



# DO NEW CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGE ROUTINES?

## PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND SERVICE DELIVERY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

DECEMBER 2020



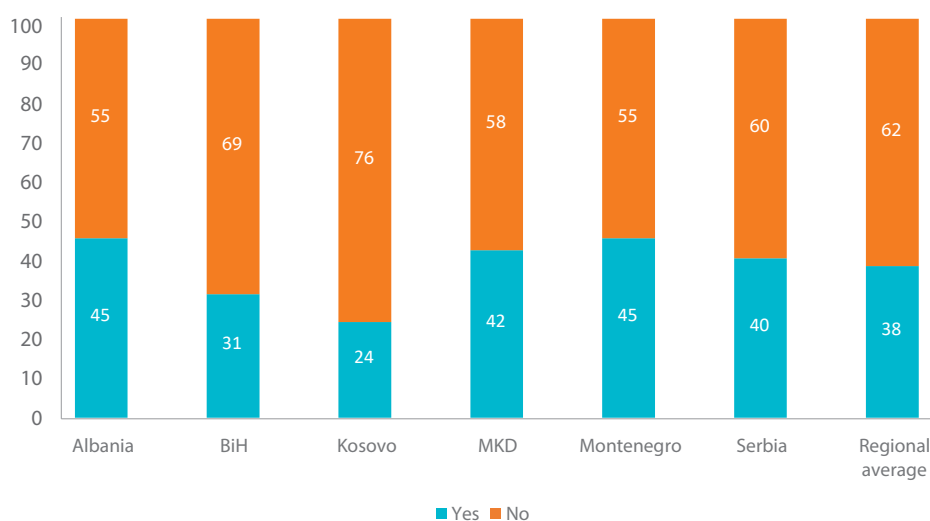
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The COVID-19 outbreak introduced significant changes in our everyday lives. Online platforms for video communication and commerce sales are booming, while the population is, by and large, changing its habits. Particularly hit are service delivery systems where both service providing institutions and their clients had to accommodate to the new modes of interaction. In this way, the pandemic has also raised important questions about the nature and quality of administrative services in these extraordinary circumstances. As our direct contacts with institutions have been minimized, the relevance of electronic services (e-services) as primary means of interaction with public administration gains importance.

To explore citizens' experiences with public administration in times of the pandemic, a public perception survey was conducted between May 15 and May 30, 2020 on the sample of 6085 respondents from the Western Balkans countries. Overall, the responses reveal that the outbreak of COVID-19 has not significantly altered habits related to the usage of administrative services provided by state institutions (Graph 1). Most citizens (62%) say that their interest in e-services has not grown since the outbreak of the pandemic. Still, there are noticeable country-level variations: 45% of citizens in Albania and Montenegro confirm their interest has grown, while Kosovo records regional lowest 24% increase of popular interest in e-services.

Graph 1. Since the start of the coronavirus crisis have you become more interested in (or researched more) about using electronic services? (%)



Moving on to the actual usage of e-services, the findings show a similar pattern (Table 1). On average, 18% of citizens claim to have used e-services more than usual during the pandemic. By contrast, 32% say they have used them either to the same or lesser extent, while as much as 50% of our respondents did not use these services during the pandemic at all.

Table 1. To what extent did you use electronic services during the recent coronavirus crisis? (%)

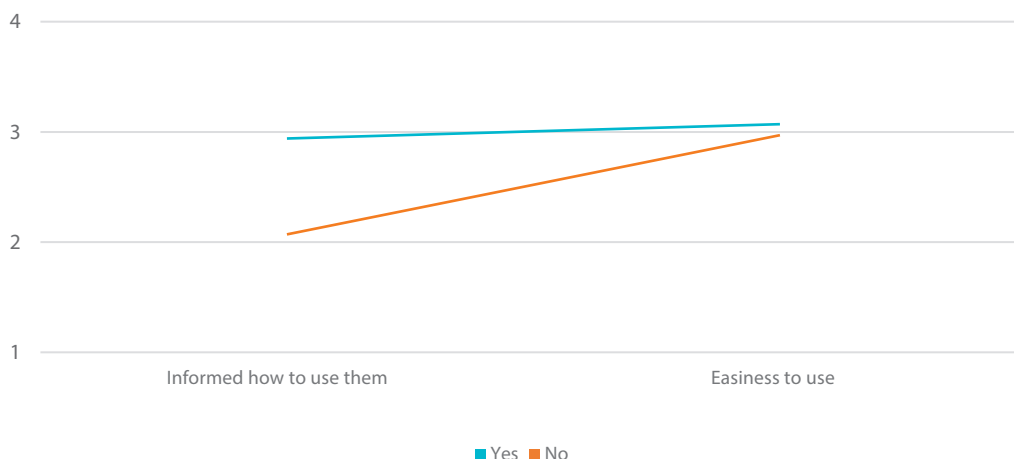
|                        | To a greater extent than usual | To the same extent as usual | To a lesser extent than usual | I have not used them at all |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| WB average             | 18                             | 26                          | 6                             | 50                          |
| Albania                | 13                             | 17                          | 7                             | 63                          |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 14                             | 21                          | 5                             | 60                          |
| Kosovo                 | 13                             | 28                          | 3                             | 56                          |
| North Macedonia        | 20                             | 30                          | 4                             | 36                          |
| Montenegro             | 26                             | 28                          | 8                             | 39                          |
| Serbia                 | 23                             | 31                          | 8                             | 38                          |

If we leave aside citizens who say they have not used e-services at all, there is 36% of those who report they used e-services more than usual during the pandemic. This is a fairly low number in the given circumstances which perhaps can be ascribed to the lack of resources (information, skills, etc.) or to the fact that getting used to interact with public administration in this way simply takes more time.

