

## WESTERN BALKANS BETWEEN ACADEMIC MOBILITY, BRAIN GAIN, AND CIRCULAR MIGRATION

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**Abstract.** *Migration due to conflicts, economic challenges, and long transition has influenced demographic changes in Kosovo and other countries of the Western Balkans. In recent years, there has also been an increasing trend of migration of the qualified labour force from the Western Balkans to EU countries. The objective of this study is to explore the connection between academic exchange, circular migration, and subsequent migration, and to examine brain drain as a consequence of this phenomenon. The specific focus will also be on circular migration driven by EU exchange programs and other forms of academic mobility. Research methods: this paper will be focused on Kosovo; therefore, for the research analysis, the qualitative research methods will be applied, including interviews with respondents in Kosovo (n-5), analysing five variables, such as family, cultural identity, affiliation, social affirmation, and finally, institutional barriers for integration in foreign countries. Results: findings indicated that family ties, career opportunities, and social recognition are the most significant factors that influence the return of people from abroad after their educational activities abroad. In addition, other factors, such as cultural identity and barriers abroad, are estimated to be less important. Conclusions: Kosovo is facing double challenges. First, from one point of view, academic exchange at EU universities and other mobility, apart from its positive impact, have increased the probability of brain drain, as well as of circular migration. From another perspective, the country's low economic development and high unemployment have increased the likelihood that local experts and professionals will seek opportunities abroad.*

**Keywords:** *migration, integration, EU programs, exchange, circular migration, universities, reforms.*

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** *migracija, integracija, ES programos, mainai, cirkuliacinė migracija, universitetai, reformos.*

## Introduction

Migration from the Western Balkan countries is an old phenomenon derived from the political situation during the 1990's, followed by a long transition period, and economic uncertainties in these countries after the 2000s. Most of the studies analysed the migration trends and remittances for the countries of the Western Balkans, including Kosovo.

The research objective of this paper is to analyze the factors influencing the brain gain of young individuals who studied abroad, followed by a circular migration analysis and an examination of EU programs. Previous studies in Albania and Kosovo have shown that this trend will have an effect not only on demographic trends but also on public health and labour productivity in countries of the Western Balkans (Kacani et al, 2024). Additionally, Petreska et al. (2025) pointed out that the Western Balkans are experiencing a significant brain drain, driven by the emigration of highly educated young individuals in search of better opportunities abroad.

As the countries of the Western Balkans are part of the EU agenda, the EU has continuously supported these countries due to their limited administrative, human, and financial resources. The EU, with its policies and strategies, created opportunities for the prosperity and sustainability of educational institutions, both for member states and countries within the enlargement process. Nevertheless, cooperation within higher education institutions (HEIs) did not begin only after the end of the war in Kosovo, as academic links and collaborations had existed earlier. A considerable share of professors pursued their studies in Croatia, now a member of the European Union, as well as in other countries. Studies undertaken abroad have influenced various domains, as evidenced by Wang et al. (2024), who find that they contribute to firm growth, industrial innovation, higher education, research, etc. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to connect the impact of various EU funds, respectively educational programs, on increasing the exchange of highly skilled educated people towards EU universities and consequently increasing the circular migration trend.

Previous experience has shown that EU funds have a positive impact on increasing the capacity of human resources in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), and additionally support local institutions with adequate absorption capabilities (Ajdarpašić and Qorraj 2020). Apart from traditional migration or low-skilled migrants, there is recent evidence of a high-skilled labor force, which poses a challenge for the Western Balkan countries, as these countries lack a skilled workforce. Previous studies analysed migration intentions, respectively, brain drain based on push and pull factors of migration with a specific focus on healthcare professionals in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo.

Brain drain is related to poor employment conditions for the highly educated, as in numerous fields of study, there's a surfeit of graduates who also have difficulty finding suitable jobs. Or there's a mismatch between the expertise demanded in the labour request and the know-how acquired at university, as advanced education programs are not better aligned with and more focused on labour request needs, with, for example, near cooperation between education institutions and employers. This also occurs due to the lack of industrial development, which limits employment opportunities for highly educated individuals primarily to teaching positions within universities. Many countries and local institutions in the Western Balkan countries applied different policies to support the Brain Gain process. In 2013, Kosovo launched a campaign entitled "*You are Part of the Homeland*", which has been interpreted as a «rebranding» of Brain Drain and which registered 400,000 diaspora members – an important first step in tackling the issue.

