
CURRENT DIMENSIONS OF ELECTORAL CORRUPTION AND VOTE-BUYING IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: Political corruption is the main generator and potential of destructive processes that determine both the low quality of functioning of the Bulgarian political system and the overall low quality of public life and public relations in Bulgaria.

Significant systemic problem in Bulgaria's post-totalitarian development is connected with the perception of political careers as low-risk and high-yielding businesses, and by private business initiative as a means of directly influencing the decision-making process.

Controlled voting and vote buying continue to have a lasting negative impact on the election process in the country. These crimes are not only a violation of fundamental political rights of citizens, but they have a very destructive effect on the political system of Bulgaria. The mechanisms of bribery and pressure on voters are becoming increasingly systematic and compromise confidence in the election process.

The spread of corruption, permanently destabilizing institutions and distorting the political process.

In fact, even when alert institutions are prepared to investigate alerts, they do not contribute to the effective detection and sanctioning of this type of infringement, due to a lack of political will and institutional competence.

The price that has been imposed in the last few elections is very high, which shows a high degree of corruption of the local authorities, because by market logic these amounts have to be recovered and multiplied.

The results of the widespread use of voting with electronic machines have shown that even if technology is used in the same way across the country, the human factor leads to a contradictory result that compromises the main positives of voting with electronic machines. In this context, the recommendation to change the way sectional election committee members are selected and trained remains relevant.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the various contemporary forms of vote-buying and controlled voting and the factors in our modern history that account for the increasingly sophisticated nature of these abuses.

The current prospects for buying votes are due to three main reasons, which are factors such as poverty, the electoral system and the nature of politics in the country.

The essential problem is the political power that causes the political class to consider a law that, in the Western world, gives citizens the highest right - the right to choose, as an instrument.

Keywords: corruption, vote buying, controlled voting, political elections, voters

1. CORRUPTION AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

While legal frameworks and democratic institutions are put in practice in many Western European and EU countries, there is still significant room for improvement across the region. While there is an EU legislative proposal to improve protections against whistle-blowers, there is a question mark over whether it will be agreed on by Member States, and ever reach the statute books. The region must gather public support for the proposal and strengthen citizens' ability to speak out against corruption.

In the last few years, several countries have also seen a rise in power of political leaders with populist tendencies, working to raise citizens' fear from targeted groups. In particular, several countries have harnessed anti-immigration sentiment to promote and justify undemocratic principles. These groups have often used digital platforms that lack transparency, and which are open to interference and abuse by foreign agents, to undermine democratic elections and processes. Across Europe, citizens' trust in democracy has been harmed as a consequence.

2. POLITICAL CORRUPTION - PREREQUICITES

The post-communist development of Bulgarian society has determined the preservation of the extremely significant influence of the political process on all spheres of public life.

The most significant systemic problem in Bulgaria's post-totalitarian development continues to be the too wide so-called grey area between business and politics, defined by the perception of political careers as low-risk and high-yielding businesses, and by private business initiative as a means of directly influencing the decision-making process. An unacceptably high corruption risk is generated in this grey area, which compromises citizens' equality before the law and the possibility of legitimate political representation of the public interest. The expanding range of services provided by the public sector - instead of being subject to the disciplinary mechanisms of market competition, decisions to redistribute public goods and resources are made on the basis of rules and procedures that

can easily be circumvented by senior officials, persons and their sponsors, in the absence of effective controls and penalties. The nature of the dominant political and civic culture - in a traditionally established culture of tolerance towards clientelist relationships, individual manifestations of political corruption are difficult to recognize as deviant or abusive behaviour. Structural deficits of the institutional environment reflect the imbalance between a publicly defensible need for regulation and a lack of political will and interest in its elaboration and implementation.

3. BUYING VOTES AS A FORM OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION

Corrupt practices in political life can be found in a variety of manifestations - from unconcealed attempts to abuse the electoral process to well-concealed behind-the-scenes preference treatment. Each of the systematic and described manifestations of political corruption has its basis in the susceptibility (understood as institutional vulnerability) of different actors and / or public pressure groups at different stages of the political process (Waleski, 2017).

