

## DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

### PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY, THE RULE OF LAW AND FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS IN 2018

Open Society Institute – Sofia has been conducting regular public opinion surveys since 2015 to establish the trends in the attitudes towards such fundamental values of the European Union as democracy, the rule of law and protection of human rights. The findings enable us to outline some of the main risks and challenges facing the practical application of these values in Bulgaria.

In 2018 the third public opinion survey from the series was carried out by the following team:

- **Georgi Stoytchev**, *editor*
- **Ivanka Ivanova, PhD**, *author*

- **Dragomira Belcheva, PhD**,  
*leader of the field study team and statistical processing of data*

- **Petia Braynova, PhD**,  
*statistical processing of data*

- **Ralitsa Dimitrova**,  
*organisation and facilitation of focus groups*

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the authors and should by no means be interpreted as reflecting the opinion of Open Society Institute – Sofia.

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## SUMMARY

The survey results in 2018 show that democracy has considerable public support: the largest group of respondents (45%) tends to agree that democracy is the best form of governance for the country and the majority identify only democratic states as suitable role models for the national government. Germany, the United Kingdom and Switzerland form the leading group of countries with good governance according to the public perceptions: 23% of the respondents identify Germany as a well governed country that can serve as example for Bulgaria, second is Switzerland with 9% and the United Kingdom is third with 8%.

The public support for democracy however is gradually eroding comparing to the data from previous surveys: in 2018 the share of respondents who agree with the statement that democracy is the best form of governance for the country drops 7% compared to 2015. Amongst the participants in survey there are dominant negative assessments of the efficiency of the government to solve the main national issues, low trust in institutions and the conviction that the political and administrative elite is formed based on connections instead on merits.

In 2018 the survey registered low civic participation in governance: the large majority of respondents are not members of any organizations, hardly 4% are members of political parties and just 2% of trade unions. However, a positive trend has been observed in this respect in the period between 2002 and 2018, although the trend has not been pronounced: membership of clubs is on the rise and an increasing number of people are prone to resort to the institutions for help with solving problems and protest in case of bad governance.

Out of the three surveyed fundamental values of the EU (democracy, the rule of law and human rights), citizens tend to consider the protection of human rights as the greatest achievement of the transition to democracy in Bulgaria. A significant share of the respondents believes that they are free to exercise their civil rights and are not afraid of repressions by the law enforcement authorities. The employed, however, seem to be vulnerable: one in five believes that they can lose their jobs if they take part in a protest or if they criticize the government in public.

The most pronounced perception of a crisis can be observed with regard the rule of law in Bulgaria: the main difference between democratic and totalitarian governments being that the first can be held politically and legally accountable by the voters unlike the latter. However, only 26% of respondents in Bulgaria agree that the government acts within the law and public assessment of the quality of legislation is extremely low: hardly 22% believe that the laws in the country are fair, hardly 14% that the laws are clear and comprehensible, hardly 8% that the laws apply equally to all.

The 2018 survey shows a crisis of public trust in television and the press as factors of more responsible governance: the television is losing its position of a medium people trust when they look for information about the situation in the country. The majority of respondents agree that the press is free to criticize the government but they do not believe that the press or television would report the truth in case a senior civil servant is involved in a crime. Without reliable information about the work of the government, citizens are prevented from taking part in the process of decision making.

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

This report is based on data from three nationally representative public opinion surveys, the last of which was conducted in April 2018. The survey has been carried out amongst a representative sample of the adult population of the country based on the face-to-face interview method and a standard questionnaire. The respondents were selected through two-state probability cluster sampling that was stratified by administrative regions and settlement type. Out of 1,200 planned interviews, 1,174 were carried out. The

**Table 1. Respondents' profile**

By gender	Number	Share
Men	522	44%
Women	652	56%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,174</b>	<b>100%</b>
By age	Number	Share
18-29 years	132	11%
30-44 years	278	24%
45-59 years	290	25%
Over 60 years	430	37%
N/A	44	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,174</b>	<b>100%</b>
By ethnic group	Number	Share
Bulgarians	993	85%
Turks	80	7%
Roma	72	6%
Other	20	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,174</b>	<b>100%</b>

maximum stochastic error is  $\pm 2.9\%$ .<sup>1</sup> In 2018 the survey was carried out by a team of the Open Society Institute – Sofia and was financed by its own funds.

## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Early parliamentary elections were held on 26 March 2017 in which the centre-right party GERB won the largest share of votes (34%). A total of five political formations were represented in the National Assembly: GERB (95 MPs), Coalition BSP for Bulgaria (79 MPs), Coalition "United Patriots" (27 MPs), the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) (25 MPs) and Political Party "Volya" (12 MPs). Following the 2017 elections the political sector seemed to be slightly more consolidated than following the previous parliamentary elections when eight formations won parliament seats. However, as of 2017 the relative weight of the nationalist parties from Coalition "United Patriots" increased and they became the third political force in the country, displacing MRF from its traditional role as a balance keeper in the government.

As of 4th May 2017 Bulgaria has been ruled by the third government of GERB led by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. It was formed with the participation of the three parties from Coalition "United Patriots" and with the parliamentary support of Political Party "Volya". The first half of the term in office of the government was focused on the preparation of the first Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (January – June 2018).

Evaluating the results of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, a number of analysts pointed out that the main achievement was the revival of the perspective of EU membership for Republic of Northern Macedonia and the other countries from the Western Balkans as well as the positive impact of the presidency on the national public administration insofar as civil servants acquired valuable experience with the mechanisms of functioning and decision-making in the EU. However, President Rumen Radev was of the opinion

<sup>1</sup> A description of the method, the definition of "democracy" used and data about the results of the first survey are published in "Democracy and Civic Participation. Public Attitudes towards Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Human Rights in 2015", Sofia, Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2017, available on [www.osis.bg](http://www.osis.bg)

that the Presidency of the Council of the EU did not assist in promoting European values in the governance of the country: “It is my opinion that Bulgaria reinforced its position of a peripheral state, the state at the outmost periphery of the EU (...) in the process of preparing and assuming the Presidency of the Council of the EU, it would have been normal for Bulgaria to become a more democratic European country with independent and efficient institutions, clear separation of powers, the rule of law, freedom of speech. However, it did not happen mainly due to the fact that the Bulgarian government hurriedly embraced only foreign politics and focused its attention on the Western Balkans but turned its back on important, if not explosive, issues in the country (...). We can see that the reform of the judiciary did not take place. The reform of the education system is revolving around renovation of school buildings and salary increase, the reform of the healthcare system – around personnel replacement. It was during the Presidency of the Council of the EU that a significant outflow of foreign investments was recorded. The new anti-corruption mega-body and its actions are met with public irony and mistrust”.<sup>2</sup>

The Bulgarian National Bank (BNB) reports that in the first quarter of 2018 foreign direct investment in the country amounted to 180 million EUR which a 34% drop compared to the same period of 2017. Capital Daily points out that “the outflow of equity totaled 160 million EUR in the first quarter which shows a considerable decrease in the long-term interest of investors compared to last year”.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the outflow of foreign direct investment, the National Statistical Institute registered an increase in the national GDP. According to the seasonally adjusted data in the period between the third quarter of 2017 and the second quarter of 2018, the GDP has increased by 0.7-0.9% per quarter and the growth rate of the Bulgarian GDP for each of these quarters has been higher than the average growth rate of the GDP of the EU Member States.

<sup>2</sup> A welcome address of President Rumen Radev at the opening of the conference titled the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU – Time for a Summing Up, held on 3 July 2018. The full text of the address is available online on the website [www.president.bg](http://www.president.bg) (last checked on 6.03.2019). When the President referred to the “new anti-corruption mega-body” he meant the Commission set up under the Act on Counteracting Corruption and on Seizure of Illegally Acquired Property (published in SG No 7/19.01.2918).

<sup>3</sup> Capital Daily, Foreign investments fell to 180 million EUR in the first quarter, 20.05.2018, available online on [www.capital.bg](http://www.capital.bg) (last checked on 6.03.2019)

In 2018 the employment rate of the working-age population increased and unemployment decreased. In the fourth quarter of 2018 the unemployment rate in the country stood at 4.7%, the three most affected groups being young people (the unemployment rate for people aged 15-24 is 9.9%), rural residents and the less educated (the unemployment rate among people with primary and lower education is 17.6%).<sup>4</sup> The average annual unemployment rate in the country in 2017 stood at 6.2% which is almost half the size of the unemployment rate in 2013 (13%).

## EFFICIENCY OF GOVERNANCE

Despite the largely positive economic context, the data of the public opinion survey show that poverty remains the most important problem for people in the country. In 2018 about a third of the respondents (32%) identified poverty as the most significant public problem and a similar result was recorded in the two previous surveys in 2015 and 2016.

Poverty is followed by a group of public problems of medium importance such as unemployment, bad governance and corruption that dispute the second place in the ranking. They are identified as a major problem by 14-18% of respondents.

A relatively small percentage of people (5-7%) ranked crime and poor healthcare system as the most significant public problems. Hardly 2% of respondents ranked poor-quality education as the most important public problem.

The most significant change in the ranking of the major problems in the country has to do with the changed place of unemployment; during the three years from 2015 to 2018 unemployment left the group of most significant problems and can be now considered as a problem of medium importance. The share of those who identified it as the most significant problem in the country fell from 32% in 2015 to 18% in 2018. This development reflects the situation on the labour market: as mentioned above, in 2018 the share of the employed increased and the unemployment rate fell to 4.7% in the last quarter of the year. However, it is worth underlining that increased employment does not solve

<sup>4</sup> Data of NSI, The unemployed and unemployment rates of people aged 15 and over in the fourth quarter of 2018, available online on [www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg) (last checked on 6.03.2019).

the issue of poverty and poverty continues to be at the top as the most important public problem.

In 2018, the share of respondents, who identified corruption, bad governance or crime as the most important problems in the country, increased, though slightly, compared to 2015. The most important problem in the country for young people (aged 18-29) is corruption (23% of them mentioned corruption), followed by unemployment (mentioned by 22% of young people) and poverty (mentioned by 18% of young people). In contrast, the most important problem in the country for the elderly (aged 60 plus) is poverty (40% of them identified poverty compared to the average 32% for the country and 18% among people aged 18-29) (Fig. 1).

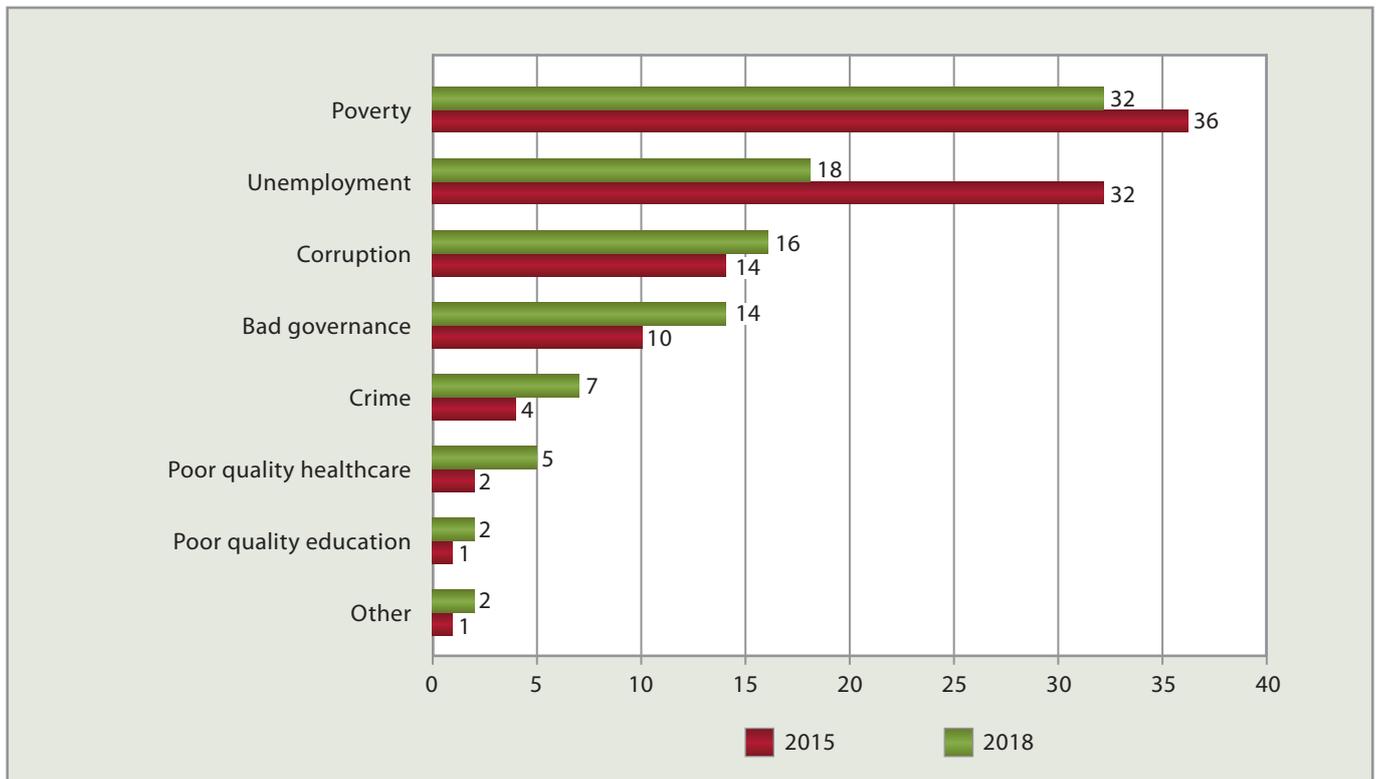
In 2018 the public continued to have a highly negative opinion in general of the efficiency of the government to address the most important problems in the country. The majority of respondents (86%) believe that the government failed to address the problem of poverty; 85% believe that the government failed to address the problem of corruption; a considerable number of people believe that the government is also inefficient in solving other issues such as crime, poor quality edu-

cation and poor quality healthcare. Despite the data quoted above about the reduced unemployment rate, a considerable percentage of respondents (75%) believe that the government failed to address the unemployment as well.

Only between 6 and 21% of respondents evaluate positively the efficiency of the government for each of the public problems in question and believe in general that the government acts sufficiently well. The government has received the highest positive evaluation for its efficiency in education (21% of the respondents believe that the government is efficient in addressing poor quality education); an equal share of people believes that the government is efficient in addressing unemployment. With regard to the evaluation of the efficiency of the government to deal with unemployment, the highest increase in the positive evaluation was recorded: in 2015 and 2016 only 10% believed that the government efficiently addressed unemployment, in 2018 their percentage increased to 20% (Fig. 2).

