

CUSTOMARY LAW AND MODERN LEGAL SYSTEMS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

How to cite this paper: Nimani, P., Avdija, S., & Maloku, A. (2025). Customary law and modern legal systems: A comparative perspective. *Corporate Law & Governance Review*, 7(2), 77–83.
<https://doi.org/10.22495/clgrv7i2p8>

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ISSN Online: 2664-1542

ISSN Print: 2707-1111

Received: 01.11.2024

Revised: 03.02.2025; 19.03.2025;
25.04.2025

Accepted: 02.05.2025

JEL Classification: K00, K40, O17

DOI: 10.22495/clgrv7i2p8

This paper examines the influence of customary law on modern legal systems in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, focusing on its integration, challenges, and implications. Customary law, such as the Kanun (the Code) of Lekë Dukagjini, continues to shape legal practices and social structures in these countries, especially in rural areas (Cara & Margjeka, 2015). Through a comparative legal analysis, the study explores how customary norms have influenced contemporary legislation and judicial practices. The research employs qualitative methods, including document analysis of legal texts, statutory legislation, and case studies, to evaluate the interaction between traditional legal frameworks and formal state law. The findings highlight both the persistence and transformation of customary law, revealing areas of conflict with human rights principles and modern legal structures. While customary law remains an important part of local legal identities, its integration into the formal legal system must align with contemporary legal standards to ensure justice, legal uniformity, and the protection of fundamental rights. This study contributes to the broader discourse on legal pluralism, offering insights into the adaptation of traditional norms within modern legal frameworks.

Keywords: Customary Law, Legal Integration, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Legal Pluralism

Authors' individual contribution: Conceptualization — P.N. and A.M.; Methodology — P.N. and A.M.; Validation — A.M.; Formal Analysis — P.N.; Investigation — P.N. and A.M.; Resources — P.N. and S.A.; Data Curation — P.N. and A.M.; Writing — Original Draft — P.N. and S.A.; Writing — Review & Editing — A.M.; Supervision — P.N. and A.M.

Declaration of conflicting interests: The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between customary law and modern legal systems remains a crucial area of legal scholarship, particularly in post-conflict societies and regions with strong traditional practices, such as the Balkans. Customary law refers to unwritten legal norms that emerge from long-standing social practices and community consensus, often regulating matters such as family relations, property rights, and dispute resolution (Alnusair et al., 2024). In the Balkans, customary law has historically been embodied by systems such as the Kanun (the Code) of Lekë Dukagjini in Albania, which has influenced

legal and social practices despite the increasing dominance of statutory law (Gajić, 2020).

While modern legal systems in the Balkans have been shaped by Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman legal traditions, their ongoing reforms aim to align with international human rights standards. However, the persistence of customary law raises questions about legal pluralism, the reconciliation of traditional norms with contemporary legal frameworks, and the extent to which customary law can be harmonized with formal legal systems (Triasmono & Ruslie, 2024).

Existing research has extensively explored the historical development of customary law and its socio-legal implications. However, there remains

a gap in comparative legal analyses that specifically examine the interaction between customary law and modern legal frameworks in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how these three countries integrate customary law into their modern legal systems, identifying challenges and best practices for legal harmonization.

The central research questions are:

RQ1: To what extent does customary law continue to influence legal systems in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro?

RQ2: What legal, cultural, and institutional factors shape the integration of customary law into statutory frameworks?

RQ3: How can modern legal systems balance the preservation of traditional norms with contemporary principles of justice and human rights?

