

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE NUMBERS

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The People Behind the Numbers: Digital Inclusion Stories from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia

Across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, digital inclusion is not just about devices or internet speed. It is about people, how they live, what they need, and what barriers keep them from being part of the digital world. The DIGI-CORE survey and focus groups show that behind every percentage lies a person who may be struggling with access, skills, or support. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, over 91% of respondents said they use the internet regularly, but in Albania, this number drops to just 50.95%. That difference reflects not only infrastructure gaps but also deeper inequalities in income, geography, and education. In places like Fushë-Arrëz, Albania, people reported losing internet for days during winter due to power cuts. One young man said, “We lose connection, we lose time, and we fall behind.” These delays are not small. They affect job applications, school tasks, and even access to health services. In the focus groups, rural women often said they simply don’t have the time to learn digital skills because of family responsibilities. One woman explained, “Even if I had internet, I wouldn’t know where to start, and I have no time between cooking, caring for kids, and everything else.”

People with disabilities face an even harder time. One participant from Kosovo shared that although he uses a text-to-speech app on his phone, he cannot use e-government services because the websites are not compatible with assistive tools. These are not isolated cases. In Albania, less than 1% of respondents own a desktop computer, and only 0.54% have a tablet. That means most people rely only on smartphones. In the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, many still depend on their children or local NGOs to help with digital forms or applications. Some even give full access to their private information to others, just to complete basic online tasks. In focus groups, elderly people across the three countries expressed the same concern: “I just wait for my daughter to come visit so she can fill out the documents.” These small, everyday challenges paint a picture of how digital exclusion creates dependency and insecurity. In Kosovo, 8.5% of people get someone else to pay their business taxes. In Albania, 23.6% rely on others to apply for personal documents. It is not because they are unwilling. It is because they feel locked out by systems they don’t understand or cannot use.

Trust also plays a big role. In North Macedonia, only 9.69% of respondents said they fully trust e-government services. In Kosovo, a large share, 43.38%, are neutral, meaning they neither trust nor distrust them. In Albania, people are more optimistic, with 25.38% saying they fully trust online services. But across the region, focus group participants voiced fears about online fraud, identity theft, or simply not knowing what happens to their data. An elderly person in Kosovo said, “I’d rather go to the office and speak to someone. The internet feels like a trap.” Others said that even when they want to use online services, the systems are slow or confusing. In Kosovo, youth complained that applying through the “Super Puna” youth employment platform was so complicated that many gave up. In North Macedonia, students said they only use digital services when schools make them, for example, to register for exams, but not out of personal choice.

Digital training is something people want but rarely get. In Albania, 32.88% of respondents said they want training in digital communication tools, while in Kosovo, 27.78% want basic IT skills. North Macedonia showed the most interest in accessing online services (21.64%) and financial digital literacy (17.53%). These are clear signals. People want to learn, but need programs that are local, accessible, and in a language or format they can understand. Some rural youth asked for training in video editing, graphic design, and programming, showing ambition far beyond just using Facebook or TikTok. One young person in Kosovo said, “I want to build apps, not just scroll.” But those opportunities don’t come easily when your village has no internet for a week and your family can only afford one smartphone for everyone.

What DIGI-CORE shows is that digital exclusion is not a statistic. It is a chain of missed chances. When people can't connect, they miss school deadlines, job opportunities, and access to social benefits. They lose time, confidence, and independence. The survey data makes the scope clear, but the voices behind the data are what matter most. These are not people who resist change. They are asking for help to be part of it.