

**BSF Report 1**



# **LOST POTENTIAL:**

## **UNDERSTANDING YOUTH MIGRATION DRIVERS AND LABOR MARKET PERCEPTIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

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**BSF** BALKAN  
STUDIES  
FOUNDATION

# LOST POTENTIAL: UNDERSTANDING YOUTH MIGRATION DRIVERS AND LABOR MARKET PERCEPTIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

IDEFE BSF Report 1/DOI:10.51331/report1 | ISBN : 978-608-4944-28-7

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*Editorial Board:* Bujamin Bela, Dilek Kütük, Mustafa Işık, Enes Turbić

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*Design:* iyicalismalar.tr

*Printed by:* Ajgraf

*Cite this paper:* Bajrami Ollogu, E. & Xhelili, A. (2025), *Lost Potential: Understanding Youth Migration Drivers and Labor Market Perceptions in North Macedonia*, BSF Report, Skopje: IDEFE Publications.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study explores the rising trend of youth emigration from North Macedonia and youth perceptions regarding the labor market in the country. Our research focuses on university-aged individuals (18 - 30 years old). It explores their motivations, perceptions, and structural challenges that shape young people's migration intentions and assesses how these dynamics contribute to the country's ongoing brain drain. In essence, we tend to explore the aspirations, motivations, and perceptions of young people regarding potential migration and their views on labor market opportunities in the country.

As the country faces an ongoing trend of youth emigration, particularly to Western European countries, the consequences on the domestic labor market are becoming increasingly evident. Therefore, this research aims to identify the key push and pull factors that influence young people's decision to emigrate, with particular attention to the economic, social, and educational conditions in North Macedonia. Through an empirical study, involving youth between 18 to 30 years old, the research investigates how youth perceive the labor market opportunities at home (country of origin) and abroad (eventual countries of destination). The analysis further focuses on the short and long-term impacts of youth emigration on the local workforce, including the loss of skilled labor and the challenges faced by the remaining workforce. Employing a quantitative method approach offers insights into the drivers of youth migration and provides recommendations for policies aimed at retaining talent and fostering a more resilient labor market in the country. Analyzing the data on a sample of 309 participants from all the country's regions, the study reveals that over 57% of youth have considered emigrating, driven primarily by limited employment opportunities, low wages, weak meritocracy, and political instability.

The findings highlight that dissatisfaction with domestic labor market conditions is a dominant push factor, while better job prospects, higher salaries, and improved quality of life in foreign countries serve as pull factors.

Key insights show that:

- Confidence in employment is strongly linked to emigration intent. Youth who feel unprepared or unsure about securing jobs are more likely to consider leaving.
- Perceptions of the labor market are overwhelmingly negative. Nearly 65% view it as weak or very weak, and 76% believe the country does not offer enough opportunities for young people.
- Field of study and gender are significantly associated with migration intentions. Social science and humanities graduates, and women, report a higher inclination to emigrate.
- Nearly half of respondents (49.8%) prefer temporary emigration, while a significant portion is open to returning if favorable conditions improve in North Macedonia.

Statistical analysis confirms the validity of four hypotheses, establishing significant relationships between emigration intent and factors such as job preparedness, labor market perceptions, gender, and academic background.

The research concludes that youth emigration is a critical socioeconomic issue with long-term consequences for North Macedonia's development. However, it also presents an opportunity. Through targeted reforms, such as improving job quality, aligning education with labor market needs, and ensuring transparent recruitment, youth migration can be mitigated.

Key Policy Recommendations:

1. *Labor Market Development*: with a focus on strengthening youth employment opportunities.

To effectively reduce youth emigration, North Macedonia must prioritize creating meaningful job opportunities tailored to young people's needs. This includes launching employment programs specifically for recent graduates, ensuring that job quality, not just quantity, is addressed. Salaries should reflect living costs and align with regional standards to reduce the financial incentive to migrate. Additionally, offering fiscal benefits to businesses that employ young workers can encourage the private sector to become more youth-inclusive and dynamic.

2. *Education and Employment Linkage*: focused on bridging the gap between education and the labor market.

A critical step toward improving youth retention is enhancing the relevance of higher education to labor market demands. Universities should regularly revise academic programs to align with evolving industry needs, ensuring that students graduate with skills that employers seek. Expanding access to internships, apprenticeships, and dual-education systems will provide students with practical experience and improve their readiness for employment. Stronger cooperation between universities and industry actors can facilitate smoother school-to-work transitions.

3. *Recruitment Transparency & Meritocracy*: focused on promoting transparency and fairness in hiring practices.

Restoring trust in institutions among young people requires concrete steps to eliminate nepotism and favoritism from recruitment processes. Public and private sectors should adopt transparent and merit-based hiring systems, possibly supported by digital platforms that reduce human bias. Ensuring that employment decisions are based on qualifications and performance will improve young people's confidence in domestic opportunities and help build a more equitable labor market.

4. *Return Migration & Diaspora Engagement*: develop institutional mechanisms for encouraging return migration and engaging the Diaspora.

The country can benefit from policies that make return migration more appealing. These may include streamlined recognition of foreign qualifications, financial support for returnees, and housing assistance. Additionally, building formal networks with the diaspora and inviting skilled emigrants to contribute to national development can transform brain drain into brain circulation. Circular migration programs, where youth can study or work abroad temporarily with pathways to return, may also serve as an effective model for retaining talent long-term.

5. *Youth Entrepreneurship Support*: focused on the support of youth-led entrepreneurship. Empowering young people to create their employment through entrepreneurship is another vital strategy.

The government and relevant institutions should provide seed funding, access to business incubators, and mentorship programs to help young entrepreneurs launch and sustain their ventures. Incorporating entrepreneurship education into university curricula will equip students with the knowledge and mindset necessary to innovate, take initiative, and contribute to job creation, thereby reducing dependence on emigration as a solution.

By addressing the root causes of youth dissatisfaction, North Macedonia can reverse the trend of brain drain and build a more inclusive, sustainable labor market for its young population. Comprehensively, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of migration trends in the country, offering valuable perspectives on the broader socioeconomic implications of youth emigration in a post-transition society.

# Introduction

In the last two decades, North Macedonia has experienced a significant and persistent trend of emigration, particularly among its young population. Youth emigration has become one of the most significant challenges for the country over the past few decades, particularly during the transition period. As the country has been navigating its post socialist transformation, a growing number of citizens have been leaving the country in search of better living conditions and employment opportunities abroad. Many studies have shown that this trend, which has accelerated since the 1990s, seems to be mainly driven by the country's relatively high unemployment rates, economic stagnation, political crisis, and limited career prospects for young graduates. Despite efforts by the governments throughout the years to address these issues, youth emigration remains a persistent phenomenon, particularly as young people see futures that are more promising in Western Europe instead of choosing to remain and contribute to the country's development.

North Macedonia has one of the highest rates of youth emigration in the Western Balkans, with many young people aged 18-34 opting to migrate to countries within the European Union and beyond. According to official data from the State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia for 2024, a total of 10,354 people emigrated in the previous year, of whom 2,372 were young people aged 15 to 29.<sup>1</sup>

Structural challenges such as high youth unemployment, limited economic opportunities, political instability, and weak institutional trust have been important factors driving these rising emigration rates. In 2023, the youth unemployment rate (ages 15-29) was 25.4%, while the general unemployment rate in the country was 13% (Stojceska et al., 2024). Furthermore, other drivers of this emigration are considered the economic hardship, lack of job security, and a perceived lack of opportunities for personal and professional growth within the domestic labor market. Graduates often face a harsh reality of limited job openings in their fields of study, while those who find employment frequently encounter low wages and poor working conditions. Additionally, social factors such as a desire for improved living standards, better healthcare, and higher-quality education also contribute to the decision to emigrate.

Politically, while North Macedonia has made significant strides toward European Union integration, many young people remain dissatisfied with the slow pace of reforms, widespread corruption,

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1 State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2024). Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of North Macedonia 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.stat.gov.mk/publikacii/2024/SG2024-web.pdf>

and the country's political instability. This has fostered a sense of disillusionment among the youth, who often view migration as the most viable option for securing a better future.

The consequences of youth emigration in North Macedonia are far-reaching, affecting not only the labor market but also the country's demographic and social structure. The "brain drain" effect, where highly skilled and educated individuals leave the country, intensifies existing labor shortages in key sectors such as healthcare, education, and technology. Moreover, this outflow of young talent presents a serious challenge for economic growth, as it undermines the capacity of local industries to innovate and expand. For the 2007- 2024 period, North Macedonia was ranked as the sixth country with the highest levels of brain drain in the world<sup>2</sup>. The country faces the dual challenge of retaining its educated youth while simultaneously addressing the factors that push them abroad.

## Migration as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon

Migration is a long-standing phenomenon, rooted in human history and driven by diverse factors such as economic disparities, political unrest, environmental pressures, and aspirations for better living standards. Historically, migration intensified during industrialization, when people moved from underdeveloped regions to areas offering more economic opportunities (McNeill, 1984). The United Nations recognizes migration as involving both spatial and temporal dimensions, generally considering individual migrants if they reside in a foreign country for at least one year (Osaki-Tomita, 2017). Migration encompasses economic, social, and political drivers, making it an increasingly relevant subject in the social sciences (Laczko & Anich, 2013).

The dynamics of population movements are quite complex and varied. Migration drivers can often be a combination of globalization, climate, and social factors interacting. The decision to move may be influenced by a wide range of economic, social, demographic, political, and environmental factors. None of these factors, however, acts in isolation; they tend to operate in combination with each other. Climate change or environmental degradation has emerged as a leading trigger factor of migration in recent times. Throughout human history, migration has always been an important adaptation strategy in response to adverse environmental conditions (Hossin, 2020).

Another perspective highlights migration as a decision influenced by a complex interplay of contextual and multifaceted factors. Migration can be a decision taken in the context of personal needs, livelihood challenges and opportunities, stress, urgency, and uncertainty, based on incomplete information about migration prospects and possible outcomes of alternative behavioral options. Thus, migration decisions are both situational and contextual. It is usually not a single

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2 For more see: The Global Economy: Human flight and brain drain - Country rankings. [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/human\\_flight\\_brain\\_drain\\_index/Europe/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/human_flight_brain_drain_index/Europe/)

driver but more often a complex combination of economic, political, social, and other developments and events that may dynamically influence both migration opportunities as well as the willingness and ability to migrate (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). Surveys by Gallup World Poll suggest that more than 750 million adults would like to migrate if they had the chance to do so (Esipova et al., 2018). Whatever the type of migration is, the core choice involves calculating the risks and benefits of moving versus staying and the ultimate decision to move may be influenced by a wide range of economic, social, demographic, political and environmental factors. These include improving income and standards of living, pursuing quality education, getting reunited with family members, escaping political persecution and getting rid of environmental threats (Hossin, 2020).

