

ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNMENT: SELF AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of 1999 Vitosha Research with the Center for the Study of Democracy and Freedom House foundation, has been working on an international project entitled Accountable Government: Self and Public Perception. Activities under this initiative included the conducting of sociological surveys in Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria.

The present paper outlines the findings of the surveys conducted in Bulgaria among the general population and MPs from the 38th National Assembly.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Sample

National random sample representative of the Bulgarian population aged 18 and over.
Sample size N=1,161.

A survey among the members of the 38th National Assembly including 163 MPs.

Method of the survey

The surveys employed the method of the face-to-face interview.

Fieldwork

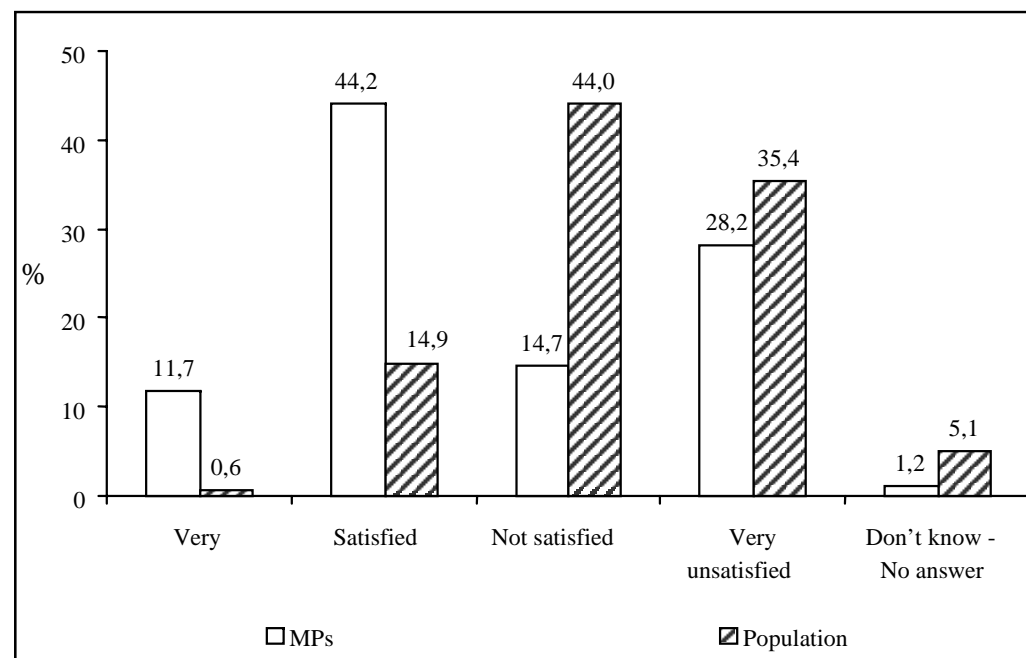
Fieldwork was conducted in the period March 23 - April 15, 2000.

GENERAL SATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT

There are considerable differences in the evaluations of citizens and MPs concerning the manner in which Bulgaria is being governed. While more than half of the MPs are satisfied with present government, such an opinion is shared only by 15% of the population. The majority of the Bulgarian public declare their full or partial disappointment with the manner of governing of the country.

Least satisfied with the government are the poor, the socially disadvantaged the unemployed, a significant part of the young people of lower social status, supporters of left-wing political powers; residents of smaller towns and villages, and representatives of the ethnic minorities.

FIGURE 1. HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH THE WAY BULGARIA IS GOVERNED NOWADAYS?



Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

EVALUATIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INSTITUTIONS

In the opinion of Bulgarian citizens most state institutions are not effective enough. This applies above all to the legislative and judiciary (Parliament, the courts and the prosecutor's offices). Opposition parties, the Cabinet, local government authorities, the police, and hospitals are also characterized to have a relatively low level of effectiveness according to public opinion. The highest effectiveness ratings are those of the Presidency and the media.

