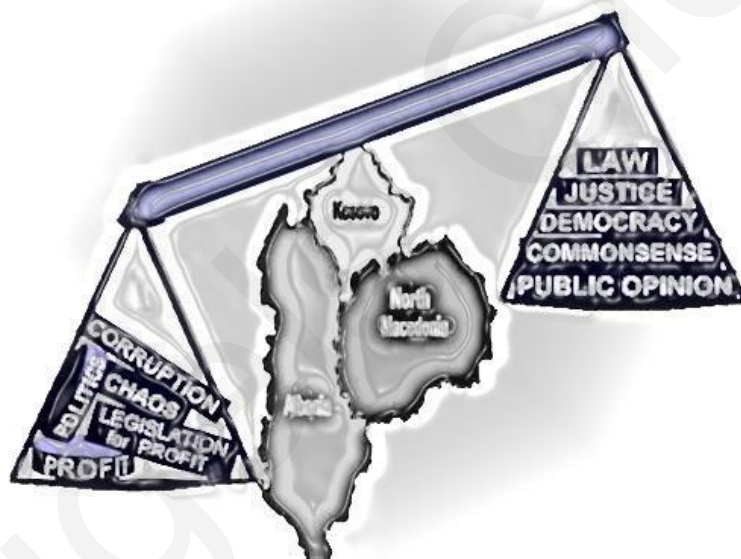




Université de Chypre

Département d'Études Françaises et Européennes

DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH AND EUROPEAN STUDIES



The impact of corruption in the check-balance system:
A case study of Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia

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Author: Rigels Cici

Supervisor: Panagiotis Christias

Table of contents

Page

Introduction 6

Motivation 8

Literature review 9

Data and methodology 12

Corruption Data 13

Worldwide governance indicators 17

Survey analysis..... 20

Cross Correlation Tests..... 25

Conclusions 27

References 30

Appendices 33

Declaration and Copyright

I, RIGELS CICI, declare that this thesis is my own original work and that it has not been presented and will not be presented to any other university for a similar or any other degree award.

Signature.....

Date.....

Acknowledgement

I owe a debt of thanks to my supervisor, Panagiotis Christias, for his patience, support, and willingness to see the work to its successful completion. He unconditionally offered me his academic and moral support during the entire period, including constructive feedback on the theoretical and organizational structure of the thesis, which was invaluable. Last, I would like to convey heartfelt acknowledgements and appreciations to my friends and family who supported me to accomplish this work. Words cannot express my gratitude.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct a comparative study of the relationship between press freedom, corruption and check-balance system in the Balkans. Corruption exists in all systems and rules because eagerness is in human nature. It also adapts to all situations and survives even when we try our best to reduce it. Since communism was overthrown in the Balkans, democracy has remained precarious and, at times, even seen as impossible. Particularly, the majority of the nations have authoritarian political structures. The social impact behind these dictatorial systems is irretrievable. Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia are examples of states where corruption has a significant adverse impact on the path to democracy. I examine the impact of corruption on these countries, focusing on how it undermines their check-balance system, and hinders democratic progress. I focus on the causes and consequences of corruption and its implications in the check-balance system. I argue that the failure to establish an effective check-balance system has allowed corruption to become endemic in the region with severe welfare implications. The analysis based on data collected from the Freedom House suggests that countries with higher democratic scorecards tend to have lower levels of corruption. Additionally, regions and countries with low levels of GDP are perceived to be more corrupt. I provide policy recommendations to achieve a more transparent legal framework, promote civil society engagement, and encourage international organizations in providing technical assistance and support for anti-corruption efforts.

Keywords: Check-balance, corruption, press freedom, judiciary system

1. Introduction

“Constant experience shows us that every man invested with power is apt to abuse it and to carry his authority as far as it will go ... To prevent this abuse, it is necessary from the very nature of things that power should be a check to power” (Montesquieu 1949, 150). The check-balance system is essential in any democratic government. It promotes good governance and social welfare by reducing the risk that a single branch might act independently and abuse its power. James Madison (1788, Federalist No. 51) discusses the role of check-balance system, stating that: “Ambition must be made to counter ambition ... It may be a reflection of human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government”. This implies that without a system to prevent one branch of government from having more power over another, the government would eventually be controlled only by one group of people. (Hamilton, A; Jay, J; Madison, J. 1961)

The impact of corruption in the progress of a government can be traced back to Aristotle’s definitions of classical political philosophy (see “*On generation and corruption*”), to Montesquieu (see “*The spirit of the laws*”), to Machiavelli (see “*The prince*”), to Rousseau (see “*Observations*”). Overall, it is commonly accepted that corruption is a degeneration of public institutions. This is the main obstacle to the creation of a state of law, to achieve economic development and to establish democratic institutions. Hence, there is a strong consensus in the literature that check-balance should be understood almost interchangeably, and that they are important tools in fighting corruption (Althusser 1971, 74).

The institutions of some Balkan countries seem not ready yet to build a fair democratic system. These countries lack, in part, democratic and corruption-free institutions for almost two generations. The impact of corruption and organized crime in the governmental level is a phenomenon easily ascertained in poor countries. Institutions in these countries are fragile and easily corruptible. There are limited studies carried out in identifying the relation between corruption and the freedom of press and how this affects the check-balance system in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. I aim to analyze the ways and attitudes that connect democracy, corruption, press freedom and their impact on governmental decision-making.

I show that the citizens of these countries have lost trust in the credibility of the institutions. Moreover, I find that corruption is more widespread among the less-economically able layers of the society. I also show that the people's perception on the transparency and freedom of media is negative. That is, media appears to be imprisoned by an elite used mainly as a medium for political propaganda. Last, I argue that reforming the education system could promote civil society engagement, and together with the efforts of EU and other international organizations, desirable anti-corruption effects could be achieved.

The rest of the study proceeds in five sections. The first section includes the introduction. The second section presents the motivation and the third section includes the literature review. Section four presents the methodology, making a comparison between corruption, press freedom and democratic scorecard, according to data obtained from the Freedom House, Reporters without Borders, Numbeo and this study's survey data. The concluding section summarizes the appear by combining both the theoretical development of the subject and the empirical results, the limitations, and possible recommendations for future research.