This study is grounded on the theoretical framework of legal pluralism, which acknowledges the coexistence of multiple legal systems within a single jurisdiction (Gashi, 2024). By applying comparative legal analysis, the research examines the codification, modification, or rejection of customary legal norms in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing doctrinal legal analysis, case studies, and policy review to evaluate how these countries navigate the integration of customary law.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for legal scholars, policymakers, and practitioners engaged in legal reform. Understanding the interaction between customary and statutory law can inform policy decisions in post-conflict societies, ensuring that legal frameworks uphold both cultural heritage and human rights (Alma'arif et al., 2025). By analyzing the experiences of Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, this study contributes to the broader discourse on legal pluralism and the evolution of legal norms in transitional societies.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on customary law and its integration into modern legal systems, with a focus on the Balkans. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing the comparative legal analysis approach and data sources. Section 4 presents the findings, highlighting the similarities and differences in how Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro have integrated customary law into their legal frameworks. Section 5 concludes the study by summarizing key insights and providing policy recommendations for improving the integration of customary law into modern legal systems.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between customary law and modern legal systems has been the subject of extensive study, particularly in regions where traditional legal practices continue to coexist with formal, state-established legal frameworks. The lengthy history of customary standards in the Balkans provides a unique setting for this dynamic. In this literature review, we critically engage with the key sources that have explored the intersection of customary and statutory law, with a specific focus on the Balkans, while also drawing comparisons to other regions to enrich our understanding of this complex relationship.

Customary law, often understood as the unwritten norms and practices that govern

society, has been central to the social fabric of many Balkan communities for centuries. One of the most significant works in this field is the study of the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, a legal code that governed northern Albanian tribes. Haider (2018) highlights Kanun's role in regulating social relations and maintaining order in the absence of state-imposed legal structures. The Kanun's influence has been profound, with its norms continuing to impact legal and cultural practices in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. However, while customary law is often romanticized as a symbol of cultural heritage, scholars have increasingly questioned its ability to coexist with modern state laws that emphasize individual rights and equality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], & Support for Improvement in Governance and Management [SIGMA], 2024).

The literature on customary law in the Balkans reflects the tension between tradition and modernization. On one hand, customary law is seen as an important component of the region's cultural identity; on the other hand, it is often at odds with contemporary legal standards, particularly regarding issues such as gender equality and human rights (Nimani & Maloku, 2025). Cara and Margjeka (2015) discuss this tension in the context of the Balkans, arguing that customary law often operates in parallel with state law, sometimes undermining the latter's implementation. For example, practices such as blood feuds, which are enshrined in the Kanun, have led to violent cycles of retaliation, challenging the modern state's monopoly on violence and law enforcement. Vago and Barkan (2021) further explore how these practices continue to pose a challenge to the formal legal system, which is rooted in a different set of values, including respect for human rights.

In Kosovo, where customary law has had a significant impact, Hoxha (2024) investigates how the legal system has attempted to integrate traditional norms within the broader framework of state law. Kosovo's legal transformation, following its declaration of independence in 2008, has been a process of balancing customary practices with international standards. Hoxha (2024) highlights how Kosovo's legal system has attempted to reconcile customary law with the European Union's (EU) legal requirements, particularly in areas like family law and property rights. Yet, despite efforts to harmonize customary and statutory laws, tensions remain, especially in rural areas where customary law continues to hold sway over formal legal practices (Swain et al., 2025; Hoxha, 2024).

While scholars, such as Hoxha (2024), focus on the integration of customary law within state systems, others, such as Míguez Núñez (2016), have explored the broader challenges posed by modernization. Çitaku et al. (2022) examine how the adoption of modern legal systems in the Balkans often requires the displacement or transformation of traditional norms, a process that is not always smooth. The article underscores the challenges in enforcing state law in areas where customary practices are deeply entrenched. For instance, the persistence of practices like the Kanun can complicate the implementation of laws related to inheritance, marriage, and land ownership. In such contexts, legal pluralism, the coexistence of different legal systems, becomes a central issue, raising questions about the legitimacy and authority of state law in rural and isolated communities (Rhodes, 2014).

