

# “Potential Policy Reforms and Initiatives for Inclusive Digital Governance”

*(Albania - Kosovo- North Macedonia)*

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## 2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital transformation has become one of the most visible and ambitious reform priorities in the Western Balkans. Over the past decade, Albania, Kosovo, and the Republic of North Macedonia have each pursued modernization strategies that place technology at the center of state–citizen interaction. Broadband infrastructure has expanded, administrative services have migrated online, and new frameworks for e-government have been introduced. These initiatives are not merely technical exercises; they are political projects that seek to rebuild the social contract, improve trust in institutions, and accelerate European Union (EU) integration.

Albania provides one of the most striking examples of rapid digitalization. Through the *e-Albania* portal, over 95 percent of government services are now available online, dramatically reducing face-to-face bureaucracy and signaling a government-wide shift toward digital-first governance<sup>1</sup>. This transition has positioned Albania as a regional frontrunner, often cited in the European Commission’s annual country reports as a best practice for service delivery modernization. Kosovo has, in parallel, developed an ambitious *E-Government Strategy 2023–2027*, which outlines goals for interoperability across ministries, universal digital access, and stronger data governance<sup>2</sup>. North Macedonia, though at an earlier stage of institutional digitalization, has experimented successfully with civic-tech platforms such as *mCommunity*, which allow citizens to submit applications to municipalities electronically and have already demonstrated impressive uptake in pilot areas<sup>3</sup>. These initiatives illustrate a shared recognition that digital transformation is not optional, but foundational to modern governance.

Behind these achievements, however, lie persistent structural challenges. Despite near-universal connectivity, with 97.7 percent of households in Albania, 96.4 percent in Kosovo, and 90.8 percent in North Macedonia reporting internet access in 2024<sup>4</sup>, the quality and inclusivity of digital services remain uneven. Rural areas frequently experience lower internet speeds and higher costs, creating an affordability divide that leaves marginalized communities behind. Older citizens, women, and low-income

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *Albania 2024 Report*, Brussels: European Commission, 2024.  
[https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2024\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2024_en)

<sup>2</sup> Government of Kosovo, *E-Government Strategy 2023–2027*, Prishtina: Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2023.  
<https://mpb.rks-gov.net/Uploads/Documents/Pdf/EN/2700/e-Government%20Strategy%20Kosovo%202023-2027.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> OECD, *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024.  
[https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile\\_170b0e53-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile_170b0e53-en.html)

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat, *Household Internet Access Statistics*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2024.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households\\_-\\_level\\_of\\_internet\\_access](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households_-_level_of_internet_access)

households are disproportionately affected by limited digital literacy, while accessibility standards for people with disabilities and minority language groups are not consistently applied.

Trust also remains fragile. In both Albania and North Macedonia, approximately one-third of citizens doubt the reliability of online services, while roughly one in four express fears of personal data misuse<sup>5</sup>. In Kosovo, civil society consultations under the DIGI-CORE project highlighted similar concerns, underscoring weaknesses in data protection enforcement and the urgent need for stronger cybersecurity measures. These perceptions matter: even the most sophisticated digital platform cannot succeed if citizens hesitate to use it because they do not believe it is safe or transparent.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are both essential and underutilized actors in this landscape. As bridges between institutions and citizens, CSOs have the potential to amplify underrepresented voices, monitor digital service delivery, and provide much-needed training to communities with lower digital skills. Yet their capacity to play this role is severely constrained. The DIGI-CORE CSO Needs Assessment found that fewer than 20 percent of CSOs in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia employ staff with dedicated digital expertise, and most operate without sustainable budgets for ICT investments. Many rely on social media as their primary digital tool, with very limited use of secure data storage, cloud services, or open-data monitoring platforms. Without intentional policies and resources to support CSO digitalization, the sector risks falling further behind, weakening the inclusivity and accountability of the digital state.

At the same time, the region contains significant latent potential. Young people are digitally native, with nearly universal smartphone ownership and high levels of daily internet use<sup>6</sup>. Civic-tech experiments, such as *mCommunity* in North Macedonia, participatory budgeting dashboards in Albania, and fact-checking platforms in Kosovo, have demonstrated that citizens are eager to engage when provided with credible, user-friendly, and accessible tools. Moreover, CSOs consistently report a willingness to participate in digital policymaking when processes are transparent and inclusive. This combination of readiness and demand creates a powerful opportunity: if governments can institutionalize participation and scale proven pilots, digital transformation can evolve from a technical exercise into a democratic renewal.

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<sup>5</sup> UNDESA, *UN E-Government Development Index 2024*, New York: United Nations, 2024. <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2024>

<sup>6</sup> European Commission, *Enlargement Package 2024: Country Reports for Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia*, Brussels: European Commission, 2024. [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en)



The DIGI-CORE project translates these findings into a coherent reform agenda that places inclusion, participation, and sustainability at the heart of digital governance. It calls for the development of National Digital Inclusion Strategies (2025–2030) in each country, setting measurable targets for broadband expansion, affordability, and accessibility. It emphasizes the importance of rural connectivity packages, including subsidies for last-mile broadband and device vouchers; and the creation of multi-tiered digital and data literacy pipelines, where young volunteers mentor older citizens in digital skills. The project further advocates for a CSO Digital Capacity and Sustainability Window, enabling grassroots organizations to access grants, mentorship, and shared services. Importantly, it stresses the need to institutionalize CSO and youth participation through advisory councils, municipal working groups, and regular digital consultations, ensuring that policymaking reflects the voices of citizens rather than remaining top-down.

Finally, the report highlights the necessity of scaling proven civic-tech solutions, such as participatory budgeting and open-data dashboards, while linking them to service discipline through the publication of service-level agreements (SLAs) and measurable outcomes. Financing must also be addressed: sustainable digital transformation requires multi-actor mechanisms, combining state resources, donor support, and private sector contributions into a dedicated Digital Inclusion & Civic-Tech Fund.

In sum, the DIGI-CORE project argues that digital governance in the Western Balkans must be seen not only as a path to efficiency, but as a path to democracy. By embedding trust, accountability, and participation into digital reforms, governments can ensure that no citizen's voice is unheard and no community is left offline.

### **3 INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

The DIGI-CORE project was designed to examine and strengthen the role of civil society in advancing inclusive digital governance across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Funded through regional cooperation frameworks, the project combined surveys, consultations, and policy analysis to identify where progress has been made, where gaps persist, and how reforms can be structured to ensure that digital transformation benefits all citizens. Its ultimate aim is to provide governments, donors, and CSOs with an actionable policy roadmap that links digitalization to democratic inclusion, transparency, and accountability.

Digital transformation in the Western Balkans has accelerated significantly over the past decade, largely driven by the imperative of EU accession. In all three countries, e-government reforms have been explicitly tied to the European Commission's benchmarks

for public administration reform and good governance<sup>7</sup>. Albania, for example, has presented the *e-Albania* portal as evidence of its modernization capacity, while Kosovo's *E-Government Strategy 2023–2027* and North Macedonia's municipal-level civic-tech initiatives form part of their accession narratives. These reforms align with the EU's *Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030*, which stresses that connectivity, skills, and public services must advance in tandem<sup>8</sup>.

