ROMA

Key findings from the qualitative
and quantitative research

> *In the past years, we have seen different political parties in power. They always change, but none of them has ever shown any interest in the Roma community problems. I don't want anything on paper. I want acts – actual solving of real-life problems.*
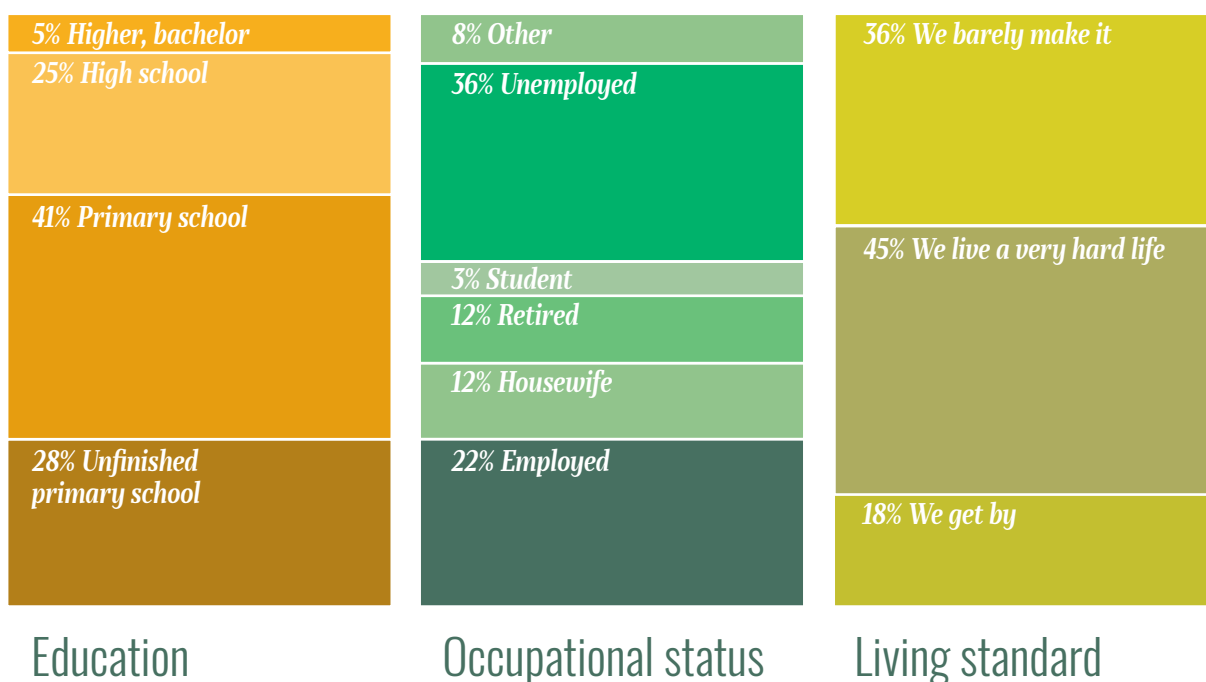> *Male, 40, Bitola*

Roma definition and size

According to the last official census in the country, conducted in 2002, a total of 2.7% of the population (53,879) identifies as Roma. North Macedonia's Roma population is the most vulnerable minority in the country and can be the target of electoral manipulation, including vote-buying.

Demographic profile

A total of 75 respondents took part in the quantitative face-to-face survey.

In order to gain an in-depth insight into the background, perceptions and opinions of the group, the quantitative survey was complemented by one focus group.

The surveyed individuals tend to have the lowest level of education in comparison to other groups. Although education is free in North Macedonia, there are still many costs associated with attending school. Compared to the general population and other demographic groups, this demographic group answered that they "live a very hard life" or "barely make it."

