

Accelerated Growth of the Average Wage in Kosovo After 2020:

A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: Since 2020, Kosovo has experienced a significant increase in the average wage in the private sector—a phenomenon that warrants a dedicated analysis when compared to previous years. This study aims to examine changes in the gross average wage during the period 2012-2024, with a particular focus on the distinct growth patterns between two periods: 2012-2019 and 2020-2024. Using official data published by national institutions, the article explores the economic, political, and institutional factors that have contributed to this accelerated wage growth in the private sector. The analysis includes year-over-year comparisons, graphical visualizations, and discussions on the impact of inflation, the increase in the minimum wage, and labor market demand. The results reveal a 57% wage increase in just four years, compared to only a 22% rise over the previous seven-year period. This transformation is closely linked to post-pandemic developments, fiscal policies, and pressures for economic formalization. While existing literature on wage dynamics in Kosovo has predominantly focused on pre-pandemic trends and public sector wages, there is a notable gap regarding the accelerated wage growth in the private sector after 2020. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comparative analysis of wage patterns before and after this critical period. The study offers recommendations for policymakers and contributes to the broader debate on the sustainability of wage growth in Kosovo.

INTRODUCTION

Wages constitute a fundamental component of an individual's economic and social well-being, directly influencing purchasing power, living standards, and the overall productivity of an economy. In this context, the analysis of wage dynamics in the private sector takes on particular importance, especially in developing countries such as the Republic of Kosovo, where the labor market has faced structural challenges, high levels of informality, and ongoing influences from macroeconomic and political factors. The period following 2020 represents a critical turning point for Kosovo's economy, marked by unexpected disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, shifts in the labor market structure, fiscal interventions by the government, and reforms in social policies.

Official data indicate that the gross average wage in Kosovo's private sector has increased significantly and at an accelerated pace over the last four years. Specifically, from 2020 to 2024, the average wage rose from €419 to €598, reflecting a 57% increase. This growth is noticeably faster than during the previous seven years (2012-2019), when the average wage increased from €337 to €411—a total rise of just 22%. This stark contrast invites a deeper analysis of the factors behind this development and its implications for economic sustainability and social equity in Kosovo.

The accelerated growth of wages in Kosovo after 2020 cannot be fully understood without a comprehensive analysis of the economic, political, and institutional factors that have influenced labor market dynamics. The global pandemic abruptly interrupted economic activity, prompting widespread political responses to mitigate the negative effects on employment. The Government of Kosovo undertook direct financial measures to support the private sector and preserve jobs through the Economic Recovery Package and other initiatives, such as wage subsidies and grants for businesses.

At the same time, amendments to the Minimum Wage Law and union pressures to improve working conditions have contributed to the overall rise in wages in the formal sector. On the other hand, labor market liberalization through migration to European Union countries and increased demand for workers in sectors such as construction, information technology, and retail have intensified competition for labor in Kosovo, naturally driving up compensation levels. This trend has been particularly evident since 2021, when many companies began facing shortages of skilled labor and attempted to attract workers through higher wage offers and better working conditions.

