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## **Does Society Nurture a Sense of Victimhood? Bulgarian and Albanian Discourse**

**Abstract:** *With the rise of the crime rate, the number of direct victims increases, in parallel with the secondary victims. This article explores the state-of-art of victimisation and victim-related policies and practices in Bulgaria and Albania. The role of state agencies, non-governmental organisations, media and civil society in preventing and responding to victimisation is under scrutiny. The focus is on the victim's culture, mentality and sense of victimhood. Based on the findings of empirical studies launched in both countries, recommendations for improving the victimogenic status quo are developed.*

**Keywords:** *victimhood; victimization; society; victim's policies and practices; comparable cultural discourse.*

### **1. Background information**

It is widely accepted that no society is entirely safe or crime-free. No one can completely eliminate the risk of becoming a victim of crime. Many communities, groups and individuals experience severe and long-lasting consequences of various forms of violence and crime. Nevertheless, society's current victimisation also refers to the harm and suffering due to discrimination, institutional abuse, economic hardship, systemic inequalities and injustice, sexism, and homophobia. Other key factors contributing to the victimisation of societies as a global phenomenon include political instability, conflicts and war, pandemics, environmental degradation, and climate change.

Different states and societies address this phenomenon differently and, accordingly, receive different results. Most developed states with robust civil societies cope better, in general, while other - new democra-

cies, countries in transitional periods - meet difficulties in finding the adequate response to the deepening, as a whole, victimisation. Moreover, in many cases, their societies nurture a sense of victimhood.

The latest research works (Berbec *et al.* 2021; Chankova 2020a and 2020b) and practical observations in Bulgaria report an increased victimisation of the society compared to other European countries. The situation in Bulgaria concerning the security and protection of the citizenry is critical. Recent statistical data (Center for the Study of Democracy 2020) about the state-of-art of criminality and a sense of victimhood confirm that. They alarm that with the rise of the crime rate, the number of direct victims increases, in parallel with the secondary victims. The Bulgarian landscape during the last three years could be characterised by long-lasting turbulences, including political instability, street protests, and non-functioning institutions. This is a fertile ground for raising the feeling of lack of safety and due protection. Civil society mechanisms also do not work correctly. The role of media is sometimes controversial. Trying to inform the population about the ongoing processes, the press and social media often increase the tension in society further. The numerous incidents and lack of adequate response feed the fear of becoming a victim.

The situation in Albania, also geographically located on the Balkan peninsula, a country with comparable cultural discourse, is more or less similar. Many events show that today's society members live in fear. Lately, Albania has experienced an increase in criminality. According to the latest INSTAT report, 7.5% more criminal offences were recorded in 2021 than in 2020 (Albanian Institute of Statistics 2021). What seems disturbing in society's perceptions is the aggressiveness of committing crimes related not only to femicide but also to the community's security.

This study was undertaken to research and verify the academic standings and practical observations about the victimogenic status quo in both countries. The aims also are to analyse and reflect on society's response to crime, the influence of the media reporting on these events, as well as what are the solutions that could increase of safety in both societies. A starting point is that governmental actors, legislators, the justice system, the penitentiary system and civil society bodies are always in the media's focus, which is only sometimes determined to fulfill its role in the service of the public.

To implement this comparative study, the relevant literature sources were reviewed. In Bulgaria, victimology is a new research subject, and the original sources are somewhat limited (Stankov 1999 and

2001; Chinova and Ivanova 2004; Panev 2004). While following the European tendencies, victim rights are more or less well explored (Chankova 2012 and 2013; Chankova and Georgieva 2019), the current processes of victimisation do not attract due attention. Bulgarian studies on victimhood, trauma, and victim precipitation are almost missing. Thus, this research aims to fill, at least partly, the existing gap.

In Albania, victimology is even younger. The main research works are connected with the response to the current significant societal problems, e.g. human trafficking (Campbell 2013) or are results of collective projects targeting Albania (Meško *et al.* 2020; Stortz *et al.* 2022; Voca *et al.* 2023). It is recognised that Albanian society is undergoing a period of rapid change, and while the traditional values have been severely weakened, new ones still need to take their place (Arsovska and Verduyn 2008). Among the primary concerns shared in public discourses and various victims' studies are those related to capacity building, limitation of human and material resources to offer supportive services to victims of crime, problems of inter-agency coordination, and inefficiencies in identifying victims of human trafficking (Mesko *et al.* 2020).

In this study, some media guidelines and practices related to crime and victim reporting have been explored. While a number of valuable guidelines have been adopted (UNICEF 2018; Supreme Judicial Council 2015), the media content review from the last months shows significant deviations from the established standards.

Based on the theoretical overview and preliminary investigations, scientific hypotheses were formulated:

Hypotheses: Bulgarian and Albanian societies feel afraid of crime. The members of these societies find that their states do not have good policies or practices in protecting crime victims, and they do not live in a safe, crime-free society/community. The role of media in raising awareness for solving the problems of crime and the protection of victims is critical.

