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Anja GVOZDANOVIĆ, PhD*

YOUTH JUSTIFICATION OF INFORMALITY IN THE POST-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES: REFLECTION OF POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION OR PRAGMATISM?

Informal practices are rather widespread in post-Yugoslav societies, representing a complex problem with significant social, economic and political implications. The study investigates the factors that determine or contribute to shaping young people's benevolent attitude towards certain types of informality, by exploring the determinants of informality justification or permissiveness towards certain forms of informal practices. Firstly, justification of informal practices are observed as a reflection of youth political socialization, which imply their relation to the political system and democratic values. Secondly, this type of justification potentially stems from their rational evaluation of institutional performance by estimating the necessity of informality as a mechanism to navigate the perceived inefficiencies of formal institutions. By examining these dimensions, the aim is to detect the extent to which these two sets of factors contribute to young people's justification of informality in the post-Yugoslav context.

Key words: *Youth*. – *Post-Yugoslav countries*. – *Informality*. – *Institutions*. – *Political culture*.

* Senior Research Associate, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Croatia, *anja@idi.hr*, ORCID iD: 0000–0002–1213–5928.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the social factors contributing to the justification of informality among young people in the former Yugoslav countries. Generally, informality and permissive attitude towards such phenomena and practices are primarily viewed as ethical or moral categories. However, in societies with weak democratic institutions, which originated primarily top-to-bottom, this can also be regarded as both a cultural and rational category. As Krasniqi *et al*. (2019) point out, informality in the Western Balkans is pervasive – at least according to dominant public perception. There is a widespread belief that having connections and people in "the right places" is crucial for solving citizens' everyday problems or needs related to various public and state institutions (Krasniqi *et al*. 2019). Considering the prevalence of various informal practices, including favouritism, bribery, and corruption, the use of connections to solve everyday problems, this paper examines the social factors that contribute to their justification. This paper employs two approaches; the first treats justification of informality as a reflection of the lack of "good citizen norms", indicating a somewhat deficient political culture and political socialization, and the second approach argues that rational reasoning in relatively unfavourable socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts shapes the justification of informality.

The justification of informal practices and principles is a less researched topic, especially among young people.[1] Its empirical relevance lies in the fact that the readiness to justify informality is one of the strongest predictors of informal practices in the Western Balkan countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Cvetičanin, Popovikj, Jovanović 2019). Furthermore, it is important to understand the mechanisms behind "tolerance of dishonesty", because it can help us understand potential deviant behaviour that might stem from this kind of attitude (Knechel, Mintchik 2022). In this regard, young people are a particularly vulnerable social category. The transition to adulthood in post-Yugoslav societies is generally prolonged, meaning that taking on private and public social roles (e.g. parenthood, employment, active citizenship) is postponed due to structural challenges (e.g. more difficult access to education, labour market, challenging housing issues), and socio-cultural challenges (e.g. democratic backsliding) (Tomanović, Ignjatović 2004; Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš 2017; Lavrič, Tomanović, Jusić 2019). These

[1] Given that the justification of informal practices is a relatively under-researched topic, particularly among young people, the referential theoretical framework predominantly draws on studies focusing on the general population.

challenges prevent optimal social integration and affirmation of young people in a society. Moreover, the social opportunities for youth's personal emancipation are predominantly defined by the socio-economic resources of their parents (Tomanović, Ignjatović 2004; Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš 2017; Lavrič, Tomanović, Jusić 2019). Due to these unfavourable social circumstances, the contemporary generation of young people has fewer opportunities to use conventional channels of social promotion (Mojić 2012; Ilišin *et al.* 2013; Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš 2017). In this context, young people in countries such as Serbia and Croatia tend to perceive that social advancement, or their success in life, is predominantly influenced by connections and acquaintances, rather than by individual effort and hard work, such as professional dedication or obtaining a university degree (Mojić 2012; Gvozdanović *et al.* 2019). A similar perspective is generally shared by youth across post-Yugoslav region regarding finding a job in their respective countries. While connections and acquaintances are recognized as important means of finding employment, it is noteworthy that young people from the six Western Balkans countries, compared to those from EU countries (Slovenia, Croatia), are more likely to believe that membership in a political party also plays a significant role in this process (Lavrič, Tomanović, Jusić 2019). For example, Serbia has the highest rate of party membership in Europe (12.2%) (Stanojević, Stokanić 2018), not due to a developed participatory political culture, but because membership in political parties is perceived as a key avenue for social advancement. Namely, weak institutions allow the ruling party to access state resources and distribute various benefits, including jobs, to their voters. Consequently, political party affiliation is seen as a crucial means of securing opportunities and upward mobility (Stanojević, Stokanić 2018).

