

# MAKING OR BREAKING CITIZENS' TRUST?

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
RESPONSIVENESS IN NORTH MACEDONIA



A PROJECT OF THE INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

## Making or Breaking Citizen's Trust? Research on Local Government Responsiveness in North Macedonia

Copyright © 2023 International Republican Institute.

All rights reserved.

**Permission Statement:** No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the International Republican Institute.

**Requests for permission should include the following information:**

- The title of the document for which permission to copy material is desired.
- A description of the material for which permission to copy is desired.
- The purpose for which the copied material will be used and the manner in which it will be used.
- Your name, title, company or organization name, telephone number, e-mail address and mailing address.

**Please send all requests for permission to:**

Attention: Communications Department International Republican Institute  
1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005  
info@iri.org

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The interaction between citizens and institutions builds trust in government; addressing citizen needs is a fundamental task of responsive governance. In June and July 2023, IRI conducted user experience testing on local government responsiveness with undecided voters in six municipalities in North Macedonia: Centar, Gazi Baba, Veles, Strumica, Kichevo, Gostivar, and Skopje. IRI subsequently convened focus group discussions (FGDs) with these undecided voters. In addition to measuring local governments' responsiveness to citizen queries and concerns, IRI also asked how local governments' effectiveness impacts citizens' trust and satisfaction. IRI also looked at national issues regarding political parties, government, European integration, and relations with North Macedonia's eastern neighbor, Bulgaria.

The findings from this research offer valuable evidence for municipalities on how to improve their responsiveness to citizens and thus also to fulfill their obligations under the Law on Acting Upon Requests and Proposals.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this research gives political and government actors insight on how to improve their work in order to boost their credibility. As is common with qualitative research, the findings do not necessarily represent the opinions of all citizens of North Macedonia.

## FINDINGS

**FINDING 1:** Basic responsiveness of municipalities is unsatisfactory. Systems for responding to citizen incoming communication online, over the phone or in-person are not formalized nor streamlined, which negatively affects citizens' trust. In cases when municipalities are responsive, citizens' requests are not answered efficiently.

**FINDING 1.1:** User experience testing demonstrated that most local governments are extremely unresponsive to citizens when they engage online. This negative experience makes citizens feel disrespected and disappointed and discourages them from future contact. It also decreases their trust in local government.

**FINDING 1.2:** Most participants had positive experiences with municipal staff over the phone. Polite and responsive interaction with municipal staff made participants feel respected. However in a few municipalities callers felt disrespected and disappointed when they could not reach the municipality.

**FINDING 1.3:** A receptive and helpful in-person experience at a municipal office made citizens feel positively surprised by how they were treated. However, they felt unmoored and uncertain when they did not get a formal response following an in-person request. None of the participants were advised about their legal rights regarding the request they submitted.

**FINDING 2:** Mayors Kostadin Kostadinov (Strumica), Marko Kolev (Veles), and Arben Taravari (Gostivar) were evaluated positively. Mayors Goran Gerasimovski (Centar), Boban Stefkovski (Gazi Baba), and Fatmir Dehari (Kichevo) received mixed evaluations. The mayor of Skopje, Danela Arsovska, received a negative evaluation.

**FINDING 3:** Participants had negative opinions about the municipal council and administration primarily because they lacked knowledge about the council's work and because they perceive the administration as inefficient, slow, incompetent, and unprofessional.

**FINDING 4:** Participants see all the municipalities and Skopje as moving in a negative direction or stagnating

---

<sup>1</sup> Government of North Macedonia, Law on Acting Upon Requests and Proposals, [zakon\\_za\\_postapuvanje\\_po\\_pretstavki\\_i\\_predlozi\\_konsolidiran\\_18112015.pdf \(vlada.mk\)](https://www.vlada.mk/en/zakon-za-postapuvanje-po-pretstavki-i-predlozi-konsolidiran-18112015.pdf), Last access on 7 November 2023

because they do not have a systemic approach to problem-solving. Some positive developments are seen in Gazi Baba, Veles, and Gostivar.

**FINDING 5:** Participants said unanimously that institutions should lead communications with citizens, and address the issues they face, not political parties. They think this role of the institutions should not be substituted by the parties. They have negative impressions about party campaigns in non-election years and they do not improve participants' opinion about parties.

**FINDING 6:** Most participants think the country is moving in the wrong direction and are concerned about corruption, emigration, and dysfunctional institutions.

**FINDING 7:** Ethnic Macedonian participants largely see Bulgaria's behavior toward North Macedonia in the European Union (EU) integration process as humiliating, a form of blackmail, and unacceptable. Most ethnic Albanian participants see it as justified, and some as aggressive and unfair. Most ethnic Macedonian and Albanian participants expressed support for EU integration as the only way which would ensure better control of how institutions perform and function.

**FINDING 8:** Participants say institutions are dysfunctional, problems are not resolved systematically, but impulsively, in an ad-hoc, or project-based manner. They assess that institutions and numerous sectors in the country are dysfunctional.

## BACKGROUND

Local governments in North Macedonia will be up for election in October 2025. The middle of their terms, the summer of 2023, was a critical time for incumbent mayors to make or break the trust of their citizens. This is when they should pause and reflect on their successes and failures and work to correct weak points. It is the mayor's responsibility to satisfy the municipality's obligations. The mayors of the 81 local government units (LGUs) in North Macedonia are elected every four years. The mayors have executive powers, and the council is the representative body in the municipality, which votes on the mayor's decisions. Municipal councils<sup>2</sup> consist of nine to 33 councilors depending on the municipality's population.

Political parties in North Macedonia are mostly ethnically based, representing ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, and other smaller communities. The government is led by the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) coalition (an ethnic Macedonian party) and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) (an ethnic Albanian party). The coalition has been in power since May 30, 2017, having won re-election in July 2020. Parliamentary elections are expected to take place by the summer of 2024. The largest opposition party is Internal Macedonia Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonia National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), while the largest ethnic Albanian party is Alliance for Albanians (AfA).

On March 27, 2020, North Macedonia became NATO's 30th member state. The country has been a candidate for European Union membership since 2005. In July 2022, after 17 years, North Macedonia finally began the negotiation process for EU membership. North Macedonia's accession had been blocked by a Greek veto objecting to the country's name. Greece lifted its veto after Macedonia signed a bilateral agreement in 2018 changing its name to North Macedonia. Yet at the 2019 EU summit, France asked North Macedonia, along with Albania, for additional reforms and vetoed the start of negotiations. Then, in 2020, Bulgaria blocked the start of North Macedonia's accession negotiations and asked the country to accept Bulgaria's definition of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Skopje is an exception with 45 councilors.

Macedonian language, implement a Macedonia–Bulgaria friendship agreement, and issue a clear statement that it has no claims on the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. In July 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted a negotiating framework for North Macedonia which was a compromise between competing demands. This green-lit North Macedonia's accession negotiations, and which officially started with bilateral screening on North Macedonia's level of preparation to adopt and implement the EU Acquis Communautaire and was finalized in December 2023. be finalized. But the talks are currently at an impasse, as North Macedonia is conditioned to change its constitution to include Bulgarians in order to continue the accession negotiations. The political opposition interprets this condition as imposed by Bulgaria, which is not making concessions on the Macedonian minority or language. Therefore, the opposition is not willing to change the constitution under the current conditions in the negotiation framework.

## OVERVIEW

In the summer of 2023, IRI designed and commissioned qualitative research with undecided voters in six municipalities in North Macedonia by combining user experience testing (mystery shopping) and focus group research to better understand the behavior of select municipal governments towards citizens as well as citizens' views and their experience-based impressions about their local government. User experience testing is a method to understand the interaction and the results from that interaction between a certain service or a product and the user with the goal of designing more user-friendly products and services, in this particular case with the municipality being the service provider and the resident being the user. Focus group participants were also asked about their views on national issues, including the government, political parties, and EU integration.

The research was conducted on behalf of the Center for Insights in Survey Research of IRI by the TIM Institute, a Skopje based market research firm.

The research was conducted in a municipality in each of North Macedonia's six electoral units from June 21 to July 10 2023, in Centar in Skopje, Gazi Baba in Skopje, Veles, Strumica, Kichevo, and Gostivar. The participant recruitment process controlled for geographic area (urban or rural), gender, and ethnic background. The FGDs were conducted with undecided voters from different neighborhoods in each municipality and included at least two participants who live close to the municipal office. Some participants communicated with the municipality via email or an online contact form, some by phone, and some through in-person interaction with the local government office. Participants had to be willing to engage in a user experience testing experiment prior to attending the FGD session and participants from Skopje-based municipalities had to contact both the municipality and the City of Skopje. Four focus groups were done in Macedonian and two in Albanian. This research was conducted with support from the [National Endowment for Democracy](#).