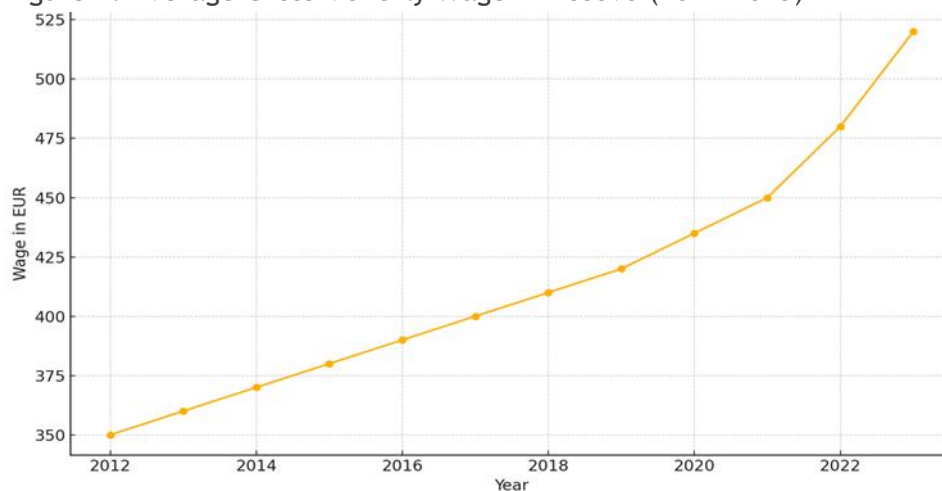
Additionally, the rise in wages is closely linked to the formalization of the private sector and enhanced oversight by the Kosovo Tax Administration (KTA). The advancement of digital financial reporting platforms and stricter enforcement of tax laws have encouraged (or compelled) many businesses to register their employees with accurate wage levels in the system. As a result, official statistics now reflect a more accurate picture of the labor market, and reported wage levels have increased, whereas past declarations were often lower than the reality.

Although existing literature on wage dynamics in Kosovo has explored various pre-pandemic trends, there is limited research specifically addressing the accelerated growth of wages in the private sector after 2020. This study seeks to contribute to filling this gap by providing a comparative analysis of wage developments across two distinct periods.

This study aims to present a comparative analysis between two distinct periods in the development of private sector wages in Kosovo: the first spanning 2012-2019 and the second from 2020 to 2024. The analysis will focus not only on the percentage growth in wages but also on the economic context, public policies implemented, market pressures, and social factors that have influenced this clear change in trend.

While the rise in the average wage can be interpreted as a positive indicator of economic development, it is essential to examine the risks and challenges it presents in the Kosovar context. An accelerated wage increase not supported by corresponding productivity growth may lead to domestic inflation, reduced competitiveness of exporters, and the risk of rising unemployment in low-margin sectors. In this light, the article will also explore the implications of wage growth for the overall economy and for key employment sectors in Kosovo.

Figure 1. Average Gross Monthly Wage in Kosovo (2012-2023)



As illustrated in Figure 1, the average gross monthly wage in Kosovo has seen a notable upward trend over the past decade, with a sharp acceleration following 2020.

The introduction concludes by outlining the research objective and key questions. This study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the main factors that have contributed to the accelerated growth of the average wage after 2020?
- How does the wage growth rate during the period 2012-2019 compare to that of the 2020-2024 period?
- Is this wage growth sustainable and based on real productivity, or is it influenced by extraordinary factors such as crises or public policy interventions?
- What are the economic and social consequences of this growth for the private sector and the labor market as a whole?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to provide a valuable contribution to the economic and social literature in Kosovo and to offer practical guidance for policymakers, the business community, and employee organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Meaning and Importance of Average Wage in Macroeconomic Analysis

The average wage is one of the key indicators in economic analyses, as it reflects the overall state of the labor market, the effectiveness of labor policies, and social equity. In macroeconomic terms, the average wage influences aggregate consumption, savings and investment levels, and above all, population well-being. According to Keynesian theory, an increase in income leads to increased aggregate demand and consequently to a rise in national output (Keynes, 1936). However, the literature suggests that wage growth is not always directly correlated with productivity growth, especially in contexts where the economy is informal and sensitive to external factors (Stiglitz, 2012).

In developing countries, the average wage is often under pressure from the informal market and the lack of institutional mechanisms for setting labor prices. Therefore, its increase may not automatically translate into improved real living conditions unless accompanied by broader labor inclusion and formalization policies. In Kosovo, this indicator has increasingly been used in fiscal and social analyses, especially after the pandemic, when subsidies and support for the private sector began to be linked to formal wage reporting.

