

CEPPS

Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening



BULGARIA: Voter Education and Get-Out-the-Vote in Advance of 2005 Parliamentary Elections

U.S. GRANTEE: Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening/
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs
(CEPPS/NDI)

DATES OF PROJECT: April 15, 2005 to July 15, 2005

BUDGET AMOUNT: [REDACTED]

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COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT: 183-A-00-05-00101-00

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Authorization:

The Executive Project Council (EPC) for the Consortium for Election and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) has authorized the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI or the Institute) to expend funds and conduct the program specified in the attached proposal.

I. SUMMARY

In 2004, the European Union recognized Bulgaria's achievements in developing democratic governing institutions, a multi-party system, and an active civil society by closing the 31 chapters required for accession to the Union. However, public opinion research indicates recent political party fractioning has resulted in public confusion over party identity. This could translate into a decline in the participation in upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for June 25. Young voters are especially at risk as they are inexperienced in making political decisions and are traditionally less likely to vote due to registration requirements for university students.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can play an important role in encouraging youth involvement in the electoral process through voter education on pending changes in the electoral code that will make it easier for university students to vote. NGOs can also encourage participation by engaging young people and political parties in discussions on specific issues. By doing so, NGOs can use the connections developed before the elections to pursue issue-based advocacy initiatives with policymakers after the elections and seek to continue youth engagement in policy and legislative affairs.

In the last three election cycles, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) worked with NGOs to promote citizen participation in the elections. Funded by USAID, NDI provided technical assistance, training, and small grants to approximately 45 NGOs throughout Bulgaria on voter education and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns under the *Ti Izbirash* (You Choose) banner. Official statistics from the 2001 presidential elections reflect that turnout in areas targeted by *Ti Izbirash* NGOs was almost 10 percent higher than national turnout. In the 2003 elections, post-election surveys indicated that the *Ti Izbirash* campaign increased voter turnout between five and ten percent, depending on the target group. Following the 2003 local elections, NDI supported *Ti Izbirash* NGOs in their engagement of municipal officials on social and infrastructure reforms.¹

To continue their development in these areas, NDI proposes a three-month program to provide technical and financial assistance to NGOs to target youth and encourage their participation in the electoral process. The Institute would issue small grants to NGOs to conduct voter education and registration activities as well as candidate debates centered on issues identified by youth. The NGOs would target young voters under 25, especially university students, in approximately ten towns throughout Bulgaria. The NGOs would develop a national media theme, inclusive of radio and television ads, as well as informational literature to provide cohesion to the activities conducted by different NGOs.

This program would complement the two NED-funded programs that NDI is conducting in Bulgaria on increasing the participation of women and Roma in political parties by capitalizing on NDI's relationships with political parties to assist NGOs as they build more connections with political leaders. NDI would deploy a representative to Bulgaria for three months to implement this program.

¹ This program was funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

II. BACKGROUND

The political crises afflicting Bulgaria in the 1990s have given way to political stability as the current government seeks to become only the second post-1989 government to complete a full, four-year mandate. The development of a multi-party system, increased government transparency, and the growing role of civil society in public affairs are important domestic factors that have led to Bulgaria's full membership in NATO and its anticipated accession to the European Union in 2007.

Nevertheless, these indicators belie a troubling element in Bulgaria's still young democracy: deep-seated public discontent with government, public policy, and the actions of political parties. Citizens express frustration over alleged corruption of political and government elites, and they perceive that politicians spend more time haggling over power than legislating. Public opinion research indicates declining confidence in political parties and flagging interest in the upcoming parliamentary elections, which are expected to be held on June 25. Recent attempts by parties to build pre-election coalitions have only led to more confusion and apathy on the part of voters, especially younger citizens who are first-time voters. This election also reflects a significant change in the voting demographic – young and first-time voters cannot remember life under communism. They will be voting for their futures, which they see as belonging to Europe, as opposed to previous elections, which were referendums on the past. Ensuring that young people participate in these elections is critical to electing a government with a mandate strong enough to push through reforms necessary for the successful completion of the European accession process.