2. Motivation

The purpose of this paper is to examine the level of corruption and its effects on democratic values by focusing on a comprehensive assessment of corruption as experienced by people in the western Balkans, especially in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. The check-balance system is commonly perceived to be very central in achieving good governance in a country. Corruption and other forms of organized crime consist of an important challenge for Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Today, Balkan's integration to EU is troubled by corruption. As a significant issue in these countries, corruption infects the efficiency and effectiveness of the check-balance system.

Corruption is a major bottleneck for political and social development. It is also evident that empirical research on corruption is limited because of the difficulty of measuring it (Treisman D 2000, 402). The 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) highlights that the majority of the Balkan countries are making little or no progress in minimizing corruption. The impact of corruption occurring on such a large scale, can be minimized if check-balance are efficiently operating, such as implementing open public procurements, publicly justifying the deliberations behind why only certain entities are chosen for a project or investment, and making the accounts publicly accessible. In Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, corruption has led to the subversion of the rule of law, election fraud, and political patronage. It has also eroded public trust in institutions spurring a sense of unfairness and injustice.

The impact of corruption on the check-balance system in these countries has become a systemic problem. More specifically, consider the lack of transparency and accountability in government operations, as well as the erosion of democratic norms. Also, the judiciary system is often compromised, and the media is frequently censored or threatened, limiting the ability of these institutions to hold those in power accountable. Thus, I explore the extent to which corruption affects the check-balance system in these countries, and how it undermines democratic governance. This aspect of strategic decision-making undertaken by public institutions is very important to understand how corruption works at the institutional level.

3. Literature review

Power is not a commodity, nor can it be acquired and transferred (Foucault 1995, 27). The Balkan region has a long history of political instability, conflict and economic challenges due to uneven distribution of power. The failure of Balkan nations is also closely related to corruption, which has affected many aspects of society. Aristotle, views corruption as a deviation from virtue and a threat to the stability of political systems. He argues that corruption arises when individuals put their personal interests above the common good or the rule of law. Also, he states that corruption not only undermines the legitimacy of government, but also leads to a decline in moral standards and social cohesion. He claims that it is the responsibility of citizens to hold their leaders accountable and promote virtuous behavior in public life. To address corruption, Aristotle suggests the establishment of robust institutional check-balance, including an independent judiciary system, separation of powers, and free press. He also emphasizes the importance of education and civic engagement in promoting ethical values and good governance. Today, Aristotle's ideas about corruption continue to be relevant, and many countries have adopted these principles to combat endemic corruption. However, the challenge remains to ensure that these principles are effectively implemented and enforced to promote transparency, accountability and democratic governance. Aristotle proposes that a society can make better decisions concerning its well-being if the decisions are made through a collective effort of several individuals rather than one or a select few (Frans de Haas, Jaap Mansfeld 2004, 231).

The theoretical foundations of the notion that check-balance can be used to fight corruption are muddled by the fact that corruption, as understood when the first institutional arrangements aimed at establishing check-balance conceived at the end of the 18th century (see (Manin 1994); (Wallis 2004), is not exactly what we think of it now—an abuse of public office for private gain. In fact, the 18th century conception of corruption is much more a fear that the governing system may become unbalanced, allowing one branch to gain leverage over another, and ultimately deteriorating into tyrannical rule. The legislature, as the popular branch of government, is particularly feared. So, 18th century check-balance is designed essentially to overcome this problem of institutional primacy, not really to address what we currently consider corruption. The closest parallel to our contemporary definition of corruption is the early 19th century fear of “systematic” corruption, whereby elites use the power of government to artificially create rents

by limiting entry into valuable economic activities. This is often realized through grants of monopoly rights, restrictive corporate charters, tariffs, quotas, biased regulations and the like (Wallis 2004). But even this shifting notion of corruption, to a version closer to our contemporary definition, is only elaborated decades after the Madisonian version of check-balance was conceived.

In “Why nations fail” (Acemoglu, D; Robinson, J 2012), the authors claim that the problem of misconduct is political and not geography or cultural customs. They argue that most of the world’s countries are poor because their political institutions are extractive, which means that they are designed so as to benefit an elite rather than the mass. In the context of Balkans, these countries have suffered from extractive institutions for much of their history. For example, under communism, the state controlled all aspects of the economy, limiting private enterprise and innovation. After the fall of communism, many Balkan governments failed to establish inclusive political and economic institutions, leading to corruption and weak rule of law. Another factor contributing to the failure of some Balkan nations is ethnic conflict. The region has a long history of inter-ethnic tensions, which have often led to violence and political instability. These conflicts can further entrench extractive institutions and hinder inclusive political and economic reform. Overall, the authors argue that to succeed, nations need to establish inclusive political and economic institutions that promote equal opportunities for all citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion or socioeconomic status. This requires significant reforms and increased accountability to address corruption. And, in turn, ensure that public officials act in the best interests of all citizens, laying the foundations for democratic governance and sustainable economic growth. So, any alternation of the principles which are at the foundation of a robust political system, i.e., numerous abuses in the field of justice and power by actors in politics and economics, may lead to undesirable consequences. Most of the countries in this region face similar problems in establishing the rule of law, mainly because existing economic and political power structures are not strong enough to fight corruption effectively. Over the years, the executive branch has attempted, often controversially, to extend its authority over the legislative and judicial branches.

Under pressure from EU, governments in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have placed corruption and organized crime high on the political agenda, and a comprehensive judicial and

anti-corruption reform program is currently in implementation. The modern idea of the separation of powers is explored more thorough in “The spirit of the laws” (Montesquieu 1949). Other scholars have also studied the separation of powers with an aim to improve governance, including the check-balance system (Keefer 2002). In Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, the constitutions stipulate the countries in adhering to the separation of powers, but several cases show that there is a violation of the important items that are stipulated by the doctrine of separation of powers. A considerable number of constitutional systems recognizes and vests to the executive branch powers that fall within the functional domain or reserve of the legislator. Among these countries are also Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia which have relatively new constitutions.

In Balkans, the ex-post nature of abstract constitutional control and the rapid mode of entry into force of the provisional laws issued by the executive branch, represent two different speed vectors, which do not have meeting points neither in legal time nor in the legal space. Today, people in these countries are highly critical of their leadership perceiving them as corrupt and disconnected from the people’s political views. Corruption is perceived by citizens as a vital phenomenon, present in all aspects of their daily activities, where they themselves often become its generators and instigators. If this phenomenon is also accompanied by the problems of bureaucracy, professional incompetence and state negligence, it constitutes the main cause for the loss of citizens’ trust in the state authority (Tanzi 1998).

