

DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY, THE RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN 2021-2022

Since 2015 Open Society Institute – Sofia has been conducting periodic public opinion surveys to identify trends in attitudes towards the European Union’s core values – democracy, the rule of law and the protection of fundamental human rights. The results allow to highlight some of the main risks and challenges to the practical application of these values in Bulgaria.

In 2021-2022 Open Society Institute – Sofia in partnership with the Centre for Liberal Strategies conducted another research on the topic, which resulted in this report prepared by a team consisting of:

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The opinions and assessments expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Open Society Institute – Sofia.

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CONTENTS

▶ Summary	2	▶ Attitudes towards political parties	22
▶ About the study	4	▶ Rule of law	24
▶ Political and economic context	4	▶ Democracy as a system of fundamental rights	29
▶ Government efficiency	5	▶ Freedom of the media	34
▶ Trust in democracy and in the main institutions	9	▶ Conclusion	36
▶ Representation and citizen participation in governance	17	▶ Annex. Exploring populism	38

SUMMARY

Democracy in Bulgaria enjoys significant public support. The majority of citizens (56% in 2021 and 52% in 2022) agree that democracy is the best form of government for the country. These are the highest levels of support for democracy recorded in a series of five opinion polls conducted since 2015.¹ By comparison, in 2018, only 45% of respondents stated their support for democratic governance.

However, the presence of a majority in favour of the democratisation should not be so reassuring as to lead to complacency. Among the respondents, negative assessments of the government effectiveness in solving the main national problems, low trust in the institutions, and a conviction that the political and administrative elite are formed by connections and not by merit are consistently dominant.

The research also registers a continuing over the years extremely low level of civic participation in organized forms of public life – the vast majority of respondents (about 80%) are not members of any organizations, only 2-5% say they are members of political parties, and only 4% – of trade unions. Membership in NGOs remains within the range of up to 3%. However, there are also positive trends: more and more people are willing to turn to institutions to seek solutions to problems, as well as to protest in cases of mismanagement; more and more believe that they can change things for the better by their own actions.

Of the three tested EU values (democracy, rule of law and fundamental human rights), the protection of fundamental civil rights still seems to be the biggest achievement of the democratic transition in Bulgaria. A significant proportion of respondents are confident that they can peacefully exercise their civil rights undisturbed and do not fear repression by the law enforcement authorities. However, there is a certain vulnerability among workers – not insig-

nificant (albeit declining in terms of share) groups still believe they could lose their jobs if they participate in a protest or if they publicly criticize the government. It is also a paradox that people are confident in their rights, have faith in the police, and do not trust the courts.

Particularly worrying is the persistence of attitudes that can be called homophobic, racist and xenophobic. In general, they are expressed in insufficient tolerance and understanding towards minorities – sexual, ethnic, religious.

The most pronounced sense of crisis is with regard to the state of the rule of law in Bulgaria: the main difference between democratic and totalitarian governments is that the former are politically and judicially accountable to their constituents, while the latter are not. In our country, however, in October 2021, only 39% of respondents agreed that the government acts within the law (this is still a significant increase from 26% in 2018). The public's assessment of the quality of legislation in 2021 has risen compared to 2018, but remains at low levels: only 31% of people think the country's laws are fair (compared to 22% in 2018), and only 23% think the laws are clear and understandable (compared to 14% in 2018). There has been no positive change on the uniform application of the law and public assessment remains extremely low – in 2021, only 7% think laws are applied fairly to everyone, compared to 8% in 2018.

Traditionally, public policies for the reform of the judiciary view the problem of the rule of law in Bulgaria, first, as a problem that exclusively affects only one branch of the state power (the judiciary), and second, as a problem that affects all citizens equally. However, the public attitudes revealed by the study show that a change in this way of thinking is necessary: on the one hand, the issue of the quality of lawmaking is primarily a matter for the legislature and a function of the low legitimacy enjoyed by the National Assembly. On the other hand,

¹ The surveys were conducted in 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2022.

citizens cannot be expected to obey the law if they are of the opinion that the government itself is not acting within the law.

With regard to the media, the 2021-2022 study confirms the deepening of tendencies already registered in previous years. There is a clear and marked decline in trust in television as the main source of information on the state of affairs in the country – for the first time less than half of the citizens (42%) report that they trust television and are mainly informed by it. At the expense of TV, trust in the internet-based media is growing – 26%. Internet-based information sites are increasingly playing the role of a real competitor to TV for the primacy in the information sphere. Among a number of demographic groups, including adult Bulgarians under the age of 50, internet-based media, including social networks, are overtaking television as the main source of information about events in the country.

The majority of people perceive the press as free to criticise the government, but they do not think that newspapers or TV stations will report the truth if a senior public official is involved in a crime – here there is not much improvement in comparison to 2018. Without reliable information about the government performance, citizens cannot participate in the decision-making process of state governance.

Two other trends need to be clearly underlined. In 2022, there is a decline in trust in the EU – it has fallen to 43%, compared to 47% in 2021 and 49% in 2018. At the same time, the share of people saying they do not trust the EU is rising from 33% in 2018 to 41% in 2021 and to 48% in June 2022. This means that there is an erosion of Euro-Atlantic majorities in the country. The EU can no longer be interpreted as an absolutely secure and unquestionable external stabiliser of liberal democracy in Bulgaria, because it is itself beginning to be politicised in domestic political debates. This finding suggests that the future of democracy in Bulgaria depends predominantly on the quality of Bulgarian political parties and their loyalty to democratic values.

Particularly worrying is the success of mass campaigns against values that can be defined as European and democratic. The result of such campaigns in recent years has been an erosion of key values in the public sphere: especially tolerance of sexual and ethnic minorities (Roma, but also refugees and migrants). If these negative mobilisations are not effectively countered, Bulgarian democracy will be progressively emptied of its content and risks becoming a dictatorship of the majority.

This study offers the first of its kind detailed analysis of populist attitudes in Bulgaria – the main conclusions are annexed to the general report. It is on the basis of this part of the study that the second important trend is highlighted: from an ideological point of view, the vast majority of citizens fall into a group with attitudes that are not entirely populist, but cannot be defined as liberal-democratic either. This, it seems, is one of the big differences between Bulgaria and an established democracy like Germany, for example, and one of the explanations for the high volatility of Bulgarian democracy and the instability of the political parties in the country. Voters change their preferences frequently and are not afraid to cross red lines by voting experimentally for parties that challenge one or another aspect of the democratic order. So far, this volatility and experimentalism has mainly led to political instability and frequent snap elections, but in the future it could call into question the democratic set-up of the country.

This tendency becomes especially dangerous for democratization when it is combined with an acute sense of crisis – real or imagined. It should be stressed that the 2022 survey demonstrates a clear sense of crisis in governance. Whether the reason for this is real inflation, fears over the war in Ukraine, or gas difficulties, our research shows a serious deterioration in virtually all indicators that are related to the effectiveness of governance and its ability to deal with problems. It is the perception of such a crisis that has led to breakdowns in many democratic societies in the past, and today we must be particularly careful not to get into such negative and destructive dynamics.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This report is based on data from two nationally representative surveys of public opinion, carried out in the period 16-23 October 2021 and 6-16 June 2022 respectively. The surveys were conducted among the adult population of the country using a direct standardized tablet-interview method at the respondents' homes. Respondents were selected using two-stage stratified sampling by region and type of locality, with quotas for sex, age and education. In each of the surveys, 1000 effective interviews were conducted. The maximum margin of error at 95% confidence level was $\pm 3.1\%$ for 50% share of the sample. The field research was conducted by Alpha Research polling agency under a project implemented and funded by the Open Society Institute – Sofia. The data were processed and analyzed by the Open Society Institute – Sofia in partnership with the Center for Liberal Strategies.

The report also cites data from three previous nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted and funded by the Institute Open Society – Sofia in 2015, 2016 and 2018. The surveys were carried out among representative samples of the adult population of the country using a face-to-face interview method based on a standardized questionnaire. Respondents were selected using probability two-stage cluster sampling, stratified by administrative region and by type of settlement. The maximum stochastic error is $\pm 2.9\%$.²

Table 1. Profile of respondents in the 2021 and 2022 surveys

By gender	2021		2022	
	Number	Share	Number	Share
Male	493	49%	496	50%
Female	507	51%	504	50%
Total	1000	100%	1000	100%

² A description of the method of work, the definition of democracy used, and data on the results of the first study, conducted in 2015, are published in the report "Democracy and Citizen Participation. Public Attitudes towards Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Human Rights in 2015", available online at: <https://osis.bg/?p=554>. The surveys in 2016 (<https://osis.bg/?p=536>) and 2018 (<https://osis.bg/?p=3261>) were carried out using the same method and are described in the respective publications available at the web addresses indicated.

By age	2021		2022	
	Number	Share	Number	Share
18-30 years	151	15%	148	15%
31-40 years old	155	16%	173	17%
41-50 years old	189	19%	210	21%
51-60 years old	205	21%	187	19%
61+ years old	300	30%	282	28%
Total	1000	100%	1000	100%

By ethnic group	2021		2022	
	Number	Share	Number	Share
Bulgarians	863	86%	864	86%
Turks	78	8%	62	6%
Roma	45	5%	60	6%
Another	5	1%	3	0%
No answer	9	1%	11	1%
Total	1000	100%	1000	100%

Some of the issues addressed in this report were not included in the June 2022 field survey, and the most up-to-date data used in this report regarding these issues is taken from the October 2021 field survey.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The years 2021 and 2022, in which the two studies of public attitudes towards democracy were carried out are undoubtedly an unusual, even extraordinary period in Bulgarian political history. The political impact of the Covid crisis from 2020 was exacerbated in Bulgaria by the prolonged protests against the third government of Boyko Borissov. This government survived until the regular parliamentary elections in April 2021, although it became the object of serious public discontent. A total of three parliamentary elections were held in 2021 and only after the last one in November was a new government formed. At the beginning of 2022, the war in Ukraine began, leading to an energy crisis throughout Europe. The war dramatically deepened the inflationary processes that had already begun in 2021. In April 2022, an acute crisis in the energy sector had begun. Russia unilaterally halted gas supplies to Bulgaria because Prime Minister Petkov's

government refused to pay in rubles under a scheme proposed by Gazprom. The government was able to find alternative supplies of gas in the short term, but as a result of the mounting pressures and tensions within the complex quadrilateral coalition, it lost a vote of no confidence at the end of June. The ensuing government crisis was not resolved by parliament and it was dissolved in early August, with new early parliamentary elections scheduled for 2 October 2022.

If we have to give a general assessment of the period 2020-2022, it is political instability and the impossibility to form a sustainable parliamentary majority and a lasting government. The country has been governed by two regular and two caretaker governments, with President Radev appointing a third caretaker cabinet from August 2022. In the meantime, three parliamentary and one presidential elections were held, and a fourth snap election for the National Assembly was scheduled for October. All this political turbulence is taking place in a situation of unprecedented coincidence of serious crises.

From a certain point of view, the period is proof of the stability of the Bulgarian constitution and of the basic democratic institutions. Despite the fragmentation of the parliament and its inability to elect a stable government in a difficult situation, the political processes in the country are taking place within the framework of the constitutional model and its procedures. There is no direct danger of an anti-democratic collapse, and although certain radical-populist parties such as Revival are on the rise, the majority of political representation and voters are democratic and even pro-European.

From an economic point of view in the period 2021-2022. Bulgaria is doing well despite the difficult international environment. The country's macro indicators remain stable and some of them are even improving. Public debt actually declined towards mid-2022 and is around 25% of GDP – a very good indicator for the EU as a whole. In 2022, economic growth passed 4%, but is expected to fall to around 2% mainly because of the crisis in Ukraine and the gas shortage in the EU. Inflation in Bulgaria has reached higher levels (12-17%) than in the euro area and this is due to a combination of several factors. Firstly, Bulgaria is a small, open economy, which amplifies the trends in the euro area, in the manner of the Baltic countries. Second, Bulgaria is the country with the lowest price levels

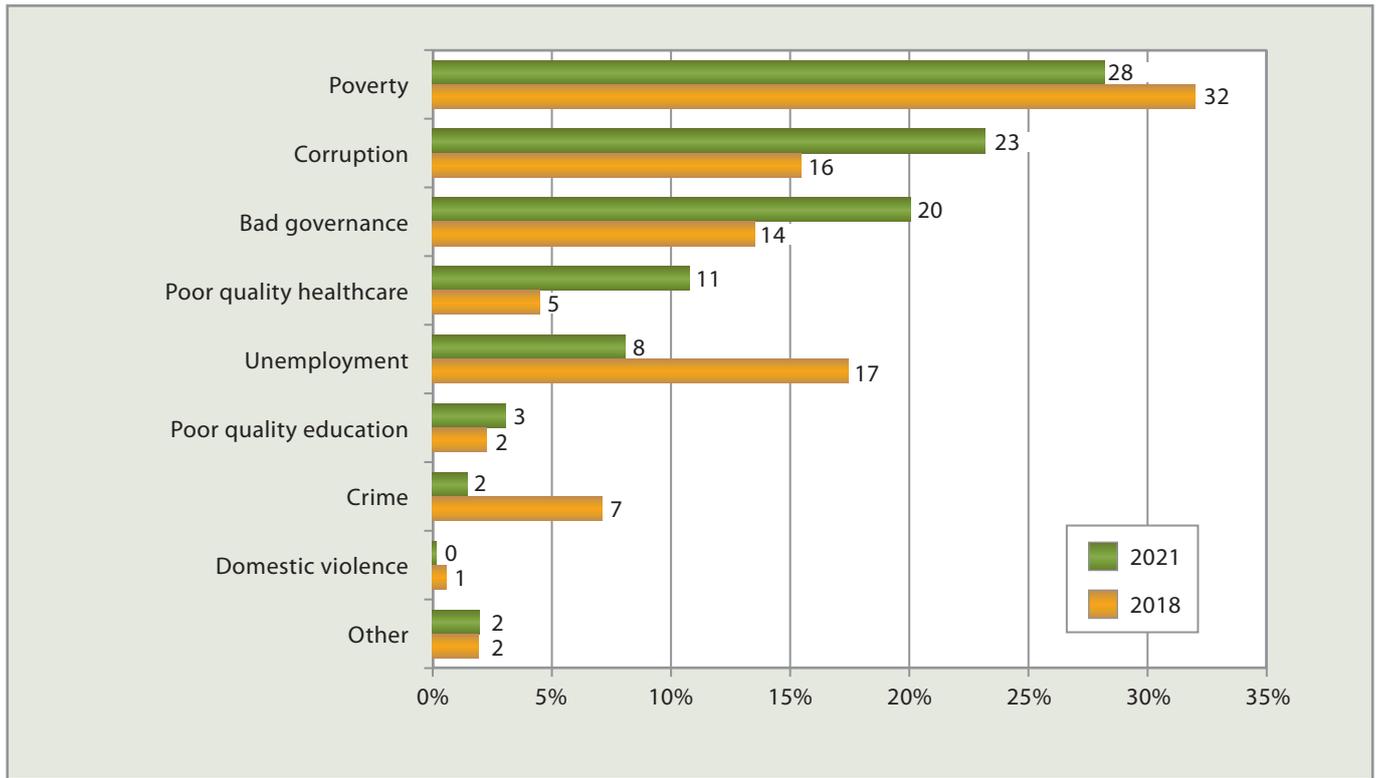
in the EU and the rise in international commodities such as gas and oil is affecting more noticeably than economies with higher price levels. Third, government programmes have been adopted to raise the incomes of pensioners and other vulnerable groups, as well as to compensate businesses for the high energy prices. Inflation, in fact, remains the only one of the Maastricht criteria for joining the euro area that Bulgaria does not currently fulfil. The country's budgets – despite the need for frequent updating due to the extraordinary challenges – are actually registering surpluses in the first half of 2022 and are likely to be within the 3% deficit criterion by the end of the year. This shows that only inflation and the lack of adequate administrative preparations can prevent the country from joining the euro area in 2024; the very fact that the country is staying the course towards adopting the common European currency in a difficult economic environment is a good testimonial for sound economic policy. At the same time, however, political instability has made it impossible to solve many difficult problems and to adopt necessary reforms in the construction of the road infrastructure and in the judiciary. There have also been serious delays in the absorption of EU funds under the Recovery and Resilience Plan.

GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY

The findings of the public attitudes survey show that in the period 2018-2021 poverty continues to be the most significant problem for people in the country. In 2018, about one-third of the respondents (32%) ranked poverty as the most important problem, a similar result recorded in the two previous surveys in 2015 and 2016. For 2021, the percentage drops to 28, perhaps reflecting the overall (albeit slow) reduction in poverty in Bulgaria (Fig. 1). The result is particularly encouraging because it also reflects the situation after the effects of the Covid crisis, which reversed some of the positive trends in poverty decline.

In 2021, compared to 2018, the share of respondents citing corruption and poor governance as the most important problems in the country is increasing. The share of those citing corruption as the main prob-

Fig. 1. The most important problems in the country – based on data from 2018 and 2021



Q: What is the most important problem facing the country at the moment? (Only one answer is possible.)

lem increased from 16% in 2018 to 23% in 2021, while those pointing out bad governance, increased over the period under review from 14% to 20%. In autumn 2021, these are the two most frequently mentioned problems facing the country after poverty. The increase in the prioritisation of corruption and bad governance over the period under review is a likely reflection of the three parliamentary elections and of negative attitudes towards Boyko Borissov's third cabinet, especially after the mass protests against him in the summer of 2020.

In 2021, compared to 2018, the proportion of people who identify poor healthcare as a major problem is also increasing (11%). This is happening against the backdrop of the Covid pandemic, which showed many weaknesses in Bulgarian healthcare.

A positive trend is the dramatic drop in those who see unemployment as a problem for the country – from 17% in 2018 to 8% in 2021. This decline also corresponds to the unprecedentedly low unemployment rates in Bulgaria in the period under review (below 5%). The share of those who cite it as the most important problem in the country has fallen steadily since 2015: from 32% in 2015 to 8% in 2021. This develop-

ment reflects the situation on the labour market: the share of the employed is rising and the unemployment rate is falling.

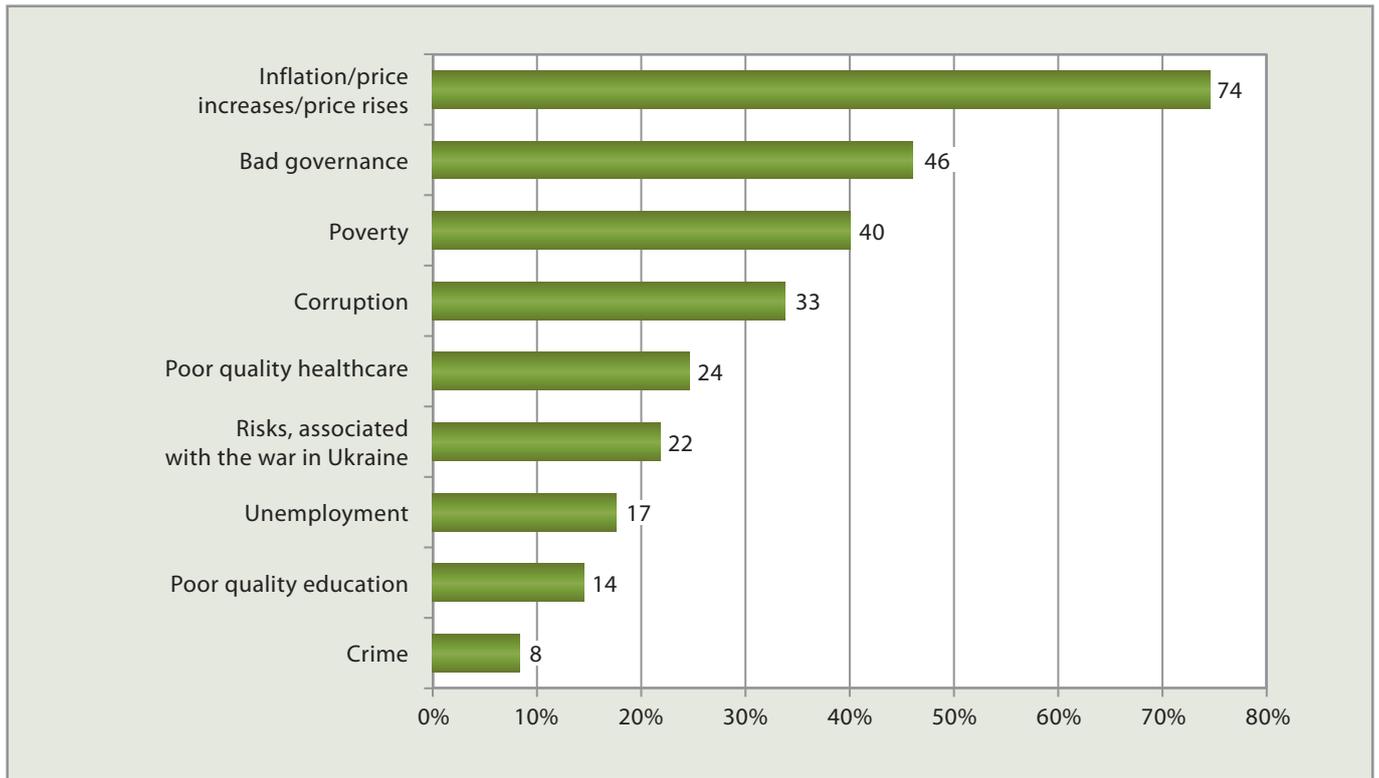
However, increased employment does not solve the problem of poverty and it still stands as the most important problem for the country in the autumn of 2021.

The tendency of a low share of people for whom poor quality education is identified as the most important public problem is maintained – 3% of respondents.

The June 2022 survey differs from previous surveys, not least because of a change in the way the question is asked.³ Inflation is cited as the most important issue facing the country in June 2022, shared by 74% of respondents. Nearly half of respondents (46%) put poor governance second, with poverty ranking third at 40% (Fig. 2). The data can be interpreted as indicative of a

³ In 2022, respondents were able to indicate up to three most important problems facing the country, compared to only one in previous surveys. Respondents were asked to rate two additional problems facing the country, absent as explicitly mentioned in the question in previous years, related to inflation and the risks of war in Ukraine.

Fig. 2. The most important problems in the country, June 2022



Q: What is the most important problem facing the country at the moment? (Up to three answers are possible.)

sense of acute crisis related to poor governance and income deprivation. Both inflation and price increases in the period under review are not necessarily and primarily the result of government action. In people’s eyes, however, the triad of “rising prices, bad governance and poverty” is hard to separate. In democracies, as is well known, the electorate holds those in power responsible for all disasters, whether they are responsible for them or not.⁴

Throughout the 2018-2022 period, citizens’ poor overall assessment of the way the government is handling the country’s most important problems has persisted. The overwhelming majority of respondents (over 80%) believe that the government is not addressing poverty; the same number believe that it is not addressing corruption; and significant majorities say that the government is not addressing other problems, such as crime, poor education, and poor health care. In spite of the above-quoted data on the reduction of unemployment, in fact, on this issue as well, the most significant share of respondents (over

70%) believe that the government is not dealing with this problem.

In 2022, all the relatively minor improvements that were recorded in 2021 compared to 2018 were erased. The responses on corruption are impressive. In October 2021, the negative sentiment that the government was not tackling corruption was the weakest for the survey period since 2015. This is most likely due to hopes for a new governance model after the fall of the Borissov government. By June 2022, however, these hopes had apparently been replaced by disappointment, and the picture of public sentiment became similar to that in 2018. Besides the general crisis anxiety, the explanation here lies in the apparent inability of the complex four-party coalition that governed the country in the first half of 2022 to carry out a successful judicial and anti-corruption reform. The public perception of government weakness correlates with the increase in findings of poor governance of the country.

On each of the public issues considered in the 2018-2022 period, only between 6 and 21% of respondents gave the government a positive rating and generally felt that it was addressing the problem. The government receives the highest positive rating for its perfor-

⁴ Achen, Christopher H. and Larry M. Bartels. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton UP, 2017.

mance in education (about 19% of respondents think the government is addressing the problem with low-quality education in 2022); a similar percentage said the government is tackling unemployment. For how

the government is handling unemployment, there is also the most significant increase in the positive assessment – in 2015 and 2016 only 10% thought the government was tackling unemployment, and in 2018

Table 2. Efficiency of governance – based on data for 2018, 2021 and 2022

Problem facing the country	Year	Copes	Not coping	I can not judge	No answer
Poor quality education	2022	19%	69%	11%	2%
	2021	12%	84%	4%	1%
	2018	21%	68%	10%	1%
Unemployment	2022	19%	71%	9%	1%
	2021	19%	73%	8%	0%
	2018	20%	75%	4%	1%
Crime	2022	18%	73%	9%	1%
	2021	20%	68%	12%	1%
	2018	12%	82%	5%	1%
Risks related to the war in Ukraine*	2022	18%	68%	13%	1%
	2021				
	2018				
Poor quality healthcare	2022	16%	78%	6%	1%
	2021	12%	83%	5%	0%
	2018	16%	78%	5%	1%
Bad governance	2022	12%	81%	6%	1%
	2021	17%	68%	13%	1%
	2018	13%	76%	10%	1%
Poverty	2022	11%	85%	3%	1%
	2021	13%	78%	8%	1%
	2018	12%	86%	2%	0%
Corruption	2022	9%	85%	5%	1%
	2021	12%	49%	36%	3%
	2018	6%	85%	8%	1%
Inflation/price increases*	2022	6%	91%	2%	1%
	2021				
	2018				
Domestic violence	2022				
	2021	16%	76%	8%	1%
	2018	14%	54%	30%	3%

Q: Please give an assessment of the way the government is dealing with the main problems facing the country at the moment.

