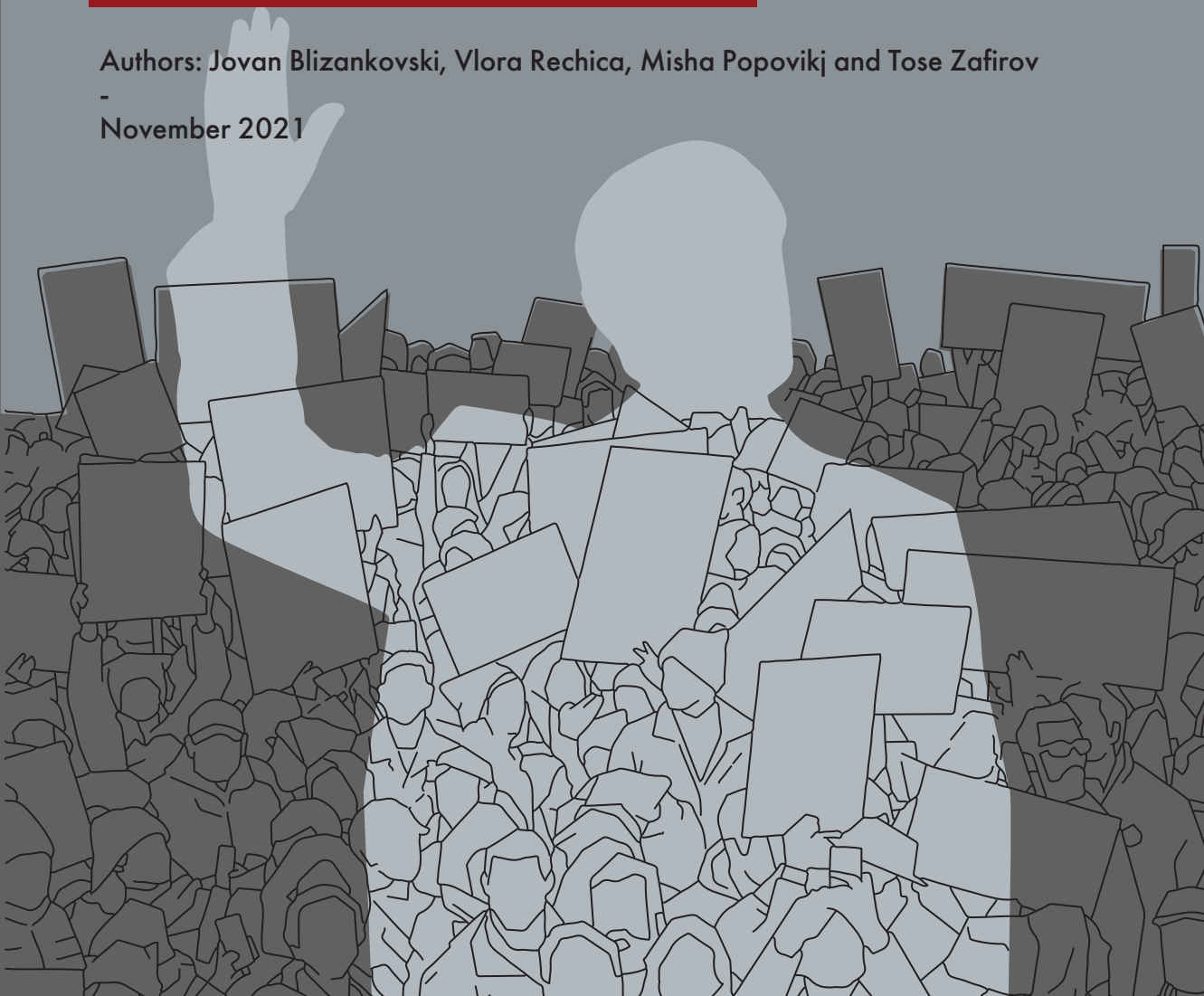


Public opinion analysis No.33/2021

Man of the People: Public Opinion Analysis of Citizen's Political Demands

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I. Methodology

Number of questions: **56**

Sample: **N=1000 (18 years of age + respondents throughout the entire territory of the country)**

Method: **face-to-face survey**

Period: **June 10 – 25 2021**

Statistical error: **±3%**

II. Introduction

Populism, in the last twenty years, has become one of the key concepts in the political life of many states. Frequently defined as a “thin” ideology in which “the people” are clashing with the political elites in a relentless struggle for political dominance, populism has been widely used by political leaders from various backgrounds in the political spectrum to win or preserve power. According to recent research (2019), focusing on 40 democracies in the period between 1998 and 2018, populist rhetoric has doubled in the last two decades, and it is typical of several developed democracies, as well,¹ where right-wing populism seems to dominate. Neither are the countries of the Western Balkans immune to this global trend. More leaders and political parties in the region can be identified as populist, bearing in mind their preference for populist rhetoric,² authoritarian practices,³ as well as their propensity for unsustainable solutions in public policy design.

¹ Cf. Lewis Paul, Caelainn Barr, Seán Clarke, Antonio Voce, Cath Levett and Pablo Gutiérrez. 2019. “Revealed: The Rise and Rise of Populist Rhetoric”. The Guardian, 6 March 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2019/mar/06/revealed-the-rise-and-rise-of-populist-rhetoric?fbclid=IwAR3wsrLFSG4NSWskMSIkT5liJbGS_Iydy-E-2-UGkQzc1ye8nZZoFY-feSo.

² Cf. for (North) Macedonia: Petkovski, Ljupcho. 2015. Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing ‘the People’ in Macedonia’s Illiberal Discourse. Contemporary Southeastern Europe 3 (2): 44– 66. http://www.contemporarysee.org/sites/default/files/papers/petkovski_authoritarian_populism_and_hegemony_0.pdf; for Kosovo: Yabanci, Bilge. 2015. Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics in Kosovo: A Case Study of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje. Contemporary Southeastern Europe 3(2): 17– 43. http://www.contemporarysee.org/sites/default/files/papers/yabanci_politics_in_kosovo.pdf; and for Montenegro: Džankić, Jelena, and Soeren Keil. 2017. “State-Sponsored Populism and the Rise of Populist Governance: The Case of Montenegro.” Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies 19 (4): 403– 18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2017.1280981>.

