



## PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION AMONG YOUTH IN THE SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: PATTERNS, PREDICTIONS, AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

**Original scientific article**

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**Abstract:** This article examines youth perceptions of corruption in the Western Balkans. The analysis focuses on identifying the social and political determinants of these perceptions, including educational attainment, urban-rural background, trust in institutions, migration aspirations, and democratic orientations. Using data from the 2024 FES Youth Study and combining cross-tabulations with logistic regression analysis, the study evaluates which factors best predict whether young people view corruption as a central societal problem. The findings indicate that youth with higher levels of education and greater support for democratic values are more likely to perceive corruption as a major obstacle to societal development. By contrast, young people in rural areas and those who prioritize traditional or religious values tend to display greater tolerance toward informal practices. Across the region, distrust in domestic political institutions is profound, while trust in the European Union remains comparatively high, reinforcing the perception of EU integration as a potential safeguard against corruption. The article contributes to the literature by linking youth perceptions of corruption to broader debates on democratization and European integration. The results underscore that corruption is not only an institutional challenge but also a

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critical factor shaping political attitudes and migration choices among younger generations.

**Key-words:** corruption perceptions; youth; Western Balkans; institutional trust; democratic values; migration aspirations

## **1. Introduction**

Fighting corruption is not only a national priority but also a global objective with significant implications for European integration and economic development in Southeast Europe. Over the past decades, the European Union (EU) has repeatedly emphasized the need for effective transparency and integrity policies as a prerequisite for the accession of the Western Balkan states.

In the region comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, corruption remains a deeply rooted problem, embedded in political, administrative, and economic structures. Since the fall of communism in the early 1990s, these countries have undergone profound political and economic transformations. Yet, weak institutions, insufficient accountability, and limited transparency have allowed corrupt practices to persist, undermining progress toward democratic consolidation and EU integration.

Corruption has long been identified as one of the main barriers to sustainable governance in the Western Balkans, eroding public trust, weakening the rule of law, and distorting economic competition. Despite substantial research on institutional reforms and elite-driven politics, there is limited systematic analysis of how younger generations perceive corruption. This represents a critical gap, as youth are both disproportionately affected by corruption in education, employment, and access to services and potentially central actors in promoting democratic change.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Youth Studies, conducted among respondents aged between 14–29 across the Western Balkans provide a valuable opportunity to explore these perspectives. Using a standardized



questionnaire applied across all participating countries, the surveys provide comparable data on youth attitudes toward corruption, institutional trust, democracy, and political engagement.

This article addresses this gap by drawing on data from the 2024 FES Youth Studies for the Western Balkan countries. It identifies the survey questions most relevant for analyzing corruption, formulates research questions and hypotheses, and examines which social and institutional factors shape youth perceptions of corruption as a major societal issue in the region.

## **2. Literature Review**

Corruption has long been recognized as one of the most significant challenges affecting governance, economic development, and democratic legitimacy. In the scholarly literature, corruption is commonly defined as the misuse of public power for private gain (Tanzi 1998; Rose-Ackerman 1999). This definition emphasizes the relationship between public authority and private interests and highlights how corruption emerges when institutional constraints fail to limit opportunistic behavior. Empirical research has demonstrated that corruption negatively affects economic performance, reduces investment, and undermines public confidence in political institutions (Mauro 1995). Similarly, studies on governance indicators show that corruption weakens regulatory capacity, reduces government effectiveness, and erodes the rule of law (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi 2009). In democratic contexts, corruption also has important political consequences because it undermines accountability and may contribute to declining trust in democratic institutions.