* These questions are only asked in 2022.

this proportion increases to 20% – by 2022 there is minimal regression in this respect (Table 2).

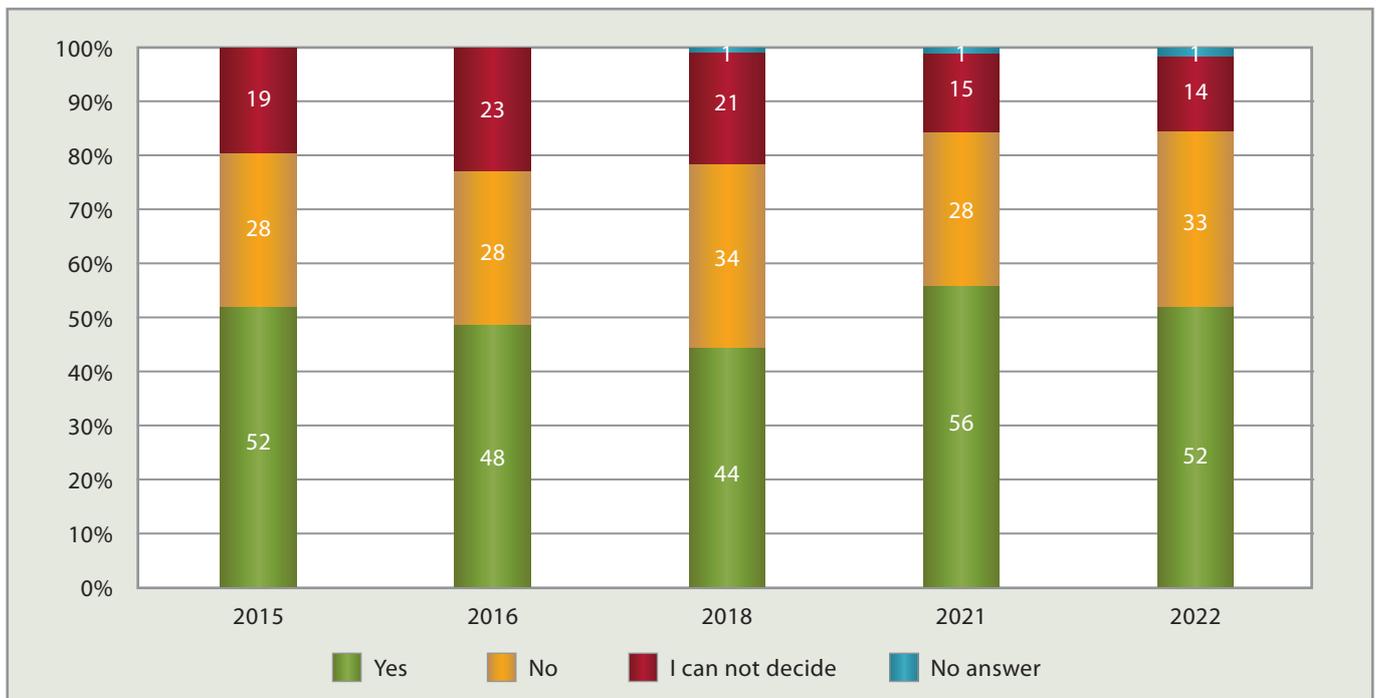
All the public opinion surveys conducted so far in the framework of this initiative suggest that there is a clear disconnect between the priorities on the citizens' agenda and their perception of the government's handling of them: in 2022, the most significant groups of the population expect the problems of inflation, bad governance, poverty and corruption to be solved, and it is in terms of solving these problems that negative assessments of the government's performance are most widespread. This mismatch in people's priorities and the government's ability to address them effectively largely determines the low public trust in the institutions of representative democracy. They are inherently perceived as ineffective in addressing the most important societal problems. Even when a problem loses its importance for a certain period, citizens do not perceive it as the result of the government's efforts. Particularly revealing is the simultaneous presence of a huge number of citizens who see the rise in prices and inflation as a problem, and of a vast majority of respondents who have a feeling of bad governance – the inability to tackle priority social problems lowers the approval of the authorities' activities.

TRUST IN DEMOCRACY AND IN THE MAIN INSTITUTIONS

The most positive result observed in the 2021 study is the increase with 12% of the share of people who trust democracy compared to 2018. In 2018, the share of respondents who rank democracy as the best form of government for the country dropped to 45 from 52% in 2015 and from 48% in 2016. The October 2021 survey shows a reversal of this negative trend and registers an increase in the share of respondents with confidence in democracy to 56%. In June 2022, there is again a drop of 4% to a level of 52%, but the generally low levels of 2018 appear to have been overcome. This is a positive result for Bulgarian democracy, demonstrating its resilience. Despite the unprecedented overlay of the effects of multiple crises, Bulgarians are far from giving up on democracy; on the contrary, they are demonstrating stable positive levels of trust in it. A risk, however, is that one-third of respondents in 2022 (33%) do not believe democracy is the best form of governance for the country (Fig. 3).

Among the more educated citizens there is clearly more pronounced support for democracy as the best

Fig. 3. Confidence in democracy – data for 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2022*



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

* It is possible that in some of the figures and tables the sum of the answers to a question may differ from 100%. This is due to the fact that the values shown are rounded to whole numbers.

form of government for the country: 63% of people with higher or semi-higher education agree with this statement compared to 14% of people with primary or lower education. However, the proportion disagreeing with this statement is the same (26-27%) for the highest and lowest education groups in 2018, while 57% of people with the lowest education already disapprove of democracy in 2022 (Fig. 4). This dramatic deterioration in attitudes towards democracy among the least educated needs a special explanation. One of the reasons may be the high income inequality in Bulgaria, which alone among the EU member states registers a GINI index of 40%. Income inequality between the capital Sofia and the countryside is another fact that may explain the dissatisfaction with the basic governance formula among the least educated parts of society. This result also demonstrates that different social classes probably experienced the kind of crisis and subsequent price shock differently – the effect on the least educated, who are generally correlated with the poorest, was dramatically stronger than the effects on the rest of society.

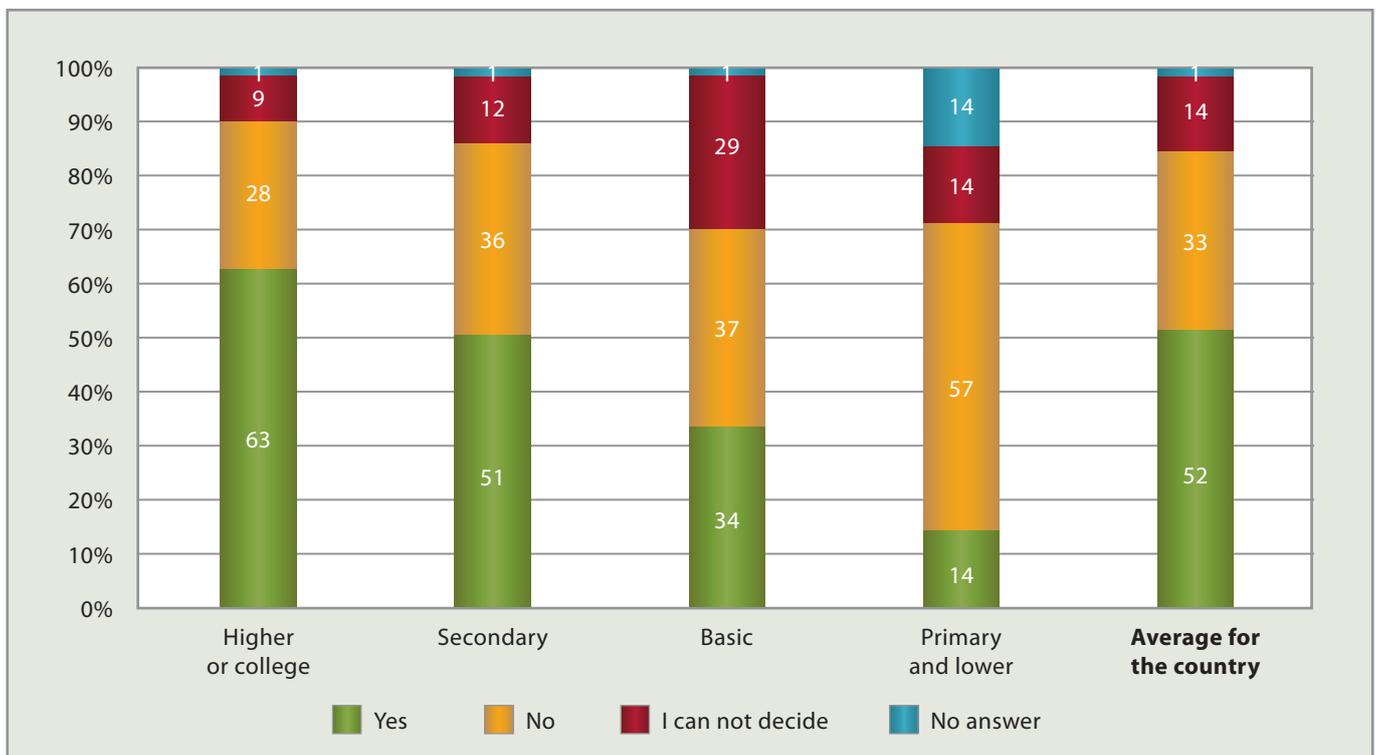
In 2022, support for democracy is more categorically expressed among the more educated, as well as among wealthier citizens (64% of those who have a

household income of more than 700 BGN per person per month believe that democracy is the best form of governing the country), among people of active age (between 54% and 57% of people aged under 50 agree with this statement), and among those living in Sofia (71% agree compared to 52% on average).

There are some differences in the perceptions of democracy as the best form of government and in relation to the region in which the respondents live. The share of those who agree that democracy is the best form of government for Bulgaria is higher than the national average in the two most economically developed regions – 69% in the South-Western Region (SWR) and 57% in the South-Central Region (SCR), where the two largest and most developed cities, Sofia and Plovdiv, are located respectively. The other regions show much lower levels of support for democracy, with the lowest levels in the North Central Region (NCR) at 35% and in the Southeast Region (SER) at 38%; similar levels, which are definitely lower than the national average, are also observed among those living in the Northeast Region (NER) and in the North Central Region (NCR).

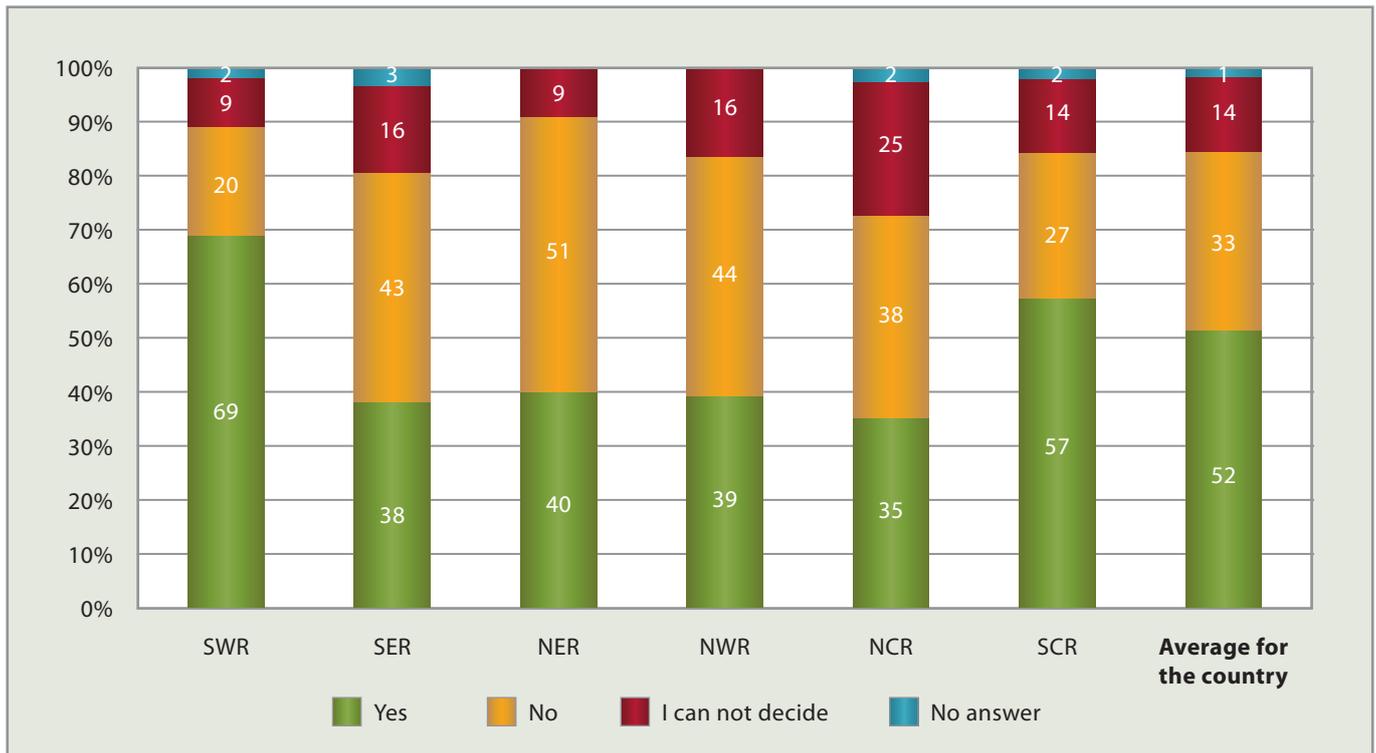
The difference between the capital and the other regions is impressive and reaches 30%. The NWR falls to last place in the new survey, indicating that its high

Fig. 4. Trust in democracy by level of education, June 2022



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

Fig. 5. Trust in democracy by region, June 2022



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

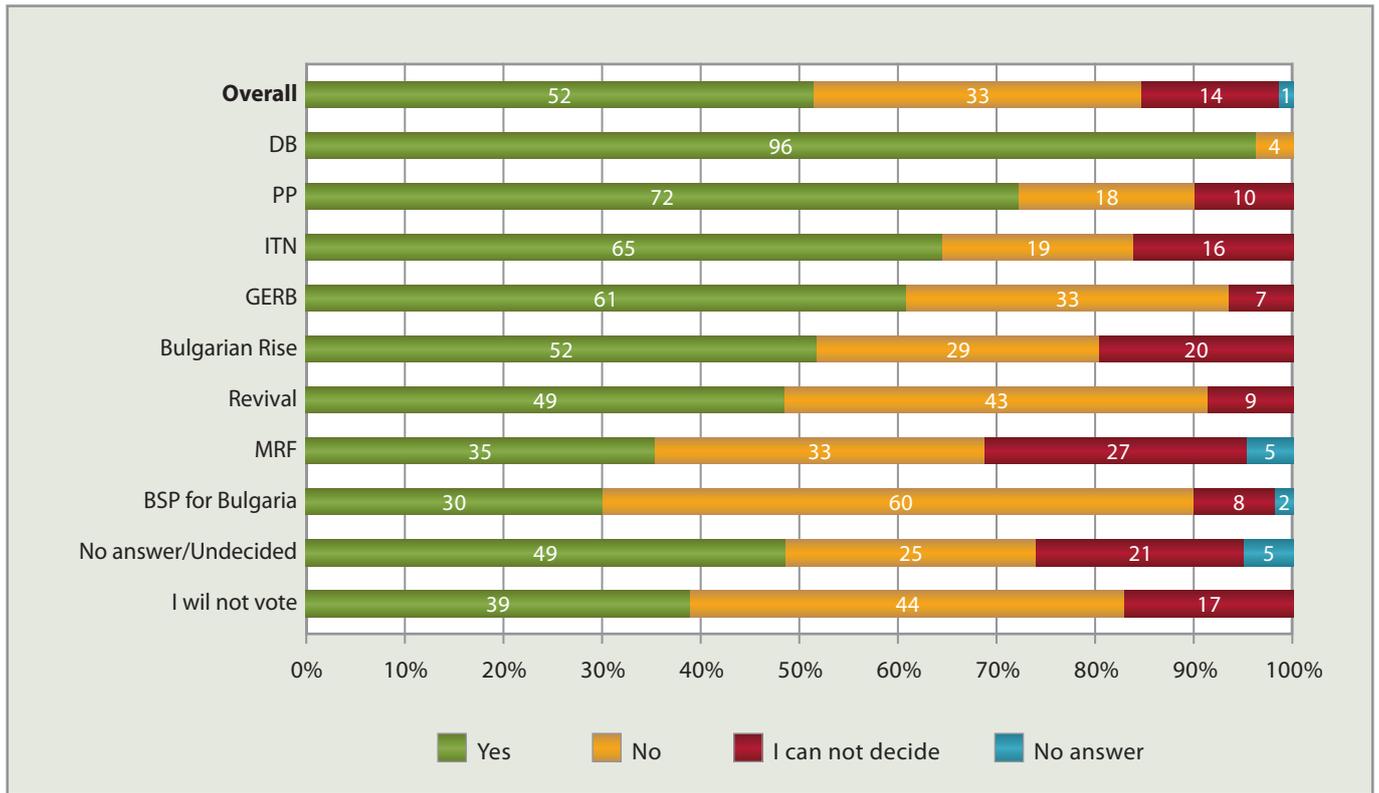
2018 values were more of a temporary blip (Fig. 5). What is worrying is the huge gap in trust in democracy that is opening up between Sofia and much of the country: this gap is highlighted by other factors, such as the serious income gap between these regions. Obviously, one of the biggest tasks of the country's governance in the next decade will be to "narrow" this gap, which cannot but lead to political instability and a pro-establishment vote of those who believe that the positives of the country's economic development are not fairly distributed.

Electoral attitudes also play a role. In June 2022, respondents who believe that democracy is the best form of government for the country represent a strong majority among supporters of Democratic Bulgaria (96%), We Continue the Change (72%), There is Such a People (65%) and GERB (61%). Among supporters of "Bulgarian Rise" belief in democracy is equal to the average for the country as a whole (52%). Belief in democracy as the best form of government is weaker than the national average among supporters of "Revival" (48% agree that democracy is the best form of government against 43% disagree) and MRF (35% agree against 33% disagree). The majority of BSP supporters (60%)

do not believe that democracy is the best form of government for the country, and only 30% of them are of the opposite opinion. People who do not believe that democracy is the best form of government are also in the majority among those who say they will not vote (49% do not believe in democracy vs. 28% who express belief in it) (Fig. 6).

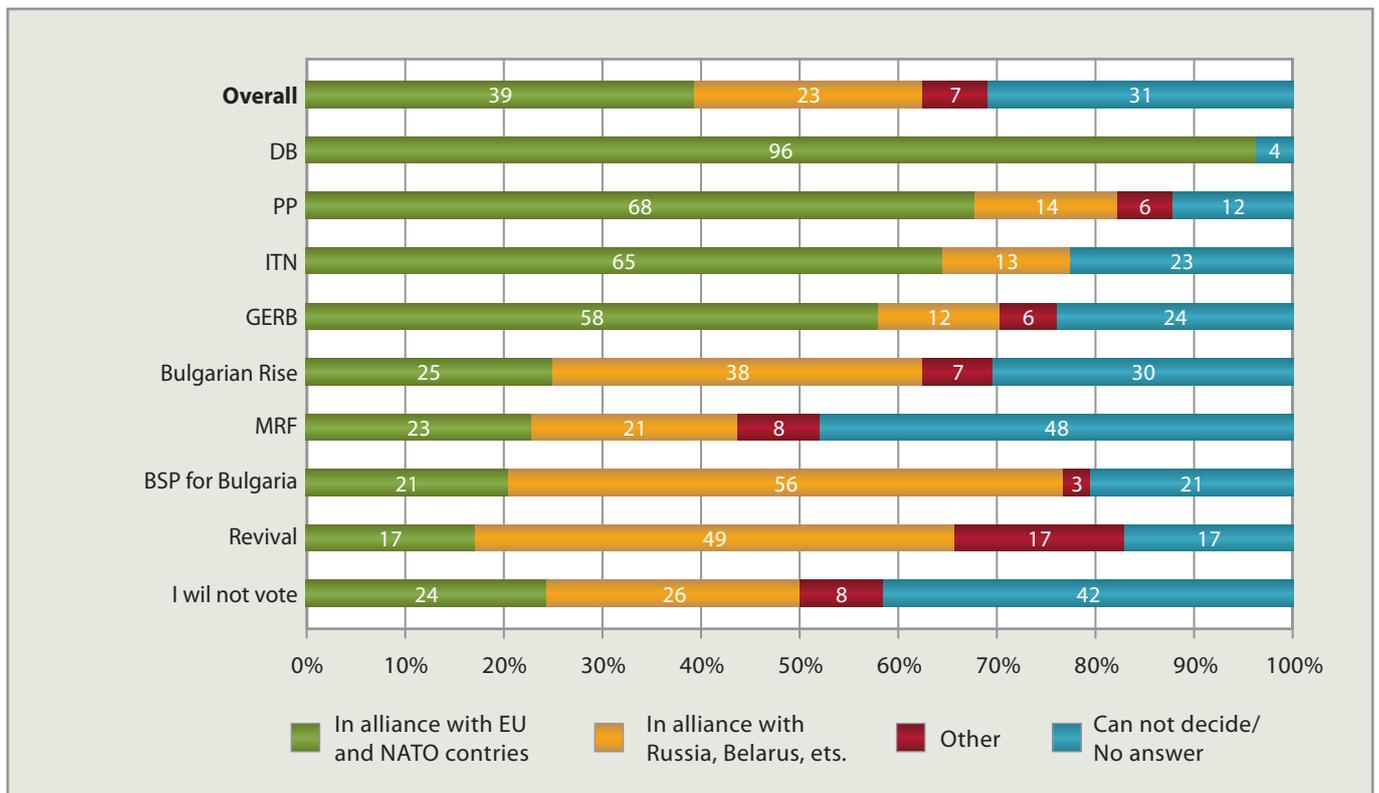
There is a direct link between the approval of democracy as the best form of government for Bulgaria and the support for the pro-Western geopolitical orientation of the country. Against the backdrop of the emerging new division in Europe after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the supporters of the parties that most approve of democracy as the most appropriate form of government for Bulgaria (DB, PP, ITN and GERB), at the same time, most support Bulgaria's positioning in an alliance with NATO and EU member states. And vice versa: the supporters of the parties that to a lesser extent approve of democracy as the most appropriate form of government for Bulgaria, to a lesser extent they approve of its participation in alliances such as NATO and the EU and to a greater extent they tend to favour an alliance with countries such as Russia (Fig. 7). This effectively turns

Fig. 6. Trust in democracy by political preference, June 2022



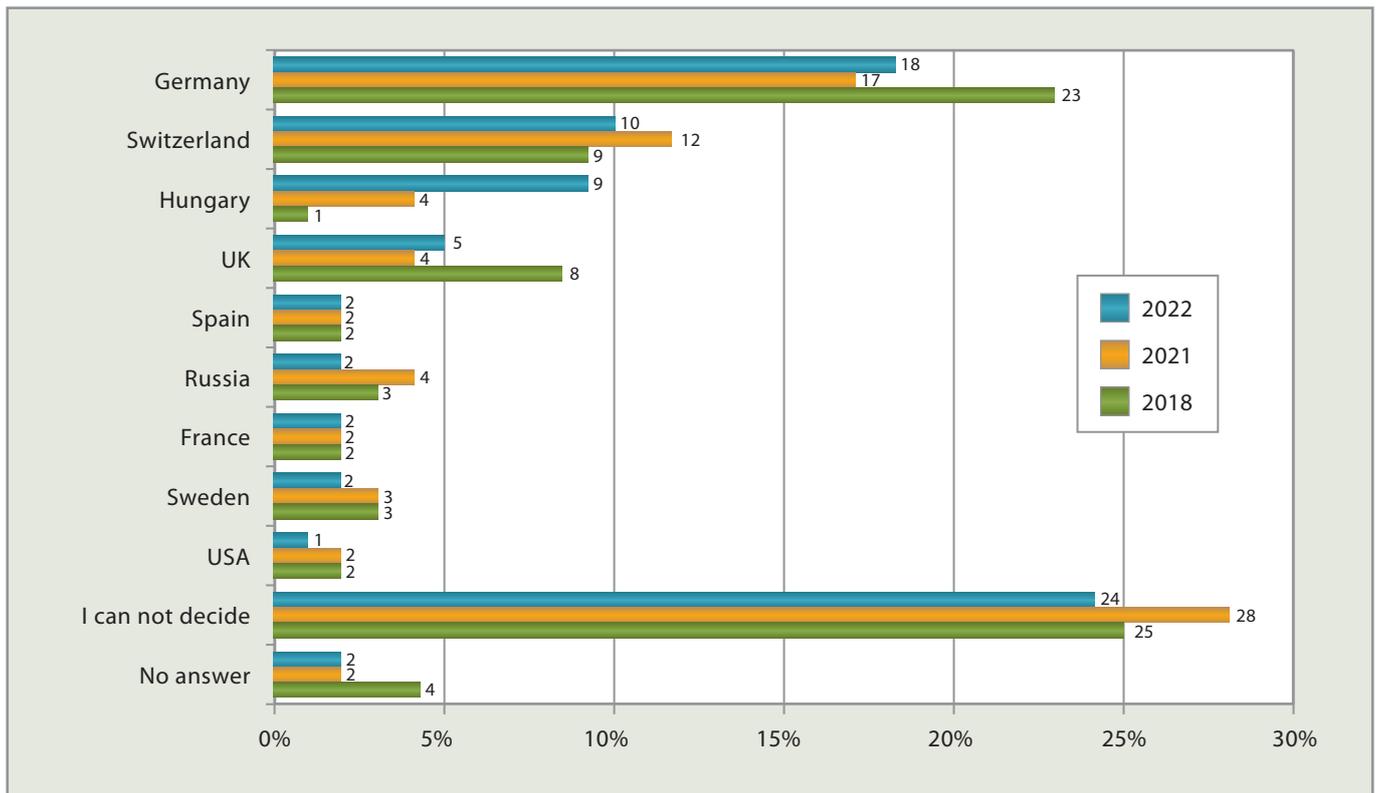
Q: Do you believe that democracy is the best form of government for Bulgaria?