Education	Occupational status	Living standard
5% Higher, bachelor	8% Other	36% We barely make it
25% High school	36% Unemployed	
41% Primary school	3% Student	45% We live a very hard life
	12% Retired	
	12% Housewife	
28% Unfinished primary school	22% Employed	18% We get by

TOPICS OF INTEREST

Interest in the socio-political developments in the country

How interested are you in the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world?
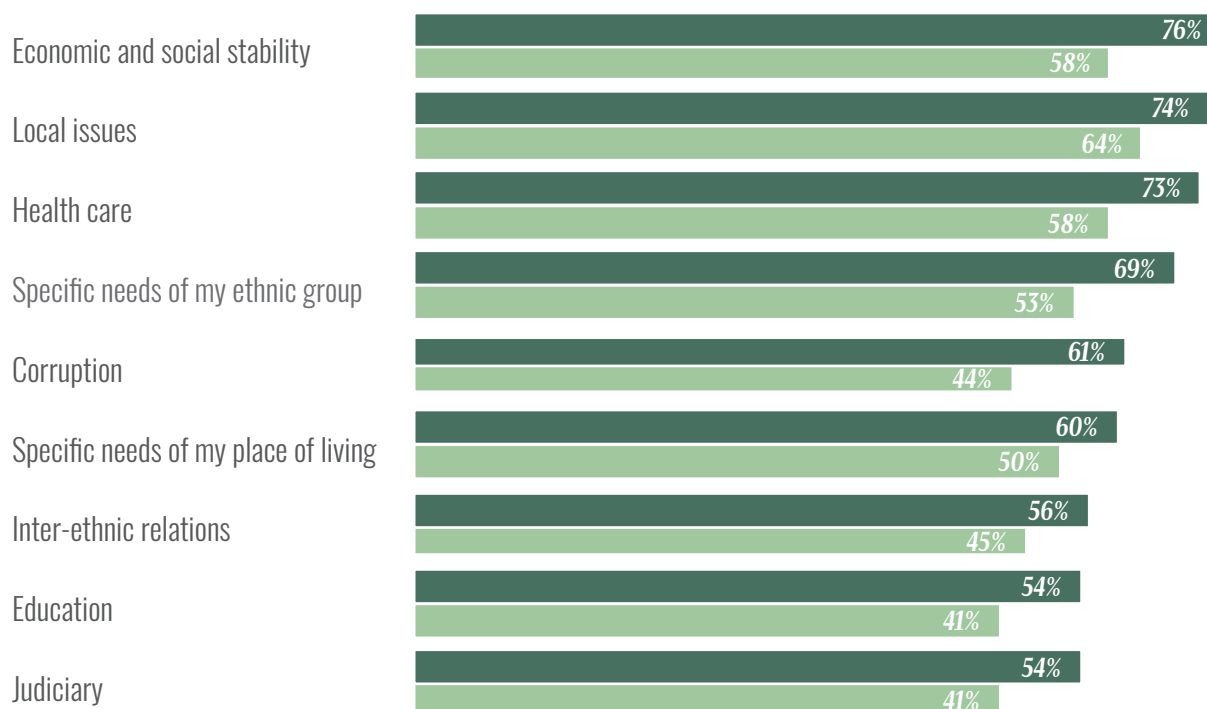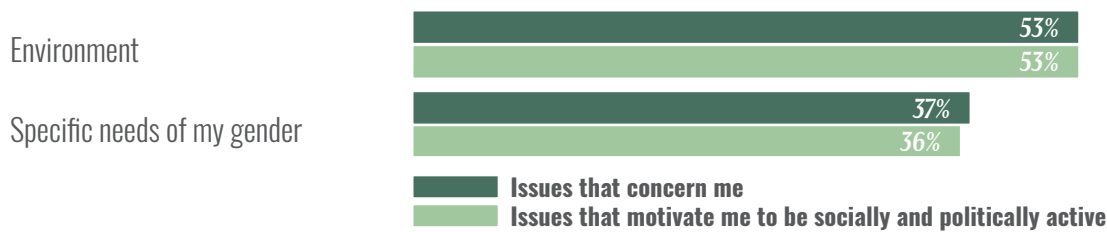
8%
Very interested

29%
Somewhat interested

30%
Not much interested

32%
Not at all interested

The research shows that 62% of the respondents are "not at all" or "not very interested" in the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world, while 37% are "very" or "somewhat interested". Almost half of the survey participants (45%) rarely or never discuss these issues with other people. Roma citizens with completed high school or university tend to be more interested in the current socio-political developments.

Concerns

How much would you say the following information/issues/topics concern you?
How much would you say the following issues/topics motivate you to be socially and politically active?

