

Conventional Crime and the Corporate Vote As Acute Threats to Human Security in Bulgaria

Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

In a globalised era and following the challenges posed by the economic crisis which started in 2009, risks to individual security have grown immensely, not bypassing the Balkans and Bulgaria. In rural areas and small towns in the country's Northwest and Southwest, two issues have emerged as tangible and acute threats to the ordinary people's way of life: conventional crime and the forced voting under the peril of losing one's job or livelihood (the 'corporate vote'). The factors behind the worrying rise in crime and compulsion to vote include dire economic situation leading to unemployment, elusive means of livelihood and poverty, community clash, isolation of the regions of focus from the main economic activities in the country and wrong institutional approach to the problems. An urgent response from policy makers and the relevant national and European Union institutions is indispensable if the security threats to individuals are to be mitigated and the communities in question revived. Such a response for addressing the problem of conventional crime would comprise more focused policy for regional economic development, introduction of temporary employment programmes, renewed social efforts at desegregation of the Roma community, sending more policemen to small villages and more effective judicial proceedings. For countering the corporate vote, measures should include change of the electoral law towards more centralised ballot counting, improved investigation capabilities of law enforcement agencies, cracking down on the grey economy in regional centres, more authority for labour inspectorates and introduction of better internal systems of control in public and private companies.

Introduction

Conventional crime and the corporate vote have increased at worrying rates in the Northwest and Southwest of Bulgaria over the recent years. According to data from the National Statistical Institute, the number of registered crimes in the four main districts of the Northwest region (Vidin, Vratsa, Montana and Pleven) has grown from 3,607 in 2004 to 5,586 in 2012.¹ Two main factors may be contributing to the trend. On the one hand, the financial crisis and ensuing economic downturn which hit Europe in 2009 have had their effects on the general well-being of people in Bulgaria too, and resort to unlawful means of earning livelihood may have increased as a result. On the other hand, the region of Northwest Bulgaria has been regularly classified as the poorest region (in the NUTS II classification) in the European Union, with the lowest per capita income and high levels of unemployment and poverty.² This systemic shortcoming in the living condition has driven the majority of young people to leave and seek fulfilment either in the capital Sofia or in Western Europe. It has also contributed to rivalries among the various groups that remain for the scarce resources available for survival. Two groups are particularly vulnerable in this respect: (i) elderly people relying on their inadequate pensions and on subsistence farming for basic food needs and (ii) compact Roma populations, a traditionally disadvantaged group in Bulgaria not only in rural areas but also in cities. The clash between these two communities has led to the rise in conventional crime and the emergence of severe human security threats for the population. Media reports and official investigations over the last years showed a rapid increase of burglaries and assaults over elderly people and their property in rural areas in the Northwest, most often perpetrated by members of the local Roma community. The elderly village inhabitants have been the object of physical, economic and psychological violence, denying them normal existence. On the other hand, the Roma (who in their offences have sometimes been assisted by Bulgarians) are obviously pushed in their actions by grave insecurity regarding means of survival: both victims and experts interviewed by IRIS as part of research on the topic expressed opinions that it is the hard economic situation that leaves no choice for the Roma but to resort to crime and that when some alternative means of livelihood are available for them, they tend to abstain from illegal activities.

The term 'corporate vote' started making its way into the jargon of political observers, social scientists and journalists in Bulgaria after the local elections in 2007. It evolved from the initially prevalent term 'vote-buying', describing the novel and worrying phenomenon of political parties paying voters for their vote, in violation of the law and of international covenants to which the country is a party. In the difficult economic situation in which rural regions and small settlements

¹ National Statistical Institute, <http://www.nsi.bg/en>.

² "Bulgaria's Northwestern Region Still Poorest in EU". *Novinite.com*, 21 March 2013. Available at: <http://www.novinite.com/articles/148866/Bulgaria's+Northwestern+Region+Still+Poorest+in+EU>.

have been after Bulgaria launched painful reforms in 1997, many people found it acceptable to sell their vote for as little as 20 levs (€10), unaware of the long-term consequences of their actions. The first conspicuous wave of evidence of vote-buying came during the 2007 local elections. Afterwards, the phenomenon of manipulated voting both evolved and branched into various forms, causing observers to coin the more precise term 'controlled vote'. Thus vote-buying became only one of the manifestations of the manipulated vote in Bulgaria; the controlled vote, on the other hand, included forms of pressure without explicit monetary exchange as a reward, such as threats and manipulation of the members of entire precinct electoral committees. One specific manifestation, which gained momentum too, has been the so-called 'corporate vote' – when owners and directors in private or public companies, mid-level managers and local administration superiors exert pressure on employees to vote for a certain political party either in exchange of some reward or face the risk of payment withholding or outright dismissal. In this case, direct exchange of cash is absent, and the transaction more sophisticated. The phenomenon, however, has become a threat for the human security of many individuals in small settlements and rural regions, where unemployment rates are high and keeping one's job is crucial for survival. According to experts interviewed by IRIS, the controlled vote represents up to 15% of the vote in certain municipalities and 3-5% nationally.