4. Data and methodology

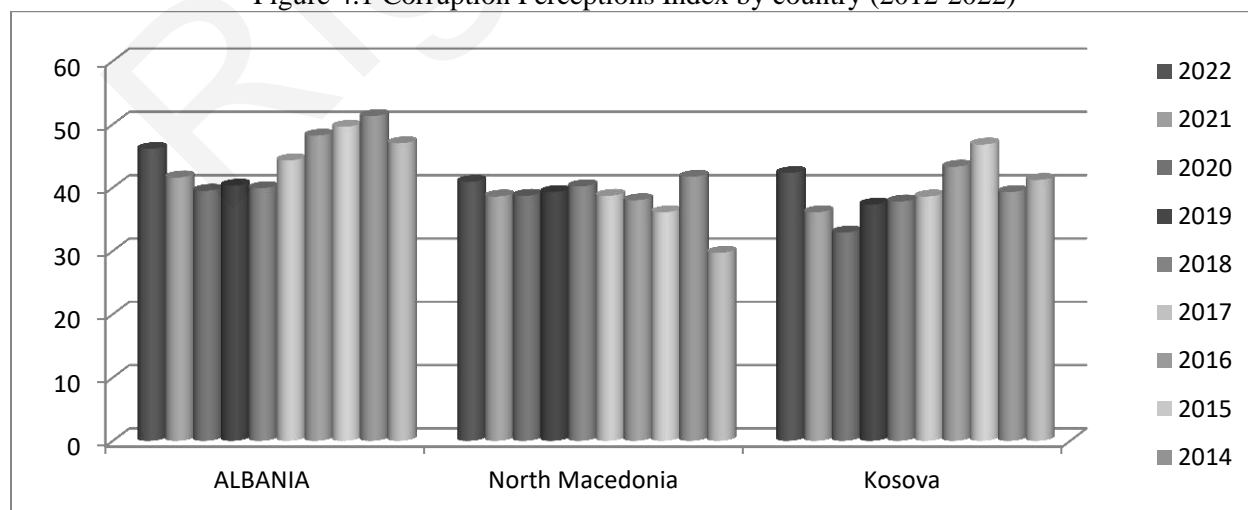
I use both primary and secondary data to address my main hypothesis. The primary source consists of survey data from citizens of Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, including their diaspora. The survey was conducted in September 2022. The sample covers responses from 123 respondents chosen randomly throughout an online survey. The aim of the survey is to gather and analyze opinions that can explain how people feel about the impact of corruption in their country. This survey was conducted online, and the target was the Albanian-speaking communities in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, which is the dominant ethnic group in these countries and societies. These three countries are selected because they share common characteristics, such as their recent history, location and political culture. Moreover, the sample population refers to people with a random variety of professions, such as teachers, politicians, lawyers, economists and journalists who are directly or indirectly involved in bodies that are influenced or affected by corruption. Albanian was chosen as the survey's language since it is one of the three countries' official languages, which lowers the chance of sampling bias.

The secondary source of public data comes from the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Freedom House, Reporters without Borders and Numbeo. These are commonly-used sources for research in this area. For example, CPI ranks countries and territories by their perceived levels of political corruption, with 1 being the least and 180 the most corrupt. This index investigates and refers the scores of these countries on the perceived levels of government corruption. I analyze and process the data using STATA, a statistical software package, and Microsoft Excel. Quantitative measurements are used as the variables for comparison. ANOVA and two-sample F tests are used as statistical tools for the quantitative analysis. As can be seen, the qualitative analysis of the study is limited by the number of subsamples gathered. In most cases, the exclusion and combination of columns is necessary to make the test valid.

4.1 Corruption Data

This chapter attempts to analyze the effects of corruption using the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Prior literature provides evidence showing that corruption and other forms of crime place a considerable challenge in Balkans (Sotiropoulos D 2017). Today, these nations are troubled by corruption. I use one of the most accurate indicators of the level of corruption in the world, the CPI, which is an indicator of perceptions of public sector corruption. The main reason why I chose the CPI index is because it derives from Transparency International which is a global independent, nongovernmental organization (NPO) that aims to stop corruption by promoting transparency. More specifically, Transparency International conducts research, advocacy work, and undergoes various projects to fight corruption. A quality control mechanism is also incorporated, consisting of independent data collection and calculations by two in-house researchers and two independent academic researchers. In order to appear in the CPI, a country must be assessed by no less than three sources. The sources must document their data collection methods and measurement approaches, whereas Transparency International assesses the quality and adequacy of these methodologies (Transparency International 2022). It contains surveys from reliable sources using various statistical structures that are based on data obtained from respondents, employers, and other various analysts, as well as the general public. Last, before these data are made public, Transparency International complements them with additional information collected from independent state institutions.

Figure 4.1 Corruption Perceptions Index by country (2012-2022)



Source: (Transparency International 2022)

The 2022 CPI data show that most of the Balkan countries are making little or no progress in ending corruption. Albania is the most corrupt country of the sample, ranked 101st, whereas North Macedonia is the second most corrupt country in the Balkans, ranked 85th. Kosovo is ranked in the 84th place. Collectively, they consist of the most corrupt countries in Europe. Statistics show a high level of corruption in public institutions and that corruption has already become the governing ideology of these governments. This implies that corruption has become a systemically important institution of these governments.

Furthermore, the magnitude of the results suggests that corruption can no longer be conceived only as a common phenomenon or occurrence in these countries, but must be treated as a type of system which continues to take root in all public institutions.

Table 4.1 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)

CPI	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Change
ALB	33	31	33	36	39	38	36	35	36	35	36	3
KOS	34	33	33	33	36	39	37	36	36	39	41	7
N.M	43	44	45	42	37	35	37	35	35	39	40	-3

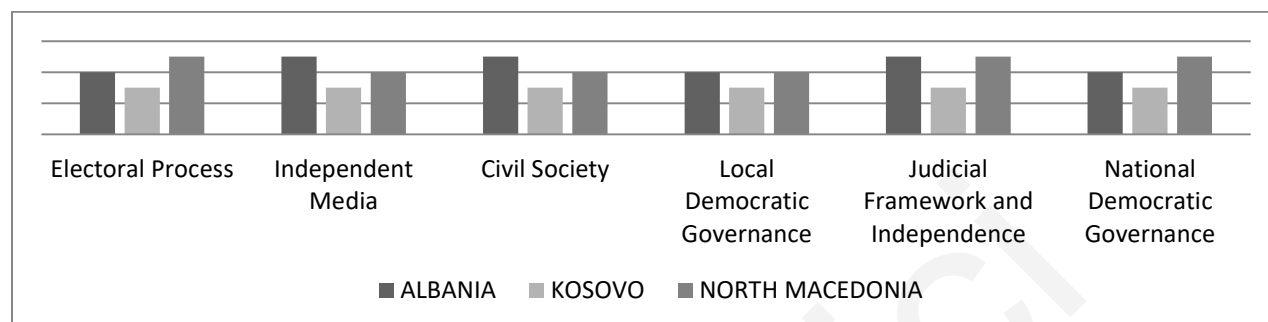
Source: (Transparency International 2022)