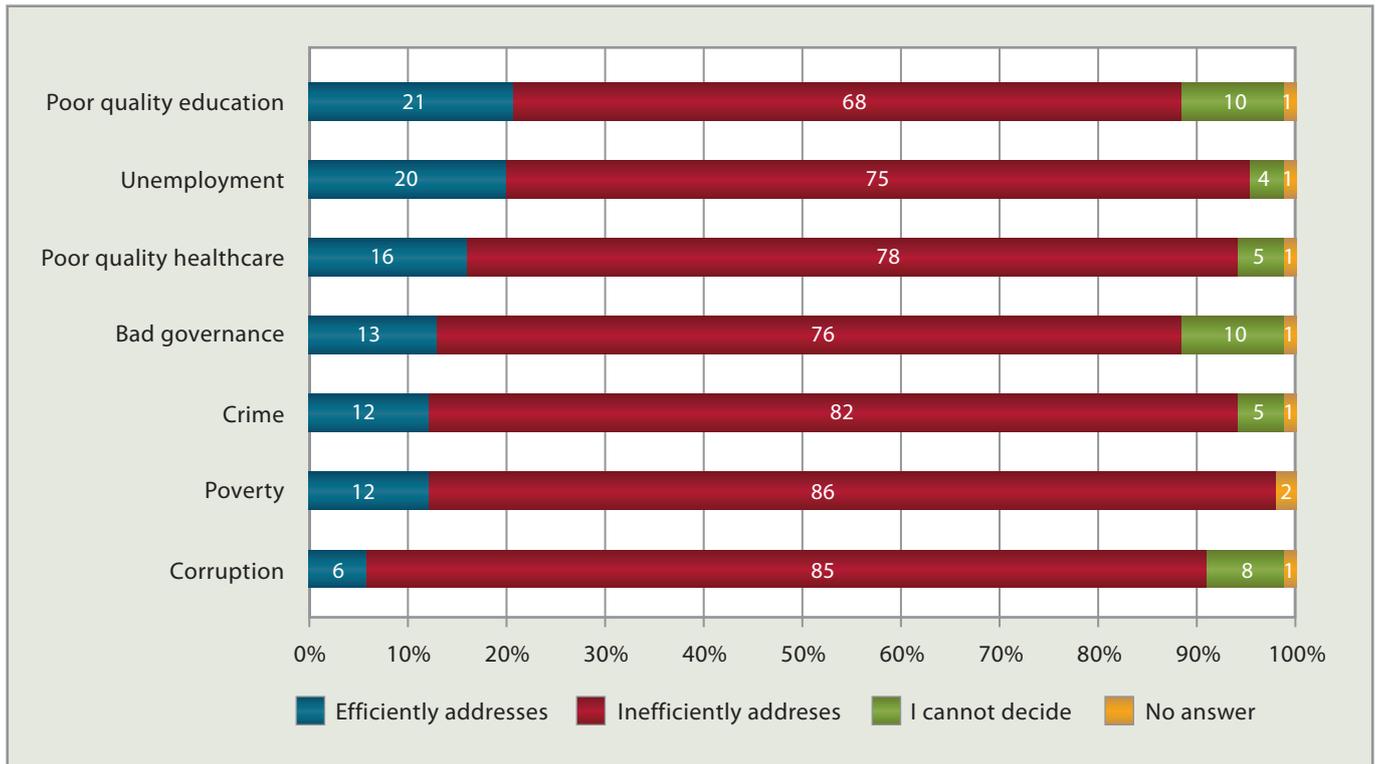
The 2018 survey demonstrates that there is a serious discrepancy between public and government priorities: the highest number of people expects the gov-

Figure 1. The most important problems in the country



Question: Which is the most important problem facing the country at the moment? Please, choose only one answer.

**Figure 2. Efficiency of governance**



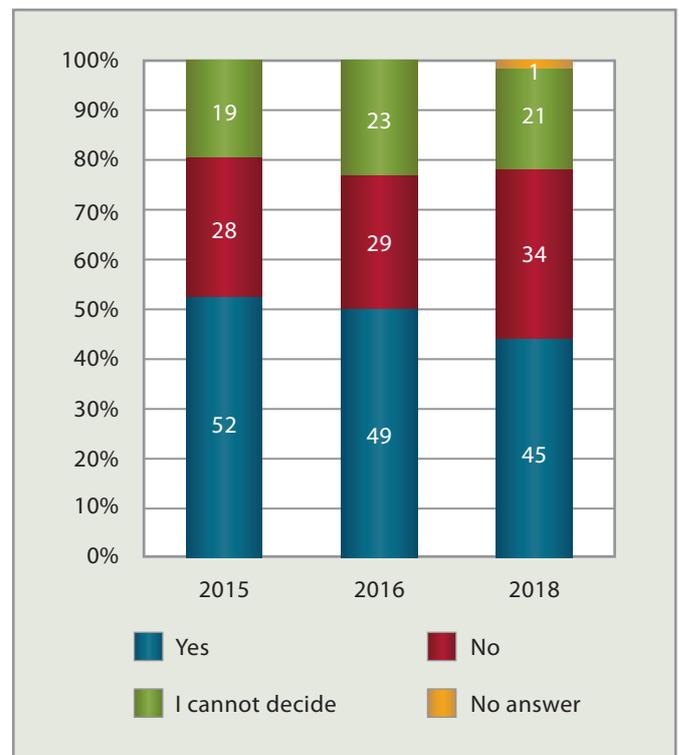
Question: How do you evaluate the efficiency of the government to address the solution of the important problems facing the country at the moment?

ernment to solve the issues of poverty, unemployment and corruption and the main negative assessments of the government’s efficiency are recorded with respect to the solution of these problems. This mismatch between public and government priorities largely pre-determines low public trust in the institutions of the representative democracy. They are perceived primarily as inefficient to solve the most important public problems. Even where a problem becomes less urgent for a certain period, the public does not perceive it as a result of the government efforts.

## CONFIDENCE IN DEMOCRACY AND THE MAIN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

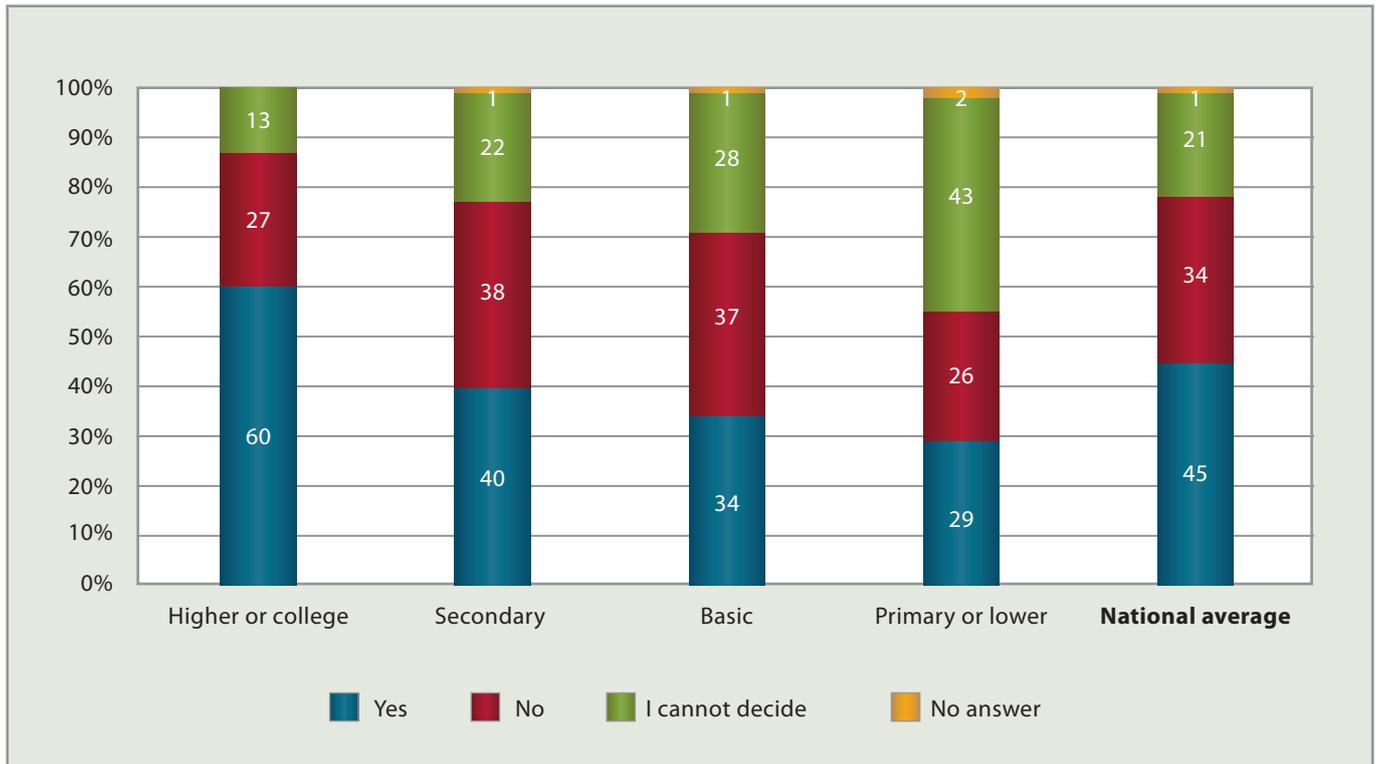
In 2018 the highest percentage of respondents (45%) agreed that democracy is the best form of state governance for Bulgaria. However, the findings from the three surveys carried out following 2015 show a small but persistent trend of reduced public confidence in

**Figure 3. Confidence in democracy**



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

**Figure 4. Confidence in democracy by level of education**



Question: *Do you believe that democracy is the best form of state governance for Bulgaria?*

democracy: in 2015 more than half of the respondents (52%) agreed that democracy was the best form of governance for Bulgaria. The share of those who disagreed with the statement that democracy is the best form of governance for the country increased by 6% in the period from 2015 to 2018. One in five responded that they could not decide (Fig. 3).

A well pronounced greater support for democracy as the best form of governance can be observed among the better educated: 60% of people with higher or college education agree with this statement compared to 30% of people with primary or lower education. However, the share of those who disagree with this statement is equal for both groups of people with the highest and lowest education level (26-27%) (Fig. 4). Thus low support for democracy among the low-educated is not so much determined by firm disagreement with its values as by the high number of respondents who answered that they could not decide how to respond to the question.

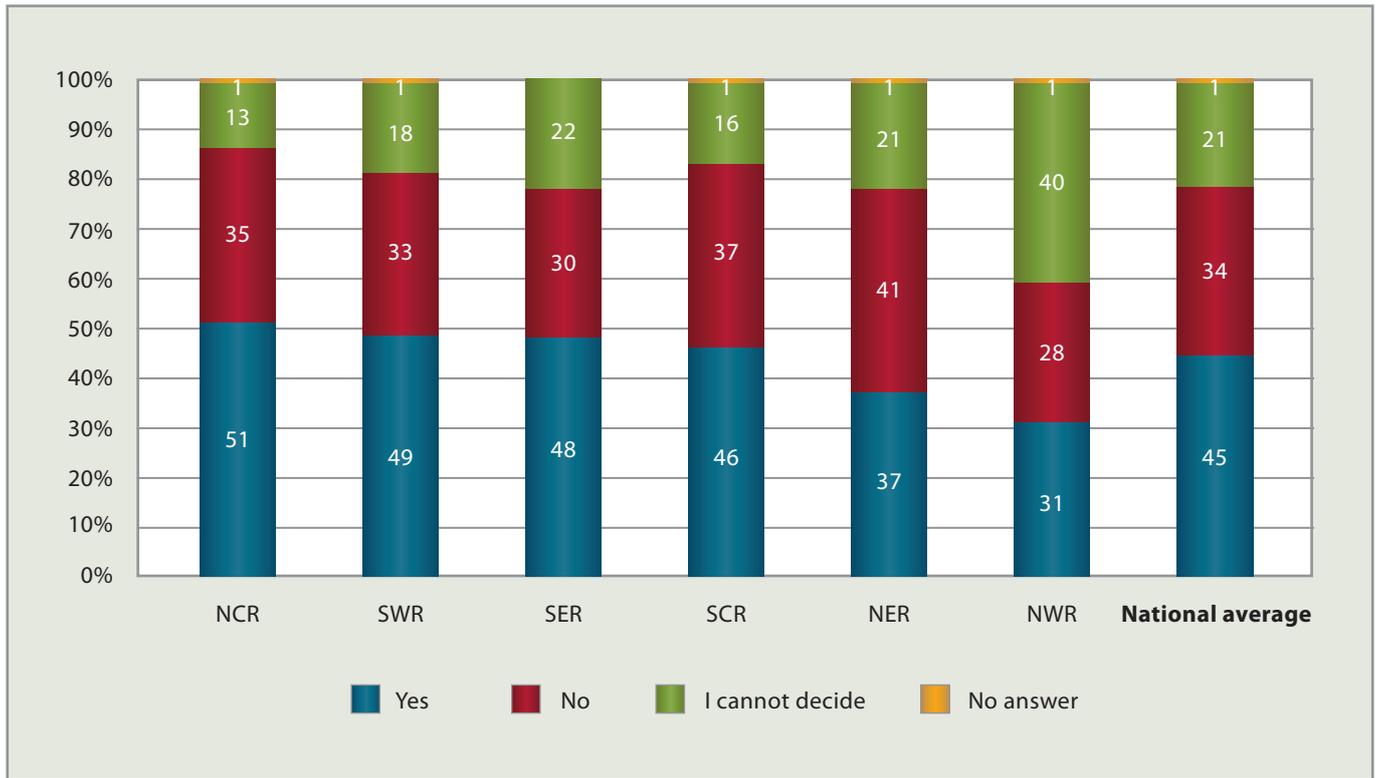
Besides the better-educated, democracy enjoys definitely more pronounced support also among the people who are well-off (64% of those with a monthly

income of more than 700 BGN per household member believe that democracy is the best form of governance for the country) as well as among the younger (53% of people aged below 44 agree with this statement) and among the residents of Sofia (50% of them agree compared to the national average of 45%).

Voting preferences also matter: 70% of those who voted for GERB in the last parliamentary elections believe that democracy is the best form of governance for the country compared to the national average of 45%. According to the 2018 survey, as well as the previous surveys, the supporters of BSP are the only demographic group with a pronounced majority of people who disagree that democracy is the best form of governance for the country (53% of the BSP voters answered negatively compared to the national average of 34%).

Certain variations can be observed in the perception of democracy as the best form of governance based on the region where the respondents live (Fig. 5). The share of those who agree that democracy is the best form of governance for Bulgaria is higher than the national average among the residents of the North Central Region (NCR), the South-West Region (SWR) and the South-East

**Figure 5. Confidence in democracy by region**



Question: *Do you believe that democracy is the best form of state governance for Bulgaria?*

Region (SER); it is definitely lower than the national average among the residents of North-East Region (NER) and North-West Region (NWR).

The majority of respondents identify only democratic countries as examples for good governance. Germany, the UK and Switzerland make the permanent top three foreign countries that can represent a role model: 23% of respondents identify Germany is the best-known example of a country with good governance; 9% mention Switzerland, and 8% the UK. Apart from Russia, mentioned only by 3% of respondents as an example of good governance and a suitable role model for Bulgaria, the respondents did not identify any non-democratic state as a role model of good governance.

The leading role of Germany in the 2016 and 2018 surveys is not that strongly pronounced as in the survey in 2015 where approximately 40% of respondents mentioned Germany as an example of a foreign country with good governance; however, the latter development may be due to a change in the formulation of the survey question: in the 2015 and 2016 surveys the respondents were invited to choose from a list of countries that were read to them alphabetically while in 2018 it was left to people to mention the first country they can think of.

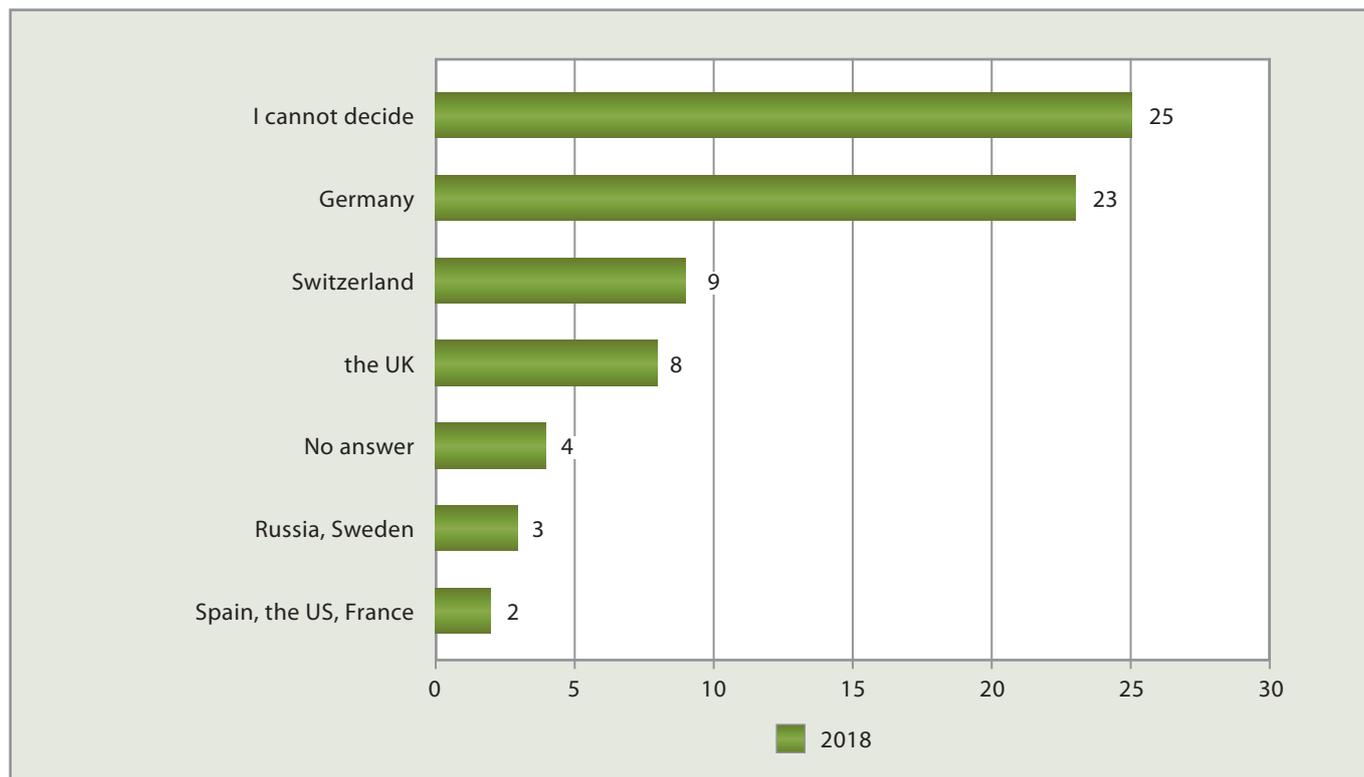
This explains in part why in 2018 one in four people responded that they cannot decide (Fig. 6).

