

## DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

### Public Attitudes towards Democracy, the Rule of Law and the Fundamental Human Rights in 2016

The present report summarizes the findings of a national representative public opinion survey conducted by the Open Society Institute – Sofia in the period 22 April – 14 May 2016.

The survey was financed by the Complimentary Actions Fund of the NGO Program in Bulgaria under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area 2009-2014. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the authors and should by no means be interpreted as reflecting the standpoint of the Open Society Institute – Sofia, the donor countries or the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area.

The survey was conducted by a team comprising:

- **Georgi Stoytchev**,  
*editor*
- **Dr. Ivanka Ivanova**,  
*author*
- **Associate Prof. Dr. Alexey Pamporov**,  
*head of data collection unit*
- **Dr. Petia Braynova and Dr. Dragomira Belcheva**,  
*data processing*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he study\* summarizes the findings of two nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted by the Open Society Institute – Sofia in 2015 and in 2016 in order to identify trends in public attitudes towards the values of democratic governance.

Democracy is the best form of government for Bulgaria according to almost half of the respondents (49% in 2016, 52% in 2015), while the perception that constitutional rights of citizens are effectively protected constitutes the most significant achievement of democratic transition in the country so far. Three quarters of respondents share the belief that there is no risk for them to be imprisoned without trial, while the vast majority (between 70% and 80% of the respondents) feel they can freely exercise their civil and political rights, i.e. they can express their political affiliations, participate in protests and criticize the government without fear of reprisal or dismissal.

At the same time, however, the vast majority of people have low confidence in the institutions of representative democracy, do not participate in decision-making and feel that the government is inefficient in solving the most persistent societal problems.

In light of the public opinion, the main challenges to the values of democratic governance can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ **Rule of law:** according to the majority of respondents, laws in the country are neither

fair, nor clear and do not apply equally to all citizens; the vast majority of the respondents share the view that organized crime influences the decision making in the major political parties, while the courts are unable to limit possibilities for the government to violate the law.

- ▶ **Inefficient governance:** according to the majority of respondents, the main problems confronting the country are poverty, unemployment, lack of good governance and corruption; the vast majority of people (80%-90%) believe that the government cannot cope with addressing these challenges. The discrepancy between the priorities of the citizens and the priorities of the government is an important symptom for an emerging crisis in which people do not consider democratic governance as a value per se and would sacrifice their freedoms for populist pledges for more security.

- ▶ **Limited public participation in decision-making:** due to poor education, poverty and discrimination, a significant share of citizens are excluded from decision-making. Although the majority of people believe their basic political and civil rights are guaranteed, among certain social groups there is a clear tendency to self-censorship and fear of reprisals. Nearly 80% of Bulgarian citizens remain passive and uninvolved in any form of organized public life.

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## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The key objective of the survey was to identify the dynamics in public attitudes towards the underlying values of the European Union: democracy, protection of the fundamental human rights and freedoms, and the rule of law.

In developing the survey questionnaire, the team adopted a broad definition of “democracy”, seeking to establish not so much the existence of formal procedures inherent in this form of government (plurality of political parties, freedom of association, periodic elections), but rather the extent to which the established procedures contribute to attaining the ultimate benefit of democracy: an accountable government.<sup>1</sup> This broader concept of “democracy” comprises also the values of rule of law and protection of the fundamental rights of citizens.

The survey sought to identify public attitudes towards six groups of issues:

- ▶ Government efficiency;
- ▶ Confidence in the main institutions;
- ▶ Political representation and participation of citizens in governance;
- ▶ The rule of law;
- ▶ Democracy as a system of fundamental rights and freedoms enjoyed by citizens;
- ▶ Public information on the business of government.

This report is based on the findings of a national representative public opinion survey conducted in the framework of the periodic omnibus surveys of the Open Society Institute – Sofia. The survey took place in the period 22 April – 14 May 2016 and the target universe included the adult population of the country. The survey used the face-to-face interview method based on a standard questionnaire. The respondents were selected through two-stage probability cluster sampling, stratified by administrative regions and type of settlement. Out of 1,200 inter-

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed overview of the definition of “democracy” used and the main findings of the first survey, conducted in 2015, see: Open Society Institute – Sofia, “Democracy and Civic Participation. Public Attitudes towards Democracy, the Rule of Law and the Fundamental Human Rights in 2015”.

**Table 1. Respondents’ profile**

By gender	Number	Share
Male	507	42.3%
Female	690	57.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,197</b>	<b>100%</b>
By age	Number	Share
18-29 years	131	10.9%
30-44 years	301	25.1%
45-59 years	301	25.1%
Above 60 years	453	37.8%
Unreported	11	0.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,197</b>	<b>100%</b>
By ethnic group	Number	Share
Bulgarian	1,021	85.2%
Turkish	102	8.5%
Roma	59	5.0%
Other	15	1.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,197</b>	<b>100%</b>

views planned, 1,197 were actually held. Collected data cover 1,197 persons. The maximum stochastic error is  $\pm 2.9\%$ .

The survey also included comparative analysis of data from the national representative public opinion survey conducted by the Open Society Institute – Sofia in March 2015, using a standard questionnaire, which to a great extent coincides with the one used in the 2016 survey. In 2015, face-to-face interviews were held with 1,178 respondents selected through two-stage probability cluster sampling.

Findings on individual survey questions were also compared to data from other national representative public opinion surveys, which had been conducted in 2002, 2006, and 2007 following similar methodology and were presented in the publication “The State of Society 2008”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “The State of Society 2008”, Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2008.

## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Bulgaria has been a member of the EU since 2007 and shares the common values of the Member States laid out in Art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union, namely: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Ten years after its accession to the EU, Bulgaria remains the poorest country in the Union. According to Eurostat data, the GDP per capita of population in Bulgaria (measured by purchasing power parity) is 47% of the average for EU Member States.

In 2016, Bulgaria registered the third consecutive year of deflation; in November 2016, consumer prices marked a 0.8% decrease calculated on an annual basis. Since 2015, however, there have been signs of growing economic activity: throughout most of 2016, economic growth has been around 3.5% on an annual basis, while unemployment has been declining from 13.2% (at the end of 2013) to 7.1% (in November 2016). In 2016, Bulgaria was among the five EU Member States with highest economic growth. In the same year, the government reported a cash budget surplus of 1.6% of GDP for the first time since 2008.

Since November 2014, Bulgaria has been run by the second government of the GERB party, which was formed in coalition with the parties of the Reformist Bloc and the Alliance for Bulgarian Revival, with the parliamentary support of the Patriotic Front. On May 10, 2016 (at the time of the survey), the Alliance for Bulgarian Revival withdrew its support for the government but this did not lead to a break-up of the governing coalition.

Due to the ongoing civil war in Syria and the general instability in the Middle East, since the fall of 2013, Bulgaria like other EU Member States has seen a growing influx of refugees and migrants. This process was accompanied by an increase in the influence of nationalist and populist parties and movements, a growing incidence of hate speech (especially against Roma

and Muslims), and occasional manifestations of racism and xenophobia.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Freedom House study “Nations in Transit”, in 2016, Bulgaria qualified as a “semi-consolidated democracy” falling in the same category with Romania, Hungary and Croatia. All other EU Member States in Central and Eastern Europe were classified as “consolidated democracies”. The report indicated that “weighted for population, the average Democracy Score of the 29 formerly Communist countries surveyed has declined every year since 2004, for 12 years in a row, while in Central Europe and the Balkans, illiberal leaders and strongmen challenged fundamental principles of democracy”.<sup>4</sup>

In 2016, Bulgaria was classified as a “country with obvious problems” in the Reporters Sans Frontières Press Freedom Index for Europe and ranked 113th among 180 countries monitored, falling seven positions behind its 2015 score and ranking last among EU Member States. According to the Reporters Sans Frontières report, the main reason for the poor rating of press freedom in Bulgaria is that the media environment in the country was “dominated by corruption and collusion between media, politicians and oligarchs”.<sup>5</sup>

## GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY

The 2015 survey indicated that in the opinion of the citizens, the two most serious problems confronting Bulgaria were poverty and unemployment. Corruption ranked third as a major problem for the country but had less relative weight than poverty and unemployment.

The data of the 2016 survey confirm these findings with regard to the first two major problems. In 2016, a significant share of respondents (one third) identified poverty as the most serious problem confronting the

<sup>3</sup> For more details on this issue, see: Open Society Institute – Sofia, “Public Attitudes towards Hate Speech in Bulgaria in 2016” ([www.ngogrants.bg](http://www.ngogrants.bg)).

<sup>4</sup> Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2016” ([www.freedom-house.org](http://www.freedom-house.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Reporters sans frontières, Classement mondial de la liberté de la presse 2016 (<https://rsf.org/fr/bulgarie>).

country at the time of the survey. Unemployment remained the second most serious problem but its relative weight compared to poverty decreased: in 2015, nearly one third of the respondents had indicated that unemployment was the most critical problem for the country, whereas in 2016 this share was one fifth – 21%. Unemployment was cited as more severe a problem than poverty only by respondents residing in the Northwestern Region (NWR).

For some social groups, poverty is a much more serious problem than the average for the country. Poverty was a major problem for 55% of the least educated people, 42% of the unemployed, 41% of the respondents above 60 years of age, and 39% of the people living in rural areas, against a national average of 33%.

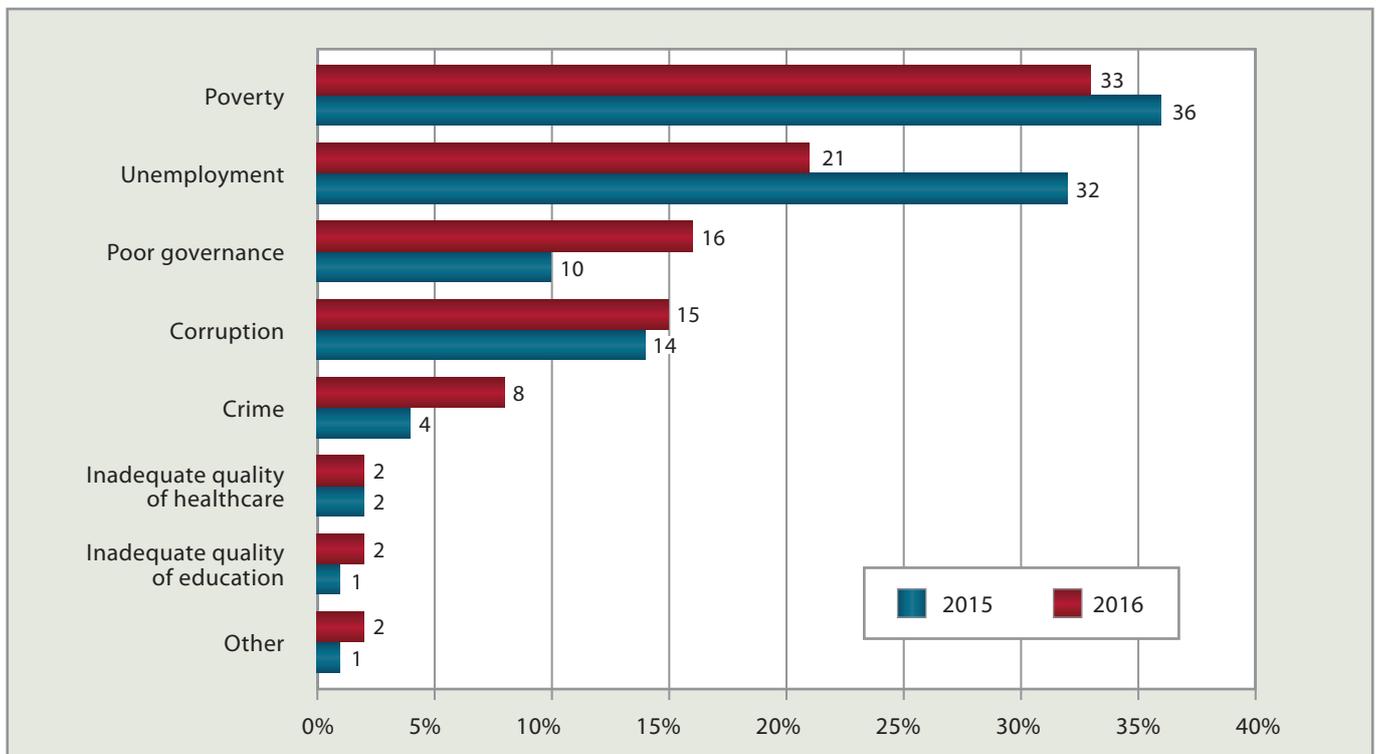
In 2016, the average weight of poor governance as a major problem increased in the public perception. In 2015, only 10% of the respondents identified it as a challenge, while in 2016 this share reached 16%. The difference is not particularly large but in 2016 poor governance gets slightly ahead of corruption as the third most significant problem confronting the country at the time of the survey.

**Male, 30 years old, from Sofia:**  
*„(Municipal gardens are not an indicator of good governance; author's note) In Oryahovo, a neighbor tells me, day in, day out someone commits suicide because they had no money or had their property taken. Then again, there is a garden in Oryahovo.“*

In 2016, corruption was a major problem for 15% of the respondents. As in 2015, some social groups tended to identify corruption as a major problem less often than the average for the country. Corruption seemed to be less of an issue for people with low education, for those who identified themselves as Turks, and for those who lived in the North Central Region (NCR) and the Northeastern Region (NER) – only 6% and 9%, respectively, of the residents of those two regions indicated that corruption was a major problem for the country, compared to a national average of 15% (fig. 1).

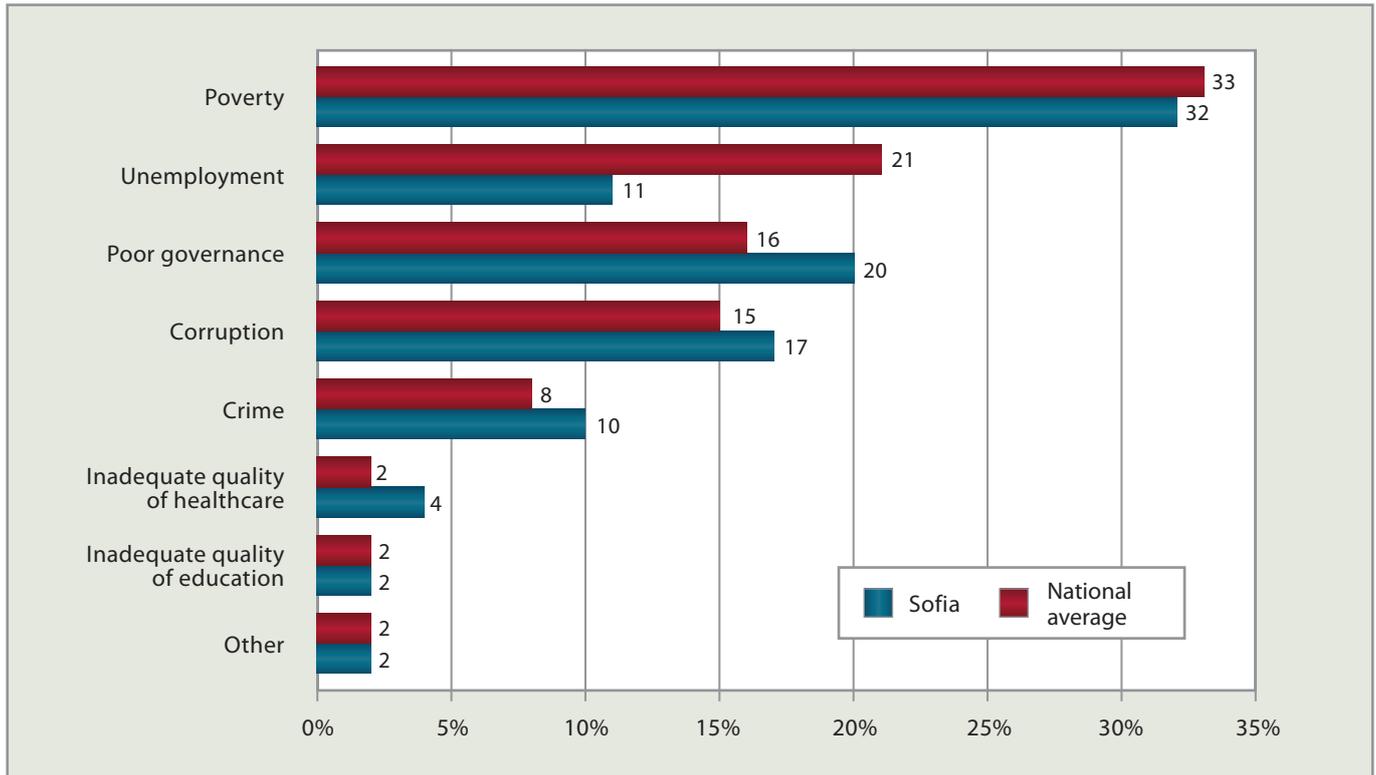
The respondents who lived in Sofia had a different perception of the major problems confronting the

**Figure 1. Major problems in the country**



Question: *What is the most important problem confronting the country at the moment? (Please, choose only one answer.)*

**Figure 2. Major problems in the country according to the residents of Sofia**



Question: *What is the most important problem confronting the country at the moment?*  
 (Please, choose only one answer.)

country at the time of the survey. Unemployment was less of an issue for the residents of Sofia than for the average citizen of the country. The second most often cited problem in Sofia was poor governance, rather than poverty, while corruption and crime were identified as major problems slightly more often than the average for the country (fig. 2).

In both 2015 and 2016, public perception of the government’s efficiency in solving the major problems before the country remained highly negative. The survey questionnaire gave respondents the possibility to assess the efficiency of the government in addressing seven major problems. In 2016, all seven categories

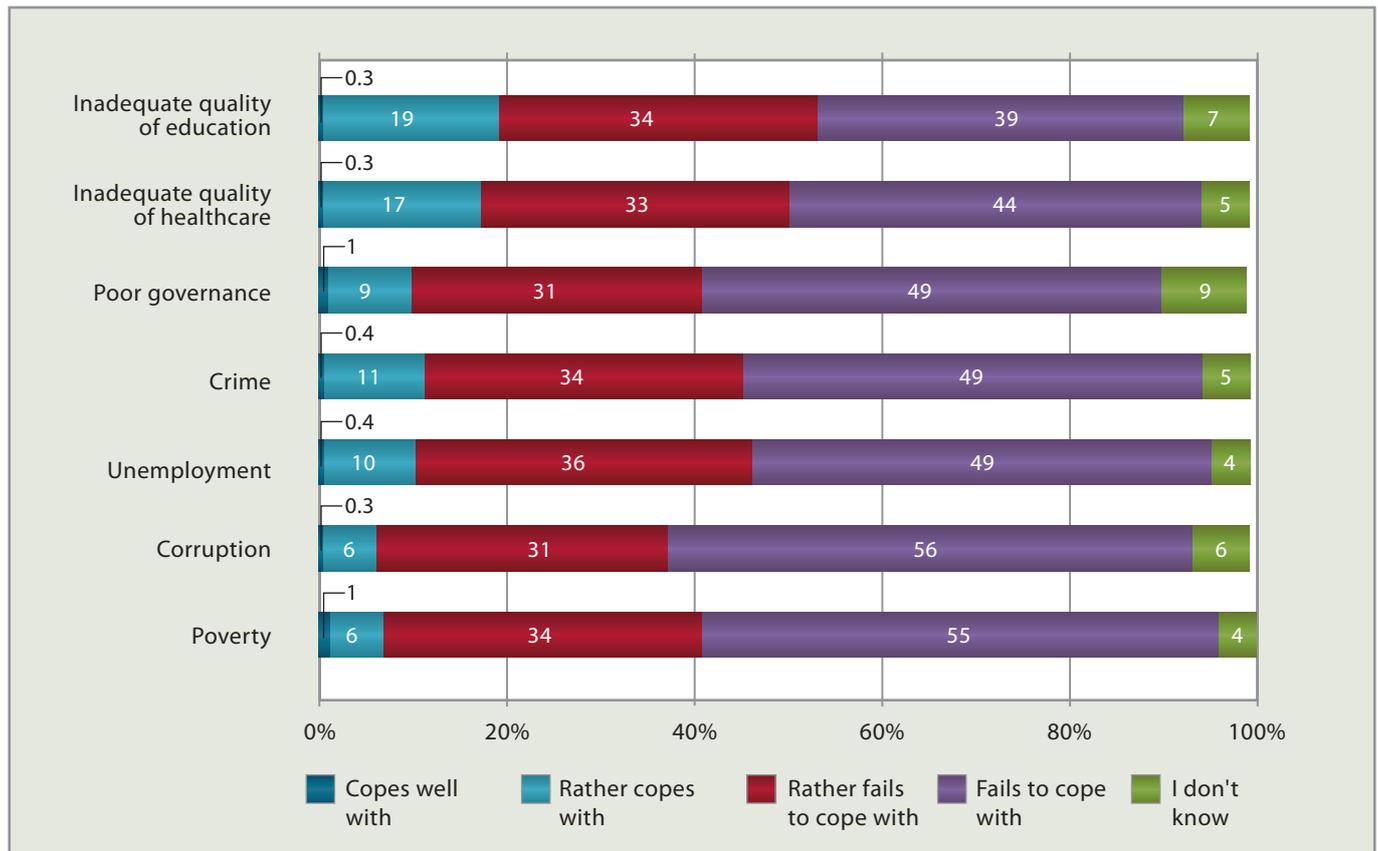
marked an increase in firmly negative perceptions and a decline in moderately negative opinions.

The majority of respondents (87%) believed that the government failed to address the problem with corruption, 89% felt that the government failed to address the problem with poverty, while around 80% responded that the government failed to address the problems with unemployment, crime, and poor governance. In 2016, 77% of the respondents thought that the government failed to address the problem with the inadequate quality of healthcare, while 73% believed that the government failed to address the problem with the inadequate quality of education.

The share of those who gave a positive assessment of the government’s efficiency remained very low since 2015 and has even declined slightly in 2016 with regard to four of the seven major problems monitored. Only one percent of the respondents or less felt that the government coped well with all major problems surveyed. The share of moderately positive opinions on the government’s efficiency was somewhat higher when it came to issues that did not seem to be a prior-

**Male, 56 years old, from a district town:**  
 „What are we talking about anyway? There are no people left here. Who will pass through the Shipka tunnel? Why are they building this thing? To throw away money? And we’re struggling to survive with these taxes.“

**Figure 3. Government efficiency**



Question: Please, rate the extent to which the government copes with the major problems confronting the country at the moment.

ity in the public perception – 17% of the respondents thought that the government rather coped with addressing the problem with the inadequate quality of healthcare, while 19% felt that the government rather coped with addressing the problem with the inadequate quality of education but these two problems have been identified as major problems by only 2% of the respondents. Data suggest divergence between the priorities of the government and the priorities of the public, as well as very low level of satisfaction with the efficiency of governance in general (fig. 3).

Although only 15% of the respondents identified corruption as a major problem for the country, corruption was and remained a critical issue, since the majority of citizens cited it as the main reason for poverty in Bulgaria: half of the respondents in both 2015 and 2016 thought that Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU because its politicians are corrupt.

