



WHAT DO CITIZENS TELL US ABOUT ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES?

The second public perception survey in the Western Balkans

DECEMBER 2020



This project is financed by the European Union

Prepared by: **Stefan Stojković**, Junior Researcher, CEP Belgrade

KEY FINDINGS

- Most of citizens in the Western Balkans perceive that dealing with public administration has become easier in the past two years (57%). This view is more pronounced in Kosovo, Serbia and Albania (73%, 65% and 63% respectively), on the one hand, than in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia (38% and 48%) on the other. Figures in Montenegro are around the average with 55%.
- With regards to the time needed to obtain administrative services, the figures are very similar to the ones in *dealing with public administration*. On average, 57% of respondents in the region agree that this time has decreased. Kosovo, Serbia and Albania are considerably above the average, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia below it, whereas the figures in Montenegro do not statistically differ from the regional average.
- The majority of respondents in the region also agrees that there have been efforts by governments to make administrative procedures simpler for citizens and businesses (58%). Again, Kosovo, Serbia and Albania score higher (70%, 70% and 62%), while North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are lagging behind the regional average with 51% and 37% respectively.
- Citizens are largely aware of electronic services but they do not use them as much. The minority of 39% of respondents in the region say they use these services sometimes or often. E-services are used more in Serbia and North Macedonia than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania. Montenegro is between these two groups of countries.
- The public in the Western Balkans sees governments more responsive to citizens' feedback on how to improve administrative services than it did in 2017. It also reports that citizens or civil society have been more involved in the monitoring of administrative services. These changes have been most obvious in Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, while somewhat less so in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. By contrast, no positive change since the 2017 survey has been recorded in Albania.
- As for the sociodemographic categories, the results show that public sector employees and citizens holding a university degree have somewhat more positive perception of public administration than the other sociodemographic groups.
- The COVID-19 pandemic does not seem to have substantially changed the nature of interaction with public administration.

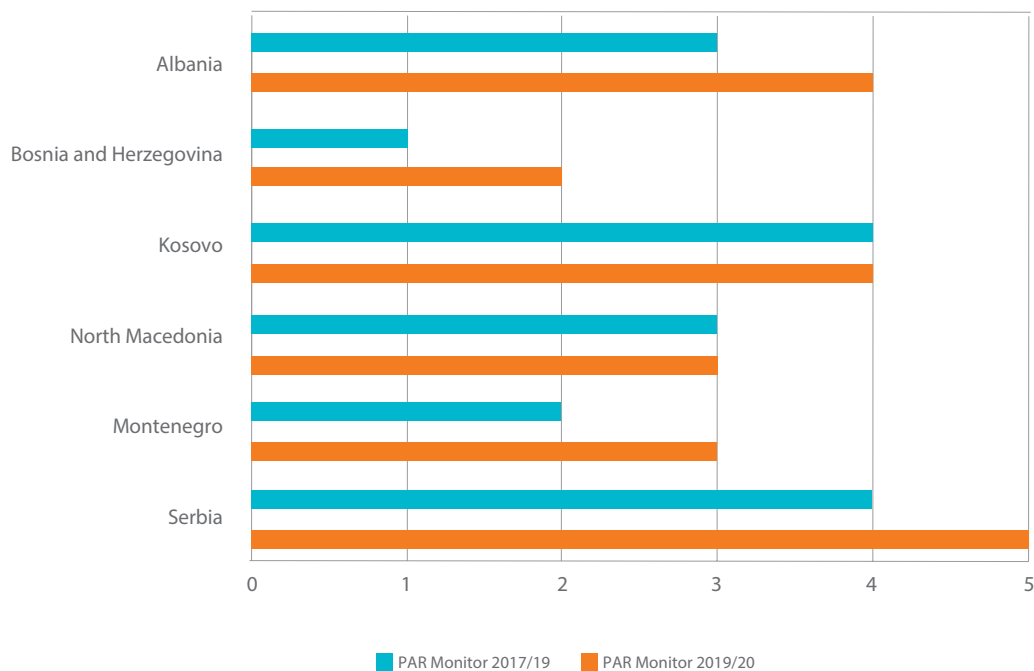
CITIZEN-ORIENTED ADMINISTRATION OR DISCONNECTED FROM REALITY?

Public administration is one of the first points of contact between citizens and their state. This is a place where citizens get their licenses, personal documents, permissions and other administrative services needed for individuals to handle their everyday affairs. As access to such services is usually the first-hand experience that the public has with its state, it is of high importance that services are delivered in an effective and citizen-friendly manner. Moreover, the significance of a well-functioning state administration is especially relevant in extraordinary circumstances, such as those caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has changed the mobility of the entire population and, thereby, accelerated discussions about the usage of electronic services (e-services) of state administration. While this is an important topic even in established democracies, it is even more so in developing countries that do not have a long history of relying on these channels for delivering administrative services.