In his widely cited paper, Hein de Haas (2011) introduces a comprehensive framework that classifies migration drivers into macro (structural), meso (intermediate), and micro (individual) levels, highlighting their interaction. Migration is a complex phenomenon shaped by a dynamic interplay of factors at these different levels. At the macro level, large-scale structural factors such as economic inequality, labor market demands, political instability, conflict, and environmental changes influence migration. These factors create the broad conditions that push people to leave their home countries or attract them to others. The meso level involves social networks, Diasporas, cultural ties, and migration systems that help facilitate and sustain migration flows. These connections often serve as bridges, lowering the costs and risks associated with moving. At the micro level, individual choices are affected by personal traits such as age, gender, education, skills, aspirations, risk tolerance, and family circumstances. Overall, these three levels demonstrate that migration is not caused by a single reason but results from complex, interconnected forces operating across society (De Haas, 2011).

Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long (2018) highlight that new approaches should be reexamined when identifying the so-called push and pull factors. They criticize the traditional push-pull model and expand it by including a layered, multilevel understanding of migration drivers, such as structural, network, and individual factors.

In today's interconnected and highly competitive global economy, the migration of highly skilled individuals, commonly referred to as "brain drain", has become a defining feature of labor mobility. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in developing and transition economies, where systemic challenges such as limited research funding, political instability and weak institutional support systems hinder the professional growth of educated youth. As a result, skilled professionals, including scientists, engineers, healthcare workers, IT specialists, and academics, are increasingly drawn to countries that offer better career pathways, advanced technological infrastructure, competitive salaries, and greater recognition of merit (Docquier & Rapoport, 2006; Kaya, 2009).

In many cases, this outflow of talents represents a significant loss of public investment, as emigrants often receive their education in the country of origin but contribute their expertise to foreign labor markets. Meanwhile, destination countries benefit from the influx of trained human

capital without bearing the costs of its development. Countries that strategically invest in higher education, innovation ecosystems, and inclusive labor markets are more likely to become magnets for such global talent. Conversely, nations unable to retain their skilled workforce face growing challenges in maintaining competitiveness, fostering innovation, and achieving sustainable development. This imbalance not only aggravates global inequalities but also deepens socioeconomic gaps within the countries experiencing high levels of brain drain.

In our research, we also tend to analyze the migration drivers in the country context and discuss some of the implications in the labor market.

## Migration drivers and youth in the context of North Macedonia

North Macedonia has been an emigration country ever since the post–World War II period. Among all the republics of the former Yugoslavia, it had the lowest post-war standard of living, which helped to spur accelerated emigration in the 1950s and 1960s to Western European countries, but even more frequently to the US, Canada, and Australia (European Training Foundation, 2021). The country has experienced a sustained and escalating trend of emigration, particularly among its youth population. Since the early 1990s, the country has undergone significant socio-economic and political transformations, yet persistent structural barriers, such as chronic unemployment, underdeveloped job markets, political instability, and limited avenues for upward mobility, have continued to push citizens abroad (Petreski, 2021). Additionally, professional development seems to be a new driving force for youth to leave the country (Xhelili et al., 2022).

The reasons why people migrate have been theorized and studied for decades. Migration theories establish multiple reasons why, when, where, and how people migrate, including economic, political, social, cultural, demographic, and ecological factors. Czaika & Reinprecht (2022), based on various studies on migration, have synthesized the most identified migration drivers. The following is considered to be the taxonomy of migration drivers, and it includes a set of categories known as driver dimensions, and for each driver dimension a set of driving factors have been identified<sup>3</sup>:

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3 For more see: Czaika, M., Reinprecht, C. (2022). Migration Drivers: Why Do People Migrate?. In: Scholten, P. (eds) Introduction to Migration Studies. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8\\_3](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_3)

| Driver dimensions      | Driving factors (with link to migration research hub index) |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Demographic            | Population Dynamics                                         |
|                        | Family Size and Structure                                   |
| Economic               | Economic and Business Conditions                            |
|                        | Labor market and Employment                                 |
|                        | Urban / Rural Development & Living standards                |
|                        | Poverty & Inequality                                        |
| Environmental          | Climate change and environmental conditions                 |
|                        | Natural disasters and environmental shocks                  |
| Human development      | Education services and training opportunities               |
|                        | Health services and situation                               |
| Individual             | Personal resources and migration experience                 |
|                        | Migrant aspirations and attitudes                           |
| Politico-institutional | Public infrastructure, services and provisions              |
|                        | Migration governance and infrastructure                     |
|                        | Migration policy and other public policies                  |
|                        | Civil and political rights                                  |
| Security               | Conflict, war and violence                                  |
|                        | Political situation, repression and regime transitions      |
| Socio-cultural         | Migrant communities and networks                            |
|                        | Migrant communities and networks                            |
|                        | Gender relations                                            |
| Supranational          | Globalization and (post)colonialism                         |
|                        | Transnational ties                                          |
|                        | International relations and geopolitical transformations    |

Nevertheless, migration scholars often emphasize the need to identify and analyze push-pull factors based on each context, in order to deeply understand the main migration drivers in a specific country context or region. In terms of migration drivers, the mainstream economic factor still remains a central push factor, although recent research highlights the growing importance of non-economic drivers, including widespread dissatisfaction with governance, entrenched corruption, a lack of institutional transparency, and a perceived absence of meritocracy in public life. These conditions contribute not only to a loss of trust in national institutions but also to a sense of civic disengagement among young people, who increasingly view migration as their most viable route to personal and professional development. In this context, emigration is not merely an economic decision but a reaction to a deeper systemic dissatisfaction, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms that go beyond economic growth to address the root causes of youth disenchantment and social exclusion. This is particularly widely met in transition economies and societies, such as North Macedonia and other countries in the region.

Different studies on migration have highlighted that the quality of satisfaction towards social policy domains, such as education, health, social services, etc., remains low. For instance, according to a 2024 study conducted by Topuzovska Latkovikj et al. (2024), satisfaction among youth with the quality of education in North Macedonia has declined since the 2018/19 academic year. Education is not well aligned with labor market demands, and 45% of employed youth work outside their field of study. Underemployment is common, with many respondents who feel their skills are undervalued. In the same study, corruption is emphasized as a new major problem perceived by youth. The long-term exposure of young people to corruption, either as witnesses or as participants, raises concern that they may normalize such practices and carry them into their professional lives. This contributes to moral erosion and a stronger desire to emigrate. Given these circumstances, their study highlights the rising willingness to emigrate. Youth overwhelmingly believe that personal connections with government officials outweigh expertise in securing employment, reflecting a lack of trust in merit-based systems.

A noticeable decline in time spent on school-related activities is reported, linked to demotivation caused by perceived corruption, outdated teaching methods, untrained staff, and the distracting impact of social media. When it comes to employment preferences, interest in the private sector and international organizations is growing. Among job selection factors, salary ranks as the most important, while working with people is seen as the least important.

According to Topuzovska Latkovikj et al. (2024), although over 90% of young people in North Macedonia have not traveled abroad for education or training, there is a significant and increasing desire to migrate. The mean score for migration desire is  $m = 3.25$  (on a 1-5 scale), with 67.7% expressing interest in leaving the country. In contrast, only 12.4% state they have no intention to migrate. Compared to the 2018/2019 study, where 62% expressed migration interest and 26% had no such intention, this represents a clear increase in emigration tendency. North Macedonia's youth show the highest desire for migration among the twelve countries included in the study.

This phenomenon is likewise linked to the lack of opportunities for quality employment and economic security. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023), more than 60% of young people in North Macedonia express a willingness to migrate for economic reasons. The dominant factors are unemployment, low wages, and a lack of professional prospects. As of early 2025, the average monthly net salary stands at 43,050 denars (approximately €700), while the minimum wage was recently raised to about €400 (24,379 den) in March 2025. (State Statistical Office, 2025).

The perception of young people about the labour market is mainly critical and often pessimistic. Bejaković and Mrnjavac (2020) argue that in the Western Balkan countries, the main challenge lies not only in the lack of jobs, but also in their quality and the way in which employment opportunities are distributed. Young people in North Macedonia report that the lack of transparency, corruption, and politicization of institutions constitute major obstacles to their integration into the labour market.

A study by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2021) shows that young people are not only influenced by current economic conditions, but also by the perception of a lack of long-term development and a lack of meritocracy in the labour market. Human capital theories (Becker, 1964) emphasize that investment in education and vocational training increases the likelihood of inclusion in the labour market. However, many young people feel practically unprepared for the challenges that await them after graduation. The Youth Progress Index (2022) emphasizes that the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills is one of the main reasons for insecurity in the labour market. Practical experience during studies, such as professional internships, has proven to be a crucial factor in increasing self-confidence and employment after graduation (Eurostat, 2021).

Another aspect to be analyzed is also the role of gender in such processes. International reports show that women in the labor market face numerous challenges, including gender discrimination, a lack of support for equality, and exclusion from decision-making. According to the World Bank (2021), women's participation in the labor force in North Macedonia is significantly lower than that of men. This directly affects the sense of security and motivation to stay in the country.

The perception of the lack of meritocracy and the presence of nepotism is another key factor influencing the desire to migrate. According to the theory of distributive justice (Adams, 1965), individuals who perceive an unfair distribution of opportunities feel dissatisfied and demotivated to contribute to such a system. In the Transparency International report (2023), North Macedonia is ranked among the countries with high levels of perceived corruption, which affects the brain drain and educated youth. In a study by Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., (2024), young people indicate the following as the biggest potential problems for the country in the next decade: corruption (63.2%); skilled workforce leaving the country (55.3%); quality of public services (healthcare, education) (51.4%); and unemployment (51.2%). As it is seen, corruption remains the first major problem perceived by young people in the country and is definitely a push factor for youth emigration. The majority also emphasizes the high levels of corruption in education<sup>4</sup>.

Given these dynamics, it is crucial to understand the specific drivers behind youth emigration in North Macedonia, the long-term implications for the labor market, and the policies that could help mitigate the negative effects of this trend. This research aims to examine these issues in depth, offering insights into the complex relationship between youth migration and labor market outcomes, and providing recommendations for policies that can help stem the outflow of young talent.

