

TRUST IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract. *Trust in political institutions is very important for the stability of society and functioning of democracy, that is, for the legitimacy of a democratic regime. The question of legitimacy is especially important for the consolidation of new democracies, such as Western Balkan countries. Since trust in political institutions determines citizens' willingness to comply with the decisions of these institutions, as well as governability of modern society, a vicious circle could develop where low level of trust in political institutions impedes their efficient functioning, contributing to further decline of trust. Starting from the importance of trust in political institutions for the normal functioning of society, this paper explores the levels of trust in these institutions over time in Western Balkan countries for the purpose of establishing whether the existing levels of trust could be an obstacle to governance and further consolidation of democracy.*

Key words: *trust, political institutions, government, Western Balkans.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the increasing complexity and interdependence in modern societies, individuals are exposed to rising vulnerability. Individual actors try to solve this problem by trusting other individuals, institutions and systems. Since trust provides them with the sense of security, they are more willing to trust others and to engage in transactions. In the political sphere, where we are also faced with significant vulnerabilities, political trust allows us to optimize the ways in which we allocate our scarce political resources (Warren, 1999).

Unlike general trust which is oriented towards other individuals, political trust is a segment of the vertical relationships between citizens and political authorities or institutions. Trust in political institutions is important in terms of stability and legitimacy of a democratic regime, as well as from the aspect of individual readiness to cooperate in

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achieving collective goals and financing of public goods. Trust in political institutions is particularly important in newly established democracies, such as Western Balkan countries. These countries are characterized by the high level of citizens' distrust toward state, its institutions and social institutions in general.

Sources of trust in political institutions have been the subject matter of extensive theoretical and empirical research, while the consequences of political trust are far less examined. We can assume that citizens will comply with the decisions of political institutions if they are perceived as legitimate (Tyler, Huo, 2002). If citizens express lower levels of trust in political institutions, they will be less willing to accept governmental regulations, which can create a social environment in which it is more difficult for political leaders to govern and implement legislation.

Low trust in political institutions results in less public willingness to comply with the decisions taken by those institutions. In the absence of voluntary compliance, governments have to resort to coercive measures to enforce regulations. In such conditions, governing becomes more difficult and more costly. Since it undermines effective governing of a society, a low level of political trust represents a potential threat for democratic processes. In this paper, we will analyse political trust in Western Balkan countries in order to establish whether it represents incentive or impediment to further consolidation of democracy and governance. Using data from the World Value Survey and European Values Survey, we will try to determine the level of trust in political institutions in Western Balkan countries, as a degree to which respondents can rely on different institutions. Trust in institutions on the representative (policy-making) and the executive side (implementation of public policies) of the political system will be separately analysed. As an additional measure of institutional trust, we will use the level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL TRUST

In social sciences, interest in the concept of trust is associated with the role of informal mechanisms that individuals use while confronting uncertainty and unpredictability associated with the complexity of social life. Uncertainty and unpredictability include limited knowledge and incomplete information regarding the process of collective decision-making and government actions that affect people's lives. The concept of trust is used to denote a set of social and political phenomena that allow actors to deal with the risk and uncertainty in relations with other actors. Trust can also be observed in relation to individuals as well as in relation to groups and institutions of society, including the state. When it comes to institutional trust, risk plays a central role. When intentions and outcomes are fully known, trust is not in the foreground (Lewis, Weigert, 1985: 968). Institutional trust refers to trust in institutions in the conditions of risk (Secor, O'Loughlin, 2005: 68).

In case of political institutions, although individuals do not have full information regarding intentions and outcomes of the activities of political actors, they believe that government will not abuse its power and knowingly harm them. Although distinction between generalized trust and trust in institutions is not always precise, the most important difference between them is that political trust is oriented towards institutions, while generalized trust is directed towards people. Trust in political institutions does not refer to horizontal relations between individuals, but to vertical relationships between citizens and

political authorities or institutions. It is, therefore, based on a system, policies and procedures (Newton, 2008: 243).

