I JUST WANT SOMEONE TO RESPOND TO MY EMAIL":

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON UNDECIDED VOTERS' VIEWS AND EXPERIENCE WITH LOCAL AND NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Center for Insights in Survey Research
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IRI IN NORTH MACEDONIA

A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded in 1983, the International Republican Institute (IRI) advances freedom and democracy worldwide by developing political parties, civic institutions, open elections, democratic governance, and the rule of law. IRI has supported North Macedonia's democratic development since the 1990s through programs that empower good governance, responsive and policy-driven political

parties, transparency, and accountability. For over two decades, IRI has conducted quantitative and qualitative public opinion research in North Macedonia to help political parties and the government gain in-depth objective data about citizens' needs and attitudes.
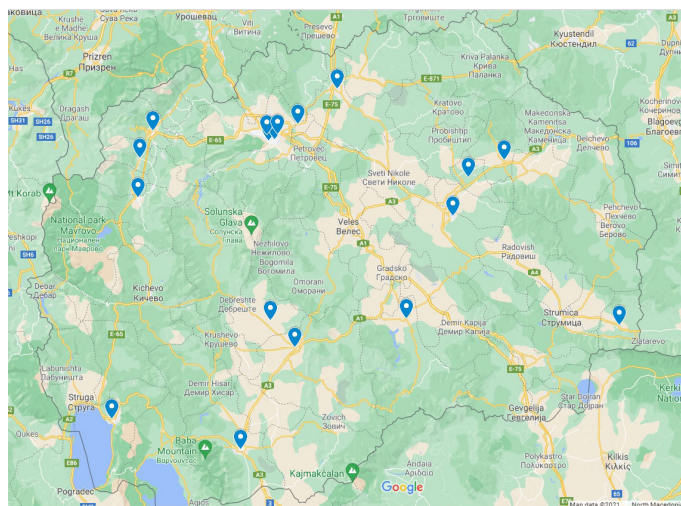
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approach

— In the spring of 2021, IRI designed and commissioned qualitative research in North Macedonia to better understand citizens' views of their local and national government ahead of the October 2021 local elections.1

— This report is based on 21 online focus group discussions (FGDs) held in 18 municipalities, i.e. three municipalities in each of North Macedonia's six electoral units. The FGDs were conducted with undecided voters from various segments of the population. The participant selection process was controlled for geographic area (urban or rural), gender, and ethnic background. The selection screening of prospective participants ensured that the participants were undecided voters and eligible to vote in the upcoming local elections.

— The focus groups were conducted in two languages - 16 were conducted in Macedonian and 5 in Albanian. The groups also included representatives from other ethnic minorities.

— IRI uses FGDs to complement its public opinion surveys and to understand how and why citizens hold their perceptions and beliefs. The focus of this particular study was on the specific issues and challenges in participants' municipalities, the work and behavior of their mayor, the municipal council and the municipal administration, the work of the government and the opposition, the country's direction, and the EU integration process. The FGDs conducted in municipalities that are part of the City of Skopje included a discussion on the issues specific to the city: the work and behavior of the mayor of Skopje and the performance of the city council and municipal administration.

— While findings from these focus groups do not represent the opinions of all undecided voters in North Macedonia, they do provide a snapshot of the participants' views on the work of the local and national government ahead of the October 2021 local elections.

Main findings

— **Finding 1:** Damaged infrastructure, poor public hygiene, and urban density are identified as the main problems at the local level. In most rural areas, basic needs such as access to clean water are not provided.

— **Finding 2:** Participants find unresponsive, uncommunicative, and inaccessible mayors to be weak and unsatisfactory mayors who should not be re-nominated. There is a clear distinction in the satisfaction with mayors who have delivered visible change and those who have not.

— **Finding 3:** The municipal councils, which are elected bodies, are unknown to the citizens they should serve and do not fulfill their representative role.

— **Finding 4:** Participants view the municipal administration as mostly overstaffed, incompetent, and inefficient. Lacking regular service delivery by their local government, citizens often use informal contacts to obtain a local government service.

— **Finding 5:** Civic participation in local government is very low or non-existent. In most cases, when citizens initiate or get involved in local government, their attempts are unsuccessful, and the local government is discouraging citizens' engagement.

— **Finding 6:** In Skopje, urban density, construction expansion, air pollution, and infrastructural problems burden the capital. Participants have divided opinions on mayor Petre Shilegov and the work of the local government.

— **Finding 7:** Key expectations of the national government are enforcing and adhering to the laws, eliminating corruption, and increasing the quality of services in healthcare, education, and the judiciary.

— **Finding 8:** Most of the ethnic Macedonian participants perceive the opposition VMRO-DPMNE as ready to be reformed, whereas the ethnic Albanian participants are split on the coalition of the Alliance for Albanians and Alternative.

— **Finding 9:** The participants support EU accession but not at a cost of renouncing their national identity.

Map of North Macedonia with locations of municipalities where the focus groups were conducted.

Key takeaways

The FGDs suggest that undecided voters:

— Are generally dissatisfied with the direction their municipalities and the country are heading;

— Have split opinions on the performance and behavior of the local government in their municipalities, largely determined by the mayor's accessibility to citizens and delivery of improvements for the municipality. At the central level, voters are disappointed by both the performance and behavior of the government and the opposition;

— Lack knowledge about the work of the local government, particularly the work of the municipal council. There is not only a dearth of information on how to participate in local government but also an impression that the local government discourages participation. Participants also do not have good understanding of the division of competences and areas of responsibility between different levels of government (national, local, and Skopje city government);

— Feel their voice is not heard by those in power, and that political leaders work for their own benefit rather than that of their citizens;

— Are dissatisfied with the performance of the national government and the direction the country is heading; however, they do not view the opposition as capable of winning the next election or, if it did, of better leadership. They see NATO membership as a positive development and recognize the benefits of EU integration, but they are skeptical that either is possible to achieve and do not want them at the cost of renouncing their national identity.

Recommendations
For mayors/local government

Behavioral recommendations

— Be accessible to citizens, listen to their problems, address their needs, be responsive, ensure other local government bodies are responsive when approached by citizens;

— Be respectful;

— Ensure that the problems and needs of all citizens are treated equally, regardless of their ethnicity or party affiliation;

— Visit local communities, get to know the situation on the ground, communicate with citizens;

— Work to ensure citizens are well informed and kept up to date about priorities, policies, and activities planned and implemented in the municipality. Be transparent and use consistent and comprehensive channels for communication and information. Use the municipal website, newsletter and social media accounts, as well as through mailing lists and local media;

— Be, or learn how to be, good and efficient managers. Professionalize, train, and prepare government employees to engage with constituents.

