

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Employment Nepotism and Favoritism: Clientelism, Institutional Failure, and Economic Implications

Nepotismo y favoritismo en el empleo: clientelismo, fallos institucionales e implicaciones económicas.

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Abstract

Nepotism and corruption are interconnected phenomena that challenge economic development, the rule of law, and the effective functioning of public institutions. Nepotism typically manifests through the employment or advancement of relatives and close associates at the expense of professional merit. This study analyzes factors associated with nepotism and corruption in Kosovo and examines their perceived effects on recruitment, career advancement, institutional functioning, and economic conditions. A mixed-methods design combines a descriptive employee survey with analysis of peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, and policy documents. The available survey results are reported as percentages because the retained study materials do not specify a complete respondent count suitable for inferential analysis. The findings indicate widespread perceptions that family and personal connections influence hiring and promotion, weaken transparency and merit-based practices, and affect organizational trust and fairness. Secondary evidence also links weak meritocratic institutions with lower administrative quality and greater corruption risk. The study recommends stronger merit-based recruitment and promotion, transparent human resource procedures, ethical training, institutional accountability, and civil-society oversight.

Keywords employment, clientelism, economic implications, nepotism, corruption.

Resumen

El nepotismo y la corrupción son fenómenos interconectados que plantean desafíos para el desarrollo económico, el Estado de derecho y el funcionamiento eficaz de las instituciones públicas. El nepotismo suele manifestarse mediante la contratación o promoción de familiares y personas cercanas en detrimento del mérito profesional. Este estudio analiza factores asociados con el nepotismo y la corrupción en Kosovo y examina sus efectos percibidos sobre la contratación, el avance profesional, el funcionamiento institucional y las condiciones económicas. Se empleó un diseño mixto que combina una encuesta descriptiva a empleados con el análisis de literatura científica, informes institucionales y documentos de política pública. Los resultados disponibles de la encuesta se presentan mediante porcentajes, ya que los materiales conservados del estudio no especifican un número completo de participantes que permita realizar análisis inferenciales. Los hallazgos indican una percepción extendida de que las conexiones familiares y personales influyen en la contratación y promoción, debilitan la transparencia y la meritocracia y afectan la confianza y la justicia organizacional. Se recomiendan procesos meritocráticos transparentes, formación ética, mecanismos de rendición de cuentas y supervisión institucional y social.

Palabras clave empleo, clientelismo, implicaciones económicas, nepotismo, corrupción.

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Introduction

Nepotism refers to preferential treatment based on family or close personal ties rather than objective qualifications or merit (Jones, 2012). Historically associated with appointments of relatives to positions of authority, the concept now encompasses employment, promotion, and organizational decisions in which kinship or personal connections override transparent criteria. Favoritism is broader and may involve friends, political allies, or other preferred groups. In contemporary organizations, both practices are relevant to human resource management because they can affect recruitment, promotion, performance evaluation, perceived fairness, and employee trust (Vveinhardt & Bendaravičienė, 2022; Pearce & Wang, 2024).

Corruption and nepotism frequently intersect in weak institutional environments because discretionary authority, low accountability, and limited transparency create opportunities for non-meritocratic decisions. Classic research has linked corruption with lower investment and economic growth (Mauro, 1995), while more recent evidence shows that meritocratic public-service recruitment and professional civil-service practices are associated with stronger government performance and lower corruption (Oliveira et al., 2024; Patterson, 2024). These relationships are especially relevant in transitional settings, where politicization and informal networks may compete with formal recruitment and promotion rules.

The organizational consequences extend beyond formal hiring decisions. Employees who perceive favoritism may report lower trust, commitment, willingness to speak up, and satisfaction (Pearce & Wang, 2024). Research on nepotism has also identified negative relationships with workplace commitment and turnover-related outcomes when employees perceive that organizational promises of fairness have been violated (Lim et al., 2023; Shatila et al., 2024). Perceived nepotism can reduce job satisfaction through distributive and procedural injustice, although supervisory trust may mitigate some of these effects (Rasheed et al., 2026).

