



Bulgaria Local Election Update

October 26, 2007

Local Elections will be held in Bulgaria on Sunday, October 28. 6,446,085 registered voters will be eligible to cast ballots at more than 11,500 polling stations across the country to elect mayors and municipal councilors in 263 municipalities. These are the first local elections since Bulgaria became a member of the European Union (EU) on January 1, 2007. The newly elected local governments will be the first to implement fiscal decentralization and to have access to EU funds. The elections are taking place after significant inflation during the summer and in the midst of a general teachers' strike that has closed 95 percent of the schools in Bulgaria for 5 weeks.

This pre-election report highlights political developments, campaign events and efforts by the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) trainees and partners to engage parties, civic groups and voters on issues surrounding the local elections. In Bulgaria, NDI currently implements programs funded by the National Endowment for Democracy to increase the political participation of Roma and women.

Election Background

On September 29, the official campaign for the local elections began. The Central Election Commission (CEC) was established on the basis of Presidential Edict 233 issued on August 1, 2007 and launched its website 10 days prior to the elections: <http://www.mi2007.org>.

The Local Elections Act was amended in parliament in July 2007, replacing the D'Hondt system with the O'Hare system of vote redistribution¹ and introducing an integral ballot, the election (rather than the appointment) of 35 district mayors in the three biggest cities –Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna—and the 10-month local residency requirement for voters. EU citizens who meet the same requirement are eligible to vote and to be elected as local councilors.

Unfortunately, 17 years after Bulgaria held its first democratic elections, vote buying and manipulative voting remain a serious issue. The mass media exposed many specific methods of controlling the vote, including using cell phone pictures or specific signs to mark the ballots. The phenomenon, usually associated with Romani communities, now seems to take place elsewhere as well, particularly in localities with fast economic growth such as the seaside or mountain resorts. In 2006, the parliament criminalized vote buying and enforced up to three years imprisonment for vote buyers. At the beginning of October 2007, members of

¹ The D'Hondt system is a mathematical method of vote distribution in a proportional representation electoral system that allocates seats among parties and slightly favors large parties and coalitions. In contrast, the O'Hare system, more commonly known as the single-transferable ballot method, allows voters to rank their choice of candidates and then allocates seats based on candidate rank on the ballot until all seats are filled.

parliament (MPs) passed a new amendment to the penal code, which envisions imprisonment and/or other sanctions for citizens who sell their vote. Despite these legislative measures, it is unlikely that Bulgaria will see any decrease in the vote buying rates because of law enforcement issues, the complicated procedure to collect evidence of the offence, and the general public's tolerance of it.

On October 18, well into the campaign and facing the challenge presented by vote buying, the parliament adopted new changes to the penal code that increased punitive measures for vote buying, including sanctions for citizens who sell their votes.

Political Parties and Candidates

In total, 88 political parties are running in the local elections, and the total number of candidates for mayors and local councilors is 60,000 – roughly 1 percent of all Bulgarians who have the right to vote. In contrast, 146 parties participated in 2003 local elections. This high number of parties in 2003 resulted in legislative measures to reduce the number of parties running (including re-registration with a considerably higher number of individual supporters and stricter financial accountability requirements). This goal seemed to have been achieved, with 22 parties running for the national parliamentary elections in 2005 and 16 parties running in May 2007 for the European Parliament (EP).

Nonetheless, one reason that the number of parties remains high is that some parties were specifically set up to run for local government, often by businesses searching for direct representation. This trend was noted in 2003, however, it has become much stronger in 2007. The positive effect is that the elected local government officials, and especially mayors, will be more independent of Sofia-based party headquarters and more responsible to their local constituencies. The concern is that the main incentive for many of the candidates may be to access significant EU funds for distribution through the municipalities, which touches the sore point of the country's political and economic life – corruption and clientelism.

Political parties have formed numerous, diverse and sometimes controversial local coalitions, particularly where an independent candidate is supported by several parties. Although their rationale is decentralization and the reflection of local circumstances, the sometimes unlikely coalitions make it increasingly difficult for people to become oriented with the principles and ideology of a given party. The other side effect is the resulting difficulty in measuring success or failure of parties in the local elections. The major political formations in the elections are Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)², *Ataka*, the National Movement for Stability and Progress (NMS), Union-BG (*Gergiovdan*), the New Time and the Bulgarian People's Union).

The public opinion polls have, to an extent, reflected this confusion by producing prognoses with unprecedented variances of around 10 percent of the vote. Below are mid-campaign projections by two polling agencies for the elections in Sofia, released on October 22, 2007.