Policy recommendations

— Organize the work of local government around the needs of its citizens, make the government service-oriented;

— Fulfill electoral promises and programs and create policies that address the most pressing issue noted by citizens, such as: poor road infrastructure, poor public hygiene, and problems arising from high urban density, such as widespread construction, traffic jams, and lack of parking infrastructure;

— Ensure that citizens' basic needs in both rural and urban municipalities are met, such as a consistent clean water supply and an effective sewage system;

— Institute easy-to-use institutional channels for citizen participation in local governance and encourage citizens' participation;

— In Skopje municipalities, along with the City of Skopje, create and publish an easy-to-use map that depicts which areas are under the competence of the City of Skopje and which are under the competence of the Skopje municipalities;

— Develop policies targeting all settlements and inhabitants of the municipality equally;

— Secure continuity and completion of initiated activities and policies, no matter which party is in power at the local level;

— Ensure the municipal council and the municipal administration provide good services to citizens and behave politely, kindly, and supportively;

— Establish staff training on development, implementation and evaluation of policies that will strengthen the municipal administration, transforming it into an efficient service hub for citizens.

For Skopje mayor

The main recommendation for the Skopje mayor is:

— **Listen, communicate, and be responsive to citizens;**

Other recommendations include:

— Along with the Skopje municipalities, devise and publish an easy-to-use map that depicts which areas are under competence of the city of Skopje and which are under competence of the Skopje municipalities;

— Be more realistic in election promises, and work harder to deliver them;

— Work more closely with the national government to develop major policy solutions to address the needs of Skopje's inhabitants;

— Be polite and civil in communication with citizens, the media, CSOs, etc.;

— Invest in developing all municipalities of Skopje equally;

— Protect Vodno mountain, build a tram connection, end widespread and dense construction in the city center, increase fines for traffic violations, maintain clean, trash-free public spaces, and prevent parking on sidewalks by ticketing and towing cars and trucks parked on them, among other suggestions.

For all political parties

— Agree on and develop a long-term vision for the country using an inclusive process, and work on the strategic goals regardless of which party is in power;

— Ensure candidates for mayors and municipal councilors are equipped to provide high-quality service to citizens and deliver visible improvements, as well as listen and respond to citizen needs;

— Train and educate party members, especially prospective public appointees, on behavior standards, policymaking, and policy delivery to improve their performance once in power and to increase citizens' trust in political parties and the institutions;

— Ensure elected representatives communicate and are responsive to citizens on a continuous basis, not only in pre-election periods.

For government and/or governing parties

Behavioral recommendations

— Listen and communicate openly and effectively with citizens. Citizens appreciate it when officials and the institutions they run share comprehensive, easily accessible information about the services under their competence and are responsive to citizen requests;

— Govern well, be honest, transparent, and accountable. Citizens support governments and institutions that run professionally, fulfil campaign promises, and are accountable to voters.

Policy recommendations

— Implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to evaluate the performance and behavior of public appointees at the local and national levels to ensure high standards for the government's work and to increase trust in institutions;

— Increase responsibilities and mechanisms for regular accountability of municipal councilors;

— Develop policies based on citizens' needs and issues, strengthen the functioning and service provision of institutions, ensure professionalization of public administration;

— Strengthen delivery on the most pressing issues, including fighting corruption, providing quality healthcare and education, ensuring an impartial and efficient judiciary, and decreasing emigration;

— Establish effective mechanisms for the rule of law, ensure that state and private entities follow regulations through regular inspections, and penalize those who do not abide by the laws;

— Continue EU integration and work on solving the dispute with Bulgaria, while protecting national identity and the history of the country and its people.

For opposition parties

— Suggest solutions to persistent problems;

— Be more active and vocal on the issues and needs of the citizens and pressure the government to create more citizen-responsive policies;

— Strengthen internal skill and serve as a corrective to the government, be direct and open in criticism of government policies, also be constructive and cooperative when needed;

— Abide by the laws of the country while in opposition and demonstrate why this is significant.

For citizens

— Be proactive, demand inclusion and responsiveness, maximize existing mechanisms for civic participation on local level, propose ideas for improvement and problem-solving in local communities;

— Inform yourself about the work and representation of the local government.

For civil society

— Advocate for and support citizen-responsive policies and support competent and transparent governance at the local and national levels;

— Educate citizens on the work and representation of municipal councilors and the role of local government;

— Closely monitor the work of both the local and national government.

OVERVIEW

The focus group research was conducted on behalf of the Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) of the International Republican Institute (IRI) by the BRIMA market research firm in North Macedonia. IRI conducted this FGD research from March 3 to April 9 2021 to better understand citizens' views on the work of their local and national governments ahead of the October 2021 local elections. The FGD study complements IRI's national public opinion survey, fielded in March and April 2021, providing insights in the experience, behavior, evaluations, and perceptions of undecided voters regarding local and national government issues.

— Twenty-one focus group were conducted in each of the six electoral units (E.U.). The focus groups were conducted in the following municipalities: Aerodrom, Chair, and Kisela Voda in E.U.1; Arachinovo, Gazi Baba, and Kumanovo in E.U.2; Cheshinovo-Obleshevo, Kochani, and Shtip in E.U.3; Kavadarci, Novo Selo, and Prilep in E.U.4; Bitola, Dolneni, and Ohrid in E.U.5; and Bogovinje, Gostivar, and Tetovo in E.U.6.[2]

— Sixteen focus groups were conducted in Macedonian and five in Albanian, inclusive of representatives from other ethnic communities, where possible. All of them were transcribed and translated into English based on the video recordings.

— Each focus group was comprised of at least six participants and included both youth (aged 18 and older) and adults.

— Apart from E.U.1, which is composed only of urban municipalities, in all other E.U.s, two FGDs were held with residents of urban areas and one FGD was held with residents of a rural municipality, ensuring geographic inclusivity.

IRI, in consultation with its research partner, developed a screening questionnaire to help select the targeted participants. The core screening questions focused on the following aspects:

— Eligibility of the prospective participant to vote;

— Likelihood to vote in the local elections in October 2021;

— Undecided voters.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the recruitment of the participants was done via phone and online and the focus groups were conducted online.

During each FGD, an experienced moderator used a semi-structured discussion guide to investigate the research objectives. The discussion guide included the following main topics:

— The municipality;

— Work of the local government;

— City of Skopje (for FGDs in Skopje municipalities);

— National political issues;

Although IRI ensures that the highest research standards are met, qualitative research methods come with limitations. This study included a total of 134 participants, with care taken to ensure a demographic and ethnic balance; however, the sample size and the non-probabilistic participants recruitment method does not result in nationally representative data. The research design supports the "transferability" of the study, developing findings that could potentially be transferred to a broader population.

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[2] A full list of the focus groups is provided in Appendix I.

