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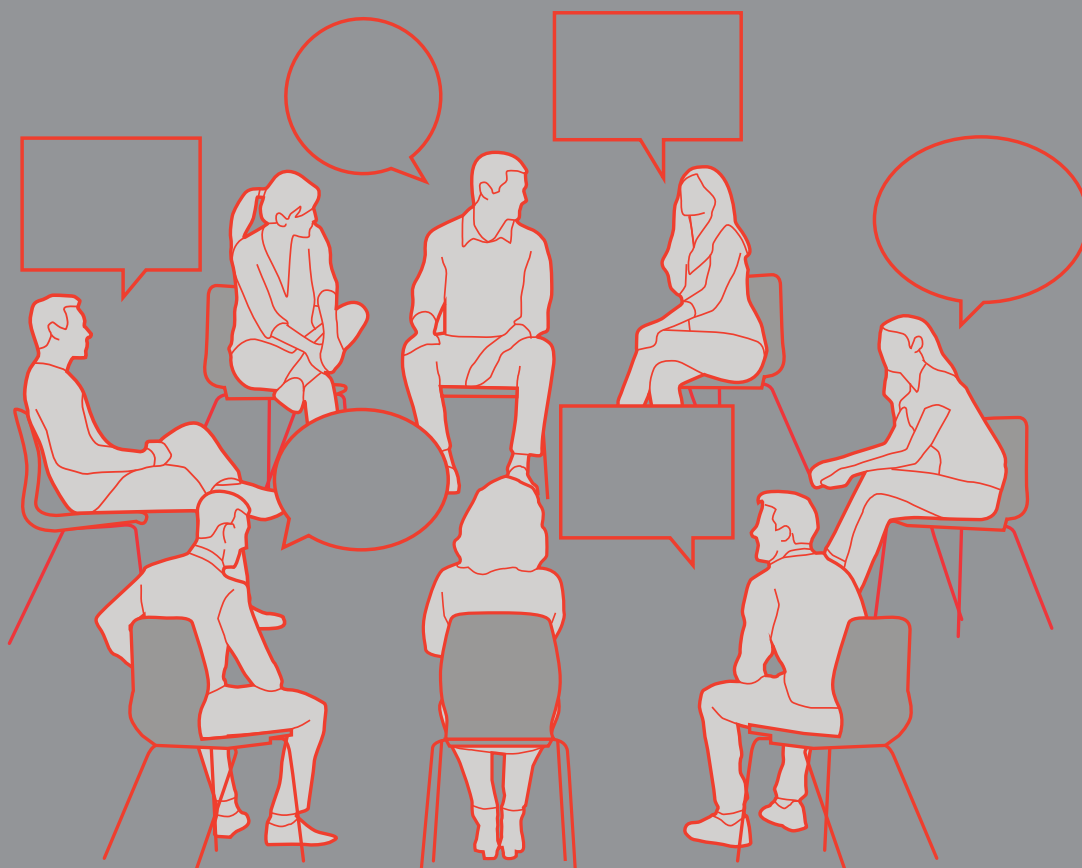
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Focus Group Research: Public Perception on Trust in Political Parties, Public Institutions and Quality of Life in North Macedonia

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I. Methodology

In September 2022, the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje, as part of the Parliament Support Programme (PSP), **conducted eight focus groups to explore better the public perception of quality of life, political issues, and trust in North Macedonia.** The focus groups were conducted in the eight planning regions in North Macedonia - Skopje (Skopje Region); Shtip (East Region); Gevgelija (Southeast Region); Kumanovo (Northeast Region); Bitola (Pelagonija Region), Kavadarci (Vardar Region); Struga (Southwest Region) and Gostivar (Polog Region).

The focus group discussions were conducted with 67 participants, demographically divided by age, gender, profession, ethnicity, residence, and political preference. From the total number of participants, 34 were female, 33 were male, while ethnically, 48 were Macedonian participants, 15 were Albanian, two were Roma, one was Turkish, and one was Bosniak. To better understand differences in opinion demographically, one focus group was conducted with only Albanian participants, two with only Macedonian participants, and five focus groups were conducted in proportion to the ethnic composition of the region.

The questionnaire was divided into five groups of questions which focused on the main problems citizens face and quality of life; trust in institutions; trust in politicians and political actors; personal experience with institutions; and polarisation in society.

II. Political Context

In line with the Constitution, the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia has the legislative power and is comprised of 120 Members of Parliament (MPs). MPs are elected directly through proportional electoral lists for a four-year term. Pursuing the informal custom, in October 2019, Zoran Zaev, the head of the then SDSM-led Government, announced a leadership meeting at which he proposed the fifth early Parliamentary elections¹ in the last decade. The elections came about as a result of the inability of the country to start accession negotiations with the European Union (EU) due to the French veto and the broken trust in the SDSM-led Government, whose platform was mainly based on the country's uninterrupted path towards the EU. **In February 2020, the Assembly unanimously decided to dissolve, while the President of the Assembly, Talat Xhaferi, within his constitutional and legal competencies, set the elections² for April 12th.**³ **Given the deteriorating situation with the Covid-19 pandemic and health concerns, the elections were postponed and finally held on July 15th, 2020.**⁴ During this time, the President declared a state of emergency five times in total,⁵ giving the legislative power to the Government to respond to the pandemic. **The dissolved Assembly and the declared state of emergency posed an increased concern about the possible deterioration of democratic processes and human rights.** The situation in this period was further aggravated due to the lack of oversight by the Assembly over the Government, which was given legislative powers by proposing decrees with the force of law.⁶

The elections were considered a success by international observing missions.⁷ **Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the "Mozheme" coalition won 46 seats, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and the "Obnova za Makedonija" coalition won 44 seats, while the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) won 15 seats. The Alliance for Albanians (AA) and Alternativa coalition won 12 seats, Levica won 2 seats, and the Democratic Party of the Albanians won 1.**⁸ **After several weeks of negotiations, a government coalition was established between SDSM and the "Mozheme" coalition, DUI and DPA.** With this coalition, the Government secured a majority in the Assembly with 62 MPs. The opposition was formed by VMRO-DPMNE and the "Obnova za Makedonija" coalition, the Alliance for Albanians, Alternativa and Levica. The constitutive session of the new Assembly was held on August 4th.