From a theoretical perspective, corruption is often explained through institutional and incentive-based approaches. Public choice theory interprets corruption as a rational response to institutional arrangements that concentrate power without sufficient oversight. Klitgaard's (1988) well-known formula, corruption equals monopoly plus discretion minus accountability, illustrates how administrative monopoly and discretionary authority create opportunities for corrupt behavior when effective accountability mechanisms are absent. Other theoretical approaches



emphasize the broader institutional environment, arguing that corruption tends to flourish where formal institutions are weak and informal networks dominate political and economic interactions (Johnston 2014). These perspectives highlight the importance of institutional design and governance structures in shaping both the prevalence and the perception of corruption. The end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe introduced profound political and economic transformations that also influenced patterns of corruption. During the transition from centrally planned systems to market democracies, many countries experienced institutional instability, weak regulatory frameworks, and the rapid privatization of state assets. These processes created opportunities for political elites and economic actors to capture state institutions and redistribute public resources through informal networks (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Scholars have frequently described this period as one characterized by state capture and clientelistic relationships, where political and economic interests become closely intertwined (Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann 2000). In such contexts, corruption often becomes embedded in everyday governance practices, shaping both institutional performance and public perceptions of fairness.

The Western Balkan countries represent a particularly important context for studying corruption within post-transition societies. Despite substantial political reforms and ongoing efforts to align institutions with European Union standards, corruption continues to be perceived as widespread across the region. Scholars have noted that the persistence of informal political networks, weak institutional accountability, and limited administrative capacity contribute to sustaining corruption risks in these countries (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019). Although anti-corruption reforms have been introduced across the region, including judicial reforms, transparency initiatives, and external monitoring through European Union accession processes, the implementation of these reforms has produced uneven outcomes (Ahmeti 2018). As a result, corruption remains a central issue in political debates and public evaluations of governance.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized that corruption should not be analyzed solely through institutional indicators but also through public perceptions and social attitudes. Perceptions of corruption



capture how citizens interpret institutional fairness, transparency, and accountability, and they therefore represent an important dimension of democratic legitimacy (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). Where citizens perceive institutions as corrupt or ineffective, trust in political authorities tends to decline, potentially weakening support for democratic governance. Research on governance and quality of government further suggests that corruption perceptions are closely linked to levels of institutional trust and citizens' evaluations of public institutions (Charron, Lapuente and Rothstein 2013). These dynamics are particularly relevant in the Western Balkans, where public opinion surveys consistently identify corruption as one of the most serious societal problems. Studies of the region indicate that citizens frequently associate corruption with nepotism in public employment, limited access to economic opportunities, and unequal treatment before the law (Bieber 2018). In such contexts, perceptions of corruption often reflect broader frustrations with political elites and institutional performance. Consequently, corruption perceptions become a key indicator of the relationship between citizens and the state, revealing underlying patterns of institutional legitimacy and governance quality.

Within this broader debate, youth represent a particularly important group for understanding corruption perceptions. Young people often encounter corruption directly in areas such as education, employment opportunities, and access to public services. At the same time, they are central actors in processes of political socialization and democratic change. Studies on youth political attitudes show that experiences of corruption and institutional unfairness can significantly influence levels of political trust, civic engagement, and support for democratic institutions (Mishler and Rose 2001; Voicu and Tufiş 2012). In contexts where corruption is perceived as widespread, young people may become politically disengaged or develop stronger incentives to seek opportunities abroad.

Recent comparative surveys across Southeast Europe indicate that young people consistently identify corruption as one of the most pressing societal challenges affecting their future opportunities. Youth frequently associate corruption with limited social mobility, clientelistic networks in employment, and declining confidence in political institutions. These perceptions are



particularly important in the Western Balkans, where high youth unemployment and persistent institutional distrust often reinforce migration aspirations and weaken engagement with domestic political processes.

Building on this literature, the article examines how structural factors such as education and place of residence interact with institutional trust, democratic orientations, and personal values in shaping youth perceptions of corruption in the Western Balkans. By focusing on youth attitudes toward corruption, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how corruption perceptions influence democratic legitimacy, political socialization, and prospects for institutional reform in post-transition societies.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

Building on the reviewed literature and the items from the FES Youth Studies 2024, this article formulates five research hypotheses addressing how education, social background, institutional trust, democratic values, and personal orientations shape youth perceptions of corruption in the Western Balkans.

*H1.* Youth with higher levels of education are less tolerant of corruption and more likely to perceive it as a major societal problem.

Research consistently demonstrates that educational attainment influences attitudes toward corruption. Higher education is associated with greater awareness of democratic norms and stronger rejection of informal practices (Treisman 2000; Mocan 2008). Educated individuals are also more inclined to view corruption as a structural problem rather than a personal coping mechanism. In the Western Balkans, where corruption in education itself is a salient issue, university-educated youth are expected to express more critical views toward corruption.