However, while the policy momentum is strong, the broader regional context demonstrates that digitalization is not a neutral or automatic process. The OECD's *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024* shows that disparities in infrastructure quality, affordability, and digital skills remain stark, especially between urban and rural communities<sup>9</sup>. Eurostat data confirm that while internet penetration is high, usage patterns vary significantly by age, gender, and income level<sup>10</sup>. For example, younger citizens use digital platforms daily, while older adults often rely on family members to access e-services. Women and marginalized groups face greater risks of exclusion, not only due to digital literacy gaps but also because accessibility standards, such as multilingual interfaces or services adapted for persons with disabilities, are not systematically applied.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical bridging role in this environment. They are often the first point of contact for communities with limited digital skills, and they act as watchdogs that can hold governments accountable for transparency, data protection, and accessibility. CSOs are also natural innovators, piloting new ways of engaging citizens through civic-tech tools, digital campaigns, or open-data platforms. Yet, the DIGI-CORE Needs Assessment highlighted that CSOs themselves often lack the resources to harness digital opportunities fully. Fewer than 20 percent reported having specialized digital staff, and most rely on short-term donor projects to fund ICT tools. Without a sustainable capacity base, their potential to contribute to inclusive governance is diminished.

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, *Enlargement Package 2024: Country Reports for Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia*, Brussels: European Commission, 2024. [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en)

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, *Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030*, Brussels: European Commission, 2022. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-decade-policy-programme-2030>

<sup>9</sup> OECD, *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024. [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile\\_170b0e53-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile_170b0e53-en.html)

<sup>10</sup> Eurostat, *Household Internet Access Statistics*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2024. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households\\_-\\_level\\_of\\_internet\\_access](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households_-_level_of_internet_access)

The regional context also underscores that trust is as important as technology. The United Nations' *E-Government Development Index 2024* notes that while infrastructure is improving, citizen confidence in digital institutions remains fragile across the Western Balkans<sup>11</sup>. Concerns about cybersecurity, data misuse, and lack of responsiveness can undermine the very reforms meant to enhance state–citizen interaction. This is why the DIGI-CORE project emphasizes not only the “hardware” of connectivity and portals but also the “software” of governance: trust, participation, and accountability.

By situating digital transformation within broader processes of democratization and EU approximation, the DIGI-CORE project provides a unique lens on the intersection between technology and politics. Its analysis makes clear that inclusive digital governance is not simply about efficiency gains, it is about ensuring that no community is left offline, that citizen voices are not sidelined, and that governments remain accountable in the digital era.

#### **4 METHODOLOGY**

The findings and recommendations presented in this report are the result of a multi-source, mixed-methods research process carried out under the DIGI-CORE project. The methodology was designed to capture both the technical and political dimensions of digital governance, ensuring that evidence on infrastructure, skills, and service delivery was complemented by insights into trust, participation, and institutional reform.

The primary source of evidence was a regional survey of 56 civil society organizations (CSOs) across Albania (33), Kosovo (11), and North Macedonia (12). The survey was distributed online and captured data on organizational profiles, digital capacities, use of ICT tools, collaboration with institutions, and perceptions of citizen needs. It provided a unique window into how CSOs experience and contribute to digital governance on the ground. Questions covered both external engagement (e.g., social media, online petitions, open-data platforms) and internal tools (e.g., cloud storage, cybersecurity systems, project management software).

To complement the survey, the project organized national consultations in Fushë-Arrëz, Prishtina, and Skopje, bringing together CSO representatives, government officials, and independent experts. These discussions allowed for validation of survey results and generated qualitative insights into barriers such as trust deficits, affordability gaps, and weak institutional consultation mechanisms. In addition, the consultations identified examples of civic-tech pilots, youth-led initiatives, and innovative approaches to digital inclusion that may not be captured in formal statistics.

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations, *UN E-Government Development Index 2024*, New York: UNDESA, 2024. <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2024>



The research also drew on country-level reports prepared under DIGI-CORE, which documented national progress, challenges, and reform opportunities. These reports were combined with international reference materials, including the European Commission's 2024 Enlargement Package<sup>12</sup>, the OECD's *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024*<sup>13</sup>, Eurostat data on internet access<sup>14</sup>, and the United Nations' *E-Government Development Index 2024*<sup>15</sup>. Together, these sources provided a robust comparative framework and ensured alignment with EU integration benchmarks.

A triangulation approach was applied throughout the research. Quantitative survey data were cross-checked against qualitative insights from consultations and validated with international benchmarks. For example, survey findings showing that fewer than 20 percent of CSOs employ digital staff were compared with OECD regional statistics on organizational capacities. Similarly, citizen trust concerns expressed in consultations were contrasted with Eurostat and UNDESA indicators on e-government uptake. This triangulation enhanced the credibility and reliability of the analysis.

Nevertheless, the research faced several limitations. First, the CSO survey was self-reported, which may introduce bias in how organizations describe their capacities or challenges. Second, because the survey was conducted online, organizations with limited digital access or capacity may have been underrepresented, especially in rural areas. Third, while consultations added qualitative depth, they could not fully capture the diverse experiences of marginalized communities, such as persons with disabilities or ethnic minorities. Finally, the absence of longitudinal data limits the ability to track progress over time, underscoring the need for repeated assessments in future phases of the project.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a solid and credible evidence base for identifying gaps, prioritizing reforms, and proposing actionable initiatives. By combining empirical data, comparative policy analysis, and stakeholder perspectives, the DIGI-CORE project ensures that the policy agenda outlined in this report is both grounded in reality and aligned with broader regional and European trends.

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<sup>12</sup> European Commission, *Enlargement Package 2024: Country Reports for Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia*, Brussels: European Commission, 2024. [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en)

<sup>13</sup> OECD, *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024. [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile\\_170b0e53-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile_170b0e53-en.html)

<sup>14</sup> Eurostat, *Household Internet Access Statistics*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2024. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households\\_-\\_level\\_of\\_internet\\_access](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households_-_level_of_internet_access)

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, *UN E-Government Development Index 2024*, New York: UNDESA, 2024. <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2024>

## 5 REGIONAL OVERVIEW: DIGITAL GOVERNANCE & CSO ENGAGEMENT

Digital governance has become a defining policy frontier across the Western Balkans. Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have each moved decisively to expand broadband coverage, migrate services online, and promote digital strategies as part of their modernization agendas. Yet, beneath this shared momentum lies a set of persistent inequalities and governance gaps that risk undermining the promise of digital transformation. The regional overview highlights both the advances achieved and the obstacles that remain, with particular attention to citizen trust, inclusion, and the role of civil society.

### Connectivity and Digital Infrastructure

The three countries of focus have achieved near-universal connectivity by 2024, positioning themselves close to EU averages. Albania reports the highest household internet access at 97.7 percent, followed closely by Kosovo at 96.4 percent, while North Macedonia lags slightly behind with 90.8 percent<sup>16</sup>. On the surface, these numbers suggest a successful rollout of infrastructure and a narrowing of the digital divide. However, when examined more closely, disparities emerge.

Urban–rural gaps remain a major concern. Broadband speeds and quality of service vary significantly between capital cities, where fiber and high-speed mobile connections are widely available, and peripheral rural municipalities, where slower connections and higher costs persist. For example, while citizens in Tirana, Prishtina, or Skopje enjoy stable access to 4G and increasingly 5G networks, those in remote mountain or border areas face limited service and costly packages relative to income. The OECD’s regional analysis underscores that affordability remains a binding constraint: even when connections are technically available, low-income households often cannot afford consistent access<sup>17</sup>.

This structural inequality has implications for service delivery. Online portals such as Albania’s *e-Albania*, Kosovo’s emerging e-government platforms, and North Macedonia’s municipal e-services assume universal access. In practice, marginalized communities frequently struggle to use these tools, perpetuating their reliance on intermediaries or face-to-face channels. The promise of digital governance therefore risks

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<sup>16</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households\\_-\\_level\\_of\\_internet\\_access](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Households_-_level_of_internet_access)

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile\\_170b0e53-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/western-balkans-competitiveness-outlook-2024-regional-profile_170b0e53-en.html)

being unevenly realized, benefitting the digitally connected while leaving behind those already disadvantaged.