To verify the hypotheses and primary, to explore the role of societies in maintaining the sense of victimhood, empirical studies were launched in Albania and Bulgaria by developing a uniform questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed among the random population in both countries in Albanian and Bulgarian languages. In Bulgaria, 100 participants took part and in Albania – 93. The respondents were from 5 different cities in each country - the capitals and four other cities. The enquiry with open and multiple choice questions was conducted face-to-

face (in Albania) and face-to-face and electronically (in Bulgaria), with guaranteed anonymity. The participants are persons aged 18 to 70, with secondary or higher education, from different professions, with varying experiences of life, and students.

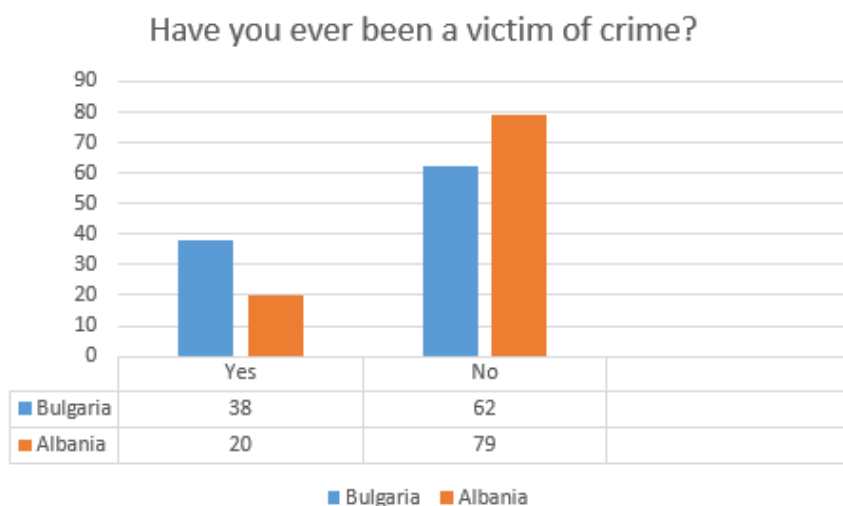
## 2. Findings and analysis of the empirical study

a/ The initial question was: Have you ever been a victim of crime?

In Bulgaria's survey, the positive answers were 38 % and the negative – 62 %. The crimes the respondents have been victims of are theft/larceny, fraud, criminal breach of trust, cybercrimes; offences against transport /traffic crimes/, compulsion; threat; kidnapping; bodily harm, destruction and damage.

In Albania's survey, the respective percentages are: positive-20%, negative-79%, and 1% do not reply. The crimes the respondents have been victims of are theft, murders, home invasion with a weapon, sexual harassment, threats on social networks, and corruption.

These data could be interpreted as follows: Bulgaria's society seems more victimised than Albanian. Although the crimes are not always severe (according to the Penal Code classification) and the crimes against the personality, property, and other gross violations of rights are not dominant, the percentage of victimised persons is pretty high. Even this very first picture is rather disturbing.



Graph.1. The respondents' victimisation (in percentages)

b/Being questioned: Do you think the problem of victimisation in society is serious and deserves attention? 81 % of Bulgarian participants responded positively, 6% negatively, and 13% did not have an opinion. In Albania, the situation is more or less the same as 94% have responded positively and only 6% negatively. This is an unambiguous evaluation of the victimogenic situation given by the participants in both countries. They consider the problem as significant and deserving of close look and measures. It is already the second signal that people feel they live in victimised societies and find it necessary to address the issue.

c/ The next question was: Do you think enough information is available to help crime victims?

A vast majority of the Bulgarian respondents - 80 % - answered with "No", 16 % with "Yes", and 4% did not have an opinion. This is more than indicative. In our days, information is the most potent instrument. The lack or insufficiency of information that is of crucial importance for this specific group is absolutely unacceptable. The responsible institutions and agencies do not fulfill their functions properly, which is a sign of inadmissible neglect.

In Albania, about 67% answered this question with "No", about 18% with "Yes", and 15% had no opinion, indicating that many people are unaware of this point.

d/ Do you think Bulgaria/Albania has good policies for crime victims' protection?

In Bulgaria, those who answered positively, although a relatively low percentage -10%, claim that there is a vision and solutions for protecting crime victims in theory and legislation. However, the respondents themselves consider that these policies must be more far-sighted and fully accomplished.

