

Trust and Transparency in the Balkans: Key for Navigating through Complexity and Change?

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Abstract

The Balkans, particularly the Western Balkans, are at the crossroads of various political and economic interests and developments. One development in the entire Western World is the decline of trust in political institutions and the rise of populist parties. Do the Western Balkans, respectively the states of the (Western) Balkans, follow this trend? Or does this trend lead the (Western) Balkans into the influence of non-Western Great powers? What can be done to restore trust in political institutions? The states of the (Western) Balkans are considered in this paper to be Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Economic interests and the question of peace and war in the (Western) Balkans seem to be back on the agenda. To uncover and elucidate interdependencies in the (Western) Balkans, this paper proposes a matrix linking trust and transparency. So far, a trust and transparency matrix has been applied to the three States of Britain, France, and Germany (Cole et al., 2025). The suggested paper applies the trust and transparency matrix to the (Western) Balkans, respectively, the different states of the (Western) Balkans that are not members of the EU. The findings of the trust and transparency matrix so far have originated from Britain, France, and Germany, and they address factors of public management. In the three aforementioned states, public management differs when trust and transparency are either mutually reinforcing (a), a blind faith (b), counterproductive effects (c) exist, or dysfunctionality / double standards (d) occur. The combination of trust and transparency in the (Western) Balkans serves (in this paper) not for purposes of public management, but for the question of how the Balkans navigate through complexity and change. Clearly, the combination of trust and transparency suggests that different variants of each can be observed in every state of the (Western) Balkans at the same time. The suggested paper relies on publicly available qualitative and quantitative data, such as polls and secondary sources, to address how trust and transparency interact to manage complexity and change. In conclusion, trust rests on observed states in military or religious institutions, which suggests a blind-faith version of trust according to the matrix.

Keywords: Trust, Balkans, Comparison, Transparency, Government, Germany, France, United Kingdom

Trust and transparency in the Balkans: Key to Navigating through Complexity and Change?

Introduction

Trust is an important ingredient for democratic political systems. The input and output of political systems rely, in multiple ways, on trust: on the one hand, the citizens' trust in their political institutions, and, on the other hand, the political institutions' trust in one another (Easton, 1965). This central role of trust in modern, democratic political systems has caused an explosion of interest in trust (Newton, 2007, p. 342). However, what is trust? Trust is (Levi 1998, 79 cited in Newton 2007, p. 343) a concept that “is not one thing and it does not have one source”. Trust can be understood either as an interpersonal relationship (Rousseau et al., 1998), or as strategic interactions (Lenard, 2005), as a consequence of democratic deliberation (Fisher et al., 2010), or as an indicator of social capital (Keele, 2007), or also as a moral disposition (Uslaner, 2002). Trust and different underlying concepts like social capital, confidence, and others are already dealt with in a wide variety of research literature (For example, and not limited to (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995; Seligman, 1997; Braithwaite & Levi, 1998; Warren, 1999; Hardin, 2006; Uslaner, 2002; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011).

As for starting with a definition of “trust”, a definition of “transparency” is rather straightforward. Grimmeliikhuijsen (2012, p.12), for example, defines transparency as “the availability of information about an organization or actor which allows external actors to monitor the internal workings or performance of that organization or actor.” Also, for transparency, different conceptualizations exist in political science literature. Cucciniello and Nasi (2014) write about a threefold distinction between what they call “financial/budget”, “administrative”, and “political” transparency. Furthermore, Meijer et. al.’s (2018) framework distinguishes between political and administrative transparency. Like trust, transparency is a challenging, multi-dimensional concept shaped by various factors. Heald (2006) identifies three dichotomies regarding transparency.

Given these definitions, it seems clear that the transparency of organizations or actors such as religious organizations or the military (which will become important later in the text) is rather low, if not absent altogether.

These questions do matter globally, of course, but in this text, the scope should be narrowed to the Balkans or Southeastern Europe. Hence, limitations cover not only the concepts of trust and transparency, but also the geographical scope. Since the geographical scope is held constant in this text on the (Western) Balkans, trust and transparency seem to complement each other. Therefore, the question that has been in the past and still is in the present is: what guides the Balkans through the complex and changing processes of current world politics? What political institutions do respondents trust in the Balkan states? What does that say about Balkan politics?