² In the capital, UDF and DSB formed the Alliance for Sofia

Mediana	
Candidate	Voters
Boyko Borisov, GERB	33.4 %
Brigo Asparuhov, BSP	17.3 %
Martin Zaimov, SDS/DSB	12.1 %
Antonia Parvanova, NMS	6.7 %
Yuliana Doncheva, Union BG	3.5 %
Slavi Binev, <i>Ataka</i>	3.1 %
Konstantin Papazov, DP	1.8 %
Other	1%
Will not vote	21.1

MBMD	
Candidate	Voters
Boyko Borisov	41.2 %
Martin Zaimov	7.7 %
Brigo Asparuhov	7.1 %
Slavi Binev	3.2 %
Konstantin Papazov	2.5 %
Youliana Doncheva	1.7 %
Antonia Parvanova	0.5 %
Other	0.7 %
Will not vote	35.9%

The expected election turnout has also varied between 36 percent (Alpha Research) and 50 percent (Mediana). For comparison, it was 57.45 percent in the 2003 local elections.

NDI Partners' Election Campaign Activities

GERB Mayoral Candidate in Targovishte, Venka Stoyanova in Candidate Debate



Venka Stoyanova, GERB candidate, during the debate.

NDI trainee and GERB mayoral candidate in Targovishte, Venka Stoyanova, was the only woman to take part in the candidate debate organized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the town of Targovishte on October 10, 2007. The initiative was supported by the Bulgarian National Television.

Together with the candidates from *Ataka*, BSP, the Union of Patriotic Forces – Defense, and the coalition - United for Targovishte, Venka

Stoyanova, a medical doctor and newcomer to the political arena, made her first high-profile public appearance, responding to citizen questions and concerns related to the development of the municipality. The issues discussed were related to local taxes and fees, the maintenance of municipality-owned buildings, the provision of administrative services to citizens, and incentives for local business development. Targovishte is an underdeveloped administrative region in northeast Bulgaria

Venka Stoyanova is the main competitor for the incumbent Krasimir Mirev (BSP) - mayor since 1999, Chairperson of the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, and Vice-President of the Committee of Regions in the European Parliament.

Stanizarka Nenova, Independent Mayoral Candidate for Pomorie, in the Media

Stanizarka Nenova, an NDI participant, has put a great emphasis on direct voter contact in her mayoral campaign. These efforts were highlighted in a recent newspaper article.



Stanizarka Nenova, independent mayoral candidate for Pomorie

“If one is following your campaign, one cannot help but notice that you focus extensively on meeting the citizens of Pomorie. Obviously this is a priority for you. Will this outreach remain your priority, if you are elected mayor?” ~24 Hours Daily, 24 October 2007

“Today no one doubts that citizen participation, and the effective interaction between local government and civil society organizations, is the essence of good local governance. Even the Bulgarian word “municipality” (*obshtina*) is derived from the word “community” (*obshtnost*): the common efforts of those who inhabit one territorial unit to address issues of importance to their everyday life. It is important that the citizens are not merely clients of municipal administrative services but rather partners in the governance of the municipality.”

~Stanizarka Nenova

Margarita Petkova Runs for a Second Term in Ihtiman

Margarita Petkova (BSP), an NDI trainee and later trainer, and Win With Women (WWW) signatory, is running for re-election after the completion of a successful four-year term as the first woman mayor of Ihtiman, in the Sofia region. In 2005, she was elected Mayor of the Year, and during the severe floods in the municipality in 2006, she was declared the best mayor-crisis manager. Margarita completed her first term in office with an impressive record of local development achievements in the areas of education, forestry and agriculture, environment, infrastructure and public-private partnerships. Oftentimes called the Iron Lady, she says that local governance is an arena to promote women’s issues.



Margarita Petkova, who’s made the environment her priority, turns the first sod of a biomass energy plant, on October 17.

“During this term in office, we proved that women in local government are a winning cause. I have entrusted many critical positions on my team to women, and I rely on them wholeheartedly. They have never let me down. To me, the women’s cause is not an opportunity for outreach, it is a reality, and I have proven my commitment to it during my four years as a mayor,” says Margarita Petkova to Trud Daily.

Margarita’s successful term in office and commitment to women’s empowerment has inevitably influenced the candidate selections in her party. In these elections, BSP has selected five women as mayoral candidates in 20 municipalities of the Sofia region, compared with only two women candidates in 2003. Margarita’s most serious competitor for the mayor’s seat in Ihtiman is another NDI trainee in the Roma Political Participation program – Emilia Kovacheva, candidate of *Evrroma*.