To explore citizens' perspective on the aforementioned issues, two public perception surveys were implemented – first in 2017 and then its second installment between May 15 and May 30, 2020 on the sample of 6085 respondents from the region. The findings revealed considerable country-level variations both in 2017 and 2020 (Graph 1). First, looking back at the 2017 findings Serbia and Kosovo were ahead of the other countries. These two were followed by Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania, while Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) found itself lagging somewhat behind the rest of the region.

The 2020 results show a positive change in four out of six countries. Citizens from Albania, BiH, Montenegro and Serbia perceive their administration as more citizen oriented compared to the 2017 survey findings. Three out of these four countries now record a fairly high level of citizen orientation of public administration, while BiH – in spite of the increase in the overall results – remains at the bottom.

Graph 1. WeBER indicator Public perception of citizen-oriented state administration, values per country (scale 0-5)



Note: indicator calculates scores on the basis of various 'citizen orientation' aspects in the public perception survey, and converts them to a single numerical scale (0-5)

Whereas a large part of the survey covering citizen orientation of service delivery shows promising changes in 2020, other aspects – such as mechanisms for ensuring quality control or usage of electronic services (e-services) – paint a less optimistic picture. For these reasons, this report proceeds in two steps: in the sections that follow, the overall results from Graph 1 are first broken down to see what specifically accounts for a more positive perception of state administration in the area of citizen orientation; second, the report moves on to analyze what public perceptions tell us about other, less positive, aspects of administration. Finally, special attention is dedicated to interaction with administration in times of the pandemic. The report ends with concluding remarks about the state of the service delivery in the Western Balkans.

Are public services user-friendly?

To understand whether public administration has become more citizen-oriented, respondents were asked to estimate whether dealing with it has become generally easier in the past two years (Table 1).

Table 1. Dealing with public administration has become easier in the past two years (%)

	Disagree or Strongly disagree	Agree or Strongly agree	Don't know/no opinion
WB average	29.4	56.9	14
Albania	22	63	15
Bosnia and Herzegovina	48	38	14
Kosovo	9	73	18
North Macedonia	40	48	12
Montenegro	31	55	14
Serbia	27	65	8

Note: red color means that a number is significantly below regional average, while green means above the average; 'significant' stands for $p < .05$ ¹

Table 1 suggests that the majority of respondents in the region agree that dealing with public administration has become easier in the past two years (57%). Looking at how country-level results deviate from this regional perspective, one may differentiate two groups of countries. On the one hand, citizens of Albania, Kosovo and Serbia show significantly higher degrees of agreement compared to the regional average (63%, 73% and 65% respectively). Kosovo and Albania also stand out in that they simultaneously record considerably lower levels of disagreement than the rest of the region. On the other hand, the figures are somewhat reversed in BiH and North Macedonia. In these two countries the levels of disagreement are higher and those of agreement lower than the regional average, meaning that the public does not see much improvement in the last two years in how difficult it is to deal with public administration. Lastly, results from Montenegro do not substantially deviate from the regional average, i.e. a thin majority (as opposed to 31% who disagree) confirms that dealing with administration has become easier.

With regards to the time needed to obtain administrative services and government's efforts to make administrative procedures simpler for citizens and businesses, the results show similar pattern. More specifically, Albania, Kosovo and Serbia are again significantly above the regional average, while BiH and North Macedonia are below it (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. In the past two years, the time needed to obtain administrative services has decreased (%)

	Disagree or Strongly disagree	Agree or Strongly agree	Don't know/no opinion
WB average	29.5	56.7	14
Albania	21	62	18
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50	36	14
Kosovo	11	71	19
North Macedonia	42	46	12
Montenegro	28	52	13
Serbia	25	68	7

Note: red color means that a number is significantly below regional average, while green means above the average; 'significant' stands for $p < .05$

¹ Significance level here means there is less than 5% probability that differences between groups are coincidental. In other words, there is enough empirical evidence to claim that differences between groups are systematic rather than random.

When asked about the time needed to obtain administrative services (Table 2), citizens from Kosovo, Albania and Serbia are above the average in the extent to which they perceive the time needed has decreased. Kosovo is on the top of this list with as much as 71% of citizens reporting this to be the case. By contrast, BiH and North Macedonia are significantly below the average, with less than 50% of respondents supporting the claim that it takes less time to obtain administrative services in the past two years (i.e. 36% and 46% respectively). Again, Montenegro does not deviate from the regional average – 58% see improvement in this area, while 29% does not.