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4 For more see: Topuzovska Latkovikj, M., Borota Popovska, M., Naumovska, B., & Starova, N. (2024). Youth study North Macedonia 2024. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/skopje/21550.pdf>

## Labor market, unemployment, and youth emigration

Over the last two decades, North Macedonia has experienced vigorous changes in its labor market due to many factors. The country's labor market has transformed from severe unemployment and informality to improved formal job creation, albeit with persistent and entrenched youth disadvantages. Despite major policy strides such as the Youth Guarantee and decent work agenda, youth unemployment, skills mismatch, and emigration continue to challenge economic vitality. Addressing these issues, particularly around wage stagnation, educational alignment, and institutional trust, remains critical to reversing brain drain and fostering sustainable growth.

From 2005 to 2024, a significant decline was registered in the unemployment rate. The following chart shows the unemployment rate in North Macedonia from 2005 to 2024, highlighting a steady and substantial decline over the past two decades.



Source: Statista<sup>5</sup>

The data suggest that North Macedonia has gradually strengthened its labor market institutions. In 2005, the unemployment rate started very high at 37.3%, indicating severe labor market challenges in the post-transition period. In 2024, the rate has fallen to 13.2%, reflecting significant improvement in job creation and economic stabilization. The most rapid drop occurred between 2018 and 2020 (from 22.86% to 16.58%), potentially due to the implementation of the *Youth Guarantee scheme*, active labor market measures, and formalization efforts. Despite improvements, a 13.2% unemployment rate is still high by EU standards, especially considering the ongoing youth unemployment, emigration, and informality concerns. Skills mismatch and brain drain may explain why unemployment remains in double digits even as job availability improves.

5 World Bank. (2025). Development Indicators. Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/510247/unemployment-rate-in-macedonia/>

Unemployment is calculated as the number of jobseekers divided by the labour force. Since 2012, the working-age population has already shrunk by about 6 percent, driven largely by young people leaving for the EU and OECD destinations (Zulfiu-Alili, 2025). When tens of thousands of 20 to 30-year-olds depart, they exit both the numerator (unemployed) and the denominator (labour force), mechanically pushing the unemployment ratio down even if few new jobs are created at home. This “statistical improvement” helps explain part of the sharp drop from the mid-30 percent range in 2005-10 to the low 20s by 2017, before policy reforms had fully taken hold.

Willing to identify the migration drivers for North Macedonia, a study of the International Organization for Migration (2022) highlighted the determinants of migration to be mostly related to the country’s socioeconomic development in recent times. In their research, the main determinant or main driver is considered the prevailing high rates of unemployment and the persistence of long-term unemployment (especially among young people), including the growth of unemployment among people with higher education (especially in a situation of massification of higher education)<sup>6</sup>.

According to labor market experts, such as Zulfiu-Alili (2025), North Macedonia is facing a labour market paradox: even though unemployment remains high, 12.5% in early 2024, with youth unemployment even higher (29.6% in 2023), businesses still struggle to fill open positions. According to the State Statistical Office, the job vacancy rate rose to 1.93% in the fourth quarter of 2024, up from 1.27% in 2016. The highest vacancy rate (3.47%) is in accommodation and food services, while public administration and defence have the lowest (0.13%). Small and medium-sized businesses (10–49 employees) and the Pelagonia region are most affected, and the largest number of vacancies (2,149) are for professionals and scientists (Zulfiu-Alili, 2025).

Emigration has undoubtedly contributed to the impressive-looking drop in unemployment, but largely by shrinking and skewing the labour force rather than by solving the underlying problems that drive people out, low wages, skills mismatch, and weak meritocracy.

## Research Significance

The significance of our study lies in its ability to offer a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between youth emigration and the labor market in North Macedonia, with a particular focus on university students. While previous research has examined migration trends in the Western Balkans, there is limited empirical work that specifically centers on the perspectives and experiences of young people currently in higher education. By focusing on young people of whom the majority university students, this study provides a unique and timely perspective on

6 For more see: International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2022. Migration in North Macedonia: A Country Profile 2021. IOM, Geneva. <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MP-North-Macedonia.pdf>

the motivations, aspirations, and plans of the country's youth, who are at the critical crossroads between education and employment.

The student-centered focus of this research is essential because it captures the aspirations and decision-making processes of those who are most likely to shape the future of the labor market. These young people represent a significant portion of North Macedonia's educated workforce, and their migration decisions will have profound long-term consequences for the country's economy and societal development. Understanding why they consider emigration as an option, as well as how they perceive the labor market at home, can help policymakers and stakeholders better address the challenges of retaining talent and fostering sustainable economic growth.

This study is particularly important in the context of North Macedonia's current socio-economic and political climate. The country is in the process of integrating into the European Union, and youth migration is seen as both a symptom of and a response to the broader challenges faced by the nation. By exploring the factors influencing the decisions of youth to migrate, the study offers valuable insights into how North Macedonia can develop effective policies to curb youth emigration.

Moreover, the study holds broader implications for regional development in the Western Balkans. Youth migration is not limited to North Macedonia alone; other countries in the region, such as Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia, face similar challenges. By shedding light on the specific causes and consequences of youth migration in North Macedonia, the study can contribute to a regional understanding of how emigration patterns are reshaping the labor market and what strategies might be effective in addressing these issues.

Our research will also fill a critical gap in empirical literature by linking youth migration patterns to labor market outcomes in a specific post-transition country in the Western Balkans. Through its empirical approach, the study will offer policy recommendations that could help North Macedonia retain skilled youth, improve labor market opportunities, and foster a more dynamic, resilient economy. Furthermore, by using a quantitative method, the study ensures a well-rounded understanding of the migration motivations and labor market perceptions of young people, adding depth and nuance to the findings.

In summary, the significance of this study lies not only in its contribution to migration studies but also in its potential to influence policymaking and shape the future of North Macedonia's labor market. By focusing on young people, of whom the majority are university students, who are poised to enter the workforce or migrate, it offers a timely and relevant perspective that can inform strategies aimed at improving economic outcomes and addressing the challenges posed by youth emigration.

In North Macedonia, young individuals have been directly or indirectly affected by ongoing political crises, high-profile corruption scandals, and setbacks in the country's European integration process, culminating in a recent change of government.

Given these complex and evolving circumstances, it is both timely and necessary to conduct updated research on the attitudes and aspirations of youth in North Macedonia, particularly regarding their intentions to migrate. Understanding their perspectives is crucial for shaping informed policies that address the root causes of youth dissatisfaction, prevent brain drain, and foster long-term national development. Thus, we pose several research questions and hypotheses aimed at addressing this urgent need and gaining deeper insight into the factors shaping youth migration intentions.

## Research Questions

|                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| RQ1: What are the main drivers influencing young people's decision to emigrate?                 |
| RQ2: How do young people perceive the opportunities available in North Macedonia?               |
| RQ3: How do young people in the country perceive the labor market and employment opportunities? |
| RQ4: Are there differences in migration intentions based on field of study or gender?           |

## Hypotheses:

|                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| H1: Young people who feel more insecure about finding a job are more likely to emigrate.       |
| H2: The perception of the labor market is significantly related to the willingness to migrate. |
| H3: There is a significant gender difference in the perception of migration.                   |
| H4: Field of study is significantly associated with emigration.                                |

# METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative method approach to explore the drivers of youth emigration and its consequences on the labor market in North Macedonia. It seeks to capture a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing youth migration decisions, as well as the broader implications of these trends on the labor market by taking into analysis existing official data and other studies' results.

## Research Design

The study employs a cross-sectional design, collecting data from young people across North Macedonia, from all ethnic communities, to assess their migration aspirations, perceptions of the domestic labor market, and their potential impact on the country's workforce. This design is suitable for understanding the current state of youth migration trends and labor market perceptions.

## Data collection and sampling

The research targeted young adults aged 18-30 from various regions in North Macedonia, including those from Skopje, Bitola, Tetovo, and other major cities. This age group is chosen as it represents the transitional phase from education to employment, making them key actors in both migration trends and labor market dynamics.

A stratified random sampling technique is used to ensure that the sample reflects the diversity of the population, concerning age, gender, field of study, etc.

## Participants

Approximately 309 participants (N=309) have been surveyed, ensuring a representative sample of the young population across disciplines (e.g., humanities, social sciences, engineering, natural sciences, etc.). The demographic composition reflects a diverse group of young individuals in terms of gender, place of residence, educational background, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Table 1). The sample was predominantly female (78.3%,  $n = 242$ ), with male participants making up 21.7% ( $n = 67$ ). In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were between 18 and

21 years old (61.8%), followed by those aged 26 to 30 (38.2). A significant portion of participants lived in urban areas (60.2%), with the remainder (39.8%) residing in rural settings, indicating a moderately urban-leaning sample.

In terms of academic focus, social sciences were the most represented field (53.4%), followed by law and administration (10.4%), economy and business (9.4%), humanities (6.5%), and technology/informatics (5.5%). An additional 14.9% were enrolled in other unspecified fields. The vast majority of participants were bachelor's level students (94.2%), with only 5.2% at the master's level, and a very small portion (0.6%) pursuing PhD studies. Reflecting the ethnic makeup of the institutions sampled, Albanian participants comprised 89.0% of the sample, with smaller groups identifying as Macedonian (9.4%), Bosnian (1.0%), and Turkish (0.6%). The majority of participants identified as students (45.0%), followed by unemployed individuals (35.9%), employed individuals (10.7%), and those working in a family business (8.4%). This distribution suggests a typical youth population with limited participation in the formal labor market. When asked about their family's monthly income, 34.3% reported earnings of more than 350 euros, while 22.0% had incomes between 200 and 350 euros, 19.4% between 100 and 200 euros, and 24.3% had incomes in the 50 to 100 euro range. This variation indicates a sample spanning lower- to middle-income households.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

|                        | Adolescents |      |
|------------------------|-------------|------|
|                        | N           | %    |
| Gender                 |             |      |
| Male                   | 67          | 21.7 |
| Female                 | 242         | 78.3 |
| Place of residence     |             |      |
| Urban                  | 186         | 60.2 |
| Rural                  | 123         | 39.8 |
| Age                    |             |      |
| 18-21                  | 191         | 61.8 |
| 26-30                  | 115         | 38.2 |
| Field of study         |             |      |
| Social Sciences        | 165         | 53.4 |
| Humanities             | 20          | 6.5  |
| Law- administration    | 32          | 10.4 |
| Economy-Business       | 29          | 9.4  |
| Technology-Informatics | 17          | 5.5  |
| Other                  | 46          | 14.9 |

|                        |     |      |
|------------------------|-----|------|
| Study level            |     |      |
| Bachelor               | 291 | 94.2 |
| Master                 | 16  | 5.2  |
| PhD                    | 2   | .6   |
| Ethnicity              |     |      |
| Macedonian             | 29  | 9.4  |
| Albanian               | 275 | 89.0 |
| Turkish                | 2   | .6   |
| Bosnian                | 3   | 1.0  |
| Employment status      |     |      |
| Unemployed             | 111 | 35.9 |
| Family business        | 26  | 8.4  |
| Student                | 139 | 45.0 |
| Employed               | 33  | 10.7 |
| Family income in euros |     |      |
| 50-100                 | 75  | 24.3 |
| 100-200                | 60  | 19.4 |
| 200-350                | 68  | 22.0 |
| >350                   | 106 | 34.3 |

## Procedures

The data collection was conducted online using Google Forms, with the support and coordination of university staff, who facilitated access to students. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the confidentiality of the information they would provide. Informed consent procedures were strictly followed. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect their privacy, all responses were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was requested. Furthermore, participants were informed that all data would be securely stored and accessible only to authorized research personnel. The research adhered to established ethical standards throughout all stages of the study.