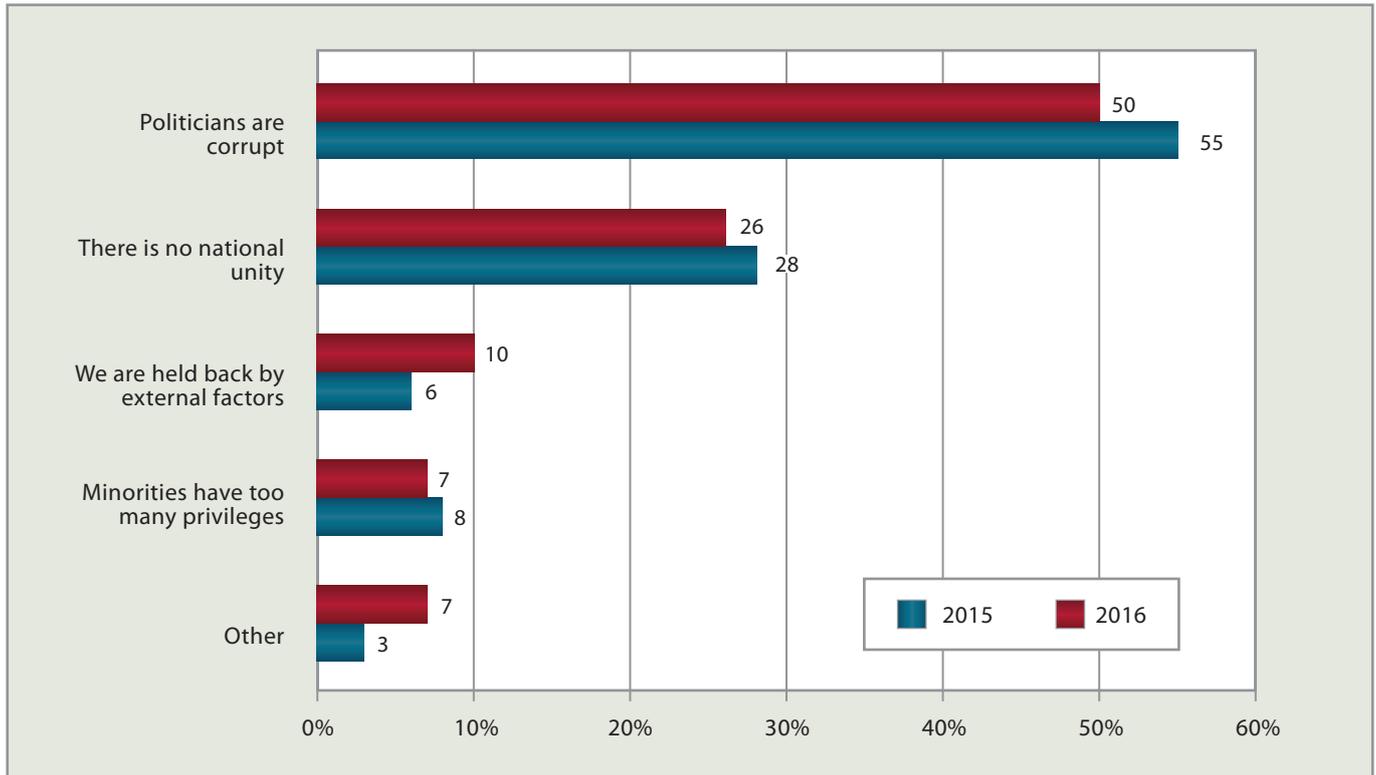
The predefined answers to this multiple choice question allow for comparing several alternative explanations for poverty in the country, some of which

are rather consistent with the fundamental values of liberal democracy (“politicians are corrupt”, “there is no national unity”), while others contradict them explicitly (“minorities have too many privileges”). As in 2015, the majority of respondents who participated in the 2016 survey chose answers that are rather consistent with the fundamental values of liberal democracy.

**Female, 42 years old, from a district town:**

„Money has to be spent on more pressing things, things that are needed for the city. They (the authorities, author’s note) should make a plan first, decide what is important. As I said before, education and healthcare. If a person is sick and bedridden, how can they be of any help for their family or the country. Not like it happens now: they give money for things like free courses for the unemployed... a course for this, a course for that... This money should be spent on more pressing things. We always put the horse before the cart, rather than begin from what is needed.“

**Figure 4. Reasons for poverty**



Question: *What is the primary reason for Bulgaria being the poorest country in the EU?*

However, the share of respondents who tended to side with explanations that contradict these values was not negligible and should not be overlooked, especially given that in 2016 this share marked a slight increase: 7% felt that poverty in the country was due to minorities having too many privileges, while 10% believed that the country was held back by external factors. The popularity of certain non-corroborated and populist explanations for what citizens consider to be the most important problem for Bulgaria (i.e. poverty) multiplies the risk of propagation of discrimination, racism and xenophobia in society (fig. 4).

**Roma from a district town:**

*„If we are to stop corruption, basically we need to have a Ministry of Interior and a Ministry of Justice. Even if corruption disappeared only there – this is my opinion, I don’t expect anyone to agree with it – even if corruption stopped in these two ministries alone, there would be no corruption in any other ministry or the judiciary.“*

## CONFIDENCE IN DEMOCRACY AND THE MAIN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

In 2016, almost half of the respondents (49%) agreed that democracy was the best form of state governance for Bulgaria. The share of respondents who had expressed this opinion in 2015 was more or less the same (52%), hence no significant developments have occurred on this issue between the two surveys. Nearly one third of the respondents (29%) however, did not agree that democracy was the best form of government for Bulgaria, while every fourth person (23%) was not sure what to reply to this question (fig. 5).

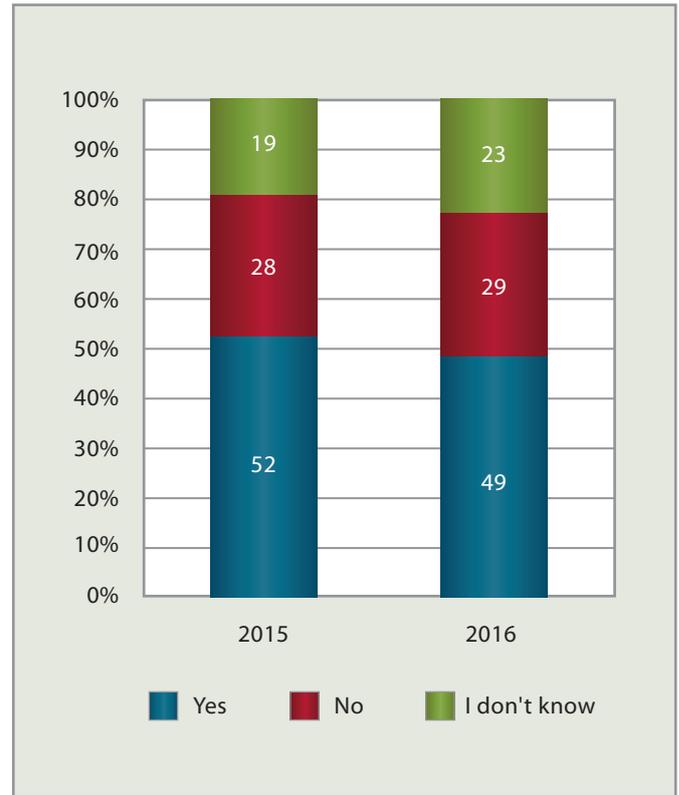
The high share of respondents who did not provide a definitive answer, seems to suggest that “democracy” is a concept which a considerable number of people are not exposed to in their daily lives, have no immediate experience with, and cannot express an opinion on. Hence, the survey questionnaire did not include a direct question asking respondents to assess whether Bulgaria can be currently described as a democratic country. Such a

question, however, was asked in the focus groups and all three groups (young people from Sofia, people living in the North Central Region and Roma from a district town) agreed that Bulgaria cannot be currently defined as a democracy.

The quantitative survey in both 2015 and 2016 revealed significant disparities in the confidence of different social groups in democracy as the best form of government for Bulgaria. In 2015, six social groups had greater confidence in democracy than the average for the country: these included people living in Sofia, people living in the North Central Region, better educated persons, more well-to-do respondents, employed persons and young people between the age of 18 and 29 years. In 2016, confidence in democracy remained higher than the national average in four of these groups: 56% of the people living in Sofia, 55% of the best educated persons, 55% of the well-to-do respondents and 52% of the employed persons agreed that democracy was the best form of government for the country, compared to a national average of 49% (fig. 6).

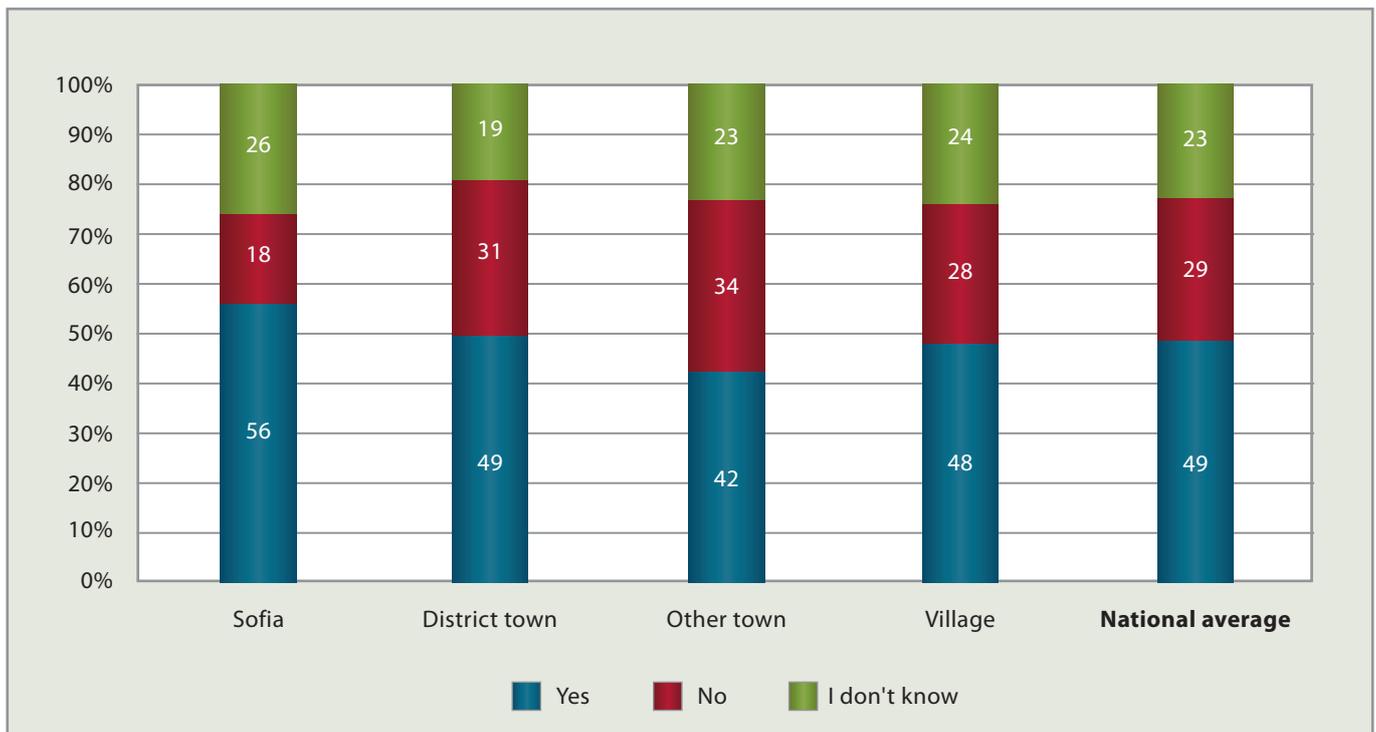
As mentioned above, better educated respondents were more likely to have confidence in democracy and the share of those who were not sure among them was

Figure 5. Confidence in democracy



Question: Do you believe that democracy is the best form of government for Bulgaria?

Figure 6. Confidence in democracy (by place of residence)



Question: Do you believe that democracy is the best form of government for Bulgaria?

**Male, 30 years old, from Sofia:**

„It (democracy; author's note) sounds a bit like an utopia. We have no civil society that is for mutual support so that it can make everything happen in the long run.“

**Female, 22 years old, from Sofia :**

„Democracy exists only for those who are at the top. For the common people there is no democracy. We are not equal before the law.“

**Female, 24 years old, from Sofia:**

„You create democracy by pushing institutions (to do their job; author's note).“

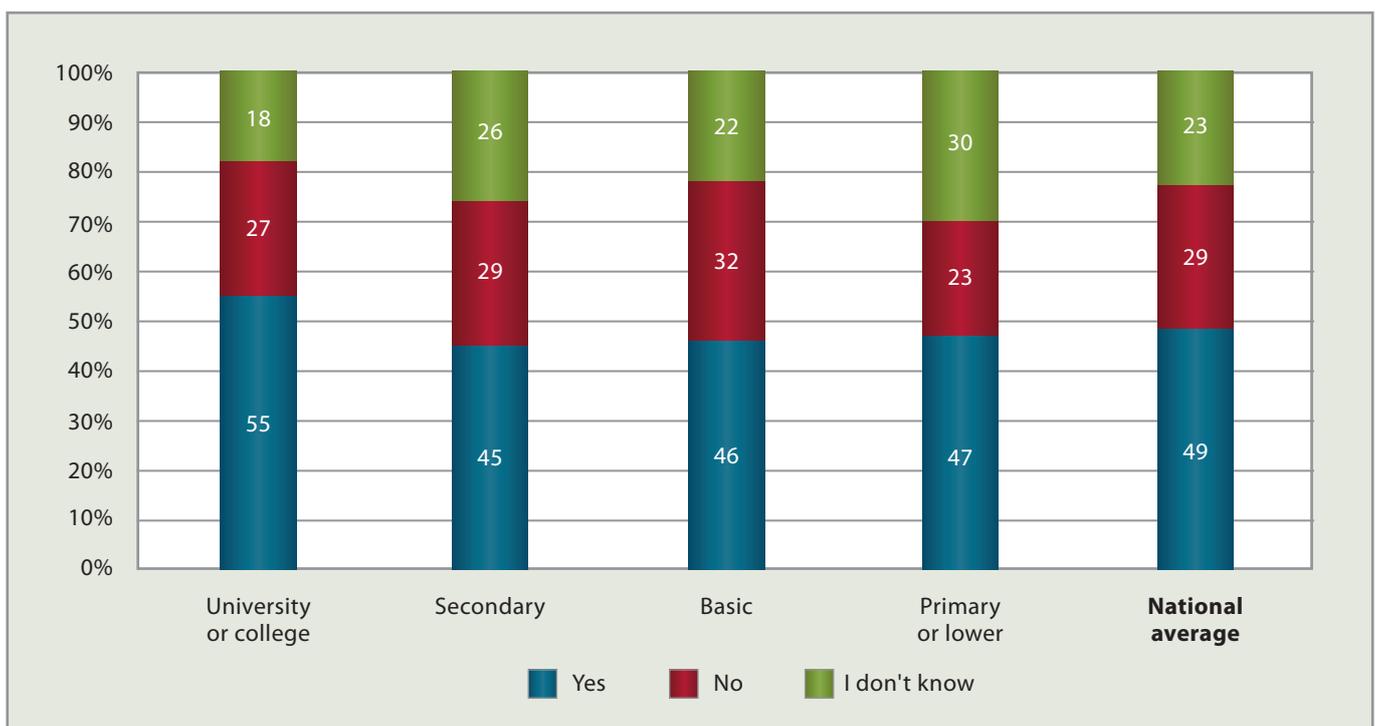
smaller: in 2016, 55% of the respondents with university or college education believed that democracy was the best form of government for the country, compared to a national average of 49%, while 18% of them said that they were not sure, compared to a national average of 23% (fig. 7).

The respondents' level of education is one of the factors determining to some extent the perceptions of

democracy, however, it is disquieting that even among the most educated, the share of those who cannot provide a definitive answer is quite high (nearly one fifth). The people with secondary education who said that they had confidence in democracy were exactly 10% less than the respondents with university or college education for whom democracy was the preferred form of government. The level of confidence in democracy, however, does not decrease proportionally to the level of education. Rather more characteristic of the people with lower than secondary education is that they were more likely to reply that they were not sure: nearly one third (30%) of the people with primary and lower education chose this answer.

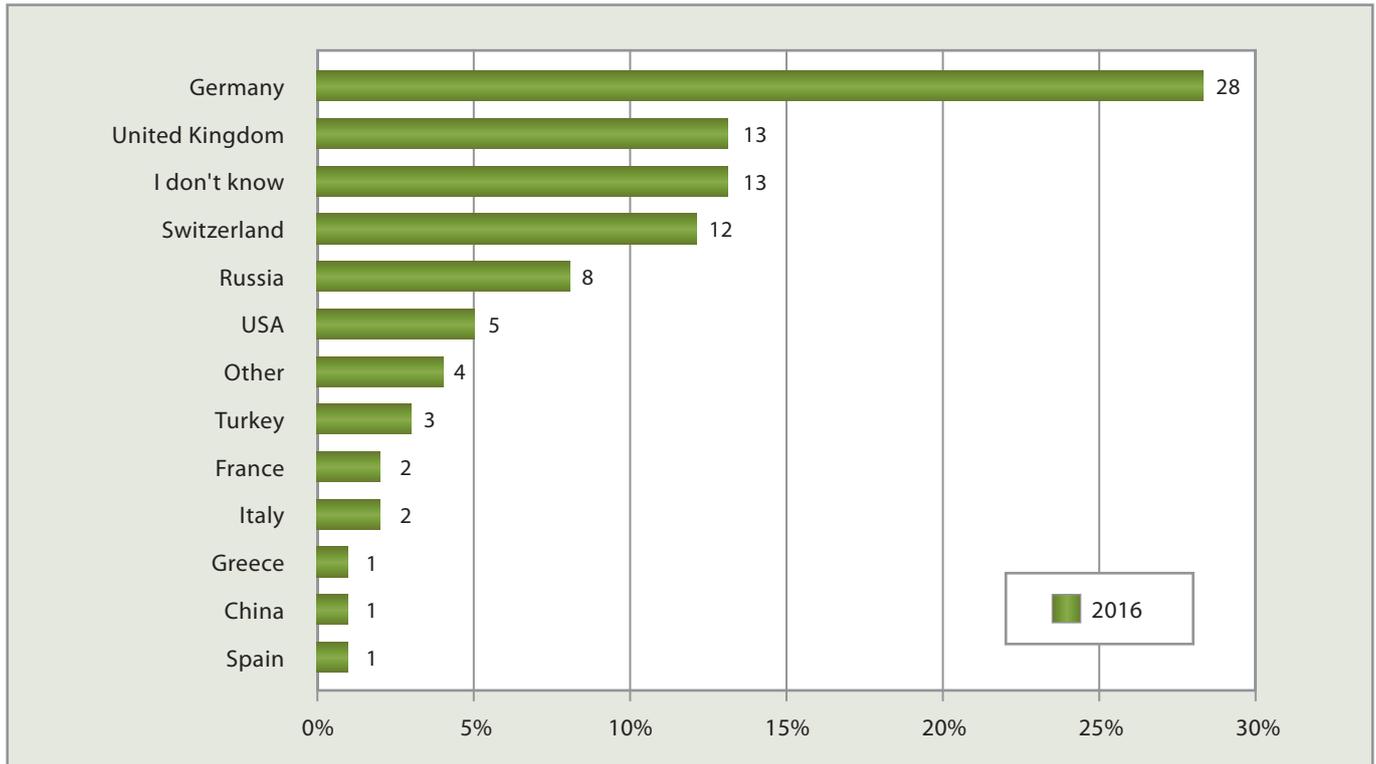
Public perceptions of democracy can be gauged indirectly based on the foreign countries, which Bulgarian citizens identify as well-governed and suitable for serving as an example for the government of Bulgaria (fig. 8). In both 2015 and 2016, the top three countries, which according to the respondents, could serve as an example for the government of Bulgaria, were all democracies. Germany remained the most often cited "role model" for the national institutions: the highest share of respondents (28%) identified Germany as a country that was governed well and could

**Figure 7. Confidence in democracy (by level of education)**



Question: Do you believe that democracy is the best form of government for Bulgaria?

**Figure 8. International example of good governance**



*Question: In your opinion, which country in the world is governed well and could serve as an example for Bulgaria?*

provide an example for Bulgaria. The second and third best governed countries according to the respondents were Great Britain and Switzerland, which gathered between 12% and 13%. The top three countries perceived as examples of good governance by Bulgarian citizens remained the same as in 2015.

The quantitative survey, however, showed that the support for Germany as a perceived “role model” has declined considerably since 2015. In the first survey, 40% of the respondents identified Germany as an example to be followed, while in the second survey only 28% shared this opinion. The decline in Germany’s popularity as a country with good governance whose example should be followed, probably reflects the fact that Bulgarians tend to disapprove Chancellor Merkel’s “open doors” policy towards refugees from the Middle East. This assumption has to be tested in a subsequent quantitative survey. In 2016, in one of the three focus groups conducted together with the quantitative survey, it was explicitly formulated as a plausible explanation for the decline of Germany’s popularity.

The main task in the three focus groups was to identify the factors based on which the governance of a foreign country can be determined as “good”; in oth-

er words, from the perspective of the Bulgarians what makes some countries a desired role model in good governance, and others not.

The participants in the focus group with young people from Sofia agreed that the best governed countries whose example Bulgaria should follow, were the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. The main reasons for which the focus group participants identified these countries as a desired role model included the broad personal freedom people enjoy there (expressed mainly through different aspects of the Dutch education system), “social security” and the lack of “ostentatious display of social status”. The latter argument (“Politicians do not flaunt their cars”) was also made in the focus group with people living in a small town in the North Central Region, who cited lack of ostentatiousness as one of the reasons for identifying Switzerland as an example of good governance. Lack of ostentatiousness is an alternative way to formulate the concept of equality among citizens as a key element of the perception of “good governance” and a desired role model to be followed by national institutions.