*H2.* Urban youth are more likely than rural youth to identify corruption as a major societal problem.



Contextual and social factors significantly shape corruption perceptions. Studies show that citizens in urban areas are more exposed to bureaucratic inefficiencies and more critical of institutional malpractice, whereas rural populations tend to display greater tolerance for clientelism due to dependence on informal networks (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006; Charron and Lapuente 2010). In the Western Balkans, where urban–rural inequalities remain pronounced, such differences are expected to persist among young people as well.

*H3.* Youth with low trust in national institutions but higher trust in the European Union are more likely to cite corruption as a reason for emigration.

Low confidence in domestic institutions is closely associated with migration intentions in transitional societies. Individuals who distrust national parliaments, governments, and courts often perceive external actors particularly the EU as more reliable guarantors of fairness and opportunity (Mishler and Rose 2001; Voicu and Tufiş 2012). In the Western Balkans, the coexistence of domestic distrust and European optimism is expected to make corruption a push factor for emigration among youth.

*H4.* Youth who strongly support democracy and reject authoritarian alternatives are more likely to view corruption as a critical societal problem.

Democratic orientations influence how corruption is perceived and tolerated. Individuals who endorse democracy associate corruption with the erosion of accountability and the weakening of the rule of law (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Johnston 2005). Conversely, those who are more open to authoritarianism may display higher tolerance toward corruption if they believe such systems ensure stability or material benefits.

*H5.* Youth who prioritize traditional or religious values are more tolerant of corruption compared to those emphasizing independence and responsibility. Moral frameworks and personal values shape how individuals justify or condemn corruption. Research indicates that traditional and religious orientations may correlate with acceptance of hierarchical authority and informal exchange practices, while values emphasizing independence,



responsibility, and merit foster rejection of corruption (Husted 1999; Gatti et al. 2003). In the Western Balkans, where religious and traditional norms retain strong influence, such value-based divides are expected to significantly affect corruption perceptions.

This article relies on data from the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Youth Study 2024*, a large-scale comparative survey conducted in twelve Southeast European countries, including all six Western Balkan states. The survey targeted young people aged 14–29 and was administered by Ipsos through a combination of Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) and Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). The sample sizes range from approximately 500 to 700 respondents per country, with national samples of N=680 in Albania, N=500 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, N=504 in North Macedonia, N=501 in Montenegro, N=750 in Serbia, and N=500 in Kosovo. Quotas for age, gender, and region were applied to ensure national-level representativeness.

A standardized questionnaire was employed across all participating countries, allowing for direct cross-national comparisons. Although some country-specific items were included, the structure and wording of the main questions remained consistent, enabling regional-level analysis. The analysis focuses on five sets of variables derived from the FES dataset. The first independent variable concerns *educational attainment*, measured through respondents' level of completed schooling. The second captures *residential background*, distinguishing between youth living in capitals, towns, and rural areas. The third set refers to *institutional trust*, operationalized as levels of confidence in national parliaments, governments, the judiciary, and the European Union. The fourth variable concerns *migration aspirations*, including whether corruption and clientelism are cited as explicit motivations for emigration. Finally, the fifth group of variables covers *democratic orientations and personal values*, particularly support for democracy versus authoritarian alternatives and the prioritization of values such as independence, responsibility, tradition, and religiosity.

The dependent variable measures whether respondents identify corruption as one of the most important problems facing their country. This indicator



captures perceived corruption as a major societal concern, rather than direct experiences with bribery, and is thus suitable for comparative attitudinal analysis.

Perception-based indicators are widely used in corruption research because corruption is inherently difficult to measure directly. Many corrupt practices occur informally and remain unreported, making objective measurement challenging. Scholars therefore argue that perceptions provide valuable insight into how citizens evaluate institutional fairness, accountability, and governance quality (Heywood 2017; Bauhr and Charron 2020). In the context of youth attitudes, perception measures are particularly relevant because they capture how young people interpret institutional performance and social opportunities.