³ Cf. Bieber, Florian. 2020. The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. New Perspectives on South-East Europe. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Even though populism places “the people” in the heart of the political struggle declaratively, still, it is widely believed that the weaknesses of the populist discourse outweigh its strengths. There is a strong consensus in academic literature that populism contributes to the emergence of authoritarian tendencies among political leaders and to the weakening of democracy.⁴ Populism is also frequently responsible for harmful ad-hoc solutions in terms of the exercise of public authority, which are aimed at satisfying the needs of various groups in society short-term, but which do not provide a sustainable response to societal issues. As such, populism encourages unsuitable public policies and irresponsible spending of public funds. Such shortsightedness in the implementation of public authority, paired with the ‘bellicose’ and inflammatory populist rhetoric, may frequently incite societal conflicts that cause considerable damage to democratic societies.

This research is focused on the societal demand for populist leaders and policies in the Republic of North Macedonia. Each political mobilization - including the one based on populist rhetoric and methods - has its supply and demand. The supply is established by the political parties and the politicians who rely on the populist discourse when participating in the democratic competition. The demand is created at a societal level, between the citizens and various groups in society. These two populism tendencies, top-down and bottom-up, are intertwined. The populism supply can stimulate the demand from citizens and vice versa. The strategically inclined political leaders, who intend to secure or stay in power, may use the populist viewpoints of the population to achieve their goals. For this reason, doing research for the demand for populism in a society is of monumental significance for tackling the consequences of this political phenomenon.

In the field research that the Institute for Democracy ‘Societas Civilis’ (IDSCS) conducted in collaboration with the Presidential Center for Political Education, populism is defined as a ‘thin’ ideology that believes that the society is, above all, divided into two homogenous and conflicting groups - the common folk, or “the people” on the one hand and the “corrupt elite” on the other; and which claims that politics must be an expression of the general will of the people.⁵ Populism is a ‘thin’ ideology because, unlike other traditional political ideologies (such as, for example, liberalism, conservatism and socialism), it does not possess “rigid” postulates that inform political action. In populism, the sole ideological premise comprises the idea that “the people” and “the elites” are inherently at odds and in constant conflict, whereas “the people”

⁴ Cf. Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. Populism: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.18-19.

⁵ This definition is typical of the so-called ideational approach towards populism, which conceptualizes populism as a discourse, world view or a “thin” ideology. Cf.: Ibid., pp. 5- 9.

play the positive, and “the elites” the negative role. The populists differ in the way they define “the people”, but, generally speaking, the definition is simplified and is based on an identifying element, such as, for example, the class they belong to, or their ethnicity or nationality. At the same time, the populists usually depict “the elite” as a political, economic, cultural and media establishment, portrayed as a homogenous subject that puts its own interests, and frequently the interests of the large corporations, foreign countries or migrants, above the interests of “the people”.

Bearing in mind the character of populism, the starting point for this research is that the populist world view has four main features: **deep mistrust of political elites, which are usually believed to be corrupt and generally focus on their own interest; the idea that “the people” are a morally superior entity compared to the elites; deep mistrust towards the democratic institutions and the rules of the game; as well as looking at politics and political life through a conflicting prism of “us versus them”**. During the research, we tried to make an assessment of the extent to which each of these features can be found in the population of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The demand for populism in the country is generally assessed through the consent statements that the respondents receive as survey questions, and which refer to the four features we have outlined before.⁶ For most of the statements, agreement points to a populist view, while in the case of a fewer number of statements, populism is characterized by lack of agreement. Apart from the “thin” ideological component, we also tried to assess the way the personal history/biography of the political candidates influence voting behavior among voters. We did this by means of a specialized survey experiment for electoral behavior, whereby the respondents could “cast their votes” or select between a “career politician” and “a people’s man”. In addition, we measured how much the population is prone to conspiracy theories, which is another indicator related to populist rhetoric which yields general mistrust of citizens, as well as (mis)trust in the democratic institutions, which in turn leads to a greater propensity for populist leaders and policies. This report is the first outcome of the survey research that was conducted in June 2021 to acquaint the broader population with the political views of the citizens of North Macedonia. What follows are the most significant findings stemming from this research.

⁶ When designing the survey questions related to the populist features of the respondents, we relied on the instrument developed by Akkerman et al. (2014) and Spruyt et al. (2016) and applied in the Netherlands and Belgium, respectively. The instrument applied in North Macedonia is based on these two studies, with a number of modifications and in line with the Macedonian context. Cf.: Akkerman, Agnes, Cas Mudde and Andrej Zaslove. 2014. *How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters*. Comparative Political Studies, Vol 47, Issue 9, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013512600>; and Spruyt, Bram, Gil Keppens and Filip Van Droogenbroeck. 2016. Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?. Political Research Quarterly, Vol 69, Issue 2, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916639138>.

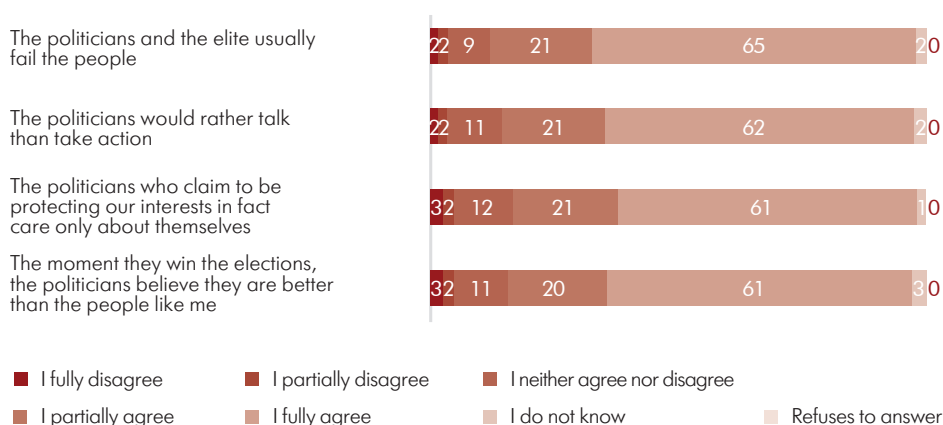
III. Research findings

• *Politicians who work solely in their own interest*

The idea that the politicians in the Republic of North Macedonia work exclusively for achieving their own, personal interests, to the detriment of the public interest, is very popular among the population. Thus, for example, a large majority of the respondents agree with the following statements: “The politicians and the elite usually fail the people” (86%); “The politicians would rather talk than take action” (83%); and “The politicians who claim to be protecting our interests in fact care only about themselves” (82%). Additionally, a large majority, or 81% of the respondents agree that “The moment they win the elections, the politicians believe they are better than the people like me”, while less than 5% did not agree with this statement. No significant differences have been detected in terms of demographic features when it comes to these four statements - a finding that points to the fact that the citizens, regardless of their demographic background, have an extremely negative view of politicians.

