



**PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO
CORRUPTION IN THE
WORKPLACE**

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The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting organisations and institutions.

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1. Introduction

Corruption is one of the main challenges facing Bulgarian society today. High levels of corruption in most areas of public life represent a serious obstacle to Bulgaria's progress towards average European standards in key sectors. Corruption practices have a strongly detrimental effect on the provision of public services that are crucial for the normal functioning of a democratic society.

Whistleblowing by people who have witnessed corruption and conflicts of interest or have even been involved in such practices is one of the main ways of identifying and countering these phenomena. Protecting individuals who have taken a risk by deciding to act as whistleblowers should be considered a top priority in the fight against corruption and conflict of interest.

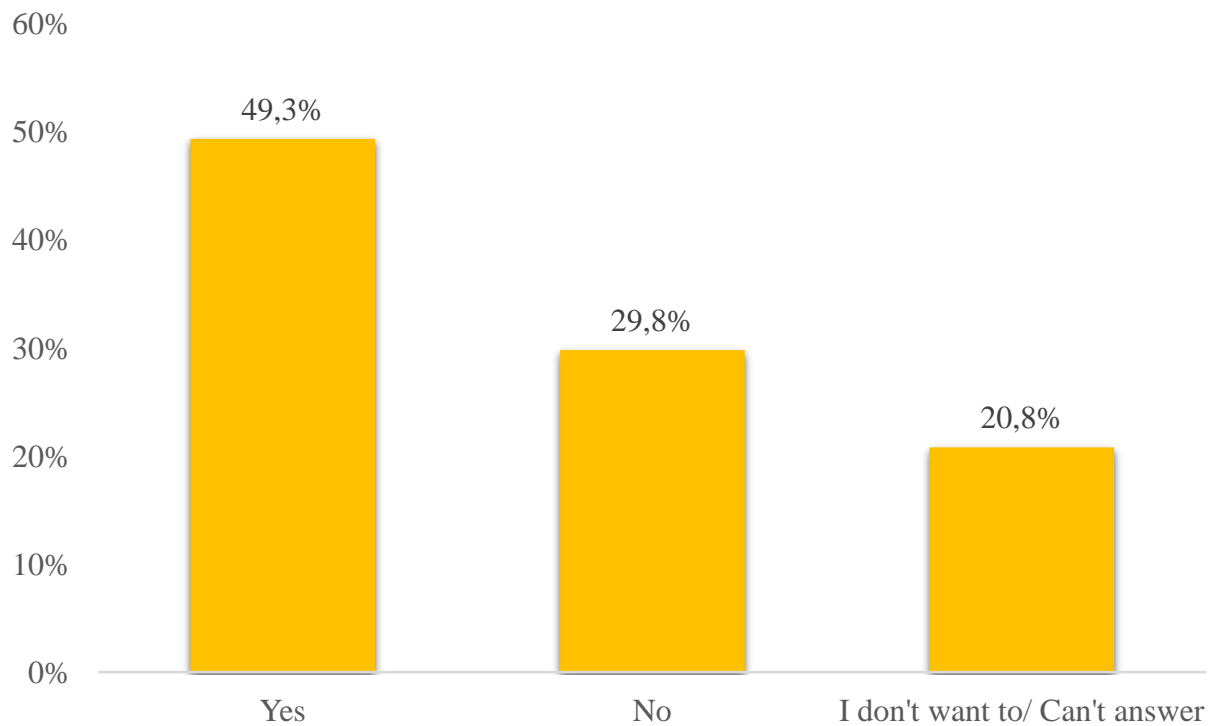
The possibility for anonymous whistleblowing should further be seen as one of the leading mechanisms to protect people who decide to report wrongdoing. Strengthening the legal framework and introducing safeguards to protect such persons is key in the context of encouraging more people to follow their example. It is also essential to create a sense that referrals to the responsible institutions will lead to visible results and that whistleblowing will not be ignored.

This study was commissioned by the Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives and covers a nationally representative sample of 1 053 adult Bulgarians who were surveyed nationwide. The survey was conducted via face-to-face interviews in the period between 1 February 2021 and 10 February 2021.

It fits into the context of Directive 2019/1937 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of whistleblowers, the transposition deadline for which expires on 17 December 2021. The questions we have asked citizens to respond to are related to important elements of the Directive, which should be discussed by the relevant institutions in Bulgaria and addressed by appropriate legal solutions.

2. Attitudes towards whistleblowing on corruption and conflict of interest

Would you act as a whistleblower if you witnessed A CASE OF CORRUPTION in your workplace?



Nearly half of the respondents (49.3 %) said they would be ready to report a case of corruption at their workplace. A total of 29.8 % took the opposite view, while 20.8 % refused to answer the question or could not decide.

The gender breakdown shows that men are more likely to report corruption at work.

Bulgarians over the age of 50 years are less likely to report corruption. A probable reason for this may be the possibility for some kind of retaliation (retribution), including dismissal, and the difficulties associated with finding a job, especially at an older age.



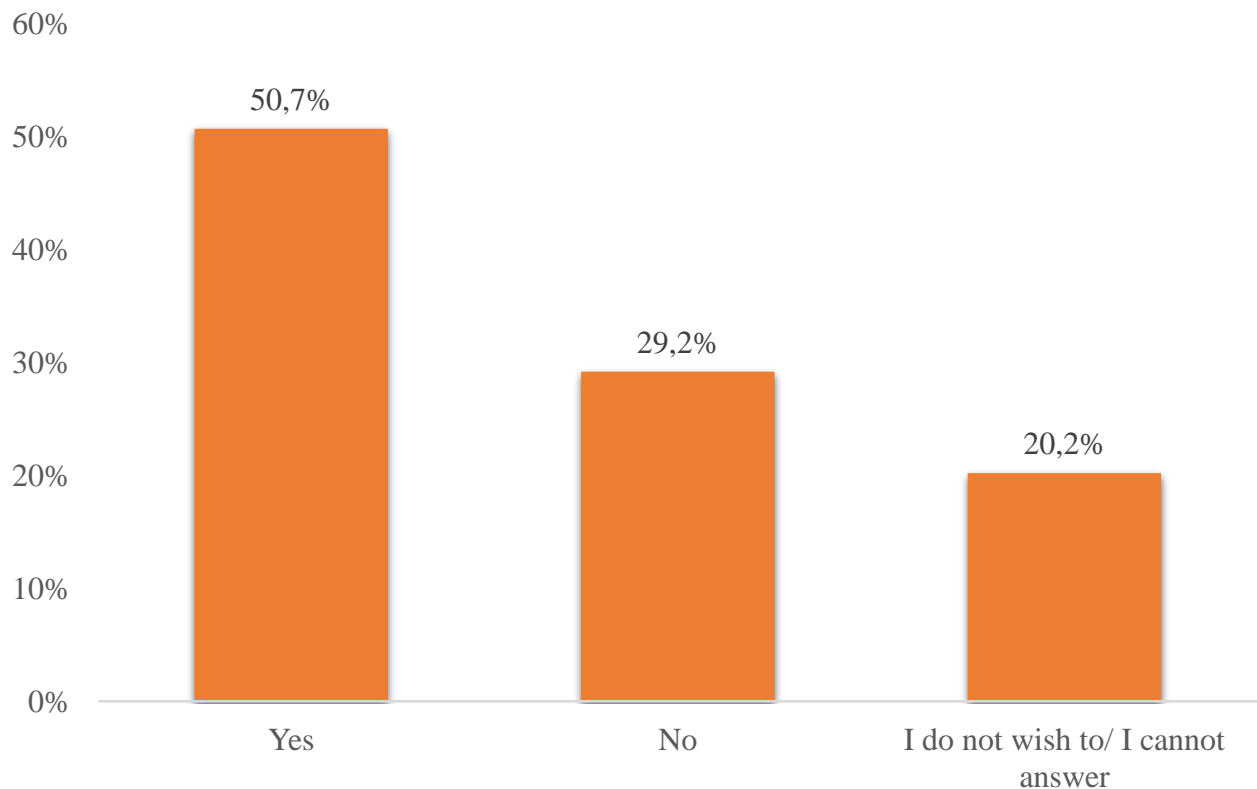
Respondents with primary or lower education were significantly less likely to report corruption, if they were to come across at their workplace. Among this group, the positions are almost equally divided — 37.3 % gave a positive answer and 36.6 gave a negative answer.

