

## CITIZENS STILL STEADILY IN FAVOUR OF GOVERNMENT SERVICE PROVISION PRACTICES

### THIRD PUBLIC PERCEPTION SURVEY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## KEY FINDINGS

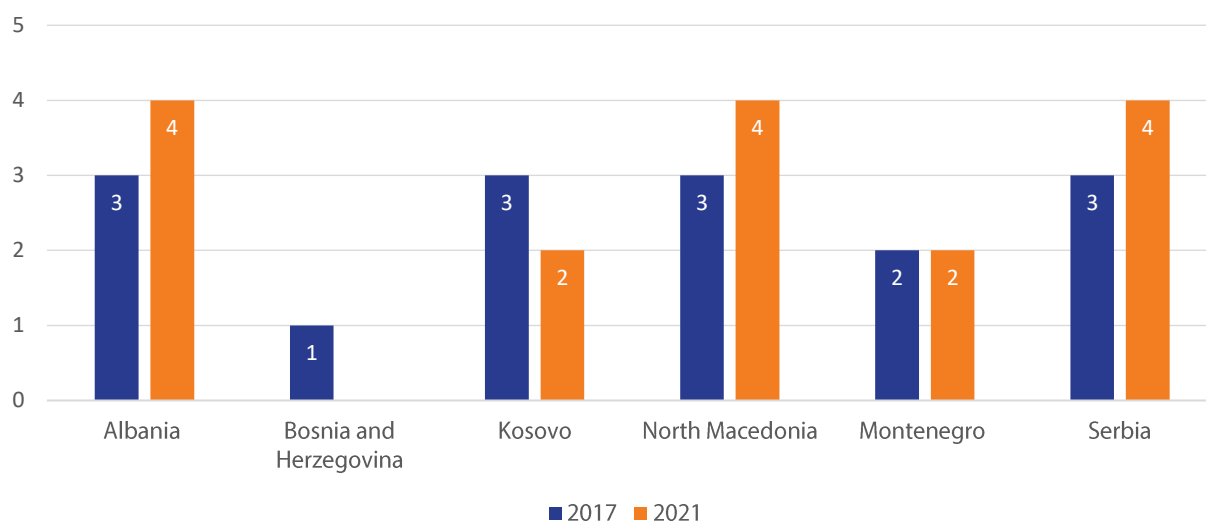
- In the latest public perception survey from 2022, citizens believe that there were more governments' efforts to simplify administrative procedures than in the survey from 2020. Namely, 53% of citizens across the Western Balkans think that the government made efforts or took initiatives to improve administrative procedures, which is five percentage points less compared to the previous survey implementation period. However, differences between the administrations are significant.
- Perception data further show that around 67% of citizens in the Western Balkan are aware of the e-services offered in their countries. It is seven percentage points higher than in 2020, signalling that digitalisation is slowly expanding across the region's administrations.
- The increase in awareness of the existence of e-services is accompanied with an increase in the preference for using such services, as opposed to accessing administrative services in a traditional way. Differences across the region are substantial, with the lowest preference for e-services observed in Kosovo (35%).
- In the last two years, which coincide with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 25% of Western Balkan citizens have never used e-services, 26% of them used them rarely, 31% sometimes, and 18% often. Differences across the region are substantial – the usage levels are the lowest in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the highest in Albania. Compared to the 2020 survey, citizens state that they have used e-services more often – the share of those who used e-services sometimes or often increased by ten percentage points, from 39% in 2020, reaching almost one-half in 2022.
- In total, 43% of citizens agree that their governments asked for their proposals for improvement of service provision (48% in 2020). Additionally, 79% of those who say they have had a chance to provide their proposals also believe that the government has implemented them, compared to 63% in 2020. Although fewer people confirm that governments seek their proposals, they are more confident that governments implement such proposals.
- Finally, even though only 38% of citizens think that citizens and civil society participate in monitoring administrative services, as much as 85% of those who believe there is such participation also feel that the monitoring has resulted in improved service provision. This represents a substantial increase in the observed improvement of administrative service provision as a result of CSOs' and citizens' monitoring compared to the survey implemented in 2020, when this value was twenty percentage points low

## THE DIGITAL IMPERATIVE IN THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM – INTRODUCTION

Public administration services are meant to be used by citizens and businesses and, as such, should be simplified as much as possible and organised in a user-friendly way. As EU membership aspirants, Western Balkan countries undergo different reform processes, and public administration reform (PAR) is one of the most challenging. Keeping these objectives in mind, the countries of the region have carried out different initiatives and put efforts into changing the ways of providing administrative services to their citizens.

According to the latest SIGMA Monitoring Report for 2021, there is an overall increase in public administration performance (except in the strategic framework of PAR) across the Western Balkan countries, with Albania and Serbia standing out with the most consistent and substantial improvement in all areas between 2017 and 2021.<sup>1</sup> Albania and Serbia are also leading the improvement in service delivery. Along with the modernisation necessary to fulfil the growing demand for administrative services, these two administrations can now deliver services faster and with higher quality than before.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1 – SIGMA Indicator values – “Citizen-oriented service delivery” for 2017 and 2021, scale 0-5



Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have all managed to increase values of the “Citizen-oriented service delivery” indicator from 3 to 4, on a 0-5 scale. While Montenegro maintained the same value of the indicator (2), Kosovo is the only one among the Western Balkan administrations whose indicator value has decreased from 3 to 2.<sup>3</sup>

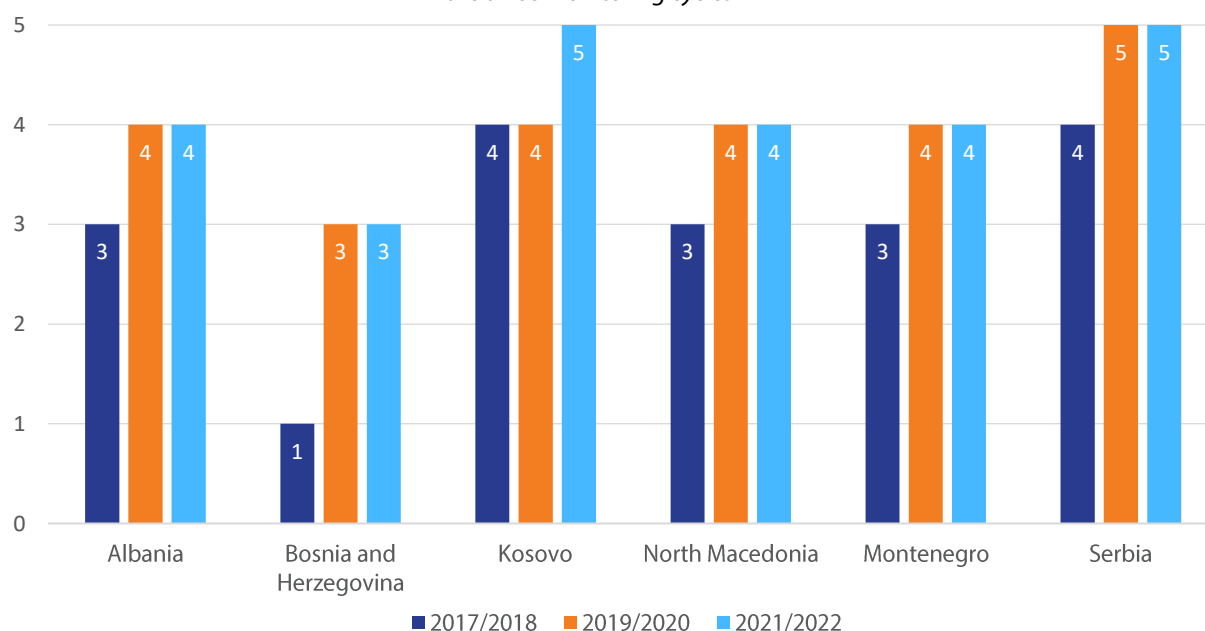
Similarly, WeBER PAR Monitor results display a clear growing trend in the region when it comes to the orientation of public administration to citizens. Namely, looking back at the three PAR monitoring cycles implemented to date, the value of the *Public perception of state administration’s citizen orientation* indicator has been mostly increasing. While the leaders in the region are Kosovo and Serbia, the indicator’s value is the lowest, but still satisfactory, in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>1</sup> SIGMA Monitoring Reports: The Principles of Public Administration, February 2022, pg. 42: <https://bit.ly/3XE3r0m>

<sup>2</sup> SIGMA Monitoring Reports: The Principles of Public Administration, February 2022, pg. 43: <https://bit.ly/3XE3r0m>

<sup>3</sup> The value of this indicator for Bosnia and Herzegovina was not available in the latest SIGMA monitoring report.

