

CIPE INTERNATIONAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2007

Engaging Youth in Reform

**The Voice of Ordinary People:
A Drive for Change in Modern Society**

Category: Citizenship in a Democratic Society

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Introduction

What are the main characteristics of a democratic society? Institutions (formal and informal) which reflect the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, honest government, fundamental human rights, including equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of race, color, religion or political belief. Governance in a democratic society should be transparent, accountable, and participatory. The political and economic priorities should be based on a broad consensus in society and there should be mechanisms that allow the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable to be heard in the decision-making processes.

Before describing the situation in Bulgaria, I would like to give my definition of civil society. Civil society is composed of voluntary civil organizations and institutions that exist to solve a given problem that affects lives of many citizens. Citizenship itself is membership in a political community and carries with it rights of political participation. All over the world citizens strive for more responsive and participatory forms of governance, they strive to be actively involved in decisions that affect their well-being. People in truly democratic societies have access to the decision-making process and their rights and duties are recognized and the result is effective participation in governance of the country.

Situation in Bulgaria

It is said that a government neglects its voters when voters neglect their own government - when people let the government become one that protects powerful special interests. The gap between citizen power and power of special-interest groups in Bulgaria is huge and has been growing in the past 17 years. This fact has discouraged and disappointed many young people and led to the opinion that they cannot change the situation. Young

people tend to believe that politicians just want to win the elections and after that they are not going to protect the public interest but only their own.

Everyday young people notice something they do not like, but they are not likely to take action to improve it. Of course, there are active people who have achieved some success, but tired and discouraged they quit trying to change anything after several unsuccessful attempts. They either start to consider the actual situation as normal or try to immigrate to a country where such problems do not exist. As a consequence, it is pretty hard to convince those who stay to take part in further civil activities.

And yet, there are forms of civil participation that affect the decision-making process. But those forms are indicative of the nature of citizens' civil culture – it is a culture of conflict. Since most young people do not believe that they can really affect the governance, they seek conflicts rather than dialogue that could enable mutual understanding and compromise. Protests are not uncommon, but often they are a sign of civil fragmentation and not of a community with shared values. For instance, there was a protest in March 2007 when taxi drivers blocked Sofia city centre because of a murder of their colleague. All other citizens did not participate and suffered from this form of protest. Some of them even accused taxi drivers of being selfish and tried to boycott their services. There was another protest of people that gathered in front of the Presidency to protest against something that has nothing to do with the President (they should have gone in front of the National Assembly building instead).

These examples from reality clearly illustrate the level of civil culture in Bulgaria and the need for a long-term strategy and strong will to change it.

What can be done to engage and enable young people to participate constructively in the governance process?

There are many ways to engage young people in the governance process but I will describe only three since I believe they are the most powerful.

1 | The first factor that can dramatically increase civil participation is formal education

I consider education to be the engine of every significant change. In my country, citizenship education is not taught at schools, or at least it is not mandatory. But before tackling the question about citizenship education, let me tell you an important thing about the nature of the teacher-student relationship. Teachers in Bulgaria tend to have great authority – whatever they say, it is considered right and students are supposed to write it down and learn it. It is usual for teachers to say 'There is only one right solution to this problem – the one I am telling you.' Students are supposed to absorb this 'knowledge' but there is little interaction - they are not supposed to express different opinions; in fact, they are not supposed to even think – the teacher makes this effort unnecessary. This is the reason why, later in college, students are disappointed that the teacher 'does not know everything' and asks them to think critically and express an opinion. I believe this passive reception in the learning process, the lack of interaction between students and teachers makes the participatory culture harder to achieve. But there is always a way to change things. The way of teaching could be changed and has to be changed, fast.

Regarding the subject of citizenship education - citizenship education provides students and young people with the knowledge, understanding, and skills needed to play an active role in society as informed and responsible citizens. Its goal is to give them the confidence and conviction that they can cooperate with others and make a difference in their communities. I believe that making citizenship education mandatory for all students,

from an early age, can change the way they perceive their role in society. Educating young people about their rights and duties, about the way institutions function, and about how to participate in a constructive manner in the governance process is a prerequisite for a democratic society. Citizenship education is taught as a subject in school in many countries and I think that this is a great opportunity for developing countries to adopt the best practices and avoid common mistakes on how to include it in the curriculum and how to teach it. In the UK, three inter-related components for citizenship education were identified¹:

- Social and moral responsibility: pupils learning - from the very beginning - self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behavior both in and beyond the classroom, towards those in authority and towards each other.
- Community involvement: pupils learning about becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their neighborhood and communities, including learning through community involvement and service to the community.
- Political literacy: pupils learning about the institutions, problems and practices of our democracy and how to make themselves effective in the life of the nation, locally, regionally and nationally through skills and values as well as knowledge - a concept wider than political knowledge alone.

