

E-GOVERNMENT PLATFORMS STRUGGLE WITH TRUST AND ACCESSIBILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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E-Government platforms struggle with trust and accessibility in the Western Balkans

Across the Western Balkans, governments have invested heavily in digital platforms to bring public services online. Albania has its E-Albania portal, Kosovo has E-Kosova, and North Macedonia has E-Uslugi. On paper, these platforms should make everyday bureaucracy easier, faster, and more transparent. But the survey on digital inclusion in the three countries shows that citizens are still reluctant to fully embrace them. The reasons are not only about technology, they are about trust, usability, and the social reality of who gets left behind.

The data indicate that the majority of respondents say they use e-government platforms at least occasionally: 71.02 percent in Albania, 68.62 percent in Kosovo, and 75.25 percent in North Macedonia. At first glance, these numbers look encouraging. But when asked how they actually carry out specific services, most respondents continue to prefer in-person visits. In Albania, scheduling a medical examination, registering a vehicle, or applying for employment are overwhelmingly done face-to-face. In Kosovo, the same is true for obtaining civil registry certificates, personal documents, or cadastral records. In North Macedonia, despite higher engagement with portals, citizens still mostly go in person for essential services like civil certificates or school enrollment.

The gap between stated platform use and real behavior reflects several barriers. First, awareness remains low among older citizens and minority groups. Focus groups revealed that many elderly respondents had never even heard of the national platforms, relying entirely on family members or social workers. Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities also reported they rarely access e-services, mainly due to lack of digital skills. Youth are aware, but they see e-government as something mandatory rather than useful. As some students in Albania noted, they only touched E-Albania to register for the Matura exam, and the process felt like an obligation, not a convenience.

Second, complexity and distrust discourage wider adoption. Many citizens feel that authentication processes are too complicated. Verification codes, password recovery steps, and multi-level identification often make platforms intimidating. Others simply do not trust the validity of digital documents. In Kosovo, for instance, some participants explained that even when they downloaded certificates online, institutions still asked for physical copies, making the digital version feel useless. This inconsistency erodes confidence and keeps people tied to the old system of standing in line at municipal counters.

Third, accessibility remains a serious issue. People with disabilities repeatedly mentioned that government websites are not compatible with assistive technologies like screen readers or text-to-speech software. Even when these tools work in English, they often fail in Albanian or Macedonian. This means that citizens who could most benefit from online services are often excluded.

In Albania, the problem has created an additional cost for vulnerable groups. Many elderly citizens who cannot navigate E-Albania turn to private businesses, paying them to handle simple applications or document requests. This practice has become common enough that the government is now pushing municipalities to establish One-Stop-Shop service offices, where citizens can receive help with online services free of charge. The Prime Minister's instruction reflects a recognition that digital platforms alone cannot solve accessibility problems if human support is not built around them. Without this, the very people who should benefit most from easier access—pensioners, rural residents, low-income families—end up paying more.

Kosovo shows a similar pattern. While E-Kosova has gained visibility, many people prefer to continue traveling to municipal offices, especially in rural areas where internet access is unstable and technical support is scarce. Some elderly participants even said they never heard of the platform at all, highlighting how information campaigns have not reached them. In North Macedonia, citizens are more engaged with online portals, especially for scholarship applications and employment services, but here too in-person visits dominate for the most important interactions like property records or court documents.

Underlying all of this is an issue of trust. The survey asked respondents about their confidence in e-government platforms, and the results show that skepticism runs deep. Many participants fear that digital services are unreliable, that their data are not secure, or that the online process will still force them to visit an office later. Others mentioned privacy concerns, especially when they must rely on relatives or even volunteers at community centers to handle digital applications on their behalf. The elderly in Kosovo highlighted this problem clearly: they often give full access to their bank accounts or personal information to children or social workers because they cannot manage services independently. This creates both vulnerability and loss of autonomy.