This research is a follow up to IRI's extensive qualitative research study on the work of local government in 18 municipalities in 2021 "[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](#)" which found that citizens largely evaluate local government based on:

1. **The behavior of the local government** (both mayor and administration), i.e. how they treat citizens, how open, communicative and responsive they are, how engaged they are and how they approach resolution of local problems;
2. **Local government's delivery of results.**

Citizens in the 2021 focus groups who evaluated their mayors and municipalities as open and responsive and delivered results were, unsurprisingly, satisfied and expressed confidence in their work.

Responsive government:

"Trust in government may depend on citizens' experiences upon receiving public services. The interaction between citizens and the state/institutions is a key factor for trust in the government." (OECD)

"A good government...gets things done..."

"A good government takes into account the demands of citizens (is responsive), and yet acts effectively on these demands (is effective)." (Putnam, 1993)

The 2021 focus group findings showed that citizens often have to overcome a wall of unresponsiveness when they try to participate in local governance or influence local government. IRI's poll, conducted April 8 through May 4, 2023,<sup>3</sup> found that slightly more respondents believe the municipality will not respond to their query (48 percent) than that it will (45 percent). Only in electoral unit four did a majority (66 percent) think that the municipality would respond.

In this follow-up study, IRI aims to answer the following research questions:

#### On Behavior and Responsiveness:

- Is local government responsive when citizens reach out about local issues?
- How does the local government's response impact citizens' trust and satisfaction?

#### On Effectiveness and Results:

- Does the mayor/local government produce results?
- How does the local government's responsiveness impact citizens' trust and satisfaction?

For the purposes of this study, we define responsiveness as the characteristic of responding, reacting timely and in a positive way to someone or something. Further, we define effectiveness as the degree to which an actor or entity is successful in producing a desired result, and the ability to produce a desired result.

## LEGAL NORMS AND OBLIGATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIVENESS

The Law on Acting Upon Requests and Proposals<sup>4</sup> has been in effect in North Macedonia since 2008. It defines a request or a proposal as "any written or oral address of the submitters, that is, the proposers to the bodies acting upon the requests, i.e., proposals, for the purpose of protecting and exercising their rights and interests,

<sup>3</sup> International Republican Institute, North Macedonia poll, April 8 – May 4, 2023; <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-north-macedonia-poll-finds-increased-support-for-eu-membership-lack-of-trust-in-rule-of-law-divisions-on-local-and-national-direction/>

<sup>4</sup> Government of North Macedonia, Law on Acting Upon Requests and Proposals, [zakon za postapuvanje po pretstavki i predlozi konsolidiran 18112015.pdf \(vlada.mk\)](https://www.zakonik.mk/Zakonik/18112015.pdf), Last access on 7 November 2023

the public interests established by law, or for the purpose of raising another initiative of public interest.”

Any person or legal entity can submit a request or a proposal in written form or recorded in minutes, solo or in a group. There is no fee to submit a request or proposal. The institution which receives the request or proposal is obligated to keep a record of such interactions. A request or proposal sent to a non-competent body should be entered into the records of that body and then delivered to a competent body without delay.

Under the law, the office which receives the request must review it and act on it immediately, or within a period of 15 days, or 30 days for a complex issue. Each office must assign one or several employees to move forward on complaints and proposals. The Minister of Information Society and Administration is responsible for prescribing the procedure of acting upon requests and proposals.

## LOCAL ISSUES

### 1. TESTING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' RESPONSIVENESS

One of the tasks of any public institution is to serve citizens by providing public services and responding to their needs. Public services can be defined broadly, as services defined by the law, that serve the public interest and improve citizens' quality of life.

For an institution to respond to citizens' needs, it needs to engage when people have a request. IRI distinguishes between two levels of responsiveness:

1) Basic responsiveness, which is the act of responding or reacting in a timely and helpful manner to someone or something, and 2) issue responsiveness, which is resolving an issue and providing a public service.

IRI applied an experiment to measure seven local government units' basic responsiveness by seeing how they responded to focus group participants' requests for public services. The participants logged their experiences and, later in FGDs, discussed how the reaction or non-reaction to their requests made them feel and how it affected their trust in local government.

Basic responsiveness was tested:

1. Online – by writing to an official mayoral or municipal email address or using a contact form. Focus group participants sent four to six requests on different issues in this way.
2. Phone – by calling the municipal government phone number and asking for information. One request per focus group was delivered through this channel.
3. In-person – by visiting the municipal government office. Participants delivered one to three in-person requests.

If they did not receive a response in a week, FGD participants who reached out online were instructed to follow up online. In these instances, the municipalities had another week to respond before the focus group discussions took place. Focus group participants who contacted the municipality by phone or in-person were not asked to follow up. Focus group participants acquired all contact information about the mayor and the municipality from

their official websites and their official Facebook pages.

Focus groups asked the municipalities and City of Skopje to address the following issues:

1. Trash pickup
2. Removing an abandoned vehicle
3. Repairing playground equipment
4. Fixing broken streetlights
5. Fixing potholes
6. Installing a trash bin
7. Installing a bench
8. Providing information on subsidies for windows

In each neighborhood, participants identified one of these concerns and approached the mayor or the municipality requesting the issue be resolved. Eight to 10 user experience tests were conducted in each municipality, depending on the number of participants in each of the focus groups, and 17 in Skopje.

## ONLINE USER EXPERIENCE WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

**FINDING 1: Basic responsiveness of municipalities is unsatisfactory. Systems for responding to citizen communication online, over the phone or in-person are not formalized nor streamlined, which negatively affects citizens' trust. In cases when municipalities are responsive, citizens' requests are not answered efficiently.**

**FINDING 1.1: User experience testing demonstrated that most local governments are extremely unresponsive to citizens when they engage online. This negative experience makes citizens feel disrespected and disappointed and discourages them from future contact. It also decreases their trust in local government.**

User testing on online engagement found that requests triggered a response 33 percent of the time. Detailed tables with number of requests submitted and number of responses received are in Appendix B.



	RESPONSIVENESS TO ONLINE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT	
	RESPONSES RECEIVED VS CITIZENS ENGAGEMENTS	PERCENT OF BASIC RESPONSIVENESS
Strumica	4/6	67%
Skopje	6/12	50%
Kichevo	3/6*	50%*
Gostivar	1/4	25%
Veles	1/5*	20%*
Gazi Baba	1/6	17*
Centar	0/6	0%
Total	16/45	33%

**Table 1: Number of online engagements in each focus group per local government unit and number of responses**

\*These municipalities responded after a second attempt at contact.

**FINDING 1.1.1: At a 67 percent response rate, the Strumica municipality was the most responsive to citizens.**

At the time of fieldwork, citizens could write to the Strumica municipality at three online locations: [gradonacalnik\[at\]strumica.gov.mk](mailto:gradonacalnik[at]strumica.gov.mk); [info\[at\]strumica.gov.mk](mailto:info[at]strumica.gov.mk); <https://sistem48.strumica.gov.mk/prijavi.php>.

Participants who received a response felt positive and encouraged, increasing their confidence in the mayor and the municipality and making them feel satisfied and proud that they prompted action to improve life in their community.

**Female, 42 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "I was surprised, I didn't expect it so soon, I even thought that I would have to write a second email. But if they fix it, I will have much more confidence."<sup>5</sup>

**Male (2), 55 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "That answer told me that I managed to encourage something and to independently activate some service that will come and clean up for everyone's benefit."

**FINDING 1.1.2: Skopje was partially responsive to citizens with a 50 percent response rate.**

Twelve participants from the Centar and Gazi Baba municipalities used the City of Skopje's four online contacts and six of them received a response. The contact options at City of Skopje are [gradonacalnik\[at\]skopje.gov.mk](mailto:gradonacalnik[at]skopje.gov.mk); [kabinet\[at\]skopje.gov.mk](mailto:kabinet[at]skopje.gov.mk); [skopje.gov.mk/mk/skopje/gradonacalnik](https://skopje.gov.mk/mk/skopje/gradonacalnik) and [24\[at\]skopje.gov.mk](https://24[at]skopje.gov.mk).

Those who received a response were cautiously positive and eager for concrete action. The participants who did not receive a response experienced feelings of discontent, shame, and helplessness. The content and the quality of the response were also identified as important factors that influence how citizens will feel about the municipality. Thus, vague responses that lacked clarity did not inspire trust.

