



Policy Brief Report



Invisible Workers, Visible Risks: Exploring Kosovo's Labor Migration Challenges

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Prishtina, 2025

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Introduction

Kosovo has long been recognized as a country of emigration and diaspora. In recent years, however, the country has begun to emerge as a destination for migrant workers, marking a significant shift from its traditional role as a transit corridor to Europe. There is limited research on the factors driving this transformation, yet it is clear that the Kosovo labor market is experiencing significant changes, both internally and

in response to global trends. Labor shortages in key sectors have increased the demand for foreign workers, particularly from the Global South. While this influx addresses immediate economic needs, it has also revealed gaps in legal, institutional, and social frameworks that leave certain groups vulnerable to invisibility, exploitation, and systemic exclusion due to the lack of clear regulation and oversight.

Migration Trends and Statistics

The available data reveal not only a quantitative rise in labor migration to Kosovo but also a transformation in its dynamics. In 2018, the country registered 594 migrant workers; by 2021 this figure had more than doubled to 1,487 (IOM, 2023), signaling that Kosovo was becoming more than a transit point. The issuance of work permits followed a similar trajectory. In 2020, authorities granted 477 permits, whereas in 2022 the number reached 1,063 (MIA, 2022), demonstrating an institutional recognition of growing labor market needs. The pace of change has accelerated further: in the second quarter of 2024 alone, 1,918 new applications for work permits were filed, predominantly by citizens of Turkey, Bangladesh, the Philippines,

and Nepal (MIA, 2024). In the third quarter of 2024, there were 912 temporary residence permits for work purposes that were issued, with the majority of applicants being from Turkey, Serbia and North Macedonia. (MIA, 2024) In the fourth quarter of 2024, there were 1104 temporary residence permits for work purposes that were issued, with the biggest number of applicants being from Turkey. (MIA, 2024) In the first quarter of 2025, there were 1224 temporary residence permits issued for work purposes, in the second quarter there were 1365 issued and in the third quarter of 2025 there were 1212 issued. (MIA, 2025) There is an increase of applications in every quarter in 2025 compared to its respective quarter in 2024. Most

applicants are from Turkey, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania. In terms of Filipino workers, most data come from 2024, specifically in the April-June period, with 30 work permit applications and 20 approvals. In the July-September period, there were 32 approved applications. (MIA, 2025)

Yet these figures conceal deeper structural problems. The high volume of applications contrasts sharply with the sluggish pace of approvals, with many permits issued in 2024 corresponding to applications submitted two or even three years earlier. Such delays highlight the administrative bottlenecks of the current system and suggest that the

state apparatus is not yet fully equipped to manage the rising demand. Moreover, the distribution of permits underscores inequalities in access to regularization: between January and June 2024, Turkish workers obtained 1,103 permits, Bangladeshi workers 334, while only 20 were issued to Filipinas. This imbalance is not merely numerical but reflects broader policy blind spots, particularly regarding migrant women in domestic and care sectors. Consequently, while migration flows to Kosovo are increasing rapidly, the ability of institutions to process, regulate, and protect these workers has not kept pace, creating fertile ground for informality and exploitation.

Legal and Institutional Framework

The legal framework governing migrant workers in Kosovo appears comprehensive at first glance, but its application reveals important shortcomings. Migrant workers fall under the same protective umbrella as domestic workers through the Labour Law No. 03/L-212 (2009), which guarantees fundamental rights such as written contracts, equal treatment in wages, working hours, and occupational protections (Official Gazette of Kosovo, 2009). Complementing this, the Law No.

04/L-161 on Safety and Health at Work (2013) sets minimum standards for workplace safety, obligating employers to secure the health and well-being of all employees regardless of nationality (Official Gazette of Kosovo, 2013).

Their residency and employment status is regulated by the Law on Foreigners No. 04/L-219 (2013), later amended by Law No. 06/L-036 (2018) and most recently by Law No. 08/L-262 (2023), which together define conditions for

for entry, stay, and employment of foreign citizens in Kosovo (Official Gazette of Kosovo, 2013; 2018; 2023). Administrative procedures that affect migrant workers, such as applications for work permits and residence rights are further structured by the Law No. 05/L-031 on General Administrative Procedure (2016), which establishes principles of legality, efficiency, and transparency in public administration (Official Gazette of Kosovo, 2016).

To obtain a work permit in Kosovo, individuals and employers must follow specific regulations. According to recruitment agencies in Prishtina, their contract should comply with labor laws and provide a minimum gross wage of 420 euros per month, with possibilities for further remuneration based on the employee's performance.