Residents of the capital city indicated more often that they would report a case of corruption, if they witnessed it at work. To a lesser extent, this is also true for those living in cities other than regional centres.

Public sector employees are more likely to say that they would act as whistleblowers if they came across a corrupt practice. This is mostly true for those working in municipal administrations.

Those working in middle and senior management positions are also more likely to report corruption if they witness it in their place of work.

Would you act as a whistleblower if you witnessed A CASE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST in your workplace?



Slightly more than half of Bulgarians (50.7 %) indicated that they would file a report if they witnessed a case of conflict of interest at their workplace. A total of 29.2 % of respondents would not file such a report and 20.2 % had difficulty or were unwilling to answer.

An overwhelming share of men report that they tend to report conflicts of interest in their workplace.

Respondents aged over 60 years are less likely to indicate that they would act as a whistleblower in a similar situation.

Among the respondents with primary or lower education, significantly fewer state their readiness to report a conflict of interest.

However, it should be noted that citizens distinguish between corruption and conflict of interest, which is a positive sign of greater awareness of the issue and understanding of the different types of misconduct and practices in the workplace.

Residents of the capital city are more likely to report a situation that falls into the category of conflict of interest at the workplace.

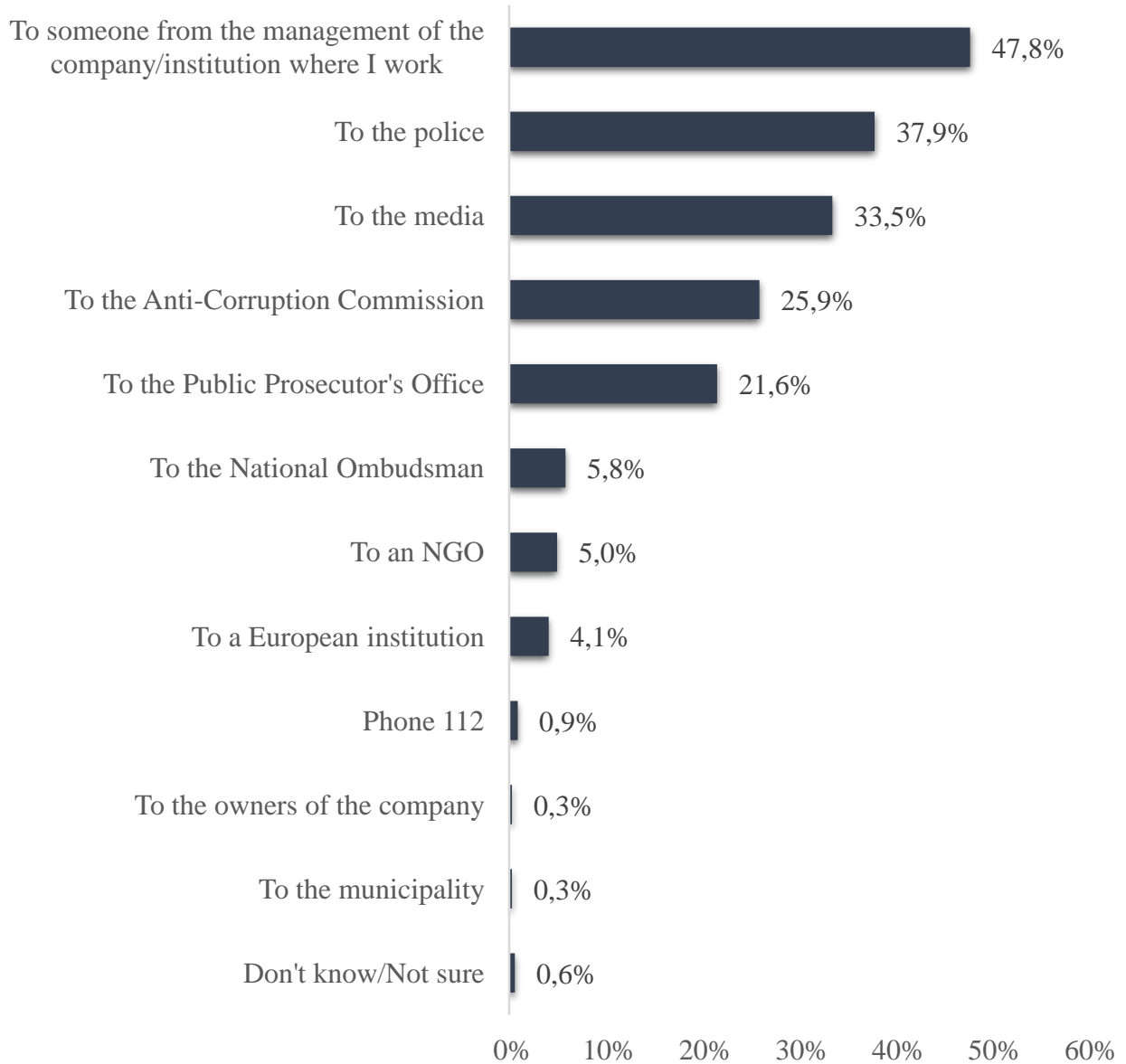
This also applies to respondents who live in smaller towns across Bulgaria, albeit to a lesser extent.

Respondents in middle and senior management are more likely to report conflicts of interest in the workplace.

The difference in the willingness to report corruption between residents of larger cities and smaller towns and villages can be explained by job opportunities. The employment rate in smaller towns is lower and there is a great deal of fear of losing one's job, coupled with the associated the difficulty of finding a new position.

To sum up the attitudes towards the two types of practices, the results potentially confirm the hypothesis that groups with more vulnerable employment and social status (respondents closer to retirement age, with low educational attainment and/or difficulty in accessing employment opportunities) are more sceptical about exposing corruption practices.