Moving on to the simplicity of administrative procedures (Table 3), a division among the countries turns out fairly similar. Citizens from Kosovo, Serbia and Albania are above the regional average in their belief that governments in their respective countries put efforts to initiate the simplification of administrative procedures for citizens and businesses. On the contrary, BiH and North Macedonia are again significantly below the average, while Montenegro does not stand out in any direction. Whereas Serbia and Kosovo record regional highest 70% in this regard, BiH is at the regional bottom, with just 37% of respondents saying that their government puts effort to simplify administrative procedures.

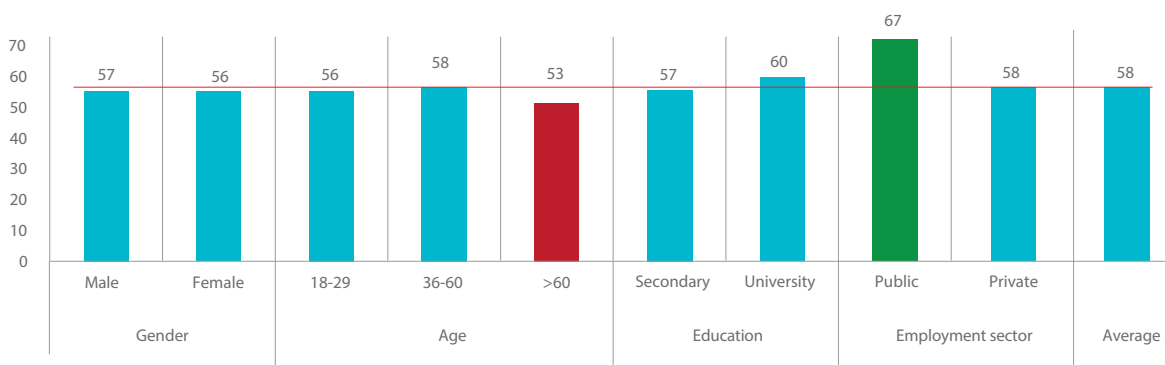
Table 3. In the past two years, there have been efforts or initiatives by the government to make administrative procedures simpler for citizens and businesses (%)

	Disagree or Strongly disagree	Agree or Strongly agree	Don't know/no opinion
WB average	28.4	58.1	14
Albania	21	62	18
Bosnia and Herzegovina	51	37	12
Kosovo	10	70	20
North Macedonia	36	51	14
Montenegro	31	55	14
Serbia	23	70	7

Note: red color means that a number is significantly below regional average, while green means above the average; 'significant' stands for $p < .05$

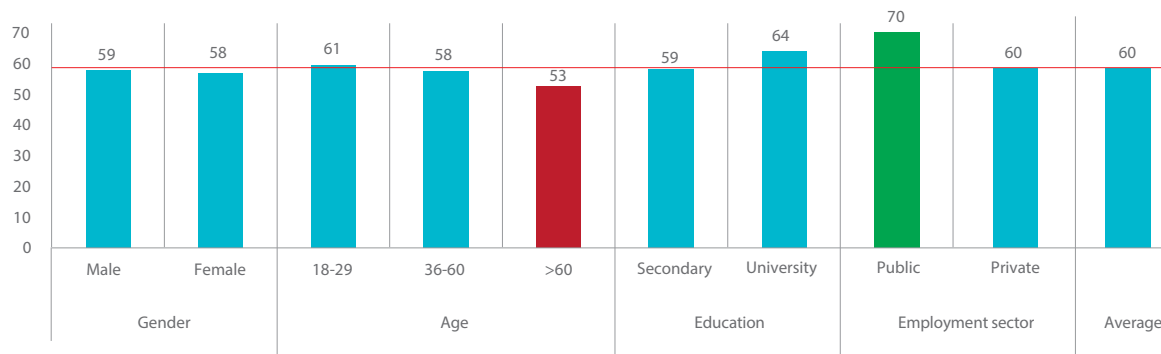
Furthermore, to understand how positive perceptions of public administration are distributed per sociodemographic category, Graphs 2 and 3 below show an interesting pattern for: (1) *Dealing with public administration has become easier in the past two years* and (2) *In the past two years, there have been efforts or initiatives by the government to make administrative procedures simpler for citizens and businesses*. Figures for respondents working in the public sector are conspicuously above the average when compared to other sociodemographic categories. This raises the question whether the results would hold when we account for the share of public sector employees in the sample.