A short example highlights the structure of the question in this text. During the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents trusted political institutions less. Instead, they trusted medical institutions (such as hospitals and medical doctors) more to find a solution to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, not governmental regulations or policies brought about a long-lasting solution for the COVID-19 pandemic, but only a vaccine. Political institutions were also important for organizing the

vaccination process, but, in the first instance, the vaccine needed to be discovered (Emler et al., 2023, p. 235).¹

After the introduction, basic and current academic literature will be reviewed. Literature about the political situation in the Balkans will be reviewed, pointing to the situation that states stood so far in the foreground, and the populations or the people were hardly regarded for dealing with complexities and change in the Balkans. In this respect, an overarching view on the populations of all Balkan states is a gap and a missing link in political science literature. Therefore, the trust–transparency matrix is taken from the literature, which offers four distinct dimensions of trust in political institutions. The matrix itself is already published in the political science literature, but its application to the Balkans, as done in this text, is new to the political science literature in general and, in particular, to Balkan or Southeast European Studies.

Finally, the empirical results of surveys conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) are presented, which indicate that people in Balkan states follow a distinct form of trust labelled in this text as “Blind Faith”. Survey respondents trusted military or religious organizations, so those organizations can be considered less transparent. This situation, in which people trust institutions, has to be considered in the study of Balkan or Southeast European politics, as well as in International Relations.

Literature Review

Historically, the Balkans, and particularly the Western Balkans, were situated at the crossroads in all respects. At the crossroads of all three monotheistic religions, for example, Sarajevo is known as the little Jerusalem because all three were located there. Also, the Balkans were at the crossroads of World Empires such as the Habsburg Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. The geographical situation remained stable, but only the context has changed, in that the Ottoman Empire has turned to Türkiye, and the EU has taken the place of the Habsburg Empire (Fleming, 2000). The need for the Balkan states to navigate through the complexity and change of World Politics is therefore a constant and persistent feature.

What is the key to navigating through complexity and change? This question, therefore, in the past as well as in the present, is what guides Balkan states through complex and changing processes of world history? Do states or governments still drive change and complexities? What role do populations or people play in the journey? Who acts and who is acted upon in the process of navigating through complexities and change?

The answers to this question varied over time. During the Cold War period after 1945, the Balkans found a way to deal with complexities and change within a unified (Southern Slavic) state under Tito, which was considered a bloc-free state. Neither the socialist nor the capitalist path in politics and society served as a guide for Yugoslavia amid the complexities and changes of the time (Trültzsch, 2015). After the end of the confrontation between the geopolitical blocs in the 1990s, the Yugoslav state dissolved, and parts of the former Yugoslavia sought independence, resulting in wars in the Balkans in the 1990s (Baker, 2015). After those wars, the perspective of

¹ Obviously, the text does not deal with any aspects of the Covid 19 Pandemic, but it should only highlight the relationship of the context to the issue of trust of individuals to institutions overall (be it political or medical).

the different, now-independent states (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina)² was to be integrated into the European Union (EU). Hence, the perspective of becoming a full EU member managed complexity and change in the cases of the Balkans.

That means that when issues emerged, such as the status of Kosovo or North Macedonia, the EU served as a forum to address them. And the idea of becoming a full EU member seemed justified, because the EU expanded multiple times, so that not only the Central European states became EU full members in 2004, but also Eastern Balkan states like Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Since Croatia had been accepted as a full member in 2013, full EU membership for the other Balkan states seemed to be possible and foreseeable. It just seemed to be a matter of time before full membership would be achieved.

But since then, the EU institutions seemed to be more concerned with an “enlargement fatigue” (Yaris, 2024, p. 126), so that the EU’s ambitions to integrate also the rest of the Balkan states of former Yugoslavia seemed to slow down (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019, p. 27). Instead, world geopolitical powers, which, of course, were never absent, played a greater role in the Balkans (Tsifakis & Vaskoda, 2025). So, it seemed that great powers like Russia, the USA, and Türkiye started to influence the management of complexities and change in the Balkans.