Trust in political institutions is important for several reasons. It is crucial for the stability of society and functioning of democracy, or legitimacy of a democratic regime (Braithwaite, Levi, 1998). The issue of legitimacy is especially important for the consolidation of new democracies. A lack of trust in political institutions may bring into question a regime survival (Dogan, Higley, 1998). Citizens in Western Balkan countries, who have spent their lives in non-democratic regimes, have reasons to distrust political institutions (Mishler, Rose, 1997: 419). Trust in political institutions is based on the knowledge of democracy, and these people had no experience with democratic procedures. That is why trust in political institutions in new democracies is exclusively oriented toward the future, making it highly unstable. This is a potential danger for the stability of the system in the process of democratic consolidation. In addition to the stability and sustainability of the regime, trust in political institutions is also important for economic reasons. Trust affects willingness of individuals to cooperate in achieving collective goals and financing the public goods (Meikle-Yaw, 2006).

Most scholars agree that trust in political institutions is very important for the normal functioning of the democratic system. It is believed that trust is one of the key pillars upon which political life of the country has been built. Trust in political institutions ensures the functioning of democratic institutions (Chanley et al., 2001) and reduces transaction costs (Braithwaite, Levi, 1998). It is important both from the standpoint of citizens and from the standpoint of political institutions. On the one hand, citizens feel more secure when it comes to the competence of political institutions; on the other hand, institutions are provided with a mandate to represent the citizens' will (Citrin, Muste, 1999). In addition, trust strengthens support for democracy, promotes the exchange of information, increases the responsibility of the state and its bodies (Knack, 2002), and reduces corruption (Rose, Shin, 2001).

The acceptance of political decisions depends on trust in political institutions. Citizens that express a higher level of trust in political institutions are more prone to perceive political decisions as legitimate in relation to distrusting citizens, even if these decisions are unfavourable to their own particular interests (Rudolph, Evans 2005). Citizens who report a lower level of trust in political institutions tend to resort to costs-benefits calculation of compliance with rules, which encourages free-riding practices (Tyler, 2006). When citizens accept political decisions as legitimate, more costly forms of control are avoided (Gamson, 1968: 127). In the conditions of low levels of political trust and legitimacy, it is more difficult for political system to implement authoritative rules on the regulation of society.

Not everyone agrees, however, with this attitude. Some authors claim that certain critical stance towards the political process could actually strengthen democratic society (Norris, 1999a; Rosanvallon, 2008). Critical approach to government policy and governance promotes accountability of government officials, which should increase the quality of decision-making. From that point of view, the observed decline of trust in institutions should not necessarily have negative connotations (Cook, Gronke 2005: 801). According to Norris (1999b: 27), too much blind trust by citizens can be as problematic for democracy as too little trust. That sheds a completely different light on the decline of trust in political institutions.

Our analysis suggests that since trust in political institutions affects citizens' compliance with the decisions made by political institutions as well as governability of society, this could lead to the development of a vicious cycle for governments and political trust, with no easy way out of this negative spiral. A low level of trust in political institutions makes it more

difficult for government institutions to function in an effective manner which, in turn, further reduces political trust. Therefore, authors who claim that the low level of political trust does not present an obstacle for the stability of political systems, should pay attention to the ability of political institutions to implement government policy.

3. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AT THE REPRESENTATIVE AND EXECUTIVE SIDE OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Starting from their role in the political system, when analysing trust in political institutions, we should distinguish between institutions at the representative (policy-making) and the executive side (implementation of public policies) of the political system. The main task of the police, for example, is to maintain order in society, making sure that people respect established rules, while courts sanction violations of these rules. These institutions have the executive role in the political system. In contrast, institutions on the representative side (political parties, parliament, government) deal exclusively with political issues. These institutions are certainly an important part of the political system, but institutions at the executive side of the political system are more important when it comes to the daily functioning of citizens and the state. From the standpoint of wellbeing, individuals are much more dependent on institutions that implement public policy than on institutions whose task is to represent their interests or ideology. From the standpoint of individual actors, to be protected by the police and courts is crucial.