In comparative legal scholarship, the integration of customary law into modern legal systems has been explored in regions beyond the Balkans. Legal pluralism, or the coexistence of multiple legal systems within a given society, is a concept that has been extensively studied in Africa and Latin America. Maluwa (2008) explore the challenges of integrating customary law into modern state systems in Africa, highlighting the tension between local customs and formal legal institutions. One of the key issues identified in these studies is the need to adapt customary law to modern standards, particularly regarding human rights. For example, customary practices in parts of Africa, such as polygamy and bride price, have come under scrutiny in light of international human rights conventions that emphasize gender equality and individual autonomy. Similarly, in the Balkans, the persistence of patriarchal structures within customary law can create significant challenges for women's rights and equality before the law (Çitaku et al., 2022).

Legal scholars in Latin America have also grappled with similar questions regarding the integration of indigenous customary law into national legal systems. Míguez Núñez (2016) provides a comparative analysis of customary law in Latin America, where indigenous communities often operate under their legal systems. In many cases, these systems have been incorporated into national legal frameworks through mechanisms like legal pluralism or special recognition for indigenous governance. Collin and Casagrande (2023) argue that the challenge in such contexts is not only to integrate customary law into the formal legal system but also to ensure that traditional norms are compatible with contemporary legal standards, particularly concerning human rights and environmental protection. This comparative perspective provides valuable insights for understanding the challenges faced by the Balkans, where customary law must also contend with similar issues of modernization, human rights, and legal pluralism.

The integration of customary law into state legal systems raises important theoretical questions about the nature of law itself. Legal scholars such as Tamanaha (2021) and O'Sullivan (2021) argue that the relationship between customary and modern legal systems is not merely one of conflict but also negotiation and adaptation. They suggest that customary law can serve as a source of legal innovation, offering alternative approaches to justice, conflict resolution, and social order that complement, rather than conflict with, state law. For example, Safarov (2024) points out that the informal dispute resolution mechanisms embedded in customary law can help alleviate the burden on state courts and provide a more culturally appropriate form of justice. However, the author also acknowledges that these mechanisms often lack transparency and accountability, raising concerns about fairness and equality.

Thus, the literature on Balkan customary law demonstrates a nuanced interaction between tradition and modernity. While customary law continues to shape social relations and legal practices in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, its integration into modern legal systems remains fraught with challenges. The persistence of customary practices, such as blood feuds and patriarchal norms, complicates the application of state law and poses significant challenges to

the protection of human rights and gender equality (Sadiku, 2014). At the same time, the legal pluralism that arises from the coexistence of customary and statutory law presents opportunities for innovation and adaptation, especially in areas like dispute resolution and community governance.

Comparative studies from Africa and Latin America provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of integrating customary law into modern legal systems. These studies highlight the importance of legal pluralism in accommodating diverse legal traditions and the need for careful negotiation between traditional norms and modern legal principles. For the Balkans, the continued study of customary law, its integration into state systems, and its impact on legal and social practices will remain essential for understanding the evolution of law in the region.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this study systematically examines the integration of customary law into the modern legal systems of Kosovo and Albania. A qualitative approach has been adopted, as it is well-suited for exploring complex legal phenomena where the emphasis is on understanding the nuances of legal traditions, social contexts, and historical developments. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of how customary law and state law interact, coexist, and at times conflict in the two jurisdictions. A thorough examination of the legal systems of Kosovo and Albania requires an understanding of how customary law is incorporated into formal state law, as it significantly influences both the legal and social structures of these countries.

A comparative legal analysis serves as the primary research method, enabling an exploration of the similarities and differences between Kosovo and Albania in terms of how customary law is recognized and applied. The comparative analysis involves examining legal texts, including constitutions, statutory laws, and court rulings, that regulate the relationship between customary and statutory law. This method is particularly valuable in understanding how customary legal norms, such as those found in the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, continue to influence contemporary legal practices despite the formal supremacy of written law. By comparing these legal frameworks, the study aims to identify the mechanisms through which customary law is integrated into the legal system while also highlighting points of conflict and convergence between traditional norms and modern legislation (Armakolas et al., 2021).

