

Group Discussion – Gabrovo, August 21 2003

Participants – 10 people. Among them:

Men:

A pensioner, 60; a government-sector economist, 53; a private-sector sound-engineer, 44; a private-sector employee, 41; a journalist, 36; a government-sector lawyer, 26;

Women:

An unemployed, 52; a government-sector chemist, 40; an employee on a maternity leave, 30; a private-sector employee, 28;

Some of the participants in the group were well informed about the situation of the municipality, while others were less. Presented were successful and unsuccessful examples of activities of the local government, as well as NGO and citizen activity. Often, totally contradictory opinions were expressed on a same issue. As a result of the discussion, the evaluation of the work of the local government during the last mandate was positive.

Problems of the town and alternatives for their solution

Citizen activity and NGO role

The preliminary survey revealed water supply, healthcare and unemployment as the problems of Gabrovo.

The problem with the water supply is the sharp rise in water prices – with nearly 33 percent. The shortage of water has always been a serious problem of the town. The Water and Sewage Company (WS) has taken a credit to enlarge the capacity of the local dam, and there is no shortage of water anymore, but because of the credit came the sharp rise in the water price. Civic protests have been organized and now the price is being reconsidered. Posed is also the question as to how expedient the credit has been used and if there is misuse on the part of the WS management.

Here the first example of civic activity was given – protests were organized in front of the City Hall against the new prices. The protests were initiated by a local NGO and gained momentum with the involvement of the syndicates (KNSB). This has led to a change in the position on prices of the municipal administration, which is a joint owner in the local WS.

A number of other examples were given for activities having led to positive results. Part of them refers to initiatives coming from the residents, others to joint efforts of citizens, private sector, local government, and NGO sector. Here are some of the concrete examples:

Mothers from a residential district organize themselves with a request before the municipality for children's playground, and after proactive actions they succeed to obtain such a place.

Residents in a Gabrovo street near a school, where many traffic accidents with victims have happened in the past, succeed after 5 years of pressure on the municipality to obtain placement of street obstacles to limit speed and reduce the number of accidents.

In some of the schools the municipality has ensured funding for repair work, in others citizens have done the work themselves.

There are also examples in the healthcare. Last year, diseased people depending on blood transfusion organized a protest and won the right to be transported with an ambulance. A social donor fund was established to raise funds for healthcare. Citizens, legal entities and the municipality take part in it. With its funds, the reanimation room was repaired and a center for early diagnosis of breast cancer was built.

Initially, the participants' common opinion was that they did not know NGOs operating in Gabrovo. However in the examples they gave, different organizations were mentioned (rarely by name). Among them are the NGO having organized the protests against the water prices, a project for establishment of an alpine Center "Usana" (Central Balkans Association), the healthcare donor fund, healthcare projects with the participation of the Red Cross, etc. The respondents consider that the citizens would get involved in NGO initiatives once they see the effect and use of the particular action.

Regarding the citizens' activity, despite examples of positive results an opinion was expressed that the status of the labor relationships in the region implies citizens' passivity. The lack of contracts, and the salaries and insurance not paid are a daily occurrence. Unemployment restrains harmed employees and workers from protesting for fear of losing the job. Passivity in this respect transfers also to the civic behavior.

Positive and negative characteristics in the work of the municipal administration

In the course of the discussion, the participants expressed rather contradictory opinions regarding the work of the municipal authorities.

The municipality is blamed for bureaucracy and a complicated communication with the citizens. An example was given with an issue solved but the solution had long been delayed. However, an example in the opposite direction is the recently built municipality information center for citizens. The opinion about the mayor is that he is open for contacts.

Another blame is that the municipal officials try to “cash” some free services. Here to notice is the low citizen awareness about their rights, which makes them vulnerable.

Again here, as in other towns, posed was the question about the municipality’s accountability to the citizens. This issue was raised following a statement about the lack of overall strategy for development of the municipality – “Gabrovo seems to be moving under its own momentum.” It is not clear if there is a strategy and how the municipality prepares it. Mentioned were a number of concrete decisions unfavorable for the citizens, whose failure seems to result from the lack of strategy: unrealized gas supply for the town; a project for construction of a Billa supermarket not implemented; unfavorable agreement with the Gabrovo market and thus unsuccessful attempt for securing funds for the local soccer team. Mentioned also were a number of positive initiatives, which finally changed the opinion positively. This includes projects addressing public works: enlargement of the dam, renovated electric street lighting, funds won for projects like “Beautiful Bulgaria” and a repair work done in the central town area. Also to mention are projects for the development of tourism – “Usana” (Central Balkans Association).

Namely in relation to the development of tourism, the conversation went also about unemployment. Initially, negative assessments were expressed about the miss of the municipality to attract the production of Vidima Ideal (Sevlievo) to Gabrovo. The investors had an interest for a particular terrain on the territory of Gabrovo, but the high price set by the municipality repulsed them. This however was considered as a plus for the municipality – if Gabrovo is to develop tourism, because such are its characteristics, it better be protected from industrial pollution. The problem here is that projects like “Usana” progress slowly due to lack of funds. Second, there is no policy for advertising of the Gabrovo Municipality as a region of tourism. Responsibility here is on many levels – from the need for an appropriate government policy in tourism, through responsibility of the local authorities for developing of a purposeful strategy in this area, and seeking additional funds. Also, this can be an area of activity of the third sector – seeking alternative funds for the development of tourism, for advertising of the region, and establishment of an association of employees in this sphere, etc.

The final evaluation of the local government is positive. During this mandate, there has been activity, additional funds have been secured, and problems have been settled with public works in the town. And not in the last place – the trend is towards preparation of a strategy for the development of the region as tourist. During this mandate, there have been quite a few

programs (Beautiful Bulgaria, From Welfare to Employment) on which the municipality has been proactive and received additional funding. What has been done by the municipality over the last mandate is considered as “a good step forward.”