The views of the respondents towards the two groups of elites, the economic and expert elites, which are also relevant for the political life in the country, are definitely more moderate.

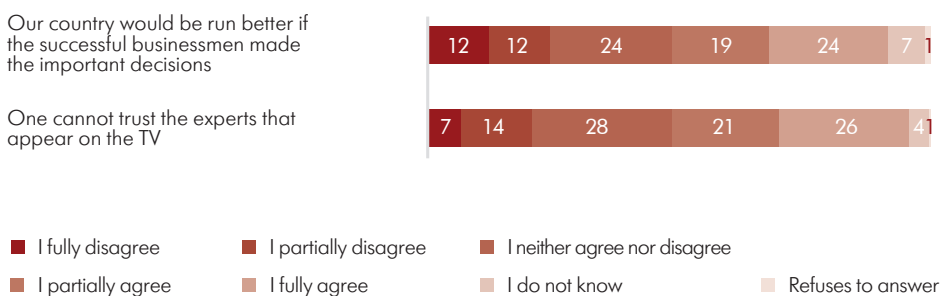
Chart 1. Views on the political elites (% of agreement with the statements)



Most of the respondents agree with the statement that “Our country would be run better if the successful businessmen made the important decisions” (43%), while nearly a quarter of the respondents (24%) disagree; this finding reveals that the economic elites enjoy a much bigger trust in running the country than the political elites. The majority of VMRO-DPMNE voters agreed with this statement (53%) as well as the abstainers (50%), while the same is not the case with any of the other political parties (where the agreement, although dominant, is still more moderate). Majority of the unemployed (53%), as well, agree with this statement.

On the other hand, most of the respondents were distrustful of the expert elites and they agreed with the statement “One cannot trust the experts that appear on the TV” (47%), while more than a fifth of the respondents held the opposing view (21%). Albanian respondents have much larger mistrust in the experts than their Macedonian counterparts. A significant majority of the Albanian respondents, or 65%, agree with the statement “One cannot trust the experts that appear on the TV”, compared to 44% of the Macedonian respondents. The majority of voters of the Alliance of Albanians (59%) and DUI (57%) agreed with the statement, while SDSM voters are the only voting group where more respondents did not agree with the statement than they agreed (38% versus 35%). Men trust the experts less than women: a 54% majority of the men agree with the statement, as opposed to 43% of the women. Most of the two youngest age groups (18 - 29 and 30 - 39), also agree with the statements that experts cannot be trusted (53% and 58%, respectively), while this is not the case with the other age groups.

Chart 2. Views on the economic and expert elites (% of agreement with the statements)

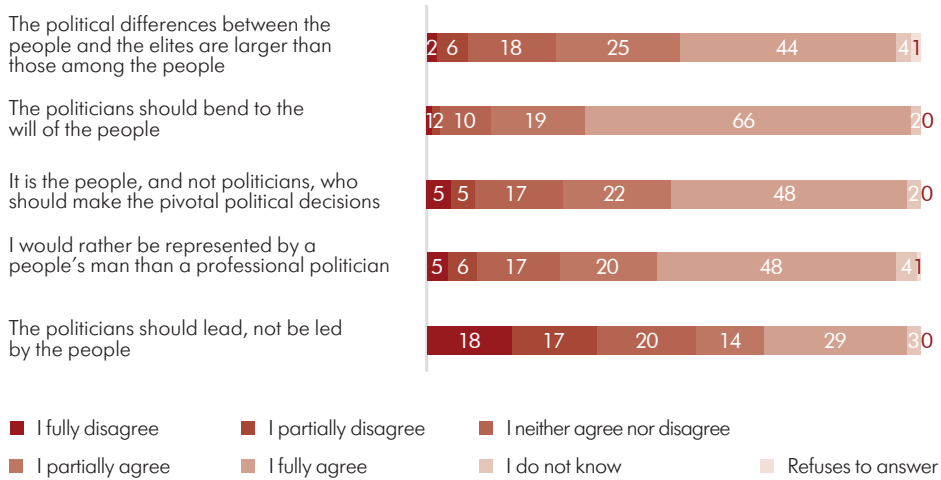


• *The people versus the elites*

The idea that there is a great conflict between the political elites and the people, and “the people” are a homogenous, morally superior force, is also quite common in the population, without any striking differences between the various demographic groups. A whopping 69% of the respondents agree with the statement “The political differences between the people and the elites are larger than those among the people”, while a negligible minority of 9% hold the opposing view. At the same time, the idea that the common folk, or “the people”, should precede the political elites in political decision-making is also prevalent. An amazing 85% of the respondents agree with the statement that “The politicians should bend to the will of the people”, while 70% agree that “It is the people, and not politicians, who should make the pivotal political decisions”. In addition, a considerable majority of 68% of the respondents agree with the statement “I would rather be represented by a people’s man than a professional politician”, while only 11% of the respondents do not agree with this statement; this finding suggests that a large number of people wish the political leaders are closer to the common folk.

Still, the citizens are divided when it comes to the question “The politicians should lead, not be led by the people”, whereby more respondents agree than disagree in terms of this statement (42% and 35%, respectively). The division is most striking in the youngest (18 to 29) and the oldest age group (60+), where the number of respondents who agree and disagree with the statement is virtually the same. In the categories related to “employment status”, most of the respondents who agree with this statement are working in the state sector - in this case, half of the respondents (51%) agree, while this is not the case in any of the other groups. The respondents who live in urban areas agree with this statement more than the respondents who live in the rural areas (47% and 39%, respectively).