A political party or its candidate may directly or indirectly "buy" voters or members of election commissions. "Buying" is done by offering different types of "incentives" (Johnson, 2016): gifts, food, short-term employment. After elections, the votes of members of national or local parliaments can be "bought" in support of one decision or another. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

4. THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The spread of corruption, permanently destabilizing institutions and distorting the political process. The existence of corruption problems in the country has led to a proactive anti-corruption policy and a strong international concern for curbing corruption as a basic requirement for Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the European Union. In this context, a number of international institutions have encouraged and provided political and practical support for anti-corruption reforms.

In Bulgaria, many citizens do not believe in political institutions and do not feel well represented. With little control over political party funding and few checks and balances, Bulgaria lacks independence and transparency in the media. It is often unclear who owns the media in Bulgaria and what political links the owners may have. In addition, there is a financial dependency on state advertisements that can embellish their material and influence any criticism they may make on public authorities. For example, Transparency International in Bulgaria (Transparency International Bulgaria, 2019) works to support election monitoring, engage citizens in speaking out and advocate for tougher anti-corruption measures across the country.

In regard to the role of institutions, it is advisable to apply the rule of law so that all public powers operate within the limits set by law, in accordance with the values of democracy and fundamental rights, and under the control of independent and impartial courts; protect whistleblowers so that all citizens can safely report violations in the public and private spheres; improve legislative transparency and access to information needed for effective public oversight; ensure a civil space that is safe for civil society to engage in dialogue with governments and authorities without fear of retaliation; protect the freedom of the press and the crucial role that the media plays in democracy.

5. VARIETY OF TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES

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In the context of unsuccessful anti-corruption measures, we should note the expected expansion of a negative phenomenon of the democratic process that we are witnessing - vote buying as part of political corruption. Plotting the Roma neighborhoods and building sustainable 'commercial' structures, which have already gained experience and built a well-structured network, make their services preferred to many applicants. Votes are sure, accurate in number and often decisive for small and medium-sized settlements. The price that has been imposed in the last few elections is very high, which shows a high degree of corruption of the local authorities, because by market logic these amounts have to be recovered and multiplied.

Local elections have a number of peculiarities, but one of the most distinctive ones is precisely the negative manifestations of local voting and corruption. They concern the preparation and conduct of elections and the behavior of political parties. In this sense, at least four strategic issues can be identified that affect the legitimacy of local elections.

6. LOW TURNOUT

Such activity is not a new phenomenon for Bulgarian political life, but it is expected that this election will be below 30-35% (International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)), which would be one of the lowest percentages of all local elections so far. The reasons for this are at least two, but quite substantial: the total lack of confidence in the ability of the Bulgarian political elite to change the present unfavourable socio-economic situation and the total desperation of the majority of people for the betterment of their lives. This means that distrust in the elite for raising their standard of living is the mainstay of low turnout, which is also stimulated by the increasing mass manifestations of alienization and pauperization of the population on the ground.

7. NEO-FEUDAL VOTE

Due to the extremely low socio-economic development, poverty, poverty and unemployment are likely to result in around 70-80% of voters voting under open and covert pressure from so-called business candidates and other local wealthy people. This is a very uncivilized, dangerous and denied trend in the developed world, which, however, has been dominating the elections for the third decade in Bulgaria. It is nourished and evolved because local authorities (mayors, administration, councils), especially in small towns, do not have the appropriate political will and not as bodies to solve public problems.

8. VOICE TRADING

Undoubtedly, this is the most serious problem before the local elections. It stems not only from the fact that during election time everything is literally bought. The problem is that for a considerable part of the Bulgarian voters, it has become a way of life and Voting Secrecy a way to solve elementary difficulties related to human nutrition. This problem has long been a problem not only for minority groups, but for entire social classes, settlements and municipal centers. It buys literally everything from the youngest voters (18 year olds) to the elderly, mainly in two main ways - monetary and material. Here the price of one vote has already reached between 50-70 levs. According to some experts in the last parliamentary elections (26.03.2017), the purchased vote was as much as 33% of the number of all voters. This is a real disaster for the democratic rule of law in the country, because democracy has become a "commodity" that everyone benefits from - politicians, brokers, businessmen, mayors and the electorate.