Topic		
Economic and social stability	76%	58%
Local issues	74%	64%
Health care	73%	58%
Specific needs of my ethnic group	69%	53%
Corruption	61%	44%
Specific needs of my place of living	60%	50%
Inter-ethnic relations	56%	45%
Education	54%	41%
Judiciary	54%	41%

Environment	53%
	53%
Specific needs of my gender	37%
	36%

■ **Issues that concern me**
■ **Issues that motivate me to be socially and politically active**

More than 70% of the survey participants indicated that economic and social stability, local issues, and health care rank the highest on the list of concerns specific to this group and are the key driving factors for their social and political participation.

The survey participants are the least concerned with the specific needs related to their gender, the environment, and the judiciary. They are also concerned with everyday problems relating to informal Roma settlements, construction of illegal buildings, lack of personal documentation, infrastructure, water supply and sewerage, social and health care.

INFORMATION SOURCES

The survey participants indicated that they are most interested in obtaining information about health care, education, employment, measures for socially vulnerable groups, as well as infrastructure, water supply, and sewerage. With regards to local issues and concerns, the focus groups participants were interested in the organisation of events and activities, as well as in obtaining related information.

> " *I am mostly interested in the daily developments at the local level, with regards to the economy, investments, healthcare and most importantly - employment. I am the least interested in the current events in the world.* "
> *Male, 29, Prilep*

Almost half of the participants (49%) indicated that television is their predominant source of information and two out of ten survey participants (predominantly of up to 34 years of age) indicated that they source information about socio-political developments via social networks. Nevertheless, a significant percentage of 21% are not informed at all.

Television is the predominant source of information, indicated by almost half of the respondents 49%

TV 49%
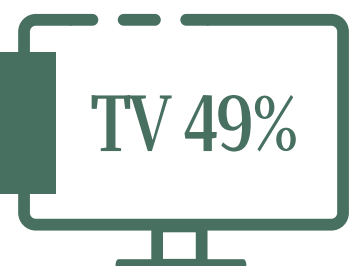
CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The majority of Roma survey participants are not interested in more active civic engagement.

Have you been involved in any event, activity, or process that could have effected change in the community or the place where you live?

28%
70%

Are you interested in more active civic involvement?

17%
80%
2%

0%   **100%**

Yes   No   Do not know

Participants with higher education and public sector employees indicated a higher interest in more active civic engagement.

Respondents indicated that health care, economic and social stability as well as local concerns are the primary issues that spark their interest for social and political activity.

The research shows that they are not very interested in politics (25%) and they don't believe that their civic engagement can effectuate change (41%), which is likely the reason for their lack of interest in active civic life.

Similarly to other population groups on the lower spectrum of income, many members of the Roma community are primarily focused on survival, with excessive energy and efforts directed towards addressing basic, existential problems. According to VOA[17] News, poverty is considered a major factor of voter discouragement. Nevertheless, poverty may also comprise grounds for civic mobilization and activism.

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17 "Election Brings No Hope to Macedonia's Roma-run 'Ghetto,' say Voters", Voice of America (December 9, 2016), available at: https://www.voanews.com/europe/election-brings-no-hope-macedonias-roma-run-ghetto-say-voters, accessed on October 21, 2020.

The survey participants indicated the following factors that inform their low civic involvement and civic participation:

- The non-governmental organizations dealing with problems of the Roma population are politically biased and divided.

- The Roma population is not united and organized.

- There are too many political parties representing the ethnic Roma population.

- Roma people are typically not educated, are very poor, and deal with persistent existential problems due to which they don't usually have time and resources for civic involvement.

- Roma population is not united and not organized.

- There are too many political parties representing the ethnic Roma population.

> *When I talk about the Roma population, there are several political parties and NGOs in each city. For example in Bitola, there are three presidents of political parties and 3 non-governmental organizations. So a total of 6 relevant people appear as 'leaders' of the Roma population. So who will point out the problems Roma people have? We need good management and focus on the current and priority problems of the Roma population.*
> *Female, 37, Bitola*

Factors that promote involvement

Personal or family benefits are the key motivators to become more involved in activities that could effectuate change in the community, as noted by one quarter of the respondents of this group. Other important motivating factors are related to the responsiveness of the system and the institutions (13%) and the representation of their interests (13%). In other words, issues perceived as abstract and political, outside of the remit of their quality of life – such as high-level corruption, EU reforms – are generally not the primary reasons for Roma community members to become active voters or active citizens. Seven out of ten respondents (68%) do not believe that they can make an impact as a citizen, while two out of ten (21%) believe they can make a meaningful impact in their municipality. Less than 5% believe they can influence the Prime Minister, the Parliament, ministers and the President of the country.

