration from Kosovo remains the low education and health level. According to the Kosovo Country Report for 2023 of the European Commission, the education system remains one of the most underdeveloped in Kosovo.⁸⁰ Education quality is low, which is also reflected in the latest results of the PISA Test of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), where Kosovo appears among the bottom ranked countries on the list (in 78th place out of 80 participating countries).⁸¹ On the other hand, according to the same report, the serious state of public health care, the lowest life expectancy in the region, child mortality, chronic disease mortality, lack of adequate equipment, long waiting lists, and lack of investment in health are some of the factors that aggravate the state of public health in Kosovo. These issues, undoubtedly, affect citizens' discouragement to stay in the country.

The lack of emigration data is one of the factors that deters quality emigration policy formulation. Western Balkan countries, including Kosovo, lack reliable, accessible, and systematic data on emigrant volume, characteristics, age, or skill breakdown. Such data are prerequisites for a comprehensive policy process.⁸²

73 Mary, R, [President of Ireland: Speech, February 1995](#).

74 Alida, V. [Luck like the Irish: How emigration can be good for the Western Balkans?](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019

75 World Bank Group and the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, [Western Balkans Labor Market Trends](#), 2020

76 Ibid.

77 Albania has adopted a National Strategy for Migration Governance and a National Diaspora Strategy for 2018-2024. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a policy on cooperation with the diaspora was adopted in 2017. North Macedonia adopted its first Brain Drain Strategy in 2013 and two migration resolutions in 2015 and 2017. Serbia in 2012 announced the Economic Migration Strategy 2021-2027 to support return and circular migration. Kosovo adopted the Diaspora Law in 2011 and the Diaspora Strategy 2014-2017 to combat irregular migration to the EU. Montenegro adopted the 2017-2020 Strategy for Integrated Migration Management and the Law on Cooperation with the Diaspora in 2018. Valeska, E. et al., [Emigration from the Western Balkans](#), Aspen Institute Germany, 2021.

78 World Bank Group and the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, [Western Balkans Labor Market Trends](#), 2020

79 Regional Cooperation Council, [Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans](#), 2021.

80 OECD, [2022 PISA Results](#).

81 Ibid.

82 Icoski, Marjan. [Toward a New Youth Brain-drain Paradigm in the Western Balkans](#), GMF, 2022.

Conclusions and recommendations

Emigration from the Western Balkans to the developed countries of the European Union is also affecting Kosovo to a substantial extent. Although Kosovo was the only country in the region limited in terms of free mobility in the Schengen area until recently, the reforms to attract immigrants from EU countries have caused increased large emigration flows from Kosovo, especially from 2018 onwards. Visa liberalization found Kosovo in a different dynamic than other states in the region at the time they were offered free movement into the EU. Kosovo's labor market continues to be challenged by workforce shortfalls, which are expected to deepen further with visa liberalization.

Research findings of the GAP Institute's public opinion survey show that 27.9% of the population have plans to emigrate from Kosovo in the first quarter of 2024. The majority of aspiring migrants are young people, motivated by the expectations of higher wages and better working conditions in the destination countries. Sectors expected to be most affected by emigration are construction, hospitality, and transportation, as well as wholesale and retail trade. Between 2012 and 2022, 338,068 citizens emigrated from Kosovo. Whereas, just looking at the latest 2022 data, 41,553 people emigrated from Kosovo. At the same time, the active workforce has decreased by 21,571 people while the inactive workforce has also decreased by 14,698 compared to the previous year. Foreign nationals who immigrate to Kosovo for employment purposes replace only a small portion of the workforce that is no longer part of the labor market.

Addressing the issue of emigration from Kosovo requires addressing a series of economic, political, and social factors that contribute to people leaving the country. Considering that the very nature of emigration control infringes on individuals' freedom of movement, the development of emigration policies should be treated with due importance and care. Through this report, GAP Institute encourages the Kosovo Government to work on the following:

- » Implementation of policies and initiatives that stimulate economic growth and job creation. This may include supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, attracting foreign investment, and promoting entrepreneurship.
- » Skills development such as investing in education and vocational training programs to enhance the skills of the workforce and tailor them to the demands of the labor market;
- » Improve health care and education systems to raise citizens' quality of life;
- » Diaspora programs that encourage the connection of citizens in Kosovo with the Kosovo diaspora to promote their involvement in the country's development. This can lead to the creation of programs that allow the diaspora to contribute to economic and social projects.
- » Encourage the development of technology and innovation. Focusing on these areas can attract a younger, tech-savvy workforce and create new opportunities.
- » Strategic planning and the development of long-term plans that address emigration root causes and provide a roadmap for sustainable development.
- » Collection of systematic data on emigrant volume, age, skills, and other characteristics, so that labor market needs forecasts are as accurate as possible.