### **Citizen Trust and Perceptions**

Trust is the intangible but essential ingredient of digital transformation. Without it, even the most advanced platforms struggle to gain user acceptance. Surveys and consultations under the DIGI-CORE project highlighted a striking gap between infrastructure availability and citizen confidence. In Albania and North Macedonia, roughly one in three citizens reported doubts about the reliability of online services, while around one-quarter feared their data might be misused<sup>18</sup>. In Kosovo, consultations echoed these concerns, pointing to limited awareness of data protection laws and weak enforcement capacity.

These perceptions matter because trust operates as a multiplier. High trust encourages uptake of digital platforms, which in turn increases efficiency and satisfaction. Low trust, by contrast, leads to under-utilization, citizen frustration, and reliance on informal or offline channels. The UN's *E-Government Development Index 2024* confirms this regional pattern: Western Balkan countries perform well on infrastructure but continue to lag on transparency, accountability, and citizen satisfaction<sup>19</sup>.

A lack of visible feedback mechanisms exacerbates the problem. Citizens often experience e-services as “black boxes”: they submit applications or forms online but rarely receive timely updates, explanations for delays, or opportunities to provide feedback. This absence of responsiveness reinforces perceptions of inefficiency and opacity, weakening confidence even in technically sound systems.

### **Civil Society Capacities**

Civil society organizations occupy a pivotal but under-resourced position in this landscape. As intermediaries, they are often the actors most trusted by citizens, particularly marginalized groups who may distrust state institutions. CSOs can translate complex procedures into accessible information, train communities in digital literacy, and advocate for inclusive reforms. Yet their ability to fulfill these roles is constrained by structural capacity deficits.

The DIGI-CORE CSO Needs Assessment revealed that fewer than 20 percent of CSOs employ staff with digital expertise or allocate consistent budgets to ICT. Most organizations rely on basic tools such as social media for outreach (used by over 98

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<sup>18</sup> [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en)

<sup>19</sup> <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2024>



percent of respondents) and standard office software for administration. Few report using secure cloud storage, project management platforms, or data visualization tools. Advanced civic-tech applications, such as co-creation platforms or participatory dashboards, are rarely within their reach.

These limitations are compounded by funding patterns. Donor projects occasionally provide CSOs with temporary resources for digital activities, but when project cycles end, the tools and expertise often dissipate. This stop-start dynamic prevents the development of institutional memory and sustainable capacities. As a result, CSOs are frequently consulted in digital governance processes but struggle to engage meaningfully or provide evidence-based monitoring.

### **Engagement in Policymaking**

Engagement of CSOs in policymaking varies considerably across the three countries. In Albania, digital reforms such as the *Digital Agenda 2022–2026* reference civil society as a stakeholder, but consultations are often ad hoc and linked to donor-funded initiatives rather than permanent institutional structures. In Kosovo, CSOs are periodically invited to provide input on draft strategies, but their role in implementation and monitoring remains minimal. North Macedonia demonstrates more promising practices at the municipal level: platforms such as *mCommunity* illustrate how local authorities can integrate citizen feedback into service delivery. Yet even here, participation often depends on the will of individual municipalities rather than being mandated by national frameworks.

This fragmented engagement undermines the potential of civil society to act as a full partner in digital transformation. When CSOs are treated as occasional consultees rather than institutional stakeholders, reforms lose the benefit of citizen perspectives and risk overlooking inclusion challenges. The European Commission’s 2024 Enlargement Reports emphasize the need for structured, permanent consultation mechanisms, noting that without them, policymaking risks being top-down and exclusionary<sup>20</sup>.

### **Regional Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion**

A comparative perspective highlights several consistent regional patterns:

- Connectivity is widespread but uneven in quality. While most households are connected, affordability and speed gaps in rural and marginalized communities persist.

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<sup>20</sup> [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en)

- Trust deficits remain significant. Citizens often question the reliability and security of online services, limiting uptake and reducing efficiency gains.
- CSO capacity gaps weaken inclusivity. Civil society is expected to support citizens and monitor reforms, but its own digitalization is constrained by limited resources.
- Youth are digitally active but civically disengaged. While young people are the most digitally connected demographic, their trust in formal political processes remains low, limiting the translation of digital skills into democratic participation.
- Civic-tech innovation is promising but fragmented. Pilots like *mCommunity* demonstrate feasibility, yet without institutionalization and scaling, they remain isolated success stories rather than systemic reforms.

Together, these findings underscore the central challenge for the region: digital transformation is advancing, but it is not yet inclusive. Unless reforms explicitly target affordability, literacy, trust, and structured participation, there is a risk of entrenching a two-tier digital society. For governments seeking EU membership, this is more than a technical issue, it is a question of democratic credibility.

## 6 COUNTRY-LEVEL ANALYSIS: ALBANIA

### National Context and Digital Governance Framework

Albania is often presented as the Western Balkans' most visible example of rapid digitalization of public services. The *e-Albania* portal, which now hosts more than 95 percent of government services, has fundamentally changed how citizens interact with state institutions. For many, this platform has replaced long queues at municipal offices and cumbersome paper-based procedures with a single, digital point of access. The European Commission has repeatedly cited *e-Albania* as a flagship reform, recognizing it not only as a technical achievement but also as a step toward modernizing public administration in line with EU accession benchmarks.

The government's *Digital Agenda 2022–2026*<sup>21</sup> provides a clear policy framework, setting out commitments to interoperability, cybersecurity, and universal access. Yet evidence from the DIGI-CORE country report on Albania suggests that while the infrastructure is impressive, the citizen experience is far from uniform. Progress at the national level is overshadowed by persistent issues of affordability, gaps in digital literacy, and fragile public trust in online services.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://akshi.gov.al/akshi/strategjia/>

## **Infrastructure and Access: Progress with Uneven Reach**

Albania has among the highest internet penetration rates in the Western Balkans, with 97.7 percent of households reporting internet access in 2024. On the surface, this positions the country as a near leader even by EU standards. Yet the national average masks sharp inequalities.

Urban centers such as Tirana benefit from fiber-optic broadband and stable 4G/5G mobile networks, providing citizens with reliable, high-speed connections. By contrast, households in remote or mountainous municipalities often contend with slower speeds, unstable coverage, and significantly higher costs relative to income. For low-income families, particularly those with multiple school-aged children, the price of subscriptions and devices remains prohibitive. These divides reinforce social inequalities and risk excluding rural populations from the benefits of digital governance.

This uneven reach creates a two-tier experience of digital transformation: urban residents perceive online services as a genuine convenience, while citizens in underserved areas remain dependent on intermediaries or physical visits to administrative offices.

## **Trust and Transparency: The Missing Link**

While Albania's infrastructure and service availability are advanced, citizen trust is fragile. Findings from the DIGI-CORE consultations confirm that 37 percent of Albanians doubt the reliability of online services, and 26 percent fear the misuse of their personal data. This skepticism is fueled not by lack of access but by the lack of transparency and responsiveness in service delivery.

For many users, *e-Albania* functions like a “black box.” Applications are submitted online, but the absence of real-time tracking, clear timelines, or explanations for delays creates frustration and fuels uncertainty. In practice, this has meant that businesses and citizens alike often maintain informal channels to “follow up” on applications, undermining the very efficiency gains the system was designed to achieve.

Restoring confidence requires more than technical improvements, it demands governance solutions. Citizens need visible guarantees: average processing times, feedback mechanisms, data protection standards, and avenues for redress. Without these, skepticism will persist, and digitalization risks reinforcing rather than alleviating frustration.