**Who would you contact if you witnessed/learned about cases of corruption or conflict of interest in your workplace? - %
who answered yes to question 1 or 2**



The wording of the question is intended to establish the extent to which employees (in the public or private sector alike and irrespective of their position) are familiar the "proper way" to report corruption or conflict of interest that they themselves have witnessed at their workplace. Proper



familiarity should lead to an accumulation of responses in the options "company management/senior officials at the institutions where I work", the police, the prosecutor's office and, as far as more specific cases involving senior civil servants are concerned, possibly the Anti-Corruption Commission.

The results indicate partial familiarity with this "pathway":

- " company management/senior officials at the institutions where I work " is the most frequently mentioned option, with an additional
- 37.9 % of respondents stating that they will turn to the police.

On the other hand, the institutional actors, such as the "prosecutor's office" and the Anti-Corruption Commission, are not in the list of top three institutions to which whistleblowers would turn. A possible explanation here is the weaker familiarity with the work of the two institutions and the cases in which a whistleblower should turn to them. Another explanation could be the low level of trust in public institutions, particularly the two in question. Thirdly, the media play the role of an anonymous whistleblower and is therefore an option for which whistleblowers have a stronger preference compared to other institutions.

Gender distribution shows that the media, the police and the Anti-Corruption Commission tend to be preferred by male whistleblowers.

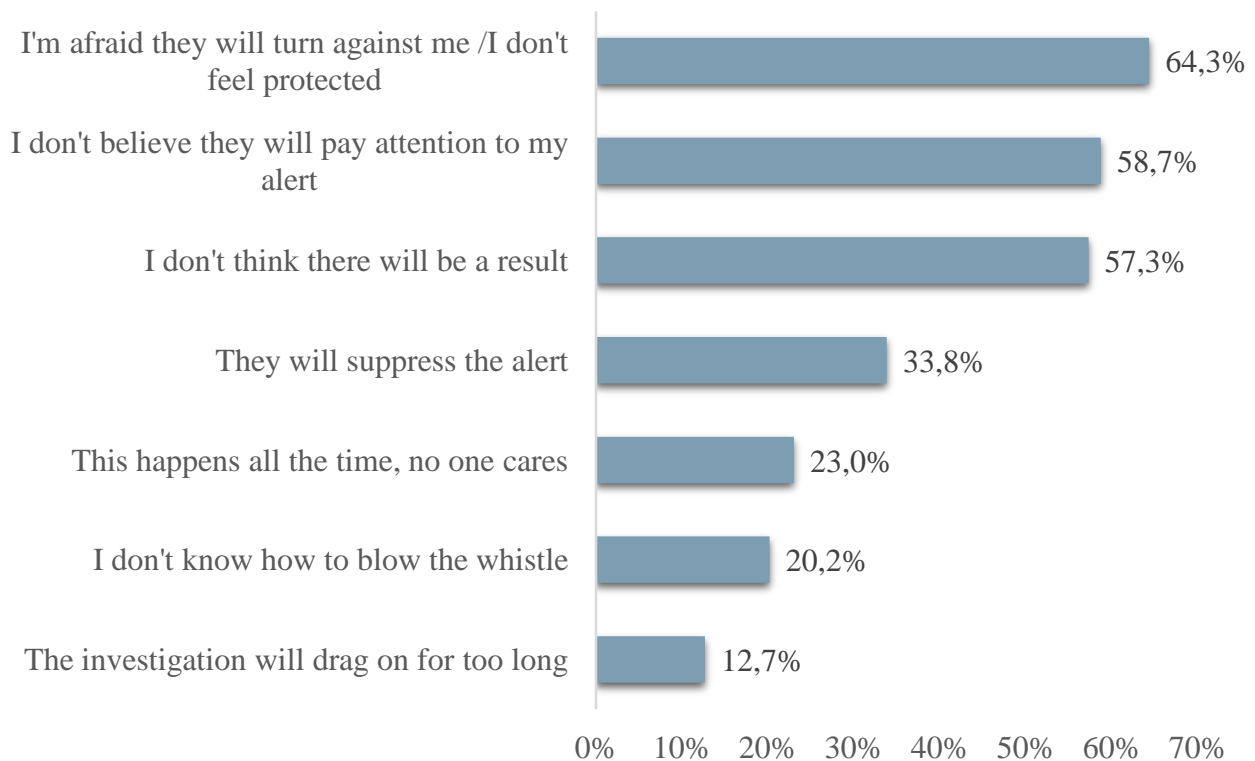
The management of the company, organisation or institution in the respondents works at is most frequently mentioned addressee of corruption reports by respondents in the 25-30 age group. It should be noted that the youngest and oldest respondents, i.e. those in the age groups 18-24 years and more than 60 years respectively, mention the police as the body to which they would direct their complaint in case of an identified corruption practice at the workplace with greater frequency.

Respondents with secondary education are more likely to go to the police, if they witness corruption or conflict of interest in their workplace. Among university graduates, the management of the company/institution and the Anti-Corruption Commission stand out as more preferred addressees for such reports.

Residents of the capital city more often share a preference for filing a report to the management of the company, institution or organisation, to the media and the Anti-Corruption Commission, if they come across a corruption case at their workplace. To a lesser extent, this is also true of the prosecution service. Residents of smaller towns and villages are more likely to turn to the police.

Those working in the public sector are more likely to say that they would turn to the management of the institution or organisation where they work and to the prosecutor's office, if they witness or learn of corruption practices or conflicts of interest. The media and the police are more frequently cited by private sector representatives, confirming the finding above relating to low levels of trust in relevant institutions.

**You have indicated that if you witness corruption/conflict of interest in your workplace, you will not report it. Why? - %
of those who answered NO to question 1 or 2**



Fear of retaliation (retaliation) and lack of a sense of protection was the most frequently mentioned reason for the decision not to report corruption or conflict of interest, cited by 64.3 % of respondents. A total of 58.7% of those who would not act as whistleblowers stated they would not do so because they doubted that anyone would pay attention to them, while 57.3 % believed that such action would not result in retaliation. For 33.8% the reluctance to report corruption or conflict of interest stems from the opinion that their report will be suppressed, and for 23 % from the belief that cases of corruption and conflict of interest are common and would not make an impression on anyone. A total of 20.2 % of respondents would not report corruption or conflict of interest because they are not aware of the mechanisms by which such cases can be reported. An additional 12.5 % would not file a whistleblower report because of the length of investigations.

The gender breakdown shows that women are more likely to fear that whistleblowing on corruption or conflicts of interest could subsequently backfire. They are also more likely to share the fear that the whistleblowing will be suppressed.

Respondents aged over 60 years of were more likely to believe that acting as a whistleblower would not lead to the desired result and that their report would be suppressed. This age group has a higher proportion of those who do not know how to report corruption or conflict of interest at work.

Villagers are more likely to say that they would not report corruption or conflict of interest in the workplace because they do not feel protected and believe that such action could backfire. They are more likely to believe that their whistleblowing will not result in their whistleblowing being given the attention it deserves and that it will be suppressed. The proportion of respondents from rural areas who said they did not know how to blow the whistle was also higher.