Unlike the public, MPs assess the effectiveness of the executive and legislative as high. In their evaluations the top three positions are occupied by the President, Parliament, and the Cabinet. Next follow the Bulgarian National Radio, the Bulgarian Telecommunications Company, and Bulgarian Posts. The lowest ratings are those of the institutions responsible for the enforcement of the rule of law – the courts and the prosecution.

TABLE 1. "I SHALL NOW READ A LIST OF INSTITUTIONS. PLEASE TELL ME HOW YOU WOULD EVALUATE THEIR PERFORMANCE IN TERMS OF SERVING THE PUBLIC INTEREST EFFECTIVELY." (MEAN VALUES*)

	MPs	Population	Difference between the means
	Mean	Mean	
Government	2,54	2,05	0,49
Parliament	2,67	1,79	0,88
President	2,67	2,83	-0,16
Court	1,77	1,93	-0,16
Local government authorities	2,18	2,10	0,08
Prosecution	1,64	1,93	-0,29
Bulgarian Posts	2,41	2,67	-0,26
Bulgarian Telecommunications Company	2,42	2,53	-0,11
Hospitals	1,97	2,08	-0,11
Schools	2,27	2,51	-0,24
Local tax department	2,18	2,43	-0,25
Bulgarian National television	2,14	2,72	-0,58
Bulgarian National Radio	2,45	2,87	-0,42
Newspapers	2,29	2,84	-0,55
Police	2,29	2,23	0,06
Political opposition parties	1,95	1,96	-0,01

**The table features the mean values under each indicator. The highest possible value is 4.00 = very high effectiveness, and the lowest, 1.00 = very low effectiveness.*

Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

EVALUATIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROFESSIONAL GROUPS

These assessments show some important differences between the evaluations of the general public and those of the MPs. According to the citizens, the work of MPs is least effective. However, Members of Parliament believe their own professional group is characterized by the highest level of effectiveness.

According to public opinion, public interests are best served by journalists and teachers. Next come university professors, doctors, and lawyers. Rated as least effective by public opinion, besides MPs, are judges and public officials.

In the assessments of MPs, the top positions are occupied by university professors and doctors. Unlike public opinion, MPs rate the work of journalists relatively low. They show a similar attitude towards public officials in central and local government. Judges are also in the bottom of the effectiveness scale. This suggests that law-enforcement authorities have a negative image not only among the general public but also among the political elite.

TABLE 2. “AND WHAT ABOUT THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE? HOW DO YOU RATE THEIR PERFORMANCE IN TERMS OF EFFECTIVELY SERVING THE PUBLIC INTEREST?” (MEAN VALUES*)

	MPs	Population	Difference
	Mean	Mean	between means
Teachers	2,45	2,67	-0,22
Trade union leaders	1,72	1,92	-0,20
Lawyers	2,34	2,31	0,03
Members of Parliament	2,63	1,79	0,84
Judges	1,92	2,02	-0,10
Public officials	1,91	2,06	-0,15
Public officials in local government	1,95	2,10	-0,15
University professors	2,62	2,57	0,05
State media journalists	2,25	2,86	-0,61
Private media journalists	2,45	2,96	-0,51
Press journalists	2,28	2,90	-0,62
Priests	2,13	2,42	-0,29
Doctors	2,53	2,43	0,10

**The table features the mean values under each indicator. The highest possible value is 4.00 = very high effectiveness, and the lowest, 1.00 = very low effectiveness.*

Base: N= 1161 (population)