Fig. 7. Geopolitical variation by policy preferences, June 2022



Q: If there is a new division in Europe, similar to the Cold War, where should Bulgaria position itself?

Fig. 8. Global example of good governance – based on data for 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: In your opinion, which country in the world is well governed and Bulgaria should take an example from it?

the question of the country's geopolitical orientation into a question of the preservation of its democratic structure.

In the three previous surveys between 2015 and 2018, respondents invariably pointed only to democratic countries as examples of good governance that Bulgaria should follow. Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland have consistently formed the top three of foreign countries that are desirable role models. In 2018, for 23% of respondents, Germany was the most popular example of a country with good governance; for 9%, Switzerland was such an example, and for 8%, the UK. Apart from Russia, which was cited by only 3% of respondents as an example of good governance and a desirable role model for Bulgaria, there was not a single non-democratic state that citizens saw as a desirable role model (Fig. 8).⁵

This picture is maintained in the 2021 and 2022 surveys: in both surveys, over 95% of the respondents

pointed to only EU and/or NATO member states or other liberal democracies such as Switzerland as examples of countries with good governance that could serve as models for Bulgaria. In terms of individual countries in 2022, Germany is again the leader, but this time with a slightly lower score (17-18%). Switzerland retains its position, while the UK – against the backdrop of post-Brexit complications – loses almost half of its support and shrinking to 4-5%. By contrast, Hungary reaches a remarkable 9% in 2022, a demonstration of the growing popularity of sovereigntist ideas and criticism of the EU. Hungary's coming out ahead in the rankings may also be an indication of the attractiveness of the ideas of Viktor Orbán's "illiberal democracy", which are promoted in Bulgaria by nationalist and far-right formations, as well as by parts of the left and the BSP. In 2022, compared to 2021, the share of people defining Russia as a country with good governance drops from 4 to 2 percent, which may be a reflection of the overall

⁵ Germany's lead in the 2016 and 2018 surveys was not as pronounced as in the 2015 survey, when around 40% of respondents named Germany as the foreign country with the best governance, but this may also be due to a change in the way the question was phrased: in the 2015 and 2016 surveys, respondents could choose from a list of countries that was read to them in alphabetical order, whereas in 2018 people were left to name a country with good governance.

negative reaction of the majority of Bulgarians to Putin's aggression in Ukraine.

Although the majority of respondents agree that democracy is the best form of governance, citizens' trust in the institutions of representative democracy and national institutions in general is persistently low. It has remained so in the last two years. The most important bodies of representative democracy – parties and parliament – are at the bottom of the ranking among the institutions and types of organisations surveyed, with the political crisis in June 2022 further undermining their credibility and leading to a drop in trust in political parties to 11% and in parliament to 9% of respondents. At the same time, more than 80% of respondents expressed distrust in them. Confidence in the government dropped from 24% in October 2021 to 16% in June 2022, probably due to disagreements between coalition partners that led to a government crisis in mid-2022. The erosion in confidence in parliament, the government and political parties since the first half of 2022 can be explained by the inability to form a stable government in the country, as well as the exacerbation of the international and energy crisis against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Traditionally, the president retains a high degree of trust. In June 2022, 54% of respondents expressed confidence in the presidential institution, up from 52% in October 2021, which is no surprise – he ruled with caretaker governments for most of 2021 and was re-elected convincingly in November of that year.

In general, it can be hypothesized that the institutions that the public sees as partisan and politicized have trust levels in the range of 10-20%. The presidential institution wins to the extent that it manages to position itself as non-partisan, but it risks starting to lose credibility if and when the majority starts to perceive it as too partisan. Low confidence in the attorney general (19% in June 2022 vs. 64% lack of trust) as an institution that should be non-partisan, is a clear demonstration that the public sees the work of this institution as rather politicized. Trust in the court is traditionally expressed by about a third of the respondents, while almost twice as many express distrust in its work. This is understandable against the background of the citizens' conviction registered in the survey that the laws in the country are not applied equally to all.

Trust in NGOs in June 2022 is expressed by 20% of respondents, which is an increase from 16% in Octo-

ber 2021 and is higher than in the National Assembly, political parties, the government and the prosecutor general, but lower than in the media, the courts and the other organizations included in the survey. It is important to note, however, that unlike the other institutions and organizations commented on, one of the factors for the relatively low proportion of respondents expressing confidence in NGOs is related to the large percentage of survey participants who have no opinion on the matter due to their lack of knowledge of the activities of this type of organization.⁶

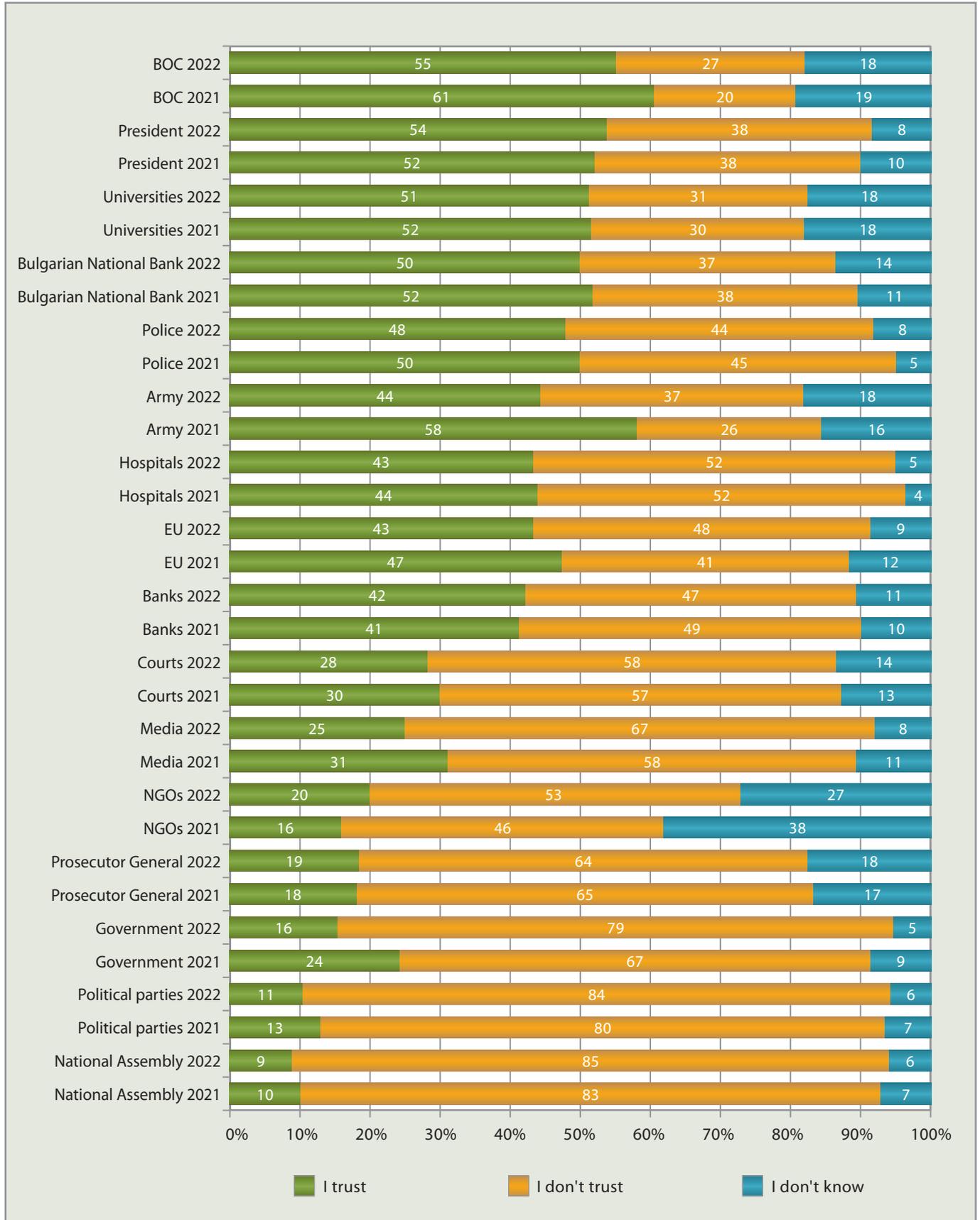
Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, the decline in the proportion of people expressing confidence in the army is striking. In October 2021 58% of respondents said they trusted the army, and it ranked second in trust among all institutions and organizations surveyed during the period, then in June 2022 – a few months after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – only 44% of respondents expressed trust in the army, and it already ranked sixth in trust among the institutions surveyed (Fig. 9).

The trust of the Bulgarian citizens in the EU remains relatively high compared to the trust in the national institutions, but registers a steady downward trend. In 2018, it was 49% and down by about 5% compared to the 2016 data: two national institutions (the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) and the President) overtake the EU as the institutions with the highest trust. In 2022, trust in the EU is already at 43%, with seven Bulgarian institutions above this level. Particularly striking is the drop in trust between 2021 (47%) and 2022 (43%). The likely reasons for this are linked to the general anxiety and sense of crisis that characterise the general mood in Bulgaria since the start of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the share of people expressing distrust in the EU is rising from 32% in 2018 to 41% in 2021 and to 48% in June 2022.

It should be noted that despite the decline in the share of respondents who express confidence in the EU, the country's membership in the Union continues to enjoy the support of the majority of Bulgarian citizens. In June 2022, the largest group of respondents (49%) stated that they would support Bulgaria's EU membership in the event of a referendum. 36%

⁶ For a detailed analysis of trust in NGOs see Zahariev, B. *Trust in NGOs in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2019, the text is available online at www.osis.bg.

Fig. 9. Trust in institutions – based on data for 2021 and 2022



Q: To what extent do you trust the following institutions/organisations? "I trust" reflects the sum of "I trust completely" and "I trust somewhat", and "I do not trust" reflects the sum of "I trust somewhat" and "I do not trust at all".

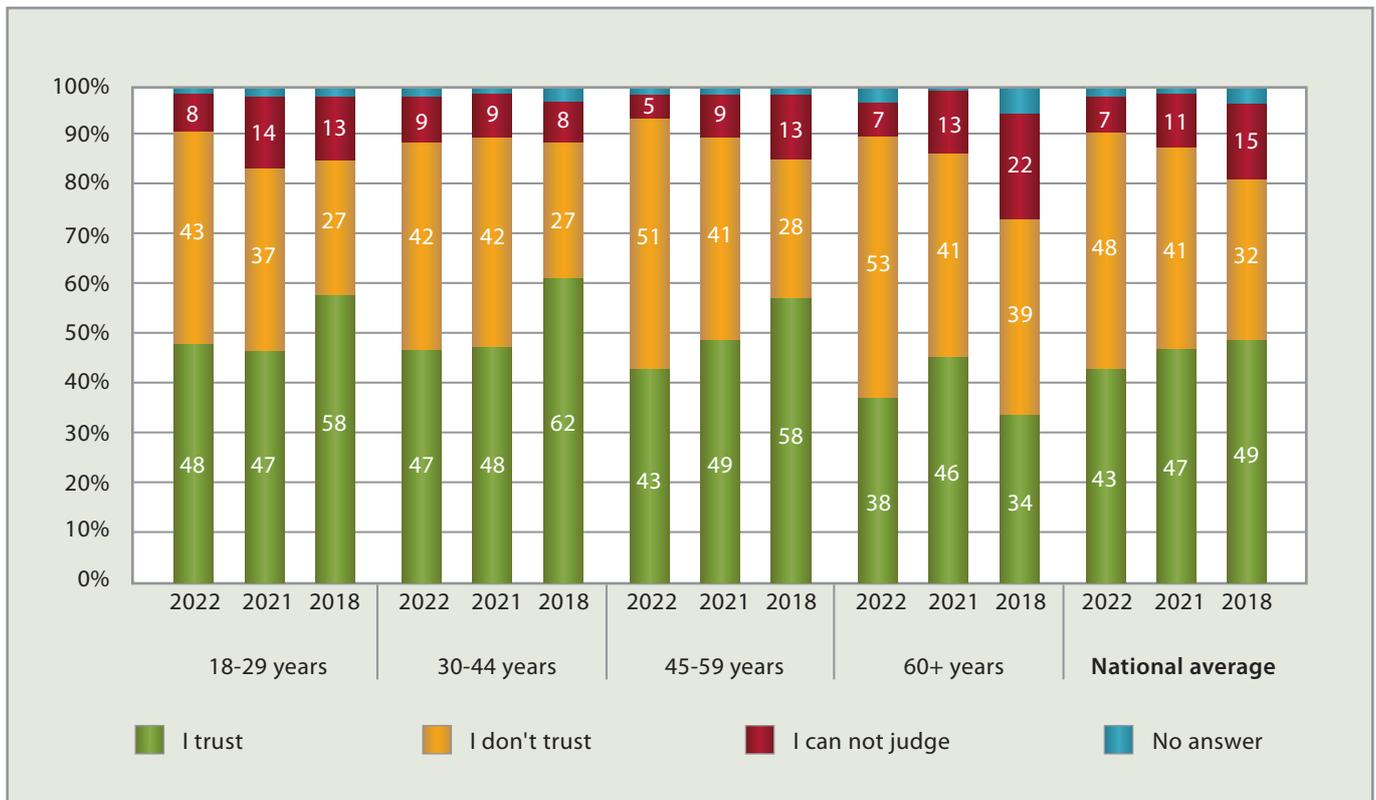
of respondents would vote against membership and 15% were undecided. Among those who expressed an opinion this would mean a result of 57% voting for EU membership against 43% against. The largest group of citizens (45%) also stated that they would not vote for a party that wanted Bulgaria to leave the EU. 28% of respondents expressed their willingness to vote for such a party, 23% could not decide and another 4% did not answer the question.

The tendency for EU credibility to depend on certain demographic characteristics persists. Young people have more trust in the EU than older people. As of June 2022, trust in the EU is highest among 18-44 year olds – 47-48% trust the EU – and only 34% among those aged 60+. It is the younger generations who are to blame for the overall decline of trust in the EU, however – while their confidence was in the range of 58-62% in 2018, it has dropped to 47-48% in 2022 (Fig. 10). This is a worrying trend that demonstrates that Euroscepticism is emerging in the country, which is not simply a product of socialist nostalgia or inherited anti-Western attitudes from Soviet times.

Citizens' low trust in national institutions is largely linked to widespread perceptions that access to senior government positions is not based on merit but on other factors. According to almost 70% of respondents in 2018, a candidate's connections are the most important factor for access to a senior government position in Bulgaria. Nearly half of respondents cited a candidate's money/wealth as the most important factor in accessing a senior government position, with popularity/ notoriety coming in third. Barely one in five believe that a candidate's education is a major factor in accessing a senior government position; only less than 15% of people believe that a candidate's experience, knowledge or skills matter. In 2016, the same question was asked to identify factors, relevant to access to judicial office, and the attitudes found are identical.

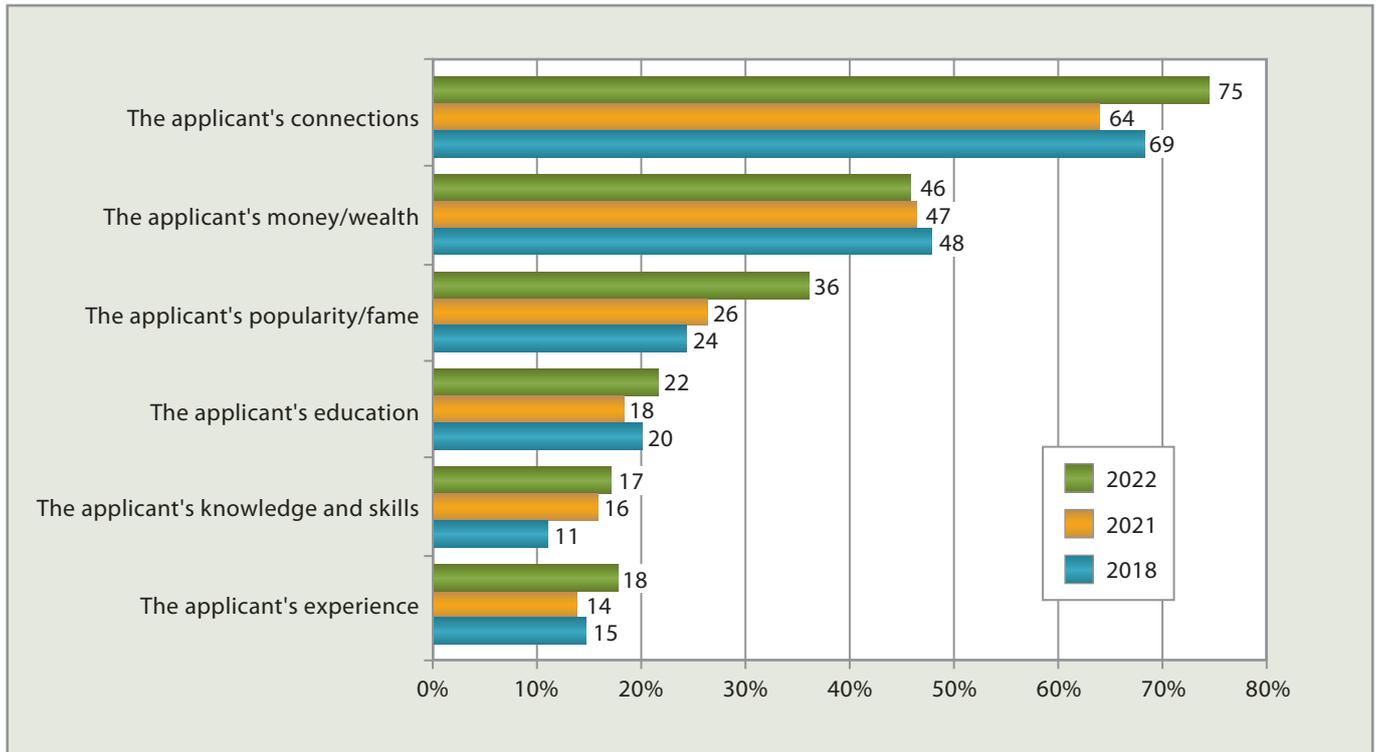
In 2022, these trends are only deepening, with 75% of respondents saying a candidate's connections are crucial to their selection. The proportion of people who rank a candidate's popularity as a decisive factor in their election is also rising (36%). Overall, the picture that emerges is that Bulgarians are not convinced of

Fig. 10. Trust in the EU by age group – based on data for 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: To what extent do you trust the following institutions/organisations? "I trust" reflects the sum of "I trust completely" and "I trust somewhat" and "I do not trust" reflects the sum of "I trust somewhat" and "I do not trust at all".

Fig. 11. Main factors for access to senior government positions – based on data for 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: Which of the following factors matter most when appointing people to senior government positions?

the meritocratic nature of their society – connections, money (46-47%) and the popularity of candidates for positions are the leading factors, with significantly fewer respondents highlighting the candidate's education (22%), knowledge and skills (17%) and experience (18%) (Fig. 11).

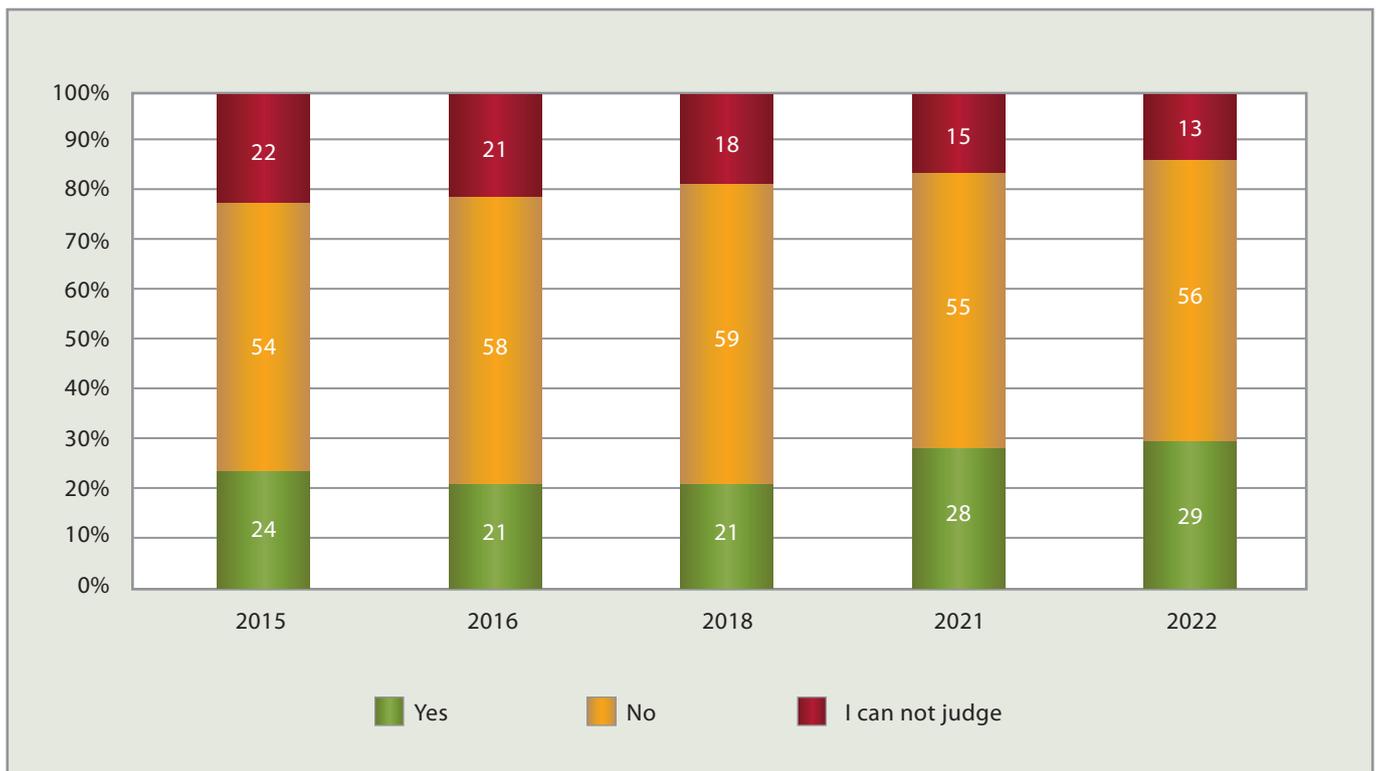
REPRESENTATION AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE

In the three surveys carried out between 2015 and 2018, the proportion of respondents who do not feel represented in governance bodies has increased slightly but steadily. The share of respondents who do not agree with the statement that there is at least one MP in the National Assembly whom they trust and whom they know represents them and people like them, rises from 54% in 2015 to 60% in 2018. The majority of people live with the feeling that they and their interests are not represented in the governance of the country, which in itself calls into question the democratic nature of governance.

In 2021-2022, there is a slight increase in the perceived representativeness of parliament: 28-29% believe that they have MPs who represent them. This should not come as much of a surprise, because in this period there were three parliamentary elections at which people could vote. Rather surprisingly, despite this fact, the proportion of those who feel represented remains below a third of the electorate (Fig. 12). There are many reasons for this, but one explanation is the record-low turnout in the parliamentary elections of November 2021 – the majority of Bulgarians did not actually go to the polls and did not feel engaged with the representatives they voted for.

The weak perception of representation in government bodies affects certain demographic groups to a greater extent than the national average. Among those living in regional centres and in cities in general, the share of those who disagree with the statement that there is at least one MP in the National Assembly whom they trust is slightly higher than among those living in Sofia and in rural areas. Less educated citizens feel less represented in the National Assembly than more educated ones. The feeling of exclusion from representative bodies is particularly strong

Fig. 12. Trust in members of Parliament – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "There is at least one MP from my constituency in the National Assembly who I trust and know is protecting the interests of people like me and my family"?

among Roma – only 3% in 2018 and 12% in 2022 of them agree that there is at least one MP in the National Assembly whom they personally trust and whom they know represents people like them and their families. On average, 29% agree with this statement. Interestingly, only 8% of Turks say they have representatives in parliament, which is strange given the enduring presence of the MRF in Bulgarian politics (Fig. 13). Apparently, people treat this issue as an expression of their overall distrust in the representative system of democracy, although in this case certain frustrations may also be involved, that voters have regarding the leadership or policy of the MRF.