Factors Influencing Wage Growth in Developing Countries

The factors that influence wage growth are numerous and interact differently depending on the socioeconomic context. Among the most important are: labor productivity, supply and demand in the labor market, the educational level of the workforce, workers' bargaining power, and state intervention through fiscal and regulatory policies. In developing countries such as Kosovo, some of the strongest effects come from labor migration and foreign investment, which create pressure for wage increases.

According to the World Bank (2022), the rapid wage growth in the Western Balkans after 2020 is a phenomenon linked to shortages of skilled labor and increases in the minimum wage in several countries. In Kosovo, this trend is most evident in the private sector, where pressure to retain existing workers has forced companies to offer higher wages.

Modern economic development theories, such as the human capital theory (Becker, 1993), emphasize the importance of education and employee training as foundations for wage growth. However, in Kosovo there remains a disconnect between the skills provided by the education system and the actual demands of the labor market, which hinders a direct correlation between productivity and wage increases.

Wage Growth in the Private Sector: International Experience and Lessons for Kosovo

International experience provides various examples of how wages rise in the private sector, especially after economic crises. In many EU countries, wage growth post-pandemic has been closely linked to state support packages, increased investments in technology, and structural labor reforms. In Germany, for example, the use of the “Kurzarbeit” scheme (short-time work supported by public funding) helped preserve jobs and wage stability during the crisis (OECD, 2021).

In countries with similar structures to Kosovo, such as Albania and North Macedonia, wage increases have been partially driven by mass migration and rising remittances, which have increased purchasing power and exerted upward pressure on employers to raise wages (UNDP, 2023). Simultaneously, pressure from trade unions and employee organizations has played an active role in improving transparency and gradually raising the minimum wage, ultimately impacting average wage levels.

The key lesson for Kosovo from these experiences is that well-targeted public interventions, cooperation between the private sector and state institutions, and the promotion of social dialogue are essential elements for ensuring fair, sustainable, and balanced wage growth.

However, while the international literature offers extensive insights on wage dynamics after economic crises, there is a notable lack of comprehensive studies analyzing the accelerated wage growth in Kosovo’s private sector following 2020. This gap highlights the need for focused research, such as the present study, to better understand this phenomenon in the local context.

Public Policies, Minimum Wage, and Market Pressures

One of the most influential factors in raising the average wage is the increase in the minimum wage. In many countries, this has resulted in a ripple effect across the wage structure, thereby raising the average wage. In Kosovo, the minimum wage remained relatively low (130-170 euros) for years until 2022, when legal reforms were initiated to raise it to 250 euros. This measure had a direct impact on lower-wage sectors, influencing the overall average wage statistics in the private sector.

Beyond the minimum wage, regional market pressures also play an important role. With visa liberalization and increased labor mobility, many companies in Kosovo have begun facing the challenge of a “worker exodus,” compelling them to raise wages to retain their workforce. This pressure is particularly felt in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and trade, where workers are more likely to leave for better opportunities abroad.

Labor economics literature suggests that public wage policies should be accompanied by measures to improve productivity and support businesses, in order to avoid the risk of wage inflation and negative effects on competitiveness (Krugman, 2019). This is especially important for small and open economies such as Kosovo’s.

The Role of Migration and Labor Shortages in Wage Growth

Migration has always been a structural component of the Kosovar economy. After 2020, with the opening of labor markets in Germany and other EU countries to workers from the Balkans, many skilled and semi-skilled workers have emigrated in search of better economic conditions. This has created a pronounced labor shortage in the domestic market, especially in technical, service, and construction sectors.

Unmet demand for workers has prompted companies to offer higher wages to retain or recruit new staff. This is a factor not directly linked to productivity growth, but rather to structural supply-side pressure. In this regard, economic migration literature confirms that labor shortages in the country of origin are one of the main causes of temporary wage increases (Borjas, 2016).

In Kosovo's case, this phenomenon has been further intensified by the trend of prolonged stays abroad and the declining interest in working in labor-intensive, low-compensation sectors.