Even though the majority of respondents agree that democracy is the best form of state governance, public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy and in national institutions in general has been permanently low and the trend is negative. The findings of the 2018 survey show an eroded trust in almost all examined institutions: trust in NGOs decreased by 11% compared to 2016, in higher education schools by 10%, in political parties, the National Assembly and the government by 6%, and even in the EU by 5%. The National Assembly and political parties are the least trusted institutions in the survey – just 15% of respondents shared that they trusted the National Assembly and just one in 10 respondents trusted political parties.

Against this backdrop in 2018 the President of the country is the only institution that enjoyed increased public trust: trust in the President sharply increased (by almost 20% in the period from 2016 to 2018) which can be explained with the change of the person holding the position in the early 2017.

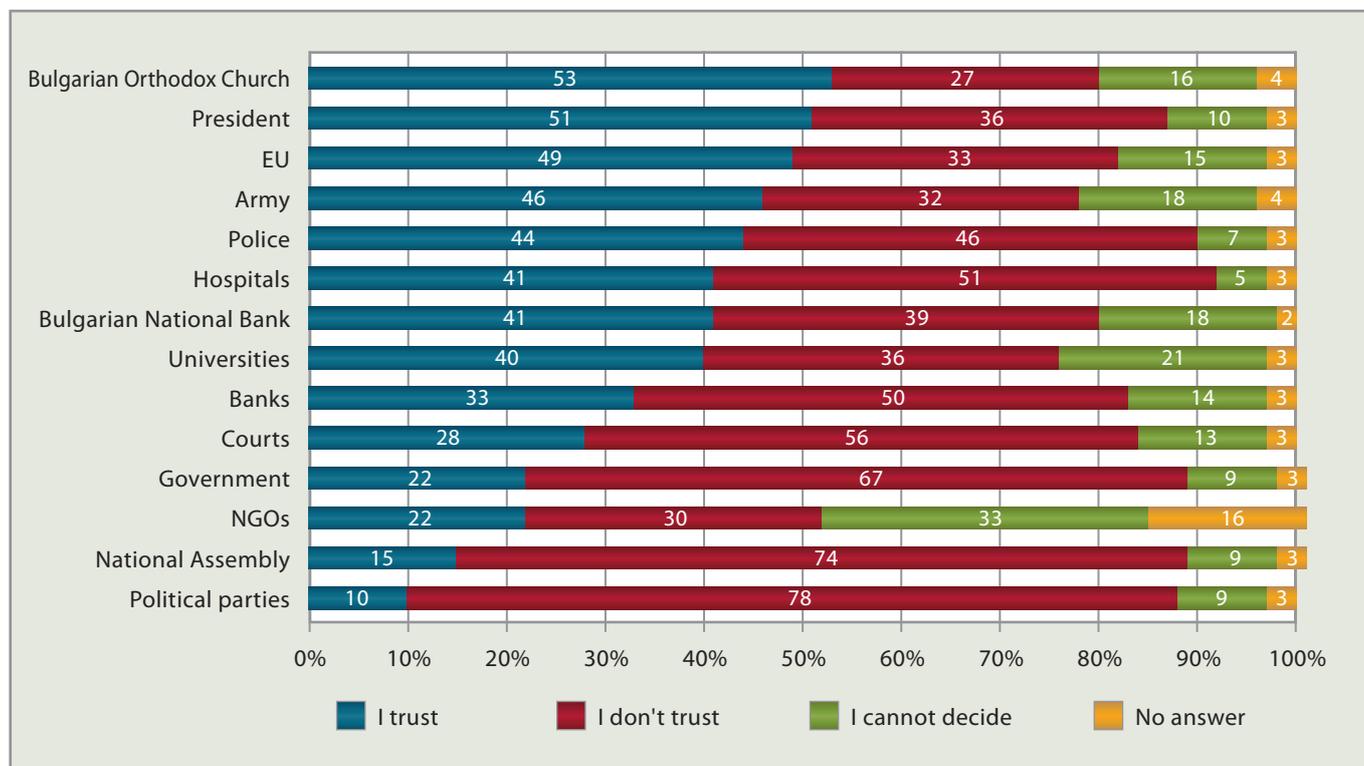
The institutions included in the 2018 survey that enjoy the greatest trust are the Bulgarian Orthodox

**Figure 6. An international example of good governance**



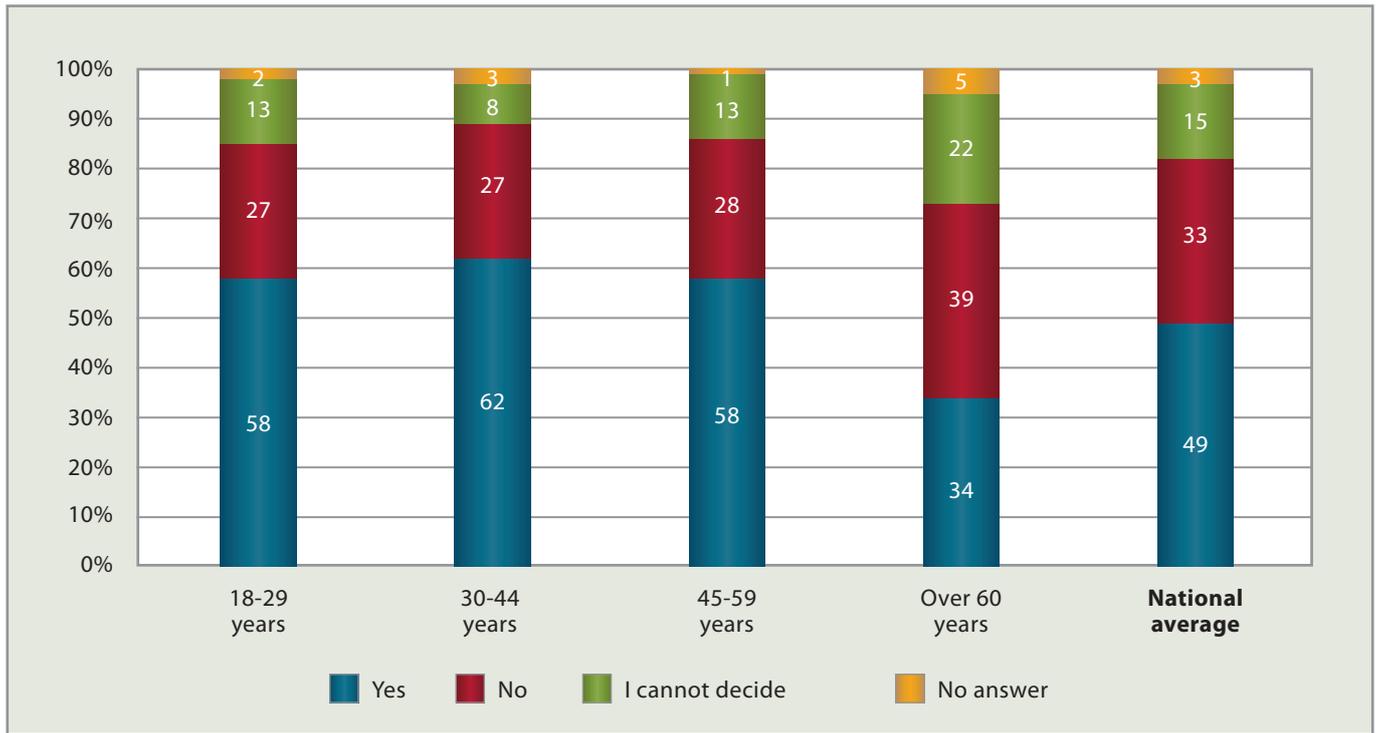
Question: Which foreign country in your opinion is governed well and could set an example for Bulgaria?

**Figure 7. Trust in institutions**



Question: To what extent do you trust the following institutions/organizations? "I trust" reflects the number of respondents who chose the answers "I fully trust" and "I rather trust", while "I don't trust" brings together the respondents who chose the answers "I rather distrust" and "I don't trust at all".

**Figure 8. Confidence in the EU by age groups**



*Question: To what extent do you trust the following institutions/organizations? – (...) The European Union. “I trust” reflectst the number of respondents who chose the answers “I fully trust” and “I rather trust”, while “I don’t trust” the respondents who chose the answers “I rather distrust” and “I don’t trust at all”.*

Church, the President and the European Union: about half of the respondents declared their partial or full confidence in these institutions.

The share of citizens who tend to trust the government is 22% and it is the same number of people who tend to trust the NGOs. However, mistrust is definitely the dominant attitude toward the government – 67% of the respondents claim that they do not trust the government, only 9% cannot decide and 3% did not give any answer. With regard to NGOs, 30% respond that they don’t trust the NGOs, but 33% of the respondents stated that they could not decide and 16% did not give an answer. Lack of information about the work of NGOs is the main reason for public mistrust and lack of an opinion<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 7).

Trust of Bulgarian citizens in the EU remains high compared to trust in national institutions but in 2018 it fell by about 5% compared to data for 2016 and two national institutions (the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the President) got ahead of the EU as the institu-

tions enjoying the greatest trust. Throughout the year several important political debates in the country have involved anti-European rhetoric and it seems to have impact on the public attitudes to the EU. The most glaring example in this respect were the political debates related to the ratification of the Council of Europe’s convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the so called “Istanbul Convention”) which was represented by some media as a threat for traditional Bulgarian values.<sup>6</sup>

Public trust in the EU depends on certain demographic variables. The young tend to trust in the EU more than the elderly. The EU enjoys the highest trust among people aged 30-44: 62% of them trust the EU compared to the national average of 49% and to only 34% of the people aged over 60 (Fig. 8).

Trust in the EU is higher than the national average also among the residents of Sofia City (57% of them trust the EU compared to the national average of 49%). The residents of the NCR and NWR have greater trust in

<sup>5</sup> For detailed analysis of the issue and for an analysis of the interdependence between public trust in NGOs and trust in democracy as the best form of state governance for Bulgaria, see Zahariev, B. Trust in non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria, Sofia: Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2019, the text is available online on [www.osis.bg](http://www.osis.bg)

<sup>6</sup> After the members of the United Patriots Coalition in the government refused to support the ratification and after the largest party in opposition (BSP) called for a referendum on the matter, on 7 March 2018 the government withdrew the draft law for the ratification of the Convention.

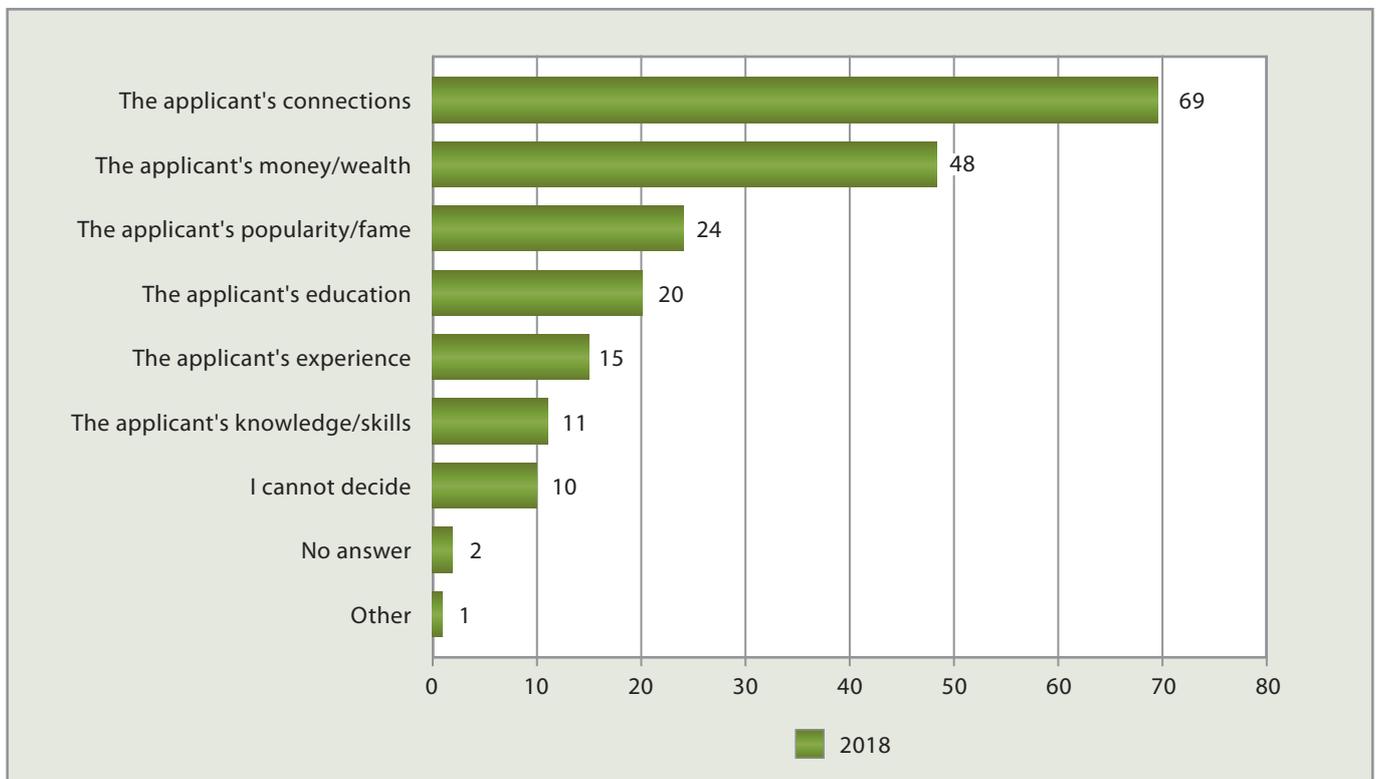
the EU than the national average while trust in the EU in the NER is 40%.

A probable reason for low public trust in the national institutions has to do with the quite common understanding that access to senior government position is granted not on merits but due to other factors. In 2018 almost 70% of respondents believed that the applicant’s connections were the most important factor ensuring access to a senior government position in Bulgaria. Almost half of the respondents mentioned the applicant’s money/wealth as the most important factor for access to a senior government position and the applicant’s popularity/prominence ranked third. Only 20% of the respondents believed that the applicant’s education is an important factor for access to a senior government position; fewer than 15% of the people believed that the applicant’s experience, knowledge or skills mattered (Fig. 9). In 2016 the same question was included in the survey to establish the factors which according to the public had bearing on providing access to the position of a judge and identical attitudes were established.

## POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE

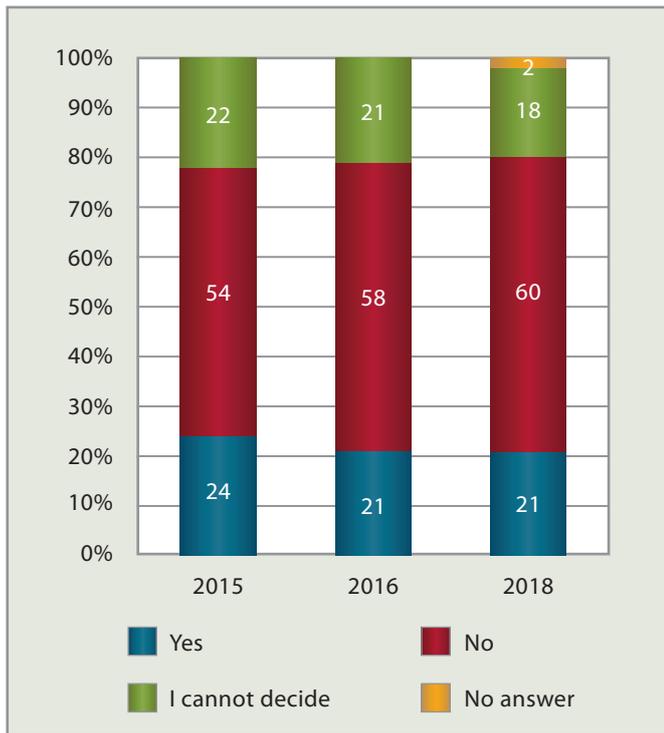
The 2018 survey data confirm a trend of slight but steady increase in the share of respondents who did not consider themselves represented by the governing bodies (Parliament, municipal councils). The share of respondents who disagree with the statement that there is at least one MP in the National Assembly whom they trust and who they know represents them and people like them rose from 54% in 2015 to 60% in 2018. In 2018 only 21% of the respondents agreed that there is at least one MP in the National Assembly whom they personally trust. One in five responded that they could not decide (Fig. 10). The majority of people believe that they and their interests are not represented in the governance of the country. This explains to a certain extent the low public trust in the democratic institutions but also puts into question the democratic nature of governance.

Figure 9. Main factors for access to senior government positions



Question: Which of the following factors are most important in the appointment of people to senior government positions?

**Figure 10. Confidence in individual Members of Parliament**

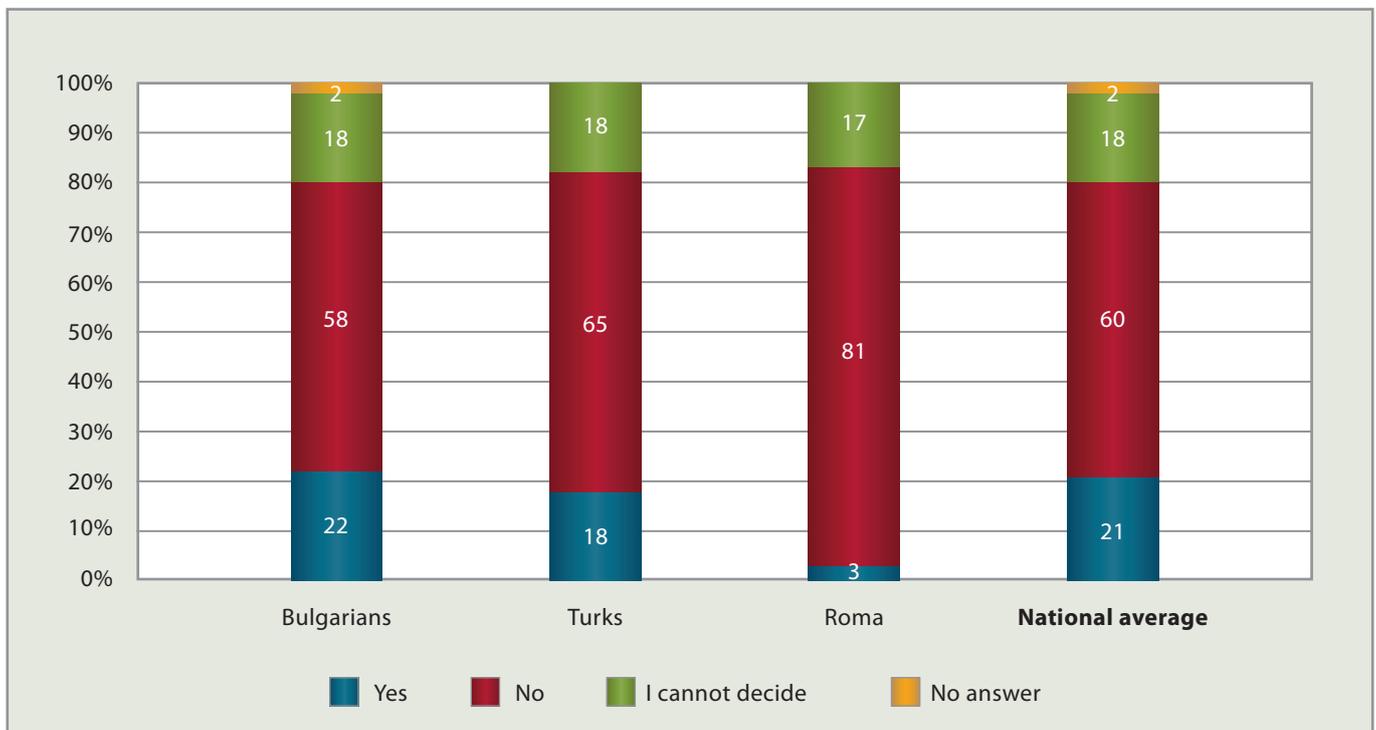


Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "There is at least one MP from my constituency in the National Assembly whom I trust and I know that he/she protects the interests of people like me and my family"?*

The feeling of underrepresentation in the governing bodies is more common among certain demographic groups than the national average. Among the residents in district cities and towns 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 the residents of the capital city of Sofia and villages. Less educated citizens feel less represented in the National Assembly than the better educated. The sense of exclusion from the governing bodies is particularly strong among those respondents who identify themselves as Roma: only 3% of them agree that there is at least one MP in the National Assembly whom they personally trust and know that he/she represents people like them and their families. The national average of those who agree with this statement is 21% (Fig. 11).

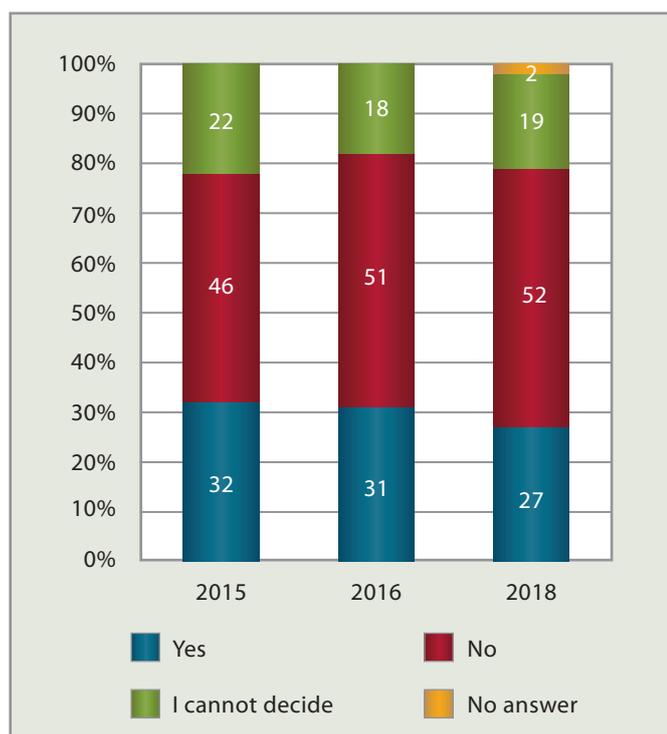
The feeling of underrepresentation of citizens by the governing bodies is also felt towards local authorities, though to a lesser extent compared to the central authorities. In 2018 more than half of the respondents (52%) disagreed with the statement that there was at least one municipal councilor in the Municipal Council of their municipality whom they personally trusted and

**Figure 11. Confidence in individual Members of Parliament by ethnic group**



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "There is at least one MP from my constituency in the National Assembly whom I trust and I know that he/she protects the interests of people like me and my family"?*

**Figure 12. Confidence in individual municipal councilors**



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "There is at least one municipal councilor in the municipal council of my municipality whom I trust and know that he/she protects the interests of people like me and my family".*

knew that he/she represented their interests. Those who agreed with this statement were 27% and their share fell by 5% compared to 2015 (Fig. 12). The feeling

of underrepresentation by local authorities is shared by young people to a greater extent than by those aged 30-60. Among people aged 18-29, only one in five (19%) agreed that there was at least one municipal councilor in the Municipal Council of their municipality whom they trusted. About 30% of young people responded that they could not decide.

All the three surveys conducted so far record not only a sense of underrepresentation of citizens in the governance of the country but also low personal involvement in organized forms of public life. In 2018 the largest share of the respondents (78%) stated that they were not members of any organizations. Hardly 4% are members of political parties and 2% of trade unions; 5% are members of clubs. However, there is a positive trend in the period from 2002 to 2018: the share of those who are not members of any organizations fell from 85% (in 2002) to 78% (in 2018). Membership of political parties and trade unions has been declining in the same period but membership of clubs and community centres has been on the rise (though very slightly) (Table 2).

Where people have been involved in any acts of civic engagement in general, most often these have been acts of charity: 29% of the respondents in 2018 shared that they donated this year to a charity campaign. Engagement in activities to express a certain political or civic position is very low: 11% of respondents signed

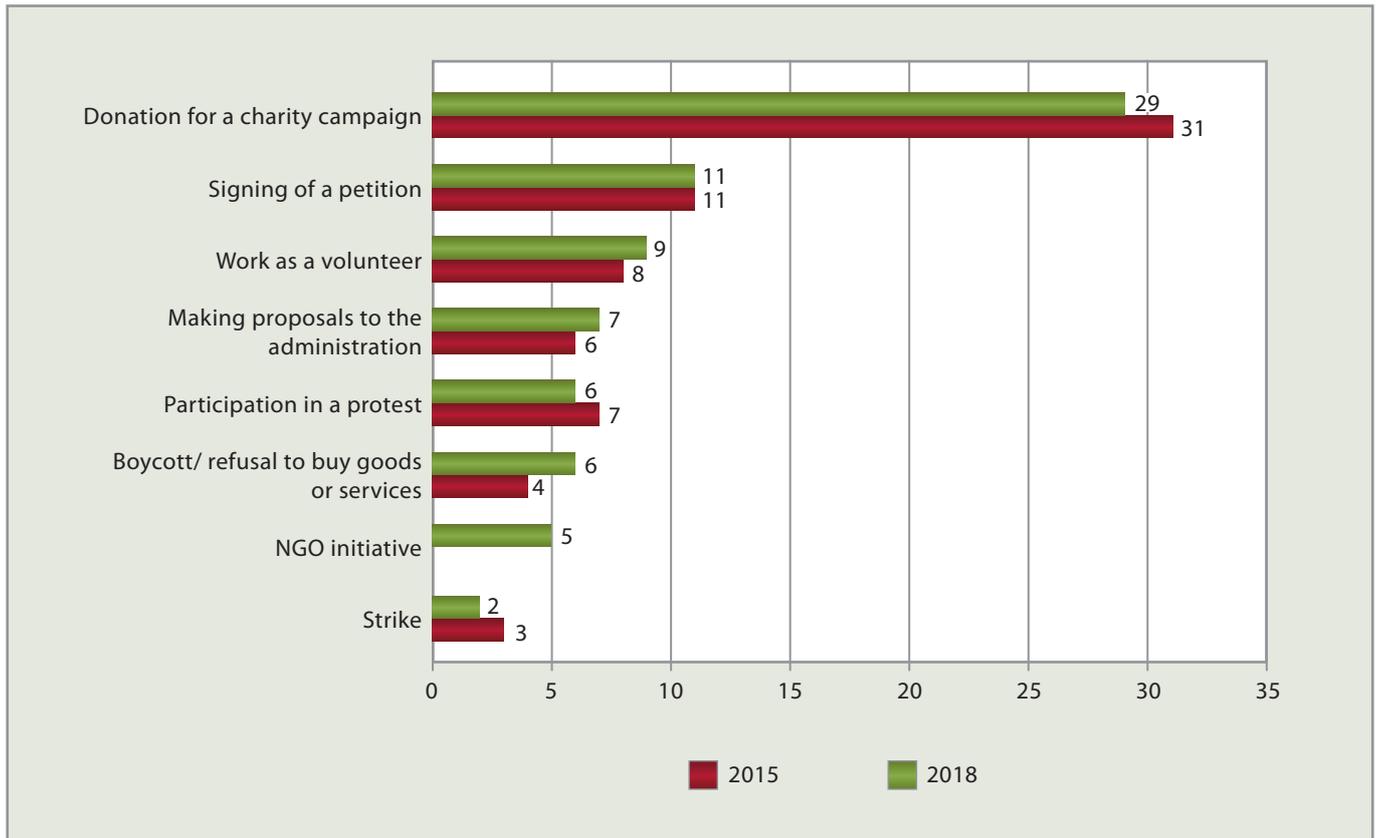
**Table 2. Share of members of parties and organizations (%)**

Organization	2002	2006	2007	2015	2016	2018
Political party	6	5	6	8	6	4
Trade union	5	5	5	7	6	2
Community centre	2	2	3	4	4	4
Sports association/Fishing & Hunting Club <sup>7</sup>	0.5	2	3	3	4	3
Club	1	3	3	6	6	5
Non-governmental organization	1	0.5	1	3	2	2
Professional/business organization	0.5	1	1	2	2	2
Other	1	1	1	0.4	1	1
I am not a member of any organization	85	84	81	81	80	78

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

<sup>7</sup> The answer "or fishing/ hunting club" was not included in the questionnaires for the survey "State of the society" in 2002 and 2006; it was added for the first time in 2007.

**Figure 13. Forms of citizen participation**



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

petitions last year, 9% volunteered, a mere 7% submitted proposals to the administration, some 6% took part in a protest or an action to boycott particular goods or services. Low citizen participation in political or civil initiatives is a persistent problem: approximately the same rate of non-engagement was recorded by the 2015 survey as well (Fig. 13).

In contrast to the situation 12 years ago (in 2006 and 2007), two positive trends stand out over the last three years with regard to civic engagement in the governance of the country. First, the share of citizens who remain passive in the face of violations of public life rules has been declining. Where in 2006 one in third (or 36%) of the respondents answered that they did not act in the event of undue interference and violation of their rights, in 2018 the share of passive citizens fell to 22%.

The second positive development is that the share of respondents who regard the institutions as a means of solving their problems has been on the rise: in 2018 the highest number of respondents (43%) shared that

in case someone violated their rights and disturbed them, they would submit a complaint to the relevant institution. In 2006 and 2007, in contrast, this share was 32-33%.

In the period from 2006 to 2018 a sizeable increase could be observed in the number of people who take actions on their own to correct violations: in 2018, 38% of respondents stated that where someone violated their rights and disturbed them, they talked to the person in question and demanded an end to it; the share of those who reported to have taken actions on their own to solve the problem increased by about 10% (Table 3).

Similarly to increased civic activity in case of transgressions that affect directly their interests, the respondents reported more often than in 2002 that they would take specific actions if they were not satisfied with the governance of the country. The share of those who would not do anything in case of dissatisfaction with the state governance fell from 38% (2002) to 29% (2018).

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

<b>If someone violated your rights and disturbed you, you would:</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2018</b>
Do nothing – that's life.	36	32	21	26	22
Complain to the relevant institution.	32	33	48	45	43
Demand from the perpetrator to stop.	22	23	37	39	38
Where possible, solve the problem on my own.	21	23	26	32	30
Take the law in your hands or hire others to deal with the perpetrator.	5	7	7	8	7
Persistently call or write to the relevant institution.	5	5	15	11	-
Cause them damage to punish them	2	2	2	4	3
Organize a civic initiative (a petition, a protest)	1	2	4	3	4
No answer	-	-	-	-	5

In 2018, the largest share of people (45%) stated that in case they were not satisfied with the governance of the state, they would sign a petition; a third (31%) would take part in a rally/march; a fifth (21%) would take part in a strike. The 2018 survey also registered an increased willingness of people who are dissatisfied with the governance of the country to turn to Bulgarian and foreign media (12% reported that they would do it compared to only 2% in 2006). However, the share of those who would write in the social media

in case they were dissatisfied with the governance of the country (14%) was slightly higher than the share of those who under similar circumstances would turn to traditional Bulgarian or foreign media (12%).