To ensure reliability and validity, document analysis is employed as a core data collection method. This involves the examination of primary legal sources, including national constitutions, laws, judicial decisions, and legal commentaries. Document analysis allows for the identification of explicit references to customary law and an assessment of how the legal systems of Kosovo and Albania accommodate, adapt, or challenge customary legal norms. The study places particular emphasis on legal areas where customary law is most commonly applied, such as family law, property rights, and conflict resolution (Hoxha, 2024). By systematically reviewing these legal texts, patterns and trends in the incorporation of

customary law into formal legal structures are identified, as well as areas where customary practices may be in tension with state law.

Additionally, content analysis is incorporated to further explore themes and concepts within legal documents. This method allows for a systematic examination of the language and structure of legal texts, identifying recurring legal principles that reflect the integration of customary law into state legal systems (Dičić Kostić et al., 2022). The analysis focuses on specific areas such as inheritance laws, dispute resolution mechanisms, and community justice practices, where customary law remains influential. This approach helps reveal how customary legal traditions are articulated within legal documents and how they influence judicial interpretations and rulings in practice.

A critical aspect of the research methodology is the application of legal pluralism as the theoretical framework. Legal pluralism acknowledges the coexistence of multiple legal systems within a single jurisdiction and provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the integration of customary law into state law. Given the historical importance of customary law in governing social relations and dispute resolution, this framework is particularly relevant for Kosovo and Albania. By employing legal pluralism, the study examines how customary and statutory legal systems interact, as well as the challenges in reconciling them. This perspective enables a nuanced understanding of the tensions and synergies between traditional legal customs and formal state law (Çitaku et al., 2022).

To enhance the credibility and depth of the research, triangulation is employed by cross-referencing multiple legal sources. This involves comparing constitutional provisions, statutory laws, judicial rulings, and legal commentaries to identify commonalities and discrepancies in how customary law is addressed. Triangulation helps validate findings by ensuring consistency across different sources and perspectives, ultimately providing a more comprehensive understanding of the integration of customary law into state legal systems (Weyant, 2022).

While the chosen methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing the research question, alternative methods could also have been employed to complement or expand the study. A quantitative approach using statistical analysis could provide empirical data on the frequency and extent of customary law application in judicial decisions. Surveys and structured interviews with legal practitioners, judges, and policymakers could offer additional insights into the practical implementation and challenges of integrating customary law into formal legal systems. Furthermore, ethnographic research involving field observations and in-depth interviews with community members could capture firsthand perspectives on how customary law continues to function in practice. These alternative methods, while not the focus of this study, could enhance future research by adding empirical and ethnographic dimensions to the analysis.

The research design is structured to ensure replicability and transparency, allowing for future studies to build upon the findings. The methodology's emphasis on document analysis, content analysis, and legal pluralism provides a clear and reproducible framework for investigating the coexistence of customary and statutory law. This

approach can be applied in other jurisdictions to examine the role of customary law in diverse legal contexts, thereby expanding the comparative scope of the study (Nimani, Maliqi, et al., 2023).

By employing a qualitative research approach that integrates comparative legal analysis, document analysis, content analysis, and legal pluralism, this study offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between customary and state law in Kosovo and Albania. The methodology ensures the reliability and validity of the findings while also acknowledging the potential contributions of alternative research methods. This comprehensive approach contributes to a deeper understanding of how customary law continues to shape legal practices in the region and provides a foundation for further comparative studies on legal pluralism.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion section presents an analysis of the findings derived from the study of the integration of customary law into the modern legal systems of Kosovo and Albania. The main goal of the research was to assess how customary legal practices, such as those derived from the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, continue to coexist with, influence, and sometimes conflict with the formal state legal systems in both countries. The study's findings reveal the persistence of customary law in regulating various aspects of life in rural areas, particularly in areas of conflict resolution, family law, and property rights, which are also pivotal aspects of state law. The discussion of these findings, supported by both historical and legal analysis, provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex interaction between customary law and modern statutory law in the region.