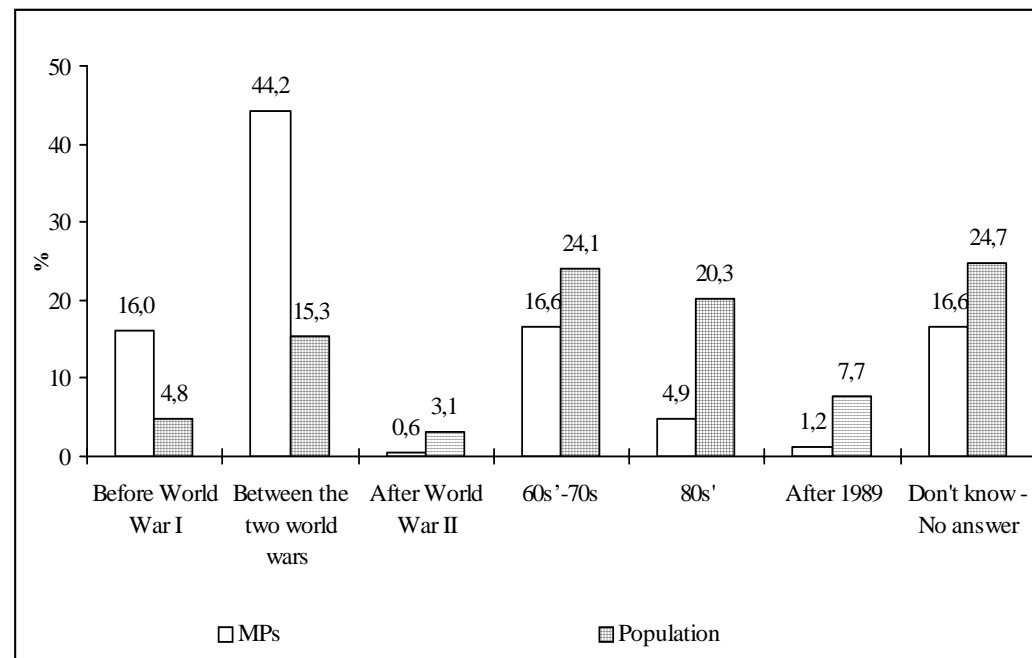
Base: N = 163 (MPs)

EVALUATIONS OF HISTORY

The survey also revealed substantial differences between the public and the MPs regarding the evaluation of Bulgaria's history. According to 44% of the MPs, our country has been governed best in the period between the two world wars. Nearly half of the citizens, however, think that the government was most effective during the period of the late socialism – in the 1960s-70s and the 1980s.

There is nevertheless one important point of agreement between the evaluations of the general public and of MPs. Both groups of respondents consider the period since 1989 as one of the least successful in terms of the governmenting of the country. The only period MPs lower is the one after World War II, while citizens also rate lower the period before World War I.

FIGURE 2. “WHAT TIME THIS CENTURY DO YOU THINK BULGARIA WAS BETTER OFF?”



Base: N= 1161 (population)

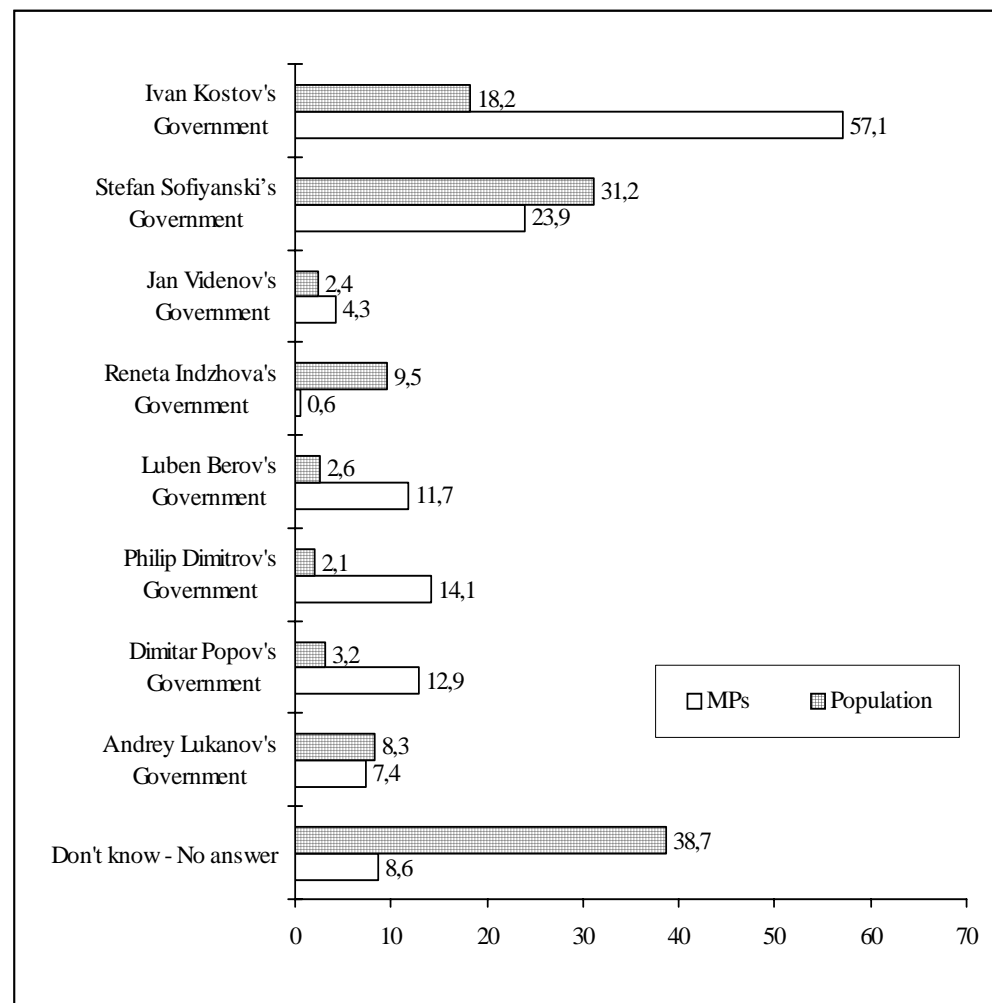
Base: N = 163 (MPs)