Figure 2 – WeBER PAR Monitor indicator SD P1 I1 Public perception of state administration's citizen orientation – comparison of values of the three monitoring cycles<sup>4</sup>

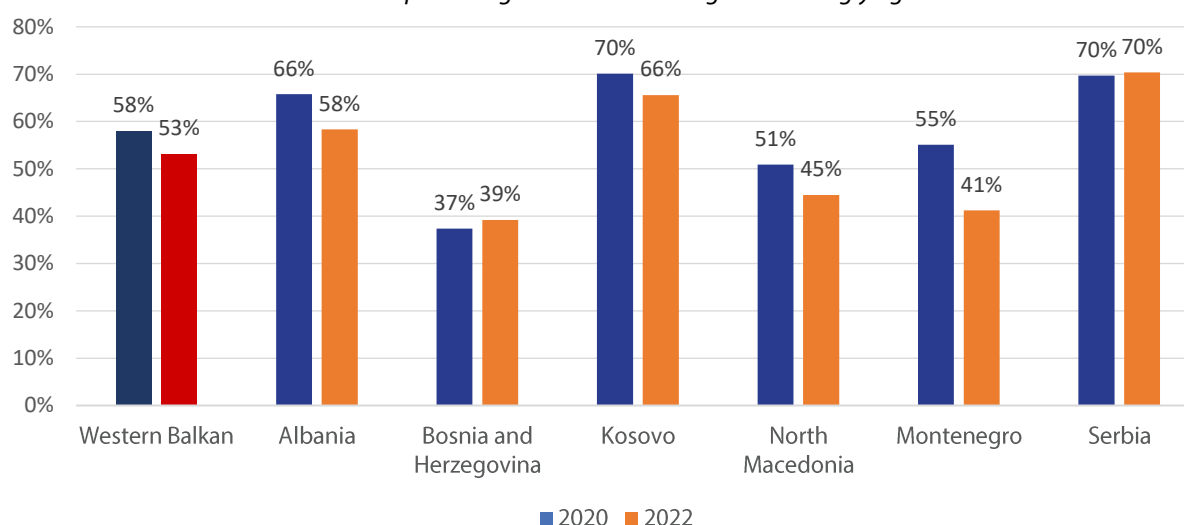


This report presents the results of the latest WeBER public perception survey, implemented in the entire Western Balkan region in May 2022.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the report draws main comparisons with the same survey conducted in 2020, shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and informs about the main changes in public perception of an administrative service provision in the last two years.

## ADMINISTRATIVE SIMPLIFICATION IN THE EYES OF CITIZENS

Citizens across the Western Balkans wish to see politicians take decisive actions towards more straightforward administrative procedures. A slight majority of Western Balkan citizens do observe the efforts of their governments in that direction (53%). However, numbers slightly decreased compared to the results from the previous survey conducted in 2020. Figure 3 presents this information broken down by the administrations. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina seem to be the most sceptical about the efforts made by their government, with a slight improvement in 2022. The low agreement rate is also present among Montenegrins and North Macedonians. Conversely, in Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania, citizens strongly support the notion that their governments are making efforts to simplify administrative procedures.

Figure 3 – In the past two years, there have been efforts or initiatives by the government to make administrative procedures simpler for citizens – percentage of citizens who agree or strongly agree



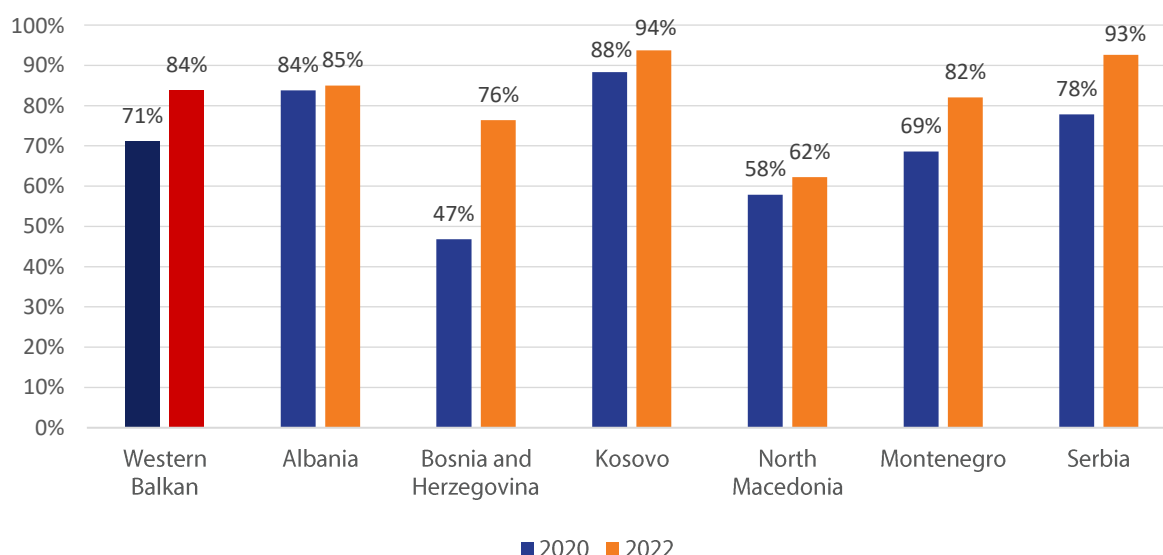
Base: Total target population, n=6085 for 2020, n=6093 for 2022

4. Indicator results for the monitoring cycle 2021/2022 are not final until the Western Balkan PAR Monitor report is published.

5. The Public perception survey was implemented in the period 4-31 May 2022, with a total sample of 6093 citizens and a maximum margin of error per country +/-3.18.

The picture is somewhat more encouraging citizens' views on the improvement of service delivery thanks to governments' efforts. In all Western Balkan administrations, those who believe that the initiatives and efforts towards simpler administrative procedures take place also express growing enthusiasm about the improvement that comes from such efforts. The increase is present in all WB administrations, but it is most evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the agreement rate increased by almost thirty percentage points, from 47% to 76%.

