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BULGARIA

SUCCESS STORY

“You Choose!” Enters National Psyche

Get-out-the-vote drive continues to energize marginalized voters



Photo: Center Amalite

During local elections in October 2007, a young activist in Veliko Turnovo hands out information to encourage voting among the Roma community.

“The seeds were planted and it’s here to stay,” said Sevdalina Voynova about USAID-supported voter education techniques.

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Since 2001, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have participated in USAID-supported get-out-the-vote campaigns that aim to educate voters, especially those traditionally marginalized.

Sevdalina Voynova, the Bulgaria director for a USAID implementing partner, said “the target groups we worked with over the years continue to have representation,” citing campaigns by Association IKAR in the town of Haskovo to mobilize disabled voters, an initiative by the Youth Center of Sevlievo to encourage youth participation, and an effort by Association Naya in the city of Targovishte to counter vote-buying.

A network of 70 NGOs, ranging from large consortia to small community groups, was recruited to encourage citizen activism and participation. The organizations were selected with careful effort to assess their potential to reach marginalized groups such as youth, women, disabled, and minorities. The campaign, which included bus tours, concerts, voter education materials, candidate debates, and canvassing of Roma and other communities, continued during elections in 2003 and 2005.

Along the way, mistakes were made and lessons learned. For example, it was discovered that traditional door-to-door canvassing was impractical in Roma communities, where it was considered rude for canvassers not to come inside the home and share food with the family. In later election cycles, funding decreased to encourage greater NGO independence, and in the 2005 election cycle, 30 NGOs paid their own expenses to participate in the campaign. The NGO network recruited spokespeople such as rock musicians and soccer stars, and produced public service announcements that were shown free on national media.

In a striking example of how deeply the campaign message became ingrained in Bulgarian society, the Bulgarian version of the television quiz show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” recently used the campaign’s slogan, “Ti Izbirash!” (“You Choose!”), in one of its questions for contestants.