In a representative poll conducted in Bulgaria in March, nearly 25 percent of the electorate said that it would not vote in these elections. Another approximately 20 percent remain undecided about their participation.² Furthermore, participation among university students has traditionally been low because students could not vote in the city where they studied (temporary residence) and they often did not have the money to travel to their hometowns to vote.³ Proposed changes in the electoral law would allow students to get a waiver from the university to permit them to vote in their temporary residences. If passed, the approximately 228,000 university students in Bulgaria⁴ would need to be educated on the changes in the law as well as the new registration procedures. To encourage not only their registration but their actual participation, 18 – 25 year olds, who make up approximately 10 percent of registered voters, should also be provided with venues to explore the parties' stances on issues that young people feel are priorities.

In this regard, nongovernmental organizations can play an important role in educating students on the changes in the

After the 2001 presidential elections, polling station data reflected a higher turnout in areas where *Ti Izbirash* was most dynamic. In targeted polling stations in Yambol, between 48 and 52 percent of registered voters participated in the first round, while national turnout was only 39 percent. For the second round of elections, turnout in targeted districts in Plovdiv was almost 10 percent higher than the national turnout.

² Polling conducted by Alpha Research in Sofia.

³ Students were allowed to vote in their temporary residence for the 2003 local elections, but had to de-register in their hometowns before re-registering in the town where they studied.

⁴ From the Sofia News Agency, www.novinite.com, March 21, 2005.

electoral law and in bringing to the forefront the issues that youth consider to be vital – high unemployment, faltering education and health care systems, and dilapidated infrastructure. By doing so, NGOs can position themselves to work with policy makers to address citizens’ concerns after the campaign speeches have been forgotten.

Bulgarian civil society organizations have a history of successful voter education and GOTV in the last three election cycles. NDI trained approximately 45 NGOs from throughout Bulgaria on GOTV during these elections as part of the *Ti Izbirash* campaigns. In 2003 alone, *Ti Izbirash* reached approximately 62,000 potential voters through canvassing, phone banks, candidate debates, tabling, rock concerts and, for the first time in Bulgaria, the Internet. After the third round of *Ti Izbirash*, NDI distributed a GOTV manual based on these experiences to civic

In 2003, many communities where NDI partners were active experienced an increase in turnout among target groups. For example, in Gotse Delchev turnout among women reached an all-time high of 43 percent. In Sevlievo, first-time voters’ participation increased five percent from 1999, while overall turnout for 2003 elections was lower. In addition, an exit poll revealed that 45 percent counted *Ti Izbirash* among that factors that motivated them to vote. In Lom, turnout in the targeted Roma neighborhood was ten percent higher than the average for the city.

organizations throughout the country to share best practices and lessons learned. Since the 2003 elections, the NGOs that participated in the GOTV campaigns have used the political capital they gained during *Ti Izbirash* in post-election advocacy campaigns to address such issues as the formation of a local Roma advisory council, wheelchair access in public schools, participation of youth in the local political process, and fixing the streets in a particular neighborhood.

Although this demonstrates significant progress on the ability of NGOs to incorporate citizen input into the policy process, organizations continue to limit their advocacy efforts to a few politicians. As Bulgaria’s political structure becomes more decentralized, more actors will enter the policymaking process, and NGOs will need to broaden their scope of contacts among governing officials and other groups, such as the National Association for Municipalities, which are beginning to have stronger roles in shaping public policy. NGOs also will need to use the media more effectively in reaching the public by using the most appropriate outlet for the target group. For example, youth are more responsive to messages on the television, radio, and internet while NGOs traditionally rely on press releases and print media.

NDI’s proposed voter-education and GOTV campaign would build on accomplishments from the previous *Ti Izbirash* programs by working with national NGO networks to organize their local NGO partners to encourage youth to participate in the electoral process in advance of the parliamentary elections. By combining the experiences of working through national networks in the 2001 *Ti Izbirash* campaign and of collaborating with local NGOs in the 2003 *Ti Izbirash* campaign, NDI would assemble a 2005 *Ti Izbirash* coalition that can build relations with government bodies and relevant nongovernmental associations at national and local levels.