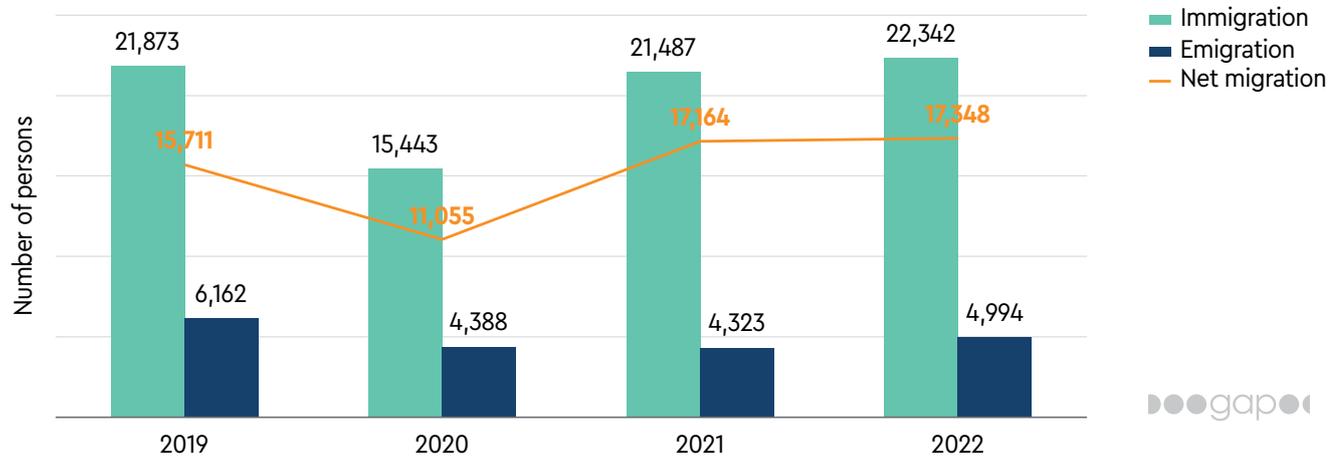
Appendices

Table 3. Net migration of Kosovans to some of the main EU destinations (2019 – 2022)

	Germany	Switzerland	Austria	Belgium	Croatia
2022	17,348	1,735	751	349	912
2021	17,164	1,762	559	308	110
2020	11,055	1,448	308	232	787
2019	15,711	1,734	602	251	3,038

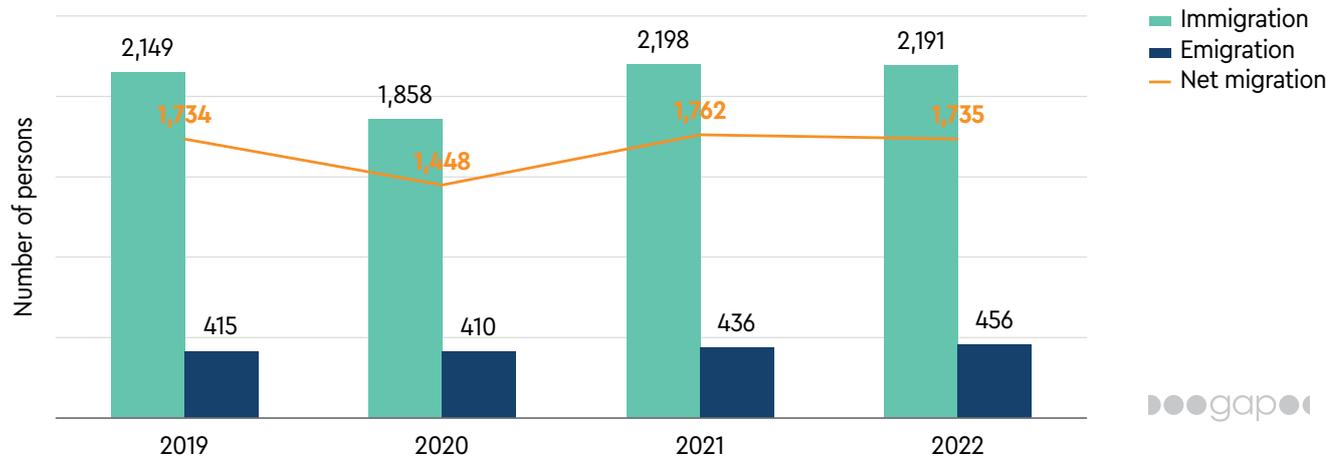
Source: National Statistical Offices of above listed countries

Figure 15. Migrimi i Kosovarëve në Gjermani (2019–2022)

