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Research Report

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Mass exodus from Kosovo: How a struggling state loses its citizens

A remarkable exodus from Kosovo occurred in the winter 2014/15, raising urgent questions about its underlying drivers and implications for both Kosovo and the destination countries. This policy brief provides a first-hand qualitative snapshot of key migration drivers, as well as insights on some particularities of the phenomenon. We find that the exodus is the result of a struggling Kosovar state, which failed to maintain the enthusiasm and hope of its young nation and turn it into sustainable development. Instead, a lack of perspectives and accumulated frustration about the existing political caste, nepotism and corruption drive out even middle class people. The extent and timing of the migration wave was closely connected with facilitated travel conditions and incentivising rumours that caused a snowball effect. We argue that EU countries will have to react with patience and care in handling incoming migrants. Changes in the asylum and visa regimes are recommended, but a smart timing of measures is important. Ultimately, to prevent a deepening crisis and possible unrest in Kosovo, temporary legal migration opportunities are needed. Within Kosovo, only breaking up existing structures and establishing efficient institutions and functioning social models in their place could allow the country to overcome its economic deadlock.

Europe currently faces a major migrant crisis. An unprecedented wave of migrants has been heading towards the EU, with a remarkable peak occurring in early 2015. While the media focus has turned to the boat tragedies happening in the Mediterranean, a remarkable exodus has happened from Kosovo, raising urgent questions about its underlying drivers and implications for both Kosovo and the destination countries.

Out-migration has a long tradition in Kosovo, but leaving the country was never a welcome prospect. In particular, rural communities sent out migrants when their traditional livelihood base, the farm, could no longer secure the livelihood of the large traditional households. Suppression and the Kosovo war led to a large number of refugees in the 1980s–1990s. After the war ended in 1999, it looked much as if the era of mass migration had come to an end. Many Kosovars returned to their home country full of hope for a better future. At the same time, migration doors closed when, among others,

Germany, where most Kosovar refugees and migrants lived, ended its generous toleration policy¹. Despite this, out-migration has again been increasing in recent years. The migration wave that started in autumn 2014 and culminated in early 2015 may be seen as an extreme amplitude of this new movement. Up to 100,000 people may have illegally crossed EU borders in a very short period. In Germany alone, more than 20,000 Kosovars arrived in the first three months of 2015 (compared to only around 1,400 in the same period in 2014).

¹ Toleration ('Duldung') provides that at present the holder cannot be compelled to leave. Reasons for being granted such a certificate may be illness or war in one's home country. Many people from Kosovo and Serbia stayed in Germany with such papers for several years; however, their status remained insecure as the papers were issued (repeatedly) only for short periods.



Source: Pfohlmann/toonpool.com

Objectives and approach

This policy brief aims to provide a first-hand qualitative snapshot of key drivers of the recent exodus, and insights on some particularities of the phenomenon. We mainly refer to seven expert interviews and thirteen qualitative interviews covering migration drivers and individual perceptions of Kosovar migrants who applied for asylum in Karlsruhe, Germany, during the recent migration wave. This research was conducted from March till May 2015 and further includes a review of media reports.

What is driving the exodus?

We identify three main factors that fuel migration. First and foremost is a high degree of frustration with Kosovar politics. Second are persistent economic hardship and a lack of perspectives. Third, a conglomerate of facilitators enticed this wave of migration.

'It's the politicians who force us to leave our country. [...] Politicians should take care of the affairs of the state, but what do they do instead? They take care of their families and give jobs to their family members who do not even have diplomas.'

Migrant interviewed in Karlsruhe, 02/2015

Recent politics, and in particular the ruling government coalition, which is seen as proof of ruthless and corrupt politicians who cooperate with their worst enemies to stay in power, have caused strong feelings of frustration and disappointment and may be seen as the torch that ignited the train. Migrants blame politicians for a highly politicised labour market, corruption and the lack of the rule of law. These migrants feel that their future has been robbed by the politicians and the powerful.

Moreover, they also feel deceived by EU nations whose rule of law mission, Eulex, is accused of corruption and of protecting senior figures in government. There is indeed ample proof for the country's precarious state and poor governance. Capussela (2015), for example, shows how the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicator has not, as opposed to most neighbouring Balkan countries, shown any progress in Kosovo during recent years.

'We are a family of eight and no one has work. How should we survive? [...] What would you do if you saw your family starving?'

Migrant interviewed in Karlsruhe, 02/2015

'People here would rather die than return to Kosovo. For fifteen years we were only hearing 'wait, wait, wait', and we were waiting, but nothing has changed.'