Table 4.1 shows the results on CPI for Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia for the period 2012–2022. All three countries have ratings between 33 and 45, with the highest score registered in 2014 by North Macedonia. The lowest score is recorded by Albania in 2013. During the period 2012-2022 the corruption score for North Macedonia decreased from 43 to 40, implying that the country failed to reduce the level of corruption. We can also observe the progress made by Kosovo from 34 in 2012 to 41 in 2022, which is the lowest corrupted country in the sample.

I also use data from the democratic scorecard of the Freedom House, which is an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties, used to evaluate the quality of democracy in a country. The analysts use a broad range of sources, including articles, academic analyses, and reports from nongovernmental organization (NPO), individual professional contacts, and on-the-

ground research. It typically measures a range of factors including the electoral process, civil society, independent media, rule of law and governance.

Figure 4.3 Democratic scorecard 2022



Source: (Freedom House 2022)

The democratic scorecard 2022 for Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia according to Freedom House shows the following:

Table 4.2: Democratic scorecard

DEMOCRATIC SCORECARD	Albania	Kosovo	North Macedonia
Electoral Process	4.25	3.50	4.50
Independent Media	3.50	3.25	3.50
Civil Society	4.75	4.50	4.75
Local Democratic Governance	4.50	3.50	4.00
Juridical Framework and Independence	3.25	2.75	3.25
Corruption	2.75	2.25	3.25
Democracy Score	3.75	3.25	3.82

Source: (Freedom House 2022)

Table 4.2 shows the results on democratic scorecard for Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. All three countries have ratings between 2.25 and 4.75 with the highest score 4.75 registered by Albania and North Macedonia. The lowest score is 2.25 recorded by Kosovo implying that the

country failed to reduce the level of corruption. Albania has been classified as a "semi-consolidated authoritarian regime", with concerns raised over issues such as the impartiality and independence of the judiciary, corruption, media freedom. Kosovo, on the other hand, has been classified as a "hybrid regime", with significant challenges still remaining in terms of democratization and the rule of law. The report highlights concerns over political interference in the judiciary, widespread corruption, and limited media pluralism. North Macedonia, which was previously classified as a "semi-consolidated democracy", has been upgraded to a "consolidated democracy" in the latest report due to positive developments in areas such as judicial reform, anti-corruption efforts, and media freedom.

Using the democratic scorecard, I identify the areas of concern about a country's democratic institutions and thus work to address them. The scorecard can also provide a basis for comparative analysis between different countries and over time, allowing stakeholders to track progress or identify regression in a country's democratic performance (Freedom House 2022). Table 4.4 shows the results on democracy score for Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia for the period 2012–2022.

Table 4.4 Democracy score (2012-2022)

DS	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Change
ALB	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.75	3.75	-0.11
KOS	2.82	2.75	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.25	+0.43
N.M	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82	3.82	-0.29
SC	9.16	9.65	9.58	9.11	9.22	9.14	9.58	9.37	9.26	9.31	9.46	+0.30
EU	8.44	8.40	8.41	8.42	8.40	8.38	8.35	8.35	8.29	8.23	8.36	-0.08

Source: (Freedom House 2022)

Countries are rated on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democratic progress. It is clear that, all the three countries have ratings between 2.82 and 4.11, with the highest score recorded by North Macedonia in 2012. The lowest index score was recorded by Kosovo in 2012. During the period 2012-2022, the score of North Macedonia

decreased from 4.11 to 3.82. Consider also the progress made by Kosovo from, i.e., from 2.82 in 2012 to 3.25 in 2022. Regarding the correlation between democratic scorecard and corruption, the evidence suggests a negative correlation between them (see Table 5.4). Countries with higher democratic scorecards tend to have lower levels of corruption. This negative correlation can be attributed to the fact that democratic countries typically have stronger institutions, greater transparency, and more robust mechanisms for holding officials accountable. Conversely, countries with weak democratic institutions may lack the check-balance necessary to prevent corruption and create an environment that is more conducive to graft and other forms of illicit activity (Acemoglu, D; Robinson, J 2012).

4.2 Worldwide governance indicators

The World Bank's Control of Corruption Index is an index used to capture perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption. The index is comprised by 21 different independent organizations such as Business Enterprise Environment Survey, Transparency International Global Competitiveness Report, Political Economic Risk Consultancy i.e. (Word Bank 2022). Table 4.6 shows the relative percentile rank of the countries, with higher values corresponding to better performance in controlling corruption.

Table 4.6 Control of Corruption

	2019	2020	2021
Albania	31.7	31.7	31.7
Kosovo	33.7	37.0	44.7
North Macedonia	38.0	34.6	43.3

Source: (Word Bank 2022)

In the period 2019-2021, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have continued to fight corruption and have taken several steps to increase their effectiveness. In 2019, the Albanian National Investigation Agency was founded, and a law was passed to increase its understanding in investigating cases of suspected corruption. In 2020, a law was adopted to increase

transparency in public tenders and in the financing of political parties. The same year in Kosovo, a national strategy for the fight against corruption was approved and in 2020 the National Anti-Corruption Agency was established. In addition, transparency is made in public procurements and in the processing of the allocation of public resources. In North Macedonia, efforts were made to increase their effectiveness in various corporate sectors. In 2019, the Central Anti-Corruption and Crime Commission was established and an action plan for the establishment of corruption was approved. Moreover, there have been sharp steps within the Regional Development Cooperation (RDC) program and through other programs to increase transparency and avoid corruption.