EVALUATIONS OF THE GOVERNMENTS SINCE 1989

With respect to the Governments in power after 1989 there are significant differences in the evaluations of the public and the MPs. It is interesting to note that the majority of the citizens are not able to compare the Bulgarian Governments since 1989. This fact is hardly due to the lack of an opinion, but rather implies the attitude: “none of them”. Most popular among the general public is Stefan Sofiyanski’s Government, cited by about one third of respondents. It is followed by the cabinets of Ivan Kostov and Reneta Indzhova.

The opinions of MPs are strongly influenced by their party affiliation. The highest rate of approval has been registered for the UDF cabinets, supported by nearly all members of the blue parliamentary group. One exception is Stefan Sofiyanski’s cabinet, enjoying the trust of a large part of the MPs, regardless of their party affiliation. The lowest ratings are obtained by cabinets supported by BSP.

FIGURE 3. “WHICH BULGARIAN CABINET AFTER 1989 GOVERNED THE COUNTRY BEST?”



Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

EVALUATIONS OF THE QUALITIES OF THOSE IN POWER

According to citizens, modern Bulgarian politicians possess personal qualities that significantly distinguish them from those in power in the period before 1989. The public image of present-day statesmen is a negative one and is associated with their wealth, good public speaking skills, corruption, and the predominance of their private interests over the public interest. Those in power during the socialist regime are considered more concerned about the people, more honest, more devoted to their country, and more hard-working. Professionalism is a quality that public opinion attributes equally to both categories.

The negative image of modern statesmen is an indication that the dissatisfaction with the present manner of government. The low standard of living also influences public attitudes towards the political class. For most citizens using power to serve the public interest has been replaced by the predominance of “personal interests” of some Bulgarian politicians.

TABLE 3. “WHEN DO YOU THINK OF PEOPLE WHO ARE RUNNING BULGARIA AND COMPARE THEM WITH PEOPLE DOING SO UNDER THE COMMUNIST REGIME, YOU THINK THAT THE CURRENT LEADERS DISPLAY MORE, LESS OR SIMILAR FEATURES?”