The focus group with people living in a small town in the North Central Region and the focus group with

**Male, 47 years old, from a district town:**

*„The best thing now (when the government is democratic; author's note) is that you can leave the country, hit the road and follow your own path.“*

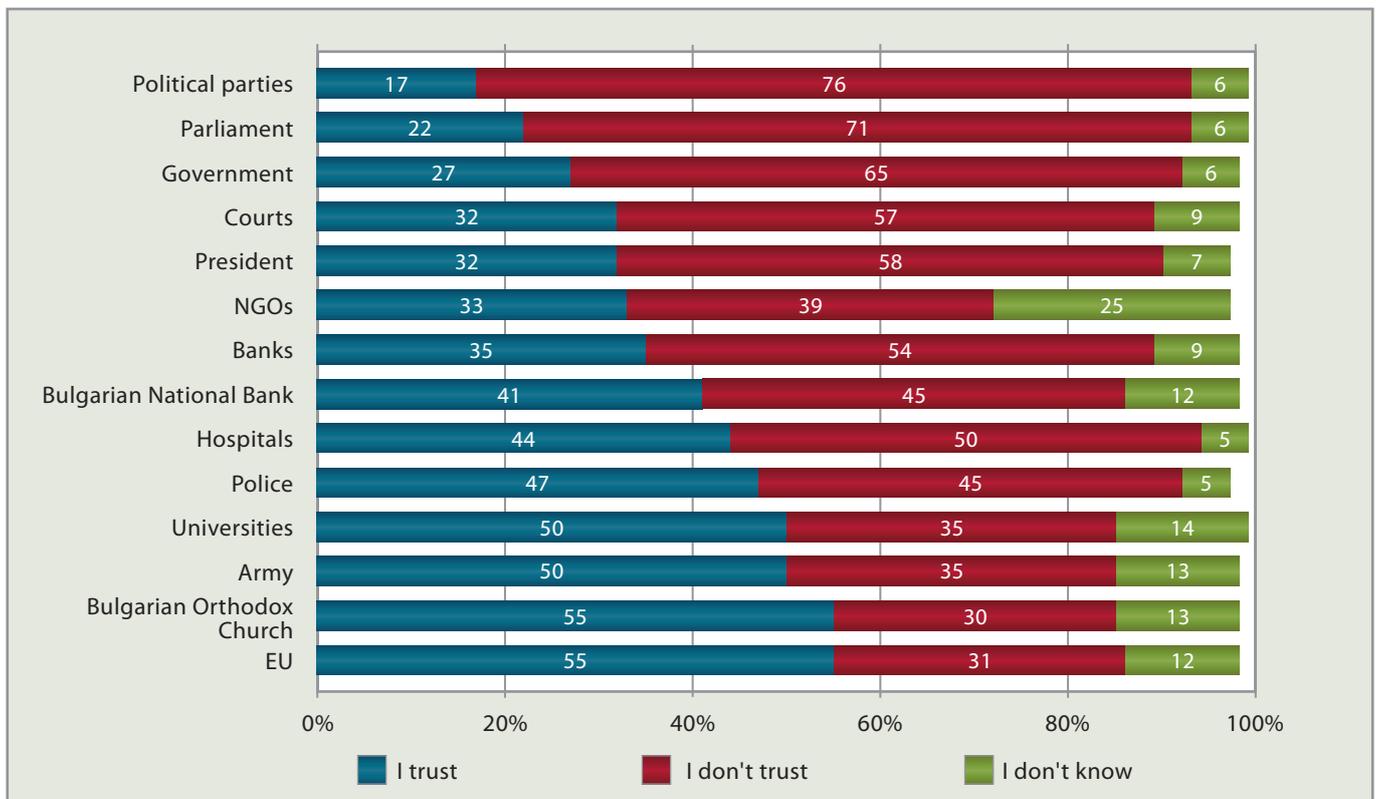
Roma from a district town ranked Greece at a much higher position among the countries that could serve as an example of good governance than the results of the quantitative survey suggested. The participants in the first focus group cited two main reasons for considering the governance of Greece “good” and a desired role model: national unity/solidarity when Greeks protest and want to achieve something as nation, and lack of fear that dissent may have adverse consequences.

In the focus group with Roma, the choice of Greece as a desired “role model” was also supported with arguments related to strong national unity in the pursuit of a common goal. In addition to Greece, the participants in this focus group identified two other coun-

tries whose example in good governance should be followed: Romania and France. In the case of Romania, the determining factor cited was “the meaningful judicial system reform” that was carried out in this country, while in the case of France, equality among citizens again emerged as a key argument, albeit formulated differently: “[France] gives all the nations it had colonized centuries ago the opportunity to become equal and full part of the French society”.

Although citizens expressed support for democracy as the best form of government for Bulgaria and identified only democratic countries as desired “role models” for the country’s government, the quantitative research revealed persistently low public confidence in the fundamental institutions of representative democracy (fig. 9). Both surveys, in 2015 and in 2016, tested public attitudes towards 14 different institutions and in both cases the National Assembly and the political parties ranked lowest in terms of public confidence. The vast majority of respondents (76%) indicated that they did not trust political parties, while 71% said they did not trust the National Assembly.

**Figure 9. Confidence in institutions**



Question: To what extent do you trust the following institutions/organizations? (“I trust” includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers “I fully trust” and “I rather trust”, while “I don't trust” includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers “I rather distrust” and “I don't trust”.)

The institutions of the European Union traditionally inspire greater confidence than national institutions. Only two of the institutions included in the survey rallied the confidence of the majority of respondents (55%): the European Union and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Half of the respondents tend to trust the army and the universities, while the police enjoys the confidence of 47% of the respondents. As in 2015, the declared confidence in the Bulgarian police was much higher than the confidence in courts: only one third of the respondents (32%) indicated that they would rather trust the courts.

Approximately one third of the respondents declared that they would rather trust non-governmental organizations in the country. This level of confidence is around the average for the 14 institutions and organizations examined. Public confidence in NGOs is higher than the confidence in political parties and the National Assembly, comparable to the confidence in the President and the courts, and much lower than the confidence in the police, the army and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

It is important to note that one fourth of the respondents (25%) replied that they were not sure whether they could trust non-governmental organizations. For all other institutions and organizations covered by the survey, the share of those who have chosen the answer "I'm not sure" was much smaller (ranging between 9% and 13%). The high percentage of people who were unable to express a clear opinion on non-governmental organizations can probably be explained with the fact that the NGO community is difficult to define. "Non-governmental organizations" are not a single organization or institution. This collective term covers many different non-profit legal entities and informal civic initiatives that perform a wide range of activities including sports clubs, organizations providing social services, educational and human rights organizations, etc. which have little in common in their scope of activity but share a common principle of organization and work. Under these circumstances,

**Female Roma, 23 years old, from a district town:**

*„(To the question which country in the world is governed well; author's note) I would say Germany before Merkel let the migrants in. The state is weakened now, as if it is not protected enough. Before, I have never heard someone breaking the law there.“*

**Elderly female Roma, from a district town:**

*„I like Germany because it's better there. All my relatives are in Germany, you won't believe the things they're telling me about life there. They tell me people go to work, there are jobs with good, handsome pay, child benefits are higher, they give decent social benefits.“*

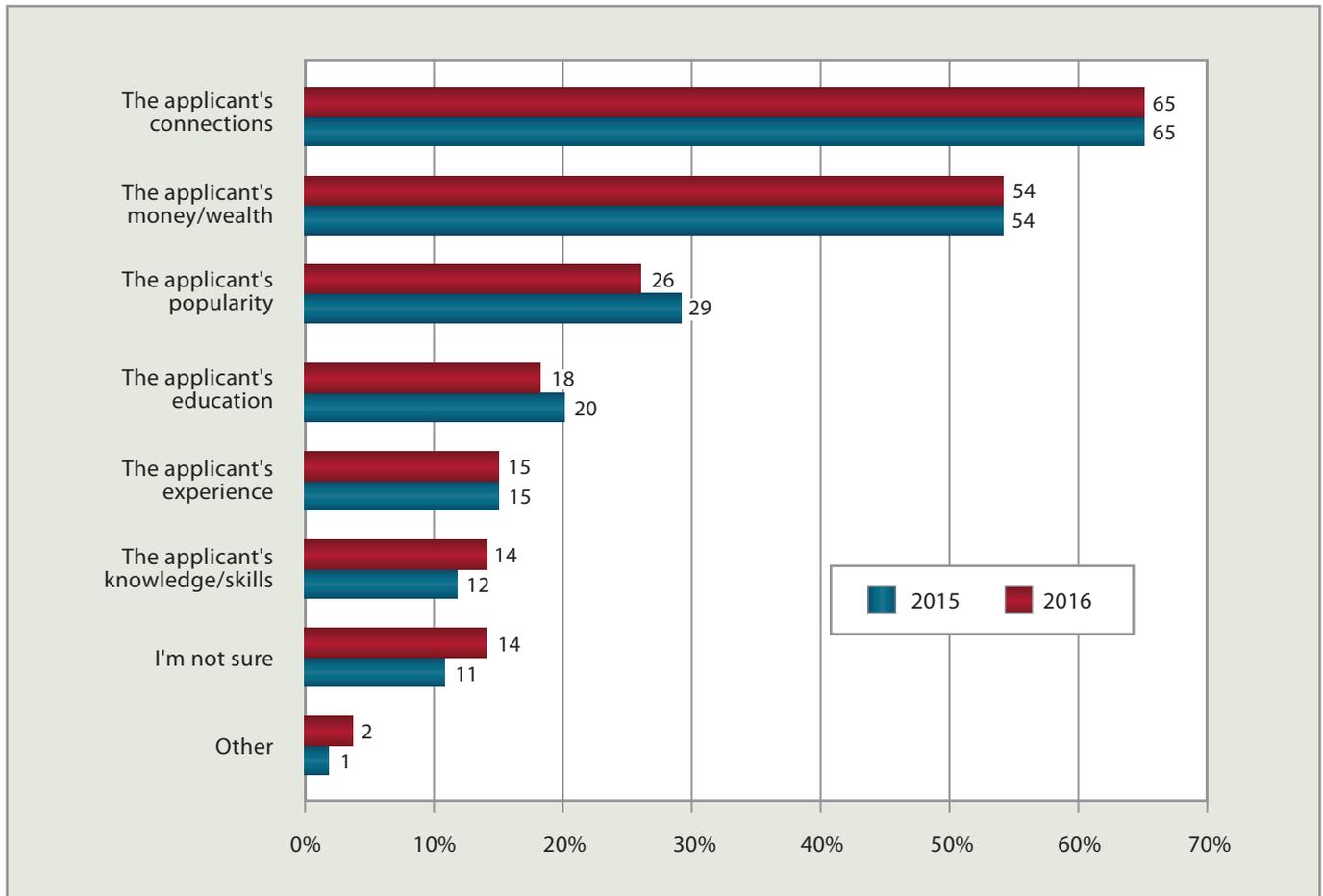
citizens find it difficult to perceive "non-governmental organizations" as a consolidated sector, while those of them who have replied that they trusted NGOs, most probably had a specific NGO in mind, hence their confidence should not necessarily be interpreted as declared confidence in the entire NGO sector.

The problem however is not limited only to the difficulties in perceiving "non-governmental organizations" as a consolidated sector. The share of respondents who were not sure whether they could trust non-governmental organizations varies by place of residence and this suggests that the access of citizens to information and serviced provided by specific non-governmental organizations also affects public perceptions. Nearly one third (32%) of the respondents who live in Sofia and in villages said that they were not sure whether they could trust non-governmental organizations, hence, one can assume that they have less access to information about NGOs or about the results of their activity. In district towns, the percentage of people who were unable to express a clear opinion was much lower – only 17%, and quite comparable with the share of those who have chosen the answer "I'm not sure" for the other institutions and organizations examined.

An important aspect of public attitudes towards democracy in Bulgaria is the clear discrepancy between support for democracy in general as a form of government, and the low public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy.<sup>6</sup> The declared confidence in democracy as a preferred form of government is not based on actual experience with participation in the democratic decision-making process and does not translate into confidence in the fundamental democratic institutions. Therefore, the

<sup>6</sup> This discrepancy has been noted on multiple occasions in other research studies. See, for instance, *Dimitrova, B.* "The Shifting Sands of Public Opinion. Political, economic and status changes in the period 2002-2007", in the publication *The State of Society 2008*, Open Society Institute – Sofia.

**Figure 10. Main factors for access to senior government positions**



Question: Which of the following factors have greater importance in the appointment of people to senior government positions?

registered support for democracy is rather abstract, grounded more in wishful thinking than in reality, and may prove unsustainable over time.

In addition to the existence of democratic institutions, possible indicators for assessing the quality of democracy are also the principles, which underlie the establishment of national elites.<sup>7</sup> The 2016 survey revealed that for the majority of respondents, the main factors for access to senior government positions in Bulgaria were the applicant’s personal connections and money/wealth. Public attitudes on this issue remained unchanged since 2015. According to the majority of respondents, the educational background, experience, knowledge or skills of the applicant are far less important for securing a senior governmental position than good personal connections and money (fig. 10).

<sup>7</sup> See: Prodanov, G. "The Quality of Democracy as a Quality of Elites", in: Kanev, D. and Todorov, A. (eds.), Quality of Democracy in Bulgaria, East – West, 2014, p. 391.

## POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN GOVERNANCE

As in 2015, the 2016 survey registered established public perceptions, which suggest that citizens do not feel adequately represented in the governance of the country and have no confidence in their elected representatives. The majority of respondents (58%) could not agree that there was at least one member of Parliament whom they trusted and who represented

**Young male, from Sofia :**

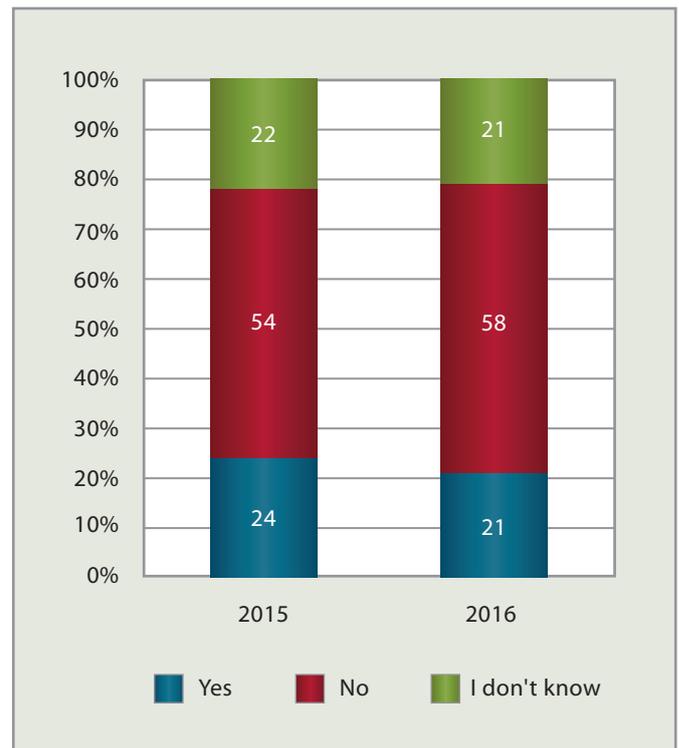
*„I don't see any good examples in politics. I don't mean to say that only people like us have to govern but we must, as a non-sick society, state what we want.“*

people like them. Only 21% of the respondents agreed with this statement (fig. 11).

There are significant variations in the perceived representation in decision-making and the citizens' confidence in individual members of Parliament according to the age, employment status, education, ethnic background and place of residence of the respondents (fig. 12, 13 and 14). The residents of Sofia tend to have less confidence and to feel less represented in the National Assembly than other citizens in the country. Only 12% of the respondents who live in Sofia agreed with the statement that there was at least one member of Parliament whom they trusted and who represented people like them, against a national average of 21%. The level of confidence and perceived representation is also low among young people between 18 and 29 years of age, among unemployed persons, and among the respondents who identified themselves as Roma. For instance, only 13% of the people aged between 18 and 29 years felt that there was at least one member of Parliament whom they trusted, the national average being 21%.

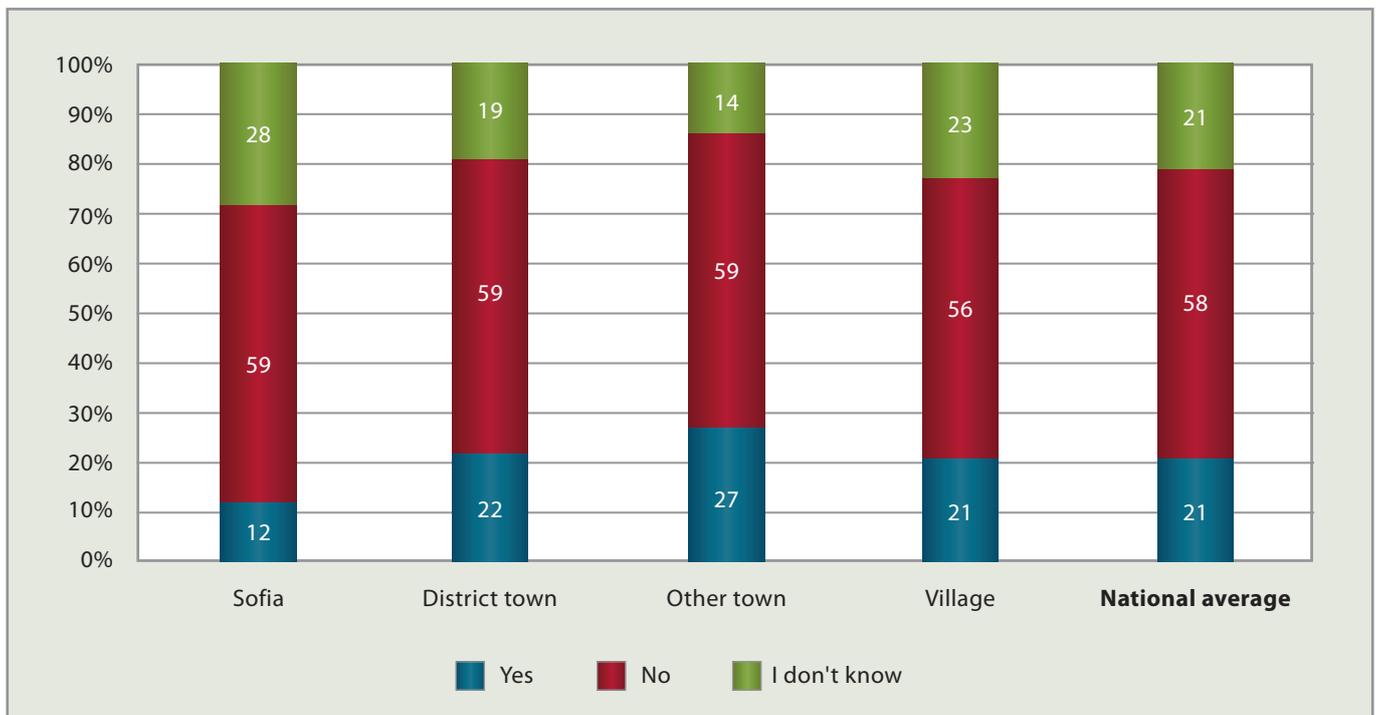
The respondents who identified themselves as Turks tend to feel more represented and to have greater confidence in their elected representatives than the

Figure 11. Confidence in individual members of Parliament



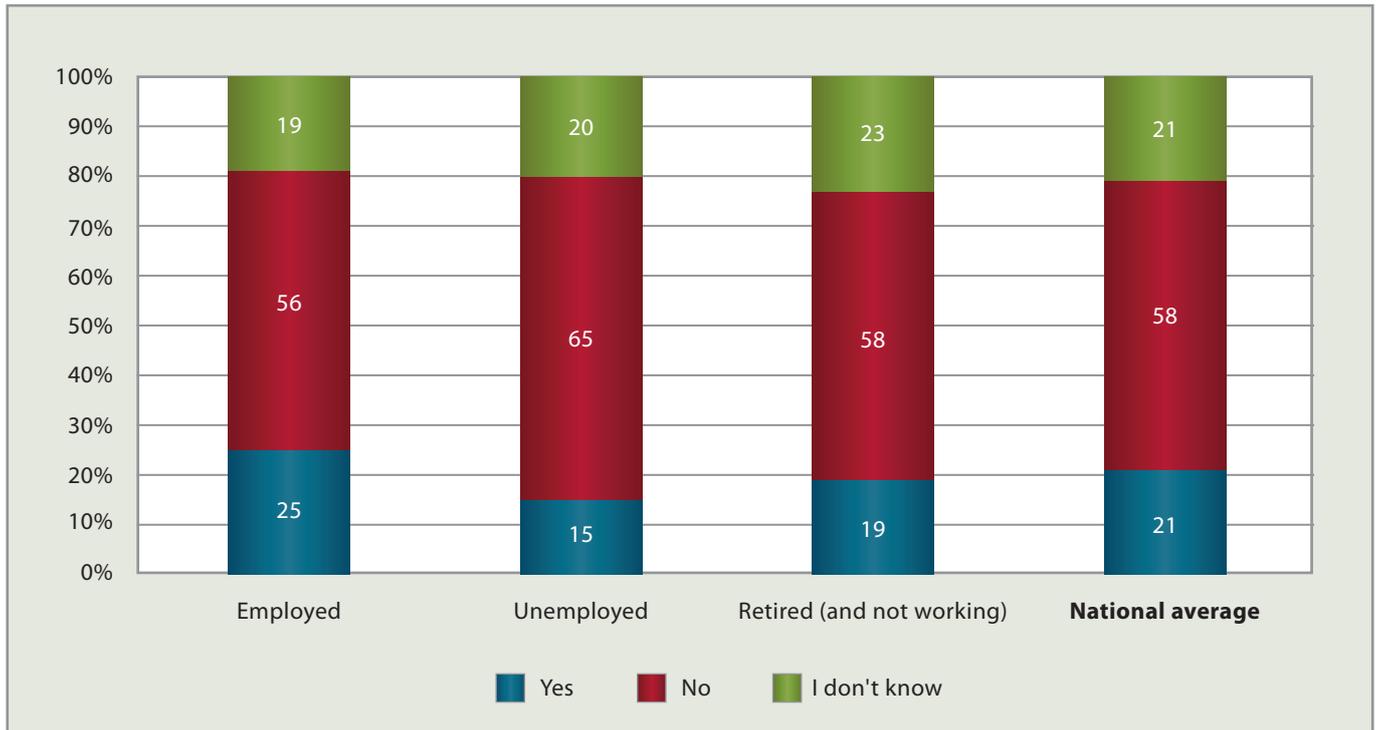
Question: Do you agree with the following statements: "In the National Assembly there is at least one representative from my constituency whom I trust and I am confident that he would defend the interest of people like me and my family"?

Figure 12. Confidence in individual members of Parliament (by place of residence)



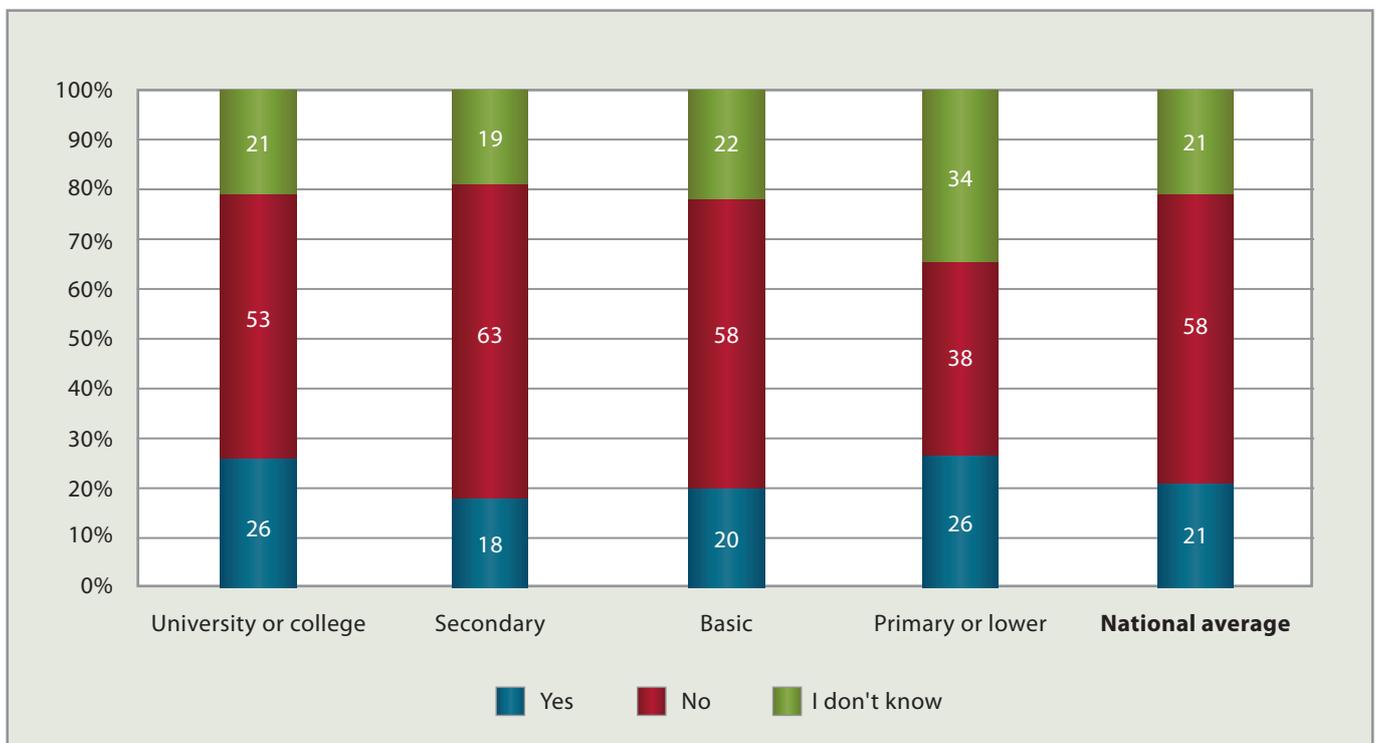
Question: Do you agree with the following statements: "In the National Assembly there is at least one representative from my constituency whom I trust and I am confident that he would defend the interest of people like me and my family"?