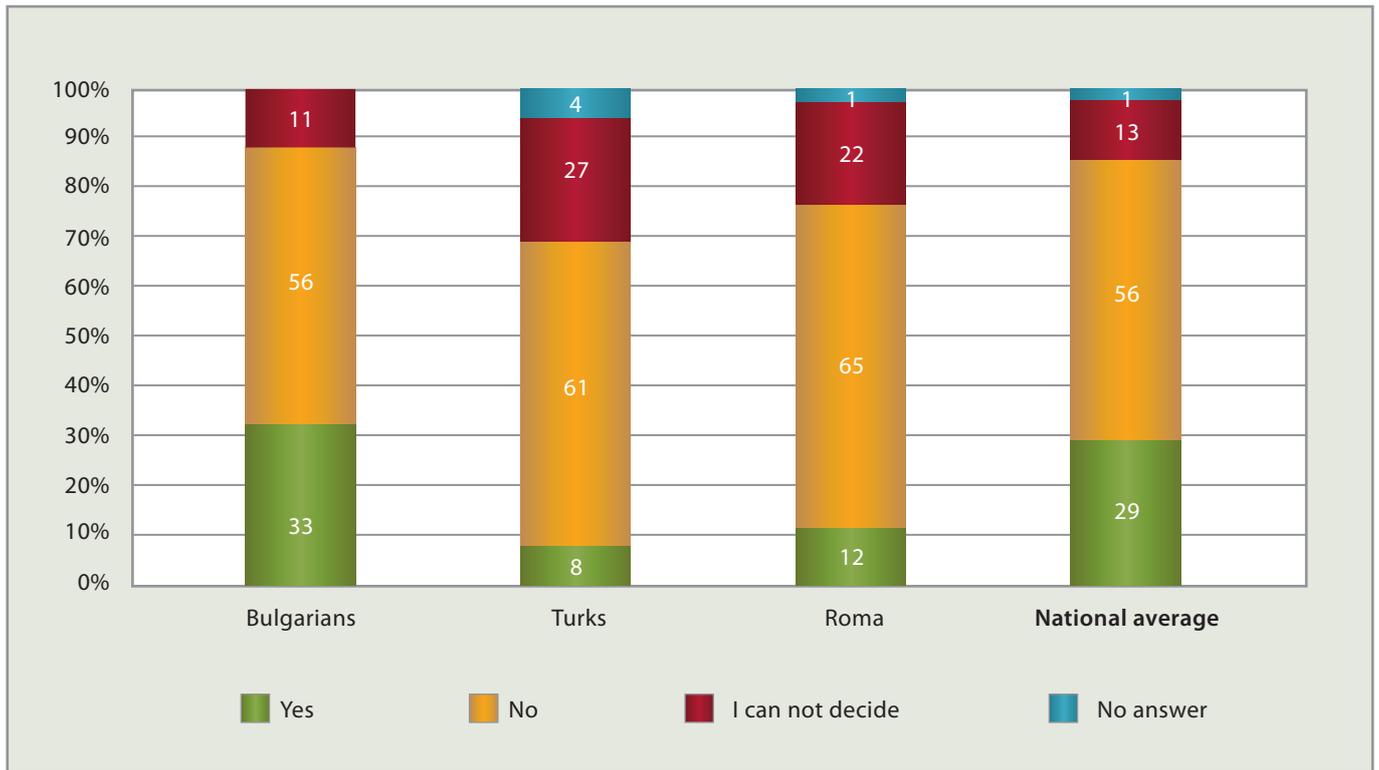
The perceived under-representation of citizens in state bodies also affects local self-government, albeit to a lesser extent than central government. In 2018, more than half of respondents (52%) disagreed with the statement that there is at least one municipal councillor on their municipal council whom they personally trust and know represents their interests. 27% agree with this statement, a 5% decrease compared to 2015. The perception of under-representation in local government af-

fects young people to a greater extent than those aged between 30 and 60. Among those aged 18-29, only one in five (19%) agree that there is at least one municipal councillor in their municipality whom they trust. Around 30% of young people answer this question by saying they cannot judge (Fig. 14).

The picture for 2021-2022 has not changed much, indicating that attitudes to local government are not dramatically affected by changes in central government. Despite the turbulence in the national politics of the last two years, the attitude towards the local authorities remains constant.

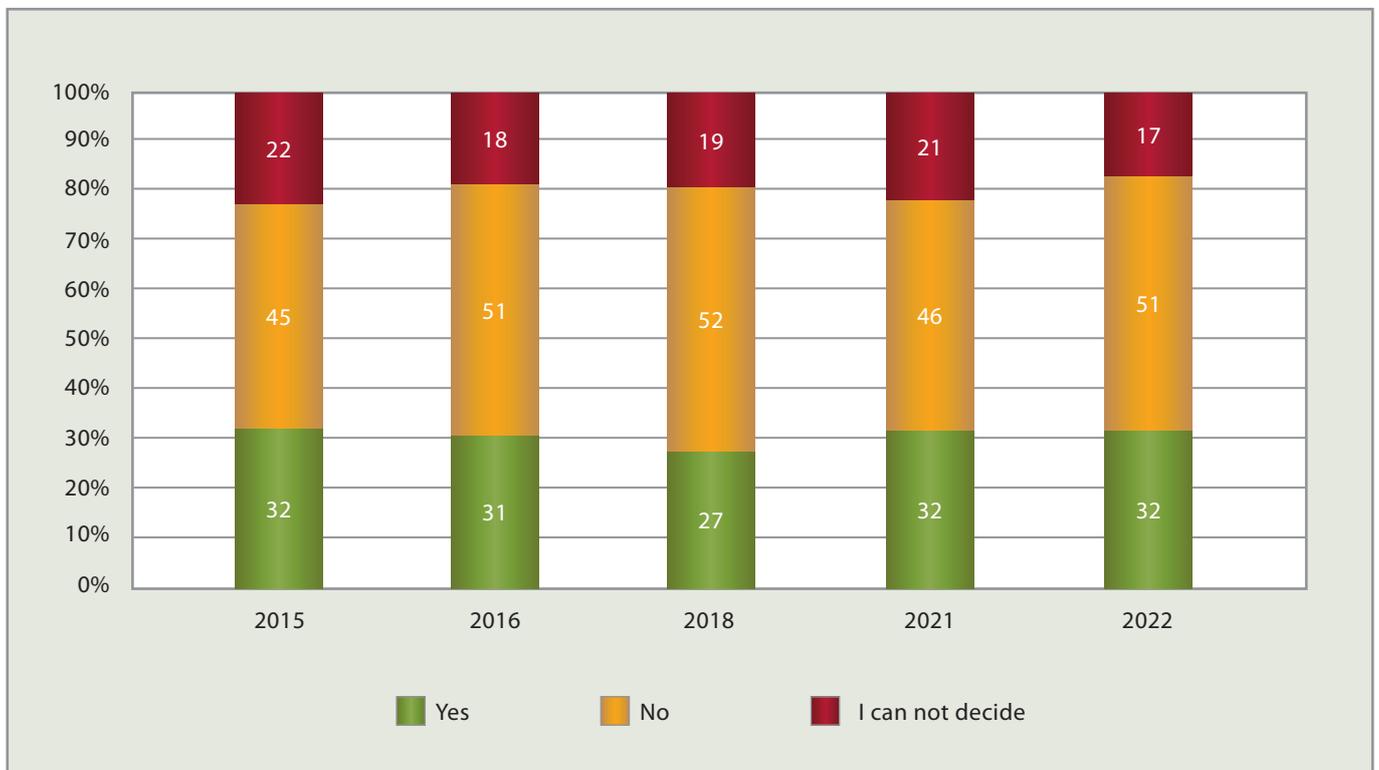
All the studies conducted so far register not only a low sense of citizen representation in governance, but also a low degree of personal participation in any organised forms of public life. The largest share of respondents (about 80%) stated that they were not members of any organisations. In the period 2021-2022, only 2-5% report being members of political parties, only 4% are members of trade unions, and 4-6% are members of clubs. Over the last 20 years, the proportion of people who say they are not members of any

Fig. 13. Trust in individual MPs by ethnic group, June 2022



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "There is at least one MP from my constituency in the National Assembly who I trust and know is protecting the interests of people like me and my family"?

Fig. 14. Trust in municipal councilors – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "There is at least one representative on my Municipal Council that I trust and know is protecting the interests of people like me and my family"?

organisation has slightly decreased from 85% in 2002 to 78-81% in 2018-2022. Over the same period, membership of political parties and trade unions has declined, but membership of clubs has increased (albeit very slightly). People who state that they are members of a non-governmental organisation remain within up to 3% (Table 3).

When people engage in individual acts of civic participation at all, these are most often acts of charity: in 2018, 29% reported making a donation to a charity campaign in the past year. In 2021, that percentage is 21. Participation in political protests understandably increased between 2015 (7%) and 2021 (9%). This difference is impressive because 2015 should bring memories of the major protests in Bulgaria in 2013, which partially continued in early 2014. Other forms of civic participation have not undergone any particular development in the period 2018-2021, and overall engagement remains within limited minorities of around 10%. For 2021, 10% of respondents participated in signing petitions, 7% worked as volunteers, 6% made proposals to the administration, 4% participated in action to boycott certain goods or services, and 2% participated in strikes (an expression of the rather weak trade union organizations). The low level of citizen involvement in political or civic initiatives is a persistent problem – approximately the same levels of non-participation were recorded in the 2015 survey (Fig. 15).

Compared to the situation 12 years ago (2006 and 2007), however, two positive trends have emerged in the last three years in terms of citizen participation in the governance of the country. On the one hand, the proportion of citizens who remain passive when faced with cases of violations of the rules of public life has more than doubled. If in 2006 one in three (or 36%) of respondents answered that they do nothing once someone breaks the rules and gets in their way, in 2021 the share of passives drops to 16%.

The second positive development is that the share of respondents who see institutions as a means to resolve their problems is increasing: in 2018, 43% reported that if someone violates the rules and obstructs them, they file a complaint with the relevant institution. (For comparison, in 2006 and 2007, this share was 32-33%.) The positive trend continues in 2021, when the share of respondents who file a complaint with institutions is already 49% – almost a majority of citizens. This question is important because it can also be seen as an indirect question of trust in the institutions – despite the abstractly stated high levels of distrust, the willingness of citizens to use the institutions is growing, which is a kind of signal of consolidation of democratic attitudes.

In a similar vein, the data on the proportion of people who take independent action to remove violations can also be viewed: in 2018, 38% of respondents report-

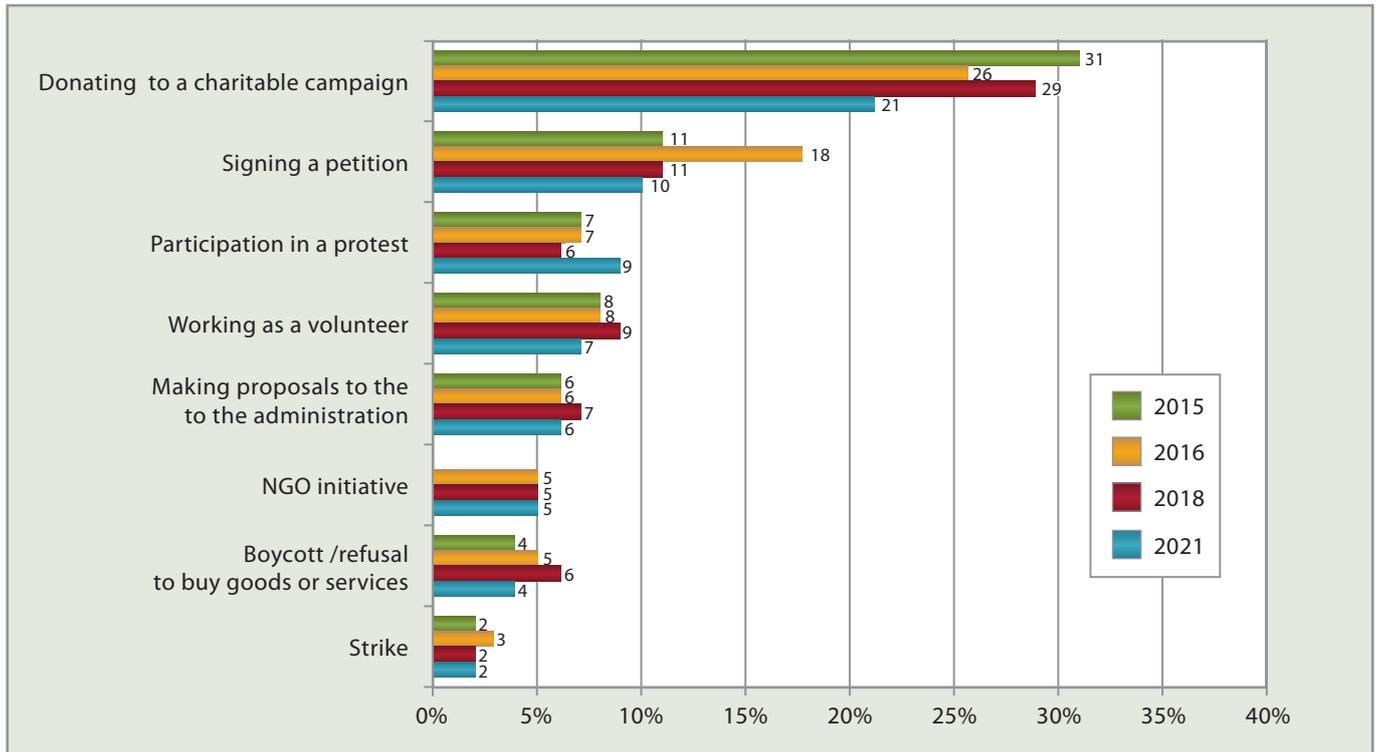
Table 3. Share of party and organization members by year (%)

Organization	2002	2006	2007	2015	2016	2018	2021	2022
Political party	6	5	6	8	6	4	5	2
Trade Union	5	5	5	7	6	2	4	4
Community Centre	2	2	3	4	4	4	3	3
Sports Association/ Fishing & Hunting Club ⁷	0.5	2	3	3	4	3	3	5
Club	1	3	3	6	6	5	4	6
NGO	1	0.5	1	3	2	2	2	3
Professional/business organisation	0.5	1	1	2	2	2	4	4
Other	1	1	1	0.4	1	1	–	–
I'm not a member of any organisation	85	84	81	81	80	78	81	78

Q: Do you belong to any of the following organisations?

⁷ This response was not included in the 2002 and 2006 State of Society Survey questionnaires; it was added for the first time in 2007. The data for 2002-2007 are from a series of surveys under the generic title 'State of Society'.

Fig. 15. Forms of citizen participation – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: In the last 12 months, have you been involved in ... (each of the following separately)?

ed that when someone breaks the rules and obstructs them, they talk to the violator and ask them to stop; 30% of those who said that they remove obstructions themselves whenever possible. In 2021, the respective percentages are already 42 and 37 (Table 4). The increase in citizens' activism in cases of irregularities is an indicator of a sense of empowerment – people feel that they are strong enough to tackle certain problems by defending the rules of the democratic order.

Similar to the increased civic activism in cases of violations that directly affect their interests, respondents reported more often than in 2002 that they would take concrete action if they were dissatisfied with the country's governance. The share of those who would do nothing when dissatisfied with the country's governance drops from 38% (2002) to 29% (2018), and this result persists in 2021.

In 2018, the largest proportion of people (45%) said that if they were dissatisfied with the country's government, they would join a petition; one in three (31%) would join a rally/march; and one in five (21%) would participate in a strike. The 2018 survey also recorded an increased propensity of citizens who are dissatisfied with the country's governance to turn to Bulgarian and foreign media (12% reported that they would do

so, compared to only 2% in 2006). However, the proportion of those who would write to the social media if they were dissatisfied with the government of the country (14%) is slightly higher than the share of those who would turn to traditional Bulgarian or foreign media in the same case (12%).

In 2021 there are no major changes in this picture. Apparently 13-14% of people use social networks (in the Bulgarian case mostly Facebook) to send (and apparently receive) socio-political messages – this makes social networks an important element of the political public sphere. There is a moderate increase in the willingness to participate in rallies and marches (34%), which is probably a reflection of the serious social mobilisation of 2020. The readiness for strike action remains at around 20%, which is an indicator of the more limited influence of trade unions in the country – the serious social mobilisation of 2020 does not correlate with a corresponding increase in strike action: the willingness to take trade union action is decreasing (there is even a slight decline).

The Strasbourg Court of Human Rights also looks a likely ally for citizens – the share of those who report that they would go to Strasbourg if they were dissatisfied with the country's governance has risen steadily

Table 4. Civic activity in cases of transgression by year (%)

If someone violated your rights and disturbs you, you would:	2006	2007	2015	2016	2018	2021
I do nothing – such is life.	36	32	21	26	22	16
I complain to the relevant institution.	32	33	48	45	43	49
Demand from the perpetrator to stop.	22	23	37	39	38	42
Where possible, solve the problem on my own.	21	23	26	32	30	37
I take the law in my hands or hire others to deal with the perpetrator.	5	7	7	8	7	7
I persistently call, write to the relevant institution.	5	5	15	11	-	-
I cause them damage to punish them.	2	2	2	4	3	3
Organise a civic initiative (petition, protest).	1	2	4	3	4	4
No answer.	-	-	-	-	5	3

from 3% in 2006 to 11% in 2018. The reasons for this reversal could be of two types: first, there is a definite decline in trust in the EU, and citizens en masse do not distinguish between the different European institutions such as the EU, the Council of Europe, the ECtHR, etc. – the general decline affects everyone. Secondly, the increase in confidence that a problem can be solved by action within the country may also be the cause of a slight decline in the demand for solutions outside the country.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICAL PARTIES

As stated above, the vast majority of respondents (80-84%) do not trust the political parties in the

country. The share of those who trust them is only 11% (2022) and 13% (2021). Between 2021 and 2022, only between 2 and 5% of respondents said they belong to political parties, with 2022 recording the lowest level ever recorded in the surveys (2%), although it was never more than 8% of respondents (2015).

The dominant perception of political parties is as projects that are run by chairmen alone and in which party members have little or no influence on decision-making processes. In 2018, the largest proportion of respondents felt that the party chairperson had the most influence over the management of the party they voted for in the last election; only 23% of respondents felt that members of the party they voted for in the last parliamentary elections have an influence on its governance. In terms of these questions, there is almost no

Table 5. Civic activity in case of bad governance (%)

If you are not satisfied with the governance of the country, would you take any action?	2002	2006	2007	2015	2016	2018	2021
I am satisfied with the governance of the country.	3	7	8	7	5	2	2
I would join a petition.	35	23	26	38	41	45	40
I would take part a rally, a march.	23	21	19	26	30	31	34
I would take part a strike.	19	11	16	17	22	21	20
I am ready to take to the streets to protest.	9	5	7	8	13	12	16
I would demand on early elections.	11	8	7	15	18	16	19
I would participate in an attack on parliament.	6	4	5	4	5	5	5
I would file a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights.	-	3	5	8	8	11	8
I would turn to Bulgarian and foreign media.	-	2	4	6	9	12	11
I would write on social media.	-	-	-	-	-	14	13
Other.	1	1	1	1	1	2	-
I wouldn't do anything.	38	52	46	35	33	29	29
No answer.	-	-	-	-	-	6	5

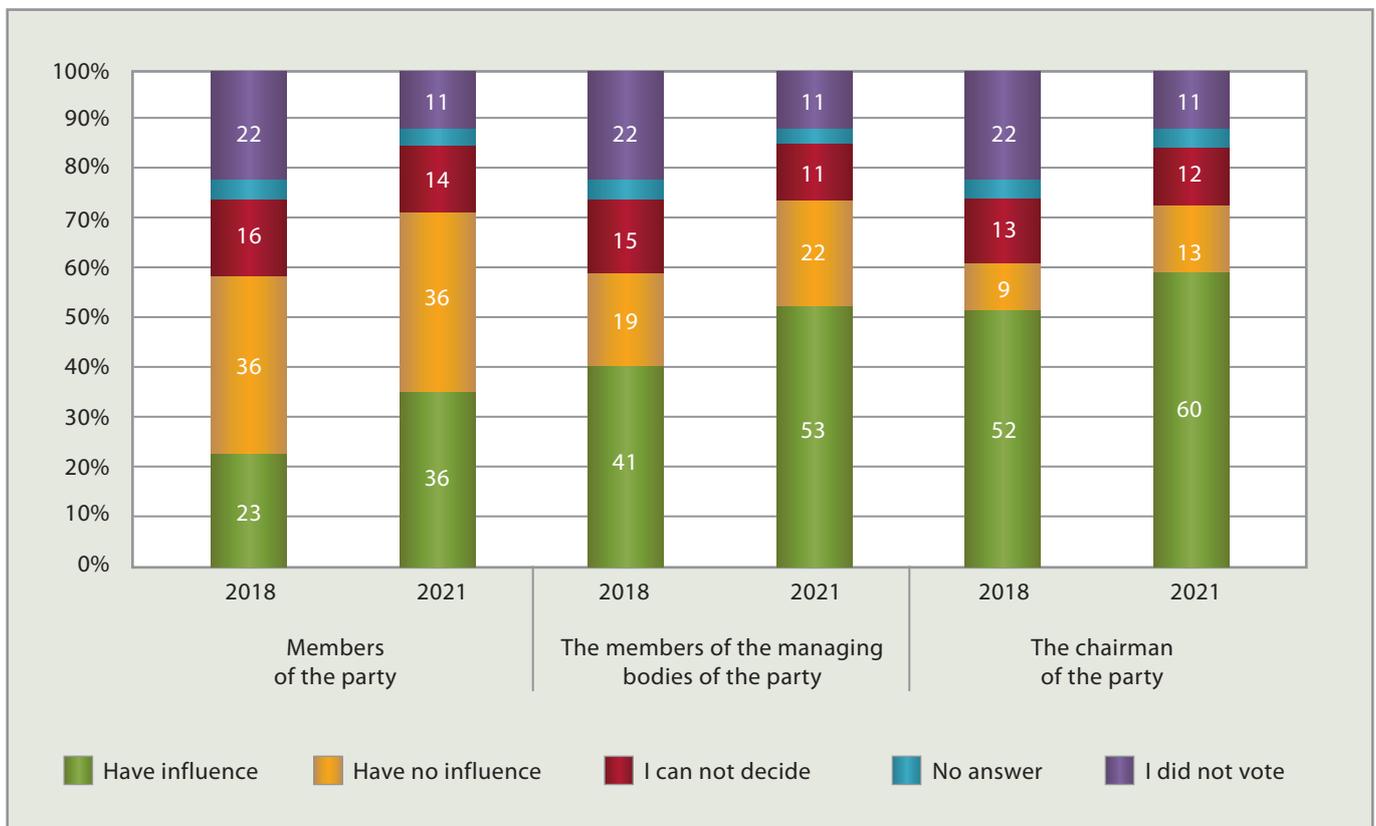
change compared to the results of the previous survey (2016); the only difference is that the share of those who believe that the decisive voice in the management of the parties belongs solely to their chairmen has increased by about 6%.

In 2021, there is again a significant increase in the share of people who think that leaders have the most influence in parties: this share is already 60%, 8% more than in 2018. Correspondingly, the number of those who think the party leadership has influence is also growing significantly – 53% (Fig. 16). From this point of view, it is evident that Bulgarians imagine the parties mainly as leadership, but this does not exclude the influence of the membership mass and the rest of the organization's leadership. On the contrary, more and more people are realising that there are multiple factors and decision-making centres in parties. From this point of view, the results are nuanced and even demonstrate some progress in the political culture of the citizens, although the tendency towards personalisation of partisanship persists.

The 2018 survey demonstrates a significant increase in the share of people who see substantive overlap between the political parties: in 2015, the share of those who do not think that the change of parties in government leads to a change in state policy was 54%, and in 2018 it is already 68%. Those agreeing with this statement were 23% of respondents in 2015 and only 13% in 2018.

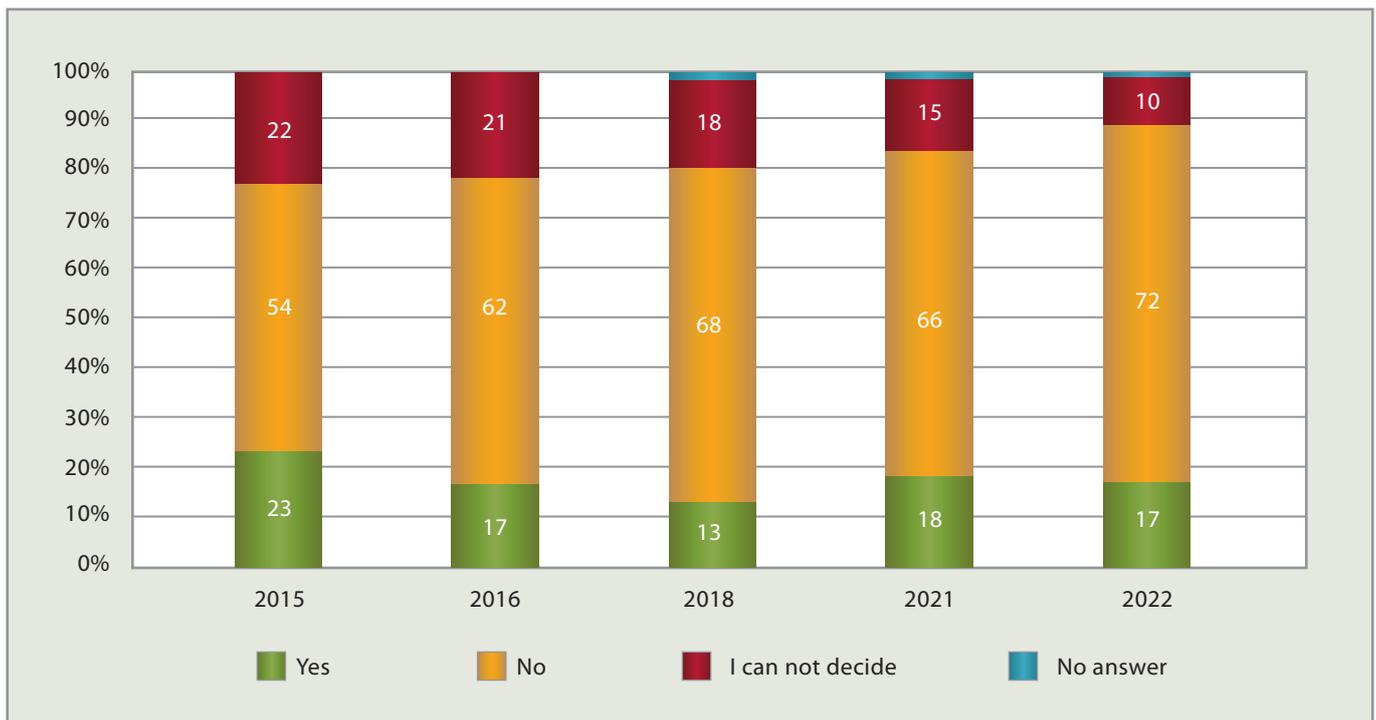
In the new surveys there is some improvement in these indicators – 18% for 2021 and 17% for 2022 believe that a change of government also leads to a change of policy. This issue is important because part of citizens' frustration with democratic procedures is related to the perception that elections do not lead to real change and alternatives. What is interesting in the Bulgarian case, however, is that the proportion of people who are convinced that there is no real change of policy is growing – it is now 72% (this is possible because of the reduction in those who are "unable to judge") (Fig. 17). In this sense, the sense of having no alternatives has not only diminished, but increased by 2022, and this is a prerequisite for disenchantment with democratic processes.