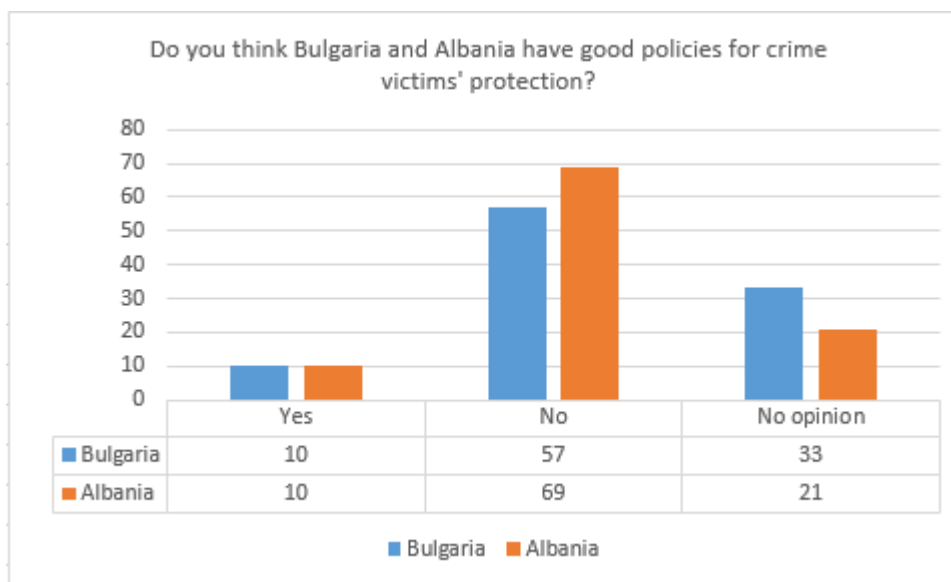
More than half -57%- answered negatively for the following reasons: Bulgarian policies are still far from the European standards and due care towards this group of vulnerable persons; even when the strategic documents contain good intentions, the practices are inconsistent in their implementation, and the institutions are passive or inadequate in their actions and work with the consequences, not with the causes; the legislator lags behind the best solutions in comparative terms; as far as there are policies, they only concern the direct victims, but not the secondary and tertiary victimised persons; as a rule, even if there are mechanisms to protect victims, they are not widespread and applicable broadly (for example, the opportunity for state compensation under the Support and Financial Compensation of Crime Victims Act 2007) is not well-known;

information campaigns to raise awareness are insufficient; the term "injured party" is still used instead of the widely accepted term "victim"; the focus continues to be put on the offender; the victim remains marginalised and undervalued.

A relatively large group of respondents -33% - do not have a specific opinion, which can be interpreted as follows: they are either indifferent to the topic or lack information, as the policies remain "invisible" to the mass public.

The perceptions of Albania's participants are similar to Bulgarian respondents. About 69% have responded with "No", 10% with "Yes", and a significant percentage of about 22% have no opinion. Most of the respondents who answered negatively expressed deep dissatisfaction with the vision of the policymakers in that aspect pointing out that not enough measures are envisaged to prevent crimes and protect potential and real victims; the state itself is run by criminals, and crimes start from the highest instances, so no good and strong will for counteraction; the victims are not part of the governmental agenda.

However, some respondents think there are good policies in Albania (although not strictly enforced), new laws have been adopted for the victims' protection, and some of them have received support.



Graph.2. Policies for crime victims' protection

e/ Do you think that in Bulgaria/Albania, there are good practices for crime victims' protection?

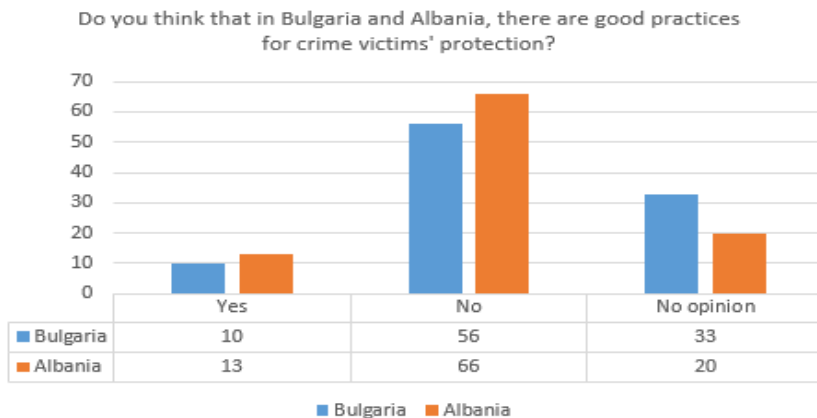
The narrow segment of Bulgarian respondents who answered positively -10%- find that some mechanisms do exist; if crimes are prosecuted, there are protective practices; such practices are carried out by the state or the non-governmental sector or jointly.

However, the overwhelming responses - 56%- are negative, considering that the victim receives insufficient protection, remaining on the periphery of the attention of the authorities and institutions concerned; the measures taken are ineffective, e.g. even with a Protection Order, domestic violence often continues; there is no good synchronization between state institutions and NGOs; sometimes, there is more ostentation and formality in the activities of NGOs, and the effectiveness is low; the practice does not always correspond to the law; the protection mechanisms are not always activated due to the victims' ignorance.

The percentage of people without an opinion -33%- remains alarmingly high, confirming that these practices, insofar as they exist, are unknown, even by the victims.

As in Bulgaria, in Albania, the prevailing responses -65%- are negative. The respondents think that the relevant institutions do not protect the victims of crime and the policies for the protection of victims are not implemented. Some survey participants even claim that no one listens to them while reporting crime without payment.