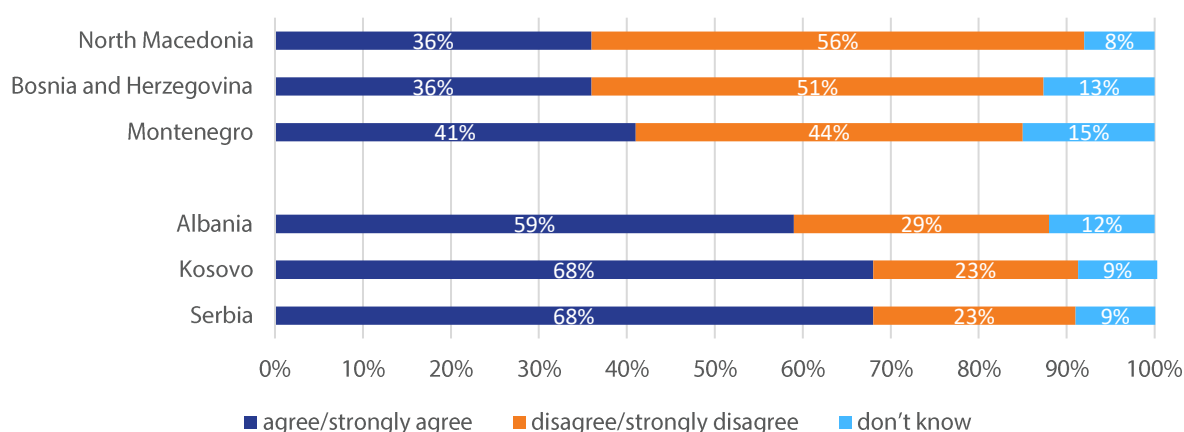
Figure 4 – In the past two years, such initiatives by the government have led to improved service delivery – percentage of citizens who agree or strongly agree



Base: Base: if "Strongly agree" or "Agree", n=4657 for 2020, n=3085 for 2022

Perception of the ease of dealing with the administration significantly differs across the region's administrations (Figure 5). The administrations can be divided into two groups. Those administrations whose citizens do see that dealing with the administration has become easier more than others are Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania, where at least 59% of citizens agree or strongly agree. On the contrary, citizens of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro believe that dealing with the administration is much less easy, with the rate of agreement ranging from 36% to 41%. Between the two monitoring cycles, the perception of this question changed for the worse in all administrations.

Figure 5 – In my own experience, dealing with the administration has become easier in the past two years

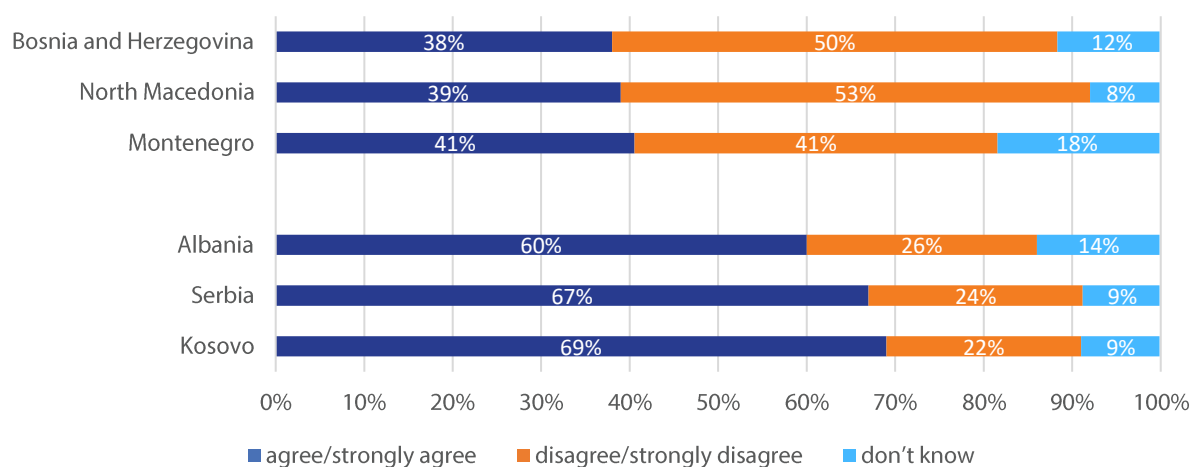


Base: Total target population: n=6093

Besides the feeling of ease when dealing with administration, the time needed to obtain administrative services is another indicator of the efficacy of administrative procedures, and one of the aspects citizens care about the most. Public administration reforms in some WB administrations shortened the time needed to obtain different administrative services, while in others, citizens do not observe a shortening of the time needed to finalise administrative services (Figure 6). In the first group, 60% to 70% of citizens in Kosovo, Serbia, and Albania see a time-wise improvement in administrative service provision. In contrast, in the second group,

citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro perceive it as more time consuming, with agreement rates ranging from only 38% to 41%.

Figure 6 – In the past two years, the time needed to obtain administrative services has decreased



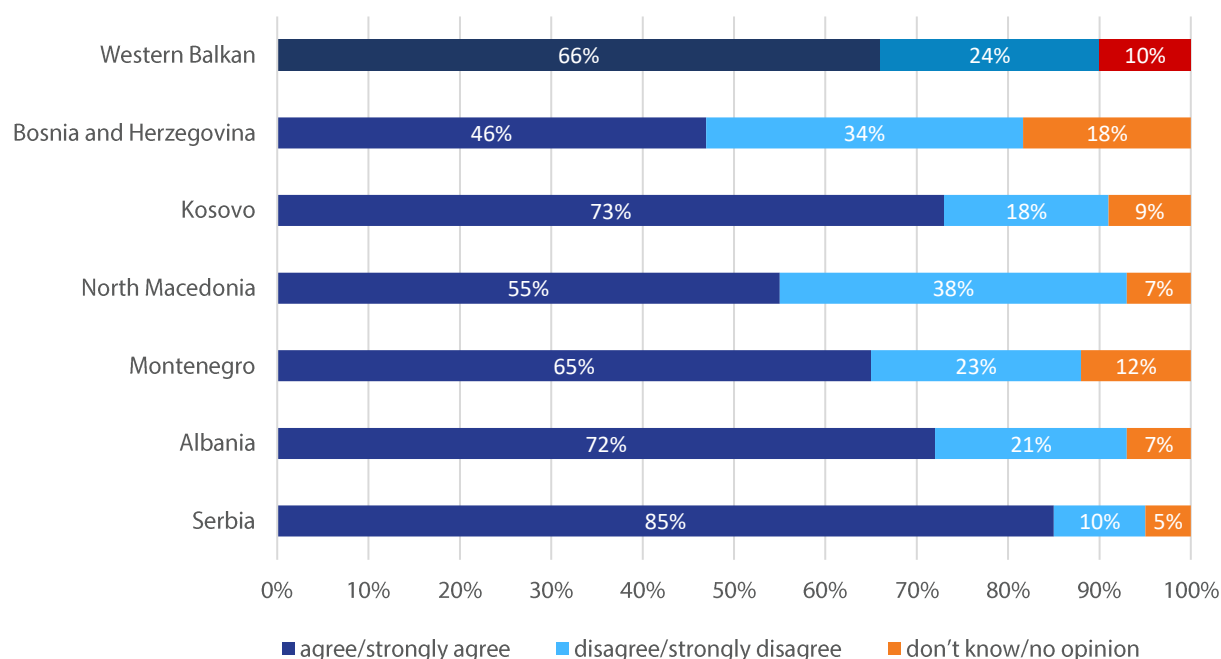
Base: Total target population: n=6093

In both matters – the time needed to finalise administrative services and the ease of dealing with administration, citizens in the first group of administrations observe improvement, while in the second group, perception of such improvement is absent. These polarised results could be related to the political circumstances, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the increasing entity-level disagreements, and in Montenegro, where turbulences started with the change of the ruling coalition after decades of one-party dominance (Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro).

## READINESS OF WB ADMINISTRATIONS FOR THE DIGITALISED WORLD

Citizens in the Western Balkan do notice efforts of their governments to move further with digitalisation. Around 66% of them agree that their government has been moving in that direction in the past two years (Figure 7). Citizens of Serbia perceive their government as very dedicated to digitalisation, with as much as 85% of them believing so, while citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are the least confident, with less than half of its citizens' agreement.