One of Skopje's responses is a positive example because the department who received the email - "24 Communal

<sup>5</sup> Quotes in this report were translated and sometimes minimally edited for clarity. The original voice was preserved to the largest extent possible, including potential errors in syntax or terminology.

Services, responded to the citizen within two days, and forwarded the email to the responsible office, in this case Parks and Greenery, an all-around positive interaction. Skopje responded to another email by informing the citizen that the service he requested was not under its jurisdiction but part of a different municipality. City workers did not forward the email to the municipality but told the citizen to contact it, which was discouraging to the participant.<sup>6</sup>

**Regarding Skopje Female, 27 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I got a response, what I liked is that they are well connected. I get a response to my email from one email, then from another email account, then a third email... so they have adequate communication. The relevant institution replied to my email. They had good communication."

**On Skopje Male, 33 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I received a response very quickly within 24 hours, even less. I did not expect that."

**On Skopje Female, 41 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "I personally feel ashamed. Really, like, ashamed that I even tried to ask them for something."

**On Skopje Female, 40 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "I wrote to the mayor's office, filled out a form. When I clicked the link directly to the mayor's office, I wrote and pressed to send it twice, and it said 'error.' It's just luck... I was disappointed. I thought there would be something, an automatic message like 'thank you for writing an email,' something like that."

**FINDING 1.1.3:** Kichevo municipality was partially responsive after a second contact by participants, but then the content and the quality of its response did not inspire trust.

The municipality of Kichevo, at the time of this fieldwork, provided two online options for citizens: an online form, "Write to the Mayor: If you have any ideas (suggestions) or you want to report a problem, make a complaint, or praise, fill out this contact form" <https://kicevo.gov.mk/sq/kontakt/> and an email address, [kercova2013\[at\]yahoo.com](mailto:kercova2013@yahoo.com). The email provided is not on the official municipal domain, which puts in question the professionalism, accessibility, storage, and security of the email communication by the municipality. Six participants made contact; three received a response.

Of the three who received a response, one was pleasantly surprised and two were told to contact the local public utility. They perceived this as demeaning, and it negatively affected their trust in the mayor. They thought that their email requests should have been forwarded to the utility for a response.

Those who did not receive any response at all were disappointed. They said they felt disrespected. This reaction made them trust the mayor less. Some of the participants said they previously had a bad experience when they contacted the municipality.

**Female, 33 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "I had a task to contact the municipality through the website. I contacted them twice and I did not receive a single response. I was not surprised by that; I would have been surprised if they had responded to me. I have no confidence at all. I have not contacted them before."

**Female, 20 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "It's not that I am surprised because it has also happened before. I wrote an email to the same address, but even then, despite writing to them twice, I did not get a response. I also did not expect it this time."

---

<sup>6</sup> Jurisdiction for local matters in Skopje is divided between the municipalities in Skopje and the City of Skopje and in most cases, citizens are told to seek out the competent authority on their own without any guidance.

**FINDING 1.1.4:** The Gostivar municipality was largely unresponsive, but because participants generally liked the mayor, this did not negatively affect their impressions of the municipality.

The Gostivar municipality, at the time of fieldwork, provided two online contacts for citizens: [info\[at\]gostivari.gov.mk](mailto:info@gostivari.gov.mk) and [arben.taravari\[at\]gostivari.gov.mk](mailto:arben.taravari@gostivari.gov.mk) (email address available on Facebook). Four participants reached out online; one received a response.

The one participant who received a quick response felt comforted and good about her local government. The other participants, because they liked the Gostivar mayor because of his openness and what he has done for the city, justified its lack of response.

**Female, 37 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "I just sent them an email, they didn't know who was sending them the email. They responded to me immediately and they made a field visit after two days and worked on the case. I was positively surprised."

**Female, 36 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "It wasn't that important to me [NB. that she did not receive a response] since I told you that I have had the experience of contacting him directly and receiving a response. I thought that maybe someone else was behind it, maybe it was a vacation period; I don't know how it works, maybe they had a technical problem in that period, thus I did not feel bad for not receiving a response."

**FINDING 1.1.5:** The Veles municipality was mostly unresponsive to online requests. One participant, after a bad experience, felt disrespected, forgotten, and ignored.

The Veles municipality and its mayor, at the time of fieldwork, provided four online options for citizen contact: [marko.kolev\[at\]veles.gov.mk](mailto:marko.kolev@veles.gov.mk) available through Facebook, [opvel\[at\]veles.gov.mk](mailto:opvel@veles.gov.mk), a contact form called Ask the Mayor <https://veles.gov.mk/prasaj-go-gradonalnikot-2/> and another contact form at <https://veles.gov.mk/kontakt-2/>. Five participants initiated contact; only one received a response.

One participant was told his request was unfounded. The municipality responded only after he sent a second request; then he was told that his concern had already been addressed. This made the participant suspicious that the municipality only handled his query after he made his original request.

**Male, 32 years old, Macedonian:** "[I feel] like I'm being cheated, like I don't exist, like they didn't check my email. They could at least answer, 'Sir, we will check and let you know. Or, we were there, we saw, here are the photos.' This makes me suspicious that they waited until it was cleaned and then took pictures, then tomorrow they went by again, waited until it was clean and took pictures again."

**Female, 34 years old, Macedonian:** "[it felt] unpleasant, like an unread message to someone after you send it."

**Female, 37 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "We have a good opinion of him [the mayor]. Probably the people who are around him who should do that part, they didn't do their job. I don't know, maybe it was conveyed and told, but there is no answer."

**Male, 40 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "The same is the case with me, I sent two emails and did not get

a response. ...Forgotten."

**FINDING 1.1.6: The Gazi Baba municipality's unresponsiveness left participants feeling that the municipality did not care about their needs and that they cannot rely on it.**

At the time of this fieldwork, citizens could contact Gazi Baba in three ways: [gradonacalnik@gazibaba.gov.com](mailto:gradonacalnik@gazibaba.gov.com), [kabinet@gazibaba.gov.com](mailto:kabinet@gazibaba.gov.com), and [opstina@gazibaba.gov.mk](mailto:opstina@gazibaba.gov.mk). Six participants made an attempt at online contact, one received a response.

The participant who got a response via email was positively surprised by the answer.

All of those who contacted the municipality by email or contact form expected to get an answer. The lack of response discouraged them from contacting the municipality again and made them feel humiliated and uncomfortable. Participants got the impression that the municipality is irresponsible and did not want to listen to them. In addition, silence made citizens think they had to use a connection or a back channel to get someone to help.

**Male, 66 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "Surprisingly, I received an immediate answer, in one day, in a couple of hours. They asked me where the issue is located... It is positive that I got a prompt response, and I was surprised."

**Female, 27 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "The moral of the story is that the next time I have an issue, I won't approach the municipality. I am completely discouraged. I specifically wrote an email. It is not just one bin that smells, but the whole street smells from those bins and every time I want to take a walk at night, I literally avoid that street. It smells too much."

**Female, 30, Albanian, Gazi Baba:** "No. I wouldn't even think about their help. Realistically, I wouldn't ask for help if I don't have someone to call them."

**Female, 30 years old, Albanian, Gazi Baba:** "No answer. Nowadays, people are in front of the computer or the phone 24 hours a day, so if nothing else, the phone itself tells you that you have an unread message. They are irresponsible. There is a service and there are employees in those positions, maybe three or five, in that place, but they are irresponsible. So, it's like you don't exist."

**Female, 27 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I felt uncomfortable. And surprised, honestly."

**Female, 59 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I was tasked to contact them via email, and they didn't respond, and I think I really expected them to respond. And I felt, just as they said, humiliated. God forbid that you need an answer for something more important and more urgent."

**FINDING 1.1.7: No one received a response when they contacted Centar through its online contact list. Participants considered this irresponsible, unprofessional, and offensive towards citizens.**

The Centar municipality and its mayor, during the fieldwork period, provided four online contacts: [gradonacalnik@centar.gov.mk](mailto:gradonacalnik@centar.gov.mk), [goran.gerasimovski@centar.gov.mk](mailto:goran.gerasimovski@centar.gov.mk), [kontakt@centar.gov.mk](mailto:kontakt@centar.gov.mk), and Report a Problem or a Suggestion at [https://www.centar.gov.mk/?page\\_id=6768](https://www.centar.gov.mk/?page_id=6768). The focus group participants said they expected a response and having their requests ignored confirmed their lack of trust in the municipality.