Graph 2. Respondents who agree that *dealing with public administration has become easier in the past two years*, grouped by sociodemographic categories (%)



Categories are compared to the regional average of affirmative responses to the statement (last column)

Graph 3. Respondents who agree that there have been efforts or initiatives by the government to make administrative procedures simpler for citizens and businesses grouped by sociodemographic categories (%)



Categories are compared to the regional average of affirmative responses to the statement (last column)

Finally, in order to see to what extent the views on interaction with public administration might have been affected by the presence of public sector employees, Table 4 presents results without this group of respondents.

Table 2. In the past two years, the time needed to obtain administrative services has decreased (%)

question	Disagree or Strongly disagree	Agree or Strongly agree	Don't know/no opinion
Dealing with administration has become easier	29.3	56.1 (-.8)	14.7
Time needed for administrative services has decreased	29.4	56.1 (-.6)	14.6
Efforts by the gov. to simplify administration	28.7	56.8 (-1.3)	14.4

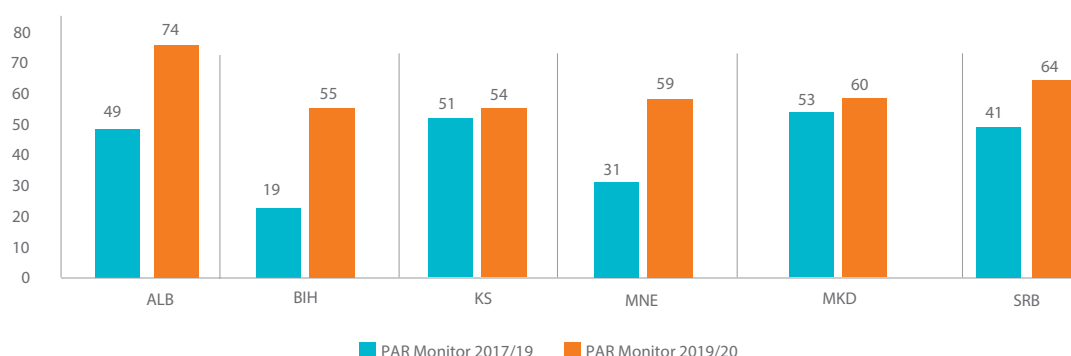
Note: in brackets are presented differences in relation to responses when public sectors employees are included in the sample

Taking out public sector employees does not dramatically change the output (Table 4). In other words, average regional figures are only about 1 percentage point less positive without these employees in the sample. The reason for a small overall change probably lies in the fact that public sector employees make less than 10% of the sample (603 of 6085 respondents), which makes it difficult to significantly distort the overall picture.

Where are we at with e-services? Awareness, accessibility and usage

In most countries of the region, citizens are markedly more aware of the existence of e-services this year than they were in 2017 (Graph 4). These figures are higher in Albania, BiH, Montenegro and Serbia where differences between the two surveys range from 23 (in Serbia) to 36 percentage points (in BiH). As for Kosovo and North Macedonia, changes in the level of awareness have been less pronounced (3 and 7 percentage points respectively).

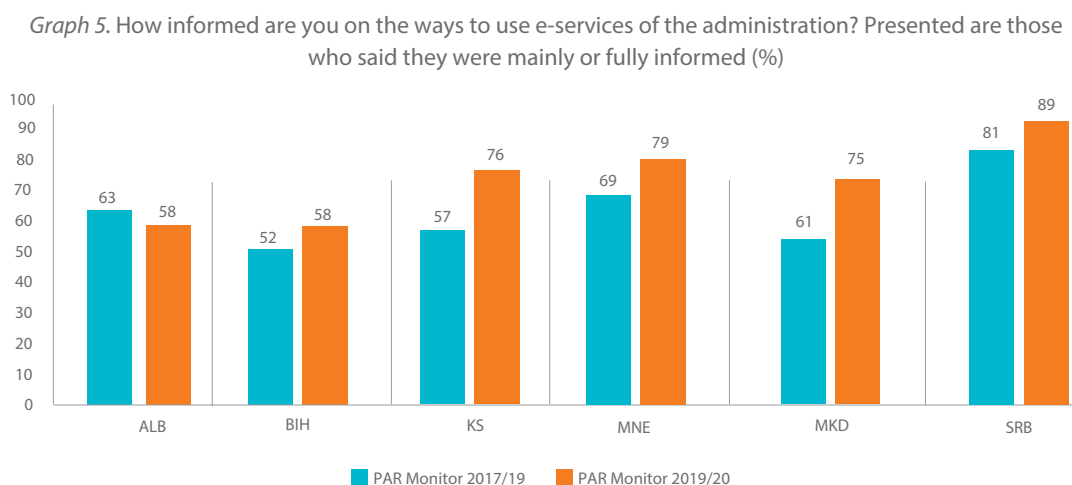
Graph 4. Are you aware if e-services are offered in your country? (% of 'yes' answers)



