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CONTROLLED VOTING IN BULGARIA

Threats
to Human
Security

Citizens' Network for Human Security (cn4hs)

Human Security in the Balkans and Turkey

C o u n t r y R e p o r t o n B u l g a r i a
p a r t I I

Controlled Voting in Bulgaria: Threats to Human Security

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THE CONTROLLED VOTE IN BULGARIA: THREATS TO HUMAN
SECURITY

Bulgarian

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Summary in English

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From January 2015 to June 2016 the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) carried out for the second time a study on the existing threats to human security in Bulgaria. The effort was part of a four-year regional project in five Balkans countries and Turkey, supported by Directorate General Enlargement of the European Commission (see more here: <http://cn4hs.org/>). Human security is a concept of security which focuses on the human aspect of the problem – the threats to the individual and his/her way of life, rather than on the traditional, state-centric aspect of security (national security).

The present study comprises two parts: a quantitative research component on the impact which the so-called ‘controlled vote’ phenomenon in Bulgaria has on human security, building upon a qualitative study on the issue which IRIS’s team implemented in the first phase of the current project (2014); and a novel, qualitative research component on prostitution and the sexual services market in Bulgaria and the existing threats to human security of the people involved in it, focusing among other things on the changes that have occurred after a similar such study conducted in 2010.

The research on the controlled, or forced, voting in Bulgaria and its impact on human security was led by **Stoycho P. Stoychev**, non-resident expert with IRIS and associate professor of political

science at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. It offers an empirical, quantitative corroboration of the findings of the qualitative study conducted on the subject by IRIS in 2014 as well as a deeper look into the mechanisms and impact of controlled voting and its connection with corruption and criminal networks in the country. By controlled voting we mean the manipulation of the free choice of Bulgarian citizens in front of the ballot box through illegal influence by an employer, local leader (formal or informal), the local authorities or a political party.

The methodology of the research comprised: a national representative survey of Bulgarian population in voting age with a two-stage cluster sample, based on the voter registration lists of the Central Election Commission for the 2014 parliamentary election; a group discussion with experts on electoral matters and controlled voting; semi-structured interviews with victims of pressure and targets of vote-buying (favour beneficiaries) as well as high-level policemen or security agency employees; in-depth interviews with power-brokers, dealers, local headmen, members of organised crime, party officials and former employees of the Ministry of the Interior.

The underlying finding of the research is frightening: nearly 28% of respondents in the survey said that they personally or a member of their close circle were the object of some form of pressure or were offered a financial and/or another material incentive to vote for a certain party.

Conclusions of the study and recommendations

The problem of controlled voting cannot be viewed separately from the social context in which it occurs because in this case we risk perceiving it solely as a deficit of representative democracy. For contemporary Bulgarian society this is a systemic and to some extent civilizational problem which cannot be solved in a strictly normative way, as the attempts so far have been.

The web-like capture of public institutions by oligarchic and criminal interests suggests a network-type counteraction to set them free and return control in the hands of the citizens. This will be a natural protective reaction of the civil society carried out via spontaneous activist association.

The groundwork for the realisation of this model is laid by the emergence and operation of authentic protest networks of civic activity such as those in 2013, “the year of protests, protest peak, the turning point marking the transition from party to contestatory democracy.” (Krasteva 2013)

A set of possible swift measures concerns polling stations. Moving stations out of segregated neighbourhoods with high concentration of vote rigging and setting up larger, mixed stations is one of the options. Another is opening regional vote counting centres where it will be possible to reaffirm the results from every polling station in the region. Internet voting will also create conditions for less manipulation, although it is linked with other forms of risk.

The specific recommendations to decision-makers and the institutions are as follows:

1. Change of the electoral law towards more centralised ballot counting. Thus fraud in the polling stations will be prevented and there will be less incentives for control of the voting process;
2. Improved investigation capabilities of law enforcement agencies. Planning for election day should start ahead and better coordination should exist between central and local authorities. New approaches for investigation such as employment of under-cover agents will make work more effective and facilitate courts in their subsequent work;
3. Cracking down on the grey economy in regional centres. This will prevent the parallel economic and state order and demolish dependency systems in Roma neighbourhoods where headmen and loan-sharks exert modern forms of servitude on ordinary families;
4. More authority for the labour inspectorate. The striking absence of the General Labour Inspectorate Executive Agency from the process should be addressed immediately, with more authority granted for investigation of cases of forced voting.
5. Introduction of better internal systems of control in public and private companies and the local administration. This will include large private companies with branches in regional centres and especially state-owned and municipality-owned companies. Measures should be even stricter in local administrations.