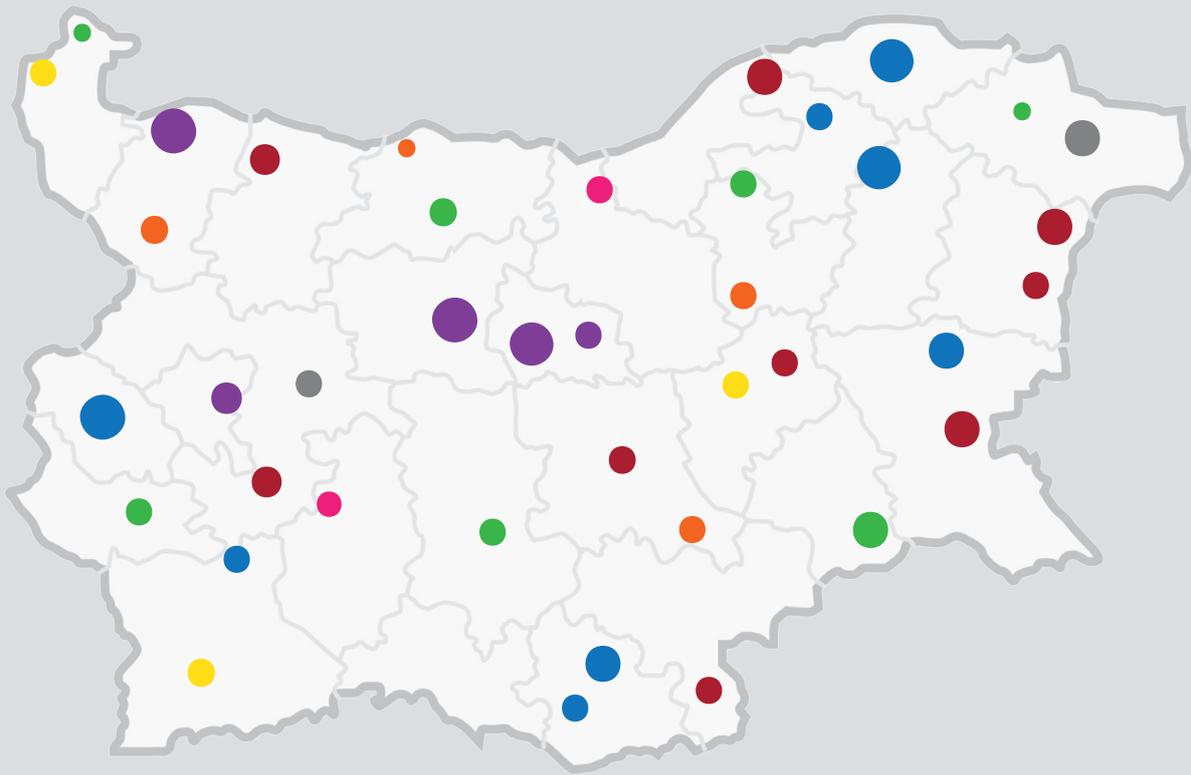


BROKEN LEGITIMACY: PREVALENCE AND IMPACT OF CONTROLLED AND PURCHASED VOTING IN BULGARIA



Resume of the analysis

The **“Broken Legitimacy: prevalence and impact of controlled and purchased voting in Bulgaria”** project is led by the Anti-corruption Fund Foundation with the financial support of Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway in the amount of EUR 9 990 within the scope of the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism (EEA FM) 2014 – 2021.

The main goal of the project is to improve the public debate in the Bulgarian society regarding the prevalence and impact of vote buying and electoral manipulation on the outcome of elections, as well as to assist the authorities in restricting the purchasing of votes, by identifying polling stations at risk of becoming targets of that irregular practice.

The entire responsibility for the content of the document rests with the Anti-Corruption Fund Foundation, and under no circumstances can it be assumed that this document reflects the official opinion of the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area and the Operator of the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria.

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In the end of March 2021, the Anti-Corruption Fund (ACF) presented the results of the first part of its analysis titled “Broken Legitimacy: prevalence and impact of controlled and purchased voting in Bulgaria.”

