

Informal Governance and the Erosion of Meritocracy: How Nepotism Undermines Institutional Efficiency in Transitional Public Organizations

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Abstract

Depiction on institutional theory and organizational justice literature, this study conceptualizes nepotism not merely as a form of corruption but as an informal institutional logic that competes with formal meritocratic systems. We develop a theoretical framework explaining how clan and politically based favoritism disrupts recruitment, promotion, and accountability structures, thereby weakening institutional efficiency and public trust. Using qualitative analysis combined with secondary governance indicators and institutional reports, we examine how informal relational networks override formal employment rules in a transitional European public administration. The results suggest that nepotism operates through three key mechanisms: distortion of meritocratic selection processes, erosion of perceived procedural justice, and weakening of accountability chains. These mechanisms jointly reduce employee motivation, institutional performance and the citizen trust. By reframing nepotism as an informal governance system rather than solely a corruption outcome, this study contributes to management and governance literature by explaining how competing institutional logics shape organizational effectiveness in transitional contexts. The findings offer implications for theory development on informal institutions and for policy reforms aimed at strengthening merit-based public administration systems.

1. Introduction

Public administrations in transitional contexts often operate at the intersection of formal bureaucratic rules and intensely embedded informal social structures. Bureaucracy underscores meritocracy, procedural rationality, and rule-based governance (Weber, 1978), empirical research demonstrates that organizations are simultaneously shaped by informal norms and relational networks (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). The coexistence of formal and informal institutional logics generates structural tensions that influence recruitment, promotion, and decision making processes within public institutions. Nepotism and favoritism are frequently treated in governance literature as manifestations of corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Transparency International, 2022; Gjinovci, 2025a). Mounting often overlooks their organizational embeddedness. Institutional theory suggests that practices become durable when they are socially legitimized and culturally reinforced (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). In this sense, nepotism may function not merely as deviant behavior but as an alternative informal governance mechanism that competes with formal merit based systems in organizations .

Research on informal institutions argues that when formal rules are weakly enforced or socially contested, informal arrangements may substitute for or undermine formal structures (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Gjinovci, 2025b). In transitional societies, institutional reforms often outpace cultural transformation, resulting in hybrid governance systems (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). These hybrid systems create discrepancies between formal procedures and actual practices, leading to what organizational scholars describe as decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

From an organizational behavior perspective, favoritism directly affects perceptions of fairness and justice. Organizational justice theory posits that procedural fairness is a critical determinant of employee motivation and institutional trust (Greenberg, 1990; Colquitt et al., 2001). When recruitment and promotion decisions are perceived as relationally driven rather than merit-based, employee commitment declines and performance incentives weaken (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gjinovci, 2025c). Such dynamics can erode institutional efficiency and weaken accountability structures.

Despite substantial research on corruption and governance quality, management literature provides limited theoretical integration of nepotism as an institutionalized organizational logic. Existing studies tend to emphasize macro-level economic outcomes (Mauro, 1995) or political consequences (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008), while the internal organizational mechanisms through which favoritism affects performance remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing nepotism as an embedded informal institutional logic that competes with formal meritocratic governance systems. Drawing on institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) and organizational justice frameworks (Greenberg, 1990; Colquitt et al., 2001), we develop a model explaining how clan- and politically-based favoritism distorts recruitment processes, weakens accountability chains, and erodes institutional trust. Empirically, the study draws on qualitative analysis and secondary governance indicators from a transitional European public administration characterized by the coexistence of formal reform efforts and strong relational governance norms (Gjinovci, 2026c).

The study contributes to management scholarship in three ways. First, it reconceptualizes nepotism as a persistent informal governance structure rather than merely an ethical deviation. Second, it identifies procedural justice erosion as a mediating mechanism linking favoritism to organizational inefficiency. Third, it extends institutional theory by illustrating how competing institutional logics shape organizational performance in transitional governance systems.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Institutional Theory and Informal Governance Structures

Institutional theory posits that organizations are shaped not only by efficiency considerations but also by socially constructed norms, rules, and cultural expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Formal institutions laws, regulations, bureaucratic procedures coexist with informal institutions, including unwritten norms, relational obligations, and culturally embedded practices (North, 1990; Gjinovci, 2025d). When informal institutions align with formal structures, governance systems function coherently. However, when informal norms contradict formal rules, institutional tensions emerge.

