



# Anti-Corruption Efforts in North Macedonia: Strategies for Building Constructive Engagement

By the Topos Partnership  
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## Executive Summary

This research, undertaken by Topos for the Open Society Foundations, was conducted among the general public of North Macedonia to understand how they think about corruption and good governance and how they respond to different ways of talking about the issues.

The research—with a diverse cross-section of the population consisting of 120 in-depth interviews conducted in Macedonian and Albanian, as well as more than 50 online surveys—was designed to discover ways of communicating on the topic that encourage regular citizens to engage and support anti-corruption work. In principle, there are many ways to approach the topic—from a focus on successful prosecutions of officials, to a focus on the harms of corruption, or the problems with pervasive “petty corruption” in North Macedonian life, or a focus on the benefits of good government. A key question for the research was which of these many lenses on the issue promotes the most constructive thinking among audiences, and can serve as a helpful way to frame conversations about the many particular topics communicators may like to address.

## Opportunities

While citizens of North Macedonia are very unhappy about what they perceive as rampant corruption in the country, there are some silver linings and opportunities in their current, default thinking related to the topic.

*Importance of functional systems:* They have a clear sense—greater than in the U.S., for instance<sup>1</sup>—that public systems of education, health care, justice, finance, and so on are important for people’s well-being, and that when these systems are dysfunctional there are concrete, negative consequences.

*Desire for transparency and consistency:* They see clear, fair, consistent operation of government systems as obviously important, partly because problems related to transparency and consistency affect their daily lives. There is a clear vision of direction in which systems need to change.

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<sup>1</sup> The project includes research in three countries: North Macedonia, Brazil and the United States. At the time of writing, research in the U.S. is complete while research in Brazil is still underway.

*High corruption not “normal”:* They see abuses by the powerful as unacceptable behaviors, very distinct from the kinds of things ordinary people do—problems that could be eliminated without fundamentally changing the North Macedonian way of life.

*Big-picture harms to the country:* Citizens of North Macedonia recognize that high-level misuse of official power makes it harder for the country to prosper and progress, and contributes to problems like stagnant wages, inferior health care and education, and younger people leaving for opportunity elsewhere.

*Openness to the idea of public power:* Despite discouragement, people continue to hope that public pressure actually can be an important force in pushing for good governance that benefits people.

## Challenges

Of course, there are also significant cultural challenges when trying to engage audiences constructively on topics related to corruption.

*Irrational to change everyday behaviors:* Citizens of North Macedonia perceive improper uses of petty bribes (*mito*) and personal connections (*vrski*) as characteristic of daily life in their country. These are largely if reluctantly accepted as means, for those with access to them, of getting important services such as medical appointments, or favorable treatment from people like university professors. *Mito* is also seen as a way of compensating helpful workers not paid enough to get buy on. A key challenge for communicators is that *the idea of changing these practices makes no sense as long as the systems in question don't function in clear, fair, effective ways.*

People also perceive that their success and survival in the work world, and/or that of their family and friends, may depend on the good favor of powerful political parties. Once again, it is difficult to ask people not to curry favor with party officials if they perceive this as the only way to protect themselves or loved ones.

*Powerlessness, Negativity, Disengagement:* Citizens of North Macedonia tend to feel there is nothing they can do about high-level corruption, no matter how much they would like to. The problem is vast—a perception reinforced by a steady stream of news stories emphasizing problems but not solutions—and they are powerless spectators or victims, who sometimes seem to suffer from “learned helplessness.” In this context it makes sense to complain, but not to engage or act.

*Politicization of (anti-)corruption:* A perception of rampant public corruption makes coherent political discourse about the topic very difficult. It is easy in this context to either believe unsubstantiated accusations (“Of course, all politicians are corrupt!”) or to discount legitimate problems (“Opponents will say anything to gain a political advantage!”).

## Recommended Approach

The research identified a promising way for communicators to navigate cultural challenges and engage citizens of North Macedonia in constructive thought, dialog, and ultimately action.

Effective communications emphasize the following idea:

***Public systems and institutions can and do create the outcomes that people of North Macedonia want, when citizens effectively insist that they do their job well.***

The important added element that makes this core idea compelling is “success stories”:

***Specific public systems are changing, modernizing, and creating important benefits, partly because of public pressure to do so.***

In short, compelling example(s) are an important tool for conveying an important core idea.

Communicators can put audiences in a constructive and hopeful frame of mind about good government outcomes, and set up conversations that can include explicit anti-corruption ideas, if they use the right kinds of examples:

*Focus on success* – rather than forefront problems, which reinforces pessimism.

*Real world* – Good governance isn’t just hypothetical or aspirational.

*Systems* – It is helpful to focus on pushing systems to achieve what they are supposed to, as opposed to focusing only on good or bad actors.

*Manageable challenges* – rather than start with a focus on government and society as a whole.

*Outcomes people care about* – People want corruption punished, but are even more interested in things like timely health care, clean air, fair schools. Examples reinforce that all of these come from government that operates in the public interest.

*Role for regular people* – People do have an active role to play, as leaders of change or as crucial supporters.

*Modernization* – Examples that refer to new technologies or new developments, for instance, are a source of pride, and also reinforce that a generational shift in practices is possible.

The following is just one example of how communicators might use a success story to convey the core idea, and then bridge to the topic they want to focus on.

Sample language:

*New technology and new ways of sharing information are helping citizens of North Macedonia push for government to do positive things. For example, in 2014 Gorjan Jovanovski launched “AirCare,” an app that shows real-time air pollution levels in different regions. As a result, thousands of people demanded government action, leading to the “Plan for Clean Air.” We should remember this example when we think about improving not just air quality, but [XXX]. If people push for specific demands, we can make sure government is working in our best interest—not just with pollution, but in other ways.*

Importantly, this approach *should not be seen as endorsing current government practices*, but rather pointing out that good government is *possible* under the right circumstances. It is very

compatible with a critique of government, and the explicit or implicit premise for the communication is always that *current government practices are problematic, but improvement is realistically possible*. Communicators can choose their own ways of signaling this perspective, in order to ensure that the message is not misunderstood as an unrealistic or propagandistic claim that “all is well.”

## Missing the Mark

The recommended approach is much more helpful than other approaches that were tried in the testing. For instance:

*Focusing on the nature/definition/extent/harms of corruption* – simply reinforces feelings of frustration and disempowerment.

