

# EMIGRATIONS FROM KOSOVA IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES OF THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY- TREND AND CHALLENGES

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## Abstract:

In the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kosova is characterized as a territory with a very high rate of emigration, a rapid decrease in births and natural increase, followed by changes in the structure of the population by age, which have consequently caused challenges in many segments of life in Kosova.

High rate of emigration is the main factor that today Kosova is facing radical changes in its demographic profile. The situation is so unfavorable that it can be defined as a demographic crisis.

The demographic problems that Kosova is facing can be prevented or mitigated through population policies that would enable the creation of conditions for sustainable demographic development, which is achieved by creating conditions for people, particularly for the youth, to have confidence in building a future in their country.

If the population, particularly young people, have access to quality education and health care, if they are in stable employment and receive support for raising children, etc., they are less likely to emigrate and more likely to decide to have children. Eliminating the causes that push young people to emigrate is the key to cease the deepening of the demographic crisis in Kosova.

The perspective of future development made it necessary to take measures to control demographic processes, especially emigration and births, after the forecasts of Kosova's population show that in the future Kosova will face many challenges as a result directly from the unfavorable demographic developments, which in the following years and decades will only deepen further.

**Key words:** emigration, population, demographic sustainability, challenges, Kosova etc.

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## 1. Introduction

*Population (people) are the greatest asset of a country*

Population emigration from Kosova to European countries is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Kosova has remained a typical migratory territory. The main causes that forced the population to emigrate were and still remain: the low level of economic development, the destruction caused by wars, the unfavorable political situation, the construction of the system based on party criteria and nepotism, avoiding meritocracy and values in the construction of the system, the dissatisfaction of the citizens of Kosova with the perspective of the socio-economic future and with the general level of well-being, which is manifested by a high rate of unemployment (especially among young people) and a high percentage of people living in poverty, etc. Therefore, the economic issues related to unemployment and poverty are the main concerns of Kosova citizens. Recent opinion polls show that these two economic parameters are also national security threats that Kosova faces with. According to these data, about 70% of respondents believed that the high rate of unemployment is the biggest threat to Kosova (1). Considering the high rate of unemployment and the large number of people living below the poverty level, emigration is seen as an opportunity by the citizens of Kosova to find a better social and economic perspective abroad, turning emigrations into a risk for demographic, socio-economic and security developments in the country.

As a result of the high migratory flux, Kosova nowadays is facing radical changes in its demographic profile: on the one hand, there is a drastic reduction in the number of births - natural increase, while on the other hand, as a result of selective emigration, the population is aging with accelerated trends. The situation is so unfavorable that it can be defined as a demographic crisis. The demographic crisis that Kosova is facing today will deepen even further in the coming decades. Therefore, in order to reduce the consequences, it is necessary to undertake and implement genuine measures and policies.

Since emigrations are the most important factor in the decline or stagnation of the population of Kosova, it is necessary for the state to act in order to affect the

reduction of the causes that encourage emigration. Creating the conditions for people, especially for the youth to contribute to building a future in their country, is the key to stopping emigration and solving the demographic crisis in Kosovo. If the causes driving the population to emigrate are not addressed, other measures aimed at increasing the natality may simply result in more people fleeing the country.

## 2. External (international) emigrations of the population

Kosovo, for a period of more than a century, has been characterized by a negative migration balance, which means that the number of emigrants has been greater than the number of returnees-immigrants.

In the period 2000-2021, over 420,000 inhabitants left Kosovo (according to KAS statistics), with an average of over 21,000 inhabitants per year, although there was previously the conviction that with freedom and independence, Kosovo would also recover from this century-old wound.