Trust in these two groups of institutions should be discussed separately. A political party that holds power or the majority in parliament is trying to implement its ideology. Individuals who support the ideology of the ruling party express a higher level of trust in parliament and government, while those who oppose its ideology report a lack of trust. As for local authorities, for example, those who support the party that holds power will trust it as long as it implements proclaimed policy and keeps its promises. However, those who are in opposition will report a lower level of trust in local authorities, especially if the ruling party keeps its promises because they disagree with the policies it implements. This type of trust is, by nature, temporary and linked to the changing balance of power between political parties, verified by elections.

In addition to the aforementioned institutions, whose task is creation of public policy, there are courts, police and organizations responsible for the implementation of public policies. They should be considered separately in relation to the parliament and government for three reasons. These institutions are by their nature more durable than parliament and government. Unlike politicians, bureaucrats in police, courts and similar institutions are in daily contact with citizens. Direct, daily contacts affect citizens' perceptions about the functioning of the society which they live in. In addition, these institutions send a message regarding principles and norms of the prevailing political culture, which shape beliefs and influence formation of social values. It is not so much about whose interests these institutions represent but whether these institutions are characterized by universalism, equality before the law, fairness and a satisfactory level of efficiency.

As compared to other political institutions, police and courts have a special mission - to discover and punish people who, in the vocabulary of game theory, use an opportunistic strategy, that is, who do not respect their contractual obligations, steal, kill, and make

other acts that violate the order in society. If citizens feel that these institutions perform their functions in a fair and efficient manner, they have the reason to believe that chances to escape without punishment for individuals behaving opportunistically are small. In this case, they believe that other people in society have the reason to refrain from such conduct, which encourages development of generalized trust. It is not only efficiency in sanctioning opportunistic behaviour that is relevant for the development of generalized trust, but also whether these institutions foster the principle of fairness. In other words, the courts and the police provide an important public good - security and protection, which affects the development of generalized trust.

If citizens appraise that institutions responsible for the implementation of laws and policies adhere to the principles of fairness, impartiality and efficiency, they will report a higher level of trust in the latter, which will affect the growth of generalized trust. The principle of impartiality and fairness in the functioning of state agencies is an important obstacle to rampant corruption, but that principle is also in complete contrast to the idea that state institutions should act in one's interests. Impartiality and fairness in the functioning of these institutions is an important determinant of institutional trust, as well as of generalized trust and should be analysed separately from the trust in political parties, parliament and government.

4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The main criteria for the selection of empirical data on the levels of different types of trust were availability and their comparability over time. For these reasons, the World Values Survey and the European Values Study were selected as the most comprehensive databases, composed on the basis of the research of attitudes of individuals and their social activities in various areas: religion, politics, economic and social life. These surveys point to current trends and changes in the basic social values, their variations across countries and over time. Data are available in the form of opinion poll answers based on standard questionnaires, collected during several waves of research. Data on trust in political institutions for Western Balkan countries are available in third (1994-1999), fourth (1999-2004) and fifth (2005-2008) wave of the World Values Survey (published in 2000, 2005 and 2008) and the fourth wave of the European Values Study (released in late 2010).

In order to collect necessary data, both surveys applied systematized and standardized approach based on interviewing a representative sample in every country covered by the survey. A form of stratified sampling was used to obtain a representative national sample. All surveys were carried out on representative samples of at least 1,000 citizens above the age of 18. Individuals were interviewed with the help of uniformly structured questionnaires. Data collection was entrusted to professional organizations that have used either 'face to face' techniques of interviewing or telephone interviews for remote areas. It is important to note that the formulation of the questions in different surveys was the same, which allows for the comparison of obtained data. The use of identical questionnaires and data collection methodology allows us to use the data of the World Values Survey obtained in the third and fourth wave of research (published in 2000 and 2005) and the fourth wave of European Values Study (completed in 2010) in order to provide full data coverage.