**Female, 40 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "It's unfair that the request was ignored."

**Female, 58 years old, Serbian, Centar:** "Do they have an email at all? Does this email exist? I was hoping someone would answer me at any moment."

**Female, 41 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "I now feel offended."

**Male, 31 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "Unprofessional."

**Female, 48 years old, Serbian, Centar:** "Sad."

**Male, 21 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "Actually, there was no trust to begin with."

## PHONE USER EXPERIENCE WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

**FINDING 1.2:** Most participants had positive experiences with municipal staff over the phone. Polite and responsive interaction with municipal staff made participants feel respected. However, in a few municipalities, callers felt disrespected and disappointed when they could not reach the municipality.

**FINDING 1.2.1:** Participants had positive phone experiences in Gostivar, Strumica, Skopje, Veles, and Centar.

	RESPONSIVENESS TO CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT BY PHONE	
	RESPONSES RECEIVED VS CITIZENS ENGAGED	PERCENT OF RESPONSIVENESS
<b>Gostivar</b>	1/1	100%
<b>Strumica</b>	1/1	100%
<b>Skopje</b>	3/3	100%
<b>Veles</b>	1/1	100%
<b>Centar</b>	2/2	100%
<b>Gazi Baba</b>	0/1	0%
<b>Kichevo</b>	0/2	0%

**Table 2:** Number of phone engagements in each focus group per local government unit and number of responses.

In order to test a municipality's response and to limit the number of phone calls a participant had to make, focus group participants were instructed to ask whether or not the municipality provided a certain public service.

Instead of requesting information on a public service, one participant from Gostivar contacted the municipality to request a service in his neighborhood. He had a positive interaction on the phone and the service he requested was fulfilled. In addition to Gostivar, participants in Strumica, Skopje, Veles, and Centar successfully contacted their municipalities by phone and received a response.

**Female, 58 years old, Serbian, Centar:** "I contacted them by phone and email, by mistake. Since I didn't get an answer by phone, I thought they wouldn't even call me, but what a surprise - they called me, and that after one attempt. It was only 09:49. It was a young lady and she was so kind, I was in a terrible shock this morning. I even forgot what I was supposed to ask! I was asked to leave my phone number. I felt very nice. Respected."

**Male, 66 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "They just asked me about my location and told me that they would try to repair it. They didn't tell an exact date, today, tomorrow, or day after tomorrow... It only took three days, and everything was repaired."

#### FINDING 1.2.2: No response by phone in Gazi Baba.

A focus group participant from Gazi Baba made several attempts to reach the municipality by phone, but he either got a busy signal or no one answered. On the second day, after a third try, he made contact. When he asked for information, he was transferred to an answering machine where he waited for a long time. After that, every time he called the municipality's phone, he was immediately transferred to an answering machine.

**Male, 60 years old, Albanian, Gazi Baba:** "I would call directly, and the first time they answered with, 'Good day, how can we help you, what do you need? Wait a minute.' So I waited while listening to music, and I waited.... The second time, the second day I called again, there was only music playing, because they knew the number and when they saw it, they played music directly."

**Moderator:** "How did that make you feel? "

**Male, 60 years old, Albanian, Gazi Baba:** "It's the stupidest thing! They just don't consider you to be a human being."

#### FINDING 1.2.3: Non-availability and complete unresponsiveness on phone in Kichevo.

Two participants contacted the municipality by phone and neither of them could get in touch. Kichevo's landline was not working at the time of fieldwork for this study.

**Male, 27 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "I was supposed to call the municipality and ask about subsidies, but unfortunately that number either doesn't exist or is disconnected ...I don't know, I felt bad because I had a grain of hope... I felt very bad when I called three days in a row and today I called again, but the phone is not working."

## IN-PERSON USER EXPERIENCE WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

**FINDING 1.3:** A receptive and helpful in-person experience at a municipal office made citizens feel positively surprised by how they were treated. However, they felt unmoored and uncertain when they did not get a formal response following an in-person request. None of the participants were advised about their legal rights regarding the request they submitted.

	CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN PERSON	RESPONSES TO CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN PERSON
	RESPONSES RECEIVED VS CITIZENS ENGAGED	PERCENT OF RESPONSIVENESS
Strumica	1/1	100%
Gazi Baba	1/1	100%
Skopje	1/2	50%
Veles	1/2	50%
Centar	0/1	0%
Gostivar	0/3	0%
Kichevo	0/2	0%

**Table 3: Number of in person engagements in each focus group per local government unit and number of responses.**

**FINDING 1.3.1: Positive and responsive in person experiences in Strumica and Gazi Baba.**

Participants who contacted Strumica and Gazi Baba in person had positive experiences. Strumica's mayor followed up on one request with a written response explaining that procurement was the next step in addressing the participant's issue, and once that was done, it would be resolved. The participant explained that this deepened her respect for the mayor, who she already saw as a problem-solver. In Gazi Baba, the participant's request was welcomed, and he was provided with the information he needed.

**Female, 39 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "Yes, so I did get it [the answer] in a letter. 'The municipality of Strumica has received the request submitted by you. An inspection has been carried out by the competent department and once the new public procurement is completed, the equipment will be placed in the required location.'... Even before, when he had just become the mayor, after a few months I submitted a request to solve my problem, and even though we don't know each other personally, he paid attention to me and solved the problem I didn't expect to be solved."

**Male, 37 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "It was a really nice experience. [The employee] made an effort to find another plot in the vicinity, and in terms of the approach and the way she explained the procedure to me and directed us, I am satisfied."

**FINDING 1.3.2: Mixed experiences with responsiveness with the City of Skopje and Veles.**

Two participants went to the City of Skopje offices in person and both of their requests were registered, but only one got a response. In the first case, after six business days, the citizen received an SMS from the city stating it would resolve his issue in a couple of months. In the second case, right when it was the participant's turn to submit a request in person, the employee in the office closed the counter and left. The remaining public servants did not know how to handle the participant's request and suggested he write it on a piece of paper and submit it.

The two participants went to the Veles municipality offices in person had varying experiences. One submitted a request in writing and paid a 50 denar fee.<sup>7</sup> The request was registered, but she did not receive a formal response.

<sup>7</sup> Equivalent to \$ 0.86 based on average exchange rate, as calculated by the National Bank of Republic of North Macedonia [https://www.nbrm.mk/kursna\\_lista.nsp](https://www.nbrm.mk/kursna_lista.nsp)

However, she noticed the issue was resolved shortly after. The second participant, who went in with the same request, was turned away by an employee who told him his concern was not the municipality's responsibility and office staff could not help him. Staff gave the participant no information on where else to go.

Participants whose requests were addressed reacted with positive surprise. They also reacted with some confusion, because they were not told their request was being addressed. Participants who were ignored felt angry and disappointed.

**Skopje Male, 31 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "Honestly, I had a bad feeling going there, just very uncomfortable... I said to myself, damn this country if I can't just go and ask. They said they would finish the service by the end of summer... Well, that surprised me. I finished quite quickly. I'll be totally surprised if they do it."

**Female, 48, Macedonian, Veles:** "I visited it [the municipality]. I submitted a request [for a bench]. Now where the taxi drivers are, up across the high school, there is a bench placed next to a sign. No one informed me that the bench has been installed."

**Skopje Male, 37 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I was personally there in the City of Skopje. I came to reception and asked the woman. She said you must submit a request to the archive, and she gave me a number. And just as my number came up next in line, she got up and left the workplace."

**Female, 44 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "I was supposed to go to the municipality, and they answered my question by telling me that it was not up to them, and that I should go to another place. I felt unpleasant."

#### FINDING 1.3.3: Help without a resolution in Centar and Gostivar.

In Centar, one in-person participant registered his request but never receive a response. His experience meeting with municipal staff was positive. He was asked to pay 50 denar fee with a debit card, but since he did not have one, he was told that he could pay later. Contrary to his expectations, the submission process was quick and straightforward and the employee was very efficient and helpful.

In Gostivar, three participants came to the municipality in person. One was immediately told that the requested service could not be provided, while the other two submitted requests in writing and did not receive a response.

**Male, 31 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "I went there. I felt quite strange as I didn't know you could go there, and if anyone has previously done so... And the clerk asked me how many benches I wanted, I said only one. She said, 'Ask for more so that we could provide more.' She sent me to office six and told me what papers to prepare. I went there and they completely surprised me. It was finished in two minutes."

**Female, 30 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "Everything was fine until they saw me off. After that, there was neither a response nor anything else. 'Yes, we will take it into consideration.'... And nothing."