One of the key findings of the study is that while Kosovo and Albania have formal legal systems that prioritize statutory law, customary law remains influential, especially in rural communities. The role of the Kanun in Kosovo, for instance, has persisted well beyond its original context, influencing community conflict resolution practices and even shaping family law. Customary law often operates in parallel to statutory law, where local communities turn to traditional norms for resolving disputes, particularly in situations where state mechanisms are inaccessible or untrusted (Cara & Margjeka, 2015). These practices have been identified as key to understanding the social order in many areas, where the state legal system has not fully penetrated. This observation confirms the findings of previous research, which suggest that customary law continues to hold significant weight in legal matters within rural and less formalized contexts (Cara & Margjeka, 2015; Çitaku et al., 2022).

Furthermore, it was observed that in both Kosovo and Albania, the integration of customary law into state law is not a straightforward process. While some aspects of customary law, particularly in areas such as inheritance and familial disputes, are indirectly acknowledged or respected by courts, there are instances where customary practices are at odds with modern human rights standards. For example, the Kanun contains provisions that contradict constitutional principles, such as those related to gender equality. In this respect, women are often disadvantaged, as customary law historically permitted practices like blood feuds, which could place women in vulnerable positions.

This tension between customary law and human rights standards has been noted in other parts of the Balkans, such as Montenegro and Albania, where similar legal pluralism exists (Triasmono & Ruslie, 2024).

Moreover, the study revealed that the legal recognition of customary law is not uniform across either Kosovo or Albania. In Kosovo, customary law is recognized by certain legal institutions, particularly in the judiciary, which is sometimes willing to consider traditional practices in its rulings. However, this recognition is not consistent and depends on the specific case and the discretion of the judge. The judicial system's selective application of customary law reflects the broader challenges within the Kosovo legal system, where the implementation of laws remains uneven, particularly in areas with a strong presence of customary practices (Maloku & Hajdari, 2024; OECD & SIGMA, 2024). In contrast, Albania's legal system has been somewhat more successful in formally incorporating certain elements of customary law into its statutory framework, though similar tensions regarding gender equality and property rights persist.

The discussion also highlights the challenges inherent in integrating customary law into the modern legal framework, particularly regarding the evolving nature of state sovereignty and the increasing influence of international legal norms (Safarov, 2024). The process of modernization in the Balkans has led to the gradual marginalization of customary law in many spheres, but not without significant resistance. Customary law is not simply discarded; instead, it is often incorporated in ways that are seen as beneficial for social cohesion and community stability. As legal pluralism continues to shape the legal systems in both Kosovo and Albania, it remains clear that the tension between traditional legal systems and state law will likely continue, particularly as both countries navigate the challenges of EU integration and the expansion of international human rights frameworks (Armakolas et al., 2021).

Interestingly, the findings suggest that there is a growing recognition of the need to balance the preservation of customary legal practices with the promotion of modern legal values. Both Kosovo and Albania have seen efforts to modernize their legal systems while attempting to integrate customary law where possible. However, the integration of customary law is still seen as a complex and ongoing challenge, particularly in areas where traditional practices persist and where state law has limited reach. This finding is consistent with the research of Mirtezani and Halili (2022), who discuss the challenges of reconciling traditional and modern legal systems in transitional societies. The need for legal reforms that accommodate the complexities of legal pluralism has been a recurring theme in the scholarship on legal systems in post-conflict societies.

The study also underscores the importance of considering local social and cultural contexts when analyzing the integration of customary law into state systems. Legal norms are not just abstract rules; they are deeply embedded in the social fabric and can only be understood about the community's historical experiences and cultural traditions. This cultural aspect of law is particularly pertinent in the case of Kosovo and Albania, where customary law has evolved to meet the needs of societies living

in often precarious or remote environments. The persistence of customary law, despite formal legal reforms, suggests a deep-rooted cultural attachment to these traditions that state law alone cannot easily replace (Đičić Kostić et al., 2022).