On paper, these laws place migrant workers on equal footing with local

workers in terms of employment conditions, wages, and social protections. However, in practice, gaps between legislation and implementation are evident. Administrative burdens and prolonged waiting times for work permits undermine the very protections the legal framework promises. Moreover, the absence of a regulatory framework for direct household-based employment leaves a critical sector such as domestic and care work outside the scope of effective labor oversight. As a result, many migrant women employed in private homes operate in a legal vacuum, where protections exist formally but cannot be enforced. This gap illustrates a broader structural challenge: while Kosovo has aligned its legislation with international standards, enforcement capacity and sector-specific provisions remain insufficient, perpetuating invisibility and vulnerability among the most marginalized categories of migrant workers.

Gender and Sectoral Dimensions

The gender and sectoral distribution of migrant workers in Kosovo is neither uniform nor accidental; it reflects broader global dynamics of labor migration as well as domestic gaps in the Kosovar labor market. Workers arriving from Turkey are spread across a relatively balanced range of professions. Men and women alike are represented

in healthcare, engineering, education, information technology, and management, with many of them bringing formal qualifications that correspond to Kosovo's professional shortages. This distribution suggests that migration from Turkey is not only driven by economic necessity but also by targeted recruitment into higher-

skilled sectors where Kosovo faces a deficit of trained professionals.

By contrast, Bangladeshi workers, who have historically constituted the largest group using Kosovo as a transit country, are almost exclusively men, employed primarily in physically demanding and low-paid sectors such as construction, infrastructure maintenance, and seasonal labor. Their concentration in these fields reflects both structural demand in Kosovo's economy and global patterns in which South Asian men are often channeled into low-skilled, labor-intensive roles. This sectoral segmentation has consequences for their living conditions, as many reside in overcrowded accommodations provided by employers, further blurring the line between work and personal life.

Asian workers more broadly, particularly those from Nepal, India, and the Philippines, are concentrated in services such as education, hospitality, and gastronomy. However, the case of Filipino workers stands out as emblematic of gendered migration. Filipino workers are disproportionately represented in domestic and care work, a sector undervalued in Kosovo's economy but crucial to many households. These women are often employed to provide childcare, eldercare, or household maintenance, filling gaps in the country's weak social care infrastructure. Their labor is "invisible" in the sense that it occurs behind closed doors, in private homes,

beyond the reach of labor inspectors and state institutions.

This feminization of migration in the care sector underscores both global care chains, where women from the Global South migrate to provide care labor in wealthier or labor-deficient countries, and the specific vulnerabilities in Kosovo. Many Filipino workers are excluded from formal contracts due to the absence of legal frameworks for household-based employment. Even when formally employed, they are often misclassified in contracts under unrelated job titles such as "cleaners" or "office assistants" in a company, while in practice performing full-time domestic or care duties. This legal fiction renders them invisible to the system and contributes to their marginalization.

The sectoral and gendered segmentation of migrant workers therefore not only meets Kosovo's labor market needs but also reproduces hierarchies of gender, class, and nationality. Male workers are pushed into physically demanding but visible roles such as construction, while female workers, especially those from the Philippines, are absorbed into private households, where their labor remains unrecognized and undervalued. This duality exposes the structural dependence of Kosovo's economy on gendered forms of migration, while simultaneously highlighting the risks of exploitation and invisibility for those working in the most vulnerable sectors.

Key Challenges

The challenges faced by migrant workers in Kosovo are multi-dimensional. One of the first obstacles migrant workers face in Kosovo is bureaucracy in the work permit system. The issue does not necessarily stem from inefficiency within the Ministry of Internal Affairs itself, but from the slowness of the overall process and the lack of inter-institutional coordination. While work permits may take months or even years to be processed, many migrant workers are already employed during this waiting period. However, because institutions such as the Kosovo Tax Administration, the Labour Inspectorate, and the Employment Agency are not digitally connected to the permit system, they often lack real-time information on these workers. This institutional disconnect means that while migrants are actively participating in the labor market, the relevant oversight and monitoring bodies cannot track their status, ensure compliance with labor laws, or guarantee their access to social protections. Thus, the challenge lies not simply in bureaucratic delay, but in the systemic inefficiency of institutional coordination, which allows for legal uncertainty and fosters spaces where informality and exploitation can thrive.

From a legislative standpoint, the issue

is also that Kosovo lacks a precise legal definition of domestic workers which impacts a large part of migrant workers who work in the domestic care sector. As a result, the majority of migrant workers who work as domestic workers, lack proper labor and social protection because the legal framework pertaining to formal employees only applies to domestic workers under contract. Workers are particularly vulnerable in this situation because the majority of domestic work is really unreported. According to a survey published by IOM in 2023, 58% of the migrant workers questioned in Kosovo applied for their jobs via a recruitment agency. The majority paid the charge, which averaged 2,800 EUR, in their country of origin. According to 15% of respondents, their employer did not follow the terms and conditions of the agreement. Additionally, before arriving, migrants lacked access to information that should have assisted them to become ready for life and work in the region, and there was a lack of support services accessible after they arrived. According to the 2023 IOM report, few services available to the local population have adapted the needs of the newcomers. Migrants also cited three major needs which were mainly stable accommodation, food and health services.