#### FINDING 1.3.4: Unresponsiveness to in person requests in Kichevo.

In Kichevo, two participants went to the municipality in person and neither received a meaningful response. One of them could not submit a request because the public servant who works in the appropriate department was not at work. The other person submitted a request that was subsequently registered, but the participant never



got further instructions or a response.

**Male, 26 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "I was supposed to go to the municipality in person. I went a week ago and they did not serve me. I could not submit a request. The staff person was not there. Today, I went again around 10:00 AM and it was a break time. I also went at 1:30 PM when I knew they should be there. Some of them were there, some of them were not, so let's wait till Monday... but this is not my first experience with a request. The point is that when the mayor wants to contact you, he will find a way."

## 2. EVALUATING MAYORS ON BEHAVIOR AND DELIVERY

In its qualitative research on mayors and local governments in 2021, IRI found that citizen satisfaction with mayors is determined by behavior and their results. Citizens' evaluations of the mayors were led by their assessment of the mayor's:

- Openness, communication, responsiveness, and respectfulness toward citizens
- whether s/he is a good and positive person, and whether they think s/he helps the citizens and the municipality
- whether they think that s/he delivers visible, tangible improvements to the municipality and address the main issues facing it

Based on these questions, IRI developed a matrix based on positive, mixed/average, and negative evaluations of mayors:

	<b>STRONG POLICY DELIVERY PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>INSUFFICIENT POLICY DELIVERY PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>WEAK POLICY DELIVERY PERFORMANCE</b>
<b>Strong Behavioral Performance</b>	Positively evaluated mayors		
<b>Insufficient Behavioral Performance</b>		Mixed evaluations	
<b>Weak Behavioral Performance</b>			Mainly negatively evaluated mayors

Based on the matrix, the mayors evaluated within these focus groups are grouped in three categories.

**FINDING 2: Mayors Kostadin Kostadinov (Strumica), Marko Kolev (Veles), and Arben Taravari (Gostivar) were evaluated positively. Mayors Goran Gerasimovski (Centar), Boban Stefkovski (Gazi Baba), and Fatmir Dehari (Kichevo) received mixed evaluations. The mayor of Skopje, Danela Arsovska, received a negative evaluation.**

**FINDING 2.1:** Citizens see Mayors Kostadinov (Strumica), Kolev (Veles), and Taravari (Gostivar) as trustworthy leaders who make citizens feel respected. They are seen as problem-solvers who, despite experiencing difficulties, deliver change to their municipalities.

Mayor Kostadinov is seen as communicative and accessible as well as ambitious and hard working. Participants specifically pointed out that he is not biased when it comes to solving problems and that he is dedicated.

**Male, 70 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "I also had a positive experience. I had a problem that I could not solve because I needed support from an institution. I scheduled a meeting with the mayor over the phone and he received me. That was the first and last time I met him. I told him my problem, he fully supported me in the situation, without any consequences. He was very close, friendly, simple... I had a very negative opinion of him at the time because I didn't know him and had no contact whatsoever. In that moment he made me change my mind 100 percent."

**Male, 22 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "Caring, communicative, and hardworking."

Participants saw Mayor Kolev as communicative and open, in addition to hard working. They think that he has produced visible changes in the city and is dedicated to the city and the citizens.

**Male, 51 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "That's the point. We have problems, but we still evaluate him positively. Hardworking, has initiative, and I think he is honest. Although I don't know him that well, this is from what I see."

**Female, 48 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "He is diligent and he wants to help others as far as I see. The previous mayor canceled the Pie Festival; this one restarted it for us. The cinema has not worked for years, and now he has opened it. He wants to open up something for young people."

Mayor Taravari is perceived as communicative and honest. They see him as someone who solves problems. However, people think that the problems he faces in the municipality are beyond his power to resolve because of a lack of financial resources and central government corruption.

**Male, 65 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "As a mayor, he is good... He is willing to do something."

**Female, 64 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "We have never been free to talk to this extent, to go freely in the municipality. He has given that opportunity to all citizens. For you to speak freely, it means that it is enough that he has liberated the town."

**Female, 56 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "Taravari vaccinated our stray dogs, and he marked them, thus we know ours."

**FINDING 2.2:** Mixed, some positive, and some unsatisfactory evaluations; participants identify some positive elements about the character and behavior of Mayors Gerasimovski (Centar), Stefkovski (Gazi Baba), and Dehari (Kichevo). They noted a lack of tangible results from these mayors.

Mayor Gerasimovski is polite and communicative, but participants saw him as passive because they were unfamiliar with his work and noticed no clear results. Participants thought the local government was complacent and disengaged because the governing party, SDSM, has a stronghold in the municipality.

**Male (2), 31 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "At the end of the day, it's all the same since he arrived at the municipality: it's neither better nor worse. I honestly wouldn't be interested in whether he is communicative or is a man of the people/ I am not interested in what he says, what matters to me is that he does."

**Female, 40 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "[There should be] a better interaction between the municipality and the citizens. The mayor is not a man of action, he is very passive. He is communicative and close to people, his approach is good, but he is passive."

Mayor Stefkovski faces similar complaints. He is perceived as a good person and a humanitarian, but he is not well known or recognized for his work. Participants do not see how the municipality is developing or what has been done so far.

**Female, 58 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I think he should have better management. He is good as a person. We cannot complain about him as a person. We can talk based on what he does. He does not inspire confidence now. Maybe he should be more persistent in what he wants to do."

**Male, 66 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "For me, the mayor is a complete unknown, both before and now. I have neither seen him nor heard him say anything, only before the elections and that's all. What he does, how he works? There is some propaganda and material on the internet, but he is nowhere to be found."

Participants see Kichevo Mayor Dehari as open and communicative. However, they note a change in performance from his earlier terms in office, and say he no longer gets things done.

**Male, 26 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "In eight years, I can say [the mayor scored] four,[out of five] but for the last four years, one or zero.<sup>8</sup> During his first two terms of office, he has done things, we cannot say no. He has delivered road infrastructure. But these last four years, it seems they have been only to fill his pockets."

**Female, 28 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "The behavior is very good, but there is no result. You cannot trust a person who has promised a lot to the town of Kichevo but has done three things."

**FINDING 2.3: Mostly negative evaluations; participants have negative perceptions of Skopje Mayor Arsovska for both her behavior and for what she has (not) done for the city.**

Focus group participants see Mayor Arsovska as detached, incompetent, and arrogant. They think she made promises and started off well, but has failed to deliver since then. Participants do not believe she will accomplish anything by the end of her term. The city has a high turnover of managers in high-level city positions, and participants think this is because the mayor does not understand her what her job is. In addition, they worry the cultural and art scene in the city has faded since she took office.

**Female, 27 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "Negative. She has a lot of negative energy when I watch her on TV."

**Male, 31 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "She is arrogant, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing. If she did the things she promised to do, I wouldn't care what she is like."

**Female, 58 years old, Serbian, Centar:** "We haven't seen anything for which we can say, 'here, this is resolved.'"

---

<sup>8</sup> Students in North Macedonia do not receive letter grades, but rather are graded on a scale of one (failing) to five (excellent performance).

### 3. VIEWS ON COUNCILS AND THE ADMINISTRATIONS

**FINDING 3: Participants had negative opinions about the municipal council and administration primarily because they lacked knowledge about the council's work and because they perceive the administration as inefficient, slow, incompetent, and unprofessional.**

**FINDING 3.1:** In Skopje, participants had little to no familiarity with the councilors and their work, while in other municipalities some participants had some awareness of the councilors from local TV or online information. A negative opinion or suspicion about the work of the council prevails across all focus groups.

#### *Strumica council*

In Strumica, participants in the group discussions said they are partially familiar with their local councilors. Some would like more transparency about the councilors' work and more accountability of the mayor to the council. One participant pointed out that there is information about the council's work on the Strumica Facebook page, but the other participants did not know this.

#### *Kichevo council*

Focus group participants from Kichevo also knew little about their councilors. They had a predominantly negative view. Some of them knew about the council via local TV and evaluated their work negatively. They think the council spends its time in political party fights and spiteful debates. One participant pointed out that the council should work for the citizens, not for a political party, and it should be politically neutral and independent.

#### *Veles council*

The participants in the Veles group discussion had some superficial awareness of their councilors and the municipal council, either from the local television station – TV Zdravkin – or from online sources. One of the participants said that TV Zdravkin regularly provides updates about the council and its work, but most of the participants do not follow this information. Everyone knew who the president of the council was, but most did not follow his work.<sup>9</sup> Because of this lack of knowledge, participants expressed suspicion about its function and conduct.