Note: total target population

SURVEY REPORT

With regards to how informed citizens are about the ways to use the aforementioned services, there have mostly been positive changes across the surveyed countries (Graph 5). This change is most obvious in Kosovo and North Macedonia (19 and 14 percentage points respectively), followed by Montenegro, Serbia and BiH (10, 8 and 6). Lastly, the only exception is Albania where slightly less respondents than in the previous survey report they are informed of the ways how to use e-services (5 percentage points differential).



Note: the base for this question are only those who said they were aware that e-services are offered in their country; n=3712 (61% of target population)

Apart from information on how aware citizens are of the existence of e-services and whether they are informed how to use them, it is relevant to know to what extent they actually use these services. Table 5 presents the level of usage of e-services across the Western Balkan countries together with significance levels.

Table 5. Thinking about the past two years, how often have you used e-services of the administration (%)

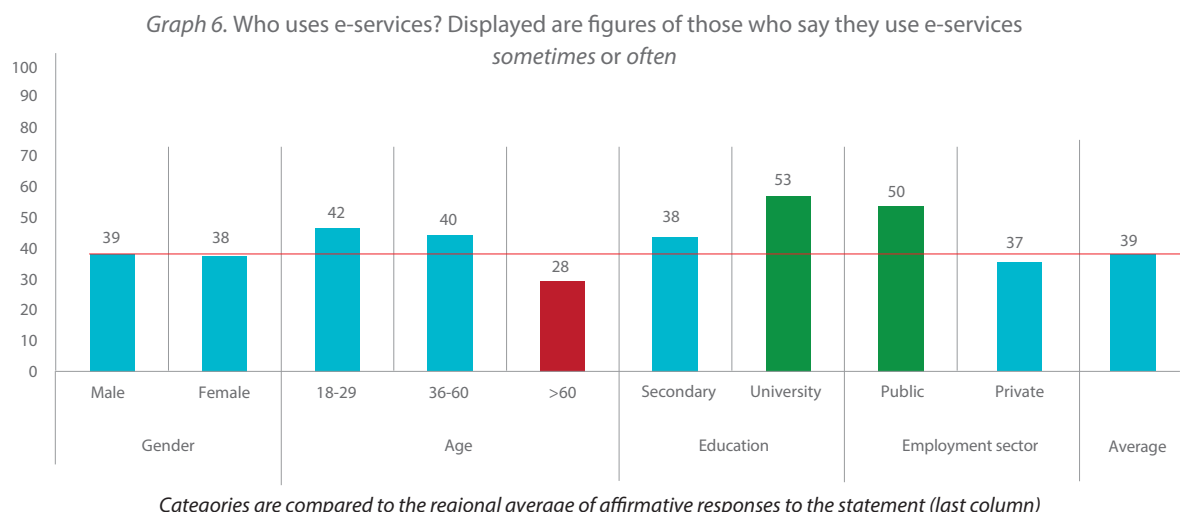
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
WB average	33	28	29	10
Albania	44	27	22	8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	44	29	24	3
Kosovo	54	21	19	6
North Macedonia	26	26	29	19
Montenegro	22	35	34	9
Serbia	13	29	42	16

Note: red color means that a number is significantly below regional average, while green means above the average; 'significant' stands for $p < .05$

Overall, the level of usage of electronic services is rather low. On average, 61% of respondents in the region say they never or rarely use these services, compared to 39% who claim to use them sometimes or often. Even though the usage levels appear to be low, this is still a tangible increase compared to the 2017 survey findings when regional average (of those saying sometimes or often) was 25%.

At country level, one can roughly speak of two groups of countries. On the one hand, citizens from Albania, BiH and Kosovo are above the regional average in saying that they never use e-services. Kosovo stands out with 54% (regional highest). On the other hand, the public in North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia appears to be significantly above the average, with respondents from Serbia being on the top of this group (58% respondents saying they use e-services sometimes or often).

As far as sociodemographic categories are concerned, respondents with university degree and those working in public sector are noticeably over the average when it comes to the usage of e-services. By contrast, older respondents (over 60) are the least frequent users with only 28% of them reporting to have used these services.