	More	About the same	Less	<i>No answer</i>
Know their job	29,2	20,5	28,7	21,6
Corrupt	49,5	23,1	9,7	17,7
Hard-working, industrious	18,7	28,9	33,7	18,7
Good speakers	53,0	22,3	8,7	16,0
Love their country	14,0	29,4	35,3	21,3
Care about people	11,9	22,5	49,9	15,7
Honest	11,2	23,3	44,8	20,7
See only to their interests	48,5	24,3	13,9	13,3
Rich	59,4	15,2	9,5	15,9

Base: N = 1161

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS OF GOVERNMENTS

There is full consensus (among MPs and citizens alike) that Bulgaria is governed worse than advanced countries such as USA, Germany, and Japan. As regards Russia, public opinion appears to be divided. One third of the citizens believe Bulgaria is governed worse than Russia. About as many share the opposite view. The majority of MPs think the Bulgarian government is superior to that of Russia.

According to 74% of the citizens Bulgaria is governed worse than neighboring Greece. Such a view is held by every other Member of Parliament, as well. There is a large degree of agreement among MPs that Bulgaria is governed better than Albania and Romania. On this issue there is no consensus among the public. A significant part of the public believes Bulgaria is governed in the same manner as these two Balkan countries.

TABLE 4. "THINKING ABOUT OTHER COUNTRIES YOU HAVE HEARD OF, DO YOU THINK BULGARIA IS AS WELL GOVERNED, BETTER GOVERNED OR WORSE GOVERNED THAN THE FOLLOWING COUNTRIES?"

	MPs				Population			
	Worse	Same	Better	NA	Worse	Same	Better	NA
USA	90,2	5,5	0,6	3,7	84,8	1,1	0,8	13,3
Russia	10,4	28,2	57,1	4,3	32,0	27,4	22,3	18,3
Greece	51,5	33,1	11,0	4,3	74,2	6,3	2,2	17,4
Germany	87,7	5,5	3,7	3,1	85,9	1,3	0,8	12,0
Albania	3,7	14,7	77,9	3,7	8,0	27,7	42,1	22,2
Romania	4,3	34,4	57,7	3,7	14,3	40,5	26,1	19,1
Japan	90,2	3,1	2,5	4,3	83,0	0,8	0,3	16,0

Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

EVALUATIONS OF DIFFERENT MODELS OF GOVERNMENT

Regarding citizen participation in decision-making on important state matters, public opinion and MPs appear to be in agreement. Over 70% of both groups agree that the Government should periodically consult the public and make decisions that are popular with the majority of the population. The differences between the citizens and MPs are particularly striking when it comes to the use of referenda for the approval of the most important government decisions. While more than two thirds of Bulgarians agree with the use of this method, approximately the same part of MPs reject it.

More than half of the citizens and the MPs cannot accept the absence of any public control over the activities of the executive. Citizens and MPs also tend to agree regarding the need for a better electoral system. Over 70% support the view that a change wherein MPs would be elected directly, rather than through party lists, would help enhance the mechanism of recruitment of the political elite.

TABLE 5. “ON THE WHOLE, HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?”

	MPs			Population		
	Agree	Disagree	NA	Agree	Disagree	NA
The most important government decisions should also seek popular approval via a referendum	32,6	63,8	3,7	69,5	14,2	16,2
We should have a better electoral system in order to vote representatives directly, and not party lists.	71,8	27,6	0,6	75,5	5,0	19,5
Even between elections the government should read polls and take only measures which are popular with the majority of people.	72,4	25,1	2,5	80,6	5,7	13,7
People should mind their own business and let the government run the country as it sees best.	39,3	61,1	0,6	34,3	51,4	14,3

Base: N= 1161 (population)
Base: N = 163 (MPs)

OPINIONS ON THE ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

More than half of the citizens support two of the possible alternatives to the present form of government – expert government and presidential government. Opposite to public opinion, MPs decidedly reject these forms of government. Neither do they favor the possibility, when a given situation calls for it, for the Government to make decisions without prior parliamentary approval. Nearly half of the citizens, however, are inclined to support a temporary limitation of parliamentary prerogatives in favor of extended powers of the executive. The highest rate of agreement between the two respondent groups is demonstrated in connection with the possibility of replacing the legitimate government of the country with military rule. In this respect negative responses were given by the overwhelming majority of citizens (71.4%) and by nearly all of the MPs.

TABLE 6. “BY AND LARGE, HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?”