Another significant challenge concerns professional qualifications. In Kosovo, the

formal recognition of degrees is not always required, which creates a situation where highly skilled migrant workers, such as doctors or other professionals from countries like Turkey, sometimes work in positions for which they do not have verified credentials. This mismatch between qualifications and practice can limit professional development, affect labor market efficiency, and raise broader questions about public safety and regulatory oversight.

The invisibility of migrant workers, particularly women employed in care roles, raises complex questions about systemic human rights protections.

Policy Recommendations

Kosovo faces complex challenges in governing labor migration, particularly in the context of household and care work. The invisibility of migrant workers, especially women, raises systemic human rights concerns, highlighting the need for both legal and institutional reforms. There are large protection gaps as a result of the misalignment between the actual employment circumstances of many migrant workers and the provisions of labor and social protection laws. Strengthening governance requires not only streamlining administrative processes for timely issuance of work

Without formal legal recognition or robust monitoring mechanisms, these workers may experience conditions in which exploitation becomes normalized and accountability is limited. This situation invites inquiry into how entrenched gender norms and the social undervaluation of care work contribute to broader patterns of exclusion and vulnerability. At the same time, the challenges faced by Kosovo's institutions in addressing these dynamics suggest gaps in the country's labor governance framework, highlighting potential risks to both domestic labor standards and international perceptions of compliance with human rights obligations.

permits but also developing a legal framework that formalizes domestic and care work, thereby addressing entrenched gender inequalities and reducing vulnerability to exploitation.

Effective monitoring and enforcement remain crucial. Labor inspections could be reinforced, complemented by alternative oversight models suitable for private households. Clear prohibitions on practices such as passport confiscation and stricter regulation of recruitment agencies are necessary. At the same time, worker empowerment through safe

reporting channels, legal aid, interpretation services, and systematic awareness campaigns, can mitigate risks associated with undocumented or informal employment. Employers, partners, and recruiting agencies can assist migrants in obtaining accurate information and preparing for their arrival. Host towns and local organizations can play an important role in integrating and retaining labor migrants and their families over time.

Institutional coordination is another key dimension. While Kosovo's Ministry of Internal Affairs has well-structured procedures, slow inter-agency communication limits timely data sharing among the Tax Administration, Inspectorate of Labour, and Employment Agency, reducing the effectiveness of workforce management (European Commission, 2023; World Bank, 2022). Exploring ways to integrate these systems and improve real-time information flow could enhance both worker protection and regulatory compliance.

Finally, Kosovo could strengthen protections for migrant workers and enhance labor market governance by negotiating bilateral employment agreements with countries that are key sources of labor, such as the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Turkey.

Such agreements would facilitate the legal recruitment of workers, ensure mutual recognition of qualifications where appropriate, and establish clear frameworks for rights, obligations, and dispute resolution. In addition, bilateral agreements could provide mechanisms to monitor working conditions, prevent exploitation, and improve coordination between sending and receiving countries. By formalizing these arrangements, Kosovo would not only safeguard migrant workers but also enhance the transparency, efficiency, and international credibility of its labor migration system.

Areas for Exploration and Actionable Strategies

Kosovo's governance of labor migration raises several critical questions. How can administrative processes be restructured to ensure timely issuance of work permits while also protecting migrant workers, particularly women in domestic and care roles, from exploitation? To what extent could legal reforms that formalize household employment help reduce the invisibility of these workers and address systemic gender inequalities?

Monitoring and enforcement also merit reflection. What models of oversight are most effective for work performed in private households, and how can labor inspections be complemented without imposing undue burdens? How can practices such as passport confiscation be systematically prevented, and what regulatory frameworks for recruitment agencies would both protect workers and ensure accountability?

Worker empowerment remains central. Which mechanisms such as safe reporting channels, legal aid, interpretation services, or awareness campaigns, are most effective in enabling undocumented or informal workers to claim their rights? How might

institutional coordination between the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Tax Administration, the Inspectorate of Labour, and the Employment Agency be improved, given current inefficiencies in data sharing and inter-agency communication (European Commission, 2023; World Bank, 2022)?

Finally, what role could international engagement play in strengthening protections for migrant workers? Could bilateral labor agreements and mutual recognition of qualifications with sending countries such as the Philippines and Bangladesh serve as effective tools to enhance both worker protection and Kosovo's international reputation?

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