The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg also seemed to be a likely ally of the citizens: the share of those who reported that in case they were dissatisfied with the governance of the country they would file a complaint to the Strasbourg Court tripled from 3% in 2006 to 11% in 2018 (Table 4).

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

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

## ATTITUDES TO POLITICAL PARTIES

In 2018 an overwhelming majority of respondents (78%) do not trust the political parties in the country; the share of those who trust them is only 10%. Hardly 4% of respondents are members of political parties and this is the lowest level recorded in the surveys so far, though it has never exceeded 8% of respondents (2015).

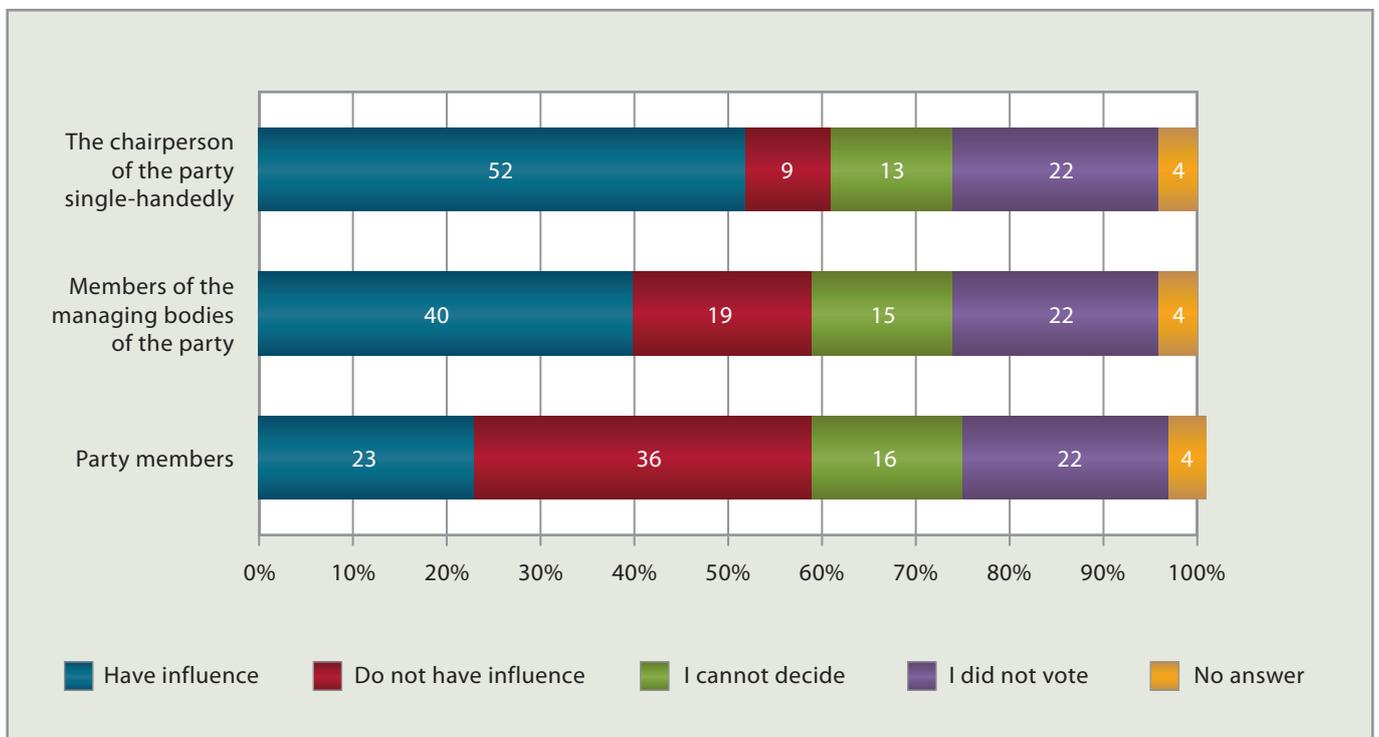
The dominant perception of political parties is that of projects that are run single-handedly by their chairpersons and whose members have weak or almost no influence on decision-making. In 2018 the largest share of respondents believed that the chairperson had singlehandedly the greatest influence on the governance of the party for which they voted in the last elections; only 23% of the respondents believed that the party members of the political party they voted for in the last parliamentary elections had influence over its governance (Fig. 14). With regard to these questions, there is

hardly any change compared to the findings from the previous survey (2016); the only difference is that the share of those who believe that chairpersons have singlehandedly the deciding vote in the governance of the party has increased by about 6%.

What is interesting to note is that differences arising from different voting preferences are not that pronounced; the share of those who believe that the chairperson of the party single-handedly exercises significant or great influence on the party governance is considerably higher than those who believe that party members have great or significant influence on its governance; this is true for those who voted for GERB and for those who voted for BSP, MRF and United Patriots. At present times there is no major political party in the country for which people believe that its management decisions are taken by the deciding vote of its members.

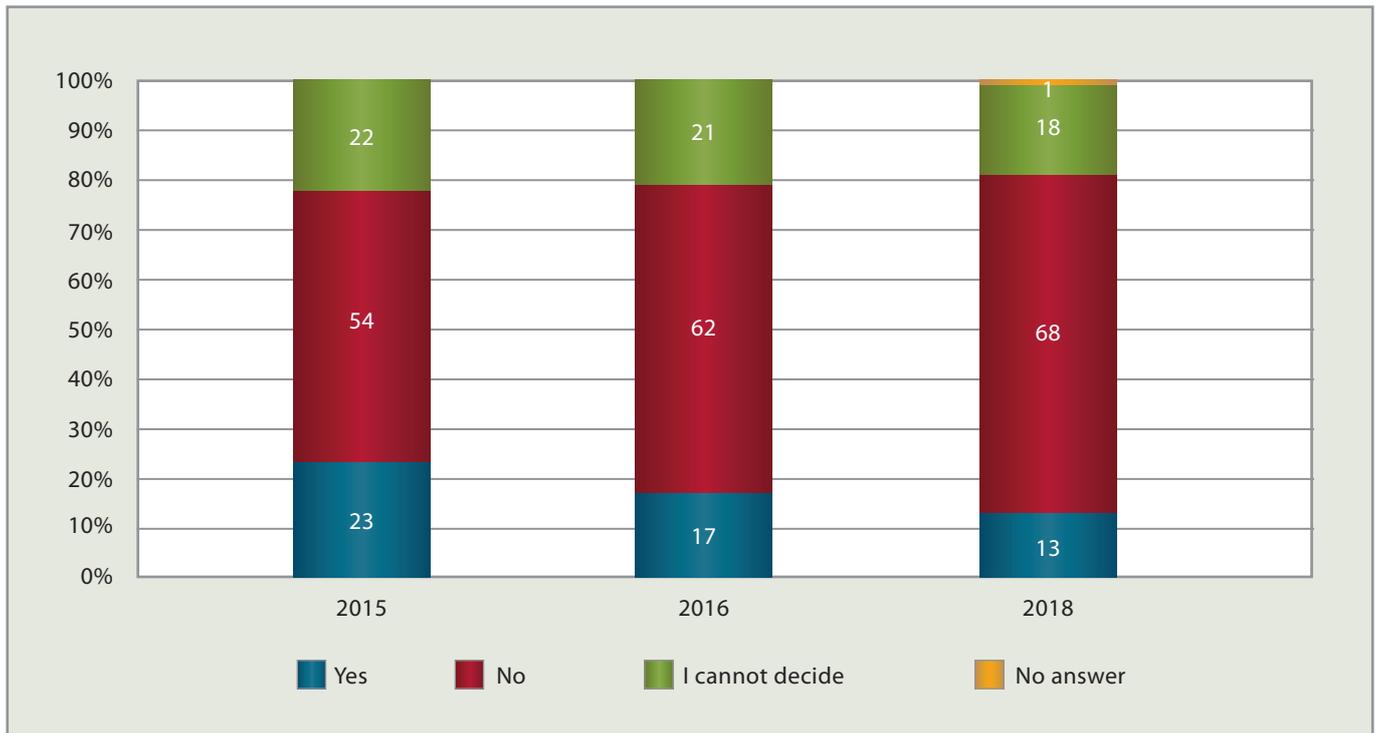
In 2018 the number of people who do not see any competition among the political parties considerably increased: in 2015 the share of those who did not think that the change of parties in the government led to a

Figure 14. Governance of parties



Question: In your opinion what influence does each of the listed people have over the governance of the party you voted for during the last parliamentary elections? "Have influence" includes those who responded "Significant influence" and "Great influence", and "Do not have influence" includes those who responded "Little influence" and "No influence at all".

**Figure 15. Competition among the parties**



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

change in the state policy was 54%, in 2018 it was already 68%. In 2015, those who agreed with this statement were 23% of respondents; in 2018 they were only 13% (Fig. 15).

According to the dominant public perceptions there are no considerable differences between individual political parties both from the perspective of their policy and party governance. This belief somewhat sums up the deepening crisis in the representative democracy observed in the surveys after 2015.

## THE RULE OF LAW

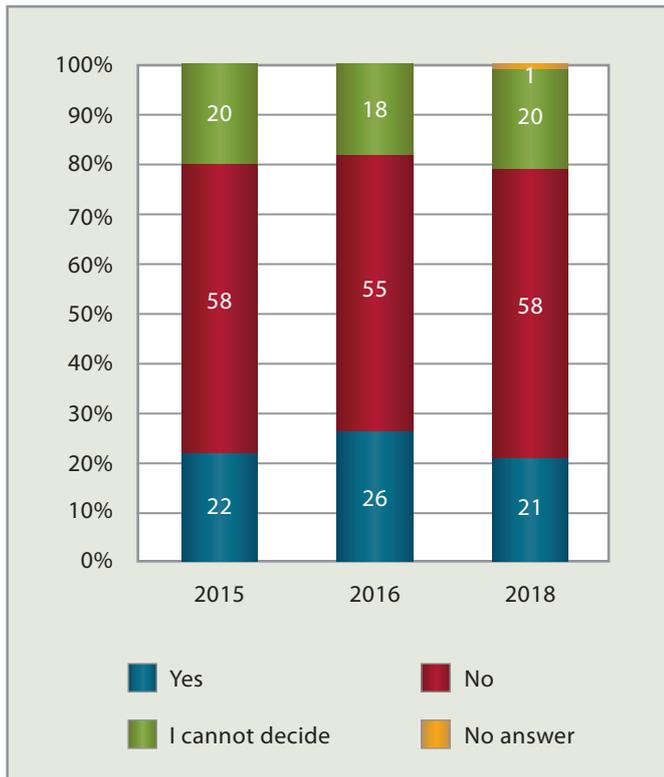
Out of the EU values examined (democracy, the rule of law and protection of the fundamental human rights), the most serious problems in Bulgarian public opinion are persistently related to the rule of law. In 2018 a considerable majority of respondents (56%) stated that they did not trust national courts. However, public distrust of political bodies and political parties is higher than distrust of courts: 67% distrust the government, 74% – the National Assembly and 78% – the

political parties. Hence important aspects of the rule of law crisis in Bulgaria are not only related to the low public trust in courts but also to low public trust in political bodies and from there – low legitimacy of the legislative process.

In 2018 the largest share of respondents (58%) did not agree that the laws in Bulgaria were fair, a 67% did not agree that the laws were clear and comprehensible for the citizens. Only 21% of respondents agreed with the statement that the laws in Bulgaria are fair (Fig. 16) and only 14% believed that the laws are clear and comprehensible for people (Fig. 17). In the period from 2015 to 2018 hardly any change has been registered with this respect and it demonstrates that the public holds deeply rooted negative opinions about the quality of legislation and this is both a problem of the rule of law and the democratic nature of governance.

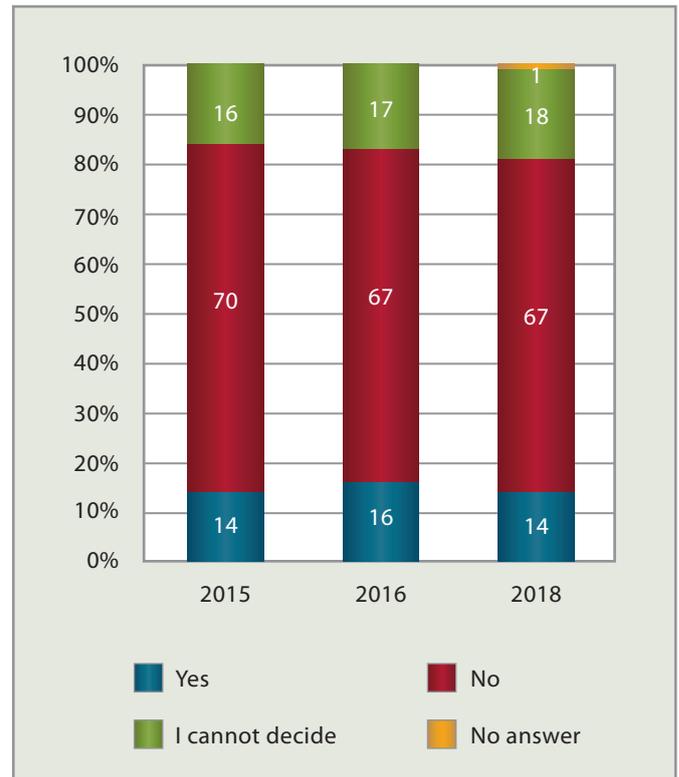
Low trust of citizens in the rule of law is related both to the way laws are adopted by political bodies and the way they are implemented by the courts. In 2018 three in four respondents (76%) disagreed with the statement that the laws in Bulgaria applied equally to all; hardly 8% agreed with this statement (Fig. 18). With regard to the answer to this question, no change has

**Figure 16. Are the laws fair?**



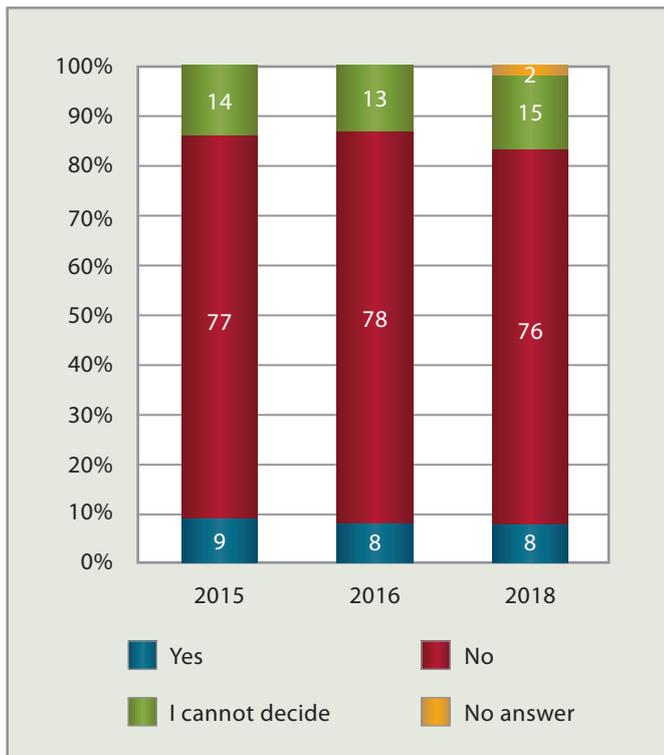
Question: Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "Are the laws in Bulgaria fair"?

**Figure 17. Are the laws clear and comprehensible?**



Question: Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "Are the laws clear and comprehensible"?