Challenges of Interpreting Wage Growth in Economies with High Informality

One of the main challenges in analyzing wages in Kosovo is the high level of informal economic activity. Although there have been notable improvements in employee registration and wage reporting, a significant portion of unregistered labor still exists. This means that the reported increase in the average wage may reflect improved reporting rather than real improvements in economic conditions.

According to the Kosovo Tax Administration and international organizations such as the ILO, the use of technology in fiscal processes—such as the EDI platform and online data declarations—has reduced opportunities for abuse and improved the accuracy of statistical data. This suggests that part of the observed post-2020 wage increase may be attributable to formalization rather than actual wage growth. This calls for caution in data interpretation and in making policy decisions based on these figures.

METHODOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Methodological Approach

This study employs a comparative quantitative approach to analyze the dynamics of average wages in Kosovo's private sector across two distinct periods: before (2012-2019) and after (2020-2024) the COVID-19 pandemic. To measure the development of average wages and identify structural changes, the research relies on official data provided by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS), the Kosovo Tax Administration (KTA), the Ministry of Finance, and the Central Bank of Kosovo (CBK). Given the limited prior research specifically addressing post-2020 wage dynamics in Kosovo's private sector, this comparative approach aims to contribute new insights into this emerging economic phenomenon.

The data used consist of a 13-year time series of monthly gross average wages in the private sector. These data are reported annually and represent a weighted average across all registered economic sectors. To assess growth

rates, both year-over-year percentage change indices and absolute change analyses are applied. Additionally, simple descriptive statistical methods are used to present wage evolution in tabular and graphical formats.

The methodology is structured around dividing the full observation period into two analytical phases:

- Phase I (2012-2019): The pre-pandemic period, characterized by moderate and relatively linear wage growth.
- Phase II (2020-2024): The post-pandemic period, marked by accelerated wage increases, policy interventions, and heightened levels of migration.

To avoid misinterpretation, several methodological limitations are taken into account, including the absence of wage breakdowns by sector, the effect of inflation on real purchasing power, and the lack of detailed monthly data that could reflect seasonal fluctuations.

Comparison of Average Wages: 2012-2019 vs. 2020-2024

To understand the fundamental difference between the two analyzed periods, we begin by presenting the baseline data on monthly gross average wages:

Table 1. Average Gross Monthly Wage in Kosovo (2012-2024)

Year	Average Wage (in €)
2012	337
2013	343
2014	348
2015	353
2016	362
2017	376
2018	396
2019	411
2020	419
2021	466
2022	518
2023	561
2024	598

Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2024). Average Gross Wages Report 2012-2024.

The analysis for the period 2012-2019 reveals a total increase of only €74 over seven years, amounting to a cumulative growth of approximately 22%. This translates to an average annual growth rate of around 2.8%. This growth was relatively stable but slow, reflecting the post-conflict economic conditions, lack of major investments, high informality, and weak market pressure for wage increases.

In contrast, the period 2020-2024 shows an increase of €179 in just four years, representing an overall rise of 42.7%, with an average annual growth rate

of over 10%. This growth is significantly more accelerated and is attributed to several key factors:

- The COVID-19 pandemic: which acted as a catalyst for government interventions and reforms in social and economic policies.
- Minimum wage reforms: public discussions and proposals for increases directly influenced real wages.
- Pressure from international labor markets: labor shortages caused by migration led to an immediate response from the private sector in raising wages.
- Market formalization: improved data collection by the Tax Administration and the introduction of digital platforms such as EDI e-Tatime led to a more accurate reflection of wages.

Interpreting Wage Growth in the Economic and Social Context

The accelerated growth of average wages in Kosovo after 2020 represents an economic phenomenon that should not be viewed solely as a sign of development, but also as a response to structural and external pressures. Key considerations in this context include:

- Inflation effect: Although wages increased in nominal terms, inflation in Kosovo—especially during 2021-2022—affected real purchasing power. Real wages experienced slight deviations in high-inflation years, reducing the tangible benefits of nominal wage growth.
- Labor migration: Wage increases have been driven more by the need to retain workers than by productivity gains. In the long term, this may be problematic, as wage increases not supported by proportional productivity growth could reduce competitiveness and fuel domestic cost inflation.
- Impact of remittances: The increase in remittances has stimulated domestic consumption, boosting demand for goods and services and increasing the demand for workers in trade and service sectors. Consequently, this has exerted upward pressure on wages.