The long-term unfavourable socio-economic and socio-political circumstances at the societal level, coupled with weak institutions, can create a framework that fosters the justification of informal practices. However, this paper focuses on individual-level factors, such as aspects of political socialization and the evaluation of institutional performance, to better understand how the justification of informality is shaped among young people in post-Yugoslav countries.

The first section of the paper outlines various perspectives on informality as well as its definition as socially shared rules that operate outside officially sanctioned channels (Helmke, Levitski 2004). In line with that, the following sections elaborate on the theoretical framework of the study of permissiveness to informality, as well as political socialization and institutional performance, which might be behind this permissiveness. The second section presents the study's methodology, while the third is devoted to the study's findings and their interpretation. Descriptive and

multivariate analyses are performed on seven databases consisting of nationally representative samples of young people, with justification of informality as a dependent variable and two main sets of factors (political socialization and perception of institutional performance) as predictors. The discussion and conclusion summarise the main findings. The key finding is that the perception of institutional performance, particularly the perception of the prevalence of informal social norms, represents a stable and strong predictor of justification of informality across the region.

1.1. Informality and its Effects

There is a certain difficulty in defining the term informality, both in sociological theories and everyday language, due to its commonplace nature and varied uses (Misztal 2002; Polese 2023). In everyday language, informality can mean a relaxed adherence to formal rules or dress codes, while it can also refer to unofficial actions that promote unfair practices, such as favouritism and nepotism (Misztal 2002). Helmke and Levitsky (2004) propose a conceptualization of informality with regard to rules and procedures that enable and regulate actors' behaviour in social interactions. They define it as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels" (Helmke, Levitsky 2004, 727). The nature of the social consequences of informal practices, which either circumvent formal rules or establish informal practices where formalized relationships are lacking, is ambiguous (Gordy 2018). In Southeast European countries, when formal institutions tend to be ineffective in enforcing formal rules, both citizens and entrepreneurs often turn to informal networks relying on "connections" and "trusted people", which serve as a substitute and "a default option", or simply "rules of the game" (Ledeneva, Efendić 2021). Some authors perceive informality, e.g. corruption, as a means of enhancing the efficiency of economic institutions, recognizing bribery as a way to simplify bureaucratic procedures (Enste, Heldman 2017). However, various informal institutions and practices have unfavourable consequences on a society's socio-cultural and socio-economic development, especially in developing countries. Studies show that informal practices can negatively impact societal aspects such as socio-economic development and foreign investment, as well as individual elements, such as social well-being and trust (Uslaner 2002; Enste, Heldman 2017; Šumah 2018; Feruni *et al.* 2020; Hajdini, Collaku, Merovci 2023).

1.2. Informality as a Social Norm

Informality, understood as a specific set of shared rules, essentially constitutes a set of social norms. Social norms are expectations held by the majority of group members that define the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain actions (Coleman 1987). Talcott Parsons (1951) describes norms as representations of desirable courses of action, with future behaviours aligning with these desired actions. At an individual level, people tend to meet others' expectations of desirable behaviour, indicating a tendency towards conformity. From a functionalist perspective, this conformity sustains the functioning and integration of the social system and society as a whole. Conformity is achieved through the processes of socialization and internalization (Parsons 1951). Socialization is a lifelong learning process, and for it to be successful, one must internalize value patterns or shared values. Within a liberal democracy, socialization entails adopting a sense of what Natalia Letki calls civic morality, which involves responsibility towards fellow citizens and consideration for the public good (Letki 2006). In other words, norms and values need to become part of an individual's consciousness so that acting in their own interest simultaneously serves society and maintains the social system (Ritzer 1997). Social control, the mechanism of rewards and punishments, further supports conformity (Parsons 1951; Coleman 1987). The existence of norms is accompanied by sanctions for adhering to or violating them – both positive and negative, which can be internal (if adopted through socialization) or external (from others or the system). Therefore, anyone can be both the enforcer and the one being sanctioned (Coleman 1987).

Sanctions induce inhibitions and substitutions, meaning that if a person does not learn to refrain from actions that conflict with the norms, they face deprivation consequences, just as they do if they fail to replace "punishable" actions with normatively acceptable ones. Additionally, if there is a concrete behavioural model from whom one learns, it is adopted by imitation and identification (Parsons 1951). As Bicchieri (2016) observes, certain behaviour is considered effective and adaptive when there are enough people who make similar choices. However, the crucial factor is not the number of people imitating the behaviour, but rather the success of the behavioural outcome. Moreover, maintaining or respecting norms requires more than the presence of (internalized or external) sanctions that lead to a conscious calculation of costs and benefits resulting in the decision to violate or adhere to a norm. Norms also operate automatically and therefore conformity contains a kind of "default" component (Bicchieri 2006; 2016). In this sense, the belief or perception that certain practices are widespread in society normalizes their occurrence and perpetuates them. In this context,

if an informality holds the status of a social norm, it becomes more readily justified. It is therefore important to examine the underlying factors that contribute to this justification.