9. HIGH CORRUPTION LEVEL

The high level of corruption in Bulgaria has never been surprising for a long time, but when it comes to an election vote, this is already a big problem. And in this case we are not talking about the so-called. "Traditional corruption" (everyday, small, large), and for many, the distribution of money under the table for a variety of election, financial, advertising and services. Within the election campaign (and before it), tens and tens of millions of levs are circulating as hidden turnover, which are not included in any official party reports, due to the simple fact that no one is looking for any responsibility for spending the election campaign. party funds. Of course, the reasons for this are different, but one of them is most intrusive: a huge part of the Bulgarian political parties have turned into trading companies, for which partisanship means free work of people for parties, and not vice versa - work of parties for people through institutions. It is therefore necessary to resurrect the electorate's European notions of parties as political actors designed to solve their problems, not as a money-making machine for party leaders and elites.

10. ELECTION-VIOLATION MONITORING

Previous studies and observations show that public opinion is dominated by the concept of political corruption, which is exhausted by bribery and abuse of office. These two figures of political corruption are undoubtedly present in the public space, but there is still a lack of public perception of their involvement in the influence trade process. That is why examples of complex corruption networks of addictions that often lead to significant damage to the public interest and a permanent deforestation of large groups of Bulgarian society are often out of the public attention.

According to a Report by Transparency International Association in Bulgaria (Sofia News Agency, 2019), from the observation of the elections for members of the European Parliament by the Republic of Bulgaria on May 26, 2019, the election campaign was different from the previous election campaigns for the EP, highlighting the problems of national importance, corruption scandals, the dominance of negative tone in the messages of a significant number of parties and candidates, and the circumvention of the rules for campaigning and campaign financing.

The monitoring of the election campaign of participants gives grounds for the assessment that some violations are systematic (they have been encountered in previous election campaigns) and continue to be ineffectively hindered. This category includes: conducting negative campaigns against political opponents that violate the credibility of candidates and political parties (e.g. by publishing and distributing videos, interviews, articles, brochures,

newspapers and books), in some cases by registered participants in elections, and on the other - by mediators, most often the media; bypassing the campaign financing rules by distributing campaign materials before the official launch (videos, billboards, publication and distribution of brochures and other print publications), thus not taking into account the actual financial costs incurred in connection with the overall campaign (Transparency International Bulgaria, 2019); publication of articles and interviews, which by their nature are paid political advertisements, but intentionally do not contain the obligatory attributes of campaign materials (for example, the absence of compulsory inscriptions on the buying and selling of votes or being published outside the sections specially marked and labelled in connection with European elections); special reductions in the goods and services provided during the election campaign (for example announcing special promotions, discounts on the purchase of automotive fuels and medicines from specific retail chains); another highlight of the current election campaign was the publication of election materials calling for violence. Such a case was found in a video of an election participant containing scenes of violence and threatening messages. Despite trying to publish this material in a way that prevents its sanction (not through the traditional type of media distribution, for which there are much more detailed rules in the Electoral Code, but through a Facebook page), the CEC has decided to suspend the broadcasting and distribution of the video and its removal from the party's Facebook page.

Immediately after its constitution, the new CEC took action to organize machine voting in the 3000 sections of the last European Parliament elections in May 2019, which focused in four directions: first, conducting a public procurement for the delivery of electronic voting machines; second, determining the sample of polling stations in which the devices will be located; third, communication with other institutions in connection with the verification of the software of the machines, logistics, etc. technical activities; fourth, development of methodological guidelines and training for the members of the section commissions for machine operation.

In the first place, voters were not sufficiently informed when dealing with electronic voting machines. The general impression is that, as a whole, voters needed additional information and guidance from the members of the section committees on how to handle the machinery. However, in connection with the need for further guidance on the use of machines, a number of questions have arisen as to the extent to which the secrecy of the vote is maintained.