This article is structured into the following sections. First presents a literature review on brain gain, circular migration, and academic mobility in the Western Balkans, respectively, in Kosovo. Additionally, in the second section, the paper will offer an overview of the methodology applied. The third section offers results and findings. The fourth section concludes with the paper's main recommendations, followed by the references.

Literature Review

Despite many demographic and social challenges, migration was one of the most important sources of financial support for the Western Balkans, respectively, Kosovo, especially during the 1990s, with special focus on: Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) support, followed by support of economic and social welfare for citizens. According to Teichler (2015), early migration has led, in recent years, to the emergence of mobility driven by the parental generation. Apart from the challenges and negative effects of migration, from 1991 to 1999, the education system in Kosovo operated in a parallel system; therefore, all educational activities in Kosovo were financed mainly by the Kosovar diaspora (Qorraj, G., Krasniqi, B., and Jusufi, G., 2022). The Western Balkan countries also benefit from other revenues from their diaspora communities, which maintain close ties to their home for several generations. The study performed in 2012, based on UNDP interviews, found that more than 90 percent of Kosovo emigrants visit the country at least once per year, staying for between two weeks and a month, while spending an average of €2,352. Even nowadays, it is evidenced that migration is a significant source of finances for Kosovo, including a higher amount of remittances, around 1 billion, 350 million, according to the Agency of Statistics of Kosovo, 2024, ASK. In addition to remittances, the diaspora also contributes to foreign direct investment (FDI) (CBK, 2025). Diaspora investments play a significant role in economic development; moreover, Gashi and Adnett (2015) find that such investments also increase the likelihood of return migration to Kosovo. The factors influencing migration are numerous and vary across specific sectors. Furthermore, Kacani et al.2024) analysed in their studies intentions to migrate and work abroad, as well as to identify the socio-demographic factors that act as the main drivers behind these intentions, by distributing a sample of 300 nursing students from various colleges and nursing departments in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo in 2022. See Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for emigration

| Category                                                         |             | Albania    | Bosnia<br>Herzegovina | Kosovo     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Reasons for emigration                                           | Yes / No    | Percentage | Percentage            | Percentage |
| Higher salary                                                    | Yes         | 92%        | 96%                   | 93%        |
|                                                                  | No          | 8%         | 3%                    | 5%         |
|                                                                  | No response | 0%         | 1%                    | 2%         |
| Better working conditions                                        | Yes         | 87%        | 95%                   | 89%        |
|                                                                  | No          | 13%        | 4%                    | 6%         |
|                                                                  | No response | 0%         | 1%                    | 5%         |
| Better opportunities for professional<br>development             | Yes         | 82%        | 88%                   | 80%        |
|                                                                  | No          | 17%        | 11%                   | 18%        |
|                                                                  | No response | 1%         | 1%                    | 2%         |
| Political uncertainty and corruption in<br>the country of origin | Yes         | 78%        | 82%                   | 91%        |
|                                                                  | No          | 21%        | 16%                   | 6%         |
|                                                                  | No response | 1%         | 2%                    | 3%         |

Source: Cost-Benefit of Academic Mobility, Brain Drain and Migration: Western Balkans at a Crossroad. HSM – Human Systems Management, 2025. Vol 44, 1: 143 – 156.

Migration, particularly from the healthcare sector, largely involves members of the workforce who have completed their studies primarily in their countries of origin. On the contrary, recent thematic literature emphasizes the problem of ‘brain drain’ – emigration to the EU of the young and highly educated/skilled. Many fear the significant negative implications of brain drain for local development (Koyama, 2022; Parker et al., 2022; Topalović and Hampel, 2023). Evidence of this problem has already been found in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo (Leitner, 2021). Using a new cohort approach, the study by Leitner confirmed that it is mostly the young – those in their early to mid-20s and early 30s – who move abroad. There is also labor mobility in the healthcare sector from EU countries to other destinations, while the resulting gaps are partially filled by workers from the Western Balkans. However, the shortages in these countries cannot be fully compensated by labor from elsewhere, due in part to working conditions as well as wage levels.