*“Success stories” about people being punished* – don’t address the core perception of widespread abuse, even if one individual gets caught.

*A primary focus on the public will* – can lead back to putting blame on the public for “allowing” corruption to happen, or can lead to public “demands” for undesirable outcomes.

*Focus on generational change* – i.e. the idea that younger people want more honest and transparent government – can leave many feeling there is no role for them, or that history will naturally take its course without public effort.

*Working against corrupt practices in daily life* – is ineffective because it doesn’t address the dysfunctional systems people must somehow navigate.

The body of the report, plus additional products from the project, offers greater detail about challenges and opportunities, but the core promising outcome from the research is an approach that can allow communicators to engage audiences in new, more energized, informed and constructive ways.

## Introduction: What is the Conversation About?

Everyone agrees that North Macedonia has a problem with corruption. Widely acknowledged problematic practices range from the familiar, everyday bribes (*mito*) and reliance on connections (*vrski*) to the widespread cronyism, racketeering and abuse of political influence that takes place among elites.

In recent years, the population has shown a willingness to engage actively with the problem. The 2016 “Colorful Revolution” was in large part a popular reaction to corruption and official impunity, and there was broad-based enthusiasm for Katica Janeva’s Special Prosecutor’s Office as a way of dealing with high-level graft and racketeering. In the end, the Colorful Revolution succeeded in removing a government, but did not seem to change the prevailing dynamics of corrupt behavior, and the spectacular collapse of the Prosecutor’s Office amid a bribery scandal—during the course of this project—has severely impacted people’s optimism that they can secure for themselves an honest, transparent government.

One of the key goals of the project has been to explore what kind of conversation can (re)engage audiences in constructive ways, so that change in the country is more likely. How can we revitalize public commitment to action on this front? Should this be a discussion of the nature of corruption? of anti-corruption? of popular power and democracy? of clean government? of effective public systems? of the rule of law? of daily life?

The results of the research establish that the answer is less about the words that are used, and much more about the concepts and the story at the heart of the communications. In particular, this narrative must include reminders of the important, valued outcomes that citizens of North Macedonia feel they deserve from their public systems, it must support the idea that public choices and actions matter, and it must highlight real-world successes where rules and systems have been put in place to keep systems on the right track.

The challenges are deep when communicating about the topic, but the research shows that citizens of North Macedonia are open to reconsidering their discouragement about change, given the right conversation.

## Research Approach

Developed over nearly twenty years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

Throughout our unique research process, the focus is on exploring—and ultimately finding ways of shifting—the current “cultural common sense” that shapes thinking on a given issue. In order to make progress, we need to understand the widely shared (mis)understandings, values and perceptions that are currently standing in the way of action and engagement; and we need to develop communications approaches that reach people at this same level.

To change the cultural common sense, ideas must be clear, compelling and “sticky,” and must offer a new perspective that leads to new conclusions and actions.

In this case, our approach for exploring these questions included a combination of several methods.

### In-depth Conversations

The earliest phase of research entailed 128 in-depth conversations—in-person from January through February 2020, and by phone or internet beginning in March due to the COVID-19 epidemic. Research subjects included a mix by gender, age, and political orientation. The research was divided evenly between Macedonian and Albanian speakers and drew on people from all around the country. Conversations—mostly one-on-one but also in small groups—ranged from 30-60 minutes and were recorded for close analysis.

These interviews, based on principles of cognitive anthropology and linguistics, yield insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. The goal of these semi-structured interviews is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. One of the key goals of Topos’s approach to interviewing is to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproduce opinions they have stated or may have heard before. Put briefly, this analysis focused on how people think rather than what they think.

### TalkBack Testing

Building on the insights from earlier conversations and analysis, in TalkBack Testing over 70 research subjects each read three brief texts (80-150 words), and responded to questions and attempts to repeat the content. In May and June 2020, 7 different texts were tested in both Macedonian and Albanian versions.

This unique approach developed by Topos principals allows us to determine how people interpret an idea, as well as the viral quality of an idea: does it “stick” and can people pass it on to others? In short, TalkBack testing is a tool for determining whether an idea is clear and memorable, whether it leads to the right kinds of thinking and can serve as an effective

“organizing idea” for communications. This is a far higher bar than most research methods attempt to achieve, but one that we feel is essential to developing a truly effective communications strategy, with potential to shift the culture. An idea has no potential for this kind of impact if people don’t remember and actively use it.

### **Note on Macedonian and Albanian language research**

Research was conducted in both the Albanian and Macedonian languages, but on this issue at least there were no strong differences between Albanian and Macedonian speakers in their thinking concerning corruption. The issues around the petty use of bribery and personal connections are common among all ethnicities in the country, as is the desire to see the country function better and more fairly for all of its citizens.

## Opportunities

There are several promising aspects of North Macedonian citizens' current, default thinking related to corruption that provide interesting openings to build on.

### Importance of functional systems

Citizens of North Macedonia have a relatively clear sense—greater than in the U.S., for instance—that public systems of education, health care, justice, finance, and so on have important, constructive roles to play in society and in their own lives.

They are equally clear that dysfunctional systems are having a negative impact on their country and the lives of individual North Macedonian citizens.

*[To make] a minimal living for an individual and especially a family here in our country it's a problem. No jobs, unstable economy, no state aid, no benefits. But abroad, in Europe this minimum is guaranteed to them. I believe that young people have left for a better life . . . including cleaner air, better living, better health care, and so on. (36-year-old woman, right leaning, Gostivar)*

*Society can't move forward, it can't develop economically due to these reasons. I think that mito and corruption affect society because for a certain group of people it is favorable for the majority to be in poverty and kept in ignorance and economically dependent on institutions and politics, so that they can profit. (42-year-old man, Kocani<sup>2</sup>)*

*[People] think they will have a safer life [abroad] even if they won't work in their profession. I think the cream of the young people have fled, and I see that politics is not taking measures to stop this. (25-year-old man, Tetovo)*

There is no hesitancy about insisting that people have a right to proper service from government systems—again, quite different from in the U.S.

### Desire for transparency and consistency

Like experts in this area, the North Macedonian public sees transparency and fair application of rules and oversight as common-sense requirements for us to achieve fairer and more effective governance—particularly because problems related to transparency and consistency play out in ways that affect daily life.