## Survey

The primary data collection method is provided through a structured survey administered online. The survey includes both closed-ended, Likert-scale questions and nominal questions that measure perceptions of working conditions, desire to migrate, academic preparation, and practical experience.

The survey was designed to gather quantitative data on the following:

- **Demographic information:** age, gender, level of study, university, field of study, geographical region, ethnic community, employment status, and income)
- **Migration intentions:** current intentions to emigrate and preferred destinations, reasons for emigration, type of emigration, etc.)
- **Perceptions regarding labor market:** (employment opportunities in North Macedonia, challenges faced, salary expectations, and career prospects)
- **Factors influencing migration:** (economic, social, political)

## Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0, with the level of statistical significance set at  $p < .05$ . The analysis followed a structured approach, beginning with reliability testing, followed by descriptive and inferential statistics.

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were calculated for all relevant variables to summarize the sample characteristics and key study dimensions.

Inferential statistical tests were then applied to examine the study's hypotheses and explore relationships between sociodemographic factors, perceptions of employment, and migration intentions. Chi-Square Test was used to assess the association between perceived readiness for the labor market and motivation to stay in the country, to compare gender differences in the perception of migration, and differences within the field of studies and the intention to emigrate.

# RESULTS

## Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to understand the youth's perspectives on migration and answer the research questions: What are the main drivers influencing young people's decision to emigrate? How do young people perceive the opportunities available in North Macedonia? And how do young people in the RMV perceive the labor market and employment opportunities?

## Perceptions regarding willingness to migrate and types of emigration

Table 2 presents the results of a survey question: *“Have you ever considered emigrating from North Macedonia?”* A clear majority of respondents, 57%, have considered emigrating. This result illustrates a high level of emigration intent or dissatisfaction with current conditions in North Macedonia. Only about a quarter (26.2%) of respondents have not considered emigrating, which suggests a minority feels stable or content with their situation. A significant portion (16.8%) is undecided, indicating potential future emigrants or those in a transitional mindset. The combined share of those who answered *“Yes”* or *“I am not sure”* is 73.8%, suggesting a broader climate of uncertainty or discontent among citizens (Figure 1).

Table 2. Youth respondents' attitudes toward emigrating from North Macedonia

| Have you ever considered emigrating from North Macedonia? |               |           |         |               |                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                                                           |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid                                                     | Yes           | 176       | 57.0    | 57.0          | 57.0               |
|                                                           | No            | 81        | 26.2    | 26.2          | 83.2               |
|                                                           | I am not sure | 52        | 16.8    | 16.8          | 100.0              |
|                                                           | Total         | 309       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

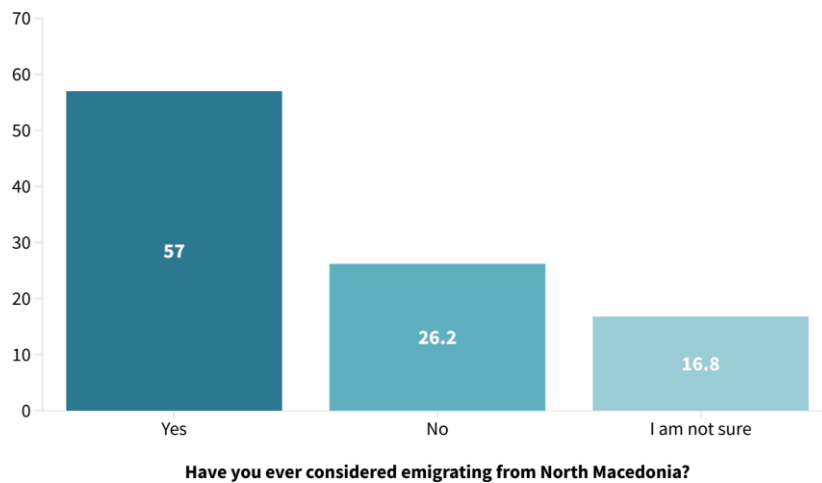


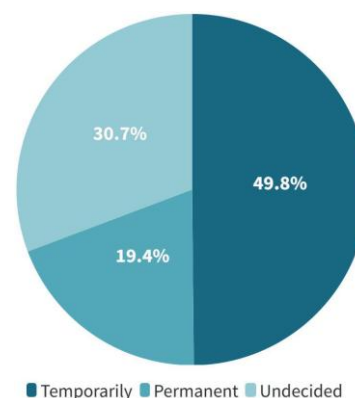
Figure 1. Youth respondents' attitudes toward emigrating

The data reveal that nearly half of the respondents (49.8%) would consider emigrating temporarily from North Macedonia, indicating a strong interest in short-term opportunities abroad, such as work or education, to return home (Table 3). Meanwhile, 19.4% of participants expressed a preference for permanent emigration, reflecting deeper dissatisfaction with domestic conditions or a desire to build a future elsewhere. Notably, 30.7% of respondents remain undecided, suggesting uncertainty about their long-term plans, which may be influenced by personal, economic, or political developments (Figure 2).

Table 3. Respondents' preferences regarding the type of emigration considered

|             | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Temporarily | 154       | 49.8    |
| Permanent   | 60        | 19.4    |
| Undecided   | 95        | 30.7    |
| Total       | 309       | 100.0   |

Figure 2. Respondents' emigration preference



Overall, the findings highlight a significant openness toward emigration in general (69.2% when combining both temporary and permanent responses), signaling a potential challenge for policy-makers in terms of retaining human capital and addressing the root causes driving this mobility (Table 3).

## Push and pull factors of youth emigration

The data in Table 4 illustrate the main motivations behind respondents' willingness to consider emigration from North Macedonia. The most frequently cited reason is the pursuit of better employment opportunities (28.3%), closely followed by quality of life and social environment (26.7%) and higher salaries (23.1%). These results highlight that economic factors and living standards are the primary drivers of emigration intentions. Additionally, although less dominant, corruption and political instability (8.8%) and lack of career advancement (4.9%) also play a role, suggesting dissatisfaction with governance and limited professional growth opportunities. Only a small portion of respondents mentioned better education (4.9%) and family unity (3.3%) as the main reasons. Overall, the findings underscore a strong link between emigration intent and systemic socio-economic challenges within the country (Figure 3).

Table 4. Main reasons for considering emigration from North Macedonia

|         |                                      | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|---------|--------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Valid   | Better employment opportunities      | 87        | 28.2    | 28.3          |
|         | Higher salaries                      | 71        | 23.0    | 23.1          |
|         | Better education                     | 15        | 4.9     | 4.9           |
|         | Corruption / political instability   | 27        | 8.7     | 8.8           |
|         | Lack of career advancement           | 15        | 4.9     | 4.9           |
|         | Quality of life / Social environment | 82        | 26.5    | 26.7          |
|         | Family unity                         | 10        | 3.2     | 3.3           |
|         | Total                                | 307       | 99.4    | 100.0         |
| Missing | System                               | 2         | .6      |               |
| Total   |                                      | 309       | 100.0   |               |

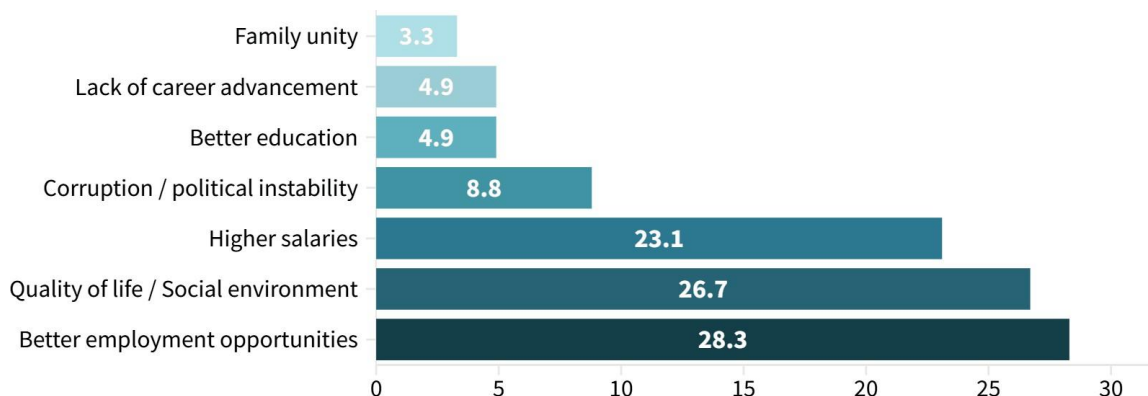


Figure 3. Main reasons for considering emigration from North Macedonia

## Labor market perceptions

As shown in Table 5, a significant proportion of respondents express uncertainty regarding their employment prospects after graduation. Specifically, 43.7% indicated that they are unsure about their ability to find a job in their field, making it the most common response. Meanwhile, 37.9% reported feeling somewhat confident, suggesting a moderate level of optimism among a sizable portion of graduates. Only 18.4% of participants feel very confident, highlighting a relatively low level of strong assurance in securing relevant employment. These findings point to a general sense of insecurity and unpredictability in the job market, possibly reflecting a mismatch between education and labor market demands, limited opportunities in specialized fields, or broader economic uncertainty in the country (Figure 4).

