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The Informal Life of Political Parties in the Western Balkan Societies

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1 Introduction

This report presents the main findings and conclusions from our research into informal political practices in the Western Balkans (WB6) societies. The research was conducted during the first half of implementation of the Horizon 2020 project 'Closing the gap between formal and informal institutions in the Balkans' (INFORM). We identify and discuss two major themes relating to the 'informal life' of political parties in the six countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia).

The first theme is parties' strategies of electoral mobilization, which, in the WB6, are often substantially based on the establishment of non-programmatic linkages with citizens. This involves an array of clientelist practices, facilitated through informal relations, which are found throughout all the countries under study to different degrees and in varying forms. On the theme of clientelism, we present cross-national findings about the extent and character of clientelist practices in the WB6, analyse the role of citizens in establishing clientelist linkages, and discuss citizens' perceptions of the various manifestations of clientelism.

The second theme of this report is concerned with the phenomenon of inter-party politics. During our research, we encountered the informal institution of 'leaders' meetings', which, as we describe, often complements and/or overrides formal institutional and political procedures and outcomes. We see the leaders' meetings as an instance for analysing the interaction between formal and informal institutions, and we use this report to lay out some of our initial findings on how this interaction takes place. We also address the role which the European Union (EU) representatives in the WB6 play in the overall dynamics of the leaders' meetings.

We start our inquiry from the working theoretical model of the INFORM project (Figure 1), which is based on previous theoretical and empirical work on the formal-informal interaction conducted by North (1990), Helmke and Levitsky (2006) and Ledeneva (1998, 2001, 2013). Our model focuses on the interaction between formal and informal institutions, conceptualised as the 'rules of the game' within a society that shape human behaviour and structure political, economic and social life (North, 1990, 1991). Formal institutions include constitutional and legal norms, contracts and mechanisms of implementation which, in our modelling, determine the 'formal constraints' of social behaviour. They are "created, communicated, and enforced through channels that are widely accepted as official" (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 727). Informal institutions consist of the informal elements that bind society together, such as traditions, cultural and moral norms, religious beliefs, habits, trust and networks (Zeghni and Fabry, 2008). These informal institutions determine informal constraints, which are "created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels" (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 727). Our model presupposes that both formal and informal constraints on behaviour shape the establishment and enforcement of social practices. Our goal within INFORM is to determine whether, how and why this takes place.

Figure 1 Working theoretical model of INFORM



Thus, when it comes to the political realm, we see political parties and citizens alike as constrained by both formal and informal rules/institutions, and we assume that political practices are shaped within this context. Informality emanates from the application of the long-standing social values and norms that are characteristic of WB6 societies, which often provide more certain reference points for agents than the formal institutions and rules. Formality, on the other hand, stems from the formal institutions/rules, which are rapidly changing because of the Europeanization process and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* by all six countries. In our model, practices are also affected by the resources of the participants, such as their economic, cultural and social capital.

These theoretical assumptions only represent the starting points in our inquiry into the role of political informality in the overall dynamic of political practices in the WB6. Our empirical investigation of the political realm will help develop a theory of interaction between the formal and informal institutions in the WB6 societies. In what follows, we first present data about the numerous practices connected with clientelism in the WB6, before presenting our main findings about the informal institution of leaders' meetings. Our findings are primarily based on data from the INFORM survey conducted in May and June 2017 (N=6040 across the WB6). We also draw on a number of semi-structured interviews and a body of ethnographic and archival work conducted by the members of the INFORM team since the start of the project.

2 Clientelism as an informal practice for political mobilization

Political clientelism is typically defined as a relationship between citizens/voters (clients) and political parties or office-seekers (patrons) which is personalized, reciprocal and asymmetric in terms of distribution of power and resources (Hopkin, 2006). It is a specific type of non-programmatic political linkage (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes et al., 2013) that is organized around particularistic transactions. Clientelist relations are elusive – they are not easy to identify and measure. Political parties do not, of course, publicly announce that their redistribution strategies are based on clientelist dealings, but the widespread pursuit of such strategies represents a ‘public secret’ in all the countries studied. Clientelist practices in the WB6 countries include vote buying, spoils-based employment in public administrations, favours ensuring preferential treatment in dealing with state institutions, and particularistic redistribution of state subsidies. Table 1 presents a ‘catalogue’ of inducements and enforcement mechanisms pursued by patrons across the WB6 that we registered during our research.

Table 1 Inducements and enforcement mechanisms that patrons employ across the WB6

Inducements	Enforcement mechanisms
Handouts for vote buying (money, goods)	Carousel voting
Party employment in public administration	Photographing the ballot
Selective distribution of subsidies for farmers	List of ‘secured voters’
Selective distribution of social benefits and similar favours	Bots (people assigned to social media to create pro-contra public opinion)
Public procurement contracts	Trading of influence, donations, protection from investigations

The variety of inducements and enforcement mechanisms that are distributed and pursued across the WB6 suggests a preliminary theoretical distinction between electoral and relational clientelism (Nichter, 2010; Gans-Morse et al., 2014), both of which occur in our countries of interest.

Electoral clientelism represents relationships that are ad-hoc, of short duration, and which typically involve transactions established and implemented during election campaigns and, especially, on the election day. A very common practice with electoral clientelist relationships is vote buying (a one-off trade of money or goods in exchange for votes). Vote buying and electoral clientelism in general typically occur among socially and

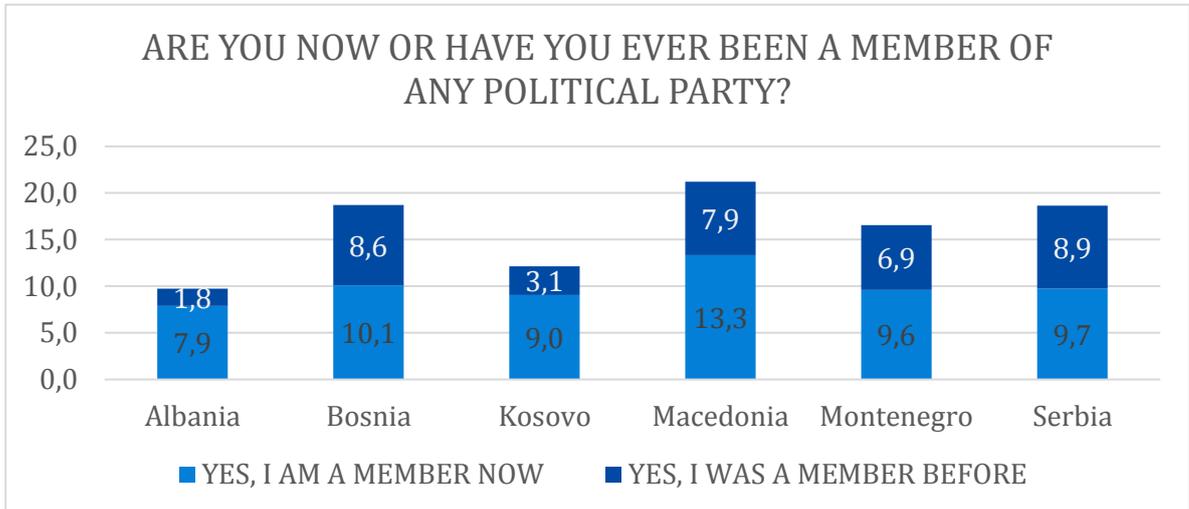
economically disadvantaged communities and individuals, and very often involve direct mechanisms of enforcement such as monitoring of voters through demands to photograph the ballot and 'carousel' voting.

Relational clientelism by contrast is based on long-term relationships, where the inducements that are distributed for the wellbeing of clients are much more substantial (Keefer, 2007). Under relational clientelism, there is a wider 'catalogue' of inducements, ranging from party patronage in employment to giving away long-term or permanent benefits, usually at the expense of public resources. Unlike electoral clientelism, these practices are much more nuanced and are often situated within a grey area of the political domain; their influence on the election outcome lies somewhere between legality and illegality. Relational clientelist practices are typically enforced through demands towards clients to provide lists of 'secured voters' (friends and family members) and to demonstrate loyalty by participating in party activities.