CONTEXT

North Macedonia is a unitary state and parliamentary democracy with a political scene dominated by largely ethnically based political parties representing the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority. Other ethnic communities also participate either through their own ethnically based parties or integrated within ethnic Macedonian parties. The local government is organized as a single tier of local government into 80 municipalities, with the City of Skopje being an exception as a separate local government unit. Local elections are held every four years with mayors elected in a two-round system if no candidate wins 50 percent of the vote in the first round. The municipal council is the representative body of the municipality, consisting of nine to 33 councilors, depending on the size of the population in the municipality, while the Skopje city council consists of 45 councilors. The last local elections took place on October 15, 2017.

This year marks 30 years since North Macedonia, then Republic of Macedonia, established its independence from Yugoslavia and 31 years since the first multiparty parliamentary elections. Local government has undergone a number of reforms and reorganizations since independence. Until 1996, there were only 32 municipalities, some of which formed the City of Skopje, but they lacked financial independence and adequate competences for resolving local issues. In 1996, the local government was re-organized into 123 municipalities; however, a more substantive decentralization process began after the adoption of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in August 2001. The agreement resulted in constitutional changes widening the scope of the local government from 6 to 14 policy areas, creating further territorial reorganization of the local government, and redefining and broadening local governments' funding sources.

These reforms lowered, the number of municipalities to 84 and later, in 2004, to 80 municipalities. The restructuring of the funding process of the municipalities started in 2005, in two phases of fiscal decentralization, enabling municipalities to equip and prepare to collect, manage, and expense their resources independently of the national government. All municipalities, except for one, have entered the second phase of fiscal decentralization. Despite expected benefits for citizens from decentralization of local government, this process has been marked by numerous problems, such as a lack of capacity, lack of funding, corruption, and partisan employment, all which have deteriorated the ability of municipalities to service citizens.

At the national level, North Macedonia is currently led by the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) coalition (ethnic Macedonian led party) and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) (ethnic Albanian party). The coalition has been in power since May 30, 2017, having won re-election in July 2020 following almost 11 years' rule by VMRO-DPMNE (largest opposition ethnic Macedonian party) and DUI.

At the international level, North Macedonia aspires to join the European Union and has been a candidate for membership since 2005. An objection by its southern neighbor Greece to the use of its name "Macedonia" obstructed the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. However, in 2018, the government signed the Prespa Agreement with Greece, solving a 27-year-long bilateral dispute. In accordance with the agreement, North Macedonia changed its name from "Republic of Macedonia" to "Republic of North Macedonia." This resulted in Greece lifting its veto on North Macedonia's integration into NATO, and the country successfully joined the Alliance on March 27, 2020.

However, solving the naming dispute did not speed up North Macedonia's EU accession. Fifteen years after first receiving its candidate status, despite making significant democratic progress and receiving continuous recommendations by the European Commission for opening accession negotiations, North Macedonia is yet to attain EU membership. Following a veto on the start of negotiations by France in 2019, North Macedonia's neighbor Bulgaria raised questions about the national identity and history of the Macedonian people, claiming they are of Bulgarian origin and demanding North Macedonia's government agree. Bulgaria is effectively blocking North Macedonia from entering the EU until these questions are resolved.

Taking into consideration how these local, national, and international issues directly affect citizens' lives, as well as the upcoming local elections scheduled for October 2021, this extensive focus group research explored the familiarity, experience, and opinions of undecided voters on local government. It also investigated public opinion about national issues, specifically the government, the opposition, EU integration, and the issue with Bulgaria. This study serves to widen knowledge and inform policymakers at all levels on how to better serve citizens.

FINDINGS

Finding #1: Damaged infrastructure, poor public hygiene, and urban density are identified as the main problems at the local level. In most rural areas, basic needs such as access to clean water are not provided.

Most participants believed their municipalities are stagnating or not heading in the right direction.

Main problems in municipalities
— Poor and damaged road and street infrastructure; — Poor public hygiene, uncleanliness, lack of garbage collection, general disregard for public hygiene; — Urban density, widespread dense construction, overpopulation, poor urban planning and development.

Main problems in urban municipalities	Main problems in rural municipalities
— Poor and damaged infrastructure of roads and streets; — Urban density, construction expansion, poor urban planning and development; — Lack of parking lots, traffic congestion; — Poor public hygiene, uncleanliness, lack of regular garbage collection, disregard for public hygiene; — Stray dogs; — Clean water supply and poor sewage system, the quality of water; — Pollution and the environment.	— No access to drinking water, unsafe water, bad water supply and sewage system; — Poor public hygiene, bad waste management, lack of regular (daily) garbage collection, utility companies not doing their jobs; — Poor and damaged infrastructure; — Weak local economy, lack of investments, youth unemployment leading to youth emigration; — Lack of access to healthcare, lack of access to primary care doctors, non-operational health clinics, lack of access to medication; — Lack of access to public transportation.

Table 1: Main problems in municipalities

Faced with these significant challenges, most participants believed their municipalities are stagnating or not heading in the right direction. There are also links between national and local issues; for example, the connection between youth brain-drain and high unemployment.

Separate from the problems noted, participants also listed several positives in their municipalities, including good relations with their neighbors, the proximity of shops and markets, schools and other institutions, and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. In a few discussions, the participants failed to specify positive aspects of living in their municipalities.

> " Beside the roads that are in a terrible condition, the sewage system is a huge issue. Especially when it's raining, the condition of the roads worsens, making it difficult even to walk."
>
> — Female, 27 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Arachinovo/Rural[3]

> " The cleanliness. The city is dirty, so to speak. The town has appalling infrastructure. Also, stray dogs are a real problem. When I go out with my children, the dogs are a problem."
>
> — Female, 34 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Ohrid/Urban

> " Overpopulation. Lately, many people are moving here. However, the area of the municipality is limited. Also, air pollution. After wiping the dust, in a few hours, there is another layer of dust again."
>
> — Female, 40 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Kisela Voda, Skopje/Urban

> " We live in the twenty-first century, and we still lack a water supply network..."
>
> — Female, 33 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Cheshinovo-Obleshevo/Rural

> " Every day we see the city's poor condition and heavy traffic. Stray dogs are still a major issue. A stray dog attacked me last year... The major issue is that little is being done..."
>
> — Male, 25 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Tetovo/Urban

[3] Quotes cited in this report may have been slightly edited for clarity or brevity. The speaker's original contribution has been preserved to the largest extent possible.

Zooming In - Our Analysis:

There is an evident discrepancy between the problems at the local level and participants' judgement of whether the mayors are addressing them. For local government to properly serve the citizens, its work should be based on research and evidence collected on local problems and priorities. Developing citizen-responsive policies and solutions based on evidence is crucial for local government to become a citizen-responsive government, to resolve problems, and increase citizens satisfaction in their communities.

Finding #2: Participants find unresponsive, uncommunicative, and inaccessible mayors to be weak and unsatisfactory leader who should not be re-nominated. There is a clear distinction in support between mayors who have delivered visible change and those who have not.

Evaluations of the mayors and their performance

The mayors and their performances can be segmented into three categories of evaluations: positive, mixed or average, and negative.