Benefits and Risks of Accelerated Wage Growth

The main benefits of this wage growth include:

- Increased purchasing power and domestic consumption.
- Higher motivation among workers and reduced labor turnover.
- Improved personal incomes contributing to lower relative poverty levels.

However, the long-term risks are not negligible:

- A lack of balance with productivity could lead to fiscal imbalances.
- Higher labor costs may discourage foreign investors in low-margin sectors.
- There is potential for a “wage-price spiral” if wage demands are not supported by productivity gains.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of Key Findings

The results of this study show a clear distinction between the two analyzed periods: 2012-2019 and 2020-2024. During the first phase, average wage growth was gradual, with an annual rate of approximately 2.8%, whereas in the second phase, growth accelerated to an annual rate exceeding 10%.

Year-over-year comparison reveals that from 2012 to 2019, the gross average wage in the private sector increased by only €74, while from 2020 to 2024, it rose by €179. This post-2020 increase is more than double in a period half as long, reflecting sudden shifts in the labor market and changes in the state’s fiscal policy.

Graphical representations show a sharp turning point in 2021, corresponding to the post-pandemic recovery and increased public spending on the private sector. The table below illustrates the cumulative wage growth index for both periods:

Table 2. Comparative Wage Growth Periods in Kosovo (2012-2024)

Period	Total Increase (€)	Percentage Increase (%)	Average Annual Growth (%)
2012–2019	+74	22%	~2.8%
2020–2024	+179	42.7%	~10.6%

Source: Own calculations based on data from Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2024).

Key Factors Influencing the Growth

Based on the data and literature reviewed, five key factors are identified as having a direct impact on the accelerated growth of the average wage:

1. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Government of Kosovo implemented several stimulus measures for the private sector, including wage subsidies to preserve jobs and increased tax reporting from businesses that previously operated informally. As a secondary effect, this led to a rise in declared wages.
2. Migration and Labor Shortages: The increase in migration of skilled labor, particularly to Germany and other EU countries, created a labor gap in the domestic market, compelling businesses to offer higher wages to attract and retain workers.
3. Minimum Wage Reform and Union Pressure: The prolonged debate over raising the minimum wage (from €130/170 to over €250) directly affected the overall wage structure, especially in labor-intensive, low-capital sectors such as trade and services.
4. Formalization of the Labor Market: Improvements in tax collection and requirements for reporting actual wages through the electronic system of the Kosovo Tax Administration have contributed to more accurate reflection of real wages.
5. Remittances and Increased Consumption: The rise in remittances has boosted aggregate demand for goods and services, prompting businesses to expand operations and, consequently, raise wages to meet labor demands.

Critical Analysis: Nominal vs. Real Wage Growth

One of the most important aspects in interpreting these results is the distinction between nominal and real wages. Although the average wage has

increased significantly after 2020, its purchasing power has been under pressure due to inflation.

According to data from the Central Bank of Kosovo (CBK), inflation in 2021 and 2022 exceeded the 7-10% range. This means that a considerable portion of nominal wage growth was offset by rising consumer prices, particularly in essential sectors such as food, energy, and housing.

In this context, the real benefit from wage increases is lower than it may appear at first glance. For example, in 2022, the gross average wage increased by €52 compared to 2021, but inflation for the same year was around 12%, significantly eroding the actual gain.

Discussion in an International Comparative Context

Wage growth in Kosovo after 2020 is partially aligned with trends in the Western Balkans, where countries such as Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia also experienced wage increases linked to the pandemic crisis and labor migration. However, the intensity of wage growth in Kosovo has been higher, reflecting a delayed effort to close the gap caused by years of economic stagnation.

