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'Frontline corruption and emigration in the Western Balkans'

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How does frontline corruption influence individuals' decisions to emigrate? Existing research has found that perceptions of grand political corruption promote emigration, particularly among the highly educated. In this article, we shift the focus to the role of frontline corruption in driving emigration decisions and distinguish between the effects of the payment of bribes to frontline bureaucrats and those of nepotism in public employment. Using data from the Balkan Barometer for the period 2018–21, we find that both bribe-paying experiences and perceived public-sector nepotism are important emigration drivers. Our findings also reveal that more highly educated an individual is, the greater the influence of perceived nepotism on the emigration decision. However, the influence of first-hand experiences with bribery is larger and remains similar across education categories. Our analysis emphasizes the need to disaggregate the varied manifestations of corruption when examining the determinants of (high-skilled) emigration. This article contributes to our understanding of the drivers of emigration in the Western Balkans and the wider corruption–migration nexus.

Keywords: emigration; corruption; bribery; nepotism; bureaucracies; Western Balkans.

1. Introduction

Frontline bureaucrats are state workers—health, education, court, tax collection and police professionals, and civil servants—who directly and routinely interact with ordinary citizens (Lipsky 2010). Abuse and discrimination by frontline bureaucrats can have a profound impact on citizens' views of the state and their sense of belonging to the wider political community (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Mettler and Soss 2004). How, then, does frontline corruption influence the emigration decision?

Existing studies on the corruption–migration nexus have mostly focused on how perceptions of grand political corruption drive emigration flows, particularly among the

highly educated. In this article, we shift the focus to the role of frontline corruption in driving individual emigration decisions and distinguish between the effects of bribery and public-sector nepotism. Our study also differs from previous micro-level research on corruption–migration nexus by exploring the links between frontline corruption and emigration preparations—the most reliable measure of the emigration decision. More broadly, our article contributes to the literature on emigration drivers in the Western Balkans—a region in which bribery and nepotism are widespread and many bureaucrats have survived the armed conflicts and the end of Communism but for which accounts of the social and political causes and consequences of international emigration are relatively scarce (King and Oruc 2019).

To investigate the relationship between frontline corruption and emigration, we use survey data from the 2018–21 waves of the Balkan Barometer. Our statistical analysis shows that both bribe-paying and public-sector nepotism are important drivers of emigration. However, the effect of nepotism in the emigration decision becomes more pronounced among more highly educated individuals, whereas the influence of bribe-paying experiences is larger and remains similar across education categories. Our results thus emphasize the need to disaggregate the varied manifestations of corruption when examining the determinants of emigration. These findings have important implications for understanding the drivers of emigration in the Western Balkans and the wider corruption–migration nexus. Those who are concerned about high levels of emigration in the region may wish to consider countering frontline corruption to encourage citizens, particularly the highly educated, to remain.

2. Emigration and corruption in the Western Balkans

Our study focuses on six countries in the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (also known as the WB-6). These are all former communist countries which have experienced conflict and aspire to join the European Union (EU).[1] All have substantial emigrant populations, ranging from 28 per cent of Albanian citizens to 10 per cent of both Serbian and Montenegrin citizens (OECD 2022). Their primary destinations are advanced democracies in Western Europe, mainly Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Switzerland (OECD 2022). Most WB-6 emigrants are young and leave permanently, setting alarm bells ringing about the possibility of a demographic implosion in the region (Heil 2020).

Indeed, more people have left the WB-6 in the last two decades than did in the wake of the fall of communism or the breakup of Yugoslavia (Heil 2020). According to the Gallup World Poll (2019), the share of WB-6 citizens who aspire to emigrate permanently to another country increased from 25 per cent in 2009 to 38 per cent in 2019. Albania has the largest share of citizens who desire to move abroad (50 per cent) while Serbia (26 per cent) and Montenegro (22 per cent) have the smallest but nevertheless substantial share. Lavrič (2019) expects one in five young people from the region to leave their country in search of better employment and educational opportunities over the next decade. Not only are education outcomes in the WB-6 below the OECD average, but unemployment

rates are twice as high, and salaries are one-half to one-quarter lower than in Western European countries (OECD 2022). Emigration rates among the highly educated are also six times greater in the WB-6 compared with other world regions (World Bank 2018). Albania ranks fourth in the world in its emigration rate of highly skilled workers (OECD 2022).

The OECD's (2022) recent 'Survey of WB-6 Emigrants' finds that, after education and employment opportunities, the most important driver of emigration is corruption. The surge in emigration has indeed coincided with growing concerns about state capture and corruption across the WB-6 (Šelo Šabić and Kolar 2019). In the latest Transparency International's (2022) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the average score for the WB-6 was 38, below the global average of 43 and the EU average of 66. The lowest score was for BiH, which ranked 110th out of 180 countries worldwide. Meanwhile, data from the V-Dem project show that Albania and BiH have the highest levels of both grand political corruption and frontline corruption in the region (Coppedge et al. 2023).

The Balkan Barometer (2022) similarly indicates that WB-6 citizens see corruption as one of the most serious problems facing their countries, second only to unemployment. Levels of public sector employment in the region are above the EU average—a result of both the legacies of communism and post-conflict state building (OECD 2020). Yet, bureaucracies are notably weak in the WB-6. According to the 2020 Quality of Government Survey, the average score of public bureaucracies professionalization for the region is −1.26, well below the EU average of 0.50 (Nitotskaya et al. 2021). Nepotism in public employment is particularly widespread in the WB-6. Besides limiting the job and salary opportunities of those without political or personal connections and creating distortions in public sector jobs, this form of corruption lowers the quality and accessibility of public goods and services (Ragauskas and Valeškaitė 2020). In the Survey of WB-6 Emigrants, prospects for accessing better public services ranked fourth among the most important reasons to leave (OECD 2022).

The payment of bribes for accessing public goods and services is particularly costly for WB-6 citizens. In 2011, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that the average bribe paid as a share of one's monthly income ranged from 14 per cent in Albania to 144 per cent in North Macedonia (Bisogno, Jandl and Reiterer 2011). The UNODC study furthermore found that 'characteristics such as income, education level or employment status do not appear to have a clear effect on the probability of experiencing bribery' at the hands of frontline bureaucrats (Bisogno, Jandl and Reiterer 2011: 9).

How, then, does pervasive and generalized frontline corruption relate to emigration in the WB-6?

3. The corruption–migration nexus

The links between corruption and emigration have attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. At the macro level, Poprawe (2015) provides evidence that higher CPI scores are associated with greater emigration flows to less-corrupt countries. Cooray and

Schneider (2016) draw a similar conclusion from the same corruption variables but find that the effect is greater for the highly skilled. Their finding is corroborated by Dimant, Krieger and Meierrieks (2013) using an alternative country-level measure of corruption: the International Country Risk Guide. Arif (2022) presents similar results and adds that the highly educated are more likely to emigrate to destination countries with lower levels of corruption.