What about the trend of migration and movements after the year 2000? Migration after the year 2000 it was characterized by other specific challenges, such as: change of the migrants’ structure, respectively from the migrants with a low level of education to migrants with a superior level of education and expertise (Leitner S, 2021, Vienna Institute). Furthermore, a study of UNDP in 2024 reports that international migration is a politicized process, as is offering migration opportunities and better working conditions for experts in Information Technology, the health sector, and research activities; therefore, these countries are benefiting from these qualified experts. Due to restrictions on free movement, other reasons for migration have been cited, such as family reunification, to attain better living conditions. Other studies performed for the Western Balkans have confirmed the correlation between migration, brain drain, and education activities and technology transfer (Munk, MD, Nikolka T, and Poutvaara P, 2022). Other studies report that migrants with higher levels of education are more likely to return to their home country when the labor market stabilizes or when new job opportunities are created. Similar findings are reported by Gashi and Adnett (2015), who show that migrants with higher education or additional training are more likely to return, as are those citizens who maintain strong family ties.

In addition, circular migration is not a new phenomenon, as in West Africa, East Africa, and Indonesia, circular migration was an important form of labor mobility in the second half of the twentieth century (Arthur 1991; Elkan 1967; Hugo 1982). Circular migration is often distinguished from so-called “return” migration, characterized by a single round trip after a long period of absence, and from “temporary” migration, which refers, where appropriate, to a single displacement of shorter duration. There is a correlation between these three phenomena, since, although they differ in terms of recurrence and absence times, all of them are characterized by the directionality of the migratory phenomenon they represent. The Commission, Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU proposed a definition of circular migration: *“Circular migration could be understood as the temporary, legal movement of people between one or more member states and particular third countries, whereby third country nationals take up legal employment opportunities in the EU or persons legally residing in the EU go to their country of origin.”*

Furthermore, Pastore (2008) proposes in his study the minimum and maximum periods or terms for which a migration can be considered circular (Table 2). Based on this scheme, we can speak of circular migration in the case of those stays that range from a minimum of three months to a maximum of five years. Suppose the stay is less than three months, and following the

Table 2. Length of stay period

| Duration               | Type of Mobility                         |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Under 3 months         | Short-term mobility                      |
| Between 6 and 9 months | Seasonal Migration (Circular Migration)  |
| Under 5 years          | Temporary Migration (Circular Migration) |
| Over 5 years           | Long-term Mobility                       |

Source: Pastore, 2008.

terminology provided by the European Union to define free movement within the Schengen area. In that case, it is preferable to speak of a short-term mobility period.

Circular migration also plays a role in stopping the brain drain from the countries of origin because the migrants will return with the experience they can use at home. Circular migration could, in this way, contribute to a stabilization of the neighbourhood of the EU, although these effects must not be overestimated, Bosman (2020). Additionally, Kelo and Wächter (2004), by addressing the circular migration, stress that this type of migrants usually moves voluntarily and “since their qualifications and skills are in demand in the destination country (and increasingly immigration policies tend to attract them), the overwhelming majority of them are legal immigrants”.

Regarding mobility, there are various distinctions and definitions of mobility, as highlighted by Teichler (2015). One of his categorizations is vertical and horizontal mobility. Vertical mobility refers to studying in countries that are more developed compared to the country of origin, whereas horizontal mobility involves moving to countries with a similar level of development. In the context of the Western Balkan countries, particularly Kosovo, vertical mobility predominates. Returning from studies abroad impacts two important aspects: first, the dissemination of learned methods and knowledge, which increases productivity in the home country; and second, the creation of networks and the facilitation of application processes for new applicants. To enhance and facilitate circular mobility, Hugo (2013) emphasizes the need to develop policies combining circular and permanent migration, reduce migration costs, and enable mobility.