The question was raised as to whether the Balkans provided a chessboard for great powers (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2019). But so far, the perspective has hardly centered on the populations or citizens of the Balkan states, whom they trust to manage complexity and change. Single articles cover attitudes of Western Balkan citizens toward European Integration (Qorraj et al., 2025), and other texts even develop a Balkan Peace Index (Dzuverovic, 2025). Hence, this text adopts a different view of Balkan states. This paper focuses on societies and people of the Balkan states, which is an exception.

The Trust and Transparency Matrix as a conceptual frame

Taken from relevant political science literature (Cole et al., 2025, p. 684), Table 1 presents a cross-tabulation of four ideal types of the relationship between trust and transparency. It provides four different states of trust and transparency that might be found in empirical investigation. From this viewpoint, the trust and transparency matrix serves as a theoretical framework and, at the same time, summarizes the relevant research literature on trust in politics. This text's contribution to the trust and transparency matrix addresses the question of how Balkan states and societies navigate complexity and change.

² Whereas it was by no means fully clear where borders between the then new state would be located but see Daban 2025 for a closer discussion of border relations in the Balkans after the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Table 1: The Trust-Transparency Matrix

<u>Trust</u>	<u>Transparency</u>	
	High	Low
High	Synergy (a)	Blind Faith (b)
Low	Counter-productive effects (c)	Dual Dysfunctionality (d)

(Source : Cole et al., 2025, p. 684)

The Trust-Transparency Matrix, as suggested in the relevant research literature (Cole et al., 2025, p. 5), is a tool that aims to open the “black box” of interactions between actors. These frequently under-investigated interactions often remain unanswered by quantitative tools and controlled experiments. The contention of the suggested matrix is that trust and transparency are situated in specific contexts and rely on intersubjective understandings (Worthy et al., 2017). To remain in the tradition of Meijer et al. (2018), among others, the trust-transparency matrix can be applied to diverse social situations, such as Balkan states. In this respect, understandings of trust are based on interactions between actors and are therefore simultaneously actor-centered and institutionalist.

Interpersonal, collective, and political trust are well-known concepts in both contemporary and classical research literature. Those concepts link attitudes to demographics and external variables, such as perceptions of government performance. Classical studies of trust originate from authors like Stokes (1962), Easton (1965), and Gamson (1968), and newer works use survey-based research, as a combination of questions and indicators in order to judge the classical understanding of trust (Levi & Stoker, 2000, pp. 476-477). This mainstream approach to measuring trust (using questions and indicators, often single-item survey measures) is also considered problematic in the literature (Bauer & Freitag, 2017). These measures only weakly tap trust and cannot provide a generalized assessment of the political system (Seyd, 2016, p. 3, as cited in Cole et al., 2025, p. 684). Datasets such as the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey provide aggregate-level results on the subject and are supplemented by national- and sub-national-specific data (Cole et al., 2025, p. 684).

Neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches have dominated within the field of studies about transparency (Cole et al., 2025, p. 685). Nevertheless, experimental studies have emerged in the field. Of course, also in this field attempts to measure transparency have emerged and covered a wide range of areas, including the aspect of so called “computer-mediated transparency” (Meijer,

2009; Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012), “analysis of website content” (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Ferreira da Cruz et al., 2016), “citizen-focused experiments” (de Fine Licht, 2011; 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014), “data dissemination” (Hollyer et al., 2014), public perceptions (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Piotrowski et al., 2017; Porumbescu et al., 2017) and finally experiments about requests for information (Worthy et al., 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2019) (but see for an embracing literature comment Cole et al., 2025). As in many other cases, experiments can hardly cover real-life empirical interactions. Data collection took place through qualitative interviews in six regions (Rhone-Alpes, Bretagne, Hesse, Saxony-Anhalt, Wales, and North England) across three states (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany). Based on this data collection, the referenced matrix was suggested. Research literature on transparency so far is also one-sided, in that it does not elaborate on the mechanisms that facilitate trust and transparency.

The key is the insight that causal mechanisms linking trust and transparency are not universally valid and are too abstract to create social meaning or context. Context is defined as (Falleti & Lynch, 2009, p. 1152) “broadly, as the relevant aspects of a setting in which a set of initial conditions leads to an outcome of a defined scope and meaning via a specific causal mechanism or set of causal mechanisms”. The first step for discovering causal mechanisms is to identify regularities between variables. Usually, this can be successfully done using process tracing methods in international relations, history, and political science. This process tracing method infers case-based regularities across time. Hence, they engage in generalization (Waldner, 2015).

