

State Budget for “Vote Buying”

Dr. Teodor Slavev, Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives

According to a quote by Otto von Bismarck, "At no time there is more lying than before the elections, during the war and after the hunt.". If we were to rephrase this in the current situation, concerning public resource in Bulgaria we would say: "At no time there is more distribution than before elections and at no time there is more collection than after elections." The government has taken a bold course towards different types of payment without any analysis of their effectiveness. More and more apparent is their aim to try to influence the election results and guarantee the favor of the electorate.

International organizations, like OSCE, GRECO, IFES, have been working for several years on the problem of using public resources for pre-election or electoral purposes. This abuse is a certain type of corrupt behavior, which is often not (or cannot be) regulated, but falls under the broad understanding for extracting undue gains as a result of occupying a state public position.

It turns out that in many countries the political elites are more tempted to loosen the purse strings before the elections. There is a direct negative influence on the right to good governance and the political rights of the citizens if this is done without a plan or analysis, or a public discussion. The negative impact is, for example, in the amount of the social payment disproportionate to the period when there are no elections, as well as when infrastructure projects commence immediately before elections (and are to be completed after them); when there is a formal or informal pressure on the state administration around the pre-election period with a risk of dismissal; when companies are given public procurement before the elections, or, in turn, when the procurement is halted after them.

One can say that these events are hardly the biggest problem of our society, because by now nobody expects that the scandalous photos of the Prime minister's bedroom with piles of euros, gold, and weapons will receive an objective investigation. The health and political crisis we are already in as well as the economic crisis that is beginning, should open our eyes to the bigger picture - the abuse of public funds. This problem should not be overlooked as it affects the behavior of entire groups of the electorate concerning the public resource, which is the money each of us pays. When Denitsa Sacheva explains that the crisis allowances of 50 leva for the pensioners will remain until March 2021, the expected time for the parliamentary elections, and after that they will consider whether that policy would continue, it sounds suspiciously a lot like ransom kidnapping. There is an unequivocal suggestion that allowances

would continue if, for instance, Denitsa Sacheva remains responsible for labor and social policies in the future government after the election.

The context in which the big distribution began, is also significant. In the dawn of the state of emergency, when the measures were the strictest and people needed help the most - the government backtracked and started a massive and reckless spending only after the start of the protests. The international situation is also working towards deregulation, because due to the COVID-19 crisis, the European Commission has triggered a derogation clause on budgetary rules and the deficit requirement by introducing temporary state aid rules. These are adequate measures, but we must not forget that Bulgaria is in a state capture situation, where trust in the institutions is critically low and every action of the government must be questioned whether it is for the purpose of someone's personal or political party gain.

This text does not oppose the missing or almost non-existent social payments, compensations, or benefits for people and businesses in Bulgaria. It aims to draw attention to the anti-democratic phenomenon of abuse of state resources for pre-election and electoral purposes, observed in Bulgaria. The humiliation, a subject of which are the Bulgarian citizens and businesses in the scope of state aid, should not be supplied by the question of what the election results would be. Borrowing and using European funds to tackle the crisis must not become a weapon for gaining political support by pouring them into unreformed and broken social systems, in which neither workers nor beneficiaries can feel a tangible improvement.

Although Bulgarians often say: "It is a good thing election is coming, they will finally do something for us.", the problem is palpable in the regulatory framework for prevention, investigation, and sanctioning of the abuse of state resources for political purposes. There is an elephant in the room, that during elections the state administration is harnessed to work for the leading party. Given GERB's long stay over the years, they have created an army of administrators who work as political agents. There are scandalous situations, in which people entitled to targeted aid for heating were to receive it only after the election of a certain candidate. Even more problematic is the case with the municipality as the main employer. The Electoral Code says that a candidate, holding a position in public administration, only needs to be on furlough during the elections in order to compete. This does not apply, however, to the other participants in the election campaign who are civil servants. It is no coincidence that there are no parties to declare voluntary work as part of their campaign financing.

In the different codes of ethics of the state administrations, where there are such, as well as in the Code of Ethics of the civil servant, there are no (or it's a rarity to have) explicitly stated prohibitions against the abuse of state resource or public office positions for electoral purposes. The inspectorates as well as the General Inspectorate do not pay attention to this corruptive element, as there is no evidence that the prosecution or other investigative bodies have encountered this problem over the years. One part of the reasons is the missing legislation, another one is the captured situation of the institutions, which during the election serve their appointees in various ways.

The socioeconomic picture in Bulgaria is not good, but it cannot be improved by pouring public funds and public resources to gain power regardless for which political player. This is done with expertise, perseverance and political courage. Voters need to be very careful when they are tossed the leftovers, because the day after the election that may be very, very costly for them.