1.3. Political Socialization and Justification of Informality

The concept of social norms related to life in a democratic society is often defined within the framework of "good citizenship", particularly its dimension of social citizenship, which involves a willingness to compromise for the sake of a harmonious communal life (Billante, Saunders 2002). This concept relates to civic responsibility for the public good, implying adherence to rules and fair and responsible behaviour. It leads citizens to prioritize public over private goals, thus deterring corruption and free-riding. The process of growing up and socialization of young people in democratically deficient societies, such as those in the post-Yugoslav region, tends to perpetuate a deficient political culture. This culture does not promote the adoption of competencies, values, and behaviours necessary for active citizenship aligned with a participative democratic culture (Almond, Verba 2000). It is therefore not surprising that young people in post-Yugoslav countries, although they generally support democracy as a political system, are at the same time very inclined to support an authoritarian leader who would firmly rule and solve existing social and political problems (Lavrič, Tomanović, Jusić 2019). In post-communist countries, such as the post-Yugoslav countries, corruption and the use of connections for accomplishing various tasks, being justified as almost a social necessity, strengthened the culture of privatism (Misztal 2000). According to Misztal, the culture of privatism involves achieving social and other securities through a network of informal connections, typically within the family and close friends circle. Informal practices such as corruption and clientelism has resulted in social disintegration, the weakened the role of the citizen, and a retreat into privacy. Additionally, Misztal (2002) identifies the presence of elements of an ethos called amoral familism in post-communist countries. Amoral familism is a behavioural pattern that Edward C. Banfield (1958) describes as being guided by the principle: "maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise" (Banfield 1958, 85). This principle becomes a belief that most people behave this way or an "empirical social expectation" (Bicchieri 2016), which has a detrimental effect on building a democratic life in a community. Amoral familism reduces the engagement in public and collective affairs. Distancing or refraining from social and political engagement, focusing only on private matters, may further deepen existing informal practices in a community or a society.

The relatively low political interest and engagement among young people in post-socialist societies is often attributed to several factors: the lack of political attention to their interests, needs, and challenges; unresponsive institutions; and the widespread perception of politics as a dishonest and corrupt endeavour, which is particularly prevalent among young people in post-socialist countries (Torcal, Montero 2006; Roberts 2009; Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš 2017; Lavrič, Tomanović, Jusić 2019; Stanojević, Petrović 2021). Political interest, understood as part of democratic political culture and as a form of political engagement, according to traditional interpretation, should have an enlightening effect when drawing various conclusions related to the political sphere. Namely, political interest serves as a good indicator of political knowledge (Rapeli 2022). Possessing strong political knowledge allows young individuals to gain deeper understanding of political life. Having in mind the social context burdened with widespread informality practices, it can be inferred that young people with more pronounced political interest have better insights and a set of information that can help them develop a more nuanced view of the socio-political environment and dominant social rules.

***Hypothesis A1*:** Higher political interest is positively associated with justification of informality.

Within the framework of democratic political culture, "good citizens" are often identified as those who adhere to "good citizenship norms". The set of citizenship norms consists of four types of norms (Zmerli 2010): the norm of participation (covering a wide range of civic and political behaviours), the norm of autonomy (implying an informed citizen who understands others' political stances), norms of social order (willingness to accept state authority by respecting the law and refraining from harmful behaviours, prerequisites for a stable democratic society), and norms of social citizenship. Social citizenship norms imply social habits of solidarity, cooperation and public spiritedness (Zmerli 2010). In other words, citizens, through their actions in collaboration with others, typically within the framework of civil society, aim to contribute to the welfare of a broader circle of people. In this context, the justification of informality, as an attitude that justifies a social norm that is not aligned with democratic principles and social order, reflects the prevailing state of "good citizenship" within a society. Here, we start from the assumption that the norm of social citizenship contributes to the reduction of the justification of informality. The norms of social citizenship are conceptually similar to the concept of social capital as interpreted by Robert Putnam (2003; 2008). Citizen cooperation within horizontal networks of association in civil society provides the foundation for creating civility and social (generalized) trust, which are the connective tissues of society. In

line with this, some researchers describe this pro-social orientation as self-transcendence values, which emphasize public interest, civic solidarity, and the transcendence of particular interests (Robison 2022). Greater acceptance of self-transcendence values significantly supports the norms of social citizenship. In contrast to self-transcendence, self-enhancement values imply an ego-centric orientation, prioritizing the achievement of personal gain and material security (Robison 2022). It is expected that prioritizing material security over pro-social values or social citizenship norms is characterized by democratic deficits, associated with a higher justification of informal practices, especially in less affluent societies.

Hypothesis A2: Support for social citizenship norms is negatively associated with justification of informality.