The analysis focuses on examining the results of all parliamentary and local elections in the period 2013-2019, with the goal to identify the prevalence and impact of controlled and purchased voting in Bulgaria. It also provides a list of polling stations at risk, shown in the form of an interactive map. The authors of the analysis are Mariya Karayotova, Doctor of Criminology, and the political scientist, Mario Rusinov.

The ACF experts identify polling stations as “at risk” on the basis of the following four indicators:

- unusually high voter turnout in a given polling station compared to the registered voter turnout in the entire municipality;
- unusually high vote for the leading party in a given polling station compared to the vote for that party in the entire municipality. In this scenario, an extreme result in favor of the winner-party is even more suspicious if a different party had won that precinct at the previous parliamentary election;
- abrupt deviations in voter turnout in a particular polling station between two consecutive elections;
- a registered abrupt change in the political preferences of voters within a particular polling station between two consecutive elections – a sudden increase or decrease in the votes for a specific political party in the station.

The most conservative assessment shows that the total number of votes, cast in 780 polling stations at risk in 2017, amounted to 170,000 votes¹, or about 5% of all cast votes. This calculation only includes the stations that the analysts considered high-risk. If the assessment includes all polling stations that displayed aberrations under at least one of the criteria above, the votes become 690,000 in 2554 polling stations, or 18.7% of all votes cast in the examined elections.²

Following the same methodology,³ the analysis of the 2015 local elections reveals that a total of 247,382 votes were cast in polling stations that are considered at risk, which represents 7.5% of all votes cast in those elections. The following local elections in 2019 witnessed a decrease in the number of votes cast in polling stations at risk – 186,944 or 6% of the total votes.

The ACF experts emphasize that while the used models can help identify discrepancies in voter behavior in specific polling stations, they cannot guarantee that controlled voting is the single reason behind any extreme results. There are a number of other economic, social, and political factors that the models cannot fully take into account, such as the ethnic origin of the population or the emergence of a strong political candidate within a community.

Despite the mentioned limitations, the used statistical models can identify, with sufficient accuracy, polling stations within the country that consistently carry a high risk of vote buying or manipulation. The interactive map published on ACF’s website⁴ shows the location of every polling station at risk, as well as the results of the 2014 and 2017 parliamentary elections in each of those stations.

1 The figure represents the total number of votes recorded in these polling stations, as the data cannot reveal what portion of the vote cast in each station carries the risk of fraud. According to interviewed experts, in polling stations at risk, not only the vote for the winner-party, but also the vote for the other parties is often controlled / purchased.

2 The provided calculations are based on the assumption that once a polling station has been classified as “at risk” in accordance with at least one of the specified models, and in at least one election year, the station is considered vulnerable in the remaining election years.

3 In the context of local (mayor) elections, the approach is to look for abrupt shifts in political preferences between the two rounds of the election — and not between two consecutive elections — owing to the majoritarian nature of the vote.

4 <https://acf.bg/bg/kontroliraniyat-i-kupen-vot-v-balgariya-2/>

Some noteworthy tendencies and examples of electoral manipulation

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the proportions of votes cast in polling stations at risk in every Bulgarian province.

The analysis demonstrates that in 2017, there was a surge in unconventional voter behavior in the eastern and north-eastern parts of Bulgaria, and particularly in the cities of Burgas, Kardzhali, Razgrad, and Shumen. Serious discrepancies were also identified in the cities of Vratsa, Sliven, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, and Blagoevgrad. The highest ratio of potentially manipulated vote to conventional (non-risk) vote is observed in the cities of Kardzhali and Sliven (Fig. 3). In other words, these cities carry the highest risk of mandate redistribution resulting from vote manipulation. On the other hand, it should be noted that voting discrepancies seem to be equally present in the entire country. (Fig. 4 and 5). Over 2/3 of the polling stations at risk are located in villages, which can be explained by the fact that they are predominantly inhabited by economically and socially disadvantaged groups.