The results of this study illustrate the complexities of integrating customary law into the modern legal frameworks of Kosovo and Albania. The coexistence of customary law and statutory law presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly in terms of gender equality and the protection of human rights. The findings are consistent with broader trends observed in other regions with legal pluralism, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to legal reform that takes into account both traditional practices and contemporary legal standards. As Kosovo and Albania continue to modernize their legal systems, the integration of customary law will remain an important area of study, with significant implications for both the legal and social landscape of the region (Nimani, Maloku, et al., 2023).

5. CONCLUSION

The integration of customary law into modern legal systems in Kosovo and Albania presents a complex and ongoing challenge, as this study has demonstrated. Customary law continues to hold significant influence, particularly in rural areas, where it governs key aspects of daily life, such as family matters, property rights, and dispute resolution. However, its coexistence with state law often results in tensions, especially when customary practices conflict with modern legal principles of equality, human rights, and democratic governance. This study highlights the need for a structured approach to legal integration, one that acknowledges the cultural significance of customary law while ensuring alignment with contemporary legal norms.

The findings reveal that the incorporation of customary law into formal legal frameworks has been neither uniform nor systematic. While some customary practices have been recognized and adapted into statutory law, others remain in legal limbo or are inconsistently applied. This selective approach has led to challenges, particularly where customary norms, such as those related to gender roles or blood feuds, clash with internationally recognized human rights standards. These challenges underscore the necessity of legal reforms that not only regulate the interaction between customary and statutory law but also provide mechanisms to resolve conflicts when they arise.

A significant implication of this study is the necessity of a comprehensive legal framework that clearly defines the scope, application, and limitations of customary law. Without such a framework, legal pluralism will continue to function inconsistently, leading to uncertainty in judicial decisions and governance. Judicial capacity-building is another critical area for intervention. Judges, legal practitioners, and policymakers require specialized training to navigate cases where customary law intersects with statutory law. Such training should emphasize the harmonization of customary norms with human rights principles to ensure fair and consistent application across different legal contexts.

Public awareness and community engagement are equally crucial in managing the coexistence of these two legal systems. Many individuals,

particularly in rural communities, remain unaware of their rights under statutory law or the extent to which customary law can legally be applied. Educational campaigns should aim to bridge this knowledge gap, fostering an understanding of legal pluralism and the importance of compliance with state law. Moreover, collaborative dialogue between legal scholars, policymakers, and community representatives practicing customary law should be encouraged to develop sustainable, culturally sensitive legal reforms.

This study also recognizes certain limitations that may guide future research. Given its qualitative approach, the findings provide a detailed legal analysis but do not offer empirical data on the extent of customary law application in judicial decisions. Future research could incorporate a quantitative dimension, such as statistical analysis or surveys, to assess how frequently customary law is invoked and how its application varies across different regions. Additionally, while this study focuses on Kosovo and Albania, comparative research on similar legal pluralism challenges in other countries could further enrich the discussion.

To ensure a fair and effective legal system, periodic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be implemented to assess how customary law is applied in practice and whether it aligns with statutory law and human rights obligations. Independent legal bodies could oversee these assessments, ensuring customary practices evolve under societal needs while maintaining their cultural relevance.

Integrating customary law into modern legal systems requires a balanced approach, one that respects traditional legal customs while safeguarding human rights and legal certainty. The success of legal integration in Kosovo and Albania will depend on the ability of policymakers, legal professionals, and communities to collaborate in developing legal frameworks that reconcile customary law with modern governance principles. By addressing inconsistencies in legal application, strengthening judicial expertise, and fostering public awareness, both countries can create a legal system that preserves cultural heritage while upholding universal legal standards.

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