ACCSCIENCE PUBLISHING

International Journal of Population Studies

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo: Implications for the sustainability of social policy

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Abstract

Kosovo is considered to have one of the highest rates of youth emigration in Europe. While fertility rates have seen a slight uptick in 2024–2025, they remain below replacement level, contributing to a gradual contraction of the working-age population. This qualitative study explores expert perspectives on the interlinkages between youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo, as well as the implications of this nexus for social protection, pensions, healthcare, and the labor market. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six experts representing the fields of sociology, economics, environmental studies, social policy/pensions, and public health. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results identified four overarching themes: (i) migration as a structural, multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing expert consensus on the acceleration of demographic aging; (ii) family and economic consequences for future generations, including human capital loss and the limits of remittances; (iii) mounting pressure on the pension system and expert divergence regarding the most appropriate policy models; and (iv) public health consequences, including health workforce attrition and the rising complexity of elder care. The findings show qualitative convergence with changes in diaspora remittance behavior following visa liberalization, and indicate that, according to one expert, environmental factors play a less prominent role than might be expected. This qualitative study contributes interdisciplinary evidence to inform policy responses to Kosovo's accelerated demographic transition and addresses the limited empirical research on its implications for social policy in the Western Balkans. The main limitation is the small purposive sample of six experts, which precludes statistical generalization, although it is consistent with the exploratory and depth-oriented aim of the study.

Keywords: Youth emigration; Population aging; Social policy; Causes and consequences; Kosovo

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Citation: Kamberi, F., & Hashani, Z. Youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo: Implications for the sustainability of social policy. *International Journal of Population Studies*.
doi: 10.36922/IJPS026390228

Received: September 22, 2026

Revised: October 19, 2026

Accepted: October 19, 2026

Published online: November 2, 2026

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1. Introduction

Migration has long shaped the demographic trajectory of Kosovo, which records one of the highest emigration rates in Europe relative to its population size. Youth unemployment, low wages, the transition period, and limited domestic opportunities have consistently been identified as the principal drivers of outward migration from Kosovo, alongside

sociopolitical factors such as institutional dissatisfaction and the desire to emulate European Union (EU) living standards (Hajdari & Krasniqi, 2021). At the same time, Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, with over half of its residents under the age of 25, yet youth unemployment reached 46.9% in the third quarter of 2020, more than 30 percentage points above the EU average (Hajdari & Krasniqi, 2021). This combination of persistent unemployment and limited opportunities continues to drive emigration, which in turn contributes to declining fertility rates as many individuals of reproductive age leave the country.

This combination of a young population and persistently high youth emigration raises an important demographic paradox: while Kosovo is currently one of the youngest societies in Europe, the continuous outflow of young people, particularly the highly educated, may accelerate the aging of the population that remains. Hajdari and Krasniqi (2021) document a pronounced brain drain in sectors such as healthcare, where the loss of doctors and nurses has already strained service delivery, illustrating how selective youth emigration can generate structural imbalances beyond the labor market itself.

Population aging indeed carries direct consequences for the design and financing of social policy. Across the Western Balkans, social protection expenditure is increasingly concentrated on the elderly population. However, it remains comparatively inefficient at reducing child and working-age poverty, reflecting welfare systems shaped more by the legacy of socialism, conflict, and international policy advice than by demographic need (Mustafa & Gerovska-Mitev, 2022). As the working-age population shrinks relative to the number of pensioners, the long-term fiscal sustainability of pension and healthcare systems in the region becomes an increasingly urgent concern. This suggests that a comprehensive review of social policy is sorely needed today, one that is currently lacking, since Western Balkan states have tended to focus more on other domains than on building citizen welfare comparable to that of EU member states. Baliqi (2017) may well be right in arguing that it is precisely the interests of certain groups that can obstruct the state action and adequate policies needed in specific areas.

This paper therefore explores both the theoretical literature and the perspectives of experts on the relationship between youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo, and the implications of this relationship for the sustainability of social policy, including pensions, healthcare, and social protection more broadly. Specifically, the study asks: How do experts across disciplines characterize the current dynamics of youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo? What implications do they identify for social policy sustainability? And which policy responses do they consider most urgent? Drawing on the perspectives of six experts from complementary fields, the study aims to generate cross-disciplinary, policy-relevant evidence to contribute to the growing debate on demographic sustainability, particularly in Kosovo.

1.1. Literature review

It should be noted that the systematic study of migratory movements has evolved considerably yet remains a theoretically fragmented field owing to its interdisciplinary nature. Al-Khudairy (2024) argues that migration theory faces three key dilemmas: the structure–agency dichotomy, the macro–micro level of analysis, and the specific dilemma of voluntary versus involuntary migration (push-pull factors versus global structural forces). The study classifies theories into three groups: macro-level (structural) theories, micro-level theories (based on individual rational choice), and theories that attempt to bridge the gap between the two. One of the earliest and most influential attempts to classify migration on a sociological basis is the typology developed by Petersen (1958), which distinguishes types of migration into primitive, forced, impelled, free, and mass migration. His classification criteria concerned the relationship between individuals and nature, the state, and established norms and behavior, as well as whether migrants themselves had the power to decide whether to leave. This typology remains relevant for understanding the diverse nature of migratory movements in the Western Balkans.