## **Civil Society Capacities: Eager but Under-Resourced**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Albania occupy a critical bridging role between citizens and institutions, yet their digital capacities remain severely underdeveloped. The



DIGI-CORE survey revealed that 58.9 percent of all respondent CSOs across the three countries were based in Albania, providing the richest sample for analysis.

Most Albanian CSOs are relatively young, 48.2 percent were established between 2010–2019 and 26.8 percent after 2020, reflecting a vibrant but institutionally fragile sector. Their policy priorities mirror the government’s reform agenda: youth empowerment (64.3%), open government and transparency (53.6%), and participation in e-governance (51.8%) rank among the top focus areas. This alignment suggests a strong willingness to engage constructively in shaping digital governance.

Yet their ability to do so is constrained by stark capacity gaps. Only a small fraction employ staff with ICT expertise, and most lack sustainable budgets for technology. When asked about barriers, 67.9 percent cited lack of financial resources, 62.5 percent pointed to limited access to open data, and 44.6 percent highlighted restricted access to decision-makers.

Albanian CSOs overwhelmingly rely on social media (98 percent) as their primary digital tool. While effective for outreach, this reliance underscores their limited ability to deploy more advanced platforms such as secure cloud services, data visualization software, or civic-tech co-creation tools. Without dedicated investment in digital skills and infrastructure, CSOs risk being confined to the margins of Albania’s digital transition.

### **Youth and Vulnerable Groups: Unequal Experiences**

The Albanian digital landscape is also characterized by sharp disparities between youth, who are digitally fluent, and vulnerable groups, who remain at risk of exclusion. Young people are among the heaviest users of mobile internet and digital platforms, yet they remain politically disengaged: surveys indicate that **62 percent express no interest in politics** (FES, 2024)<sup>22</sup>. This paradox, digital fluency without civic participation, illustrates the importance of linking digital governance reforms with broader efforts to rebuild trust in democratic institutions.

Women, minorities, and persons with disabilities face additional barriers. Accessibility standards are not consistently implemented, and older citizens, particularly in rural areas, frequently prefer face-to-face services. Without inclusive design and assisted-digital support, Albania risks reinforcing existing inequalities through its digital reforms.

### **Civic-Tech: From Pilots to Systemic Change**

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<sup>22</sup> <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/21457.pdf>

Albania has witnessed a number of promising civic-tech pilots, including participatory budgeting dashboards and citizen feedback tools at the municipal level. These initiatives demonstrate that digital platforms can enhance accountability, amplify citizen voices, and foster transparency. However, they remain fragmented and small-scale, often dependent on donor funding cycles rather than integrated into national platforms.

To realize their potential, civic-tech tools need to be scaled and embedded into mainstream systems such as *e-Albania*. Embedding participatory dashboards or citizen feedback loops directly into the state’s primary portal would not only ensure sustainability but also visibly demonstrate to citizens that their voices shape service delivery and policy.

### **Reform Priorities for Albania**

Building on DIGI-CORE findings and national consultations, several reforms are critical to ensure Albania’s digital transition is inclusive, transparent, and sustainable:

1. **National Digital Inclusion Strategy (2025–2030):** Set measurable targets for broadband expansion, affordability, accessibility, and participation, with a strong rural focus.
2. **Expand Assisted-Digital Access:** Establish municipal help desks, kiosks, and call centers to support citizens with limited skills, particularly elderly and rural populations.
3. **Strengthen CSO Digital Capacity:** Launch a **CSO Digital Capacity & Sustainability Window**, offering grants, mentorship, and shared ICT services.
4. **Institutionalize CSO & Youth Participation:** Create a **National Digital Advisory Council** and municipal e-governance working groups to formalize their role in policymaking and monitoring.
5. **Scale Civic-Tech Innovations:** Roll out participatory budgeting dashboards, feedback apps, and open-data platforms nationwide, integrating them into *e-Albania*.
6. **Enhance Trust through Transparency:** Publish service guarantees, processing times, and data protection standards, coupled with real-time service tracking.

## **7 COUNTRY-LEVEL ANALYSIS: NORTH MACEDONIA**

### **National Context and Digital Governance**

North Macedonia has made significant strides in digital governance, framing service modernization as part of its democratic and EU integration agenda. Since 2018, municipal-level innovations such as *mCommunity* have pioneered civic-tech solutions, while national strategies commit to one-stop service models and interoperability. Yet, as the DIGI-CORE country study emphasizes, these reforms remain uneven: policy frameworks exist, but operational funding, institutional memory, and trust gaps continue to limit their impact.

The government's commitment to digitalization aligns with the EU's *Digital Decade 2030* priorities, and the European Commission's Enlargement Reports have consistently encouraged North Macedonia to expand e-government services and ensure equitable access<sup>23</sup>. Still, the challenge is not infrastructure alone but the *human dimension*, building skills, trust, and meaningful participation in a context marked by rural divides, ethnic diversity, and long-standing concerns over governance quality.

### **Infrastructure, Awareness, and Trust**

Connectivity is widespread: 96.6 percent of citizens report daily internet use, and 97.7 percent own a smartphone, confirming that North Macedonia is effectively a mobile-first society.

Personal and laptop computer ownership is lower (62.9 percent), while tablet use is marginal (27.3 percent). These figures highlight the importance of designing services primarily for mobile platforms rather than desktop-first interfaces.

Despite strong connectivity, awareness and trust remain critical chokepoints. More than half of surveyed citizens were unaware that municipalities even offer e-services, while among those who are aware, 37.5 percent expressed doubts about reliability, 26 percent feared misuse of data, and 24 percent still preferred in-person channels.

This mismatch between technical access and citizen confidence underscores a central challenge: digital reforms are not only about portals and apps but about credibility and communication. Social media is the most common information channel (43 percent), outpacing official government campaigns or traditional media, suggesting that state communication strategies are not yet fully adapted to the platforms citizens trust most.

### **Civil Society Capacities and Engagement**

Civil society organizations in North Macedonia reflect a mixed picture of engagement. On one hand, they are enthusiastic adopters of basic tools such as websites and social media. On the other hand, adoption of advanced digital solutions, data visualization,

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<sup>23</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2024\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2024_en)

secure communications, monitoring and evaluation platforms, or e-participation tools, remains limited due to resource and skills constraints

Few CSOs have dedicated ICT staff, and project-based funding cycles inhibit sustainable investment in digital infrastructure. As a result, their participation in shaping digital reforms is often ad hoc rather than institutionalized. Consultations tend to occur during drafting phases of national strategies, but structured roles in monitoring or evaluation are rare. This dynamic weakens the potential of CSOs to act as watchdogs and to bridge marginalized communities into the digital transformation agenda.

The DIGI-CORE assessment suggests a path forward: mentorship consortia and shared ICT services could enable smaller or rural CSOs to overcome capability thresholds. Embedding digital officers within coalitions or pairing grassroots groups with advanced NGOs or IT firms would help professionalize the sector.

### **Youth and Marginalized Communities**

Young people in North Macedonia are “always online.” Daily internet use exceeds 95 percent among youth, yet their engagement in formal civic mechanisms remains low. Participation is often issue-based and mediated through social media, not through institutional channels. This echoes regional survey findings that youth digital fluency does not automatically translate into democratic participation<sup>24</sup>.

Marginalized groups face stacked barriers: patchy broadband in rural areas, affordability constraints for low-income households, limited digital skills, language barriers (particularly between Macedonian and Albanian), and historically low trust in institutions. Many citizens, especially elderly and rural populations, still desire human interaction, preferring to complement rather than replace face-to-face contact with digital services.

These findings highlight the need for assisted-digital models, such as municipal help desks, call-back services, guided kiosks, and webchat support. Without these pathways, digitalization risks deepening exclusion rather than reducing it.