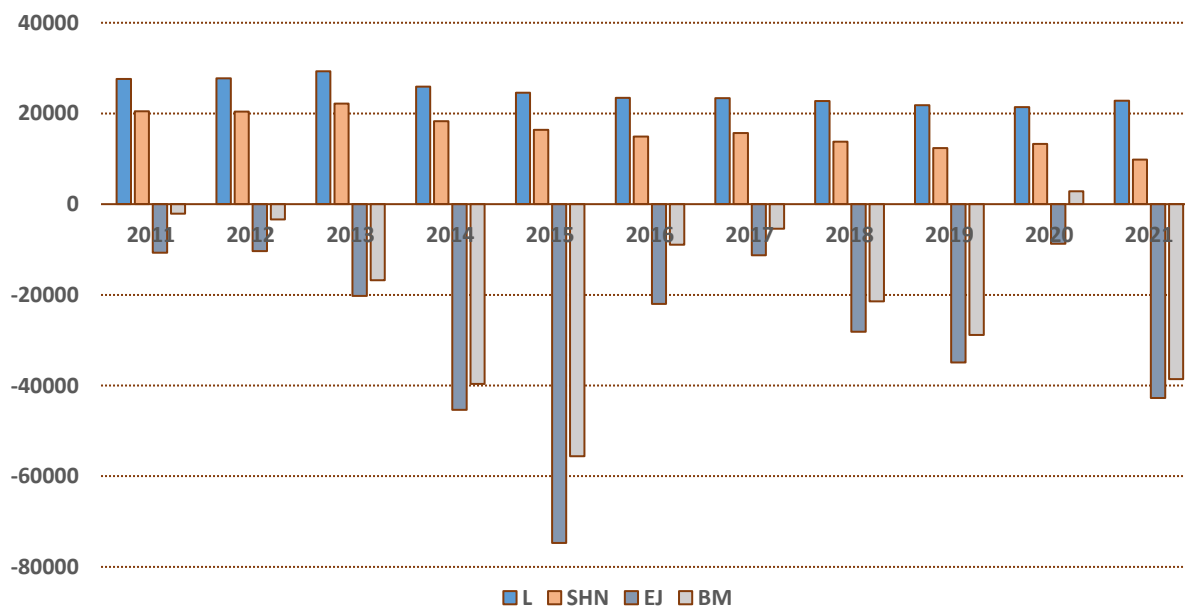
External emigration is one of the main reasons why Kosovo nowadays is characterized by unfavorable demographic trends such as: stagnation of the total

number of the population with a downward trend, rapid trends of decreasing the birth and natural increase, deterioration in the structures of the population by age - demographic age, as well as other population structures. The situation is so unfavorable that it can be considered a demographic crisis.

Since the end of the 1999 war, strong waves of emigration from Kosovo have been associated with the second decade of the XXI century, with a culmination during the years 2014 and 2015, which are also associated with the economic crisis and global uncertainty. **While in the beginning the reasons for emigration were of an economic nature, now the loss of hope and uncertainty about the future in Kosovo has become the main reason for emigration.**

**The emigrations of the two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the most unfavorable waves so far. This trend is developing in circumstances of reduced births, decline in natural increase, stagnation with decreasing trends in the total number of the population and the accelerated process of deformation of the population structures, particularly that by the age towards the aging of the population.**

**Graph 1.** Trends in births, natural increase, emigrations and external migration balance in Kosovo 2011-2021



### 2.1. Trends of external emigrations of the population 2011-2021

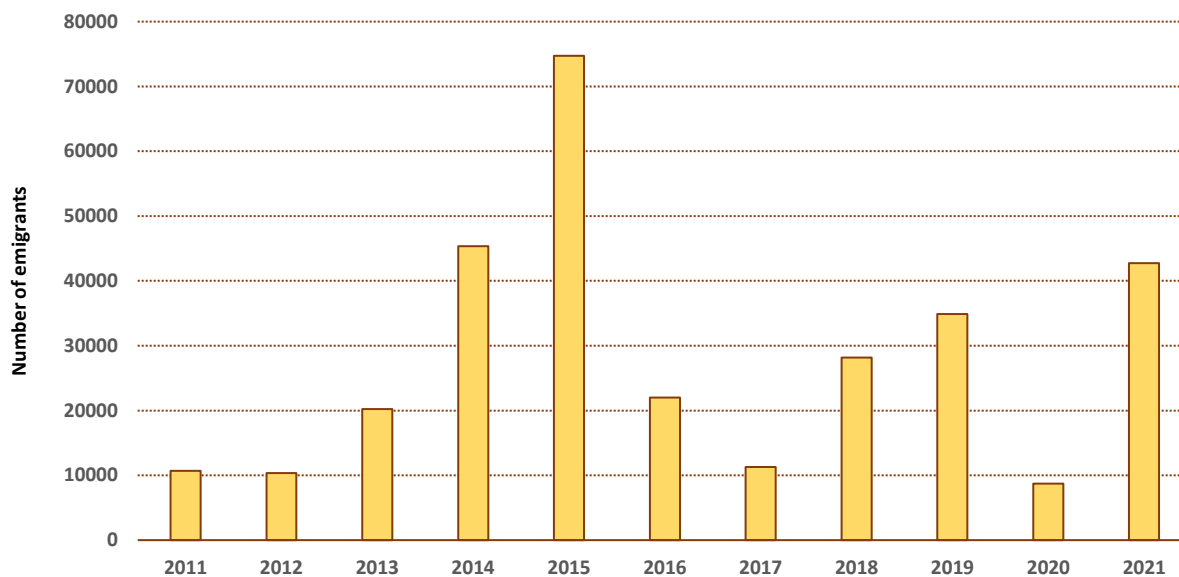
As in many countries of the world, also in Kosovo, emigration statistics are incomplete because many residents do not deregister their residence in Kosovo before they leave or they do so long after moving. However, even such incomplete data show that in the period 2011-2021 more than 309 thousand inhabitants moved abroad, this number is much higher (almost 190 thousand more) than in the period 2001-2010, when more than 119 thousand of them moved.