Table 5. Perceived confidence in finding employment in one's field after graduation

|       |                    | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|--------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Very confident     | 57        | 18.4    | 18.4          | 18.4               |
|       | Somewhat confident | 117       | 37.9    | 37.9          | 56.3               |
|       | Unsure             | 135       | 43.7    | 43.7          | 100.0              |
|       | Total              | 309       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

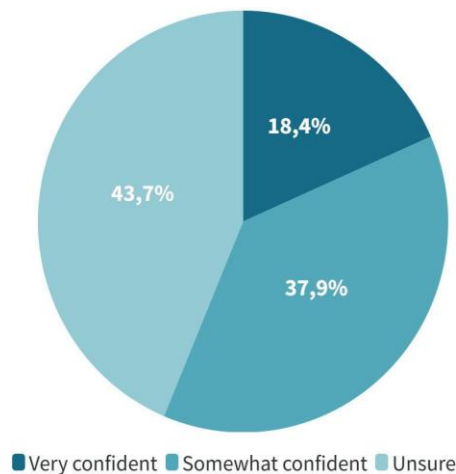


Figure 4. Perceived confidence in finding employment in one's field after graduation

Table 6 reflects a predominantly negative assessment of the youth labor market among respondents. Almost two-thirds of participants (64.7%) view the labor market as either weak (46.9%) or very weak (17.8%), indicating widespread concerns about the availability and quality of employment opportunities for young people. In contrast, only about a third of respondents perceive the market positively, with 4.2% rating it as very good and 26.2% as good. A small share of

respondents (4.9%) expressed uncertainty, selecting “I don’t know.” These results suggest significant challenges in the youth labor market, including possible issues related to job scarcity, job quality, or mismatches between skills and market demands, which could impact young people’s career prospects and overall economic well-being (Figure 5).

Table 6. Youth perception of the general situation of the labor market in North Macedonia

|       |              | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Very good    | 13        | 4.2     | 4.2           | 4.2                |
|       | Good         | 81        | 26.2    | 26.2          | 30.4               |
|       | Weak         | 145       | 46.9    | 46.9          | 77.3               |
|       | Very weak    | 55        | 17.8    | 17.8          | 95.1               |
|       | I don’t know | 15        | 4.9     | 4.9           | 100.0              |
|       | Total        | 309       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

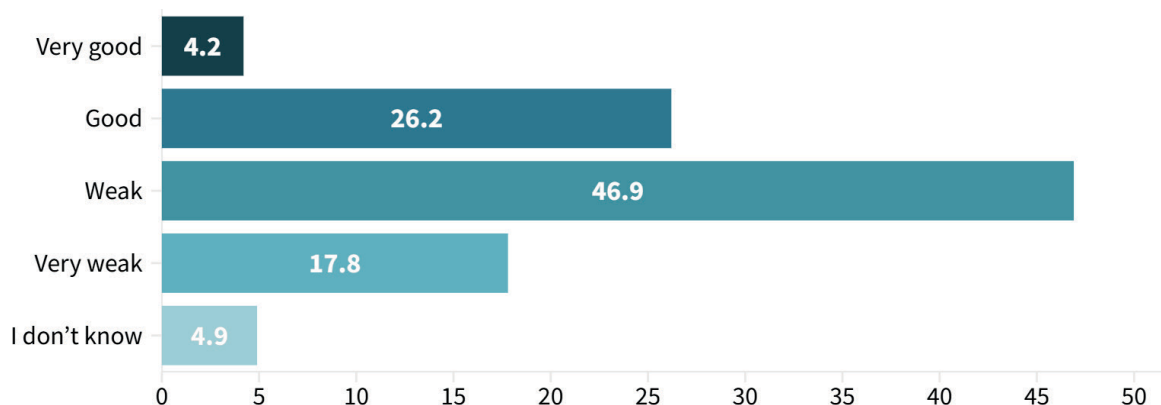


Figure 5. Youth perception of the general situation of the labor market in North Macedonia

Table 7 shows that an overwhelming majority of respondents (76.4%) believe that North Macedonia does not offer enough opportunities for young people in the labor market. This strong negative perception highlights widespread concerns about limited job availability or quality for youth. Only a small fraction (6.5%) feel that sufficient opportunities exist, while 17.2% remain uncertain. These findings reinforce earlier results about the challenging conditions facing young job seekers in the country and underscore the need for targeted policies to improve youth employment prospects (Figure 6).

Table 7. Perceptions of opportunities available to youth in the labor market in North Macedonia

|               | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------|
| Yes           | 20        | 6.5     |
| No            | 236       | 76.4    |
| I am not sure | 53        | 17.2    |
| Total         | 309       | 100.0   |

Figure 6. Opportunities available to youth in the labor market in North Macedonia

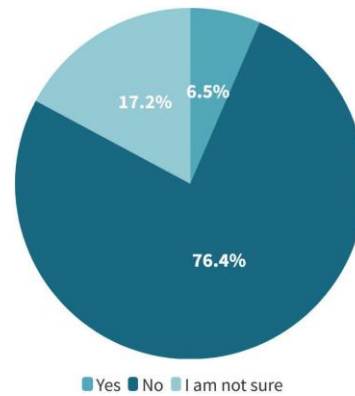


Table 8 highlights the main challenges that youth expect to face in the labor market. The most commonly anticipated difficulty is low wages, cited by 36.6% of respondents, indicating concerns about insufficient financial compensation. Following this, 28.8% expect to struggle with the lack of employment opportunities in their specific fields, pointing to a gap between qualifications and available jobs. Additionally, 21.4% identified nepotism and lack of meritocracy as a significant barrier, reflecting concerns over unfair hiring practices. Issues such as gender or ethnicity discrimination (8.4%) and skills mismatch (2.6%) were less frequently mentioned but remain relevant. A small proportion (2.3%) anticipate facing all of these challenges simultaneously (Figure 7). Overall, these results underscore multiple structural and systemic obstacles that young people perceive as limiting their successful integration into the labor market.

Table 8. Expected challenges faced by youth in the labor market

|       |                                 | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|---------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Lack of employment in my field  | 89        | 28.8    | 28.8          | 28.8               |
|       | Low wages                       | 113       | 36.6    | 36.6          | 65.4               |
|       | Nepotism/lack of meritocracy    | 66        | 21.4    | 21.4          | 86.7               |
|       | Skills mismatch                 | 8         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 89.3               |
|       | Gender or ethnic discrimination | 26        | 8.4     | 8.4           | 97.7               |
|       | All of them                     | 7         | 2.3     | 2.3           | 100.0              |
|       | Total                           | 309       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

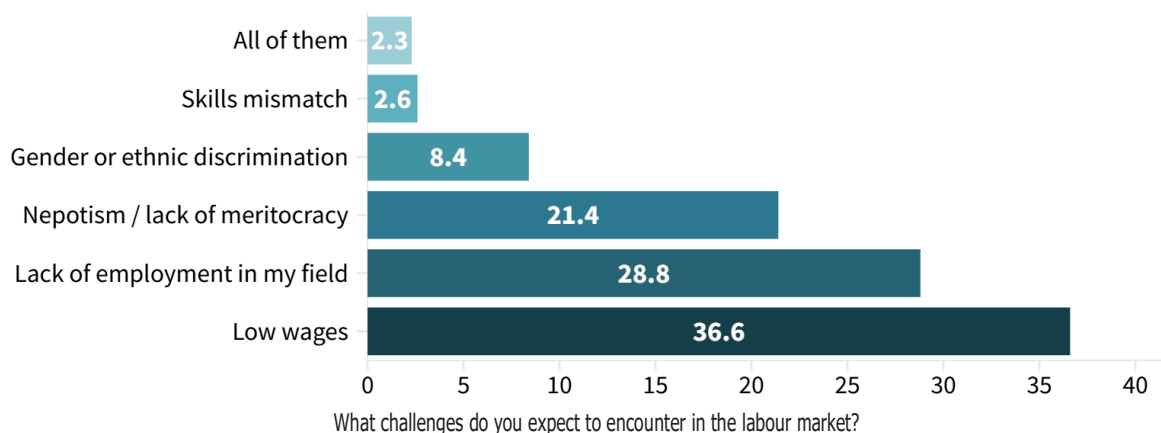


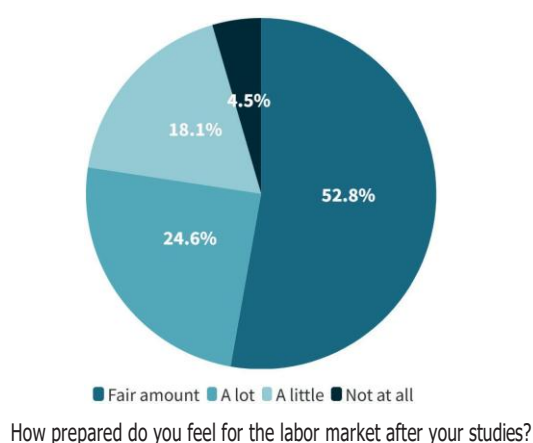
Figure 7. Challenges in the labor market

In the following, Table 9 reveals that more than half of the respondents (52.8%) feel they are prepared to a fair amount for entering the labor market after completing their studies. Additionally, nearly a quarter (24.6%) feel very well prepared, suggesting a reasonable level of confidence among students regarding their readiness for professional challenges. However, a notable minority report feeling underprepared, with 18.1% stating they feel prepared only a little, and 4.5% expressing that they feel not at all ready (Figure 8). These results indicate a generally moderate to positive self-assessment of readiness, though they also point to areas where universities or training programs could improve to better equip graduates for the demands of the labor market.

Table 9. Self-assessment of preparedness for the labor market after graduation

|             | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------|-----------|---------|
| A lot       | 76        | 24.6    |
| Fair amount | 163       | 52.8    |
| A little    | 56        | 18.1    |
| Not at all  | 14        | 4.5     |
| Total       | 309       | 100.0   |

Figure 8. Readiness for the labor market after studies



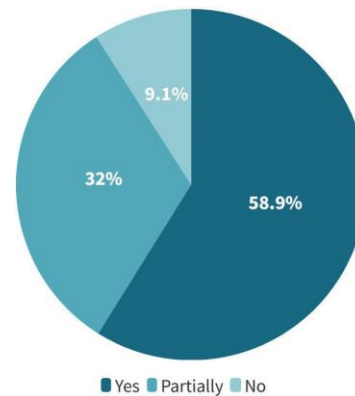
As illustrated in Table 10, a majority of respondents (58.9%) believe that practical experience is crucial for finding a job, underscoring the value placed on hands-on skills and real-world exposure in the labor market. An additional 32.0% consider practical experience partially important, indicating that while it may not be the sole factor, it still plays a significant role. Only a small fraction

(9.1%) think that practical experience is not important for employment (Figure 9). These results emphasize the critical role of internships, apprenticeships, and other practical learning opportunities in improving employability prospects for graduates.