## UNINFORMED, DISINTERESTED OR SOMETHING ELSE?

To understand the reasons behind the limited increase of interests in e-services since the outbreak of COVID-19, citizens’ responses on how easy it was to use e-services (ranging from 1 – very difficult to use, to 4 – very easy to use) and how informed they were about the ways of usage (1 – completely uninformed to 4 – completely informed) were analyzed. Figure 1 shows the results on these two questions for citizens who have become more interested in e-services during the pandemic (blue line) and those who have not (orange line).

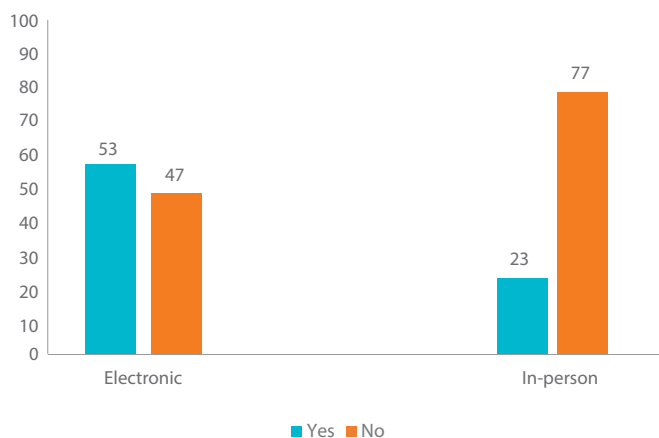
Figure 1. Interest for e-services during the pandemic (Yes/No). Differences with regard to (1) how informed citizens are about the ways of usage and (2) how easy it is for citizens to actually use e-services



The results show that the extent to which people are informed about how to use e-services makes a difference. More precisely, citizens who have not become more interested in e-services during the pandemic are considerably less informed about the ways of usage than the rest of the population. By contrast, no difference is found on easiness to use. Citizens from both groups (who actually used e-services) say that it is easy to use them.

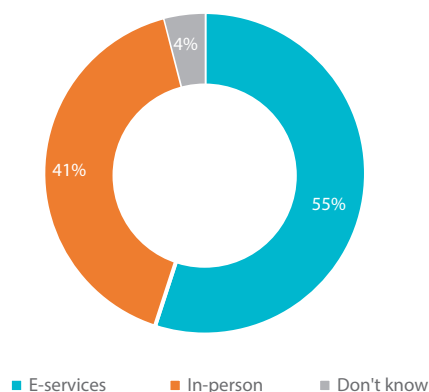
Moving on to citizens' preferences with regards to accessing administrative services, the data reveals another interesting difference between the two groups. Simply put, people who generally prefer accessing services in-person have, by and large, not become more interested in e-services during the pandemic (Graph 2).

Graph 2. Since the start of the pandemic, have you become more interested in using e-services (Yes/No)? Distribution of responses for citizens a) preferring e-services and b) preferring to access services in person



Moreover, a large proportion of the population in the region (around 40%) still prefers accessing administrative services in person, rather than electronically (Graph 3).

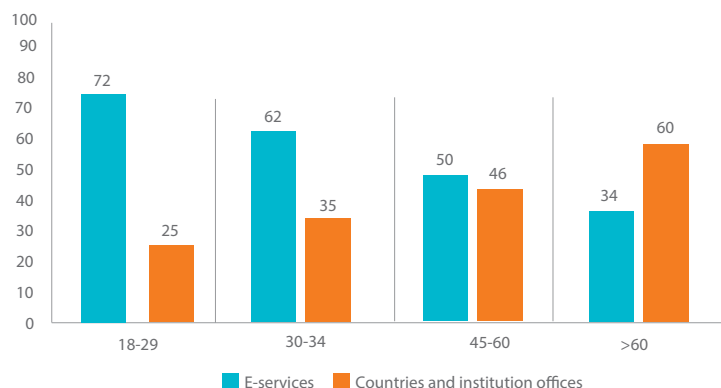
Graph 3. Which ways of accessing administrative services in general do you prefer using?



If the complexity of e-services is not much of a problem (Figure 1), the lack of know-how coupled with *old habits* is probably what keeps many people away from relying on electronic interaction with their administration.

To get a sense of how preferences for accessing administrative services are distributed in the population, Graph 4 shows the responses per age category. The data reveals that preferences for e-services vary substantially across different categories, with older citizens not particularly being in favour of dealing with the administration online.

Graph 4. Preference of e-services compared to preference of accessing services in person at counters or institution offices (%)



There is a strong preference of e-services among the youngest group of respondents (72%). However, this relation changes throughout the age categories and, finally, it reverses for the oldest citizens (over 60 years old): roughly 60% of these citizens prefer accessing services in person over accessing them electronically.

## NEW CIRCUMSTANCES HARDLY CHANGE ESTABLISHED ROUTINES

In synthesis, switching to e-services probably takes more than one extraordinary external event. Two findings are especially indicative and leave room for improvements: first, insufficient information on how to use e-services makes a noticeable difference in how interested in these services people have become during the pandemic; second, and more interestingly, many still prefer in-person over electronic access to administrative services. Taken together, these two factors largely account for fairly low levels of actual usage of e-service since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

E-services are less demanding and a less time-consuming way of dealing with public administration, and yet, people appear to approach them with reservation, even in times of pandemic. The findings indicate that there is room for administrative institutions to further familiarize the public with e-services and assure it of their reliability. More proactive information campaigns could make people use e-services more extensively. Besides, it is important to bear in mind that confidence in electronic modes of interaction comes with the assurance that these modes are efficient. Therefore, if information campaigns are backed by high functionality of e-services in practice, there is no doubt that people will increasingly rely on this type of interaction with public administration in the near future – both in regular and extraordinary circumstances.

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