Figure 7 – In the past two years, the Government has increasingly been moving toward digitalisation

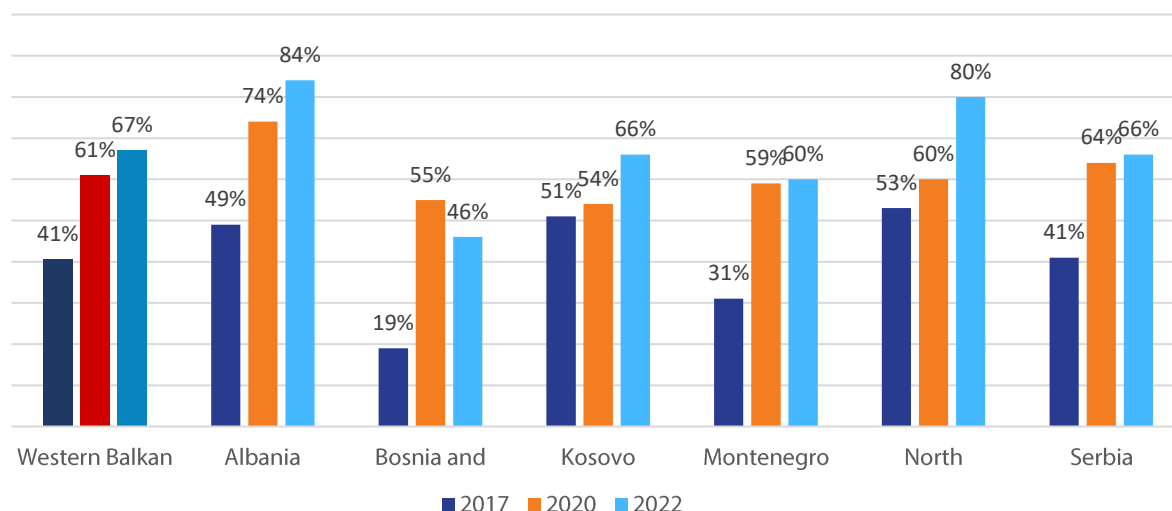


Base: Total target population: n=6093

Concerning e-services, two-thirds of citizens, on average, are aware of the e-services offered in their countries. That means that almost one-third is still not aware and that there is still much work to be done on the promotion of using the internet to access them. However, differences among administrations are, again, more than significant. Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro stand around the regional average. Citizens of Albania turn out to be the most aware (84%), and the lowest awareness is in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with only 45% of its citizens knowing that they can use some of the administrative services through online channels.

Moreover, Bosnia and Herzegovina saw the sharpest pullback among all the Western Balkan administrations regarding citizens' awareness of e-services offered. In the period of two years, the percentage of those aware that e-services are available dropped by ten percentage points from around 55% in 2020 to 45% in 2022.

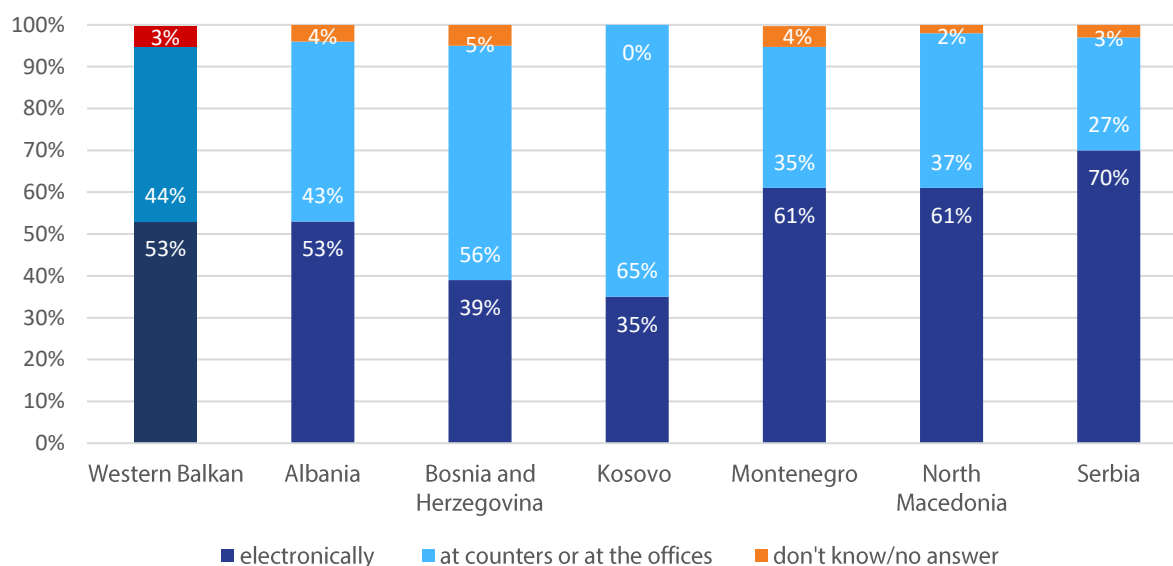
Figure 8 - Are you aware if e-services (or administrative services via the internet) are available in your country (percentage of those replying "yes")



Base: Total target population: n=6093

Regarding preferred ways of accessing administrative services, the region is, once again, divided. Citizens of Serbia have the highest preferences for electronic access to administrative services over the traditional, at-the-counter way. In Albania and Kosovo, for example, even though the awareness of e-services is high, preferences for accessing these services electronically are relatively low, especially in Kosovo.

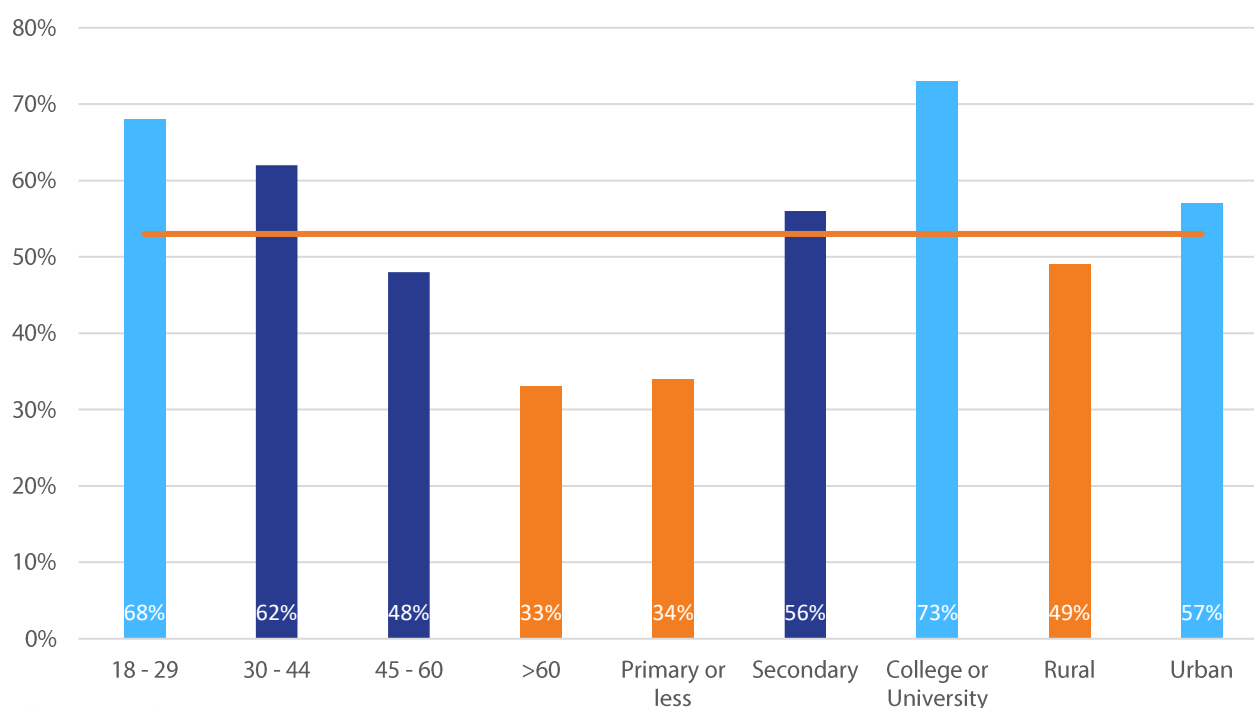
Figure 9 – What ways of accessing administrative services would you prefer using?