*I think most people leave not because of the economic factors but the lifestyle they are forced into. Whether they get fairer treatment there or not, I don't know. (Participant in focus group)*

*Those are the countries where the young people from Macedonia go to, or dream of going to: countries where you can prosper, because you are well educated, because you are an expert, a good doctor, a good teacher—a place where all of this is valued and recognized. (41-year-old woman, Struga)*

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that not all participants shared their political leanings.

*... I have given up on a career in Macedonia. The topic [respecting the queue] should be very important for the country, but I don't think that there is any law and order here" (31-year-old man, Eastern Macedonia)*

The bright side of these frustrating challenges is that there is a clear vision of direction in which systems need to change.

## High corruption not “normal”

Unlike daily acts of petty bribery, for instance (see next section), abuses at the top are not seen as typical of North Macedonian life. Rather, when powerful people abuse their positions in order to enrich themselves or help their friends, these are seen as unacceptable behaviors and very distinct from the kinds of things ordinary people do.

*Those two words are very close according to me, mito and corruption. However, racketeering is something completely [different]—it’s at a higher level. ... Racketeering is from the film Godfather." (52-year-old woman, Skopje)*

*Metastasis in a society—the impact of corruption is the dysfunction of a society, of the state. Racketeering is the highest crime... (47-year-old man, center-leaning, Tetovo)*

In principle, at least, this means government corruption should be punishable and preventable.

## “Big-picture” harms to the country

The topic isn’t just about daily or personal frustrations. When average North Macedonian citizens consider public corruption, they often feel that the widespread misuse of official power is at the heart of their country’s failure to advance and progress. Problems like low and stagnant wages, inferior health care and education, a younger generation leaving for opportunity elsewhere, are all evidence for North Macedonian citizens’ sense that they are stuck in place, unable to get their country moving forward.

*In a country where there is so much bribery and corruption, as I think there is in the country, I think it can hardly prosper. When taxes are evaded, health and other institutions cannot prosper, and one of the basic problems is the non-functioning of the judiciary system, i.e. justice. (49-year-old woman, center-left leaning, Skopje)*

*So we as citizens who have decided to stay and live in this country are... victims of all of those events. If the social structure is destroyed, then there won’t be a state, nothing will exist. Simply said we... I don’t know how to say this—maybe it’s best if I say that we ourselves cut the branch we stand on. If there are no more people in these areas, there won’t be a state, there won’t be any officials, nothing. (30-year-old man, left-leaning, Prilep)*

*Without money nobody cares about the sick person. Even if they are 70 or 80 years old, they won’t look at them if they aren’t treated to something. The staff, the doctors—they won’t look at him. Doesn’t that person have a right to live? (42-year-old woman, right-leaning, Skopje)*

While depressing in some important senses, this recognition of the real harms of a corrupt system places citizens of North Macedonia ahead of many in the United States, for instance, who may resent corrupt politicians yet see no specific harms to themselves from unethical practices.

## Openness to the idea of public power

Despite the discouraging track record, there is a lingering hope that public pressure actually can be an important force in moving the country forward, toward good governance that benefits people.

*If nothing else at least we learned [from the Colorful Revolution] that protests can change the situation—if a person fights for their rights or for what they think is their right, that they should protest and not believe that in our country nothing will change anyway. So our thinking has changed in terms of whether or not something can be achieved by protest. (43-year-old woman, center-left leaning, Skopje)*

*In general, we can say there is improvement in some aspects [since the Colorful Revolution]. ... There is a political peace in terms of interethnic relations which are not in the spotlight as they were before. (46-year-old man, Skopje)*

*What do you mean average people don't have the power to go against parties and corrupt leaders? We need to become aware that the power is in the average person and his capacity for collective consciousness. If we all have enough trust in each other and hold to one idea that is opposite to that of the parties, for example we don't like their policies, their use of the people... we need to collectively go against that, be prepared for pressure, the crisis that will follow, but go against the bad system to the end (24-year-old woman, Gevgelija)*

## Challenges

The following patterns observed consistently in the research constitute challenging aspects of the cultural/cognitive landscape that must be navigated.

### A culture of everyday corruption: navigating dysfunctional services

It is difficult to ask or expect people to change everyday acts of corruption (sometimes called “petty corruption” in the social science literature), if they regard these as the best or only way to meet ordinary needs. Media reporting often reinforces this sense of pervasive corruption:

There are some cases in which people may refuse to give bribes even if that means that they won't get a certain service, for example the administration not resolving their case on rightful ownership. But when it comes to health, that's an existential issue which they can't give up on and that's why the bar is lower there. (Malinovski, Trpkovski, G. Zivot so korupcija – nesigurnost, nebulozi i nepravdi, Prizma.mk, 30.04.2020)

The research confirms that citizens of North Macedonia see their culture afflicted from top to bottom with corrupt practices. People may feel that they need to give *mito* to a doctor or nurse for better treatment; a student may buy expensive books from a teacher to ensure a better grade; a person will resort to personal connections—*vrski*—within a bureaucracy to bypass confusing procedures or long waiting periods.

*There's a rule in Macedonia: it's not important who you are, but who you know. Nothing without vrski. So, vrski are a way of communicating—you have your own man, you don't take the right path and through vrski try to get something you need, get something done faster. (45-year-old man, center-left leaning, Gostivar)*

*...The key of everything is call someone and get a job done...I feel ashamed sometime, but this is it...this is a result of political parties, they spread their forces everywhere.” (36-year-old woman, left-leaning, Tetovo)*

*Macedonia is the mother of corruption and racketeering. Everyone familiar with life in Macedonia will tell you so! We witness it every day.... Mito and Vrski...Both are very wrong! Unfortunately it has become normal in our society. People that use mito and vrski are viewed as people who can manage things: resourceful. The worst part about using mito and vrski is that it has become so normal that people have started to praise it as if it was positive. (34-year-old man, left-leaning, Kichevo)*

People typically excuse or sympathize with these behaviors when they are seen to be an effort to get what one actually needs from institutions and bureaucracies that are not inclined to serve the public well—but rather to withhold fair and effective service. People acknowledge that *mito* or *vrski* are “wrong” in some sense, but also see them as understandable responses to dysfunctional systems.