Fig. 16. Governance of the parties – based on data for 2018 and 2021



Q: In your opinion, what influence do each of the following have on the governance of the party you voted for in the last parliamentary elections? The sum of those who answered "Very much influence" and "Much influence" is indicated as "Have influence", and the sum of those who answered "Little influence" and "No influence at all" is indicated as "Have no influence".

Fig. 17. Competition among parties – data for 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: Do you think that the change of ruling parties in Bulgaria leads to a real change in the state policy in general?

RULE OF LAW

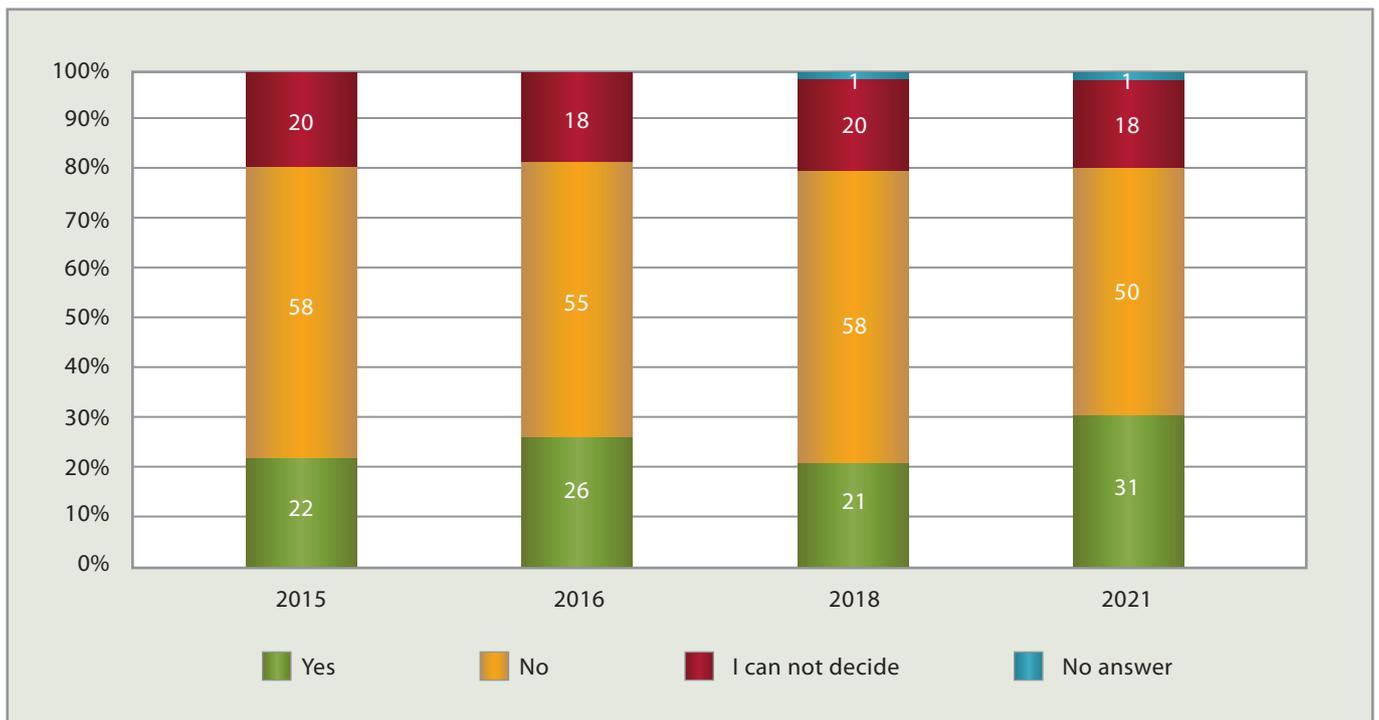
The public attitudes surveys conducted between 2015 and 2018 show that the EU values discussed (democracy, rule of law and protection of fundamental human rights) are the the most acute problems in Bulgaria. As mentioned above, in 2018 a significant majority of respondents (56%) stated that they had no confidence in national courts. Also in 2018, the most significant proportion of respondents (58%) disagreed that the laws in our country are fair, and 67% disagreed that the laws are clear and understandable to citizens. Only 21% of people agree with the statement that laws in our country are fair; only 14% think that laws are clear and understandable for citizens. Between 2015 and 2018, there has been almost no change in this respect, which shows that there are persistent negative assessments of the quality of legislation in the country, and this is as much a rule of law problem as a problem of the democratic nature of governance.

The 2021 survey recorded some improvement in the perception of the fairness of the laws: the proportion of those giving a positive response increased by 10% (to 31%), while the proportion giving a negative

response decreased by 8% (to 50%) (Fig. 18). This is without a doubt a positive trend and record within the 2015 surveys and since earlier. Similarly, the problem of clarity of laws has also declined, with a 10% drop in the proportion of people finding laws unclear between 2018 and 2021 (Fig. 19). The question regarding these positive trends is whether this will be a lasting trend or rather a conjunctural effect of the protest mobilisations against Borissov's third government in 2020.

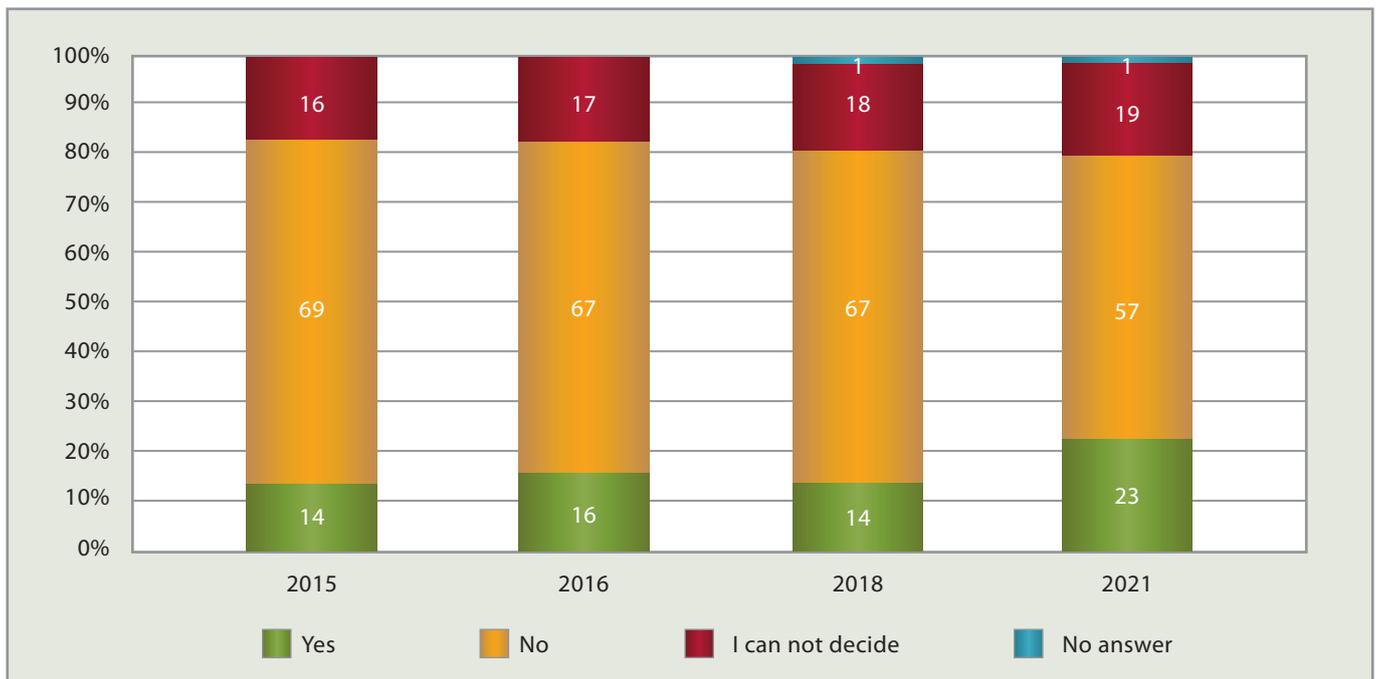
Citizens' low trust in the rule of law affects both the way laws are passed by political bodies and the way they are applied by the courts. In 2018, three out of four respondents (76%) disagreed with the statement that laws in our country are applied equally to everyone; only 8% agreed with this statement. In terms of responses to this question, there was no change from the two surveys conducted in 2015 and 2016. Interestingly, the perception of unequal application of laws increased in 2021 to 85% – only 8% remained convinced otherwise (Fig. 20). This result is not easy to explain against the backdrop of a general increase in indicators related to the rule of law. One possible factor for this deterioration is the incomplete reform of the judiciary and especially the prosecution, which is perceived as politicized.

Fig. 18. Are the laws fair? – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "Our laws are fair"?

Fig. 19. Are the laws clear and comprehensible? – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021

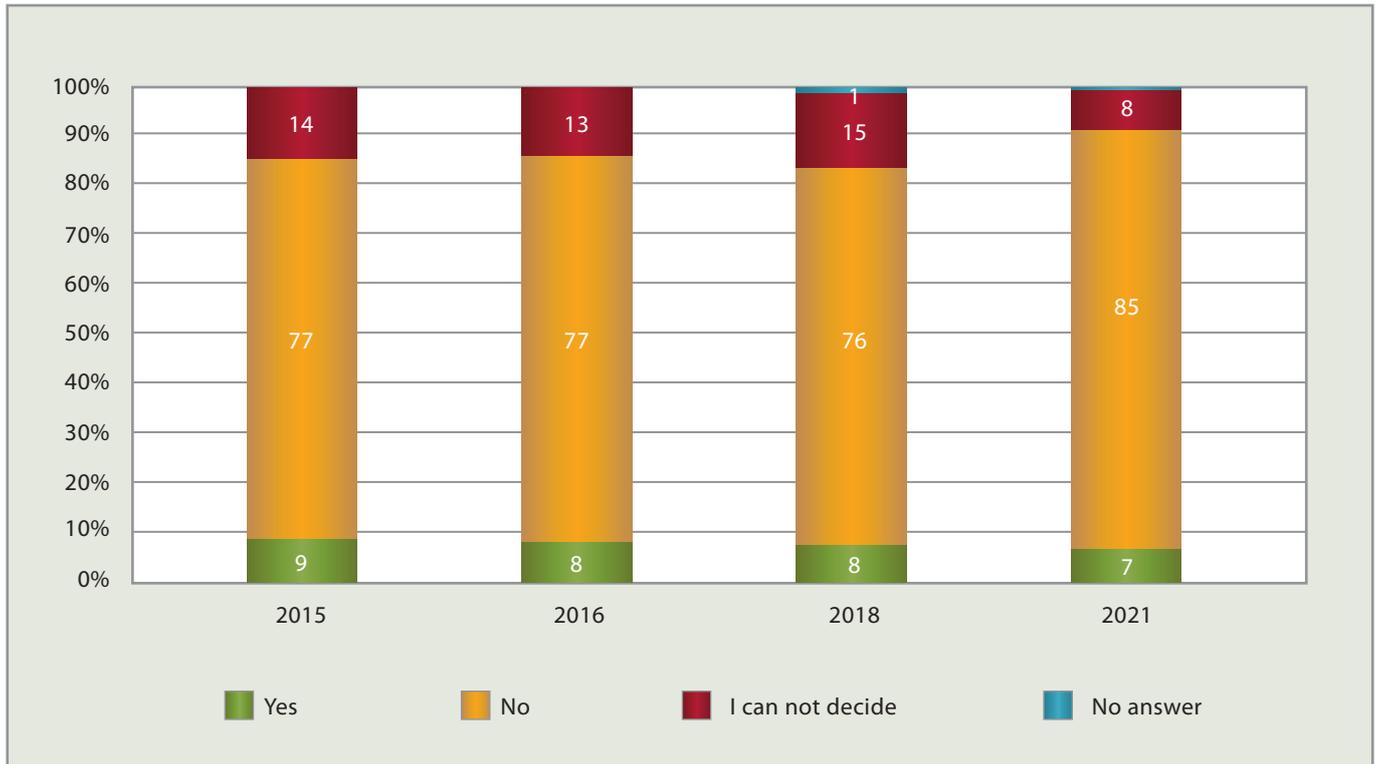


Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "Our laws are clear and understandable to citizens"?

The crisis with the rule of law in Bulgaria affects not only the legislative branch and the judiciary, but also the executive. In 2018, almost half of respondents felt that the government was not acting within

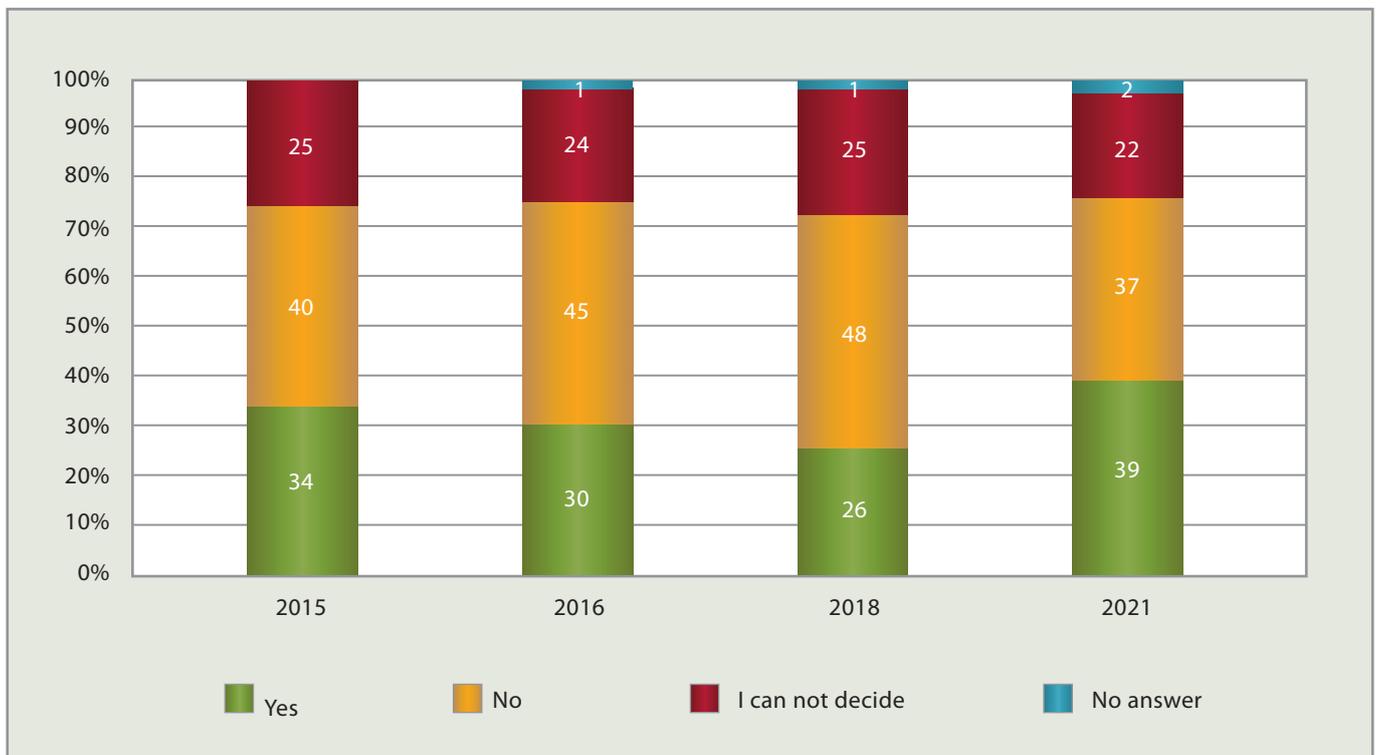
the law. Electoral preferences matter. Those who voted for GERB in the last parliamentary elections were the only group where more than half (53%) agreed that the government acted within the law.

Fig. 20. Do the laws equally apply? – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



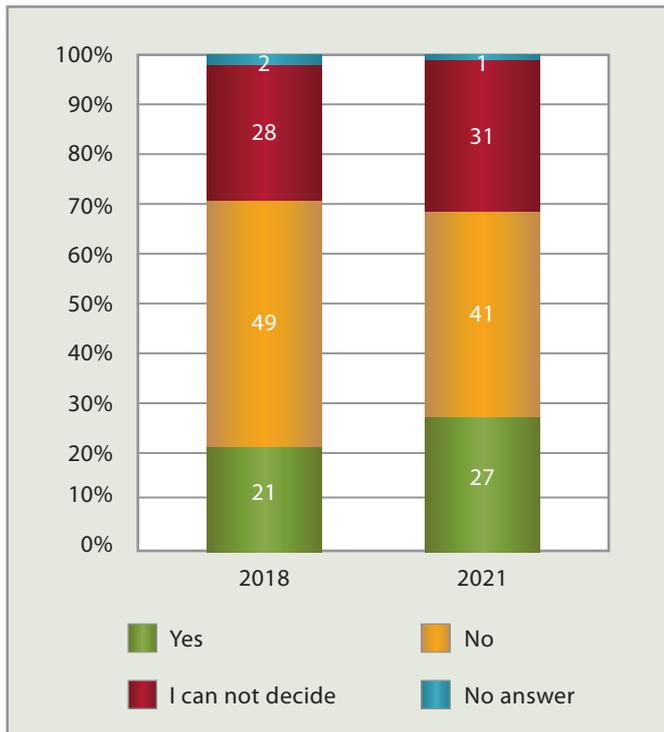
Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "The laws apply equally to all citizens"?

Fig. 21. Government acting within the law – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "Our government acts within the law"?

Fig. 22. Courts restrain government – based on 2018 and 2021 data



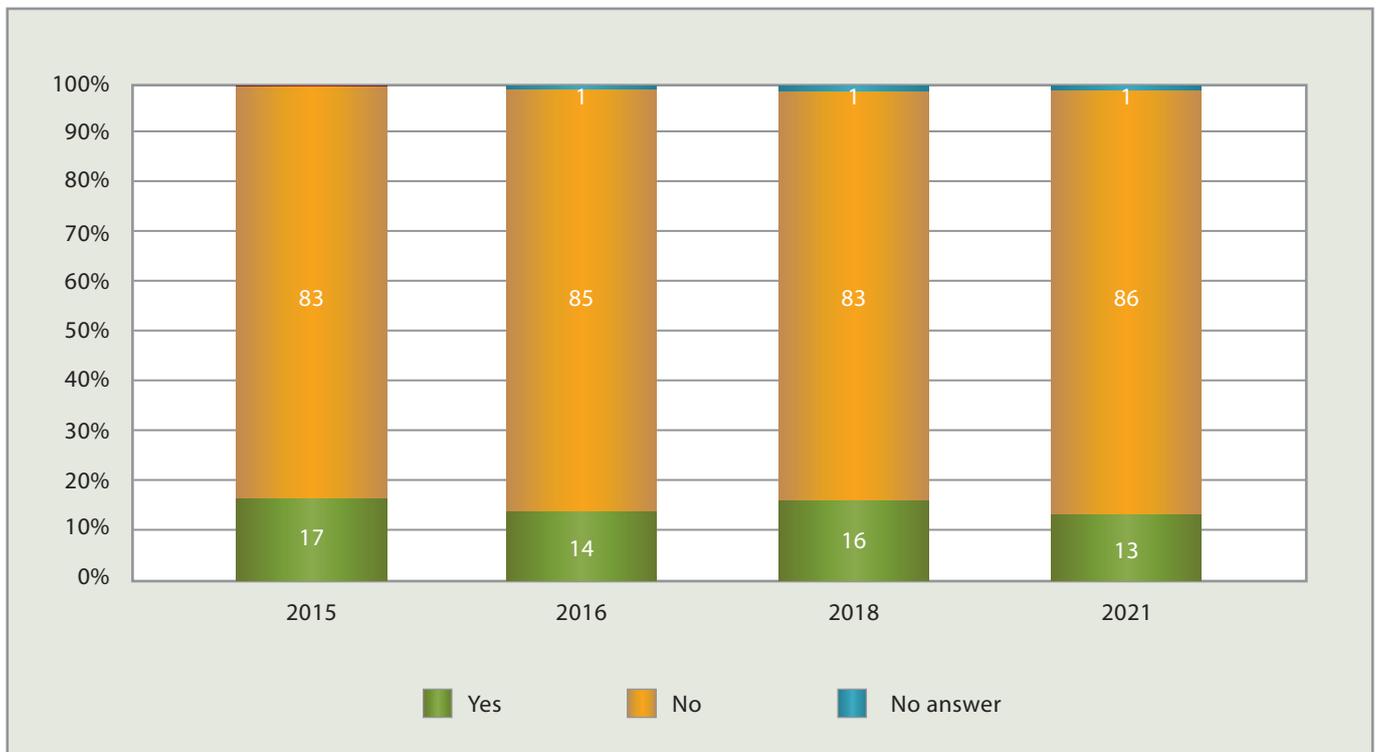
Q: Do you agree with the following statement: "The courts are preventing the government from breaking the law"?

Even among them, however, a quarter disagreed with this statement.

In 2021, the share of respondents who believe that the government does not act within the law has dropped significantly from 48 to 37%. Correspondingly, those convinced otherwise increased from 26 to 39% (Fig. 21). These changes are an indication that the 2021 election cycle has restored people's confidence that they can scrutinise the government's activities for legality and make corrections through voting when necessary. For the first time since 2015, the number of citizens who believe that the government complies with the law outweighs those who believe the opposite. However, here too the proportion of sceptics is very high.

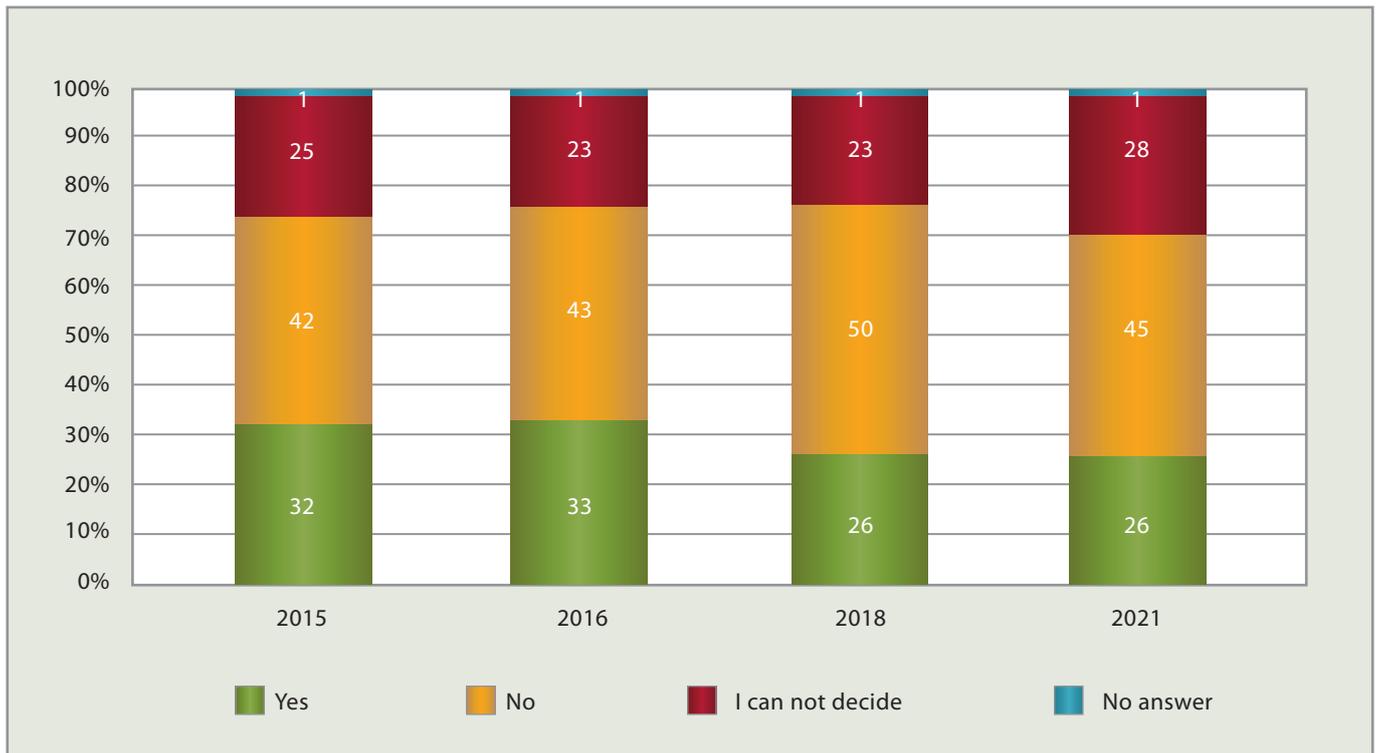
Positive trends can also be observed in the opinion on the work of the courts. While in 2018, half of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the courts prevent the government from breaking the law, i.e., they did not think, that the courts are performing their main constitutional function, their share has fallen by 8% in 2021 to 41% overall. Correspondingly, those who are satisfied with the court's supervisory functions have increased by 6% (to 27%) (Fig. 22).