### **Civic-Tech Proof of Concept: *mCommunity***

One of the most promising innovations in North Macedonia is *mCommunity*, a civic-tech platform introduced in 2018. The tool allows citizens to report problems, apply for subsidies and communal services, engage in consultations, and receive real-time notifications. Municipalities using *mCommunity* report significantly stronger data management skills and are more likely to adopt digital strategies.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/skopje/21550.pdf>

The uptake has been impressive: in one municipality, 73 percent of applications were submitted online through the platform

This demonstrates that when services are user-centered, well-communicated, and responsive, citizens will embrace them.

The lesson is clear: civic-tech works at scale when it is tied to workflows that deliver visible results. Simply launching software is not enough, training, communication, and institutional anchoring are essential for sustainability.

### **Reform Priorities for North Macedonia**

Building on survey data, consultations, and national analysis, the following reform priorities emerge:

1. **National Digital Inclusion Strategy (2025–2030):** Address skills, affordability, accessibility, and awareness in tandem with infrastructure investment.
2. **Close Rural Connectivity Gaps:** Launch targeted broadband programs and affordability measures (vouchers, community hubs, mobile service caravans) to ensure the “last mile” is no longer the last barrier.
3. **Build a National Digital & Data Literacy Pipeline:** Implement modular training (basic–advanced) through schools, municipalities, libraries, and CSOs, with “train-the-trainer” models for rural areas and youth volunteers coaching elders.
4. **Professionalize CSO Digital Capacities:** Establish a **CSO Digital Capacity & Sustainability Window** with mini-grants, mentorship consortia, embedded ICT officers, and shared services.
5. **Institutionalize Participation:** Create a **Digital Advisory Council** bringing together government, CSOs, academia, youth, and industry; establish municipal e-governance working groups; and launch youth digital forums with visible “you said / we did” accountability.
6. **Scale Proven Civic-Tech:** Roll out *mCommunity* nationally, equip municipalities with help-desk playbooks, and integrate participatory tools (e-petitions, participatory budgeting, open data apps) into mainstream e-services.
7. **Enhance Trust and Transparency:** Use social media as a primary channel for outreach, publish service guarantees and processing times, and disaggregate service data by geography, age, gender, language, and income to identify inequities.

8. **Secure Sustainable Financing and Coordination:** Create a **Digital Inclusion & Civic-Tech Fund** pooling government and donor resources, with quarterly coordination across ministries, municipalities, donors, and CSOs.

## 8 COUNTRY-LEVEL ANALYSIS: KOSOVO

### National Context and Digital Governance

Kosovo has made digital transformation a national priority, linking it to public administration reform and EU integration. The adoption of the *E-Government Strategy 2023–2027* sets out ambitious objectives for interoperability, citizen-centered services, and enhanced cybersecurity<sup>25</sup>. Connectivity is widespread, with almost all households reporting internet access, and the majority of citizens relying on mobile devices as their primary point of entry to the digital world.

Yet, as consultations under the DIGI-CORE project revealed, the country’s progress is not evenly distributed. Civil society organizations (CSOs) emphasized that while Prishtina benefits from strong infrastructure and training opportunities, rural municipalities still struggle with unreliable connections, high costs, and limited awareness of available e-services

This urban–rural divide continues to shape how citizens experience Kosovo’s digital transition.

### Access, Skills, and Inclusion

Internet penetration in Kosovo is nearly universal, but quality and affordability vary by geography. CSOs in rural areas highlighted the limits of access, noting that poor connections often prevent the use of advanced collaboration platforms or civic-tech applications. Instead, most organizations rely on basic tools such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and email, with far fewer employing platforms for data analysis, visualization, or secure cloud storage.

A recurring theme in consultations was the lack of advanced digital skills within CSOs. Few organizations employ dedicated IT or data officers. Training is often donor-funded and concentrated in Prishtina, leaving rural CSOs and smaller groups underserved. Once projects end, digital engagement frequently declines. This stop-start pattern undermines sustainability and reinforces dependency on external support.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://mpb.rks-gov.net/Uploads/Documents/Pdf/EN/2700/e-Government%20Strategy%20Kosovo%202023-2027.pdf>



Gender and social inclusion present further challenges. Women-led CSOs, particularly in rural areas, report limited access to training and affordable devices. Ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities also face exclusion: online platforms rarely comply with accessibility standards or provide content in multiple languages.

### **Trust, Privacy, and Cybersecurity**

Low trust in e-services emerged as a central concern. CSOs expressed fears about the misuse of personal data, the lack of GDPR alignment, and the vulnerability of activists and journalists to cyberattacks.

For many organizations, the risks are not abstract: NGOs working on human rights and media freedom have experienced online harassment and targeted breaches.

The absence of clear security protocols and rapid response mechanisms leaves both citizens and CSOs exposed. This fragility is compounded by limited public awareness. While government strategies highlight cybersecurity, implementation remains weak, and CSOs often lack guidance on compliance.

### **Media Governance and Online Harm**

Kosovo's digital space offers enormous opportunities for outreach, activism, and participation, but it also carries growing risks. CSOs highlighted the proliferation of disinformation, online hate speech, and harassment as major threats to both democracy and civic engagement.

These findings echo UNESCO's *Building Trust in Media* initiative, which has flagged Kosovo as particularly vulnerable to harmful content ecosystems<sup>26</sup>.

Participants consistently called for Media and Information Literacy (MIL) programs, especially for youth and marginalized communities. Such initiatives would help citizens critically assess online content, resist manipulation, and strengthen democratic resilience. Fact-checking organizations and independent journalism were also identified as crucial allies in this process.

### **Civil Society Participation and Policy Influence**

Despite progress on strategy, CSOs in Kosovo report being marginally involved in digital policymaking. Consultations are often treated as formalities, with little feedback incorporated into final documents. Access to government data is limited, despite legal obligations for transparency. For many CSOs, this lack of structured participation is a major barrier to evidence-based advocacy.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386562>

The DIGI-CORE assessment calls for a permanent advisory mechanism within the Digital Transformation Council to formalize civil society's role. This would ensure that policymaking moves beyond symbolic consultations and becomes genuinely participatory.

### **Civic-Tech and Citizen Engagement**

Kosovo has piloted several promising civic-tech initiatives, ranging from open-data portals to digital reporting platforms. However, most remain small-scale and donor-dependent, with little institutional support for sustainability. Without stronger integration into government workflows, these tools risk fading once project cycles end.

Citizen-centered design is also critical. CSOs argue that many e-services are built from an administrative perspective rather than a user perspective. Adopting a “life-event” approach, designing services around key citizen milestones such as birth registration, school enrollment, or business start-ups, would make platforms more intuitive and widely used.

### **Reform Priorities for Kosovo**

Based on DIGI-CORE findings and consultations, several reform priorities emerge:

1. **Institutionalize Governance and Participation:** Establish a permanent CSO advisory mechanism within the Digital Transformation Council and mandate structured consultations.
2. **Expand Digital Skills and Literacy:** Create modular training programs from basic literacy to advanced data and cybersecurity, prioritizing rural CSOs, women-led groups, and marginalized communities.
3. **Design Citizen-Centered E-Services:** Apply a life-event approach, ensure multilingual content, and guarantee accessibility for persons with disabilities.
4. **Strengthen Cybersecurity and Data Protection:** Align frameworks with GDPR, adopt security-by-design principles, and provide targeted cybersecurity support for CSOs and journalists.
5. **Counter Disinformation and Online Harm:** Introduce MIL programs for youth and vulnerable groups, support fact-checking networks, and adapt EU principles (DSA, EMFA) to Kosovo's context.
6. **Provide Sustainable CSO Support:** Create grant schemes for digitalization, encourage multi-year donor/government support, and foster regional exchanges for sharing practices.