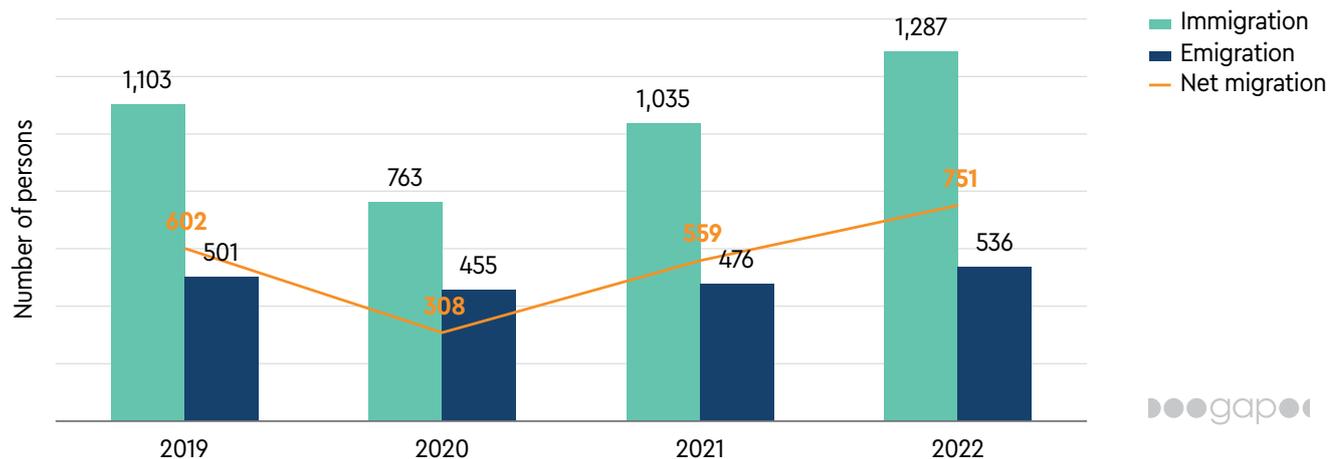


Source: German Federal Statistical Office

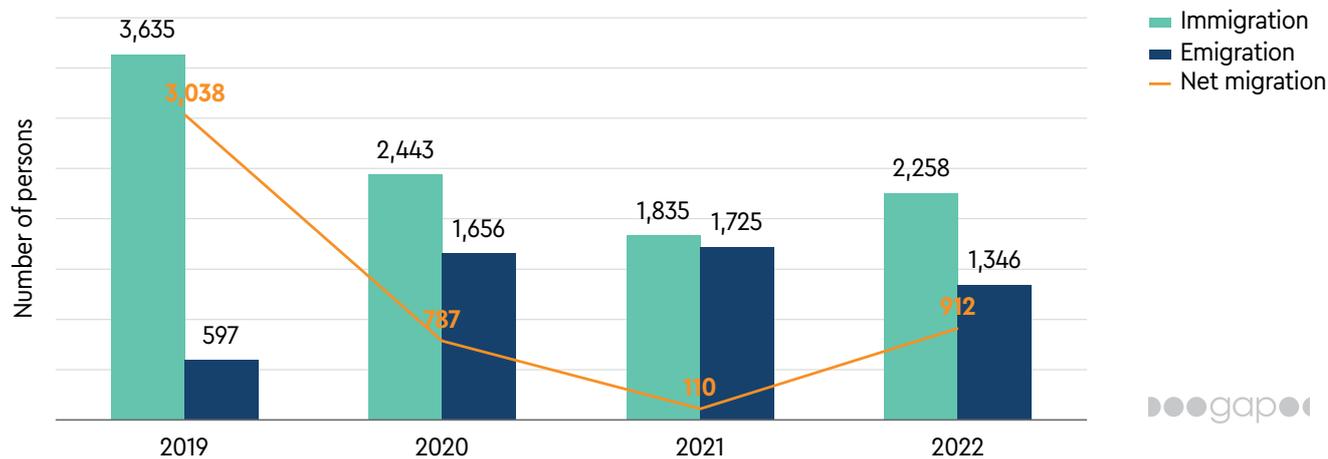
Figure 16. Migration of Kosovans to Switzerland (2019–2022)



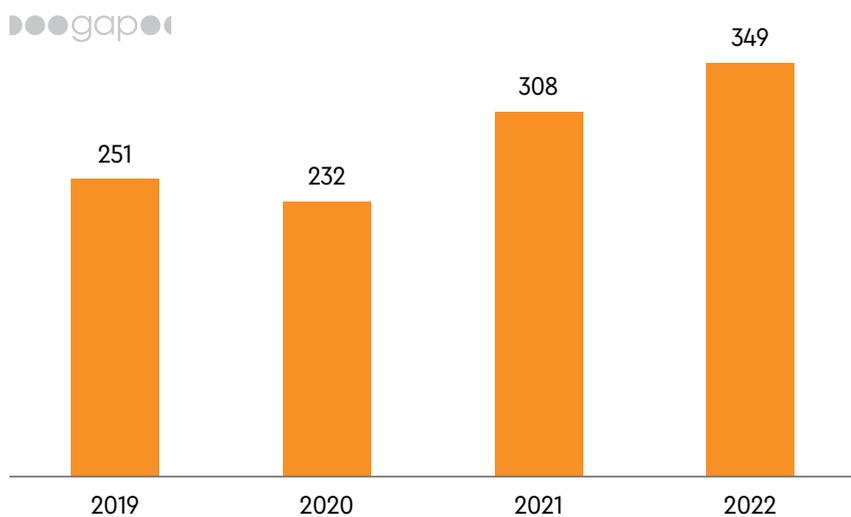
Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office

Figure 17. Migration of Kosovans to Austria (2019–2022)