Willingness and ability to participate in civic activities

With regards to participation in public life, Roma community members are most willing to respond to a questionnaire (43%), read a brochure or a leaflet (29%) and meet colleagues/ friends to discuss personal or family issues (27%). Based on the focus group discussion, which confirms the findings of the field survey, the reasons for the low socio-political engagement are rooted in the overall marginalization of the Roma community, their existential problems, social divisions within their demographic group or polarization of the wider society, low level of education, excessive poverty, as well as general disappointment in politics and scepticism in their ability to effectuate change.

In which of the civic activities are you willing to participate?

43%
Respond a questionnaire

29%
Read a brochure or a leaflet

27%
Meet colleagues, friends to discuss

ELECTION PROCESS

Survey participants most often associate elections in the country with phrases such as "stealing again," "good acting," "empty promises," "asphalting" and "salary and pension raise."

Do you think that every vote is important and can affect the election results?	**56%** Yes	**33%** No	**11%** Refuses to answer

More than half of the respondents believe every vote is important and can impact election results (56%), while one third (33%) do not believe so, a percentage which is significantly higher compared to the general population (18%). Almost half of the respondents (48%) indicate that voting per se is not sufficient to engage citizens in policy changes, one third believe that voting is sufficient, while 17% claim ignorant on the issue. Overall, the survey data indicates a marginalization and distrust in mainstream politics among the Roma population.

Motivation to vote

How regularly do you vote?

| 44% regularly | 19% often | 19% sometimes | 5% usually not | 13% never |

Forty-four per cent (44%) of survey participants indicate they almost regularly vote, 19% often, 19% sometimes, 5% usually do not vote and 13% never vote.

Half of the survey participants (50%) vote for different political parties during different election cycles, while 27% regularly vote for the same party. This percentage is higher compared to all other demographic groups which shows that the Roma community can be vulnerable to manipulation.

Factors that influence their decision to vote

The top three factors that influence Roma people's decision to vote are: perception that voting is a civic right and duty (48%), personal interests and benefits (35%), and prospects for better future (31%).