Practices that fall under the umbrella of relational clientelism depend to a large degree on informal relations. The more substantial inducements are 'negotiated' between patrons and clients through reliance on the informal 'rules of the game'. Often, it takes a long-term clientelist relationship and/or strong informal connections to ensure substantial particularistic benefits (for example, employment in public administration, subsidies, or preferential treatment in dealing with state institutions). The fulfilment of such a benefit also creates a stronger link between the client and patron, which is further materialized into long-term political support. It is therefore critical to understand relational clientelism if we are to grasp the range of informal practices and norms in the WB6. This is an important theoretical and empirical preliminary that was established in the study of clientelism within the framework of INFORM, and which will further guide our inquiries.

It is important to point out that political parties in WB6 societies are more successful political mobilizers, in comparison to elsewhere in Europe. One indicator of this point is the high frequency of political party membership. While the East European average stands at 3% of the population (Van Biezen et al., 2012), nearly one in every six respondents in our survey reported being politically socialized through membership in a political party (Graph 1). The data shows that 10% of the respondents in the six surveyed countries are members of political parties, while 6.4% used to be members. Current party membership is largest in Macedonia (13.3%), and lowest in Albania (7.9%). Party membership in Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo ranges from 9% to 10.1%. Moreover, nearly 9% of the respondents in Serbia, 8.6% in Bosnia, 7.9% in Macedonia and 6.9% in Montenegro reported that they had been members of a political party in the past. Respondents in Albania and Kosovo reported past membership in much lower frequencies (1.8% and 3.1% respectively).

Graph 1 Party membership

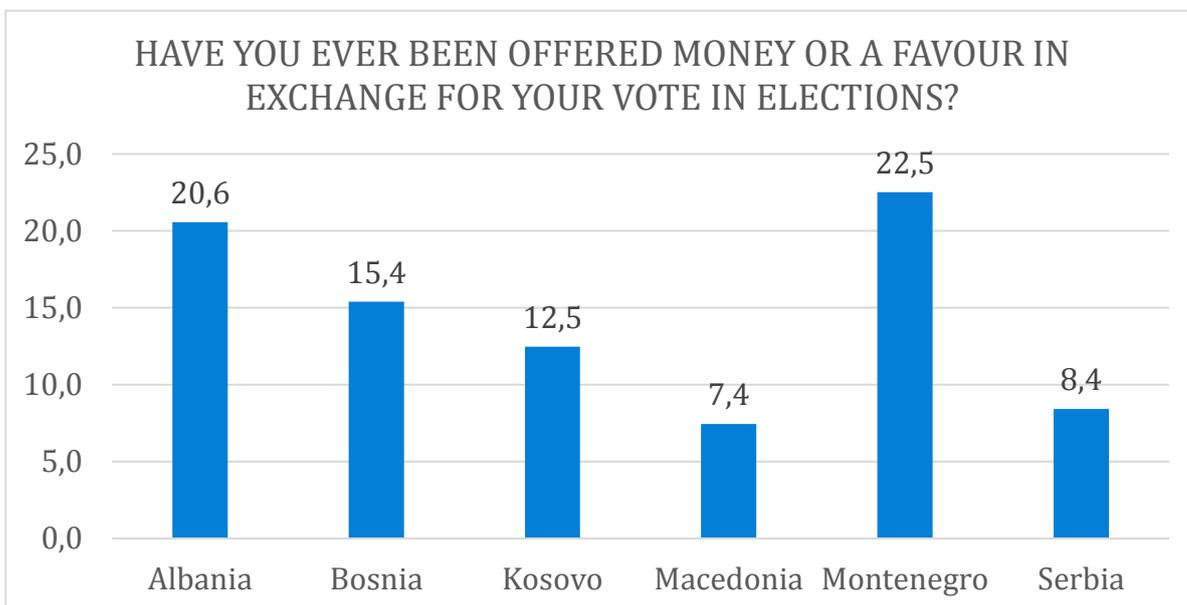


In the rest of this section, we present findings from the INFORM survey. First, we provide data on the extent of electoral and relational clientelism across the WB6. Next, we discuss the role of citizens in establishing clientelist relationships. Finally, we describe citizens' perceptions of several closely connected practices that make up the 'universe' of clientelism in the WB6.

2.1 Extent of clientelist practices, according to citizens' reported experience

Our survey's most reliable measure of the extent of clientelist practices in the WB6 is the question "Have you ever been offered money or a favour in exchange for your vote in elections?" (Graph 2). This question directly measures citizens' experiences of clientelist offers, and we therefore deem it a more suitable indicator of the presence of clientelism than items that report on the citizens' perceptions of the extent of the phenomenon. Notably, one in five respondents in Montenegro (22.5%) and Albania (20.6%) reported receiving an offer of money or favours in exchange for a vote, while the corresponding figures in Bosnia and Kosovo were 15.4% and 12.5% respectively. The clientelist pressure on voters is lowest in Serbia (8.4%) and Macedonia (7.4%).

Graph 2 Have you ever been offered money or a favour in exchange for your vote in elections? (%)



To gain a more practical understanding of the effect of clientelism on election days across the WB6, we projected the figures onto the number of registered voters in the last general elections before our survey (Table 2). We juxtapose this with data about electoral performance in the same elections for the winning party/coalition and for the party/coalition entering with fewest votes in the parliament. In each of the countries of interest, the number of voters who have ever experienced a clientelist offer represents a substantial proportion of the electorate, which is thus able to affect election outcomes. The number of voters who are projected to have been targeted with clientelist offers in each country significantly surpasses the number of votes needed for a party to obtain at least one seat. It is also more than two-thirds of the votes for the election winners in Albania and Montenegro, while it exceeds the number of voters for the winners in Bosnia and Kosovo. Of course, our projections should not be taken as a precise indicator of the effects of clientelism in election outcomes. Nevertheless, they do provide a very rough illustration of the extent of its influence, suggesting that political parties in the WB6 devote significant energies to establishing clientelist linkages for the sake of political support. In short, our findings suggest that the scale of clientelism is enough to swing election results.

Table 2 Projection of survey responses onto the number of registered voters in the WB6 countries

	ALB 2013	BIH 2014	KOS 2014	MKD 2016	MNE 2016	SRB 2016
Registered voters*	3,271,885	3,278,908	1,799,023	1,784,416	528,817	6,739,441
% of reported pressured voters**	20.6	15.4	12.5	7.4	22.5	8.4

Projection of pressured voters	674,008	504,952	224,878	132,047	118,984	566,113
Votes: election winner (seats/total)*	993,904 (83/140)	274,057 (9/42)	222,181 (37/120)	454,577 (51/120)	158,490 (36/81)	1,823,147 (131/250)
Votes: last party entering parliament (seats/total)*	7,993 (1/140)	22,088 (1/42)	645 (1/120)	30,964 (2/120)	1,802 (1/81)	16,262 (1/250)

Sources: *National electoral commissions and **INFORM survey.

Political parties in the WB6 also exert more negative forms of pressure – threats and sanctions – on voters to secure political support. In Montenegro, 11.7% of respondents reported that they have been asked by their manager/boss to vote for a certain party on election day, while 7.5% said that they have been asked to participate in party activities. The corresponding figures are 6%/3.4% in Macedonia, 5.5%/5.1% in Kosovo, 5.2%/6% in Serbia, 4.8%/5.6% in Albania and 4.5%/3.3% in Bosnia (Graph 3).

