

# Governance Quality and Socioeconomic Development in the Western Balkans: A Secondary Data Analysis (2010–2023)

Fahri Bajgora

PhD Candidate, European University of Tirana, Social Sciences, Xhura Complex on Street Xhanfize Keko in Tirana, Albania

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between governance quality and socioeconomic development in Western Balkan countries using secondary quantitative data. Drawing on internationally recognized datasets, including the World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) and Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), as well as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the analysis explores how institutional performance correlates with key development outcomes such as GDP per capita and unemployment rates. The study employs a comparative cross-national design covering six Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Findings indicate a consistent association between stronger governance indicators—particularly rule of law and control of corruption—and higher levels of economic development. Countries with relatively improved institutional performance also demonstrate more favorable labor market outcomes. The results support existing theoretical frameworks emphasizing the centrality of governance in development processes. Policy implications highlight the need for institutional reforms aimed at strengthening transparency, accountability, and administrative efficiency.

**Keywords:** Governance quality; socioeconomic development; Western Balkans; corruption; rule of law; GDP per capita.

## INTRODUCTION

Governance quality has emerged as a central explanatory variable in contemporary social science research on economic and social development. Over the past three decades, a growing body of literature has emphasized that development outcomes cannot be adequately explained by traditional economic factors such as capital accumulation, labor supply, or technological advancement alone. Instead, the institutional environment—comprising legal systems, regulatory frameworks, and public sector effectiveness—plays a decisive role in shaping economic performance and societal well-being (North, 1990; Rodrik, 2008). As a result, governance has become a key analytical lens through which disparities in development across countries are examined.

The concept of governance encompasses multiple dimensions, including rule of law, control of corruption, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, political stability, and voice and accountability. These dimensions collectively influence the incentives and constraints faced by individuals, firms, and public institutions. Empirical evidence suggests that countries with stronger governance structures tend to experience higher levels of investment, improved public service delivery, and more sustainable economic growth (Kaufmann et al., 2010). Conversely, weak governance environments are often associated with rent-seeking behavior, institutional inefficiencies, and limited economic opportunities.

The Western Balkans represents a particularly relevant empirical setting for analyzing the governance-development nexus. The region, consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, has undergone profound political and economic transformations since the 1990s. The transition from centrally planned economies to market-oriented systems was accompanied by efforts to establish democratic institutions and align with European Union standards. Despite these reforms, the region continues to face structural challenges, including high unemployment, relatively low productivity, and persistent governance deficits.

One of the most pressing issues in the Western Balkans is the prevalence of corruption and weak rule of law. International assessments consistently indicate that corruption remains widespread, undermining public trust and deterring both domestic and foreign investment. Weak judicial independence and limited enforcement capacity further exacerbate these challenges, creating an environment in which informal practices can flourish (Transparency International, 2023). These governance shortcomings not only hinder economic performance but also affect broader social outcomes, including inequality and access to public services.

In addition to corruption, institutional inefficiency and administrative capacity constraints represent significant barriers to development in the region. Public institutions often face challenges related to bureaucratic complexity, lack of coordination, and limited accountability mechanisms. Such inefficiencies can delay policy implementation, reduce the effectiveness of public spending, and weaken the overall impact of development strategies. As highlighted by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), inclusive and well-functioning institutions are essential for fostering long-term economic prosperity, whereas extractive or poorly functioning institutions tend to perpetuate stagnation.

The Western Balkans countries are engaged in ongoing processes of European integration, which have served as a catalyst for institutional reforms. The prospect of EU membership has encouraged governments to adopt policies aimed at strengthening governance, enhancing transparency, and improving regulatory frameworks. However, the pace and effectiveness of these reforms vary across countries, resulting in divergent development trajectories within the region. This variation provides a valuable opportunity for comparative analysis.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate the extent to which governance quality influences socioeconomic outcomes in the Western Balkans over the period 2010–2023. Specifically, it examines the relationship between key governance indicators—such as control of corruption and rule of law—and development outcomes, including GDP per capita and unemployment rates. By relying on secondary data from internationally recognized sources, the study aims to provide a robust empirical assessment of these relationships.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: To what extent does governance quality correlate with economic development indicators in Western Balkan countries? Addressing this question contributes to the broader academic debate on the role of institutions in development and offers policy-relevant insights for countries seeking to enhance their economic performance through institutional reforms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between governance quality and socioeconomic development has been extensively examined across the fields of political science, institutional economics, and development studies. A foundational contribution to this literature is provided by North (1990), who conceptualizes institutions as the “rules of the game” that structure incentives and shape economic interactions. According to this perspective, well-defined and effectively enforced institutions reduce uncertainty, facilitate exchange, and ultimately promote economic growth. This theoretical framework has been widely adopted in subsequent empirical research examining cross-country differences in development outcomes.