Furthermore, Kosovo remains among the countries with the lowest productivity per labor unit, raising concerns about the sustainability of this wage growth in the medium and long term. For comparison:

Table 3. Average Gross Monthly Wage in 2023 and Growth Since 2020 (Regional Comparison)

Country	Gross Average Wage (2023)	Increase Since 2020 (%)
Kosovo	561 €	34%
Albania	613 €	22%
Serbia	845 €	28%
North Macedonia	750 €	25%

Source: National statistical offices and labor ministries of respective countries (2024).

This shows that, although Kosovo remains last in the region in absolute terms, it leads in terms of growth rate in recent years.

Figure 2. Comparative Wage Growth (2020-2023)

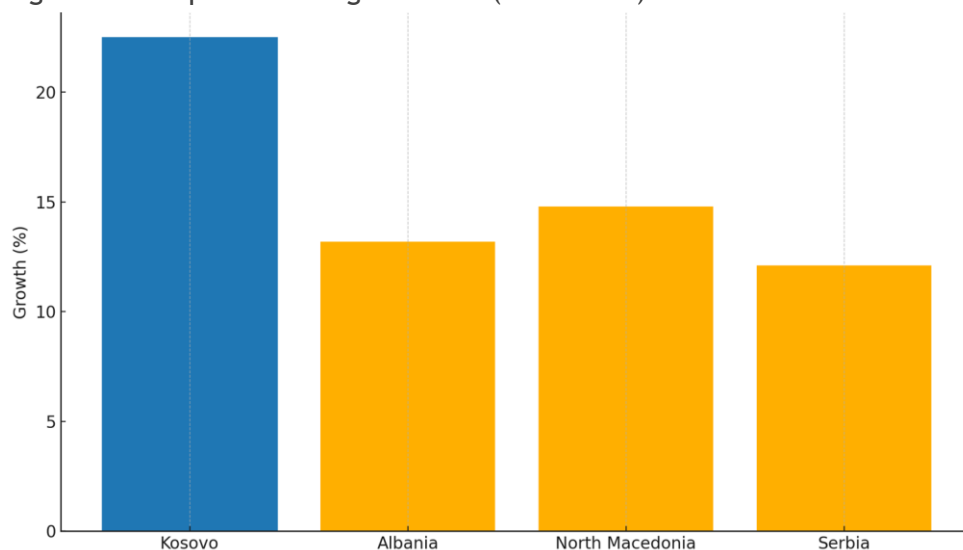
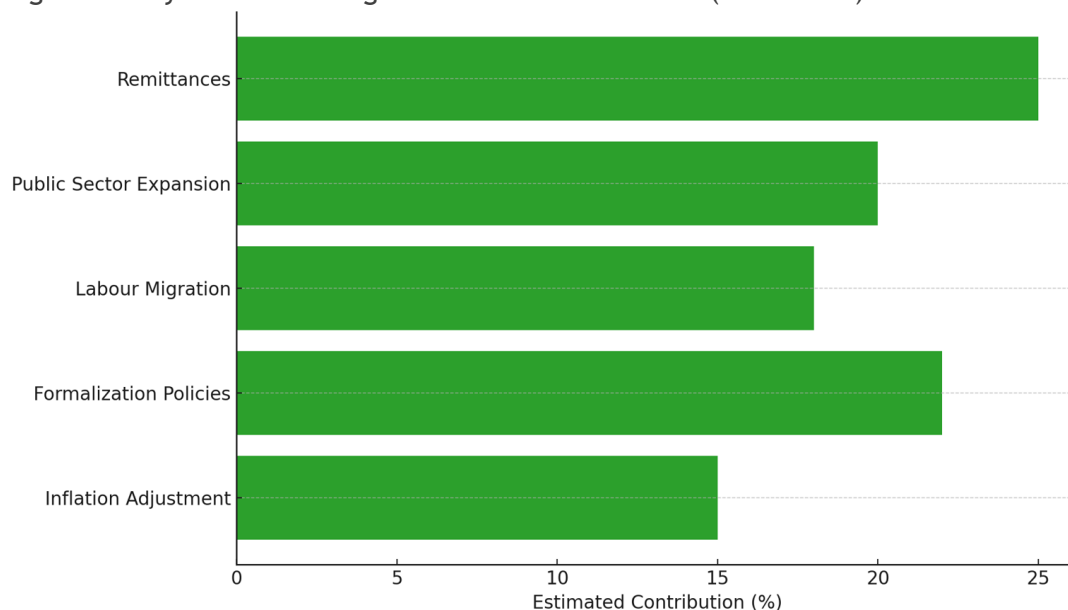