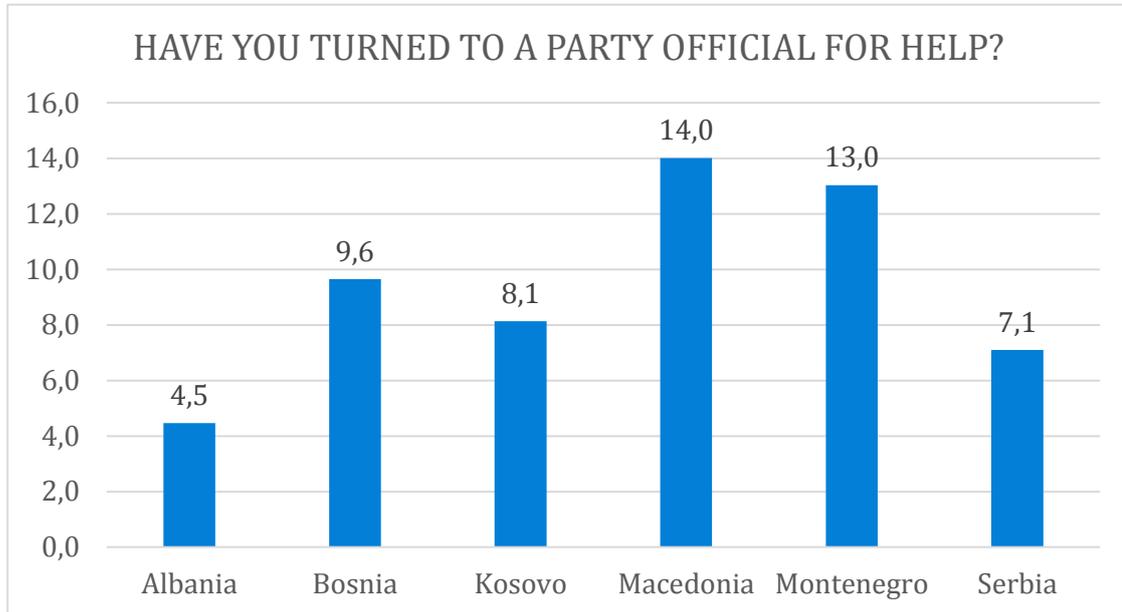
Graph 3 Reported pressure from employers (%)



2.2 A role for citizens in forging the clientelist link?

Our survey suggests that citizens too engage in establishing relationships with political parties and their officials/activists for the sake of securing particularistic benefits. When respondents were asked whether they have ever approached a party official or activist for help, the highest proportions of affirmative responses were in Macedonia (14%) and Montenegro (13%), while lowest were in Albania (4.5%) (Graph 4). The figures for the other countries lie in the middle: 9.6% of Bosnian respondents, 8.1% of Kosovars and 7.1% of Serbs reported asking help from political parties. The key issue here is whether these citizens who seek benefits brokered by political parties represent a group from which parties draw their base of clients. If so, we may conclude that citizens as well as politicians contribute to the presence of clientelism in the WB6.

Graph 4 Reported turning to party officials for help (%)



We tested for the effect of requests directed toward political parties (i.e. ‘benefit-seeking’) on the probability of receiving a clientelist offer (answer to the question: “Have you ever been offered money or a favour in exchange for your vote in elections?”). Our findings confirm that ‘benefit-seeking’ has a statistically significant positive effect both within all the country samples and at the level of the whole region. Indeed, among a range of control variables that are typical theoretical candidates for explaining clientelism, benefit-seeking behaviour is the best predictor of the ‘clientelist offer’ (Table 3).

Table 3 Models calculating the effect of benefit-seeking on the probability of clientelist offers

	ALB (Model 1)	BIH (Model 2)	KOS (Model 3)	MKD (Model 4)	MNE (Model 5)	SRB (Model 6)	WB6 (Model 7)
Benefit	2.239 (5.60)**	1.955 (6.43)**	2.398 (6.29)**	1.836 (5.55)**	1.203 (4.08)**	1.333 (3.29)**	1.731 (13.13)**
hh_income	0.182 (2.78)**	0.096 (1.38)	0.134 (1.76)	-0.072 (0.74)	0.010 (0.15)	-0.108 (1.23)	0.056 (1.92)
employ_6cats	0.026 -0.39	-0.040 (0.51)	-0.053 (0.58)	0.116 (1.30)	-0.027 (0.39)	0.007 (0.08)	-0.002 (0.08)
educ_3cats	-0.419 (2.48)*	-0.243 (1.06)	0.139 (0.56)	0.207 (0.82)	-0.450 (1.98)*	0.424 (1.56)	-0.147 (1.68)
Partym	-0.33 -1.16	0.179 (0.92)	0.083 (0.29)	0.087 (0.37)	0.263 (1.38)	0.423 (2.09)*	0.151 (1.72)
Residence	0.12 -1.48	-0.154 (1.10)	-0.059 (0.42)	0.206 (1.43)	0.359 (3.08)**	-0.531 (3.41)**	0.043 (0.93)
Perception	0.039 -1.07	0.198 (3.03)**	-0.015 (0.32)	-0.019 (0.38)	0.230 (4.27)**	-0.016 (0.23)	0.064 (3.28)**
favorvote_just	0.21 (2.29)*	-0.008 (0.09)	-0.198 (1.94)	0.160 (1.66)	0.189 (2.34)*	0.084 (0.82)	0.062 (1.72)
Age	-0.018 (2.83)**	-0.026 (3.20)**	-0.014 (1.32)	-0.013 (1.37)	-0.023 (3.05)**	-0.042 (4.27)**	-0.022 (6.66)**
Gender	-0.086 -0.41	-0.375 (1.49)	-0.108 (0.34)	-0.386 (1.20)	-0.003 (0.02)	-0.164 (0.54)	-0.199 (1.92)
Ethnicity		0.016 (1.10)	0.013 (0.24)	0.000 (0.01)	-0.014 (1.21)	-0.033 (0.58)	-0.002 (0.30)
Cons	-1.819 (2.22)*	-1.640 (1.42)	-1.498 (1.31)	-3.313 (2.93)**	-2.618 (2.69)**	0.336 (0.27)	
N	634	616	478	735	524	627	3622

*p<0.05; ** p<0.01

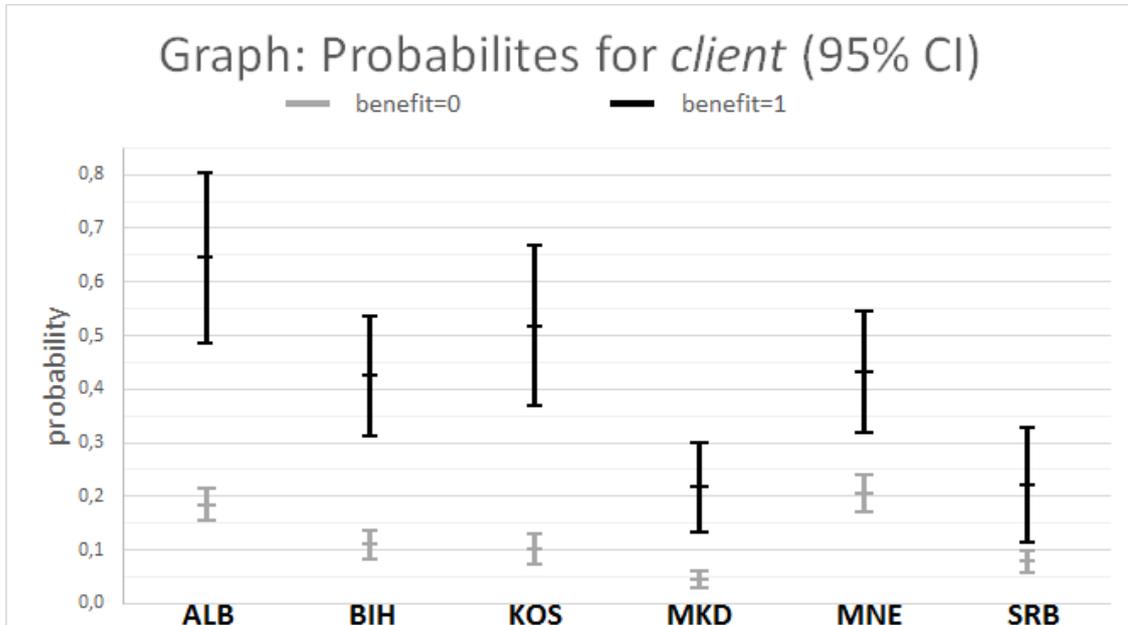
Dependent variable: *client* (coded “1” if the respondent reported a clientelist offer, coded “0” if not). Main independent variable: *benefit* (coded “1” if the respondent reported benefit-seeking, “0” if not). Control variables: *hh_income* (household income); *employ_6cats* (employment, six categories); *educ_3cats* (education, three categories); *partym* (party membership, three categories: current, past and no party membership); *residence* (place of residence, four categories: village, town, city, big city); *perception* (perception of occurrence of the practice: “to become a member of a political party to get a job in state/public sector or enterprises”); *favorvote_just* ([dis-]agreement with the statement “If someone receives a favour from a political party, they are obliged to vote for the party that gave it”); *age*; *gender*; *ethnicity*. Coefficients are calculated by logistic regression for models 1-6 (on the samples for Albania [ALB], Bosnia and Herzegovina [BIH], Kosovo [KOS], Macedonia [MKD], Montenegro [MNE] and Serbia [SRB]). Coefficients are calculated by conditional (fixed-effects) logistic regression for the sample at the level of the Western Balkans (WB6, Model 7). Data from the “INFORM” survey, June 2017.