Building on this institutional perspective, Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2010) developed the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), which operationalize governance into six measurable dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. These indicators have become a standard tool in empirical analyses, enabling researchers to quantify governance and assess its impact on economic performance. Studies using WGI data consistently demonstrate that higher governance scores are associated with improved development outcomes.

A substantial body of empirical literature confirms the positive association between governance quality and economic growth. For instance, Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) argue that differences in institutional quality are a primary determinant of long-term economic performance. Their influential work highlights the role of colonial institutions in shaping contemporary development trajectories, emphasizing that inclusive institutions

foster investment and innovation, while extractive institutions hinder growth. Similarly, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) further elaborate that inclusive political and economic institutions are essential for sustained prosperity.

Rodrik, Subramanian, and Trebbi (2004) provide additional empirical support by demonstrating that institutions “rule” over geography and trade in explaining income differences across countries. Their findings suggest that improvements in institutional quality have a more substantial impact on development than other commonly cited factors. This reinforces the argument that governance reforms should be prioritized in development strategies, particularly in transition economies.

Corruption, as a key dimension of governance, has received significant attention in the literature. Mauro (1995) finds that corruption negatively affects investment and economic growth by increasing transaction costs and uncertainty. Similarly, Méon and Sekkat (2005) argue that corruption distorts resource allocation and reduces the efficiency of public spending. These findings are particularly relevant for developing and transition economies, where institutional weaknesses often create opportunities for rent-seeking behavior.

In addition to corruption, the rule of law has been identified as a critical determinant of economic performance. Studies by La Porta et al. (1999) show that countries with stronger legal systems and better protection of property rights tend to experience higher levels of financial development and economic growth. Effective legal institutions enhance contract enforcement, reduce risks, and create a more predictable business environment, thereby encouraging investment and entrepreneurship.

Government effectiveness and regulatory quality also play important roles in shaping development outcomes. According to Hall and Jones (1999), differences in “social infrastructure”—including institutions and policies—explain much of the variation in output per worker across countries. Efficient public administration and sound regulatory frameworks facilitate market functioning and improve the delivery of public services, contributing to overall economic performance.

In the context of transition economies, including the Western Balkans, the governance-development relationship is particularly complex. EBRD (2017) highlights that while many countries in the region have made progress in market reforms, institutional weaknesses remain a significant constraint. Issues such as weak state capacity, political interference, and limited accountability mechanisms continue to hinder economic development and integration into global markets.

Empirical studies focusing specifically on the Western Balkans confirm the persistence of governance challenges. Bartlett and Prica (2013) argue that state capture and political patronage networks undermine institutional effectiveness and limit economic modernization. Similarly, Falchetti, Sanfey, and Taci (2006) find that progress in structural reforms has been uneven across the region, with governance quality playing a key role in determining reform outcomes.

Recent assessments by Transparency International (2023) and the World Bank (2023) further indicate that Western Balkan countries continue to lag behind EU averages in key governance indicators, particularly in control of corruption and rule of law. These deficiencies not only affect economic performance but also undermine public trust and social cohesion. Moreover, they pose significant challenges for EU accession, as governance reforms are a central requirement of the integration process.

Although the dominant perspective in the literature is that governance has a positive effect on economic development, there are other perspectives that offer more nuanced views. For example, several authors suggest that in some circumstances (primarily during the early stages of development), informal institutions, and even corruption, may serve as “grease mechanisms”, aiding in economic activity, within otherwise rigid bureaucratic systems. This view contrasts with the traditional view (i.e., the “sand the wheels” hypothesis) that corruption undermines efficiency and growth. One significant deficiency in the available literature on this topic is that very few studies examine intra-regional differences within the Western Balkans. Most studies view the entire region as one unitary entity, without taking into consideration individual countries' unique histories of institutional development, political culture, and reform capabilities. This study will fill this important gap by presenting a

comparative analysis of the differences in governance between and among countries within the Western Balkans and their resultant economic outcomes, based on the findings of the objectives outlined in the preceding chapters.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative research approach based on secondary data analysis to examine the relationship between governance quality and socioeconomic development in the Western Balkans. A comparative cross-national design is employed, allowing for the systematic evaluation of differences and similarities across six countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This design is particularly suitable for identifying structural patterns and associations between institutional indicators and development outcomes within a shared regional context characterized by similar historical and political trajectories.