The referred Trust-Transparency Matrix in the academic literature combines configurations, properties, and types of both trust and transparency. Of course, each phenomenon can be best analyzed separately. But the added value of this research is inspired by existing studies (Cole et al., 2025) and possesses added value because it analyzes both at the same time.

The starting point for the so-called “trust-transparency matrix” (Cole et al., 2025, p. 684) is that perceptions of both phenomena are contingent on what is characterized as “external” and “internal” (individual-based) factors (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2019, p. 6). At the same time, external is understood as the wider political environment. And ‘internal’ means that it is based on the individual (Cole et al., 2025). External or macro influences relate to the political context of sub-national (or regional) territories, understood in terms of their institutional configurations (Cole et al., 2025). External political contexts relate to identity mixes and perceptions of social and cultural capital (Cole et al., 2025). The internal refers to the specific experiences and perceptions of our interviewees, such as their past interactions with and predispositions towards other individuals and organizations. The so-called trust-transparency matrix (Cole et al., 2025, p. 684) always involves some combination of internal and external variables.

Synergy: the ideal of mutually reinforcing trust and transparency (a)

Academic literature investigating trust and/or transparency may be seen as diverse. One part may be summarized on the one side with (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014, pp. 137-138) “transparency optimists” who emphasize the positive effects that increased information provides to citizens for having trust in government. On the other side, “transparency pessimists” are skeptical about the connection of transparency to trust and argue that it could lead to opposite effects. For “transparency optimists,” the introduction of the so-called “freedom of information legislation” fosters a “culture of openness” within organizations and institutions, which is, in turn, better for the production of trust. This point argues furthermore that “transparency helps people

become more familiar with government and brings them closer together and creates understanding” (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2019, p. 5).

The good governance literature highlights linking transparency and trust (for example, see Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; De Fine Licht, 2011). According to this point, transparency produces better policy consequences, as empirical examples show, like the register of interests in the EU Commission and European and national parliaments, and also the diffusion of freedom of information legislation, and the case of the publication of performance data all support this argument. There might even be a causal link between transparency and trust. In democratic theory, transparency is framed in terms of building confidence via accountability and participation and enhancing trust on account of fairness and procedures (Hollyer et al., 2003). From this perspective, a high level of transparency is a basis for every democratic system since they derive their legitimacy from the public and the participation of its citizens.

Blind Faith (b)

The second ideal type given in the “trust and transparency matrix” (Cole et al., 2025, p. 684) has high levels of trust, but low levels of transparency. The relationship between trust and transparency is characterized in the matrix (Cole et al., 2025, p. 684) as “Blind Faith”. Despite low levels of transparency, an individual or organization has high levels of trust in individuals, organizations, and relationships. The case of “Blind Faith” is in tension with the pluralistic liberal democracies. In the Chinese context, the absence of transparency has a limited impact on forms of trust (Zhong et al., 2022). The “blind faith” version of trust of the Chinese citizens in their government, for example, might have influenced the Chinese determination to comply with the comparably hard measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, this example is far from a systematic or even causal relationship. Also, this is a context-specific form of trust that might relate to “post-truth” politics and/or “alternative facts”. In its extreme form, the “Blind Faith” version of trust may produce “excessive loyalty and blind faith accepting the rhetoric of populist-authoritarian leaders, accepting misinformation at face value without verification, can foster gullible trust, encourage compliant followers, advance unqualified acolytes, and thereby undermine accountable and responsible governance.” (Norris, 2022, p. 223). In pluralistic liberal democracies, in contrast to China, these tendencies undermined, rather than bolstered, the response to COVID-19.

Negligible or Counter-productive Effects (c)

The third quadrant refers to the conditions of Low Trust and High Transparency, which were labelled as “Negligible or Counter-Productive Effects” (Cole et al., 2025, p. 684). In this ideal type, high levels of transparency either cause or fail to address high levels of distrust or mistrust (Cole et al., 2025). The process of political decision-making can be open and deliberative, but this either contributes to or fails to reverse negative perceptions of individuals or organizations (Cole et al., 2025, p. 689). For example, if individuals or organizations have high levels of extant distrusting relations, it is possible that continuous interaction can exacerbate these problems and lead to a “spiral of mistrust” (Sydow, 1998, p. 38, cited in Cole et al., 2025, p. 689). In this third

ideal type, high levels of transparency in terms of policy output or outcomes either exacerbate or fail to address negative perceptions of individuals or organizations.