We use logistic regression models to calculate the coefficients for the country-level samples and a fixed-effects logistic regression for the whole WB6 sample. Our dependent variable *client* is a binary variable, coded “1” if the respondent reported receiving a clientelist offer in the past, and “0” if not. We use this variable as a proxy for clientelism. Our main independent variable measures ‘benefit-seeking’ directly: the binary variable *benefit* is coded “1” if the respondent reported requesting help from a political party official/activist in the past and “0” if not. In terms of socio-economic variables, we control for household income, employment, education and place of residence. Furthermore, we control for respondents’ interaction with political party organizations (current and past membership of a political party, as well as non-membership). Finally, we include two variables that control for respondents’ perceptions and attitudes towards clientelism. One variable reports on respondents’ perception of how pervasive clientelism is in the country (i.e. the item: “How widespread is to become a member of a political party to get a job in state/public sector or enterprises?”). Another variable reports attitudes, i.e. respondents’ (dis-)agreement with the statement “If someone receives a favour from a political party, they are obliged to vote for the party that gave it”.

As stated, our *benefit* variable has a statistically significant effect on the variable *client* in all country-level samples, and also at the level of the overall WB6 sample. Furthermore, the control variables that report for socio-economic status, political party socialization, perceptions and attitudes do not show a constant effect on the probability of clientelism. These findings underline that benefit-seeking is a sound predictor of clientelist practices, highlighting the role of citizen agency in forging patron-client links.

To gauge the effects of benefit-seeking on clientelism, we calculated the probabilities and odds ratios for the occurrence of the outcome of clientelism among benefit-seekers and non-benefit-seekers. Once again, we obtained statistically significant values both at country levels and at the regional level. The calculated probabilities are presented in Graph 5, while the odds ratios are presented in Table 4.

Graph 5 Probabilities for clientelist practices



Across all the countries there are statistically significant differences between benefit-seekers and non-benefit-seekers in the occurrence of clientelist transactions, all other variables being equal. In Albania, the probability of a clientelist transaction rises to an estimated value of 0.64 for benefit-seekers, compared to a probability of 0.18 among non-benefit-seekers (95% CI); in Bosnia, the probability among benefit-seekers is 0.42, compared to 0.11 among non-benefit-seekers, while in Kosovo, the probabilities are 0.51 and 0.1. In the other three WB6 countries the contrasts are lower: 0.21 compared to 0.04 in Macedonia, 0.43 compared to 0.2 in Montenegro, and 0.21 compared to 0.08 in Serbia.

Regarding the odds ratios between benefit-seekers and non-benefit-seekers for the occurrence of clientelism, the values are highest for Kosovo (benefit-seekers in Kosovo have 11 times the odds of participating in a clientelist transaction than non-benefit-seekers) and Albania (odds among benefit-seekers are 9.4 higher). The odds ratios for Serbia (3.8) and Montenegro (3.3) are the lowest in the whole WB6 group, but are still fairly high and are statistically significant. The odds ratios for Bosnia (7) and Macedonia (6.2) lie somewhere in between. At the regional level, benefit-seekers have 5.6 times higher odds of participating in clientelist transactions than non-benefit-seekers (all values are calculated with a 95% CI).

Table 4 Odds ratios between benefit-seekers and non-benefit-seekers for the occurrence offer of a clientelist transaction

	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
ALB (Model 1)	9.386607	3.751046	5.6	0.000	4.288982	20.54296
BIH (Model 2)	7.060694	2.145831	6.43	0.000	3.891857	12.80967
KOS (Model 3)	11.00233	4.196782	6.29	0.000	5.209529	23.23652
MKD (Model 4)	6.273709	2.074904	5.55	0.000	3.281002	11.99616
MNE (Model 5)	3.329183	0.9804644	4.08	0.000	1.869191	5.929549
SRB (Model 6)	3.793714	1.537452	3.29	0.001	1.714369	8.395083
WB6 (Model 7)	5.648285	0.7448981	13.13	0.000	4.36174	7.314311

Strong citizen agency in clientelist relationships indicates that any study of the phenomenon must not focus exclusively on the effects of patrons' actions, but should also develop an understanding of the role of citizens. This fits very well with the overall 'bottom-up' approach of INFORM to the study of informality, and will thus be one avenue to be explored in the second half of project implementation.

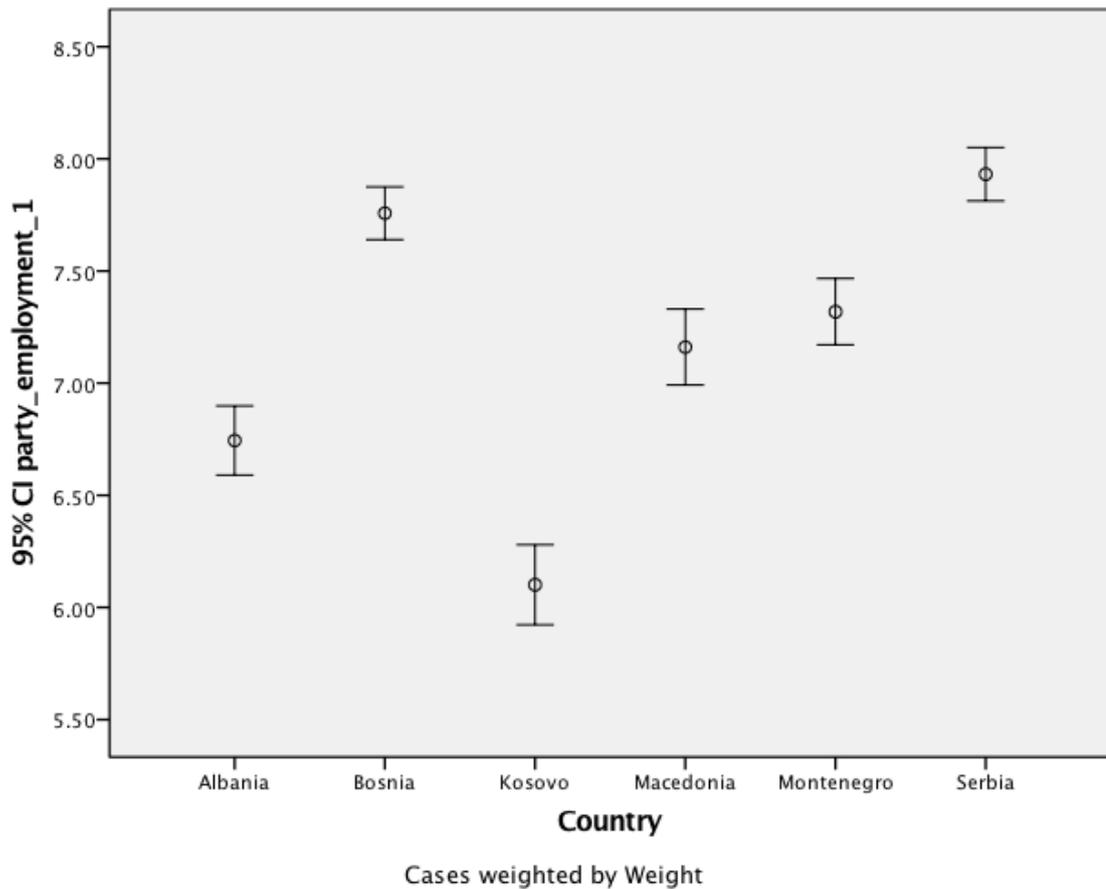
2.3 Perceptions and shared expectations of clientelism