Migrant interviewed in Karlsruhe, 02/2015

One-third of the Kosovar population lives in poverty, and this is a strong push factor. However, statistics do not support the notion that the economic situation worsened in a way that could sufficiently explain the observed migration wave. Kosovo's GDP increased by 5% in 2014 and wages also increased. Our interviews also confirm that the majority of people who have recently left did not leave because they were unemployed and poor, but rather because they lost hope that things will change for the better. One of our interviewed experts, Alban Hashani, describes this as the 'collective pessimism' of a nation that is running out of patience with its struggling state and feels it no longer has anything to lose.

'We Kosovars believe a lot and we hope even more.'

Expert E. Gjokaj

A conglomerate of facilitating factors has further triggered the exodus. Although most migrants do not name this as the most important reason for leaving, they certainly contribute to explain-

ing the extent and timing of the wave of migrants. Numerous (mostly) false promises spread as rumours through media and personal networks across Kosovo. Some experts suspect those who directly benefit from the outflow, that is, smugglers and their accomplices, have contributed to spreading such incentivising information. One example was a rumour spread in the region of Ferizaj that Germany would automatically grant asylum to incoming migrants who arrived during February 2015.

Easier travel conditions have led to a significant decrease in the cost of migration. Indeed, many migrants paid only a couple of hundred Euros per person, around 10–20% of the previous standard smuggling rate, which is usually financed with borrowed money or by liquidating family savings and assets. The Serb-Hungarian border is relatively permeable and has been used by illegal migrants to gain access to the EU for quite some time, but two changes facilitate migration: Hungary no longer detains migrants due to a change in the asylum law in order to comply with EU legislation. Thus, since 2013 migrants can leave Hungary smoothly towards their destination countries. Secondly, unobstructed travel through Serbia has been possible since the autumn of 2014 when visa-free entry to Serbia became operational.

Finally, a snowball effect built up this migration wave. The feeling of not wanting to stay put when everyone else is leaving, together with the rumours that raised high hopes, as well as missing clear signals that immediate evictions take place, all contributed to this.

Who are the migrants?

Migrants are typically lower-middle class people – poor, but not from the poorest strata. We estimated that around 60% of the incoming migrants have completed at least high school education, and seem to have left Kosovo rather spontaneously, without much more than a couple of days between the decision to leave and their departure. Many migrants are uninformed and naïve with regard to what to expect in the destination county – despite the fact that there is also a considerable share of people with previous migration experience in the EU or even German language skills. The latter have often left Germany deliberately after the war had ended; they return to Germany disillusioned and hoping to go back to their previous lives. There is also a distinct group of young people that could be labelled a lost generation; they once went to school in Germany and wish to return because they were never able to fully integrate into the Kosovar society again.

The biggest share of incoming migrants in Germany resembles the migrant archetype – single young men, willing and able to work. These young men are desperate for paid and secure jobs, which they could not find in Kosovo. A rather new phenomenon is the significant number of people who have left as a group or with their families. Not all

of them are poor, but they have turned their back on a life without perspectives. Our expert Beqe Cufaj estimates the share of migrant families to be around 20%; expert Alban Hashani reckons that even up to 50% travel in groups of several family members. Lastly, there is a smaller group of around 10% of very poor and/or vulnerable persons. Often they are elderly or people with health problems who hope to receive appropriate treatment and social assistance.

Implications

To sum up, a lack of perspectives and accumulated frustration about the political caste that uses the public to enrich themselves, the widespread corruption, nepotism, and unemployment in Kosovo drive out even middle-class people and entire families. The recent migration wave may thus be seen as the result of a struggling state which failed to maintain the enthusiasm and hope of its young nation and turn it into sustainable development.

The dissatisfaction over the political system is central to the recent exodus. Since both migrants and experts have expressed that the alternative to leaving the country could be violent protest and social unrest, we interpret the exodus as a sort of revolt against the political system. This bears the danger of a crisis with unknown outcomes, especially if migrants will be returned quickly.

Within Kosovo the outpouring of people could lead to short-term relief on the labour market. It might, if remittances start flowing, benefit impoverished migrant-sending households in the medium term. However, if migrants are returned before they can cover the cost of their migration, the situation might worsen instead. The loss of people during the winter of 2014/15 may lead to a loss of up to 10% of Kosovo's working-age population. The exodus definitely poses a significant threat to the viability of the young state when angry young people are losing their hope and patience, and a large number of educated and middle-class people leave.

Policy Recommendations

Corruption is known to be linked with migration by encouraging emigration and inhibiting return (Carling et al. 2015). This link seems important for the case of Kosovo as well, and thus the call for anti-corruption policies is manifest. Yet policy solutions, no matter how sweeping and smart they are, require time. Meanwhile, EU countries should get used to the idea that Kosovar people will continue to enter the EU – no matter if they are welcome or not.