*You have to look for friends to get something done. I have been in a situation where I had to carry my passport around for 6 months. Why? Because I couldn't get to the institution to get my picture taken for my identity card during working hours. We deal with those kinds of things. And in those moments you have to look for friends to get things done. (45-year-old man, center-left leaning, Gostivar)*

*In fact, in North Macedonia in order to get something done one first looks for possible “connections.” My colleague during my bachelor studies in Law failed in the exam twice because she was not prepared to pass it until she found a person that was a “well-known” judge in the district court in which he interfered to the professor using his authority; my colleague passed the exam with the highest mark possible without taking the exam but only by using her connections unfairly. (23-year-old woman, left-leaning, Tetovo)*

Research observation: When prompted to think about the ways to make a hypothetical institution less corrupt, one participant simply said “get institutions to work”—she explained further that there was no reason besides the poor financial status of employees for institutions to be inefficient. According to her, people wouldn’t have to engage in petty corruption if they didn’t need that to get basic tasks done. (53-year-old woman, right-leaning, Prilep)

Ordinary people also accept these behaviors because they believe many workers' salaries are too low, making it understandable that they would accept *mito* in order to supplement their income—another way in which systems are dysfunctional.

*Well I would define *mito* again as a reaction to a system that did not put into place correct norms and principles to correctly value people’s work. In essence that’s what it is. People are susceptible to *mito* mostly because they don’t make enough from their incomes. (30-year-old man, left-leaning, Prilep)*

*[There’s no nurse in this country that doesn’t take *mito* . . . ] Why is that? Because health care doesn’t work the way it should. There shouldn’t be [corrupt practices], she should have a salary that’s much higher. (30-year-old man, left-leaning, Prilep)*

## **Navigating a dysfunctional (“clientelistic”) work world**

It is also difficult to expect people to change their ways when they perceive them as the only way to get or keep a job. Many professionals understand that their career advancement has more to do with their relations to powerful people or political parties than it does to their merits and true qualifications. More generally, it is understood that political parties have so much direct and indirect control of hiring and other job-related decisions that the only way to get by or get ahead is through party connections.

*Nowadays you need to be obedient to the party. Primarily, you need to have family and friends in high positions—so they can find you a job. You can see that especially as people ask for employment in administration or state institutions. They want to be covered by the budget. And we all know who can get you a job under the budget, only those in power or those who have a few fingers in the government. (78-year-old man, center-left leaning, Bitola/Skopje)*

*You should have been a party member, i.e. at that time, a member of VMRO. Only in that way could a person be employed. I know in the time of VMRO, to get hired into the public city transport enterprise, 3,000 euros had to be given to people who are associated with the party. I guess part of the money goes to them, part goes to the party. In order to be hired into the Ministry of Interior, the police, 5,000 euros had to be given. It is a public secret. (49-year-old woman, center-left leaning, Skopje)*

The clientelism of employment also interferes with life in indirect ways, such as making it harder to hold people or institutions accountable for wrongdoing.

*First and foremost we need to have an evaluation system for the whole administration, health care and educational system, because in reality even in schools we have employment of people who aren't really competent to be teachers—I mean public schools. Every second person who gets a party membership, for example one of my university acquaintances who at 27 has no integrity to be a teacher . . . They are giving out jobs to anything and everyone as long as they have party memberships. (32-year-old woman, Skopje)*

*Most people in the public administration were put there by political parties. . . . If a person has entered that way, that's how they will continue working. Most of those people are unqualified for those jobs, so for two unqualified people you need to employ one qualified person to do their job. (26-year-old woman, Skopje)*

## Powerlessness and Negativity

While there are advantages to being aware of problems, there are also significant downsides. Citizens of North Macedonia are consistently pessimistic and cynical about a government they see as pervasively corrupt—a perception that is fed by a steady stream of negative news stories that focus on problems but not solutions.

Is the state consciously turning a blind eye when it comes to the rise of illegal construction in cities and protected areas, constantly shifting responsibility from one to another institution, in that way protecting the interests of individuals or groups close to certain political structures? (Tanevski S., Divite Gradbi Kako Sistemska Degradacija, Nova Makedonija, 25.07.2020)

A person doesn't have to be very informed to figure out that, with those profits, there is not one customs official, inspector, chief or minister in the Balkan area who can't be bought (or eliminated!) to modify the measurement instruments, to look "aside" when passing by a certain composition filled with waste or to act "clever" if an investigation or unscheduled check needs to be conducted. (Ordanoski S., Gjubreto e Chisto, a i odamna fino mirisa!, Civil Media, 21.01.2020)

In conversations with several journalists for the project, it was pointed out that journalism in the country still adheres to the old rule that "bad news is good for journalists." This is one reason news media frequently report on corruption, problematic situations or failures, while positive examples are less frequently mentioned.

In the end, citizens of North Macedonia tend to feel there is nothing they can do about high-level corruption, no matter how much they would like to. By themselves, they are powerless spectators or victims. They have watched recent popular attempts to fight corruption fail to create deep or sustained change.

*Sadly, although honestly we all had high expectations of the Colorful Revolution, starting with the student protests which in a way were the precursor of the Colorful Revolution and for older people to become aware of the situation... In the end it turned out that everyone has a price and anyone can be bought whether that is through money, an apartment or making available an expensive medical treatment... Unfortunately nothing changed, things just went on as they used to, just with different people. (28-year-old woman, left-leaning, Prilep)*

*For me, the biggest problem is that in these last years since the state's independence, there is a perpetuation of the ways and morals of how things used to work. And all of those things we call cultural—like vrski being a cultural thing—all those things are part of the old tradition and all these years nothing has changed because everyone practically functions in the same way (52-year-old man, center-right leaning, Skopje)*

Psychologists discuss the syndrome of “learned helplessness,” in which repeated failure and sense of powerlessness results in passivity and depression that persist even when conditions change and people do have a greater ability to act. For many citizens of North Macedonia, the constant drone of bad news about corruption scandals, the spectacular failure of the Office of the Special Prosecutor, the shortcomings of the Colorful Revolution, the continued influence of parties and politicians—all contribute to a sense that nothing will change no matter what they do.

This sense of powerlessness means that citizens of North Macedonia are more inclined to complain than to act. They are quite comfortable and articulate in discussing the problematic state of things, whereas solutions are off their radar, or can easily seem implausible. So people tend not to talk about or focus on possible actions and solutions, nor to get personally involved.