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- 1 Dautche Welle (2019), Zaev: We opt for early parliamentary elections. Access on: <https://p.dw.com/p/3RYux>
 - 2 Decision for call for early parliamentary elections in Republic of North Macedonia. Decision downloaded from the website of the State Election Commission (SEC). Access on: https://www.sec.mk/parlamentarni-izbori-2020/?_thumb_nail_id=6946
 - 3 Pankovski, M. and other (2020). Handbook for the parliamentary elections in Republic of North Macedonia 2020: Second amended edition. Foundation Conrad Adenauer, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje. Access on: https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Prirachnik_za_parlamentarni_izbori_2020_MKD.pdf
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 18 March (lasting for 30 days), 16 April (30 days), on 15 May (14 days), 30 May (14 days) and June 15 (8 days)
 - 6 Rechica V. (2020) What is the general perception of citizens about the Assembly of Republic of North Macedonia? Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje. Access on: <https://bit.ly/3iOBtMt>
 - 7 ODIHR Special election assessment mission. Access on: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/e/465648_2.pdf
 - 8 Pankovski, M. and other (2020). Handbook for the parliamentary elections in Republic of North Macedonia 2020: Second amended edition. Foundation Conrad Adenauer, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje. Access on: https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Prirachnik_za_parlamentarni_izbori_2020_MKD.pdf

The work of the Assembly in 2020 was generally stagnant, given the reduced capacity due to the gravity of the situation with the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite citizens' support for the majority proposal for remote work of the Assembly,⁹ the opposition did not support the initiative, and the proposal was not adopted.

On August 6th, 2021, the President of the Assembly announced the seventh local elections to be held on October 17th 2021. **On the same day, the decision was taken that the Assembly would have regular sessions only until September 23rd 2021 and then would be inactive until the end of the local elections. Xhaferi reasoned this decision as a preventive measure to avoid political campaigning in the Assembly sessions.**¹⁰ Given the conditions, no parliamentary sessions were held until after the second round of local elections on October 31st 2021.

Election results fueled another political crisis in the country and reshaped the parliamentary composition and the Government. **After official results were announced, due to poor results, Zoran Zaev announced his resignation as Prime Minister and President of SDSM. On November 8th 2021, eight days after announcing the resignation, 61 MPs signed an initiative for a vote of confidence for the Government. In addition to the MPs of the opposition, i.e., VMRO-DPMNE and the coalition "Obnova za Makedonija" the coalition Alliance of Albanians and Alternativa and the political party Levica, this initiative was joined by the MPs of the political party BESA, Government partners of SDSM.** As rationale for the initiative, the MPs relied on the fact that despite the announced resignation, the Prime Minister had not officially submitted it to the Assembly. However, on the day of the vote of confidence, scheduled for November 11th 2021, the Assembly could not convene due to a lack of quorum of 61 MPs. Namely, of 61 MPS who initially signed the vote of confidence initiative, Kastriot Redzeqi, a BESA MP, changed his position and did not attend the scheduled session. **Hence, the initiative for the vote of confidence of the SDSM Government failed.**¹¹ On the following day, November 12th 2021, the political party BESA officially left the Government.¹² **After intensive negotiations between the leader of SDSM, Zoran Zaev and the leader of the political party Alternativa, Afrim Gashi, on December 5th 2021, a new parliamentary majority of 64 MPs was officially formed at the Assembly, this time including four MPs of the political party Alternativa.**¹³

Prime Minister Zaev filed his resignation to the Assembly on December 22nd 2021 and withdrew from the SDSM president position. **On December 29th 2021, President Pendarovski handed the mandate for the composition of the new Government to Dimitar Kovachevski, who was elected as President of the ruling SDSM after Zaev's resignation. On January 16th 2022, with 62 votes "for", 46 "against," and without abstentions, the Assembly voted for the new Government, and Dimitar Kovachevski was appointed President of the Government.**¹⁴

9 Rechica V. and Jovevska Georgjevik A. (2021) Parliament Watch: Results of the field survey of citizens' perception of the work of the Assembly of Republic of North Macedonia (17 February – 10 March 2020). Access on: https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/MKDWEB_A4_Terenska_anketa_mart_2021.pdf

10 Radio Free Europe (2021) Xhaferi announced the local elections, the Assembly will be inactive during the campaign. Access on: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31397318.html>

11 Dautche Welle (2021) Vote of confidence: The opposition in need of one vote for quorum. Access on: <https://vlada.mk/node/27166>

12 Sakam da kazam (2021) MINISTER HODZA AND TWO DEPUTY MINISTERS FROM BESA RESIGNED. Access on: <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/ministerot-hodha-i-dvajtsata-zamenitsi-ministri-od-besa-podnesoa-ostavki/>

13 Government of RNM (2021) Zaev: We have stable parliamentary majority and Government for secure future of the country and the people. Access on: <https://vlada.mk/node/27166>

14 Zekjirovik, E. (2022) Dimitar Kovachevski took over the Prime Minister function from Zoran Zaev. Access on: <https://www.aa.com.tr/mk/политика/дмитар-ковачевски-ја-презеде-премиерската-функција-од-зоран-заев/2475876>

This mandate of the Assembly has gone through important developments that have often hindered its regular workflow. **The difficulties started with the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic put on the parliamentary staff and MPs, which seriously lowered the capacity of the Assembly to address new and crucial legislation.** Further, the work effectiveness of this parliamentary composition has also been impacted by the "active blockade" by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, which started in May 2022. **As announced by VMRO-DOMNE, the opposition MPs will use filibustering tactics to obstruct the work of the Assembly unless the Government agrees to discussions about conducting early elections. The French proposal, designed to end the Bulgarian veto in North Macedonia's EU path, in July 2022 also caused major turmoil in the political landscape, with several days of disorder in the Assembly.** The quarrels between the majority and opposition¹⁵ in the Assembly stemmed from the conflicting views on the French proposal of the parliamentary majority and the MPs from VMRO-DPMNE and the Left. The political turmoil continues as the opposition maintains the "active blockade" and demands a referendum on withdrawing the agreement with Bulgaria.