— **Mayors who received positive evaluations:** Mitko Janchev (Kavadarci), Nikolcho Iliev (Kochani), and Albon Xhemaili (Bogovinje);

> " In the past, the city was in poor condition, and the only project was the paving of the square. Now the whole city is completely renovated, especially the center. The facades of all the buildings have been renovated, new sidewalks, streets, and boulevards are being. There are many reasons why I evaluate him positively."
>
> — Male, 37 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kavadarci/Urban

> " He's been very transparent and has fulfilled many promises. There are many projects, and I think that if he had a little bit more help from the central government, he would achieve much more."
>
> — Female, 29 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Bogovinje/Rural

> " His attitude towards everyone that wants to see him is always hospitable, he accepts them, and listens and explains well. He doesn't choose who to talk to or who not to talk to, and when a day for meeting or listening to problems is set, he is always open to all citizens. He is accessible, at any time."
>
> — Female, 40 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kochani/Urban

— **Mayors who received mixed evaluations:** Arben Taravari (Gostivar), Maksim Dimitrievski (Kumanovo), Konstantin Georgievski (Ohrid), Sasko Nikolov (Shtip), Natasha Petrovska (Bitola), Teuta Arifi (Tetovo), Milikie Halimi (Arachinovo), Nikola Andonov (Novo Selo), and Xhemil Qamili (Dolneni);

> " I will say that nothing works. She is wasting resources in vain. If it is true that she is afraid, that is not an excuse. She should resign and leave the position of mayor to capable individuals. Many people are waiting to work."
>
> — Male, 39 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Bitola/Urban

> " I believe he is afraid to make a change because of the people around him. In my opinion, if he were to do anything for our village, those around him would become enraged. That's why he's hesitant to begin something."
>
> — Female, 46 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Dolneni/Rural

> " Some playgrounds were reconstructed, and the walkway was cleaned. He is doing something, unlike the previous mayor. You can always do more."
>
> — Female, 31 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo/Urban

> " *As was already said, she has done something to improve the life in Tetovo. I can't say I am very satisfied. She could have done a lot more.*"
>
> — Female, 25 years, unemployed, ethnic Albanian, Tetovo/Urban

— **Mayors who received mainly negative evaluations:**
Zlatko Marin (Aerodrom), Filip Temelkovski (Kisela Voda), Boris Georgievski (Gazi Baba), Gorancho Krstev (Cheshinovo-Obleshevo), Visar Ganiu (Chair), and Ilija Jovanovski (Prilep).

> " The mayor is very passive; if there are 10 people from the municipality, 7 out of 10 would not recognize him as their mayor."
>
> — Male, 22 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Aerodrom, Skopje/Urban

> " I'm at a loss for words. Ignorant, uninformed--he is unfamiliar with many aspects of the municipality."
>
> — Female, 37 years, employed, Macedonian, Cheshinovo-Obleshevo/Rural

> " Idle, inadequate. I say idle since we have not seen him doing something for this municipality which is visible. Inadequate, I don't think he is the right person for this position."
>
> — Female, 40 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

> " The way he listens to the citizens. He needs to be more dedicated to his work. He should pay attention to what people living in the municipality are looking for. They should create a way for the citizens to express their opinions and for him to respond to them."
>
> — Male, 21 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kisela Voda, Skopje/Urban

Zoom In – Our Analysis

Looking deeper into the participants' assessments and their level of satisfaction with their mayors, IRI finds key factors in the performance and behavior of mayors that lead to these evaluations. These key factors can be organized into two categories:

Behavioral

— Is the mayor open, communicative, responsive, and respectful toward citizens?

— Is the mayor viewed as being a good and positive person, who thinks about how they can help both the citizens and the municipality?

Performance and Delivery

— Does the mayor deliver visible, tangible improvements to the municipality and address the main issues facing it?

With these two primary factors in mind, IRI organizes its positively, mixed, and negatively evaluated mayors in the following manner:

	Strong Policy Delivery Performance	Insufficient Policy Delivery Performance	Weak Policy Delivery Performance
Strong Behavioral Performance	Positively evaluated mayors		
Insufficient Behavioral Performance		Mixed evaluations	
Weak Behavioral Performance			Mainly negatively evaluated mayors

Table 2: Evaluations of mayors

Mayors who receive positive evaluations – this assessment was given to those mayors who are accessible, communicate with citizens, have generally made improvements in their municipalities, and delivered on their election promises. In regard to the **behavioral** aspect, participants were very pleased that their mayors are responsive, helpful, friendly, receptive, open to suggestions, transparent, and polite**.** For each of these mayors, the participants noted that they are good people, who have a receptive approach, and who think about how they can help both citizens and the municipality. In regard to the **performance and delivery** aspect, the participants expressed a high level of satisfaction when they saw the mayor "getting things done." When issues in the municipality had visibly improved, they evaluated the mayor's performance as much better than that of the previous mayors and they saw the mayor as a "person of action."

Mayors who receive mixed and/or somewhat unsatisfactory evaluations – half of the mayors analyzed in this research fall into this group and can be further disaggregated into three subgroups.

— **Mayors who delivered an insufficient number of improvements** - the participants recognized that there are some improvements to the municipality that the mayor has made, but they expect more. In these cases, the positive behavioral and personality aspects are largely missing and the participants' medium level of satisfaction with the mayor's performance is not paired with a positive impression of the mayor's behavior, in contrast to mayors who were positively evaluated. In some cases, the

participants recognized that the mayor is trying to do things for the municipality but is hindered by a lack of funds or internal party workings;

— **Those who are viewed as nice people but incompetent mayors** – the participants pointed out that these mayors are unfit for the position. This assessment was given to mayors who were seen as having done insufficient work. Participants were somewhat satisfied with the work of these mayors but believed that the mayors lack competence to do more. They pointed to a lack of skills, inability to deliver change and election promises, and lack of communication and responsiveness to citizens. It was also often pointed out that the mayor is a good, honest person trying to initiate change, but that little change occurs;

— **Mayors who deliver for citizens of their own ethnic communities, but not for citizens of other ethnic communities** – this assessment was encountered during FGDs in ethnically mixed municipalities with a dominant Albanian population. In these cases, participants sharing the same (Albanian) ethnicity as the mayor were usually satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their mayor's work. They pointed to the hard work of the mayor and improvements made in the municipality. On the other hand, the ethnic Macedonian minority shared a different and mostly negative perception of the mayor. They largely saw the mayor as uninterested, not delivering for the municipality, and not fulfilling election promises.

Mayors who are evaluated mainly negatively and whose work is deemed unsatisfactory – this assessment is given to mayors who are inaccessible, unknown, or "invisible" to the FGD participants. They are unresponsive, fail to communicate with citizens and have not delivered for their municipality. The participants were direct and united in expressing dissatisfaction with the underperforming mayors. In addition to the lack of communication and responsiveness to the citizens, participants pointed out that these mayors are unfit for the position, lack initiative, and do not hire efficient staff members.