48%
Civic right and duty

35%
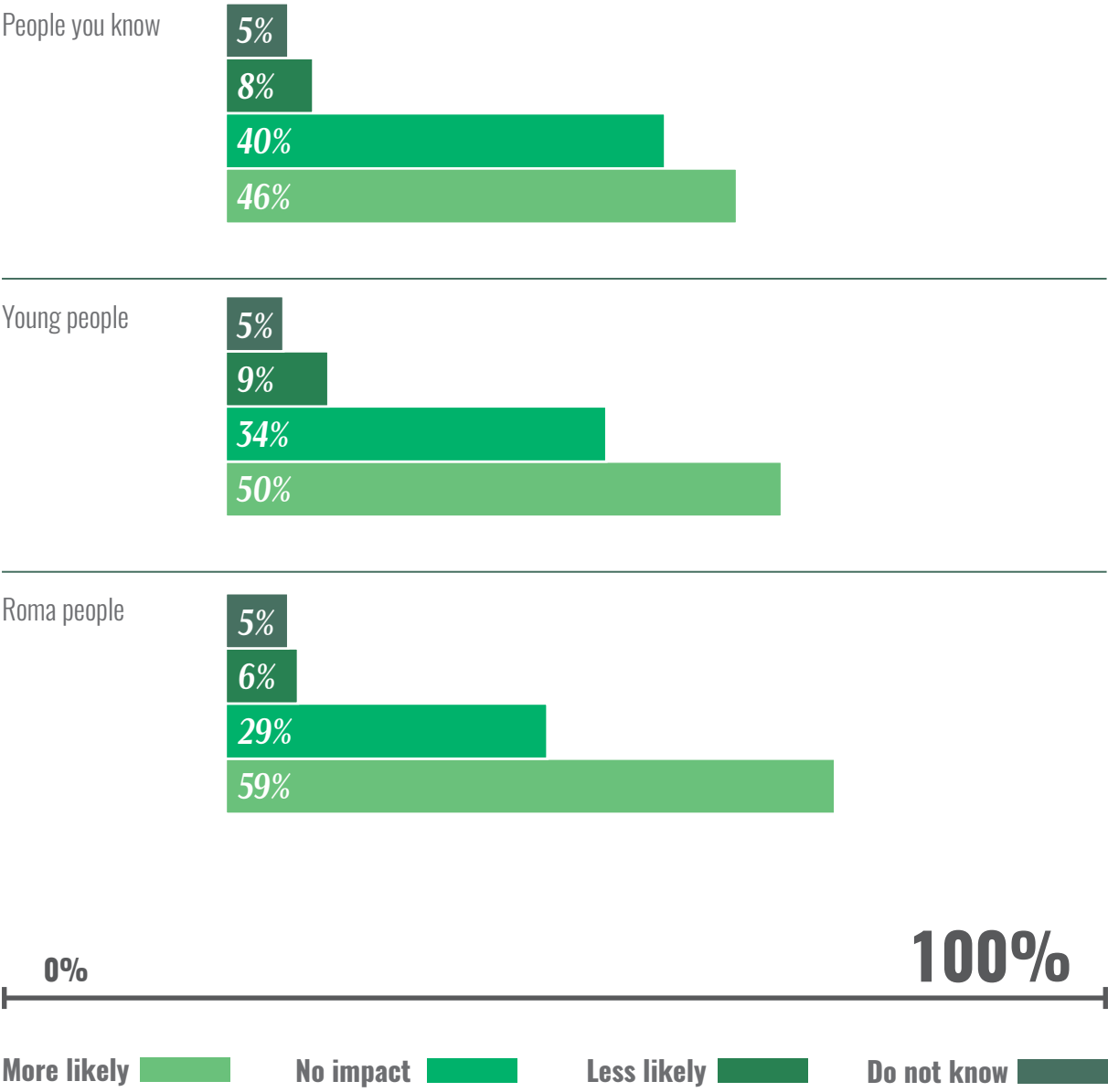Personal interests and benefits

31%
Better future

The focus group participants note that election irregularities are much more pronounced in their community compared to the other ethnic communities. These range from bribery, vote buying, sale of IDs for money, organized transport of voters to polling places with vehicles of the political parties and local police forces.

> *The gravest manipulations, bribery and pressures occur among the uneducated citizens who are most exposed to manipulation.*
> *Male, 40, Bitola*

Slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) indicate that their decision to vote is the same or most often the same as that of their families, while almost a quarter (24%) state that their decision is the same or most often the same as that of their friends.

