



“Buying of votes” or the Death of Local Democracy”

The project “Buying of votes” or the Death of Local Democracy” is realized by the Institute for Public Environment Development, funded by the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe.

What is explored is the structure of the political representation in the municipal councils and the way the institutions of the local democracy in five municipalities with corrupted election process – Nessebar, Sozopol, Kazanlak, Petrich and Sandanski.

- **The Questions**

How will the local authorities, elected in a corrupted process, considered as an unfair and unfree, manage the local community?

Are there preconditions in the model of the local government itself, which are producing strategies for capturing of the municipalities by economic groups and criminal networks?

- **The model of local government in Bulgaria – “balances without responsibility”**

The interrelations between the main institutions in the local government – municipal council and mayor, are based on the institutional weakness of each of the two institutions and their mutual dependence in fulfilling their functions. The achievement of balance and equilibrium between them is turning to be a compulsory condition for the municipal management.

The “pro-mayor” governing coalitions are structured through a nonpublic agreement between the different economic interests and demands. The price for the support of the stability of such coalitions is a corrupted management of the property and directing of the public errands to the constituting “distributing coalitions” agents.

Main precondition about that is the technology for decision making itself, which seriously impedes the hunt of administrative and punitive duty from those who are part of the municipal government.

- **Strategies for capturing the local government**

The criminal strategies for capturing the local government through the “buying of votes” in elections are produced and fully consistent with the faults of the established model of local government in Bulgaria.

Competitive economic interests are looking for representation in the local government institutions and are using the elections to get positioned one towards the other. A business strategy is used – coalitions of close and similar and not in any case conflict interests, covered behind local election coalitions and parties, are established. In order to be registered those coalitions and parties are “temporary renting” the documents and registrations of fully unknown and without any influence on the local stage parties.

The strategies are foreseeing taking a share of the market with votes, which will guarantee a place in the future governing majority. After the elections the business players are negotiating about the government – each of them from the position that has managed to conquer. The purpose is to get competitive priorities and an access to the public resources, through a direct participation in the management of the municipalities.

- **Getting the votes needed**

If we take the election process of 2007-2008, we will clearly see the use of criminal organization for “buying” and controlling the local of votes, through the usage of the criminal structures – drug dealers, members of human trafficking organizations, contrabandists, and crime groups. Their task is to assure the “mobilization” of the voters.

The typical activities for the criminal structures – selling of security and the “trade with violence” – are very similar with what they do during the elections – trading with votes and securing the terrain with voters from the competency.

We can certainly claim that in the municipal councils of the five explored municipalities some of the councilors are chosen through bought with “dirty money” votes, controlled vote and under compulsion.

According to the interviewed representatives of the different political parties in the explored municipalities, around 30 % of the mandates of the political parties and coalitions, presented on the local stage are bought or manipulated through a controlled vote.

The violence is constantly presented in the election process in the border and the Black sea municipalities. It is related with the higher concentration of criminal contingent, ready to brutally violate the rules and to settle control over the territory and the voters, through the use of force. By definition in such regions where there is a presence of stable structures of the organized crime the collapse of the political is already determined.

The local has accepted this reality as inevitable – “It has always been like that. No one can win elections without buying votes anymore. The authorities stay aside”, are convinced the interviewed. No one has the strength to face the expansion of the criminal structures, “the perfectly dressed businessman” from the black and grey economy who has legalized their business, and the oligarchs.

The harsh punishments provided by the law do not stop the interests attacking the local government. The institutions are helpless.

The buying of votes with the participation of the criminal structures, financing of the elections with money from the organized crime and the following capture of political positions in the local government, are happening in the situation of a common illegality and impunity, produced by the weak controlling institutions, judicial system with questionable independence and the missing public control – lack of stable local and regional media.

- **The results for the political representation**

The data for the political representation in the explored municipalities clearly underlines the tenancy of a lasting loss of influence by the parties, which have strong presence on the national stage. This result is definitely influenced by the strategies used by the business coalitions and the criminal networks to occupy the local government, strategies that do not include the participation of the national parties. The national parties are changed by business structures, taking part in the elections as a local coalitions or local/regional parties.

- **The decision**

The results from the project show that only changes in the election legislation and the neutralizing of the 300 bosses, terrorizing the local communities (according to the Prosecutor’s office and the Government), will not be enough to solve the problem with the corruption on local level and the corrupted local elections.

There is a need of public debate in order a new meaning of the existing model of local government in Bulgaria to be found. The causes and the preconditions, attracting the economic groups and the criminal networks in participation in the local government should be removed.