The few positive respondents - 13%- insist that different institutions help, enough laws exist, and, in most victim cases, efforts are invested. One participant did not reply, and 20% of the respondents had no opinion.

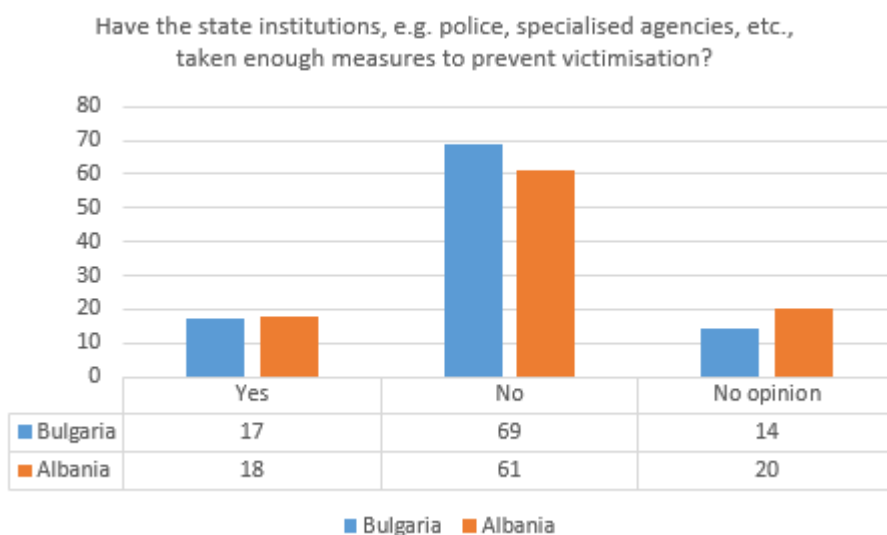


Graph.3. Practices for crime victims' protection

f/ Have the state institutions, e.g. police, specialised agencies, etc., taken enough measures to prevent victimisation?

Again, a negative evaluation prevails in Bulgaria - 69% of the respondents express dissatisfaction with the measures undertaken. However, 17 % find the actions sufficient, but the high percentage of those without opinion -14%- shows that these actions remain invisible, which might affect the sense of security.

Similar is the situation in Albania: 61% replied with “No”, 18% with “Yes”, and 20% had no opinion.



Graph.4. Measures from state institutions to prevent victimisation

g/ Do you feel fear of becoming a direct victim of crime?

Those in Bulgaria's survey who answered affirmatively prevailed - 56%. They ground their answers on the following arguments: the danger of being victimised is tremendous and real; becoming a victim is highly disadvantageous as the victim is neglected in the mass case and does not receive or rarely receives specialised help, hence the reason to worry; fear is a natural sense of self-preservation, as no one is immunised against victimisation; the escalating crime rate is frightening; the consequences for physical and mental health are grave; justice cannot be relied upon, crimes go unpunished; security is not guaranteed.

A quarter of respondents -26 % - answered negatively because they do not belong to the risk groups, can take care of themselves and



have already taken the necessary measures; they also think that fear is counterproductive; one cannot live in fear.

Two respondents claim they do not feel threatened because they live in a safe society. The rest - 17% - have no opinion. However, more than half of the excerpt is scary, and this is anxious.

A vast majority- 77% -of the Albanian respondents also feel fear because they have already been victims and are fully aware of the deficits of the situation; according to them Albania has become a not very safe country; crimes are happening every day and nobody could feel protected; moreover, many people have mental problems, drug-addicted have increased in number, and this is dangerous as those groups are most criminogenic.

Almost 13% of the respondents do not fear because of their precautions, such as trying to protect themselves, not dealing with other people's problems, and not being involved in suspicious activities. About 9% do not have any opinion.



*Graph.5. Fear of becoming a direct victim of crime*

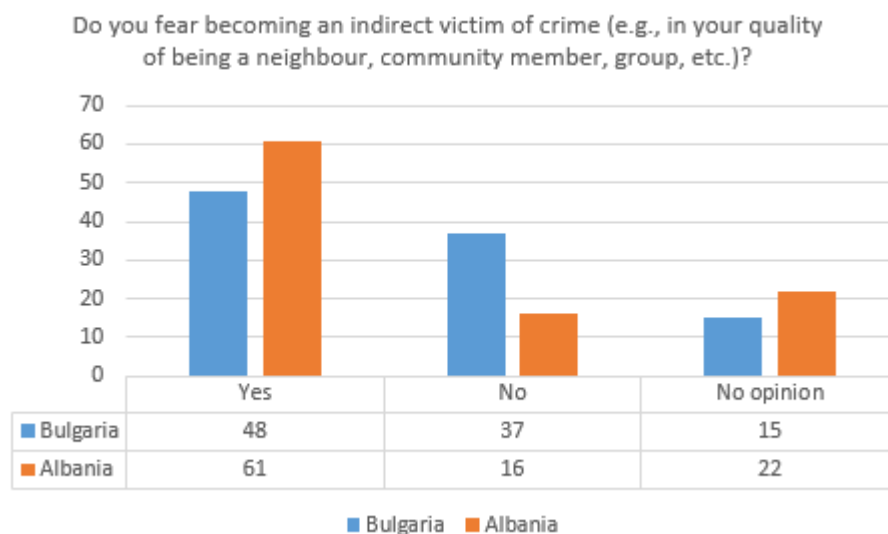
h/ Do you fear becoming an indirect victim of crime (e.g., in your quality of being a neighbour, community member, group member, etc.)?