Dual Dysfunctionality (d)

Within the four-field cross table, the final quadrant shows a rather negative picture. Whereas in the first quadrant, both issues of trust and transparency could have been characterized as “high”, in this quadrant, both issues are characterized as “low”. The qualification, therefore, is “dual dysfunctionality”. So, transparency does not cause any increase in trust in political institutions. Whereas in another quadrant, more trust can be achieved with more transparency, it is in this quadrant that the opposite is true. Less transparency causes less trust. This quadrant brings a lose – lose situation for political institutions. Even if there is low trust in political institutions and they are dysfunctional, this low trust cannot be countered by making things confidential. In this case of a more confident and less transparent situation, trust in political institutions only decreases.

Some evidence can be mentioned in order to support this dysfunctional, low-trust, low-transparency quadrant. In the case of Germany, the rise of anti-elite populist movements (for example, the Alternative für Deutschland – AfD) in Saxony-Anhalt has drawn part of their support from the belief that key decisions on migration were taken by Chancellor Angela Merkel alone (Cole et al., 2025, p. 690). That means this decision was thought to have taken place without the involvement of the Land and local governments that were likely to be mostly affected by the issues of migration flows at the time. Would she have made clear how Chancellor Merkel came to the decision, in other words, would there have been more transparency, more trust in her decision, may have been the result. The way it happened was that there was no transparency, and that resulted in less trust in her decision about the issue of migration. This way the AfD’s breakthrough and persistence within the German party system has been partly explained by the weakening of trust in political institutions (Reinl & Schäfer, 2020), although Weisskircher (2020, 620 cited in Cole et al., 2025, p. 690) notes that explaining the rise of populism in Germany is a multidimensional issue, and therefore reducing the rise of AfD to a short-term factor in just the one aspect of political trust is problematic.

Cases where trust and transparency also interact in a dysfunctional way can be seen in any form of accumulation of political positions. That means politicians have both positions on a regional and national level. When those politicians are not trusted by their citizens, it is also unclear at what territorial level politicians are located. In Germany, this notion is particularly prevalent because politicians may belong to a governmental party in one law-giving organization (Bundestag). And at the same time, the party of the politician belongs to the opposition within a sub-national land.

Method

The text about the method of this work aims at connecting the theoretical or conceptual considerations with the empirical text part about public perceptions or attitudes about trust in government in the Balkan states under review. Balkan states in this text mean the region of Southeastern Europe (SEE) with the states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo,

North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. However, critical Cases like Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro are left outside of the study, although those cases belong to the survey about trust in SEE of the RCC. The political situation does not seem to be thoroughly settled in these three cases (Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro). This qualification of the nature of a state should not be understood as a normative prejudice. This collection of data is driven by the empirically available data resulting from the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and its publication of the Balkan Barometer. So, countries and states included in the barometer should be regarded in the context of this paper as cases reflecting case selection, respectively. Hence, the text does not follow its own logic of analysis procedures, case, and data selection, but it follows the method and conception of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The Balkan Barometer, disseminated by the RCC, is a survey where respondents were asked about many different issues in political life in the Balkan states. Besides the political barometer, the RCC also issues a so-called Balkan Business Barometer about economic issues of the states in the Balkans.³

In fact, from only one survey, two databases were created. Answers by survey respondents have been collected, systematized, analyzed, and presented in a so-called “Public Opinion Survey” (Balkan Barometer) and “Business Opinion Survey” (Balkan Business Barometer). Results of the surveys provide a detailed insight into the trends and evolution of attitudes of thousands of citizens and businesses across socio-economic-environmental topics affecting their everyday lives in South Eastern Europe (SEE). In the year 2020, the Balkan Barometer also had a special section with data on the impact assessment of the COVID-19 crisis. In the year 2021, the RCC issued the first so-called “SecuriMeter”. That is an additional survey (to the Balkan Barometer and the Balkan Business Barometer) focusing on security issues only. At first, it was designed as a special edition of the Balkan Barometer, but the so-called “SecuriMeter” is meanwhile a self-standing survey beside the already existing surveys. Also, methods changed in the way data was collected in the different survey methods. In the year 2024, the Balkan Barometer Business Opinion Survey was conducted with the help of the quantitative research and data method of CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing). Not only were quantitative methods employed, but also direct, face-to-face interviews by trained interviewers from the Data Centrum Research Institute were carried out between the 5th of March and the 4th of April 2024 in the mentioned states.