#### 4. Research Results and Discussion

The empirical analysis examines how education, settlement type, institutional trust, democratic orientations, and personal values shape youth perceptions of corruption in the Western Balkan countries. To address these relationships, the analysis proceeds in two stages. First, cross-tabulations are used to explore the relationship between corruption perceptions and the key explanatory variables. Second, logistic regression analysis is employed to estimate the combined effects of these predictors while controlling for demographic characteristics such as age and gender.

Table 1: Youth Identifying Corruption as One of the Main Problems by Education Level (%)

Country	Lower education (≤ secondary) (%)	Higher education (≥ university) (%)	Difference (%age points)
Albania	55	72	+17
Bosnia and Herzegovina	48	66	+18
Kosovo	60	74	+14
North Macedonia	52	69	+17



Montenegro	50	63	+13
Serbia	54	68	+14

Source: FES Youth Study 2024

The results reveal a consistent educational gradient across all six Western Balkan countries. Youth with higher levels of education are systematically more likely to identify corruption as one of the main societal problems. This pattern suggests that education strengthens critical awareness of institutional shortcomings and reduces tolerance toward informal practices. Higher educational attainment may also increase exposure to political information, public debate, and comparative perspectives, which in turn reinforce sensitivity to corruption as a structural problem. Overall, the findings provide strong support for Hypothesis 1.

Table 2 examines whether settlement type influences corruption perceptions by comparing responses among youth living in rural areas, urban centers, and capital cities across the Western Balkan countries.

Table 2: Settlement Type and Perceptions of Corruption (%)

Country	Rural	Urban	Capital city
Albania	53	64	71
Bosnia and Herzegovina	45	58	65
Kosovo	55	66	73
North Macedonia	50	61	68
Montenegro	47	59	65
Serbia	52	63	70

Source: FES Youth Study 2024

The findings reveal a consistent urban-rural divide in corruption perceptions across the Western Balkan region. Youth living in capital cities and larger urban areas are systematically more likely to identify corruption as a major societal problem compared with their rural counterparts. This pattern suggests that exposure to public institutions, political debate, and media



coverage may increase awareness of corruption as a structural governance issue.

By contrast, rural communities often rely more heavily on localized social networks and informal relationships, which may normalize certain clientelist practices and reduce the perception of corruption as a systemic problem. These results are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that urban populations tend to display stronger sensitivity toward institutional malpractice due to greater institutional interaction and access to political information. Overall, the findings provide empirical support for Hypothesis 2. Beyond socio-demographic factors such as education and settlement type, perceptions of corruption are also closely related to levels of institutional trust. In the Western Balkans, distrust toward domestic political institutions has frequently been associated with dissatisfaction with governance and declining expectations of meritocratic opportunity. Table 3 therefore explores the relationship between trust in national institutions, attitudes toward the European Union, and the extent to which corruption is mentioned as a motivation for emigration.

Table 3: Institutional Trust, EU Trust, and Corruption as a Reason for Migration (%)

Country	Low trust in national inst.	High trust in EU	% citing corruption as migration reason
Albania	72	68	41
Bosnia and Herzegovina	65	62	37
Kosovo	70	69	39
North Macedonia	71	66	42
Montenegro	60	58	34
Serbia	64	55	29

Source: FES Youth Study 2024



The results indicate a strong relationship between institutional distrust and corruption perceptions among youth in the Western Balkans. Respondents who express low confidence in national institutions are considerably more likely to identify corruption as a central societal problem. At the same time, relatively higher levels of trust in the European Union suggest that many young people view European integration as a potential external safeguard against domestic governance weaknesses.

An additional pattern emerging from the data concerns migration motivations. A substantial proportion of respondents across the region identify corruption and clientelism as important factors influencing their desire to emigrate. This relationship reflects a broader dynamic in which institutional dissatisfaction translates into outward mobility rather than increased political participation. In this sense, corruption perceptions do not only affect political attitudes but also shape long-term demographic and developmental trends in the region. These findings provide empirical support for Hypothesis 3.

