

Group Discussion – Bourgas, August 22, 2003

Participants – 10 people. Among them:

Men:

A pensioner, 58; a sole proprietor, 45; a private-sector employee, 38; a free-lance professional, 36;

Women:

A pensioner, 64; a pensioner, 62; a government-sector employee, 52; a government-sector geodesy surveyor, 45; an unemployed, 30; an unemployed, 20;

Some of the participants in the group were well informed about the situation of the municipality, while others were less. Prevailing were opinions and examples of activities of the local authorities. NGO activities were not known. Again here, as in Pazardjik and Gabrovo, the mention of numerous facts about the work of the municipal authorities led to a positive assessment at the end of the discussion.

Problems of the town and main responsibilities for their solution

The preliminary survey of the problems of Bourgas put forward the environment, the healthcare, and the conditions of streets and roads.

A major environmental problem is the industrial pollution. The question is about Neftohim and the air pollution. Yet there are other factories, which also pollute the air of the town. As a result, Bourgas is in one of the first places with reference to lung and cancer diseases. The common opinion is that the factories' management feels non-punishable. Blamed for this are HEI (Hygienic-Epidemiological Inspectorate), the municipal administration, and RIE (Regional Inspectorate on Environment), which do not execute any control. Here, as at other discussions, a question about the lack of control is raised, because "you can't rely on conscience."

Another major environmental issue is the pollution of the seashore and the beach. The main polluter in this respect is the port, especially the oil port. The opinion is that the Bourgas Bay is highly polluted, including with oil products. There are many cafes in the beach zone, which do not keep their areas clean. Also here blamed is the municipal administration, which does not impose sanctions.

Another serious environmental problem relates to the airport. It was built when Bourgas was smaller. With the town's growth, the airways now go above at least two of its residential districts. Besides the noise, the problem is connected also with the "drainage" of the waste fuel over these districts, as well as the sea and the agricultural land around Bourgas.

Next are problems of cleanness with regard to the shortage of garbage cans – in both the residential districts and the central area of the town. Also is the lack of hygienic habits of the residents – "the municipal administration cannot maintain everything, particularly around blocks of flats."

The problems with the transport are primarily related to the condition of the streets. Beside the ill-famed "holes", problems occur also as a result of construction work. There are old residential districts in the town where present construction work leaves the streets in a bad condition. The Municipal Administration does not keep track and sanction construction firms, which dig up streets to lay cables, water supply and sewage connections, etc.

Expressed is also the opinion that the municipal authorities not simply do not keep track of the violations, but most probably "do not dare sanction or they are just corrupt. They are on the side of the violator." Some such examples – polluting factories not sanctioned, irresponsible destruction of road infrastructure, areas around important public places not maintained – probably provoke the impression of "corruption in the municipal administration" (pointed in a quantitative survey in May as the main reason for the local authorities not to cope with the problems of the town).

As a major healthcare problem the respondents put forward the paid health services. Good specialists work in private health centers and prefer to see patients there for payment. General practitioners re-direct patients only to doctors they know, who most often require payment. Dentists do not observe the agreements with the health fund. All this leads to the impression that there are speculations with healthcare, and a good service cannot be received without payment – even in cases when the client has a right for non-paid services.

The citizens' activity, the role of the municipal authorities and NGOs

As far as the main problems of the town were associated with careless attitude of the public institutions (municipal authorities, HEI, RIE), the main forms of citizens' reaction, of which the respondents could guess, were civic disobedience or refusal to pay taxes.

Activity so far referred primarily to participation in subscription lists – to preserve the Bourgas branch of the Bulgarian National Bank and against the use of Sarafovo Airport for military purposes.

Few of the respondents have tried to pursue their violated rights. In a discussion on this issue, two different logical theses were presented: “There is order, we have rights, and if we pursue them we’ll succeed” and the opposite “in about 10 years you’ll succeed...” Unfortunately, the second thesis prevails, yet it is supported with the above examples of violations remained unsanctioned by the municipal administration – from major violators (like polluting factories) to minor breaches.

The respondents do not know the NGOs in town. Initiatives they have heard of fully relate to local media. One example is the initiative of Darik Radio for Easter cleaning-up of the town. Another is the initiative of Atlantic Radio – a telephone hotline to receive signals about violations, irregularities, damages, etc. A third example refers to an existing telephone of the Association for Protection of the Customer.

The common opinion is that NGOs could help like the above-mentioned organizations help the people. According to the respondents however, two things are important – first is who is the leader of the NGO. He/she must be a proven and dedicated civic activist, but there are no such. And second, NGOs must publicize their activities so that people could learn about them. The local media (particularly TV Skat) are mentioned as channels of information and contact. Another suggestion is to set up a free telephone similar to that for protection of the customer.

As regards the municipal authorities, the main criticism is against the lack of control and sanctions on violators of all types and sizes. The second criticism refers to a series of unrealized major projects – gas supply for the town, installation of a heating system. Here again the respondents take into account that the budget is insufficient, and the biggest taxpayer – Neftohim – does not pay its taxes to the Bourgas Municipality. Hence the conclusion is that the municipal administration must more actively seek alternative funding under different programs.

However, taken into account are also a number of success stories about the municipal administration, particularly with regard to the outlook of the town. Finally, also here the overall assessment of the local government remained positive.