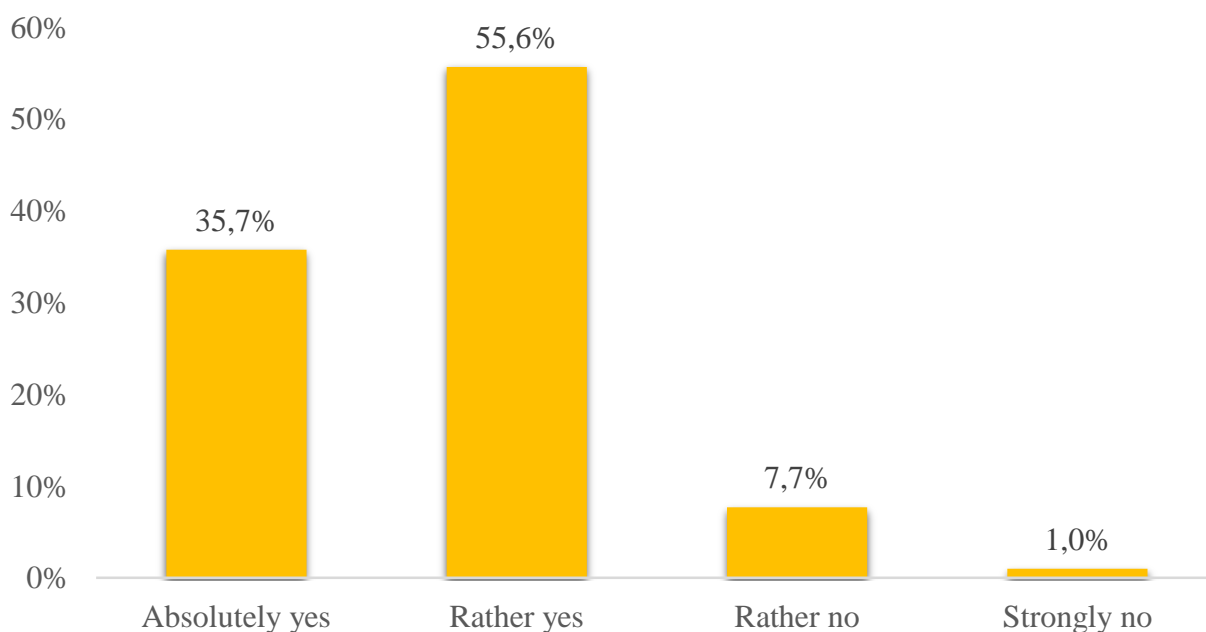
Bulgarian citizens working in the public sector more often say that they are afraid to report corruption or conflict of interest at work because they do not feel sufficiently protected and because they assume that such an action could turn against them.

Employees practicing their profession in an executive position were more likely to share each of the concerns listed in the question.

Possible directions to overcome the reluctance to report based on the results are:

- Fear, need for additional protection - shared by the majority of respondents, but most strongly by those at greater risk in terms of the topic - people in non-managerial positions (including women, as they are less likely to hold managerial positions), civil servants, people with difficult access to diverse employment opportunities (pre-retirement age, small settlement),
- the need for a broader explanation of the "way forward" for responding to a situation where a corrupt practice is observed, especially with a focus on labour and socially vulnerable groups. This means that, following the transposition of Directive 2019/1937, responsible institutions should regularly carry out targeted awareness-raising and training on the protection of whistleblowers and the ways in which they can be assisted.

In your opinion, should people report if they witness corruption/conflict of interest in their workplace?



91.4% is the total share of the surveyed citizens who believe that people should report if they witness corruption or conflict of interest at their workplace - 35.7% strongly support and 55.6% - rather support. 7.7% of respondents are of the opinion that people should rather not report if they witness such an event, while 1% are firm in their assessment that reports should not be made.

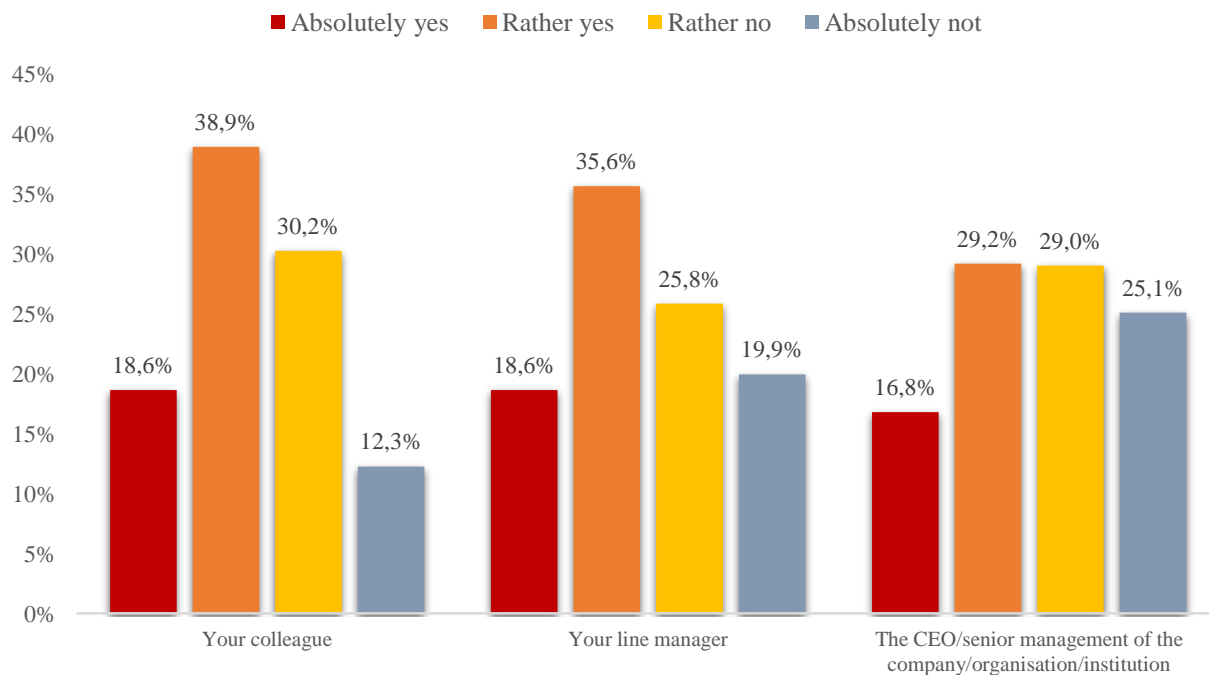


Respondents with primary or lower education are less likely to share the view that people should report cases of corruption or conflicts of interest that they have witnessed in the workplace. The proportion of those who support whistleblowing also increases with a higher level of completed education, and is highest among university graduates.

In Sofia, the share of those who strongly support the statement that people should report corruption or conflicts of interest witnessed at workplace is significantly higher. Among other provincial centres and smaller towns, the "rather yes" option prevails. The highest number of negative responses was among residents of rural areas.

Citizens with the highest incomes more than BGN 1,001 income divided among household members and more BGN 1 201 personal monthly income) are the most supportive of the statement that citizens should report corruption and conflict of interest, if they encounter a corrupt practice or conflict of interest at their workplace.

