

# DIGITAL ACCESS GAPS

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## **Digital Access Gaps: Devices and Internet Connectivity in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia**

Access to digital devices remains unequal across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Mobile phones are the most commonly owned devices, especially smartphones, which are used widely for communication and social media. However, laptops, tablets, and desktop computers are much less common, especially in rural areas and among low-income groups. In Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, mobile phones are the most commonly owned digital device. In the survey that we have conducted within the Project DIGI-CORE, it shows that 92% of all respondents across the three countries own a mobile phone. In contrast, laptops are far less common. Only 2.5% of respondents in Albania own a laptop, while this number is 7.69% in Kosovo and 11.63% in North Macedonia. Desktop computer ownership is also low. Albania shows the lowest rate at 0.89%, Kosovo has 3.58%, and North Macedonia leads with 9.12%. Tablet ownership is extremely limited, with only 0.54% of Albanian respondents having one, compared to 2.15% in Kosovo and 4.47% in North Macedonia. These numbers point to a major affordability barrier for owning larger or more advanced digital devices. Focus groups confirmed this, especially in Albania and Kosovo, where many participants said they cannot afford anything beyond a smartphone. Even among those with disabilities, access to assistive digital tools is low. One participant in Kosovo mentioned using text-to-speech tools on a mobile phone, but that e-government websites do not support these functions. Digital exclusion due to lack of device variety is especially high in rural and low-income communities, where shared or outdated devices are the norm.

Internet connectivity is another area where big differences exist. The data shows that in Kosovo, 91.26% of respondents use the internet regularly. In North Macedonia, 91.06% of people also report regular access. These figures suggest strong internet penetration. In contrast, Albania is far behind. Only 50.95% of people use the internet regularly there, and 33.61% use it occasionally. A high number—15.44%—do not use the internet at all. In Albania, this is especially true in rural zones like Fushë-Arrëz. Focus group participants in that area said they face long periods without internet during winter, due to power cuts and weak infrastructure. By comparison, people in rural Kosovo and North Macedonia reported better internet reliability. For example, in Kosovo, some participants said internet cuts in villages may last a week, while in cities they are resolved in a day. These regional differences are also linked to geography. Rural respondents in Kosovo and North Macedonia lived closer to the capitals, while Albanian rural respondents came from more isolated areas. Financial problems also affect access. In Albania, unemployed people and part-time workers have much lower levels of internet use compared to those employed full-time. According to the data, full-time workers and students have the highest digital access in all three countries. A young person from Albania explained that limited income and harsh winters prevent many from going online or buying digital devices during the cold season.

The gap between urban and rural access becomes clearer when combining income level with location. Respondents from Albania often said that digital services such as e-kiosks are not available in their villages. Even if online access is possible, some services require printing documents, which adds another barrier. One person in North Macedonia said that even if they managed to complete an online form, they still had to print it—but printers are too expensive for most people. In Albania, the focus groups highlighted that people do not only lack internet, but also lack the skills or confidence to use it for anything beyond Facebook or WhatsApp. Among the elderly, especially in Kosovo and Albania, the internet is rarely used without help from a family member. The same is true for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. They often rely on NGOs or relatives for help. The issue is not just physical access, but usability. If a person owns only a mobile phone and does not know how to use websites or apps, they are still excluded. In North Macedonia, desktop and laptop ownership is slightly better, possibly because of better access to IT labs in schools or offices. But even there, nearly 73.9% of people still go in person for basic government services like obtaining civil registry certificates.

The digital divide is more than just a number. It reflects a combination of affordability, geography, infrastructure, and daily challenges. The numbers in this report clearly show that Albania has the weakest access, while Kosovo and North Macedonia face more manageable gaps, but all three still need major improvement to make digital access equal and usable for everyone.