Base: Total target population: n=6093

Significant differences also exist among different socio-demographic groups. As expected, the youngest age group (18-29) has the highest preference for using e-services in the region, followed by those between 30 and 44 years old (Figure 10). The preferences for using administrative services electronically in the 18-29 age group is the highest in all administrations, except in Serbia. In Serbia, the highest preferences for e-services are recorded among those between 30 and 45 years old. Along with those with college or university degrees in North Macedonia, they are socio-demographic group with the highest preference for e-services in the region – 86% and 87%, respectively. Furthermore, 73% of those with college or university degrees in the Western Balkans prefer using administrative services electronically, which is almost forty percentage points more than the same preference among those with only primary education (Figure 10). Differences in preferences on the urban-rural level also exist; however, they are much lower than those among different age groups and educational levels.

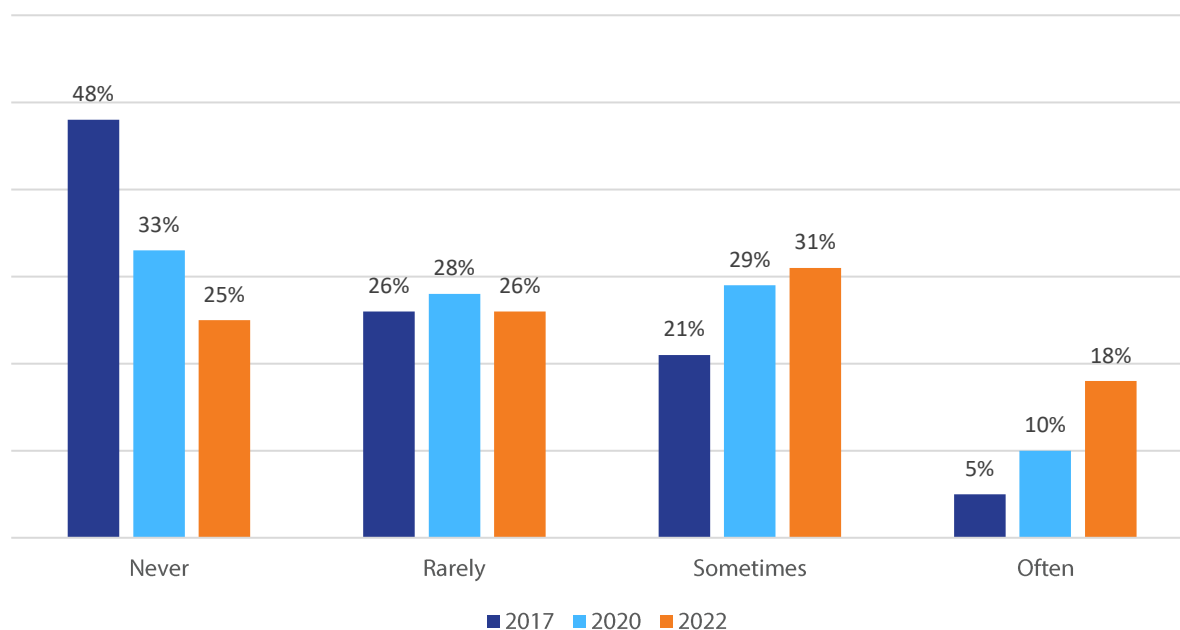
Figure 10 – Percentage of people who prefer to access services electronically (via the internet)



Base: Total target population: n=6093

Using the internet for accessing administrative services is slowly becoming as important as the traditional ways of access. Figure 11 shows that, at the regional level, a portion of those who have never used e-services has been steadily decreasing over the years. Namely, in the 2022 survey, only one-quarter of those who are at least minimally informed about the ways to use e-services said they had never done so, compared to nearly half of the citizens in the baseline survey from 2017. In the same period, the percentage of those who have used them often increased from 5% to almost 20%.

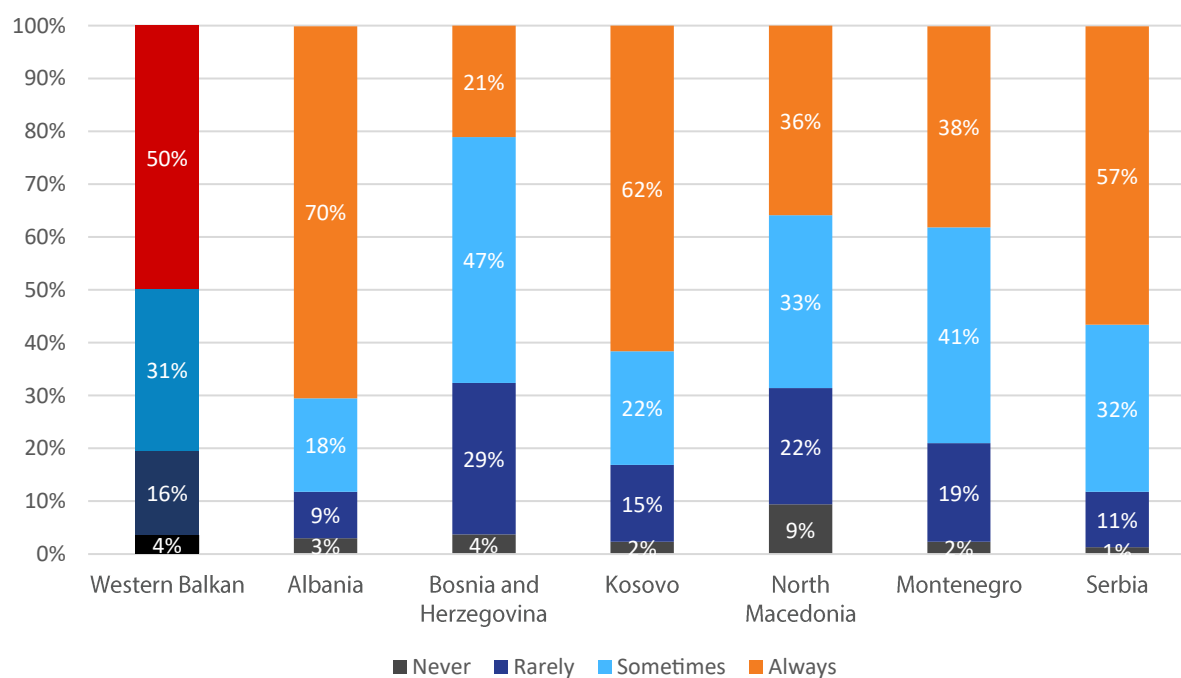
Figure 11 – Frequency of e-services use



Base: Those who are “Mainly uninformed”, “Mainly informed”, or “Completely informed” about the ways on using e-services of the administration, n=4400 for 2017, n=3554 for 2020, n=3316 for 2022.

Even when political will is there and citizens are well informed about the possibility of obtaining services online, the efficiency of their provision is not always the best. Only half of the e-services users stated that they managed to finalise the services they requested in all instances (Figure 12). Around 30% of them managed to complete the requested services sometimes and for 16% of them, services were rarely finalised. About 4% of all respondents did not have a positive experience and stated that they have never managed to obtain requested services via online platforms.

Figure 12 – In the instances that you used e-services, how often have you managed to finalise (obtain) the service that you requested (applied for)?