Would you personally testify in a case of corruption/conflict of interest in your workplace against



Most surveyed Bulgarians state that in case of corruption or conflict of interest they would testify against a colleague and against a line manager - 57.5 % against a colleague (18.6 % - strongly, 38.9 % - rather) and 54.2% - against a line manager (18.6 % - strongly, 35.6 % - rather). The picture is different when it comes to testifying against a CEO or against members of the senior management of the company, organization or institution. 45.9 % would testify against such people (16.8 % - definitely would, 29.2 % - rather would), while 54.1 % would not (29 % - rather would not, 25.1 % - definitely would not). It is noteworthy that the categorical refusal to testify in cases of corruption or conflict of interest increases at each successive higher management level.

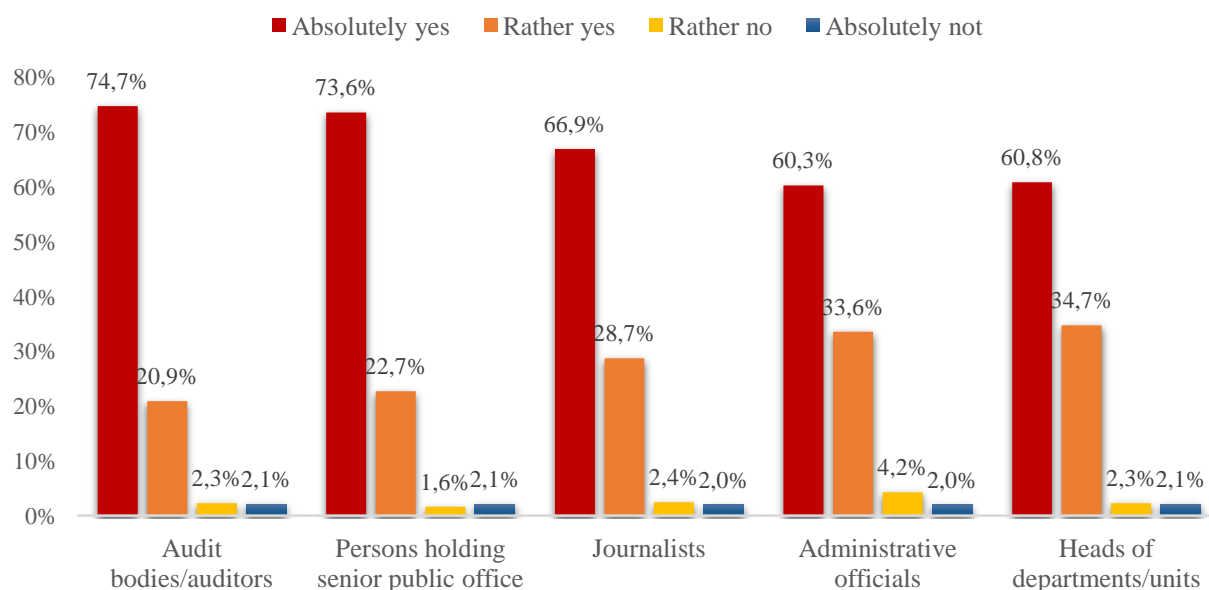
Citizens with primary or lower education were the least likely to say they would testify against a colleague, direct supervisor or director if there was a case of corruption or conflict of interest.

Among residents of the capital, the proportions of those who say they would testify about a corrupt practice or conflict of interest - whether against a colleague, direct supervisor or director/member of senior management - are significantly higher.

Respondents working in the public sector were less likely to report testifying against a director general or a member of the senior management of their institution.

Employees practicing their profession in an executive position were the least likely to say they would testify against a director or member of senior management of the institution where they work. They are less likely to testify against both a colleague and their immediate supervisor.

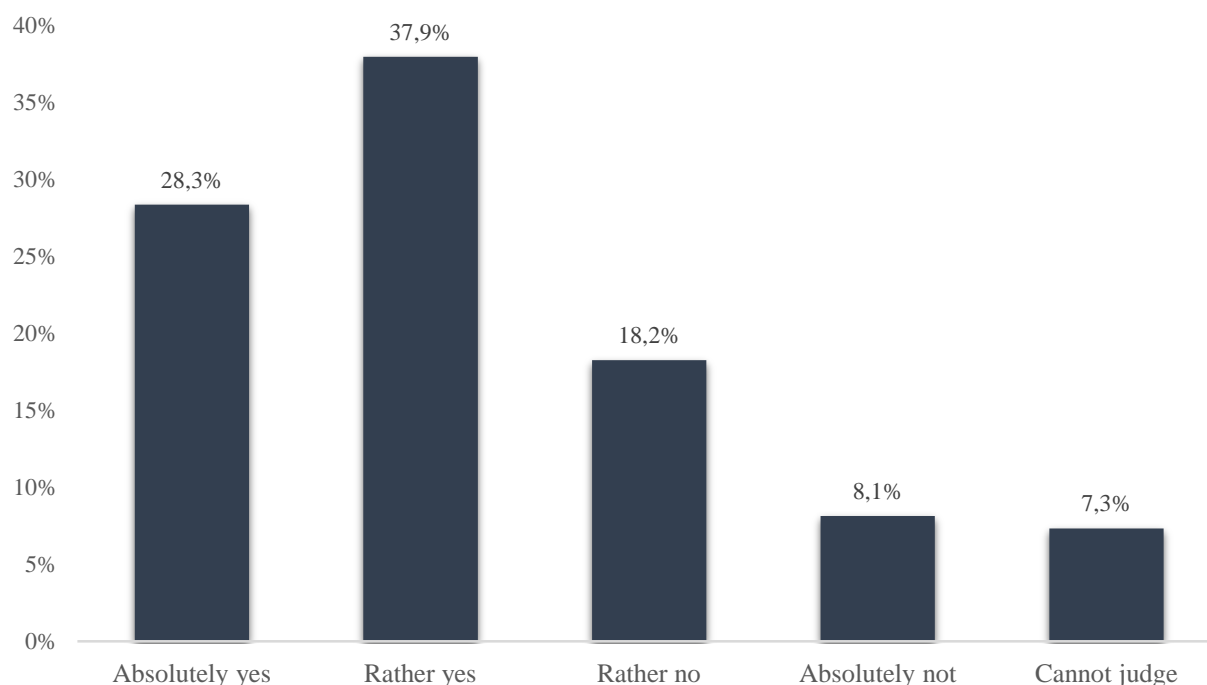
In your opinion, are the following persons obliged to report if they witness or have information about cases of corruption/conflict of interest in the course of their work and in the capacity indicated below?



More than 90 % of the Bulgarians surveyed are of the opinion that audit bodies and auditors, persons holding senior state positions, journalists, heads of departments and units, as well as officials from the state administration are obliged to report if they witness or have information about cases of corruption or conflict of interest. The highest proportion of respondents who share this opinion are persons holding senior state positions - 96.2% (73.6% - strongly, 22.7% - rather). The highest proportion of respondents who answered strongly affirmative was for audit bodies - 74.7%.