In comparison to reported experiences of clientelism, the data about citizen perceptions shows even more widespread recognition of clientelist practices, which are seen to be primarily associated with the employment process. Clientelist-based employment fits well with the definition of relational clientelism, because it is based on a durable relationship established through providing employment in exchange for loyal votes and party activism. This section discusses citizens' perceptions about finding employment in terms of different variables, and analyses the connection between the variables.

The majority of respondents in the WB6 believe that employment is closely related to political parties. This refers both to employment in the public sector and to employment in other sectors, which indicates that citizens see political parties as informal employment brokers. To analyse these perceptions, we computed a new variable labelled *party_employment*, which is based on three interconnected variables (Cronbach's

Alpha=0.782) coded on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating “does not occur at all” and 10 indicating “occurs all the time”. The computed variables indicate citizens’ perceptions about the pervasiveness of the following behaviours: 1) employment through entering a political party or party support; 2) becoming a member of a political party to receive a job in state/public sector or enterprise; 3) losing or not being given a job because of political party affiliation.

Graph 6 Perceptions of the spread of party-based employment



The survey data drawn from our composite variable on party employment shows that party-related employment is seen as a widespread phenomenon (WB6 aggregate mean = 7.2). These perceptions are strongest in Serbia (mean = 7.93) and Bosnia (7.75), followed by Montenegro (7.31), Macedonia (7.16) and Albania (6.74), while they are weaker but still notable in Kosovo (6.1).

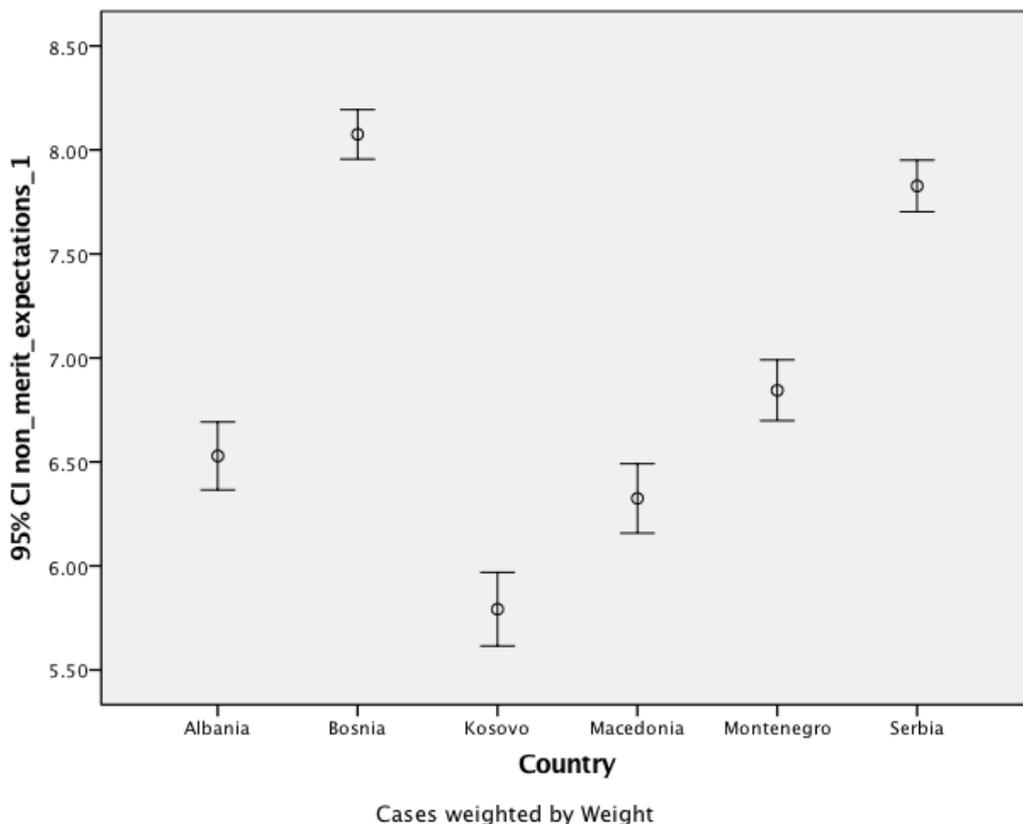
This data may indicate two interconnected phenomena: first, that political parties are actively engaged in top-down practices of clientelist employment, which are reflected in respondents’ perceptions; secondly, that the idea of party-sponsored employment is deeply embedded in citizens’ perceptions, to the extent that clientelist employment is seen as a normal ‘rule of the game’. This suggests that there are shared expectations

which act as informal incentives on political parties' behaviour in a bottom-up manner forming a sort of vicious cycle.

While the top-down phenomenon has been explored already through the results of the computed party employment variable, the following analysis will elaborate the connection between party employment and broader public attitudes towards (non-)meritocratic employment. To compare attitudes towards merits-based employment with attitudes towards party-based employment and other types of clientelist employment (based on favours, gifts, connections or paying), we computed another variable:

non_merit_expectations. This variable was computed from four variables (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.868) reporting on the spread of the following practices: 1) using contact(s) to find a job in state/public sector or enterprises; 2) general employment through a relevant informal connection; 3) paying money to find a job in the state/public sector or enterprises; 4) general employment by paying for the job.