Citizenship education should develop habits and skills of enquiry, communication, participation and responsible action through learning.

Success stories of civil actions (by informed, educated, and responsible citizens) are a great motivator. However, just telling a story of an active citizen (or more likely a group of citizens) about how they dealt with an issue and how their actions led to a change or a benefit for many people is not enough. Success stories should be used as a learning tool –

¹ Report of the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools.

by studying the elements and factors of success, the strategies and techniques of making a change.

2 | The second instrument that could increase citizen participation includes non-governmental organizations (NGO)

Non-governmental organizations play a critical role in helping to amplify the voices of citizens, especially of the poor and most vulnerable ones, in the decision-making processes that have strong impact on their lives. NGOs support many initiatives that are not tackled by the government or business and efficiently influence policy makers. Non-governmental organizations are strengthening the civil society; they are a form of civil structure that enables ordinary people to become participants in governance rather than mere spectators or even victims.

Young people should be informed about the activities of various NGOs. This is a task of the NGOs themselves, but still the government could assist. Public awareness raising campaign could produce results and improve the image and the general knowledge about NGOs among citizens and thus attracting more young people for the activities that are carried out.

3 | The third and probably most powerful tool for developing a civil society involves Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

The rapid development and proliferation of new and emerging information and communication technologies present new opportunities for developing countries around the world. In many countries, governments are trying to find ways to harness the potential of these new technologies to create environment for accelerated economic growth.

Among other benefits, information and communication technologies could provide a platform for better governance, increased citizen participation and true democracy.

Information and communication technologies are an extremely powerful tool to transform government institutions, democracy, and the way people interact with government.

The so-called electronic governance allows governments to get closer to citizens and establish closer partnerships with diverse communities of interest, practice, expertise, and beliefs. But there are some prerequisites for electronic government to be effective: basic access to computers and the Internet (the technology should be affordable to citizens, compared to their incomes); computer literacy of the population. E-government could achieve its goals only when the number of people using the Internet has reached certain levels.

E-government will make the government itself more open for interaction with the civil society. There are many examples of using ICT in EU Member States for improving governance in democratic societies: initiatives providing on-line facilities for public access to reports, minutes, and agenda of government officials (improved access of citizens to the decision-making process); online discussion boards where citizens, politicians, and public administration are able to engage in debates and discussions; e-petition tools that transform the old style of public petitioning by helping to overcome lack of awareness, illegible signatures, lack of information, lack of debate, and lack of feedback, instead providing an open, accountable and deliberative participation process; online debating forums for persons up to 18 years of age, etc. All these examples illustrate the transition from passive information access to active citizen participation. In our century information means power. More informed citizens are more likely to exercise their rights and participate more actively in important social matters. Through the use of ICT in government, the citizens are informed, represented, encouraged, and involved.

E-government:

- improves the accessibility of citizens to their elected representatives;
- stimulates debate;
- increases electoral activity;
- provides equal access;
- increases citizens' participation;

In May 2007, elections for representatives in the European Parliament were held in Bulgaria and the electoral activity was unprecedentedly low. I remember the election day clearly – it was raining heavily and many citizens chose to stay at home rather than go out and vote. Of course, this was not the main reason for the low activity, but if a system for e-voting was in place, much more people would have cast their ballots, especially because the majority of non-voters are also people using the Internet.

Blogs as a tool for participation

There are small groups of people that are not satisfied with certain aspects of reality and want to change the situation. They meet a few other people that understand them and share the same beliefs, but still, small groups of people have little chance to be heard. This statement was true a few years ago, before blogs became popular. The so-called online diaries solve this communication problem and allow everybody to express their opinion in public, gather support, and receive feedback. Blogs really do matter and there are now many informal leaders that use this media and influence a lot of people. Even politicians turn to blogs in their campaigns because they have become aware of their power. They keep in touch with the electorate; they have a tool for interaction that enables them to adapt their campaigns and messages through two-way communication. There are examples of many online civil activities transforming into offline, real life ones with a great impact. There was an initiative that was born in an online forum to discuss problems of orphans. It quickly produced results and brought together many people that donated clothes of their already grown-up children. Again, this is evidence proving that when young people have the tool, the platform for free expression and action, they will use it in a way that nobody considered a decade ago.

Final thoughts - determined action is needed

So, what are the prospects? All that is needed to make the change happen is will. Strong will to go beyond a simple statement which says: 'What a great idea!.' We all know that this is not enough. It is not enough to wait for someone else to come and solve our problems. Even the recognition of this fact is a huge step forward, but it is the first one along the way. As citizens, we need to think for ourselves what we can do and strive for it, we need to act decisively and stay true to our values and beliefs. And as stated in the text above, our success will motivate other people to join and combine efforts.

References

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