**Figure 18. Do the laws equally apply?**



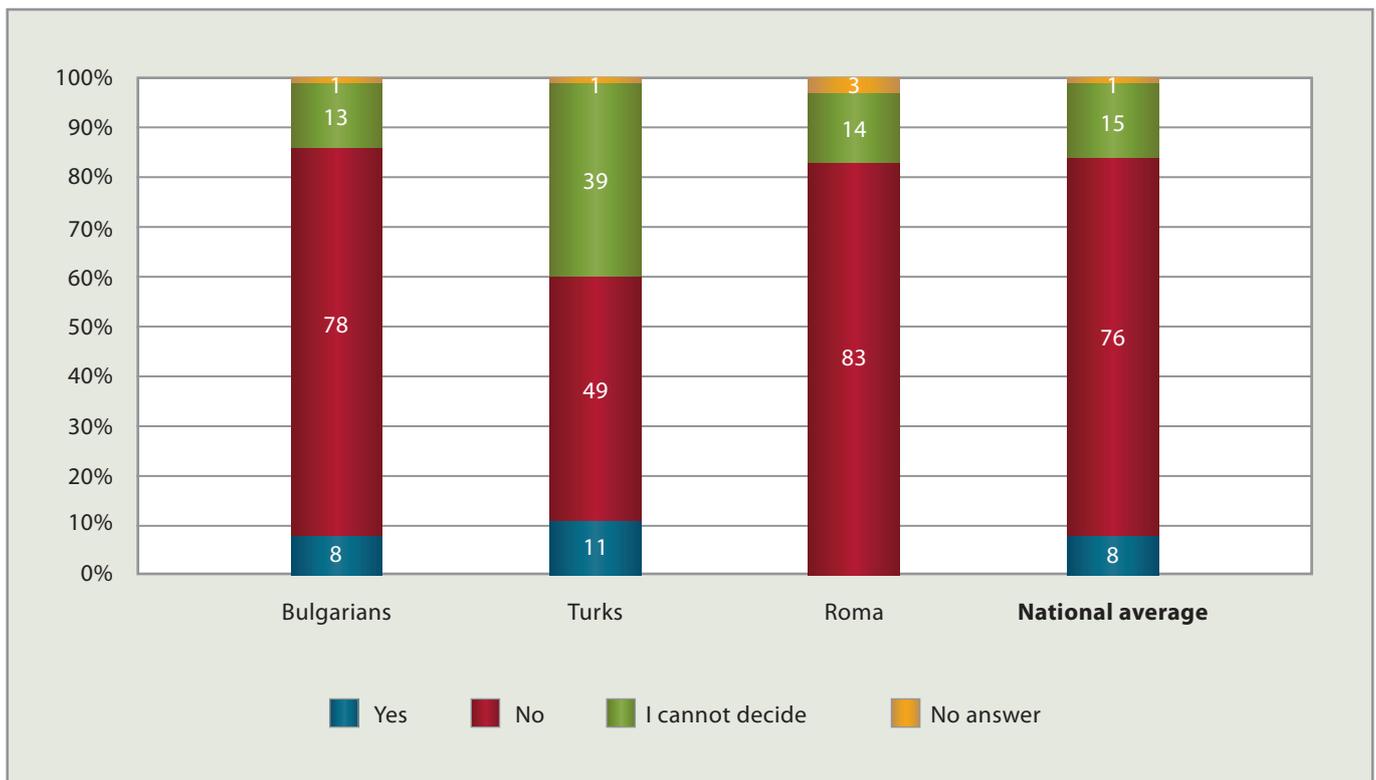
Question: Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "The laws apply equally to all citizens"?

been registered compared with the two previous surveys in 2015 and 2016.

The largest share of respondents who disagreed with the statement that the laws in Bulgaria applied equally to all were among those who identified themselves as Roma – 83% of them disagreed with this statement compared to the national average of 76%. Out of the respondents who identified themselves as Roma (72 people in the sampling) no one agreed that the laws in Bulgaria applied equally to all. Among the people who identified themselves as Turks, 11% agreed with the statement that the laws applied equally to all which is even more than among Bulgarians. However, more than a third of the respondents (39%) who identified themselves as Turks actually refrained from answering the question by replying that they could not decide (Fig. 19).

The crisis of the rule of law in Bulgaria affects not only the legislative and judicial but also the executive branch as well. In 2018 almost half of the respondents believed that the government did not act within the law (Fig. 20). The voting preferences of the respondents influence the answers to certain extent. Those who vot-

**Figure 19. Do the laws apply equally? By the ethnic background of the respondents**



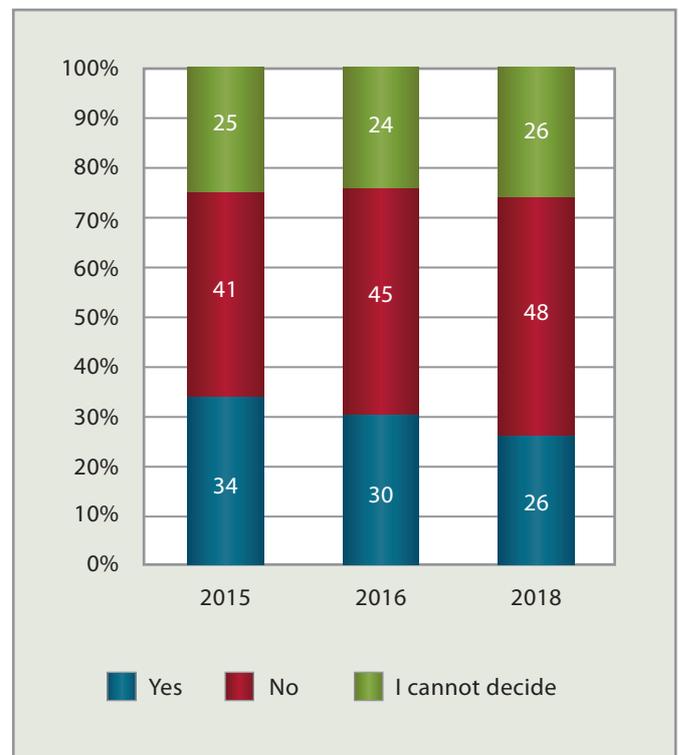
Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "The laws apply equally to all citizens"?*

ed for GERB in the last parliamentary elections were the only group more than half of whom (53%) agreed that the government acted within the law. However, even among them a fourth did not agree with this statement. The ratio is opposite for those who voted for BSP: 54% disagreed that the government acted within the law and 22% agreed. Among those who did not vote, 55% did not agree that the government acted within the law and only 15% agreed.

In 2018 half of the respondents did not agree with the statement that courts prevent the government from breaking the law, i.e. did not believe that courts fulfill their main function under the constitution. Hardly one in five (21%) of the respondents agreed with this statement and 28% responded that they could not decide (Fig. 21).

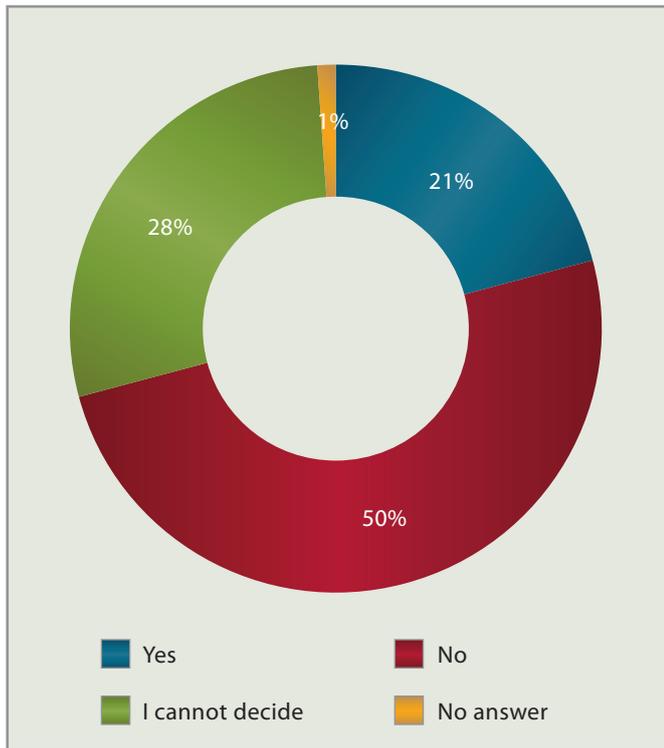
Even though a considerable number of the respondents have an opinion as to whether the laws in the country apply equally, few citizens in reality have had firsthand experience with the courts. One in sixth (or 16% of respondents) shared that they had to deal with the court over the last year prior to the survey. The majority of the respondents (83%) did not have first-

**Figure 20. The government acts within the law**



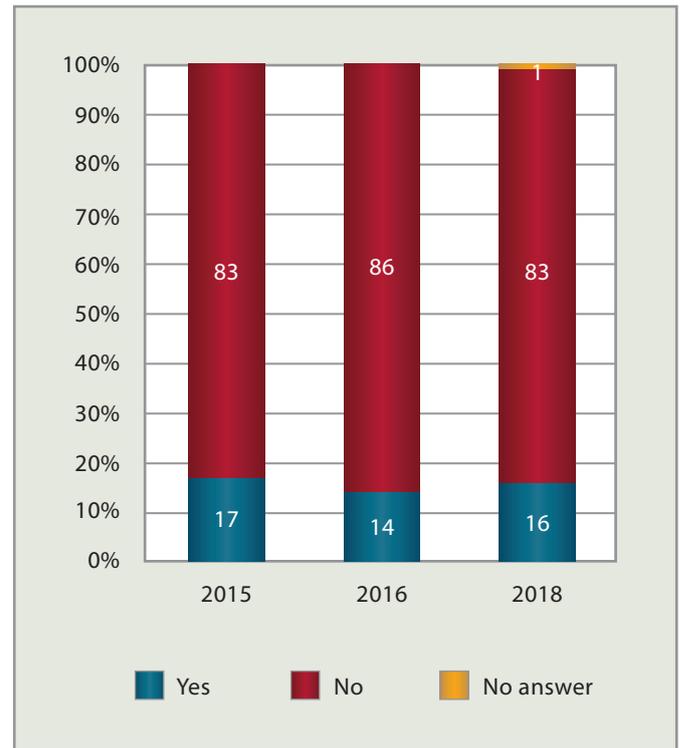
Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "The government in Bulgaria acts within the law"?*

**Figure 21. Courts restrain the government**



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: (...) "Courts prevent the government from breaking the law".*

**Figure 22. Personal experience with the courts**



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

hand experience with the court and in order to form their opinion about the quality of the work of courts most likely relied on information supplied by politicians and reporters (Fig. 22).

Even where citizens paid a visit to the court building last year, in most cases their visit was not related to participation in a court trial. People most often visited the court to have a copy of documents issued and only 18% of those who visited the court last year did it as a party or a witness in a court case, i.e. they had firsthand impressions about the main activity of the court. The development of opportunities for e-services by judicial bodies in the future (including issuance of copies of documents) will increasingly limit direct contact between courts and citizens as well as the opportunities for citizens to form an opinion of the court’s work based on their firsthand impressions.

The 2018 survey, just like the two previous surveys, demonstrated that among those who visited at all the court building last year, the number of people who appeared before the court as court experts or those employed by the court was higher than the number of those who took part in court proceedings as jurors.

Even though one of the main goals of the institution of jurors is to ensure participation of the public in law administration, the findings of the survey show that a very limited circle of people (below 1%) take part in the work of the court in such capacity (Table 5).

**Table 5. Reasons for a court visit**

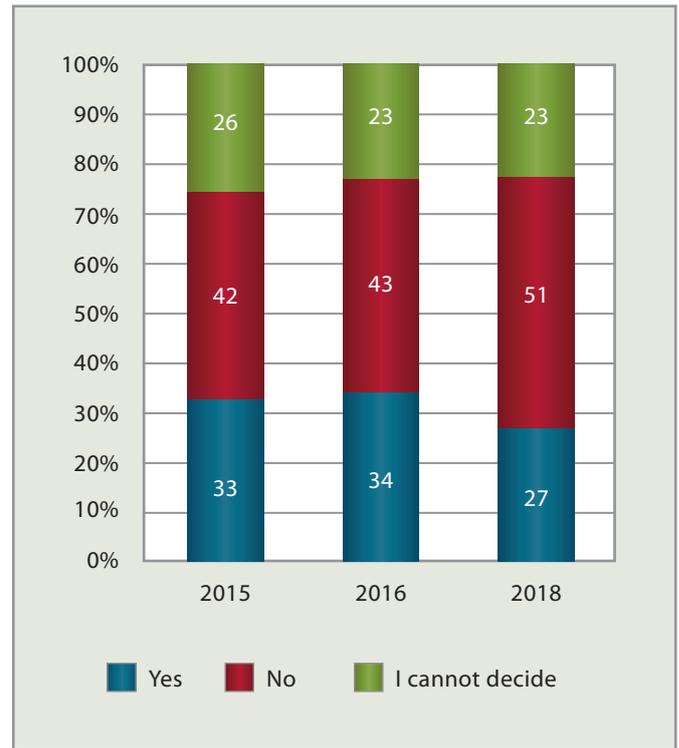
If "Yes", what was the reason for your visit of the court last year?	Percentage
To have a copy of a document issued	60
As a party in court proceedings	18
As a witness in a trial	18
No answer	3
As an expert	3
Other	2
I work in court	2
As a juror	<1

The three surveys conducted since 2015 showed a steady increase in the share of people who believe that in case they had to go to court, they most probably would not receive a fair trial. About half of the respondents (51%) in 2018 believed that compared to 42% in 2015. Hardly 27% of respondents expected to receive a fair trial in case they went to court (Fig. 23).

## DEMOCRACY AS A SYSTEM OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

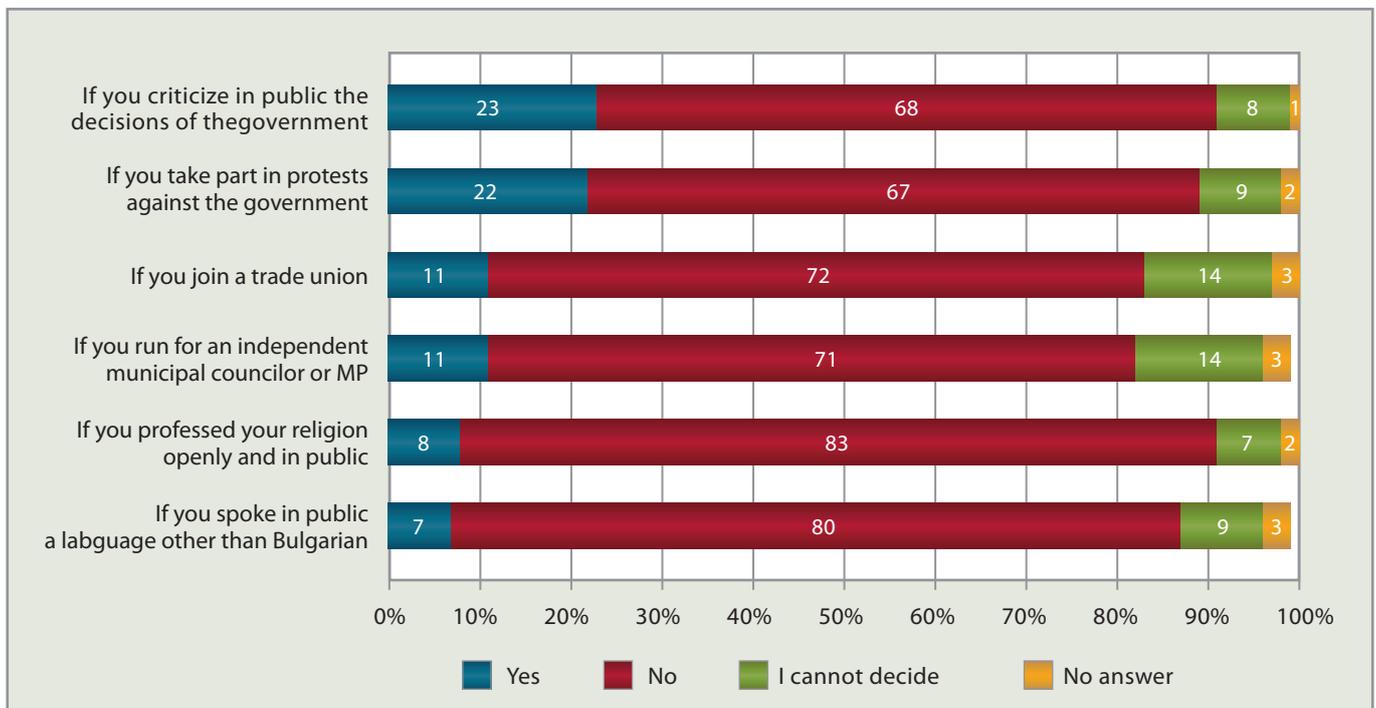
Widespread and lasting attitudes can be observed among citizens that their fundamental human rights are protected and they can exercise them freely in public without fear of penalties or repression. The majority of employed respondents (83%) believe that they are not likely to lose their job or business if they profess their religion openly and in public; 80% believe that they are not likely to lose their job or business if they speak in public a language other than Bulgarian; 72% believe that they are not likely to lose their job/

Figure 23. Expectations of a fair trial



Question: *Do you believe that if you have to go to court, you would receive a fair trial? "Yes" sums up the respondents who replied "definitely yes" and "more likely yes"; "No" those who replied "definitely no" and "more likely no".*

Figure 24. Risk of wrongful dismissal



Question: *"How likely is it for you to lose your job/business if..." (please, answer for each option separately). "Yes" includes the respondents who have chosen the answers "Highly likely" and "Rather likely", while "No" includes the respondents who have chosen the answers "Rather unlikely" and "Not likely at all".*

business if they join a trade union and 67% believe that they are not likely to lose their job/business if they take part in a protest against the government.