The arguments of those in Bulgaria who answered in the affirmative - 48% - are that they are, in effect, indirect victims since the stress of criminal encroachment is constant; as members of the community all are

victims - either directly or indirectly; even the witness can be considered a victim; the environment, when risky, feeds the fear of victimisation.

Those with a negative answer- 37%- do not feel threatened; 15% do not have an opinion.

The majority of 61% in Albania have also answered with “Yes”. There is a minority that does not feel threatened- 16%, but a significant percentage - 22% -of the respondents have no opinion.



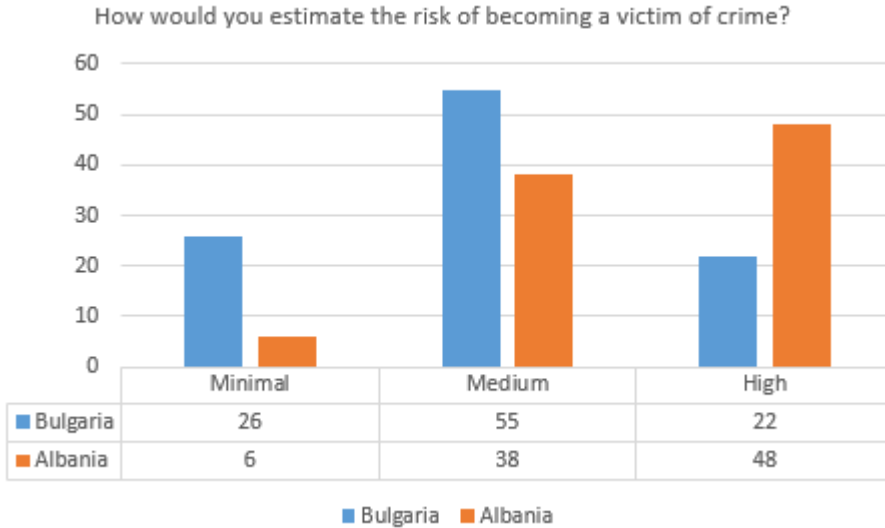
Graph.6. Fear of becoming an indirect victim of crime

i/ How would you estimate the risk of becoming a victim of crime?

The answers to the last question correspond to a great extent to the responses to the previous ones. More than half of the Bulgarian respondents -55%- esteem the risk as a medium, 26 % - as minimal and 22% as high. Only 7% answered differently, including with the optimistic vision that there is no risk at all. It can be extrapolated that the Bulgarian reality is quite critical regarding the probability of becoming a victim of crime, according to the participants.

More dramatic is the situation in Albania. The risk of becoming a victim of crime is estimated primarily as medium and high. Most respondents – 48 %- think there is an increased risk of becoming a victim; 38% believe the risk is medium, and only 6% assume the risk is minimal.

These findings are more than alarming and require immediate response. The modest contribution of this survey is to inform the respective institutions and agencies.



*Graph. 7. Risk of becoming a victim of crime*

j/ Do you think media (e.g. TV, radio, social networks) help prevent victimisation?

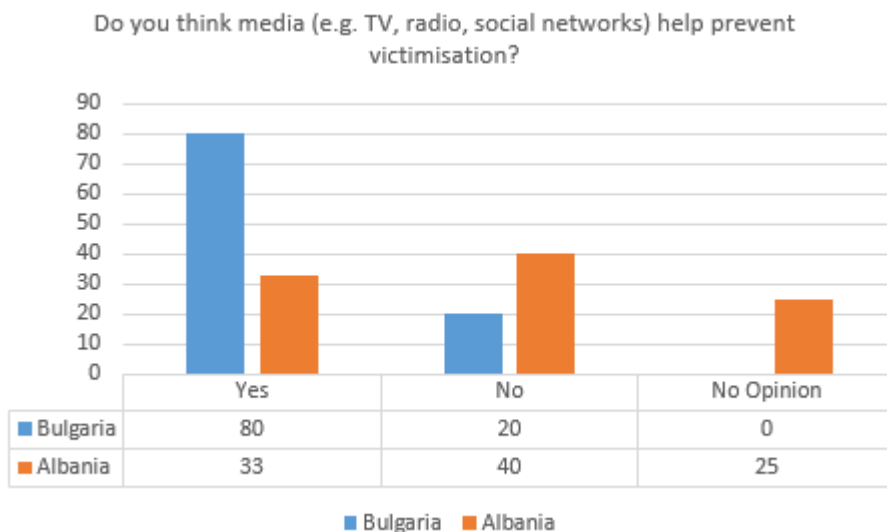
On the Bulgarian landscape, the respondents are divided into two groups:

Approximately 80% answer in the affirmative way and point to the following proven positive effects of media activities: increase public awareness of the state of crime; engage social vigilance; act as a deterrent to the criminal contingent; engage the institutions to take appropriate measures; stimulate the people themselves to take protective measures; provide helpful advice from experts about many crimes - telephone fraud, online crimes, etc.