From a human resource management perspective, merit-based recruitment and promotion protect both organizational capability and perceived justice. A systematic review of 96 empirical studies found that meritocratic appointment, advancement, impartiality, and professionalism are consistently associated with better government performance and lower corruption (Oliveira et al., 2024). Similarly, research on civil-service management shows that merit-based selection can make public employment more attractive to capable candidates (Yang, 2024). These findings support the view that transparent and competency-based HR systems are not merely procedural safeguards but strategic mechanisms for institutional effectiveness.

Kosovo provides a relevant context for examining these issues because public-sector reform, institutional trust, and the consolidation of merit-based administration remain important governance challenges. The European Commission's Kosovo Report 2024 continues to emphasize the need to strengthen public administration, accountability, and institutional effectiveness (European Commission, 2024). Previous Kosovo-focused research has also documented concerns regarding political influence, non-merit-based employment, and the consequences of nepotism and corruption for public administration and economic performance (Gjinovci, 2016; Gjinovci, 2018; Gjinovci & Gjinovci, 2025a).

The relationship between clientelism and employment opportunities is also supported by comparative literature. Clientelistic arrangements may transform access to public employment into an exchange based on political or personal loyalty rather than qualifications, generating inequality in employment opportunities (García Godos Peñaloza & García Godos Peñaloza, 2023). Evidence from public personnel research likewise shows that friendship favoritism can be especially damaging to organizational trust and commitment even where formal rules exist (Pearce & Wang, 2024).

Nepotism should nevertheless be analyzed carefully rather than treated as a uniform causal mechanism. Some studies report context-dependent outcomes and show that organizational justice can alter how nepotism relates to employee behavior and performance (Khairy & Elzek, 2024). Accordingly, the present study focuses on employees' perceptions of non-meritocratic practices and combines those perceptions with external institutional and academic evidence rather than claiming that descriptive survey percentages alone establish national causal effects.

Within this framework, the study examines how nepotism, favoritism, and corruption are perceived to affect employment, promotion, transparency, resource distribution, organizational culture, and institutional functioning in Kosovo. It also considers the broader economic implications discussed in the corruption and meritocracy literature, while distinguishing between findings derived from the survey and conclusions supported by secondary sources.

The study aims to analyze the perceived impact of nepotism and corruption on employment, professional advancement, and human resource management in Kosovo, and to relate these perceptions to institutional performance and economic implications documented in the literature. Its contribution lies in integrating organizational HR concerns—recruitment, promotion, fairness, and employee development—with evidence on meritocratic public administration and institutional accountability.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design that combines descriptive survey evidence with a qualitative review of peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. The quantitative component explores employee perceptions of nepotism, favoritism, recruitment transparency, promotion, and organizational fairness in Kosovo. Because the retained study materials provide percentages but do not specify a complete respondent count, the survey evidence is treated as descriptive and no inferential statistical claims are made. The qualitative component is used to contextualize the survey patterns and compare them with independent evidence on meritocracy, corruption, public administration, and human resource management.

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to employees of public and private organizations in Kosovo. The available documentation indicates purposive recruitment across different sectors, hierarchical levels, and geographic areas; therefore, the sampling approach is described as purposive rather than probabilistic. The retained results include three preliminary items on advancement criteria (education, professional experience, and merit/contribution) and 10 core statements (B1–B10) addressing employment, promotion, transparency, favoritism, organizational policies, resource distribution, and social pressure. Since the original records available for this revision do not specify the final number of valid respondents, no sample size is reconstructed or inferred.

The 10 core statements (B1–B10) were grouped into four thematic dimensions:

- Nepotism in employment and promotion (B1, B2, B3);
- Transparency and equal treatment (B4, B5, B6);
- Policy effectiveness and resource distribution (B7, B8, B9);
- Social pressure and organizational culture (B10).

Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, with Neutral as the midpoint. The instrument was pilot-tested with 20 respondents. The pilot was used to assess clarity, comprehension, and the sequence of the items, and minor wording and ordering adjustments were made. No reliability coefficient or formal psychometric validation statistic is reported because such results are not available in the retained study materials.

Quantitative results were summarized using the percentages available in the study records. The analysis is descriptive and focuses

on patterns of agreement and disagreement across the advancement items and statements B1–B10. The tables reproduce the percentages reported by the study; where a percentage total is incomplete, the discrepancy is explicitly identified rather than recalculated without raw data. No correlation, regression, or significance testing is reported because the available information does not support such analyses.

The qualitative component reviewed peer-reviewed research and institutional sources relevant to nepotism, favoritism, clientelism, meritocratic recruitment, corruption, and public-sector human resource management. Independent recent evidence was prioritized to contextualize the Kosovo findings, together with selected verified prior studies by the authors that directly address the national context. Institutional evidence included the European Commission's Kosovo Report 2024. This component was used to distinguish perceptions observed in the survey from broader institutional and economic relationships established in external research.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed of the study purpose, confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw. Data were used for academic purposes. The retained manuscript materials do not provide a formal ethics-committee approval number or exemption; accordingly, no approval identifier is claimed. If institutional ethics approval or exemption was obtained, it should be added to the journal record before final publication.

The study has several limitations. First, the available records do not specify the final number of valid respondents, preventing assessment of sampling precision and inferential analysis. Second, the purposive recruitment strategy and reliance on self-reported perceptions limit generalizability. Third, the pilot assessed clarity and comprehension but the available records do not provide psychometric reliability or validity coefficients. Finally, the study is geographically focused on Kosovo. These limitations mean that the survey results should be interpreted as descriptive perceptions and triangulated with external evidence rather than treated as estimates of prevalence for the entire Kosovo labor market.

Results and discussion

The descriptive results indicate strong perceptions that employment and advancement are not consistently governed by merit-based criteria. The interpretation below is limited to the percentages reported in the available survey records and does not imply statistical significance or national prevalence.

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of three preliminary advancement criteria: education, professional experience, and individual merit/contribution. The available results show that 85% disagree that advancement is based on education, while 10% agree and 5% are neutral.

Table 1. Comparison of employee advancement based on education, experience, and merits

Advancement Criteria	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Comments
Advancement based on education	10	85	5	Education is not sufficiently valued in promotions.
Advancement based on professional experience	10	80	10	Experience is often overlooked when promoting staff.
Advancement based on merit and contribution	15	75	10	Employee contributions are not fully recognized.

For professional experience, 80% disagree that it is considered in advancement, 10% agree, and 10% are neutral. These responses suggest that experience is perceived as insufficiently recognized in promotion decisions.

For merit and contribution, 75% disagree that advancement is based on this criterion, 15% agree, and 10% are neutral. Taken together, the three items indicate a strong perceived weakness of objective advancement criteria among the surveyed participants.

These perceptions are consistent with independent evidence showing that meritocratic recruitment and advancement are

associated with better government performance, professionalism, and lower corruption (Oliveira et al., 2024; Patterson, 2024). They should, however, be interpreted as perceptions of the surveyed participants rather than as proof that meritocracy is absent across the entire Kosovo labor market.

Table 2 is an analytical synthesis of the secondary literature and institutional documents reviewed in the study; it is not a direct output of the employee questionnaire. It summarizes how corruption and nepotism are linked in the literature with investment, public administration, justice, public services, and institutional trust.