Although the emigration statistics are incomplete, they are the only official data on the number of emigrants presented in table 1. As can be seen from the table and graph on population emigration in Kosovo 2011-2021, from 2011 to 2015 there is a constant increase in the number of emigrants. The year 2014 and particularly 2015, represent the years with an extreme increase in the number of emigrants where the number of emigrants compared to 2011 had increased by 323.9% or 4.2 times (2014) and 598.8% or close to 7 times (2015). Excluding

the mass exodus and deportation of about 1 million Albanians by the Milosevic regime in 1999, between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, an unprecedented phenomenon of illegal emigration occurred in Kosova (2). Also, in the period 2017-2021, there was a continuous growth, with exception of the year 2020 when Kosova was characterized by a positive migration balance. The main reason for this is the pandemic of the disease COVID-19, due to which many countries closed their borders, so the

employment of foreign nationals in these countries became difficult or impossible. Thus, more than 150 countries had imposed such restrictive measures, making this period with the most movement restrictions in the history of international travel (3). However, in 2021, the number of emigrants was much higher than in 2020 (4.8 times higher) and close to 2014, so it can be expected that after 2021 there will be no decrease in the number of emigrants.

**Graph 2.** Number of emigrants from Kosova 2011-2021



**That emigrations have reached alarming proportions is also proven by the fact that during 2021, 119 people left Kosova within a day, or 1 person every 12 minutes.** Based on the preliminary data, during 2022 the situation only worsened even more.

Even more worrying is the fact that based on various surveys carried out in the country, about 60% of the respondents have expressed the desire to leave Kosova, mainly the new generations (20 to 40 years old) who make up the main demographic and birth contingent, the contingent of work, security, etc., causing a decline in "human capital", as the main carrier of socio-economic development.

Despite the fact that Kosova faces a very high emigration flux, more than half of Kosova's citizens (55.4%) agree that emigration will have a negative impact on future developments in the country, 15.3% agree that there will be none impact, 16.9% do not know what impact they will have, while 11.6% agree that emigration will have a positive impact (4).

Taking into account the current progress but also what is expected in economic development, employment opportunities and other unfavorable circumstances, for some more time there should be expected migratory movements of the population with undiminished intensity. Unfortunately, Kosova's institutions have done very little in addressing the emigration driving factors such as:

economic development, unemployment, prospects for a better and safer, more dignified life, etc.

The situation in terms of emigrations may even deteriorate in the case of visa liberalization and the union of Kosova with the EU, which may trigger an increasing wave of emigration, given the fact that Kosova lags behind the EU countries in the socio-economic sphere, since one of the main factors of migrations is the difference in incomes between the countries of origin and the hosting countries. Such a tendency is also based on the practices of various countries which, after liberalization and membership in the EU, have faced an increased migratory flux.

## 2.2. External emigrations from Kosova by municipalities

The analysis of emigration at the level of municipalities provides us with information about the spatial dimension of this phenomenon in Kosova, as well as the ascertainment whether there have been significant changes in certain periods of time.