In addition, several authors addressed the impact of labour mobility as it helps to solve problems related to skill gaps and labour shortages, LJanavičiūtė, A. Telešienė and J. Barynienė (2017). From an economic point of view, it helps to deal with unemployment disparities between sectors and distribute efficient human resources. Incoming workers benefit the local economy by helping to deal with labour market problems. It also boosts competitiveness and helps to widen the range of services. Labour mobility for sending countries brings both disadvantages and advantages. Home countries suffer from brain drain and skill shortages in specific sectors. Highly qualified workers get high wages, pay more taxes, and are less dependent on social benefits; their integration is easier.

### Academic Mobility, European Programs, and Circular Migration

The EU, through its research and scientific programs, has supported the Western Balkan countries in the process of research, science, and academic exchange, which activities have increased the capacity building of higher educational institutions in these countries, but also contributed indirectly to brain drain and circular migration. Academic mobility is viewed as an important form of development for higher education institutions, as well as for the societal effects it generates, particularly in transition countries such as those in the Western Balkans, where it supports democratization and facilitates their path toward the European Union. Developments since the beginning of the millennium have enabled various forms of mobility. Teichler (2015) emphasizes that the main forms include physical mobility, recognition of study achievements across borders, other modes of knowledge transfer, internationalization in the content of higher education, and international orientations and attitudes. Academic mobility of researchers is regarded as one of the most effective integration approaches for the cooperation of Western Balkans researchers with their European counterparts. The integrative power of mobility was prominently featured in the processes of forming the European Research Area (European Commission, 2020a). The Western Balkan countries, respectively Universities, since the year 2000, have intensively benefited from the different EU programs, initially from the Tempus Program, followed by Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, and recently Horizon Europe. Horizon 2020 is considered the biggest project on research and innovation, with almost €80 billion of funding available for 2014–2020, while for the period 2021–2021 with around 100 billion euros. This program aims to support sustainable and inclusive economic growth and is a useful instrument for supporting research, innovation, knowledge, and growth, especially for countries with

limited financial capabilities. Compared to other EU programmes, Horizon 2020, followed by Horizon Europe, embraces all existing EU research and innovation funding, including the Framework Programme for Research (FP7), the innovation-related activities of the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (Ajdarpašić and Qorraj 2019). According to the EU Commission Report (2025), the EU is supporting Kosovo's participation in programmes such as Erasmus+, the Single Market Programme, the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, Creative Europe, the Customs programme, the Fiscalis programme, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, Programme for Employment and Social Innovation, and the Justice programme. However, Kosovo's participation in the EU framework programme for research and innovation remains low. Since the launch of Horizon Europe in 2021, Kosovo has submitted 171 project applications, of which 15 were successful, amounting to EUR 1.59 million in funding, resulting in a success rate of 9.36%. A specific and very important aspect within Europe's R&D programme Horizon 2020, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) provide several sub-instruments that support structured researcher mobility: Cofunding of regional, national, and international programmes that finance fellowships involving mobility to or from another country (COFUND). It offers additional funding to regional, national, and international programmes for research training and career development. The scheme can support doctoral and fellowship programmes. Individual Fellowships support the mobility of researchers within and beyond Europe, attracting the best foreign researchers to work in the EU.

The importance of these programs was initially influenced by the reforms implemented under the Bologna Process, based on the Bologna Declaration, which also required profound institutional reforms that Western Balkan countries committed to fulfilling. Consequently, academic mobility became essential for the further development of curricula and, subsequently, for the academic and scientific advancement of staff primarily involved in higher education. Table 3 shows the staff mobility of Kosovo researchers through the CEEPUS, Erasmus+, and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Programs.

**Table 3.** *Mobility of academic staff and students at EU programs 2005/2006 until 2019/2020)*

| Programmes | CEEPUS | Erasmus+ | Marie Skłodowska Curie |
|------------|--------|----------|------------------------|
| Number     | 105    | 2771     | 4                      |

Source: European Commission, *Researchers' Mobility in the Western Balkans*, 2021.

Furthermore, various EU programs, together with government initiatives, have enabled Kosovans to pursue studies primarily at the master's level, often with the obligation to return to Kosovo to serve in institutions for a specified period. However, in many cases, employment opportunities were not available despite the completion of their studies, and some returned to positions that did not correspond to their qualifications. In certain instances, after fulfilling the mandatory service period, individuals returned to the countries where they had studied or moved to another EU country. In the early 2000s, study programs attended by Kosovan students were primarily conducted, mainly in the United Kingdom and the US. Over time, these programs expanded to other EU countries.