Fig. 1: Proportions of voters from polling stations exhibiting a potential or high risk of electoral manipulation in the 2017 parliamentary election (by province)

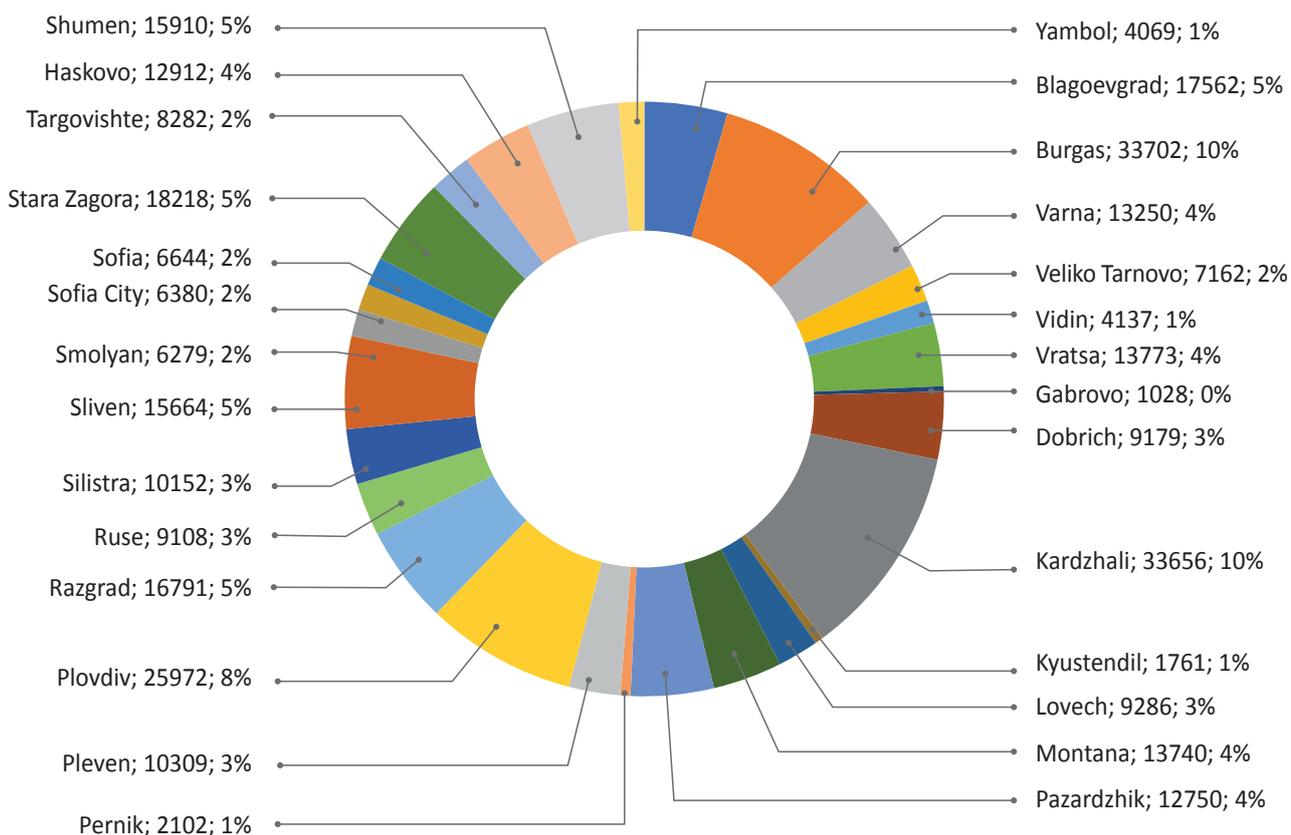


Fig. 2: Proportions of voters from polling stations exhibiting a high risk of electoral manipulation during the 2017 parliamentary election (by province)