Table 2. Analytical synthesis of corruption and nepotism in public and economic sectors

Sector	Corruption-related pattern in literature	Nepotism/favoritism-related pattern	Reported institutional implication
Economy	Lower investment and greater uncertainty	Non-merit-based hiring and allocation of opportunities	Potential constraints on productivity and growth
Public Administration	Abuse of discretion and weak accountability	Political or family-based appointments	Reduced professionalism and administrative capacity
Judicial System	Political interference and integrity risks	Preferential access or influence may affect perceived fairness	Lower institutional trust and legal certainty
Public Services	Higher costs and weaker service accountability	Non-merit-based recruitment or promotion	Lower perceived service quality and employee fairness

In the economic literature, corruption is associated with lower investment and weaker growth, while non-merit-based hiring can reduce the efficient allocation of human capital (Mauro, 1995; Oliveira et al., 2024). These relationships provide a broader context for the organizational perceptions reported in the survey.

In public administration, politicized or family-based appointments can weaken professionalism and institutional capacity. Merit-based recruitment, by contrast, is associated with stronger public-sector performance and lower corruption risk (Oliveira et al., 2024; Yang, 2024).

In justice and public services, the literature links corruption and weak accountability with reduced trust and institutional effectiveness. These broader relationships derive from secondary evidence and should not be attributed directly to the survey percentages reported in this study (Albanese & Artello, 2019; European Commission, 2024).

Accordingly, Table 2 should be read as contextual evidence supporting the institutional relevance of the survey findings, not as a causal estimate derived from the questionnaire.

Tables 3–5 present the 10 core statements B1–B10. The results show high reported agreement with statements describing family influence, personal connections, limited transparency, non-merit-based favoritism, weak preventive policies, unfair resource distribution, and pressure to cultivate personal connections.

Table 3. Perceptions regarding the extent of nepotism in employment processes, managerial decision-making, and promotions within organizations

Statement	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
B1. Family preferences influence employment	10	0	40	50
B2. Managerial decisions favor personal connections	15	0	40	45
B3. Promotions occur due to family connections	5	10	35	45

For B1, 90% agree or strongly agree that family preferences influence employment, while 10% disagree. For B2, 85% agree or strongly agree that managerial decisions favor personal connections, while 15% disagree. For B3, 80% agree or strongly agree that promotions occur because of family connections and 10% are neutral. The source table reports 5% as disagree and totals 95%; because raw counts are unavailable, the missing 5% is not reallocated. The pattern nevertheless indicates a high perceived role of family and personal connections in recruitment and promotion.

Table 4 addresses transparency, workplace treatment, and non-merit-based favoritism. For B4, 80% agree or strongly agree that recruitment is not always transparent. For B5, 80% agree or strongly agree that employees with family connections receive better treatment. For B6, 85% agree or strongly agree that non-merit-based favoritism is evident. These descriptive findings are consistent with research showing that perceived favoritism is associated with lower trust, commitment, and organizational fairness (Pearce & Wang, 2024; Rasheed et al., 2026).

Table 4. Transparency, treatment, and non-merit-based favoritism (B4–B6)

Statement	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
B4. Recruitment is not always transparent	10	10	40	40
B5. Employees with family connections are treated better	5	15	35	45
B6. Non-merit-based favoritism is evident	15	0	40	45

Table 5 extends the analysis to organizational policies, resource distribution, and social pressure. The results show that 75% agree or strongly agree that connected candidates can advance without the necessary qualifications (B7) and that policies do not effectively prevent family-based favoritism (B8). For B9, 85% agree or strongly agree that nepotism affects the fair distribution of resources, while for B10, 85% agree or strongly agree that employees feel pressure to create personal connections for career advancement.

Table 5. Nepotism, policy gaps, and influence on resource distribution (B7–B10)

Statement	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
B7. Candidates with connections advance without qualifications	10	15	35	40
B8. Policies do not prevent family-based favoritism	15	10	40	35
B9. Nepotism affects the unfair distribution of resources	10	5	40	45
B10. Employees feel obliged to create personal connections	15	0	50	35

These findings suggest that respondents perceive nepotism as extending beyond individual hiring decisions to organizational policies, distributive fairness, and workplace culture. Similar mechanisms have been documented in recent research linking nepotism to psychological contract violation, job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions (Lim et al., 2023; Shatila et al., 2024; Rasheed et al., 2026).