Getting information about the local government

The mayor's or municipal Facebook page, other social media channels, local TV and radio stations, friends, neighbors, and family members are among the primary sources of information on the work of local governments. In rural areas, information is mostly shared by word of mouth, through friends, neighbors, relatives, municipal officials, and social media. In urban areas, people rely more on publicly available sources, i.e. the municipal or mayoral Facebook page, other social media, local TV and radio stations, and official websites. Participants from urban areas mentioned friends, neighbors, relatives, the mayor's Facebook page, and municipal newsletters as secondary sources through which they learn about activities.

> ❝ *We usually get informed through the newspaper, which is delivered to our mailboxes. That newsletter was published every three months, and everything was very nicely and neatly written in it, all projects that are ongoing or that have been completed were written and shown."*
>
> — Male, 53 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Aerodrom, Skopje/Urban

> ❝ I recommend that every month in the mailboxes of the residents of the municipality, they should leave flyers with details on what has been done."
>
> — Female, 43 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kisela Voda, Skopje/Urban

Zoom In – Our Analysis

Participants receive information about the municipality and its work from a diverse set of sources in a dispersed manner. Very few participants mentioned that their municipalities distribute newsletters, even though some mentioned them as a useful, comprehensive, and reliable source of information about the municipality and the work of the local government.

In recently published research on the level of transparency in 2021 in North Macedonia,[4] the Center for Civil Communication scored the average transparency of municipalities at 60%, less than that of government ministries (79 percent). The research further found that municipalities are weakest in publishing information on the issues which are within their own competence, i.e. they publish less than half, just 42 percent of the information they are legally obliged to publish.

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[4] Active Transparency Index 2021, Center for Civil Communications, Skopje, May 2021, https://ccc.org.mk/images/stories/akt21.pdf

Finding #3: The municipal councils, which are elected bodies, are largely unknown to the citizens they should serve and do not fulfill their representative role.

In almost all FGDs, the participants were unfamiliar with who their municipal councilors are and with their work. Those participants who were familiar with their councilors often knew them as personal acquaintances. As the words 'councilor' and 'advisor' are homonyms in both Macedonian and Albanian, some FGD participants confused the role of the elected municipal councilors with that of advisors in the municipality.

In all FGDs, there was a mixture of both positive and negative evaluations of the councilors' work. Participants' evaluations of their council appear correlate with how they evaluated their mayor. In cases of dissatisfaction with the mayor and the situation in the municipality, negative comments of the council often centered on the idea that it just serves as a "voting machine."

> " I don't really know them. They don't communicate with us, the citizens. We only see them before elections."
>
> — Male, 58 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Tetovo/Urban

> " Half of them are VMRO-DPMNE, half are SDSM. I know that each session is full of quarrels. I know some of them. [...] I'd assess their work as 'no-work'."
>
> — Female, 33 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Cheshinovo-Obleshevo/Rural

> " I have no idea who they are, what they do, why they do it…I don't know anyone, I don't know what their role is.."
>
> — Female, 40 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Kisela Voda, Skopje/Urban

> " I have no information about who the councilors are, it's like their work is non-existent."
>
> — Female, 45 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Prilep/Urban

Zoom In – Our Analysis

Citizens know very little about their municipal council and councilors. IRI's North Macedonia poll from March-April 2021 also found that half of the population (49 percent) do not know any of their municipal councilors by name, while another 27 percent only know one or two of their councilors. Even though the council represents residents in deciding local matters, the municipal councilors seem to do a poor job in communicating their work. This leads to a general lack of knowledge of the organization, service, and functioning of the local government.

The assessment of the councilors often correlates to that of the mayor. If the participants are satisfied with their mayor, they also express satisfaction with their councilors, even if they do not know them (the so-called "halo effect"). However, due to the weaker knowledge of the council, in general the council is evaluated worse than the mayor.

The participants also criticized the behavior of the councilors, specifically the practice of blocking initiatives, dialogue, and policies proposed by the opposing parties. Such behavior by councilors is seen as contributing to an overall negative political climate, including polarization, and the absence of healthy debate.

Finding #4: Participants view the municipal administration as mostly overstaffed, incompetent, and inefficient. Lacking regular service delivery by their local government, citizens often use informal contacts to obtain a local government service.

Asked to describe their impression of the municipal administration, FGD participants expressed dissatisfaction due to several reasons:

— **Overstaffing** – most participants complained that their municipalities are overstaffed, and provide a large number of jobs for whichever party is in power. They pointed out that a lot of municipal employees do not do their job, and in some municipalities, they do not even show up to up to work. Instead, their work is done by a minority of dedicated employees;

— **Incompetent, inefficient, and slow –** about two thirds of the focus groups evaluated their municipal administration negatively due to incompetence, often because of patronage hires. They complained that it is difficult and time-consuming to obtain a service from the municipal administration;

— **Need of informal contacts 'to get things done,' i.e., to obtain a service** - many participants pointed out the need for informal contacts – friends or relatives – to obtain a service which should be regularly provided by municipal employees. They pointed that such informal connections are needed either to get the work they need done in a reasonable timeframe or at all.

In about a quarter of the FGDs, there were also positive evaluations of the municipal administration's work. Participants who were satisfied with the municipal administration shared their experience of receiving a service without problems and within a reasonable timeframe.

> It is a fact that the administration is overstaffed; there are many employees who only get paid, they don't do any work in the municipality, they stay at home. There are also people who do their job properly, and know how to provide the services, but there are also many of them who continuously send you to other locations."
>
> — Male, 33 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Tetovo/Urban

> The public administration is dysfunctional and partisan. If you don't have a friend there, you cannot finish basic things."
>
> — Male, 59 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Shtip/Urban

> *I have a problem, and it is still not solved. It has to do with a deed, and it is still the status quo. They pass the ball to each other."*
>
> — Female, 32 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Novo Selo/Rural

> **"**They always have an excuse that what you are asking is not within their competence. It's a vicious circle. For a simple job that takes one day, each of us wastes three months."
>
> — Male, 22 years, student, ethnic Macedonian, Aerodrom, Skopje/Urban

> **"**Whatever problems I have or jobs I need to do, I only get them done because I know certain people. If I did not know those people, I could not finish anything."
>
> — Female, 41 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Ohrid/Urban

> **"**They are very helpful. Even in the time of pandemic, they have been very helpful to us. They always help you with any form you need to fill out. I would say very positive."
>
> — Female, 53 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Bogovinje/Rural

Zoom In – Our Analysis

In general, local governments are not seen as citizen and service-oriented. Most employees are perceived as trying to avoid tasks and responsibilities, failing to providing easily understandable information, and being excessively slow.