Villagers are more supportive of the assertion that audit bodies have a duty to report if they witness corruption or conflicts of interest. Citizens from smaller towns more often indicated that it is the duty of officials in the administration to blow the whistle when they find corrupt practices. Respondents from small towns and villages are more likely to recognise it as the duty of those in senior government positions and heads of departments and units to report when there is a case of corruption or conflict of interest.

Will you be afraid to report to the authorities if you witness corruption?



Nearly two-thirds of the Bulgarian citizens surveyed said that they would be afraid to some extent to report to the competent authorities if they witnessed corruption (28.3% said they would be afraid, 37.9% - rather afraid). 18.2% said they would rather not be afraid to blow the whistle in case of need and 8.1% said they would not feel afraid. 7.3% of respondents struggled to judge whether they would be afraid in a similar situation.

Villagers are more likely to testify to a possible fear of reporting if they witness corruption.

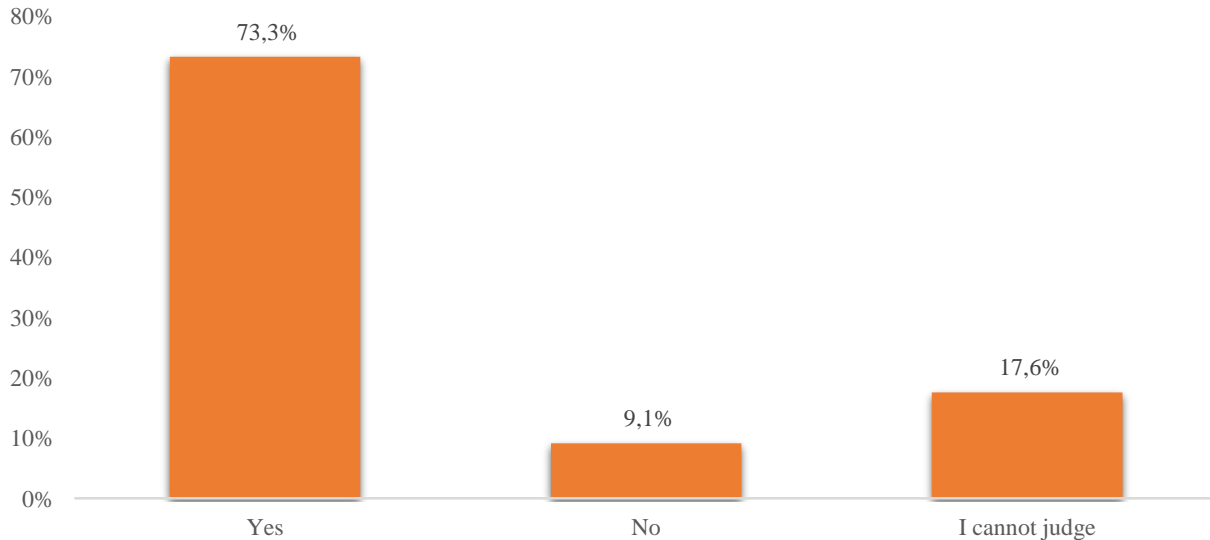
Respondents with primary education or less were more likely to say they would be afraid to report if they came across a corrupt practice.

Those working in the private sector of the economy are more likely to say they would be afraid to report if they witnessed corruption. Among those working in the public sector, civil servants and those working in a state-owned enterprise are most afraid.



3. Protection of whistleblowers. Anonymous whistleblowing

Should there be an anonymous whistleblowing option in cases of corruption or conflict of interest in your workplace?

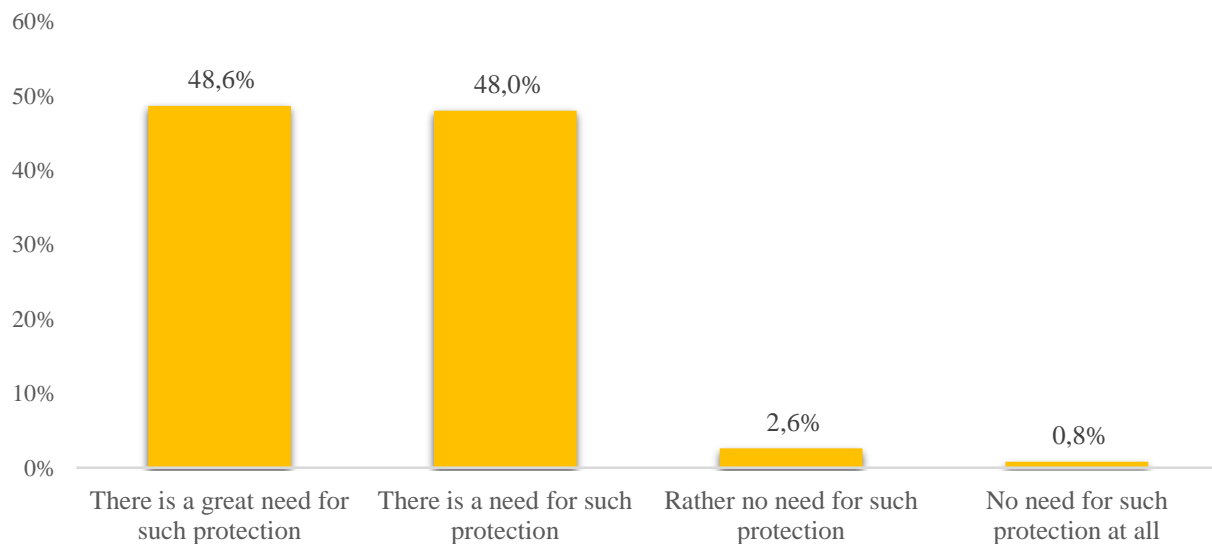


The trend of expressed fear of whistleblowing can also be read in the high percentage of declared willingness to report anonymously. Over 70% of the citizens surveyed are of this opinion. Slightly over 9% are of the opposite opinion, and a full 17.6% could not decide.

Those who answered in the negative were mostly people living outside the capital and those aged between 40 and 50. It is also noticeable that private owners and freelancers are more likely than others to believe that anonymity is not necessary when reporting corruption. Of the respondents working in the public sector, those in municipal administrations were most often against anonymous reporting in cases of corruption in their workplace. A possible hypothesis that needs to be further explored would be that anonymous whistleblowing is a potential tool for both abusive and internal administrative retaliation, i.e., the anonymity of whistleblowing can also appear as a double-edged sword.



To what extent is it necessary to put in place a whistleblower protection framework?