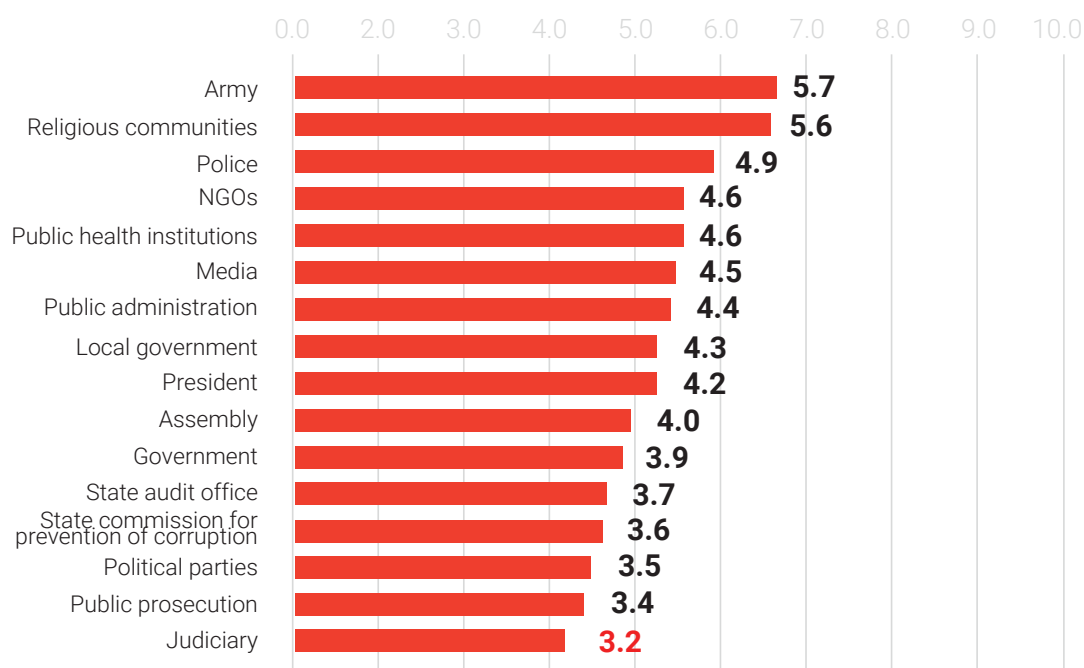
15 Jakov Marusic, S. (2022) "Demand for Referendum on French Deal Divides North Macedonia" Access on: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/25/demand-for-referendum-on-french-deal-divides-north-macedonia/>

III. Introduction

The focus groups were conducted to provide in-depth information on the citizens' dissatisfaction with the quality of life in North Macedonia, the low trust in institutions, such as the Assembly, a key institution in the country's political system and the vanishing trust in political parties, as crucial actors in the country's political life. **The data from the focus groups add to existing research on the work of the Assembly conducted within the framework of the PSP through the annual survey on the perception of the citizens on the work of the Assembly and the Discourse Quality Index (DQI), which analyses the quality of the debate in the Assembly.**

The focus group questionnaire was designed based on the PSP survey data gathered in February and March 2022 from among 1,000 respondents, which showed dissatisfaction with political processes and a lack of trust in institutions and political actors (below 5 on a scale from 1 to 10). The highest degree of trust is given to the President of the country – 4.2, while the lowest to the Judiciary - 3.1, whereby the trust in the Assembly (4.0) and the Government (3.9) is rated almost identically. Trust is also low in political parties (3.4).¹⁶ Previous research conducted by IDSCS also shows that politicians (3.2) as individuals have the lowest trust compared to other societal actors.¹⁷

Chart 1. Trust in institutions - On 1-10 scale, please describe your trust in the following institutions:

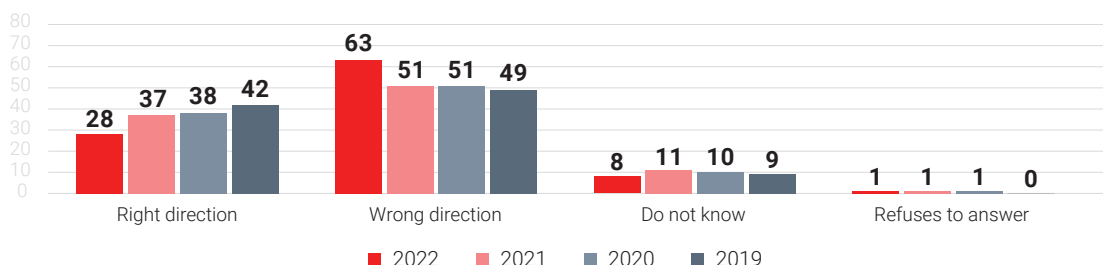


16 "Parliament Watch: Citizens' perception about the work of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia – 2022" (Rechica V. and Jovevska Gjoregjevikj A. June, 2022). Institute for democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje. Access on: <https://cutt.ly/BBUDok2>

17 "Man of the people: Public Opinion Analysis of Citizen's Political Demands," Bliznakovski et al., November 2021. Access on: <https://idscs.org.mk/en/2021/11/29/man-of-the-people-man-public-opinion-analysis-of-citizens-political-demands-2/>