Table 10. Perceptions on the importance of practical experience for employment

|           | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Yes       | 182       | 58.9    |
| No        | 28        | 9.1     |
| Partially | 99        | 32.0    |
| Total     | 309       | 100.0   |

Figure 9. Perceptions regarding labor market skills



Do you think that practical experience is crucial for finding a job?

## Perceptions regarding return and retention

Table 11 shows that a substantial majority of respondents (77.7%) indicated they would stay in North Macedonia if offered better career opportunities, suggesting that improved job prospects could significantly reduce emigration intentions. Additionally, 15.2% expressed uncertainty with a “maybe,” implying that career opportunities are a key but not the only factor influencing their decision to remain. Only a small minority (7.1%) stated that better career opportunities would not affect their decision to stay, indicating other reasons may drive their emigration considerations (Figure 10). These findings highlight the critical importance of creating attractive career pathways to retain young talent within the country.

Table 11. Impact of better career opportunities on the decision to stay in North Macedonia

|       | Frequency | Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|
| Yes   | 240       | 77.7    |
| No    | 22        | 7.1     |
| Maybe | 47        | 15.2    |
| Total | 309       | 100.0   |

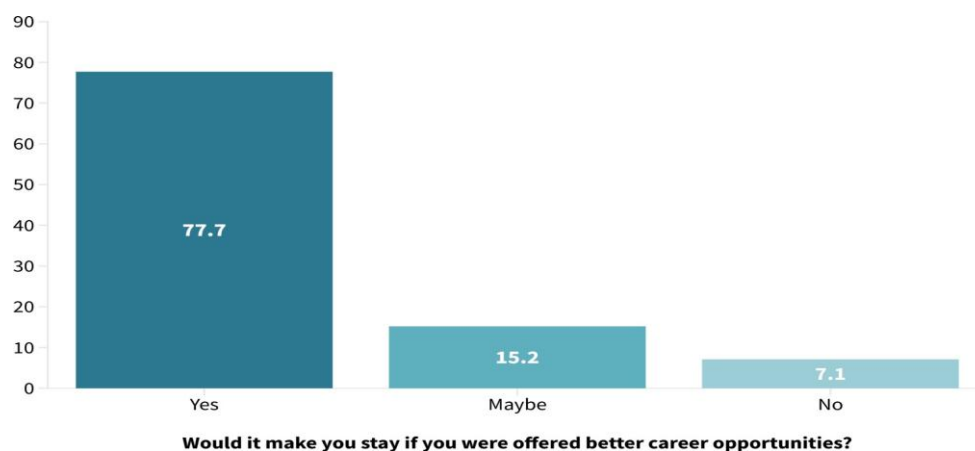


Figure 10. Impact of better career opportunities on the decision to stay in North Macedonia

Table 12 reveals that nearly half of the respondents (46.6%) would consider returning to North Macedonia after emigrating. An additional 36.9% are uncertain, responding “maybe,” which suggests a significant proportion of emigrants remain open to the possibility of returning under favorable conditions. Meanwhile, 16.5% do not plan to return (Figure 11). These findings indicate a moderately optimistic potential for return migration, emphasizing the importance of creating conditions that could encourage diaspora youth to come back and contribute to the country’s development.

Table 12. Willingness to return to North Macedonia after emigration

|       | Frequency | Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|
| Yes   | 144       | 46.6    |
| No    | 51        | 16.5    |
| Maybe | 114       | 36.9    |
| Total | 309       | 100.0   |

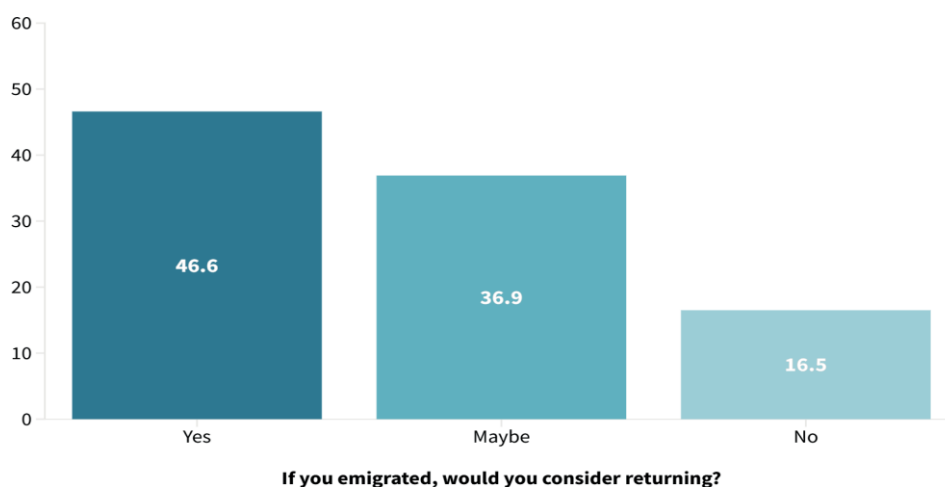


Figure 11. Willingness to return to North Macedonia

## Emigration aspirations by study field

Table 13 presents the relationship between the field of study and the consideration of emigration among students and graduates. The majority of respondents from the Social Sciences (95 out of 165) have considered emigrating, reflecting a relatively high emigration consideration in this group. Fields such as Humanities and Economy-Business also show notable proportions of individuals thinking about emigration.

In contrast, the Technology - Informatics and Legal-Administration groups shows fewer respondents considering emigration. The “Other” category displays a more balanced distribution between those who have and have not considered emigrating (Figure 12).

Table 13. Consideration of emigration by field of study

|                                         |                          | Have you ever considered emigrating from North Macedonia? |    |               | Total |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------|-------|
|                                         |                          | Yes                                                       | No | I am not sure |       |
| Field you are studying or graduated in? | Social Sciences          | 95                                                        | 47 | 23            | 165   |
|                                         | Humanities               | 15                                                        | 2  | 3             | 20    |
|                                         | Legal - Administration   | 16                                                        | 7  | 9             | 32    |
|                                         | Economy-Business         | 20                                                        | 6  | 3             | 29    |
|                                         | Technology - Informatics | 10                                                        | 2  | 5             | 17    |
|                                         | Other                    | 20                                                        | 17 | 9             | 46    |
| Total                                   |                          | 176                                                       | 81 | 52            | 309   |

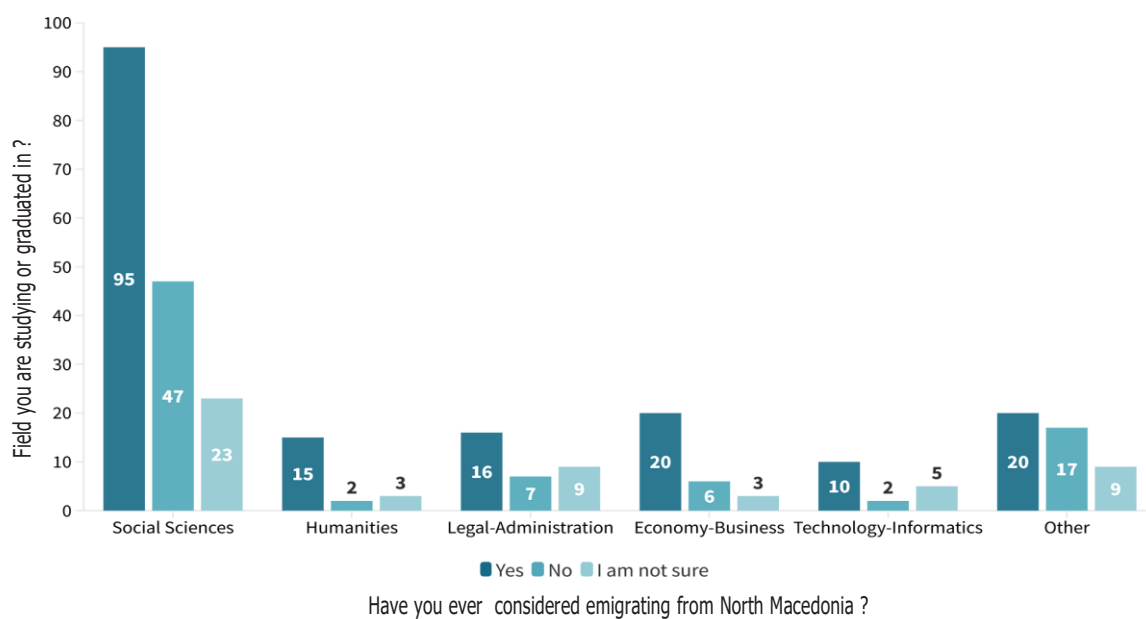


Figure 12. Consideration of emigration by field of study

Overall, this data suggests that the likelihood of considering emigration varies by field of study, with social sciences and humanities showing higher tendencies, potentially linked to labor market conditions and opportunities available within those fields.

Table 14 shows that the primary factor that would encourage young people to stay in North Macedonia is better job offers, chosen by 46.0% of respondents. This underscores the importance of creating attractive employment opportunities to retain youth. Other significant factors include a better work-life balance (21.7%) and strong family ties (15.5%), highlighting that quality of life and social connections are also key considerations.

Table 14. Factors that would encourage youth to stay in North Macedonia

|       |                                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Better job offers                | 142       | 46.0    | 46.0          | 46.0               |
|       | Fair recruitment and advancement | 30        | 9.7     | 9.7           | 55.7               |
|       | Support for entrepreneurship     | 6         | 1.9     | 1.9           | 57.6               |
|       | Political stability              | 15        | 4.9     | 4.9           | 62.5               |
|       | Work-life balance                | 67        | 21.7    | 21.7          | 84.1               |
|       | Family ties                      | 48        | 15.5    | 15.5          | 99.7               |
|       | Missing                          | 1         | .3      | .3            | 100.0              |
|       | Total                            | 309       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

Additionally, fair recruitment and career advancement opportunities (9.7%) and political stability (4.9%) were identified as important, though to a lesser extent. Support for entrepreneurship was mentioned by a small percentage (1.9%), indicating some interest in self-employment opportunities (Figure 13). These findings emphasize those economic, social, and political factors all play a role in young people's decisions to remain in their home country.