The survey participants would like to see more representatives of Roma people, young people, and familiar people on the candidate or council lists.
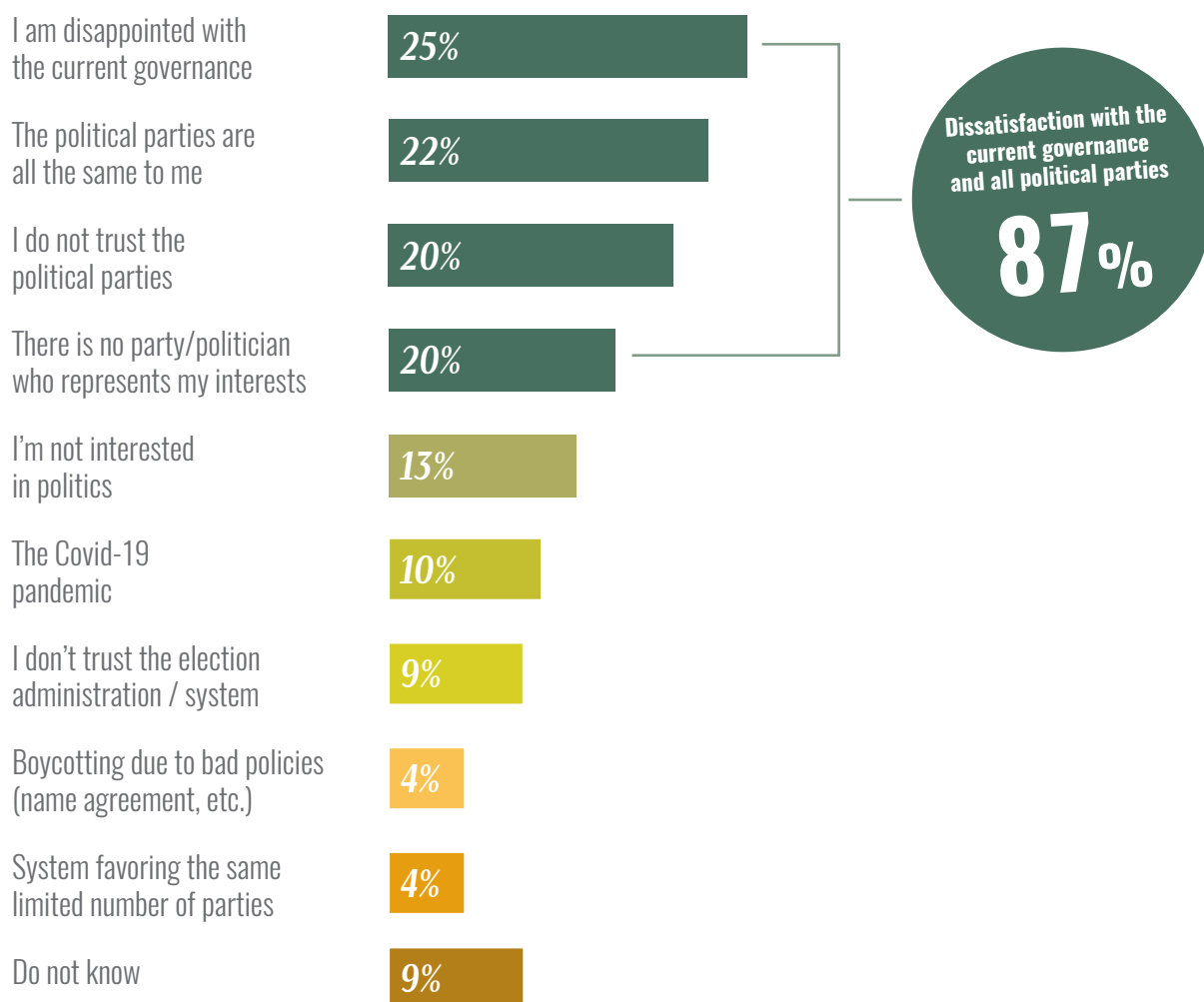
*If there are representatives of the following groups on the candidate lists,
how likely is it that you would vote for that political party?*

People you know
- 5%
- 8%
- 40%
- 46%

Young people
- 5%
- 9%
- 34%
- 50%

Roma people
- 5%
- 6%
- 29%
- 59%

0%   100%

More likely   No impact   Less likely   Do not know

Demotivation to vote

Dissatisfaction with the governance and the political parties is the key factor that influences the survey participants' decision to abstain from voting.

What can influence your decision not to vote?

I am disappointed with the current governance	25%
The political parties are all the same to me	22%
I do not trust the political parties	20%
There is no party/politician who represents my interests	20%
I'm not interested in politics	13%
The Covid-19 pandemic	10%
I don't trust the election administration / system	9%
Boycotting due to bad policies (name agreement, etc.)	4%
System favoring the same limited number of parties	4%
Do not know	9%

Dissatisfaction with the current governance and all political parties

87%

The survey results demonstrate that Roma people are faced with increased difficulties during the electoral process in comparison to other groups. They scored highest with regards to: voter list errors, voting under pressure, and lack of knowledge of voting procedures. These challenges make the Roma community the most vulnerable population with regards to election-related irregularities. A challenge which is specific to the Roma community concerns the issue of undocumented children and citizens. This issue requires systematic approach to stimulate and enable the voting process.

Another burning issue for this group is the lack of voter education and limited access to basic election information. For example, among others, they do not know how to check if their personal information is included in the voter lists.

COMMUNICATION WITH CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

Survey participants noted that newscasts (62%) and debates (16%) are the most practiced ways of finding information about elections.

Similarly to the other polled groups, Roma voters tend to rely on the previous track record of the politicians to make an informed decision in the period between elections. Other preferred methods of obtaining election information are in-person communication with party candidates and elected representatives as well as traditional media.

In addition, the survey participants would like political parties to:

- Fulfil pre-election promises - "at least 50% of them".
- Develop realistic party programs that are context-specific and responsive to the needs of the citizens.
- Unite around the most important national interests and overcome the COVID-19 crisis.