Fig. 23. Personal experience with the court – by data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: Have you had to go to court in the last year?

Fig. 24. Expectation of a fair trial – based on data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: *If you had to go to court, do you think you would get a fair trial? "Yes" – sum of "definitely yes" and "rather yes"; "No" – sum of "definitely no" and "rather no".*

The research shows that on the one hand, a significant proportion of respondents have an opinion on whether the laws in the country are applied equally, but on the other hand, few citizens have direct experience with the courts. In 2018, only one in six citizens (or 16% of respondents) reported having had to go to court in the last year before the survey: this proportion falls to 13% in 2021. The vast majority of respondents (86%) have no personal experience of the courts and base their perceptions of the quality of their work on what politicians and journalists say about the subject (Fig. 23). In this sense, the opinions expressed on these issues reflect the general attitude of citizens on the subject of the rule of law. The improvement in some of the indicators by 2021 is most likely a reflection of increased optimism about the fight against corruption and the reform of the judiciary; the deterioration in some of the indicators, on the other hand, can also be explained by disillusionment with these particular policies.

Even when citizens have visited a courthouse in the past year, it has most often not been to attend a trial. In 2021, the most common reason people visited a courthouse was to obtain a copy of documents, and

Table 6. Reasons for visiting the court
(% of those who stated that they attended court in last 12 months) – based on data for 2018 and 2021

If "Yes", for what reason did you attend court in the last year?	2018	2021
To have a copy of a document issued	60	55
As a party in court proceedings	18	29
As a witness in a trial	18	20
No answer	3	0
Expert witness	3	2
Other	2	7
I work in a court	2	2
As a juror	<1	1

only 29% of those who visited a courthouse in the past year appeared as a party or witness in a case, i.e. they had a first-hand impression of the basic workings of a court (there is some increase here compared to 2018 – 18%). In the future, the development of the electronic provision of services by the judiciary (including the issuance of copies of documents) will increasingly limit the personal contact between the courts and citizens and the opportunities for citizens to form their assessment of the work of the court based on their personal impressions.

Although one of the main objectives of the institution of the jury is to ensure the participation of the public in the process of justice, the results of the survey show that a very limited number of people (about 1% of those who have attended court in the last 12 months) are involved in the work of the court in this capacity, i.e. the institution of the jury is clearly not achieving its main objective (Table 6).

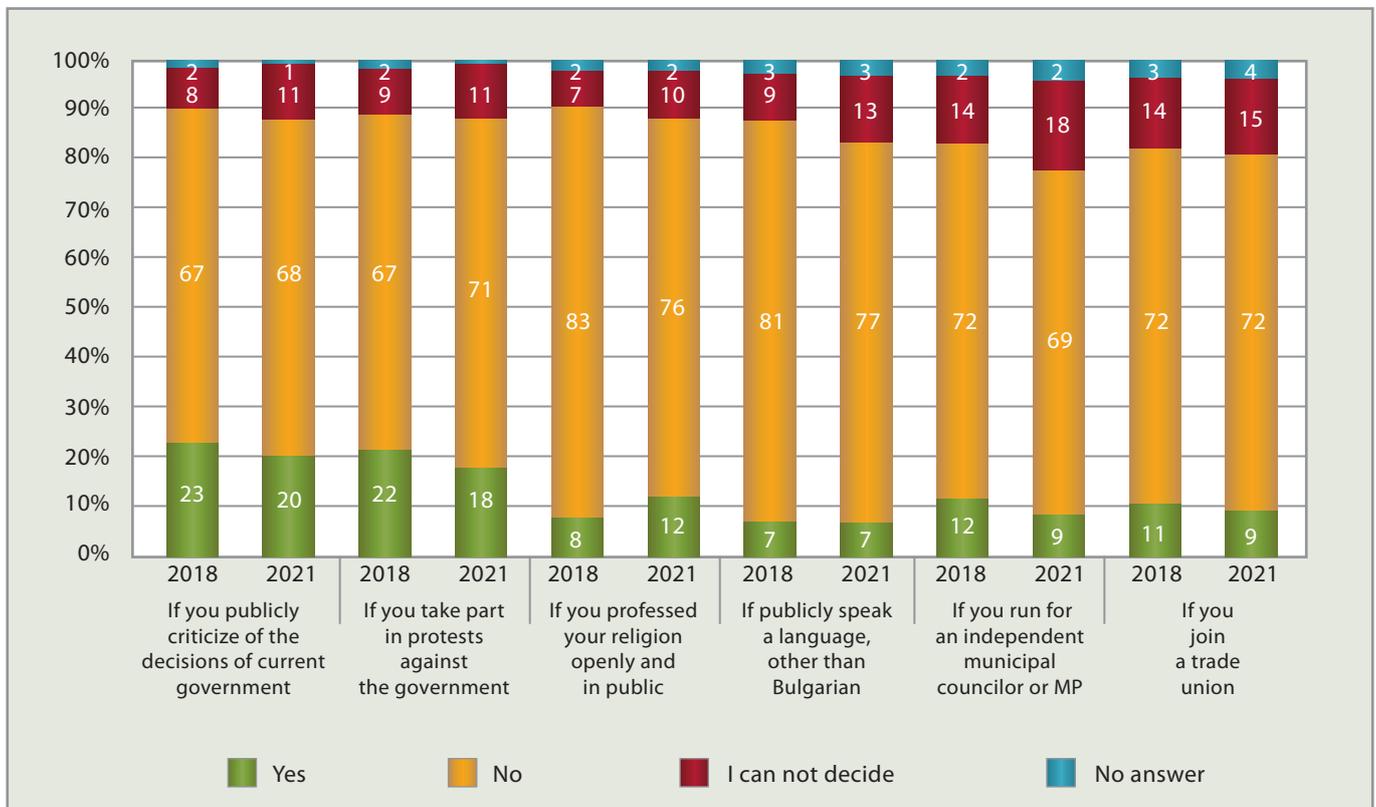
In 2021, there are some positive developments in relation to one key indicator: the proportion of people who believe that if they have to go to court, they

are more likely than not to receive a fair trial drops from 50% in 2018 to 45%. But in 2015, this percentage was 42 – indicating that there is not any fundamental shift in the attitudes (Fig. 24). The conclusion is that, in general, there are many more people who have no expectations of a fair process in Bulgaria than there are those who have confidence in the fairness of the judiciary.

DEMOCRACY AS A SYSTEM OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Among the citizens there are widespread and enduring attitudes that their basic civil rights are protected and that they can enjoy them in peace in the public sphere without fear of sanctions or reprisals. The overwhelming share of working respondents, 76% in 2021 (83% in 2018), believe they are not likely to lose their job or business if they openly and publicly disclose their religious affiliation; 77% in 2021 (81% in 2018.) say they are unlikely to lose their job or busi-

Fig. 25. Risk of unfair dismissal – based on data from 2018 and 2021



Q: How likely are you to lose your job/business if... (for each statement). "Yes" represents the sum of those who answered "Very likely" and "Somewhat likely"; "No" represents the sum of those who answered "Somewhat unlikely" and "Not at all likely".

ness if they speak a language other than Bulgarian in public; 72% believe they are unlikely to lose their job/business if they sign up to join a trade union; and 71% (67% in 2018) say they are unlikely to lose their job/business if they take part in a protest against the government.

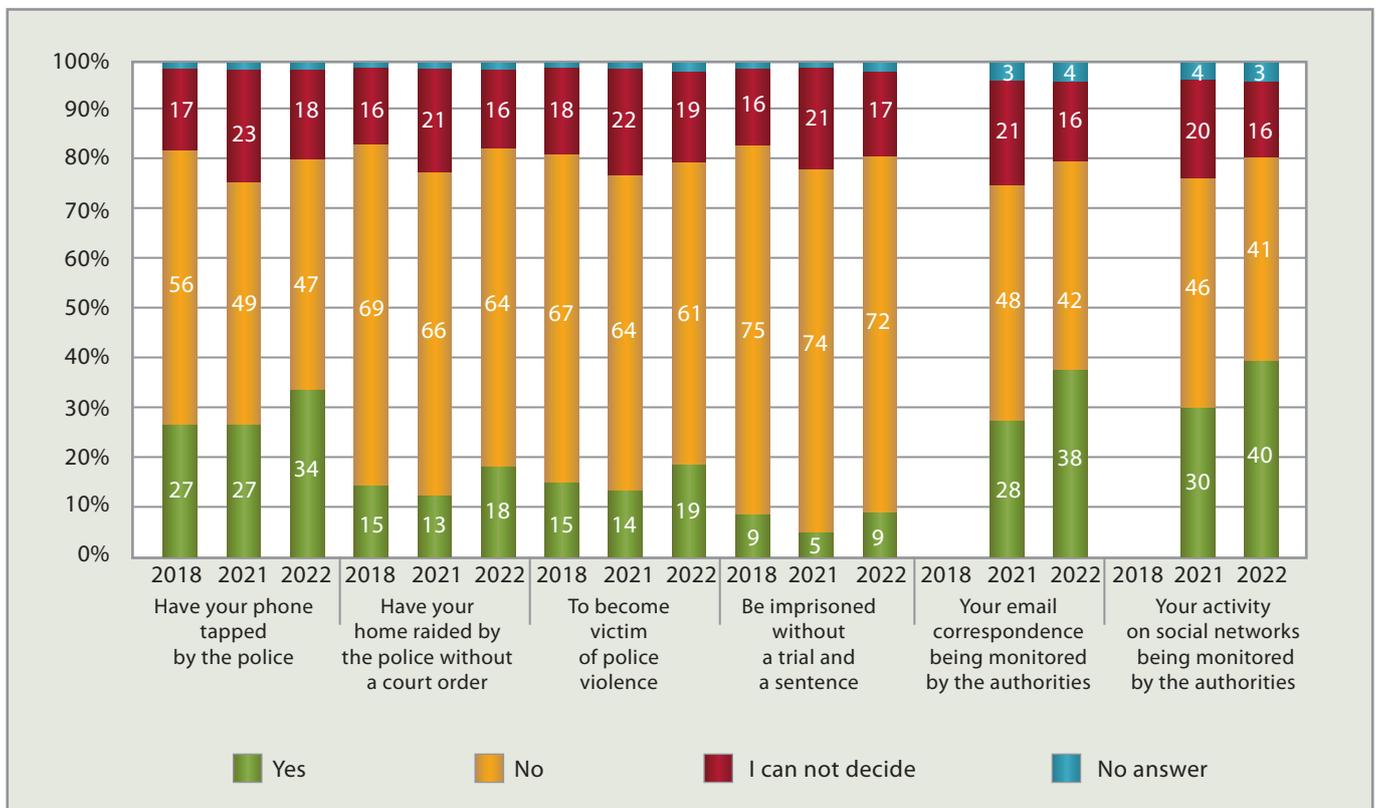
Although the proportion of respondents who are of the opposite opinion is considerably lower, the fact that for many people the exercise of political and civil rights is associated with certain risks cannot be ignored. 20% of working people believe that they are likely to lose their job or business if they publicly criticise the government's decisions or if they participate in protests against it (18%); 9% of working people say that there is a risk of losing their job/business if they sign up to a trade union or if they run as an independent councillor or MP (Fig. 25).

The most significant proportion of respondents feel confident that their rights are protected against unwarranted intervention by law enforcement agencies. Three-quarters of people (74%) in 2021 believe they are not likely to be jailed without a trial and conviction in the next 12 months; 66% say they are not likely to

have their home raided by police without a court order; 64% say they are not likely to be a victim of police violence; and 49% say they are not likely to have their phone tapped by police. For most of these, the 2022 versus 2021 survey registers some deterioration.

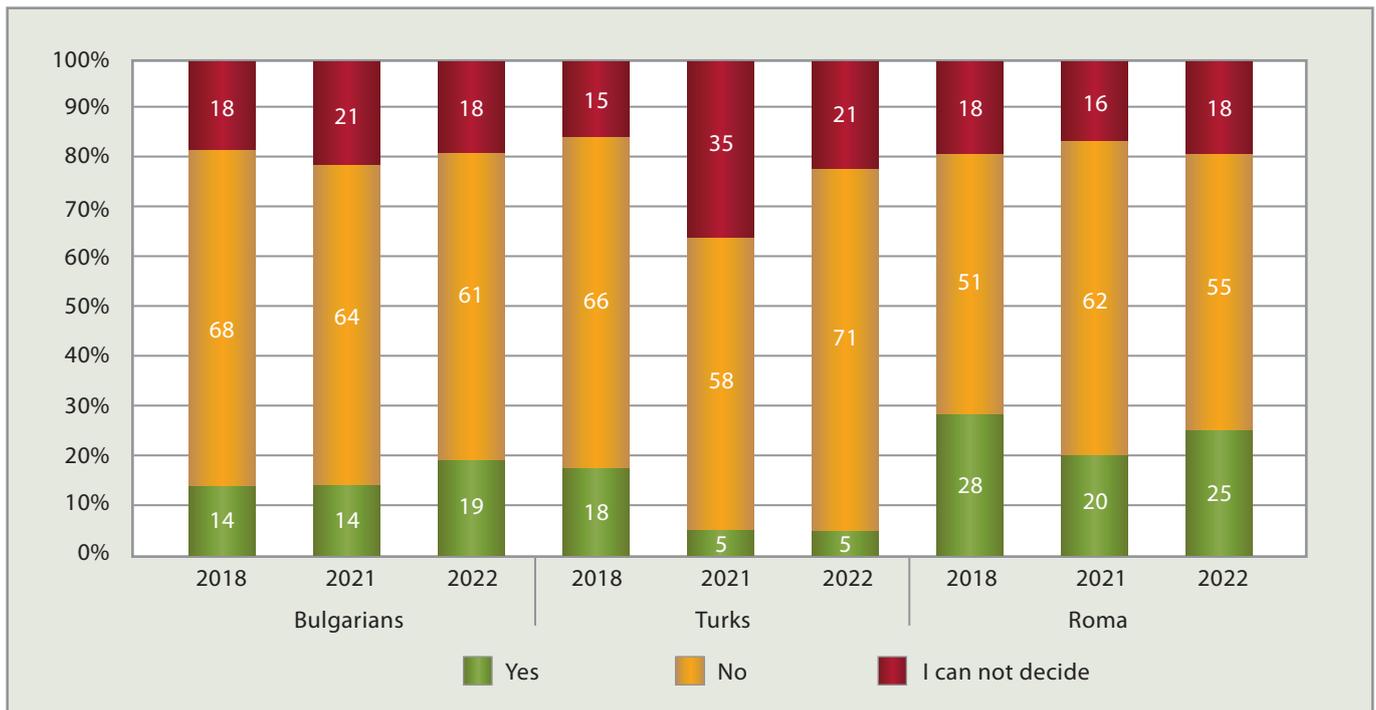
In June 2022, the number of people worried that their phone might be tapped (34%, up from 27% nine months earlier); that their home might be raided by police without a warrant (18%, up from 13%); that they might be the victim of police violence (19%, up from 14%); and that their social media activity might be monitored (40%, up from 30%). Explanations here can go in two directions – the first is that the actions of the four-party coalition government have contributed to such a deterioration in indicators. Some of the opposition parties – GERB and MRF – have made such accusations, particularly with regard to the arrest the leader of the opposition Borissov, as well as the actions of the Interior Ministry during the election process. The second explanation is that the deterioration of the indicators is a function of the general sense of crisis in the governance of the state – simply all key indicators deteriorated for the first few months of 2022.

Fig. 26. Risk of illegal invasions of privacy – based on data for 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: In your opinion, are any of these events likely to happen to you personally in the next 12 months?

Fig. 27. Risk of police violence (by ethnicity) – based on data for 2018, 2021 and 2022



Q: In your opinion, are any of these events likely to happen to you personally in the next 12 months: "Becoming a victim of police violence"?

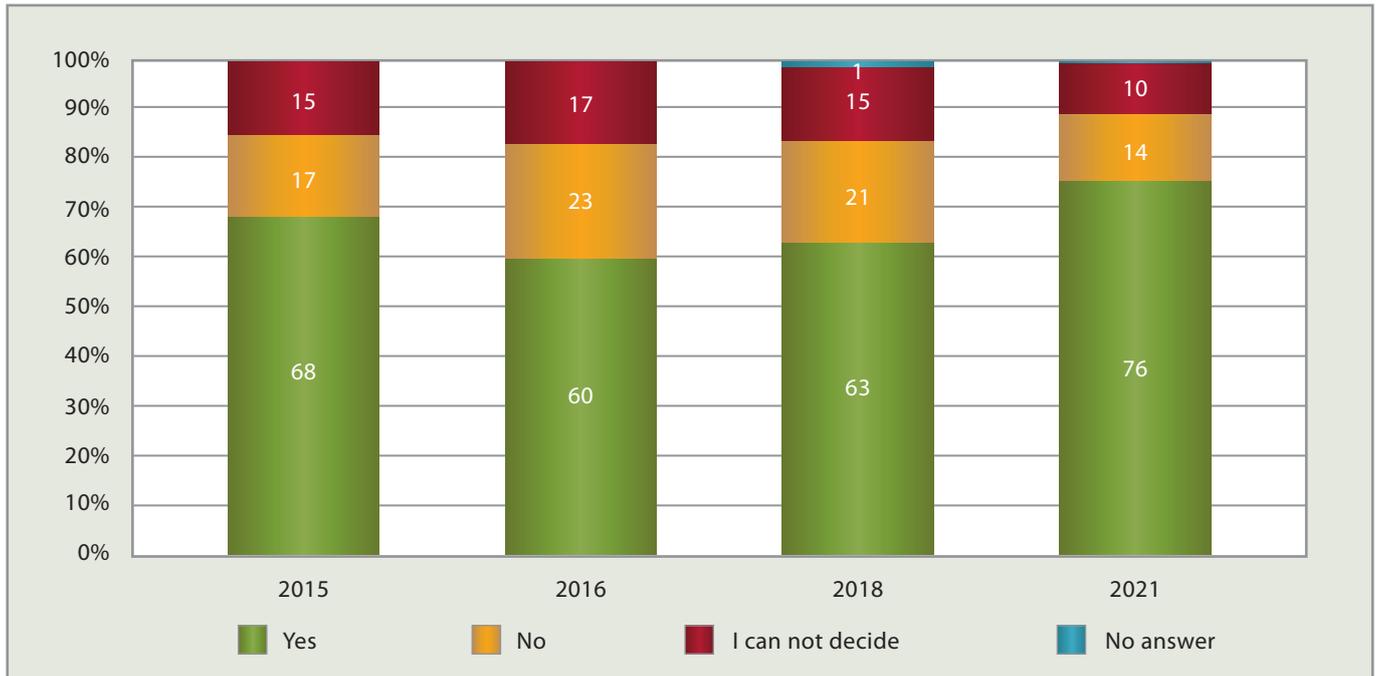
It seems that citizens in general feel most vulnerable with regard to the privacy of their private correspondence and the ability of the authorities to monitor their activity on social networks. Virtually one in three fears that their phone may be tapped and their email correspondence monitored by the authorities; 40% of respondents and virtually one in two with an opinion on the matter fear that their social networking activity may be monitored by the authorities. Not to be overlooked is the fact that approximately one in five respondents believes that in the next 12 months there is a risk of being the victim of a police raid or having their home invaded by the police without a warrant, and one in ten believes that there is a risk of being imprisoned without a trial or conviction. Although respondents expressing such concerns represent a minority, the data show the existence of significant and growing groups of citizens who do not feel fully protected against possible police arbitrariness (Fig. 26).

Representatives of the Roma community continue to feel the most vulnerable to possible police action. In June 2022, one in four respondents who self-identify as Roma believe that they are at risk of becoming a victim of police violence in the next 12 months. Com-

pared to 2018, however, the perceived risk of police violence among Roma and Turks is decreasing. Compared to previous surveys (2018), the proportion of respondents who believe they are likely to be a victim of police violence in the next 12 months among those who self-identify as Roma (20% in 2021; 25% in 2022) is no longer twice as high as those who self-identify as Bulgarian (14% in 2021 and 19% in 2022). The situation is the same among Turks – only 5% of respondents with this self-identification believe they are at risk of police violence in 2021 and 2022. This is particularly indicative, because a large part of the political line of the MRF party was to prove a trend of systematic police violence against minority communities – apparently the attitudes of their voters are at odds with such a claim. Overall, the drop in the assessment of the risk of violence in the Turkish community is dramatic – from 18% in 2018 to 5% in 2021 and 2022 (Fig. 27).

In 2021, the share of people who believe that the rights of minorities in the country are generally protected is seriously increasing – from 63% in 2018 to 76%. This is a record of sorts for the period studied and is a positive trend overall. However, one in seven (14% of respondents) disagreed with this statement (Fig. 28). The tendency among young people (aged 18-

Fig. 28. Minority rights – data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "The rights of minorities in our country are protected"?

29) and among the less educated to disagree with this statement is higher than the national average: among young people 19.2% and among people with primary, secondary or lower education 19.4% disagree with the statement that minority rights are protected in our country, compared to the national average of 14%. The share of disagreement is higher among the unemployed (41%).

The most striking difference in the assessment of the degree of protection of the fundamental rights of minorities is in relation to the different ethnic backgrounds of the respondents: in 2021, 56% (76% in 2018) of the respondents who self-identified as Roma and 23% (34% in 2018) of respondents who self-identify as Turkish disagree with the statement that minority rights are protected in Bulgaria, compared to 14% (21% in 2018) disagreeing among respondents who self-identify as Bulgarian.

Despite the widespread belief that the rights of minorities in Bulgaria are protected, the 2021 survey, as well as previous surveys, registered persistent discriminatory attitudes. Moreover, these attitudes visibly worsened – almost without exception – between 2018 and 2021.

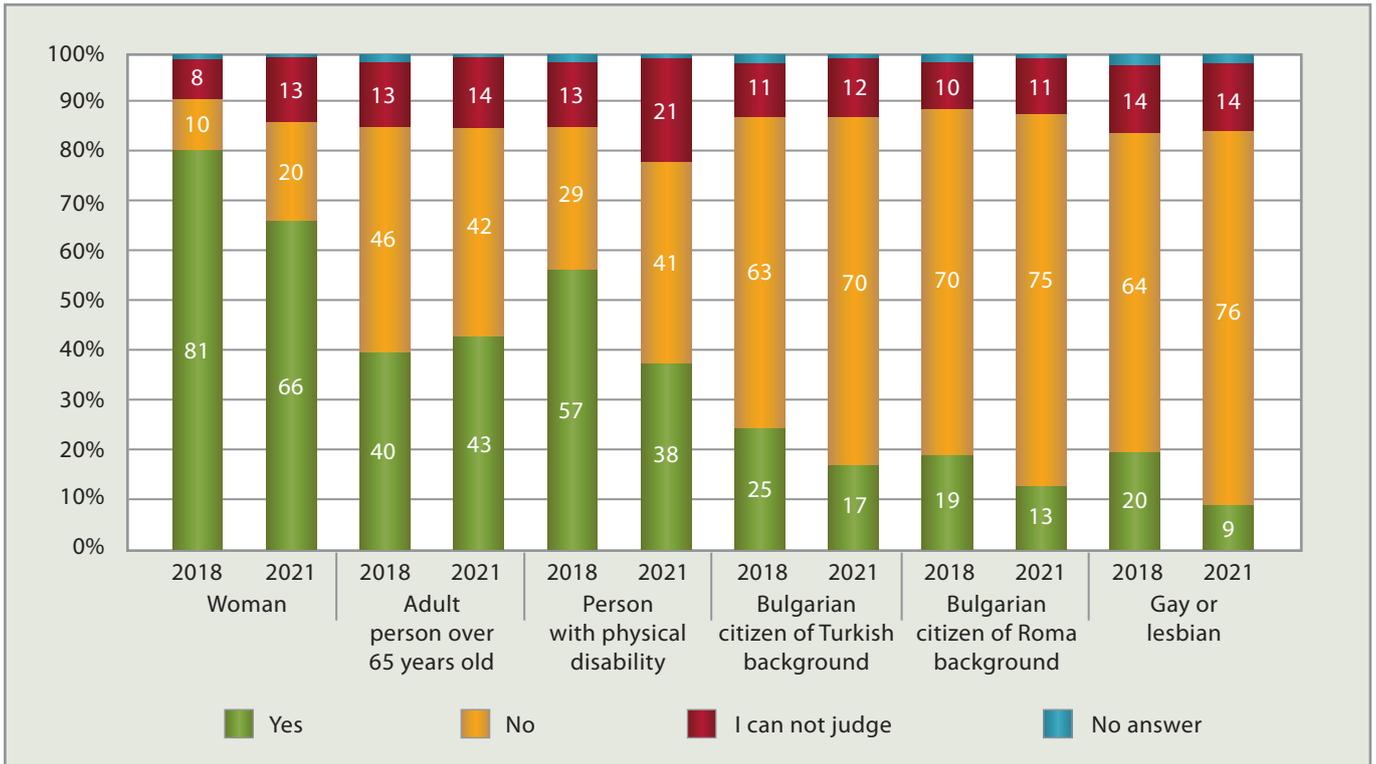
The question used to measure these attitudes in 2021 is whether, other things being equal, people

would vote for representatives of minority groups. The results are quite disturbing. In 2021, 75% of respondents would not vote for a presidential candidate who is of Roma origin – up 5% from 2018⁸; 76% would not vote for a candidate who is gay/lesbian (64% in 2018.); 70% would not vote for a Bulgarian citizen of Turkish descent (63% in 2018); almost half – 42% (46% in 2018) would not vote for an elderly candidate (over 65 years); 41% would not vote for a person with a disability and a full 20% would not vote for a female candidate (10% in 2018). These significant differences can also be partly explained by a successful political propaganda by conservative, national-populist parties that use homophobic and xenophobic themes for political mobilisation. It is true that Bulgaria is not unique in the imposition of such themes in the public space, but it seems that in our country they fall into an extremely beneficial environment. The differences may be partly due to the fact that in 2018 the question was asked in relation to a mayoral candidate, and in 2021 in relation to a presidential candidate (Fig. 29).