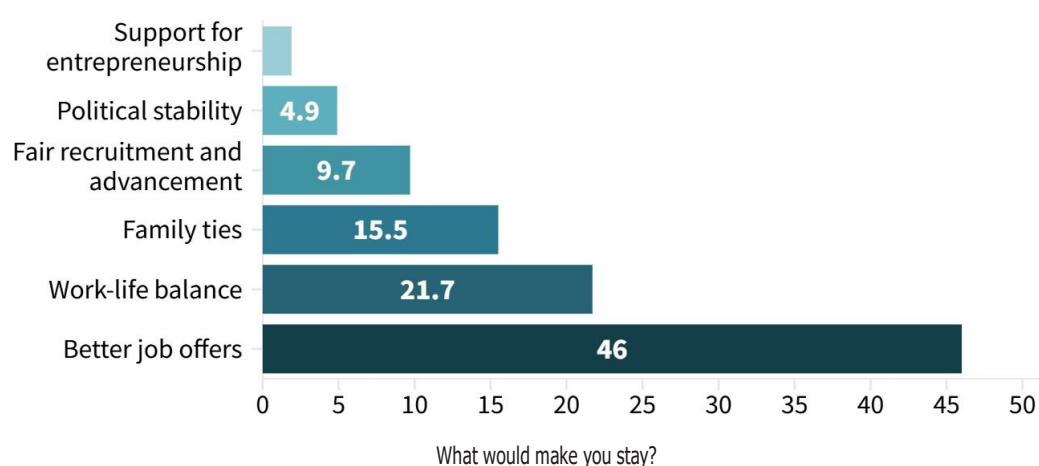


Figure 13. Factors that would encourage youth to stay in North Macedonia

## Inferential statistics

### Perceptions concerning confidence in employment vs. emigration consideration

**H1:** Young people who feel more insecure about finding a job are more likely to emigrate.

From Table 15, we observe the following: among those who are unsure about finding a job, a large proportion (81 out of 135, or 60%) have considered emigrating. On the other hand, those who feel very confident about finding a job are less likely to have considered emigration (37 out of 57, or 65%, still high, but with a higher “no” and “unsure” response share) (Figure 14). The “somewhat confident” group is more evenly distributed, though still leans toward emigration. This suggests a pattern: as confidence in employment decreases, the likelihood of considering emigration increases, which aligns with the hypothesis.

Table 15. Confidence in employment vs. emigration consideration

|                                                                                    |                    | Have you ever considered emigrating from North Macedonia? |    |               | Total |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------|-------|
|                                                                                    |                    | Yes                                                       | No | I am not sure |       |
| How confident do you feel that you will find a job in your field after graduation? | Very confident     | 37                                                        | 17 | 3             | 57    |
|                                                                                    | Somewhat confident | 58                                                        | 33 | 26            | 117   |
|                                                                                    | Unsure             | 81                                                        | 31 | 23            | 135   |
| Total                                                                              |                    | 176                                                       | 81 | 52            | 309   |

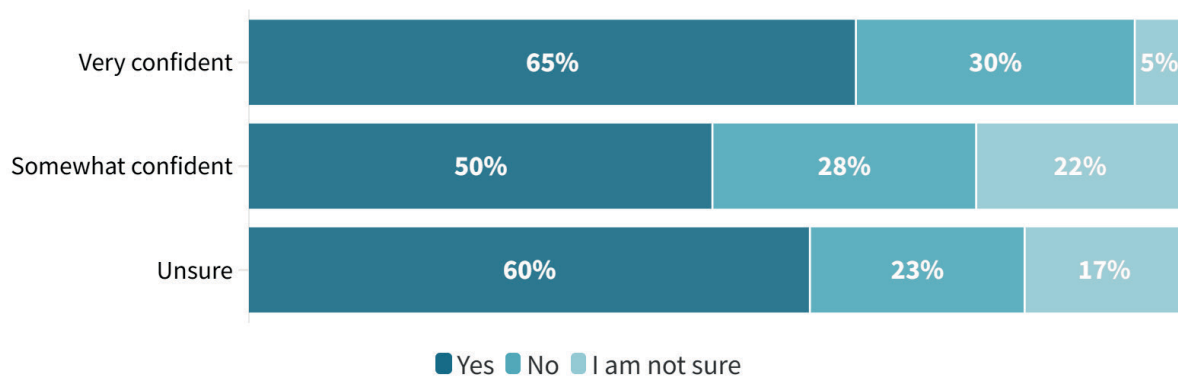


Figure 14. Confidence in employment vs. emigration consideration

The Pearson Chi-Square test ( $\chi^2 = 9.534$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ) indicates that the association between confidence in finding a job and consideration of emigration is statistically significant at the 5% level. This means that the distribution of responses is not random, and there is a meaningful relationship between these two variables (Table 16).

Table 16. Chi-Square Tests: Confidence in employment vs. emigration consideration

|                                                                                        | Value              | Df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square                                                                     | 9.534 <sup>a</sup> | 4  | .049                  |
| Likelihood Ratio                                                                       | 11.055             | 4  | .026                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association                                                           | .535               | 1  | .465                  |
| N of Valid Cases                                                                       | 309                |    |                       |
| a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9.59. |                    |    |                       |

The results demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between employment confidence and emigration consideration. Those who feel less confident or unsure about finding a job are more likely to consider emigration, compared to those who feel confident. This highlights the importance of strengthening employment prospects and career guidance to reduce the push factors driving youth emigration.

### Perceptions regarding labor market preparedness vs. emigration consideration

**H2:** The perception of the labor market is significantly related to the willingness to migrate.

Crosstab on Table 17 reveals that among those who feel “not at all” prepared, a very high proportion (11 out of 14) have considered emigrating (79%). Those with “a little” preparedness also show a strong tendency toward emigration (39 out of 56, 70%). In contrast, those who feel “a lot” prepared are less likely to consider emigration (36 out of 76, 47%). This trend supports the hypothesis that lower perceived preparedness is associated with higher willingness to emigrate.

Table 17. Perceived labor market preparedness vs. emigration consideration

| Have you ever considered emigrating from North Macedonia?         |             |     |    |               |       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----|----|---------------|-------|
|                                                                   |             | Yes | No | I am not sure | Total |
| How prepared do you feel for the labor market after your studies? | A lot       | 36  | 24 | 16            | 76    |
|                                                                   | Fair amount | 90  | 44 | 29            | 163   |
|                                                                   | A little    | 39  | 11 | 6             | 56    |
|                                                                   | Not at all  | 11  | 2  | 1             | 14    |
| Total                                                             |             | 176 | 81 | 52            | 309   |

The Pearson Chi-Square test result ( $\chi^2 = 9.519$ ,  $p = 0.046$ ) is statistically significant at the 5% level. This means there is a statistically significant association between how prepared young people feel for the labor market and whether they have considered emigrating. The Likelihood Ratio test also supports this finding ( $p = 0.029$ ). Additionally, the Linear-by-Linear Association is highly significant ( $p = 0.004$ ), suggesting a clear trend: as perceived preparedness decreases, the likelihood of considering emigration increases (Table 18).

Table 18. Chi-Square Test Results

|                              | Value              | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 9.519 <sup>a</sup> | 6  | .046                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 9.897              | 6  | .029                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 8.166              | 1  | .004                  |
| N of Valid Cases             | 309                |    |                       |

### Perceptions regarding migration by gender

**H3:** There is a significant gender difference in the perception of migration.

Table 19 shows that a higher number of female respondents (135 out of 242) have considered emigrating compared to males (41 out of 67). While the absolute number of females considering emigration is larger, it is important to note the total respondents by gender, as females constitute a bigger share of the sample. Among males, a smaller proportion have considered emigrating, with fewer males responding “No” or “I am not sure” compared to females (Figure 15). This data suggests that emigration consideration is prevalent between both genders, but may be somewhat higher in absolute terms among females, possibly reflecting differing motivations or circumstances between genders.

Table 19. Consideration of emigration by gender

|        |        | Have you ever considered emigrating from North Macedonia? |    |               | Total |
|--------|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------|-------|
|        |        | Yes                                                       | No | I am not sure |       |
| Gender | Male   | 41                                                        | 9  | 17            | 67    |
|        | Female | 135                                                       | 72 | 35            | 242   |
| Total  |        | 176                                                       | 81 | 52            | 309   |

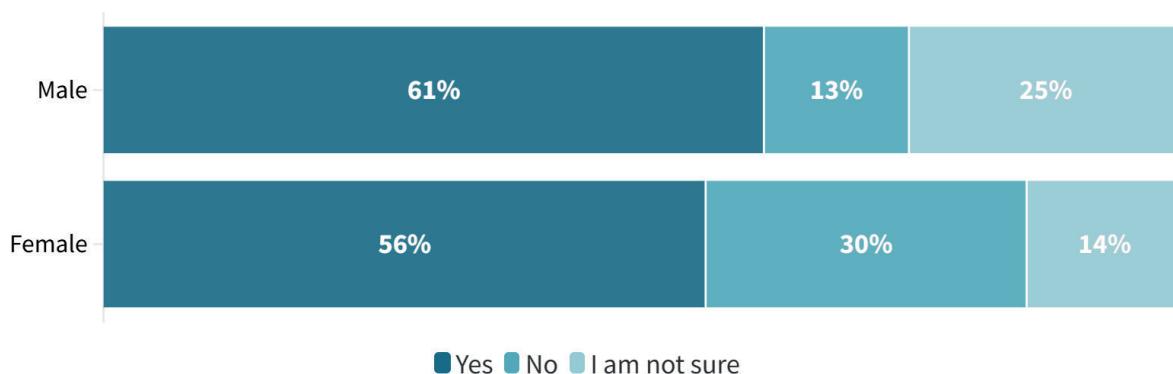


Figure 15. Consideration of emigration by gender

The Pearson Chi-Square test shows a value of  $\chi^2 = 9.312$  with 2 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.010. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the result is statistically significant at the 5% level, indicating that there is a meaningful association between gender and whether someone has considered emigrating from North Macedonia. The Linear-by-Linear Association is not significant ( $p = 0.600$ ), which suggests that there is no clear linear trend across the response categories (Table 20).

There is a statistically significant relationship between gender and emigration consideration. In other words, the likelihood of having considered emigration differs by gender, although the nature of that difference (e.g., higher among females in absolute numbers) would need to be explored further. This may reflect differences in social roles, economic expectations, or perceived opportunities between men and women.