In principle, general powerlessness and negativity can also make it tempting to support a strong, individual leader who promises to personally take action to disrupt the system and end corruption—a “strongman” or some other outside force who may have little regard for democratic norms and civil society.

*If the leadership itself is corrupt, who would control it? So, we need someone from the outside. Maybe it is better for someone from the outside to come, but nobody on the outside is actually interested. You can't have someone else take care of your own people, right? (31-year-old man, center-right leaning, Skopje)*

*We have to fight, but how...Impossible, but if we had a special court with people from outside, not from MK, and I do not believe there are other options, it is the institutions that have to fight corruption and if they themselves are involved in corruption and nepotism how can we expect from them? (43-year-old man, Tetovo)*

## **Politicization of (anti-)corruption**

Finally, if people assume that all or most politicians and parties are misusing government systems, it is easy to believe accusations when they aren't true, or to dismiss genuine accusations because they can be written off as political manipulation. It is hard to sort out who is being honest about whom.

One gets the impression that the Anti-corruption committee publicly deals with all reports sent to it and opens cases without any kind of administrative filter or prior preparation. The Anti-corruption committee opens cases for easily verifiable false reports and reports based on speculations ... The easy acceptance of false reports put the committee in the service of party battles. (Apostolov, V. Antikorupciska vo potraga po jasen fokus, Prizma.mk, 21.05.19)

Political will is not expressed only through the adoption of laws in Parliament, [but also in having] institutions implement laws as they are written. We see strong politicization of the institutions which is actually reflected in the characterization of the state as a very weak democracy. (Stojancova P., Politikata e protiv nezavisni antikorupcioneri, Radio Slobodna Evropa, 29.01.2019)

## Recommended Approach

The research established several elements that are critical to dealing with the dynamics just discussed, and building support and engagement for action by individual North Macedonian citizens.

### Core idea

The core idea at the heart of the most effective communications is the following:

*Public systems and institutions can and do create the outcomes that North Macedonians want, especially when citizens are able to insist on it.*

And the most effective way to make this core idea compelling is by highlighting specific, successful cases that fit the following template:

*Specific public systems are changing, modernizing, and creating important benefits, partly because of public pressure to do so.*

In other words, communications are most effective when they use a compelling example(s) in order to convey the core idea. Even without a specific focus on “corruption,” this type of communication puts audiences in a constructive, engaged and hopeful frame of mind about government that is accountable and beneficial, and sets up conversations that can include explicit anti-corruption ideas.

### Not a claim that “all is well”

Note that the approach should not be confused with an endorsement of current leaders or practices. While it is important to convey that good government practices are realistically achievable, it is also important to avoid the impression of an unrealistic or propagandistic stance that “all is well.” Based on context, communicators can find many different ways of signaling the premise that *current government practices are problematic, but improvement is realistically possible*. For instance, this can be achieved with brief language such as, “There are some serious problems with how the current administration operates, but ...” or, “While there are good reasons to be frustrated with the way many government decisions are made ...” In the context of research conversations, it was always clear that corruption and other problems with government are real, and form an important background for any discussion of the topic.

### Characteristics to keep in mind

There are several elements that are important to the effectiveness of this approach.

*A focus on success:* Emphasizing problems only reinforces assumptions about widespread patterns of dishonesty, unfairness, and so forth. But a focus on successes can motivate people to shift to a constructive frame of mind. (Note that this doesn’t mean failures, etc., can’t be mentioned—only that it is more helpful to begin with and return to a focus on what success looks like.)

*Real world cases:* It is important to remind people that success and good governance *can be achieved in the real world*—not just as a matter of wishing or abstractions. Without

examples like these, virtually any ideas about good governance strike people as hypothetical or even implausible.

*Systems:* It is important to focus on improving *systems*, in order to steer away from a counterproductive focus on powerful actors, good or (usually) bad.

*Manageable challenges:* It is easier to understand and believe stories about specific victories and successes than to start by thinking about government and society as a whole. Conversations can then bridge to broader goals.

*Emphasizing positive outcomes that matter:* Citizens of North Macedonia want to see dishonest leaders punished, but they are even more interested in things like good, timely health care, clean air, and workplaces or schools that operate fairly. Communications should refer to positive outcomes that people want—and implicitly or explicitly reinforce the common-sense idea that good education, good medical treatment, durable bridges and so forth come from government that operates in the public interest.

*Role for the regular citizen:* To combat the sense of powerlessness, or the appeal of passively waiting for someone to rescue us from our plight, it is important to reinforce that when people join together, their actions and decisions have a crucial impact on whether we have good government or bad government. It is important to give people a role in the exercise of power—whether as the leader of change or as a crucial supporting element.

*Modernization:* Citizens of North Macedonia are often motivated by the idea that the country can move forward. Communications elements that refer to new technologies or new developments, for instance, are a source of pride, and also reinforce that a generational shift in practices is possible.

Importantly, the conversation doesn't have to be explicitly about "corruption" at all—instead it can be about the more positive and inspiring question of how we get the public systems we want and need.

## Sample success stories

The following are just two illustrations of how success stories can play out.

*New technology and new ways of sharing information are helping citizens of North Macedonia push for government to do positive things. For example, in 2014 Gorjan Jovanovski launched "AirCare," an app that shows real-time air pollution levels in different regions. As a result, thousands of people demanded government action, leading to the "Plan for Clean Air." If people get involved, and use new information and communication tools, we can make sure government is working in our best interest—not just with pollution, but in other ways.*

*The training and professionalism of medical workers has been improving in North Macedonia. Recently the first heart transplant operation was conducted in the country by our own surgeons and medical experts. The media likes to highlight corruption scandals, but what doesn't make the headlines is recent progress in creating fair, effective training and evaluation in our health service. Citizens and good government groups have pushed hard to make sure medical training*

*focuses on medicine—not on distractions like political influence and connections. Many other citizens of North Macedonia are pushing for this in their own professions as well.*

Sample public responses to success stories:

*Person A: If what we just talked about is implemented from the bottom up, then definitely. We will all definitively be content and less people will move abroad.*

*Person B: Because they will be content here. It's possible if some fundamental changes are made to this society and the way it functions.*

*Person C: Yes and then those changes will automatically trigger secondary changes so... and then in several generations we will get to a higher level. (28-year-old woman, center-right leaning, Skopje; two 29-year-old men, Skopje)*

## **Talking directly about corruption?**

Overall, the research confirms that a primary focus on corruption and bad behavior tends to increase despair and perception of being stuck in a hijacked state.