“For the first time we have completed a project that took us to the next campaign. Now we cannot say it’s over and drop the issue after all we have done around it, and will have to continue to work on the Roma integration strategy.”

Roma Future Rakovski on its participation in NDI’s 2003 GOTV program.

NDI would require NGOs to target young people under 25. By targeting one group of voters, organizations can better tailor activities to be most effective and to aggregate and present the opinions of the young people to present to candidates. To this end, NDI would draw on relationships with political leaders from other programs, such as its NED-funded Roma and women's participation programs. NDI would encourage candidates to participate in civic-organized activities, such as townhall meetings and candidate debates. Because lack of participation by candidates in the 2003 elections was reflected in decreased support for them in the polls, the likelihood of candidates' participation in the events is high.

The proposed program would complement the efforts of the International Republican Institute, which is conducting a USAID-funded program with political parties on utilizing public opinion research in developing party platforms and targeting strategies.

III. PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

The objective of the program is to provide technical and financial assistance to NGOs to target youth and encourage their participation in the electoral process.

IV. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES⁵

NGO networks and National *Ti Izbirash* Theme

NDI anticipates working with such NGO networks as the National Association of Municipalities, the National Network for Equal Opportunities (women), and the Center for Independent Living (disabled). These organizations have youth working groups and local partners throughout Bulgaria and participated in previous *Ti Izbirash* campaigns.

NDI has found that by giving NGOs decisionmaking authority, they are more vested in the outcome of the program. Thus, NDI would seek to form an executive council of the lead organizations in each network. In addition, during the 2001 *Ti Izbirash* campaign, each network or NGO produced paid media pieces of varying quality. To combat this problem and to maximize the monetary resources available, in the 2003 *Ti Izbirash* cycle NDI worked with partners to develop the national TV and radio ads as well as a national informational brochure, which supplemented the NGOs' materials. This proved to be an effective method for developing the national theme, and NDI would use this as a model for the 2005 program.

The executive council would be responsible for developing the youth-oriented logo and message to be included on all campaign materials. The use of the same message would provide cohesion to the campaigns being conducted in different municipalities, and to reinforce the message throughout Bulgaria. The executive council would also serve as the final decision-making body on all aspects related to the national *Ti Izbirash* theme:

- Recruiting celebrities to support the *Ti Izbirash* effort;
- Providing direction for television and radio ads;
- Finalizing media partners and paid media;⁶

⁵ Activities are based on the anticipated election date of June 25, 2005. An illustrative activity timeline is attached.

- Developing informational literature; and
- Selecting the national spokesperson.

Small Grants

The Institute would issue approximately 10 small grants of \$2,000 each to the lead organization in each network to conduct activities with its partner NGOs. In previous *Ti Izbirash* campaigns, the Institute has found that, in distributing small grants through networks, partner NGOs also contributed their own resources.⁷ NDI would encourage, but not mandate, that proposals include such contributions. NDI would advertise the small grants program through its traditional contacts with NGO networks, previous partners, universities, as well as on the NDI/Bulgaria website. NGOs that are not affiliated with the networks, but target young voters would also be eligible to apply.

Grant Selection

By working within the national NGO networks, NDI seeks to increase the number of small grants that go to NGOs with previous advocacy and GOTV experience, although any NGO network with documented organizing experience would be eligible. Grant proposals would be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Project objectives are realistic and achievable
- Project targets young voters under 25, especially university students and first-time voters
- Activities involve direct contact with youth
- Project is cost-effective (with a preference for projects that include their own resources)

NDI anticipates that approximately 10 municipalities would be reached by the program. Based on the location of previous *Ti Izbirash* partners, these would include larger urban areas with universities, such as Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Pleven, Plovdiv, Sofia, Varna, or Veliko Turnovo. The grants would be used to conduct direct-contact activities that fall under one of two categories: voter education/registration and candidate debates.