Institutional trust, however, represents only one dimension shaping corruption perceptions. Attitudes toward political systems and democratic governance may also influence how young people interpret corruption and evaluate institutional legitimacy. Table 4 therefore examines whether democratic orientations affect the likelihood that youth perceive corruption as a major societal problem.

Table 4: Democratic Orientations and Perceptions of Corruption (%)

Country	Support democracy strongly	Prefer strong leader
Albania	74	59
Bosnia and Herzegovina	68	52
Kosovo	72	54
North Macedonia	70	53
Montenegro	66	49
Serbia	69	50

Source: FES Youth Study 2024



The results reveal a consistent relationship between democratic orientations and corruption perceptions across the Western Balkan countries. Youth who strongly support democracy are systematically more likely to identify corruption as a major societal problem compared with those who express preference for stronger personal leadership models.

This pattern suggests that corruption perceptions are closely linked to normative commitments to democratic governance. Individuals who value democratic accountability tend to interpret corruption as a violation of fundamental principles such as transparency, equality before the law, and institutional responsibility. By contrast, those who prioritize strong leadership may display greater tolerance toward informal practices if such arrangements are perceived as ensuring stability or effective decision-making. These findings confirm Hypothesis 4 and highlight the normative dimension of corruption perceptions among young people in the region.

In addition to political orientations, personal value systems may also influence how young people evaluate corruption and institutional fairness. Value preferences shape attitudes toward authority, responsibility, and meritocratic norms, which in turn affect tolerance toward informal practices. Table 5 therefore examines the relationship between personal value orientations and corruption perceptions among youth in the Western Balkans.

Table 5: Personal Values and Perceptions of Corruption (%)

Country	Independence/Responsibility	Religion/Tradition
Albania	71	57
Bosnia and Herzegovina	65	50
Kosovo	69	53
North Macedonia	67	51
Montenegro	63	48
Serbia	64	49

Source: FES Youth Study 2024



The findings indicate that personal value orientations play an important role in shaping corruption perceptions among youth. Respondents who prioritize values such as independence and personal responsibility display consistently higher levels of concern about corruption compared with those who emphasize religion and traditional authority. This pattern suggests that value systems associated with individual autonomy and meritocratic achievement are more strongly aligned with norms of accountability and transparency. In contrast, value frameworks that emphasize hierarchy and traditional authority may be more compatible with informal social arrangements, which can reduce the perception of corruption as a systemic problem. Overall, the results support Hypothesis 5 and underline the importance of cultural and normative factors in explaining variations in corruption perceptions across the region.

While the cross-tabulations provide insight into the individual relationships between corruption perceptions and the explanatory variables, it is also important to evaluate their combined influence. To address this question, a logistic regression model was estimated in order to identify which factors most strongly predict whether young people perceive corruption as a major societal problem.

Table 6: Logistic Regression Predicting Perceptions of Corruption as a Major Societal Problem

Predictor variables	Odds Ratio	Significance
Higher education	1.45	p<0.01
Urban/capital residence	1.30	p<0.05
Low trust in national inst.	1.60	p<0.01
High trust in EU	1.25	p<0.1
Strong support for democracy	1.50	p<0.01
Values: independence/responsib.	1.35	p<0.05

Source: FES Youth Study 2024

The regression results confirm that corruption perceptions among youth in the Western Balkans are shaped by both structural and normative factors.



Higher education and low trust in national institutions emerge as the strongest predictors of identifying corruption as a major societal problem. This finding reinforces the earlier descriptive results, suggesting that education increases critical awareness of institutional shortcomings, while distrust in national governance structures heightens sensitivity toward corruption.

Democratic orientations also remain statistically significant, indicating that support for democratic governance is closely associated with stronger rejection of corruption. Young people who value democratic accountability appear more likely to interpret corruption as a violation of fundamental institutional principles.

Personal values also contribute to explaining variation in corruption perceptions. Youth who prioritize independence and personal responsibility demonstrate greater concern about corruption, highlighting the importance of cultural and normative factors in shaping political attitudes. Interestingly, trust in the European Union shows a weaker but positive association with corruption perceptions. This suggests that while European integration may be viewed as a potential external safeguard against governance failures, it cannot substitute for the legitimacy of domestic institutions.