However, about 20% of respondents are not convinced that the media helps prevent victimisation, usually with the following arguments: media are involved too late - after the crime has been committed, and while helping to reveal and investigate crimes, the media does not contribute to prevention.

More diversified is the picture in Albania. Almost 40% of the participants responded with “No” because they think that the media always report when the crime happens and not before; there are cases when media set examples for criminals and even stimulate crime by irritating criminals with much negative coverage of the events and little consideration for prevention, media does not raise any awareness, etc.

The other part -33% -lists the following reasons when answering with “Yes”: there is good will in the media to spread the correct information at the right time; media help people to be more careful and vigilant; thanks to media measures have been taken; the media do raise awareness. A significant percentage -25%- of the respondents have no opinion.



Graph. 8. The respondent's view about media effects in preventing victimisation

k/ Do you think media (e.g. TV, radio, social networks) raise your fear of becoming a victim?

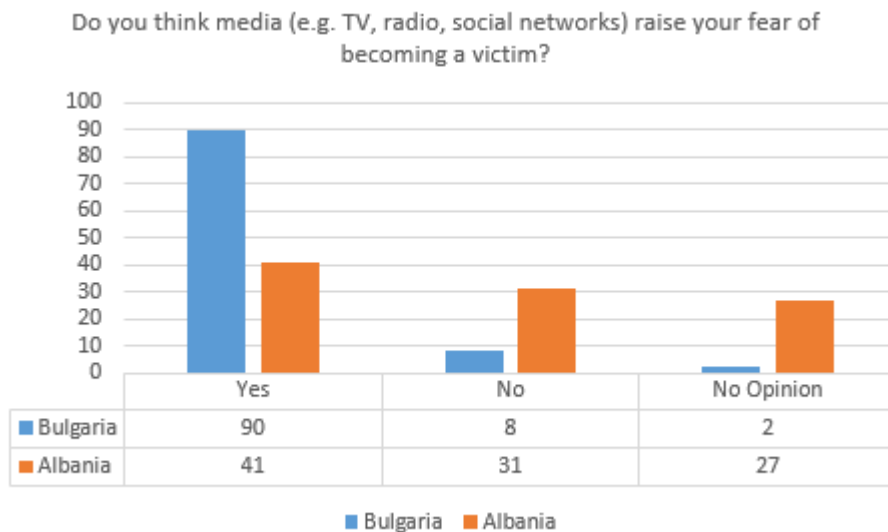
Over 90% of Bulgarian respondents answered this question in the affirmative, reasoning as follows: by reporting on crimes, the media provokes negative emotions, affecting the sense of security; too much attention is paid to violence, and it scares; media not always present the information objectively but rather sensationally; alert about the committed crimes, but not about the imposed punishments; often, after the media reports, there remains a feeling of powerlessness, insecurity, lack of justice; by not giving information about the work done by the institutions, they create confidence in the criminal contingent in their inaccessibility and impunity.

The percentage of those who do not raise their fears of becoming a victim of crime is low- about 8%. The remaining 2 % do not have an opinion.

These findings show the enormous role of the media concerning crime and victimisation. They also confirm that their activity can have a dual effect - significantly helping prevent victimisation and instilling fear in society. It is a function of how they work. In Bulgaria, the media can only sometimes fulfil their multiple roles in a balanced way - as a messenger, security guard, trainer, etc.

In Albania, the situation looks like this: A good portion of the respondents - 41% - think that the media increase the fear of being victims of a crime because they spread misinformation and "promote" crime; in the television chronicles there is a lot of reporting on crime and victims and much negativity which affects the citizens emotionally and psychologically.

Many participants - 31% - think that the media does not increase the fear of being a victim of a crime because they warn the citizens timely and help them feel safer and vigilant. At the same time, a significant percentage of the respondents - 27% - have no opinion on the matter.



*Graph.9. Media effects in raising the fear of becoming a victim*

1/Do you think the other social actors (e.g. NGOs, charities, etc.) help the prevention of victimisation?

Those in Bulgaria who answered with "Yes" - 49% - consider that NGOs work to improve the legislation; develop and implement good practices following contemporary standards; NGOs and charities carry

out many helpful, practical activities - provide legal and psychological assistance, conduct training, inform the general public as they are standing on the front line, making direct contact with the victim; they assist the recovery of the victim and respectively gain more and more trust.