### Research Objective

Several authors applied different variables to address the emigration process. According to T. Bryer. et al (2020), and based on their review of the literature, they identified fifteen categories of non-economic factors that have been found to contribute to decisions to emigrate or to remain. Nine categories of variables, as derived from the literature, were identified for testing in a nationwide survey in Lithuania. These are: (1) Quality of Services, including distinct sub-categories of Education, Culture and Sport, Safety and

Security, and Health and Social, (2) Quality of Working Life (Job Related), (3) Confidence in the Future, (4) Quality of Society (Freedom and Tolerance), and (5) Quality of Civic Life (Civic and Corruption). Additionally, pull factors include personal relationships, Family aspiration, and international experience. The objective of this research is to analyse migration with a specific focus on circular migration, which is interlinked with EU Programs and academic exchange. The idea is to analyse the most significant factors supporting transition from academic exchange to possible migration or circular migration for these categories, specifically for the respondents who performed their studies and academic activities after the year 2000.

The main questions are as follows:

- Q1. How important were *family ties* (parents, children, relatives) in your decision to return?
- Q2. To what extent did *cultural identity and sense of belonging* influence your decision?
- Q3. Did *career or professional opportunities available in your country* affect your return decision?
- Q4. To what extent did *social status or recognition at home* motivate your decision?
- Q5. Was the *difficulty of settlement abroad* (visa restrictions, limited career, discrimination, etc.) a factor in your return?

Methodology

The research has applied a qualitative research methodology based on interviews with 5 respondents n-5. The respondents are current professionals who studied abroad mainly in the United Kingdom and European Union countries. These respondents supported by different educational programs pursued bachelor's, master's, and PhD studies in these countries. Most of these categories performed many exchange mobilities during the last decades. The analysis includes the period from 2000 to 2020. After their studies, they came back to their homeland, working mainly in academia, government institutions, and other local institutions.

Results

In general, data analysis generated the following results; therefore, findings are sufficiently significant to be presented in this study. The objective is to present those findings applicable to the research objectives.

Table 4. Factors affecting circular mobility

| Question (Reason for Return)                                                | Likert Scale (1-5)                      | Response (Narrative Justification)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Family ties (spouse, children, relatives) influenced my decision to return. | 1 = Not important<br>5 = Very important | 5 – Family has always been one of the strongest motivations behind my decision to return to Kosovo. During my studies in Vienna and my professional engagements in the United States (IMF) and other international institutions (Respondent1).<br>5 – The close connection with my family and relatives was one of the main objectives (Respondent 2).<br>5 – Close relationship with family and my relatives (Respondent 3).<br>5 – Family relationship and need to support them was one of the core aims of my return (Respondent 4).<br>5.- A close relationship with my parents, relatives, and my children was one of the objectives to return to Kosovo (Respondent 5) |

| Question (Reason for Return)                                                      | Likert Scale (1–5) | Response (Narrative Justification)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cultural identity and sense of belonging motivated me to return.</b>           | 1 → 5              | <p>5 – Even though I spent many years studying and working abroad, my identity and roots remained in Kosovo. I consider culture, language, and traditions to be essential parts of who I am. Transition (R1).</p> <p>4 – Apart from my integration into the cultural life of the, my cultural life in the homeland was very crucial (R2).</p> <p>3– Language, culture, and other cultural issues are very important but not crucial (R3).</p> <p>1 – There were few cultural barriers in the EU countries, as we were integrated very well (R4)</p> <p>2- The feeling about identity and culture is relatively important (R5)</p>           |
| <b>Career opportunities in my home country encouraged my return.</b>              | 1 → 5              | <p>5 – While professional opportunities abroad were significant, the unique chance to contribute to Kosovo's academic and institutional development was decisive. master's and PhD levels (R1).</p> <p>5 – Approach to political life in Kosovo and involvement in the University research (R2).</p> <p>5- Contribution to the academic life and connection with the University was the main objective (R3).</p> <p>5- My position at the University of Prishtina was very important (R4).</p> <p>5- Lecturing at the University, respectively, my affiliation with the University was highly important (R5).</p>                           |
| <b>Social recognition and respect at home motivated me to return.</b>             | 1 → 5              | <p>5 – Having studied in Vienna, completed a fellowship at MIT, and worked at the IMF, I returned to Kosovo with significant international experience (R1).</p> <p>5 – Those who studied in Europe, respectively, abroad have ensured a social recognition and a positive approach from society (R2)</p> <p>5 – In Kosovo, it was a very positive approach towards people who studied abroad, especially in the EU and the USA (R3).</p> <p>4– Social recognition and respect at home were important for my return (R4)</p> <p>4-Respect from society and community was very important for me (R5)</p>                                      |
| <b>Barriers abroad (visa, career limits, discrimination) pushed me to return.</b> | 1 → 5              | <p>2 – I did not face barriers in terms of visas, integration, or career progression abroad. In fact, my experiences at IMF, SECO, and OECD were enriching and open to further advancement (R1).</p> <p>3 - Rules and regulations in the EU countries are costly and time-consuming (R2)</p> <p>4 – Initially, it was a few barriers, but later they were reduced and eliminated (R3).</p> <p>2 – There were administrative procedures, which I overcame during the time, but I aimed to go back to my country due to other reasons (R4).</p> <p>3- Including all the opportunities and challenges, I aimed to get back to Kosovo (R5).</p> |