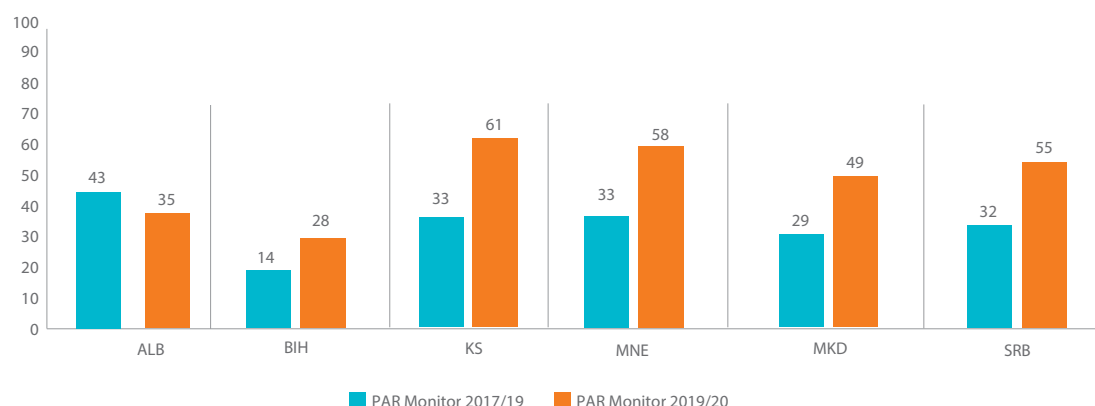


This is very similar to the 2017 survey results. Highly educated individuals are more likely to have developed digital literacy which is why handling e-services might be less of a burden for them. Similarly, civil servants are presumably more likely to get accustomed to these e-services quicker than other citizens because working in public sector gives more exposure to information on e-services. On the other hand, citizens over the age of 60 did not grow up using internet as their means of interacting with state administration, nor they had to necessarily develop digital skills during their education. For these reasons, it is expected that these citizens do not use e-services as much.

Feedback matters: Citizens perceive state administration as increasingly responsive

The question of whether users are given a say in how administrative services could be improved may serve as a good proxy to estimate the extent to which the administration is oriented towards its citizens. To this end, citizens were asked (1) if the administration had left room for their proposals on how to improve service delivery in the past two years and (2) to what extent had the government acknowledged these proposals. Findings are presented in Graphs 7 and 8, together with comparison to the 2017 survey results.

Graph 7. In the past two years, the administration has asked for citizens' proposals on how to improve administrative services

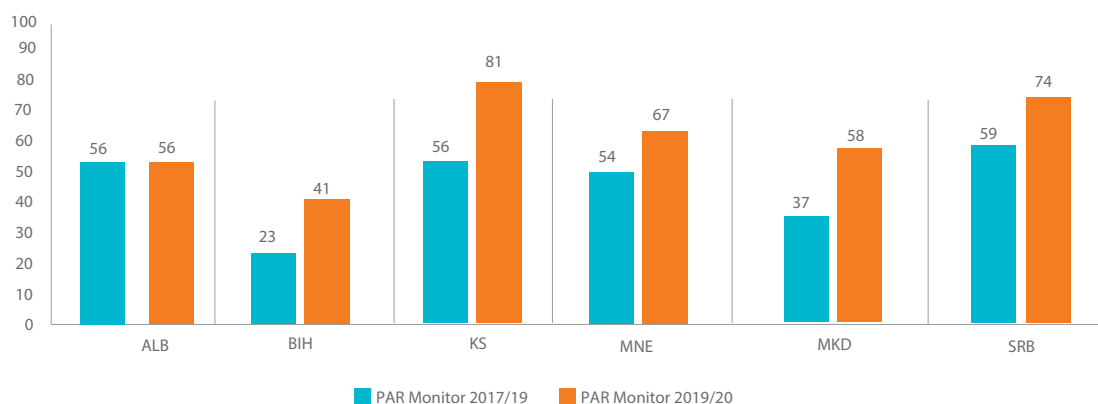


Note: the base for this question are only those who said they were aware that e-services are offered in their country; n=3712 (61% of target population)

With the exception of Albania, more citizens generally report that the administration asks for their feedback on how to improve administrative services (Graph 7). Kosovo records regional high of 61% which is nearly 30 percentage points increase compared to our 2017 survey results. Furthermore, noticeable changes are found in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (25, 20 and 25 percentage point change respectively). With regards to Bosnia and Herzegovina, while there has also been an increase in the number of respondents who perceive the administration as interested in what they have to say on service delivery – this is still just somewhat less than a third of the population (28%). Finally, it is interesting to note that Albania is the only country in the region whose figures are lower than in 2017 – 8% less citizens report that their public administration asks them about proposals for improvement.