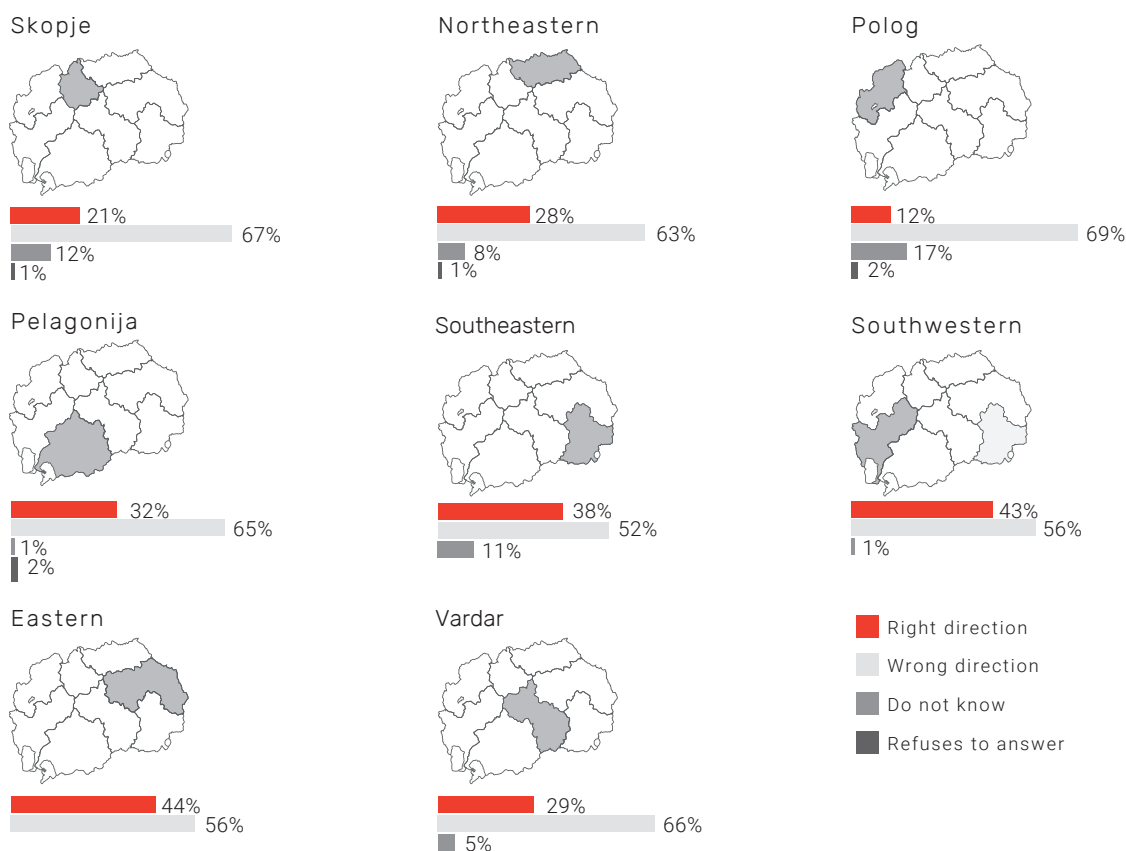
Moreover, the survey data show a general dissatisfaction with life in North Macedonia, as the majority of the respondents think that life in the country is headed in the wrong direction (63%), while only one-fourth of the respondents (28%) think that life is headed in the right direction.

Chart 2. In general, do you think that the life in our country is headed in the: (%)



The perception that life in the country is headed in the wrong direction is common in almost all planning regions of the country; however, some are more pessimistic than others. **Relative optimism is found among citizens of the Eastern (44%) and Southwestern regions (43%), as almost half responded that life is headed in the right direction. The biggest pessimists are the citizens of the Polog region - 69%, the Skopje region - 67%, and finally, the citizens of the Vardar region - 66%.**

Chart 3. Do you think that life in North Macedonia in general is headed in: (by regions, %)

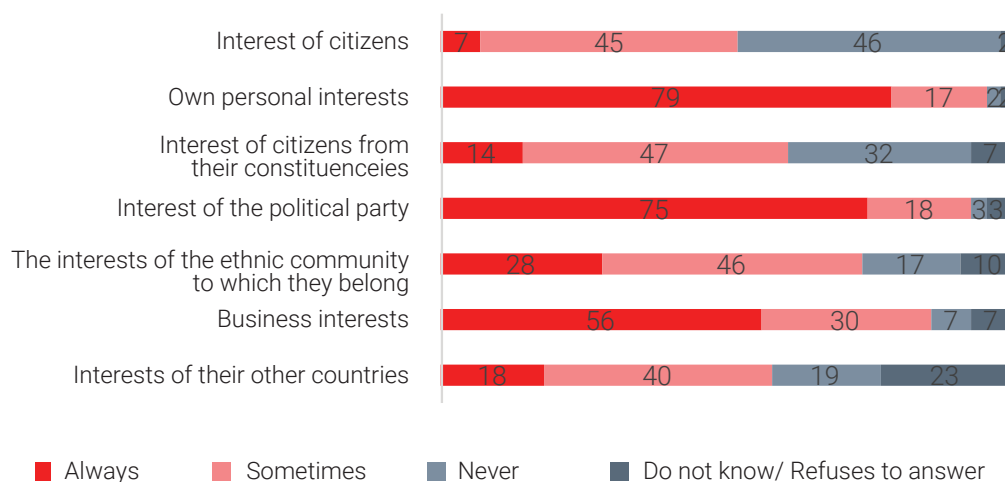


Inspired by these initial findings from the annual PSP survey, the focus groups were designed to garner in-depth information from the general perception of the citizens. The discussions were held with cross-cutting groups of citizens representing diversity in North Macedonia, including gender and ethnicity, among others. **The qualitative data gained by this research add to the survey data and serve researchers and policymakers to understand how the citizens perceive institutions, political parties and certain policies, identifying possible areas for future intervention.**