Source: Austrian Federal Statistical Office

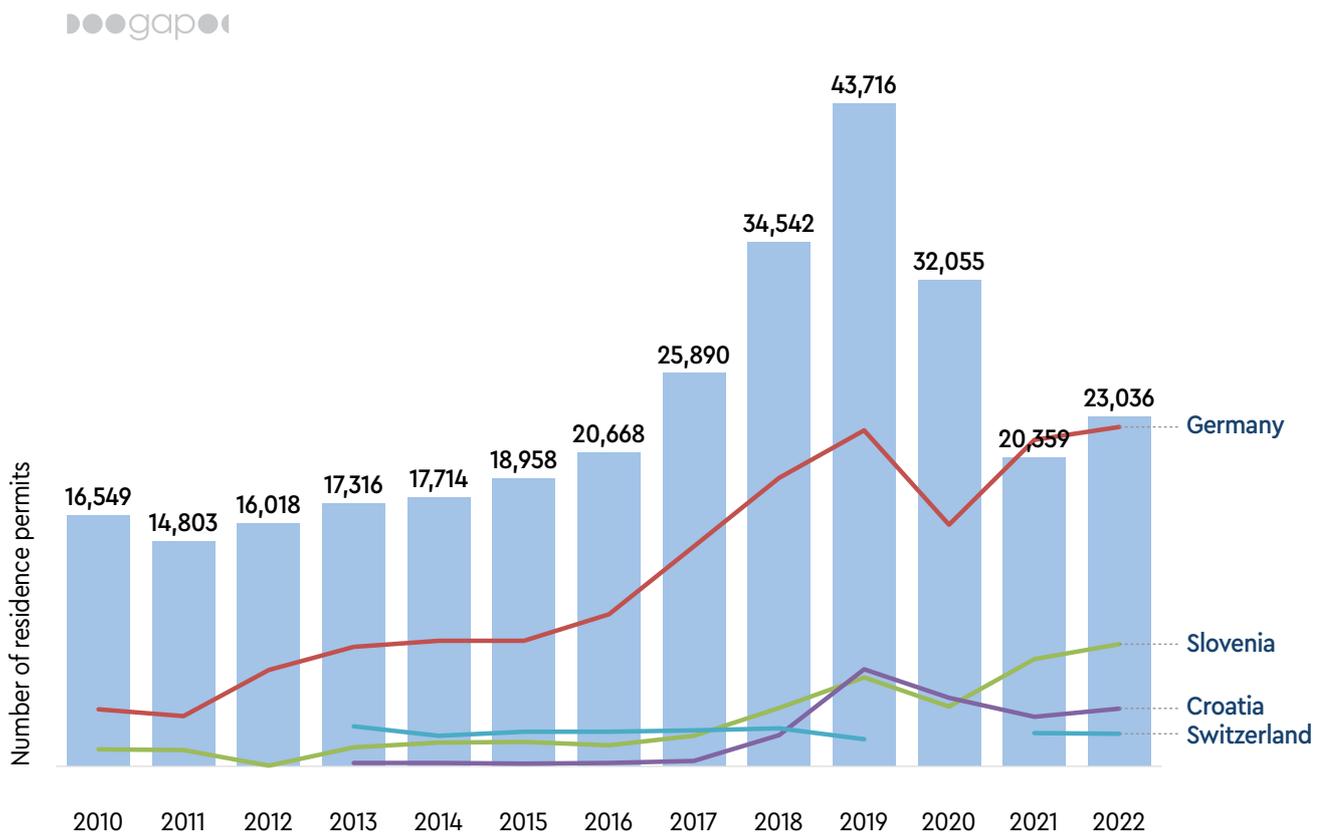
Figure 18. Migration of Kosovans to Croatia (2019–2022)

Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics

Figure 19. Net Migration of Kosovans to Belgium (2019–2022)