Due to the lack of regular service delivery through local government's formal channels, many citizens use informal channels and contacts, such as family members and friends employed in the municipality, to intervene and complete tasks. While these informal practices help the individual obtain a service in the short-term, they also help an inefficient system survive, provide fertile ground for corrupt practices, and prevent the transformation to service-oriented local governments.

With over 130,000 employees,[5] the need for continual professionalization of public administration has been often noted in EU progress reports on North Macedonia.[6]

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[5] Министерство за информатичко општество и администрација, „Извештај од регистарот на вработените во јавниот сектор 2020": https://www.mioa.gov.mk/sites/default/files/pbl_files/documents/reports/izvestaj_registar_2020_rev.1.01.pdf (стр. 19).
[6] Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia 2019 Report: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf (p.11); Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia 2020 Report: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf (p. 12).

Finding #5: Civic participation in local government is very low or non-existent. In most cases, when citizens try to get involved in local government, their attempts are unsuccessful, and the local government is seen as discouraging citizens' engagement.

Almost none of the participants have contacted their local government or the City of Skopje about a problem or presented a proposal to improve life in their communities. In general, the FGD participants did not recognize their local government, or any other local government body, as an actor that can address their proposals and requests.

Those who have reached out to their local government with proposals and requests were mostly rejected. It was also noted that initiatives were sometimes submitted through informal channels, such as contacting the mayor directly, posting on Facebook, etc. Acceptance of citizen initiatives occurred in municipalities with mayors who received positive evaluations.

> *I haven't. It's not that I don't want to, but I am pretty sure that proposals are not taken into consideration at all."*
>
> — Male, 21 years, student, ethnic Albanian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

> *The result was that we received no answer."*
>
> — Male, 29 years, unemployed, ethnic Roma, Prilep/Urban

> It's like science-fiction to contact the mayor."
>
> — Female, 46 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Gazi Baba, Skopje/Urban

> We, as an organization, had also made a youth strategy adopted by the Kochani Council. But, we had more demands for help with environmental campaigns, the construction of streets in the Roma community and, we always received help and positive answers [N.B. from the Kochani local government]."
>
> — Female, 40 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kochani/Urban

Zoom In – Our Analysis

Citizens' motivation and willingness to participate in local government is low and this is largely an outcome of the negative perception of, and experience with, local government's responsiveness and accessibility. The overall impression and experience of those who have contacted their local government is that it is unresponsive and deters citizens from participating in local governance matters.

The use of informal channels to approach local government also indicates the absence of easily available, user-friendly formal channels through which citizens can voice their interests and initiatives regarding local issues.

Finding #6: In Skopje, urban density, construction expansion, air pollution, and infrastructural problems burden the capital. Participants have divided opinions on mayor Petre Shilegov and the work of the local government.

The biggest problems in Skopje

The FGD participants from municipalities that are part of the City of Skopje – Aerodrom, Chair, Gazi Baba, and Kisela Voda – were asked a set of questions about Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia.

Skopje residents raised problems that fall into several groups:

— **Urban density, construction expansion and overpopulation** – Skopje residents expressed concerns about the extensive dense construction across the city, which they say leads to significant urban density, overpopulation and it hurts the quality of life in the capital. The participants blamed lack of urban planning by the authorities and the power of the urban mafia.

— **Air pollution** – this was raised as one of the major problems in Skopje. Participants said that factories and the burning of waste at illegal landfills contributes to air pollution.

— **Infrastructure problems – inadequate and damaged infrastructure, traffic jams and lack of parking lots -** these are among the biggest problems that hinder the smooth movement of people across the city. Some point to the lack of bike lanes, which would ease movement throughout the city. FGD participants also complain about inadequate and damaged road infrastructure, i.e., lack of well-organized infrastructure and a prevalence of potholes.

— Other problems include **uncleanliness of the city and poor public hygiene, stray dogs, and a lack of green areas.**

> " The problem of air pollution must be addressed. It is very difficult to breathe and smell."
>
> — Female, 41 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

> " All of Macedonia moved to Skopje as if Skopje was the center of the world. I think this is the root of all problems, and this is where everything comes from. Issues such as overcrowding, lack of parking, heavy traffic jams, pollution, urbanization, etc."
>
> — Female, 40 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Kisela Voda, Skopje/Urban

Divided opinion on Skopje mayor Petre Shilegov

Opinions on the work and behavior of Skopje mayor Petre Shilegov were divided, but most gave him credit for both his public and media presence.

Most participants had a negative perception of him due to his behavior:

— These participants noted him as arrogant, a braggart, dishonest, and manipulative. Regarding his work, these participants saw him as unfit to be mayor, as well as inactive.

Some participants emphasized positive attributes:

— These participants noted that the mayor is hardworking and has produced visible results, including renovating and repaving streets and building roundabouts. Some also perceived him as competent and visible, and ethnic Albanian participants perceived him as approachable.

> *[He needs] to decrease his arrogance, to work in the interest of the people, not his own interest. [He needs] to be self-critical and learn from mistakes. Otherwise, people won't vote him again…."*
>
> — Female, 41 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

> I follow him on Facebook. It's true that he has completed many projects, his work is notable. I have to admit that the City of Skopje has done much more for Chair than the municipality of Chair itself. There is an example in Chair, a traffic circle that was constructed by the City of Skopje; it has definitely made the traffic more functional."
>
> — Male, 32 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

> *His entire attitude towards the people is arrogant. That is how I see him. I believe he is not on the same page as the people and is unaware of our problems. He believes he is on a higher level than the public, and as a result, is inaccessible for any ideas or comments."*
>
> — Female, 46 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Gazi Baba, Skopje/Urban

> I have a semi-positive opinion of him. Although he promises a lot and does not keep every promise, he still makes a significant contribution to the city. A difference can be seen in the city's hygiene and greenery. The negative is in terms of urbanization. The construction of the buildings across from the Holiday Inn is in progress. There were many announcements that Skopje 2014 would be rearranged, but nothing was done about that."
>
> — Female, 40 years, unemployed, Macedonian, Kisela Voda, Skopje/Urban

> " The mayor should focus on his accomplishments, instead of bragging in the media."
>
> — Female, 46 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Gazi Baba, Skopje/Urban

Skopje city councilors are largely unknown to the Skopje residents.

Most FGD participants did not know Skopje's city councilors and could not assess their work; however, some stated that they are not transparent enough. Few positive or negative assessments were presented.

> " *The work of the councilors is not presented in public, only the work of the mayor and the municipality in general, so I can't grade them.*"
>
> — Male, 22 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Aerodrom, Skopje/Urban

Lack of, or mixed, experience with the Skopje administration

Many FGD participants had never contacted Skopje's administration and could not evaluate its work. Some participants evaluated its work negatively, describing it as slow, ineffective, overstaffed, and incompetent due to patronage hire and nepotism. A smaller proportion of participants evaluated its work positively.