Respondents are adamant that there should be a form of protection for whistleblowers. With an even split of about 50%, respondents rated the need for such support as moderate and strong. A statistical breakdown by location of respondents shows that, the smaller the location in which respondents live, the more likely they are to believe that *there is rather no need* to introduce a specific whistleblower protection framework. This relationship can be explained through several hypotheses that need to be further tested, as follows:

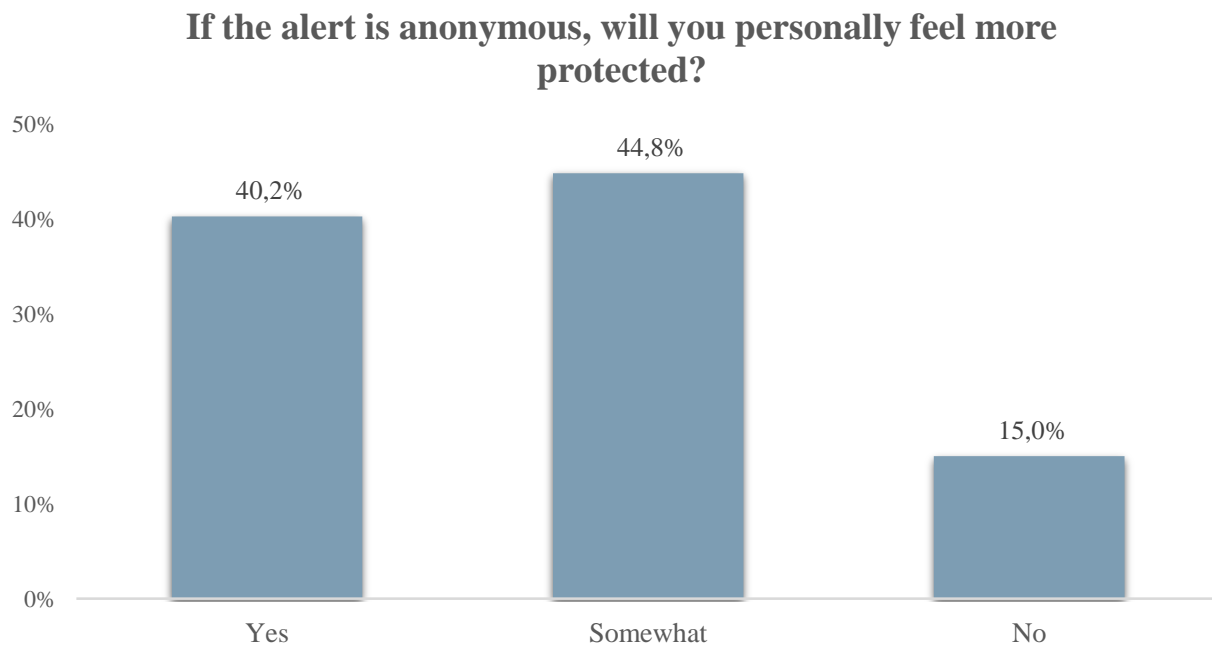
Those living in a less populated area have more difficulty accessing a variety of employment opportunities and would not enter a whistleblowing situation at all as they risk their full employability. For them, protected or not - whistleblowing is not an option, which is why their responses are that there is no need.

Another hypothesis is possible - the perception of "wrongness" and "protection" changes as the social scale of the settlement decreases. In smaller settlements, people are more often aware of "who is doing what", so the perception of anonymity is very low and practically unenforceable - hence there is no need to search for it.

Respondents in the capital most often indicated that there is a *very great need* for such a mechanism. This result somewhat supports the second hypothesis - with the high level of

anonymity in the capital city, its protection is additionally sought. The age distribution shows that young people (up to 24 years) are more likely to believe that no special whistleblowing protection framework is needed.

Again, those working in municipal administrations more often responded that there was rather no need for a special protection framework. However, the proportion sharing such attitudes is relatively low - around one sixth. The statistical distribution shows that students and unemployed persons more often do not share the commonly held view. In the capital and regional cities, the view that a whistleblower protection framework should be put in place is relatively more common. It should be noted that those living in the capital are considerably more emphatic than those living in regional cities, who in turn outnumber those who believe there is a need, but it is not very great.



Although major shares of respondents support anonymity in reporting corruption, nearly one-half doubt that this will bring them full security. When asked whether they would feel protected if their whistleblowing was anonymous, just over 40% of respondents answered in the affirmative. However, a significant proportion of respondents said that

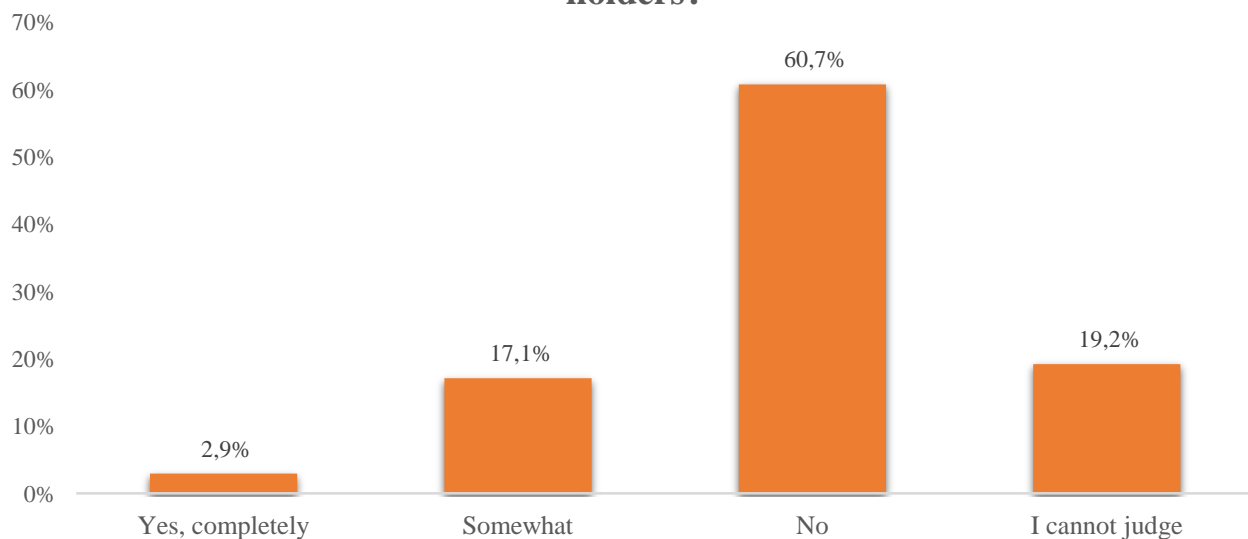


they would not feel fully protected even if their identity were kept secret. Nearly 45% believe it would give them only some security. Here again, the explanation can be sought in the seriously undermined trust in the work of the institutions - their impartiality, independence and equal treatment of citizens regardless of what position they are in or what the situation is at the time.

Those living in Bulgaria's capital and provincial centres are considerably more sceptical than others about the extent to which guaranteed anonymity would protect them. Such concerns are shared by respondents of all ages, with the exception of the youngest and oldest respondents, where the proportion is relatively lower.

While those in public sector positions are more adamant that ensuring anonymity would be enough to feel safe in reporting corruption, it is again noticeable that those working in state and municipal administrations more often do not share this opinion (just over one fifth).

Do you think you will be sufficiently protected if you report corruption or conflicts of interest related to public office holders?