Chart 3. Views of the relationship between “the people” and the political elites
(% of agreement with the statements)



• **“A career politician” or “a people’s man”**

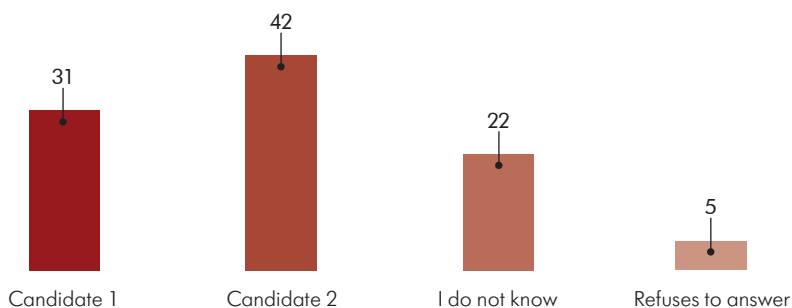
In order to find out more about the voting preferences of the respondents, in terms of the personal/biography characteristics of the candidates, we integrated an electoral behavior experiment in the questionnaire. The respondents received a fictitious biography scenario for two candidates and were asked who they would vote for. The candidates were divided between “a career politician” (candidate 1) and “a people’s man” or an outsider (candidate 2). The respondents were asked to imagine they are getting ready to vote at the parliamentary elections. They were presented with a scenario in which, according to polls, the race between the two candidates and their parties is in a dead heat, that is both candidates are popular among the citizens and are given equal chances to win at the elections. According to the scenario, the political programs of both candidates do not differ, i.e., both candidates promise the citizens a better life, but they both point out that in order to achieve this, difficult, political, economic and societal changes are necessary. Then, the respondents were presented with the CVs of the candidates and they were asked which candidate, in their view, is more likely to stand by their promise, that is to bring a better life for the citizens of the country.

Candidate 1 (a career politician): (Made-Up Name 1) was born in 1976. He has been a member of one of the major parties since a young age, and he has moved up the ranks of the party before becoming its president. He has overseen the party since 2017. Between 2013 and 2016 he was the head of the city water supply company, and between 2016 and 2017, he was also the deputy minister for local self-government. His undergraduate and graduate studies were in political sciences. He is married to the current MP (Made-Up Name 1.1), with whom he has two kids. He lives and works in Skopje.

Candidate 2 (a people's man): (Made-Up Name 2) was born in 1978. He is the founder of one of the smaller parties, which was founded recently, in 2017, and so far it had not achieved any memorable results at the elections. He enters politics and becomes popular by helping in the local community. He has not held public office yet, and in the past, he has worked in the electricity distribution public enterprise. He has a diploma in electrical engineering. He is married to (a Made-Up Name 2.2), a lecturer, and he has two children with her. He lives and works in Skopje.

Two fifths of the respondents (42%) responded that, if they were to pick between candidates 1 and 2 on the ballot for the parliamentary elections, **they would pick candidate 2**, i.e., the candidate who has established their own party and who has not held public office before the elections. On the other hand, nearly a third (31%) of the respondents replied that they would vote for candidate 1, i.e., according to the categorization, the career politician. 22% of the respondents were undecided, while 5% refused to answer the question.

Chart 4. Which candidate would you vote for in elections? (%)

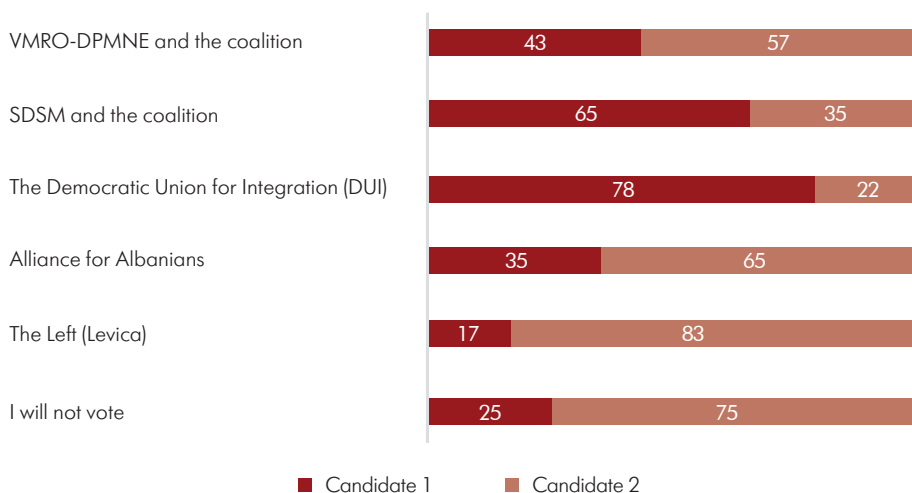


⁷ The candidates were appointed depending on the language in which the survey was conducted, i.e., if it was conducted in Macedonian, the respondent was given a candidate with a Macedonian name, and if it was conducted in Albanian, the respondent was given a candidate with an Albanian name.

By carrying out a more thorough analysis of the data, we attempted to find out who the voters of the existing political parties in North Macedonia would choose. VMRO-DPMNE voters are divided in their opinion. 57% of the respondents who answered that if the elections were held next week, they would vote for VMRO-DPMNE and the coalition, chose the second candidate from the experiment, while 43% opted for the first. On the other hand, SDSM voters prefer the profile of the first candidate, with almost two-thirds of respondents saying they would vote for him (65%). The situation with the DUI voters is clearer, as they explicitly prefer the first candidate (78%), i.e., the career politician. On the other hand, the Albanian opposition voters have a different preference, with 65% of the respondents who would vote for the “Alliance for Albanians” if elections were held next week prefer the second choice, or the “people’s man”. 83% of respondents who answered that if elections were held next week would vote for the Left (Levica) for political leader prefer the profile of the second candidate.

The data show that there is a noticeable distinction between the voters of the two largest political parties in the country, whereby the VMRO-DPMNE voters generally prefer the second candidate, while the SDSM voters prefer the first. There is also a tendency for voters of the ruling political parties to prefer the profile of the first candidate, as opposed to voters of the opposition parties, who explicitly prefer the profile of the second candidate. Citizens who stated that they would not vote in the election chose the second candidate in the experiment (75%).