Table 4.7 Government Effectiveness

	2019	2020	2021
Albania	51.4	48.1	53.4
Kosovo	38.5	39.9	42.8
North Macedonia	48.1	55.3	50

Source: (Word Bank 2022)

In the period 2019-2021, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have continued working to improve the effectiveness of the government and have taken several steps in this direction. In Albania, there have been efforts to increase transparency and accountability in the public sector. In 2019, a law was passed to increase the effectiveness of public administration and reduce bureaucracy. In Kosovo, efforts were made to increase the effectiveness of the government and to improve the quality of public services. In 2019, a law was passed to increase the efficiency of the administrative procedure and reduce the cost of businesses. In North Macedonia, steps were taken to increase government effectiveness and improve the quality of public services. In 2019, a strategy was adopted to improve the quality of public services and increase accountability. Also, in the Western Balkans, there have been various efforts by the European Union and international organizations to improve the effectiveness of the government and to develop better capacities for the management of public services.

Table 4.8 Rule of law

<i>Rule of Law</i>	2019	2020	2021
Albania	38.9	40.9	43.8
Kosovo	39.9	39.4	43.3
North Macedonia	45.2	51.9	52.4

Source: (Word Bank 2022)

In Albania, the judicial reform process started in 2016, in Kosovo the reform process started in 2014 and in North Macedonia, the judicial reform started in 2018. The main reason was to improve the independence and efficiency of the judiciary. The reform includes the vetting of judges and prosecutors, the establishment of a new judicial system and the strengthening of the institutional framework for judicial independence. The recent rulings by the judiciary in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia over powerful personalities involved in high-profile cases and related scandals send a strong message for the need to reform a rotten system and also signals the coming of a zero-tolerance attitude towards corruption. From 2019-2021, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia continued to work on strengthening their legal systems and improving access to justice for their citizens. In Albania, the government passed several important laws during this period, including a new law on the protection of whistleblowers and a new anti-corruption law. In Kosovo, the government focused on implementing reforms to improve the efficiency and independence of the judiciary. One of the major accomplishments during this time was the establishment of a new special court to prosecute war crimes committed during the 1998-99 conflict in Kosovo. In North Macedonia, the government made significant progress towards opening the negotiations for joining the European Union during by implementing a series of reforms related to the rule of law. This included strengthening the independence of the judiciary and improving access to justice for marginalized groups.

Reporters without Borders index on press freedom 2022 demonstrated a similar placement comparing with CPI (Transparency International 2022) in the ranking system: out of a total of

180 countries, Albania was number 93, Kosovo number 74 and North Macedonia number 101 (Reporters Without Borders 2022). High levels of press freedom are often associated with low levels of corruption, a so-called negative connection, although the causality is debated (Bolsius 2012).

Table 4.9 Press Freedom

<i>Press Freedom</i>	2020	2021	2022
Albania	84	83	93
Kosovo	70	75	74
North Macedonia	92	86	101

Source: (Reporters Without Borders 2022)

These rankings indicate that the press freedom is limited in all three countries, and are often related with corruption. A high degree of press freedom acts as a channel through which education decreases corruption. Only in countries where press freedom is well developed, there is a positive effect of education on corruption (Ahrend R 2002). As the media can play an important role in exposing corruption. The media serves as a crucial watchdog of government and corrupt individuals or organizations. Moreover, another strand of scholars argue that greater press freedom correlates with low levels of corruption (Freille, Haque and Kneller 2007).

4.3 Survey analysis

In terms of age, the minimum age category ranged from 18-29 whereby the maximum category was from 70 and above. In this aspect 36 people who are equal to 30% of all the respondents were aged between 18 and 29. Between 30 and 49 there were 60 people, who in percentage were equal to 49% of all the respondents, another 16 people who were equal to 13% aged between 50 and 69. Age group which was 70 and above contained 10 people which is similar to 8%. Ages 18-30 (36 respondents) 30% and 30-49 (60 respondents) 49% were the main participants with approximately 80%.

Table 5.1 Respondent's Age

Age	Number of respondents	Percentage
18-29	36	30%
30-49	60	49%
50-69	16	13%
Over 70	10	8%
Total	123	100%

Source: Research Data, 2023

In terms of Gender, the sample consisted of participants, with 74 males (61%) and 48 females (39%).

Table 5.2 Respondent's Gender

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	74	61%
Female	48	39%
Total	123	100%

Source: Research Data, 2023

Among all respondent's, 12 respondents (10%) were Legal (Lawyers), 7 (6%) were Journalists, 7 (6%) were Politicians, 12 (10%) were Economists and the remaining 77 (67%) were other professions. Table 5.3 below summaries the data.

Table 5.3 Respondent's Profession

Profession	Frequency	Percentage
Legal (Lawyers)	12	10%
Politician	7	6%
Economist	12	10%
Journalist	7	6%

Other	77	67%
Total	123	100%

Source: Research Data, 2023

In terms of residency, the respondents declared their county of residence. In this aspect 50 people who are equal to 41% of all the respondents were resident in Albania. Resident of Republic of Kosovo was 27 people who in percentage were equal to 22% of all the respondents, another 16 people who were equal to 13% were resident in North Macedonia. Resident in other countries called as diaspora was 29 people equal to 24% of all respondents. Table 5.4 below summarizes the data.

Table 5.4 Respondent's residency

Country	Frequency	Percentage
Albania	50	41%
Kosovo	27	22%
North Macedonia	16	13%
Other	29	24%
Total	123	100%

Source: Research Data, 2023

Similarly, politicians in the Balkans are often viewed as corrupt and unaccountable. There is a perception that they are more interested in advancing their own interests or those of their political party or ethnic group than in serving the public good (Warren 2004). This lack of trust in both the media and politics is a serious problem for democracy in the region. It undermines the ability of citizens to make informed decisions, and it reduces the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms such as elections, public protests and investigative journalism (Arndt 2006).