**Figure 13. Confidence in individual members of Parliament (by employment status)**



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: "In the National Assembly there is at least one representative from my constituency whom I trust and I am confident that he would defend the interest of people like me and my family"?*

**Figure 14. Confidence in individual members of Parliament (by level of education)**



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: "In the National Assembly there is at least one representative from my constituency whom I trust and I am confident that he would defend the interest of people like me and my family"?*

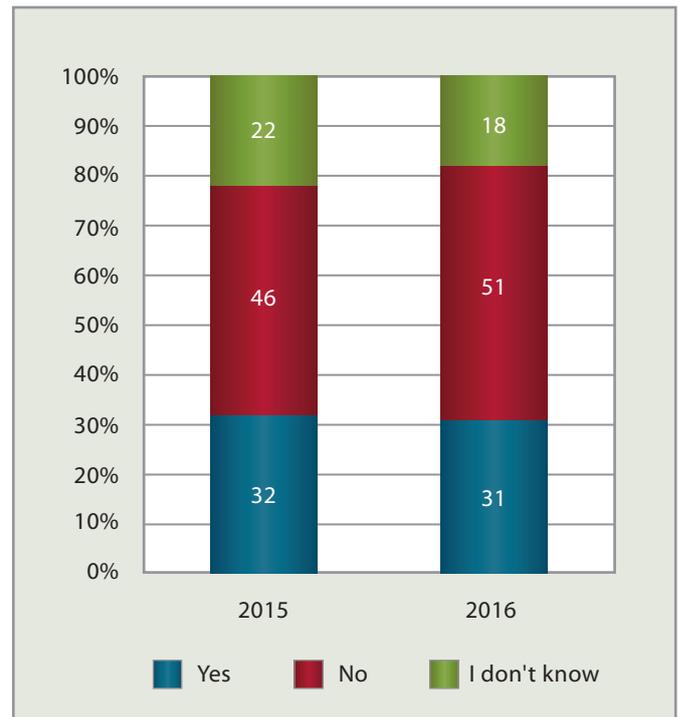
average citizen: 36% of them agreed that there was at least one member of Parliament whom they trusted, against a national average of 21%. The level of confidence and perceived representation is also slightly higher among people with average income (400-600 BGN per household member per month), employed persons and people living in towns other than the district centers.

As in 2015, the survey showed that citizens tend to have greater confidence in and to feel better represented by local government institutions than by the central government. Every third respondent felt represented and trusted at least one municipal councilor in the municipality he or she resided (fig. 15). The level of confidence in individual municipal councilors is much lower than the average for the country among the same groups of respondents who felt underrepresented in the National Assembly. Only 18% of the people living in Sofia, only 17% of the respondents who identified themselves as Roma, and only 21% of the young people between 18 and 29 years of age said that they had confidence in at least one municipal councilor and felt represented in the local government of their municipality, the average for the country being 31%.

The confidence in individual municipal councilors and the perceived degree of representation is above the average for the country among four social groups: respondents who identified themselves as Turks (49% of them trust at least one municipal councilor), people living in the North Central Region (47% of them trust at least one municipal councilor), people with average income (41% of them trust at least one municipal councilor), and people living in towns other than district centers and villages (38-39% of them trust at least one municipal councilor), against a national average of 31%.

In Sofia, the level of confidence in individual municipal councilors differs significantly compared to other parts of the country. More than half of the respondents in Sofia (52%) did not agree with the statement that in the Municipal Council of their municipality there was at least one councilor whom they trusted and who represented the interest of people like them. Nearly one third of the respondents in Sofia said that they were not sure, while only 18% agreed with this statement. For comparison, in other parts of the

Figure 15. Confidence in individual municipal councilors



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: "In the Municipal Council of my municipality there is at least one councilor whom I trust and I am confident that he would defend the interest of people like me and my family?"*

country the share of respondents who were not sure ranged between 12% and 18%. Moreover, in Sofia, the percentage of respondents who had confidence in at least one municipal councilor was twice as low as among people who live in towns other than district centers and in villages where 38% and 39%, respectively, said they trusted at least one municipal councilor.

The reasons why respondents in Sofia deviated from the country average could be sought in the structure of local government in Bulgaria, which has been laid out in the Constitution and the Local Government and Local Administration Act. Sofia has one Municipal Council for 1.25 million population, which significantly undermines both perceived representation and citizens' confidence in local government compared to other parts of the country.

**Male, 56 years old, from a district town:**

*„There is a deeply rooted fear in people lest they disturb anyone, because you never know.“*

**Female, 42 years old, from a district town:**

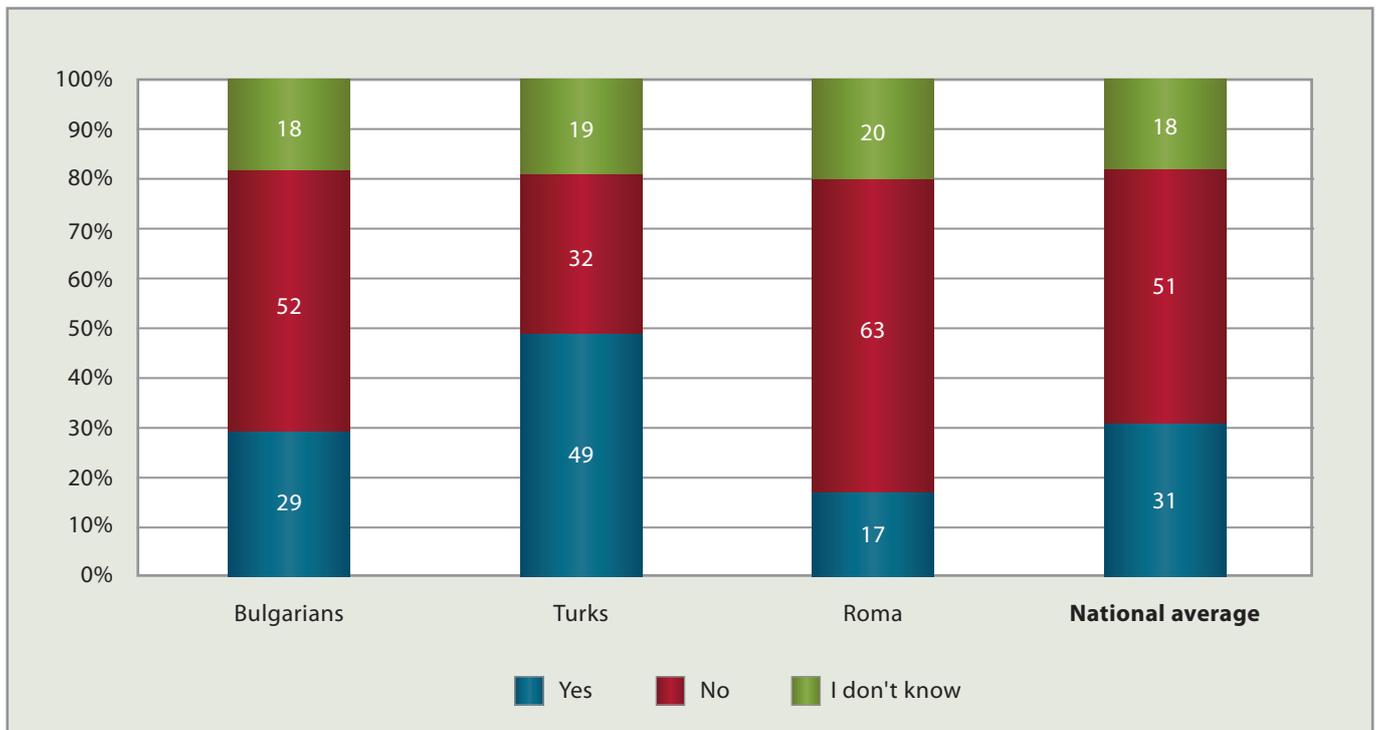
*„Maybe they are afraid, maybe they think why should I speak up first. I don't know, maybe it's anxiety, fear that if someone stood up first, there would be consequences for their job.“*

There are some differences in the perceived degree of representation and level of confidence in local government institutions depending on the respondents' ethnic background. Nearly half (49%) of those who identified themselves as Turks agreed with the statement that in the Municipal Council of their municipality there was at least one councilor whom they trusted and who represented their interest, which is much higher than the average for the country (31%). At the opposite end of the spectrum are the respondents who identified themselves as Roma. The majority of them (63%) did not agree with the statement that there was at least one councilor whom they could trust to represent their interest. Only 17% of the respondents who identified themselves as Roma agreed with this statement, against a national average of 31% (fig. 16).

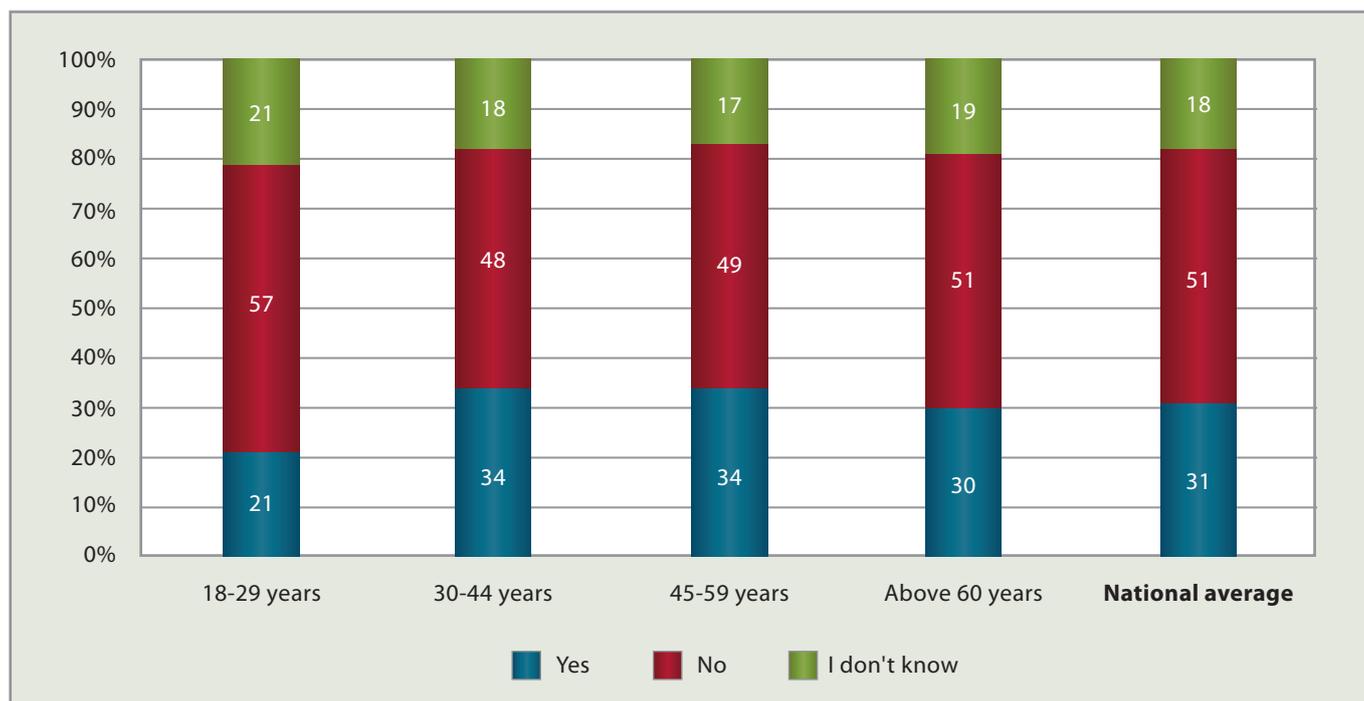
The respondents' age also affects the degree of perceived representation and the level of confidence in individual municipal councilors. The youngest feel less represented in local government: only 21% of the respondents between 18 and 29 years of age agreed that in the Municipal Council of their municipality there was at least one councilor whom they trusted and who represented their interest. This is significantly below the national average of 31% (fig. 17). As mentioned earlier, young people feel less represented in the National Assembly as well and have less confidence in individual members of Parliament than the average citizen.

The low public confidence in institutions and the inadequate degree of perceived representation of citizens in decision-making are coupled by a third major challenge to the fundamental values of the EU in Bulgaria: the low level of citizens' participation in all forms of public life. Only 5% to 6% of respondents reported that they were involved in a professional union or a political party and this share has remained unchanged since previous similar surveys, the earliest of which was conducted in 2002. In the period 2002 – 2016, membership in community centers, sports

**Figure 16. Confidence in individual municipal councilors (by self-declared ethnicity)**



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: "In the Municipal Council of my municipality there is at least one councilor whom I trust and I am confident that he would defend the interest of people like me and my family"?*

**Figure 17. Confidence in individual municipal councilors (by age)**

Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: "In the Municipal Council of my municipality there is at least one councilor whom I trust and I am confident that he would defend the interest of people like me and my family"?*

associations and various clubs slightly increased but the total share of their members remained between 4% and 6% of the citizens. For the same period of 14 years, the share of those who are not involved in any public organization decreased from 85% to 80% but is still alarmingly high and suggests exclusion of large groups of citizens from public life.

The issue with the involvement of citizens in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) needs to be con-

sidered separately. In 2016, only 2% of the respondents reported that they were involved in NGOs, which were specifically mentioned among the possible answers on the questionnaire. This term, however, encompasses a broad range of organizations with different scope of activity. Sports associations, clubs, professional and business organizations are often registered under the Non-Profit Organizations Act and hence, formally also constitute NGOs, but were listed as separate options

**Table 2. Share of persons involved in parties and organizations (%)**

Organization	2002	2006	2007	2015	2016
Political party	6.0	5.0	6.0	8.0	6.0
Trade union	5.0	5.0	5.0	7.0	6.0
Community center	2.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	4.0
Sports association/Fishing/Hunting club <sup>8</sup>	0.5	2.0	3.0	3.0	4.0
Club	1.0	3.0	3.0	6.0	6.0
Non-governmental organization	1.0	0.5	1.0	3.0	2.0
Professional/business organization	0.5	1.0	1.0	2.0	2.0
Other	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.4	1.0
I am not a member in any organization	85.0	84.0	81.0	81.0	80.0

Question: *Are you a member in any of the following organizations?*

<sup>8</sup> This option was not included in the questionnaire of the "State of Society" survey in 2002 and 2006; it was added for the first time in 2007.

**Female, 42 years old, from a district town:**

*„We have the unique ability to destroy. The Red Star was a symbol of socialism. Well, it's history, why should you destroy it? We're just unique in destroying things.“*

on the survey questionnaire. Therefore, one can assume that the share of respondents who indicated that they were involved in NGOs, actually reflects involvement only in NGOs that are not clubs, special interest associations, professional or business organizations. If involvement in NGOs is measured by the membership in any legal entity registered under the Non-Profit Organizations Act, then one can surmise that it covers anywhere between 10% and 20% of the citizens.

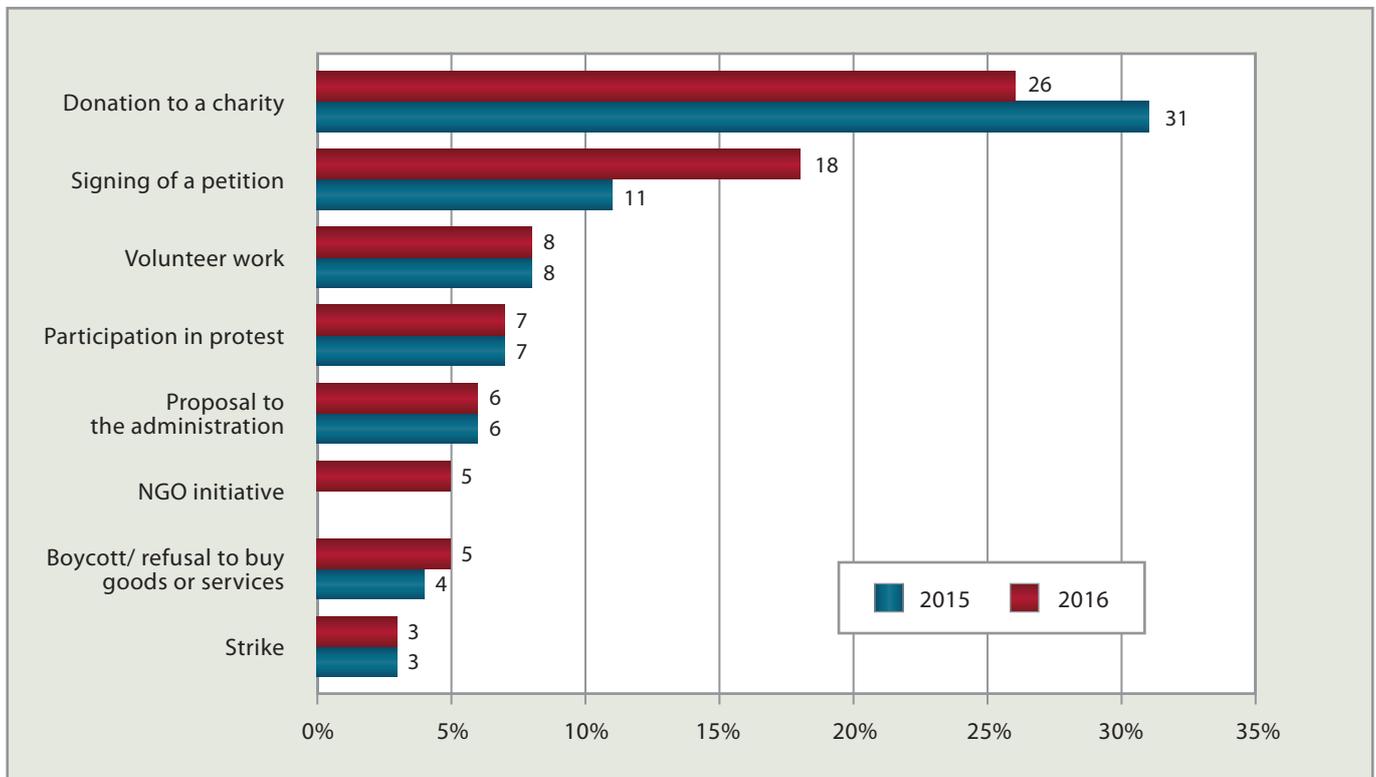
In both surveys conducted in 2015 and in 2016, donations for charities remained the most popular form of civic involvement in solving social or private problems. In 2016, the largest share of respondents (26%) reported that they had participated in a charity campaign with donations, which marks a slight decrease

compared to 2015 when 31% of the respondents claimed they had made donations.

The second most popular form of civic participation is the signing of petitions. In 2016, 18% of the respondents reported that they had signed a petition; this share is slightly higher than the one registered in the 2015 survey (11% of the respondents). The percentage of citizens who have had personal experience with other forms of civic participation throughout the year has remained unchanged between 2015 and 2016: 8% reported that they had worked as volunteers, 7% said that they had participated in protests, while 6% have made proposals to the state or municipal administration. Only 5% reported that in the last year they had been involved in an NGO initiative (fig. 18).

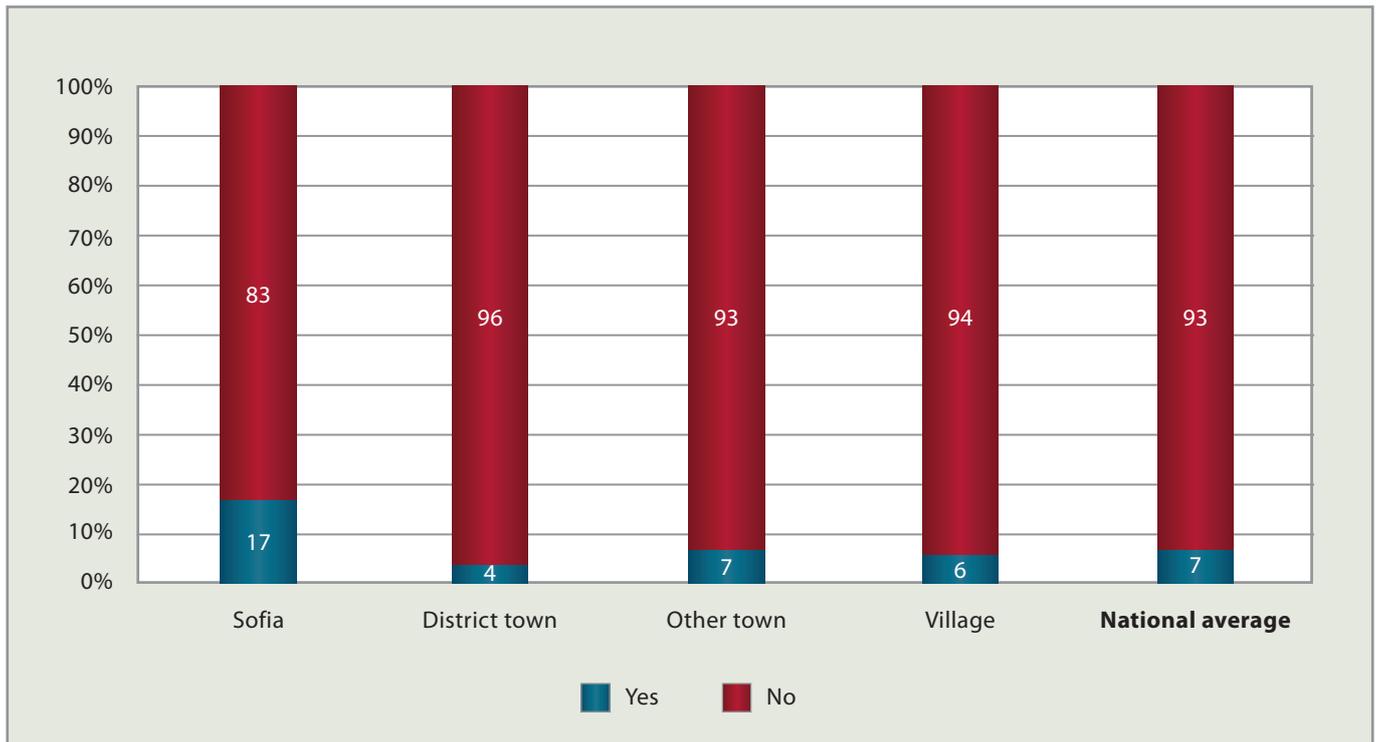
The share of respondents who have been personally involved in various civic initiatives (protests, boycott, petitions) is much higher among the residents of Sofia than among citizens from other parts of the country. In 2016, 17% of the respondents who lived in Sofia reported that they had participated in protests; this share is 4% for the residents of district towns and 6% for people living in villages (fig. 19). Some forms of

**Figure 18. Forms of civic participation**



Question: *In the last 12 months, did you happen to participate in... (answers for each option separately)? (Share of respondents who have replied "Yes".)*

**Figure 19. Participation in protests (by place of residence of the respondents)**



Question: *In the last 12 months, did you happen to participate in... protest? (Share of respondents who have replied "Yes".)*

civic activity such as boycott/refusal to buy goods and services are virtually unknown as forms of civic participation outside Sofia.