Chart 5. Which candidate would you vote for in elections according to political preferences (%)



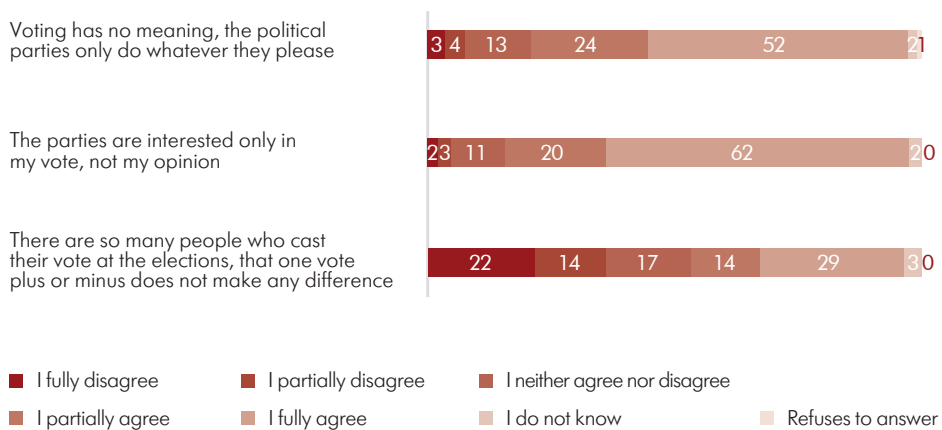
When it comes to voter ethnicity, Macedonians are inclined to vote for the second candidate (58%), while the Albanian voters are divided - 49% prefer the second candidate, while 51% prefer the first one. While the opinion of the respondents who have completed primary education and those who have completed higher education is divided, the respondents who have completed secondary education generally prefer the second candidate (63%). There are also differences between respondents with different employment status. The respondents employed in the state sector prefer the first candidate (59%), while the respondents employed in the private sector (61%), the self-employed and the part-time workers (65%), the students (73%), the retired people (54%) and the unemployed respondents (68%) prefer the second candidate. The second candidate is also preferred by the younger respondents, up to 29 years of age (63%), as well as the respondents between 50 and 59 years of age (66%) and the 60+ group (58%). The respondents between 30 and 49 years of age are the most divided in their preferences.

• *From mistrust of the elites to disappointment in the rules of democracy*

The considerable mistrust towards the political elites and parties is also reflected on the mistrust towards the key democratic mechanism - the elections, as well as the act of voting itself, which, for a large majority of respondents, is disappointing. A vast majority, or 76% of the respondents, agreed with the statement that "Voting has no meaning, the political parties only do whatever they please," while just 8% disagreed with it. This finding illustrates the significant mistrust towards voting in the sense of its potential to "discipline" the elites and the parties. In addition, 82% of the respondents agree that the sole interest of the political parties are the votes, but not the citizens' opinion (statement: "The parties are interested only in my vote, not my opinion"). As a result, for a significant majority of the citizens, voting does not provide an opportunity to influence the political elites and parties; this situation is a far cry from the ideal model of democracy, where the politicians are held accountable to the citizens by means of the key democratic mechanism - the elections.

The inability to control the elites and parties is linked to the reduced sense of civic responsibility for the voting. Thus, a considerable number of respondents (43%) agree that their vote does not matter very much (statement: "There are so many people who cast their vote at the elections, that one vote plus or minus does not make any difference"), while a smaller number (36%) have the opposing view. This indifferent view is prevalent in the youngest age group (18 - 29), where the majority (56%) agrees with this statement, while it is the least supported in the second age group (30 - 39), 38% of which agree with the statement. Virtually half of the respondents who have completed their primary education agree that their vote does not make a difference at the elections (49%), while (quite the contrary) virtually half of the respondents who have completed their higher education do not agree with the statement (49%). Majority of SDSM voters (53%) and the Left (51%) do not agree with the statement that the personal vote does not make a difference, while the majority of DUI voters think the opposite (59%), as well as most of the voters of VMRO- DPMNE (47%) and the Alliance of Albanians (45%).

Graph 6. Views on the elections and the voting (% of agreement with the statements)

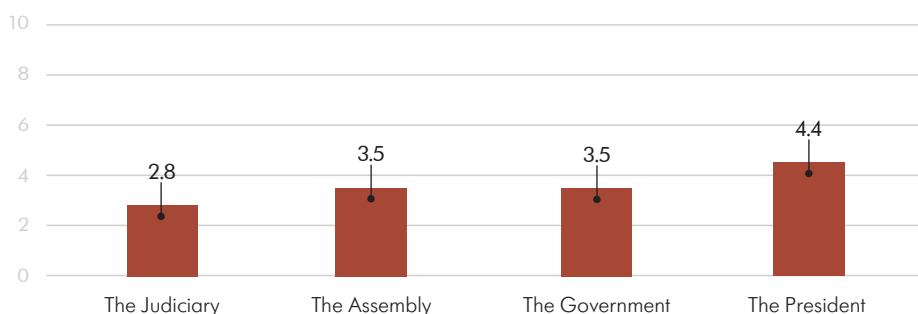


• *Trust in the democratic institutions*

The research was also used to assess the trust of citizens in the democratic institutions, as well as in other actors in the political life of the country and the society, such as the media, the civic organizations and the religious organizations. The respondents were asked how much they trust the institutions and the other actors on a scale from 1 to 10, whereby 1 signifies no trust at all, while 10 signifies complete trust.

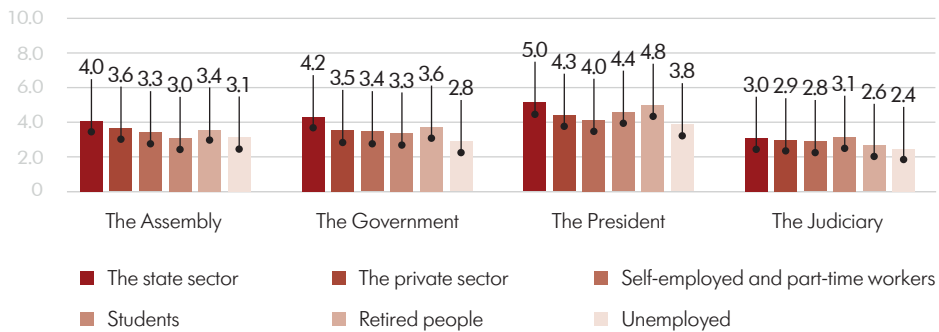
On the basis of the score the respondents gave in regard to this question, it is evident that the trust in the most important institutions in the political system of North Macedonia, such as the assembly, the government, the president and the judiciary, is abysmal. Expressed as a mean score, the assembly received a 3.5 from the respondents, which is the same as the grade of trust in the government (3.5). The president of the country enjoys the biggest trust (4.4), while the judiciary is the least trusted, with a mean score of 2.8. Virtually 5 out of 10 citizens assessed the judiciary with a grade 1, that is, responded that they have no faith in the judiciary at all. This sends a strong message about how citizens perceive the rule of law, the fight against corruption, the independence of the judiciary, as well as the efficiency of the courts. The grading of the trust in the key institutions of the political system, by ethnicity, above all when it comes to the Macedonians and Albanians, mirrors the aggregate grading and the general trend, except in the deviation in the grade for the institution of president, which in the Albanian ethnic community is 3.4, while in the Macedonian ethnic community it is 4.7.