Regarding the actual responsiveness to citizens feedback (Graph 8), the figures are fairly similar. The highest percentage of affirmative responses is found in Kosovo (81%), followed by Serbia (74%) and Montenegro (67%). In terms of a change – compared to the 2017 survey findings – Kosovo is again leading the way with 25 percentage point increase. By contrast, the share of those who see their government as responsive to citizens’ proposals in Albania remains about the same.

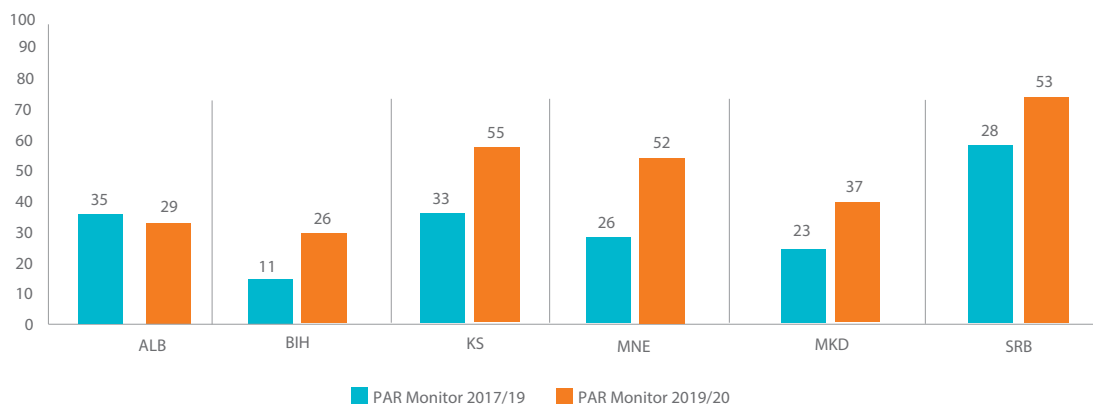
Graph 8. In the past two years, the government has used such proposals from citizens, to improve administrative services (%)



Note: presented are responses of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement (of the total target population)

Finally, citizens were also asked to estimate whether they or civil society representatives have been involved in the monitoring of administrative services overall (Graph 9). The highest increase in positive perception since 2017 is noted in Montenegro and Serbia (26 and 25 percentage points respectively). These countries are followed by Kosovo (22), BiH (15) and North Macedonia (14), while in Albania the change is reversed: there is 6 percentage points decrease in the number of Albanian citizens who believe that the public or civil society representatives have been involved in monitoring administrative services.

Graph 9. In the past two years, citizens or civil society have been involved in the monitoring of administrative services (%)



Note: presented are responses of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement (of the total target population)

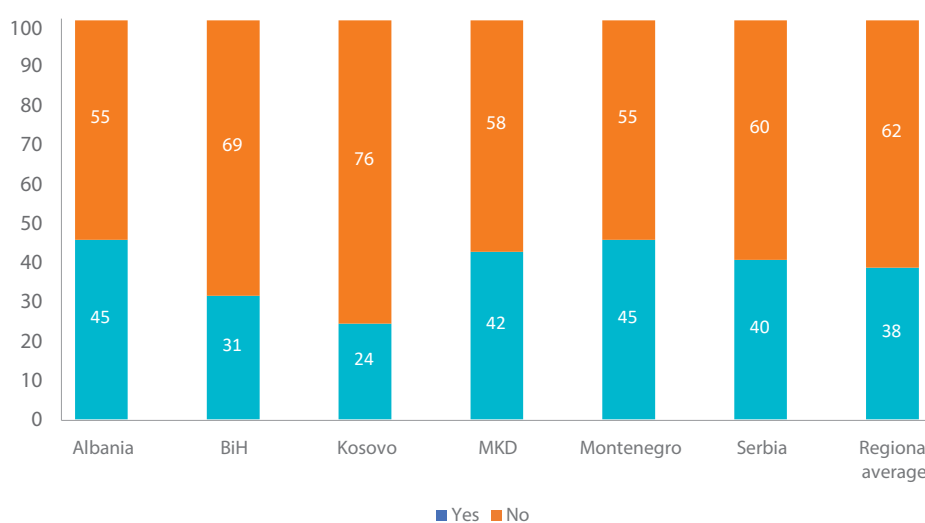
It is worth noting that this is the fourth aspect to suggest that there has been no improvement in how Albanian citizens see their administration. Compared to the 2017 survey results, fewer Albanian citizens (1) understand how to use electronic services, (2) say that the administration asks for their proposals on how to improve service delivery, (3) report that they or civil society have been involved in monitoring administrative services and, finally, (4) about the same number of respondents as in 2017 claim that the government uses citizens’ proposals to improve service delivery.