Between 2018 and 2021, there is a small increase in the proportion of respondents who, all other things

⁸ In 2018, the question was asked regarding a candidate for mayor.

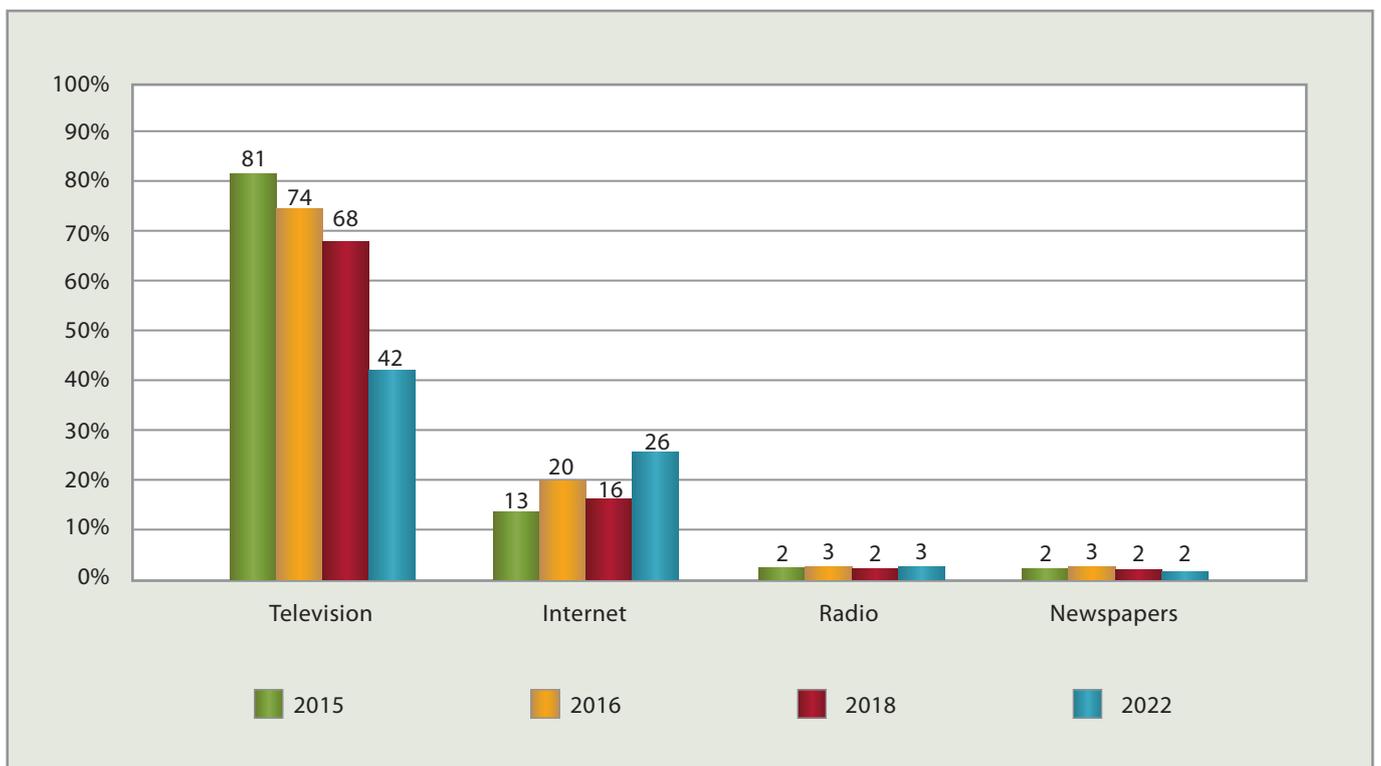
Fig. 29. Discriminatory attitudes – data for 2018 and 2021



Question from the 2021 survey: "If you had to choose between two candidates for PRESIDENT who had the same qualifications and political views, would you vote for the one who: ..."

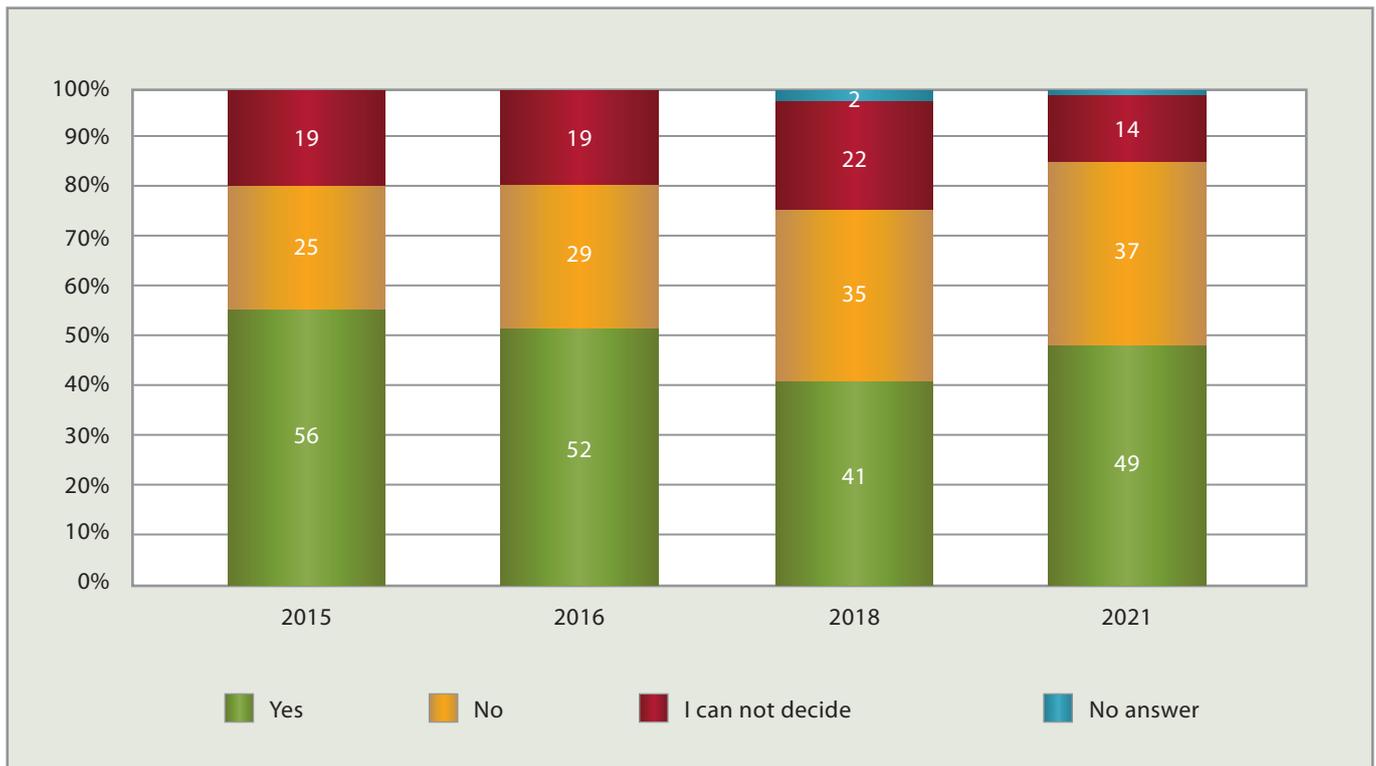
Question from the 2018 survey: "If you had to choose between two candidates for MAYOR who had the same qualifications and political views, would you vote for the one who is: ..."

Fig. 30. Trust in the media – data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2022



Q: Which media do you mainly trust when you need information about the situation in the country?

Fig. 31. Media freedom – data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "The media in this country are generally free to criticize the government"?

being equal, would vote for a candidate for an elective political position who is a person over the age of 65 (in 2018, 40% of respondents would vote, and in 2021, 43%) – the explanation here is unlikely to be attributable to the success of large-scale anti-crime campaigns (of which there are generally none) – rather, the natural ageing of the population may play a role in the moderate improvement of this indicator.

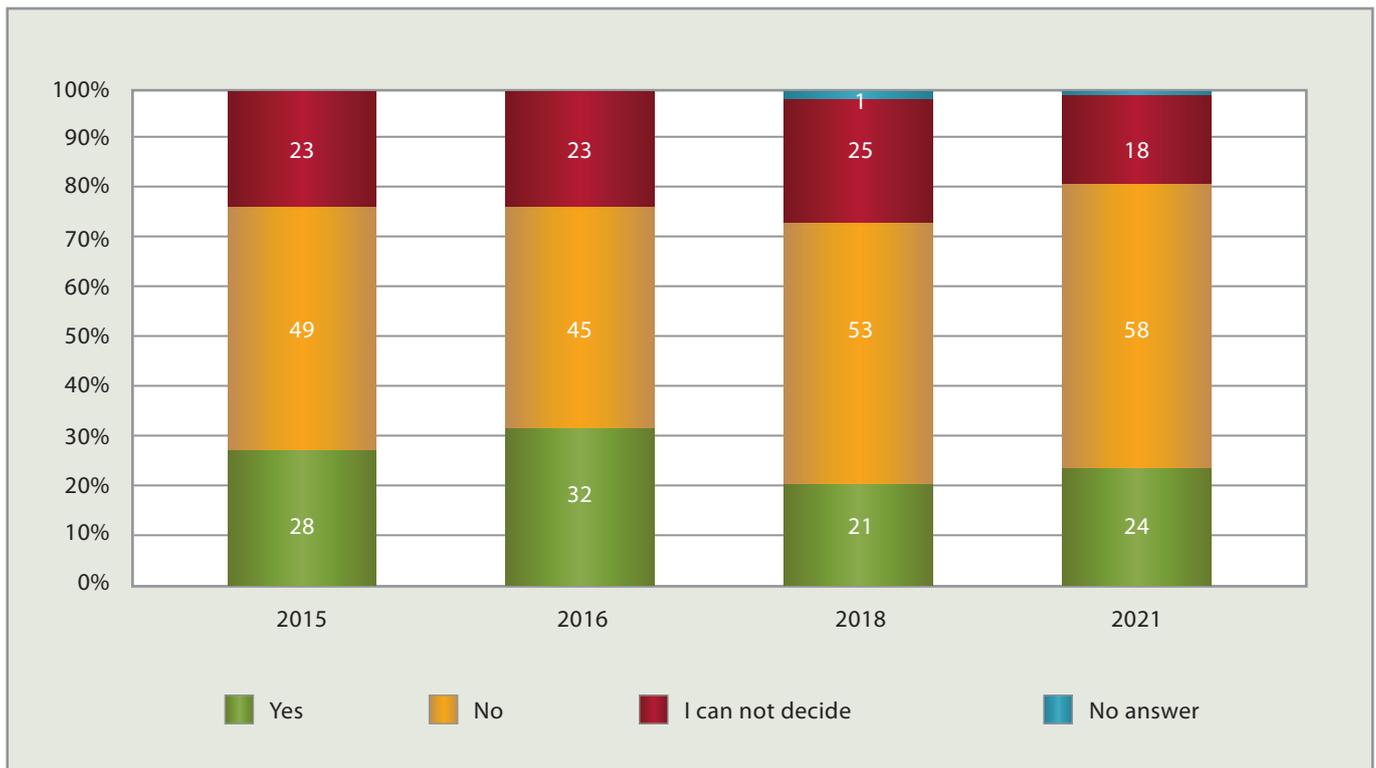
In general, the more educated, the younger and those living in Sofia are more likely to be tolerant and more often report that they would vote for a presidential candidate who is a woman, a gay/lesbian person, a person with a physical disability, or a person of Roma origin. However, this higher tolerance does not apply equally to all groups surveyed. In 2021, university graduates, respondents under the age of 30, and Sofia residents are less likely than the national average to support a candidate from a Turkish background. At the same time, among respondents who self-identify as Roma and as Turkish, the proportion who would vote for a woman, an elderly person, a person with a disability, or a gay/lesbian person is lower than the national average.

FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA

Media freedom is an important element of any democratic governance. Citizens cannot participate in governance if they do not have access to the reliable information about the government's work. Compared to 2018, the 2021 survey registers some positive trends, but indicators remain at lower levels than in 2015. The overall conclusion is that there has been no significant reversal of the generally poor media environment. Another important development is the change in the weight of different type of media in terms of citizens' trust – the 2021 survey demonstrates a noticeable jump in trust in internet-based media (including social networks) as a source of information about the situation in the country, which play an increasing role in the public environment.

Television remains the main media that citizens trust when they need information about the situation in the country, but there is a significant drop in this trust – from 81% in 2015 to 68% in 2018 to 42% in 2022. This represents reducing by a half the proportion of people who trust TV as their main source of information about

Fig. 32. Opinion on media freedom – by data for 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2021



Q: Do you agree with the following statement, "If a senior government official is involved in a crime, the media in our country will report the case objectively"?

the situation in the country over the last 7 years, and means that television is now trusted less than half of the citizens. Internet-based news sites with their 26% (a 10% jump compared to 2018) now become a real competitor to televisions in terms of trust.⁹ Moreover, the trend is clearly in the right direction and the momentum is entirely on the side of the internet-based media. Add to this the fact that the young prefer internet-based media, and the future picture of a retreat on the part of television is largely clear. In 2022, online media, including social media, are the main source of information about the situation in the country for the majority of people under 50, those living in the capital, university graduates and among supporters of Democratic Bulgaria and Revival. For everyone else the main source of information continues to be television. As in 2018, only about 2-3% of people trust the radio and newspapers respectively to be informed about the situation in the country (Fig. 30).

⁹ It should be borne in mind that another 6% of the respondents stated that they get their information from Facebook and other social media, i.e. it can be assumed that about 32% of the respondents mainly use internet-based media when they need information about the situation in the country.

In 2021, there was some improvement in the public's assessment of the freedom and objectivity of the press and of the TV stations compared to the data from the 2018 survey. Agreement with the statement that newspapers in this country are generally free to criticize the government is increasing from 41% in 2018 to 49% in 2021, i.e. an 8% increase in the number of people who are convinced of the freedom of the press. But those convinced of the opposite also rise (more modestly) from 35 to 37%. And overall, we are far from the 56% convinced of freedom of speech recorded in 2015 (Fig. 31).

The public assessment of the objectivity of the media in the case of a crime in the higher echelons of power is rather negative and, in general, seems to be deteriorating. In 2018, only 21% of the respondents were of the opinion that if a senior public official was implicated in a crime, the media in the country would report the truth about the case; this percentage increases modestly to 24% in 2021. However, the proportion of those who are convinced otherwise is growing at a faster rate, from 53% in 2018 to 58% in 2021. The proportion convinced of the media's objectivity falls by 8% between 2016 and 2021 (Fig. 32).

CONCLUSION

The eight public opinion surveys carried out between 2015 and 2022 show that democracy enjoys significant public support. A majority of citizens (56% in 2021 and 52% in 2022) agree that democracy is the best form of government for the country – for the first time since 2015, more than half of the people declare their support for the democratic way of governing.

At the same time, however, this overall positive assessment should not lead to complacency. Among the respondents, negative assessments of the government's effectiveness in solving the main national problems, low trust in the institutions, and a belief that the political and administrative elite are formed by connections and not by merit are consistently dominant.

The surveys also record a continuing extremely low level of civic participation in organized forms of public life – the vast majority of respondents (about 80%) are not members of any organizations, only 2-5% say they are members of political parties, and only 4% are members of trade unions. Membership in NGOs remains within the range of up to 3%.

However, there are also positive trends: more and more people are willing to turn to institutions to seek solutions to problems, and to protest in cases of poor government; increasingly they believe that they can change things for the better by their own actions.

Of the three tested EU values (democracy, rule of law and fundamental human rights) the protection of fundamental civil rights continues to look like the greatest achievement of the democratic transition in Bulgaria. A significant proportion of respondents are confident that they can exercise their civil rights with confidence and do not fear reprisals from law enforcement authorities. However, vulnerability is evident among workers – small (though declining) groups still believe they could lose their jobs if they participate in a protest or if they publicly criticize the government. Paradoxically, people are confident in their rights, trust the police, and do not trust the courts.

Particularly worrying is the persistence of attitudes that could be called homophobic, racist and

xenophobic. In general, they are expressed in a lack of tolerance and understanding towards minorities – sexual, ethnic, religious.

The most pronounced sense of crisis is with regard to the state of the rule of law in Bulgaria: the main difference between democratic and totalitarian governments is that the former are politically and judicially accountable to the citizens, while the latter are not. In our country, however, in October 2021 only 39% of respondents agreed that the government acts within the law (this is still a significant improvement from 26% in 2018). In 2021, the public's assessment of the quality of the law has increased compared to 2018, but remains at low levels: only 31% of people think that the country's laws are fair, only 23% think that laws are clear and understandable, and only 7% think that laws apply equally to everyone.

Traditionally, public policies for the reform of the judiciary view the problem of the rule of law in Bulgaria, first, as a problem that exclusively affects only one branch of state power (the judiciary), and second, as a problem that affects all citizens equally. However, the public attitudes found in the study show that a change in this way of thinking is necessary: on the one hand, the issue of the quality of legislation is primarily an embodiment of the legislative power and a function of the low legitimacy enjoyed by the National Assembly. On the other hand, citizens cannot be expected to respect the law if the majority of them are convinced that the government itself is not acting within the law.

The 2021-2022 study confirmed the trends of the previous studies regarding the media. There has been a clear and marked decline in trust in television as the main source of information about the situation in the country – for the first time less than half of the citizens (42%) trust television when they need information about the situation in the country. At the expense of television, trust in the internet-based media is growing – 26%. A majority of people perceive the press to be in a position to criticise the government, but they do not think that newspapers or TV stations will report the truth of the matter if a senior government official is involved in misconduct – here there is no particular improvement on 2018. Without reliable information

about the government's performance, citizens cannot participate in the decision-making process of the state government.

Two other observations need to be clearly underlined. There is a downward trend in trust in the EU – in 2022 it is already 43% with 48% distrust. For the first time, the share of people expressing distrust in the EU, exceeds that of people with confidence in it. This is a signal that there is an erosion of Euro-Atlantic majorities in the country. The EU can no longer be interpreted as an absolutely secure and unquestioned external stabiliser of liberal democracy in Bulgaria, because it is itself becoming politicised and a focus of debate. This implies that the future of democracy in Bulgaria depends crucially on the quality of Bulgarian political parties and their loyalty to democratic values. Particularly disturbing is the tendency to wage massive and successful campaigns within a short period of time against values that can be defined as European and democratic. Such campaigns in recent years have resulted in the erosion of key values in the public sphere – especially tolerance of sexual and ethnic minorities. If these negative mobilisations are not effectively countered, Bulgarian democracy will be progressively emptied of content and risks becoming a dictatorship of the majority.

The second important trend is that from an ideological point of view a huge part of the citizens fall into a group with attitudes that are not entirely populist, but also cannot be defined as liberal-democratic. This seems to be the big difference between Bulgaria and Germany and is one of the explanations for the high volatility of Bulgarian democracy and the instability of the parties. Voters often change their preferences and are not afraid to cross borders by voting experimentally for parties that challenge one or another aspect of the democratic system. So far, this volatility and experimentalism have mainly led to political instability and frequent snap elections.

This trend becomes particularly dangerous for democracy when it is combined with an acute sense of crisis – real or imagined. It should be stressed that the 2022 survey demonstrates a clear sense of crisis. Whether it is real inflation, fears over the war in Ukraine, or gas difficulties, our research shows a serious deterioration in virtually all indicators that relate to the effectiveness of government and its ability to deal with problems. It is the perception of such acute crises in the past that has led to breakdowns in many democratic societies, and today we need to be particularly careful not to get into such negative and destructive dynamics.

ANNEX

Exploring populism¹

1. WHAT IS POPULISM?

Populism, according to the most common definition of Cas Mudde and the so-called “ideational” approach, is a minimalist ideology that is centred on opposing the good people to the corrupt elite.² Populism has other characteristics, such as the insistence that the nation as a whole is homogeneous. Populism can be called a basic democratic ideology insofar as it places the popular will at the heart of legitimately made decisions. At the same time, however, populism can come into tension with the liberal elements of democracy, especially as regards the rights of individuals and minorities. Authors such as Jan Werner-Müller, for example, argue that populism is not only illiberal by definition, but also anti-democratic.

In this study, conducted in October 2021 and June 2022, the Open Society Institute – Sofia tried to empirically measure populist attitudes in Bulgarian society. The study included a number of questions related to the political and economic situation in the country, public attitudes towards the media and institutions, the level of trust in the political, health, social and economic systems in the country. In this context, the respondents were also asked a series of questions aimed at measuring the proportion of people who could be called populist and, respectively, the proportion of those who could be defined as entirely non-populist.

2. HOW IS POPULISM MEASURED?

The methodology used to measure the level of the attitudes concerned is borrowed from “Populism Barometer 2020” of the Bertelsmann Stiftung³. The report uses the understanding that populism is a philosophy based on the opposition of the “common people” and the “corrupt elite”, as well as on the fact that society is homogeneous and has a common will of the people. On the basis of this understanding, a system of 8 statements has been developed that reflect the three dimensions of populism. The measurement of the level of populism in society is done through an empirical sociological survey in which respondents answer to what extent they agree with each of these 8 statements. For the authors, populism or populist attitudes should be considered simultaneously in the three dimensions that appear to be a necessary condition for classifying someone as a populist, and it is not correct to consider only one of them. The same applies to the 8 statements listed – they must be considered together and in interaction with each other. Only if someone agrees with all of them can they be classified as “complete populists” in terms of understanding of democracy and politics in general. The three dimensions of populism mentioned by the authors are: against the status quo, for the sovereignty of the people, against pluralism. The 8 statements measuring populist attitudes in these three dimensions, adapted in the Bulgarian questionnaire, are presented in Tab. 1.

¹The analysis is co-authored by Dr. Daniel Smilov from the Center for Liberal Strategies and Dr. Dragomira Belcheva from the Open Society Institute – Sofia.

² Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

³ Vehrkamp, Robert and Wolfgang Merkel. *Populism Barometer 2020: Populist Attitudes among Voters and Non-Voters in Germany 2020*, <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/populism-barometer-2020-all>

Table 1. The 8 statements measuring populist attitudes adapted in the Bulgarian questionnaire and the distribution of the answers of the surveyed Bulgarian citizens (%)*

Claims measuring populist attitudes	I completely agree	I rather agree	I rather disagree	I completely disagree	I can't decide	No answer
1. There is often agreement among the people, but politicians pursue different goals.	34	41	11	4	8	1
2. I would rather be represented by a citizen than by professional politician.	23	34	15	6	20	2
3. Political parties only want people's votes, but are not interested in their opinion.	45	37	10	2	5	2
4. Political differences between ordinary people and the elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.	42	39	7	3	9	2
5. Important issues should be decided in a referendum, not in parliament.	33	30	13	7	15	2
6. Politicians in the Bulgarian Parliament should always follow the will of the people.	58	32	4	1	4	1
7. People in Bulgaria generally agree on what should be done in politics.	21	34	17	9	18	2
8. What in politics is called "compromise", is actually a betrayal of principles and values.	26	30	17	6	19	2

* The data are from October 2021.