From the collected data (Survey 2022), it can be argued that a large percent of respondents (66%) agree that corruption is the destruction of a democratic country. Moreover, 73% of all the respondents believe that the Balkans is one of the regions with the highest level of corruption. Although a large percent of respondents (75%) agree that corruption is one of the priorities that

these countries must fulfill in order to join the EU (European Union). The EU has an important role in the fight against corruption in these countries, providing financial and technical support for justice and governance reforms, as well as emphasizing the need for transparency and accountability in decision-making. Additionally, 66% of the respondents believe that corruption takes the breath of free competition. Corruption completely paralyzes commercial activity by destroying the private sector and hindering foreign investors (Hoinaru, Răzvan, et al 2020). Corruption severely affects the development of the democratic society of the state, through the obstruction of the market economy (Keisuke, O.; Sovannroeun, S 2010). Also, it was identified that 88% of the respondents are against corruption and social-civil informality. This is a very good indicator, showing that a large percent of people are aware of the importance of such concerns. Most economists and much economic theory assume a positive relationship between investment and growth. Therefore, if corruption affects investments, it must also affect growth (Jain 2001, 96). In addition,, Balkan nations have also faced economic challenges. Many countries in the region have struggled to implement effective economic policies. Out of all respondents, 61% of the answers agree that poor people/families are more affected by corruption. This has led to high unemployment rates and low levels of economic growth. The common view is also that informality affects the development of corruption. This has contributed to a sense of disillusionment among citizens and has made it more difficult for governments to gain support for reforms. One important aspect noted during the analysis is that 72% of the answers agree that corruption has already become an inseparable part of the society in their country, even relating corruption to organized crime in their countries.

This lack of accountability for corruption among politicians and public officials undermines the rule of law and erodes public trust in government institutions. It also creates a culture of impunity, in which those in power engage in corrupt practices without fearing consequences (Lederman D, Loayza N, Soares R 2005). There is a widespread lack of trust in both the media and politicians. This is partly due to the prevalence of corruption in both sectors, as well as a history of political instability, ethnic conflict and economic hardship. A free press is another mechanism that checks the power of government (Brunetti, Aymo & Beatrice Weder 2003). Media outlets in the Balkans often lack independence and transparency, and are seen as beholden to political or economic interests. This has led to a perception that the media is not objective and

that it cannot be relied upon to provide accurate and unbiased information. Many media outlets are owned or controlled by political elites. This has led to a lack of diversity of viewpoints and a lack of critical reporting (Coyne J. and Leeson P 2009). This has also undermined the role of the media as a watchdog and has made it difficult for citizens to make informed decisions. The lack of an independent media has also had a negative impact on public trust in institutions (Bolsius 2012). Citizens are often skeptical of official information and are more likely to rely on rumors and conspiracy theories. This has contributed to a climate of mistrust and has made it more difficult for institutions to gain legitimacy. With close to 90% of the answers agree that the media are connected and financed by the political structure or by criminal organizations. Organized crime still dominates the economy of three countries and affects the political developments and control most of the media as well. Obviously, the prevalence of organized crime is intrinsically connected to rampant corruption and, by extension, political opacity in these countries. It is both a cause and consequence of a criminal culture that permeates the region, and the way that corruption is linked to politics suggests a degree of organized corruption, and even elements of state capture in the region.

Politicians and public officials have been able to benefit from special immunities or legal protections, which makes it difficult to hold them accountable for corruption, 84% of the respondents believe that politicians have special immunities which allow them to avoid being charged with criminal offenses related to corruption. These immunities can take many forms, such as immunity from prosecution, immunity from civil lawsuits, or immunity from being investigated by law enforcement agencies. In some cases, politicians may also be able to use their political influence to pressure law enforcement agencies or the judiciary to drop charges or reduce penalties (Wittman 1995). Last, the most frequent acts of corruption appear to be favoritism (34%) and nepotism (31%), while after these comes interference and political influence (27%). Also, a large percent of the respondents seem to understand the importance of the central authority against corruption, i.e. around 47%. Finally, it is important to engage civil society organizations and the public in the fight against corruption, to ensure that there is sustained pressure on politicians and government institutions to address this problem. This could involve measures such as supporting independent media and civil society organizations, and

promoting greater public awareness of the harms of corruption and the benefits of transparency and accountability.

4.4 Cross Correlation Tests

Cross correlation tests were conducted between indices measuring Corruption, GDP, Democracy and Press Freedom. The results during the period 2019-2022 are the following:

Table 5.4 Correlations

Correlations	Corruption	GDP	Democracy score	Press Freedom
Corruption	1	-0.80	-0.52	-0.93
GDP per capital	-0.80	1	0.98	0.99
Democracy score	-0.52	0.98	1	0.92
Press Freedom	-0.93	0.99	0.92	1

Source: Author own work.

Tables 5.4 shows that the cross correlations between many indices are significantly high implying that there is a significant relationship between the four components. First, there is a negative association between corruption perception indexes and levels of economic development measured by real per capital GDP. The correlation coefficient is -0.80 (Jain 2001, 90). Given the correlation relationships between the different indices, evidently there is a negative correlation between democracy and corruption. Countries with higher levels of democracy tend to have lower levels of corruption. The results also show a negative relationship between corruption and press freedom. A free and independent press could expose abuses of power and hold those in power accountable. Last, there is a positive relationship between press freedom and democracy. Clearly, free and independent media is essential for the functioning of a healthy democratic system by exposing corruption. This indicates that if democracy or press freedom increases, then the level of corruption may reduce. In the case of Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia it is easily ascertained that the principle of separation and balancing still remains a work in progress, as in practice the legislative power is “extended” essentially in the executive branch (Global Integrity 2022, 35).

Table 5.5 Corruption by Region

Measures/CPI Value 2022	EU-27	Scandinavia	Balkans	Albania/Kosovo/North Macedonia
N	27	5	9	3
Average Score	66	83.6	41.8	39
Max	82	90	52	41
Min	42	74	34	36
Press Freedom	75.8	88.64	63.37	63.95

Source: Author own work.

Table 5.5 displays several statistical measures relying on the 2022 CPI. The 44 countries that were included are grouped in four categories: EU-27, Scandinavia, Balkans and Albania/Kosovo/North Macedonia. There are twenty seven countries from Europe, five from Scandinavia, nine from Balkans and the last three countries of the sample. The main purpose is to compare and contrast the perceived level of corruption among emerging and developed economies. Obviously, there are significant differences in the perceived level of corruption within the four categories. Specifically, A/K/NM has the lowest mean and Scandinavia has the highest mean score among the four regions. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are the least corrupt nations in the world, ranking consistently high among international financial transparency. Finally, the relations shown in Table 5.4 indicate that countries with higher corruption tend to have a lower growth rate.

5. Conclusions

The survey data and the information from the indexes are analyzed to drive inferences regarding corruption in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The perceptions of respondents, overall, closely follow the indications of the indexes. Corruption and the system of check-balance are both directly impacted by the economic status of the region. There are noticeable distinctions between the three countries of the sample and other countries in central Europe or Scandinavia. I analyze and evaluate the results of earlier research, and comparing them with the results of my study I drive conclusions about the relations among the freedom of press, the level of corruption, and the strength of the check-balance system.