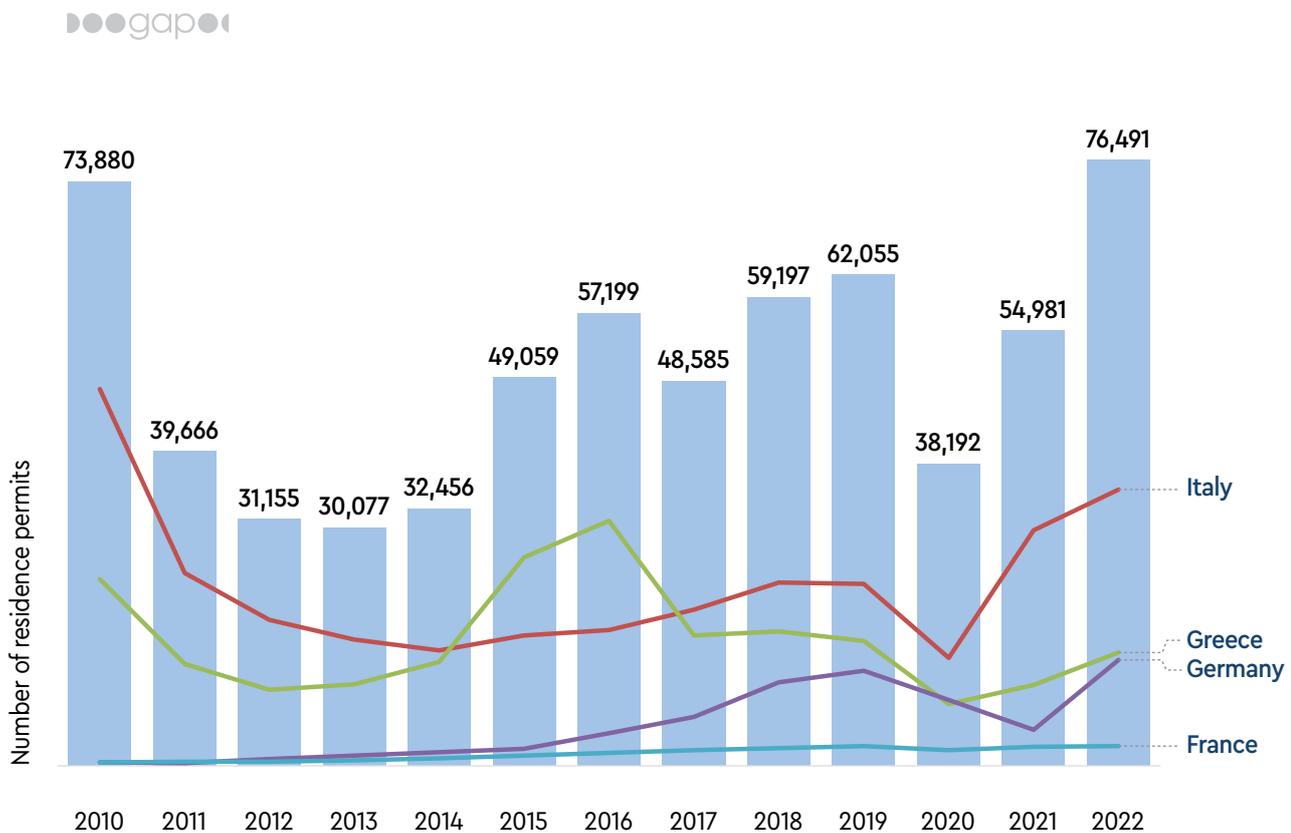
Source: Belgian Statistical Office

Figure 20. First permits in the EU for Kosovo citizens



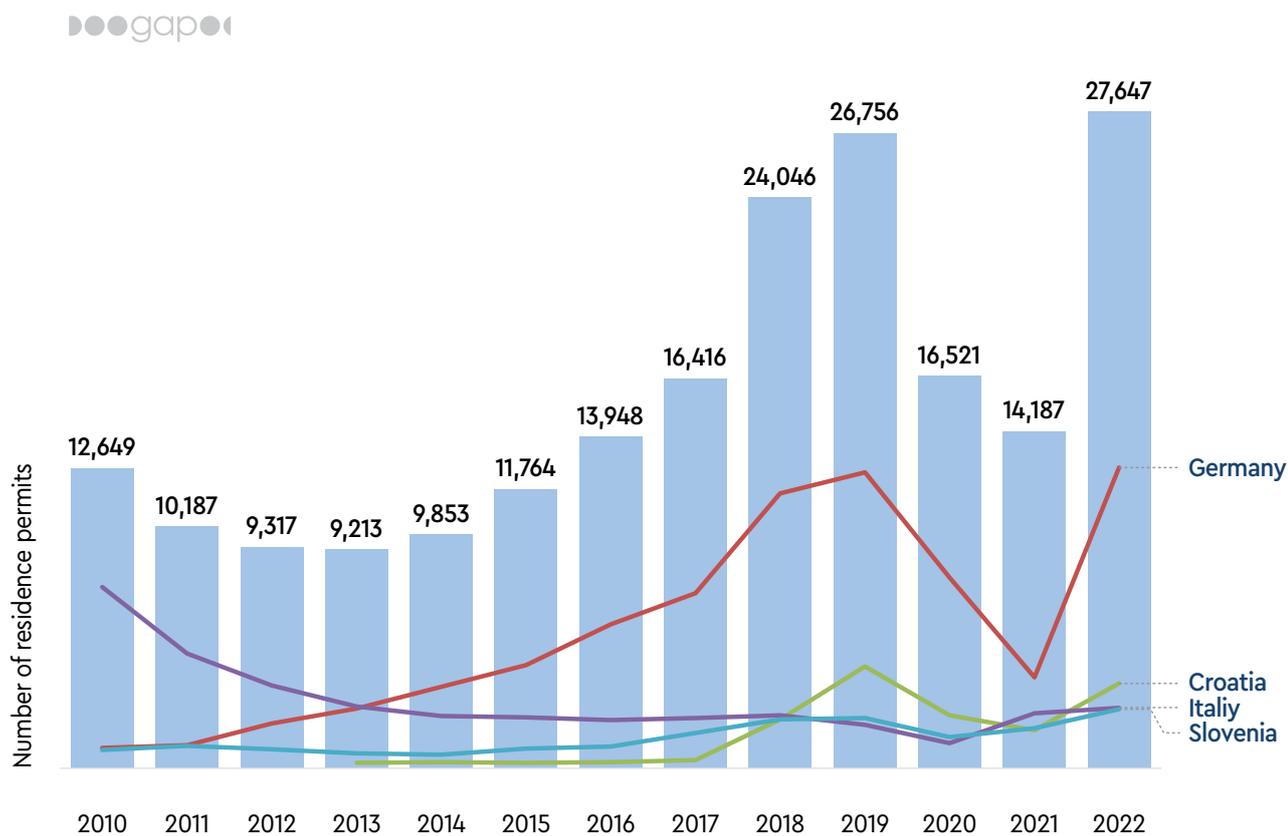
Source: Eurostat

Figure 21. First permits in the EU for Albania citizens