#### *Gostivar council*

In Gostivar, most participants were not familiar with the councilors or their work. Because of this, participants said they did not have an opinion about the council. Two participants knew a councilor personally and said the council is trying to get its work done, but they were not sure how successfully.

#### *Skopje city council*

Participants in the Skopje municipalities had little familiarity with their municipal council. In Centar, participants were not at all familiar with the councilors or their work, and a couple of participants mistook two of the Skopje councilors for Centar councilors. A few participants said they were only aware of the councilors they knew personally. Because of this lack of awareness, the participants had a negative impression of the council.

---

<sup>9</sup> The president of the council is a film and theater actor.

*Gazi Baba council*

In Gazi Baba, apart from a couple of instances in which participants knew some councilors, none of the participants knew what the council does. They said they have a highly negative opinion of the council because of this.

*Centar council*

Participants from Centar and Gazi Baba were also uniformed about the members and the Skopje city council's work. Some said they think the council does not solve city problems and instead spends time on political fights. Participants also said tense relations between the Skopje council and Mayor Arsovska make it difficult for the city to function.

**(Regarding the Skopje city council) Male, 66 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "No matter what we do, nothing works. Whatever one proposes, others obstruct it. That's the biggest problem: the coordination between councilors and the mayor's office."

**Moderator:** "And do you know who the councilors of the City of Skopje are?"

**Gazi Baba and Centar focus groups:** All participants answered negatively.

**Female, 58, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I only know one, who lives behind me."

**Male, 32 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "When some tension happens [in the council], I see cuts [in the livestream], and the cameras immediately turn off."<sup>10</sup>

**Female, 42 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "We know some of them, they are our generation. All of them are doctors."

**Male, 26 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "I used to follow almost all [council sessions]. There were many debates, debates where they could not understand each other. Everyone was shouting, no one was taking notes, no one. Those from [the party] BESA were contradicting those from DUI, those from VMRO-DPMNE were contradicting those from SDSM, and they were fighting each other. They were doing things in a spiteful manner; someone would suggest something and someone else would not accept it."

**FINDING 3.2:** Participants across all focus groups perceive the municipal administration as inefficient, slow, incompetent, and unprofessional.

Some participants based their negative opinions on experience, while others relied on perception. Most participants blamed the system, which "kills the enthusiasm of employees." They also lamented the absence of "a system of rewards and sanctions and promotion based on merit." In general, participants pointed out that there was a range of conscientiousness among public servants: some were very conscientious while others were not particularly conscientious. Participants noted that municipal administrations often employ partisan staff.

**Female, 41 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "My husband had a problem, I can't remember what it was. They don't know how to solve it; they don't even try."

<sup>10</sup> The Veles council president is a well-known actor. The speaker uses the president's past life as an actor to critique the way he shuts down unfavorable discussion.

**Male, 37 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "The administration in the municipality is a mess. The conditions are bad. They smoke inside the offices, old sheds. I don't even know how they manage... The sheds are about to fall apart; they should also build a nice building."

**Regarding Skopje city administration: Woman, 48 years old, Serbian, Centar:** "I went to the City of Skopje about taxes. They made a mistake, then I had to bring all sorts of documents, then I waited 15 days, then no answer, then I went again, then they lost my documents, then again... two months to sort out the tax... They have no idea what they are doing."

**Male, 32 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "I was waiting for a long time to be told how much tax I have to pay for the house. They didn't know."

**Woman, 60 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "There are people who are doing their job, and there are people who just walk around in the corridors."

**Male, 26 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "Last year, I was supposed to apply for a subsidy for an air conditioner and I was helped a lot by the administration on what to do. It was a real shock for me, to be helped, to have someone tell you, 'Hey, this document is not right, this is needed, that is needed.' Many people provided suggestions and helped me, 'You should get this document, this should be filled in.' Something I didn't expect, that is, to be helped."

**Male, 66 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "They lost my length of service document. I have been bringing the length of service document for seven years, and since I know the person who is in charge of it, as she is a daughter of my friend, I said to myself that she will provide even better service. She tells me to come back after a week. I called them a month later, I went there, and I didn't know where the document was. They had lost it."

## 4. THE FUTURE AND IMPORTANT LOCAL PROBLEMS

**FINDING 4: Participants see all the municipalities and Skopje as moving in a negative direction or stagnating because they do not have a systemic approach to problem-solving. Some positive developments are seen in Gazi Baba, Veles, and Gostivar.**

People worry about the future of their municipalities. Participants did not see a focus on problem-solving and think municipalities too often let problems go unresolved for too long. However, residents of Gazi Baba, Veles, and Gostivar saw improvements. Gazi Baba residents praised greater transparency, new parks, and street repairs as positives. Veles residents supported improvements to their city's cultural life, entertainment, and its revitalized city center. Residents in Gostivar attributed their city's improvements to the mayor's leadership.

The biggest problem in their municipalities, according to participants, is a failure to maintain municipal infrastructure. Participants in Centar, Gazi Baba, Skopje, Veles, Strumica, and Gostivar expressed concern about infrastructure repairs. Residents of Skopje, Veles, Strumica, Kichevo, and Gostivar complained about a lack of cleanliness, including illegal dumpsites. Air pollution from factories, construction, and wood-based heating was a notable concern in Centar, Skopje, Strumica, and Kichevo. People in Centar, Skopje, and Strumica also complained about parking. Residents in municipalities outside the capital identified emigration, especially of young people, as a concern.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT	MAJOR PROBLEMS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL
Centar	<p>Poor spatial management; overcrowding; excessive construction; Lack of parking space, sidewalks, and bike lanes; unmarked and unsafe construction sites;</p> <p>Air pollution, especially in winter; construction debris;</p> <p>Reduced green areas;</p> <p>Lack of infrastructure maintenance affecting streets, buildings, parks, and playgrounds (once damaged, the municipality does not repair or maintain them).</p>
Gazi baba	<p>Poor and neglected infrastructure; Lack of repairs of roads, sidewalks; Municipal management;</p> <p>Too few sports fields and playgrounds.</p> <p>Deterioration and non-maintenance of water supply and sewage network.</p>
Skopje (Centar and Gazi Baba FGD participants)	<p>Rapid urbanization, overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure, hospitals, schools and kindergartens;</p> <p>Poor and neglected infrastructure;</p> <p>Lack of public cleanness;</p> <p>Air pollution, toxic emissions from factories, lack of inspections;</p> <p>Traffic jams, problems with public transport, inadequate bicycle lanes, parking lots, and sidewalks;</p> <p>A dearth of cultural and art happenings.</p>
Veles	<p>Low spending power of municipal residents; lack of foreign or domestic investments;</p> <p>Emigration, especially of young people;</p> <p>Poor infrastructure and neglected maintenance, especially in city outskirts; a lack of street lighting, pedestrian and bicycle paths, and flood mitigation during torrential rains;</p> <p>Lack of public cleanness – poor waste collection;</p> <p>A constant unpleasant smell from a neighboring pig farm that spreads to the city;</p> <p>Non-maintenance of the public facilities, equipment, and playgrounds.</p>
Strumica	<p>Poor infrastructure, poorly maintained;</p> <p>Not enough sidewalks, cafes and illegal vendors usurping sidewalk space;</p> <p>Lack of public cleanness;</p> <p>Air pollution from wood heat; pollution from construction debris;</p> <p>Too many casinos;</p> <p>Uncontrolled construction and piles of construction rubble;</p> <p>Air heating and a greenhouse effect from the greenhouses (agricultural films) surrounding the city;</p> <p>Emigration of young people;</p> <p>Traffic congestion.</p>
Kichevo	<p>Emigration of young people to other cities and outside the country;</p> <p>High unemployment;</p> <p>Air pollution from the nearby Oslovey thermal power plant and its deleterious impact on human health;</p> <p>Illegal dumpsites.</p> <p>Stray dogs;</p> <p>Lack of healthcare staff;</p> <p>Education: difficulties in transporting students to schools, heat outages that impact teaching, limited opportunities for vocational education.</p>

Gostivar	Stray dogs; Lack of parking spaces; Lack of public cleanness - irregular and untimely waste collection; Poorly built and maintained infrastructure; Sewage (in some parts of town) and problems with drinking water.
----------	--

## NATIONAL ISSUES

### 5. POLITICAL PARTIES' CAMPAIGNS IN NON-ELECTION YEARS

**FINDING 5:** Participants said unanimously that institutions should lead communications with citizens, and address the issues they face, not political parties. They think this role of the institutions should not be substituted by the parties. They have negative impressions about party campaigns in non-election years and they do not improve participants' opinion about parties.