Personal involvement in and response to petitions is also higher among younger and better educated groups of respondents (fig. 20 and 21). At the opposite end of the spectrum are respondents who identified themselves as Turks or Roma, people who live in villages, and unemployed persons whose reported participation in petitions is half as low as the average for the country (18%). Participation in petitions is most strongly influenced by the respondents' level of education, being the highest among respondents with university or college education and declining as the level of completed education becomes lower. None of the respondents with primary or lower than primary education reported having participated in petitions in the last twelve months, compared to a national average of 18%.

**Elderly Roma male, from a district town:**

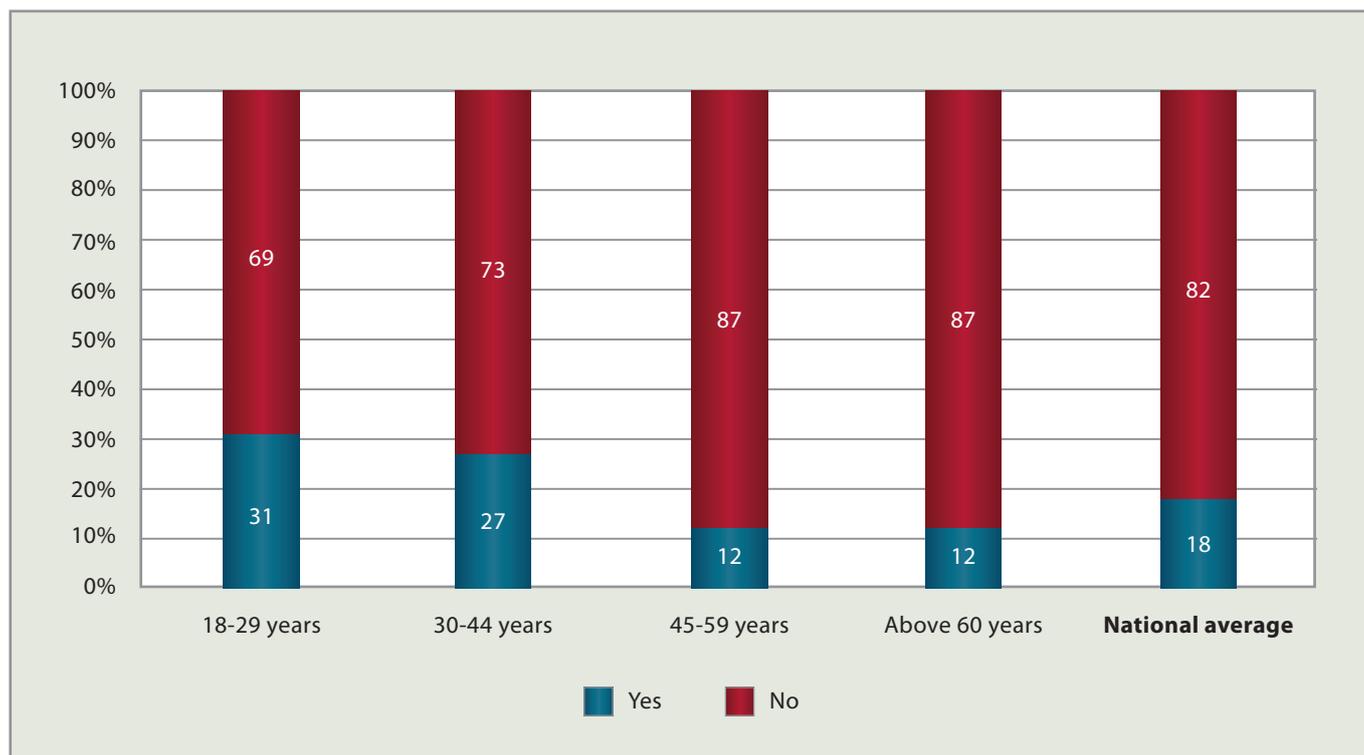
*„We have a huge responsibility as citizens, all of us, because we demonstrate weakness. We are disinterested. We want a lot but give nothing in return.“*

With regard to young people in particular (respondents between 18 and 29 years of age), the findings reveal a somewhat contradictory picture: on the one hand, young people tend to participate quite actively in civic initiatives, while on the other hand, they do not feel they are adequately represented in local and central government and they have low confidence in institutions. Among other things, this creates the risk for every civic initiative targeted at institutions to become a battleground between “young” and “old”.

The surveys conducted between 2006 and 2016 show a decline in the percentage of citizens who tend to remain passive in the face of transgressions they might have witnessed. In the last 10 years, the share of those who reported that they would do nothing if someone broke the rules and created difficulties for them, and would rather accept that such things happened in life, declined by 10%: in 2006, more than one third of respondents (36%) said that they would do nothing, while in 2016, every fourth person (26%) would remain passive.

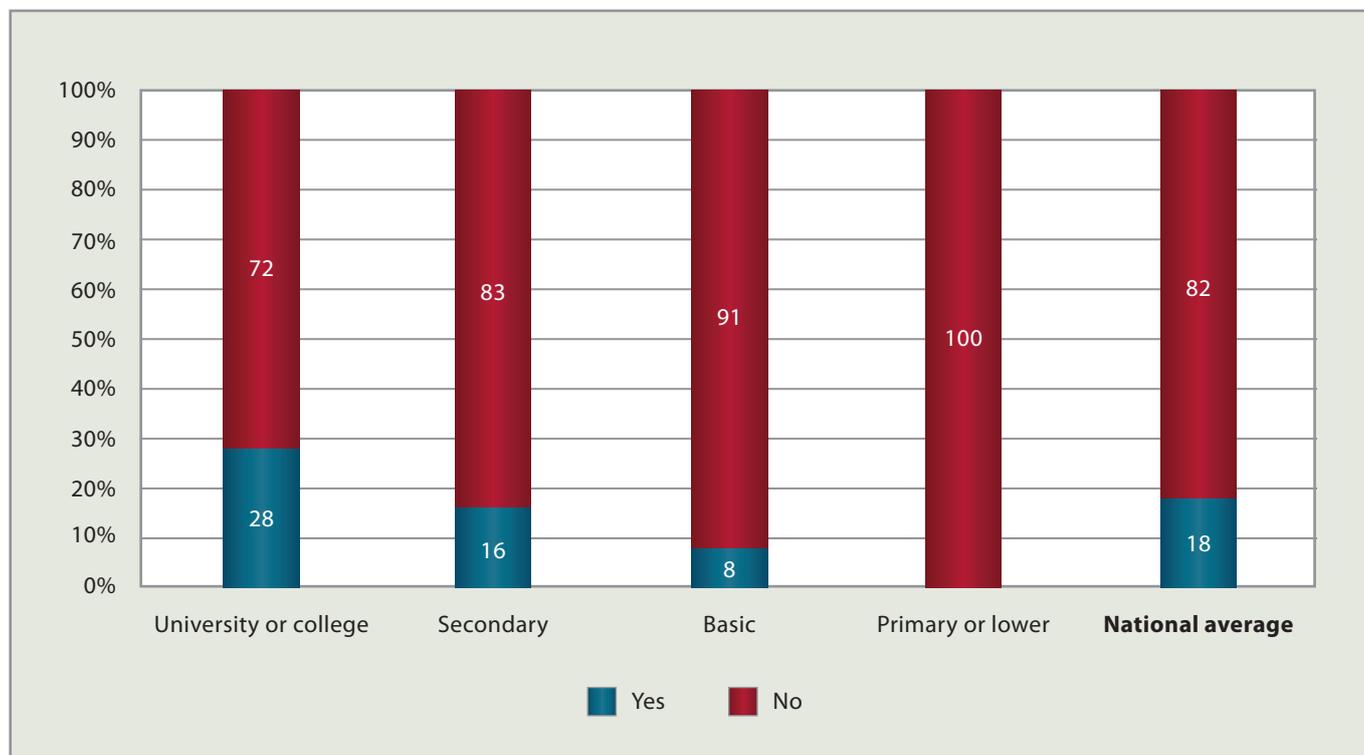
The likelihood of actively seeking to address potential wrongdoings increased over the ten-year period for each of the measures examined. For instance, the

**Figure 20. Participation in petition (by age of the respondents)**



Question: *In the last 12 months, did you happen to participate in... signing a petition? (Share of respondents who have replied "Yes".)*

**Figure 21. Participation in petition (by level of education)**



Question: *In the last 12 months, did you happen to participate in... signing a petition? (Share of respondents who have replied "Yes".)*

**Table 3. Civic activity in case of transgressions (%)**

If someone broke the rules and created difficulties for you, you would...	2006	2007	2015	2016
Do nothing – that's life	36	32	21	26
Complain to the relevant authorities	32	33	48	45
Talk to the transgressor/ demand that they desisted	22	23	37	39
Solve the problem alone when possible	21	23	26	32
Punish the transgressor or hire others to do it	5	7	7	8
Persistently call or write to the relevant authorities	5	5	15	11
Cause them damage by way of punishment	2	2	2	4
Organize a civic initiative (petition, protest)	1	2	4	3

share of those who would lodge a complaint rose by 13%, while the share of those who would talk to the transgressor and demand that they desisted increased by 17%.

The increased likelihood for citizens to act upon transgressions should be examined in light of the low confidence in institutions that was registered in the survey. Although the share of those who would seek a solution through institutional channels has increased, there has been also an increase in the percentage of those who would resort to mob law or would find

other ways to punish the transgressor, taking justice in their own hands. In 2016, 8% of the respondents admitted that they would personally seek retribution, if someone broke the rules and created difficulties for them.

Between 2006 and 2016 there has been a slight decline in the citizens' tendency to accept and remain passive to acts of poor governance. In 2006, more than half of the respondents (52%) replied that they would do nothing if they were dissatisfied with the way the country is governed, while in 2016 this share has de-

**Table 4. Civic activity in case of poor governance (%)**

If you were dissatisfied with the way the country is governed, would you take any action?	2002	2006	2007	2015	2016
I am satisfied with the way the country is governed	3	7	8	7	5
I would join a petition	35	23	26	38	41
I would join a rally/procession	23	21	19	26	30
I would join a strike	19	11	16	17	22
I am prepared to riot in the streets	9	5	7	8	13
I would insist on early elections	11	8	7	15	18
I would insist on early elections	6	4	5	4	5
I would turn to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg	-	3	5	8	8
I would turn to national or international media	-	2	4	6	9
Other	1	1	1	1	1
I would do nothing	38	52	46	35	33

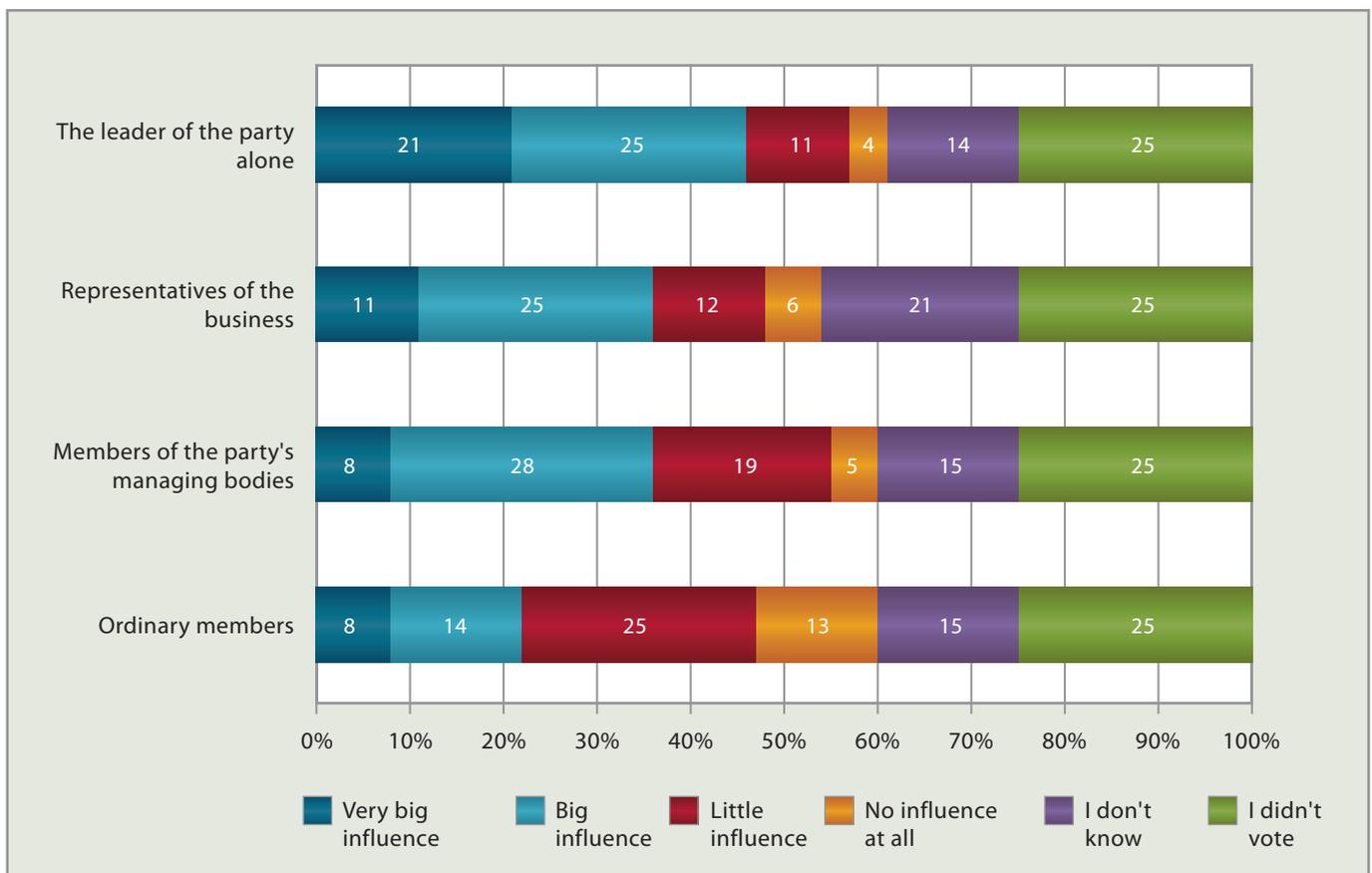
creased to one third of the citizens (33%). The percentage of those who claimed that they would act against poor governance has increased for each of the examined constitutional forms of protest: petition, rally, strike, plea to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg or appeal to the media.

As with civic activity in case of transgressions, the increased likelihood for citizens to act against poor governance is at odds with the low confidence in institutions and this creates certain risk for radical actions, reflected in the higher share of respondents who claimed that they would riot in the streets: 13% in 2016, compared to 5% in 2006. On the other hand, support for the most radical action included in the questionnaire has remained the same: only 5% of the respondents would participate in an attack on Parliament like the one that took place in 1997. The likelihood for citizens to launch an attack on Parliament has not changed over the last 10 years but affects quite a large number of the adult population in real terms.

## PUBLIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS POLITICAL PARTIES

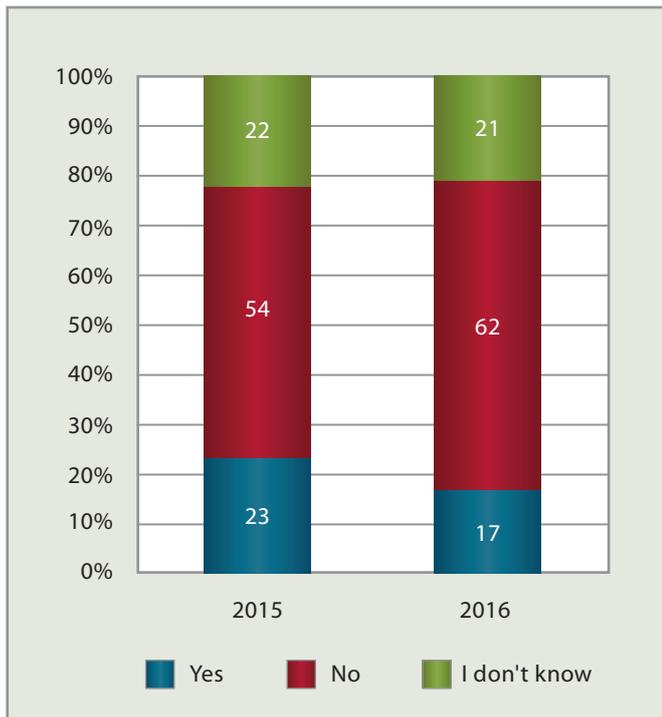
As stated above, public confidence in political parties is low and few respondents have reported being members in political parties. A possible explanation for the low confidence and low participation in political parties is that citizens see political parties as leadership projects in which decisions are taken solely by the leader, while ordinary members are relatively powerless. More than one third of the respondents (38%) believe that the members of the party for which they voted in the last parliamentary elections have little or no influence on its leadership. According to the majority of respondents (46%) decisions within a political party are entirely at the discretion of the party leader. In the public perception, the second most influential group in party decision-making are the representatives of the business who are not even organs of the party but for

Figure 22. Decision making in political parties



Question: In your opinion, what influence do each of the following have on the decision making in the party you voted for in the last parliamentary elections?

**Figure 23. Competition among the parties**



Question: *Do you think that the change of parties in government leads to actual changes in the overall government policy?*

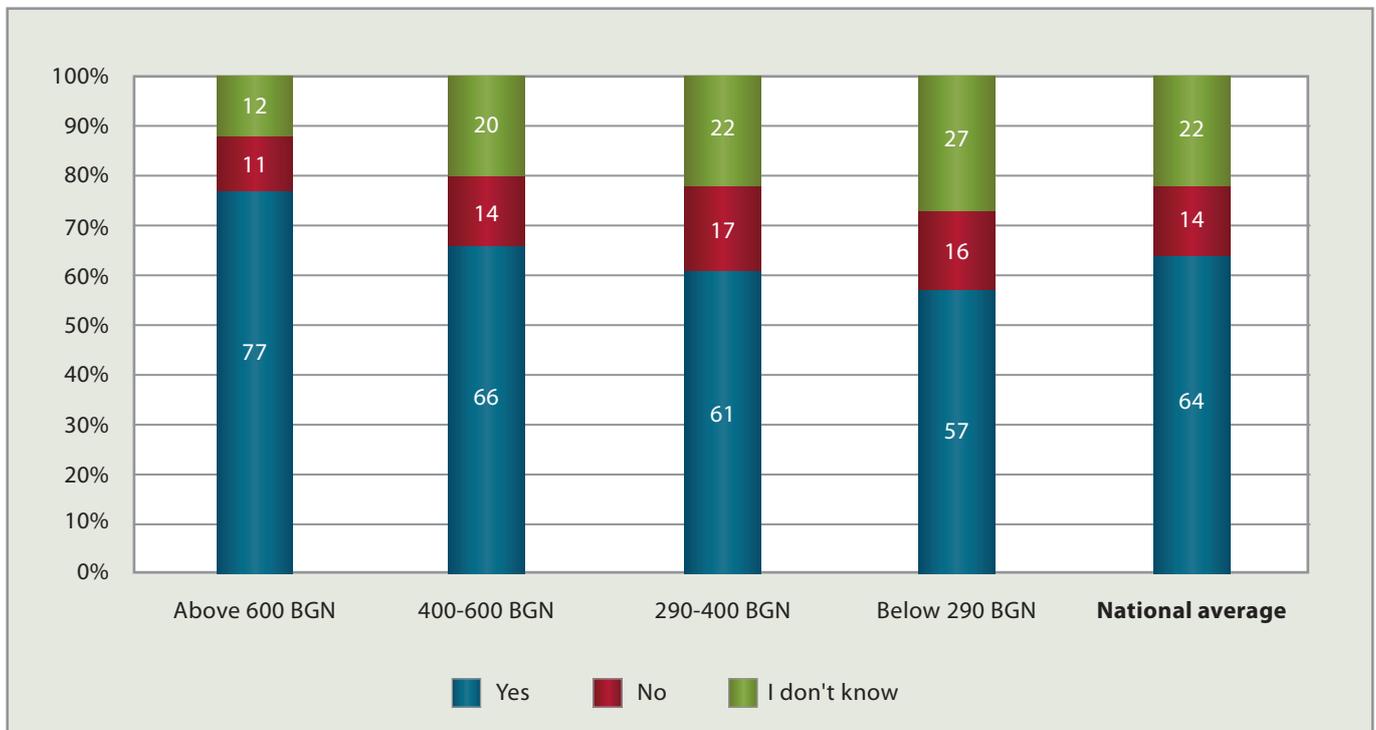
a considerable number of respondents have greater influence on the decisions taken by a party than its ordinary members (fig. 22). Public perceptions on this issue have remained unchanged since 2015.

The share of respondents who feel that there is real competition of ideas among the political parties on possible government approaches is decreasing: in 2016, only 17% of the respondents agreed that the change of parties in government led to an actual change in government policies, while in 2015, this opinion was shared by 23% of the respondents (fig. 23).

Both studies (2015 and 2016) revealed that according to a significant majority of respondents organized crime exerted influence on the leadership of the major political parties in the country. In 2016, one third of the respondents believed that organized crime had a “big influence” on some of the major political parties in the country, while 31% believed it had a “very big influence”.

Considerable variations in the respondents’ perception of the influence of organized crime on the major

**Figure 24. Perceived influence of organized crime on political parties (by income status)**



Question: *Do you believe that organized crime influences some of the major political parties in Bulgaria? (“Yes” includes the sum of those who have answered “very big influence” and “big influence”, while “No” includes the sum of those who have answered “little influence” and “no influence at all”.)*

political parties exist among respondents from different regions and among citizens with different income status. More well-to-do people (with income above 600 BGN per household member per month) are more prone to agree that organized crime influences political parties than the average citizen (fig. 24).

In the dominant public perception, the free participation of citizens in elections is undermined by corruption and arbitrariness. Approximately 5% of the respondents reported that in the latest local elections in October 2015, someone had offered them money to vote for a particular party or coalition (fig. 25). This share was significantly higher (20%) among respondents who identified themselves as Roma.

Vote trading seems to affect more often people of working age (between 30 and 60 years), rather than older citizens (above 60 years), and is not limited to the poor. For instance, 6% of the respondents who live in the wealthiest households (with income above 600 BGN per household member per month) also reported that they had been offered money to vote one way or the other.

Vote trading seems to affect more often the unemployed but there are also employed persons who re-

ported they had been offered money. Almost 2% of respondents reported also that in the last local elections they had been threatened with dismissal or violence if they did not vote for a particular party or coalition. Extrapolated to the whole population of the country, the findings seem to suggest that in the recent local elections more than 300,000 people had been offered money, while approximately 120,000 people had been threatened with dismissal or violence in order to vote one way or the other.