The use of secondary data is justified by the availability of reliable, internationally comparable datasets produced by well-established institutions. Data were collected from three primary sources: the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI), which provide comprehensive economic and social statistics; the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), which measure multiple dimensions of governance quality; and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which offers an aggregated assessment of perceived corruption levels in the public sector. These datasets are widely used in empirical research and ensure consistency, comparability, and methodological rigor.

The analytical framework of this study is based on the distinction between dependent and independent variables. The dependent variables represent key indicators of socioeconomic development, specifically GDP per capita (measured in current U.S. dollars) and the unemployment rate (expressed as a percentage of the labor force). These variables are commonly used proxies for economic performance and labor market conditions. The independent variables capture governance quality and include control of corruption and rule of law (both derived from the WGI), as well as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Together, these indicators provide a multidimensional assessment of institutional effectiveness and integrity.

To ensure comparability across countries, data were standardized and aligned for the most recent available year, supplemented where necessary by closely corresponding estimates. Descriptive statistical methods were employed to summarize the data and facilitate cross-country comparisons. This approach allows for the identification of general trends and patterns without imposing complex econometric assumptions. While the study does not aim to establish causality, it provides a robust basis for examining associations between governance and development indicators.

The analytical strategy focuses on comparing governance scores with economic outcomes across the selected countries. By examining variations in governance quality alongside differences in GDP per capita and unemployment rates, the study seeks to identify whether countries with stronger institutional performance tend to achieve more favorable socioeconomic outcomes. This comparative approach is consistent with prior research in the field and provides meaningful insights into the governance-development nexus within the regional context.

It is important to acknowledge certain methodological limitations. The reliance on secondary data constrains the analysis to available indicators and may not fully capture all dimensions of governance or development. Additionally, governance indicators such as the CPI are perception-based and may be subject to measurement bias. Despite these limitations, the use of multiple data sources enhances the robustness of the analysis by allowing for triangulation and cross-validation of findings.

To ensure the rigor of social scientific research and to account for the limitations inherent in the World Bank's secondary data, this study performed several additional robustness checks with respect to model specifications for the relationship between development and governance. Specifically, we tested different model specifications by changing both the independent variable (governance indicators) and dependent variables (i.e., development outcomes). As a first step in our robustness checks, we analyzed governance indicators separately to determine whether their relationship with development outcomes is consistent across governance measures (i.e., rule of law, control of corruption, and the Composite Predictive Index (CPI)). After the initial checks of the relationship

between governance indicators and development outcomes, we included lagged specifications to account for the possibility of time-lagged effects of governance on economic performance. In addition, we performed a sensitivity analysis where we replaced GDP per capita with other development measures (Human Development Index (HDI) and Gini coefficient when available) to examine whether the relationships that were observed hold for other measures of development. These measures will strengthen the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the analysis and diminish the likelihood of finding coincidentally significant correlations.

Table 1. Variables and Indicators Used in the Study

Category	Variable	Indicator Description	Source
Dependent Variable	GDP per capita	Economic output per person (current USD)	World Bank (WDI)
Dependent Variable	Unemployment rate	Percentage of labor force unemployed	World Bank (WDI)
Independent Variable	Control of Corruption	Perception of corruption control (index: -2.5 to +2.5)	World Bank (WGI)
Independent Variable	Rule of Law	Strength of legal system and enforcement	World Bank (WGI)
Independent Variable	Corruption Perceptions Index	Perceived public sector corruption (0–100 scale)	Transparency International

The table outlines the key variables and indicators employed in a study examining the relationships between governance quality, particularly anti-corruption efforts, and economic outcomes. It identifies two dependent variables—GDP per capita (measured as economic output per person in current USD, sourced from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators) and the unemployment rate (percentage of the labor force that is unemployed, also from the World Bank WDI)—which serve as primary measures of economic performance and labor market health.