There are two counterparties in a corruption event: the corruptor and the corrupted. Because there are two sides, it is challenging to locate and identify specific pieces of evidence. Maybe it is a conflictual situation alike that of Miguel Cervantes, against windmills. Could also be that the "game" of corruption is a zero-sum one. The legal and institutional tools to combat corruption in other departments of authority are ineffective if the judiciary and the media are corrupt, making the battle against corruption difficult or impossible.

I show that in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, there is still a strong lack of a culture promoting judicial independence and the separation of powers. The Judicial Council and Council of Public Prosecutors are mostly controlled by persons in power, which is the biggest issue with the independence criteria. It is crucial to take away the political sway. The issue of corruption is still very difficult, and it has an adverse impact on citizens' daily lives. That is, the main issue for the region is the pervasiveness of political corruption, which makes it difficult to establish the rule of law and an independent judiciary.

The judicial reform project has encountered difficulties in all three nations, including political opposition, capacity limitations, and the need for continued commitment from the government and civil society. In order to increase the judiciary's efficacy and independence from political meddling, the juridical system must be reformed. This could involve measures such as requiring politicians and public officials to disclose their assets and income, and establishing independent oversight bodies to investigate allegations of corruption. However, these reforms are essential for

improving the effectiveness of the check-balance system, ensuring the rule of law, and promoting transparency and accountability in government.

Political elites often use their power to protect their own interests, which has led to a culture of impunity. This has made it difficult to implement effective measures to combat corruption and to hold those in power accountable. It is also important to promote greater transparency and accountability in government institutions, including through the use of open data and public reporting mechanisms. Respondents regard corruption as a big problem and a limitation to their safety. The perception of the importance of press freedom seems to be common, and a vast majority of respondents means that lack of press freedom is an obstacle to revealing corruption.

Moreover, this thesis has also shown the validity and strength of the indices and tools used to evaluate corruption, media freedom, and democracy by showing high correlations between the measures despite diverse approaches in how they were assembled. The results suggest that the role of a free press in fighting corruption differs depending on whether the country at play has a well, newly, or non-established electoral democracy: among the well-established electoral democracies, the level of press freedom is very important for the ability to fight corruption. Moreover, the impact of a free press on institutions provides general benefits and undermines institutions that allow elites to abuse their power. This is a check mechanism independent of the government, but that can be enabled or inhibited by the government control of media (Coyne J. and Leeson P 2009). It can be concluded that media freedom and political freedom both play central roles in fighting corruption, with some countries showing a stronger effect than others. The loss of trust in the media and the Press Freedom index are close correlated. If the public loses faith in the media, then the Press Freedom index is expected to be low. This has affected the media and caused a loss of confidence in them, fueling doubts in the justice system and other state institutions.

Regarding corruption levels, the Balkan countries are more corrupt than the EU countries, as the latter ones have CPI scores nearly twice as high as those of the former ones. If the perception of corruption is high, then the CPI index is expected to be low, while if the perception is low, the CPI index is expected to be high. This shows that the less corruption there is, the more trust the

public will have in state institutions and in the democratic values of society. The correlation between the perception of corruption and the CPI index shows that the more trust the public has in state institutions and in the democratic values of society, the less corruption is expected. The respective governments should take all the essential measurements to combat corruption, including both preventive and repressive actions. However, more analytical studies should be conducted in this field in order to draw acts and regulation that could fight corruption. Specifically, most of these tools and measurements are country-specific and tailored to the situation, thus they cannot be generalized. In other words, what is effective for the Balkans may not work for other countries with different setups. Undoubtedly, more research is needed to determine the factors, policies, and characteristics shared by most of the countries which are strongly affected by corruption. This study highlights the fact that the sample Balkan countries are more corrupt than EU and Scandinavian countries. This implies that such countries still have a lot of work to achieve success in terms of freedom of the press, the separation of powers, the legal system, and good governance. An effective system of checks and balances can help reduce corruption and increase the credibility of government and institutions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Survey questions (Survey 2022)

1	Please record your gender.	Male Female	1 2
2	How old are you?	18-29 30-49 50-69 70+	1 2 3 4
3	Which is your profession?	Lawyer Politician Economist Journalist other	1 2 3 4 5
4	What is your marital status?	Single Married Divorced	1 2 3
5	Where do you live?	Albania Kosovo North Macedonia Other	1 2 3 4
6	Do you think that corruption is the destruction of a democratic country?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
7	Do you believe that Balkans are one of the regions with high corruption level?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
8	Its corruption one of the priorities that these countries must fulfill in order to join the EU (European union)?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
9	Corruption can be fought in different ways such as: repression or punishment, prevention and awareness or education, which do you think is more appropriate or more practical?	Oppression or punishment Preventing Awareness or education Idk	1 2 3 4
10	The main forms of corruption are bribery, extortion, favoritism, embezzlement, conflict of interest and fraud, which of them is more visible in	

	your country?		
11	Corruption takes the breath of free competition, does this happen as a result of high economic informality?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
12	Has your country designed the central authority for the purposes of proposing the international assistance and cooperation provided for in the convention?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
13	Has your country designed the central authority for the purposes of proposing the international assistance and cooperation against corruption?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
14	Has the government taken any measures to fight corruption?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
15	Its state capture (private sector, mafia networks) the most important and destructive corrupt problem?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
16	What are some of the causes of corruption?	
17	Foreign investments are falling and as a result their contribution to the country's economy is falling, does this happen as a result of high corruption?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
18	Does corruption affect the growth and formation/education of a person?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
19	What position will you personally take, for or against corruption and social-civil informality?	Pros Against	1 2
20	Are the poor people most affected by corruption?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
21	Does informality affect the development of corruption?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
22	Corruption is a natural occurrence and part of our daily life in your country?	Yes No	1 2

		Idk	3
23	It's there reason to believe that there is a link between corruption and organized crime in your country?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3
24	Please describe how the media reports on issues related to corruption in your country?	
25	Do you think that the media are connected and financed by the political structure or by criminal organizations?	Yes No	1 2
26	Do you think that politicians or public officials benefit from special immunities that allow them to avoid being indicated for corruption related offenses?	Yes No Idk	1 2 3