Another circumstance that brings to the fore the role of the human factor is the different approach of section committees to the processing of paper and electronic voting data. In this regard, shortly after the elections, there were publications stating that the election commissions did not include numerical data from the electronic voting document, the omissions being most often expressed in the disregard of preferences for all or part of the candidates.

The report also systematizes specific forms of manifestation of a controlled vote during the May 2019 Euro elections, which illustrate the existence of a compromised electoral vote. (Waleski, 2017)

Controlled voting is a specific category that covers a range of indicators of offenses and / or crimes against citizens' suffrage. It can be both the result of exerting pressure on voters to vote in accordance with the will of others (by coercion, without payment), and may serve as an indicator of the prepared or realized purchase of votes.

For a consecutive year, the controlled vote was also carried out by persons, members of the PEC, as well as by people with unclear status and role in the election process. In this regard, the specific types of violations witnessed by border observers are: assembly of voters in front of a section and submission of lists indicating which party to vote for (Plovdiv, Sheker Mahala); disclosure of the secret of the vote - most often when observing the machine vote by a member of the commission / observer (for example, a member of a section election committee shows a young man how to vote with the electronic machine while continuing to observe the vote of the voter (Burgas, "Copper mine"); a sticker with the party number placed on the phone of a member of a section election commission (Kardzhali, Petko Slaveikov School).

Within the election day, voter control practices were observed, which were also carried out in the previous elections: the presence of advocates or persons accompanying groups of voters to polling stations; organized transportation by car of voters' groups; the same person accompanies several voters to the polling station.

Controlled voting signals received during the election day give grounds for claiming that voter control in the election process is exercised by the following categories of persons: party and candidate advocates; members of sectional election commissions; party representatives; persons without official status and markings present at polling stations and exercising control over voters.

11. ILLEGAL AGGITATION

In 2019, the share of these violations is 9.9% of the total, and their nature does not differ significantly from the traditional ones registered in previous elections most often agitation in a foreign language; the presence of campaign materials placed before the polling station or displayed to voters by PEC members. (Paunova, 2015)

12. OVERAL ASSESSMENT OF DOMINANT PROBLEMS

The results of the observation of the elections for members of the European Parliament by the Republic of Bulgaria, held on May 26, 2019, confirm the conclusions from previous observations, namely:

(1) The systematic circumvention and violation of the legal framework, in particular the rules for financing, continue during the election campaign. Outsourcing activities beyond the official start of the election campaign, conducting negative campaigns against political competitors, concealing some of the actual revenues and the actual costs of the election campaigns remain insufficiently sanctioned.

(2) Organizational irregularities have the most significant role on election day. In this respect, the most significant deficits stem from the way in which the members of the election commissions are selected, trained and exercised. To overcome this long-established trend, a new, substantially changed approach to major components of the process is needed.

(3) Controlled and purchased votes, along with organizational irregularities, continue to have a significant negative impact on the election process. Although the magnitude of these two interrelated phenomena does not represent a dominant share of the total number of electoral violations, the nature of their impact is such that they continue to be central to election evaluation.

The results of the widespread use of voting with electronic machines have shown that even if technology is used in the same way across the country, the human factor leads to a contradictory result that compromises the main positives of voting with electronic machines. In this context, the recommendation to change the way sectional election committee members are selected and trained remains relevant.

13. CONCLUSION

Small bills and poorly played PR statements on electoral law raise one of the most important questions for both the political class and the electorate: can parties be positioned without resorting to prosecutorial media and regulatory tricks, to win the voice of a sovereign? (Centre for Social Sciences, 2015)

And this is a question that should be raised with particular urgency before every vote. At this juncture, it seems once again that this goal is unattainable. Therefore, for at least half a year, the familiar theme of the technical machinations that have secured this or that mayoral seat will be chewed. Which is undeniably an important topic, but a secondary one. The essential problem is the political power that causes the political class to consider a law that, in the Western world, gives citizens the highest right - the right to choose, as an instrument. A tool for campaigning, for electoral victory, depending on whether the current role is opposition or managerial.

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