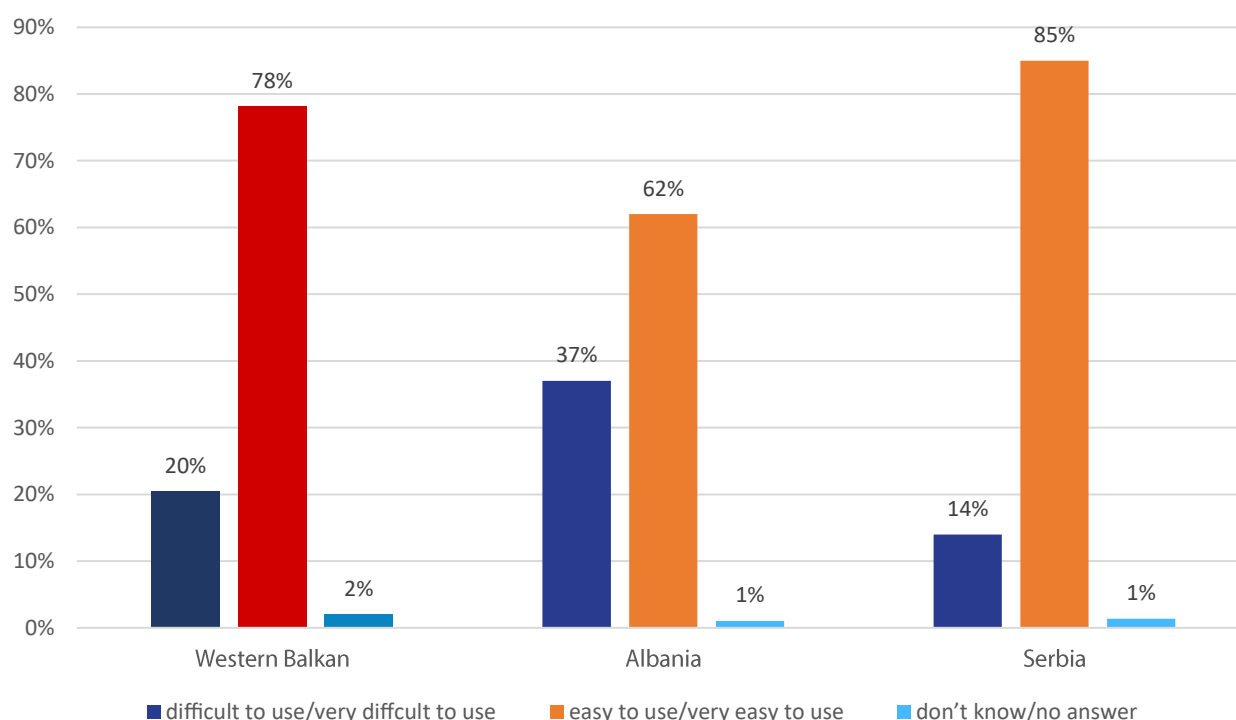
Base: Those who used e-services of the administration in the past two years: n=2676



Nevertheless, the overall regional picture can be misleading due to significant differences across the Western Balkans. For instance, the e-services offered in Albania appear to be the most efficient in the region. As much as 70% of e-services users stated that they have managed to obtain the services they applied for, and on the other hand, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this percentage is only 21%. As shown in Figure 12, most e-services users in Bosnia and Herzegovina think that requested services were finalised in some but not all cases (46%), and 29% of them stated that was rarely the case.

Finally, 78% of e-services users in the Western Balkans, on average, think that e-services are easy or very easy to use, while 20% of them believe the opposite (Figure 13). In this aspect, the region's population is way more uniform than in others. Serbia stands out slightly, with 85% of those who used e-services in the past two years thinking that they are easy or very easy to use. Albania is, in this regard, on the opposite side. Even though the users of e-services in Albania manage to fulfil their requests in most instances, administrative services offered through online channels appear to be the most complicated for its users, with 37% thinking that they are hard or very hard to use (Figure 13).

Figure 13 – In your experience, how easy or difficult to use are e-services in general?

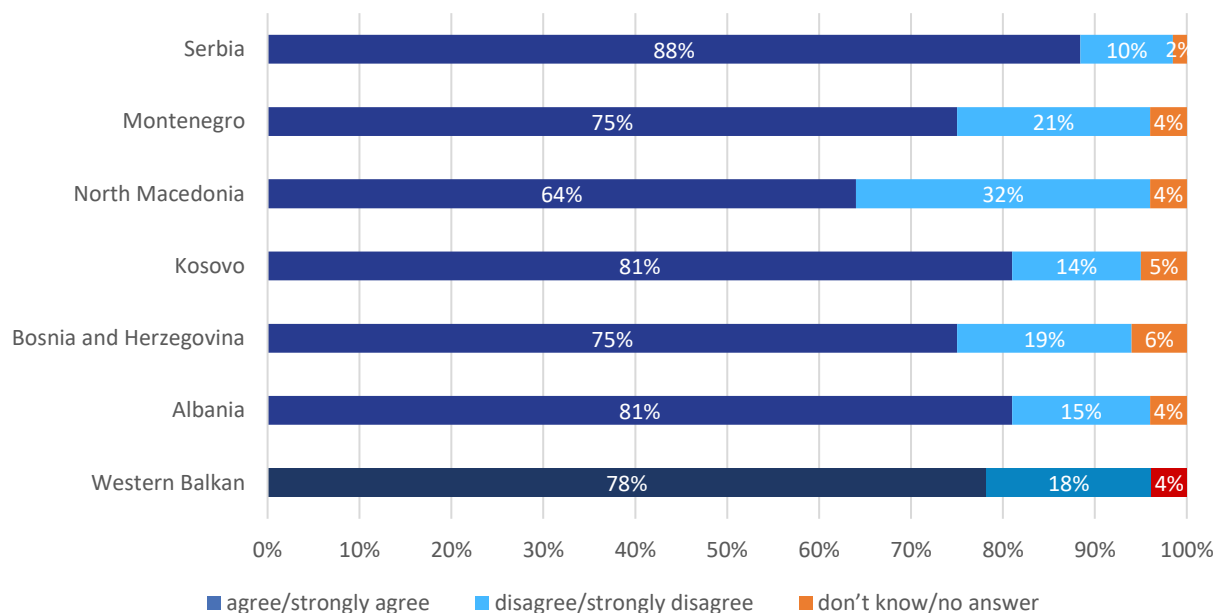


Base: Those who used e-services of the administration in the past two years: n=2676 (Western Balkan), n=519 (Albania), n=561 (Serbia).

## COVID-19 ERA OF E-SERVICES

It is no news that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people interact, and the provision of administrative services is no exception. Governments worldwide had to adjust the way they communicate with citizens, and Western Balkans caught that same wave as a push to further digitalise administration. Figure 14 shows that citizens in Serbia have noticed the government initiatives to additionally boost practices for providing contactless, electronic services as of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, more than the citizens in the rest of the region. Almost 90% of Serbian citizens who have used e-services in the past two years do see that the government has improved its provision since then. According to public opinion, the least proactive and below the regional average seems to be North Macedonia, but even there, more than 60% of respondents think that the government has improved the provision of e-services.