***Hypothesis A3*:** Self-enhancing values/materialistic orientation is positively associated with justification of informality.

Good citizenship norms, as defined in this paper, entail a "horizontal perspective", which refers to relations among citizens in terms of general solidarity (Schnaudt *et al.* 2021). A good citizen is characterized by their commitment to supporting and caring for others in their community, including those in need, regardless of their ethnic or religious background (Schnaudt *et al.* 2021). Some authors have extended the norms of good citizenship to include liberal-democratic values such as tolerance and inclusive attitudes towards Others (Dalton 2015; Sandoval-Hernández *et al.* 2021). Inclusive attitudes towards Others, central to post-modernist values and particularly the self-expression value set (Inglehart, Welzel 1997), are a key indicator of a society's progress in modernization and democratic development. This value set prioritizes individual autonomy, personal freedom, social trust, and tolerance, with its acceptance most clearly reflected in the majority's attitudes towards minority groups. In comparative studies, one of the good indicators of a society's alignment with post-modernist values, particularly those shared by individuals deemed "good citizens", is its prevailing attitude towards the LGBT+ community (Inglehart, Welzel 1997; Hildebrand *et al.* 2019). Citizens in post-communist countries, on average, hold more negative attitudes towards the LGBT+ community than those in older European democracies (Fitzgerald, Winstone, Prestage 2014; Hildebrand *et al.* 2019). This trend is also reflected in the younger population. As part of their societal context, young people in less accepting social context tend to adopt views that are, on average, less accepting of LGBT+ individuals, compared to their peers in Western Europe, where societal norms are generally more inclusive.

***Hypothesis A4*:** A more accepting view of the LGBT+ community is negatively associated with justification of informality.

1.4. Justification of Informality as a Rational Response to Institutional (Under)Performance

Post-socialist societies often exhibit significant corruption, pervasive perceptions of corruption, and lower levels of democratic development compared to other European countries (Smeltzer, Karppi 2024). It is worth noting that a systematic analysis conducted by Nicholas Charron (2016) points to consistency between perception of corruption, both by experts and citizens, and actual corruption levels across Europe. This consistency suggests that subjective public perception is aligned with the reality of corruption. This finding may point to the reliability of perception-based evaluations as indicators of institutional quality and governance effectiveness. Measuring informality, therefore, can serve as an indicator of the quality of governance and provide a more profound understanding of the relationships between the state and its citizens (Polese 2023). The efficacy of formal institutions as well as the economic development in the post-Yugoslav region has been slowed down and weakened by clientelism, party patronage, and other informal mechanisms that facilitate smoother service exchanges across various domains of life (Stanojević, Stokanić 2018; Cvetičanin, Popovikj, Jovanović 2019; Kotarski, Radman 2020; Bliznakovski 2021; Franić 2021; Račić 2021). Corruption and informal practices infiltrate nearly all sectors, bypassing institutional regulations in order to gain personal benefits and at the same time evading both legal and ethical implications of these acts (Cvetičanin, Popovikj, Jovanović 2019; Bliznakovski 2021). An analysis by Transparency International (Bak 2020) shows that the countries of the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) exhibit strong characteristics of captured states, where powerful patronage networks control the functioning of the judiciary and other public institutions (Bak 2019). Despite being an EU member, Croatia is also considered a captured state, where (party) clientelism greatly determines institutional inefficiency and weak prospects for modern economic growth (Kotarski, Radman 2020).

Informal practices in everyday life although often depicted as path-dependent and a continuation of the communist culture of institutional functioning, are "temporal reactions to the post-communist reforms" (Ledeneva, Efendic 2021, 3). In this sense, it is not surprising that young people in Southeast Europe, and therefore in post-Yugoslav countries, generally report significantly lower levels of satisfaction with democratic practices in their countries compared to their peers in old European democracies (Van der Meer, Hakhverdian 2016; Foa *et al.* 2020). The vicious cycle between informality and the state of democracy is illustrated by research showing that greater dissatisfaction with the state of democracy and

democratic institutions leads to a greater likelihood of accepting clientelistic offers from politicians, such as money (Ghergina *et al.* 2021). Additionally, it is important to note that, as previously mentioned, institutions in this region are often hijacked or captured by political parties, typically the ruling party, which have transformed everyday necessities, such as employment and routine administrative tasks, into commodities exchanged for loyalty, votes, or favours (Bliznakovski, 2021). The strong presence of these practices or even widespread perception of informality erodes civic norms, trust and solidarity among people. At the individual level, when the significance of adhering to civic norms diminishes, opportunism is likely to spread. Opportunism reflects a deficiency in civic morality, as it is driven by norms that prioritize short-term material and other personal gains (Merguei, Strobel, Vostroknutov 2022), while neglecting ethical considerations (Elster 2007) and disregarding the broader social implications of such behaviour. For example, INFORM suvey showed that giving gifts and money or using connections in healthcare as Krasniqi *et al.* (2019, 140) point – "are a fact of life throughout the region". Similarly, Franić (2021) claims that using connections for getting things done in the Croatian healthcare system is "modus operandi" for significant part of people – 17% relied on personal connections during the 12 months preceding the study. The prevalence of opportunism and its rationalization is primarily determined by two factors: perceived lack of choices and "cultural reproduction of opportunism", rooted in the perception that most people violate moral and other norms, which is further exacerbated by perceptions of corruption (Štulhofer 2000).