	MPs			Population		
	Agree	Disagree	NA	Agree	Disagree	NA
The President should be the one to really govern this country.	12,9	85,9	1,2	53,3	27,2	19,6
Instead of political governments we should have experts running the country.	19,0	80,4	0,6	56,9	16,8	26,2
This country would be better of if it were run by the military.	1,2	98,8	0,0	8,8	71,4	19,8
Government should not waste time with approval of the Parliament if there are emergency decisions to be made.	29,4	69,3	1,2	43,9	26,3	29,7

Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

PERCEPTIONS OF THE REASONS FOR THE FAILURES IN THE COUNTRY'S GOVERNMENT

According to the majority of citizens the main reason for Bulgaria to lag behind the other post-communist states is the performance of the political class as a whole, regardless of the specific party affiliation of its representatives or the government strategy pursued by any cabinet. This reason considerably surpasses the other and has been cited in equal measure by all age, social, and educational groups in Bulgarian society.

The above opinion is commonly held by MPs as well, but is not the most widespread one. More than half of them share the view that the legacy of the communist past is the chief reason for Bulgaria's lagging behind. Other important factors are the parties that succeeded the former communist party and western states and organizations.

TABLE 7. "SOME PEOPLE CONSIDER THAT OUR COUNTRY PERFORMED WORSE THAN OTHER POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES IN THE PAST DECADE. WHOSE FAULT DO YOU THINK WAS THAT?"

	MPs	Population
Fault of post-communist parties	54,0	25,3
Fault of anti-Communist parties	16,0	12,7
Fault of the political class in general	44,8	54,7
Fault of the heritage communism left	56,4	27,3
Fault of the Western countries and organizations for discriminating against our country	16,6	23,3
Fault of the people for not having worked hard enough	9,2	5,6
Fault of union leaders and other people who oppose reform	23,3	10,1
Other	6,1	3,9
No answer	2,5	16,7

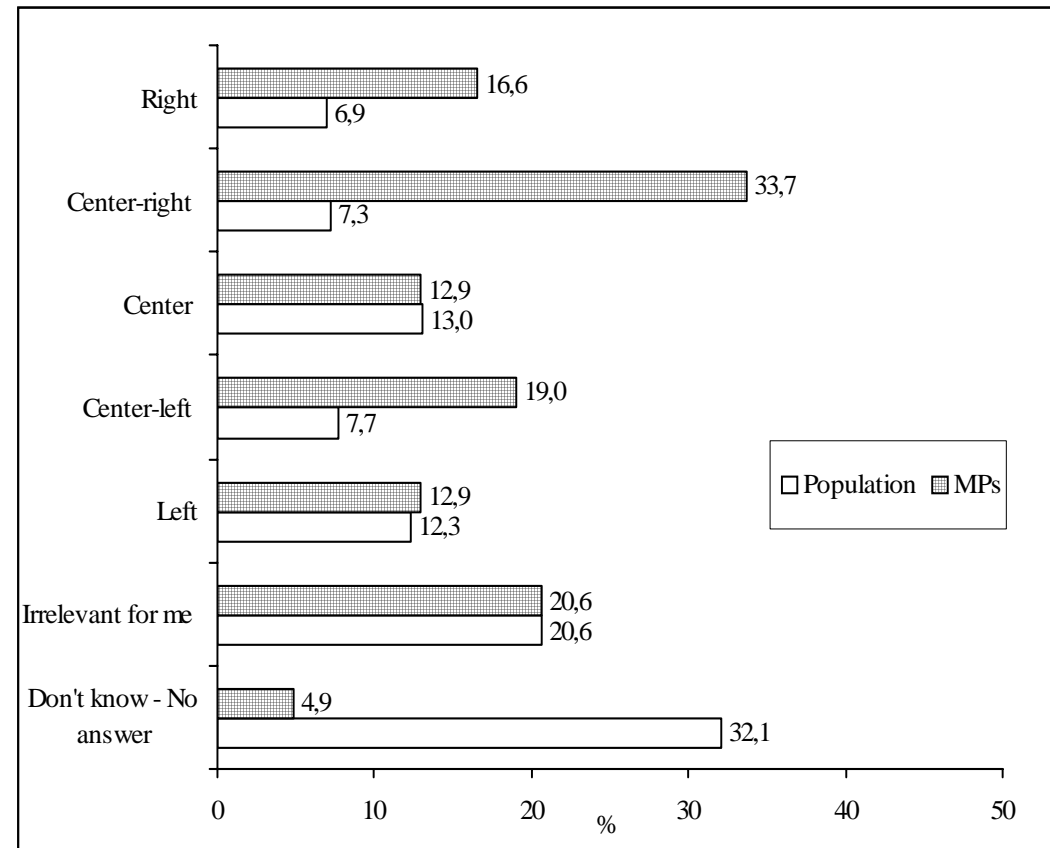
Base: N= 1161 (population)
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POLITICAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION

The MPs identify their political orientation on the left-right scale without any notable problems. However, more than half of the citizens are unable to define their political affiliation. It is worth noting that Bulgarians with leftist orientation are nearly twice as many as those leaning to the right. The political center has been gaining more and more supporters while there has been a substantial withdrawal from the extreme political views.

Political orientation, besides being a means of identification for MPs, constitutes a key factor in forming their personal perception of the government policy. Nearly 90% of the MPs who define their political beliefs as right wing are satisfied with the way Bulgaria is governed at present. All of the MPs with left-wing political orientation share the opposite view and declare their dissatisfaction with the present government.

FIGURE 4. “SOME PEOPLE CONSIDER THEMSELVES TO BE MORE TO THE RIGHT, OTHERS MORE TO THE LEFT. WHERE DO YOU PERSONALLY STAND ?”



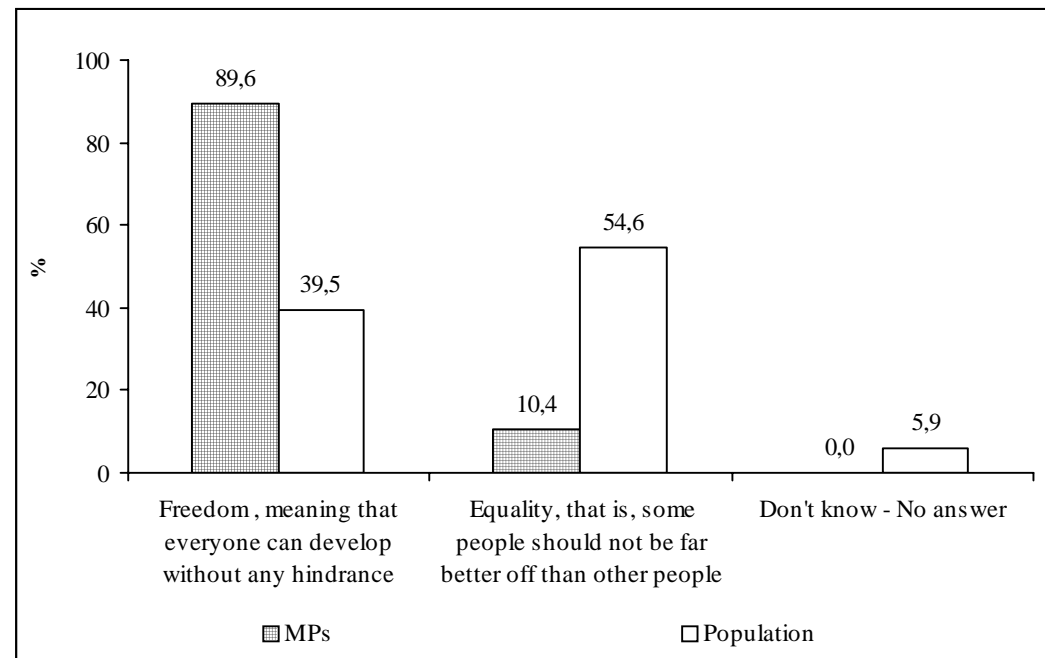
Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

THE TRADE-OFF BETWEEN FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

Through this indicator the survey revealed one of the biggest differences in the perceptions of the public and the political elite. More than half of the citizens cannot accept the existence of great economic differences between citizens. Even at present, among Bulgarians, egalitarian thinking considerably predominates over liberal attitudes. Such empirical observations explain why a substantial part of the Bulgarian population does not support the reforms under way in the country and does not accept the increasing stratification in Bulgarian society. The opinion of the MPs is quite the opposite. According to nearly 90% of them personal freedom is a more important value for social development than the equality between the people.