In order to ascertain the spatial change and the fact that there have been changes in the intensity of external emigration, there will be used as the indicator - the rate of emigration, which represents the ratio between the number of emigrants in relation to the number of the resident population in 2021 in the respective municipality (per 100 inhabitants). The number of emigrants in relation to the

number of resident population in Kosova differs greatly among municipalities. The data from the 2011 population census show that in municipalities with a small number of resident population, such as: Shtërpca, Graçanica, Ranillug and Mamusha, the emigration was lower, below 10%.

In this census, Kosova had 21.4% of the population living abroad, whereas between 1-9% of the population abroad was from 9 municipalities, 10-19% 12 municipalities, 20-29% 13 municipalities, 30-39% 3 municipalities and over 40% 1 municipality. In relation to the resident population, Suhareka had the largest number of emigrants in the 2011 census, nearly 47% of the population lived abroad, Klina 34.1%, Mitrovica 33.2%, Gjakova 31.4%, etc. (5)

The data and the difference (increase) in the data on emigration at the municipal level, between the 2011 population census and the emigration statistics of 2021 show that the phenomenon of emigrations in many municipalities has taken on worrying proportions.

Based on the statistics of the Kosovo Agency of Statistics in 2021, the participation of the population abroad in Kosova had reached 36.6% from 21.4% in the 2011 population census, while there was a significant increase in this participation in its municipalities. Thus, between 1-

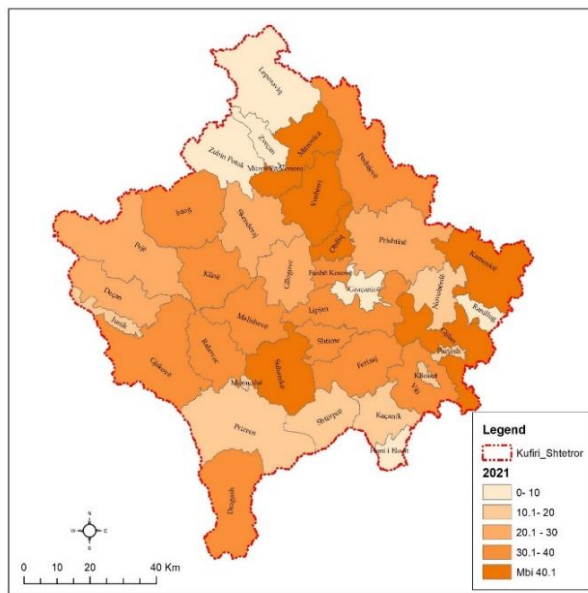
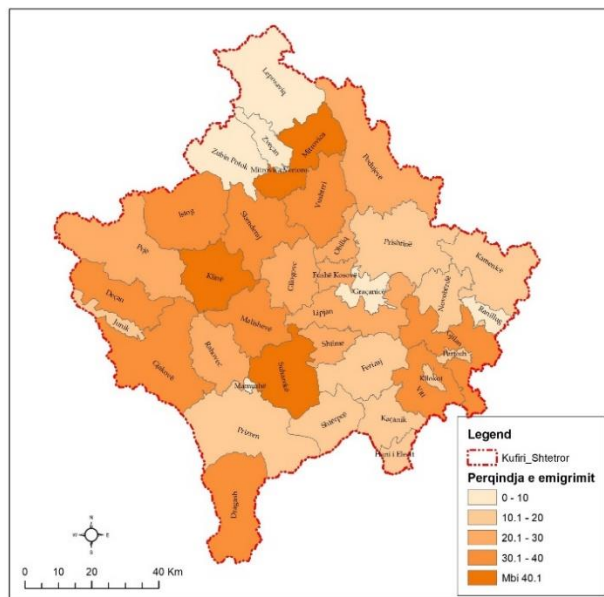
9% of the population abroad was from 6 municipalities, 10-19% 7 municipalities, 20-29% 6 municipalities, 30-39% 8 municipalities and over 40%, 11 municipalities. In relation to the resident population, Suhareka, Obiliq, Gjilan, Mitrovica, Vushtrri, etc. had the largest number of population involved in emigration.