Regaining credibility, better governance and anti-corruption reforms

The political caste of Kosovo has caused a high level of frustration that drives its people out of the country. To turn this around, a willingness for

change is desperately needed. Kosovo must dare the impossible, that is, a break-up of the existing clan structure, politicised labour markets, and circle of corruption. Only this will allow the country to regain credibility, end the economic deadlock and slow down migration rates. As a first step, Kosovo needs to provide its citizens with a feeling of security (and functioning justice) and, in particular, to transform the grey labour market into one that relies on enforceable contracts and offers fair access to jobs and a social security system. Clearly, EU countries also need to re-establish credibility. Kosovo is a state-building and democratisation project undertaken by Western nations that seems to be heading towards failure. It is of utmost importance to understand what ultimately led to this bleeding out of the country, and to ensure that future EU policies are more convincing and effective in strengthening functioning institutions.

There is ample proof that governments can contribute significantly to the economic development of countries by providing institutions that reduce the uncertainty of investors and loan providers, particularly by encountering corruption and establishing efficient bureaucracy (e.g. Koester and Forstner 2014). We therefore propose to direct efforts towards establishing a new, de-politicised state administration where strong anti-corruption measures can be enforced. The successful reforms in Georgia may be an excellent blueprint for Kosovo (World Bank 2012). While the general support of the people is there, a credible executive with a clear anti-corruption vision is needed to head a rapid and frontal assault with zero tolerance for corruption. Necessary measures include a transparent renewing and shrinking of the state sector at all levels, including decent wages for honest, corruption-free work.

Re-think EU visa regulations

Visa regulations and asylum laws have played a major role in facilitating and enticing this migration wave. However, when the EU is considering measures and actions, proper timing is important. Speeding up the processing of asylum claims is certainly desirable and could lead to a drop in applications. However, rapid evictions could bear the risk of unrest (and thus new out-flows of migrants) in Kosovo. Thus, it might be sensible to offer limited work permits to rejected migrants as part of a gradual return policy in order to prevent the routine filing of objections and thus long and costly court procedures. However, such measures should be limited in duration and apply only to those who are already in the asylum procedure to not set incentives for new migrants to follow.

Legal migration opportunities in EU countries

Asylum is neither a desirable nor in most cases acceptable migration path for Kosovars. Thus, it is worthwhile to think about alternative, legal migration options. Kosovo desperately needs opportunities for work outside the country because even under the most hopeful scenarios the majority of

young people cannot be employed in their home country in the medium term. The resulting social crisis will possibly contribute to the state-building project's failure, a scenario that is certainly not in the interest of the EU. For Germany, taking over responsibility, especially for this 'lost generation' of young people who grew up in Germany, should be a matter of course.

The slightest serious prospect of future legal migration, or even only access to the European visa programs would, in our opinion, help to slow down the recent illegal exodus.² The exclusion of Kosovo from the visa-free regimes that are operational in all neighbouring countries (e.g. Albania, Macedonia), fosters a feeling of abandonment and isolation, and increases the wish and urgency to escape the situation. Clearly, a new visa policy should be harmonised with the timely introduction of measures preventing an increase in the abuse of the asylum system such as rapid (special) asylum procedures, cautious use of cash benefits, and targeted information campaigns.

'I don't want anything from the [German] state. All I want is a work permit. If I can work I will find my peace.'
Migrant interviewed in Karlsruhe, 02/2015

Temporary, seasonal, or circular legal work could provide a suitable opportunity to offer legal access to work without burdening Kosovo with massive brain drain. While there is no final proof that temporary or circular migration is a 'triple win' policy tool for managed migration (benefitting the destination country, the migrant and the country of origin), it seems well-suited to the traditional migration patterns of Kosovo. In the country, poor households will benefit from remittances, and the labour market could be relieved to allow for substantial reform. For the host societies it is important to understand that yes, Kosovars desire access to the EU economic and social systems, but they want it through employment. In that sense, legal travel and migration opportunities are the better solution.

² The view that more barriers will rather increase illegal migration and put the most vulnerable at higher risk is supported by our interviewed experts from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

Further Information

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List of interviewed experts: Beqe Cufaj, Germany based Kosovar Publicist, Journalist and Writer; Jorge Baca-Vaughan, Chief of Mission, IOM Pristina; Magdalena Majkowska-Tomkin, Chief of Mission, IOM Budapest; Besa Shahini, Senior Analyst, European Stability Initiative (ESI); Ekrem Gjokaj, Head of Department for Economic Analysis and Agricultural Statistics, Kosovo Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development, Prishtina; Alban Hashani, Research Director, Riinvest Institute for Development Research, Prishtina; Agron Demi, Director of Research, Institute of Advanced Studies (GAP), Prishtina.

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