Graph 7 Spread of other non-merit employment expectations

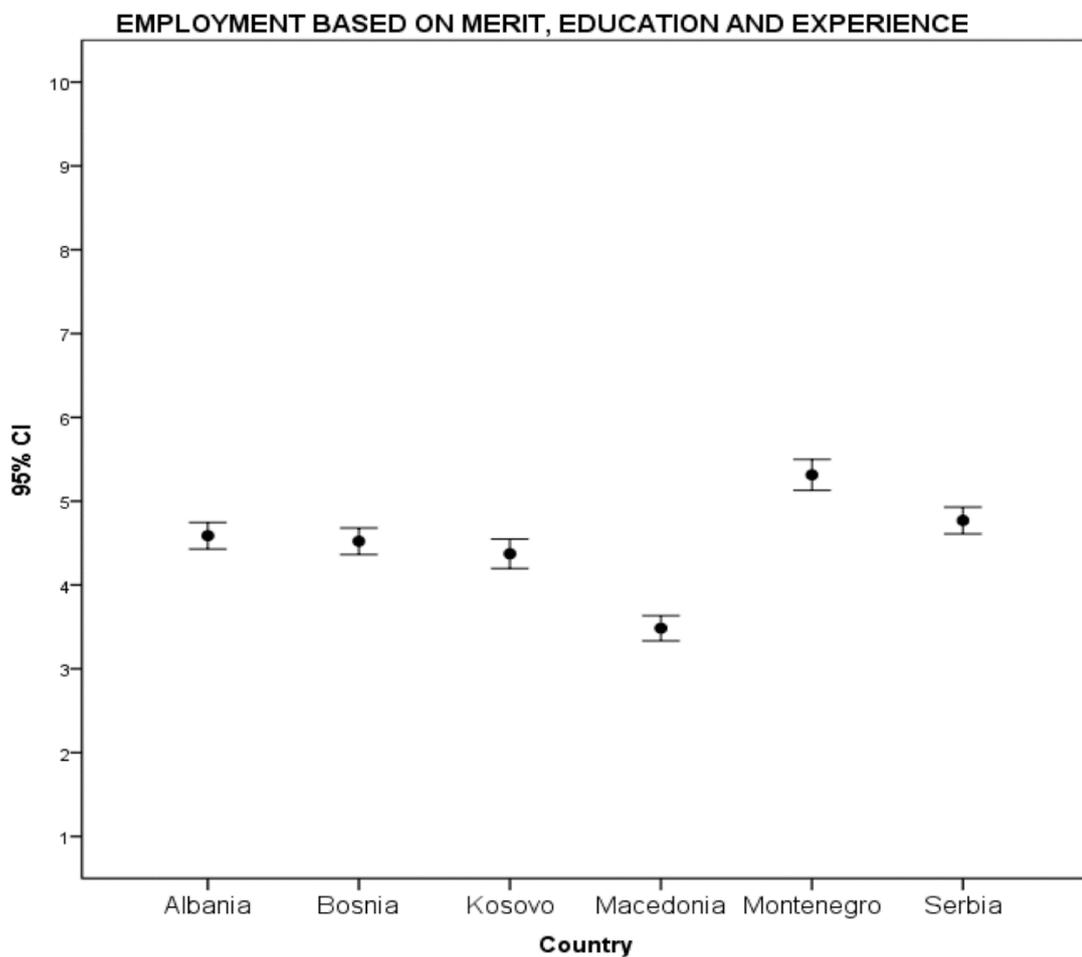


The results from these four computed variables indicate that non-merit employment expectations are on average fairly widespread across the entire region (WB6 aggregate mean = 6.97). Non-merit employment expectations are again most widespread in Bosnia (mean = 8.07) and Serbia (7.82), followed by Montenegro (6.84), Albania (6.52) and Macedonia (6.32), while such expectations are lowest in Kosovo (5.79). This suggests

that respondents believe not that employment is based on merit, but that finding a job requires gifts or favours, connections (*veze, vrski*) and even money.

On the other hand, survey results indicate that citizens are generally sceptical about the spread of meritocratic employment based on qualifications and previous work experience. Most of the respondents from all countries generally believe that employment is not based on merit, education and experience: Macedonian respondents have the lowest belief in the presence of meritocratic employment (mean = 3.48), followed by Kosovo (4.37), Albania (4.48), Bosnia (4.52) and Serbia (4.77), while only Montenegrin respondents reported a somewhat positive perception (5.31).

Graph 8 Perceptions about the presence of employment based on merit, education and experience



Finally, citizens' expectations about party-related employment are strongly correlated with those about employment through favours and gifts, connections, or even through paying for the job, and are negatively associated with expectations of employment based on merit, education and experience.

3 'Leaders' meetings' as an informal institution of high-level politics

The institution of leaders' meetings is one of the phenomena of informality in the WB6 societies that was identified and studied by the INFORM team during the first half of the project. Leaders' meetings can be identified as a distinct informal institution in all the WB6 countries except for Serbia, because of their clear presence in the public discourse and their crucial impact on political and policy outcomes. Unlike most of the phenomena studied by INFORM, which are most visible at the level of society, leaders' meetings are visible at the level of 'high politics', often capturing public and media attention in the WB6 countries.

Leaders' meetings can be defined as an institution, as well as a set of practices, which is constituted by negotiations between the leaders of major political parties conducted outside the framework of the formal institutions, with a view to achieving a consensus that is then incorporated in the formal order. It could be argued that negotiations among political elites are a widespread political phenomenon that can be found around the world. However, what we examine in the WB6 is a systematic pattern of decision-making that circumvents formal institutions. Leaders' meetings are institutionalized as the rule rather than the exception. They come as a consequence of the inability of formal political institutions, especially national parliaments, to mitigate and resolve inter-party conflicts. Instead, such crises in the WB6 have frequently resulted in some political actors blockading and boycotting the formal political institutions and processes.

Some recent examples of leaders' meetings leading both to a successful outcome to substantial, longstanding political disputes include the process of forming a government after the general elections in Kosovo (2014), the adoption of the EU coordination mechanism in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2015), the agreement between the government and the opposition parties over EU-promoted judicial reform in Albania (2016), and the meetings about the agreement between the government and opposition parties that resolved the political crises in Macedonia (i.e. the so-called 'Przhino Agreement', 2015-2016) and in Montenegro (2015-2016).

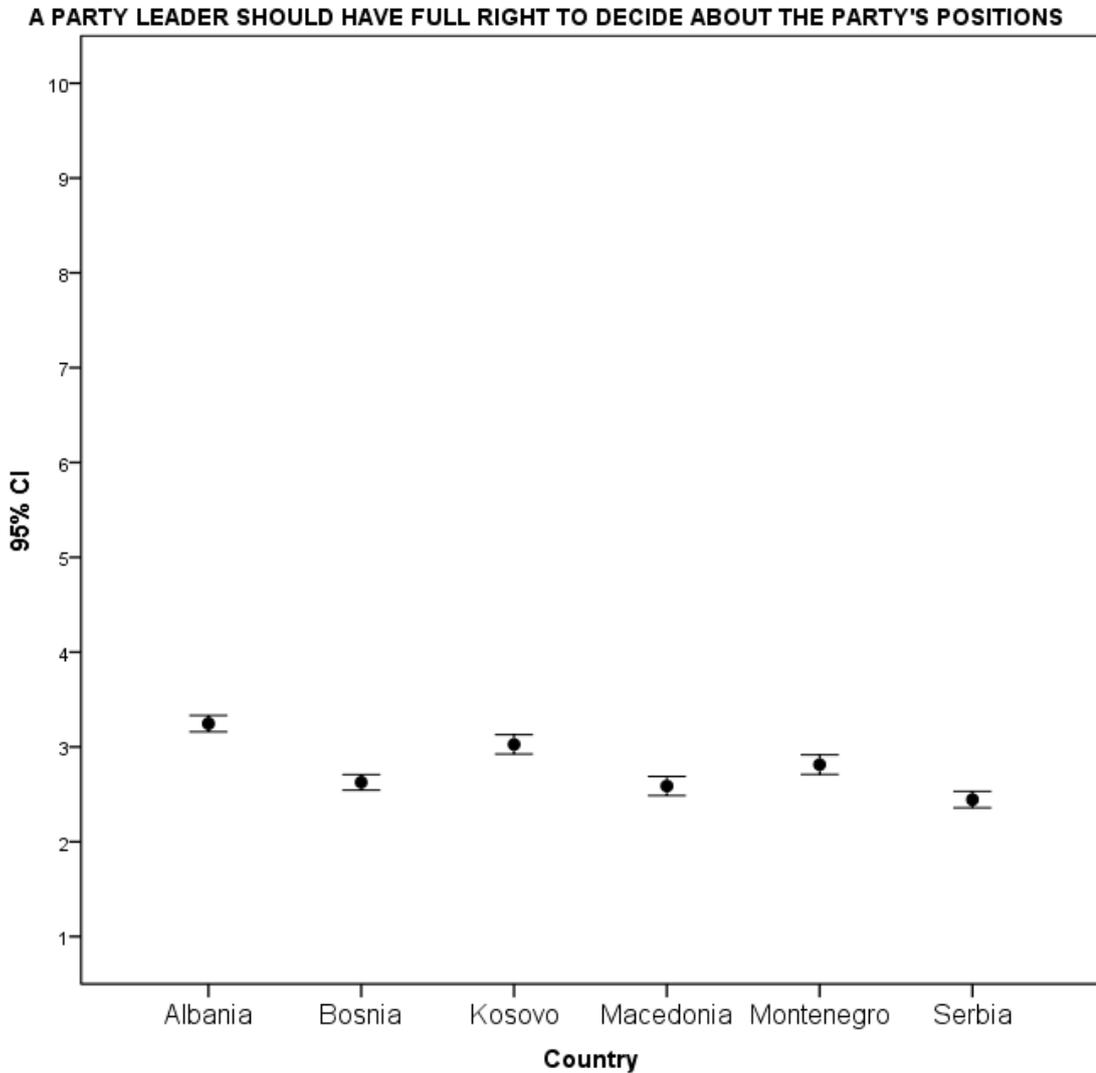
In all these cases, the leaders' meetings had four elements in common. First, they were result of the inability of political actors to achieve a solution to the disputes within formal political institutions. Indeed, when formal institutions proved ineffective in mitigating political conflict, such conflicts have shown the potential to spill over out of the state institutions (for example, in the mass civic protests during the Macedonian political crisis in 2015 and 2016, as well as the protests in Montenegro in 2015). Consequently, high-level political mediation such as leaders' meetings seem necessary to prevent larger societal conflict and to bring the dispute back into some form of political dialogue which, though it may be informal (behind the leaders' negotiation table), is still effective. In the case of the adoption of the EU coordination mechanism in Bosnia, leaders' meetings were promoted as a tool to overcome the blockage in the process of drafting the mechanism within the formal institutions, which had stalled for more than a year. In all these examples, the formal process had been blocked, sometimes with wider consequences for