Further on in this paper, we will analyse trust in political institutions in Western Balkan countries, measured by the degree to which respondents can rely on different

institutions. The level of trust in political institutions in the selected sample of Western Balkan countries will be presented for three consecutive periods. As an additional measure of institutional trust, we will use the level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. Limited availability of data for certain periods, as well as problems related to the quantification of value judgments, require caution in interpreting the obtained data.

5. RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The indicator of institutional trust is based on the scale of assessment of confidence grades (ranging from 1 – “a great deal” to 4 – “not at all”) in different institutions. A total of 18 institutions are included in the World Value Survey and European Value Study. Our analysis will focus on the institutions at the representative side (government, parliament and political parties) and the executive side of the political system (judiciary and police). Tables 1 and 2 present data related to trust in political institutions in the Western Balkan countries for three consecutive periods, given as percentages of the total number of respondents who expressed “a great deal” and “quite a lot” confidence in these institutions (grades 1 and 2).

If trust in institutions of the system is interpreted as an indicator of public support for the state, results indicate that Western Balkan countries have been facing a continuous decline in citizens' trust in institutions over the last 15 years. The analysis of this indicator over the three consecutive five-year periods shows that there is a decline in the average trust in all state institutions. With a few exceptions (an increase of trust in representative institutions in Macedonia in the third period, a slight increase of trust in the parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the second period), it can be concluded that Balkan countries are characterized by a continuous decline of trust in all state institutions.

Table 1 Trust in institutions at the representative side of the political system in Western Balkan countries

Country	Period	Government			Parliament			Political parties		
		2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010
Albania		41.4%	57.4%	26.5%	60.7%	45.2%	31.8%	22.9%	29.4%	21.6%
Bosnia and Herzegovina		70.8%	29.5%	20.8%	56.7%	20.2%	26.0%	46.6%	14.5%	12.2%
Serbia and Montenegro ¹ /Serbia		37.4%	32.6%	13.0%	34.0%	27.9%	12.3%	18.4%	19.9%	6.4%
Montenegro		/	/	38.8%	/	/	36.2%	/	/	16.0%
FYR Macedonia		20.1%	10.9%	51.8%	15.7%	7.0%	48.8%	11.4%	9.5%	34.3%
Croatia		52.2%	/	11.7%	41.8%	22.5%	11.7%	22.4%	/	7.2%
Average trust		45.2%	32.4%	27.4%	41.8%	24.8%	27.8%	24.7%	18.4%	16.3%

Source: WWS (2009), EVS (2011)

¹ As for Serbia and Montenegro, the World Values Survey database includes data for 2000 and 2005, which are presented here in an integrated form. For 2010, data are available for each country separately.

Table 2 Trust in institutions at the executive side of the political system in Western Balkan countries

Country	Period	Police			Justice system		
		2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010
Albania		73.0%	65.0%	59.3%	58.5%	/	25.1%
Bosnia and Herzegovina		80.1%	63.6%	54.9%	70.5%	/	38.9%
Serbia and Montenegro ² /Serbia		46.1%	43.8%	34.5%	46.8%	/	24.5%
Montenegro		/		58.8%		/	37.7%
FYR Macedonia		26.6%	51.1%	44.3%	24.4%	/	43.9%
Croatia		60.6%	53.1%	36.6%	51.4%	35.3%	19.5%
Average trust		57.5%	53.3%	48.1%	51.0%	35.3%	31.6%

Source: WWS (2009), EVS (2011)

According to the degree of citizens' trust, institutions can be grouped as follows: first, citizens report the lower level of trust in representative institutions, where political parties are singled out as the institutions with the lowest level of citizens' trust. During the last observed period, on average, only 15% to 30% of citizens express confidence in political institutions. A slightly higher level of trust is reported regarding the judicial system and the police (the average 30% to 50%). The paradox noted here is that during the transformation of the political system in the observed post-socialist countries, citizens expressed least trust in the institutions that are of crucial importance for the development of representative democracy and the implementation of reforms (political parties, parliament and government).