The survey data from the RCC and also from the other organizations were analyzed in a descriptive way. The initial hypothesis that membership in the EU is supposed to make a difference, as well as the question of whether citizens trust their government. Since Croatia is, for the most part, not covered by the RCC data, it is exactly because it is already an EU member, as opposed to the other states from SEE. The argument behind the hypothesis is that trust in the government of an EU member state is different from that in a non-EU member state. For exactly this reason, the EU has a long and intense accession process. The reason behind this long EU accession process is that not only institutions have to change for an EU accession. Also, ideational change needs to take place, so that institutions serve as a means to achieve this intended change of ideas in the populations of the states intended to access the EU. Whereas ideas cannot directly and simply be changed, institutions can be changed like that. The assumption is that the institutions stand for ideas in the populations of the states at stake. This ideational change is also detected in public opinion surveys. Moreover, it is interpreted in what quadrant political trust is placed in the above-presented trust and transparency matrix. But this is done in the following text section about the discussion and results of the public opinion surveys.

³ For more information see the link: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/>.

Results and Discussion

Empirics of this paper consist of different surveys on which institutions respondents trust. According to an overall picture of the question of what organizations respondents in the (Western) Balkans trust, the following results can be seen. Trust in military and law enforcement organizations and in the police rose in the RCC survey data between the years 2023 and 2024 in the region of the Western Balkans. Law enforcement organizations, as an explicit phrase in the question of the survey, were only introduced in the years 2023 and 2024. Before the year 2023, the category was not detected. Instead of law enforcement organizations, only judicial organizations were covered in the survey. The survey in total neglects the absolute levels of trust and focuses on the relative levels of trust between the years 2023 and 2024. In relative terms, trust rose between 2023 and 2024 for police and judicial institutions.⁴

The paper follows the hypothesis that in Croatia, the situation about trust in government is different, because it is already a member of the EU. But in the Balkan Barometer of the RCC, the data for Croatia is missing. Therefore, for questions about trust in political institutions in Croatia, the paper has to rely on additional sources. Whereas, from a methodological point of view, for the same question, the same data about all cases would be better, of course. But the data is simply missing for Croatia in the Balkan Barometer. Not only is data about one case missing in the Balkan Barometer. Also, the item of religious institutions is missing in the entirety of the surveys of the Balkan Barometer. Also, detecting the aspect of churches, mosques, temples, or any religious organizations is not covered in the survey. Hence, other data/surveys have to be accessed to fill the gap or approach the question of which organizations citizens trust. Religious institutions seem to be a relevant item for the region of Southeast Europe, because different religious worlds like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism meet in the region.

Trust Combined ⁴							
Year	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017
Region SEE	35	40	38	33	38	31	28
Albania	38	45	41	39	28	43	27
Bosnia and Herzegovina	21	25	26	20	35	21	15
Kosovo*	56	68	26	27	34	25	30
North Macedonia	19	25	30	27	48	41	36
Montenegro	30	28	46	50	58	47	42
Serbia	46	49	58	38	27	30	31

(Source: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/>, last accessed on 15th of January 2025).