society. In such contexts, leaders' meetings proved to be an effective way to deliver tangible results when formal institutions remained incapacitated.

The second shared feature of these examples is the highly centralised nature of the political parties in the WB6, which affects the transparency of the overall political process. This renders parliaments weak institutions that cannot absorb potential conflicts through debate and deliberation between opposing sides in the political process. Since political parties are almost always dominated by the leader (Karasimeonov 2005), the only effective mitigation of political conflict takes place at the highest level. That is, since party leaders hold most leverage in a political dispute, they are the only ones who can solve it, which inevitably results in non-transparent, 'face-to-face' decision making which is far from public scrutiny. Evidently, such outcomes leave space for public doubt about some hidden provisions (see, for example, the gossip about mutual pardoning between the main two political leaders in Macedonia). Moreover, the ad hoc character of the political solutions may be disputed by some actors as opposed to the formal constitutional or legal order, and may suffer from provisions that are the result of negotiations rather than problem-solving analysis (for example, the so-called 'Law on the Special Public Prosecutor' that has been adopted in Macedonia).

However, although this process, which is firmly controlled by political party leaders, leads to overall lack of transparency, our survey shows that such a leadership role is highly desired and seen as justified across the WB6, with a notable exception of Serbia. Our survey data shows that the majority of respondents in Bosnia (62.5%), Albania (55.2%) and Kosovo (51.3%) believe that the leaders of political parties should have full freedom to decide on their parties' positions. The same is true of nearly half the respondents in Macedonia (49.5%) and Montenegro (46.2%). Only in Serbia do most respondents consider that party leaders should not take decisions on their own (54.5%). This data reveals the general preferences of the public, which predominantly approves of party leaders having the capacity to decide autonomously on party positions. This strongly suggests that leaders' meetings will continue to play a prominent role in politics in the WB6.

Graph 9 A party leader should have the full right to decide on the party's positions



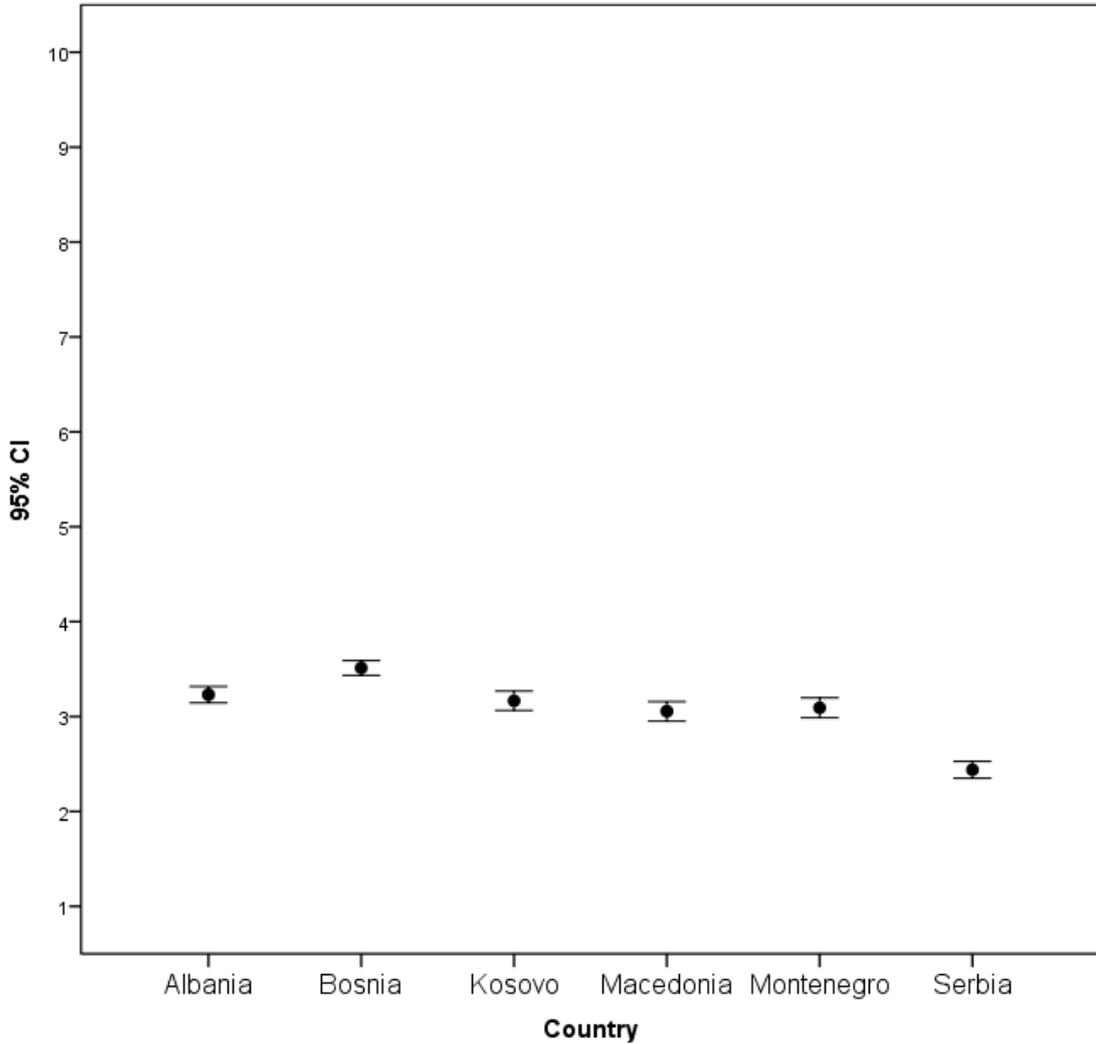
The third shared element in the recent cases of leaders' meetings is the involvement of the international community, especially EU representatives, both as brokers of the meetings and as participants providing positive and negative inducements for the parties involved in the conflict. EU mediators assumed a prominent, if not crucial, role in the negotiations between the leaders of political parties in regard to the adoption of judicial reform in Albania, the EU coordination mechanism in Bosnia and the agreement halting the political crisis in Macedonia. Indeed, the case of leaders' meetings in Albania's judicial reform and the EU coordination mechanism in Bosnia were even initiated in response to the inability of formal institutions to meet EU accession requirements. In the other cases, the EU participated by exercising the power of conditionality and using the accession process as an inducement to push for solutions (though this was most evident in EU representatives' pressure over the government formation in Kosovo, it was a feature in all cases that we overviewed). This leads the EU to assume a rather controversial role in the

political process in the WB6. Since the leaders' meetings suffer from a transparency deficit, the EU's participation in this mode of decision making indirectly contributes to the overall lack of transparency in politics in the WB6 countries. This represents a point of ambiguity, since the EU's efforts are often targeted in the opposite direction; for example, by participating in the negotiations in Albania and Macedonia, the EU attempted to contribute to solidifying the rule of law and transparency in the long run. However, the instrument of leaders' meetings, while highly effective, makes the road towards a desired solution problematic.