The role of education in moderating the relationship between corruption and emigration in these studies gives clues towards a potential causal mechanism. According to neoclassical models, income maximization is a key driver of emigration (Sjaadstad 1962; Grogger and Hanson 2011). Education is expected to increase income because it improves individuals' positions in the labour market, but economies with high levels of corruption are likely to have less meritocratic labour markets. When corruption levels are high, greater rewards in the labour market accrue to those with connections to political or administrative power rather than those who invest in skills and education. Highly educated individuals are therefore more likely to benefit from migration to an economy with lower levels of corruption where they will be better able to reap the benefits of investment in their personal human capital (Cooray and Schneider 2016; Arif 2022). While anyone might benefit from migrating from a high- to a low-corruption country, those with more education will receive a greater benefit, which accounts for the pattern found by existing macro-level studies.

Micro-level studies confirm that potential emigrants differ from those who intend to stay not only in their education levels, but also in their views on corruption. Lapshyna (2014) and Crisan, Crisan-Mitra and Dragos (2019) find in Ukraine and Romania, respectively, that those who aspire to emigrate have more intense perceptions of political corruption. Auer et al. (2020) combine survey data from Gallup World Polls (GWP) conducted between 2010 and 2014 with aggregate-level corruption measures from V-Dem and the World Bank and identify a positive relationship between the share of individuals who aspire to emigrate and country-level measures of perceived political corruption. Helms (2023) also uses data from the GWP and finds that highly educated individuals are more likely to emigrate in response to perceived government corruption.

A caveat with these studies is that they conceptualize and measure 'corruption' as a unidimensional concept in terms of macro-level indices based on expert surveys or as individuals' perceptions of grand political corruption. This is problematic for various reasons. First, unidimensional measures of corruption do not distinguish between 'grand political corruption' involving officials at the highest levels of government and 'frontline corruption' entailing civil servants and public officers in direct contact with ordinary citizens. While these two forms of corruption might be related, high levels of political corruption can sometimes coexist with low levels of bureaucratic corruption and vice versa (Bardhan 2006).

Second, individuals' beliefs about whether a variety of corruption practices are widespread at the highest levels of government often have little to do with individuals' own experiences with frontline bureaucrats (Treisman 2007; Morris 2008; Gutmann, Padovano and Voigt 2020). Individuals' perceptions of grand political corruption are influenced by multiple factors—including media exposure, education level, political awareness, party affiliation, and political orientation, as well as the country, social, and even family environment in which

individuals live (Gutmann, Padovano and Voigt 2020). In post-socialist countries such as the WB-6, memories of Communism still play a significant role in citizens' perceptions of grand political corruption (Morris and Polese 2016).

Measuring and conceptualizing corruption through the use of aggregate unidimensional variables or perceptions of grand corruption can severely limit our understanding of the corruption–migration nexus because we cannot be sure which types of corruption are driving emigration and how they are doing so. As Ang (2020: 1) suggests, disaggregating different levels and forms of corruption and analysing their socio-economic effects separately can '(change) our responses to commonly asked questions about corruption'.

Grand political corruption, for instance, refers to practices which citizens rarely take part in, such as the theft of public money by government ministers or senior civil servants, the payment of large bribes by multinational companies for arms deals or the awarding of major public works contracts to political cronies. However, citizens regularly interact with and often pay bribes to frontline bureaucrats to access public goods and services. Frontline corruption is therefore likely to be more consequential than grand political corruption for the emigration decision.

Empirical findings from Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa show that citizens who directly suffer from corruption at the hands of frontline officers are more likely to aspire to emigrate (Hiskey, Montalvo and Orcés 2014; Acevedo 2021; Sellers 2021). Survey evidence from Eastern European and former Soviet countries similarly indicates that tolerance of bribe paying is lower among those with emigration intentions (Berlinschi and Harutyunyan 2019). While compelling, these studies find no evidence of education playing a moderating role in the relationship between emigration and corruption. This contrasts with existing macro-level findings on the (grand political) corruption–migration nexus.

Besides the payment of bribes, frontline corruption includes practices such as petty theft of public property by frontline bureaucrats as well as cronyism and nepotism in public sector hiring and promotion. The latter can directly affect the employment opportunities of the more highly educated. Yet, public-sector nepotism has received little attention in the study of emigration drivers. The key contributions of this article are therefore to better understand the migration–corruption nexus and how it relates to education by (1) focusing more precisely on frontline corruption rather than grand political corruption and (2) disaggregating the effects of the payment of bribes to frontline bureaucrats from those of nepotism in public employment.

Our article also improves on earlier micro-level studies on frontline corruption which are based on survey measures of emigration *aspirations* by focusing on emigration *preparations*. Emigration *aspirations* rest on 'the conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration' (Carling and Schewel 2018: 946). However, emigration depends also on the ability to see it through; not all individuals can move abroad or wish to do so. A more accurate measure of the realization of these migration aspirations/plans is asking respondents about their emigration *preparations* (Carling and Schewel 2018). The Balkan Barometer questions allow us to investigate both emigration *aspirations* and *preparations*. Thus, we examine how emigration *preparations* relate to bribe-paying experiences,

assessments of nepotism in public employment, and perceived frontline corruption in general. We find that all three measures of frontline corruption are associated with emigration, but education only moderates the relationship for nepotism.

4. Frontline corruption and emigration decisions

The consequences of frontline corruption are felt widely: citizens must pay to access public services that should be free, miss out on public sector job opportunities or receive poor services from hollowed-out public institutions. We posit that the payment of bribes is an important driver of emigration in the WB-6, but nepotism in public employment is consequential only for the emigration decisions of the highly educated.

4.1 Bribery

In societies with dysfunctional bureaucracies, citizens commonly pay bribes to frontline bureaucrats to access public services such as healthcare and education, to speed up administrative processes and to avoid problems with security agencies (Kaufmann, Montoriol-Garriga and Recanatini 2005). Where bribery is common, access to public services like healthcare or education is neither public nor free. In the WB-6, citizens have difficulties accessing public healthcare: out-of-pocket expenditures for healthcare are twice as high as in the EU (OECD 2022). The majority of citizens in the region thus purchase healthcare access 'privately' either from non-state providers or from frontline bureaucrats via bribes (Morris and Polese 2016). The payment of bribes is however more difficult to avoid when there are no other alternatives to state-provided goods and services (e.g. certificates, permits) (Rose and Peiffer 2015). If a bribe must be paid to a local officer in order to receive medical care, secure a child's place in a public school or receive an education certificate, families will worry that an inability to pay might jeopardize their well-being or their children's futures and hence consider emigration.