Even though the share of respondents who believe the opposite is considerably lower, one should not overlook the fact that for many people the exercising of their political and civil rights is bound to certain risks: approximately 23% of the employed believe that they are likely to lose their job or business if they criticize in public the decisions of the government or if they take part in protests against it; 11% of the employed believe that they stand a risk of losing their job/business if they join a trade union or if they run for an independent municipal councilor or Member of Parliament (Fig. 24).

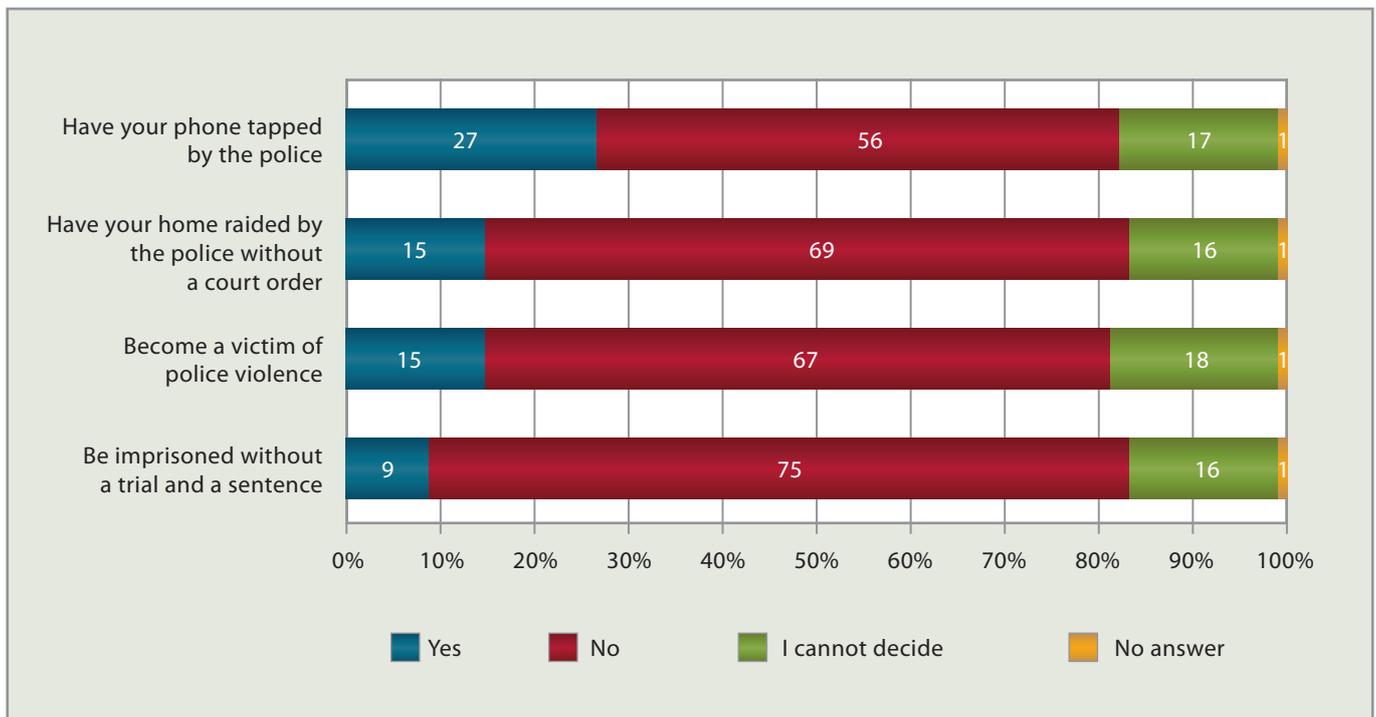
The largest share of the respondents feels confident that their rights are protected against abuse by the law enforcement authorities. Three-fourths of the respondents believe that over the next 12 months they are not likely to be deprived of their liberty without a trial and a sentence; 69% believe that it is not likely that the police would raid their home without a court order; 67% believe that they are not likely to become victims of police violence and 56% believe that it is not likely that their phones will be tapped by the police. The 2018 survey

has not recorded any significant changes with regard to each of these perceptions compared to the findings from the 2015 and 2016 surveys. The established opinion seems to be that the law enforcement authorities would not abuse their powers and they cannot be used as a tool to violate on a massive scale the fundamental rights of citizens. However, the share of those who feel potentially threatened by the law enforcement abuse is not negligible at all (Fig. 25).

The share of respondents who believe that they are likely to become victims of police violence over the next 12 months is twice as high among those who identify themselves as Roma compared to those who identify as Bulgarians (Fig. 26). Among the respondents who reside in Sofia there is also a slightly higher proportion of those, who believe that they are likely to become a victim of police violence compared to those living in villages. Some 79% of the village residents believe that they are not likely to become a victim of police violence next year compared to 58% of the residents in Sofia City and a national average of 67%.

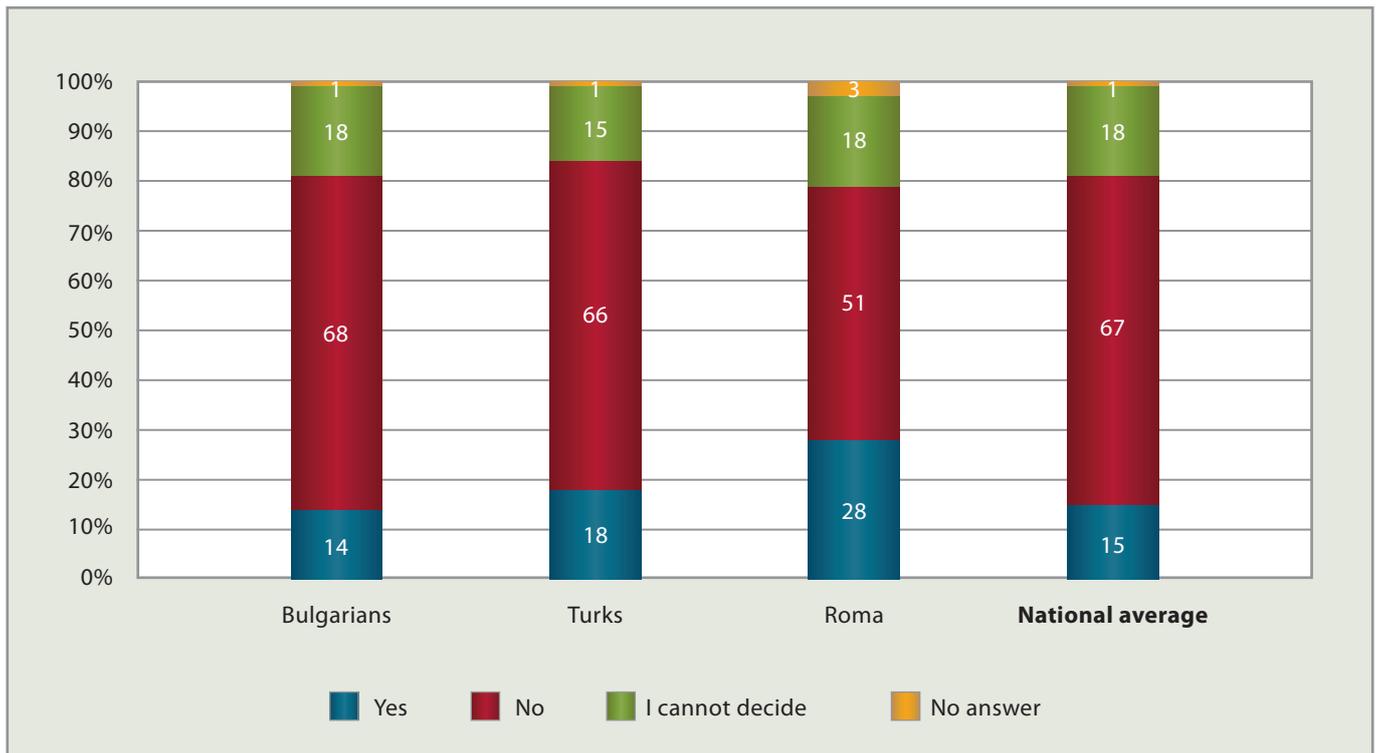
These attitudes match to a certain extent the real trends in the level of victimization among the respondents: even though certain political circles are constant-

**Figure 25. Risk of illegal invasion of privacy**



Question: *What is the likelihood in your opinion of any of the following events to happen to you personally over the next 12 months?*

**Figure 26. Risk of police violence (by ethnicity)**



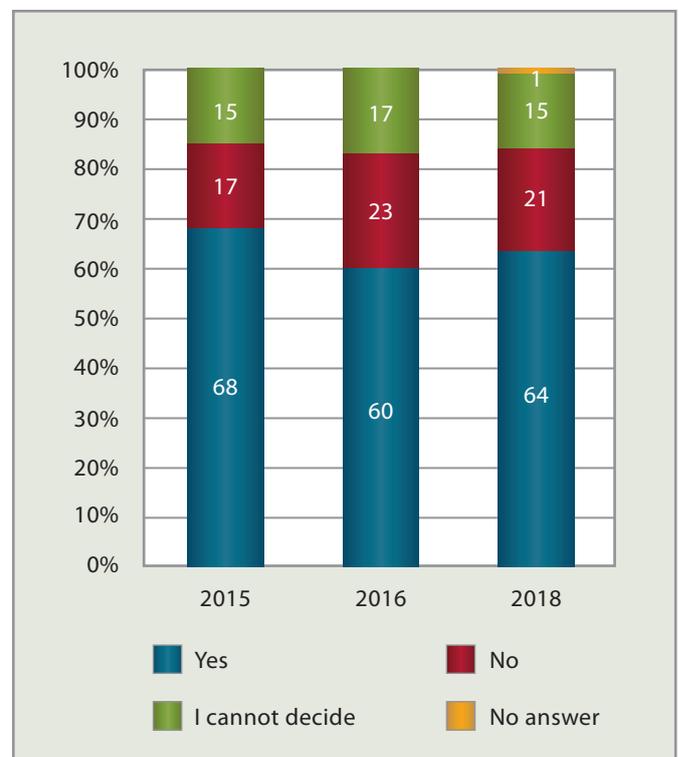
Question: *Is it likely in your opinion that any of these events might happen to you personally over the next 12 months: (...) „Become a victim of police violence“?*

ly dwelling on “petty” crime (in villages), the survey shows that the number of victims of crimes among village residents is three times lower compared to Sofia City. In the 2018 survey 9% of respondents gave a positive answer to the question “Have you been a victim of crime last year?; the share of those who gave a positive answer among village residents was 5% and among Sofia residents was 15%.

In 2018 the largest number of respondents (64% were of the opinion that the rights of minorities in Bulgaria were protected. However, one in five (21% of the respondents) disagreed with this statement (Fig. 27). Among young people (aged 18-29) and the less educated the share of those who disagreed with this statement was almost twice higher compared to the national average: 39% of young people and people with basic, primary or lower education disagreed with the statement that the rights of minorities in Bulgaria were protected compared to a national average of 21%. The share of those who disagreed is higher also among the unemployed (35%).

The most pronounced difference in the perception of the degree of protection of the fundamental rights

**Figure 27. Rights of minorities**



Question: *Do you agree with the following statements: (...) “The rights of minorities in Bulgaria are protected“?*

of minorities can be observed with regard to the different ethnic background of the respondents: 76% of respondents who identify themselves as Roma and 34% of those who identify themselves as Turks disagree with the statement that the rights of minorities in Bulgaria are protected compared to 15% of people who disagree among those who identify themselves as Bulgarians.

Despite the widespread belief that the rights of minorities in Bulgaria are protected, the survey established deeply rooted discriminatory attitudes.

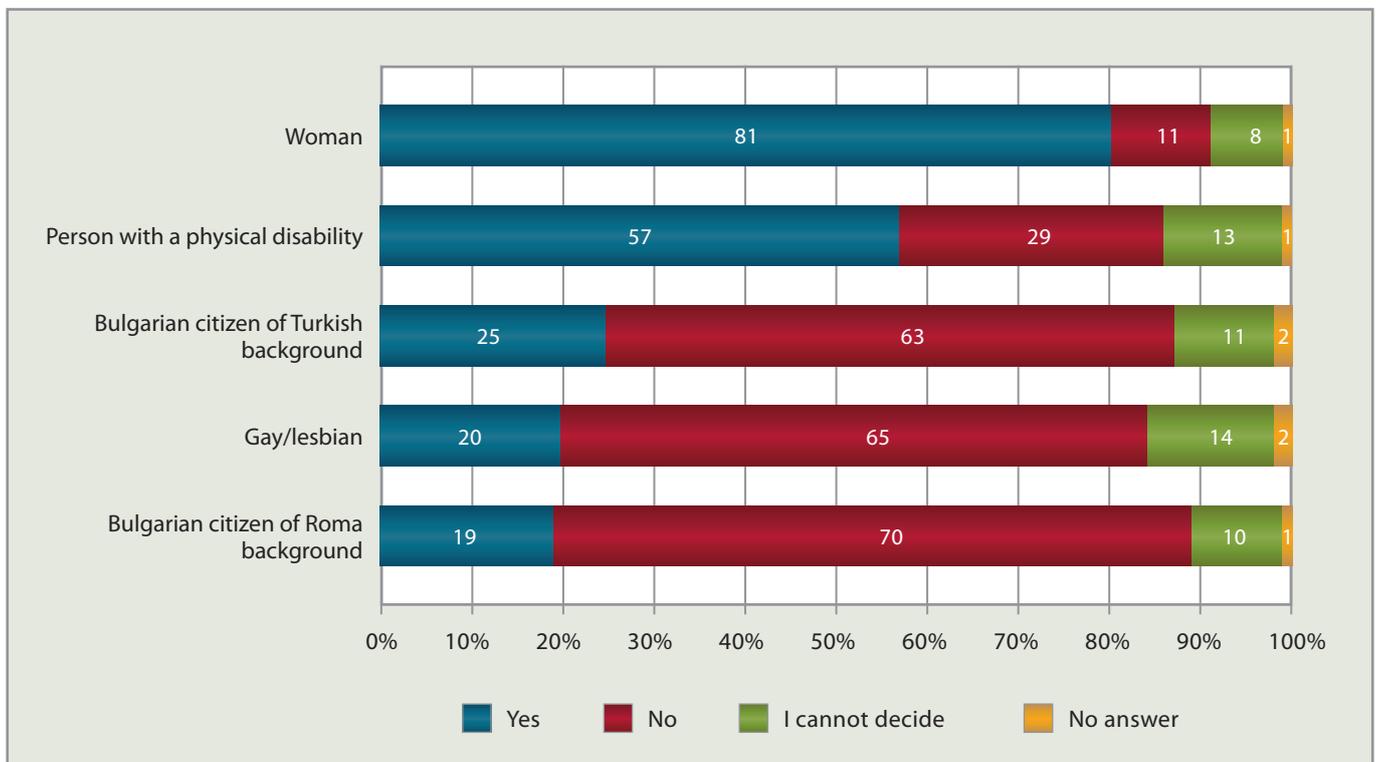
In the upcoming local elections (autumn 2019), all other things being equal, 70% of respondents would not vote for a candidate for mayor who is Roma; 65% would not vote for a candidate for mayor who is gay/lesbian; 63% would not vote for a Bulgarian citizen of Turkish origin; almost half of the respondents (46%) would not vote for an elderly candidate (over 65); 29% would not vote for a person with a disability and 11% would not vote for a candidate for mayor who is a woman. Among the respondents who identify themselves as Roma, the share of those who would vote for a candidate for mayor who is a woman, an elderly or a dis-

abled person is slightly lower than the national average (Fig. 28).