In contrast to WB6 citizens' generally positive attitude towards the role of party leaders, the public in the WB6 does not on the whole look favourably on the EU's involvement in negotiations within the leaders' meetings. Only in Albania do a majority of respondents (55%) support the involvement of the international community when national politicians cannot agree on solutions. By contrast, the majority of respondents in Serbia (60.4%) disagree that the international community should intervene to reach a solution, followed by the respondents in Macedonia (57.5%) and Bosnia (55.1%). Respondents in Kosovo seem to be most divided over the issue: 44.8% agree with the involvement of the international community while 41.4% disagree. The public in Montenegro is also divided but to a lesser extent than in Kosovo: 47.4% disagree with the involvement and 38% agree.

Graph 10 When our politicians get into conflict and cannot agree among each other on important political issues, the international community should intervene to reach a solution

WHEN OUR POLITICIANS GET INTO CONFLICT AND CANNOT AGREE AMONG EACH OTHER...



The final common element in the cases of leaders' meetings discussed here is the direct connection between the informally reached solutions and the formally adopted ones: the latter are a clear consequence of the former. Thus, the leaders' meetings produce draft legislation that is swiftly incorporated into the formal order, becoming state policy. For example, the 'Przhino Agreement', which contributed to halting the political crisis in Macedonia, has been implemented by a number of legislative amendments which were enacted without any debate in the parliament. Once the four political party leaders agreed, 'their' MPs passively consented to the readymade legislation, which had been agreed at a late-night negotiation table. There was a similar situation regarding justice reform in Albania: the legislative package which had created such controversy and division between the government and the opposition parties was in the end adopted by the Albanian parliament without a single vote against. In the case of the adoption of the EU coordination mechanism in Bosnia, once the leaders' agreement was in place, its

formal adoption swiftly followed at all levels of governance. This kind of interconnection between the informal institution of leaders' meetings and the formal order of decision-making makes leaders' meetings a site where the interaction between formal and informal institutions can be studied.

In terms of the formal-informal interaction, following the four-category typology developed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004; 2006), leaders' meetings can be characterised as a special case of a 'substitutive' informal institution. Substitutive informal institutions appear in spaces where formal institutions fail to deliver a broadly desired state of affairs, i.e. where formal institutions are 'weak'. In such spaces, informal institutions step in to achieve the outcomes which should be achieved by formal institutions. In the case of the EU-required judiciary reform in Albania and the EU coordination mechanism in Bosnia, the leaders' meetings have contributed to fulfilling EU-accession demands when formal institutions failed. In the cases involving fierce political conflict – i.e. in Macedonia and Montenegro – the leaders' meetings have had a broader impact, creating conditions for the immediate application of rule of law principles. In the cases of Macedonia and Montenegro, one of the outcomes of the leaders' meetings was a technical government tasked with organizing elections. This, to a limited extent, levelled the unequal political playing field between the government and the opposition, founded on widespread corruption, clientelism and partisanship of the state by the ruling political parties. In these cases, the leaders' meetings have provided outcomes that circumvent a range of formal institutions in the judiciary, parliament and independent bodies which have been ineffective in terms of the application of rule of law and democratic principles.

Leaders' meetings remain crucial to the study of political informality in the WB6 for several reasons. First, they occur so frequently that they have become a systematic mode of decision making. Second, their impact on political and policy outcomes is substantial, and our data suggests that we can view them as a substitutive type of informal institution, clearly interacting with the formal ones by filling the gap left by the latter. Finally, the EU's engagement in the leaders' meetings makes them an important topic in the overall research agenda on the Europeanization of the WB6. Strikingly, our data suggests that the EU, by involving itself in the leaders' meetings, unintentionally contributes to the lack of transparency of the political process, while intentionally seeking to enhance its effectiveness. The study of leaders' meetings will therefore continue to be a significant part of the INFORM agenda in the second half of the project.

4 Conclusions

This report has focused on two themes of political informality in the WB6 societies. We have presented some preliminary findings that shed light on the character and extent of political clientelism in the WB6 countries, and – in accordance with INFORM's bottom-up research orientation – we have focused on the role of citizens, their practices and perceptions regarding clientelism as a specific type of non-programmatic linkage. We have also discussed the informal institution of 'leaders' meetings', which is prominent in most of the WB6 societies as a mode of decision making that complements formal institutional outcomes. In this section, we summarize our conclusions on the two themes, on the basis of the findings from the first half of the implementation of INFORM.

4.1 On clientelism as an informal practice of political mobilization

Clientelism is widely present in the WB6 societies, and seems to have a substantial effect on political/policy outcomes. We have provided data which suggests that clientelism is present to such an extent that it influences election results in all the WB6 countries, although it seems that the extent of clientelism varies cross-nationally.

The character of clientelist relationships in the WB6 societies varies. We distinguish between two broad rubrics: electoral and relational clientelism. While the latter are primarily based on more durable informal relations which lead to more substantial benefits for clients (e.g. party employment), the former are based on short-term and one-off transactions with less substantial benefits (e.g. vote buying with money or goods).

The distinction between electoral and relational clientelism is not only relevant for analytical purposes, but also for policy making. Applying this distinction in policy allows two foci, one on electoral and another on relational, in contrast to the current dominant focus on election day client practices. This enables wider consideration in policy that encompasses measures that prevent and suppress both electoral and relational practices that feed into election outcomes. Our initial fieldwork suggests that practices of relational clientelism, with the systematic deterioration of institutions and arbitrary, particularistic distribution of resources, ensure advantages for incumbents well before elections. Ensuring less clientelism in general (as opposed to stricter rules only for the period during elections) is not only relevant to good governance, meaning well-functioning institutions, but also to ensuring democratic outcomes within the political process of holding elections. Thus, understanding that there are different types of the phenomenon creates a better foundation to tackle it.

Regarding the problem of how clientelist linkages are established, we find evidence of both top-down and bottom-up dynamics. Political parties offer money and favours in exchange for votes, but citizens also turn to political parties for help when necessary. It seems that not just political parties but also citizens actively participate in setting up the clientelist link. We have thus provided findings in support of the hypothesis that citizens are an important determinant of the clientelist link. Once again, this finding has dual relevance – both for analytical purposes and for the purposes of designing policies to tackle clientelism.

Clientelist exchanges have a strong impact on citizens' perceptions, especially those regarding party employment. Citizens believe that party employment is widespread in all the WB6 countries. They also consider employment to be often associated with the use of informal connections, providing gifts, favours and even bribery. Indeed, citizens are sceptical about the extent of merit-based employment. The perceptions that clientelist practices are widespread suggest that citizens view them as the normal 'rules of the game' in the WB6 countries.

4.2 On leaders' meetings as an informal institution of high-level politics

The institutionalization of leaders' meetings in the public discourses of the WB6 countries suggests that we can view them as an informal institution. We have identified four

common features of the leaders' meetings across the WB6: first, they result from the inability of the formal institutions, especially national parliaments, to resolve political disputes; second, by relying on political parties' centralized organization, the leaders' meetings contribute to the lack of transparency of the political process; third, EU representatives often function as mediators and brokers in the leaders' meetings, i.e. the EU plays a pronounced role in this mode of decision making; finally, leaders' meetings have a crucial impact on political/policy outcomes in the WB6, i.e. they represent a substitutive type of informal institution.

Majorities, or near-majorities, of citizens of all WB6 countries except for Serbia (where, unlike the rest of the WB6, 'leaders' meetings do not take place frequently) believe that party leaders should have full autonomy in deciding the party positions. This can be read as implicit support for the mode of decision making promoted by leaders' meetings.

The EU and its representatives actively mediate in leaders' meetings. However, only in Albania is the involvement of the EU and IC representatives predominantly viewed positively and desired by the majority of citizens. By contrast, the majority of citizens in Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia see the participation of EU/IC representatives as undesired.

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