According to the New Economics of Labour Migration, households opt to send a family member abroad and use the remittances they send to help them to diversify risk and overcome barriers to accessing credit and insurance markets (Stark and Bloom 1985). We posit that bribe-paying experiences raise citizens' awareness of the inability of the public service provision to properly function without the payment of kickbacks. To minimize the risk that important public services are not accessible or available when needed, households affected by the payment of bribes may choose to send a family member overseas.

This reasoning has underpinned research on the political effects of remittances, which has emphasized the 'substitution effect' whereby remittances are used to replace public with private services (Adida and Girod 2011; Doyle 2015; Germano 2018; López García and Maydom 2021). It also helps to account for the finding that remittance recipients are more likely to pay bribes than nonrecipients (Ivlevs and King 2017; Konte and Ndubuisi 2020; Acevedo 2021). Economies in the WB-6 are indeed highly dependent on remittances (Figure A2, Supplementary Material). Over half of the emigrants from the region send

remittances home; after consumption, remittances tend to be spent on welfare (OECD 2022). We thus propose the first hypothesis:

H1: Individuals who have paid bribes to frontline bureaucrats are more likely to prepare to emigrate than those who have not.

4.2 Nepotism

In addition to public goods and services to the citizenry, the public sector provides employment to civil servants. However, bureaucratic malpractices such as nepotism can affect citizens' chances of gaining, or advancing their careers in, public sector employment and make the prospect of emigration more attractive. Neoclassical models assume that the decision to emigrate is driven by the prospects of higher returns to human capital and labour supply abroad (Sjaadstad 1962; Grogger and Hanson 2011). If medical students think that procurement and hiring in public health clinics are influenced more by nepotism and cronyism than applicants' qualifications or local medical needs, they will consider emigrating to a country where there is more meritocratic access to jobs or where they believe the phenomenon to be less prevalent. The prospect of better employment and career advancement opportunities and conditions abroad will lead individuals to consider leaving home. This leads us to our second hypothesis:

H2: The more nepotism in public sector employment an individual thinks there is, the more likely they will be to prepare to emigrate.

4.3 The role of education

How might education moderate the relationship between frontline corruption and emigration? As discussed above, existing research on the corruption–migration nexus finds that those with higher levels of education are more likely to emigrate because of the greater potential rewards to be reaped from their investment in human capital in a less corrupt setting (Arif 2022; Cooray and Schneider 2016; Helms 2023). However, these studies do not disaggregate between diverse types of (frontline) corruption. We posit that the highly educated are more sensitive to nepotism in public employment than to bribe-paying experiences.

One might argue that the highly educated would react more strongly to the payment of bribes because they are more aware of the negative consequences of this phenomenon. In post-socialist countries, however, the payment of bribes is often required to make it all the way through the education system (Morris and Polese 2016). Individuals may benefit from obtaining preferential access to highly ranked public schools or a faster processing of education permits, despite the monetary losses involved. This can make the highly skilled more tolerant of bribery because these informal payments come to be seen as inconvenient but 'socially acceptable' (Bisogno, Jandl and Reiterer 2011; Letki et al., 2023). Moreover, in the WB-6 no social group is exempt from experiencing bribery (Bisogno,

Jandl and Reiterer 2011: 9). Bureaucrats demand bribes from users of public services regardless of their education level or socio-economic status, even if the amount demanded might vary: those perceived as more wealthy (or more educated) for instance may be asked for higher amounts (Morris and Polese 2016). In the WB-6 context, then, we do not expect education to play a moderating role in the relationship between bribe-paying experiences and emigration behaviour.

In contrast to bribery, nepotism and the resulting weakening of meritocracy in the allocation of public jobs may have different effects on the emigration decisions according to individuals' level of education. This is because low-skilled and high-skilled individuals follow different labour market paths and outcomes. In the WB-6 not only are most professional jobs provided by the state (OECD 2020), but the public sector is more attractive to the high skilled because wages are higher than in the private sector (Mara and Landesmann 2022). However, the recruitment, promotion, and salary of frontline bureaucrats in the region depend less on skills and qualifications and more on kinship, friendship, and party connections. Politicians regularly use career advancement as a reward to frontline bureaucrats for helping to generate electoral support (Grzymala-Busse 2007). Besides patronage, it is commonplace for public schools in the WB-6 to recruit new teachers from the relatives of employees (Šimić Banović 2019).

If public employment, promotion, and salary increases are given to those with better connections rather than those who have invested in their human capital, those who have done so by gaining higher levels of education will lose out more than those who have not invested as much. By affecting the salary and job prospects of this group of individuals, nepotism in public employment leads to the underutilization of the skills and expertise of the highly educated and distorts the labour market. Based on this reasoning, we expect that the emigration of the highly educated is more sensitive to nepotism in public employment compared with the emigration of the less well educated. We thus advance a third hypothesis:

> **H3**: The relationship between perceived nepotism in public employment and emigration preparations becomes stronger the more highly educated an individual is.

5. Empirical setup

5.1 Data

We test our hypotheses using the 2018–21 waves of the Balkan Barometer conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council on nationally representative samples of the countries of the WB-6.[2] This survey is particularly helpful for the purposes of our study because it asks respondents about their emigration *aspirations* and *preparations*, their experiences of paying bribes, beliefs about what it takes to succeed in the public sector, and broader corruption perceptions in different public-service agencies. Our sample covers four survey

rounds. Since the key questions remain the same throughout the different waves, we pool data for the six countries and include wave fixed effects to control for temporal variation.

5.1.1 *Dependent variable: emigration preparations.*   To operationalize emigration *preparations*, we use an item in the Balkan Barometer survey which asks respondents if they have considered leaving and working abroad (emigration *aspirations*) and, if so, what phase of preparation they have reached. We then construct a binary variable, coded 1 if respondents reported that they were making concrete preparations to move abroad at the time of the survey and 0 otherwise. This covers those who responded that they were: 'actively getting informed about possibilities/options that they have to study and live abroad'; 'reviewing and applying for vacancies'; 'concretized everything, currently finishing necessary administrative issues'; or 'knew the exact date of departure'.

5.1.2 *Independent variables.*   We measure individuals' bribe-paying experiences using a binary variable taking the value of 1 if the respondent reported that they or someone living in their household had in the year prior to the survey paid a bribe to officials in any of the following domains: education, healthcare, the courts, permit-issuing offices, the police, utility services, tax agencies, land services, local authorities, and any other government offices.

To capture citizens' perceptions of nepotism in public employment, we use an ordinal variable, ranging from 0 to 9, with higher values indicating greater agreement with the claim 'Connections are necessary to succeed in the public sector'.