## 9 REGIONAL PATHWAYS TO INCLUSIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Across the Western Balkans, digital governance has become a cornerstone of modernization agendas. Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have all invested heavily in expanding internet connectivity, rolling out online public services, and aligning strategies with the EU's *Digital Decade 2030*. Yet evidence from the DIGI-CORE project and complementary European sources demonstrates that inclusion, trust, and participation remain fragile.

While more than 95% of households across the three countries now have internet access, affordability gaps persist for rural and low-income communities. Youth are digitally fluent but politically disengaged. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are eager to act as partners, yet fewer than 20% have staff with digital skills. And while civic-tech pilots, from Albania's participatory budgeting dashboards to North Macedonia's *mCommunity* app-show promise, they remain fragmented and donor-dependent.

To navigate these contradictions, the region requires a strategic shift. Instead of treating digital transformation as a technical process, it must be seen as a democratic project. This section identifies four regional pathways, grounded in DIGI-CORE findings, survey data, and external benchmarks, that can ensure digital governance is not only efficient, but also inclusive, trusted, and citizen-driven.

### Building Trust in Digital Services

Trust is the invisible infrastructure of digital governance. When citizens do not trust the system, they avoid using online services, no matter how well designed. In DIGI-CORE surveys, one-third of respondents doubted the reliability of e-services, and one-quarter feared misuse of personal data. These concerns cut across all three countries, even where connectivity is strong.

- **Albania:** The *e-Albania* portal has digitized 95% of services, yet many users describe it as a “black box.” Applications disappear into the system without clear feedback, prompting people to rely on informal channels for follow-up.
- **Kosovo:** Citizens report high fear of data misuse, in part due to weak cybersecurity protocols and the absence of GDPR alignment. Civil society actors, especially journalists and human rights groups, are vulnerable to online harassment and data breaches.
- **North Macedonia:** Awareness is the main bottleneck. Over half of citizens were unaware that municipalities even offer e-services, while 37.5% of those aware doubted their reliability.

Building trust requires a **three-pronged approach:**

1. **Transparency by Design** – embedding real-time dashboards into portals to display processing times, service completion rates, and data use.
2. **Clear Redress Mechanisms** – visible pathways for complaints, appeals, and follow-up, reducing the sense of opacity.
3. **Strong Data Protection** – aligning frameworks with GDPR, training staff on compliance, and publicly communicating protections.

International experience shows the dividends of trust. Estonia’s X-Road platform and Denmark’s Borger.dk portal achieved near-universal uptake because governments invested in *responsiveness, reliability, and respect for citizens’ data*.<sup>27</sup> For the Western Balkans, the lesson is clear: digitalization without trust risks deepening alienation rather than improving governance.

### **Empowering Civil Society**

Civil society is the connective tissue between citizens and institutions. In digital governance, CSOs play multiple roles: watchdogs, innovators, advocates, and intermediaries for marginalized groups. Yet across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, CSO digital capacity is severely limited.

- Survey evidence: Only 18% of CSOs across the region employ staff with ICT expertise.
- Tools used: Nearly all rely on social media (98%) for outreach, but fewer than 20% use data visualization or secure communication platforms.
- Barriers: 68% cited financial constraints, 63% lack of access to open data, and 45% limited engagement with decision-makers.

Despite these constraints, enthusiasm is high. CSOs consistently expressed interest in digital transformation, especially in fields like youth empowerment, open governance, and e-participation. What is missing is support.

The region needs a CSO Digital Capacity & Sustainability Window, a dedicated multi-country mechanism providing:

- Grants for infrastructure, software, and staff training.
- Mentorship consortia pairing grassroots CSOs with advanced NGOs or IT firms.

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<sup>27</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/01/2023-oecd-digital-government-index\\_b11e8e8e/1a89ed5e-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/01/2023-oecd-digital-government-index_b11e8e8e/1a89ed5e-en.pdf)

- Shared IT services (cloud hosting, cybersecurity audits, data tools) to reduce costs.
- Regional peer-learning platforms where CSOs exchange best practices.

Equally crucial is institutionalized participation. Currently, CSOs are consulted on strategies, but their feedback rarely shapes final policies. Establishing National Digital Advisory Councils, formally recognized multi-stakeholder bodies, would give CSOs, youth, academia, and industry a permanent voice. Such councils should report annually on progress, ensuring accountability.

Empowering CSOs is not charity; it is necessity. Without their involvement, governments risk designing digital policies that work for the majority while excluding those most in need of inclusion.

### **Closing the Digital Divide**

Connectivity statistics tell an optimistic story: internet access across the three countries ranges between 95–98% of households. Yet this masks stubborn inequalities:

- **Urban–rural divides:** Urban residents enjoy fiber and 5G, while rural families pay more for slower connections.
- **Income barriers:** For low-income households, the cost of subscriptions and devices remains prohibitive, particularly for families with multiple children.
- **Age gaps:** Older citizens, especially in rural areas, are far less likely to use e-services, preferring face-to-face contact.
- **Disability and language gaps:** Accessibility standards are weak, and services are rarely multilingual, excluding ethnic minorities.

Closing the divide requires both infrastructure and social solutions:

1. **Rural Broadband Expansion** – leveraging EU IPA funds and public–private partnerships to reach the “last mile.”
2. **Affordability Packages** – vouchers for low-income households, discounted student bundles, and subsidies for schools and libraries.
3. **Assisted-Digital Models** – municipal kiosks, mobile caravans, and trained intermediaries to help citizens navigate services.
4. **Accessibility by Default** – ensuring compliance with WCAG standards, offering content in multiple languages, and designing with inclusivity in mind.

If ignored, the divide risks creating a two-tier digital citizenship: one for connected urban elites and another for excluded rural and vulnerable groups. If addressed, it could transform digital governance into a tool for social cohesion, reducing inequality and strengthening democratic resilience.

### **Scaling Civic-Tech and Citizen Participation**

The region is rich in civic-tech pilots:

- **Albania:** Participatory budgeting dashboards and feedback apps.
- **Kosovo:** Open-data portals and digital reporting tools.
- **North Macedonia:** *mCommunity* app, with one municipality reporting 73% of applications submitted online.

These pilots show what is possible, but they remain small-scale and donor-dependent. Without institutional adoption, they risk fading once funding ends.

Scaling civic-tech requires a proof-to-policy model:

1. **Integration into National Platforms** – embedding proven tools directly into *e-Albania*, Kosovo’s one-stop portal, or North Macedonia’s municipal systems.
2. **Government Ownership** – allocating budget lines for civic-tech maintenance, not just donor projects.
3. **Citizen-Centered Design** – shifting from administrative logic to life-event approaches (birth registration, school enrollment, business start-up).
4. **Visible Impact** – adopting a “you said / we did” model to show citizens how their input changes decisions.

When citizens see that their voices are heard, participation increases. Conversely, when input is ignored, apathy deepens. Scaling civic-tech is therefore not just about technology, it is about restoring the social contract.

## **10 POLICY REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of the DIGI-CORE project highlight a simple truth: digital transformation is not merely about technology, it is about governance, equity, and trust. Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have all made commendable progress in rolling out online services, expanding connectivity, and aligning their digital agendas with EU priorities. Yet as the evidence shows, the social dimension of digital governance remains fragile: citizens



doubt reliability, rural communities face affordability barriers, CSOs lack capacity, and youth remain politically disengaged despite digital fluency.

To address these gaps, this chapter sets out a coherent reform package that builds on country-level insights and regional survey data. The recommendations are not abstract principles; they are practical steps designed to operationalize inclusion, empower civil society, and anchor digital governance in democratic values.