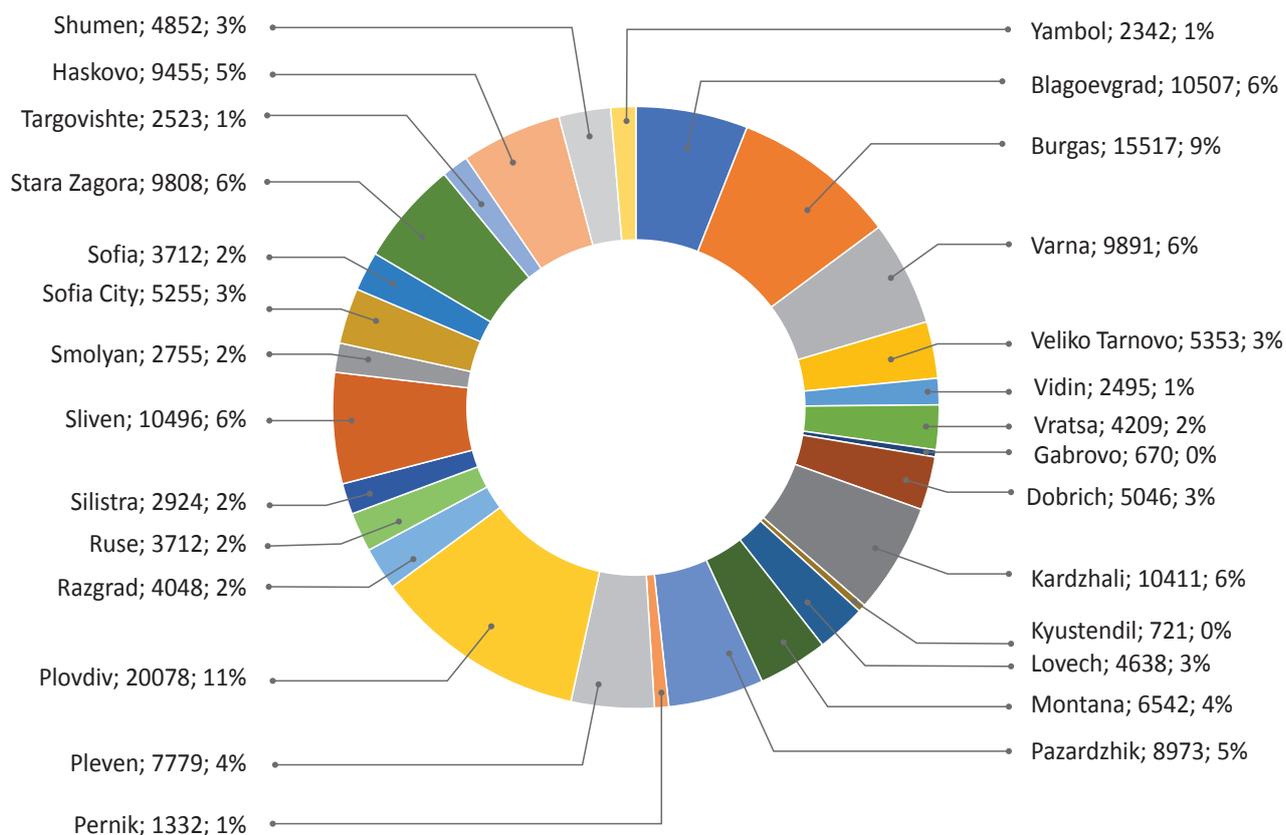
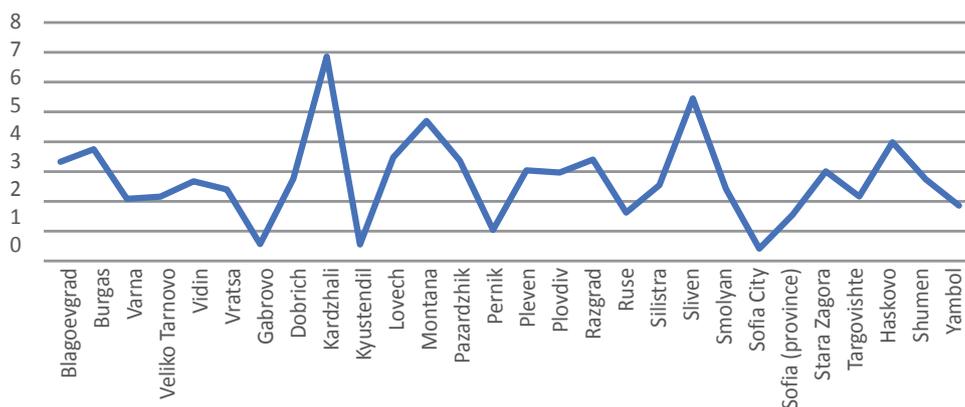


Fig. 3: Proportion of purchased votes from all cast votes by province – conservative assessment



Factors affecting electoral manipulation

The conducted qualitative analysis shows that electoral manipulation is heavily dependent on economic, educational, and socio-economic factors. Thus, the provinces with higher proportions of manipulated vote are also the ones generating lower GDP per capita.⁵ We believe that examining the correlation between GDP per capita at municipal level (or even at the level of smaller administrative units), on the one hand, and the existence of polling stations at risk, on the other, will reveal a relatively strong statistical interdependence, as the majority of identified polling stations at risk are located in small settlements — mostly villages, where incomes are lower. However, at present the NSI only publishes data for GDP per capita at provincial level, which are not representative, as cities remain the main financial centers in the Bulgarian context. This assertion is even more valid with regards to provincial capitals.