To measure individuals' broader perceptions of frontline corruption, we construct a variable based on the responses to a series of questions posed regarding the pervasiveness of corruption in public education, public healthcare, the judiciary, the police, the military, customs offices, and civil servants. These are all ordinal variables, ranging from 0 to 3—with the latter value indicating the highest levels of perceived corruption in a particular government agency. Perceptions of frontline corruption in one policy area are, however, related to perceptions of corruption in others (see Supplementary Table A2). To reduce these correlation issues and to bring the variation in these variables into one latent variable of perceived frontline corruption, we use item response theory (IRT). IRT is more appropriate to use here than alternatives such as principal component analysis because it deals specifically with binary and categorical variables.

As argued above, bribe-paying experiences are different from nepotism in public employment and other forms of frontline corruption. Our data confirm this: the payment of bribes is not significantly related to our measure of nepotism ($\rho = -0.006$, n.s.). This strengthens the need to study the influence on emigration of bribe-paying experiences separately from that of perceived nepotism. Broader perceptions of frontline corruption are nonetheless significantly but weakly correlated to both bribe-paying experiences ($\rho = 0.142$, $p < .05$) and assessments of nepotism in public employment ($\rho = 0.235$, $p < .05$) (Supplementary Table A3).

5.1.3 *Control variables.* We include a set of variables in each of the models to control for socio-economic and demographic factors likely to influence individuals' propensity to emigrate. For instance, it is well-known that the emigration decision involves various costs (Sjaadstad 1962). The highly educated might be more inclined to emigrate because they face lower costs: they have skills which are transferrable across countries and already know or can more easily learn a new language (Docquier, Peri and Ruyssen 2014). Besides education, we control for respondents' gender, marital status, age, employment status, residence in an urban area, and their households' poverty status.[3] A full description of all the variables used and summary statistics are available in the Supplementary Material (Table A2).

5.2 Estimation strategy

We estimate the following baseline specifications:

$$\Pr\left(Emigration_{ijt} = 1 \mid X_{ijt}\right) = \alpha_1 + Bribes_{jt} \times \beta_1 + Nepotism_{ijt} \times \beta_2 + \xi_1 X_{ijt} + \eta_j + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{ijt1}$$

(1)

where *ijt* refer to individual *i* surveyed in country *j* in year *t*. *Emigration*$_{ijt}$ is our main dependent variable, denoting whether an individual has made concrete emigration preparations or not. *Bribes*$_{ijt}$ and *Nepotism*$_{ijt}$ represent the variables measuring respondents' bribe-paying experiences, and perceived nepotism in public employment, respectively. The vector X_{ijt} includes information on a variety of covariates which could influence emigration preparations as well as individual bribe-paying experiences and perceived bureaucratic nepotism. δ_t is a dummy for every wave of the Balkan Barometer survey to control for any unobserved or unmeasured differences across countries over time. Finally, η_j controls for any unobserved or unmeasured differences across countries, such as formal and informal institutions as well as prevailing notions on the public sector.[4]

Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we employ probit regression models. In all model specifications, we cluster standard errors by country-wave.

5.3 Descriptives

Pooling data from the six countries, we find that 45 per cent of respondents have considered emigrating, but only 18 per cent reported having made concrete preparations to do so at the time of survey. That said, the share of individuals with emigration *aspirations* and emigration *preparations* varies considerably by country. The percentage of those aspiring to emigrate is highest in Albania (50 per cent each) and lowest in North Macedonia (38 per cent) and Serbia (39 per cent). Emigration preparations are similarly most prevalent in Albania (20 per cent) and rarest in Serbia (13 per cent) (Figure 1).
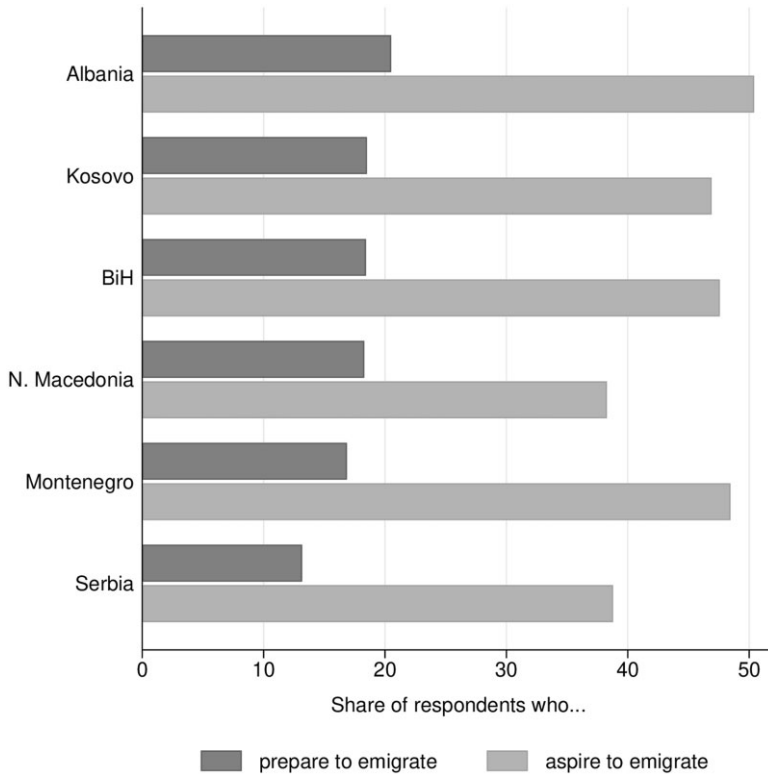
Figure 1. Emigration aspirations and preparations by country.
Source: Balkan Barometer (2018–2021).

Across all countries and survey waves, 22 per cent of respondents had paid a bribe in the year leading up to the survey. Bribe-paying experiences were most frequent when dealing with public healthcare providers (17 per cent), followed by police officers (8 per cent). There is again a great deal of variation across the region: the share of respondents who paid a bribe is highest in Albania (52 per cent) and lowest in Serbia (13 per cent). For nepotism, however, we find the highest levels in Serbia (mean $= 6.4$) and the lowest in Montenegro (mean $= 5.7$). At the country level, bribe-paying experiences are therefore not strongly related to perceived nepotism, providing further incentive to disaggregate the effects of different forms of frontline corruption on emigration (Figure 2).