Chart 7. Level of trust in the democratic institutions (on a scale of 1 to 10)



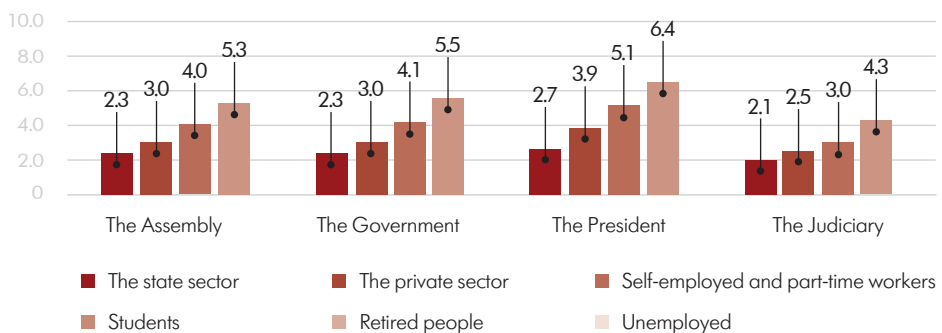
According to employment status, the unemployed have the least amount of trust in the government, with a grade of 2.8, while the trust in the assembly is weakest among students, who have given it a grade of 3.0. The president and the government enjoy the greatest trust among the employees of the state sector, which have graded the trust in these institutions with a 5.0 and 4.2, respectively. If we disregard the employment status, the citizens have the lowest trust in the judiciary, while their trust is highest in the president of the country.

Chart 8. Trust in the institutions according to the employment status (on a scale of 1 to 10)



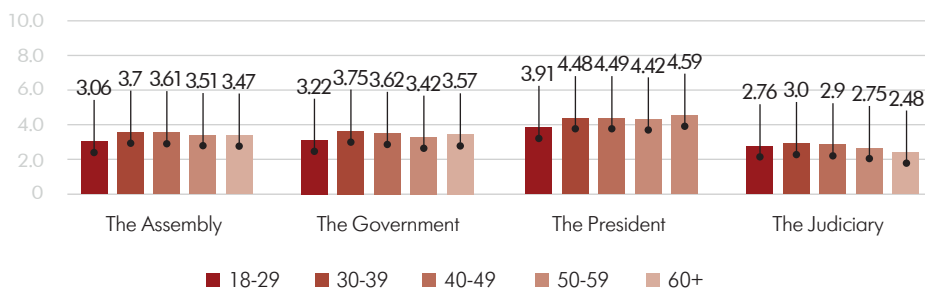
If we take into account the way the respondents perceive their current financial situation, the more unsafe and uncertain they perceive their current financial situation, the lower they grade the trust in the key institutions of the political system. The citizens who responded that their current financial situation is extremely unsafe mistrust all four institutions, with a mean score lower than 3.0, while the respondents who stated that at the moment their financial situation is pretty good and safe have the highest trust in the democratic institutions of the country.

Chart 9. Trust in the institutions according to financial security (on a scale of 1 to 10)



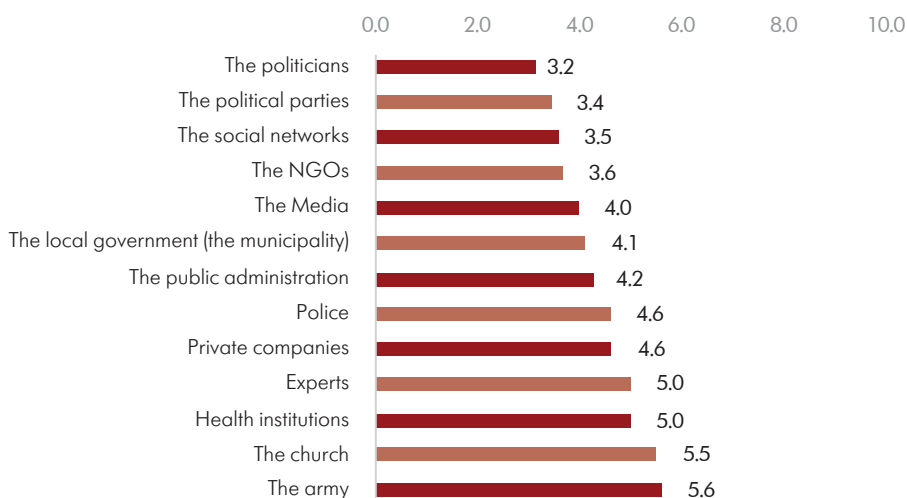
By age group, the lowest trust in the key institutions of the political system can be found among the youngest respondents, aged 18 to 29. The president enjoys the highest trust, with a grade of 4.6 among the 60+ population, while the population aged between 30 and 39 graded their trust in the assembly and the government with a 3.7 and 3.8, respectively.

Chart 10. Trust in the institutions according to age (on a scale of 1 to 10)



The trust in the army, with a grade of 5.6 and the church, with a grade of 5.5, are relatively higher, while the health institutions and experts are in the middle of the scale with a grade of 5.0, unlike the trust in the media, which has a grade of 4.0. The respondents also have little trust in the politicians (3.2) and political parties (3.4). The bottom half of the scale includes the social networks (3.5), the non-governmental organizations (3.6), the local government (4.1), the public administration (4.2), the police (4.6) and the private companies (4.6).

Chart 11. Trust in the democratic institutions and the other actors (on a scale of 1 to 10)



The relatively low trust in the institutions and in the political and societal actors reflects the general mistrust in the political and societal elites and illustrates the potential for populist demand in the country. The lack of trust in the institutions and the elites may lead to votes being cast for populist candidates and a situation where the populist supply is being bolstered. In this sense, the strengthening of the trust in the institutions by reinforcing their independence and effectiveness may be key for tackling the harmful consequences of populism in the following period.