Where do you get information about election?

55%
TV

19%
Social Media

11%
Close people

8%
Web portals

8%
Don't get informed
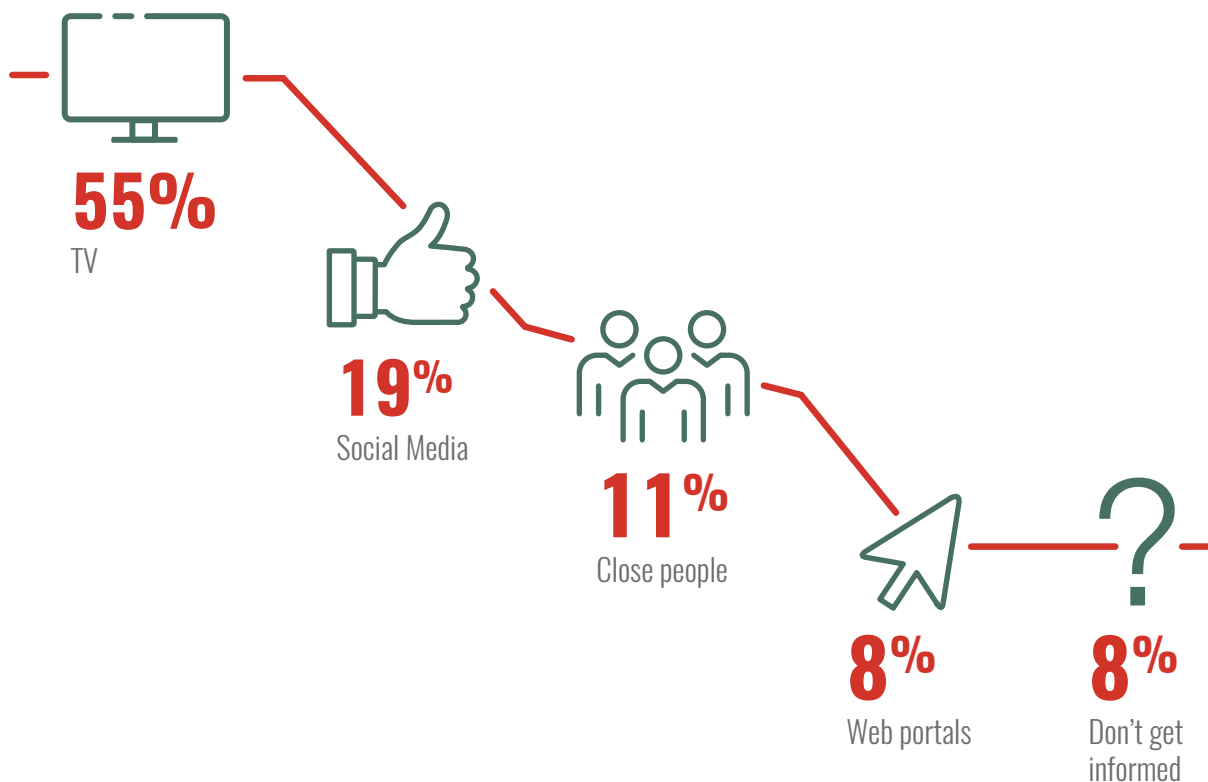
BARRIERS

The Roma population is faced with various social, political, and economic challenges that curtail their full integration and active participation in the society and the public life. Roma political and public marginalization is caused by many factors such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, substandard living conditions, language barriers, poor infrastructure, lack of resources, etc. a number of structural and social barriers are identified in this research:

> The political participation of every underrepresented or politically marginalized group (or lack thereof) is very important and should be addressed accordingly. Currently Roma are one of the most politically marginalized ethnic groups in North Macedonia.