Figure 2 presents a comparative view, highlighting Kosovo's wage growth outpacing that of neighbouring economies such as Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

Figure 3. Key Drivers of Wage Acceleration in Kosovo (2020-2023)



The main economic and structural drivers behind this wage acceleration are shown in Figure 3, with remittances and public sector expansion playing dominant roles.

It is also worth noting that, despite the relevance of these trends, there has been a lack of in-depth academic analysis focusing specifically on the post-2020 wage dynamics in Kosovo's private sector. This study seeks to address this gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of this important economic development.

Challenges and Risks for the Future

The findings highlight several critical concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the recent wage growth trend in Kosovo:

- Forced but potentially unsustainable formalization: The increase in declared wages may not reflect real wage growth, but rather a shift from the informal to the formal economy.
- Pressure on small businesses: Rising labor costs, without adequate productivity improvements, may result in bankruptcies or higher consumer prices, particularly in labor-intensive sectors.
- Youth emigration risk: Despite wage increases, the lack of career prospects and economic stability continues to drive the emigration of young and skilled workers.
- Disconnect between wages and performance: In the absence of merit-based compensation systems, wage growth may not translate into higher quality of work or improved services.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings

The study of accelerated average wage growth in Kosovo after 2020 reveals a structural shift in the country's economic trajectory compared to the previous decade. Key conclusions include:

- A sharp acceleration in wage growth, with the annual rate more than doubling compared to the 2012-2019 period.
- Significant increases in the private sector, driven by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, labor shortages due to migration, union pressure, and fiscal reforms.
- Improved wage reporting and formalization, which, although not always indicating real gains in well-being, demonstrate improved fiscal and institutional transparency.

Nevertheless, this wage growth remains vulnerable to persistent challenges, including inflation, informal employment, labor migration, and weak productivity growth. Compared to regional peers, Kosovo shows an unusual combination: it has the lowest gross average wage but one of the highest recent growth rates – signaling a catch-up dynamic rather than consolidated economic development. Furthermore, this study contributes to addressing an existing gap in the academic literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the post-2020 wage dynamics in Kosovo's private sector – a topic that has so far received limited scholarly attention.

Policy Recommendations

1. Link wage increases to productivity: Employment and fiscal policies should focus on boosting high value-added sectors. Wage growth should stem from output gains rather than labor shortages.
2. Establish merit-based compensation mechanisms: Government, the private sector, and labor unions should work together to develop performance-linked wage evaluation systems.

3. Promote sustainable formalization: Continued efforts are needed to make formal income reporting both mandatory and beneficial to businesses, including through tax incentives or institutional support.

4. Monitor migration impacts and foster brain gain: Policies aimed at retaining or attracting skilled workers should include labor market reforms, returnee programs, and investment in innovation ecosystems.

5. Invest in vocational and technological education: Aligning vocational training with labor market demands is essential for preparing a competitive workforce and supporting sustainable wage growth.

Suggestions for Future Research

To build on this analysis, future studies could explore:

- The impact of wage increases on household consumption and domestic investment behavior.
- Sectoral wage dynamics, particularly in construction, services, and technology.
- Worker perceptions of wage fairness, productivity, and job satisfaction, offering a qualitative balance to statistical analyses.

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