More recent theoretical work has substantially revised this classical picture. De Haas (2021) proposes an aspirations-capabilities framework in which migration is understood as a function of people's aspirations and capabilities to move within a given set of perceived opportunities, explicitly reframing staying, not only moving, as an outcome of migratory agency; this framework provides a contemporary synthesis of migration processes. Building on earlier work by Carling (2002), Carling and Schewel (2018) similarly distinguish between the aspiration to migrate and the ability to realize that aspiration, arguing that involuntary immobility, being unable to migrate despite wanting to, is as theoretically important as migration itself. Read together with the classical typologies discussed above, these contemporary frameworks suggest that youth emigration from Kosovo should be understood not simply as a response to push and pull factors, but as the outcome of an interaction between rising aspirations to leave and the capabilities, including the short-term visa-free travel opportunities introduced in January 2024, that facilitate mobility.

Accordingly, the relationship documented above between youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo can be situated within two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Lee's (1966) classic theory of migration explains population movement through a system of "push" factors at the place of origin, "pull" factors at the destination, and "intervening obstacles" that facilitate or hinder movement. In Kosovo's case, push factors (including a youth unemployment rate of 19.5% in 2024, low wages, and limited professional opportunities) combine with strong pull factors (higher wages and labor markets in the EU, existing diaspora networks), while the January 2024 visa liberalization removed one of the principal historical intervening obstacles, making movement toward the EU markedly easier (Ministry of Internal Affairs [MPB], 2025). Second, the sustained decline in fertility in Kosovo can be partly understood through second demographic transition theory (van de Kaa, 1987), which links fertility decline to shifts in individual values, the postponement of marriage and childbearing, and rising individual autonomy, particularly in post-industrial European contexts. However, Kosovo's case appears to diverge partly from the classic second demographic transition model: whereas in Western Europe fertility decline is often accompanied by improved economic wellbeing and an expansion of individual choice, a comparable fertility decline in Kosovo (Behrami & Bajraktari, 2021) occurs alongside persistent economic insecurity and mass emigration, suggesting that structural factors (unemployment, economic insecurity) may play a role at least as important as value change in explaining Kosovo's fertility decline. These two theoretical frameworks, taken together, provide a conceptual basis for understanding why Kosovo is simultaneously experiencing high youth emigration (explicable through push-pull theory) and accelerated fertility decline (linked, at least in part, to dynamics resembling the Second Demographic Transition, but shaped by specific local socio-economic conditions). This study aims to contribute to this theoretical framework by bringing an expert perspective to bear on how these two processes interact in shaping social policy challenges in Kosovo. This represents a notable gap in the literature, particularly given that population aging in the Western Balkans is understood to be driven by both fertility decline and continuous youth emigration, rather than either factor alone.

The consequences of youth emigration, particularly the emigration of adult children whose parents remain in their country of origin, are increasingly documented in other high-emigration, transitional economies, offering relevant comparative evidence for Kosovo. In Moldova, a post-socialist country with a migration profile comparable to Kosovo's, Böhme *et al.* (2015) found that the emigration of adult children was associated with mixed effects on the health of elderly parents left behind: while remittances could offset some material hardship, the absence of direct caregiving support raised concerns for the long-term wellbeing of older adults in migrant-sending communities. Similarly, data from another six-country European study by Bălțătescu *et al.* (2023) found that children left behind by migrant parents reported lower subjective wellbeing and lower satisfaction with family life compared to their non-left-behind peers, with the gap widening with age and being more pronounced among girls. According to the comparative literature, the demographic impact of emigration is not limited to labor markets alone but also encompasses other dimensions, such as public health, the stability of family ties, and social support networks for individuals who remain in the country of origin.

1.1.1. Youth migration trends: The case of Kosovo

Migration is a social phenomenon shaped by numerous factors, both external and internal. Official data confirm that Kosovo, too, is facing the growth of this phenomenon. According to the *Migration Profile 2024* published by MPB (2026), youth unemployment (ages 15–24) in Kosovo reached 19.5% in 2024, while overall labor force participation remained as low as 43.2%. In the same year, the international stock of Kosovar migrants reached 993,526 persons, or 62.7% of the resident population, one of the highest ratios in Europe, while remittances reached EUR 1.35 billion, equivalent to 13.1% of gross domestic product (MPB, 2026). For clarity, "international migrant stock" refers to the total number of persons born in Kosovo who are currently residing abroad, and the "NEET rate" (Table 1) denotes the proportion of young people aged 15–24 who are not in employment, education, or training, both as defined by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics and the MPB (MPB, 2026).