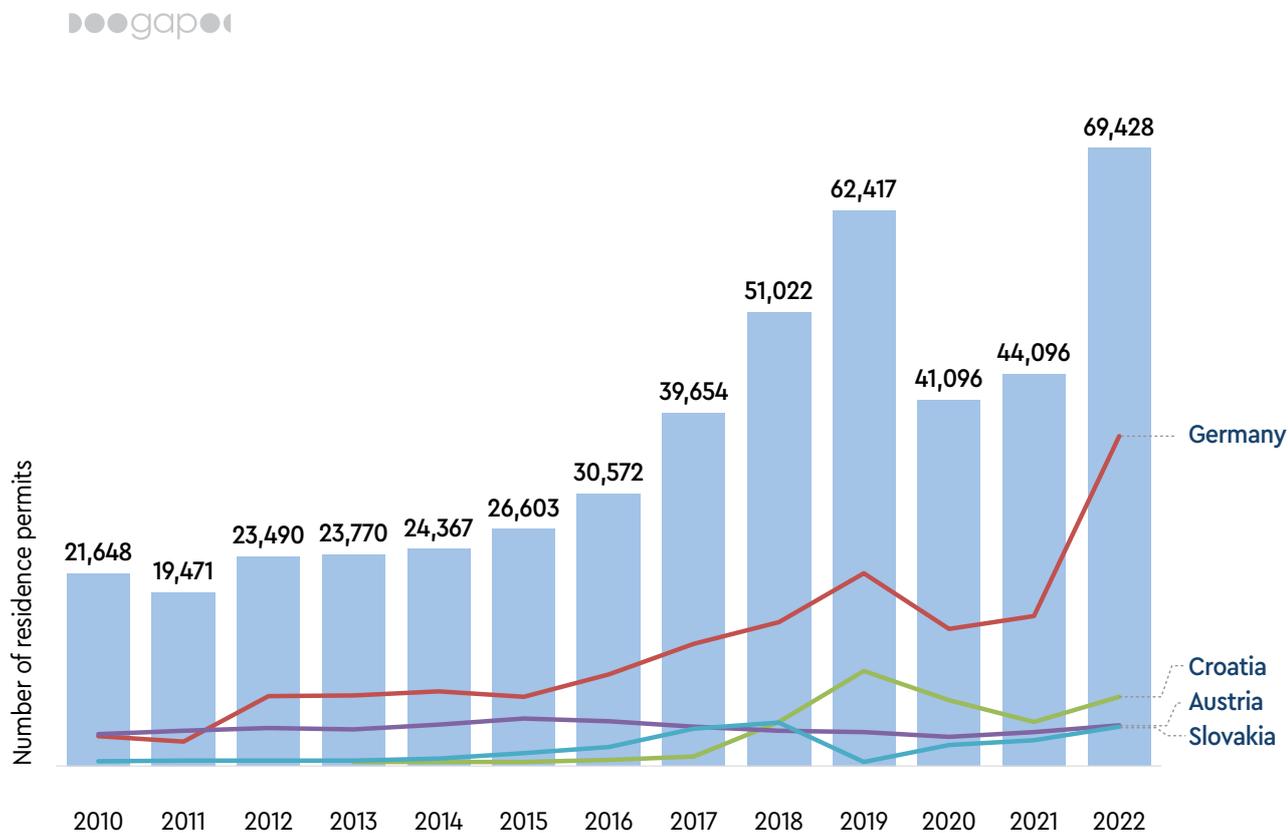
Source: Eurostat

Figure 22. First permits in the EU for North Macedonia citizens

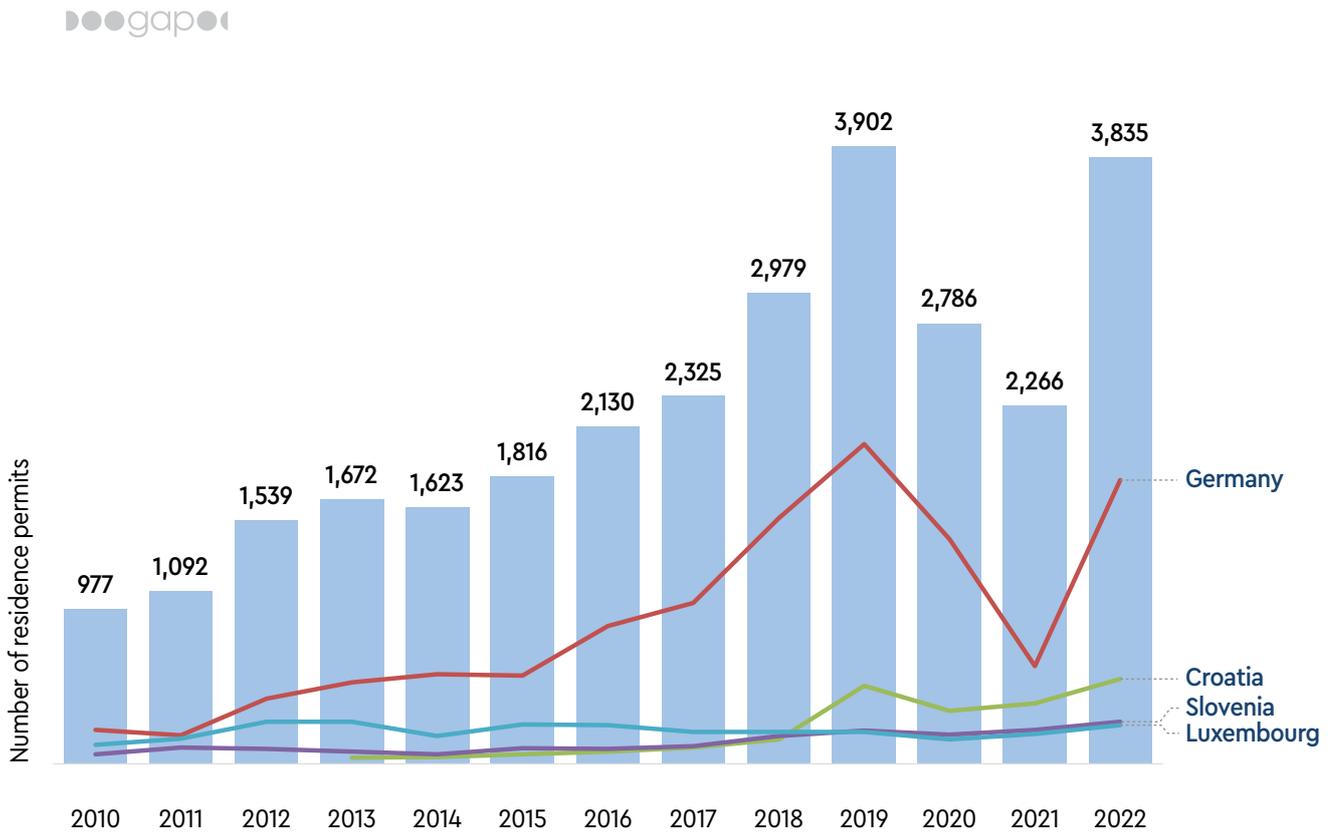


Source: Eurostat

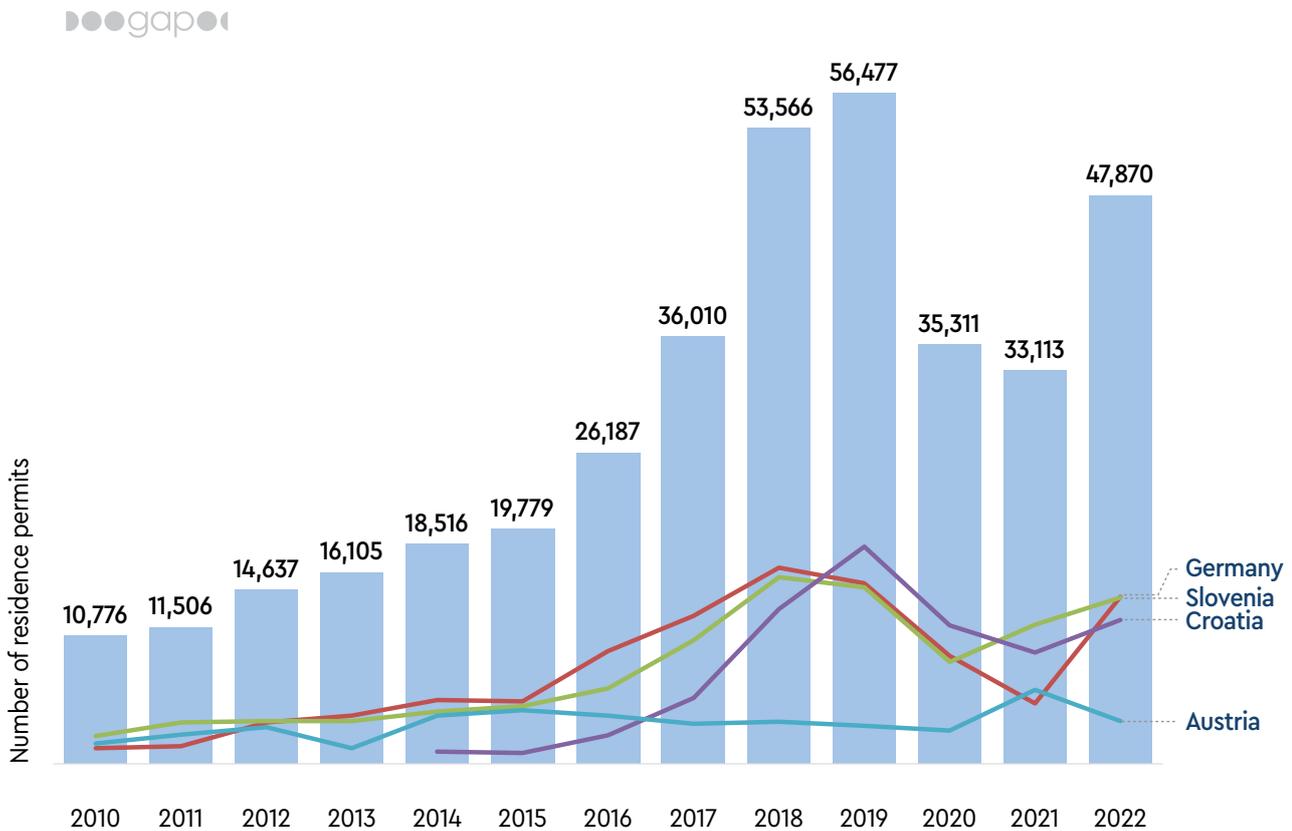
Figure 23. First permits in the EU for Serbia citizens



Source: Eurostat

Figure 24. First permits in the EU for Montenegro citizens

Source: Eurostat

Figure 25. First permits in the EU for North Macedonia citizens

Source: Eurostat

Table 4. Residence permits for foreign nationals in Kosovo (2022)

