

# Informality and everyday life: How 'things get done' in contemporary South East Europe

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## Introduction

Informality is a pattern of social life; it is multifaceted, socially embedded, and connected to formal institutions. Formal and informal rules and practices are organically linked to one another in everyday life, where informal practices frequently emerge to accomplish tasks that the formal rules do not make possible. Informal rules are resilient and enduring, and often remain in the private domain of family and kinship relations to 'get things done', but also are essential for formal structures to work as there are no formal rules that can describe all possible situations.

Grounded in survey findings, this policy brief outlines how informality shapes everyday life in societies of South East Europe, more specifically Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The approach taken here places an emphasis on the nature of informality in everyday life, aiming to highlight public perceptions on informal practices and also to understand how citizens in South East Europe navigate through formal rules and informal practices. Everyday life here concerns the attitudes and practices that are familiar, ordinary and routine – the category encompasses several fields of social life, particularly healthcare, the judicial system, the police, education, and employment. Our research seeks to track the circumstances under which family ties and social connections interact in everyday life to 'get things done.' The findings show that informality mediates between the public and private spheres. Yet, informality is not deviant but rather ordinary in everyday relationships and encounters. It is a response to the current organisation and mode of operation of public institutions.

## Evidence and analysis

### *Public Perceptions on Informality*

Citizens in South East European societies perceive informality to be omnipresent. More than 70% of those surveyed in these societies think that having connections and to 'have people in places' is crucial in order to 'get things done.' However, perceptions of informality vary in the fields surveyed by the research and across countries. For instance, giving money, having contacts or giving gifts to doctors is most pronounced in BiH and Serbia, followed by Montenegro. This perception is less frequently identified in Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. In terms of institutions, the survey data indicate that use of connections and informal incentives is more pervasive in the health sector and less so in the courts. The practice of using gifts or connections to obtain access to kindergartens, schools and university education is most prevalent in BiH and least frequently reported in Albania. Offering gifts to police officers in order to dismiss or avoid paying a fine is perceived as a widespread practice in BiH and Serbia. It is perceived to be to less common in Kosovo and Macedonia.

Nevertheless, citizens of South East European societies still maintain a positive outlook on formal institutions such as municipal administration, the courts, the police, healthcare, education, social services, and tax authorities. They report that they are satisfied with treatment that they receive from these institutions.

The research indicates that strong bonds of family and kinship coexist with low trust in society, state and political institutions. Citizens in all societies in the region express that they can rely on their parents, cousins or friends to help them with childcare or care for the elderly and ill (70%). A further 50% to 60% of the respondents consider that, in cases of great life misfortunes (death, illness, permanent loss of the employment), they can count on the help of their families, cousins, friends, and neighbours. However, trust in people is rather low across the region, scoring a low of 2.9 in Macedonia and a high of 3.8 in Albania (on the scale from 1 to 5). The level of trust in state institutions is higher than trust in people. It is the highest in Montenegro (mean score reaching 4.9), followed by Albania, Serbia and Kosovo. In contrast, BiH and Macedonia show less trust in state institutions (mean scores 3.5 and 3.7). The family is the most trusted institution while political parties are the least trusted. Relatives and friends enjoy high levels of trust, while colleagues, neighbours, people of the same national and religious backgrounds are somewhat trusted.

## *Encountering Informality on an Individual Level*

When looking at personal experiences of respondents and the people they know about practices such as gift giving, providing services, money, and connections to 'get things done,' the fields of healthcare, the courts, the education system, and gaining employment are sites where informal practices emerge as a means of obtaining access to services. The expectation that gifts or favours will be required to obtain healthcare is a fact of life throughout the region. The survey data show that half of the respondents from all the countries, except Kosovo, know someone personally who has had to bring a gift, provide a service, pay money, or find a connection in order to obtain better health care. Moreover, most respondents in Albania and Kosovo paid to get treatment in public healthcare (Albania 68%, Kosovo 54%); in Macedonia and Montenegro 40% of respondents sought and found a connection. Gift giving is the most frequent practice in Serbia (45%); in BiH almost the same percentage of respondents give gifts and as give money (39%) for treatment in public healthcare.

With regard to the courts, a smaller number of respondents' report resorting to informal practices to influence court decisions. This is not to say that the frequency of using connections is lower in the courts compared to other institutions. One should bear in mind that the interaction of citizens with the courts is less frequent compared to other institutions. However, the most common practice of informality in the courts consists of 'giving gifts' with around 47% in BiH, Serbia 44%, Montenegro 35%, Macedonia 26%, Albania 14%, and Kosovo 10% reporting that they did 'give gifts' in order to obtain a favourable court decision.

Enrolling children in kindergarten, school or university is less connected to informal practices in comparison to other domains of everyday life. The percentage of those who know someone that has used connections to get a place for their child in a kindergarten or to enrol in school or university ranges from around 18% in Kosovo to 30% in Macedonia. The informal practice that was least frequently reported is having to seek connections to get a place for a child in the kindergarten and/or enrol in school or university (Macedonia 6% and Kosovo 2%).

However, the research data indicates that informal practices regulate access to employment. Of those surveyed who have reported to personally know someone who had to provide a gift, service, pay money or find a connection to get employment, it is Macedonia and Serbia that score the highest (40%), followed by Kosovo (16.7%) and Montenegro (9.3%). It is in BiH that personal knowledge of these practices is least prevalent (2.7%).