Meanwhile, broader assessments of frontline corruption are the highest in BiH (mean $= 0.22$, as captured by the IRT measure) and lowest in Kosovo (mean $= -0.18$). It is also worth noting that in Albania—the country with the highest share of respondents who have paid a bribe—assessments of frontline corruption (mean $= 0.04$) do not differ so much from that in Serbia (mean $= 0.01$), the country with
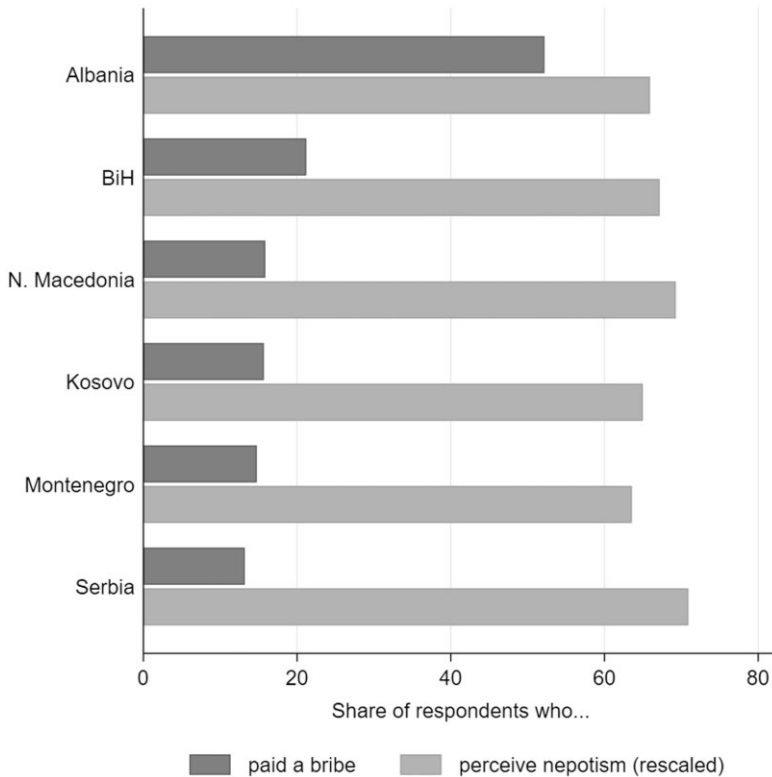
Figure 2. Bribe paying and perceived nepotism by country.
Source: Balkan Barometer (2018–2021).

the lowest share of respondents with bribe-paying experiences and emigration preparations (Supplementary Figure A4).

6. Results

This section reports the results of a series of probit regression models estimating the likelihood of emigration preparations. All models include country and wave fixed effects. Regression results are reported in Table 1 and graphically displayed in Figure 3 in terms of average marginal effects, with all dummy (categorical) variables set to 0 and average values for all other covariates. Since the analysis is not causal, results should be interpreted as correlational.

The results of Models 1 and 2 (Table 1) show that the payment of bribes is significantly associated with a greater likelihood of emigration. More specifically, those who reported having paid a bribe to a frontline bureaucrat are on average 6 per cent more likely to

Table 1. Probit regression: emigration, bribe-paying experiences, and perceptions of frontline corruption

DV: Emigration preparations	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Paid a bribe	0.084***	0.060***					0.060***	0.057***
	(0.014)	(0.013)					(0.014)	(0.014)
Perceived nepotism			0.008***	0.005***			0.005***	0.004**
			(0.002)	(0.001)			(0.001)	(0.001)
Perceived frontline corruption					0.025***	0.017***		0.011*
					(0.004)	(0.004)		(0.004)
Age group: 35–54 years		−0.092***		−0.092***		−0.092***	−0.092***	−0.092***
		(0.007)		(0.007)		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Age group: >55 years		−0.212***		−0.213***		−0.213***	−0.211***	−0.211***
		(0.012)		(0.011)		(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Female		−0.047***		−0.048***		−0.047***	−0.047***	−0.046***
		(0.008)		(0.007)		(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Urban residence		−0.006		−0.007		−0.007	−0.007	−0.008
		(0.005)		(0.005)		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Poor household		0.065***		0.070***		0.069***	0.064***	0.062***
		(0.008)		(0.008)		(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
High school diploma		0.039***		0.038***		0.039***	0.037***	0.037***
		(0.008)		(0.008)		(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
University degree or higher		0.049***		0.050***		0.051***	0.047***	0.047***
		(0.009)		(0.009)		(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Married		−0.019**		−0.019**		−0.019**	−0.019**	−0.019**
		(0.007)		(0.007)		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Employed		−0.033***		−0.033***		−0.033***	−0.033***	−0.032***
		(0.007)		(0.007)		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
N	21,473	21,473	21,786	21,786	21,802	21,802	21,473	21,473

Notes: Coefficients displayed as marginal effects. Standard errors clustered by country-waves in parentheses. Country and wave dummies included in all models. Coefficients significant at *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
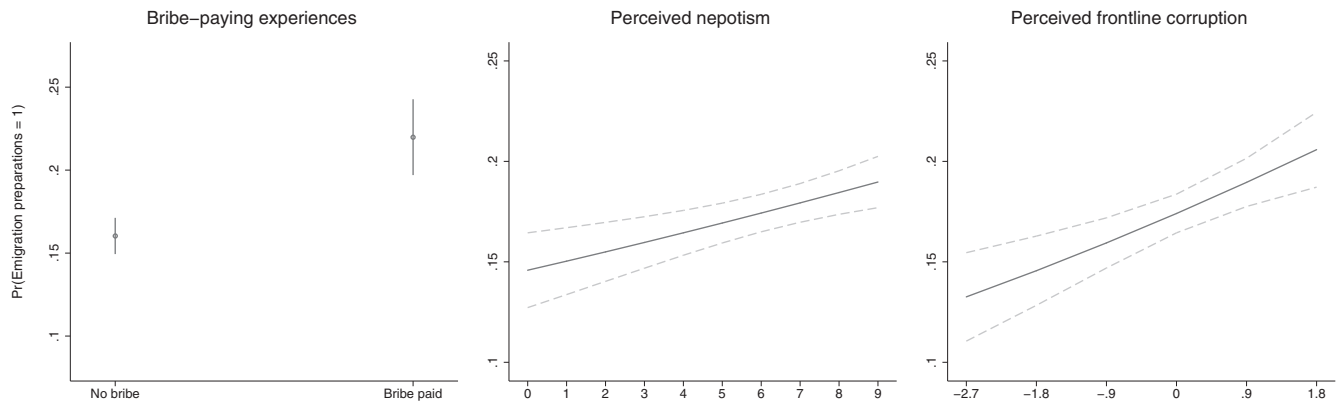
Figure 3. Emigration and frontline corruption.
Note: Marginal effects with 95% CIs, based on coefficients in Table 1.

make preparations to leave their country. The magnitude of the marginal effect of bribe-paying experiences is not trivial; it is slightly higher than the marginal effect of moving from being less-educated to university-educated. To ensure that our aggregation of bribe-paying across different types of government agencies has not skewed our results, we report models using disaggregated measures of bribe-paying experiences in Supplementary Table A4 and find that the payment of bribes to all types of public service agencies is significantly and positively associated with the likelihood of emigration preparations being made. These results provide us with evidence to accept H1.