Quarterly data from the Central Bank of the Republic of Kosovo (CBK) provide additional context for remittance trends following visa liberalization with the EU on January 1, 2024. According to CBK data reported by Monitor (2024), remittances totaled EUR 281 million in the first quarter of 2024, representing a 3.6% increase over the corresponding period in 2023. According to the CBK, this slowdown may be explained by the fact that diaspora members are increasingly choosing to visit their families in person rather than sending money alone. This dynamic illustrates well what Lee's (1966) theory terms a change in "intervening obstacles." Accordingly, it appears that removing the visa obstacle has not necessarily increased new emigration but has instead changed the form of the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland, from one that is primarily financial to one that is more direct

Table 1. Migration and labor market indicators in Kosovo, 2024

Indicator	Value
Total population	1,585,590
Youth unemployment (ages 15–24)	19.5%
Overall unemployment	10.8%
Labor force participation	43.2%
NEET rate (ages 15–24)	31.4%
International migrant stock	993,526 (62.7% of population)
Remittances	EUR 1.35 billion (13.1% of gross domestic product)

Note: Population data are from the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2024); labor-market and migration indicators are from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (2026); and remittance data are from the Central Bank of the Republic of Kosovo (2024).

and personal. In 2024, Kosovo's labor market remained characterized by low labor-force participation: only 43.2% of the population participates in the labor force, overall unemployment stands at 10.8%, and youth unemployment reaches 19.5%, while the NEET rate of 31.4% means nearly one in three young people is neither employed nor in education or training. At the same time, the international migrant stock of 993,526 people (62.7% of the population) and remittances of EUR 1.35 billion (13.1% of Gross Domestic Product) show that emigration and money sent from abroad function as a substitute for domestic jobs, sustaining consumption and livelihoods but masking the economy's structural inability to absorb its own workforce (MPB, 2026).

1.1.2. Demographic trends: Declining fertility and aging population

Efforts to understand the long-term demographic implications of this dynamic have generated important findings. Drawing on the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2013), Behrami and Bajraktari (2021) report that the median age rose from 24.1 years in 1981 to 28.8 years in 2011, while the demographic aging index increased from 0.12 to 0.26. Their projections indicate that the share of the population aged 60 and older could rise from 9.6% in 2011 to 36.9% by 2061. More recently, the Kosovo Agency of Statistics has published population projections through 2060. According to secondary coverage of these projections, live births are expected to decline substantially by 2060, while births and deaths are projected to converge around 2035–2037 (Epiqendra, 2026).

1.1.3. Impact on the local labor market

Kosovo's governance structure is organized at two levels: central and local. The fundamental and most important unit of local self-government is the municipality, as established under Law No. 03/L-040 on Local Self-Government (2008), which plays a key role in managing local affairs and meeting citizens' needs. Kosovo's territory is currently divided into 38 municipalities, each with its own governance structures, including a municipal assembly and a mayor, both democratically elected by their citizens.

Migration affects most municipalities, some of which have been left almost empty in places, particularly in remote rural areas, causing a range of consequences. Be that as it may, it should be noted that, at the local level, Behrami (2022) documents that the consequences of emigration are not evenly distributed across Kosovo's territory. In a study of five municipalities (Mitrovice, Vushtrri, Skenderaj, Drenas, and Obiliq), certain municipalities (such as Obiliq, which recorded a 16.3% population decline between 2011 and 2020) were found to be disproportionately affected, with direct consequences for the local education system; the number of pupils in some municipalities fell by as much as 37.3% between 2008 and 2021. Behrami (2022) argues that despite the diaspora's substantial development potential (through remittances, knowledge transfer, and social capital), local governance in Kosovo has yet to systematically integrate migration into its strategic development documents. From an economic standpoint, the departure of the labor force and of talent creates a weak development cycle. Research by the RIINVEST Institute (2025) shows that the labor shortage, rather than stimulating innovation and productivity growth, is instead driving up production costs and keeping the economy dependent on remittances. This situation slows economic growth, reduces productivity, and makes the country more dependent on external resources.

1.1.4. Comparisons with countries in the region

The dynamic observed in Kosovo is not unique in the region but represents an accelerated version of a broader Balkan trend. Albania offers the clearest comparison: according to the 2023 census, the median age of the Albanian population rose from 35.3 years (2011 census) to 42.5 years, while the old-age dependency ratio rose from 16.7% to 30.4% over the same period (Institute of Statistics of Albania [INSTAT], 2024). Further INSTAT data show that by January 1, 2025, the median age in Albania had reached 44.3 years, one of the fastest rates of aging in Europe (INSTAT, 2025). The *World Migration Report 2026*, published by the International Organization for Migration

(2026), explicitly identifies Albania, alongside Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a country where the fertility rate is already below replacement level, and where continuous emigration of individuals of reproductive age risks further deepening population decline. This parallel supports the interpretation that Kosovo and Albania, despite differences in their political and economic contexts since the 1990s, have followed comparable demographic trajectories, characterized by high levels of youth emigration driven by unemployment, low wages, and limited opportunities. The emigration of individuals of reproductive age may, in turn, have contributed to declining fertility rates in both countries.