IV. General findings

Some recurring themes could be identified in all eight focus groups, which serve to understand the general opinions of the citizens expressed in the annual survey. **Almost all participants were concerned by partisan politics and the divisiveness caused by political parties** - "among us, we will say he's a traitor, the other a patriot, but they will continue with their agenda" (Male, Ethnic Albanian, Kumanovo, 51-65), or as one young participant from the same group shared "they rule us while dividing us into Albanians and Macedonians... while we have the same problems" (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo, 18 – 30). **For most participants, political parties are mainly concerned about their agenda and interests rather than the general good and the well-being of the citizens** - "... the largest part of political party members only want to get to functions, jobs, pay... absolutely no initiative to do anything" (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Shtip, 51-65). This stance of the focus group participants gives us a better understanding of the data from the annual PSP survey, which shows that over two-thirds (75%) of the citizens think that MPs in the Assembly always represent the interest of their political parties, whereas 18% think that they do it only sometimes. Only 7% of the citizens think that the MPs always represent the interests of the citizens.

Chart 4. How often do MPs represent the following interests? (%)



There is a shared perception that the political crisis and institutional incapacity are not a newly created situations; however, there is a perception that the political situation has significantly deteriorated as the years have passed. There is a shared perception in all groups that more focus needs to be put on internal affairs and everyday issues the citizens face, such as the economic crisis and the general quality of life, rather than foreign affairs, which have been at the forefront of the political life in the country. **As one young participant states, "It's not that we focus more on foreign policy, but in our political system, we only talk about the EU. I have studied European studies; they tell us that the EU is a promised land. This is the biggest problem in our country. The EU helps you a lot, but the main thing that we need to change is the thing that we need to change ourselves, for example, corruption, bribery is everywhere..."** (Male, Ethnic Albanian, Skopje, 18-30).

However, the most prominent theme across the focus groups was the need for consensus, compromise and discussions. The participants insisted that political parties have become so polarised due to party interests that the interests of the citizens have been marginalised. They expect discussion between the main political actors regarding crucial issues concerning the well-being of the citizens and key national interests when it comes to disputes with neighbour countries, such as the recent dispute with Bulgaria on the country's national identity - *"We don't have supra-party consensus on anything... there is no way that no law works well, there must be something they agree on... now, it's only party bickering"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Gevgelija, 31-50).

V. Main problems and quality of life

The common feeling is that the country is not moving in the right direction, a perception shared by participants in all focus groups. **The recent economic crisis has exacerbated feelings of helplessness and perception of low quality of life, as stated by a participant from Shtip "If we ask the citizens how they're doing, they will start crying... what is my future in this country, I create... but don't have a dignified life" (Male, Ethnic Roma, Shtip, 31-50).** The perception that life in the country is headed in the wrong direction is not new, as previous research conducted by the Institute for Democracy has shown,¹⁸ however, there is a shared perception that the quality of life has deteriorated in recent years.

They attribute the low quality of life to long-term bad management by political elites throughout the last three decades of independence, as well as the extensive focus on foreign affairs and lack of focus on economic and general conditions at home, as shared by one older participant in Bitola *"they are stuck in the deal with Bulgaria, they forgot about us living here"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 51-65). Moreover, there is a shared perception of low quality of life, even when economic conditions are good. **Most participants see this as a hopeless situation and that there can be no change without thorough reforms and a committed fight against corruption at all levels. They attribute most of the issues to the lack of vision by political parties and politicians on crucial reforms and where the country should be headed.** One participant from Gevegelija describes it in the following way: *"maybe someone has a vision, but even if they have a vision, they succumb to party orders... whatever the party says"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Gevgelija, over 65).

While there is a general dissatisfaction, some issues persist in the focus group discussions starting with concerns about the economic crisis and lack of crucial investments. **The economic conditions and general financial well-being were brought up as an issue by all age groups, with older people sharing concerns of precarity and social exclusion due to the recent economic crisis and high inflation levels.** Younger people were mainly concerned with the lack of opportunities to employ their skills and knowledge and the small labour market.

Brain drain and the "exodus" of young people were also one of the most persistent issues mentioned by participants. **The concern of the ageing population was shared across focus groups, or as put forward by one older participant in Gostivar, "old people cannot build a country" (Male, Ethnic Albanian, Gostivar, over 65).** The drop in population was also confirmed by the 2021 population census, which showed a 9.2 per cent drop in the population, losing mainly young people.¹⁹ The population drop is in line with regional trends, and its a consequence among other reasons of low natality and emigration.²⁰

18 Public opinion reports and publications, 2009-2022, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje. Access on: <https://idscs.org.mk/mk/category/publikacii/page/63/>

19 Population census in North Macedonia, 2021, State Statistical Office (SSO). Access on: <https://popis2021.stat.gov.mk/>

20 Judah, T. (2020) Wildly Wrong: North Macedonia's Population Mystery. Access on: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/14/wildly-wrong-north-macedonias-population-mystery/>

Another persistent issue discussed by the participants was corruption, mainly clientelism and nepotism. **Most participants expressed concerns about everyday corruption in institutions and the lack of employment possibilities due to partisan employment. As a student in Struga put forward, "connections and party affiliations are key when looking for employment... your employment is based on connection, rather than competencies" (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Struga, 18-30).** The feeling of the omnipresence of corruption was overpowering in all focus groups. In most instances, corruption was connected to party clientelism and narrow party interests.

Other issues include the low quality of education and health system, which affect their quality of life and everyday activities. **Most participants complained about health institutions' lack of quality services, especially in smaller cities. Corruption in these institutions was also put forward as an issue which affects their health.** One younger participant in Kumanovo puts it in the following way: *"I'm younger, I can't say how it was before, but now everything is just getting worse, it's not even stagnant... there is systematic crime all the time... for example, we do not have good healthcare at all; there is no vaccine against tetanus in the whole country..." (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo, 18-30).*

In terms of politics, many participants complained about political polarisation, which in their words, divides people into "patriots and traitors" and has influenced the overall social atmosphere. They stress that political culture affects how people perceive these issues and that low quality of education has greatly impacted this. Young people in the focus groups tend to complain that the passive mindset and the expectation of state employment are important factors in why the country stagnates in many areas, including lack of economic progress.