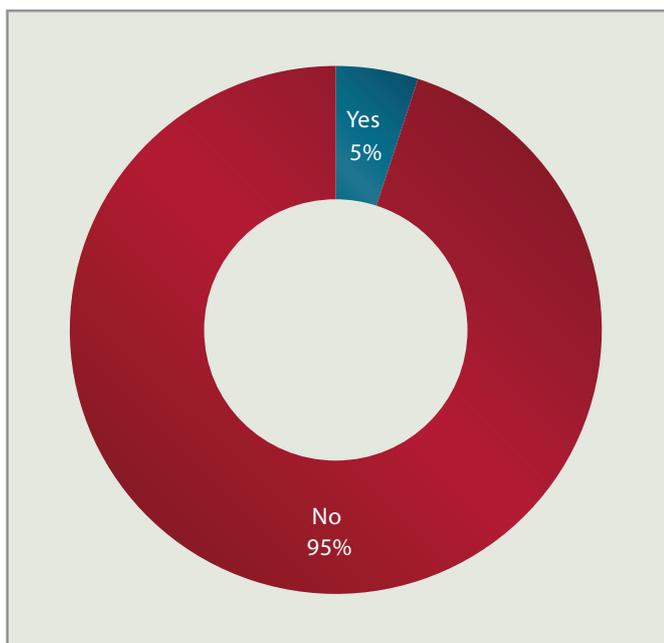
## THE RULE OF LAW

In the study, the rule of law was examined as part of the concept of democratic governance and as one of the EU values. For the purposes of the survey, the concept “rule of law” was limited to examining public attitudes towards the quality of legislation and public perceptions of the equality of citizens before the law and the independence of courts.

As stated above, public confidence in the courts is not high; moreover, public perceptions in Bulgaria differ significantly from public attitudes in other Member States. In 2016, 32% of the respondents reported that trusted national courts (in much or lesser extend), which is much lower than the confidence in other institutions such as the police, for instance (47% confidence), or the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (55%). However, in 2016 confidence in the national courts was slightly higher than confidence in Parliament and in political parties.

The 2015 survey had revealed that the majority of respondents did not perceive the laws as fair, clear and comprehensible and did not think that they applied equally to all. These findings were fully corroborated by the 2016 survey, which suggests that they most

Figure 25. Vote trading attempts

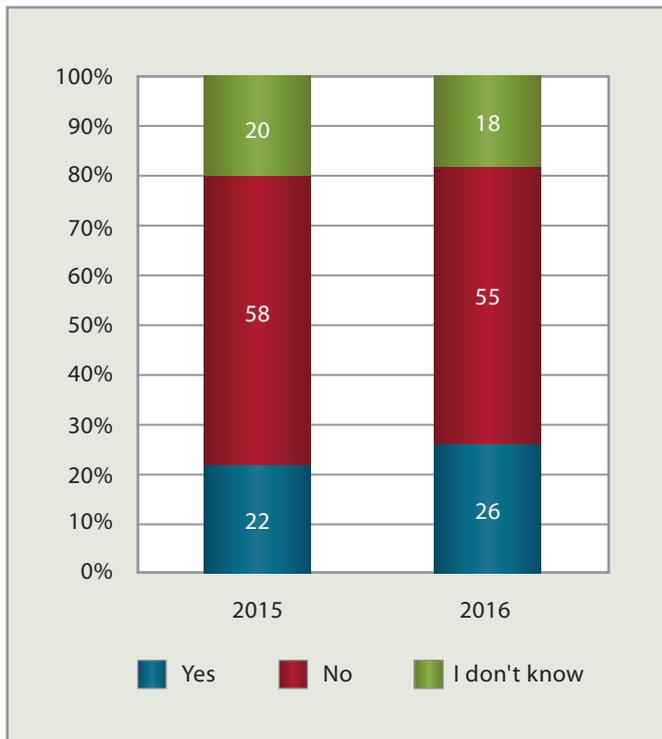


Question: During the campaign or on election day of latest local elections in October 2015 has anyone offered you money to vote for a particular political party or coalition?

**Female, 24 years old, Sofia:**

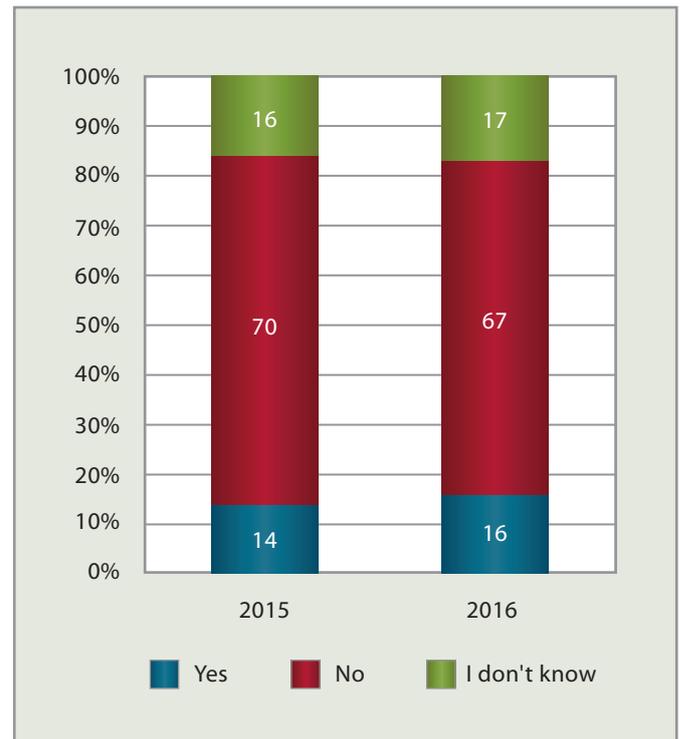
„Bureaucracy and red tape are a huge problem for the administration. This is what delays the process. Sometimes, even if the institution is doing its job properly, the very rules and laws make it cumbersome and unreliable in the eyes of the people.“

**Figure 26. Are the laws fair?**



Question: *Would you agree with the following statement: "The laws in Bulgaria are fair"?*

**Figure 27. Are the laws clear and comprehensible?**



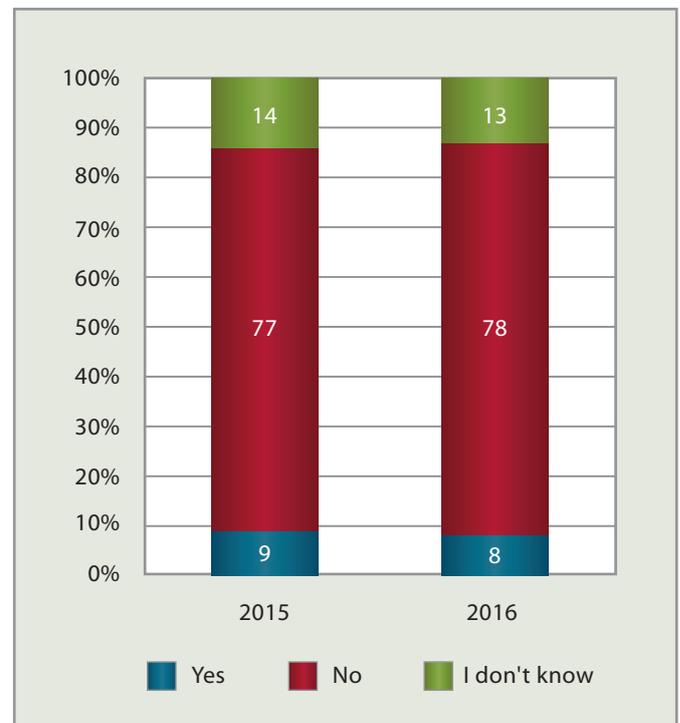
Question: *Would you agree with the following statement: "The laws in Bulgaria are clear and comprehensible to the citizens"?*

probably reflect a deeply rooted negative perception of the quality of legislation and the application of the constitutional principle of equality of citizens before the law. More than half of respondents (55%) disagreed with the statement that the laws in Bulgaria were fair (fig. 26). Those who agreed with this statement were more than those who disagreed only among the respondents from the North Central Region. Among the respondents who identified themselves as Roma, only 17% tended to agree that the laws in the country were fair, compared to a national average of 26%.

A significant majority (two thirds) of respondents disagreed with the statement that the laws in Bulgarian were clear and comprehensible to the citizens (fig. 27).

More than three quarters (78%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the laws in Bulgaria applied equally to all, while those who agreed were only 8% (fig. 28). The share of those who agree with this statement was twice as high as the national average among the respondent living in the North Central Region and the South Eastern Region. The respond-

**Figure 28. Do laws apply equally to all?**



Question: *Would you agree with the following statement: "The laws in Bulgaria apply equally to all"?*

**Elderly Roma male, from a district town:**

*„Corruption is very high (in the judiciary; author's note) and I can say it because I have stuck my neck out among the big shots who deal with big money... 2-3 thousand leva... and I know that the law goes where the money is...“*

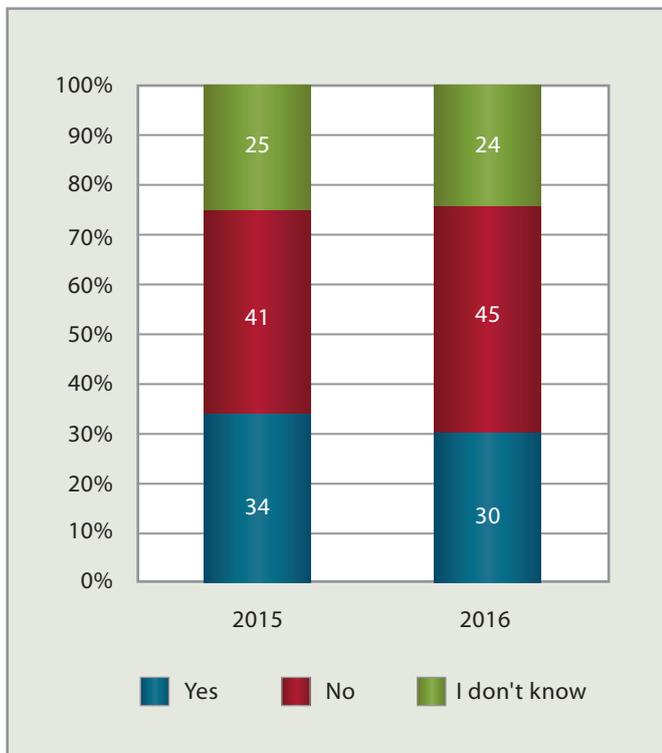
ents who identified themselves as Roma and Turks were also slightly more likely than the average to agree that the laws applied equally to everyone.

The majority of respondents (45%) disagreed with the statement that the government of Bulgaria acted within the law. There has been no significant change in this respect compared to 2015 when 41% of the respondents shared this opinion. In 2016, those who felt that the government acted within the law were around 30% (fig. 29). The share of those who agreed with this statement was higher than the percentage of those who disagreed only among the supporters of the GERB party and among the people living in the North Central Region.

Slightly more than one third of the respondents (37%) agreed with the statement that the courts could prevent the government from violating the law. In this respect, there has also been no change since 2015 (fig. 30). A slightly higher level of confidence in the ability of the courts to restrain the government were recorded among better educated respondents, among employed people and among those who lived in the North Central Region. In these three groups, the share of respondents who agreed with the statement that the courts could prevent the government from violating the law was higher than the percentage of those who disagreed.

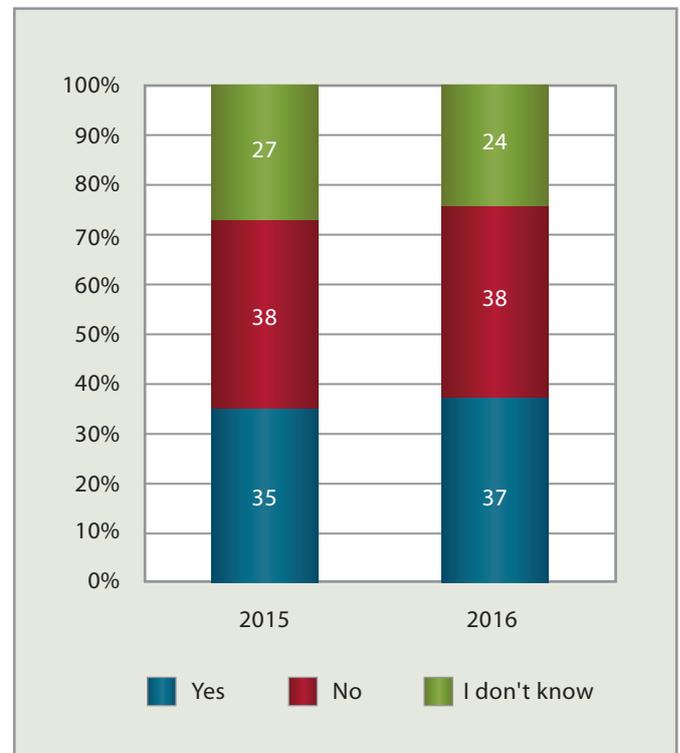
The findings related to public confidence in the courts and public assessment of the courts' performance should not be taken at face value because they are not necessarily shaped by personal experience. Over the past 12 months, only 14% of the respondents have entered a court building and in the vast majority of cases, they did so in order to obtain a copy of a document, rather for matters related to the main functions of the courts. People at an early active age (30-44 years) and better educated respondents reported slightly more often that they had personal experi-

**Figure 29. The government acts within the law**



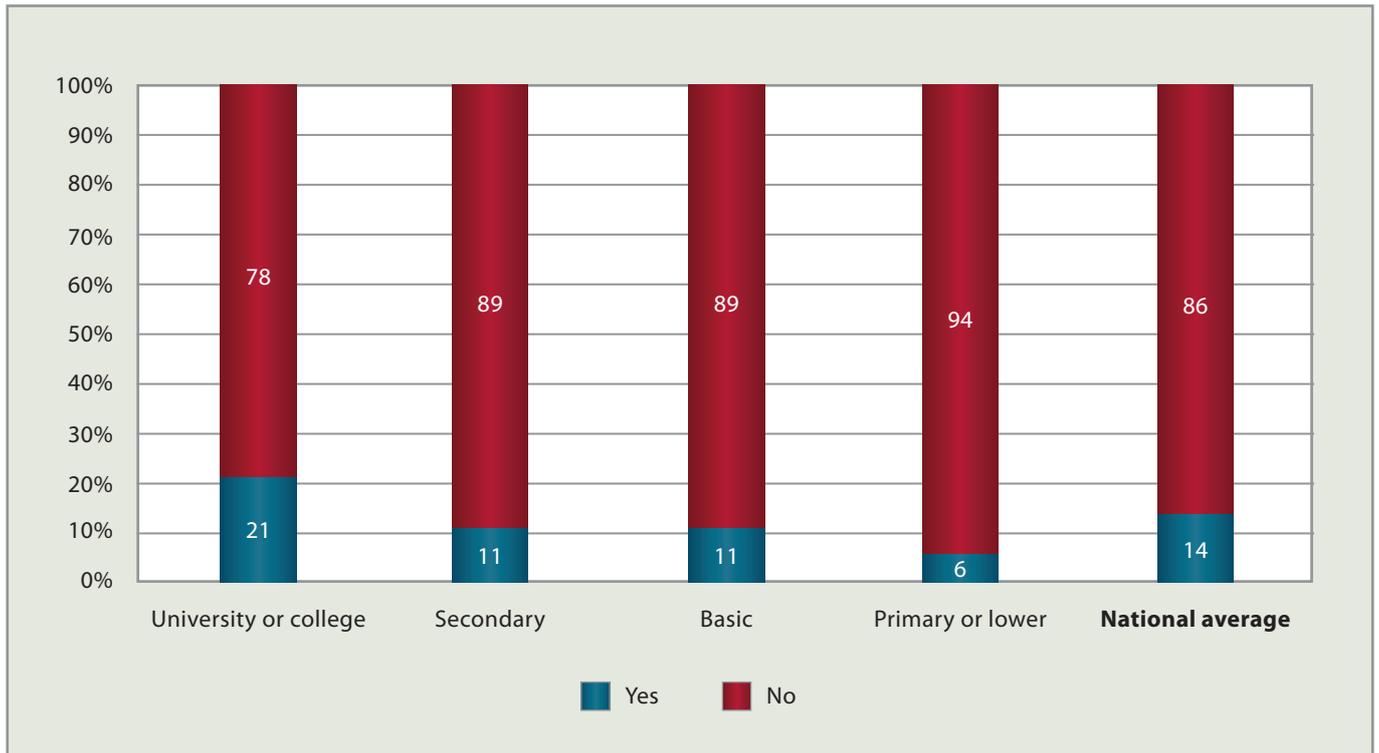
Question: *Would you agree with the following statement: "The government of Bulgaria acts within the law"?*

**Figure 30. Courts restrain the government**



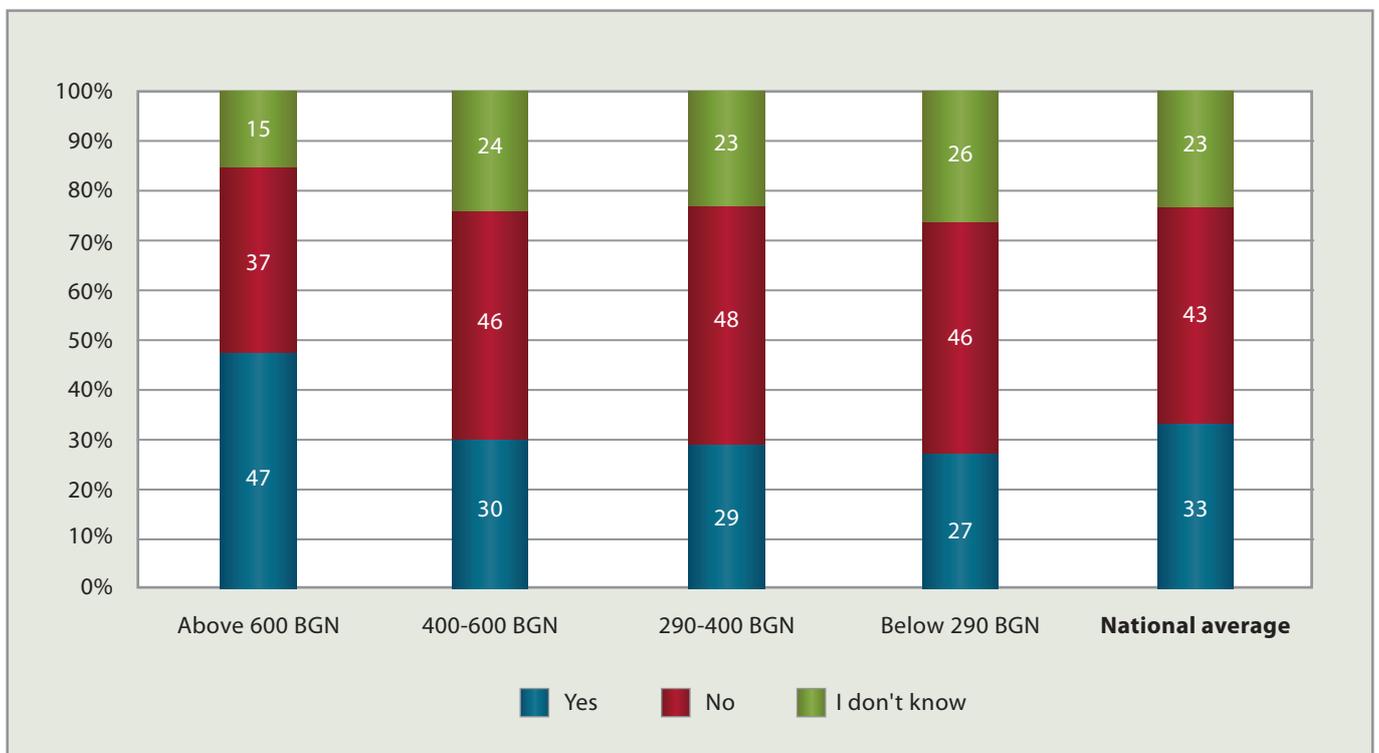
Question: *Would you agree with the following statement: "Courts can prevent the government from violating the law"?*

**Figure 31. Personal experience with the courts (by level of education)**



Question: *In the last 12 months have you happened to enter into a court of law?*

**Figure 32. Expectations of a fair trial (by income status)**



Question: *If you had to go to court, do you believe that you would receive a fair trial? ("Yes" includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers "Definitely yes" and "Rather yes", while "No" includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers "Definitely no" and "Rather no".)*

**Young Roma female, from a district town:**

*„(In the judiciary; author’s note) the deeper the pocket, the easier the truth. For petty theft there’s no forgiveness, for millions (stolen) there are no laws.“*

ence with the courts than other demographic groups (fig. 31).

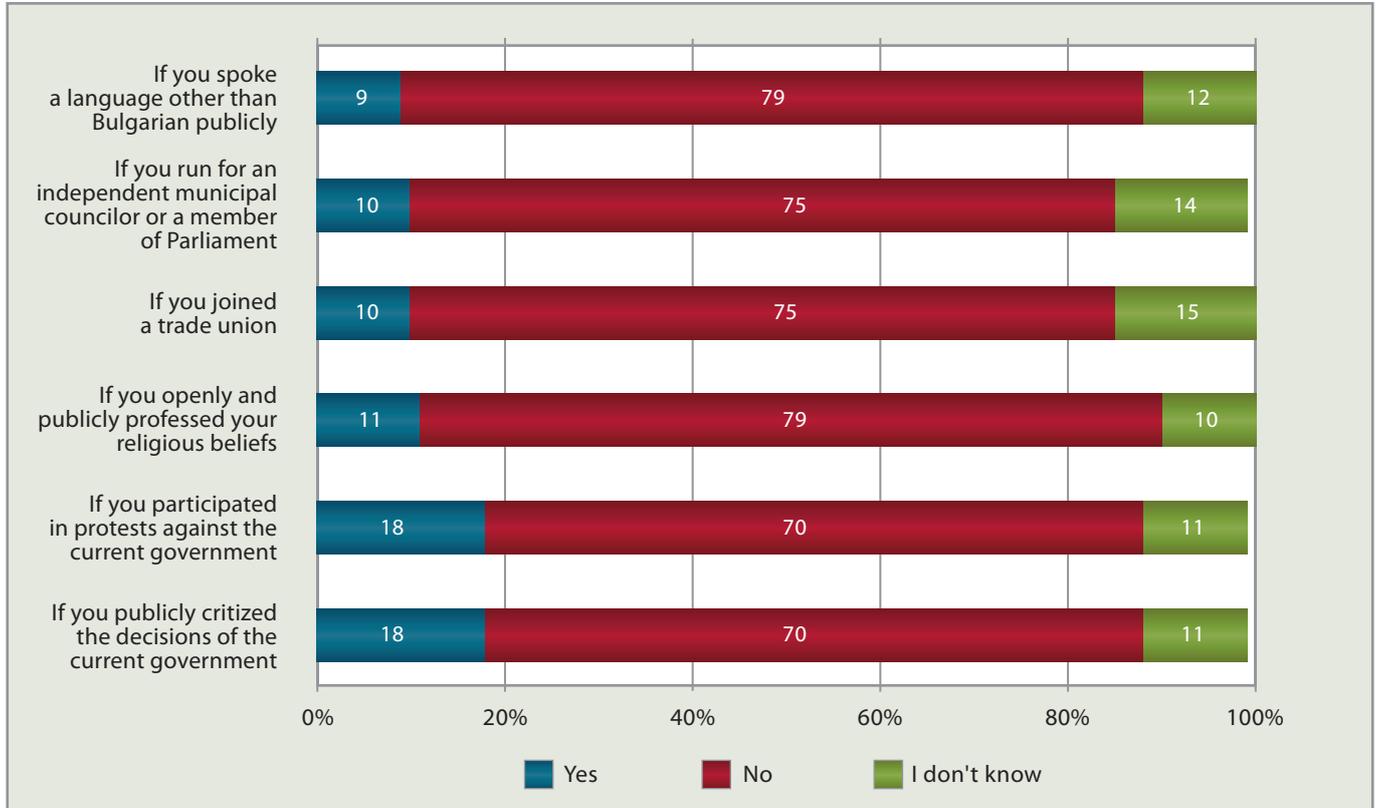
The citizens’ expectations of a fair trial remain pessimistic and have not changed since 2015; asked whether they expected a fair trial if they had to go to court, the majority of respondents (43%) answered “no” or “definitely no”. Only one third of the respondents felt that they would receive a fair trial, if they had to go to court. The survey registered some regional differences in public perceptions: both in 2015 and in 2016, the respondents from the North Central Region who expected to receive a fair trial were far more (60%) than the national average (33%), while the respondents from North Western Region who expected to receive a fair trial were less (21%) than the average for the country.