First Debate on Roma Integration Policies in Sofia with District Mayoral Candidates

On October 23, NDI, in cooperation with the Open Society Institute – Sofia (OSI) and several Roma NGOs, organized a debate on the **Roma Integration Policies in Sofia** among mayoral candidates in the Sofia districts of Slatina, Krasna Polyana, Vazrazhdane, and Lyulin. Eight mayoral



Eight mayoral candidates from four Sofia districts discuss policies to better integrate Roma.

candidates from the four Sofia districts with a sizable Roma population, and nominated by mainstream political parties with the highest chance of getting elected, took part in the debate. Agop Ovagimyan - Alliance for Sofia; Bozhidar Iskrenov - MRF; Emil Voynov - BSP; Lyubomir Teoharov - Union BG; Nikolay Spasov - Alliance for Sofia; Stoyan Georgiev - NMS; Valentin Vutov - BSP, and Zhivko Zhelev - BSP debated the challenges of Roma integration and their visions for the development of their districts concerning Romani issues. The debate occurred in the presence of NGO



Candidates answered questions from the audience and pre-recorded questions from Romani neighborhoods.

representatives, citizens from the four districts, the candidates' election headquarters' staff, and media.

Roma comprise almost 10 percent of the Sofia population; 25 percent of the houses in Romani neighborhoods are illegal, and more than 6,000 of them must be torn down. Unemployment in the segregated Romani neighborhoods exceeds 70 percent, while six of the schools in Sofia are entirely attended by Romani children, though almost 70 percent of them drop out after seventh grade. Romani health has deteriorated and the average life expectancy is 10 years lower than the average for the country. These, together with very specific community issues like the lack of public transport or lack of subsidies for Romani community centers, were addressed by both candidates and the audience. The questions from the hall were supplemented by videotaped questions from the Roma communities. The issue of vote-buying was also raised. The candidates accompanied their prepared statements with the anticipated promises of assistance if they are elected. For some of the candidates this debate was the first and only event in their campaigns. The event was well covered by the media.



Many NGO representatives and Roma from the candidates' neighborhoods attended the debate.



NDI Roma participant Zdravko Kotov launches his campaign with a public rally in Knezha.

NDI Trainee Zdravko Kotov Runs for Mayor of Knezha

On October 9, Zdravko Kotov, the MRF candidate for mayor of Knezha and graduate of NDI's Roma political leadership program, organized the official opening of his campaign with a big rally in the center of the Romani neighborhood in town.

More than 300 people from Knezha and neighboring villages gathered for the event. Among the guests was Mithat Metin, MRF MP from the region, and a number of top regional party officials.

Zdravko and the other MRF municipal councilor candidates currently rank first or second in opinion polls. Thus far, there has never been a Romani *municipal* mayor – only Romani mayors of small villages – and Zdravko is one of the competitors who has a serious chance of being elected.

He introduced the nominees from the MRF candidate list of fifteen, which features two women in electable positions. MRF prides itself in being the only party which has attracted members and supporters from all ethnic groups. Zdravko presented his mayoral election platform highlighting his priorities of creating employment, improving the infrastructure of the Romani neighborhood, and devoting special attention



The rally ended with a live music show.

to the community school, which is said to have produced the most graduates per capita in the whole Knezha region.

“Together for Kamen” - Atanas Stoyanov



Campaign poster for Atanas Stoyanov

NDI Roma program graduate Atanas Stoyanov is a first-time candidate for local councilor in the municipality of Strazhica. He has targeted his campaign towards his native village of Kamen, where he is the first university student in the Romani community. Atanas developed his platform after conducting a survey among more than 300 fellow-villagers, which helped him identify and focus on two priorities: combating unemployment and high school drop out rates. His campaign outreach has presented a balance between social events specific for the Romani community like celebrations of baptisms and weddings, with more traditional methods like public forums, media coverage, and debates. Atanas, who is 21, recruited a campaign team of young people, both Roma and non-Roma, and focused on outreach to youth in the municipality and his village of Kamen.

NDI Trainees and Civic Partners Address Vote Buying



Tatyana Kalkanova
NMS MP

Tatyana Kalkanova – NMS MP, Win With Women signatory, and long-term NDI partner – initiated a campaign called “No To Vote Buying” in her constituency of Pernik municipality. She launched the initiative after receiving signals that more than 13,000 citizens in Pernik had been included in vote-buying lists, which contained their personal data. Nine out of 14 mayoral candidates in the city joined the campaign, which aims to raise voter awareness through public events and print materials, and to promote ethical campaigning.

Meanwhile, the Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance *Amalipe*—an NDI Romani NGO partner—launched a campaign in Romani communities entitled “Don’t Sell Your Vote!” The campaign includes advertisements in national daily newspapers, direct contact awareness building, and interaction with the political party election campaigns to mobilize Roma voters on Election Day and to put a stop to vote buying and other manipulative voting practices.



“Don’t Sell Your Vote!” Logo