But when the focus is on successes, public choices and beneficial outcomes, the mention of “corruption” does not derail the conversation.

In fact, acknowledging corruption as a problem is an important part of the conversation for many people. Although the focus should be on solutions and real and potential successes, it can sound naïve or utopian to ignore how deeply engrained patterns of corruption are in the country.

## **Concrete plans and proposals**

In the research conversations, once people were engaged, they were very attentive to the details of how change could be enacted or how systems could be regulated. *Not offering a specific plan isn't an option*, since people reject such talk as empty rhetoric. This is another area where success stories are helpful to reduce (though never eliminate) people's default skepticism.

## **Focusing on (higher-level) systems rather than daily behaviors**

There are several reasons why the recommended approach ends up focusing on higher-level problems and solutions rather than petty corruption.

- This approach leads naturally to a conversation about policy and/or other “big picture” steps that communicators can use as the focus of campaigns.
- Addressing petty corruption, on the other hand, tends to lead to (less constructive) conversations focused on individual morality and choices.
- Systems must be changed from the top, and made more functional, or *mito and vrski* will continue to be seen as practical necessities.

- While it is daunting to imagine addressing high-level corruption, there is also a sense in which it is easier to imagine it being eliminated than mito and vrski, which are seen as more embedded in the culture of the country.

### **Bridging from success stories to other/broader topics**

The core idea and success stories should be used to introduce the topic of improving how government operates—communications can then move in a number of different directions based on context, while returning to the core theme and examples as central organizing points.

For example, the beginning of a blog post might be structured as follows:

<i>A recent event in our country illustrates that there are (new) ways to push for a government that does what we need it to in a fair and open way.</i>	Introduce core takeaway
[Real world success story]	Use easy-to-understand example to make the core point convincing
<i>We should remember this example and ones like it when we think about improving [... e.g. universities, health care, courts, ...] or any other important public institutions.</i>	Bridge to other/broader topics

### **Messengers**

While the research did not focus on the responses to different messengers, the context of the conversations makes it clear that voices associated with any particular political party or agenda are least likely to be trusted and taken at face value. More effective messengers would include anyone who is perceived as honest, and sincerely concerned with the country—or town, region—and its future. In principle this might, for instance, include certain individual community leaders, journalists or news outlets, businesspeople, or academics.

## Missing the Mark

To better understand the recommended strategy, it is helpful to consider some alternative focuses that are less effective *as focuses and starting points*.

Importantly, some of these ideas may still be helpful as secondary, supporting points.

### Emphasizing corruption as a problem

Citizens of North Macedonia don't need to be convinced that corruption is a problem and that it does significant and intolerable damage.

Sample language:

*We need to stop corruption now, not just because it is expensive and inefficient, but because it is damaging the psychological well-being of the country and especially our young people. Navigating corruption is stressful, depressing and frustrating, and teaches people not to think about or believe in the common good. Are we supposed to teach our children to take part in a system that we know is wrong? In countries where corruption is rare, people have more peace of mind and young people can focus on what they should be focusing on.*

Focusing on the nature and extent of the problem reminds people of the things they don't like or trust about government, as well as their own feelings of frustration and disempowerment.

The following excerpt is from a conversation among research subjects focused on the definition and extent of corruption in the country:

- A: *In general, since our mentality is that way, if you see one person doing something you ask yourself, "Hey, if he can do it why shouldn't I?" and you do it as well, and then someone else sees you doing and it spreads that way.*
- B: *You break the rotten system even more.*
- C: *You're forced to break it.*
- B: *In order to survive, support your family—in the long term all of that affects the future negatively. So, a propos the topic that people are moving, looking for countries where that system works, where they can lean on the state, where they know that what they give is what they get back or you give what you take and you take what you give.*
- A: *Where they can simply exist without having to worry whether they will have money for bread or the most basic necessities. (28-year-old woman, center-right leaning, Skopje; two 29-year-old men, Skopje)*

### “Success stories” about people being caught/punished

Although people certainly like it when powerful corrupt people get punished, this information has no real bearing on the overall problem.

Sample media language:

The former president of the Skopje Criminal Court, Vladimir Pancevski, was sentenced to three years and six months in prison for abuses of the AKMIS system, confirmed in the court in Veles. (Vladimir Pancevski osuden na tri i pol godini zatvor, Nova Makedonija, 04.08.2020)

Bojan Jovanovski-Boki 13 and Katica Janeva (Special Public Prosecutor) were found guilty in the "Racket" case. Jovanovski was sentenced to 9 years in prison for the offenses of receiving a reward for illegal influence and money laundering, and Janeva to 7 years for abuse of official position and authority. The verdict is the first instance and the convicts have the right to appeal to the higher court. (Sluchaj "Reket": Janeva osudena na sedum, Jovanovski dobi devet godini zatvor, IRLMakedonija, 12.08.2020)

The current project confirms prior findings that talking about corruption—even in the context of successful prosecution—tends to deepen cynicism and the belief that corruption is endemic and ultimately impossible to solve.

## Power to the people

While communications should include themes that make people feel they have more of a voice, a central focus on the need for people to rise up and demand change is not helpful.

Sample language:

*When hundreds of regular citizens share their thoughts and ideas on an institution's website about how to make things better and fairer, it becomes hard for officials to ignore that and keep the same old ways. When a thousand citizens propose that students should have fair standardized exams or a hotline to report problems of unfair vrski or mito, then such things will come to be. Change can happen if we decide we are in charge and demand that our schools and universities take the steps they should.*

A conversation focused mainly on the public's role easily reduces to self-blame, in which we the people deserve a corrupt society, because we allow it to happen to us.

*Sometimes I think we deserve this country, with all the problems in it, we do not denounce any kind of bad things...but in the other hand, where to, is all corrupted...We should, for the future of our kids. (43-year-old woman, Tetovo)*

A central focus on the will of the people may also, at least hypothetically, lead to the support of bad outcomes, such as support for a demagogue, because "it's what the people want."