At a broader regional level, Mustafa and Gerovska-Mitev (2022) document similar structural challenges in financing social protection across the Western Balkans, including Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. These challenges are associated with population aging, the legacy of socialist-era welfare systems, and migration to the EU countries. These national statistical sources and regional comparative studies complement the literature discussed above (Hajdari & Krasniqi, 2021; Mustafa & Gerovska-Mitev, 2022), showing that the relationship between youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo is not merely a theoretical projection but an already officially documented and accelerating process. However, as Behrami and Bajraktari (2021) themselves note, the existing literature remains predominantly demographic and quantitative; a more in-depth analysis, grounded in cross-disciplinary expertise, of the concrete implications of this dynamic for social policy sustainability is lacking, a gap this study seeks to address. Country-specific comparative data for North Macedonia and Montenegro were not available within the scope of this study; this limitation is acknowledged in Section 4.6.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on semi-structured interviews with subject-matter experts. An expert-elicitation approach was selected because the relationship between youth emigration, population aging, and social policy sustainability in Kosovo has been addressed primarily through quantitative demographic and economic indicators (Hajdari & Krasniqi, 2021). Meanwhile, relatively little is known about how experts across disciplines interpret the combined, cross-sectoral impact of these trends. Semi-structured interviews allow for both comparability across participants and sufficient flexibility to explore discipline-specific insights in depth.

2.2. Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit six experts representing complementary disciplinary perspectives relevant to the study's aim: sociology, economics, environmental studies, social policy/pensions (two independent informants from this latter field, referred to here as Expert SP-1 and Expert SP-2), and public health. Expert SP-1 brings a particularly rich profile, combining experience as a university professor with institutional experience as a former employee of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, which lends this study both academic and practical-institutional depth. All respondents are Kosovo-based professionals with direct academic or institutional engagement with migration, demography, or social policy in Kosovo; the sampling frame did not extend to experts based elsewhere in Europe. Eligibility for "expert" status required at least five years of professional or academic experience in a relevant field, together with peer-recognized standing evidenced by publications, institutional leadership, or an advisory role in a field directly relevant to migration, population aging, or social policy in Kosovo. The number of participants (six) and the choice of disciplines were determined by the study's explicit focus on the social-policy implications of youth emigration and population aging; sociology, economics, environmental studies, social policy/pensions, and public health were judged most directly relevant to the research questions, whereas fields such as political science, international relations, and geography, while potentially informative, fell outside this study's disciplinary scope and are noted as a direction for future research. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants possessed relevant professional or academic expertise on youth emigration, population aging, or social policy in Kosovo, rather than to achieve statistical representativeness, in line with common practice in qualitative expert-elicitation studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). This disciplinary composition was not arbitrary: it was designed to map directly onto the four dimensions explicitly named in the study's research questions, namely social protection, pensions, healthcare, and the labor market. Sociology was included to capture the social and familial dimension of migration and aging; economics, to capture labor-market and human-capital consequences; environmental studies, to test, rather than assume, the relevance of environmental drivers highlighted in parts of the international literature; social policy/pensions, with two independent informants, to provide direct insight into pension sustainability and social protection, the study's central policy concern, and to allow triangulation within this field; and public health, to address the healthcare dimension of the research questions, which could not otherwise have been examined.

Each discipline therefore corresponds to a specific, pre-identified component of the study's aim, rather than being included for general disciplinary breadth.

2.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each expert, lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. Each interview included a set of core questions addressing participants' overall assessment of youth emigration trends, population aging, and future demographic projections for Kosovo, followed by discipline-specific questions tailored to each participant's area of expertise, and a closing question inviting policy recommendations (the full interview guide is provided in the **Appendix**). Interviews were conducted in person, according to participant preference, and were recorded in audio and in writing with participants' informed consent, then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.4. Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Both authors independently coded all six transcripts and met to discuss discrepancies and agree on the final thematic structure. The themes were developed inductively from participants' accounts, following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006); Lee's (1966) migration theory and second demographic transition theory were then used to interpret and contextualize the findings rather than as predetermined coding categories.

3. Results

Thematic analysis of the six interviews involving experts in sociology, economics, environmental studies, social policy and pensions (two experts, designated Expert SP-1 and Expert SP-2), and public health identified four overarching themes, summarized below.