Appendix B

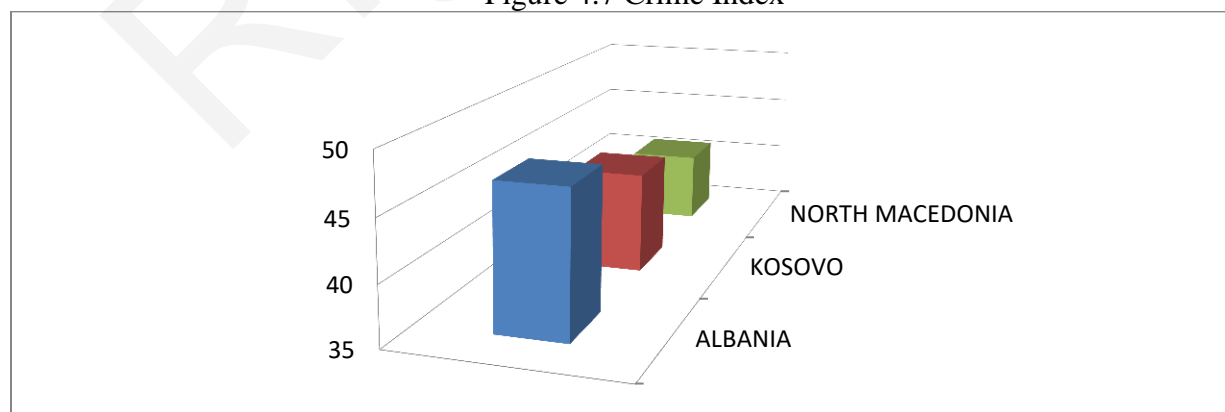
Freedom House data

Table 4.3: Democratic scorecard 2022

<u>Country</u>	<u>The democratic scorecard</u>
Albania	67 (Partly Free)
Kosovo	60 (Partly Free)
North Macedonia	68 (Partly Free)

Source: (Freedom House 2022)

Figure 4.7 Crime Index



Source: Numbeo (2022)

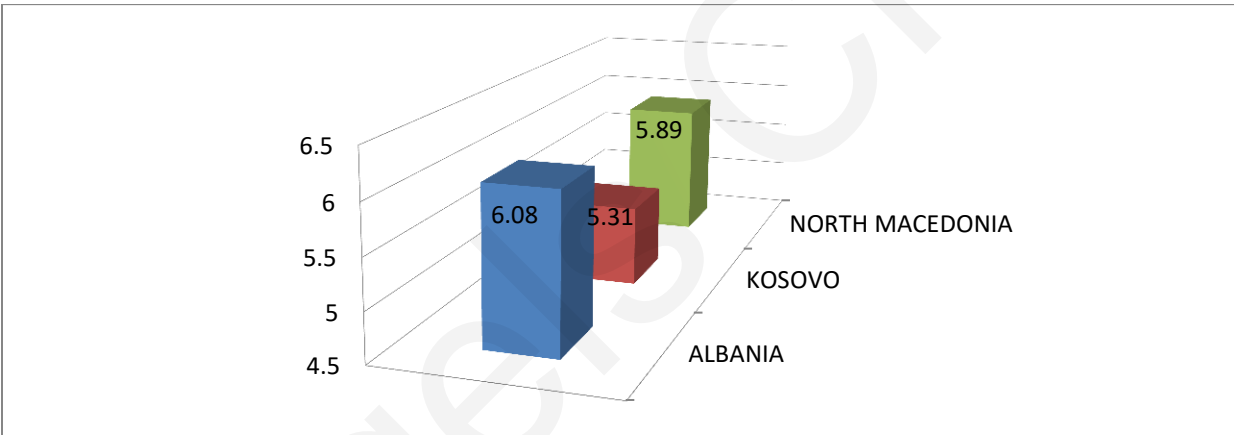
The crime index 2022 for Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo according to Numbeo is as follows:

Table 4.5: Crime Index

Country	The crime index 2022
Albania	46.1
Kosovo	42.3
North Macedonia	40.9

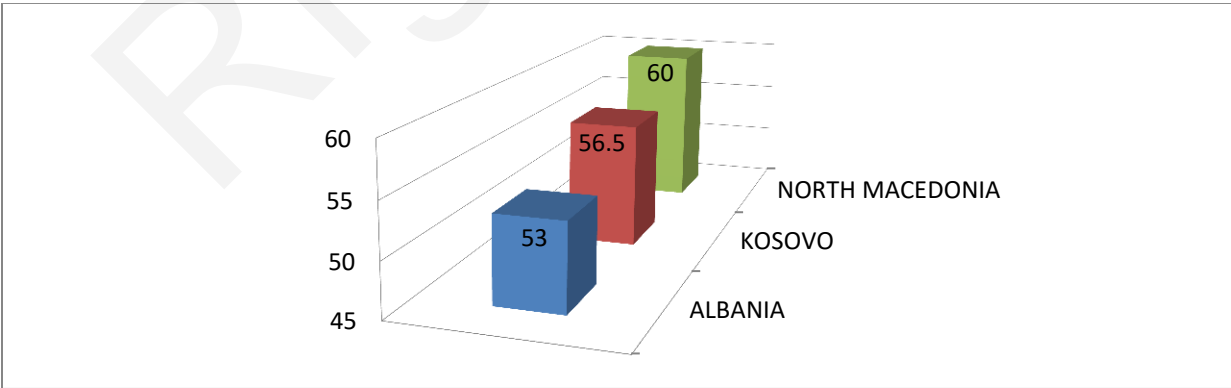
Source: Numbeo (2022)

Figure 4.4 Democracy Index



Source: (Freedom House 2022)

Figure 4.6 Safety Index



Source: Numbeo (2022).

There is a negative correlation between safety index and corruption. Countries with higher levels of corruption tend to have lower safety indices.

Appendix C: Correlation of Corruption, Democracy and Media Freedom 2019-2022

Albania	Corruption	Democracy	Press
Corruption	1	-0.94	-0.81
Democracy	-0.94	1	0.58
Press	-0.81	0.58	1

Kosovo	Corruption	Democracy	Press
Corruption	1	0.37	-0.95
Democracy	0.37	1	-0.65
Press	-0.95	-0.65	1

North Macedonia	Corruption	Democracy	Press
Corruption	1	0.21	-0.18
Democracy	0.21	1	0.92
Press	-0.18	0.92	1

According to the tables, the cross correlations between many indices are quite high and these results show that there is a measurable relationship between the three components. After seeing the correlation relationships between the different indices, the basis for a stronger investigation was set.