Those who answered with "No" - 8%- claim that the number of the non-governmental and charitable organisations is not sufficient; they do not have the necessary funds and human resources for adequate work with the victims; often show bias and selectivity; NGOs are addicted to a particular group and exaggerate its victimisation significance.

Those unfamiliar with NGOs and charities' activities – 43%- naturally have no opinion.

The results are too symptomatic. Obviously, the role of these main partners of the state in preventing and counteracting crime is not sufficiently known. However, the citizens themselves have suffered from this ignorance, as they do not count on support from them. In the comparative aspect, relatively much reliance is placed on these organisations, and this reinforces the sense of security and protection. However, on Bulgarian terrain, their presence is not visible and significant enough. This, in turn, reinforces people's fears.

In Albania, part of the respondents - 30%- answered "Yes" because they believe these actors are involved in finding the truth, they work hard, send positive messages and support victims, and frequently they are the only ones in the field.

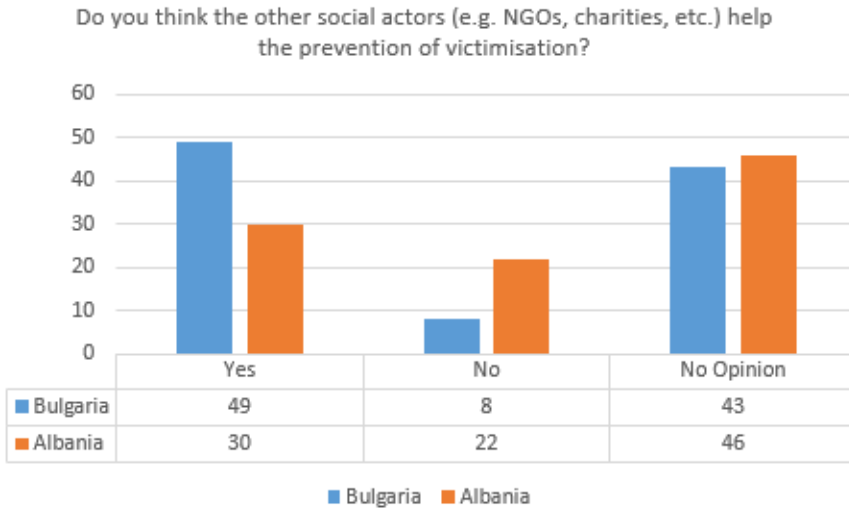
However, some of the respondents -22% - answered "No" because, according to them, nothing significantly is done, the crime rates are high, the NGOs and charities are powerless in the face of crime, and as a rule, people do not consider NGOs as essential actors.

A significant percentage -46% - have no opinion on the matter.

m/ Can you say you live in a safe, crime-free society/community?

In Bulgaria, not surprisingly, very few - 6% of the respondents - consider themselves to live in a safe and crime-free society.

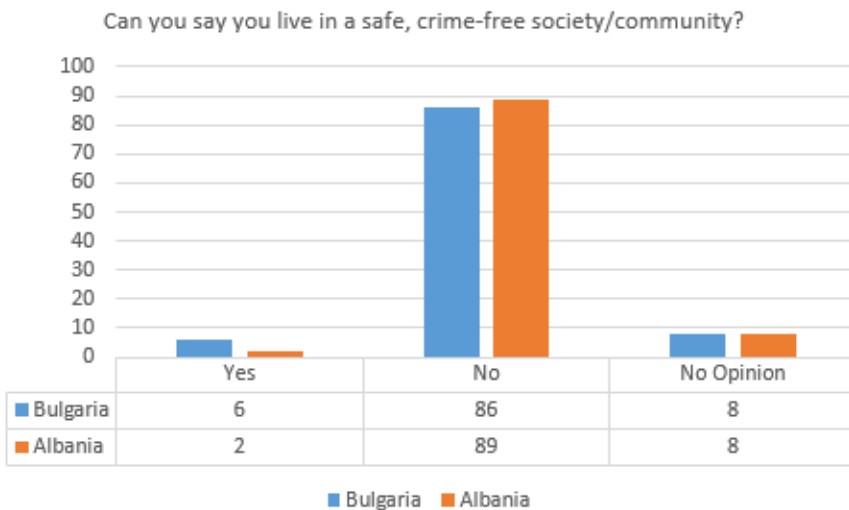
The great majority – 86 %- answering negatively claim that crime is everywhere and cannot be eliminated; it exists not only in Bulgaria but also in Europe and the world, hence the risk of "import" since we cannot isolate ourselves; Bulgaria is a dangerous country in this regard, with a high crime rate; there have always been and always will exist deviant individuals; complete security and safety are not possible.



Graph.10. NGOs and charities' effects in preventing victimisation

Eight percent do not have an opinion.

An extremely high number of the respondents in Albania - 89%-replied "No" because, according to them, there is no security in the state, the penal laws do not produce the desired effect, the organized crime and corruption are everywhere in Albania, serious crimes are committed daily, etc. A small percentage -only 2% - have replied "Yes" as they feel safe. Eight percent do not have an opinion.