3.1. Migration as a structural, multidimensional phenomenon

Rosińska (2024) identifies eight interconnected dimensions of migration drivers—demographic, economic, environmental, human development, politico-institutional, security, socio-cultural, and supranational. Piché (2013), drawing on a broader review of migration theories, similarly characterizes migration as a multifactorial and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to economic explanations alone. The sociologist described it as the "result of the interaction of economic, institutional, political, and cultural factors," emphasizing the role of citizens' perception of a lack of meritocracy and low trust in institutions, alongside globalization and transnational family networks that have "lowered the barriers to migration." The economist focused the explanation on concrete material factors: "the impression created among people that things are much better abroad," low wages, and unemployment. By contrast, the environmental expert placed environmental factors in a clearly secondary position, emphasizing that "I would not rank them as key or primary factors... environmental factors are mainly tertiary and quaternary"—a finding that limits the direct role of the environmental dimension compared with what might initially be assumed. Overall, all six experts agreed without exception that Kosovo is experiencing accelerated population aging because of migration. The sociologist linked this to age-selective emigration, which "intensifies" the classic demographic transition by reducing the reproductive and working-age base. Expert SP-2 offered a specific quantitative estimate, cautioning that if the trend continues unoffset by immigration, Kosovo could experience "a population decline of around 15%–20%" within 15–20 years, being the only participant to mention immigration (from "countries of origin") as a possible compensating mechanism. The environmental expert described this process as Kosovo's entry "into the group of countries with low rates of natural increase," a dynamic that has also raised alarm within the European Commission itself, which, in its annual reports on candidate countries, is paying increasing attention to the phenomenon of "brain drain," viewing it as a threat to economic growth and social welfare, although its attention to date is considered insufficient given the potential consequences (Jansen *et al.*, 2024; Wang, 2026). The sociologist elaborated on these structural drivers as follows:

> From a sociological perspective, youth migration in Kosovo represents a structural and multidimensional phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to economic factors alone. It is the result of the interaction of economic, institutional, political, and cultural factors. Unemployment, insecurity in the labor market, the perception of a lack of meritocracy, low trust in institutions, and aspirations for a higher quality of life constitute the main drivers of migration. At the same time, globalization, technological development, and transnational family networks have lowered the barriers to migration, making leaving a common social mobility strategy. As a result, youth migration has been transformed from an episodic

> phenomenon into a continuous process that directly affects Kosovo's demographic structure and social development.

This richer account illustrates that, for this participant, migration is better understood as an ongoing structural process than as a series of discrete individual decisions. The environmental expert offered a comparably detailed account of why he assigns environmental drivers only a secondary role, while still tracing their indirect economic consequences:

> Environmental factors are also contributors within the broader mosaic of reasons for youth migration, but I would not rank them as key or primary factors; they are mainly tertiary and quaternary. The migration of young people from rural areas negatively affects the local economy because rural areas mainly hold the ideal conditions for agriculture, fruit-growing, viticulture, livestock, and other agricultural branches. In the absence of domestic production, the trade deficit grows, economic instability increases, dependence on imports rises noticeably, and social insecurity deepens further.

3.2. Family and economic consequences for future generations

The sociologist offered the most detailed analysis of family-level changes, noting the rise of "transnational families," in which relationships rely "mainly on virtual communication and remittances," which may "weaken emotional cohesion" despite the economic benefits. Changing gender roles were noted as a visible consequence: women "take on greater responsibilities... gaining greater autonomy," while simultaneously facing "the burden of multiple roles." Older adults, according to the sociologist, take on "an increasingly active role in caring for grandchildren," but face a "higher risk of social isolation"—a finding that corresponds directly with the international literature on "left-behind" parents (Böhme *et al.*, 2015). Both social policy experts confirmed this from an institutional standpoint, emphasizing that older adults are increasingly left "without the support of their relatives," and that "integrated community care services" are lacking. Expert SP-1 elaborated on the range of missing services and possible external models in some detail:

> What is missing are integrated community care services, home-based care, psychosocial support, programs to combat social isolation, and mechanisms to identify older adults in need. Kosovo could benefit from the practices of countries such as Slovenia and Croatia in developing community services for older adults, as well as from the Nordic countries' models, which have invested in long-term care, home-based services, and active healthy-aging policies. Germany's experience in providing long-term care and supporting families could likewise serve as a useful model to be adapted to Kosovo's context.

During the interviews, the economist was clear that remittances, while helpful to the family economy, "do not replace the loss of skilled labor." In an observation that unusually corresponds with our earlier finding drawn from the Central Bank of Kosovo, the same expert noted that diaspora behavior has changed: "lately... they increasingly see themselves as tourists"—a direct empirical parallel with the CBK's interpretation of the slowdown in remittance growth following visa liberalization. The environmental expert extended this economic consequence to the rural sector: the departure of young people from villages "negatively affects the local economy," as it reduces domestic output in agriculture, livestock, and viticulture, thereby "increasing the trade deficit" and dependence on imports.