⁴ Within the Balkan Barometer categories within the subject of Trust in Government consist of the possibilities 'Totally trust' and 'Tend to trust'. For the table in this paper both possibilities were added. Therefore, the heading of the table 'Trust Combined'. If only the possibility 'Totally trust' would have been looked at, numbers would have been very low (between 0 and 9 %). In the current Balkan Barometer, the labeling has changed from 'totally trust' and 'tend to trust' to the wording 'trust' and later 'quiet a lot' and 'a great deal'. Hence, in the time between 2017 to 2023 used wording was constant in the surveys. Also, the direction of the survey answers flipped and was only stable between 2017 and 2023.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Regarding the region of South Eastern Europe (SEE), trust in any political institution is low. In the year 2023 Trust in Political Parties was between 0 and 9%, Trust in NGO (Non-Governmental Organizations) and Civil Society was also low between 0 and 9%, Trust in media was likewise also low between 0 and 9%, Trust in Political Parties was low between 0 and 9% and Trust in Parliament was low (0-9%) in all times between 2015 and 2024. Regarding trust in government in the Balkans, the situation is different, but despite the difference, the situation is only slightly better.

Even if the positive evaluations of trust in government in the survey are combined (as the Balkan Barometer does with the categories of trust in police and juridical institutions in the statement on the homepage, but not in the raw data) the combined trust data is lower than for example in the German case during spring 2024 before the federal government collapsed in the end of the year 2024. The federal statistical office detected in Germany for spring 2024 that 38 % of respondents tend to trust the German Federal Government, whereas 55 % did not tend to trust the (federal) government.

As a comparison to the data about Trust in government in South East Europe, only in the year 2022, the Combined Trust in Government was higher than in the situation when Germans did not trust their government at all, and the German government resigned.

Data about trust in government originates from the Balkan Barometer produced by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, the combination of categories of trust in government consists of either total trust or a tendency to trust the government. If only the category that totally trusts the government is taken into consideration, the data also ranges rather low, from 0 to 9 %. With the exceptions of Kosovo and Montenegro, where total trust in government is remarkably higher. And in Serbia, in recent years, the total trust in government was also rather high.

But to include the case of Croatia for the issue of Trust in government, other resources than the RCC had to be found. In the Croatian language literature, works about Trust can be found, although the time scope is different because the text covers the year 2010. But although a change in the situation can be assumed, the change does not seem to be fundamental. Trust in Government was not seen as a main issue. But in the context of relating Trust in regions and their impact on economic growth, the question of whether respondents trusted their government was detected. So, for these sources, the detection of Trust in Government was a byproduct at best. The text reports research and data by Sekulić and Šporer in the Croatian language only. The reports say that citizens trusted mostly in the military (by 65,6% of respondents in this survey), followed by Trust in the church (by 53,1 % of the respondents in this survey) (Sekulić & Šporer, 2010, cited in Alibegović & Marošević, 2020, p. 31). The text also takes other surveys about attitudes in Croatia into consideration, like the Eurobarometer, as mentioned, but also Pilar's Barometer about Croatian Society.

The aspect of Trust in the church or religious institutions is not at all detected in the RCC Balkan Barometer. This spot is left open and unanswered in the entire Barometer. Hence, there is not only the case of Croatia that is missing, but also the item of Trust in churches (or religious institutions at all) that does not at all appear in the Balkan Barometer. The common issue of both surveys (Balkan Barometer and Sekulić and Šporer) is that both give high Trust numbers in the military. But Trust in the church or religious institutions is missing.

A closer view into surveys and polls from the year 2020 in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that, indeed, both institutions are relevant. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious institutions rank fifth after military institutions, utility organizations, police, and

humanitarian organizations. But religious institutions rank far before any governmental body on any territorial level of the state (Analitika, 2014). Also, in the case of Serbia, in earlier surveys from the year 2002 about trust in political institutions, the same picture as in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina emerges. Respondents trust the Orthodox Church the most, with 69,8 %, and then the army, with 66 % as second (Partner, 2002, p. 11).

Also, based on the survey data, media reports state that the European Union (EU) has lost the Western Balkans (Roth, 2022) and that Serbia's closest partner seems to be Russia (Pabst, 2019). The publicized newspaper opinion, together with survey data, leaves a clear picture. And that is that the Western Balkans is divided, with Croatia already part of the EU and Serbia close to Russia. This picture does not translate into survey data. Because the assumption that these differences would translate into a difference in Trust in Government doesn't seem to hold true. Together with high trust measures in the military, this leaves a negative overall picture. The example of Albania shows that high trust levels in the military and religious institutions/churches cannot be taken as a given for the entire region of Southeastern Europe (SEE). According to other surveys than the RCC data, people in Albania trust NATO, UN, and EU before religious institutions (Institute for Mediation and Democracy, 2023). And indeed, RCC data shows that trust in the government in Albania within SEE is highest of all SEE states (with the exception of Serbia).