Source: Own calculations

## Interpretation of the Results

After the performed analysis and interviews with respondents, the interpretation of results will be in this part of the paper, based on the variables, such as:

- a) if family ties (spouse, children, relatives) influenced the decision to return;
- b) if cultural identity and sense of belonging motivated respondents to return;
- c) if career opportunities in the home country encouraged the return;
- d) if social recognition and respect at home are motivating to return;
- e) if barriers abroad (visa, career limits, discrimination) pushed them to return.

**Family ties**, as one of the most important variables, according to the respondents, are a crucial component that influenced their return after their educational activities abroad. Most of the respondents declared that they have a close relationship with their families, relatives, and children; therefore, they decided to return to their homeland. Connection with family members, children, and relatives is still an important issue in Kosovo and has a significant role in the person's behaviour; therefore, it is also confirmed by our analysis in the paper.

**Cultural identity and a sense of belonging** are not such an important issue, according to the respondents who participated in the interview process. Apart from the homeland, which is important for them, many of the respondents declared that they have been integrated very well abroad during their studies. Being part of the educational system, cultural activities, and friendship with different people, they created a close relationship and have adapted to the system abroad; however, it was their intention to return and work at their local institutions, according to the respondents.

**Career opportunities in the home country** are also a significant variable according to the respondents, as all the respondents have been affiliated with a university in their homeland; therefore, they respected their agreements, respectively, contracts with their local institutions. This behaviour was also very important, related to their funding, as most of the respondents were supported financially by international and EU programs. Additionally, most of them have been involved in the political life in Kosovo as a support of local institutions, and they contributed with their knowledge and experience in their country.

**Social recognition** in their country could be a very important condition for many people which spent many years abroad during their education. Most of the respondents appreciated the social recognition, respect, and positive approach at their local institutions; therefore, this factor influenced them to return to their homeland. This category of educated people abroad faced many advantages and opportunities in Kosovo due to their reputation, knowledge, experience, and connections with international and EU institutions operating in the country.

**Barriers abroad** have been evident for all the respondents, initially related to the free movement of people in most Universities worldwide, followed by other rules and regulations. According to the respondents, at the early stage of their studies and activities abroad, they faced different challenges related to their visa limits, accommodation, and other rules and regulations, but later they overcame these situations. However, most of the respondents reported that the barriers and rules abroad were not a significant reason for coming back to their homeland.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Several authors analysed the migration process in the Western Balkans and Kosovo with a specific focus on low-skilled workers and mainly remittances, while this paper aims to connect migration, academic exchange, and circular migration of highly skilled workers. It therefore examines brain gain as a crucial challenge for local institutions, especially in transition countries such as Kosovo, as the country needs

highly skilled and experienced human resources to address the EU agenda process. Therefore, the main conclusions are as follows:

- Findings from the analysis performed indicated that family ties, career opportunities, and social recognition are the most significant factors that influence the return of people from abroad after their educational activities. In addition, other factors such as cultural identity and barriers abroad are estimated as less important, as the respondents, despite initial challenges abroad, were later integrated very well in the European and international societies and cultures where they studied.
- Low-skilled workers, due to necessity, unemployment, and other challenges in Kosovo, sought opportunities abroad. Nowadays, apart from the migration of low-skilled workers, there is a tendency for the movement of experts supported by the EU programs, seasonal work, and academic exchange, towards permanent migration. This is driven by economic conditions and political problems in the country, and with the idea of long-term stability and more opportunities in the EU countries.
- From a macroeconomic point of view, for Kosovo, the main challenging issue is the migration of highly skilled workers due to many opportunities abroad. Therefore, this fact will limit the human resources in the country, local absorption capacities, and consequently, this fact will increase challenges in public administration, health, and educational institutions.
- Furthermore, long-term transition, regional challenges, and an unclear European perspective of the country have recently increased the intention of highly skilled workers and experts searching for other opportunities abroad, mostly in the EU countries.
- Regarding recommendations, apart from supportive measures, local institutions should ensure structured mobility programs that support knowledge and experience exchange, academic partnership with EU universities, but these measures should guarantee the activity and return of the qualified labor force in Kosovo.
- Government supportive measures for highly skilled experts, such as competitive salaries, health and security packages, will reduce the intention of these categories to migrate to the EU and other countries. These measures will also balance work-life activities, which recently it is very significant issue for many people in the country.
- Better allocation of the national budget and effective use of the EU financial assistance, in support of the young generation of experts by involving them in different schemes, could create an appropriate environment for work and life in the country.
- Developing comparative advantages in information technology and other professional services at the national level will enhance outsourcing activities by highly educated and experienced experts, which will create jobs and opportunities in the country, by working and cooperating with EU and worldwide companies rather than migrating abroad.

### Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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## VAKARŲ BALKANAI TARP AKADEMINIO MOBILUMO, „PROTŲ SUSIGRAŽINIMO“ IR CIKLINĖS MIGRACIJOS

**Anotacija.** Migracija, kurią lėmė konfliktai, ekonominiai sunkumai ir ilgas pereinamasis laikotarpis, turėjo įtakos demografiniams pokyčiams Kosove ir kitose Vakarų Balkanų šalyse. Pastaraisiais metais taip pat pastebima didėjanti kvalifikuotos darbo jėgos migracijos iš Vakarų Balkanų į ES šalis tendencija. Šio tyrimo tikslas – ištirti ryšį tarp akademinų mainų, cirkuliacinės migracijos ir vėlesnės migracijos, taip pat išnagrinėti protų nutekėjimą kaip šio reiškinio pasekmę. Ypatingas dėmesys taip pat bus skiriamas cirkuliacinei migracijai, kurią skatina ES mainų programos ir kitos akademinio mobilumo formos. Tyrimo metodai: šiame straipsnyje pagrindinis dėmesys bus skiriamas Kosovui. Todėl tyrimui bus taikomi kokybiniai tyrimo metodai, įskaitant interviu su respondentais Kosove (n=5), analizuojant penkis kintamuosius: šeimą, kultūrinę tapatybę, priklausomybę, socialinį pripažinimą ir, galiausiai, institucines integracijos užsienio šalyse kliūtis. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad šeimos ryšiai, karjeros galimybės ir socialinis pripažinimas yra svarbiausi veiksniai, darantys įtaką žmonių grįžimui iš užsienio po studijų užsienyje. Be to, kiti veiksniai, tokie kaip kultūrinė tapatybė ir kliūtys užsienyje, vertinami kaip mažiau svarbūs. Išvados: Kosovas susiduria su dvejopais iššūkiais. Pirma, žiūrint iš vienos pusės, akademiniai mainai ES universitetuose ir kitos mobilumo formos, nepaisant teigiamo poveikio, padidino „protų nutekėjimą“ bei cirkuliacinės migracijos tikimybę. Kita vertus, dėl žemo šalies ekonominio išsivystymo lygio ir aukšto nedarbo lygio padidėjo tikimybė, kad vietiniai ekspertai ir specialistai ieškos galimybių užsienyje.

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