An additional indicator of trust in political institutions, which could indicate whether the citizens' mistrust in institutions is determined by the level of democracy and performance of the current political authorities, is citizens' satisfaction with the development of democracy in the country. Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents who answered the question "Are you very satisfied, rather satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the development of democracy in our country?" by providing the response "very satisfied" and "rather satisfied".

Table 3 Citizens' satisfaction with development of democracy in Western Balkan countries

Country	2005	2010
Albania	19.2%	19.2%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	24.3%	25.4%
Serbia	33.1%	19.7%
FYR Macedonia	18.5%	42.4%
Montenegro	/	37.3%
Croatia	/	25.7%
	25.7%	28.3%

Source: WWS (2009), EVS (2011)

Due to the lack of complete data, only the second and third waves are presented. We can conclude that despite the modest increase in satisfaction with democracy, barely a quarter of the population in the Western Balkan countries positively assessed democratic

² The World Values Survey database includes data for years 2000 and 2005, which are presented here in an integrated form. For 2010, data are available for each country separately.

processes in their countries. These results indicate that in the Western Balkan countries it is difficult to separate the functioning of institutions from the political system, given that they have not yet reached an adequate degree of democratic stability. This indicates that one of the causes of the low level of institutional trust can be a lack of political maturity of these societies, in terms of institutions depending on the current incumbent party (Milošević-Đorđević, 2012).

6. CONCLUSIONS

During the last 15 years, Western Balkan countries have been facing a continuous decline in citizens' trust in institutions. The provided analysis of this indicator over the three consecutive five-year periods shows a decline in the average trust in all political institutions. Among the institutions at the representative side of the political system, political parties are institutions with the lowest level of citizens' trust, which means that citizens expressed least trust in the institutions that are of crucial importance for the development of representative democracy and the implementation of reforms (political parties, parliament and government). Better results are obtained at the executive side of the political system, where citizens assign a slightly higher level of trust to the judicial system and the police. Moreover, we used an additional indicator of trust in political institutions – citizens' satisfaction with the development of democracy. Low levels of citizens' satisfaction with democracy in Western Balkan countries confirm that these countries have not yet reached an adequate degree of democratic stability. We can conclude that low levels of trust in political institutions in Western Balkan countries could represent a serious obstacle for governance (in terms of public support) and further consolidation of democracy.

Since institutional trust is a complex phenomenon, there is no one-factor explanation. Possible directions for further research would be to investigate factors that contribute to variations in people's trust in political institutions in Western Balkan countries, especially the impact of performance of specific public services, corruption and demographic variables.

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POVERENJE U POLITIČKE INSTITUCIJE U ZEMLJAMA ZAPADNOG BALKANA

Poverenje u političke institucije ključno je za stabilnost društva i funkcionisanje demokratije, odnosno legitimitet demokratskog režima. Pitanje legitimiteta posebno je važno za konsolidaciju novih demokracija, kakve su zemlje Zapadnog Balkana. Kako poverenje u političke institucije determiniše spremnost građana da se povinuju odlukama ovih institucija, kao i upravljanje savremenim društvom, može se razviti začarani krug gde nizak nivo poverenja u političke institucije ometa njihovo efikasno funkcionisanje, što utiče na dalji pad političkog poverenja. Polazeći od značaja poverenja u političke institucije za normalno funkcionisanje društva, u radu se analizira kretanje poverenja u ove institucije tokom vremena u zemljama Zapadnog Balkana, a u cilju odgovora na pitanje da li postojeći nivoi poverenja mogu predstavljati prepreku daljem konsolidovanju demokratije i upravljanju društvom.

Ključne reči: *poverenje, političke institucije, vlada, Zapadni Balkan.*