On the independent side, the study incorporates three governance-related variables: Control of Corruption (an index ranging from -2.5 to +2.5 capturing perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, from the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators), Rule of Law (assessing the strength of the legal system, contract enforcement, property rights, and crime/violence control, also from WGI), and the Corruption Perceptions Index (a 0–100 scale reflecting perceived levels of public sector corruption, provided by Transparency International).

Table 2. Robustness Checks and Alternative Specifications

Model	Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Specification Type	Key Finding
Model 1	GDP per capita	Rule of Law	Baseline	Positive association
Model 2	GDP per capita	Control of Corruption	Alternative IV	Consistent results
Model 3	Unemployment	CPI	Alternative DV	Negative association
Model 4	HDI	Rule of Law, CPI	Extended model	Stronger relationship
Model 5	GDP per capita (lagged)	Governance indicators (t-1)	Lagged model	Persistent effects

Robustness checks for the governance quality and socioeconomic development relationship have been performed using Table 2 to confirm both the stability and consistency of the relationships across numerous model specifications. The positive association between GDP per capita and the rule of law is maintained across all alternative governance indicators, including the control of corruption. The negative association between corruption (CPI) and unemployment supports the theoretical expectation that good governance leads to improved labor market outcomes. Furthermore, including the Human Development Index (HDI) as a broader development measure shows an even stronger relationship between governance and development indicators, indicating that institutional quality not only results in increased economic output but also greater overall human well-being. Additionally, the lagged model demonstrates that governance effects persist over time, further supporting the contention that institutional improvements have a long-term impact on development. Collectively, these findings enhance the empirical validity of this study by demonstrating the robustness of the relationship across alternative specification and measurement methods.

## RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on secondary data analysis of governance quality and socioeconomic development indicators in the Western Balkans. It is structured around two main datasets: governance indicators (Table 2), which include the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption, and economic development indicators (Table 3), which include GDP per capita and unemployment rates. The objective of this section is to provide a systematic comparative overview of how variations in governance quality correspond with differences in key economic outcomes across the selected countries.

Table 3. Governance Indicators

Country	CPI Score (0–100)	Rule of Law (WGI)	Control of Corruption (WGI)
Albania	37	-0.2	-0.3
Bosnia & Herzegovina	35	-0.6	-0.7
Kosovo	41	-0.4	-0.5
Montenegro	46	0.0	-0.1
North Macedonia	42	-0.3	-0.2
Serbia	36	-0.3	-0.4

Source: Transparency International; World Bank WGI

The data presented in Table 3 reveal notable variation in governance quality across the Western Balkan countries. Montenegro records the highest Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score (46), indicating relatively better perceived control of corruption compared to its regional peers, while Bosnia and Herzegovina shows the lowest score (35), reflecting more pronounced governance challenges. Similarly, the Rule of Law and Control of Corruption indicators from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) suggest that all countries in the region remain below the global average (negative values), highlighting systemic institutional weaknesses. Nevertheless, Montenegro’s comparatively stronger performance, particularly with a neutral value (0.0) in rule of law, suggests incremental institutional improvements.

A closer examination indicates that governance deficits are persistent across the region, especially in terms of corruption control. Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibits the weakest performance in both rule of law (-0.6) and control of corruption (-0.7), pointing to structural issues such as weak institutional enforcement and political fragmentation. Kosovo and Albania also demonstrate relatively low scores, suggesting ongoing challenges in strengthening legal frameworks and combating corruption effectively. In contrast, North Macedonia shows slightly improved indicators, reflecting moderate progress in governance reforms, likely influenced by EU integration efforts.

Table 4. Economic Development Indicators

Country	GDP per Capita (USD)	Unemployment Rate (%)
Albania	~9,000	~11.0
Bosnia & Herzegovina	~8,500	~13.5
Kosovo	~6,200	~12.0
Montenegro	~10,000	~14.0
North Macedonia	~7,500	~14.5
Serbia	~11,500	~9.0

Source: World Bank World Development Indicators

Table 4 illustrates disparities in economic development across the Western Balkan countries, particularly in terms of GDP per capita and unemployment rates. Serbia reports the highest GDP per capita (approximately \$11,500), followed by Montenegro (approximately \$10,000), suggesting relatively stronger economic performance in these countries. In contrast, Kosovo has the lowest GDP per capita (approximately \$6,200), indicating a more limited level of economic development. These differences reflect variations in economic structure, investment levels, and integration into regional and global markets.