We also find that perceived nepotism in public employment is a positive and significant predictor of emigration. Models 3 and 4 show that moving upwards by one point on the ten-point scale in the measure of perceived nepotism is related to a 0.5 per cent greater likelihood of preparing to emigrate. The shift from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree' in response to the statement 'Connections are necessary to succeed in the public sector' is associated with a 4.4 per cent greater probability of emigration. This is a smaller change compared with experiencing bribery, but we nevertheless have evidence to accept H2.

Meanwhile, the point estimates of Models 5 and 6 show that the likelihood of emigration is positively related to individuals' overall perception of the extent of frontline corruption. Moving from the minimum to the maximum value of this variable is associated with a 7.1 per cent greater likelihood of preparing for emigration. In Supplementary Table A5, we show that this association holds across corruption perceptions of different public-service agencies; it is not a result of our aggregation of frontline corruption perceptions.

One of the central claims in this article is that we should differentiate the relationship between distinct forms of frontline corruption and emigration because they are likely to vary in their mechanisms. The coefficients of bribery and nepotism in Models 7 and 8 remain similar when we include these variables together in the same model. This indicates that bribery and nepotism influence emigration through different processes; they are not merely two measures of the same unidimensional concept of frontline corruption. It is worth noting that the coefficients of both bribe-paying experiences and perceived nepotism remain significant even after accounting for our aggregated measure of frontline corruption, and that the coefficient of the latter variable remains significant too. This suggests that frontline corruption influences individuals' emigration decisions through other bureaucratic malpractices or channels not considered in this article (e.g., theft or graft by frontline bureaucrats).

With regards to the other independent variables in the models, our results align with previous studies on emigration from the Western Balkans (Papapanagos and Sanfey 2001; OECD 2022). Younger and more educated people are more likely to prepare to emigrate. Compared with those aged 34 and under, individuals aged 35–54 are 9 per cent less likely to emigrate and those aged 55 or above are 21 per cent less likely to do so. Relative to those with no education or who have only finished middle school, those with a high school diploma are 4 per cent more likely to prepare for emigration and those with a college degree are 5 per cent more likely to do so. Our models also indicate that less well-off individuals are more likely to make preparations to emigrate. Respondents who live in households that have experienced any income shocks in the year prior to the survey are 7 per cent more likely to emigrate. Unemployed individuals are 3 per cent more likely to

**Table 2.** Probit regression: emigration, education, and frontline corruption

	(1)	(2)	(3)
High school diploma	0.215***	−0.082	0.181***
	(0.056)	(0.093)	(0.041)
University degree or higher	0.231***	−0.106	0.227***
	(0.055)	(0.121)	(0.045)
Paid a bribe	0.315**		
	(0.108)		
High school * Bribe	−0.117		
	(0.098)		
University * Bribe	−0.022		
	(0.090)		
Perceived nepotism		−0.022	
		(0.016)	
High school * Nepotism		0.044**	
		(0.014)	
University * Nepotism		0.056**	
		(0.019)	
Perceived frontline corruption			0.092*
			(0.039)
High school * Frontline corruption			−0.026
			(0.030)
University * Frontline corruption			−0.019
			(0.037)
N	21,473	21,786	21,802

Notes: Coefficients displayed as marginal effects. Standard errors clustered by country-waves in parentheses. Country and wave dummies included in all models.
Coefficients significant at $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

prepare for emigration. Meanwhile, women are 5 per cent less prone to make emigration preparations than men are. Compared with single individuals, those married or living in a partnership are 2 per cent less likely to emigrate. Urban residence is not a significant predictor of emigration preparations.

We have seen that bribe-paying experiences, assessments of nepotism in public employment, and overall perceptions of frontline corruption are important drivers of emigration in the WB-6. But how might education moderate these relationships? To examine this issue, we estimate a set of models including interactive terms between education categories and frontline corruption measures. Those who have not completed high school are treated as the reference category. Results are reported in Table 2 and graphically displayed in Figures 4–6.
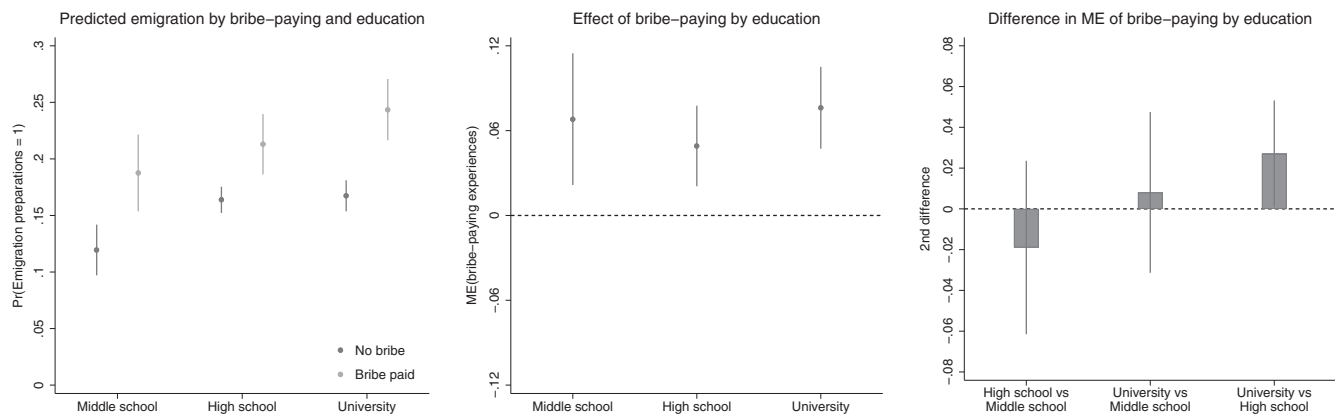
Figure 4. Emigration preparations by bribe paying and education.
Note: Marginal effects with 95% CIs, based on coefficients in Model 1 (Table 2).
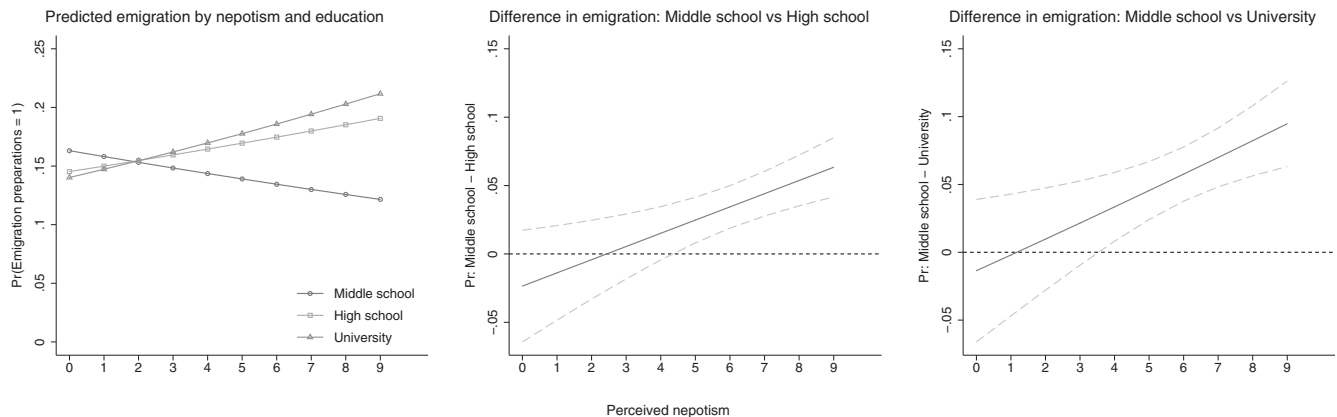
Figure 5. Emigration preparations by perceived nepotism and education.
Note: Marginal effects with 95% CIs, based on coefficients in Model 2 (Table 2).
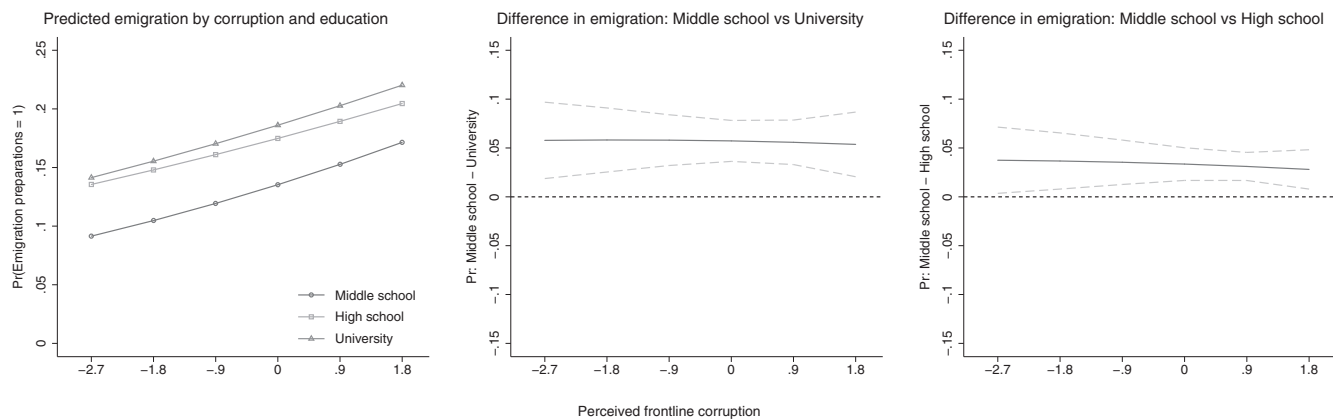
Figure 6. Emigration preparations by perceptions of frontline corruption and education.
Note: Marginal effects with 95% CIs, based on coefficients in Model 3 (Table 2).