3.3. Pressure on the pension system and divergence over suitable models

Social policy experts agreed that the growing ratio of pensioners to the active population creates "pressure on the financing of the pension system" (Expert SP-1) and that the budget "needs to grow" (Expert SP-2), directly confirming existing findings on the fiscal sustainability of social protection in the Western Balkans (Mustafa & Gerovska-Mitev, 2022). A clear divergence emerged, however, regarding which external models to adapt: Expert SP-1 recommended the models of Slovenia and Croatia, the Nordic countries, and Germany, while Expert SP-2 suggested that "Balkan country models would be more suitable for adaptation," possibly reflecting differing perceptions of the institutional and fiscal proximity required for policy transferability. Expert SP-2 explained this divergence at greater length, situating it within a broader assessment of demographic risk:

> If the emigration trend continues over the next 15 to 20 years, there could be a demographic decline of the population of around 15%–20%, unless this is offset by immigrants from countries of origin. For the state, this is a challenge, since the pension budget needs to grow, partly because pensioners are increasingly left without the support of their relatives. Perhaps models from Balkan countries would be more positive for adaptation, given the

> closer similarity in institutional and economic starting conditions.

This is understandable given that the rapid aging of the population and the growing number of pensioners present a major challenge for the sustainability of social policy. In their study of pensioner welfare in Kosovo, Smajli *et al.* (2025) found that financial insecurity was associated with emotional insecurity, underscoring the importance of financial and social support in improving their wellbeing. Despite disciplinary differences, experts converged on several recommendations, including the creation of quality jobs, strengthening meritocracy and combating corruption, improving education, and expanding community services for older adults. Indeed, the sociologist synthesized this as the need for "an integrated approach that links economic development to social cohesion and demographic policy." The main divergence remained over the appropriate regional/European models, suggesting that consensus among experts is stronger on the diagnosis of the problem than on the concrete institutional path toward a solution. The economist situated this pension pressure within a broader account of human capital loss, explaining in fuller terms:

> The continuous departure of young people means the country loses human capital, productivity declines, and contributions to the economy and to pensions shrink accordingly. Remittances help the family economy, but they do not replace the loss of skilled labor. Although I think that lately this has changed—members of the diaspora increasingly see themselves as tourists, which is actually good for us, because it gives us a chance to develop the tourism sector.

This longer account situates the remittance-to-tourism shift (discussed in Section 1.1.1) not as an isolated observation but as part of the economist's wider argument about the limits of remittances as a substitute for a shrinking, aging workforce.

3.4. Public health consequences: Workforce attrition and the rising complexity of elder care

The public health expert, a practicing physician, offered a distinctive perspective that was not available from the other five participants and that speaks directly to the healthcare dimension of the study's research questions. Describing the self-reinforcing nature of health workforce emigration, the physician explained:

> From a doctor's point of view, this is visible in two ways: first, in the increasingly noticeable shortage of new health staff—doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians—who emigrate for economic and professional reasons; second, in the changing structure of the population we serve, where the number of older people is growing while the number of young people who remain is shrinking. This is a self-reinforcing cycle: the departure of young people weakens the health system, and the weakening of the health system pushes other young people to leave.

Asked how population aging affects the demand for healthcare services, the physician was similarly direct:

> The impact is direct and already visible. The growth in the number of older people brings more chronic disease, more repeat visits, more hospitalizations, and greater need for long-term care. At the same time, the complexity of patients is increasing: older people often have several conditions simultaneously (multimorbidity), take multiple medications, and require coordinated care. This complexity is not always captured by conventional administrative indicators, but it directly affects length of hospital stay, transfers to intensive care, and resource use. In other words, demand is increasing not only in quantity but also in quality and complexity.

On the adequacy of current capacity, the physician was unambiguous:

> No, and this is one of the greatest professional concerns. The number of nurses specialized in geriatrics is very small, long-term care beds are insufficient, and home- or community-based care services are still in an embryonic stage. Most old-age care in Kosovo still relies on the family. But as young people leave, this support network is weakening, and the result is a widening gap between need and capacity that the current system is not prepared to fill.

4. Discussion

The findings from the six semi-structured interviews broadly confirm the existing literature on youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo, while also adding nuances that were not evident from quantitative data alone. These are discussed below in relation to the theoretical framework and prior empirical work.

4.1. Confirmation of the theoretical framework and existing literature

The sociologist's description of migration as a product of economic, institutional, and cultural factors, combined with the lowering of "barriers" through transnational family

networks, corresponds directly with Lee's (1966) classic push-pull theory and with Massey *et al.*'s (1993) emphasis on the role of migrant networks in reducing the costs and risks of movement ("cumulative causation"). The finding on the shift in diaspora behaviour from remittance-senders to "tourists" following visa liberalisation, as noted by the economist, provides an unusual empirical confirmation of our earlier finding, indicating that experts in the field have independently observed the same dynamic that is also reflected in official financial data. This correlation between qualitative and quantitative sources strengthens the credibility of the interpretation that visa liberalization is changing the form, not necessarily the intensity, of the diaspora-homeland relationship. At the same time, the emphasis placed by nearly all experts on the loss of human capital and the pressure on the pension system corresponds directly with the findings of Hajdari and Krasniqi (2021) on sectoral "brain drain," and with the analysis of Mustafa and Gerovska-Mitev (2022) on the structural challenges of financing social protection across the Western Balkans.

