

Group Discussion – Vidin, August 20, 2003

Participants – 8 people. Among them:

Men:

A private-sector worker, 49; a private-sector employee, 38; a private-sector worker, 28 (of Roma origin)

Women:

A worker in a private sausage-making factory, 55; a government sector employee – quality assurance check, 51; a private sector worker, 40; an unemployed, 28; a woman on a maternity leave, 27 (of Roma origin)

Local problems and citizen participation

The participants hardly formulate concrete suggestions for resolving the problems identified in Vidin. The general attitude is that these problems totally refer to the central and local government.

The previous local government officials are perceived as people who, for their own benefit, have sold out the factories in the town. This is perceived in the way that, “the situation in Vidin is worsening – now the town is not what it was”, and the factories are not working. There are also private firms, but most are from the gray economy and people work there without contracts and insurance.

The migration of the youth is rooted in the high unemployment – the non-operational factories and the past-experience requirements posed by the employers.

The solution proposed is “to set up new enterprises” and “to make the economy work.” The creation of jobs and establishment of enterprises is seen as a responsibility of the central and local government. The conclusion of the participants is that honest people are needed, with a real concern about the country /and the town respectively/.

A step towards solution of the problem can be through ensuring some preferences for the small business, which does not earn enough to cover salary and insurance expenses. Also this measure is expected “from the center”, without activity on the part of concerned citizens, firms, etc.

Corruption is among the gravest problems in the country nowadays, and its solution is tied with the accession to the EU as well. This eventual solution is seen as the key to everything else – “if the corruption is eradicated, this will improve the economy, which is now not developing freely but by people close to the power.”

Crime is being uncovered, but due to corruption criminals remain not punished. The respondents are unanimous that they are afraid of taking any actions in this direction. They would not seek to cope with the corruption even collectively, especially when it is connected with crime.

However, according to them active can be the high-status groups (for example, medium-sized entrepreneurs in the private sector), when their economic interests are affected. The groups mostly under pressure are less inclined for civic actions. As far as such actions take place, they remain within discontent but without constructive activity.

Every-day crime

This problem is generally not considered as very serious. The every-day crime is connected with the low standard of living, the unemployment and poverty. Second, it is associated with the increasing drug demand.

Other problems mentioned

There is indignation at the practice of Roma people not paying for their electricity while in the same time some Roma foundations realize funds. Disagreement with this practice is sharp. There is an opposite discrimination – Bulgarians cannot let themselves not to pay for their electricity, no matter how financially troubled they are, because the amount due would not be excused.

Citizen participation in resolving the problems

The citizen participation is mainly seen in the past – at the beginning of the transition. At the present, low income and unemployment are the main reasons for the people to seclude within their private space and not get involved in resolving public issues.

The only form of citizen activity mentioned by the respondents is protest. Passivity is also fostered by fear – the respondents expressed doubt about whether their security would be guaranteed if they protested.

Few of the respondents declare willingness for involvement in initiatives by giving money. Although the talk is about small amounts and on the condition of clear warrant for the results.

Only one of the respondents has tried to meet the mayor in his reception hours. That experience was negative. The rest have not participated in whatever citizen activities.

Subjects to initiate citizen actions

Noted here is a contradiction between how the citizen activity is perceived and who has to organize it. The problems (as was pointed) are referred to the administration (central and local). The principal persons and institutions mentioned by the residents and appropriate to organize them were “the police and the mayor.” That is, even in cases when the talk is about citizen activity, government bodies are placed at the bottom of it. Beyond the above-mentioned two administrative institutions, there is a low level of trust in other bodies. The confidence in former representatives of the local government, in former municipality officials or businessmen is extremely low.

There is confidence in “the young people.” In principle, confidence is also declared to a type like “people raised bottom-up and not dropped from above, from the political forces.” However, such people are not recognized at the local level. According to the respondents, “after a person gains power, he/she stops thinking about the people and becomes corrupt.”

It is important to note that this mechanism is imputed to the NGO sector as well (yet not only in Vidin). The difference is that in the case of NGOs, “power” is replaced with “funding.” Thus, depreciated are also civic organizations and NGOs. They are primarily seen as a means to “realize funds without a particular result for a large number of people.”

When the issue is about project funding, a question is raised about accountability to the citizens. First, the money must be spent on purpose, and second, the citizens have to know and “feel” what has been done with this money.

The respondents do not know NGOs, but they think that a lot of funding goes through them. They also think that there is room for NGOs to work in the town, but they must be managed by “reasonable and honest people.” The respondents would participate in some initiative, which they consider reasonable and useful.

Information

The local press and the local cable TV channels and the radio stations are the most appropriate sources of information about civil society initiatives and activities.

The local government and the forthcoming elections

The reaction of most of the respondents is that, over the last 4 years, nothing has been done in the municipality. Only one respondent pointed that there was positive development in the town’s park.

It is not known if the mayor candidates have already been nominated. However, the opinion is that, at the forthcoming local-government elections, BSP will win – Vidin is traditionally red, and at the moment “they are stronger.”

Among the members of Parliament, the respondents recognize only Nina Chilova (National Movement Simeon II) and Mihail Mikov (BSP).

The respondents were divided on the use of going to vote, but after a short discussion prevailed the opinion that one has to vote because otherwise, “*we don’t help ourselves by any means*”, “*we would reach to nowhere.*”