> " *Always the same talk, you should not wait at this counter, go to the other counter, it is always the same story. The same case as the municipal administration.*"
>
> — Male, 38 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Aerodrom, Skopje/Urban

> " *The administration of Skopje, as the administration of the municipality, is overstaffed and slow. I notice they are very engaged only when collecting property tax. If they can be engaged and have at their disposal the data of every citizen of this city and send them the property tax bills, then, having the data, they can be as engaged and quick for all the other things we need.*"
>
> — Female, 46 years, unemployed, Macedonian, Gazi Baba, Skopje/Urban

> **"** *I've been there a few times. I have to say they are very decent. Although, there are also cases of corruption, but in general I would say they are doing good."*
>
> — Male, 21 years, student, ethnic Albanian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

Finding #7: Key expectations for the national government: Enforcing and adhering to laws, eliminating corruption, and increasing the quality of services in healthcare, education, and the judiciary.

The country is largely seen as going in a negative direction.

Most FGD participants were dissatisfied with the direction the country is heading. They cited high unemployment, emigration, low living standards, stagnating EU integration, and corruption as reasons for their negative perceptions. Some FGD participants also commented that the country has no direction or focus, lacks vision, and needs a long-term plan, regardless of which party is in power.

NATO membership was seen as good for the future of the country. Positive perceptions of the country's direction were present mostly among a few ethnic Albanians who perceived NATO membership and EU integration as positive.

Split or negative views on the government

When asked to assess the government's work, the participants had negative or split opinions.

Negative assessments are associated with the government's lack of capacity to deal with persisting problems, such as the presence of crime and corruption, unemployment, low living standards, emigration, poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic, partisan employments, focus on its own and not citizens' interests, inability to professionally manage and deliver government services, unreasonable budget spending, and insufficient transparency and accountability. Certain discussants also expressed strong disappointment with politicians from both the governing and opposition parties and thought they should be replaced. They expect increase in the quality of functioning and delivery of services in health care, education and other areas, as well as improvements in the judiciary.

NATO membership is viewed as one of the biggest achievements of the current government; however, slow but steady progress in Euro-Atlantic integration is overshadowed by internal political challenges and socio-economic hardships. Positive assessments include support for Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and his work, EU integration efforts, improving relations with Greece, and the government's willingness to improve the living conditions in the country.

> **"** *In Macedonia it is necessary to start abiding by the laws."*
>
> — Male, 57 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kochani/Urban

" *Unlike the previous government, there may be some slight improvements like joining NATO, but we cannot see the results in day-to-day life. We cannot see the difference."*

— Female, 23 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Shtip/Urban

" *They're trying something, but it's a complete mess. They start and then stop, and you are unable to assess them. [...] Maybe they do have problems, but instead of working hard to solve them, they find excuses."*

— Male, 46 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Gostivar/Urban

" *They should accomplish many things that they haven't done in the past. They should be more honest with the people and open as many job positions as possible."*

— Female, 27 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Arachinovo/Rural

" *On the state level, there should be a plan and a program as to where the country is going in the next 10, 20 years."*

— Female, 43 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kisela Voda, Skopje/Urban

Zoom In – Our Analysis

In general, the participants expect the government to change the overall situation in the country and they do not feel that this has been accomplished. They have similar recommendations for leaders at the national and local levels: listen more to citizens' needs, do not use public resources for personal gain, and enforce and abide by the country's laws. Additionally, negative perceptions of the government are largely intertwined with the overall lack of trust in political leaders.

Finding #8: Most of the ethnic Macedonian participants perceive the opposition VMRO-DPMNE party as ready to be reformed, whereas the ethnic Albanian participants are split on the coalition of the Alliance for Albanians and Alternative.

The participants had different opinions about the opposition; however, most participants did not perceive the opposition as able to win. Many pointed out that its weakness is an advantage to the current government.

VMRO-DPMNE, ethnic Macedonian party, main opposition party

The views on VMRO-DPMNE's performance and behavior were mixed or negative among participants in Macedonian speaking FGDs.

VMRO-DPMNE's performance and behavior are negatively perceived in most municipalities. Most ethnic Macedonian participants described VMRO-DPMNE as unconstructive, dysfunctional, and lacking ideas and leadership. They also said that VMRO-DPMNE needs to solve its internal problems and become more solution-oriented. Some FGD participants expressed mixed perceptions about VMRO-DPMNE, noting some positive examples in past performance and policies implemented while in power. Participants in many FGDs mentioned the need for an internal transformation of the party and believed that this will strengthen the party's capacities and put it back on the political scene.

In a few FGDs, ethnic Macedonian participants believed that ethnic Albanian parties work more for the needs of their voters than the opposition in the ethnic Macedonian bloc.

About the opposition, I will say it is asleep."

— Male, 32 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Kochani/Urban

I do not have a special opinion [about VMRO-DPMNE]. They are not a competent opposition. I think they can do so much better."

— Male, 23 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo/Urban

VMRO[-DPMNE] should be internally reformed and cleansed. After that, VMRO[-DPMNE] would gain much more trust from the citizens."

— Male, 33 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Ohrid/Urban

Alliance for Albanians and Alternative, main ethnic Albanian opposition coalition

Views of the ethnic Albanian opposition coalition of Alliance for Albanians and Alternative vary significantly among the ethnic Albanian participants; however, participants expressed largely positive opinions. They see the opposition as active, bringing something new, fighting hard to become a political force, providing hope for citizens, and believe they should be given the chance to govern. However, even among those who evaluated it positively, some are hesitant about its ability to govern once in power.

On the other hand, the main negative comments on the coalition were that they are disorganized, inactive, lack the potential for change, unable to gain power, and not holding governing parties accountable.

> " *The opposition is fighting really hard to become a political force in charge. However, their ambitions remain to be seen in case they come to power."*
>
> — Male, 28 years, unemployed, ethnic Albanian, Gostivar/Urban

> " *A very active opposition. I think that we finally have a constructive opposition that is trying its best to direct us in the right direction."*
>
> — Female, 29 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Bogovinje/Rural

> " *We have witnessed when the opposition has won elections, and afterwards, they do nothing. I say this for both opposition blocs, the Macedonian and the Albanian. As per the current opposition, we should give them the chance to see how they would act as a governing side."*
>
> — Female, 22 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Arachinovo/Rural

Levica, newcomer, ethnic Macedonian, opposition party

Macedonian speaking focus groups were also asked to discuss Levica, and participants had split opinions about its performance and behavior. For some, the party brings novelty to the political system but, others view Levica negatively and as having a populist approach. A few participants said they lack the information to accurately evaluate the party, since it is new. Most of the younger participants expressed positive opinions about its work. People who viewed it positively saw it as bringing hope to the polarized political environment, as well as novel, direct, and different. Other participants described the party negatively and called its leader as populist, "a clown," and not serious enough. Interestingly, its leader was described as far-left by some and right-wing by others.