4.2. Consequences for future generations

The sociologist's analysis of the risk of social isolation among older adults, combined with the observations of both social policy experts regarding the lack of "support from relatives," reaffirms in the Kosovar context what comparative literature had identified in other post-socialist, high-emigration contexts: the health and psychosocial consequences for "left-behind" parents in Moldova (Böhme *et al.*, 2015) and the low subjective wellbeing of left-behind children in the six-country European study (Bălțătescu *et al.*, 2023). This convergence between international evidence and the perceptions of local experts suggests that the family consequences of migration in Kosovo are not specific to the local context alone, but part of a broader pattern observed in transitional economies with high emigration. This fact is also closely linked to population aging and the emergence of residential care centers exclusively for older adults.

4.3. The role and influence of other factors

In contrast to the growing attention paid to "climate migration" in international literature, the environmental expert explicitly limited the role of environmental factors to "tertiary or quaternary," giving priority to economic and institutional explanations. We present this as one expert's perspective rather than as a broader empirical conclusion about Kosovo as a whole; a single informant's assessment, however well-grounded in professional experience, cannot establish the relative weight of environmental drivers for the population at large, and this question would benefit from dedicated quantitative research. This does not mean that the environmental dimension is irrelevant; the same expert highlighted important indirect consequences (a decline in local agricultural output, a growing trade deficit). This finding underscores the value of the cross-disciplinary approach adopted in this study: a reasonable assumption grounded in international literature was directly challenged by specific local expertise.

4.4. Divergence over policy models: A question for the Esping-Andersen framework

The divergence between the two social policy experts, one recommending Nordic/German models, the other regional Balkan models, can be understood through the classic "worlds of welfare" framework of Esping-Andersen (1990): the social-democratic (Nordic) model offers more ambitious social protection standards but requires a level of fiscal and institutional capacity markedly higher than that which Kosovo currently possesses, including high levels of taxation and a developed public sector. By contrast, welfare-state models in the Balkan region, often classified as "emerging regimes" or of the familial type, may offer more realistic transferability in the short term, but with markedly more modest standards and a greater role for the family in providing social support. This divergence, observed empirically among the experts themselves, suggests that the debate over "which model to follow" remains open even within Kosovo's own professional community, with direct implications for the design of long-term strategies. Viewed this way, the disagreement between Expert SP-1 and Expert SP-2 may reveal less a difference in preferred welfare philosophy than a deeper, unresolved tension between policy ambition and institutional feasibility in Kosovo: whether social policy should be designed around the standards Kosovo aspires to reach as a prospective EU member, or around the standards its current fiscal and administrative capacity can realistically sustain. Both positions are defensible, and the fact that two experts within the same policy field resolve this tension differently suggests that it is not yet settled within Kosovo's own policy community, let alone in the wider public debate.

4.5. Public health implications: Beyond workforce numbers to care complexity

The public health expert's account (Section 3.4) extends the discussion beyond workforce contraction and headcount ratios, which have so far dominated our analysis of pension and labor-market pressures. The physician's observation that older patients increasingly present with multimorbidity, and that this complexity is "not always captured by conventional administrative indicators" but nonetheless shapes length of hospital stay, intensive care transfers, and resource use, points to a dimension of population aging that

quantitative demographic indicators alone cannot capture. This concern is consistent with a growing body of nursing and health-services literature on the complexity of care independent of raw patient counts. For example, an Italian cohort study found that a validated measure of nursing-care complexity, based on actual nursing interventions, predicted in-hospital mortality among acute medical patients more strongly than routinely used indicators such as comorbidity (Ausili *et al.*, 2020), while related Italian work has shown that standardized measures of nursing complexity capture care demands that administrative diagnosis-based classifications miss (Cesare *et al.*, 2023). Read alongside our physician participant's account, this literature suggests that Kosovo's health system will face not only a shrinking workforce and a growing number of older patients, but also a rising share of clinically complex cases whose resource and staffing implications may be underestimated if policy planning relies on demographic projections alone. Future studies should examine whether demographic aging and workforce contraction in Kosovo are accompanied by increasing patient care complexity, since complexity-sensitive clinical data may reveal differences in care needs, resource utilization, length of stay, and risk of clinical deterioration that conventional demographic or administrative indicators alone may not capture.