### **National Digital Inclusion Strategies (2025–2030)**

Each of the three countries has adopted ambitious digital agendas, but they remain fragmented and often technocratic. A dedicated National Digital Inclusion Strategy is needed in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia to ensure that digital reforms are not only efficient but also equitable.

Such strategies should:

- **Set measurable targets** for broadband penetration, affordability, accessibility, and participation.
- **Embed inclusion indicators** (age, gender, geography, income, disability) in monitoring frameworks.
- **Integrate EU standards**, particularly the *Digital Decade 2030* objectives on digital skills and secure, inclusive public services<sup>28</sup>.
- **Define accountability structures**, including annual progress reports and independent audits.

These strategies would move inclusion from rhetoric to obligation, making governments answerable for progress. Without them, digital governance risks cementing inequalities rather than closing them.

### **Rural Connectivity & Affordability Packages**

Connectivity statistics suggest near-universal internet access across the Western Balkans, but the lived reality is uneven. Urban households enjoy fiber and 5G, while rural families pay more for slower connections. For low-income households, the cost of subscriptions and devices remains prohibitive.

A regional package of rural connectivity and affordability measures should therefore be introduced, drawing on EU and OECD models:

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<sup>28</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A32022D2481&utm\\_source](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A32022D2481&utm_source)

- **Targeted broadband expansion** through public–private partnerships, leveraging IPA and WBIF funds.
- **Voucher schemes** for low-income families, modeled on Greece’s “Digital Solidarity” program, covering subscriptions and devices.
- **Community hubs** (libraries, schools, municipal offices) equipped with free Wi-Fi and devices for shared use.
- **Mobile service caravans** to bring digital access and training to remote settlements.

These interventions would help dismantle the “two-speed” digital divide and ensure that rural residents are not left behind in the digital transition.

### **Digital & Data Literacy Pipelines**

While connectivity is widespread, digital skills remain a major bottleneck. Fewer than one in five CSOs employ staff with ICT expertise, and many citizens lack confidence in navigating online services. Older adults, women in rural areas, and ethnic minorities are particularly at risk of exclusion.

Governments should establish multi-tiered digital and data literacy pipelines:

- **Basic skills training** through schools, libraries, and municipal centers.
- **Intermediate programs** on e-services, cybersecurity, and digital rights for citizens.
- **Advanced modules** on data analysis, civic-tech, and advocacy for CSOs and youth leaders.
- **“Train-the-trainer” models**, where digitally skilled youth mentor elders or marginalized groups.

By embedding literacy pipelines into formal education and lifelong learning systems, governments can ensure that citizens are not just connected, but also empowered to use digital services meaningfully and safely<sup>29</sup>.

### **CSO Digital Capacity & Sustainability Window**

Civil society is essential for inclusive governance, yet CSOs remain under-resourced and digitally constrained. Survey data from DIGI-CORE shows that 68% of CSOs cited lack

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/digital-transition-in-the-western-balkans.html>

of financial resources, 63% limited access to open data, and 45% restricted engagement with decision-makers.

To address this, a CSO Digital Capacity & Sustainability Window should be established, ideally as a regional facility co-funded by governments and donors. It should provide:

- **Small grants** for digital infrastructure, staff training, and secure software.
- **Mentorship consortia**, pairing grassroots CSOs with advanced NGOs, IT firms, or universities.
- **Shared IT services** (secure hosting, cloud solutions, cybersecurity audits) to reduce costs.
- **Regional peer-learning exchanges** on civic-tech, digital advocacy, and participatory tools.

This window would transform CSOs from reactive users of donor-driven tools into sustainable partners in the digital transition.

### **Institutionalizing CSO & Youth Participation**

Digital policymaking in the Western Balkans remains largely top-down. Consultations occur, but they are often symbolic, with little feedback incorporated. CSOs and youth, despite being the most digitally fluent actors, remain on the margins of decision-making.

To change this, governments should:

- Establish **National Digital Advisory Councils** bringing together ministries, CSOs, academia, youth groups, and private sector actors.
- Mandate **municipal e-governance working groups**, ensuring local participation in service design and monitoring.
- Create **youth digital forums** where young people co-design civic-tech tools and advise on policy.
- Institutionalize a **“you said / we did” accountability model**, publicly showing how citizen input shapes outcomes.

Institutionalizing participation is not only democratic, it is efficient. Policies designed with CSOs and youth are more likely to reflect lived realities and gain public trust.

### **Scaling Civic-Tech Solutions**

The region has an abundance of promising pilots: Albania's participatory budgeting dashboards, Kosovo's open-data portals, North Macedonia's *mCommunity* platform. But most remain small-scale and donor-dependent.

The next step is systemic scaling:

- **Integrate proven tools into national portals** (*e-Albania*, Kosovo's one-stop platform, *mCommunity* in North Macedonia).
- **Allocate government budget lines** for civic-tech maintenance, ensuring sustainability beyond donor cycles.
- **Design citizen-centered services**, structured around life events (e.g., birth, school, business).
- **Link participation to accountability**, showing citizens how their contributions influence policy.

Scaling civic-tech is about moving from islands of innovation to a continent of systemic change. Without this step, promising initiatives risk disappearing once projects end.

### **Financing & Coordination Mechanisms**

Finally, no reform package can succeed without financing and coordination. Fragmentation between ministries, donors, and municipalities, remains a core weakness in all three countries.

To address this, governments and partners should establish a **Digital Inclusion & Civic-Tech Fund** at both national and regional levels. This fund would:

- Pool resources from governments, EU IPA programs, bilateral donors, and development banks.
- Support both infrastructure (broadband expansion) and soft measures (CSO capacity, literacy, civic-tech).
- Require **joint monitoring indicators** on inclusion, accessibility, and citizen participation.
- Convene **quarterly coordination platforms** to align priorities and reduce duplication.

Such mechanisms would provide predictable, multi-actor financing and ensure that digital governance is pursued as a long-term priority, not a patchwork of short-term projects.

The digital transition of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia has reached an important crossroads. Connectivity and services have expanded rapidly, but inclusion, trust, and participation remain fragile. The recommendations presented in this chapter offer a roadmap to ensure that digital governance evolves not as a technocratic exercise but as a democratic transformation.

## 11 RISKS AND MITIGATION

Reforming digital governance in the Western Balkans is a journey filled with both opportunity and vulnerability. Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have each shown remarkable ambition in expanding online services and aligning with the EU's *Digital Decade 2030*. Yet the DIGI-CORE consultations revealed an underlying fragility: citizens doubt the reliability of platforms, CSOs are under-prepared for digital engagement, rural families face disproportionate barriers, and cyberattacks remain an ever-present threat. In this context, acknowledging risks is not a sign of weakness, it is a condition of credibility. A reform package that does not anticipate political, financial, institutional, social, and technological risks will falter at the first sign of crisis. A reform package that does anticipate them, and proposes concrete mitigation measures, can withstand shocks and build trust.

Risks are not obstacles to digital transformation; they are its reality. Political cycles, financial constraints, institutional fragmentation, social inequality, and technological threats will inevitably shape the trajectory of reforms in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. What matters is not whether risks exist, but whether governments and partners address them with foresight and determination.

### Political Risks

Politics in the Western Balkans is often turbulent. Governments change frequently, coalitions are fragile, and long-term strategies can be overturned by short-term calculations. This volatility poses a direct threat to digital reforms, which require continuity and stable political commitment to succeed. In Albania, the *e-Albania* platform was initially heralded as a flagship reform, yet civil society fears that the absence of strong oversight may reduce momentum once leadership priorities shift. In Kosovo, the ambitious *E-Government Strategy 2023–2027*<sup>30</sup> risks being diluted if future administrations deprioritize inclusion or data protection. North Macedonia has already experienced stop-start progress as municipal pilots thrive but national strategies stagnate.

