

SMARTPHONES DOMINATE, BUT THE DIGITAL DIVIDE REMAINS DEEP IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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The path toward digital inclusion in the Western Balkans often begins with the most basic question: what devices do people actually own, and do they have stable access to the internet? According to the recent regional survey on digital inclusion in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia administered by the DIGI-CORE project, the picture is far from uniform. While smartphones dominate as the most common entry point into the digital world, deeper structural inequalities remain, leaving many groups excluded from the benefits of digital transformation.

The survey reveals that mobile phones are by far the most widespread digital device across the three countries, with 92 percent of respondents reporting ownership. This finding is significant because it shows that the majority of people, including those in marginalized communities, are at least connected through a smartphone. Yet when looking beyond the phone, the gaps become visible. Laptop ownership is just 28 percent overall, with North Macedonia recording the highest level at 11.63 percent, Kosovo at 7.69 percent, and Albania trailing with only 2.5 percent. Tablets are even rarer, with North Macedonia again leading at 4.47 percent, Kosovo at 2.15 percent, and Albania at just 0.54 percent. Desktop computer ownership, once the backbone of digital access, has almost disappeared in Albania (0.89 percent) and Kosovo (3.58 percent), while North Macedonia maintains slightly higher levels at 9.12 percent.

These numbers matter because they tell us not only what people use to go online, but also what kinds of digital activities they can realistically perform. A smartphone may be enough for social media or messaging, but it is far from ideal for writing a job application, preparing a CV, or completing government forms. The survey confirms that people with higher income, urban residents, and those with stable jobs are more likely to own laptops and desktops, while low-income and rural households are stuck with just a smartphone, if anything at all.

Internet access tells a similar story. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, more than 91 percent of respondents report regular internet use, suggesting relatively strong penetration. Non-users are rare, with only around 2 percent saying they never go online. But Albania shows a very different reality: only 50.95 percent of respondents use the internet regularly, 33.61 percent report occasional use, and a striking 15.44 percent remain offline altogether. This indicates

that Albania still faces serious challenges in basic connectivity. Focus groups conducted as part of the study explain why. In rural areas like Fushë Arrëz, internet access is patchy, often dependent on electricity, and subject to long outages during the winter months. “The main obstacle to accessing the internet and buying devices is the financial constraints. People who live in this area face significant service shortages during the winter because of electricity cuts,” explained one participant. In Kosovo, a young participant described the difference between rural and urban access: “If the internet breaks in our village, it can take a week to fix. In the city, it’s done in a day”.

The survey also links employment status with internet access. Full-time workers and students are the most connected, while unemployed individuals and those working part-time report more difficulties in staying online. This is not surprising, as stable employment not only provides income to afford devices and internet but also makes digital access a necessity for professional life. The unemployed face a double disadvantage: they need the internet to apply for jobs, yet they are least likely to have stable access.

Another barrier is the hidden cost of digital participation. Even if someone has a phone and an internet connection, many public services still require additional tools like printers or desktop computers. One North Macedonian participant put it clearly: “Even if we could access online services, we still have to print documents. But printers are expensive, and not everyone has one.” This simple but important detail highlights how digital exclusion is not only about infrastructure but also about the affordability of all the complementary tools needed to fully participate.

What does this mean for Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia? The data show that while Kosovo and North Macedonia have made significant progress in basic connectivity, the digital divide is still entrenched, especially in rural areas and among low-income households. Albania, in particular, faces urgent challenges, with half of its respondents using the internet only occasionally or not at all. Without targeted interventions, this gap risks becoming a structural barrier to education, employment, and civic participation.