We find that across all education groups, the effect of bribe-paying experiences is positive and significant ($\Delta_{\text{middle school}} = 0.068$, $p < .01$; $\Delta_{\text{high school}} = 0.049$, $p < .01$; $\Delta_{\text{university}} = 0.076$, $p < .001$). However, the influence of bribe-paying is similar for the lower educated and those with completed high school (second difference, $p = .383$), and for the lower educated and those with a college degree (second difference, $p = .689$). That is, the relationship between bribe-paying and emigration does not vary significantly across education categories ($\chi^2 = 4.08$, $p = .130$) (Figure 4).

Education does matter for understanding the relationship between emigration and nepotism in public employment ($\chi^2 = 11.94$, $p < .01$). Perceived nepotism has no influence on the probability of emigration of the lower educated ($p = .152$), but it is associated with a greater probability of emigration for both those with a high school diploma ($\Delta_{\text{high school}} = 0.005$, $p < .01$), and those with a college degree ($\Delta_{\text{university}} = 0.008$, $p < .01$). Relative to the lower educated, the effect of nepotism is significantly stronger for those with a college degree (second difference $= 0.013$, $p < .01$) and for those with a high school diploma (second difference $= 0.010$, $p < .01$). The effect of nepotism is however stronger for the university educated. For example, when moving over the range of perceived nepotism, the probability of emigration rises from a minimum of 14 per cent to a maximum of 21.2 per cent for the university educated (Figure 5). We therefore have evidence to support H3.

As mentioned above, the variable measuring perceptions about the extent of frontline corruption captures a broader concept shaped not only by bribe-paying and nepotism in public employment, but also by other bureaucratic malpractices. Results indicate that the association between broader perceptions of frontline corruption and the likelihood of emigration is of equal size at all levels of education ($\chi^2 = 0.42$, $p = .812$). The effect of broader perceptions of frontline corruption on emigration preparations is similar both for the middle-school educated and the high-school educated (second difference, $p = .886$), and for the middle-school educated and the university educated (second difference, $p = .545$) (Figure 6).

Overall, our evidence confirms that the emigration of the highly educated is sensitive to only one form of frontline corruption—nepotistic public sector hiring and promotion—but not to other forms such as bribery and the bundle of practices that respondents have in mind when asked about generalized frontline corruption. While bribe-paying experiences and general perceptions of frontline corruption are associated with a greater likelihood of emigration preparations, the lack of moderation by education suggests that these mechanisms do not run through (perceived) labour market distortion as assumed by earlier research, but rather by generalized frustration at bureaucratic malpractices, particularly those affecting the accessibility and the quality of public services.

6.1 Sensitivity tests

6.1.1 *Additional controls.* To ensure the robustness of our findings, we run a series of models including additional control variables, which are reported in the Supplementary Material. Our results hold after including measures of dissatisfaction with the economy as well as other factors—such as the quality of one's social life and the respect for differences in the country—which might influence emigration. Dissatisfaction with the national and

the household economy and with one's social life is associated with a greater likelihood of emigration as is greater tolerance of difference (Supplementary Tables A6–A9).

We also include a variable measuring respondents' belonging to a remittance-receiving household as a proxy for individuals' connections abroad. Migration plans tend to be network-driven; those with family members living abroad have a greater ability and face lower costs to emigrate (Massey 1990; McKenzie and Rapoport 2010). Receiving remittances may, at the same time, both lower the costs of migration and relax the budget constraints regarding paying the necessary bribes to frontline bureaucrats (Ivlevs and King 2017; Konte and Ndubuisi 2020). In BiH, for instance, the receipt of remittances has been linked with greater prospects of family emigration (Dimova and Wolff 2015). Our results remain robust to the inclusion of remittances, whose receipt is indeed associated with a greater likelihood of emigration (Supplementary Tables A10 and A11).