Many participants identified the lack of implementation of laws as an important issue. **They mainly agree that there might be good laws; however, they lack proper implementation and follow-up, which turns good laws into bad ones.** The lack of implementation is discussed by one participant in Kumanovo who says: *"... maybe the Ministry of Interior is doing a good job, but they fail... because when they catch the criminals, the court releases them... a dead end" (Male, Ethnic Albanian, Kumanovo, 51-65).*

The Albanian participants in the mono-ethnic focus group shared concerns about their minority status, which they expressed has improved over the years. These feelings were freely discussed in the Albanian focus group; however, they were not mentioned by the participants among their concerns in the mixed focus groups.

VI. Trust in institutions

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There is a general lack of trust in the institutions' will and competency to contribute to bettering the general situation in the country. Corruption, nepotism, clientelism, personal and party interests, and political and family connections constitute the most mentioned issues connected to institutions and as the main source of distrust. If we are to put this simply, the citizens feel that corruption is omnipresent. As stated by a male participant in Bitola, *"There is a point in the process when things don't move forward, a dead-end – someone does not want to do their job unless there is a personal interest"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 31-50).

Besides corruption, the participants also mentioned the lack of expertise, proper planning and adequate cadres as crucial problems regarding state institutions, whether political or administrative. They also talked about the problem of over-employed public administration, which was usually connected with party clientelism. They mainly agree that some individuals in the public administration and state institutions might be competent and are doing well; however, the surroundings squash their potential and initiatives; as stated by an elderly woman in Bitola, *"whoever initiates a change, their initiative is squashed, because they cannot act smarter than their superiors"* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 31- 50). **The majority opinion is that there are no competent institutions, and they cannot trust any of them to do a good job.**

Asked about **their opinions on the main political institutions in the country**, the opinions do not differ greatly across focus groups. **They are mostly divided in their opinion of the President.** Some consider him independent and a good representative of the country's foreign policy. One young woman from Skopje states, *"...I like the fact that the president's statements are different from the prime minister, that he dares to make his statements different from the prime minister's statements"* (Female, Ethnic Roma, Skopje, 18-30). However, some consider that the President has been silent and not prominent enough in addressing the needs of the citizens. A woman from Kavadarci states, *"if you ask my kids, they will have no idea who the President is"* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Kavadarci, 31-50). The participants understand that the role of the President is ceremonial; however, they believe he should assume a firmer role in foreign policy and pose himself as an important leader of the country.

In terms of the Government - the participants mainly share the opinion that elections do not bring better Governments that resolve the problems of the citizens but only Governments that work for their personal interests. **They do not trust that the Government is competent enough to resolve their problems. For example, one participant from Struga says: "we need people that are competent for that job, that have the capabilities for that job, we need a new competent government"** (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Struga, above 65). In some focus groups, concerns were shared regarding how government coalitions are formed and function, as expressed by one participant in Shtip: *"the political parties need to change the way they communicate with each other... the internal deals between SDSM and DUI are very harmful, or any deal between DUI and VMRO could be harmful... they need to surpass their personal interests and work on a parliamentary agreement among each other, for the interest of the citizens..."* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Shtip, 31 - 50). **Some participants shared**

concerns about the lack of merit in the appointment of ministers and high government positions, as well as in other government bodies - *"in the last four years, we have appointed officials that have surpassed the legally allowed mandate, and although the State Commission for Anticorruption has raised the red flag, no one has done anything"* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Shtip, 31 – 50).

Considering the Judiciary's work, the participants' main opinion is that the Judiciary is the most corrupt institution and enjoys the least trust. In their opinion, political parties always find ways to infringe on the work of the Judiciary through corruptive mechanisms. The rule of law is lacking, and there is an unequal treatment based on financial and political capital. They believe politicians are "protected bears," and as stated by a woman in Shtip, *"the reason why people don't trust the Judiciary is corruption – as it is illogical to have a family of lawyers, judges, all interconnected..."* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Shtip, 31-50). **The inequality perceived by the focus group participants in front of the court of law is most expressively expressed by an older participant in Gevgelija, who says, "some are less human than others"** (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Gevgelija, above 65).

Asked **what could be done to ameliorate the situation**, some participants suggested digitalisation as a tool to fight corruption and increase efficiency; however, this solution was not a favourite for many due to the low trust that the public administration would be capable of following through with such a process. In line with fighting corruption, many pushed for collective governmental accountability but also individual accountability of public administration employees. **Mainly, they think that the appointment of officials should be more transparent. Some suggested the creation of a commission in the Assembly or as a governmental body for appointing directors and heads of departments.** This body would submit to greater scrutiny by the public and more pressure to put competent people in charge. Lastly, in the words of a participant from Bitola, *"in my opinion, if we depoliticise our institutions, that's when we will be able to move forward."* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 51-65).

In terms of the work of the Assembly, the main perception is that the institution is in an everlasting crisis or constant deadlock. The main opinion shared among focus group participants is that blocking the work of the Assembly is harming all "ordinary citizens." The opinion shared in the focus groups is in line with public opinion research, which found that the majority of the citizens (65%) think that boycotting the work of the Assembly is not the right way to express political views.

There was also a shared opinion that the Members of Parliament (MPs) are inactive; thus, many participants shared that they are unaware of their MPs. They think that the MPs are generally inexperienced and unaware of the issues the people are facing. Participants thought that the capacity of MPs of this mandate is much worse than previous ones, or in their words, *"we have MPs who have never taken the stand, but only vote"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Gevgelija, above 65). One young participant from Kumanovo says, *"in an Assembly of 120 MPs, only three know what they are talking about; the rest are lost, while they get a huge salary"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo, 18-30).). **In the participants' opinion, this is the case because MPs are not interested in their opinions and needs but mainly in the political decisions of their political leaders/parties. One participant in Shtip says, "in the Parliament, they [the MPs] do not use arguments, research, and facts, is the decision they are making good or no"** (Male, Ethnic Roma, Shtip, 31-50).