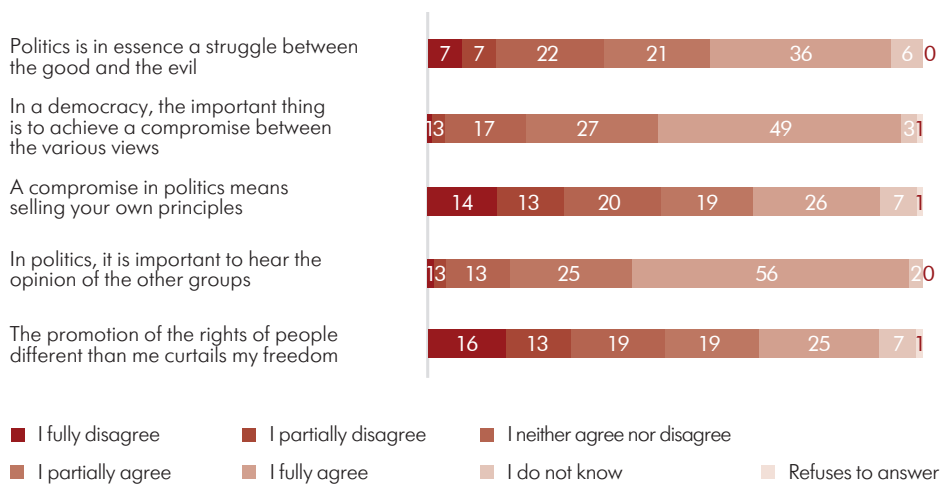
• **Confrontation: “Us versus them”**

The “us versus them” dualism is also prevalent in the populist worldview and is intrinsically linked to the mistrust towards political elites, as well as the disappointment in the democratic rules of the game. Politics are considered as an all-or-nothing battle, where there is little room for accepting the opinion of the other actors in society. These views are also quite popular among the population, with certain differences between the demographic groups. Thus, the majority of the respondents agree with the statement that “Politics is in essence a struggle between the good and the evil” (58%), while a minority of the respondents (14%) hold the opposite view. The respondents in the youngest (18-29) and in the oldest age groups (60+) generally agree with this statement more than the respondents in the other age groups.

Even though a significant majority of the respondents agree with the statement “In a democracy, the important thing is to achieve a compromise between the various views” (76%, as opposed to only 3% who believe the opposite), still, nearly half of the respondents agree that “A compromise in politics means selling your own principles” (45%, as opposed to the 27% who disagree with this statement). These findings reveal that even though the citizens understand that compromise is important for the democratic processes, it is still seen as a cause for serious harm for one’s own group. In comparison to the ethnic Albanians, the ethnic Macedonians are slightly more convinced that compromise in practice is harmful for one’s own group: the majority (52%) of the Macedonians agree with this statement (and 27% disagree), in comparison to 47% of the Albanians (while 36% disagree). Many of the respondents who have finished primary education share this view (54%), while the respondents who have completed higher education disagree more (37%) in comparison to the other groups classified by education. VMRO-DPMNE voters overwhelmingly agree that the compromise is tantamount to selling ones’ principles (62%), while voters of the other political parties are more moderate on the issue.

In a similar vein, even though a large majority of the respondents agree with the statement that “In politics, it is important to hear the opinion of the other groups” (81%), only 29% of the respondents disagree that “The promotion of the rights of people different than me curtails my freedom”. The latter view is shared by most of the respondents in the lowest education bracket (56%). As a result, the citizens are declaratively ready to accept the differences in politics, but this readiness dwindles when it should be applied in practice and when it may have negative consequences on one’s own group. The Albanians more frequently, and more than the Macedonians (53% as opposed to 47%) agree with the statement that “the promotion of the rights of people different than me limits my freedom,” as well as most of the workers in the private sector (52%) and the unemployed (54%). A majority of VMRO-DPMNE (54%) and DUI (63%) voters, as well as a majority of abstainers (51%), agree that promoting the rights of others restricts their personal freedom. Most voters of the Alliance for Albanians (40%) and the Left (43%) also agree with the statement. On the contrary, most of the SDSM voters (43%) expressed disagreement with the presented statement.

Chart 12. Views on politics as an arena for cooperation and conflict (% of agreement with the statements)

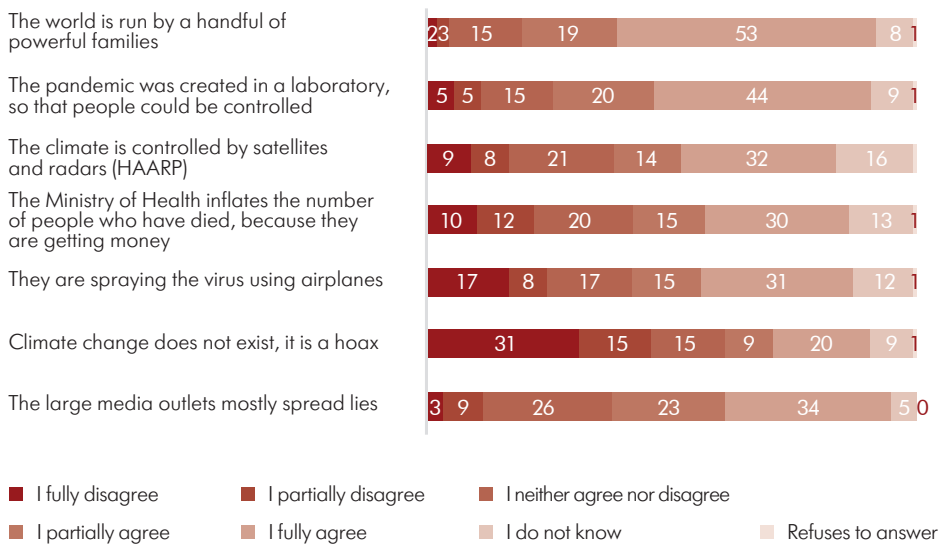


• *The secret relationship: Conspiracy theories as a worldview*

The propensity for conspiracy theories is a fertile ground for using the voters in a confrontational political process. The conspiracy theories suggest a worldview in which politics, instead of a democratic process, is a result of the work of cabals that steer the course of history. Thus, the control is established over the societal, but sometimes over the natural processes, as well, such as climate change. Such a worldview, in which the individual is estranged not just from the political process, but also from the sense of control, strengthens insecurity, which may be misused by the political actors. Thus, using conspiracy theories, these political actors may win the individuals over, supposedly getting them involved in the fight against the cabals.

Research has shown that the citizens are prone to believing in conspiracy theories. Thus, 72% of the respondents believe that the world is run by a handful of powerful families, 65% think that COVID-19 was created in a lab so that people could be controlled, 46% think that the climate is controlled by satellites and radars, 44% think that the number of COVID-19 victims was inflated on purpose because the Ministry of Health was handing out money, 46% think that the virus is being sprayed from airplanes, 29% think that climate change is a hoax and 57% think that the large media outlets spread lies.