Additionally, we include a binary variable measuring citizens' support for their country joining the EU. Those who consider EU membership to be a good thing are likely to have views which are similar to those living in advanced democracies and to be more critical of corruption in their homeland; most migrants from the WB-6 are concentrated in EU countries, too. Again, baseline results hold when controlling for individual support for EU membership (Supplementary Tables A12 and A13). Those who consider membership to be a good thing for their country are more likely to report making emigration preparations.

6.1.2 *Outliers.*   The estimates presented so far have been based on a pooled sample. All our regression models include dummy variables for each country; as such, they account for variation within countries rather than across them. Nonetheless, we verify that our results are not driven by particular countries by running models which exclude from the sample Albania and Serbia—the countries with the highest and lowest shares of respondents with emigration preparations and experiences of bribery (Supplementary Tables A14 and A15). We also ran regressions omitting one country in each (Supplementary Tables A16 and A17). Although the magnitude of the coefficients obtained differs across countries, the results are similar to our baseline specifications. We are therefore confident that the baseline results are not driven by particular countries.

6.1.3 *Alternative models.*   The models above focus on emigration *preparations*, which are contingent on individuals having the aspiration to emigrate in the first place. The Balkan Barometer also includes a question on emigration *aspirations*, allowing us to model migration as a two-step process: *aspirations* followed by *preparations*. To do so, we specify a series of selection models.[5] Given the dichotomous nature of our variables (emigration *preparations*, on the one hand, and emigration *aspirations*, on the other), these models consist of two probit models. Across models, however, we fail to refute the null hypothesis that the errors of the outcome and selection equations are uncorrelated (Supplementary Table A19). That is, selection models are not appropriate to use in this case.

While some factors like education might influence the probability of emigration aspirations and, through this channel, emigration preparations, education could also directly influence the probability of emigration preparations itself. To verify that our results are

not biased in this way, we specify a series of bivariate probit models which allow us to simultaneously estimate the joint distribution of emigration *aspirations* and emigration *preparations*. To verify that these two outcomes are correlated, we test the significance of ρ. Across models, we reject the null hypothesis that the errors of the two equations are uncorrelated, indicating that bivariate probit is an appropriate estimation strategy to use. The results of these models are consistent with those of our baseline specifications (Supplementary Table A20).

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that emigration from the WB-6 is strongly influenced by experiences and perceptions of frontline corruption. Furthermore, we have found that education moderates the influence of nepotism in public employment on emigration, but not that of direct experiences with bribe-paying or general perceptions of frontline corruption. We attribute this to nepotistic practices creating labour market distortions that affect highly educated people in particular. Our findings should push migration scholars to distinguish between the varied types of corruption to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of the corruption–migration nexus and the determinants of (high-skilled) emigration in the WB-6 and beyond.

Although our focus was on those preparing to emigrate, the exit of those who experience bribery and perceive greater nepotism in public employment might mean fewer voices being raised against it back home (Helms 2023; Lim 2023). Our analysis is, however, limited by its consideration of only the first stage of the migration process: the decision to leave. Future research could investigate the role of frontline corruption in other migration stages. For instance, using survey evidence from the Balkans, Ivlevs and King (2017) find that the receipt of remittances increases the individual propensity of those left behind to pay bribes, but having family members living abroad (particularly in Western democracies) reduces the incentives to engage in these corrupt practices through migration-driven norm diffusion. Evidence from the Philippines also shows that migrants withhold remittances to their families when they consider their governments to be affected by corruption (Tusalem 2018). The experience of moving from a high- to low-corruption setting can thus reduce the incentives for migrants and their family members back home to condone petty bribery and nepotism. Socialization into a less-corrupt public sector context, where there is greater meritocracy and public-service providers are held more accountable, can also make emigrants more committed to social change back home—and hence more vocal in opposing bribery, nepotism, and other bureaucratic malpractices. This possibility resonates with previous work showing that migration to less-corrupt countries increases demands for transparency and accountability in origin countries (Tyburski 2012, 2014). More fine-grained data on migrant connections and trajectories, as well as on destination-country characteristics, could examine these processes in the WB-6.

Further research is also needed to understand the different mechanisms through which bribe-paying experiences and nepotism in public employment influence emigration behaviour. Qualitative accounts based on interviews or focus groups could shed further light by analysing how those preparing to move or already living abroad understand how frontline bureaucracies work. Future studies could also address endogeneity and reverse

causality concerns between emigration preparations and frontline corruption. Those preparing to move abroad are likely to interact more frequently with frontline bureaucrats (to acquire passports, for instance). In the process, their experiences and perceptions of frontline corruption are likely to undergo change. Scholars could also examine how emigration is driven by petty theft of public sector resources by frontline bureaucrats or extortion by state security officers. As discussed above, frontline corruption encompasses a wide range of forms and practices beyond the categories in this study.

These undertakings will help us to more accurately answer questions about whether efforts against frontline corruption in the WB-6 will become more prominent as the emigrant populations from these countries increase. Given the paucity of previous migration research in the region, this geographic focus is a key contribution of our study. Although our analysis is based on national representative survey data from the WB-6, future work could explore whether the results extend to other regions, where frontline corruption is pervasive too, such as Latin America or sub-Saharan Africa. Analysing the links between emigration and corruption from a frontline perspective seems to be a promising avenue for future research on migration, both in the Western Balkans and in global comparative perspective.

Notes

1. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are EU candidate countries, BiH and Kosovo are potential candidates.
2. For details of this survey project, see https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/.
3. Although the Balkan Barometer asks respondents about their household income, this variable is not measured consistently across waves and countries and has a large number of missing observations. Hence, we built a poverty measure using a binary variable, coded 1 if respondents reported having experienced shortages of food, basic supplies, energy, cash income and holidays in the year prior to the survey and 0 otherwise.
4. In our models, Serbia and the 2018 wave of the Balkan Barometer serve as reference categories.
5. In the selection models, we use individuals' urban residence as the identification variable. For this to be valid, two conditions need to hold true. First, conditional on all remaining controls, urban residence should be correlated with emigration aspirations. This appears to be the case: regression models show that 'urban residence' is a positive and significant predictor of 'emigration aspirations' (Supplementary Table A18). Second, we require unobserved factors that could affect 'urban residence' to be orthogonal to unobserved factors to 'emigration preparations', conditional on all of our controls. That is, while affecting emigration aspirations, urban residence should not influence the key observables which are typically correlated with emigration preparations. In the regression models, we see that urban residence was not a significant predictor of emigration preparations.

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Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *MIGRAT Journal* online.

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Conflict of interest statement

We confirm that we have no competing interests regarding publication of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

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