### 2.3. Emigration by Municipalities 2011-2021

Migration, especially external emigration, continued with considerable intensity during the period 2011-2021. During this period, almost all municipalities in Kosovo were characterized by a negative migration balance, except for the year 2020 when, due to the pandemic (when movements, especially abroad, were restricted), only the municipalities of Prishtina and Kaçanik had a negative migration balance; all other municipalities in 2020 had a positive balance.

Data (5 and 6) published by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics show that at the Kosovo level, in the period 2011-2021, an average of 15.9 residents (16 residents per 100) were involved in migration compared to the total number of residents in 2021

**Map 1 and 2:** The number of emigrant population compared to the resident population by municipalities in 2011 and 2021, expressed as a percentage.



As in the 2011 population census and during the 2011-2021 period, in municipalities with a small number of resident populations, migration was lower, such as in Partesh, Graçanica, Zvečan, Zubin Potok, Klllokot, Hani i Elezit, North Mitrovica, and Deçan, municipalities that had fewer than 5 emigrants per 100 residents. However, it should be noted that low migration in some municipalities (especially those with a majority Serb population) may also be due to incomplete statistics (non-inclusion) and the fact

that these municipalities are already experiencing demographic aging (lack of migration potential).

During the 2011-2021 period, in relation to the resident population, the municipalities with the highest number of emigrants (per 100 residents) were: Obiliq 45.4%, Gjilan 40.3%, Kamenica 38.6%, Vushtrri 31.3%, Fushë Kosovë 28.3%, Suhareka 26.6%, Ferizaj 22.2%, Mitrovica 20.4%, Shtime 20.4%, etc. It should also be noted that external

migration is the dominant form of migration throughout the observed period and in almost all municipalities in Kosovo.

### 3. The Consequences of emigration

The unfavorable economic situation in Kosovo, the decline in the standard of living for many citizens, the inability to find work even in one's profession, long waits for employment, insufficient wages considering qualifications, an unfavorable climate, and the loss of prospects for a better life, especially among the youth, are some of the most important economic factors driving individuals to decide to emigrate temporarily or permanently from Kosovo.

In the UNDP Public Pulse survey of 2022, the unfavorable economic situation—unemployment (36.4%) and poverty (21.1%)—are the main problems Kosovo currently faces (7). Unemployment, poverty, and the search for a better future for their families remain the primary reasons for migration among Kosovars, especially among the youth.

Among the youth, the number one reason for considering emigration was the lack of job opportunities in Kosovo, according to 67% of respondents (55% in 2018). Another 45% cited the lack of personal prospects as a reason (32% in 2018), and 39% mentioned the unfavorable economic situation in their families/low income levels (38% in 2018). The findings from focus groups further emphasized the issues of unemployment, financial difficulties, and lack of prospects as possible reasons for migration (8).

Over the last twenty years, Kosovo has been characterized by massive emigration, especially among highly educated youth. This is evidenced by the increase in the participation of emigrants with higher education (before emigration) from 17.8% in the 1990s to around 31.5% (9) in the first decade of the 21st century.

Particularly concerning is the recent trend of increased emigration not only of individuals but also of entire families (10). Many of the young people who emigrate do not leave alone; in most cases, they move with their families, and many others start families in the host country, significantly impacting Kosovo's demographic landscape.

The consequences of migration manifest in all segments of life:

- **Demographic:** (the size of the population, causing the loss of the segment of the population that constitutes development potential, birth rates, natural population growth, and the structure of the population—demographic, economic, social, ethnic, etc.—leading to natural depopulation, brain drain, and population aging);
- **Socio-economic:** (low per capita GDP growth, slowed economic growth, loss of labor force, decreased competitiveness, negative impact on the social system and pensions, emigration of qualified individuals, etc.);
- **Education system:** (the reduction in the number of pupils and students as a result of emigration and declining natural growth—over the last seven years in Kosovo, a reduction in the number of pupils by 16.1% in primary and lower secondary education, 11.2% in

upper secondary education, and 21.3% in higher education has been observed in the last five years);

- **National security:** (In the 21st century, the concept of "security" has transformed significantly and is no longer equated only with military security but also includes other forms such as demographic, economic, ecological, political, and other types of security);
- **And more.**

Due to space constraints, only the consequences of migration on demographic developments in Kosovo are addressed in this paper.