Taken together, the regression results confirm the robustness of the patterns identified in the descriptive analysis. Corruption perceptions among youth are influenced by a combination of educational background, institutional trust, democratic values, and personal orientations, indicating that corruption is not only an institutional challenge but also a broader social and cultural phenomenon.

Overall, the empirical findings demonstrate that corruption perceptions among youth in the Western Balkans are shaped by multiple interconnected factors. Education, institutional trust, democratic orientations, and personal values all contribute to explaining how young people interpret corruption and evaluate the functioning of public institutions. These results highlight that corruption perceptions are not solely a reflection of institutional



performance, but also of broader processes of political socialization and normative orientation among younger generations.

### **Corruption in Education and Informal Practices**

The education sector represents one of the areas in which young people across the Western Balkans most frequently perceive corruption in their daily lives. Academic integrity, understood as the belief that grades and diplomas are awarded on the basis of merit, serves as an important indicator of trust in institutions. Findings from the FES Youth Studies (2024) indicate that a substantial proportion of youth in the region express skepticism regarding the fairness of educational systems.

In several countries, particularly Albania and North Macedonia, large shares of respondents believe that grades and examinations can be influenced through informal practices. Similar perceptions appear in Serbia and Montenegro, where many young people report that personal connections may affect educational outcomes and access to employment opportunities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, respondents likewise emphasize the role of informal networks in shaping access to social mobility.

These findings suggest that corruption in education is often perceived not as an isolated phenomenon but as a structural feature of opportunity systems in the region. At the same time, youth attitudes toward informal practices reveal a certain ambivalence: while corruption is widely criticized in public discourse, informal networks are frequently tolerated in everyday life as mechanisms that facilitate access to scarce opportunities. In this sense, corruption perceptions among youth reflect a broader tension between formal institutional rules and informal social arrangements. The persistence of such practices indicates that anti-corruption strategies must address not only institutional reforms but also the social norms that sustain clientelistic behavior.

### **Institutional Trust and Migration Aspirations**

Trust in political and social institutions represents a central dimension of democratic legitimacy. Data from the FES Youth Studies (2024) indicate that youth across the Western Balkans display relatively low levels of confidence



in domestic political institutions such as parliaments, governments, and judicial systems. At the same time, higher levels of trust are often expressed toward external or traditional actors, including the European Union, the military, or religious institutions. This pattern reflects a broader crisis of institutional legitimacy in the region. Where domestic institutions are perceived as ineffective or corrupt, young people tend to place greater trust in actors perceived as more stable or external to national political conflicts. The comparative evidence from Romania and Bulgaria suggests that EU membership can partially stabilize institutional legitimacy by providing an additional reference point for governance standards.

Low institutional trust is also closely connected to migration aspirations. Across the Western Balkans, many young people identify corruption and clientelism as factors influencing their decision to consider emigration. When access to employment and social advancement is perceived as dependent on informal connections rather than merit, migration becomes an alternative strategy for achieving personal and professional opportunities.

This dynamic reflects Hirschman's (1970) well-known framework of "exit" versus "voice." When institutional trust declines, citizens may respond by withdrawing from political engagement and seeking opportunities elsewhere. In the context of the Western Balkans, this mechanism contributes to the persistence of high youth emigration rates and may weaken the long-term capacity for democratic reform.

### **Values and Democratic Orientations**

Youth perceptions of corruption are also shaped by broader normative orientations and value systems. Across the Western Balkans, young people generally express support for democracy as a political ideal, yet many remain dissatisfied with the way democratic institutions function in practice. This gap between democratic ideals and institutional performance contributes to a complex pattern of political attitudes. On the one hand, young people frequently express normative commitment to democratic governance. On the other hand, relatively low levels of political participation and institutional trust suggest a degree of political disengagement.



Value orientations also influence how corruption is interpreted. Youth who emphasize independence and personal responsibility tend to display stronger rejection of corruption and clientelist practices. In contrast, value frameworks that emphasize tradition, hierarchy, or authority may be more compatible with informal social arrangements.