## *The Mediators: Family and Friends*

The mediators in the informal exchanges across all countries are drawn from circles of family and friends. Mediators are individuals whose placement in informal networks, broad reach of acquaintance, and familiarity with practices of informal exchange put them in a unique position to mediate between individuals who seek services and the institutions that provide them.

Informal exchanges mediated by family members are most often frequent in Kosovo and Albania. While friends are active everywhere, they most commonly act as mediators in Montenegro and Macedonia. In BiH and Serbia friends are the main mediators to 'get things done'. In dealing with the courts, the main mediators are friends and relatives, followed by political parties. In employment, the mediators are friends. In BiH, there are fewer intermediaries and respondents report less help from friends, while in Albania friends and relatives are the main mediators. In Kosovo, relatives seem to be of paramount importance to gain employment in the public sector. However, the mediators are not necessarily those who receive 'favours.'

## *Conclusions*

Informality in South East Europe can be understood through the interconnections between formal institutions and informal and practices. The most common practice is 'gift giving', rendering services and giving money, and favours through clientelist relations. Informality is the most prevalent in the public health system and least so in childcare and education. The research confirms that informality does not exist independent of everyday life experiences, but it is part of it and that it can only be defined in the context of formality.

In Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia informality permeates everyday life through multifaceted practices often time based on family/kinship relations, but also in response to formal constraints for upward social mobility. Informality is not the preferred course of action, but a reaction to unresponsive state institutions. The research findings indicate that informality is not freed from ambivalence and ambiguity. Practices of informality can be understood only in relation to the interplay between the accepted norms and rules on the one hand, and formal structures and processes on the other. Everyday life is embedded in social norms, solidarity and reliance on kinship and social networks. Overall, as the research finds, citizens across South East Europe, while agreeing to formal rules, often subscribe to informality to 'get things done'. Indeed, the research indicates that informality is a response to inefficient institutions and a preferred strategy that ensures security of the procedures to make things happen.

## Policy implications and recommendations

The states, civil society and the EU each have a stake in overcoming challenges that informality poses in everyday life. A set of recommendations is put forward to that end:

### *To the Governments*

- The states should work towards an integrated policy framework to address informality in everyday life.
- The states should demonstrate accountability in governance through rule of law.
- The states should promote equality and anti-discrimination policies, as well as increase transparency mechanisms to guarantee equality and fairness in healthcare, employment, education, social services, judiciary and security.
- The states should extend social and health protection; improve the public health system by increasing public expenditure on health and welfare protection.
- The states should enact legislation to combat corruption, clientelism, and nepotism in employment in the public sector and ensure that recruitment is merit-based.

### *To Civil Society*

- Civil society should continue to promote equality, solidarity and reciprocity and counteract negative informality.
- Civil society organisations should work to restore public trust through citizens' participation in decision-making at community and state levels.

### *To the European Union*

- The EU policy should prioritise socio-economic development as integral to EU integration strategy of the countries of South East Europe.
- The EU policy should ensure that the national governments take steps to enhance the trustworthiness of formal institutions and uphold the rule of law.
- The EU's support to South East European countries should address informality in the public sector, especially in health, public administration and courts to ensure fair and equal treatment for all.

## Research parameters

The evidence for this brief is based on a quantitative methodology, which uses the data from a representative regional survey implemented as part of the INFORM project. The survey was conducted through *face-to-face* interviews with 5900 respondents: 900 in Albania; 1200 in BiH; 900 in Kosovo; 1000 in FYR of Macedonia; 800 in Montenegro; and 1100 in Serbia. The questionnaire included demographic, economic, political and social capital questions in relation to formal and informal institutions and practices. The survey was carried out by Ipsos Adria, in June of 2017.

## Project identity

**PROJECT NAME** Closing the Gap Between Formal and Informal Institutions in the Balkans (INFORM)

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**COORDINATOR** Eric Gordy, School of Slavonic and East-European Studies at University College London, London, United Kingdom, [e.gordy@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:e.gordy@ucl.ac.uk)

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**CONSORTIUM**

Centre for Empirical Cultural Studies of South-East Europe – CECS – Nis, Serbia

Center for Intradisciplinary Social Applied Research – CISAR – Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” - Skopje – IDSCS – Skopje, Macedonia

Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research – IEF – Zagreb, Croatia

Center for Historical and Anthropological Research – QKHA – Tirana, Albania

Riga Stradins University – RSU – Riga, Latvia

School of Slavonic and East-European Studies – SSEES UCL – London, United Kingdom

Social Research Kosova – SRK – Prishtina, Kosovo

University of Maribor – UM – Maribor, Slovenia

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**WEBSITE** <http://www.formal-informal.eu/home.html>

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**FURTHER READING**

Hysa A., Kera G. and Pandelejmoni, E. (2018) Report on informal and clientelist political practices in Albania: The case of the 2017 general elections.

Efendić N., Obad O., Prica I., Škokić T., Krasniqi V. and Gavrilović, D. (2018) Women's entrepreneurship between production and reproduction.

Sedlenieks Klavs, Puzo Ieva and Dubrovskā Diāna (2018) Report on informal institutions in everyday life in Montenegro.