#### 3.1. Demographic Consequences

Demographic issues are of crucial importance for the development of any state because development cannot be achieved under unfavorable demographic conditions where migration plays a significant role.

Migration affects the size of the population by causing the loss of that segment of the population which constitutes development potential, birth rates (with a decline in births), natural population growth, and the population structures (demographic, economic, social, ethnic, etc.), leading to natural depopulation, brain drain, and population aging.

As a result of the decrease in the number of births from 38,687 (2000) to 22,830 (2021), representing a decline of 15,857 births or nearly a halving of births (-41%), and the increase in the number of deaths, natural increase is characterized by an even faster decline compared to birth rates. Thus, compared to 2000 when the natural increase was 34,296 people, it decreased to 9,811 in 2021, representing a reduction of 24,485 people, or about 3/4 (-71.4%). The natural increase in 2021 is similar to that of the second half of the 1930s.

The scale of the decline in the number of births is illustrated by the fact that in Kosovo in 2008, an average of 94 babies were born per day, while in 2021 this number decreased to 62 births per day, and regarding natural increase, from 76 new residents to only 27 residents.

The significant impact of migration on the decline in birth rates and natural increase is also evidenced by the increase in the share of births and natural increase that occurred abroad. From 2011 to 2021, the share of births outside Kosovo increased from 19.3% to 31.8% of the total number of births, meaning that migration has also taken away a significant portion of the birth rate—about 1/3.

The rapid decline in natural increase and selective migration (ages 20-39 constitute nearly half of the emigrants) have accelerated the process of population aging. For example, while in 2011 people aged 60 and over constituted 9.6% of the population, in 2021 this share increased to 13.3%. At the same time, the age group 0-19 years has shown a trend of decreasing participation from 38.1% to 32.3%. Population aging has negative consequences for demographic, economic, social developments, etc.

To prevent population aging due to the predominance of young age groups in migration flows, it is necessary to discourage external migration of the population at a young age through improvements in conditions, opportunities, access, and integration of youth into professional training,

vocational education, university education in market-demanded fields, and the labor market.

Alongside the concerning negative demographic trends of today, recent migration trends are increasingly impacting other areas of life, such as the labor market, destabilization of educational and health systems, and in the coming years will also affect the economic, social, and pension systems, among others, for an extended period. In the long term, the old structure of the workforce, negative natural increase, and the departure of youth from Kosovo will threaten the functioning of pension and disability insurance funds and health insurance, which will lack sufficient funds to cover future obligations.

To reduce the negative socio-economic effects of migration, it is necessary to adopt a series of measures and strategies for population policies, measures for migration sustainability, and a series of economic reforms that would improve the business environment, stimulate job creation, favor investments, and restore optimism among youth, which would mitigate and reduce the emigration contingent from Kosovo, transforming migration from a negative process into a positive one.

## Conclusion

Mass emigration from Kosovo can now be considered a threat to the demographic, economic, and social prosperity of Kosovar society. Therefore, an imperative for Kosovo's current and future development is that the emigration of its population becomes sustainable. Sustainable migration implies proactive demographic, economic, social, technological, and regional policies that will ensure Kosovo remains an attractive place to live, primarily for its residents.

Since migration is the most significant factor in the decline or stagnation of Kosovo's population, it is necessary for the state to act to influence the reduction of the causes driving emigration. This can be achieved by increasing efforts to reduce economic and psychological insecurity, accelerating economic and social development, creating an atmosphere of prosperity, and supporting health and educational programs. If the causes driving the population to emigrate are not addressed, other measures aimed at increasing birth rates may simply result in more people leaving the country. Creating conditions for people, especially youth, to have confidence in building a future in their own country is key to stopping the demographic crisis in Kosovo. If the population—particularly young people—has access to quality education and healthcare, stable employment, and support for child-rearing, they are less likely to emigrate and more likely to decide to have children.

However, if measures are not prompt and effective, merely reducing emigration and implementing the measures outlined above will not be sufficient. It is also necessary to consider strategies for attracting emigrants from other countries, which is a process fraught with many challenges.

Today, due to the lack of policies, emigration and the diaspora may be considered more of a loss and threat than an asset and partner, even though in reality, the diaspora is a valuable asset in the establishment of the state of Kosovo.

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