Graph.11. The respondents' views about living in a safe, crime-free society/community

### 3. Additional observations and conclusions

Theoretical overview, our personal observations and the survey results lead to the firm conclusion that the victimogenic situation in both countries is rather serious, although to a different degree. In Bulgaria, it is more alarming. Victimhood, as a persistent state of feeling victimised, either through loss of a sense of self-worth and security or feelings of negativity and vulnerability, is an attribute to a significant part of Bulgarian and Albanian societies. It is fuelled by many factors - high crime rate, an unsatisfactory response by the state and law enforcement institutions, insufficient measures and infrastructure to prevent victimisation and support victims, weak civil society, etc. Especially important in this aspect are media maintaining and even raising fears, thus nurturing the sense of victimhood. Moreover, a new phenomenon is observed in both countries. Victim mentality seems to be a characteristic not only of the real victims - people with experience who suffered from crimes but also of potential victims. It could be daring to generalise that wide society's circles live in permanent stress and fear of becoming victims, blaming others, institutions, politics, etc. Yet, we live in turbulent times and face economic, political, health, and many other crises. These seriously affect people's daily lives and the self-esteem of citizens who cannot always cope with difficult situations and challenges. This is somewhat justified - the colossal dynamic of the political and social processes and lack of stability often do not allow people to accomplish their plans and seriously disturb their established modus vivendi. Living a long time in such a critical situation and torn society, many people feel like victims of the current status quo. They do not see good perspectives for the ordinary life, to say nothing about the situation when they are indeed victimised. The chronic lack of trust in institutions, state authorities, civil society's structures, etc., nurtures their pessimism, frustration and even hopelessness, although sometimes "in advance". This is also grounded on the experience of the already injured by crime, institutional abuse, violence and other similar acts citizens who recovered long time.

The role of victims in society has evolved over time. In early societies, victims were primarily involved in responding to their victimisation. Still, in recent decades, victims have re-emerged as essential participants in justice delivery processes and formulating penal and victim-related policies. There is an ongoing paradigm shift - from a marginalised party, the victims gradually become the centre of public attention. However, simultaneously, a new risk emerges - for misuse of the victim's status. Victimhood culture allows blame-shifting, excuse-making and self-pity



to keep people from being accountable for their own actions. It also generates a society of people who identify foremost as being oppressed. It seems that this is the case with Bulgarian and Albanian culture. The conventional concept of victimisation is challenged. It is not enough to have a set of norms that operate as criteria delimiting who will be socially recognised as a victim and who will not be. Today, if not a "nation of victims", we face a society of victimised or feeling victimised, or fearing and expecting their further victimisation people.

In a comparative view, this conclusion is reaffirmed (Campbell and Manning 2018; Berski 2021). Apparently, in the global world, victims and societies experience the same problems and challenges.

#### **4. Recommendations**

The ongoing process of deepening victimisation should be addressed as it is counterproductive for the functioning of the state, society, groups and separate individuals. No doubt, preventing victimisation in society requires a collective effort from everyone. It is vital to create awareness about the issue and educate people on identifying and preventing it. This can be done through public campaigns, workshops, and training programs. It is also essential to have strong laws and policies that protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. Additionally, it is crucial to create a culture of respect and empathy where people are encouraged to speak up against victimisation and support those who have been affected by it.

The fundamental role of media in this process, and especially concerning the general sense of victimhood, should be rethought. The enormous resources of this powerful actor should be appropriately directed - from a herald of the event of the crime, often presented too sensationally, to a reliable factor of support and protection of the population. This study shows that the role of the media in raising awareness of issues related to victimisation and victims' rights and the prevention of crimes is recognised by the citizens. However, it seems that the media should make more efforts to increase professionalism, avoid disinformation and fake news, and superficial reporting of events with a lack of professional ethics. A big job needs to be done regarding media literacy by educating the public on healthily consuming media content. Citizens agree that there is room for more information on victims' rights and deepening the discussion on victim issues in public.

Moreover, restorative justice, restorative practices and ethos should become part of the Bulgarian and Albanian reality. They should be legis-

lated and widely applied. Their vast potential can be successfully used when working with victims, in institutions, schools, etc. E-justice and e-governance can minimise the number of victimising practices. Further complete digitisation in the relevant spheres would remove the negatives of the subjective factor. Implementing artificial intelligence in some areas could also be supported after careful consideration.

Simultaneously, the main actors must work more vigorously for the well-being and mental health of individuals and society as a whole. The marginalisation of many community members increases the risk of becoming a criminal contingent and producing new victims.

More resources - financial and human- should be redirected in this area; control over their absorption is of utmost importance. Good educational work with children from the early years is vital for building empathy and sensitivity to the victims and creating a victim-friendly society. The culture of belonging is essential for the harmonious and peaceful coexistence. Today's society should nurture not a sense of victimhood but active citizenship in safe and prosperous communities and states.

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