FIGURE 5. “I KNOW BOTH FREEDOM AND EQUALITY ARE IMPORTANT. HOWEVER, IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE, WHICH ONE WOULD YOU CONSIDER MORE IMPORTANT FOR YOU PERSONALLY?”



Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

NATIONAL AND ETHNIC TOLERANCE

There is a large degree of agreement between the citizens and the political elite regarding the need to preserve national independence in the governing of the country. The majority of the respondents definitely reject the possible intervention of a foreign country or an international organization in Bulgaria's domestic affairs. At the same time, approximately half the respondents from both groups share the view that there are territories of other countries that in principle belong to Bulgaria. The majority of the MPs and over half of the citizens do not support the view that the people who do not speak Bulgarian should not have the right to vote. Nevertheless, one fourth of the citizens (among the MPs this share is considerably smaller) demonstrate lack of political tolerance to the ethnic minorities in this country. Another common public attitude is that there exist certain groups in Bulgaria that pose a threat to the country's sovereignty and national security (nearly 44% of the public share this view). More than half of the MPs, however, do not see any internal threat to the country's national security.

TABLE 8. "NOW PLEASE TELL ME WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS COME CLOSE TO YOUR VIEWS OR NOT."

	MPs			Population		
	Agree	Disagree	NA	Agree	Disagree	NA
There are territories of our country within the boundaries of other countries.	50,9	40,5	8,6	45,6	25,5	29,0
The people who do not speak Bulgarian should not have the right to vote.	16,6	81,0	2,5	26,2	57,3	16,6
No foreign country or organization has the right to tell Bulgarians how to govern their own country.	73,6	25,7	0,6	72,5	16,7	10,8
There are groups living within this country which pose a threat to our sovereignty, national security and our borders.	36,9	58,9	4,3	43,5	24,1	32,4

Base: N= 1161 (population)

Base: N = 163 (MPs)

SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

The survey shows that there is a considerable divergence between the evaluations and perceptions of the Bulgarian public and MPs of certain key aspects of government.

1. General satisfaction with the manner in which Bulgaria is governed

More than half of the MPs are satisfied with the present government but barely 15% of the public shares such a view. Nearly 80% of Bulgarian citizens are disappointed with the manner in which the country is governed.

2. Effectiveness of the institutions of the legislative, judiciary, and executive, and the related social and professional groups.

In the opinion of Bulgarian citizens, most state institutions do not function effectively enough and the work of MPs, compared to the other professional groups, is characterized by the lowest level of effectiveness.

MPs assess the effectiveness of the executive and legislative powers as high and rate the effectiveness of their own activity highest.

3. Evaluations of the activity of Bulgarian Governments in different historical periods.

According to 44% of the MPs, Bulgaria has been governed best between the two world wars. The majority of the citizens however believe the country was governed best in the 1960-70s and the 1980s.

4. Political self-identification.

More than half of the citizens are unable to define their political affiliation. Nevertheless, the Bulgarians with leftist political orientation are nearly twice as many as those on the right, while 90% of the MPs define their political position as right-wing.

5. Distribution of egalitarian and liberal core values.

Among Bulgarian citizens egalitarian thinking predominates over liberal attitudes. The opinion of MPs is radically different – for nearly 90% of them personal freedom is more important than equality between the people.

Vitosha Research is the social and market research agency of the Center for the Study of Democracy. VR specializes in social and market research in the fields of privatization, social policies, economic, political and electoral behavior, value orientations and attitudes of Bulgarians, public opinion studies, surveys of media audiences and programs, advertising research and others.



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