Some participants pointed out that because institutions do not communicate well, citizens feel that they are not heard, respected, or valued, and, ultimately, become apathetic, disinterested, and inactive in engaging with local problems. Nonetheless, they do not think this role of institutions should be substituted by the parties. Thus, they emphasize that the institutions should improve their communication and outreach to citizens. Some participants also complained that the institutions are partisan and often serve the parties instead of the citizens.

**Male, 32 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "I support the municipality for this [NB. to communicate directly with citizens]. I used to have friends from Kavadarci, [they were telling] every week wardens from the municipality go out and visit every street, take record of the situation, and provide an answer [to the people] within a week."

**Female, 60 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "It [NB. the communication] should definitely not be with the parties!"

**Moderator:** "What do the others think? Are the institutions or political parties the ones to respond to citizens?"

**All participants:** "Institutions."

**Male, 66 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "It should be obligatory [for institutions to respond to citizens' demands]."

**Female, 37 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "That's their job [of the institutions], but they are not doing that."

**Male, 20 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "The political party, as such, is not in charge of these services. For example, we cannot go to the political party and ask for light bulbs. There are official competent institutions in charge of different services that have to deal with us. It's the institutions and the front offices."



**Male, 37 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I don't think it should work through the parties, and that's another problem – that they get involved. We all have local communities, and those local communities are politically dependent."

Participants think the parties carry out campaigns in non-election years "for the sake of it," because "they are part of the parties' 'to do list,' without substance." Further, they describe them as "déjà vu," "money laundering," "giving away lighters," and "empty promises". They also see them as populist, boring, financially unjustified, and fake. Further, they associate them with extortion of votes in exchange for "flour, salt, wood, cooking oil and social assistance" and pre-election self-promotion.

Some participants pointed out that as it is the task of the political parties to create election platforms, it is understandable that, in those situations, citizens should be asked what they need and the platforms should be created based on their input.

Furthermore, when asked about recent campaigns organized by the parties in the period prior to the focus groups, most participants knew little about these happenings.

**Male, 60, Albanian, Gazi Baba:** "I don't even want to listen to them at all [NB. the parties]. I know that they won't implement what they say. Those are just empty promises."

**Female, 58, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "It's the same when a student goes to take an exam and only wants to pass in order to be free. So, to me it seems the campaigns were done like that."

**Male, 51 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "You will talk about some problems and that it'll be good if we win, things will be sorted, then afterwards they [NB. party representatives] won't even say hello when they win the elections."

**Female, 42 years old, Strumica:** "I don't know, I have neither seen, nor attended such campaign."

## 6. THE COUNTRY'S DIRECTION AND ITS MAIN PROBLEMS

**FINDING 6: Most participants think the country is moving in the wrong direction and are concerned about corruption, emigration, and dysfunctional institutions.**

Participants largely see the country as going "downhill" into an "abyss." A minority of participants have a more positive outlook because of potential European integration, and some expect positive changes as a result of EU membership negotiations.

Some of the participants worry that North Macedonia is a "caricature," in which nothing functions. They say the country's health system is collapsing; the education system does not function properly; and corruption is widespread. Participants have generally negative assessments of the government. They think it is not coordinated, disorganized, and does not tackle corruption, emigration, inflation, or economic issues. They have the impression that nothing is functioning in the country and no institution is doing its job.

**Female, 42 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "The health system has collapsed. Are we going the right way? We don't have healthcare. We don't have education. They don't have books for children to study. So which is the right way to go? They didn't have books for a year."

**Male, 65 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "There is a new scandal every day. The state is not functioning."

## 7. BULGARIA AND EU INTEGRATION

**FINDING 7: Ethnic Macedonian participants largely see Bulgaria's behavior toward North Macedonia in the EU integration process as humiliating, a form of blackmail, and unacceptable. Most ethnic Albanian participants see it as justified, and some as aggressive and unfair. Most ethnic Macedonian and Albanian participants expressed support for EU integration as the only way which would ensure better control of how institutions perform and function.**

For ethnic Macedonian participants, Bulgaria's behavior towards North Macedonia is largely seen as unacceptable and provocative. Some participants interpret it as "big game in the background" and have a somewhat extreme impression that the EU wants Bulgaria to slow or block North Macedonia's accession because the EU thinks that North Macedonia is not ready to join. Some participants likened this to a long torture, which allows politicians to "function in the dark." Some participants interpret Bulgaria's constant demands regarding North Macedonia as opening Pandora's box.

Most ethnic Albanian participants support Bulgaria, saying it is simply trying to preserve its territorial integrity. They note that many Macedonian citizens carry Bulgarian passports. They also say that history is in favor of Bulgaria's demands as Bulgaria established a state before Macedonia. They think that both countries should work together to solve the problem through dialogue. Other ethnic Albanian participants find Bulgaria's behavior toward North Macedonia aggressive and unfair, but that this is the EU's fault, not Bulgaria's, as the EU is letting Bulgaria behave aggressively towards North Macedonia.

**Male, 66 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "I have never seen a greater humiliation of the Macedonian people. It was the Greeks, now the Bulgarians, then there will be someone else."

**Female, 34 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "Yes, and we expect more and more requests from them. [NB. From Bulgaria]. They started with a name, the constitution, then they will think of something else."

**Female, 48 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "We need to find a good capable person in the government, and then we won't need the EU. Everyone is looking for personal gain. Once they get the chair, they look to fill their pockets."

**Male, 27 years old, Albanian, Kichevo:** "I think Bulgaria has more right [i.e. Bulgaria has acted correctly in its dealings with North Macedonia], it is looking for its rights."

Most ethnic Macedonian participants support North Macedonia's EU membership pursuit and see it as the country's best chance at order, reducing crime and corruption, and better control of institutions and public funds. For some, EU integration is the only path to progress and or the institutions to start functioning. For others, the price of entry into the EU is too high and North Macedonia should focus on solving its own problems. Some feel the need to become part of the European family, to be led by someone else, to feel the benefits of access

to European funds and to reduce emigration. Some see EU accession as a double-edged sword and think that many will be hurt by the integration process and that the country will suffer by the time it becomes an EU member.

Some ethnic Macedonian participants were unsupportive of integration into the EU.

Ethnic Albanian participants mostly expressed support for integration, seeing it as North Macedonia's only hope for a better future. They think that integration is the path toward progress, stronger institutions, a rise in foreign investment, jobs creation, and higher incomes.

**Female, 53 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "Maybe there will be some control."

**Male, 66 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "The EU is the only path, nothing else. Only Europe will save us. It is very significant especially for us, the Albanians."

**Female, 42 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "We will give up everything for the road to Europe."

**Male, 70 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "There are many negatives, however, the right direction is the country's entry into the European Union."

**FINDING 8: Participants say institutions are dysfunctional, problems are not resolved systematically, but impulsively, in an ad-hoc, or project based manner. They assess that institutions and numerous sectors in the country are dysfunctional.**

Without prompting or input from moderators, focus groups brought up concerns about the lack of a systematic approach by institutions in the country. They are disappointed because they perceive that "there is no system" and that "nothing functions." They think institutions and political leaders do not solve problems in a thoughtful, systematic manner. Participants say the root of this problem is the politicization of institutions by the parties.

**Male, 37 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "The problem is that nothing is resolved systematically, everything is addressed impulsively, on a case-to-case basis, project-based. The problem is that we don't know that is happening, there is no transparency and systematic resolution of problems."

**Male, 66 years old, Macedonian, Gazi Baba:** "When someone will take a public office, he should execute it. In every aspect. He should work systematically."

**Male, 51 years old, Macedonian, Veles:** "If there is a system, it will be the same as if we are in the EU."

**Male, 31 years old, Macedonian, Centar:** "Changes should be done from the root. Even if you want to do something... you don't have a role model to follow."

**Male, 55 years old, Macedonian, Strumica:** "We can locate the problem. As one would say, the fish rots from the head down. The mayor, institutions, public enterprises, etc., they all take salaries. Where exactly is the blame, I cannot say, but it's certainly in some of the institutions."

**Female, 36 years old, Albanian, Gostivar:** "Crime, corruption, youth emigration, non-merit-based employments, education, healthcare, infrastructure, judiciary. None of these key sectors functions."

**Male, 65 years, Albanian, Gostivar:** "Everything is politicized, there is nothing which is untouched. Nothing functions in the country."