Those who expected to receive a fair trial prevailed over the sceptics among the more wealthy respondents (with income above 600 BGN per household member per month – fig. 32) and among the better educated. The respondents who identified themselves as Turks and those who identified themselves as Roma had lower expectations of a fair trial compared to the national average – 26% of the respondents who identified themselves as Turks and only 20% of the respondents who identified themselves as Roma expected to receive a fair trial, if they had to go to court, against an average of 33% for the country.

## DEMOCRACY AS A SYSTEM OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

As in the 2015 survey, the predominant share of respondents were confident that their civil and political rights were guaranteed. Almost 80% of the respondents believed that they faced no risk of los-

**Figure 33. Risk of wrongful dismissal**



Question: How likely it is for you to lose your job/business if ... (answers for each option separately)? (“Yes” includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers “Highly likely” and “Rather likely”, while “No” includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers “Rather unlikely” and “Highly unlikely”.)

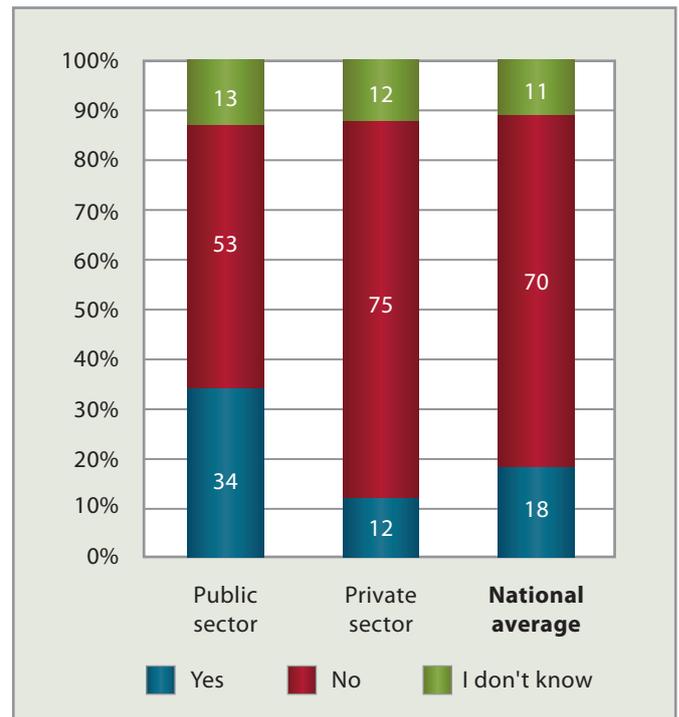
ing their job or business if they spoke a language other than Bulgarian publicly or professed freely their religious beliefs. Three quarters of the respondents thought that they were unlikely to lose their job or business, if they run for an independent municipal councilor, while 70% were confident they would not lose their job/business, if they engaged in a protest or criticized the government.

Nevertheless, every fifth citizen believed that they were likely to lose their job, if they participated in a protest or criticized government decisions publicly (fig. 33). People with low income (below 290 BGN per household member per month) reported significantly more often than the average citizen that they thought they would lose their jobs, if they spoke a language other than Bulgarian publicly. Every fourth respondent among the poorest shared this fear, while on the average this concern was expressed by only 8% of the citizens. Every fourth of the respondents who identified themselves as Turks (26%) said that they risked losing their job, if they professed freely their religious beliefs, against a national average of 11%.

Fear of wrongful dismissal for criticism or participation in protests against the government is much more pronounced among people who work in the public sector (civil servants, teachers, police officers, etc.) than among private sector employees. One third (33%) of those who work in the public sector felt that it was likely for them to lose their job, if they criticized government decisions or participate in protests against the government, which is almost three times higher than the share of private sector employees who shared the same fear; only 12% of them felt that they faced such a risk. Public sector employees were also more likely than the average citizen to believe they could be fired if they exercised freely other civil rights – for instance, if they run for an independent municipal councilor, if they joined a trade union or if they spoke a language other than Bulgarian publicly (fig. 34).

As in the 2015 survey, the majority of respondents felt protected against illegal encroachment of their private sphere by public bodies: three-quarters (74%) believed that in the next 12 months they faced no risk of being imprisoned without trial, 68% were convinced that there was no risk for the police to violate the privacy of their home without a warrant, two-thirds (66%) believed that they faced no risk of becoming victim of

**Figure 34. Risk of wrongful dismissal (by employment status)**



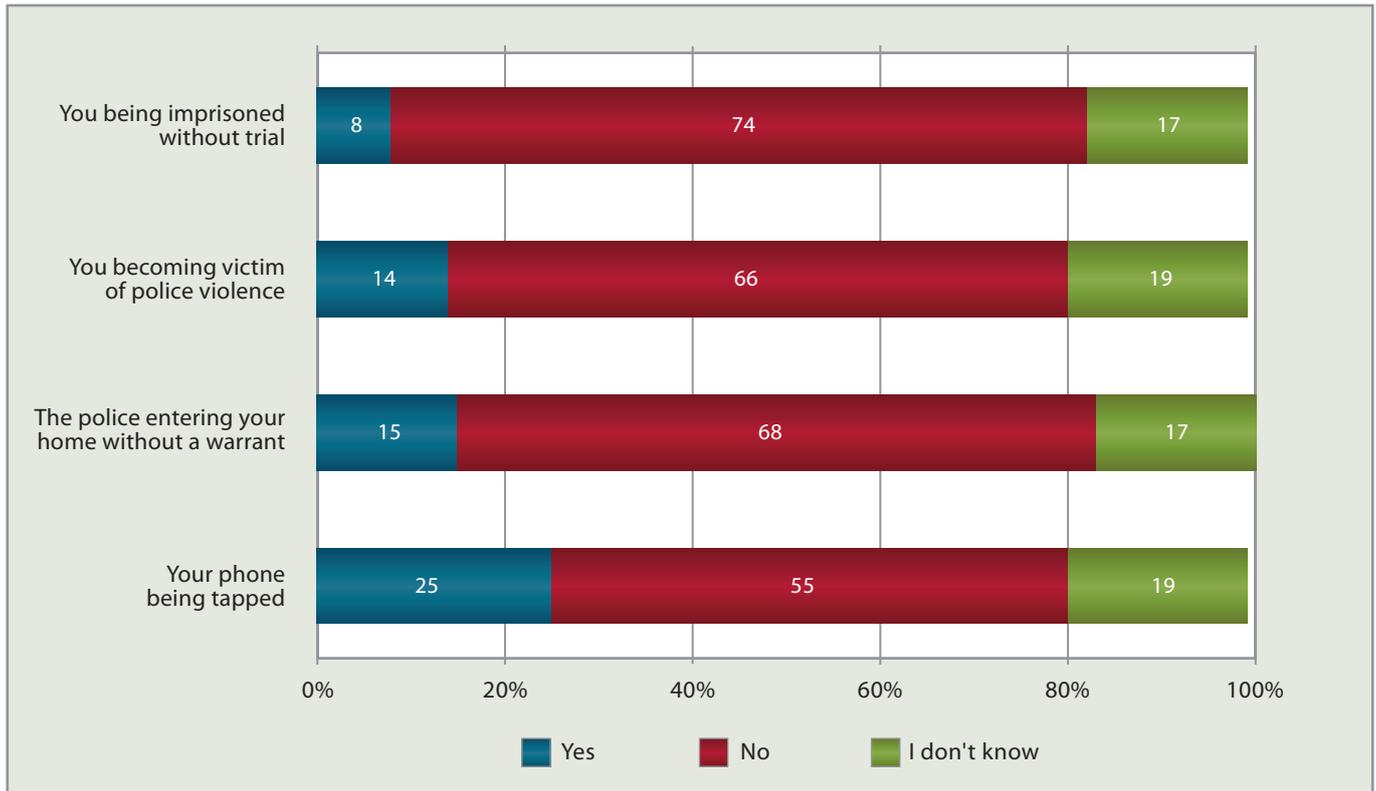
Question: How likely it is for you to lose your job/business if... “you participated in protests against the current government”? (“Yes” includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers “Highly likely” and “Rather likely”, while “No” includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers “Rather unlikely” and “Highly unlikely”.)

police violence, and more than half (55%) believed that there was no risk for their phone to be tapped (fig. 35).

The findings of the 2015 survey were largely the same, though in 2016 a slight increase was registered in the share of those who felt protected against encroachment by public bodies. Since 2015, the share of those who believed that in next 12 months they faced a risk of becoming a victim of police violence has decreased from 19% to 14% (fig. 36), while the share of those who believed that the police could enter their home without a warrant has declined from 20% to 15% of the respondents.

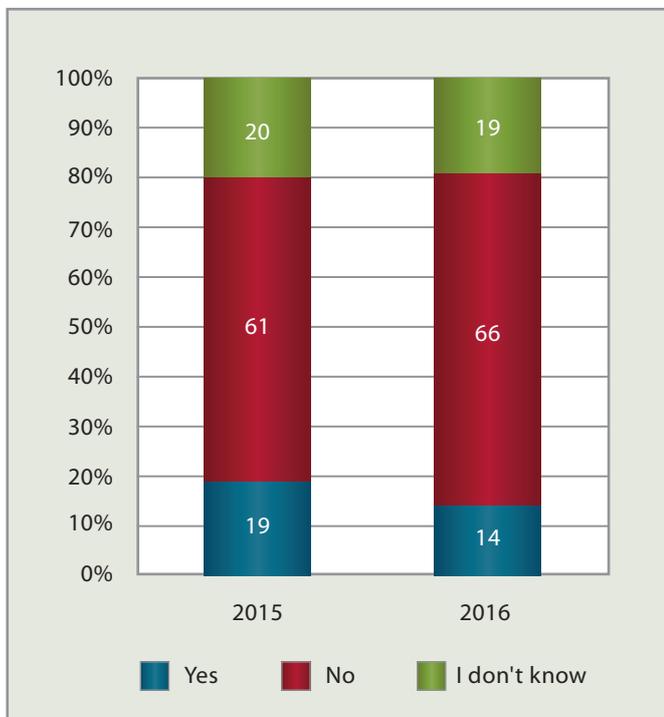
The share of citizens who do not feel protected against arbitrary actions by the authorities is by no means insignificant. Every fourth respondent believed that in the next 12 months their phone might be tapped, while in Sofia every third person shared this fear. Every seventh respondent feared that they could become a victim of police violence or that the police could enter their home without a warrant, while 8%

**Figure 35. Risk of encroachment of privacy**



Question: *Do you believe that there is a possibility for any of these events to happen to you in the next 12 months?*

**Figure 36. Risk of police violence**



Question: *Do you believe that there is a possibility for any of these events to happen to you in the next 12 months: you becoming victim of police violence?*

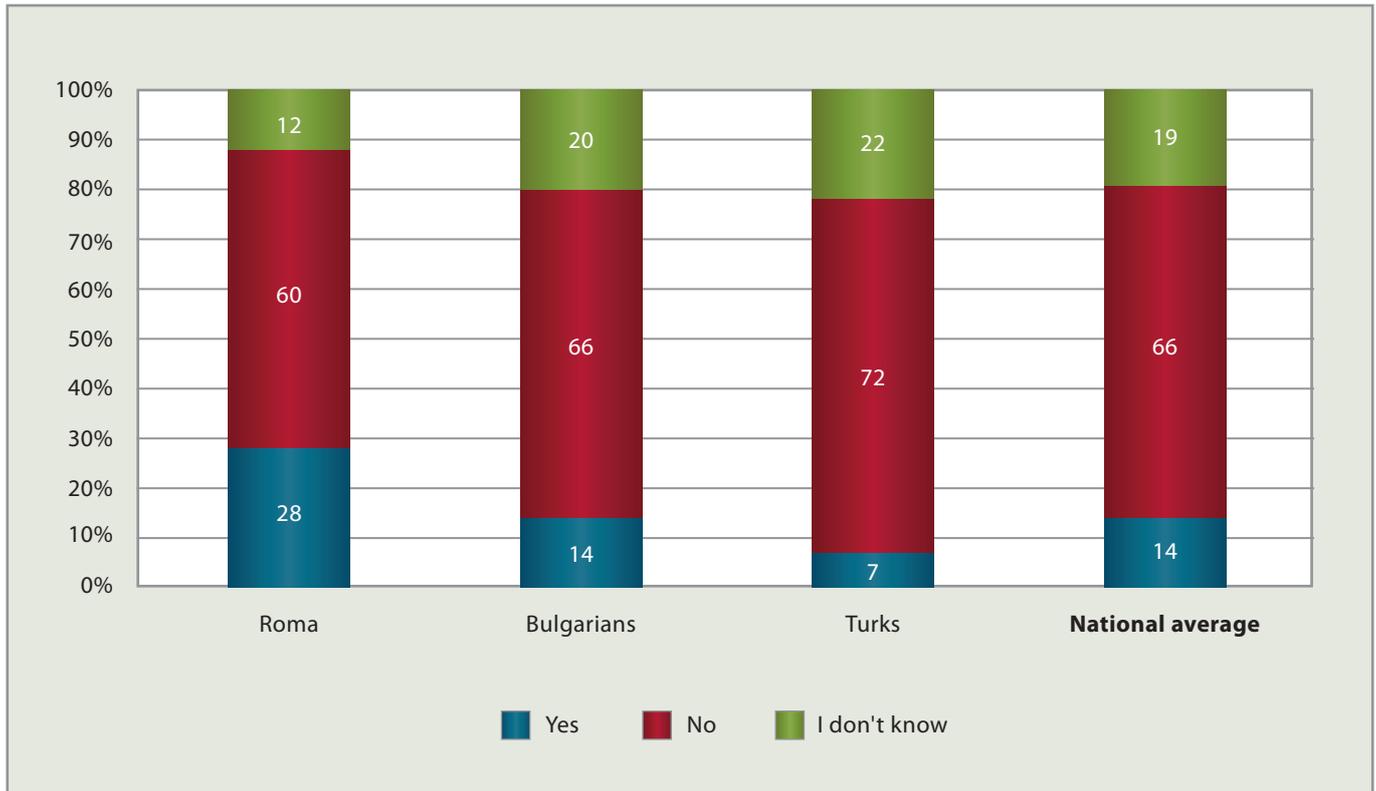
felt that there was a possibility for them to be imprisoned without trial.

Respondents who identified themselves as Roma tended to feel two times more threatened by police violence than respondents who identified themselves as Bulgarians and three times more threatened than respondents who identified themselves as Turks. More than one fourth of the respondents who identified themselves as Roma (28%) believed that in the next 12 months they were likely to become a victim of police violence (fig. 37).

As regards the set of questions examining public attitudes towards fundamental civil rights, the major negative change in 2016 involves public perceptions of the protection of minority rights. In 2016, the share of those who believed that the rights of minorities in the country were protected decreased from 68% (2015) to 60% (fig. 38).

The decline in the share of respondents who agree that minority rights are adequately protected in Bulgaria is particularly pronounced for two demographic

**Figure 37. Risk of police violence (by ethnicity)**

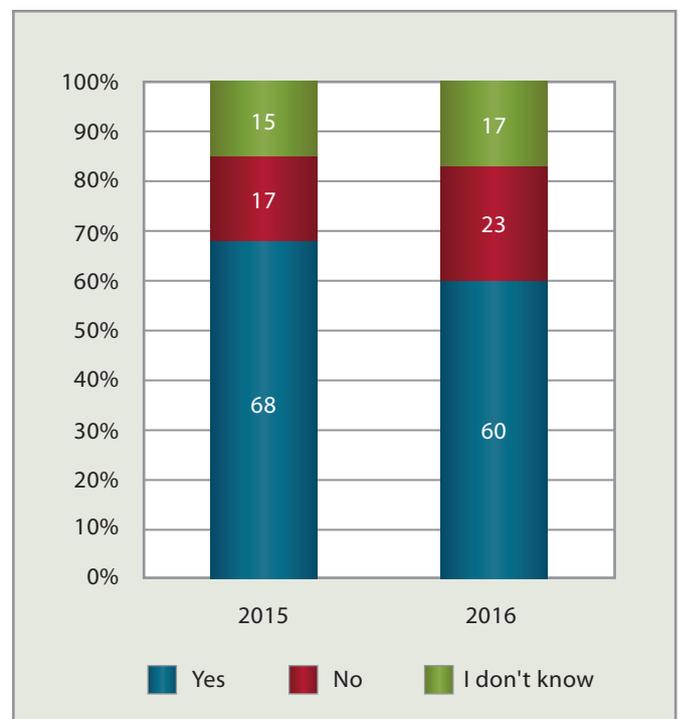


Question: *Do you believe that there is a possibility for any of these events to happen to you in the next 12 months: you becoming victim of police violence?*

groups: among the respondents who identified themselves as Roma this share has decreased by half, while among the respondents who identified themselves as Turks the decline is 10%. More than two thirds of those who identified themselves as Roma (70%) and almost half of those who identified themselves as Turks (47%) disagreed with the statement that the minority rights were adequately protected in the country, compared to a national average of 23% (fig. 39).

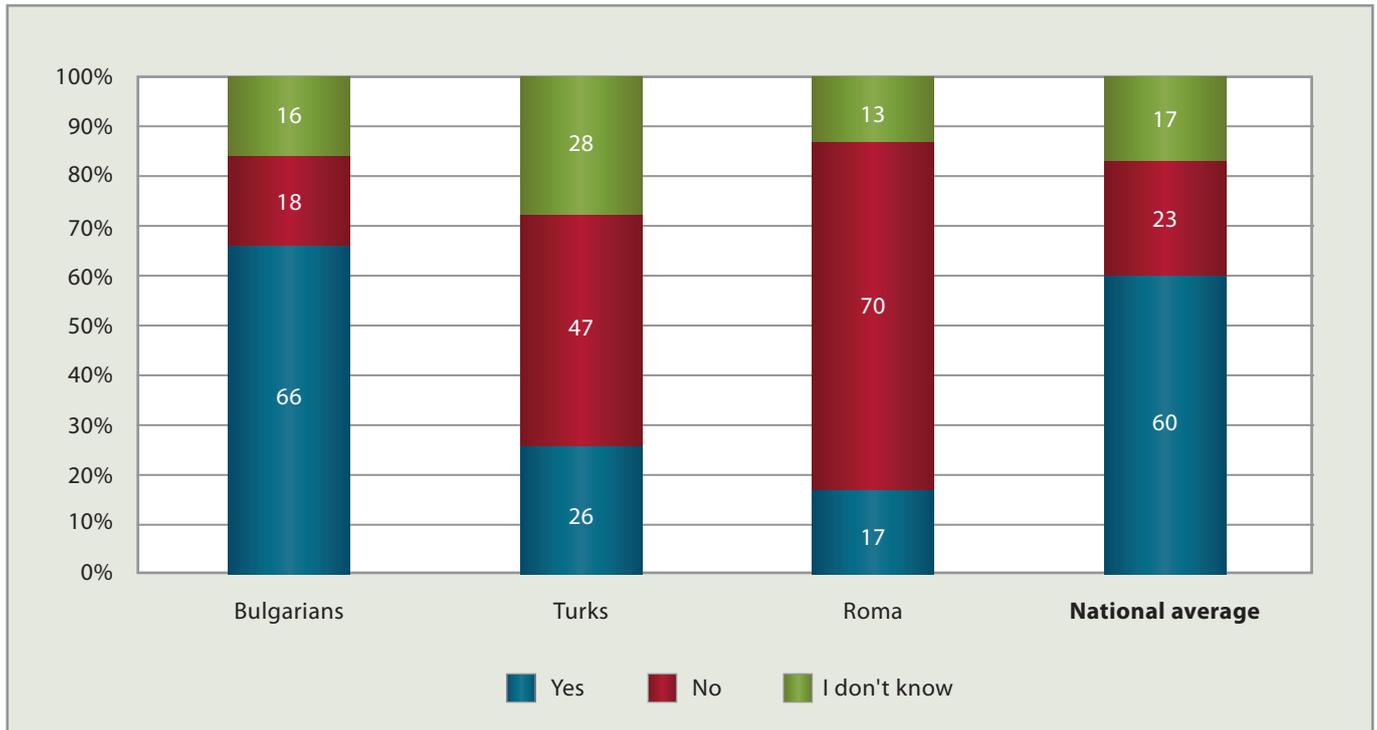
As in 2015, the 2016 survey established strong discriminatory attitudes towards members of certain minority groups. Other things being equal, if people were to choose, 72% of them would not vote for a presidential candidate of Roma background, 70% would not vote for a presidential candidate of Turkish background, 67% would not vote for a presidential candidate who was gay/lesbian, 49% would not vote for a presidential candidate who is elderly (over 65 years), 43% would not vote for a presidential candidate who was physically disabled, while 12% would not vote for a woman candidate (fig. 40).