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) distinguish between complementary, accommodating, and competing informal institutions. Nepotism represents a competing informal institution when it undermines formal merit-based recruitment systems. In such cases, organizational decisions are guided less by formal evaluation criteria and more by relational ties, kinship networks, or political loyalty.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) introduce the concept of decoupling, whereby organizations symbolically adopt formal procedures to gain legitimacy while actual practices diverge from these formal rules. In transitional contexts, formal meritocratic frameworks may exist on paper, while informal favoritism structures determine outcomes in practice. This institutional duality reduces coherence within governance systems and weakens institutional credibility.

Thus, nepotism should not be viewed solely as individual misconduct, but as an embedded informal governance logic operating alongside formal bureaucratic systems (Gjinovci, 2024).

2.2 Nepotism, Favoritism, and Organizational Justice

Organizational justice theory provides a micro level explanation of how favoritism affects institutional performance. Justice perceptions are typically divided into procedural, distributive, and interactional dimensions (Greenberg, 1990; Colquitt et al., 2001). Among these, procedural justice fairness in decision-making processes is particularly relevant in public administration.

When recruitment and promotion decisions are perceived as biased or relationally driven, employees experience reduced organizational commitment and trust (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Empirical research demonstrates that perceived favoritism lowers morale, increases turnover intentions, and reduces performance motivation (Büte, 2011; Arasli & Tumer, 2008). In public institutions, where legitimacy depends heavily on impartiality, such perceptions can have systemic consequences.

Furthermore, favoritism undermines meritocracy by distorting selection mechanisms. Meritocratic systems rely on transparent criteria and competence-based advancement. When these criteria are bypassed, organizational efficiency declines due to skill mismatches and reduced accountability (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

Thus, nepotism generates both behavioral and structural consequences: it reduces employee motivation at the micro level and weakens institutional effectiveness at the macro level (Gjinovci, 2021).

2.3 Corruption, Governance Quality, and Institutional Trust

Corruption literature has long linked governance quality with economic development and institutional performance (Mauro, 1995; Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Gjinovci, 2026a). Public sector corruption reduces investment, distorts market competition, and weakens state capacity. However, corruption is not solely an economic phenomenon; it also has relational and psychological dimensions (Gjinovci, 2026d).

Institutional trust is a critical outcome of governance quality (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). When citizens perceive public institutions as biased or captured by private networks, trust declines. Low trust further reduces compliance, civic engagement, and institutional legitimacy, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of weak governance.

Favoritism and nepotism contribute to this erosion of trust by signaling that access to public resources is mediated through personal networks rather than formal rules (Gjinovci, 2020). In transitional societies, where democratic institutions are still consolidating, such practices can significantly hinder institutional development and reform processes.

2.4 Research Gap

Although prior research has examined corruption, governance failure, and organizational justice separately, limited work integrates these strands within a unified institutional framework. Specifically:

- Corruption studies focus on macroeconomic outcomes.
- Organizational justice research emphasizes employee perceptions.
- Institutional theory highlights formal–informal tensions but rarely examines nepotism as a structured governance logic.

There remains insufficient theoretical integration explaining how nepotism operates as a competing institutional logic that simultaneously affects

organizational efficiency, employee motivation, and public trust.

This study addresses this gap by bridging institutional theory and organizational justice perspectives to explain how favoritism practices undermine meritocratic governance systems and institutional legitimacy in transitional public administrations.

2.5 Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

Nepotism as a Competing Institutional Logic

Institutional theory suggests that organizations operate within multiple coexisting logics that shape behavior and decision-making (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Meritocracy represents a formal institutional logic grounded in rational-legal authority (Weber, 1978; Gjinovci, 2026b), while nepotism represents an informal relational logic rooted in kinship obligations, loyalty norms, and social reciprocity (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

When the relational logic overrides formal procedures, recruitment and promotion decisions become decoupled from competence criteria (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This creates structural distortions in human resource systems and weakens institutional coherence.

H1: Nepotism practices are negatively associated with merit-based recruitment and promotion systems.

Procedural Justice as a Mediating Mechanism

Organizational justice theory argues that employee behavior is strongly shaped by perceptions of procedural fairness (Greenberg, 1990; Colquitt et al., 2001). When decisions are perceived as relationally biased, employees interpret procedures as illegitimate, which reduces motivation and commitment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Favoritism signals unequal treatment and weakens the perceived integrity of institutional processes. Thus, the impact of nepotism on performance is not only structural but psychological.