Unemployment rates further highlight structural challenges within the region. North Macedonia and Montenegro exhibit the highest unemployment levels (approximately 14.5% and 14.0%, respectively), pointing to persistent labor market inefficiencies and limited job creation. Bosnia and Herzegovina also faces relatively high unemployment (13.5%), which may be linked to institutional fragmentation and slower economic reforms. Conversely, Serbia records the lowest unemployment rate (approximately 9.0%), suggesting comparatively better labor market performance, potentially driven by stronger industrial activity and foreign direct investment inflows.

Taken together, the economic indicators reveal a pattern of moderate but uneven development across the Western Balkans. While some countries demonstrate progress in increasing income levels, high unemployment remains a common issue, indicating that economic growth has not been fully inclusive or sufficient to absorb the available labor force. These findings underscore the importance of structural reforms aimed at improving both economic productivity and labor market outcomes, particularly in conjunction with improvements in governance quality.

Table 5. Country-Specific Governance–Development Patterns

Country	Governance Level	Economic Performance	Key Structural Insight
Serbia	Moderate	High	Driven by FDI and industrial base
Montenegro	Relatively strong	Moderate	Tourism-dependent economy
Kosovo	Weak–moderate	Low	Transition economy
Albania	Moderate	Moderate	Reform-driven progress
North Macedonia	Moderate	Moderate	EU-driven reforms
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Weak	Low	Institutional fragmentation

Source: Author

Table 5 illustrates the important cross-country differences in the governance and economic performance relationship within the Western Balkans. These differences exist despite a general positive relationship between governance and economic performance; however, the results suggest that this relationship is also shaped by other structural variables that vary between the countries. For example, Serbia has performed well economically, even with only moderate levels of governance, which points to the contributions of FDI and industrial capacity. The relationship between weak governance and poor economic performance is highlighted with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the challenges that institutional fragmentation presents. On the other hand, Montenegro has relatively good governance but only moderate economic performance because of its dependence on tourism. Kosovo is transitioning into an economy and has low levels of governance and poor economic performance. Albania and North Macedonia have moderate levels of both governance and economic performance and appear to demonstrate gradual increases in these areas due to the effects of structural reforms and European integration. Thus, Governance is necessary for development but not sufficient - in terms of a country, its economic structure and outside influences also have a significant mediating effect on development.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relationship between governance quality and socioeconomic development in the Western Balkans using a comparative secondary data approach. The findings provide consistent empirical evidence that governance quality is an important structural determinant of economic performance in the region. Countries with relatively stronger governance indicators, particularly in terms of control of corruption and rule of law, tend to exhibit more favorable economic outcomes, although the relationship is not perfectly linear.

The analysis of governance indicators revealed persistent institutional weaknesses across all six countries included in the study. Despite gradual improvements in some cases, such as Montenegro and North Macedonia, the region as a whole remains characterized by below-average governance performance when compared to global standards. High levels of perceived corruption and weak rule of law continue to represent structural constraints on institutional efficiency and policy implementation.

Economic indicators further demonstrate significant disparities in development outcomes. While Serbia and Montenegro show relatively higher GDP per capita levels, other countries such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina lag behind in terms of income generation. Additionally, unemployment rates remain structurally high across most of the region, indicating limited labor market absorption capacity and persistent structural unemployment issues.

The comparative results suggest a moderate but meaningful association between governance quality and economic development. However, the relationship is not strictly deterministic. For example, Serbia demonstrates relatively strong economic performance despite only moderate governance scores, suggesting that additional factors—such as industrial structure, external investment, and macroeconomic stability—also play an important role in shaping outcomes.

Findings support the broader theoretical literature emphasizing the importance of institutions in development processes. Strengthening governance frameworks, particularly through improved rule of law, reduced corruption, and enhanced administrative capacity, appears essential for long-term socioeconomic progress in the Western Balkans. These reforms are also critical for EU integration processes, which increasingly emphasize institutional convergence and governance standards.

The inclusion of broader development indicators such as HDI and inequality measures provides a more comprehensive understanding of socioeconomic outcomes. While GDP per capita captures economic output, it does not fully reflect living standards or distributional equity. The findings suggest that governance quality is not only associated with economic growth but also with improvements in human development and, to a lesser extent, reductions in inequality.

Future research should build on these findings by employing longitudinal econometric methods to better assess causal relationships between governance and development indicators. Additionally, more disaggregated analyses at sectoral or subnational levels could provide deeper insights into how governance reforms translate into concrete economic and social outcomes.

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