Table 20. Chi-Square Tests

|                                                                                         | Value              | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square                                                                      | 9.312 <sup>a</sup> | 2  | .010                  |
| Likelihood Ratio                                                                        | 9.820              | 2  | .007                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association                                                            | .274               | 1  | .600                  |
| N of Valid Cases                                                                        | 309                |    |                       |
| a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.28. |                    |    |                       |

## Youth educational profiles and emigration

**H4:** Field of study is significantly associated with emigration.

Table 21 shows that technical or business students are significantly less likely to consider emigration than social science or humanities students are; this supports the idea that career outlook shaped by field of study affects migration intentions. Conversely, social science students dominate the “Yes” column (95 out of 176), which implies lower labor market satisfaction, which drives higher emigration intentions (Figure 16).

The Pearson Chi-Square test (Table 22) is statistically significant at  $p = 0.008$ , indicating that field of study and intention to emigrate are significantly associated. The Likelihood Ratio supports this ( $p = 0.001$ ), increasing confidence in the result. This suggests that students’ academic background influences their likelihood of considering migration, potentially due to differing job prospects, expectations, or exposure to opportunities abroad.

Table 21. Crosstabulation: Association between field of study and consideration of emigration

|                                         |                          | Have you ever considered emigrating from North Macedonia? |    |               | Total |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------|-------|
|                                         |                          | Yes                                                       | No | I am not sure |       |
| Field you are studying or graduated in? | Social Sciences          | 95                                                        | 47 | 23            | 165   |
|                                         | Humanities               | 15                                                        | 2  | 3             | 20    |
|                                         | Legal - Administration   | 16                                                        | 7  | 9             | 32    |
|                                         | Economy-Business         | 20                                                        | 6  | 3             | 29    |
|                                         | Technology - Informatics | 10                                                        | 2  | 5             | 17    |
|                                         | Other                    | 20                                                        | 17 | 9             | 46    |
| Total                                   |                          | 176                                                       | 81 | 52            | 309   |

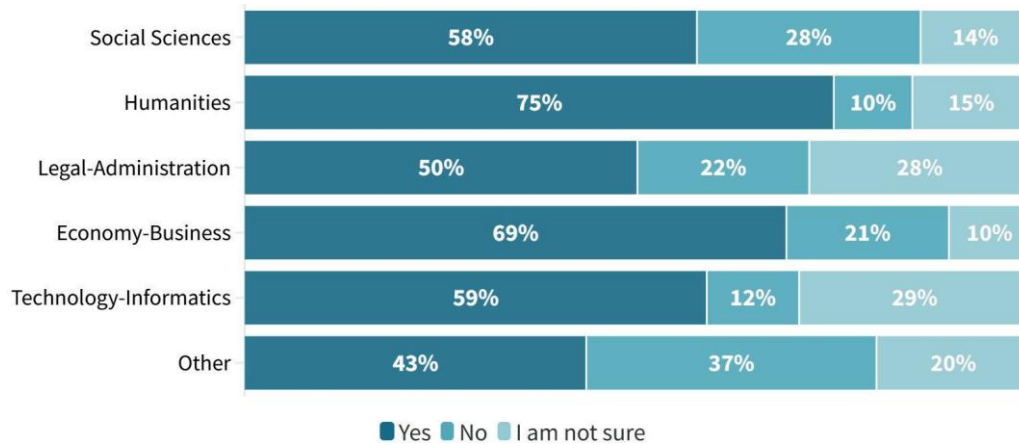


Figure 16. Association between field of study and consideration of emigration

Table 22. Association between field of study and consideration of emigration (Chi-Square Test)

|                              | Value               | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 15.728 <sup>a</sup> | 10 | .008                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 15.953              | 10 | .001                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 2.024               | 1  | .055                  |

# DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics revealed significant challenges and perspectives of youth in North Macedonia regarding their labor market experiences and migration intentions. A majority of young people have considered emigrating, primarily driven by the search for better employment opportunities, higher salaries, and improved quality of life. Despite a moderate level of self-reported preparedness for the labor market, many express concerns about the availability of jobs in their field, low wages, and issues such as nepotism and discrimination.

Confidence in finding a job related to their studies is mixed, with a substantial portion feeling unsure, reflecting uncertainties within the youth labor market. Furthermore, perceptions about the overall labor market are predominantly negative, with most respondents believing that the country does not offer sufficient opportunities for young people.

Practical experience is widely regarded as a crucial factor for employment, highlighting the need for enhanced vocational and internship opportunities. Encouragingly, the data suggest that better career opportunities and improved working conditions, including work-life balance and fair recruitment practices, would incentivize many youths to stay in North Macedonia or even return after emigration.

The primary reasons motivating young people to consider emigration include better employment opportunities (28.3%), higher salaries (23.1%), and improved quality of life or social environment (26.7%). Other factors like corruption, political instability (8.8%), and lack of career advancement (4.9%) also contribute, but to a lesser extent. This shows that economic prospects and living conditions are the strongest drivers behind the emigration decision.

The vast majority (76.4%) believe that the country does not offer enough opportunities in the labor market for young people, while only 6.5% think opportunities are sufficient. About 17.2% are unsure. This reflects a general pessimism regarding local opportunities, which likely influences their emigration intentions.

Nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of respondents assess the youth labor market as weak or very weak, with only 30.4% rating it as good or very good. Moreover, a significant portion expresses low confidence in finding a job in their field after graduation, with 43.7% being unsure and only 18.4% feeling very confident. Challenges identified include low wages (36.6%), lack of employment in their field (28.8%), nepotism/lack of meritocracy (21.4%), and discrimination (8.4%). These perceptions reveal a largely unfavorable view of the labor market.

Overall, these findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive policy measures aimed at creating attractive job prospects, fostering transparent and merit-based recruitment, and improving the general socio-economic environment to retain young talent and curb brain drain.

H1, which suggested that young people who feel more insecure about finding a job are more likely to consider emigration, is supported by the statistically significant association found between job confidence and emigration intention. This indicates that perceived job insecurity plays an important role in motivating migration.

Similarly, H2, stating that perceptions of the labor market are significantly related to willingness to migrate, also finds support in the data. Respondents' negative assessments of the labor market correlate with a higher likelihood of considering emigration, confirming that labor market perceptions influence migration decisions.

Regarding H3, the hypothesis of a significant gender difference in the perception of migration is confirmed. The data reveal meaningful differences between male and female respondents in their emigration considerations, suggesting that gender shapes migration attitudes and intentions.

Finally, H4, which posited that the field of study is significantly associated with emigration, is supported by the Chi-Square results indicating a statistically significant relationship between students' academic disciplines and their emigration plans. This implies that educational background influences migration propensity.

Overall, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of migration intentions among youth, influenced by employment confidence, labor market perceptions, gender, and field of study.

## Limitations

This study faced some limitations, including:

- *Response Bias*: Young people, of whom the majority of students are more likely to have strong opinions on emigration, may be more willing to participate, potentially leading to skewed findings.
- *Generalizability*: While the sample is mostly representative of university students, the findings may not fully represent the entire youth population.

# CONCLUSION

Our research confirms that youth emigration in North Macedonia remains a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, strongly shaped by economic, political, and social factors that converge across macro, *meso*, and micro levels.

Youth emigration appears to be one of the most pressing socioeconomic challenges in the country context. Findings from a survey of 309 young people aged 18-30 reveal that over 57% have considered emigration, primarily due to limited employment opportunities, low wages, and weak meritocracy. This trend threatens national development by accelerating brain drain and undermining the local labor market's sustainability. The research highlights a critical disconnection between young people's aspirations and the domestic labor market's capacity to meet their expectations. Key drivers of emigration, such as limited employment opportunities, low wages, lack of meritocracy, and political instability, were consistently identified across the data. The findings reveal that over half of the surveyed youth have considered emigrating, with many expressing a strong preference for leaving temporarily or permanently due to dissatisfaction with current job prospects and career development opportunities.

Statistical analysis confirmed that perceived job insecurity, negative views of the labor market, gender, and field of study are all significantly associated with youth emigration intentions. Social sciences and humanities graduates, in particular, show higher tendencies toward emigration, underscoring the mismatch between academic preparation and labor market demand. Moreover, young people overwhelmingly believe that improved job offers, fair recruitment, and career advancement opportunities could reduce their willingness to leave, suggesting that talent retention is possible with targeted, transparent, and inclusive labor market reforms.

The study also provides evidence of potential return migration, contingent on favorable changes in career opportunities and quality of life. Therefore, while emigration remains a pressing challenge, it also presents an opportunity for North Macedonia to reform its labor policies, strengthen its institutions, and invest in human capital to build a more attractive and resilient environment for its youth.

## Recommendations

Based on our findings, we propose a set of recommendations aimed at addressing the challenges of youth migration, with a particular focus on fostering a more resilient labor market in North Macedonia. These policy measures span five key areas:

| POLICY AREA                               | RECOMMENDATION                                                                      | PURPOSE                                               |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Labor Market Development               | Create targeted employment schemes for graduates                                    | Increase access to quality jobs for young people      |
|                                           | Align wages with the cost of living and regional standards                          | Reduce economic push factors                          |
|                                           | Offer tax incentives to employers hiring youth                                      | Encourage youth employment in the private sector      |
| 2. Education and Employment Linkage       | Update university curricula to match labor market needs                             | Improve graduate employability                        |
|                                           | Expand internships and dual education programs.                                     | Strengthen practical readiness for employment.        |
|                                           | Build university and industry cooperation                                           | Foster a smoother transition into the workforce.      |
| 3. Recruitment Transparency & Meritocracy | Enforce fair and merit-based recruitment processes                                  | Restore youth trust in institutions                   |
|                                           | Digitize public sector hiring platforms.                                            | Improve accountability and reduce nepotism.           |
| 4. Return Migration & Diaspora Engagement | Provide incentives for returnees (recognition of diplomas, grants, housing support) | Attract back skilled youth from the diaspora          |
|                                           | Establish diaspora talent networks and platforms.                                   | Engage migrants in national development.              |
|                                           | Promote circular migration models.                                                  | Facilitate temporary movement with long-term benefit. |
| 5. Youth Entrepreneurship Support         | Offer start-up grants and business incubator access                                 | Encourage self-employment and innovation              |
|                                           | Integrate entrepreneurship education at the university level                        | Prepare youth for entrepreneurial careers             |

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