

DIGITAL SKILLS GAPS KEEP CITIZENS DEPENDENT AND LIMIT PARTICIPATION

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Digital skills gaps keep citizens dependent and limit participation

Having access to a device or an internet connection is only the first step. The real question is whether people can use digital tools effectively to improve their lives, work, and access to public services. The survey on digital inclusion in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia shows that digital literacy remains a serious obstacle, particularly for elderly people, women in rural areas, and ethnic minorities. This gap not only affects how citizens interact with e-government platforms, but also whether they can seize opportunities in education and employment.

The study makes clear that many individuals, especially older adults, rely heavily on family members or non-governmental organizations for basic digital tasks. In the focus groups, older participants in all three countries openly admitted they depend on children or grandchildren to help them register for services or navigate government portals. Women in rural areas, as well as Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, also reported very limited skills, leaving them dependent on intermediaries. This dependency creates both a practical and a psychological barrier: people do not feel independent, and often they avoid digital services altogether because they lack confidence.

Youth, on the other hand, show more competence, but even here the gap is visible. While young people are skilled in social media, messaging, and entertainment, they struggle with more complex platforms like e-Albania, e-Kosova, or North Macedonia's e-Uslugi. The survey explains that many young people only use digital services when it is mandatory, such as registering for the Matura exam. Even then, they often rely on schools or others to handle the process. This means that digital literacy among youth is often superficial, good enough for leisure but not for navigating public or professional services.

When asked about preferred areas of training, respondents showed a clear interest in both basic and advanced digital skills. In Albania, the focus remains on fundamental IT skills (32.44 percent) and communication tools (32.88 percent), showing that many still lack even the most essential competencies. In Kosovo, interest is more diverse, with 27.78 percent mentioning basic IT and 20.62 percent digital communication, but also 18.25 percent showing demand for training in accessing online services. North Macedonia stands out with a stronger emphasis on online service usage (21.64 percent) and financial digital literacy (17.53 percent), suggesting citizens there are more prepared to use digital tools for practical tasks.

Interestingly, there is also a smaller but notable demand for more advanced training. Respondents in Kosovo mentioned programming languages like Java and C#, graphic design,

video editing, and even artificial intelligence. While these were small percentages, they point to an emerging interest in professional and creative digital skills that go beyond everyday needs. This suggests that in some parts of the region, digital skills are not only about access to public services, but also about creating pathways to new careers.

Focus groups further confirmed the demand for structured and accessible training. Youth in all three countries called for programs that focus on how to use e-government services more efficiently. In North Macedonia, women and people with disabilities emphasized that training must be tailored to their realities, making sure they can navigate services independently. One participant in Macedonia noted that community centers could serve as hubs for digital literacy, providing hands-on guidance for those who cannot afford private courses. The suggestion reflects a broader need for community-based solutions rather than relying only on schools or online platforms.

What emerges from these findings is a picture of uneven readiness. The region has many digitally active citizens, but their skills are often limited to narrow uses. The lack of confidence in government platforms, the absence of training opportunities for vulnerable groups, and the dependency on others prevent people from fully entering the digital society. This is not just about missing convenience, it is about exclusion from services, jobs, and opportunities. For Albania, the skills gap reinforces the existing problem of low internet usage. Even when internet access exists, people often cannot make use of it effectively. For Kosovo, the challenge is to turn youthful enthusiasm for social media into professional and civic skills that improve employability and service access. For North Macedonia, which already shows stronger interest in financial and service-oriented literacy, the task is to expand training so that these skills reach rural and marginalized communities, not just urban residents.

The consequences are clear. Without stronger digital literacy policies, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia risk building a digital environment that only a fraction of citizens can actually use. This risks deepening inequality rather than solving it. Investing in community training hubs, school-based programs, and specialized courses for women, elderly, and minorities could change the picture. If governments, NGOs, and local institutions take this seriously, the region can turn digital literacy into a driver of independence and inclusion rather than a new form of dependency.