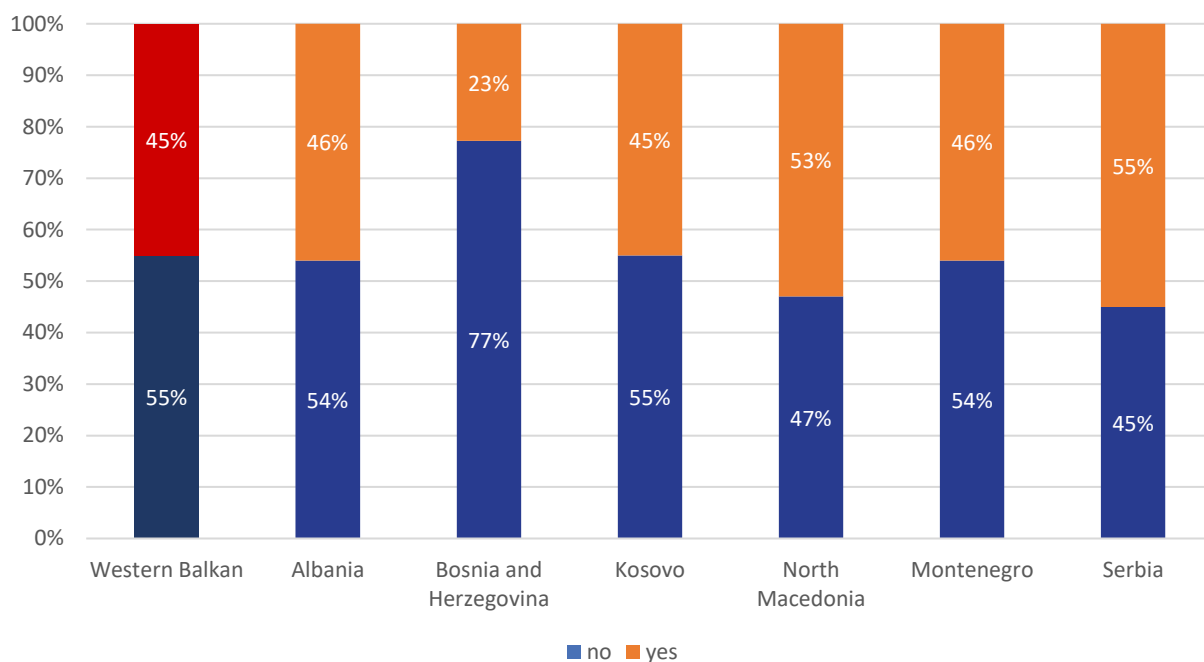
Figure 14 – Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has improved the provision of e-services



Base: Those who used e-services of the administration in the past two years: n=6093

Citizens of Serbia and North Macedonia are the ones with the most significant interest in e-services since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in interest is the lowest in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while it is around the regional average of 45% for the three remaining administrations (Figure 15). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose citizens have been the least interested in e-services through the years, the COVID-19 outbreak and accompanying measures did not seem to be enough to make its citizens more drawn towards e-services. Namely, only 23% of its citizens became more interested in accessing administrative services via the internet. The highest increase in interest in accessing such services electronically is present in Serbia, although such interest was substantial even before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Figure 15 – Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have you become more interested in (or researched more about) using electronic services?



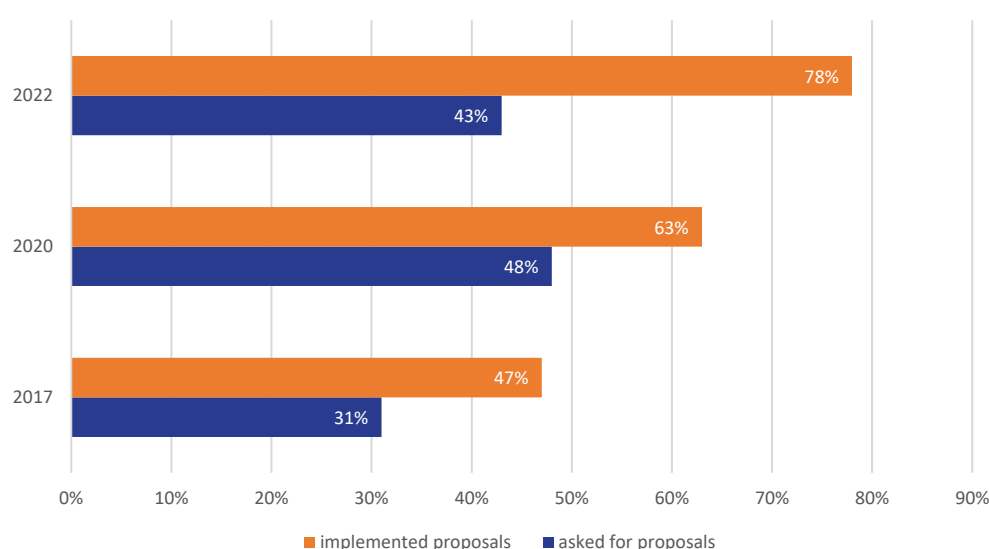
Base: Total target population: n=6093

## THE VOICE OF CITIZENS

Increased participation of citizens in developing ideas for improvement of administrative services, as well as in the monitoring of these services, is present in all the administrations in the region. Although there is a slight pullback on specific issues, the overall impression is that the governments are listening to their citizens and trying to fulfil their needs.

More precisely, according to the 2022 survey, citizens in the Western Balkans felt their administrations were slightly less willing to ask for their opinion about how they could improve administrative services compared to the one from 2020. However, this drop of five percentage points on this issue does not seem to be significant, since the belief of Western Balkan citizens about the implementation of their proposals is steadily growing. In four years, it rose by almost 30 percentage points, from 47% in the baseline survey from 2017, to 78% in the 2022 survey.

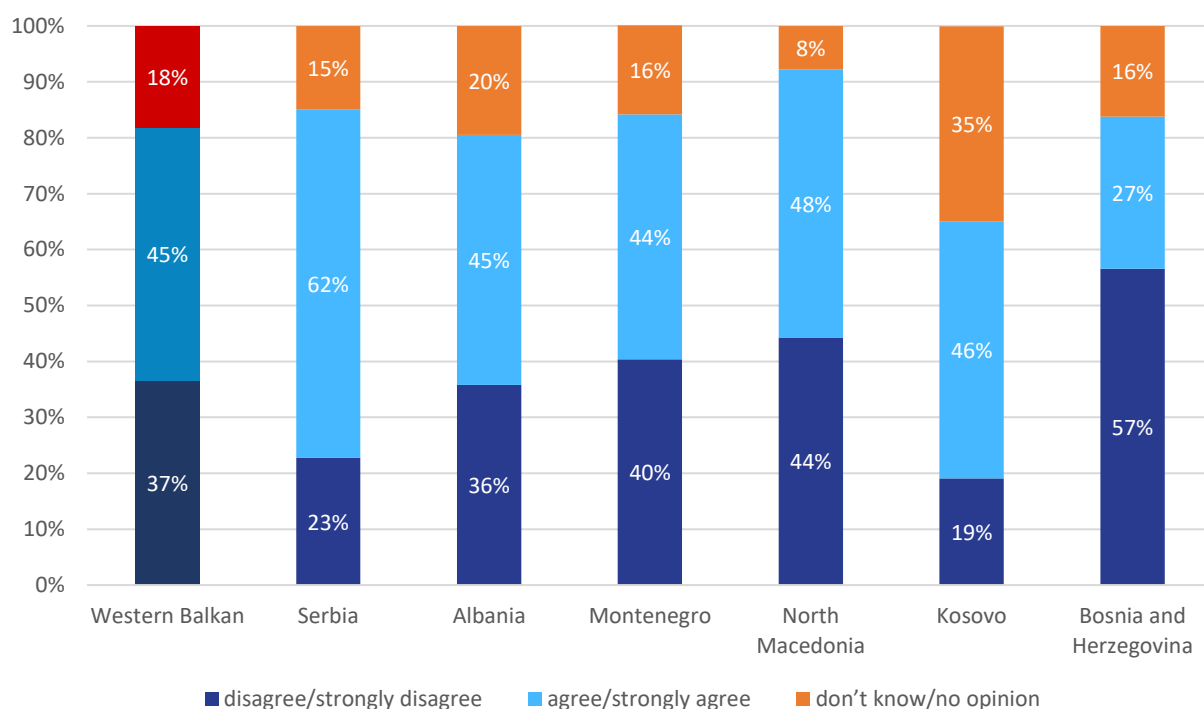
*Figure 16 – Percentage of those who agree that the government asked citizens for their proposals on how to improve administrative services and percentage of those who agree that those proposals were implemented*



*Base: In the past two years, the administration has asked for the citizen's proposals on how to improve administrative services: total target population; In the past two years, the government has used such proposals from citizens, to improve administrative services: if "Strongly agree" or "Agree" in the previous question.*

Additionally, Figure 17 below shows that about 45% of citizens of the Western Balkan region agree or strongly agree about having the possibility to share their opinion on the quality of administrative services, ranging from 27% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 62% in Serbia. The four remaining Western Balkan administrations are somewhere around the region's average.