The survey evidence is therefore most appropriately interpreted as a coherent pattern of perceived non-meritocratic practices. It does not establish causal effects or population prevalence, but it identifies areas of HR governance—recruitment, promotion, transparency, resource allocation, and organizational culture—that warrant stronger institutional safeguards.

The results indicate that surveyed employees perceive merit-based advancement as substantially weakened. This interpretation aligns with broader empirical literature showing that meritocratic recruitment and advancement are positively related to government performance, service quality, professionalism, and lower corruption (Oliveira et al., 2024). Recent evidence also shows that merit-based selection can attract more capable candidates to public service (Yang, 2024).

The findings also suggest that favoritism may become normalized when formal rules are not matched by transparent enforcement. Research in public personnel administration shows that workplace favoritism can undermine trust, organizational commitment, willingness to speak up, and pay satisfaction (Pearce & Wang, 2024). In this sense, the Kosovo responses are consistent with the organizational-justice literature, which emphasizes the importance of transparent and consistently applied HR procedures.

At the macro-institutional level, the survey itself cannot establish effects on investment or economic growth. Those implications are supported instead by external evidence: corruption has long been associated with lower investment and growth (Mauro, 1995), and recent comparative research links meritocratic civil-service recruitment with lower corruption and stronger institutional outcomes (Oliveira et al., 2024; Patterson, 2024). The contribution of the

present study is to connect these broader institutional relationships with employees' reported perceptions of recruitment and advancement practices in Kosovo.

Figure 1 summarizes five high-agreement themes drawn from the descriptive survey results: perceived family influence in employment, personal connections in advancement, lack of transparency, non-meritocratic practices, and social pressure. The figure is descriptive and does not represent a test of statistical significance.

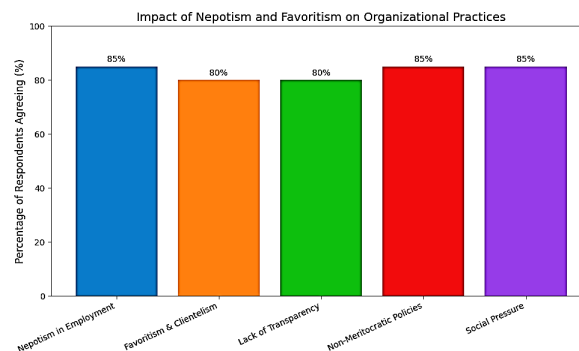


Figure 1. Relationship between nepotism, corruption, institutional performance, and economic outcomes.

Conclusions

The study indicates that surveyed employees perceive nepotism, favoritism, and personal connections as important influences on employment and career advancement in Kosovo. High levels of agreement across the available descriptive items point to concerns about recruitment transparency, merit-based promotion, equal treatment, resource distribution, and organizational culture. These perceptions are consistent with independent research showing that favoritism and nepotism can undermine organizational trust, satisfaction, commitment, and fairness, while meritocratic recruitment and professional civil-service systems are associated with stronger institutional performance and lower corruption. Because the retained study records do not specify the final respondent count and do not support inferential analysis, the findings should not be generalized as prevalence estimates for the entire Kosovo labor market. The results nevertheless support practical recommendations for transparent recruitment and promotion criteria, documented HR decisions, conflict-of-interest controls, ethics training, effective complaint mechanisms, and external accountability. Future studies should report complete sample information, use validated measures, and apply probability sampling or well-defined comparative designs to test the relationships identified here.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contribution

Conceptualization: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Data curation: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Formal analysis: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Investigation: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Methodology: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Supervision: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Validation: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Visualization: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Writing—original draft: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D. Writing—review and editing: Gjinovci, A., & Gjinovci, D.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies to improve the readability and clarity of the article.

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