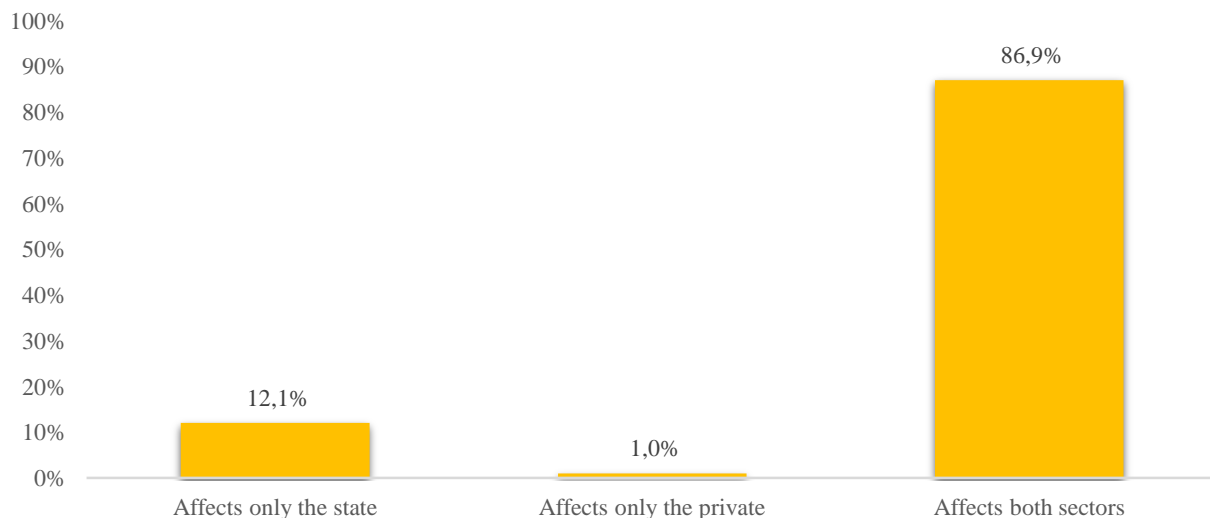
Sixty percent of the citizens surveyed do not think they would be sufficiently protected if they report corruption or conflict of interest related to public office holders. Only 2.9% said they would feel completely comfortable making such a report.



A statistical breakdown by age of respondents shows that those over 50 are significantly more likely to believe that they would not be sufficiently protected if they had to report a person holding public office. This view is shared more by men and non-managerial office holders. The statistical distribution shows that the social status of citizens partially influences their attitudes. Respondents who, for one reason or another, were outside the labour market at the time of the survey also showed more scepticism about whether they could report corruption against a public figure without hindrance.

4. Scope of corrupt practices

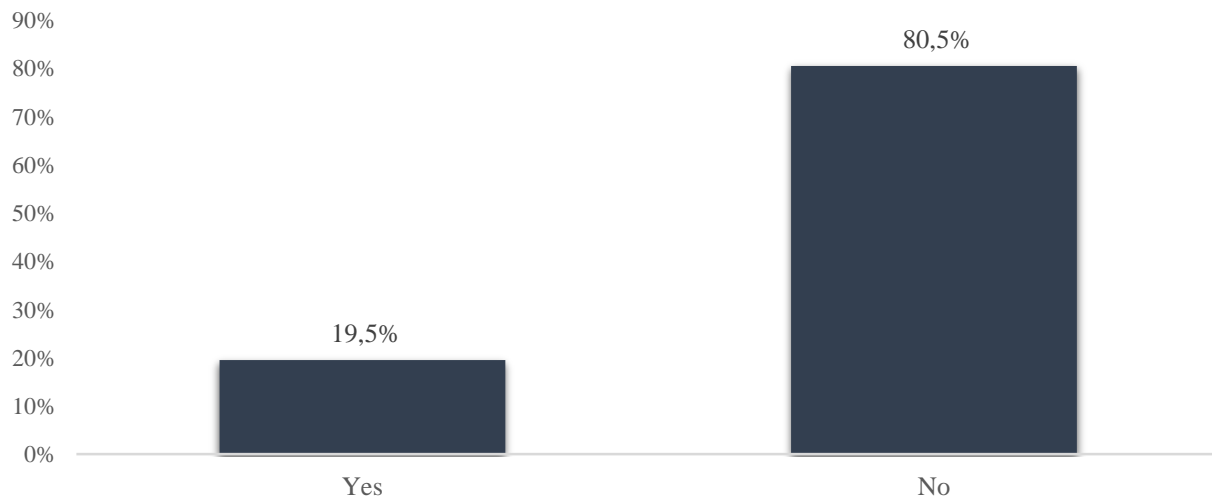
In your opinion, corruption can only affect relations in which one party is a representative of the state and municipal sector or can it also cover relations between two private companies?



Nearly 90% of the citizens are of the opinion that corruption could cover both relations between the state and the private sector, as well as those between two private companies. Respondents in the age groups 18-24 and 50-60 and older were mostly of the opposite opinion. A statistical cross-section by education shows that respondents with lower educational attainment - are more often of the opinion that corruption covers only the state or only the private sector. Similar trends are observed among respondents who are unemployed.



Are you personally aware of any cases where corruption has been committed in transactions between private organisations?



Despite the respondents' conviction that corruption exists in transactions between private companies without the involvement of the state sector, the share of people who know about specific cases is about four times smaller - 19.5%. The overall impression from the data is that respondents with higher social status were more likely to have witnessed corrupt practices between private organisations. The statistical cross-section clearly shows that individuals with higher levels of education and income are more likely to be aware of a situation in which this form of corruption has taken place. Relatively equal proportions of the public and private sectors report having knowledge of such a case. However, among those working in the public sector, strong trends again emerge. The highest proportions of respondents holding positions in administrations and state-owned enterprises have information about cases of corruption in the private sector.



5. Conclusion

Nearly half of the Bulgarian citizens would report a case of corruption at their workplace. More than half of the respondents would do the same if they noticed a conflict of interest at their place of work.

The management of the company/institution/organisation, the police and the media are the three most frequently mentioned authorities that Bulgarian citizens would turn to in case of a corrupt practice or conflict of interest arising in their workplace.

Over 90% of Bulgarian citizens support to some extent the statement that people should report if they witness corruption or conflict of interest.

The lack of guarantees for protection and the fear of action against the whistleblower are the most frequently cited reasons for refusing to report corrupt practices and conflicts of interest. More than 50% of those who said they would not report such a whistleblower cited as a reason the feeling that the whistleblower would not be paid attention to and that such action would not result in any outcome.

More than 60% of respondents said they would not feel sufficiently protected if they decided to report misconduct related to corruption and conflict of interest.

The possibility to submit anonymous signals is approved by more than 70% of Bulgarian citizens. More than 80% would feel somewhat more protected if such a mechanism existed. Over 95% of respondents also share the view that a framework is needed to protect whistleblowers.

The phenomenon "corruption" is recognized as affecting both the public and private sectors by over 85% of Bulgarian citizens. However, just under a fifth of them have information about corrupt practices in transactions between private organisations.

The overwhelming majority of the citizens surveyed are of the opinion that journalists, persons holding senior state positions, audit bodies, public administration officials, heads of

departments and units have a duty to testify if they come across a case of corruption or conflict of interest. This obligation is most widely recognised in audit institutions.

The majority of Bulgarian citizens would to some extent be willing to testify against a colleague or direct superior in a case of corruption or conflict of interest. Fewer respondents would take such action against a senior manager.