Voter Education/Registration

The Bulgarian government amends the electoral code before every election cycle. NDI anticipates two changes for this election that may cause confusion among voters. The first anticipated change may be the introduction of a single, integrated ballot – Bulgaria has traditionally used colored ballots for each contesting party in the parliamentary elections. The second change may allow students to apply for a waiver from the university so they can vote in the city where they study, as opposed to traveling to their hometown. In addition to any change in the electoral code, NGOs would educate first-time voters and others on their rights and responsibilities as a voter, how to ensure they are registered and how to locate their polling

⁶ NDI anticipates a representative from Promedia or the Bulgarian Media Coalition will consult with the executive council on media issues.

⁷ In the 2003 *Ti Izbirash*, two national organizations joined the campaign after it started, and two others located funding for partners to conduct activities in an additional 18 communities.

station, as well as what to expect at the polling station on election day. NGOs would produce informational pamphlets and distribute them to voters through such methods as setting up information tables in areas frequented by youth (for example internet centers, discos, university libraries), canvassing at student housing, using listserves, and visiting schools.

Candidate Debates

Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria are traditionally centered on issues set by the parties, not the citizens. To change this cycle, NGOs would organize events, such as townhall meetings where citizens can question the candidates, candidate debates where civic leaders work with youth to prepare questions for the candidates in advance, or more personal and informal “meet the candidate” events where voters can discuss issues with candidates one-on-one.

The Institute does not anticipate that NGOs would meet resistance from candidates, as NGOs held debates before the 2003 local elections. These debates generated a large amount of public interest, both in participation and media coverage, and lack of participation by candidates resulted in fewer votes for them in the polls. In cases where NGOs experience problems organizing these events, NDI would assist the organizations by facilitating meetings between party and civic leaders to encourage their candidates’ participation.

V. EVALUATION

Objective: To provide technical and financial assistance to NGOs to target youth and encourage their participation in the electoral process.

Indicator: Number of voter education/registration activities and candidate debates conducted, inclusive of events that bring candidates and young voters together to discuss specific issues.

Measurement: NGOs submit documentation of such activities to NDI, such as invitations to or media coverage of events, number of participants at events, and copies of campaign brochures developed, with evidence of public distribution (i.e. 200 brochures distributed during a canvass).

Indicator: Number of television and radio spots that target youth and encourage them to vote.

Measurement: NDI will monitor television and radio to determine the number of times spots are aired.

Indicator: Number of students that apply for a waiver from the university to enable them to vote in the city where they study.⁸

⁸ This indicator can only be used if the anticipated changes in the electoral law are passed and the changes allow NGOs can have access to this information.

Measurement: NGOs work with university registrars to get a total number of waivers issued.

Indicator: Voter turnout among youth remains consistent or increases as compared to the 1997 and 2001 local elections.⁹

Measurement: NGOs use pre- and post-election surveys, 1997 and 2001 National Statistics and 2005 results to analyze the changes in turnout among youth.

VI. STAFFING

Sevdalina Voynova, the NDI/Bulgaria country director (and program manager from the previous *Ti Izbirash* programs) would oversee the implementation of the program. NDI would deploy a resident program officer to Bulgaria for a threemonth period to manage the day-to-day activities associated with this program. The resident program officer would have organizing experience and knowledge of previous GOTV programs in Bulgaria. In addition, the Institute would hire a short-term local staff person to support this program.

VII. BUDGET

Attached is a budget in the amount of [REDACTED] and budget notes.

⁹ Both of these elections had high participation at 62.9 percent (1997) and 67 percent (2001). It is highly unlikely that participation rate will increase from these numbers.

Appendix One – Tentative Timeline

These dates are tentative and based on the anticipated June 25 election date.

April 15, 2005 – NDI announces program and call for small grants proposals and calls for bids for materials associated with the national campaign (television, radio, printing, and t-shirts)

Third week April – Begin assembling executive council

Fourth week in April – First meeting of executive council, continue to meet every 7-10 days until a week after elections.

April 26 – Deadline for small grants and all contractual bids

April 29 – Small grants notification

May 2 – Voter registration activities begin

May 25 – Official campaign period starts for political parties

Last week May – Candidate debates begin, continue throughout June

June 25 – Election day

July 5 – Small grants reports due

July 15– program closes