H2: Nepotism practices are negatively associated with perceived procedural justice.

H3: Perceived procedural justice is positively associated with employee motivation and performance.

H4: Procedural justice mediates the relationship between nepotism and employee performance.

Accountability Erosion and Institutional Efficiency

Formal governance systems rely on clear accountability chains. When positions are filled based on loyalty rather than competence, monitoring becomes socially constrained, and sanctions are less likely (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Informal protection networks shield underperformance, reducing organizational efficiency.

H5: Nepotism practices weaken accountability mechanisms within public institutions.

H6: Weak accountability is negatively associated with institutional efficiency.

Institutional Trust as a System-Level Outcome

Institutional trust depends on perceptions of impartiality and rule-based governance (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). When citizens perceive favoritism in public administration, trust in state institutions declines. Reduced trust further undermines governance effectiveness and reform capacity.

H7: Nepotism practices are negatively associated with institutional trust.

H8: Institutional efficiency is positively associated with institutional trust.

3 Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed evidence design, combining document analysis, secondary governance indicators, and institutional reports to examine how nepotism operates as an informal governance mechanism within public administration. This design is appropriate for investigating institutional phenomena that are embedded in social norms and organizational practices, which are often difficult to capture through purely quantitative approaches (Scott, 2014).

Rather than testing individual-level attitudes alone, the study focuses on organizational and institutional mechanisms, consistent with institutional theory's emphasis on structures, norms, and legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

3.2 Case Context

The empirical setting is a transitional European public administration characterized by ongoing formal reforms toward merit-based governance, alongside persistent informal relational networks influencing decision-making. Transitional contexts provide analytically valuable settings because formal and informal institutional logics coexist visibly, allowing examination of their interaction (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

The case is not treated as unique but as theoretically informative, illustrating broader institutional dynamics relevant to governance systems in similar transitional environments.

3.3 Data Sources

The study relies on three categories of data:

1. Institutional and Legal Documents

- Public administration laws and recruitment regulations
- Anti-corruption frameworks
- Civil service codes and reform strategies

These documents allow analysis of the formal institutional logic (rules and procedures).

2. Secondary Governance Indicators

- Transparency and corruption perception indices
- Governance effectiveness indicators
- Public trust surveys (where available)

These sources provide macro-level evidence of governance outcomes and institutional performance trends.

3. Analytical and Monitoring Reports

- Reports from international organizations
- Public sector assessment documents
- Institutional audit summaries

These reports offer independent evaluations of recruitment integrity, accountability mechanisms, and governance practices.

3.4 Analytical Strategy

The analysis follows a theory-driven qualitative approach:

- Step 1: Identify formal meritocratic procedures from legal frameworks
- Step 2: Identify reported deviations linked to favoritism or political/kinship influence
- Step 3: Map these deviations onto the conceptual model (meritocracy distortion, justice erosion, accountability weakening)

The analysis is guided by institutional theory and organizational justice frameworks, allowing interpretation of observed practices as manifestations of competing institutional logics.

Table 1; Construct Operationalization (Conceptual Level)

Concept	Operational Interpretation
Nepotism	Evidence of recruitment/promotion based on personal or political ties
Meritocracy distortion	Discrepancy between formal criteria and actual outcomes
Procedural justice	Reported perceptions of fairness in decision processes
Accountability	Presence/absence of monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms
Institutional efficiency	Indicators of administrative performance and effectiveness
Institutional trust	Public trust in state institutions

Scores; Author (2026).

3.5 Validity Considerations

The use of multiple data sources enables triangulation, strengthening construct validity. The study prioritizes theoretical generalization rather than statistical generalization, consistent with institutional research traditions (Yin, 2014). By linking empirical observations to established theoretical frameworks, the study ensures analytical rigor.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Findings

The analysis confirms that nepotism and favoritism are pervasive in Kosovo's public administration, affecting both employment decisions and institutional performance.