Lack of knowledge and information to navigate the election process related to voter registration, voter list scrutiny, or reporting irregularities and manipulations

Lack of personal identification documents due to which Roma citizens are not included in the voter list

Insufficient understanding of political and electoral processes thereby limiting the interest in politics and political participation of Roma citizens with lower social status and/or educational background

Low level of involvement due to preoccupation with existential issues

Difficulties relating to abstract political and civic topics seemingly irrelevant to everyday life

Scepticism about their power to influence politics and policies in the country

Underrepresentation in state administration and perception that their concerns are not addressed by those who represent them

Lack of skills to confidently participate in political and civic life and lack of awareness of the need to participate. These are also influenced by existing divisions, lack of unity and structure among Roma political activists and within the community

Limited access to information and education due to limited resources: finances, time, living standard as well as skills such as literacy, digital literacy, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these identified challenges and barriers, a set of interventions are recommended that may effectively contribute to improve civic and political participation of the Roma population in the country:

Continue and expand on civic education efforts

- Focus on outlining the benefits of civic engagement, forms and channels for participation, improved understanding of voting rights and Election Day activities. Stress the importance of the individual vote - its value and potential impact, the connection with a better quality of life, or protection of voting rights.

- Conduct information and education campaigns in the Romani language, in addition to the official language(s) of the country. Employ non-conventional approaches including direct meetings, radio programs, visual and illustrative presentation of printed materials, neighbourhood campaigns, community leader's partnerships to reach communities and individuals with literacy issues.

Raise awareness of the importance of the election process

Encourage political parties, public authorities, and the media to promote issues of interest and relevance for Roma population such as: unemployment, informal Roma settlements, illegal buildings, infrastructure problems, water supply and sewerage, social and health problems.

- Conduct single-issue campaigning targeting Roma communities that address relevant policy issues or upcoming political decisions.

Strengthen their belief that they can make an impact in the community or society

- Promote positive examples of prominent Roma activists and their impact. Use examples that prove that activism matters and has the power to influence/improve and influence the society.

- Promote micro community projects and initiatives that tackle various issues of concern specific to the Roma community.

- Consider different formats such as testimonials, third-party stories, local community projects facilitated by political parties or organizations.

Alleviate the negative perception of being underrepresented by elected officials

- Include and keep Roma-related issues in the public agenda of relevant political representatives.

- Follow-up and periodically check on the issues the Roma community is facing in the period between elections.

- Encourage Roma politicians and activists affiliated to the major political parties to advocate for the Roma community's needs.
- Use a variety of engagement tools such as regular open days in the community as a channel for two-way communication, promotion of Roma-specific issues on the social media.

Promote tailored communication for the younger Roma population

- Engage young, educated people as a link between the political parties and the wider Roma community.
- Harness the potential of personal contact to influence, educate, and help voters to navigate the electoral process.

Create alliances:

With non-government organizations, in cooperation with the authorities or independently, to:

- Inform and educate about the voting process and improve voter registration.
- Improve Roma representation in NGOs and other entities that advocate for Roma rights
- Strengthen the capacities, position and networking of NGOs within Roma community to increase their credibility and power to influence.

With the media (digital and traditional)
- Promote narratives focused on positive and successful examples of Roma activists.
- Promote new channels and avenues for civic participation of the Roma community.
- Educate and inform about the importance of voting, mechanisms to protect the voting rights and navigate the voting process during elections.
- Educate and raise awareness about electoral irregularities, violence, and hate speech.

Use relevant communication channels and apply both traditional and non-conventional approaches

Use TV to reach the Roma population

- Use formats that give opportunities to contextualize the information and increase its relevance.
- Consider other communication formats in addition to newscasts e.g. debates, editorials, short stories and testimonials portraying local concerns and providing perspective into the voting process.
- Focus on TV stations airing programs in the Romani language, as well as local TV stations

- Whenever possible, present illustrative information in Romani language, particularly with regard to the voting process, voting rights, reporting election irregularities.

Organize face-to-face meetings or other community events

- Use a variety of formats for direct interaction such as small gatherings, local informal meetings to build trusting relationships with Roma voters and increase their perception of self-appreciation and importance.
- Propose community projects or activities with potential of gathering people or specific groups from the community.

Pilot other non-traditional channels

- Consider ways to reach Roma community members in their daily lives in order to disseminate information, including in buses, at bus stations, local stores, open markets, barber shops, inside food packages, bags, etc.

Use social media to increase participation and influence, particularly of young Roma population through:

- A more personalized and direct communication based on demographics, location, and interest.
- Promotion of relevant topics and issues for Roma communities.
- Engagement of the young Roma community through focused discussions via commentaries, polls, forums, live video debates, etc.
- Higher communication frequency.
- Increased information relevance by using the potential of the influencers about the voting process, elections, and civic life.