> " *Levica and Apasiev [Levica's leader] have received a lot of support. They are the only party that gives me confidence that something will change."*
>
> — Female, 41 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

> " *Good opinion. Their leader is ambitious and wants to change something, to introduce something new."*
>
> — Female, 21 years, student, ethnic Macedonian, Kavadarci/Urban

> *If you listen to Apasiev, he is extremely left. That is suicide for the state. Instead of us promoting pro-democratic parties, we are going back. This is pure populism."*
>
> — Male, 41 years, unemployed, ethnic Macedonian, Ohrid/Urban

Would the opposition abide by the laws if in power?

Although there is some optimism, most participants did not believe that the opposition would abide by the laws once in power or that a change in power would lead to meaningful change. Ethnic Macedonian participants distrusted that the opposition is, or can be, different from the government, while ethnic Albanian participants believed that the ethnic Albanian opposition should be given a chance to demonstrate what it can do when in power. Young participants thought that Levica might be one of the few parties to abide by the law once in power.

> *I think nothing will change. Employment of party members, sinking of the judiciary… I guess they will not abide by the laws."*
>
> — Male, 44 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Shtip/Urban

> *It will be the same. Whether it is this government or the previous one, nothing will change, and no one will respect anything."*
>
> — Female, 18 years, high school student, ethnic Macedonian, Novo Selo/Rural

> *I believe they [Alliance of Albanians] have learned a lot from the government's mistakes. I think that they would do good."*
>
> — Male, 24 years, student, ethnic Albanian, Chair, Skopje/Urban

Zoom In - Our Analysis

Participants do not believe that, if given power, the opposition would create positive change and abide by the rule of law. This follows a general distrust of politics and politicians, the opposition's inability to differentiate itself from the profile of current or former politicians, and all the negative attributes participants ascribe to them. When participants evaluate the opposition, their opinions are based on behavior; the behavior of the opposition does not instill trust that it will "abide by the law, if in power." This is a crucial area in which the opposition needs to improve.

Finding #9: The participants support the EU accession but not at a cost of renouncing their national identity.

Views towards EU integration

The participants maintained positive views and recognized the benefits of EU membership, believing that the standard of living, job opportunities, the quality of education and healthcare would improve, while crime, corruption, and youth emigration would decrease. The benefits of the EU membership are recognized by participants living in both rural and urban areas, as well as among all ethnic communities. However, participants remain skeptical about whether North Macedonia will manage to complete its EU accession. Considering the current state of the country's EU integration, most participants are pessimistic that the country will ultimately become an EU member. A main reason behind this view is the issue with Bulgaria over Macedonian national identity and history. Some also point to internal problems, such as the need for reforms and the need to change the mentality of the citizens.

A few participants were not supportive of EU integration, believing that EU membership will bring more economic hardships, higher prices of goods and a lower standard of living.

I do not know how ready we are at all for the EU, and how much the EU is interested in accepting a member-country like us. Among the countries, we are leaders in corruption, have dysfunctional legal regulations, and are economically weak. So, I think it is mutual, neither we are ready, nor are they interested in accepting us."

— Female, 45 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Prilep/Urban

We need to change the way of thinking. If I don't respect myself and my own values, how do I expect you to respect me?"

— Male, 26 years, student, ethnic Macedonian, Kochani/Urban

The prices we have are too high for the salaries we receive. When we become part of EU, the people will have more hope that things will change for better."

— Female, 26 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Dolneni/Rural

How to address the issue with Bulgaria?

The FGD participants called for the government to resolve the issue with Bulgaria in a number of different ways:

— Stop any further negotiations with Bulgaria; look for other alternatives to EU membership (present among ethnic Macedonian participants);

— Be clear that Macedonian identity and history are non-negotiable (dominant among ethnic Macedonian participants);

— Leave the negotiations to the domestic experts and historians or to external EU experts (present across different FGDs, regardless of ethnic belonging);

— Continue negotiations with Bulgaria to speed up EU integration (dominant among the ethnic Albanian participants).

> ❝ *I believe that as long as we lack confidence, bravery, and integrity, there will always be a problem. Even if we can resolve the Bulgarian issue, another issue will arise, as will a new request. That is my point of view. We must stay true to ourselves."*
>
> — Female, 20 years, student, ethnic Macedonian, Kumanovo/Urban

> ❝ *Both sides should sit together and start the negotiations."*
>
> — Female, 25 years, employed, ethnic Albanian, Gostivar/Urban

> ❝ *We should not be so soft towards Bulgaria; we should have a firmer attitude. We should not give up anything."*
>
> — Male, 30 years, employed, ethnic Macedonian, Bitola/Urban

Zoom In – Our Analysis

The national identity and history issue with Bulgaria is perceived as the main reason why participants are losing hope that the country will become an EU member. This increasing pessimism is present across all focus groups; however, it is more evident among ethnic Macedonians, while ethnic Albanians are more neutral. Such differentiation is largely a result of the sense of national belonging in the two ethnic communities, with ethnic Macedonians identifying more with the country's Macedonian national identity.

Although citizens continue to believe that EU membership will bring benefits, there has been a rise in negative sentiment, predominantly among ethnic Macedonians, about EU membership due to the 15-year-long integration process and the constant obstacles (disputes over the Macedonian name, language, and history). Many participants shared disappointment that the 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece, solving a 27-year-long bilateral dispute on the use of the country's name and changing it to "Republic of North Macedonia," did not result in EU membership.

Some participants focused on the importance of internal reforms as a criterion for EU membership. Internal reforms should help the country become more self-reliant, allowing its citizens to see a brighter future and to demand policies that are focused on their needs. Additionally, some participants reflected on the need for a mental and behavioral change among both the citizens and political leaders: citizens need to take care of their communities and work to improve their country, while political leaders need to govern in a responsible, transparent, and accountable manner, and adhere to the laws.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Methodology

Table 1: List of focus groups and main demographics characteristics

	Electoral unit	Municipality	Geographical Area	Age	Gender	Political Affiliation
1.	1	Aerodrom, Skopje	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
2.	1	Chair (in Macedonian), Skopje	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
3.	1	Chair (in Albanian), Skopje	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
4.	1	Kisela Voda, Skopje	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
5.	2	Arachinovo	Rural	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
6.	2	Gazi Baba, Skopje	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
7.	2	Kumanovo	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
8.	3	Cheshinovo-Obleshevo	Rural	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
9.	3	Kochani	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
10.	3	Shtip	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
11.	4	Kavadarci	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
12.	4	Novo Selo	Rural	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
13.	4	Prilep	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters

14.	5	Bitola	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
15.	5	Dolneni	Rural	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
16.	5	Ohrid	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
17.	6	Bogovinje	Rural	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
18.	6	Gostivar (in Macedonian)	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
19.	6	Gostivar (in Albanian)	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
20.	6	Tetovo (in Macedonian)	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters
21.	6	Tetovo (in Albanian)	Urban	Mixed Youth/ Adult	Mixed	Undecided likely voters