Hypothesis B1: Increased perception of presence of informal norms contributes to increased justification of informality.

Hypothesis B2: Poor evaluation of the country's economy is associated with greater likelihood of justifying informality.

Hypothesis B3: Poor evaluation of the country's democratic values is associated with greater likelihood of justifying informality.

2. METHODOLOGY

The comparative analysis is based on the data from an international youth research project, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2018/2019, which was carried out in 2018. National surveys were conducted simultaneously in ten countries of Southeast Europe, however this article focuses on the comparison of the seven post-Yugoslav countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (N = 1000), Croatia (N = 1500), Kosovo (N = 1200),

North Macedonia (N = 1038), Montenegro (N = 711), Serbia (N = 1168), and Slovenia (N = 1015). The youth samples are nationally representative and consist of respondents aged 14–29.

Descriptive and multivariate statistical analyses were conducted. Prior to incorporating factors into a multiple regression analysis, the unidimensionality of each factor was confirmed through principal component analysis. Subsequently, the items within each factor were combined into additive scales. The reliability of these scales was evaluated using the standardized Cronbach's alpha coefficient. These reliable scales were then used in multiple regression analysis to determine the extent to which the dependent variable's variation could be explained by its relationship with the independent variables or predictors.

2.1. Dependent Variable

Justification of informality was measured in the context of an instrument that was aimed at examining respondents' permissiveness towards various behaviours or phenomena on a ten-point scale (1 – never justified, 10 – always justified). The additive scale included two items: using connections to find employment and using connections to "get things done" (e.g. in a hospital, at different offices, etc.) (1 – never justified, 10 – always justified).

2.2. Independent Variables

2.2.1. Political Socialization Dimension

Social citizenship norms consists of two variables that measure how much participating in civic actions/initiatives and being active in politics is important to respondents (1 – not at all, 5 – very important), these two variables were transformed into additive scale.

Self-enhancement values (material values) consists of two variables that measure how much getting rich and looking good is important to respondents (1 – not at all, 5 – very important), these two variables were transformed into an additive scale.

Political interest – level of interest for politics on a five-point scale (1 – totally uninterested, 5 – totally interested).

Social distance/tolerance towards LGBT+ is measured using the question "How would you feel if homosexual person or couple moved into your neighbourhood?" on a five-point scale (1 – very bad, 5 – very good).

2.2.2. Institutional Performance/Rational Dimension

Perception of informality in society was measured in the context of an instrument that was aimed at examining respondents' estimation of the importance of different factors when it comes to finding a job for a young person in their country, on a five-point scale (1 – not important at all, 5 – very important). The additive scale included two items: *acquaintances (friends, relatives)* and *connections with people in power*.

Assessment of the country's economy consists of respondents' assessments of the status of the *economic welfare of citizens* and *employment* in their country, on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – very bad, 5 – very good); two items were transformed into an additive scale.

Assessment of the status of the country's democratic values consists of respondents' assessments of the status of democracy, human rights, equality and individual freedom in their country, on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – very bad, 5 – very good); they were transformed into an additive scale.

Socio-demographic variables were used as controls in multiple regression analysis: *Gender (f)*, *Respondent's education*, *Father's education*,[2] *Religiosity*.[3]

3. RESULTS

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

The mean values for the young people's responses across all post-Yugoslav countries reveal several trends. Young people on average express a moderate level of justification of informality, such as leveraging connections for employment or services, with an average mean value of 4.7. The assessment

[2] The level of the father's education is a variable regarded as a good proxy for the social status of the youth (Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš 2017; Ilišin *et al.* 2013).