Many shared frustrations in terms of the benefits the MPs have, or as shared in Kavadarci, *"they are not doing their job but are getting paid"* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Kavadarci, 51-65). The feeling of unfairness is also connected to the economic hardships they are currently facing due to the economic crisis and inflation.

Asked about possible solutions to the many issues they discussed, the participants mainly focused on the accountability of MPs, and **the need for more direct contact**, as described by one *"maybe it is a bit our fault that we do not hold them accountable... we need to ask them to come in their local communities more often, so they can hear what we have to say... they have no relation to the voters,... the relationship MP – the citizen is lost"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 51-65). **In line with this sentiment, the introduction of open lists was mentioned as a possible solution in all focus groups and was overwhelmingly supported by participants.** They believe that being able to identify the candidates on the voting list would ensure more accountability by political parties and candidates.

VII. Trust in politicians and political parties

The most shared opinion among focus group participants is that **all politicians** work considering their own personal interests. They do not believe in their will to make a change for the positive and are not ready to implement the most necessary reforms. **In their opinion, political parties lack vision for the country and only think in four-year terms - as expressed by a young man in Bitola, "... only how much they can steal in four years" (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 18-30).** Others think politicians and political parties want to conduct reforms, but they do not know how or maybe the challenges they face while in power hinder them.

Participants identify high dependency on the party leaders, or as one male participant in Gevgelija put it, *"democratic country, autocratic parties"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Gevgelija, 51-65). **In their opinion, the main issue is clientelism and political parties that use citizens as voting machines or "party soldiers."** Moreover, in their opinion, the effect of the political parties is mainly polarising and divisive, **while the shared feeling is that at this crucial point for the country, there is a need for cooperation and compromise to address people's issues. Generally, there is an unfavourable opinion about politicians and political parties, which is common across all focus groups and among all participants, regardless of demographic differences.** In the words of a young participant from Struga, *"I think that they [political parties] might have a vision, but the moment they see the money and power, they only look only their personal interest"* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Struga, 18-30).

There is a shared opinion that politicians and political parties depend highly on foreign powers when making strategic and crucial decisions for the country. **In the words of a participant in Kumanovo, "when America says you will do like this, they will have to do like that... we do not have our own will" (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo, 18-30) or as put by another participant in Gostivar, "...we are too small" (Male, Ethnic Albanian, Gostivar, above 65).**

To better understand the citizens' opinions about politicians and political parties, we employed a **personification exercise**, where we asked the participants to identify a political party with an animal. The participants had to explain why they identified a certain animal with one of the political parties in North Macedonia. From the exercise, we understood that most participants **identify all political parties with a fox**, employing attributes such as sly, cunning, unreliable, and self-interested. This opinion was common in all focus groups, with levels of agreement among participants.

Regarding individual political parties, the participants could identify and employ several animal characteristics; however, there were a few common themes regarding each party across focus groups. **In terms of VMRO-DPMNE**, participants mainly considered them a strong party; however, highly corrupt and lacking in action. **Regarding SDSM**, considering the animal characteristics attributed to them, the party is considered unreliable and highly dependent on foreign powers or the agenda of third parties. **In terms of DUI**, the party is considered a strong political player but highly corrupt and self-interested. **Regarding the Alliance for Albanians (AA)**, the party was not easily recognised in mainly Macedonian focus groups; thus, the participants refrained from identifying them with animals, as they were unaware of the party, its leader or its policies. On the other hand, participants familiar with the party consider it power-hungry and not interested in addressing citizens' needs.

Regarding the Left, considering the animal characteristics attributed to them, the political party was mostly considered loud in critique but lacking in actions.

Some participants gave their opinion regarding parties such as Movement BESA, saying that the party was unstable and with no ideology, or the Liberal Democrats (LDP), suggesting that it is a party true to its principles. In terms of the Roma parties, one Roma participant states, *"Roma political parties fail to form a coalition with the right side to represent Roma interests, and I would say that they are trying to swim in the world of politics... however, the small number of votes they have makes them less credible"* (Female, Ethnic Roma, Skopje, 18 – 30).

Asked if they have any expectations or ideas of how a new movement, party or leader, should look like, the participants mostly shared the need for leaders with a vision and new ideas. Parties and leaders that will be with the citizens and accessible to them. As a participant in Bitola said, *"to be part of the people and not create new elites"* (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 31 – 50); in other words, a man of the people. They also expect more "courageous parties" that will stand up to "foreign powers." The need for "courageous parties" is mainly connected to the feelings of resignation and helplessness, which a participant in Kumanovo describes in the following way *"it's like 14 countries decide on the fate of the whole world, their word - that's our fate"* (Male, Ethnic Albanian, Kumanovo 51- 65). The expectations for "a man of the people" can prove problematic due to the highly populist view of what a political leader should look like, which could be misused by autocratic leaders. More on the populist demand in North Macedonia can be found in the recent research by the Institute for Democracy titled "The Populist Citizen: Why do the citizens support populist leaders and policies in North Macedonia?"²¹ **However, the participants also expect uncorrupted or "clean" leaders in the political scene; in the words of one participant from Struga, "we need new people, not the same old washed-up guys"** (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Struga, 51- 65). Further, the participants also talked about the need for ideological parties with a story and vision for the country, rather than clientelist motives for their operation.

For many, the future is grim, and they have no expectations. One participant compared possible future parties with the "The Last Supper," equating it with betrayal, while another compared it to a bleak and ruined painting. In the word of a young participant in Gostivar, "like a natural disaster waiting to happen" (Female, Ethnic Albanian, Gostivar, 18 - 30).