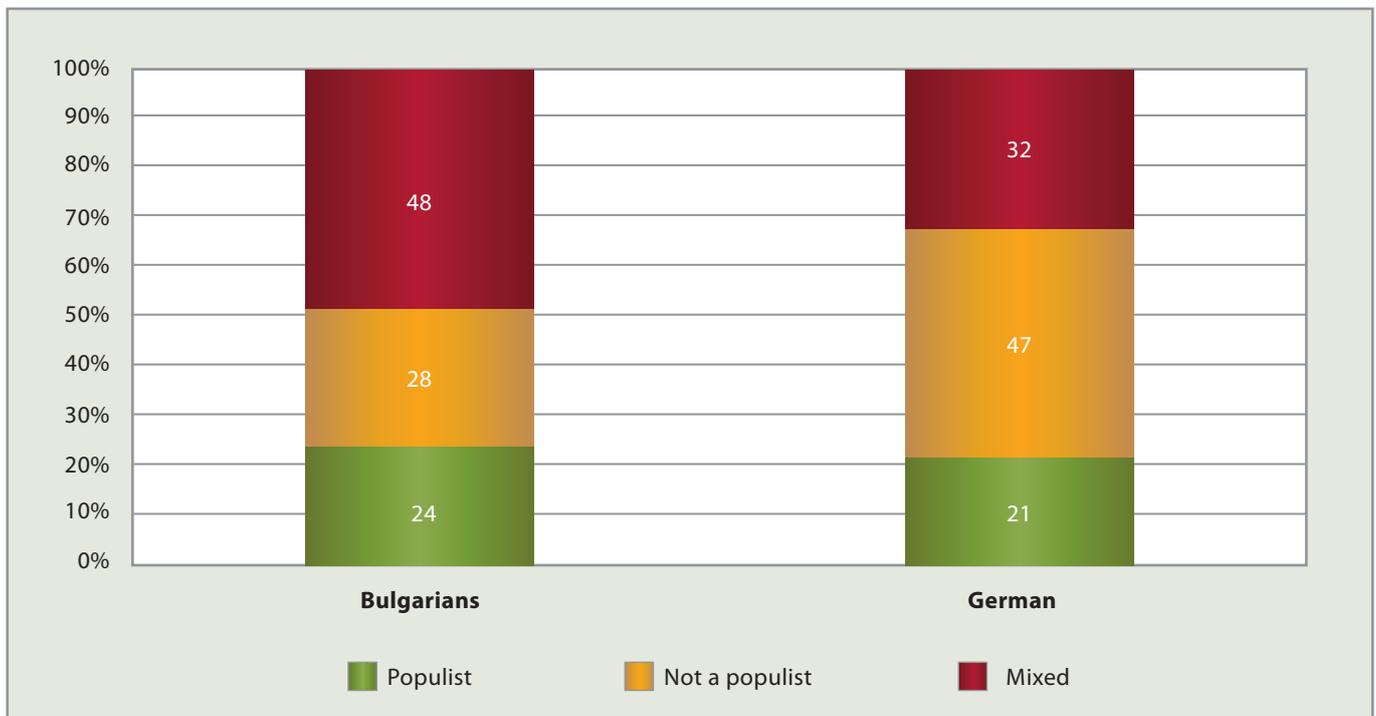
According to the methodology developed in the cited report, a populist is defined as someone who "strongly agrees" or "somewhat agrees" with each of these 8 statements. Those who "completely disagree" with at least one statement or "somewhat disagree" with at least half of the statements are defined as non-populists. All others are in the so-called mixed category, or partial populists, i.e. they share some of the populist statements but not all.

3. HOW MANY POPULISTS ARE THERE IN BULGARIA?

The results of a nationally representative survey conducted in October 2021 show that nearly a quarter of Bulgarians can be classified as populists according to the adopted definition. Slightly more are non-populists and the main part of the respondents (nearly 50%) are those of mixed type, partially agreeing with populist statements – "partial populists". For comparison: according to the cited Populism Barometer 2020 report, in Germany 21% of Germans classify themselves as populists, 47% as non-populists, and 32% are of the mixed type. Comparatively speaking, it turns out that among the Bulgarians the majority are of the mixed type, i.e. they agree with only a part of the statements, while among the Germans a third fall into this category and almost half are in the group of non-populists (Fig. 1).

Among the populist group, those who believe that democracy is the best form of government account for 53%, while 32% do not consider this statement to be true. In comparison, among the non-populist group, supporters of democracy as a form of government are significantly higher at 67%, at the expense of only 20% who do not believe it is the best form of government for a country.

Fig. 1. Comparison of populists and non-populists in Bulgaria and Germany



Sources: PSI-C, October 2021; infratest dimap and YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

4. WHAT IS THE DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE THE POPULISTS AND THE NON-POPULISTS?

When a demographic profile of the populists is to be made, they are mainly residents of the capital, aged between 18 and 30, with secondary education and students (studying and/or studying and working). The largest is the share of people with populist attitudes among residents of the capital and small towns; among residents of district towns it is close to the national average, and among those living in rural areas it is about 10% lower. Among those living in Sofia there are the most populists (27%), but there are also the most non-populists (32%). Among Bulgarians living in villages the group of non-populists is also

smaller compared to those living in Sofia or in small towns. By contrast, among those living in rural areas, over 60% can be defined as mixed type, i.e. partially agreeing with populist statements, but without having extreme views in one direction or the other (Fig. 2).

It can be said that populist views are closest to the youngest part of the population – almost a third of respondents aged 18-29 belong to the populist group. The older people get, the further they move away

Fig. 2. Distribution of populists and non-populists depending on the locality in which they live, October 2021

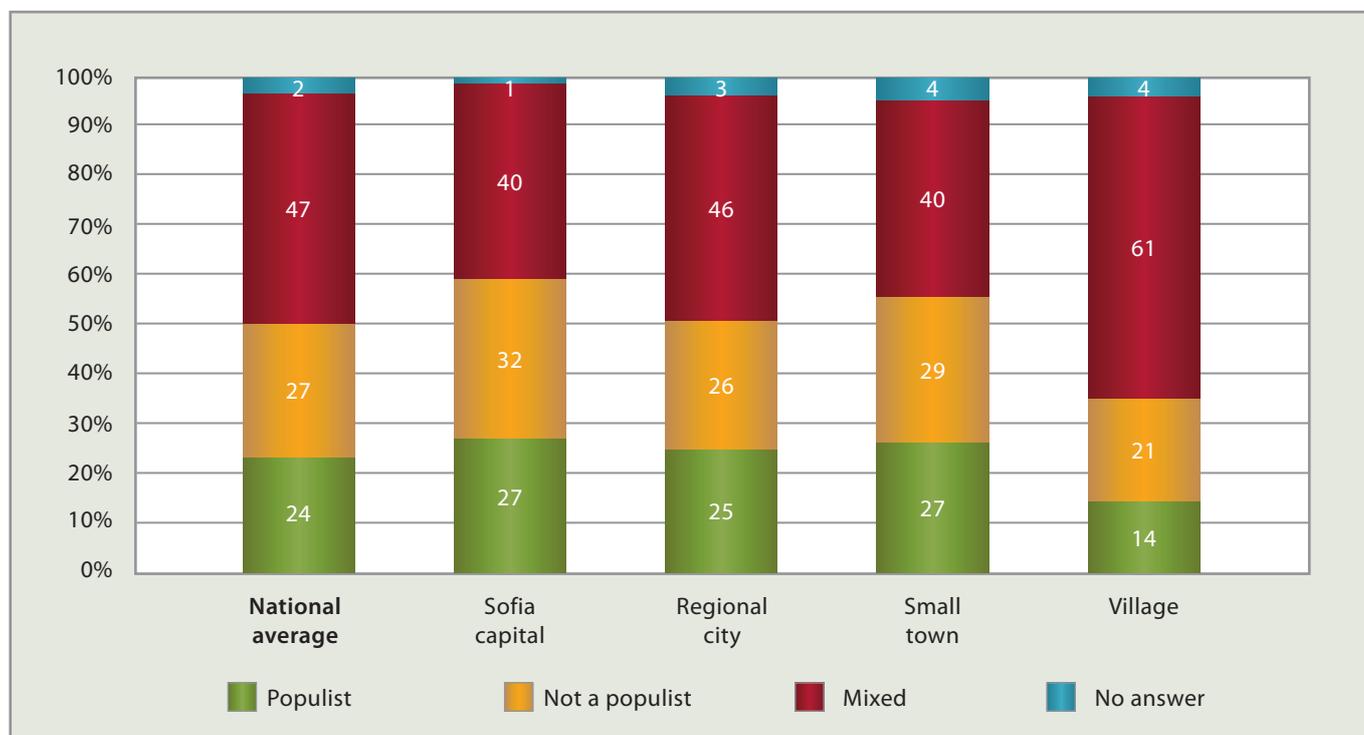


Fig. 3. Distribution of populists and non-populists by age, October 2021

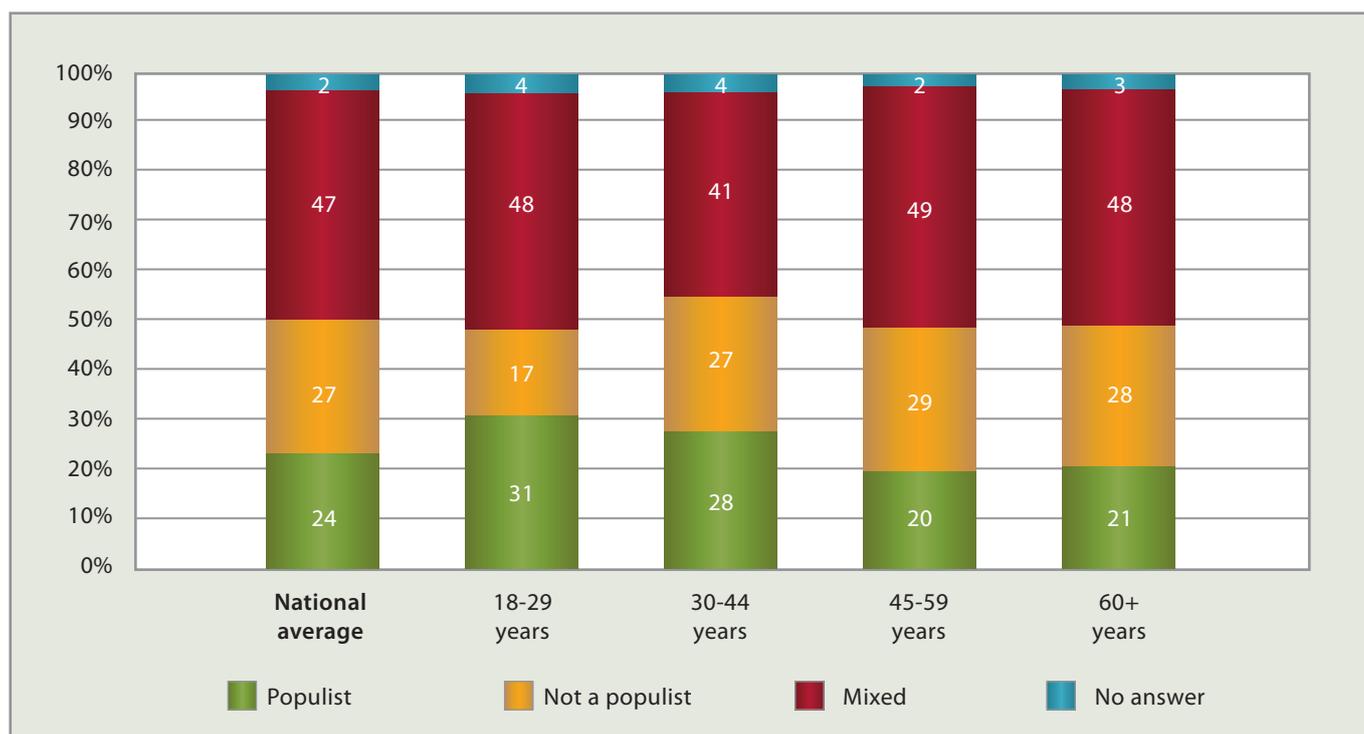
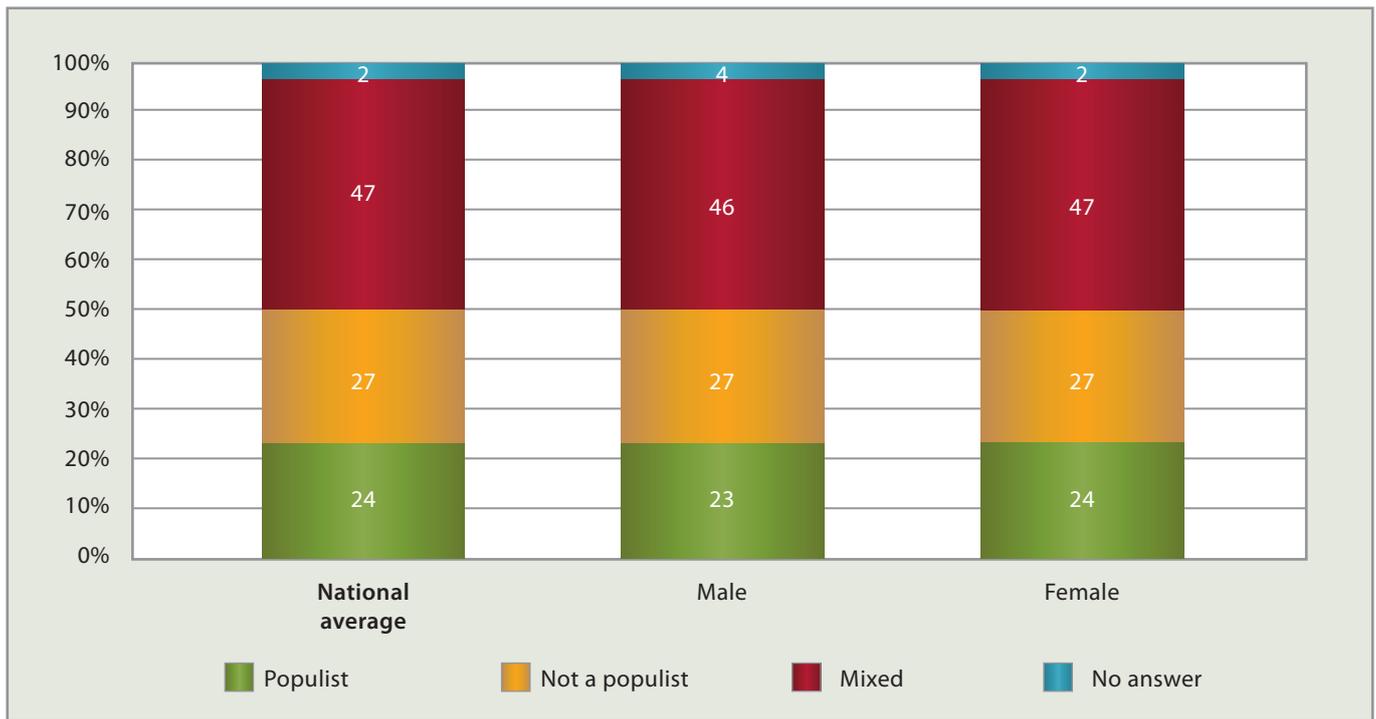


Fig. 4. Distribution of populists and non-populists by gender of respondents, October 2021

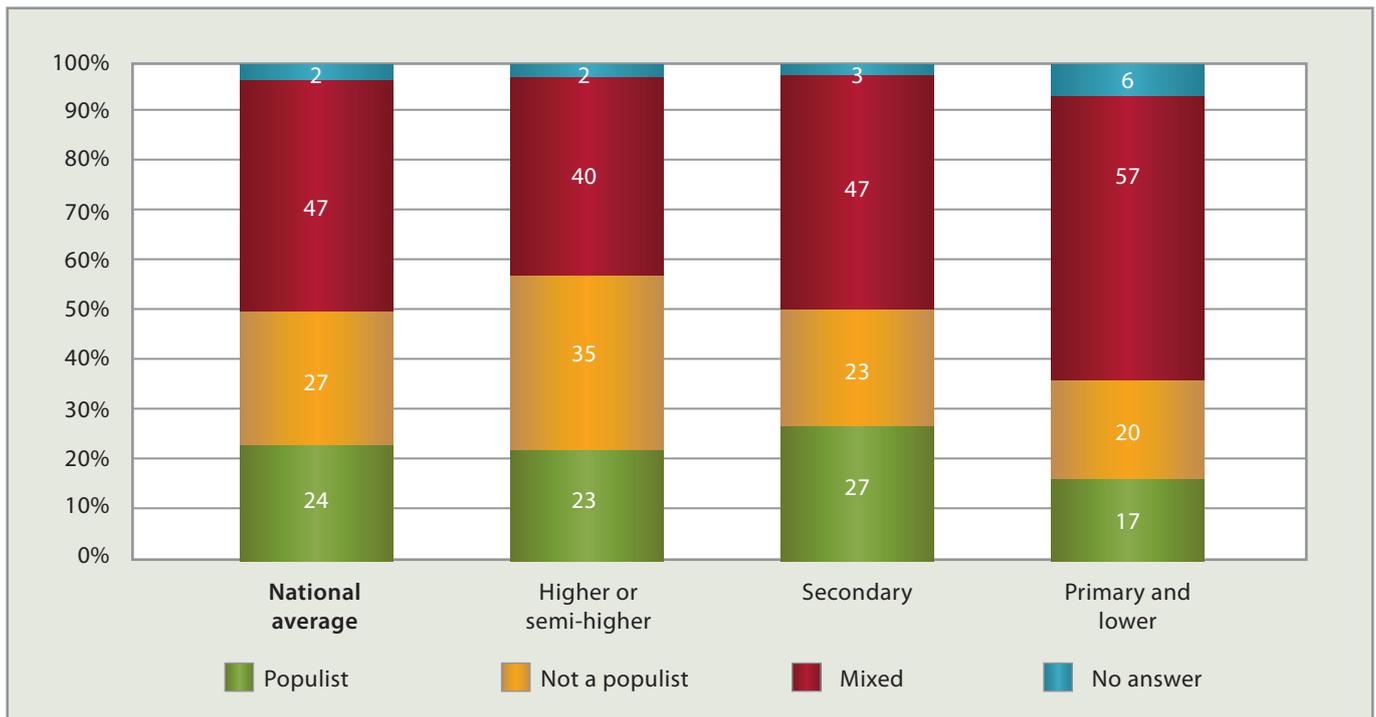


from these views, and among those aged 45 and over, those who can be described as populist are closest to the national average – around a fifth (20%) share populist views. Interestingly, the youngest age group has the fewest extreme non-populists – 17% of respondents aged under 29 could be classified as this group (Figure 3). In all age categories, the group of those who partially subscribe to populist ideas hovers around the national average, i.e. the differences commented above are due to spill-over from the populist group to the non-populist group and vice versa.

The gender of the respondents had no influence on the presence or absence of populist sentiment among the respondents. The study shows that populist ideas are equally present among both men and women in Bulgaria. The same applies to the supporters of the opposite ideas, i.e. there is also no predominance of one or the other among the non-populists (Fig. 4).

Education turns out to be a differentiating factor in defining populist and non-populist groups. Among people with higher education the share of those who can be defined as populists is close to the national average; however, among people with secondary education this group is larger, and among those with primary and lower education – the opposite, the group of populists "shrinks" to 17%. Although among the most highly educated those with populist views do not differ from the national average, those who can be defined as non-populist are significantly more numerous – one in three university graduates define themselves as non-populist. By contrast, among this category, the mixed-type group is the smallest – about 40% of graduates share only some populist views, but not all. Among those with a secondary education, the populist, non-populist and mixed-type groups are closest to the national averages, which can be partly explained by the fact that this is the most numerous group among the respondents, respectively it is the strongest determinant of the averages. Among people with primary and lower education, the populist group is the smallest (17%), and the largest group is those who approve of only some of the statements measuring populism – 57% of respondents with primary and lower education classify themselves as the mixed type. The non-populists are also the least in this category compared to the national average and compared to the other two educational categories (Fig. 5).

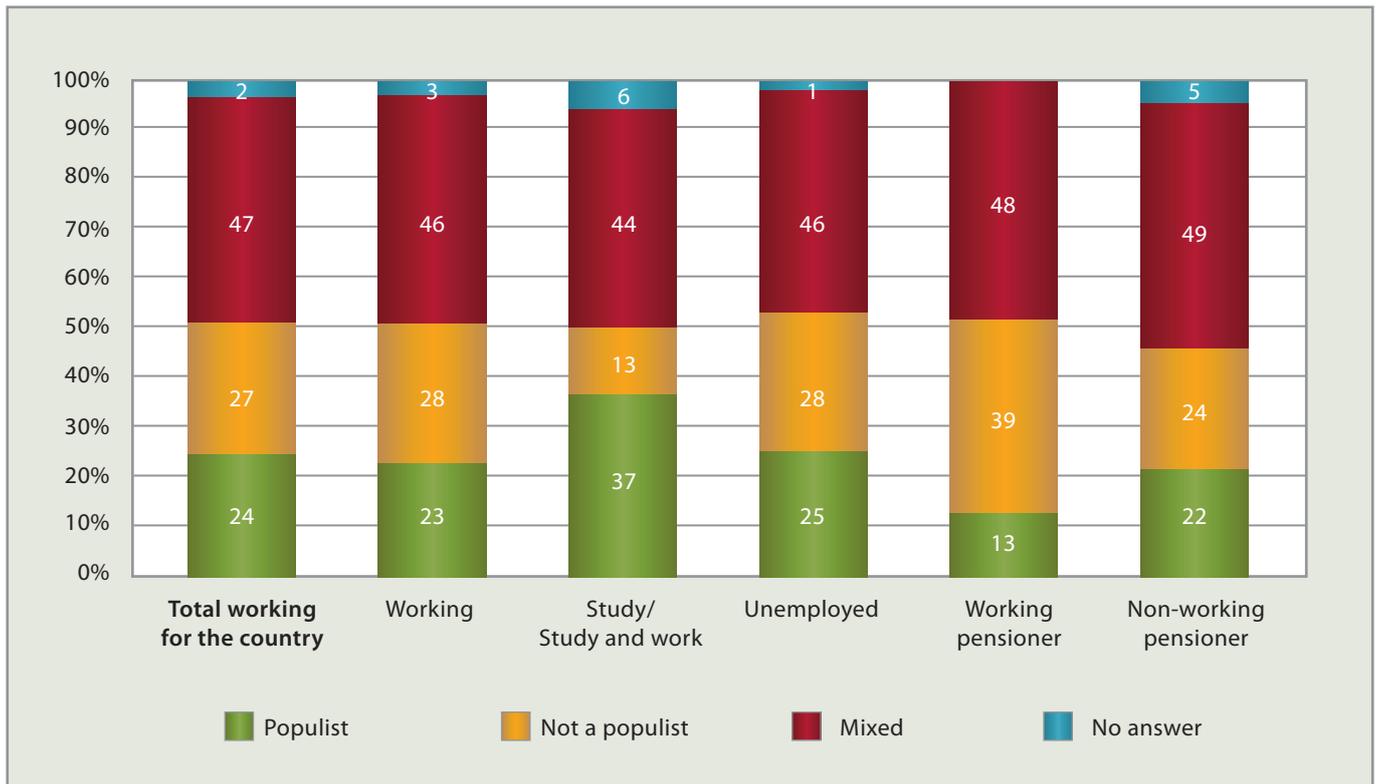
Fig. 5. Distribution of populists and non-populists according to respondents' education, October 2021



Social status also proves to be a differentiating factor in defining populist and non-populist groups. It is interesting to note that the mixed-type group, i.e., those who only partially adopt populist views, is equal in volume (in percentage) among all social groups, and the differences arise from the spill-over from one extreme group to the other. First of all, among the employed and among the unemployed, the shares of populists and non-populists are practically equal to the respective national averages, which is partly explained by the volume of the employed group, which represents over 50% of the sample, but is also characteristic of the unemployed group, which represents a comparatively small part of the sample. On the other hand, among the young people who are studying or working and studying at the same time, the populist group is significantly larger and approaches 37%, while the non-populist group is relatively small – only 17% of the students can be classified as such. These data, of course, correspond with the above-mentioned ones, which show that the populist group is the largest among young people up to the age of 29 compared to the same for other age groups. Working pensioners, although a relatively small group in terms of numbers, are interesting in terms of their acceptance of populist ideas. As commented above, people over 60 are less likely to embrace such ideas (20% of them are populists), but among working pensioners those with populist views are only 13%. By contrast, those who can be defined as non-populists account for nearly 40% of all working pensioners. There is a difference in views on populism between working and non-working pensioners, with the latter being quite close to the national average (Fig. 6).

The systematic and periodic study of populist attitudes is important for assessing the sustainability of constitutional liberal democracy in Bulgaria. The present picture leads to one basic conclusion that can be drawn when comparing Bulgaria with an established democracy like Germany. In our country, the share of people with "mixed" views – not entirely populist, but not entirely liberal democratic – is much higher; accordingly, those who are entirely non-populist are much fewer. This difference provides grounds for the hypothesis that the instability of the Bulgarian party system is (at least partly) due to this very "mixed character" of the basic attitudes of a large part of the electorate. This mixed character facilitates the frequent emergence of new, populist formations, which have an experimental attitude towards democracy and are

Fig. 6. Distribution of populists and non-populists by social status of respondents, October 2021



ready to question some aspects of it – be it of a procedural nature or related to citizens' rights. From this point of view, populist attitudes correlate with the lack of sustainable internalisation of basic democratic values and are an important indicator for the state of democracy.

The data are from a nationally representative public opinion survey conducted among the population aged 18 and over in October 2021 using a face-to-face interview method using a standardised electronic questionnaire. Respondents were selected through a two-stage stratified sampling by region and type of locality with a quota for gender, age, education. 1000 effective interviews were conducted. The maximum allowable stochastic error was ±3.1%. The field research was conducted by Alpha Research under a project implemented and funded by the Open Society Institute – Sofia in partnership with the Center for Liberal Strategies.

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