## Focus on generational change

The idea that there is hope that the next generation could move behind the current dysfunctional ways of doing things is compelling and interesting and sometimes inspires hope—and is implicitly present in the recommended strategy.

Sample language:

*More and more young people in our country are calling corruption the Old Way. Mito, vrski, and corrupt politicians is the way past generations lived and worked, but North Macedonia is joining the modern world thanks to new generations, and fair, transparent ways of doing things—from getting grades to seeing a doctor to getting a job.*

As a central focus, however, this perspective triggers thinking about how most citizens of North Macedonia won't change their ways, and implies there is nothing for the bulk of North Macedonian citizens to actively do.

*...It is up to us to change things, but from my experience nepotism is still a major problem. The old way is still The way. As long as functions are passed on like dynasties, it will be very difficult for “the common people” to have a breakthrough. (41-year-old woman, Struga)*

*We have, however, entered politics for many years, meaning not politics, but partization and party influences. And I see salvation only in young people, so to speak, starting with the generations of our children. So from those generations, the generations of our children, we can change something, not our generations. (50-year-old woman, Prilep)*

## Discrediting Petty Corruption

It might seem promising to try to increase motivations for action against high corruption by helping people be less tolerant of the familiar petty corruption of everyday life.

Sample language:

*We can't make government and public services perfect overnight, but many citizens of North Macedonia are focusing on one important and achievable goal: “respecting the queue”! It is so frustrating when others get services or jobs first because of mito and vrski. But the Respect the Queue movement is all about noticing and protesting whenever this happens, so that we get what we need, when we need it, and everything is fairer and clearer.*

But in fact, convincing people that it is wrong to bribe nurses or ask a friend to help secure a document misses the point of where the most important corruption is.

*...we should not discuss whether it will work or not, but we should encourage these movements, because each of us sees personal interest without considering the collective interest, or sensitization. We must allow any movement that will fight corruption to happen. (34-year-old man, center-left leaning, Tetovo)*

*I totally respect the “Respect the queue” movement. However, living here for the past 34 years, I believe that changing this phenomenon is almost impossible. There will always be those “samo da prasham (I just wanna ask something really quick)” people cutting in line and they usually are the ones that got all the “vrskas” or older people that just don't know any better or are so used to this system that when you ask them not to cut in line, they feel like you are taking away*

*their right to do so and may end up in a brawl. And from what I've seen, people that respect the queue, do not want any brawls. (34-year-old man, left-leaning, Kichevo)*

## Supporting action from within

The idea that citizens or specific programs and initiatives could support honorable people within government (officials, teachers, medical professionals) who would have an interest in reforming their ranks is appealing.

Sample language:

*What would you think if you heard that some younger public workers are starting to wear pins that say Fair Service? They believe civil service is an honorable duty, and want everyone to know that they don't engage in mito and vrski, because these do not benefit the general public. They don't want their own reputations hurt by taking part in it. And they invite their colleagues to join them.*

Response:

*Every institution should openly offer the opportunity to express its opinion about the services provided, or the table where it can be announced; for example, the best worker of the week, of the month, etc. Some time ago there were some devices in the counters, where we could press the button how satisfied we were with the service of the administrator, but they worked very short period. It is good to have such things, though, that we can choose the best worker, and then increase them the salary that maybe they are even more motivated when the most workers are selected. Well, your salary will increase by 5% or more, and this form may be affected. (35-year-old man, left-leaning, Skopje)*

But this approach ends up simply reinforcing a focus on individuals, and does not strike people as a plausible way of changing a profoundly troubled system.

## Transparency

Citizens of North Macedonia certainly believe the government *should* be transparent, we *should* know what's going on.

Sample language:

*Growing numbers of professionals and businesspeople in North Macedonia are pushing for a cleaner, more transparent society, because it's better for business. And they invite regular people to join their movement. Corruption creates expenses and uncertainties, and causes too many talented young people to leave the country. The new movement called Businesses for Transparency is pushing for real openness about how decisions are made in government.*

But when treated as a central focus, the idea of transparency fails to energize people, in part because knowing isn't the same as having the power to create change. Moreover, a focus on

transparency often ends up highlighting wrongdoing, rather than promoting what good governance can do.

## Conclusion

The strategy emerging from this research will help communicators create more engaging, hopeful and constructive conversations. And it will help audiences remember that we CAN shape government to be effective and fair through better, smarter policy and citizen action.

It may seem like a paradox to argue that in order to create engagement for success you need to already have successes. Clearly, winning more battles will be a big help for overcoming the current climate of discouragement, but this is not to imply that we need to wait for a successful revolution or even the re-making of a ministry. Highlighting even small successes of citizen-led change—and also acknowledging the reality that many government systems already DO produce good outcomes—all helps to create a mental space where people can resume work on the challenge of making sure government does what it is supposed to.

In some ways this approach goes against many advocates' instincts. We often feel that we need to portray a problem as so severe and dire that people will be forced to take action; that if we talk about successes people will assume the job is done and walk away from the task—but in cases of extreme fatalism these instincts are off target. What people need at this point is the belief that something can be done—that whatever engagement and commitment they lend to the task at hand will contribute in some real way to an improvement in their world.

The recommendations given here are not about insincere or overly optimistic stories. They instead convey that even in troubled, difficult, discouraging times, concerted action can still have an effect and that there are real ways to move forward.

Finally, it is important to note one other dimension of the challenge that the recommended strategy can only partially help with: *a lack of trust in the information citizens of North Macedonia have access to*. Many interviewees expressed the opinion that the media in North Macedonia are deeply politicized—reflecting the fact that these organizations are quite dependent on major financiers, making them susceptible to influences including pressure from political parties. If people don't know the truth about the realities surrounding them, or feel they don't know it, it is much harder to engage them in efforts to improve those realities.

## Appendix: Sample Tested Messages

### *Businesses for Transparency*

Growing numbers of professionals and businesspeople in North Macedonia are pushing for a cleaner, more transparent society, because it's better for business. Corruption creates expenses and uncertainties for businesses. It makes it harder to work with other modern economies like those in Europe. And it causes too many talented young people to leave the country. That is why businesspeople are inviting others to join their movement, called Businesses for Transparency. This movement is pushing for real openness about how decisions are made in government, and an end to the power that political parties have to determine who gets jobs, contracts, information and so on.