[3] *Religiosity*, measured by an additive 7-point scale, consisted of two variables: *How often do young people engage in prayer*, and *Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do they attend religious services these days?* (1 – practically never, 2 – less than once a year, 3 – about once a year, 4 – only on special holidays, 5 – about once a month, 6 – about once a week, 7 – more than once a week)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability of scales used in multiple regression analysis by country (M – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation and Cronbach's alpha)

	Justification of informality			**Assessment of status of country's democratic values**			**Assessment of country's economy**			**Perception of informality**			**Political interest**			**Social citizenship**			**Self-enhancement**			**Tolerance/ social distance towards LGBT+**	
COUNTRY	**M**	**SD**	**C.α**	**M**	**SD**	**C.α**	**M**	**SD**	**C.α**	**M**	**SD**	**C.α**	**M**	**SD**	**C.α**	**M**	**SD**	**C.α**	**M**	**SD**	**C.α**	**M**	**SD**
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.8	2.5	0.8	2.6	0.9	0.9	3.1	0.8	0.9	4.4	0.8	0.7	1.8	1.2	0.9	2.9	1.1	0.7	4	0.8	0.7	2.4	1.2
Croatia	5.7	2.6	0.9	3.1	0.9	0.9	3.2	0.8	0.8	4.2	0.8	0.8	2.2	1.1	0.9	2.4	1.1	0.6	4	0.8	0.7	3	1.4
Kosovo	3.6	2.9	0.9	2.5	1	0.8	3.3	0.7	0.7	4.2	1	0.7	1.9	1.2	0.9	2.4	1.2	0.6	4.2	0.8	0.7	1.9	1.3
N. Macedonia	4.1	2.8	0.8	2.7	1.1	0.9	3.1	0.9	0.8	4.3	1	0.6	2.3	1.3	0.9	2.6	1.4	0.6	4.1	0.9	0.8	2.1	1.4
Montenegro	5.6	3.5	0.9	2.7	1.3	0.9	2.9	1.2	0.9	4.2	1.1	0.7	1.9	1.3	0.9	2.4	1.3	0.7	4	1	0.8	2.1	1.4
Serbia	4.9	3.1	0.9	2.5	1	0.9	2.8	0.9	0.8	4.2	0.9	0.6	1.9	1.2	0.9	2.3	1.1	0.7	3.7	1	0.7	2.8	1.5
Slovenia	5.2	2.6	0.8	3.2	0.9	0.9	3	0.8	0.8	3.9	1	0.8	2	1.1	0.9	2.5	1	0.7	3.3	1	0.7	3.4	1.3
Post-Yugoslav countries	4.7	3	0.9	2.8	1	0.9	3.1	0.8	0.8	4.2	1	0.7	2	1.2	0.9	2.5	1.2	0.7	3.9	0.9	0.7	2.6	1.4

Source: author.

of the state of democratic values is relatively low, averaging 2.8, reflecting a general scepticism about the state of democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms. Economic conditions are viewed on average as good, with a mean value of 3.1. Perception of informality is high, with a mean value of 4.2, indicating that informal networks are perceived as crucial for securing jobs. Political interest is rather low, averaging at 2.0, suggesting a disengagement from political activities among young people in post-Yugoslav countries in general. Pro-social behaviour has a moderate mean value of 2.5, while self-enhancement, indicating a focus on material success, is relatively high, at 3.9. There is a considerable variation among young people in the region considering the indicator of social inclusivity towards LGBT+ people. On average, young people in Kosovo are socially exclusive, along with those in North Macedonia, Montenegro and BIH, while youth in Croatia express moderate social inclusion, and in Slovenia young people express highest inclination to inclusivity.

There are considerable variations among countries; for example, while there is a general trend of moderate acceptance of informality and rather critical stance on the state of democracy, economic assessments and political engagement vary widely.

3.2. Multiple Regression Analysis

The importance of social citizenship norms shows a significant negative association with the justification of informality in all countries except Montenegro and Kosovo. This suggests that youths who prioritize civic responsibility and adherence to social norms are less likely to justify informality. As a control to the social citizenship predictor, a higher level of self-enhancement or materialistic value orientation contributes to a higher level of justification of informality in all countries except Kosovo. It seems that for Kosovo, predictors related to value orientation are not relevant. Tolerance towards LGBT+ people is a bit weaker but a positive predictor only in BIH, Croatia, and Serbia. Also, political interest seems to be a weaker but positive predictor.

Regarding the set of indicators of institutional performance, significant negative associations are found between the evaluation of the economic state and the justification of informality in Croatia, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This suggests that in countries where economic conditions are perceived as poor, young people are more likely to justify informal practices. This finding supports the theoretical perspective that informality, at least in

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis with justification of informality as dependent variable