**Figure 38. Protection of minority rights**



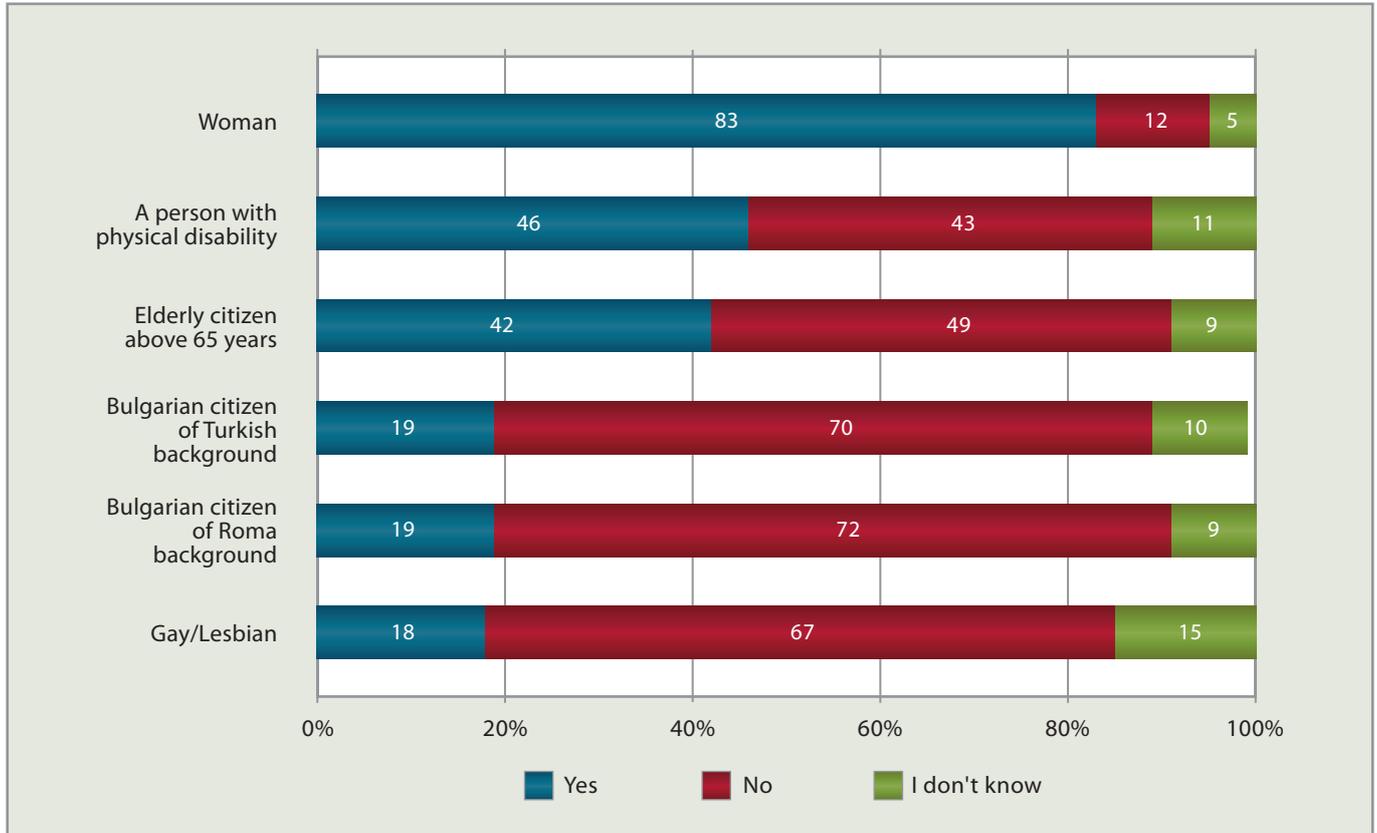
Question: *Do you agree with the following statement: "Minority rights are adequately protected in Bulgaria"?*

**Figure 39. Protection of minority rights (by self-declared ethnicity)**



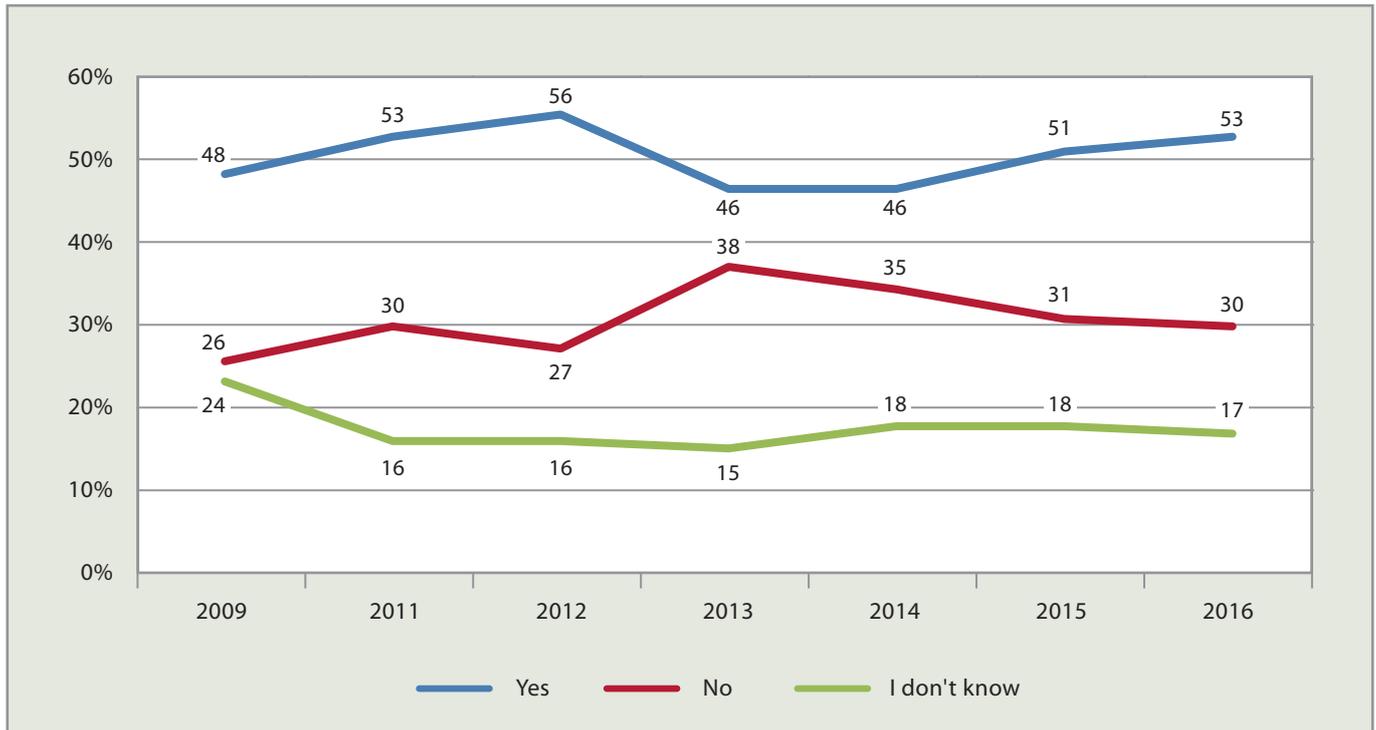
Question: *Do you agree with the following statement: "Minority rights are adequately protected in Bulgaria"?*

**Figure 40. Discriminatory attitudes**



Question: *If you were to choose between two presidential candidates with similar qualification and political views, would you vote for someone who was...?*

**Figure 41. Support for temporary restriction of fundamental rights and freedoms**



Question: *Would you agree with some temporary restrictions of democratic rights and freedoms so as to bring order and security and to stabilize the economy? ("Yes" includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers "Definitely yes" and "Rather yes"; while "No" includes the sum of respondents who have chosen the answers "Rather no" and "Definitely no".)*

The confidence of citizens that their fundamental rights are guaranteed by public institutions can be identified as the main achievement of democratic reforms in Bulgaria after the fall of the totalitarian regime, but it is difficult to assess whether such attitudes are firmly and permanently rooted in the public perceptions of democracy in the country. Over the past seven years, approximately half of the respondents have been consistently reporting that they would agree to have their democratic rights and freedoms limited provisionally so as to bring order and security and to stabilize the country's economy.

The responses given to this question in the framework of a national representative public opinion survey should not be taken at face value because the question does not test an actual choice between specific policy alternatives. Some political decisions, such as the adoption of the Criminal Assets Forfeiture Act<sup>9</sup> or the building of a fence along the border with Turkey, for instance, have been criticized by experts and non-governmental organizations as contravening fundamental constitutional rights, but in both cases there has been no expert assessment of the impact of their implementation or unequivocal answer to the question whether they indeed provide more order and safety to citizens, or are simply used as a populist temporary solution to pressing social problems.

These concerns notwithstanding, the permanently established tendency among approximately half of the respondents to support the restriction of civil rights and liberties in the interest of achieving specific policy goals seems to suggest that the relative value of fundamental rights and freedoms in society is not very high, while the guarantees for their protection are constantly being threatened (fig. 41).

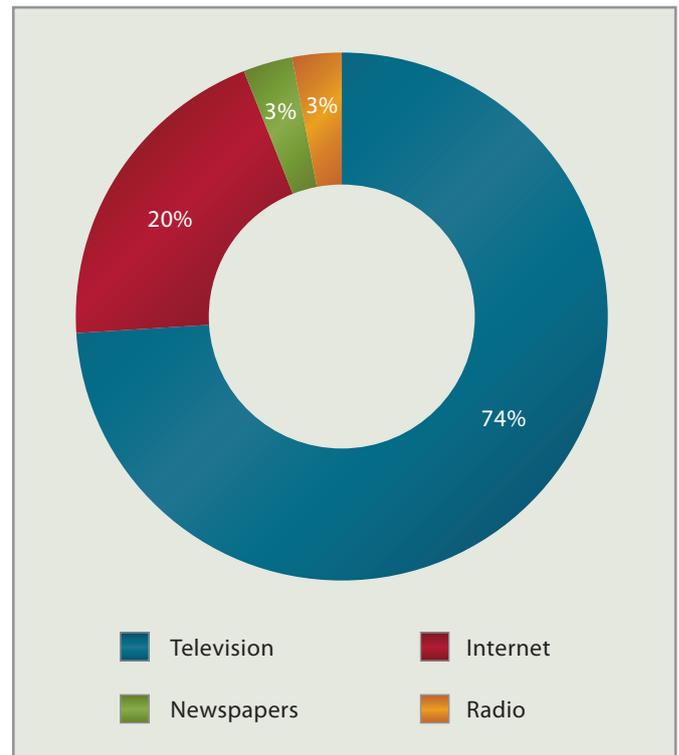
<sup>9</sup> Promulgated in State Gazette, No. 38 of 18 May 2012.

## RELIABLE INFORMATION ON THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT

Television is the main source of information on the situation in the country for the majority of respondents; 74% reported that they relied primarily on television; one in five (20%) tend to rely on the Internet, while only 3% of the respondents reported that they trusted newspapers or radio each (fig. 42).

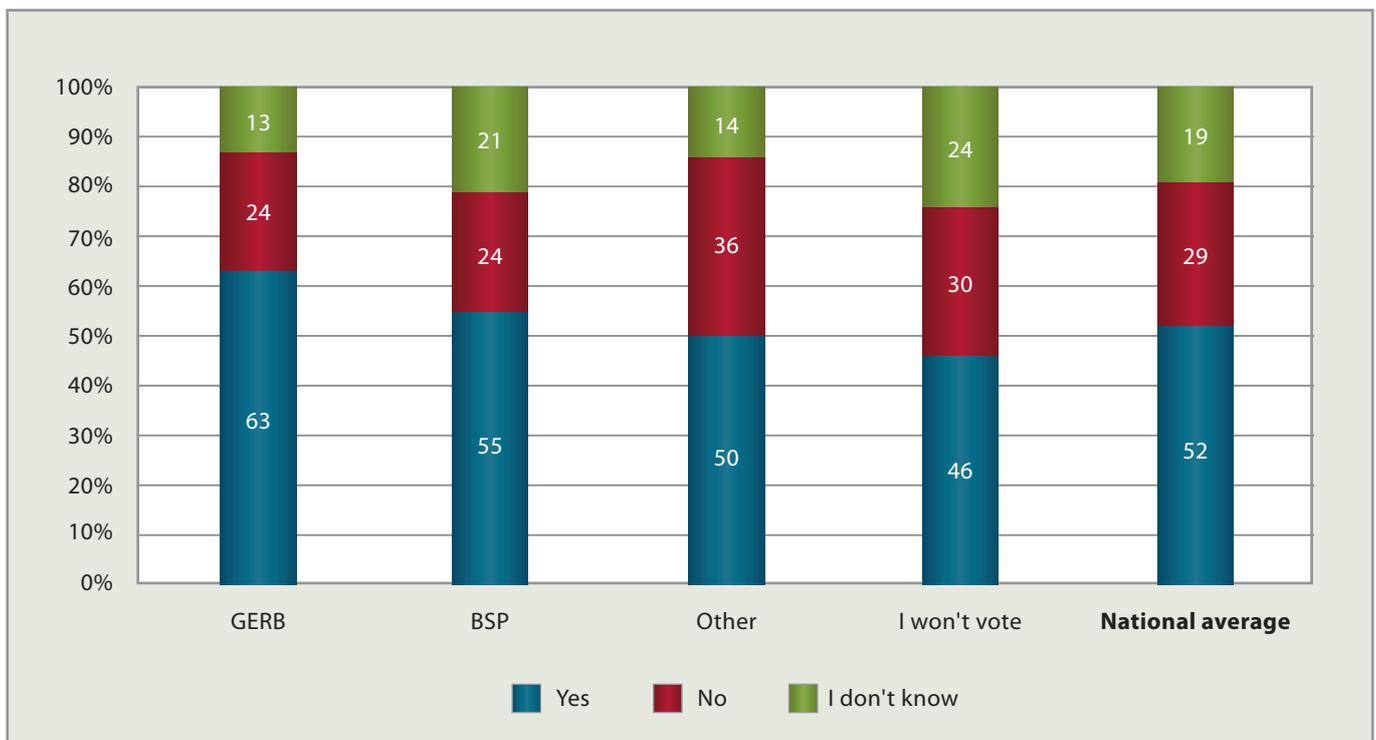
The majority of respondents (50%) agreed with the statement that they received sufficient information from newspapers and television to be able to assess whether the government was working well; those who disagreed amounted to 31%, while 18% gave no straight answer. In 2016, there has been a slight increase in the share of people who agreed that they were getting enough information about the performance of the government from newspapers and television; in the 2015 survey, the share of those who agreed and those who disagreed was equal (40%).

Figure 42. Confidence in the media



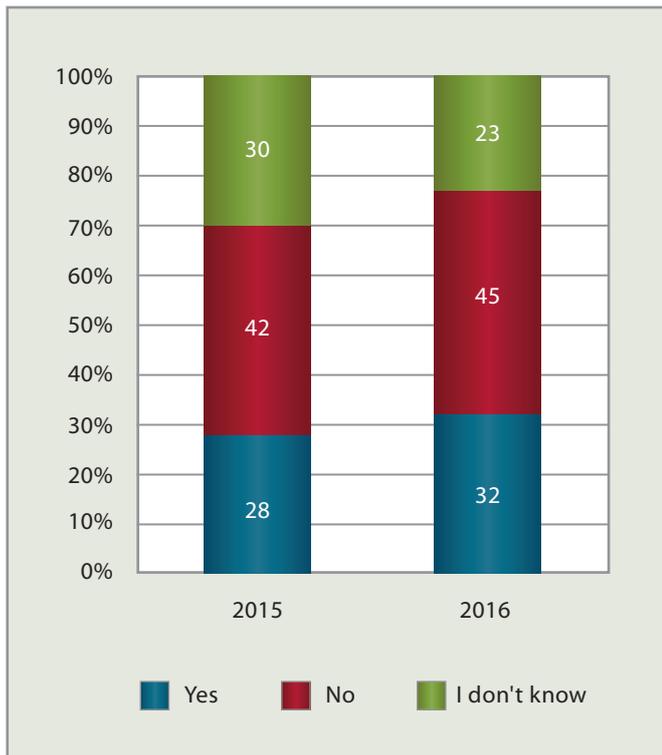
Question: Which media do you tend to trust most when you need information about the situation in the country?

Figure 43. Freedom of press (by political affiliation)



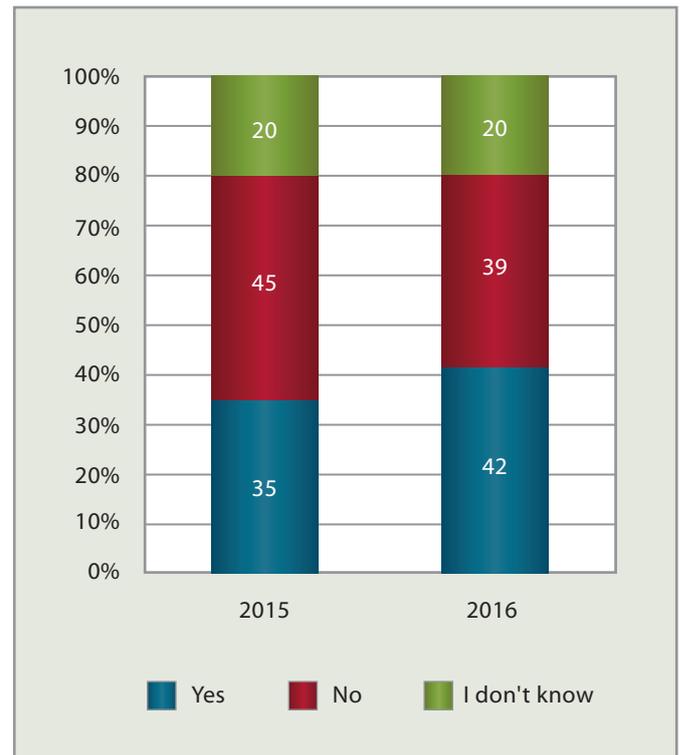
Question: Would you agree with the following statement: "As a rule, newspapers in Bulgaria are free to criticize the government"?

**Figure 44. Public opinion of the objectivity of the press**



Question: *Would you agree with the following statement: "If a senior official was involved in a crime, newspapers in Bulgaria would reveal the truth"?*

**Figure 45. Public opinion of the objectivity of television**



Question: *Would you agree with the following statement: "If a senior official was involved in a crime, television channels in Bulgaria would reveal the truth"?*

The residents of Sofia tend to be more critical than the average citizen to information they receive from newspapers and television; the majority of them (48%) disagreed with the statement that they received sufficient information to be able to assess whether the government was working well, while those who agreed amounted to 31% (against a national average of 50%).

Conversely, people living in the North Central Region were more likely to agree that they were getting enough information about the performance of the government from newspapers and television; 71% of them agreed with this statement against a national average of 50%, while the share of those who disagreed amounted to 20%, compared to a national average of 31%.

According to the majority of respondents (52%), newspapers in Bulgaria were free to criticize the government; however, almost one third of the respondents (29%) disagreed with this statement.

Public perceptions of the freedom of press seem to be influenced to some extent by the respondents' po-

litical affiliations. The supporters of GERB were more likely than the average citizen to agree that the newspapers were free to criticize the government, while those who do not intend to vote in the next parliamentary elections were slightly less likely to agree that the press is free (fig. 43).

An interesting paradox emerges: in 2016, according to the prevailing public opinion, the media would feel free to criticize the government but not to expose the crimes of high-ranking public officials. The majority of respondents (45%) disagreed with the statement that the press would reveal the truth if a senior official were involved in a crime. Only about one third of the respondents (32%) agreed with this statement (fig. 44).

The respondents from Sofia who agreed that newspapers and television would reveal the truth, were approximately 10% less than the average for the country, which suggest that as in the case with the freedom of newspapers to criticize the government, the residents of Sofia tend to have a more critical attitude than the

average citizen. It should be noted also that people who live in Sofia and in rural areas tend to read newspapers less often than in district centers and provincial towns. In Sofia and in rural areas, 17%-18% of the people reported that they read newspapers every day, while in district centers and provincial towns this share is around 27%-28%, the national average being 23%.

In the North Central Region and the North Eastern Region, the majority of respondents (52% and 41%, respectively) agreed with the statement that the press would reveal the truth if a senior official were involved in a crime, which is higher than the national average of 32%. In these two regions people also tend to read newspapers much more often than the average citizen. The share of those who reported that they read newspapers every day was 38% in the North Eastern Region and 36% in the North Central Region, against a national average of 23%. For comparison, in the North Western Region and the South Western Region (dominated by Sofia) only 15% of the respondents reported reading newspapers every day.

The results of the 2016 survey revealed that citizens tend to have greater confidence in the objectivity of television than the objectivity of the press. Moreover, this tendency has increased significantly since 2015. Whereas in 2015 a little more than one third of the respondents (35%) agreed with the statement that television stations would reveal the truth if a senior official were involved in a crime, in 2016 this share has increased to 42%. However, those who remain skeptical about the objectivity of television are by no means few: 39% disagreed with the statement that television stations would reveal the truth if a senior official were involved in a crime (fig. 45).

## CONCLUSION

The survey sought to identify the dynamics in public attitudes towards democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of the fundamental human rights and freedoms, which are enshrined in the Constitution of Bulgaria and reflect values that are shared by all EU Member States. The survey sought to identify public attitudes towards six groups of issues: government efficiency; confidence in the main institutions; political representation and participation of citizens in

governance; the rule of law; democracy as a system of fundamental rights and freedoms enjoyed by citizens; and access to public information on the business of government. The aim was to assess progress in democratic reforms and to identify key risks and challenges to this process.

There are few differences between findings of the 2015 and the 2016 survey, which suggests that public attitudes to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental human rights are permanently established and are not influenced significantly by changes in the political situation.

The findings of the 2016 survey confirmed that the major achievement of democratic reforms in the country so far is the confidence of the majority of citizens that their fundamental political and civil rights are guaranteed against arbitrary abuse by the authorities. Some social groups, however, tend to feel more threatened that police violence might be exercised against them or that they might lose their job if they expressed their opinion freely or participated in protests.

As in the 2015 survey, the main challenges to democratic values in Bulgaria involve the exclusion of large groups from public and political life (due to poverty and low level of education but also due to discrimination and fear of reprisal and job loss in case of dissenting opinion or participation in protests) and the difficulties in ensuring accountability of the government.

In formal terms, the country belongs to the EU and shares the values of the Union. The government changes through periodic elections in which different political parties participate. Half of the citizens agree that democracy is the best form of government for the country. However, it appears that the priorities of society and the agenda of the government do not agree; confidence in the institutions of representative democracy is low, a significant share of the population do not participate in public life and in political decision-making, and feel that the country is not governed efficiently.

This contradiction poses two specific challenges to the effective implementation of the common EU values in Bulgaria.

The first risk stems from the fact that the opportunities to increase civic participation without deepening democratic reforms of key institutions have been

exhausted. The public opinion surveys conducted in 2015 and 2016 both revealed low level of public participation in decision-making and weak involvement in civic initiatives. However, compared to previous studies of the “State of Society” series (from 2002 and 2006), there is a small but noticeable shift towards more active civic participation, greater intolerance to violations and increased likelihood for citizens to engage with their own efforts and means in eliminating transgressions or mitigating the consequences of poor governance.

Can one really expect civic participation in governance to increase given the permanently low level of confidence in the institutions, the widespread perceptions of incompetence and corruption in high-ranking government positions, and the low confidence in the ability of the judiciary to apply the law equally to all? These are the underlying causes behind the proclivity of citizens to seek solutions outside the institutions or in spite of them: the periodic calls for more direct democracy in which institutions and experts are presented as undesirable participants in the process of decision-making, as well as the increased risk of mob law and civil disobedience: the respondents who claimed that they would riot in the streets increased from 9%

in 2002 to 13% in 2016, while in 2016 around 6% of the citizens said that they were prepared to launch an attack on Parliament in case of poor governance.

The second challenge is related to the risk of an emerging and growing conflict between the themes of democratic governance and government efficiency. In literature, these two concepts do not contradict each other; according to many studies democracy is a more efficient form of government than autocracy.<sup>10</sup> But when the government is nominally democratic, yet people perceive it as inefficient, there is a risk for the public discontent with the inefficiency of the government to extend over to the concept of democratic governance, i.e. people to assume that the country is governed democratically, but democracy itself is not an efficient form of government. Such attitudes can be discerned in the periodic bursts of nostalgia for the totalitarian regime and the existence of certain public support for solutions that seek to make the government more efficient by limiting its democratic nature (support for authoritarian leaders, support for limiting civil rights for the sake of greater security promised). Such attitudes create a high and permanent risk of undermining democratic governance and paving the way for authoritarianism.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, *Schmitter, P. and Trechsel, A. (2004) The Future of Democracy in Europe: Trends, Analyses and Reforms. A Green Paper for the Council of Europe*, p. 9.

**Contact us:**

Open Society Institute – Sofia  
56, Solunska str., Sofia 1000

tel.: (+359 2) 930 66 19, fax: (+359 2) 951 63 48

**[www.osi.bg](http://www.osi.bg)**