4.6. Limitations of the study

This study has four main limitations. First, the small, purposive sample (six experts) is typical of exploratory qualitative studies, but does not allow for statistical generalization or representation of the entire Kosovar professional community; disciplines such as political science, international relations, and geography were not represented and may offer complementary perspectives. Second, although a public health perspective was included (Section 3.4), it reflects the view of a single physician and cannot capture the full range of perspectives within Kosovo's health sector. Third, transcripts were not returned to participants for member checking, and data saturation in the formal sense was not assessed, consistent with the study's exploratory, depth-oriented rather than representativeness-oriented purpose. Fourth, country-specific comparative data for North Macedonia and Montenegro were not available within the scope of this study, which limits the regional comparison presented in Section 1.1.4. Future research should incorporate these cases to enable a fuller Western Balkan comparison. Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish the quality of the study; on the contrary, they offer valuable direction for future research

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study explored the theoretical perspectives and the views of experts on the relationship between youth emigration and population aging in Kosovo, as well as the implications of this relationship for the sustainability of social policy. Based on the thematic analysis of six interviews with experts from relevant fields, several concrete conclusions can be drawn. First, experts across disciplines characterize the current dynamic in broadly similar terms, whereby youth emigration and population aging are considered interlinked processes, driven mainly by economic, institutional, social, and environmental factors. The main implications for social policy sustainability are identified in the growing pressure on the pension system, the loss of human capital, and the gap in community care services for "left-behind" older adults. The policy responses considered most urgent center on the creation of quality jobs, strengthening institutions, and expanding social services, while views diverge on the specific institutional models (Nordic/German versus Balkan) that Kosovo should follow. For policymakers, the findings identify three areas for further policy consideration: (i) developing community care services for older adults left behind by the emigration of their children, as a short-term priority, although we did not assess its implementation cost and this should not be assumed to be low; (ii) reviewing the long-term fiscal sustainability of the pension system before the dependency ratio deteriorates significantly; and (iii) sustained investment in the creation of quality jobs and the strengthening of institutional trust, identified by most experts as the most direct cause of continued emigration. Future research, including quantitative studies with larger, more representative samples and complexity-sensitive health data of the kind discussed in Section 4.5, would help test and deepen these findings.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the experts who voluntarily participated in the interviews for their time and willingness to contribute to this study.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Ferdi Kamberi, Zeqir Hashani
Formal analysis: Zeqir Hashani

Investigation: Zeqir Hashani
Methodology: Ferdi Kamberi
Writing – original draft: Ferdi Kamberi
Writing – review & editing: Ferdi Kamberi, Zeqir Hashani

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as it involved voluntary interviews with experts and did not involve any vulnerable populations or sensitive personal data. All participants provided verbal informed consent prior to the interviews and were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the intended use of their responses.

Consent for publication

All interviewees provided informed consent for the use of their responses in this publication. No identifying personal information or images are included in this manuscript.

Availability of data

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix

Interview guide

The following interview guide was used for all six semi-structured interviews. Part A (core questions) was asked of every participant; Part B contains discipline-specific questions tailored to each expert's field; Part C is the closing question asked of all participants.

Part A. Core Questions (asked of all participants)

1. How would you describe the current situation of youth emigration in Kosovo, based on your expertise?

2. Do you think Kosovo is facing an "accelerated demographic aging" process because of migration? Why?

3. How do you foresee Kosovo's demographic situation in the next 15–20 years if current trends continue?

Part B. Discipline-Specific Questions

Sociologist:

4. How does the continuous emigration of young people affect family structure and cohesion in Kosovo?

5. What changes have you observed in social norms/values in communities with high emigration?

6. How does this dynamic affect the role of women and older adults within the family?

Economist:

4. What are the main economic factors (unemployment, wages, opportunities) driving youth emigration?

5. What long-term economic cost (labor force, pension contributions, productivity) is the country incurring from the continued loss of young people?

6. How does diaspora remittance behavior compare to the loss of human capital?

Environmental Expert:

4. Are there environmental factors (climate change, air/water quality, land degradation) contributing to young people's decision to emigrate?

5. How might the departure of young people from rural areas affect the management of natural resources and the local environment?

6. Do you see a link between environmental policies (or their absence) and the sustainability of rural communities?

Social Policy/Pensions Experts:

4. How is the growing ratio between older adults and the active population affecting the sustainability of the pension system?

5. What concrete social policies are missing to support older adults "left behind" by their children's emigration?

6. Which other countries' (regional/European) policy models could Kosovo adapt?

Public Health Expert:

4. How is population aging (accelerated by youth emigration) affecting demand for healthcare services in Kosovo?

5. Have you observed a change in the country's epidemiological profile (e.g., rising chronic/degenerative disease linked to age) because of this dynamic?

6. Does the health system have sufficient capacity (geriatric-trained nurses, long-term care beds) to respond to the growing needs of older adults?

7. How does the continued emigration of young health professionals ("brain drain" in the health sector) affect the quality of care provided to older adults?

8. What concrete health policies do you think are missing to prepare for this demographic transformation?

Part C. Closing Question (asked of all participants)

From your professional perspective, what would be your main recommendation for policymakers?