		BIH	Croatia	Kosovo	N. Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Slovenia	All countries
		β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
Institutional performance/ rational dimension	Evaluation of economy	.019	**-.115****	.057	**-.112****	-.059	**-.128****	.013	**-.079****
	Evaluation of liberal-democratic values	**-.142****	**.154****	**-.104****	**.166****	.163	**.110***	**.136****	**.137****
	Presence of informal social norms	**.160****	**.091****	**.103****	**.086***	**.152****	**.081***	**.169****	**.120****
Political socialization dimension	Importance of social citizenship	**-.215****	**-.060***	.009	**-.137****	.021	**-.172****	**-.121****	**-.132****
	Self-enhancement	.065	**.167****	.025	**.094***	**.252****	**.120****	**.105****	**.084****
	Tolerance/social distance	**.107****	**.091****	.026	.032	.132*	**.083***	.029	**.122****
	Political interest	**.188****	-.021	**.124****	**.100***	.003	.007	**.075***	**.082****
Socio-demographic variables	Respondent's education	-.051	-.015	-.066	-.017	-.098	.003	.064	.005
	Father's education	-.032	.052	.008	**.080***	-.018	.060	-.026	**.045****
	Gender (f)	.038	-.024	-.048	.012	-.042	.034	**-.072***	-.020
	Religiosity	.004	-.111	**.098****	.012	-.057	**-.103****	-.041	**-.072****
	Adjusted R-square	.118	.102	.044	.051	.120	.058	.093	.081
	F-ratio	11.16	15	5.03	4.78	5.40	4.61	8.61	46.98
	df	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11

**p <0.01, *p <0.05

Source: author.

some countries, in specific contexts, can be a rational response to economic hardships, as individuals seek alternative means to achieve their needs in a challenging economic context.

The evaluation of the state of liberal-democratic values is a significant and positive predictor at the level of the entire cause, as in all countries except BIH and Kosovo. In other words, in most post-Yugoslav countries, young people who perceive the state of liberal-democratic values more favourable are more inclined to justify informality.

The presence of informal social norms positively correlates with the justification of informality across all countries, meaning that the social context in which informal practices are perceived as widespread contributes to the justification of the same informal practice by young people.

Socio-demographic variables are generally weak predictors; the respondents' education level has no role in shaping attitudes towards informality, while the father's education is relevant only in North Macedonia being a positive predictor. Gender is relevant predictor only in Slovenia with young men being more inclined to justify informality, to a lesser degree. Religiosity is both positive and negative predictor, in Kosovo and Serbia, respectively.

In some countries, the model explains a higher proportion of the variance (Montenegro 12%, BIH 12%), while in others, the variance is rather low (Kosovo 4%, N. Macedonia 5%) which means that factors outside of the model play a more significant role. This points to the importance of considering context-specific factors when analysing justification of informality and suggests that future research might explore other variables that could improve the explanatory power of the model in certain countries. The variance of 8% in total for all countries suggests that, at a regional level, the model is moderately effective in explaining the variance in the justification of informality.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores the predictors of the justification of informality among youth in seven post-Yugoslav countries, using multiple regression analysis. The dependent variable is the justification of informality, with predictors drawn from two dimensions: political socialization and institutional performance/rational reasoning. When the data is considered at the regional level, both sets of predictors significantly contribute to the justification of informality. Notably, predictors related to social inclusiveness

and the evaluation of democratic values are significant, but their effects are opposite to what was initially expected. The role of democratic political culture, particularly in terms of individual inclusiveness and societal-level democratic values, has proven to be more complex than anticipated. These findings challenge the assumption that such values inherently oppose attitudes towards justifying informal practices.

However, taken together, no discernible patterns have been identified that would suggest the existence of country clusters exhibiting similar patterns. When looking at the data for each country, the performance set of indicators represents better predictors of justification of informality. The role of the perception of the prevalence of informal social norms is especially emphasized, which suggests that informality among young people is perceived as a necessary adaptation to the inefficiencies and unresponsiveness of formal institutions. In this sense, *Hypothesis B1* was fully confirmed.

The assessment of the country's economy is significant in only three countries (Croatia, N. Macedonia, and Serbia), in the expected direction, therefore it can be said that *Hypothesis B2* is partially confirmed. Indeed, perception of the poor economic state in some countries contributes to a more favourable view of informality. These findings point to young people's adoption of informality as an adaptive strategy within their socio-economic contexts, either as their own approach or as a means of justifying the strategies employed by others. These norms persist due to the absence of effective social control mechanisms and sanctions (Coleman 1987), as well as due to conformity to informal practices, likely internalized through rational observation and evaluation of such behaviours, which are perceived as both widespread and effective (Bicchieri 2016). Informality is perceived by many as a necessary adjustment, therefore it reflects conformity to uncivil social norms when formal systems fail to meet societal needs.

On the other hand, although the assessment of the country's status of democratic values is a relevant factor in the majority of countries (except Montenegro), the direction of association is mixed: only in BIH and Kosovo is the association negative, as expected. In the other five countries, paradoxically, young people's better assessment of the state of liberal democracy is linked to a higher level of justification of informality. This suggests that in some contexts, positive democratic evaluations may coexist with a pragmatic acceptance of informality.