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

### ON BEHAVIOR AND RESPONSIVENESS

Is the local government responsive when citizens contact it? How does a government's response, or lack of response, influence trust and satisfaction?

User experience testing found that most local governments in North Macedonia are extremely unresponsive to citizens when they engage online. This negative experience makes citizens feel disrespected and disappointed and it discourages them from future contact. It diminishes their trust in local government. While local governments offer many avenues for contact, evidence shows that citizens who reach out are largely ignored. The general perception of the municipal administration as inefficient, largely due to party based employment, can offer part of the explanation for this unresponsiveness.

Digitization is an important part of modern communications, and the above finding shows that governments need to do more to make sure digitization works in an inclusive and responsive way. This study shows that, even though the focus group sample was small and not representative, citizens are better received when they contact their municipality in person or by phone.

Unresponsiveness degrades citizens' trust in the institutions and makes them feel disrespected and neglected. This is the case regardless of whether citizens contacted their municipality online, by phone, or in person.

In contrast, people who received a response felt optimistic and encouraged. A response increased their confidence in the mayor's and municipality's work, and they felt satisfied and proud that they encouraged action to improve community life.

However, the impact of unresponsiveness on trust in government institutions is not linear. The focus group discussions revealed that two variables can determine whether a municipality's responsiveness will affect trust.

The first variable is the strength of a citizen's preexisting opinion about the institution or the mayor. When someone has a negative opinion and yet receives a response, they are surprised and pleased. If this pattern continues, citizen trust will increase. When citizens already have a positive opinion of their local government, a lack of response will not immediately decrease their trust. In such cases, this study's participants were willing to justify a lack of response. Yet if the unresponsiveness persists, the government endangers that trust.

The content and manner of the municipality's response also affects citizen trust. Trust-inducing responses include acknowledging the request, explaining the institution's role in solving the problem, and answering promptly. Responses should be expressed in a helpful and respectful manner; they should not simply direct the citizen to go elsewhere for an answer.

**Recommendations for municipalities and institutions in general:**

- Establish guidelines and procedures for receiving, addressing, and responding to communication from citizens using all types of channels: formal and informal online contacts, in person, phone, and mail.
- Create and maintain a registry of requests and proposals (as obligated by law).
- Designate one email address with one form for use in contacting the municipality.
- Provide clear guidance on what each municipal email address published on the websites serves for.
- Maintain and update contact forms and email addresses published on the websites when necessary.
- The municipality must not charge citizens for submitting requests (as per the law).
- Ensure all municipal website information and contact forms are in the municipality's official languages.
- Manage the managers: the lead staff member should provide the mayor with monthly reports on requests and responses.

**ON EFFECTIVENESS AND RESULTS**

Does the local government deliver results? How does a government's ability to deliver influence trust and satisfaction?

The focus group research shows that citizens' trust and satisfaction is directly linked to whether they think the mayor is delivering results for the municipality. Two factors contribute to this. One is the perception that the mayor is working diligently to resolve problems. The second one is open and responsive behavior toward citizens.

**Recommendations for improving results and communicating successes to citizens:**

- Politicians should not promise anything they cannot deliver.
- Leaders must define key priorities, address the most pervasive problems, and then dedicate substantial human and financial resources to improvement.
- Communicate progress toward results. Consider using a comparison between how things were before and after improvement.

Example:

2021, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TERM	2023, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TERM
30% green areas	40% green areas
Ranks 25 out of 100 on clean city index	Ranks 60 out of 100 on clean city index
80 km of free pavements	100 km of free pavements
Literacy scores 60 out of 100 for children in elementary school	Literacy scores 75 out of 100 for children in elementary school

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Development, O. -O.-o. (n.d.). Trust in Government – Responsiveness. <https://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-responsiveness.htm>.

OECD. (n.d.). Trust in Government – Responsiveness. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Putnam, R. D. (1993). Making Democracy Work, Civic Traditions in Modern Italy p.64 . Princeton, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUPS COMPOSITION

FG#	LOCATION	DATE	COMPOSITION	ETHNIC BACKGROUND	LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
1	Strumica	21 June 2023	Mixed gender, 18+	Macedonians	Macedonian	8
2	Veles	22 June 2023	Mixed gender, 18+	Macedonians	Macedonian	8
3	Centar, Skopje	28 June 2023	Mixed gender, 18+	Mostly Macedonian, few Serbs	Macedonian	9
4	Gazi Baba, Skopje	29 June 2023	Mixed gender, 18+	Mostly Macedonian, few Albanians	Macedonian	8
5	Gostivar	6 July 2023	Mixed gender, 18+	Albanians	Albanian	8
6	Kichevo	10 July 2023	Mixed gender, 18+	Albanians	Albanian	10

### APPENDIX B: RESPONSIVENESS PER MUNICIPAL PER EMAIL OR WEBSITE CONTACT FORM

Table 1	Mayor email 1	Municipality email	Municipal contact form on website	
<b>Strumica</b>	<a href="mailto:gradonacalnik@strumica.gov.mk">gradonacalnik@strumica.gov.mk</a>	<a href="mailto:info@strumica.gov.mk">info@strumica.gov.mk</a>	<a href="https://sistem48.strumica.gov.mk/prijavi.php">https://sistem48.strumica.gov.mk/prijavi.php</a>	
Responses provided vs submitted requests	1/1	3/4	0/1	
	Table 1			
Table 2	Mayor email 1	Mayor email 2	Mayor contact form on website	Municipality email
<b>Skopje</b>	<a href="mailto:gradonacalnik@skopje.gov.mk">gradonacalnik@skopje.gov.mk</a>	<a href="mailto:kabinet@skopje.gov.mk">kabinet@skopje.gov.mk</a>	<a href="https://skopje.gov.mk/mk/skopje/gradonacalnik">skopje.gov.mk/mk/skopje/gradonacalnik</a>	<a href="mailto:24@skopje.gov.mk">24@skopje.gov.mk</a>
Responses provided vs submitted requests	0/2	2/3	0/2	4/5

Table 3	Municipality email	Mayor contact form on website		
<b>Kicevo</b>	<a href="mailto:kercova2013@yahoo.com">kercova2013@yahoo.com</a>	<a href="https://kicevo.gov.mk/sq/kontakt/">https://kicevo.gov.mk/sq/kontakt/</a>		
Responses provided vs submitted re-quests	2/3	1/3		
Table 4	Mayor email 1	Municipality email		
<b>Gostivar</b>	<a href="mailto:arben.taravari@gostivari.gov.mk">arben.taravari@gostivari.gov.mk</a>	<a href="mailto:info@gostivari.gov.mk">info@gostivari.gov.mk</a>		
Responses provided vs submitted re-quests	1/2	0/2		
Table 5	Mayor email 1	Mayor contact form on website	Municipality email	Municipal contact form on website
<b>Veles</b>	<a href="mailto:marko.kolev@veles.gov.mk">marko.kolev@veles.gov.mk</a>	<a href="https://veles.gov.mk/prasaj-go-gradonacalnikot-2/">Прашај го градоначалникот – Општина Велес https://veles.gov.mk/prasaj-go-gradonacalnikot-2/</a>	<a href="mailto:opve@veles.gov.mk">opve@veles.gov.mk</a>	<a href="https://veles.gov.mk/kontakt-2/">https://veles.gov.mk/kontakt-2/</a>
Responses provided vs submitted requests	0/1	0/1	1/2	0/1
Table 6	Mayor email 1	Mayor email 2	Municipality email	
<b>Gazi Baba</b>	<a href="mailto:gradonacalnik@gazibaba.gov.mk">gradonacalnik@gazibaba.gov.mk</a>	<a href="mailto:kabinet@gazibaba.gov.com">kabinet@gazibaba.gov.com</a>	<a href="mailto:opstina@gazibaba.gov.mk">opstina@gazibaba.gov.mk</a>	
Responses provided vs submitted re-quests	1/2	0/2	0/2	
Table 7	Mayor email 1	Mayor email 2	Municipality email	Municipal contact form on website
<b>Centar</b>	<a href="mailto:gradonacalnik@centar.gov.mk">gradonacalnik@centar.gov.mk</a>	<a href="mailto:goran.gerasimovski@centar.gov.mk">goran.gerasimovski@centar.gov.mk</a>	<a href="mailto:kontakt@centar.gov.mk">kontakt@centar.gov.mk</a>	<a href="https://www.centar.gov.mk/?page_id=6768">https://www.centar.gov.mk/?page_id=6768</a>
Responses provided vs submitted re-quests	0/2	0/1	0/2	0/1