In the period between 2015 and 2018 there has been a slight increase in the share of respondents who, all other conditions being equal, would vote for a candidate for mayor who is over 65 (in 2015, 32% of the respondents would vote and in 2018, 40%); a candidate for a mayor who is disabled (in 2015, 53% would vote for a candidate for mayor with a physical disability and in 2018 – 57%).

The better educated, the younger, the better-off and the residents in Sofia City are more likely to show tolerance and they more often share that they would vote for a candidate for mayor who is gay/lesbian or a person with a physical disability. However, this is not the case with the likelihood to vote for a candidate for mayor who is elderly (older than 65) or a Bulgarian citizen of Roma origin. The poorer and less educated are more prone to share that they would vote for a candidate for mayor who is Roma. It can be assumed that this is the case because more Roma are members of these demographic groups. Among the better educated,

Figure 28. Discriminatory attitudes



Question: *If you had to choose between two candidates for mayor, who have the same qualifications and political beliefs, would you vote for the one who is:...*

the residents of Sofia City and the better-off there is a slightly lower number of people who are likely to vote for a candidate for mayor, who is an elderly person, all other things being equal. In contrast, the poorer and village residents are more likely to vote for an elderly candidate for mayor. This may be related to the fact that there are more elderly people among the poorer and among the village residents.

## MEDIA FREEDOM

Media freedom is an important element of any democratic governance. Citizens cannot take part in the governance if they do not have access to reliable information about the work of the government. However, it is with regard to media freedom in particular that the three surveys conducted so far showed rapid worsening of the context.

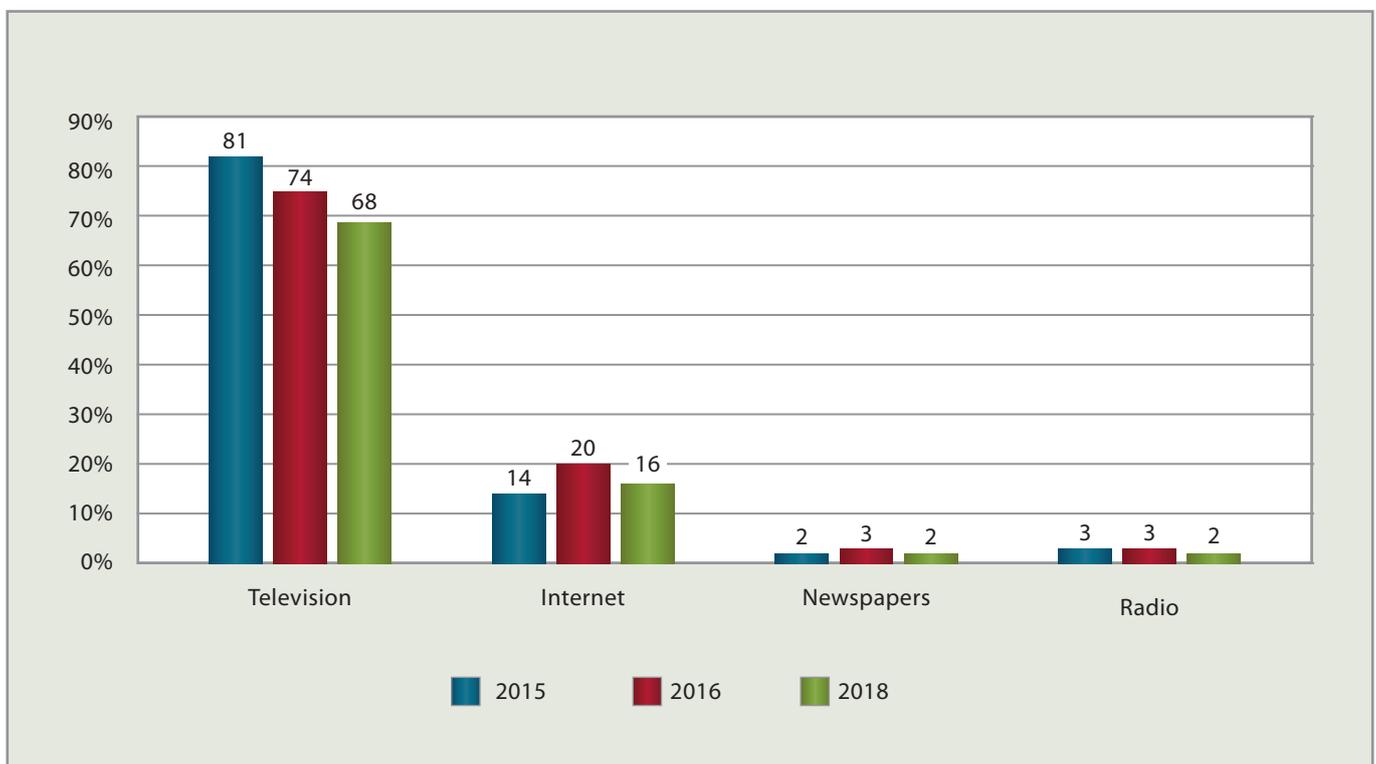
The television is the main medium trusted by citizens when they needed information about the situation in the country. In 2018 the largest share of respondents

(68%) reported that they obtained information mainly from television; the internet was the second most important medium people trust: 16% said that they obtained information from the internet; hardly about 2% of respondents trusted radio and the printed press to obtain information about the situation in the country.

Trust in radio and the printed press as sources of information about the situation in the country is relatively stable in the period 2015-2018. The most pronounced dynamic development involves television: it gradually loses public trust as a source of information about the situation in the country. In 2015, 81% of respondents shared that they trusted television to inform themselves about the situation in the country, while in 2018 their share fell to 68%, i.e. a 13% decrease (Fig. 29).

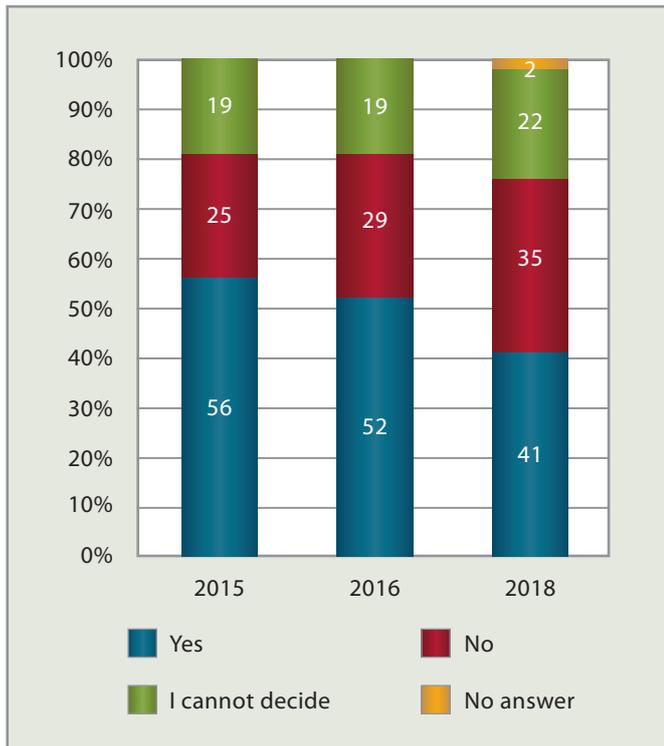
The 2018 findings show that public evaluation of the freedom and objectivity of the press and television has considerably worsened compared to the findings from the 2015 and 2016 surveys. The share of respondents who agree with the statement that newspapers in Bulgaria are free in general to criticize the government

Figure 29. Confidence in the media



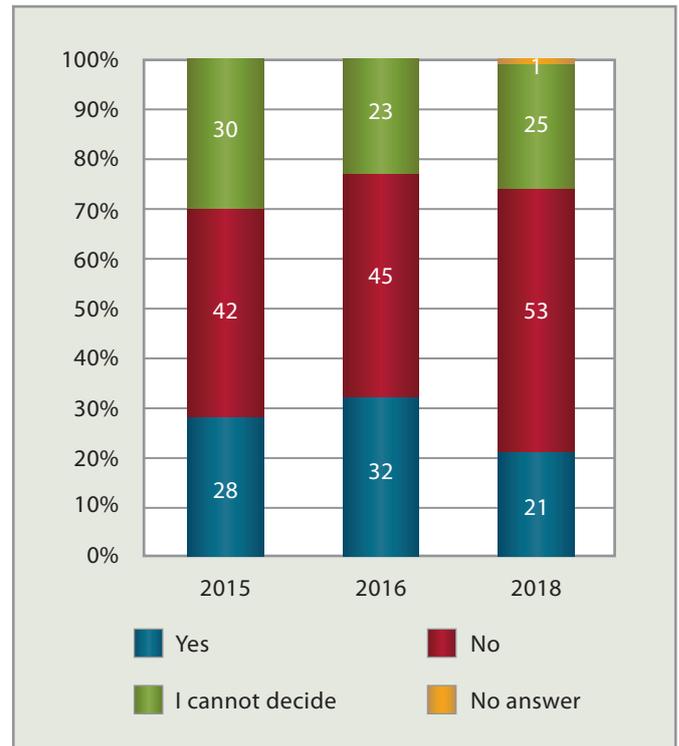
Question: Which media do you mainly trust when you need information about the situation in the country?

**Figure 30. Freedom of the press**



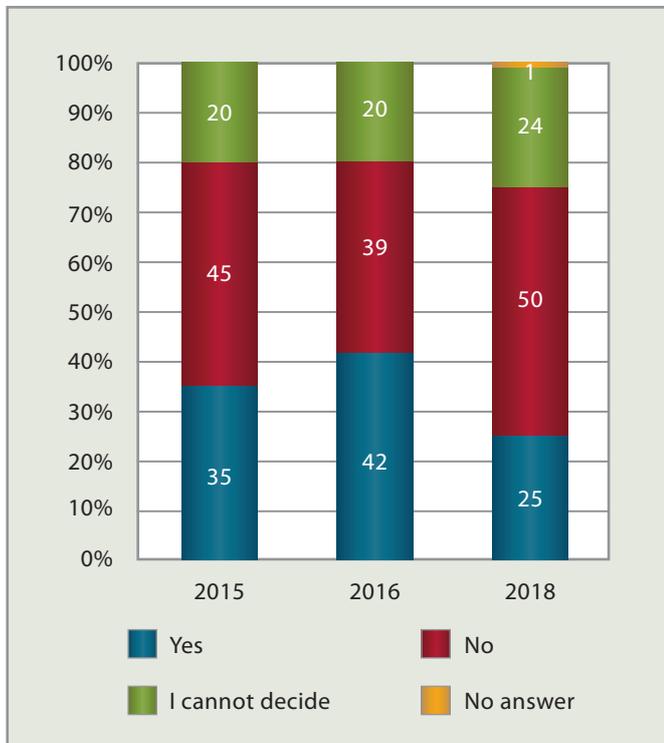
Question: *Do you agree with the following statement: "Newspapers in Bulgaria are free in general to criticize the government"?*

**Figure 31. Public opinion of the objectivity of the press**



Question: *Do you agree with this statement: "If a senior state official were involved in a crime, newspapers in Bulgaria would report the truth about the case"?*

**Figure 32. Public opinion of the objectivity of television**



Question: *Do you agree with this statement: "In case a senior state official were involved in a crime, television in Bulgaria would report the truth about the case"?*

went down from 56% in 2015 to 41% in 2018, i.e. the number of people who believe in the freedom of the press decreased by 15% (Fig. 30).

Public evaluation of the objectivity of the press in the event of high-level crime tends to be negative. In 2018, hardly 21% of respondents believed that if a senior state official were involved in a crime, the newspapers in Bulgaria would report the truth about the case. The share of those who believed in the objectivity of the press fell by 11% between 2016 and 2018. The largest share of respondents (53% in 2018) did not believe that newspapers would report the truth about a case of a senior state official involved in a crime (Fig. 31).

In the period 2015-2018, a similar increase in the negative evaluation of the objectivity of television has been observed. In 2018 the largest share of respondents (50%) believed that in case a senior state official were involved in a crime, television in Bulgaria would not report the truth about the case. Hardly 25% of respondents believed that television would report the truth which is by 17% less compared with the findings from the 2016 survey (Fig. 32).

## CONCLUSION

The 2018 survey shows that democracy enjoys considerable public support: the largest share of citizens (45%) agrees that democracy is the best form of governance for the country and the respondents identify only democratic states as suitable role models for good governance. Germany, the UK and Switzerland form the top group of role models for good governance: for 23% of the respondents Germany is the most popular example of a country with good governance, for 9% this is Switzerland, for 8% – the UK.

The public support for democracy though is slowly eroding compared to the findings of the previous surveys: in 2018 the share of those who agreed with the statement that democracy is the best form of governance for Bulgaria decreased by 7% compared to 2015. Negative public perceptions dominate with regard to the efficiency of the government to solve the main national problems, low trust in institutions and the conviction that the political and administrative elite is formed based on connections not merits.

In 2018 the survey registered low civic engagement with governance; the majority of respondents are not members of any organizations, only 4% are members of political parties and just 2% of trade unions. However, a positive trend, though not that prominent, can be observed in this respect in the period from 2002 to 2018: membership of clubs is on the rise, more and more people are prone to turn to the institutions to resolve their problems and protest in case of bad governance.

Out of the three examined EU values (democracy, the rule of law and fundamental human rights), protection of fundamental civil rights seems to remain the most important achievement of the democratic transition in Bulgaria. A considerable number of respondents are confident that they can exercise freely their civil rights and do not fear repressions by the law enforcement authorities. However, the employed feel vulnerable to certain extent: one in five believes that they can lose their job if they take part in a protest or if they criticize openly the government. There is also non negligible group of people who are afraid that in the next 12 months can become victims of police violence (15%

of the respondents) or other law enforcement abuse of power.

The most pronounced sense of crisis can be observed with regard to the state of the rule of law in Bulgaria: the main difference between democratic and totalitarian governments is that the first can be held politically accountable and liable by its voters unlike the latter. However, only 26% of respondents in Bulgaria agree that the government acts within the law and the public opinion of the quality of legislation is very low: hardly 22% of respondents believe that the laws in the country are fair, hardly 14% deem the laws to be clear and comprehensible and hardly 8% believe that the laws apply equally to all.

Traditionally governmental policies have regarded the situation with the rule of the law in Bulgaria as a problem exclusively of one of the branches of state power (the judiciary) in the first place and second, as an problems that is affecting all the people. However, the public attitudes established in the survey show that it is necessary to change this view: on the one hand, quality of legislation is first and foremost a matter of the legislative power and a function of the low public legitimacy of the National Assembly. On the other hand, citizens cannot be expected to abide by the law if the government itself does not act within the law. Finally, certain public groups have been affected by arbitrary actions to a much greater extent than others: among the respondents who identify themselves as Roma, there is not one who agrees with the statement that the laws in Bulgaria apply equally to all.

The 2018 survey showed the declining role of the traditional media as a factor determining democratic governance: television is losing its position of media people trust when they need information about the situation in the country. The majority of people believe the press to be free to criticize the government but do not believe that newspapers or television would tell the truth in case a senior state official were involved in a crime. Without reliable information about the work of the government, citizens cannot take part in the decision-making process about state governance.

**Contact us:**

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

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

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