Comparative evidence from Romania and Bulgaria shows similar tensions between democratic support and political participation. Although EU membership appears to reinforce democratic norms, it does not automatically translate into active civic engagement. In both the Western Balkans and EU member states of the region, youth attitudes toward corruption therefore reflect a broader interaction between democratic values, institutional trust, and social expectations.

The findings presented in this study demonstrate that youth perceptions of corruption in the Western Balkans are shaped by a combination of structural, institutional, and normative factors. Rather than representing isolated attitudes, these perceptions follow systematic patterns that reflect broader dynamics of governance and political socialization.

Education emerges as one of the most consistent predictors of corruption perceptions. Across all countries included in the analysis, higher educational attainment is associated with a greater likelihood of identifying corruption as a major societal problem. This pattern supports theoretical arguments that education enhances civic competence and critical awareness of institutional performance. The urban-rural divide observed in the data further highlights the importance of structural exposure to institutions and information. Youth living in urban areas and capital cities display higher sensitivity to corruption than their rural counterparts, suggesting that access to political debate, media coverage, and institutional interactions increases awareness of governance shortcomings.

Institutional trust also plays a central role, youth who express low confidence in national institutions are significantly more likely to identify corruption as a major societal problem. At the same time, relatively higher trust in the European Union indicates that young people differentiate between domestic



institutional performance and broader normative frameworks of governance. Importantly, the relationship between institutional distrust and migration aspirations illustrates the broader societal consequences of corruption perceptions. When domestic institutions fail to ensure fairness and meritocracy, migration becomes a rational alternative strategy for personal advancement.

Finally, democratic orientations and personal values contribute to explaining variation in corruption perceptions. Youth who strongly support democratic governance and emphasize values such as independence and responsibility demonstrate lower tolerance toward corruption. These findings highlight the importance of normative and cultural factors in shaping political attitudes. Taken together, the results suggest that corruption in the Western Balkans cannot be understood solely as an institutional problem. Instead, it reflects a broader interaction between social structures, institutional legitimacy, and value orientations. Effective anti-corruption strategies therefore require not only legal reforms but also investments in education, civic engagement, and youth participation in democratic processes.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article examined youth perceptions of corruption in the Western Balkans using data from the 2024 FES Youth Study. By combining cross-tabulations with logistic regression analysis, the study explored how education, settlement type, institutional trust, democratic orientations, and personal values influence the likelihood that young people perceive corruption as a major societal problem.

The findings indicate that corruption perceptions among youth are shaped by a combination of structural, institutional, and normative factors. Education emerges as one of the most consistent predictors: young people with higher educational attainment demonstrate greater sensitivity to corruption and stronger expectations of institutional accountability. Similarly, the urban-rural divide highlights the role of social context and exposure to institutions in shaping political awareness.



Institutional trust also plays a central role. Youth who express low confidence in national political institutions are significantly more likely to identify corruption as a major societal issue. At the same time, relatively higher levels of trust in the European Union suggest that many young people view European integration as a potential external reference point for governance standards. Importantly, the connection between institutional distrust and migration aspirations illustrates how corruption perceptions can influence broader social dynamics, including youth emigration and political disengagement.

The analysis further shows that democratic orientations and personal values contribute to explaining variation in corruption perceptions. Youth who strongly support democratic governance and emphasize values such as independence and personal responsibility display lower tolerance toward corruption than those prioritizing more traditional or hierarchical value systems. These findings highlight the importance of political socialization and normative frameworks in shaping attitudes toward corruption.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these results. The study relies on perception-based indicators rather than direct measures of corrupt behavior, and the cross-sectional nature of the dataset limits causal inference. Moreover, although the survey instrument is standardized across countries, national contexts may influence how respondents interpret corruption-related questions.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights into how younger generations interpret corruption and evaluate institutional performance in post-transition societies. The results suggest that effective anti-corruption strategies should extend beyond legal enforcement and institutional reform. Investments in education, civic engagement, and youth participation are equally important for strengthening democratic norms and reducing tolerance toward corruption.

Understanding youth perceptions is particularly important for the Western Balkans, where younger generations represent both those most affected by corruption and those most capable of driving long-term institutional change.



Addressing their expectations and concerns therefore remains essential for strengthening democratic legitimacy and improving governance across the region.

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