Public administration services in times of COVID-19

The pandemic came up as an unprecedented event that has affected many spheres of everyday life. Accordingly, there are obvious reasons to believe it has also affected the way citizens interact with their administration. For these reasons, the public perception survey asked about the interest in and usage of e-services of public administration over the course of the pandemic.ˆ

First, public perceptions show that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has not significantly altered people’s habits related to the usage of administrative services (Graph 10). Most citizens (62%) say their interest in e-services has not grown since the outbreak of the pandemic. Still, there are country-level variations. For instance, 45% of citizens in Albania and Montenegro confirm their interest has grown, while the regional low is found in Kosovo – 24%.

Graph 10. Since the start of the coronavirus crisis have you become more interested in (or researched more) about using electronic services? (%)



Note: total target population

Second, the actual usage of e-services reveals similar pattern (Table 6). On average, the minority of respondents (18%) claim to have used electronic services more than usual during the pandemic. By contrast, 32% say they have used them either to the same or lesser extent than usual, while as much as 50% of our respondents reportedly did not use these services at all.

Table 6. To what extent did you use electronic services during the recent coronavirus crisis? (%)

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

Note: no significance levels are displayed because figures for those who actually used electronic services are very low

These findings indicate that out of only a half of citizens who have used e-services since the outbreak of COVID-19, most of them have not used them more frequently than before the pandemic. This leads to a conclusion that switching to e-services takes more than extraordinary external circumstances. It may well be that citizens lack resources (information, skills, etc.) to interact with public administration online, or that getting used to interact with public administration in this way simply takes more time.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, public perceptions tell us that state administration has become more citizen oriented in four out of six Western Balkans countries between 2017 and 2020. Moreover, citizens across the region have become more aware that e-services are offered as alternative tools for obtaining administrative services. At country level, however, the results in certain areas show significant variations. It is important to note that public perceptions are volatile and do not necessarily present a key factor in deriving policy recommendations.² Nonetheless, as they reveal citizens’ experiences with public administration, (changing) public perceptions are indicative of where administration is heading and, as such, they can be utilized to inform policy makers.

Governments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia need to put more effort to (1) simplify administrative procedures for citizens and businesses and to (2) decrease time needed to obtain administrative services. These two countries fall significantly below the regional average in these two aspects of service delivery, unlike the rest of the region where figures are significantly higher.

Governments in Kosovo and North Macedonia need to better promote electronic services. Based on public perception, other governments in the region have done a good job in raising awareness of e-services: there is 23 percentage point or more increase in those who are aware of these services now (compared to 2017). By comparison, Kosovo and North Macedonia have witnessed only a small increase (3 and 7 percentage points respectively).

Governments in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina need to improve administrative services based on citizens’ feedback. With regards to Albania, the figures have either dropped or remained the same in terms of the quality of feedback mechanisms: less citizens report their administration asks for proposals on how to improve services at all, while no change has been detected in the extent to which the government utilizes citizens’ proposals. As for BiH, even though there are more citizens who report positive changes in the domain of feedback mechanisms, these still represent a minority.

² Public perception survey is just one of multiple research methods that WeBER PAR monitoring makes use of: interviews, focus groups and surveys with civil servants, civil society representatives and citizens, as well as desk research. Therefore, findings based on public perceptions are a complementary, rather than determining factor in PAR Monitor reports and in deriving policy recommendations.

Finally, in spite of a predominantly positive public perception of feedback mechanisms in Montenegro and Serbia *the governments in these two countries need to continue investing in these areas as there is still lots of space for improvement.* For instance, while being among regional leaders in (1) the share of citizens who perceive that civil society is involved in monitoring administrative services or in (2) the number of those who report that their government does ask for citizens’ feedback on how to improve services, there is still a large number of citizens who do not see these trends taking place in these two countries.

APPENDIX

Table 7. Methodology framework

Methodology information

Location	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia
Time	15 - 30 May, 2020
Data collection method	CATI in combination with CAWI
Sampling frame	Entire 18+ population of permanent residents of target countries
Sample size	N=6085; Albania (n=1007), Bosnia and Herzegovina (n=1027), Kosovo (n=1021), North Macedonia(n=1022), Montenegro (n=1003) and Serbia (n=1005)
Sampling	Three stage random representative stratified sample (PSU: Polling station territories, SSU: Households, TSU: Household member)
Margin of error	Average margin of error per country is $\pm 3.13\%$ at the 95% confidence level

