

Discussion – Kirkovo, Kurdjali, June 27, 2003

Participants – 8 people, all of them Muslem Bulgarians. Among them:

Men:

A farmer, 59; a teacher, 42; a farmer, 34;

Women:

A teacher, 52; a government employee, 45; a teacher, 42; an unemployed, 30; a teacher, 27;

Theme 1 – Problems of the village

The first problem to mention was unemployment. Two tailoring shops, owned by Bulgarians, are working and providing a living to women in the village. Presently, there is another opportunity for work under the project for construction of Makaza Pass, however few people are hired there at a low payment.

The alternative is in farming – tobacco growing. However, the parcels are small and fragmented, and the labor is fully manual. The second problem pointed by the respondents is in the raised criteria in buying the tobacco, which results in part of the production unsold.

As a result, some of the young people leave the village. Nevertheless, there are now many young people there, which is also due to closed schools in neighbor villages and re-direction of pupils to Kirkovo. Therefore important is the issue of creation of favorable conditions for the young people – a youth center or something similar, with dancing groups or other forms of activities.

The next theme is the lack of information about projects and programs, on which funding could be obtained for small and medium-sized business. There is no such information in the village and one must go to the district center.

The question is not only about information on such projects and programs, but also on how to apply for them. The time of those farming people goes in growing tobacco, so the cycle is almost closed throughout the year. This is why such an information place would be a facility for them.

Next comes the problem with the working hours of the village administration. They have been changed recently, and the starting hour now is 9 a.m. This embarrasses the people, because most of them are already out to work by that time.

There are also problems with protection of the environment. Part of the garbage is being thrown in the riverbeds around the village. Most often thrown are glass bottles, which are not bought out.

Similar is the problem with sidewalks, on which some residents keep timber, sand, etc. In the winter, this seriously impedes cleaning and hence the traffic. A recommendation was made for the municipal administration to be stricter on such occasions and to sanction.

Collection of garbage is not regular, too. The municipality has provided enough containers. There is however only one truck that operates in several villages and is not always able to collect the garbage on time.

More serious is the problem with the trucks that serve the woodcutting areas in the region. They often drive directly through farming parcels, thus destroying the farmers' production.

There are lots of micro-dams not fenced off and safe, which endanger the children bathing in there.

Raised was the issue of the condition of the roads in the municipality.

At the end of this theme, posed was the question about a periodic accountability of the municipal administration to the residents of the village.

Theme 2 – Collaboration of the mayor and municipal councilors

The general opinion is that both the mayor and the municipal councilors make efforts to work in favor of the village, but often things do not depend on them. There is little money in the budget. More money out of the raised funds should remain in the municipality.

Negative for the municipality is the fact that the district governor and the mayor of the village are from different political parties. According to the respondents, this leads to complicated relations and reflects also the budget of the village.

The first shortage mentioned concerning the work of the municipal councilors and the mayor is that the former seldom meet with the people and walk about the village. "They are here – on final account, if they are not interested in the problems and do not walk about the village, what remains for the members of Parliament."

There is difference by party membership between the mayor and municipal councilors as well. The mayor is from UDF (Union of Democratic Forces), while the majority of the councilors are from MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms). This sometimes blocks the work, and decisions are hardly taken.

As an example of such a clash, the respondents mentioned a project for construction of a hospital in Kirkovo. There is terrain, there is a building, there are qualified specialists who want to build a hospital, but the municipality does not allow and blocks the process. Local GPs are municipal councilors, and according to the respondents, it is namely the GPs who are not interested in having a hospital in the village. This is why they impede the decision, and the residents are forced to go to Kurdjali when they need a healthcare service.

However, the opinion on this matter is that it is not so much a question of a party clash as it is a conflict of economic interests.

Theme 3 – Preparation of councilor lists

Also at this discussion expressed was the preference in favor of the majority form of elections – even when the case is to elect councilors.

The present mayor was mentioned as an example – he is an extraordinarily influential person representing the UDF. In the same time, “the first three in the UDF list were inappropriate”, so the mayor was elected but the majority of municipal councilors are now from MRF and BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party).

The opinion is that there are the right people in the municipality, but they rarely fall in the lists. Often, inappropriate people are elected, “some of them incompetent and not familiar with administrative rules and laws, even they don’t read the ‘State Gazette’.” The respondents would take part in the selection of candidates for the lists, regardless of the party affiliation.

As for the mixed lists, the opinion is that BSP and UDF more often propose ethnically mixed lists, unlike MRF. There is no problem to support the right people regardless of the party, let alone ethnicity: “We are a mixed region here, so we don’t have such problems.” The present mayor candidate of MRF is given as an example – he is perceived as a figure good to support. The previous candidate from MRF was not appropriate and thus not elected.

On the question as to whether it would be better if the mayor and the councilors are from the same party, the opinion is that they better be from different parties. This may complicate their work, but it is a guarantee for a better decision-making and for a mutual control between them.

Theme 4 – The Mayor

The party that has raised him/her does not matter. It is important that the candidate be good. The main characteristics mentioned are – clever, intelligent, sociable, a man of principles, and

persistent. However, the opinion is that whoever the mayor is, he/she “doesn’t receive the respect of the central government.”

It is also important for him/her to have administrative experience, because “until he/she learns, the mandate is over.” Here the accent again is on the weak administrative knowledge of the councilors, the bad command of the legislation even on the part of the administration itself (one of the participants has a long negative experience with the local authorities).

Expressed was also the opinion that it is necessary for the administration to renew itself periodically, in order for new, young people to get in.

The experience of the mayor should not necessarily be gained working in administration – a businessman, having managed and “activated” a firm, should have also obtained such experience and knowledge.