2022	Total	Family Reunion	Employment	Education	Humanitarian	Other
Total	6,244	2,740	2,979	400	78	47
Albania	1,789	1,050	691	28	0	28
Serbia	1,297	627	469	193	0	8
Turkey	1,197	297	742	125	33	0
North Macedonia	643	375	250	15	0	3
USA	259	51	192	16	0	0
Montenegro	111	57	41	12	0	0
Germany	103	37	55	1	0	1
Great Britain	54	22	32	0	0	0
Philippines	53	3	50	0	0	0
Switzerland	50	32	18	0	0	0
Italy	46	7	38	1	0	0
Pakistan	43	3	38	2	0	0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	36	14	21	1	0	0
France	36	8	25	3	0	0
Thailand	27	0	27	0	0	0
Jordan	24	1	23	0	0	0
Syria	24	1	23	0	12	0
China	21	2	19	0	0	0
Other	431	153	225	3	33	7

Source: Ministry of Interior

Table 5. Residence permits for foreign nationals (2021)

2021	Total	Family Reunion	Employment	Education	Humanitarian	Other
Total	4,279	1,861	2,121	226	51	20
Albania	1,203	638	543	16	0	6
Serbia	936	455	339	137	15	0
Turkey	692	195	431	46	15	5
North Macedonia	459	268	184	7	0	0
USA	167	37	130	0	0	0
Montenegro	90	51	25	14	0	0
Germany	55	21	33	0	0	1
Philippines	40	2	38	0	0	0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	39	13	26	0	0	0
Great Britain	39	11	28	0	0	0
Italy	38	4	34	0	0	0
Switzerland	33	21	12	0	0	0
China	27	1	26	0	0	0
Pakistani	27	2	23	2	0	0
Syria	24	8	0	0	16	0
Croatia	22	4	18	0	0	0
France	21	3	18	0	0	0
India	19	3	16	0	0	0
Other	348	124	197	4	5	8

Source: Ministry of Interior

GAP Institute is a Think Tank established in October 2007 in Kosovo. GAP's main goal is to attract professionals to create an environment of professional development and research, as seen in similar institutions in Western countries. This also provides Kosovars with opportunities to research, develop and implement projects in order to advance the Kosovo society. Priority for this Institute is the mobilization of professionals to address the country's economic, political and social challenges. GAP's main goals are to fill the gaps between government and citizens, and between problems and solutions.

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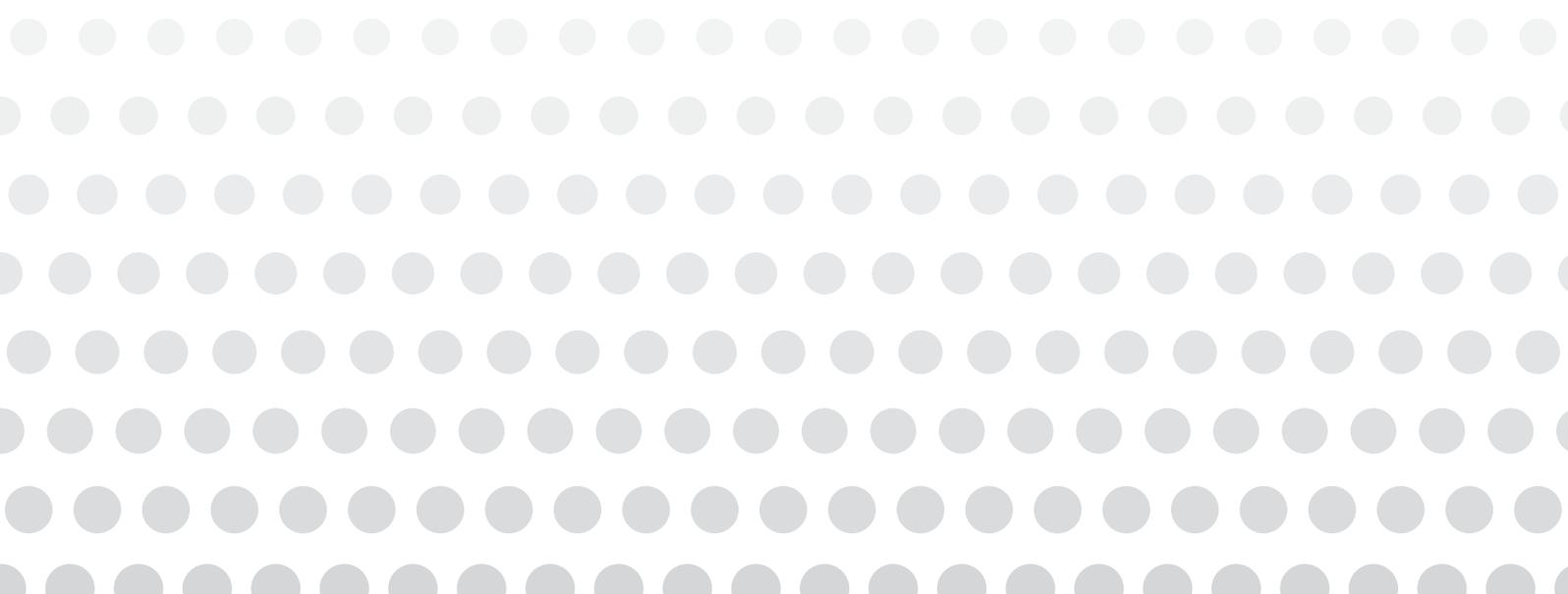
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**Propensity to emigrate from Kosovo
following visa liberalization:
implications for the workforce**