Approaches and results

IRIS has conducted a parallel research of the increasingly acute problems of conventional crime in Northwest Bulgaria and the corporate vote (forced voting in the workplace) in the Southwest and Northwest of the country. The regions were chosen as particularly problematic vis-à-vis the human security issues touched upon, as publicised by the media and in previous research. Our investigation was part of a cross-border partnership project on human security in the Balkans and Turkey. The initiative, "Citizens' Network for Peace, Reconciliation and Human Security," involves research and advocacy efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey and is supported by the European Commission (find out more here: <http://cn4hs.org/>). It included, among other elements, field interviews with victims of conventional crime and forced voting, so as to give a human-centred perspective of the problems – something not present in the bulk of research on crime and electoral fraud so far. The research findings were frightening: Conventional crime, though not uniformly, poses a serious threat to individuals in Northwest Bulgaria, while controlled voting in many state-owned and private firms and in Roma neighbourhoods has become so routine and deeply rooted that it represents a grave human security risk for entire communities.

Conventional crime in Northwest Bulgaria

Several fundamental conclusions can be drawn. Conventional crime has become a severe human security threat in Northwest Bulgaria, involving direct and structural violence. There is a clear clash of communities (impoverished, elderly Bulgarians and the Roma community) for the scarce resources of survival in the region of focus. The severity of the human security threat grows from villages situated in the vicinity of towns or the Danube river towards the more isolated villages in the hinterland. Although the majority of offences have been committed by representatives of the Roma community, the crimes cannot be characterised as specific for this group and targeting the other. The seasonal nature of crimes shows that their origin is purely economic and related to securing survival of the perpetrators, rather than an organic process resulting from innate predisposition for criminality. And institutions are largely ineffective in addressing the problem, with the possible exception of some *ad hoc* interventions of law enforcement in the peak of crimes in early 2014. The experiences of individuals take the form of fear for physical survival, fear for securing livelihood, a strong sense of despair and a feeling of injustice. The coping strategies of victims include insulation from the outside world (“more locks”) and reduction of free movement (“never go out in the dark”), reliance on the institutions and hiring of private security agencies. The latter two are seen as mostly ineffective, with a couple of exceptions.

Corporate vote (forced voting on the workplace or as a result of dependencies in the informal sector)

The research findings demonstrate that the phenomenon of the corporate vote can be both a threat for and a perceived guarantor of security for the people, the latter perception however representing a classic form of symbolic (undetected) violence. In both cases, the corporate vote is deeply connected with the economic security of individuals: it is both a source and manifestation of insecurity originating in the high levels of unemployment and poverty and the isolation of the rural regions and small towns researched (mostly in Northwest Bulgaria). This desperation to keep by all means one’s means of livelihood has made many of the people there vulnerable to pressure by employers. In other places, fear of exclusion from the community, psychological harassment, of losing a comfortable spot in the public administration or losing a procurement bid has been the driver behind succumbing to the pressure. An extreme case of dependency was seen in segregated Roma neighbourhoods in some settlements, where modern forms of servitude exist: in an informal economic setting (a parallel, grey economy), ‘employers’ (local headmen and loan-sharks) are in total control of their ‘employees’ (entire families running sporadic errands for them or taking high-interest loans from them). For most of the victims of the corporate vote, there is no clear-cut way to address the threat (excluding, of course, those who do not perceive it as such): the coping strategies include mere compliance, leaving town,

and in only one case pursuing one's rights in court. In this context, findings show that trust in institutions with regard to labour law and voting rights is extremely low among both experts and ordinary people.

Conclusion and recommendations

Although conventional crime is not absent in big cities or in other parts of Bulgaria, it has become a grave human security threat in the Northwest due to a particularly vicious combination of factors, and need immediate response from the relevant agencies and decision-makers. The corporate vote, despite providing some means of living for people in compact Roma neighbourhoods, constitutes direct economic and psychological violence over people in both private and public companies and the administration as well as contextual violence detrimental to the human rights of vulnerable groups as the Roma in the long term. In this light, and based on the research findings of IRIS (consultations with experts and interviews with the victims), the following recommendations can be made to address the two problems from individual, human perspective.

On conventional crime in Northwest Bulgaria

For Bulgarian decision-makers and institutions:

- More focused policy for regional economic development in the Northwest. Central planning should involve less money for richer regions such as the capital Sofia and more funds for Vidin, Vratsa, Montana and Pleven and their surrounding rural areas. Priority funding for infrastructure projects in this part of the country in order to decrease its isolation;
- Introduction of temporary employment programmes. Priority should be given to villages with compact Roma population. Research has shown that crime conspicuously falls when programmes are being implemented;
- Renewed social efforts at integration of the Roma community. This will include desegregation of schools from early age. The number of schools can be reduced for the purpose. Schools should be all-day long and include three meals per day for Roma and Bulgarian pupils;
- Sending more policemen to small villages. The absence of law enforcement in small settlements is striking. Resources should be redirected from bureaucracy in the Ministry of Interior in Sofia (by far the most heavily financed ministry) to on-the-ground police force in the villages;

- More effective judicial proceedings. Reform of the judiciary would contribute to more effective sentences and discouragement of crime.

For EU decision-makers and institutions:

- Special targeting of Bulgaria's Northwest (NUTS II Severozapaden region, BG11) under the EU's regional programmes;
- More funds for temporary employment programmes in areas with compact Roma minority, to be administered by the Bulgarian government.

On the corporate vote in Southwest and Northwest Bulgaria

For Bulgarian decision-makers and institutions

- Change of the electoral law towards more centralised ballot counting. Thus fraud in the precinct electoral committees will be prevented and there will be less incentives for control of the voting process;
- 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;
- 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;
- 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.
- 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.