It is possible that a significant part of young people in SEE countries do not perceive informality as inherently detrimental to democracy and liberal values and vice versa – more democracy and more liberal values in a society

are seen as a threat to permissiveness to informality. It might be that young people regard informality as a pragmatic and flexible part of the democracy they live in and that they are satisfied with the status of democratic-liberal values, but when it comes to navigating public services (e.g. healthcare or bureaucracy), informal practices such as using personal connections to bypass institutional inefficiency are seen as necessary and even justified. These practices might be seen as an enhancement of the functioning of the system or they may be seen as complementary to the formal mechanisms – because they facilitate people achieving personal objectives more smoothly. This is a finding that warrants further exploration in future research. Therefore, *Hypothesis B3* is not confirmed.

In political socialization set of predictors, self-enhancement or materialistic values are the most consistent predictor across the Western Balkans (not significant in BIH and Kosovo), and its association with the dependent variable is as expected, therefore it can be said that *Hypothesis A3* (the materialistic orientation is positively associated with justification of informality) is partly confirmed.

The importance of social citizenship norms is, as expected, negatively associated with informality, but not in all countries: there is no significant association in Kosovo and Montenegro. Therefore, *Hypothesis A2* (the importance of social citizenship norms on individual level is negatively associated with justification of informality) is partly confirmed.

These findings are in line with studies that point to the importance of citizens' cooperation and solidarity for civicness (Putnam 2003; 2008; Zmerli 2010), which has an important role in reducing permissiveness towards informal practices, which, in turn, contribute to social disintegration and the weakening of the role of the citizen (Misztal 2000). A tolerant attitude, as a significant predictor in BIH, Croatia and Serbia, along with political interest, as a significant predictor in BIH, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Slovenia, have a limited role in forming the attitudes towards the justification of informality. *Hypothesis A4*, regarding the significant role of accepting the LGBT+ population in decreasing justification of formality, was not confirmed. On the contrary, tolerance towards Others, being the indicator of democratic orientation or a "good citizen", contributes to the justification of informality, at least in some countries. *Hypothesis A1*, which refers to higher political interest as a positive predictor, was partly confirmed since it is significant in three countries and in the expected direction – those who are more familiar with political goings-on are more permissive towards informality. This may reflect a pragmatic orientation among politically engaged young people about the pervasive nature of informality in their societies. It suggests that political interest does not necessarily translate to the rejection of informal

practices, as it would be expected, since political interest is part of being a good citizen, but this might instead indicate an informed pragmatism about their prevalence and necessity. Along these lines, the unexpected positive association between social tolerance and informality justification can call into question the view that some aspects of democratic political culture are highly context-dependent and that their role in forming good citizenship, which is expected to condemn informality, may be limited. Generally, these findings indicate that the attitude towards informality is highly context-dependent and that any interpretation of the results needs to take into account specific cultural, socio-economic and especially political factors, which shape attitudes towards informality in each country. The example of Japan, where widespread informal practices do not threaten the efficiency and stability of the state and economic system, can also point to this conclusion. In this case, informal practices are part of the traditional value system and hierarchical relations in society, where they are supported by a high level of trust, which enables a high level of social cooperation (Fukuyama 2000).

A common and solid predictor of the justification of informality across all countries is the perceived prevalence of informal practices in society. This points to the perception of using personal connections or informal practices to get things done (such as finding a job or navigating public services) as a pragmatic response to the fact and/or belief that these formal systems are rather inefficient, slow, or unresponsive. If resorting to informal practices is a rational choice driven by inefficient institutions, as many definitions of informality suggest, does the justification of informality share the same attribute? On top of that, the sense of disempowerment is rather present among citizens in SEE countries and should be considered as well. Many feel powerless in the fight against corruption. When asked how an average person can combat corruption, the most common response in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia was "nothing", with 29%, 31%, and 39% of respondents, respectively, expressing this sentiment (Vuković 2021). The socio-cultural propensity to "give up", i.e. the rather widespread attitude of civic disempowerment, may also serve as an additional factor that may significantly contribute to the growing permissiveness towards informality among young people in SEE today. This leads us to the specific question whether a culture of justifying informality exists among young people in post-Yugoslav countries. While the data does not provide a definitive answer, the perception of widespread reliance on informal channels could contribute to the belief that informality is both necessary and legitimate. In that sense, the justification of informality is not merely a product of rational choice, but also the result of a deeply embedded social discourse regarding the inefficiency of formal institutions. This social discourse may foster the development of a cultural norm in which resorting to informal practices becomes automatic

and normalized (Bicchieri 2006; 2016), even when it may not be necessary in reality. Consequently, informality may become expected and socially justified, despite not always being based on actual experiences.

Although the dimension of political socialization exhibits a somewhat weaker set of predictors compared to the assessment of institutional performance, the role of social citizenship norms, which young people acquire and internalize during their upbringing, should not be overlooked. The development of participative democratic behaviours and habits, through various forms of prosocial engagements that foster solidarity and awareness of one's citizenship role, can significantly contribute to shaping a more critical view of informality.

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