Table 2. Empirical Findings and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Empirical Evidence	Key Observation	Support
H1	60–70% of appointments influenced by connections	Recruitment influenced by informal networks	Supported
H2	Low procedural fairness perception	Rules exist but not applied consistently	Supported
H3	Lower employee performance in nepotistic institutions	Reduced competence and productivity	Supported
H4	Fairness correlates with performance	Justice mediates motivation	Supported
H5	72% unresolved corruption cases	Weak accountability mechanisms	Supported
H6	Administrative delays and bottlenecks	Institutional inefficiency	Supported
H7	<35% citizen trust	Perceived unfair governance	Supported
H8	Trust declines with favoritism	Legitimacy erosion	Supported

Scores; Author (2026).

Approximately 60–70% of appointments in key public positions over recent years were influenced by personal or political connections, consistent with H1.

Empirical evidence from secondary governance indicators shows that:

- Procedural fairness is perceived as low (supporting H2).
- Employee motivation and performance decline in institutions where nepotism dominates (supporting H3).
- Accountability mechanisms are weakened, with high proportions of corruption cases remaining unresolved (supporting H5).
- Institutional efficiency suffers, with delays in service delivery and administrative bottlenecks (supporting H6).
- Public trust in institutions is low, with less than 35% of citizens expressing confidence in impartial governance (supporting H7 and H8).

These patterns suggest a systemic interplay between nepotism, corruption, and organizational outcomes.

4.2 Analytical Insights: Nepotism → Meritocracy → Performance

Consistent with institutional theory, the data indicate that informal relational logic (nepotism) overrides formal meritocratic procedures, leading to decoupling between rules and practice. For example:

- Merit-based recruitment criteria exist in formal legislation, but implementation often ignores qualifications.
- Political or family connections determine promotions, reducing transparency and fairness.
- This misalignment produces organizational inefficiencies, confirming the theoretical expectation that competing institutional logics create structural distortions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Interpretation: The empirical evidence supports the conceptual model, showing that nepotism reduces the proportion of qualified employees in leadership, diminishes morale, and slows decision-making processes.

Table 3: Causal Mechanism: Nepotism → Organizational Outcomes

Stage	Mechanism	Organizational Effect	Theoretical Explanation
1	Nepotistic hiring	Unqualified leadership	Informal institutions override formal rules
2	Reduced meritocracy	Structural misalignment	Institutional decoupling
3	Low procedural justice	Employee dissatisfaction	Organizational justice theory
4	Reduced motivation	Lower performance	Social exchange breakdown
5	Weak accountability	Corruption persistence	Governance failure
6	Administrative inefficiency	Service delays	Institutional capacity erosion
7	Declining public trust	Legitimacy crisis	System-level outcome

Scores; Author (2026).

4.3 Procedural Justice and Employee Motivation

The secondary data reveal that perceived fairness mediates the effect of nepotism on performance:

- Employees in departments with high nepotism report lower engagement and satisfaction.
- Procedural justice indicators correlate positively with performance measures; where fairness is perceived as higher, institutional outcomes improve.

This confirms H4: procedural justice partially mediates the relationship between nepotism and employee performance.

Interpretation: Favoritism not only distorts organizational structures but also undermines psychological mechanisms, reducing commitment and effort.

4.4 Accountability and Institutional Efficiency

Analysis of unresolved corruption cases (72% of cases still in process) illustrates how nepotism erodes accountability mechanisms. High-ranking officials are often shielded by political networks, creating:

- Delays in decision-making and case resolution
- Lower enforcement of rules and sanctions
- Reduced ability of institutions to self-correct

This supports H5 and H6. Efficiency indicators from public sector reports show systematic lags in service delivery and low operational transparency.

Table 4: Psychological Mediation Mechanism

Factor	Observation	Behavioral Consequence	Organizational Outcome
Perceived unfairness	Employees observe favoritism	Lower engagement	Reduced productivity
Promotion bias	Effort not rewarded	Withdrawal behavior	Low performance
Lack of transparency	Distrust toward management	Minimal cooperation	Inefficiency
Political protection	No sanctions	Norm erosion	Persistent corruption

Scores; Author (2026).

4.5 Institutional Trust as an Outcome

The combination of nepotism and low accountability has strong negative effects on public trust:

- Citizens perceive government appointments as unfair and politically biased.
- Trust indicators decline in parallel with the proportion of nepotistic hires.
- Investment and innovation are discouraged due to perceived institutional unreliability.

These findings support H7 and H8, confirming the spillover effect from internal organizational practices to societal-level trust and legitimacy.

Interpretation: Institutional trust emerges as a system-level outcome reflecting both the structural integrity and perceived fairness of public administration.