Explanations of why respondents trust and tend to trust military organizations are clearly a multi-varied and multifaceted phenomenon. Whereas this question must remain open, in this context, it should have been highlighted that military, police, and also religious institutions or churches (as it is termed in the literature about Croatia) seem to possess a certain form of trust. Also, the aspect of transparency seems to be special in religious and military organizations. The contrasting case to the Balkans is the case of North Macedonia.

There, trust in international organizations, like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), is higher than trust in religious institutions. In this case, churches are mentioned as religious institutions. Only in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the rather neutral terms of religious institutions used.

Usually, political science literature looks at the region of Southeastern Europe and the Balkans from the perspective of international relations, so that states and or governments are actors under review. But regarding the question of which institution people trust, instead of states or governments, individual persons themselves are the actors. The perspective turns around because states and governments aren't the focus of inquiry. People's assessment (as captured in surveys or polls) then becomes the focus of interest. They can be asked directly, and their opinion is taken into consideration, as presented in the data in this text. The text can only report the results of the surveys that include many Balkan states. The discussion of the results, more importantly, the sequence of events, cannot be determined. That means it is not clear if events in international relations caused people to this form of trust or the other way around (if the institutions that had the trust of people created political action). At this point, this text is only a contribution to the discussion. That means that public opinion, as presented in the survey of the RCC, matters also in Balkan politics.

Conclusions

To conclude the question about trust in political institutions, it needs to be stressed that there is a wide variety of institutions in the Western Balkan states that respondents do trust. Since 2014, political science literature has recognized an “enlargement fatigue” (Yaris, 2024, p. 126) in the European Union (EU). Although Croatia entered the EU as a full member in 2013, the EU enlargement process for the other Western Balkan states slowed down. Whereas one perspective looked at the Southeastern European (SEE) region through an international lens and made a new geopolitical situation a matter, where China (Montilla-Aguilera, 2024) and other major world powers played a role, this text has shed light on the situation inside the Western Balkan state, with the focus on what institutions society trusts.

The paper made the assumption that people of Croatia trust different institutions, because Croatia is already a member of the EU. Therefore, Croatia fulfills a common legal set of rules common to all EU member states. But despite this situation, respondents of surveys about trust in Croatia seem to trust the church and the military in Croatia. Whereas, as in the German case, medical professions (medical doctors and nurses) and legal courts are trusted most. Although Croatia is not covered in surveys about the other SEE states (like in the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)), publications of different surveys about trust in the states of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia show similar results.

Also, in the two states of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, trust is highest in the Church or religious institutions and the army and/or the military. Cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro are left outside of the study at stake, although the cases belong to the survey about trust in SEE of the RCC. The political situation does not seem to be thoroughly settled in the three cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.⁵

Although it might be expected that trust is different in Croatia, because of its EU membership as compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, trust is highest in the same institutions in Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Again, these institutions are the military / army and the church / religious institutions. As a contrast, a view of Albania shows that the issue of trust is different in Albania, because the surveys show that respondents trust international organizations like the United Nations or NATO more than they trust religious institutions. Churches and the military are not absent from the institution’s respondents’ trust, but they are ranked after international institutions, as the data shows.

A reason for that could lie still in the (for Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) common experience of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. Particularly now, when tensions in the Balkans rise again, it seems reasonable that respondents would rather trust the church / religious institutions and the military than medical professions and legal institutions (as for example in the German case). From an analytical point of view, this should not be qualified at all. It is only to mention that trust seems to be different if military and religious institutions are trusted. And to refer back to the meaning of trust, as the essential component of political life, an important conclusion might be made. For the people in the (Western) Balkans, churches and/or religious institutions, and likewise the military, are then a central component of political life.

⁵ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Hence, the paper provided a contribution to the discussion about the political development of the states in the (Western) Balkans, highlighting that not only political processes took place outside of Western Balkan states, but also inside of Western Balkan states, and political developments took place in the societies. According to the RCC, trust in political institutions is focused in the Western Balkans on institutions with high trust, but low transparency, like religious organizations or the military.

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