### *Less than people think*

If we realize most things are actually done fairly, we can be more confident about correcting the problems we do have, like protecting the natural environment or dealing with the global public health crisis. Studies show that there is much less use of *mito* and *vrski* here in North Macedonia than most people think. These studies show that most affairs are conducted in a fair, normal way, and our perceptions are exaggerated. In fact, the same is also true about corruption at higher levels: More than 90% of trials are conducted fairly, and most elected leaders do their jobs well, but we always hear most about the worst cases.

### *Promote the best*

Creating a just and equitable system in our country is less about punishing criminals and more about finding ways to motivate people with positive examples in our everyday lives. Besides negative situations and individuals, there are many positive examples in our society—excellent students, professionals in certain spheres, successful workers, doctors, lawyers, chefs, and transparent tenders. Promoting the best and most likely to succeed in our society can be a motivational example for improving our citizens' behavior and our society.

### *AirCare*

Thanks to new technology and new ways of gaining and sharing information, people in North Macedonia have more ability to push for government to do positive things. For example, in 2014 Gorjan Jovanovski launched "AirCare," an app that shows real-time air pollution levels in different regions. As a result, thousands of people demanded government action, leading to the "Plan for Clean Air." If people get involved, and use new information and communication tools, we can make sure government is working in our best interest—not just with pollution, but in other ways.

### *Respecting the Queue*

We can't make government and public services perfect overnight, but many citizens of North Macedonia are focusing on one important and achievable goal: "respecting the queue"! It is so frustrating when others get services or jobs first because of *mito* and *vrski*. But the Respect the Queue movement is all about noticing and protesting whenever this happens, so that we get what we need, when we need it, and everything is fairer and clearer.

### ***You are the Minister 1***

“If you were the Minister” is a new way to push for change in educational institutions. When hundreds of regular citizens share their thoughts and ideas on an institution’s website about how to make things better and fairer, it becomes hard for officials to ignore that and keep the same old ways. When a thousand citizens propose that students should have fair standardized exams or a hotline to report problems of unfair vrski or mito, then such things will come to be. Change can happen if we decide we are in charge and demand that our schools and universities take the steps they should.

### ***You are the Minister 2 (thought exercise)***

Imagine that you are the Minister of Education and you wanted to make sure that students were evaluated based on merit rather than vrski, what kinds of things might you do?

### ***Try again***

The people of North Macedonia tried to tackle corruption (through the recent demonstrations, SPO, etc.) and failed to change things. We need to learn from that and try again.

### ***Electrification***

Electrification and road-building were huge steps toward bringing the Balkans into the modern world. The next step in modernization is to move away from mito/vrski/rackets and toward systems and procedures that work properly, efficiently and fairly.

### ***Fair Service Pins***

What would you think if you heard that some younger public workers are starting to wear pins that say Fair Service? They believe civil service is an honorable duty, and want everyone to know that they don’t engage in mito and vrski, because these do not benefit the general public. They don’t want their own reputations hurt by taking part in it. And they invite their colleagues to join them. What’s your reaction to hearing about that?

### ***Fair Treatment Awards***

One of the simplest things we could do to move our country forward would be to make health care more fair and transparent. We can’t change everything about mito and vrski, but we can make sure every patient gets fair treatment when they need it. A group of North Macedonian citizens is giving out a Fair Treatment award to doctors and clinics who are known for treating all patients well and equally.

### ***Rewarding Merit***

Corruption is less about punishing criminals and more about finding ways to make sure that what gets rewarded is the most promising student, the best doctor or nurse, the best governmental plan, and the best, most sensible tender/contract. What ways could we do that?

### ***Exposing Party Connections***

Most of us in our country are tired of political parties interfering in who gets what job, who gets into the university, etc. So there is a new movement gaining momentum, to make public any time someone is hired or fired because of party connections. The more people who actively join in, the bigger the difference we can make.

### ***Business Allies***

Growing numbers of professionals and businesspeople in North Macedonia are pushing for a cleaner more transparent society, because it's better for business. And they invite regular people to join their movement. Corruption creates expenses and uncertainties, and causes too many talented young people to leave the country. The new movement called Businesses for Transparency is pushing for real openness about how decisions are made in government, and an end to the power that political parties have to determine who gets jobs, contracts, information and so on.

### ***Talent Drain***

Experts say the best way to keep talented young people from leaving the country is to stop behaviors that are ruining our schools, our services and trust in our government. Right now, many young people want to go to other countries where they can succeed fairly through hard work and talent—not mito and vrski.

### ***Old Way***

More and more young people in our country are calling corruption the Old Way. Mito, vrski, and corrupt politicians is the way past generations lived and worked, but North Macedonia is joining the modern world thanks to new generations, and fair, transparent ways of doing things—from getting grades to seeing a doctor to getting a job.

### ***Honeyland***

The star of “Honeyland,” Atidze, is well known for her golden rule, “Half for me, half for you,” the equation to a sustainable and fair life shared with nature. What is amazing is how many people in North Macedonia were touched by this rule and the hope for this sincerity to be recognized globally. People here want to showcase their principles of justice and equality. When people act both for their interests AND the interests of society, we have a country that can flourish. That's why citizens of North Macedonia are losing patience for public officials and parties that try to take all for themselves. It is not sustainable and a country cannot survive that way. “Honeyland” should be a reminder to us that there is a little Atidze in all of us.

### ***Damaging Psychologically***

We need to stop corruption now, not just because it is expensive and inefficient, but because it is damaging the psychological well-being of the country and especially our young people. Navigating corruption is stressful, depressing and frustrating, and teaches people not to think about or believe in the common good. Are we supposed to teach our children to take part in a system that we know is wrong? In countries where corruption is rare, people have more peace of mind and young people can focus on what they should be focusing on.

### ***Rules and Systems***

Countries that have succeeded at fighting corruption haven't succeeded because they made their officials less greedy or more public minded. They did it by making the rules transparent and then enforcing those rules. You can't stop corruption by reaching into the hearts of politicians, but you can create systems that work—for example, when regular people as well as honest officials can report acts of corruption, when bad officials suffer consequences and good

officials get promoted. Every step in that direction—more transparent procedures, better reporting, less political interference—makes that system a bit stronger and the corrupt officials a bit weaker.