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<sup>30</sup><https://mpb.rksgov.net/Uploads/Documents/Pdf/EN/2700/eGovernment%20Strategy%20Kosovo%202023-2027.pdf>

To mitigate this, reforms must be anchored not in personalities but in institutions. Parliamentary committees should adopt cross-party commitments to digital inclusion, ensuring that strategies survive electoral cycles. Embedding reforms within the EU enlargement framework also provides external accountability: the European Commission's annual progress reports evaluate not only adoption of strategies but also their implementation. By rooting reforms in these wider frameworks, governments can insulate them from domestic volatility and send a signal that digital governance is a national priority, not a partisan project.

### **Financial Risks**

Even when political will exists, financial constraints can derail progress. Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia all face limited fiscal space, and donor support, while crucial, is often fragmented and short-term. Civic-tech pilots flourish for two years under EU or UNDP funding, then disappear once the project ends. CSO digital trainings are intensive but episodic, leaving no resources for sustainability. This cycle breeds dependency and undermines the credibility of reforms.

To break this pattern, digital governance needs predictable financing. One way forward is to establish Digital Inclusion and Civic-Tech Funds that pool contributions from governments, EU IPA funds, bilateral donors, and private actors. By combining infrastructure investment with support for civil society and literacy programs, such funds could create stability beyond project cycles. Public-private partnerships can also play a role: telecom operators, for example, can co-finance broadband expansion in rural areas while governments subsidize access for low-income families. Including multi-year budget lines for digital reforms in national strategies signals seriousness and avoids the impression that reforms are donor-driven experiments. Without such measures, digital governance risks remaining a patchwork of projects rather than a coherent policy ecosystem.

### **Institutional Risks**

Even with financing, weak institutional capacity can slow progress. The DIGI-CORE consultations highlighted the same frustration across all three countries: ministries often work in silos, municipalities lack resources, and coordination between central and local levels is sporadic. In Albania, digitalization has been heavily centralized, with municipalities struggling to align local services with national platforms. In Kosovo, different agencies hold overlapping mandates for cybersecurity and data protection, creating confusion. In North Macedonia, local governments have pioneered tools like *mCommunity*, but without stronger national coordination, these successes remain isolated.

The solution is to strengthen coordination and create structures that survive leadership changes. Each government should appoint a lead digital coordinator with the authority to



align ministries, municipalities, and donor programs. Municipal e-governance working groups should be institutionalized to ensure reforms are implemented at the local level, not only in capital cities. Equally important, CSOs and youth should not be consulted as an afterthought. National Digital Advisory Councils, formally recognized and mandated to review policies, can transform consultation from symbolic ritual into genuine co-creation. These institutional reforms would create the connective tissue that makes strategies operational rather than aspirational.

### **Social Risks**

The digital divide is perhaps the most persistent social risk. On paper, internet access across the three countries exceeds 95%. In reality, rural families pay more for slower connections, women-led CSOs in small towns struggle with outdated devices, and older citizens prefer face-to-face services. Vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, low-income households, risk being left behind if reforms are not deliberately inclusive. Moreover, youth, despite being digitally fluent, remain politically disengaged. They may be the heaviest users of social media, but this does not translate into trust in institutions or participation in decision-making.

Mitigating these risks requires both design and delivery solutions. Assisted-digital models, municipal help desks, mobile caravans, and telephone support, can ensure that those who cannot independently navigate digital platforms are not excluded. Accessibility and multilingualism should be designing requirements, not optional add-ons. Youth engagement should be reimagined: instead of treating young people as passive users, governments should invite them to co-create civic-tech solutions, fostering a sense of ownership. Publishing disaggregated service data, by gender, geography, age, and income, would also help identify inequalities and hold governments accountable for addressing them. Without these measures, digital governance risks reinforcing inequality rather than reducing it.

### **Technological and Cybersecurity Risks**

Finally, technological risks remain acute. Both Albania and Kosovo have already faced high-profile cyberattacks that disrupted government services and exposed vulnerabilities<sup>31</sup>. Civil society actors, particularly journalists and human rights defenders, report harassment, phishing attempts, and targeted breaches. At the same time, low digital literacy leaves citizens susceptible to disinformation and online manipulation. UNESCO has identified Kosovo as especially vulnerable to harmful content ecosystems<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://ccdcoe.org/library/publications/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384216>

Mitigation requires a layered approach. Data protection frameworks should be aligned with GDPR, not only in law but in practice, with independent regulators empowered to act. National cybersecurity response teams (CERTs) need adequate resources and should coordinate across borders, since cyberthreats rarely respect frontiers. Civil society must also be supported: CSOs, activists, and journalists require training, subsidized security tools, and emergency response mechanisms when attacks occur. Finally, digital literacy cannot be limited to technical skills; it must include Media and Information Literacy (MIL) programs in schools and communities, equipping citizens to critically assess online content and resist manipulation. Without such measures, the promise of digital transformation will remain vulnerable to the perils of the digital age.

## 12 CONCLUSION

The journey toward inclusive digital governance in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia is at once inspiring and unfinished. Over the last decade, each country has taken bold steps to digitize public services, expand connectivity, and modernize administrative processes. Platforms such as *e-Albania*, Kosovo's forthcoming one-stop e-government portal, and North Macedonia's *mCommunity* app are visible signs of this transformation. Citizens can now apply for documents, track services, and engage with authorities in ways that were unimaginable a generation ago.

And yet, beneath these achievements lies a more complex reality. The DIGI-CORE project has shown that digital transformation is uneven and fragile. Connectivity does not always translate into affordability; services exist but are not always trusted; CSOs are eager to contribute but lack the resources to sustain engagement; youth are digitally fluent but politically disengaged. In short, progress has been substantial, but it has not been sufficiently inclusive.

This report has translated evidence from CSO needs assessments, surveys, and country consultations into a coherent reform agenda. The pathways and recommendations outlined here, national digital inclusion strategies, affordability packages, literacy pipelines, CSO capacity windows, institutionalized participation, scaled civic-tech, and pooled financing, form not just a technical checklist but a democratic roadmap. They are designed to ensure that digital governance becomes more than efficiency; that it becomes a vehicle for transparency, accountability, and empowerment.

The stakes are high. For the Western Balkans, digital governance is not an isolated policy domain. It is a cross-cutting reform that touches economic development, social cohesion, and political trust. It is also a test of EU accession readiness. The *Digital Decade 2030* sets ambitious goals for skills, services, and infrastructure, and Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia cannot afford to lag behind. More importantly, citizens cannot afford to be left behind.

What this report emphasizes most is that digital governance must be human-centered. The citizen is not a passive user but an active partner. Civil society is not a stakeholder to be consulted occasionally but a co-creator and watchdog. Youth are not only digital natives but potential innovators and bridge-builders. Marginalized groups are not beneficiaries of charity but rightful claimants to equal access and participation.

Looking forward, the vision is clear: a region where online platforms are trusted, where services are affordable and accessible to all, where civic-tech is scaled into mainstream governance, and where digitalization strengthens rather than weakens democracy. Achieving this will not be simple, but it is achievable. It will require political courage, financial investment, and above all, a recognition that technology must serve people, not the other way around.

The DIGI-CORE project has given us evidence, insights, and proposals. The next step belongs to policymakers, CSOs, and citizens themselves. If the reforms outlined here are pursued with determination and inclusivity, the Western Balkans can move from fragmented pilots to systemic transformation. And in doing so, they can offer a model for how small states with complex histories can harness digital governance as a force for integration, empowerment, and democratic renewal.