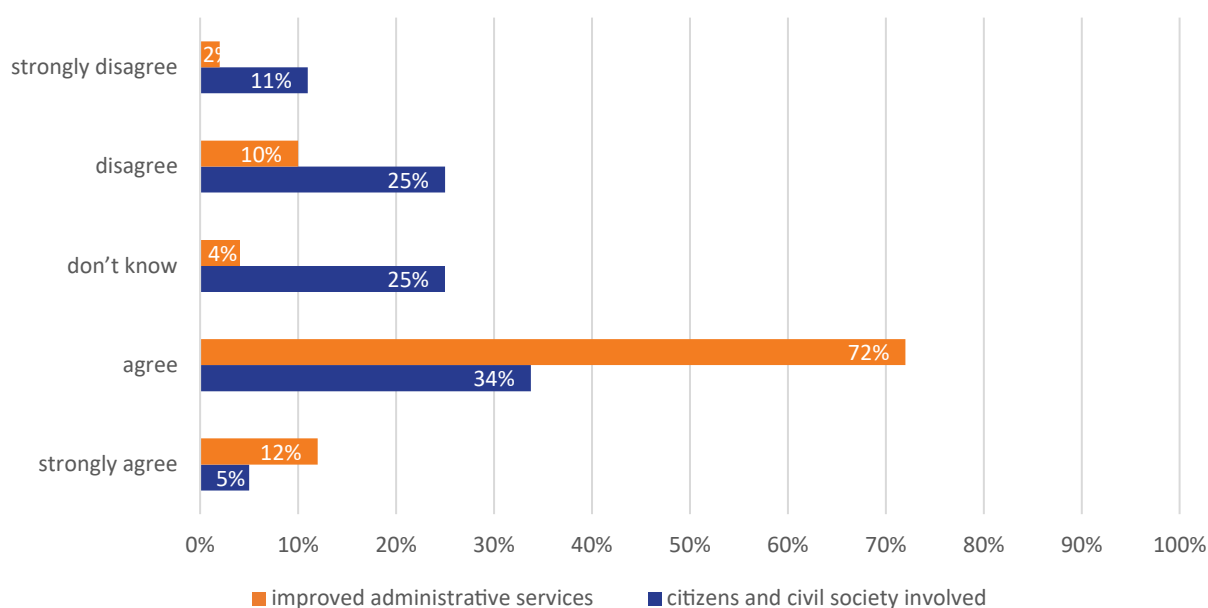
Figure 17 – As a user of administrative services, I have a possibility to give my opinion on the quality of the individual services that I receive (obtain)



Base: Total target population: n=6093

There is a different tone when it comes to the involvement of citizens and civil society in monitoring administrative services. Perception tends to be split between those who agree (39%), those who are not sure whether such involvement takes place (25%), and those who disagree (36%). This indicates that inclusive service delivery monitoring is still a goal to reach in the region. Yet, among those who agree, more than 80% think that such monitoring results in improved administrative services (Figure 18, responses “agree” and “strongly agree”). While the rate of agreement about the involvement of citizens and civil society in the monitoring process declined moderately (from 42% in 2020 to 39% in 2022), the agreement rate about the positive impact of such monitoring expanded, from 65% in 2020 to more than 80% in 2022.

Figure 18 – Citizens' perception of citizens' and CSOs' involvement in the monitoring of administrative services and improvement of administrative services as a result of such monitoring in the Western Balkans



Base: In the past two years, citizens or civil society have been involved in the monitoring of administrative services: Total target population n =6093. In the past two years, as a result of such monitoring by citizens or civil society, the government has improved administrative services: Those who “Strongly agree” or “Agree” in the previous question: n=2328.

## CONCLUSIONS

Citizens in the Western Balkans recognise that their administrations have become more citizen-oriented in the past few years. This is in line with the findings presented in the latest SIGMA monitoring reports on the PAR developments in the region. Differences among the countries became more significant as some countries advanced more in adopting reforms than others. All in all, according to both SIGMA assessments and public perception surveys, regularly implemented within the WeBER PAR monitoring, Albania and Serbia are best standing in their efforts to shift public administration towards a more citizen-oriented direction.

Nevertheless, certain issues remain, especially in the administrations that have not advanced in the reform process and have yet to make a significant shift towards putting the growing needs of citizens and businesses in the focus of their operations. Burdens of inefficient public administration, thus, remain, with public perception offering relevant insights into the areas for potential future improvement.

Albania and Serbia are leading the way in public administration reform, closely followed by Kosovo. However, the Serbian government should raise more awareness about the availability of e-services among its citizens. Furthermore, Albania needs to put additional effort into communication with its citizens and make the e-channels easier to use. The administration in Kosovo has succeeded in easing the dealing with the administration for its citizens and decreasing the time needed to finalise the services. Nevertheless, the interest of its citizens in using such services is still the lowest in the region, and there is a space to motivate them to switch from the traditional ways of accessing services to digital ones.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is lagging behind the rest of the Western Balkan administrations in most matters. Citizens are not confident that the government is putting enough effort into reforms. Bosnia and Herzegovina is showing the gap in the use of e-services. Not only that the usage of e-services is not very extensive, but also there is little interest in its use. Regardless, the results show significant improvement, especially when compared to the baseline survey from the 2017/2018 monitoring cycle. Besides doing their side of the job in improving the services they offer, the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina should also find ways to motivate its citizens to access those services via the internet.

North Macedonia and Montenegro are making steps towards simpler and more digitalised administration at their own pace; however, their citizens still perceive a need to make access to administrative services easier and simpler. These governments should put an exceptional effort into shortening the time needed to obtain services if they intend to keep pace with the regional frontrunners. In both, North Macedonia and Montenegro, citizens prefer to access administration services online. These preferences could be a good push for their governments to put additional efforts into digitalisation. Finally, North Macedonia has more understanding of the needs of its citizens, as it is one of the administrations in the region that implements citizens' proposals about how to improve the administration services the most. On the other hand, the government in Montenegro still has to find a way to better listen to the proposal and feedback of its citizens.

Lastly, better and simpler access to administrative services is one of the many steps the region needs to take to catch up with the EU and the quality of life the EU provides to its citizens. Further digitalisation might push WB citizens to stay and develop businesses in the region. Moreover, improved access to e-services and simpler procedures could attract foreigners, foreign companies, and even freelancers to help solve decades-long problems of depopulation and brain drain in the region. It is now the time to speed up the process that is already going in the right direction and, under any circumstances, not to let already made results fade.

## APPENDIX

Country	Time frame		Marginal error	Sample size
	Beginning	End		
Albania	10.05.	17.05.	±3.16 for events with 50% incidence (marginal error)	1009
Bosnia and Herzegovina	04.05.	23.05.	±3.12 for occurrences with 50% incidence (marginal error)	1037
Kosovo	17.05.	31.05.	±3.13 for events with 50% incidence (marginal error)	1026
Montenegro	06.05.	18.05.	±3.15 for occurrences with 50% incidence (marginal error)	1016
North Macedonia	04.05.	15.05.	±3.18 for events with 50% incidence (marginal error)	1000
Serbia	20.05.	22.05.	±3.14 for occurrences with 50% incidence (marginal error)	1005

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