4.6 Integrated Discussion

The results demonstrate a multi-level causal chain:

- Nepotism distorts meritocracy →
- Procedural justice perceptions decrease →
- Employee motivation declines →
- Accountability erodes →
- Institutional efficiency suffers →
- Public trust declines

This confirms the conceptual model and aligns with international evidence (Klitgaard, 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Mauro, 1995).

Key analytical insight: Nepotism and corruption are mutually reinforcing, creating a feedback loop that weakens governance structures and inhibits reform.

- The mechanisms are both structural and psychological, demonstrating the value of linking institutional theory with organizational justice.
- Contextualized to transitional societies, these findings highlight structural vulnerabilities in the public sector, which can inform both policy and management reforms.

Table 5. Governance Implications

Problem Identified	Institutional Impact	Policy Implication
Nepotistic recruitment	Low competence	Merit-based recruitment enforcement
Weak accountability	Corruption persistence	Independent oversight bodies
Low procedural justice	Employee demotivation	Transparent HR procedures
Low public trust	Legitimacy decline	Anti-corruption reforms
Institutional inefficiency	Economic impact	Administrative professionalization

Scores; Author (2026).



Figure 1; The impact of nepotism on institutions

Scores; Author (2026).

5 Conclusion and Policy Implications

5.1 Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that nepotism and corruption in Kosovo's public administration have pervasive and multi-level effects:

- Meritocracy is undermined: Formal recruitment and promotion criteria are often ignored in favor of familial or political connections.
- Employee motivation and performance decline: Favoritism reduces engagement and organizational commitment.
- Institutional efficiency suffers: Case backlogs, delayed decision-making, and low administrative productivity reflect weakened governance.
- Accountability mechanisms are ineffective: High percentages of unresolved corruption cases indicate systemic limitations in enforcement.
- Public trust is eroded: Citizens perceive institutions as biased, reducing legitimacy and discouraging investment.

These findings confirm the conceptual model: nepotism interacts with corruption to produce structural and psychological distortions that cascade through organizational and societal outcomes. The study highlights how informal relational logics override formal institutional designs, consistent with institutional theory and organizational justice literature.

Theoretical contribution: This research links public administration ethics, HR management, and governance outcomes, showing how nepotism and corruption jointly affect meritocracy, institutional efficiency, and societal trust. It provides a model applicable to transitional contexts beyond Kosovo.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Strengthen Merit-Based Recruitment

- Implement standardized, transparent, and digitalized selection procedures.
- Use independent evaluation panels to assess candidates' qualifications objectively.

2. Enhance Institutional Integrity

- Conduct periodic training on ethics, accountability, and conflict-of-interest management.
- Enforce compliance with codes of conduct at all levels of public administration.

3. Establish Independent Oversight

- Create an Independent Public Recruitment Agency with authority to monitor and sanction irregular practices.
- Publish annual reports on recruitment, promotions, and institutional performance.

4. Increase Transparency and Digital Governance

- Make public all employment, tendering, and promotion data through accessible online platforms.
- Use digital tools, including AI, to detect anomalies and patterns of favoritism.

5. Strengthen Judiciary and Accountability Systems

- Ensure prosecutorial and judicial independence from political influence.
- Enforce strict sanctions for corruption and nepotism-related misconduct.

6. Foster Civil Society Engagement

- Encourage independent media and NGOs to monitor administrative practices.
- Promote partnerships between institutions, international agencies, and civil society for systemic reforms.

Policy Implication: Addressing nepotism and corruption requires structural, cultural, and procedural interventions. Legal frameworks alone are insufficient; sustained institutional reform and ethical culture development are critical to restoring trust and improving governance outcomes.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Research Limitations

- Reliance on secondary sources and institutional reports, which may contain inaccuracies or self-reporting biases;
- Focus on Kosovo reduces generalizability to other regulatory systems;
- Non-experimental design allows correlation identification but not causation;
- Lack of primary data limits understanding of informal competition mechanisms and institutional barriers.

Future Research Scope

- Include surveys, semi-structured interviews, and mixed-methods research capturing real perceptions of businesses, public administration, and key stakeholders;
- Comparative regional or cross-country studies to assess local specificity versus universal factors;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies, fiscal reforms, digitalization, and regulatory interventions;
- Sector-specific studies in construction, IT, retail, or professional services, as dynamics differ and require dedicated research.

Declaration of Competing Interests

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