Asked what could be done to improve their trust in political parties, the participants mainly expected the **political parties to fulfil their promises and become accountable**, as one participant in Kumanovo said, *"I want to know what from the programme was fulfilled, I promised this – I did this"* (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo, 51-65). **As discussed above, participants believe that open lists could be a solution to ensure more accountability by the political parties.**

21 Study: "The Populist Citizen: Why do the citizens support populist leaders and policies in North Macedonia?" Rechica V., Bliznakovski J. and Popovikj M., April 2022). Institute for Democracy. Access on: https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2_B5_PopulizamENG.pdf

VIII. Personal experience/ engagement/ solution

In all focus groups, participants shared personal experiences of corruption and discrimination. These experiences were mainly attributed to the incompetence of institutions and poor treatment in the public administration and other public institutions. Some participants shared the frustration the ill-treatment had caused - "when I received my identity card, I almost cried" (Female, Ethnic Albanian, Gostivar, 31 -50). Some shared that they lost their job due to a change of Government, and some shared their experience with corruption and the fact that they need connections to "get things done." **Many focus group participants expressed that certain political decisions have affected them personally, and while some shared that they tried to use official mechanisms such as petitions, protests, and requests, many shared that they had to use personal connections to resolve their issues.**

IX. Polarisation and reconciliation

Most focus group participants agree that there is polarisation and divisiveness among them due to the last political decisions concerning the country's EU path. Some participants expressed their sentiments against the French proposal regarding the effects it could have on the national identity - "my kid saw the news on TV the other day and asked me 'so what am I now...'" (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Kavadarci, 31-50). **One common feeling among participants from all focus groups is the disappointment with the Prespa Agreement aftermath** - "we were promised good economic conditions, progress... and we changed the name, and here we are, in the same place we were before the name change, so I am not sure what else can we give" (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Struga, 31-50). **Some participants expressed frustration with the country's foreign policy and lack of internal commitment to resolve citizens' issues** - "as if our problems aren't enough, now we have to deal with Bulgaria", as expressed by one participant in Bitola (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 31-50). **Many of them expressed the polarisation caused by the French proposal, which renders them either Macedonian or traitors. Many think that the polarisation is caused by the "partisan mindset" and is caused by the rhetoric employed by the political parties** - "Most of the quarrels are imposed by political parties, VMRO, SDSM, DUI, it doesn't matter which, but us young people are becoming more open mind..., older people susceptible to that rhetoric" (Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Struga, 18 - 30).

Regarding **the constitutional changes to recognise the Bulgarian minority**, required by the French proposal to move forward with the EU accession negotiation process, **the main fear among the participants is that the requests by the EU and the country's neighbours will not stop with the constitutional changes. As one participant from Bitola puts it, "if not Bulgaria, someone else will ask something else from us – a never-ending story... that's why we should not open the Constitution"** (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 31 – 50). **However, this**

is not a shared opinion among all participants, as many think that the country has reached a point of not returning - "I don't see an issue, as long as the country moves forwards" (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Gevgelija, 51 - 65). As another male participant in Gevgelija put forward, "there is no way back; we move forward now... this is our reality, just as the Albanians, the Turks, the Bosniaks... we don't lose anything; we can only win from this process (Male, Ethnic Macedonian, Gevgelija, 31 - 50)."

Participants from minorities generally are 'for' the required constitutional changes; however, they expressed their opinion more freely in the Albanian focus group, while they were more refrained in the mixed groups in sharing their opinion.

Regarding the **referendum initiative about the French proposal** by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE and announcements by the Left, most participants agree that the parties should unite to solve the dispute with Bulgaria and not spend the money on campaigns, which can be diverted to solving our internal problems, especially economic issues. **One participant in Bitola says, "it's our money, the people's money, and it a waste... at the end of the day, they will sign it, and do as the big guys will say..." Female, Ethnic Macedonian, Bitola, 51-65).** While it is the citizen's responsibility to vote on the referendum or any elections, the participants think a referendum regarding this question is only a ruse for party political points. **Moreover, most participants think that no matter their opinion, "they" – the politicians, will do what they want.** This opinion is mainly connected with disappointment from previous referendums, especially with the name referendum in 2018.

X. Demographic differences

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There were expected differences between mixed and mono-ethnic groups. **The Albanian participants expressed their support for the French proposal more freely in the mono-ethnic group, while they were much more considerate in mixed groups, especially in their wording.** The Macedonian mono-ethnic groups expressed more condemning opinions towards Albanians, using discriminatory language. On the other hand, as opposed to the mono-ethnic groups, in the mixed groups, participants channelled their disappointment towards DUI rather than ethnic Albanians.

The focus group discussions were dominated by men, as women lacked the self-initiative to join the discussion, and this was noticed even in focus groups where men were outnumbered. In general, women did not differ in opinion from men, although they were more candid in sharing personal experiences.

Youth generally lacked self-initiative to join the discussion and only participated when directly asked or pushed by others. They were less hopeful about their future in the country, especially due to economic conditions and future possibilities the country offers. Older participants did not hesitate to participate and express their opinions; similarly, they had a grim picture of the country's future.

Information about the project

The Swiss Parliament Support Programme (PSP) will support the efforts of the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia for independence by building consensus, implementing structural reforms and capacity building in the institutional development of Parliament, in its legislative and oversight roles, and its institutional transparency and accountability. PSP is implemented by the National Democratic Institute, the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" - Skopje and the Centre for Change Management to support Parliament's strategic planning; reforms in human resource management; improved impact assessment of procurement regulations and processes; commitment to open data and by measuring public opinion and monitoring reform efforts, also for increased civic involvement in policy-making processes.

Information about IDSCS

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

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ПРОГРАМА ЗА ПАРЛАМЕНТАРНА ПОДДРШКА
PROGRAMI PËR MBËSHETJE PARLAMENTARE
PARLIAMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Public Opinion Analysis No. 22/2022

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**Focus Group Research:
Public Perception on Trust in Political
Parties, Public Institutions and Quality
of Life in North Macedonia**

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