Chart 13. Propensity towards conspiracy theories (%)



The cross-analysis shows that the voters of SDSM and the coalition believe less in these theories than the voters of the coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE, and the voters of DUI, the Alliance for Albanians, and the Left. Thus, 69% of SDSM voters believe that the world is run by several families, compared to 82% of VMRO-DPMNE, 79% of DUI, 85% of the Alliance for Albanians and 86% of the Left. The difference is drastic in terms of the opinion about the artificial creation of COVID-19 and its use for human control. About 55% of the voters of SDSM have this attitude, 77% of the voters of the Left, and the same is present in over 83% of the voters of VMRO-DPMNE, DUI and the voters of the Alliance for Albanians (88%). Nearly one in three SDSM voters (34%) believe that the climate is controlled by satellites and radars, 52% of the supporters of the Left, while this attitude is present in more than two out of every three VMRO-DPMNE voters (70%), DUI (67%) and the Alliance for Albanians (65%). The difference is more drastic in the views on the falsification of deaths from COVID-19. Thus, 24% of SDSM voters think that the number of registered deaths is higher than the real one, which is the case with about two thirds of the voters of VMRO-DPMNE, DUI and Alliance for Albanians, and with more than half of the voters of the Left. It is similar with regard to the opinion that viruses are sprayed from the planes, which is present in 33% of SDSM voters, 64% of DUI and Alliance voters, 66% of the Left voters and 67% of VMRO-DPMNE-voters. Almost every second voter of SDSM (45%) thinks that the big media cannot be trusted, which is the case with about two thirds of the voters of VMRO-DPMNE, DUI (68%) and the Alliance for Albanians (58%). The same view is held by 68% of the voters of the Left. A quarter of SDSM voters (26%) do not believe in climate change, 28% of the Left supporters, 41% of the Alliance for Albanians and about half of VMRO-DPMNE (48%) and DUI (48%) voters hold the same opinion.

The generation between 30 and 39 years of age is more skeptical towards conspiracy theories in comparison to the other age groups. So, this group is considerably less supportive of the theories that the pandemic was created in a lab in order to control the people (63%) in comparison to the other age groups, where the percentage exceeds 70. The story is similar when it comes to the theory of satellite control of the climate - 47% of this generation agrees with it, while 55% of the other generations share this view. The difference is similar between the groups who believe that the Ministry of Health has bribed families to report people who have died of COVID-19. In terms of the other theories, this generation does not deviate to a great extent, i.e., there are no significant differences.

Higher education is a factor that influences the susceptibility towards conspiracy theories. Thus, there is a noticeable difference in terms of the views related to the pandemic, whereby 65% of the people who have higher education believe that it was created to control people, a

view taken by 74% of the people who have completed secondary education. 43% of the people with higher education believe that climate is controlled using radars and satellites, while that view is held by 58% of the people with secondary education and 62% of the people with primary education. The distribution in terms of the theory that claims that the number of people dying from COVID-19 was forged is similar, so 43% of the people with higher education believe that the Ministry has bribed people, an opinion shared by 53% of people with secondary education and 61% of the people with primary education. In terms of the level of education, a difference is also evident in the theory that climate change is a hoax, but it can be found between those with primary education (42%) and those with secondary and higher education (around 30%).

The analysis has shown an interesting trend among the unemployed. If compared to the employed (formally and informally, as well as the part-time workers), they are more susceptible to conspiracy theories. There is a considerable difference between these two categories in terms of the pandemic; 78% of the unemployed believe that it was created in order to control people, and this view is supported by between 66% and 73% of the different categories of employed people. About 63% of the unemployed believe that climate is controlled, and this attitude varies between 47% and 58% among the employed. Two thirds of the unemployed believe that the number of dead people from COVID-19 was rigged, while the number of supporters of this view varies between 42% and 50% among the different categories of employed people. One can also see differences in the view of the veracity of the news presented by the large media outlets, whereby 70% of the unemployed do not have faith in them, while between 53% and 63% of the different categories of employed people believe them.

• *Conclusion*

Even though the research of populist tendencies among citizens warrants a more comprehensive analysis and more thorough investigation, this report represents an initial attempt to record the demand side of populism in North Macedonia by means of a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire is used to carry out a detailed analysis of the views of the citizens in terms of **the pronounced mistrust of political elites, which are generally considered to be corrupt and mainly focused on their own interests.**

These views can be seen in **the generally negative view of politicians, which, according to the respondents, work only in their personal interest.** In addition, a large number of respondents believe that **"the people" are an entity morally superior to the elites.** The people are positioned in stark contrast to the elites, and are believed to be a homogenous, morally superior force, while the elites are believed to be corrupt and self-serving.

These views were also reflected in the survey experiment, in which most of the respondents prefer the second candidate or "the people's man", as opposed to the "career politician". In addition, one can also notice a difference between the voters of different political entities in the country; namely, the voters of the political parties in power generally prefer the first candidate, while the voters of the political parties in opposition prefer the second candidate.

Another factor that has a great influence on the increased demand for populism is the general **mistrust towards the democratic institutions and the rules of the game.** The considerable mistrust in the elections, as a key democratic mechanism in a representative democracy, but also in the act of voting itself, is exceptionally important. Here we also have the low level of trust in the democratically elected institutions and in the other societal actors, while the citizens have the least amount of trust in the most important institutions of the political system of the country, such as the assembly, the government, the president and the judiciary. This type of general mistrust in most of the state and societal actors has its bearing on the propensity of citizens to turn to populist leaders and solutions to their issues.

Generally speaking, the respondents mostly **understand politics and political life as a struggle of “us versus them”**, and less as an activity that should enable the resolution of societal issues, in line with the interests of the various groups. The high level of mistrust in the democratic institutions and the rules of the game also makes people **more vulnerable to conspiracy theories, which are gaining momentum on a global level**. The increasing tendency to trust conspiracy theories points to the potential misuse of the vulnerability of citizens for political gains by populist politicians, who more often than not use inflammatory rhetoric to garner political points.

Information about IDSCS

IDSCS is a think-tank organisation researching the development of good governance, rule of law and North Macedonia's European integration. IDSCS has the mission to support citizens' involvement in the decision-making process and strengthen the participatory political culture. By strengthening liberal values, IDSCS contributes towards coexistence of diversities.

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Information about the project

This research was conducted by the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje, in cooperation with the Office of the President of the Republic of North Macedonia within the established cooperation with the School of Politics at the Presidential Center for Political Education. The purpose of this research is to explore the views of citizens on several topics related to politics and democracy, with a focus on the social demand for populist leaders and policies in the Republic of North Macedonia.

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