Taking into consideration the popular beliefs that the risk of vote buying or manipulation is higher among the Roma population, we compared the ethnic origin ratios within settlements⁶ Taking into consideration the popular beliefs that the risk of vote buying or manipulation is higher among the Roma population, we compared the ethnic origin ratios within settlements against the proportion of high-risk vote within the same settlements. The analysis revealed that settlements with a larger Turkish and Roma populations exhibit a much stronger correlation – 0.47, whereas those with exclusively Roma population – only 0.34. The latter can be considered a weak correlation. However, the combination of Turkish and Roma populations, and the people who do not self-identify in any way, shows an average correlation of 0.55 (see Fig. 5). The predominance of the Turkish population in the polling stations susceptible to vote buying and manipulation has been highlighted in other reports on the topic, notably that of Assoc.prof. St. Stoytchev. He points out that “Given the compactness of the Turkish population, there are hardly any people who do not vote as they were told... The core stimulation tools ... are promoting political loyalty and reinforcing the sense of belonging to the municipality and the party. Accordingly, the main control mechanism is the fear of being ostracized.”⁷

5 The data showing GDP per capita were sourced from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) – GDP – regional level | National Statistical Institute (nsi.bg)

6 We used the most current and comprehensive database of the last population census, performed in 2011. The data are available at: Ethnic composition of Bulgaria 2011 (mashke.org)

7 2018. Stoycho Stoychev, “Controlled voting in Bulgaria: threats to human security”, 25-28 broshora-vot.indd (iris-bg.org)

Fig. 4: Polling stations in potential risk of electoral manipulation in the country⁸

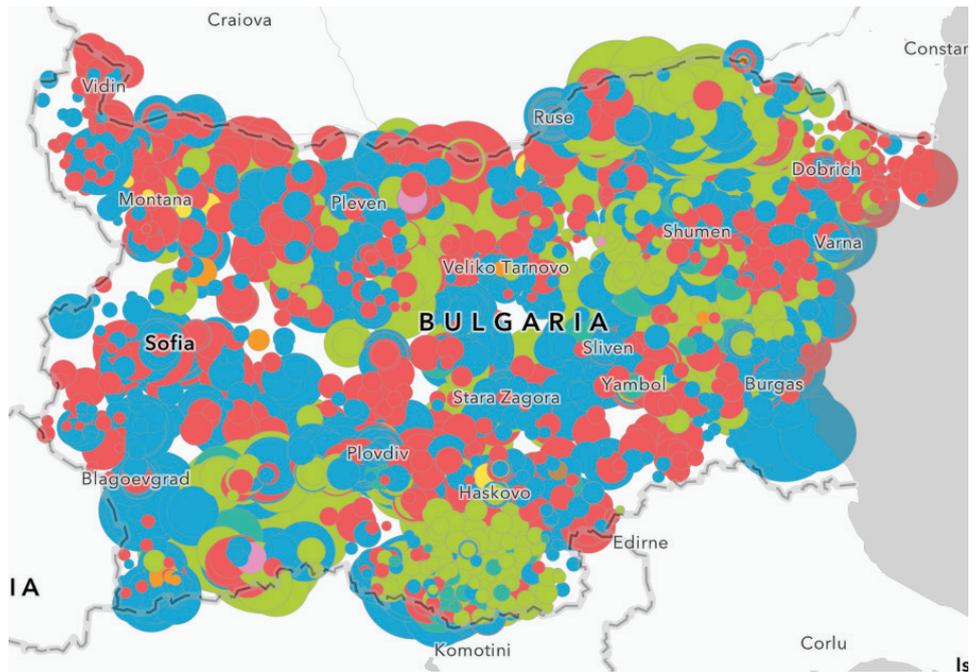
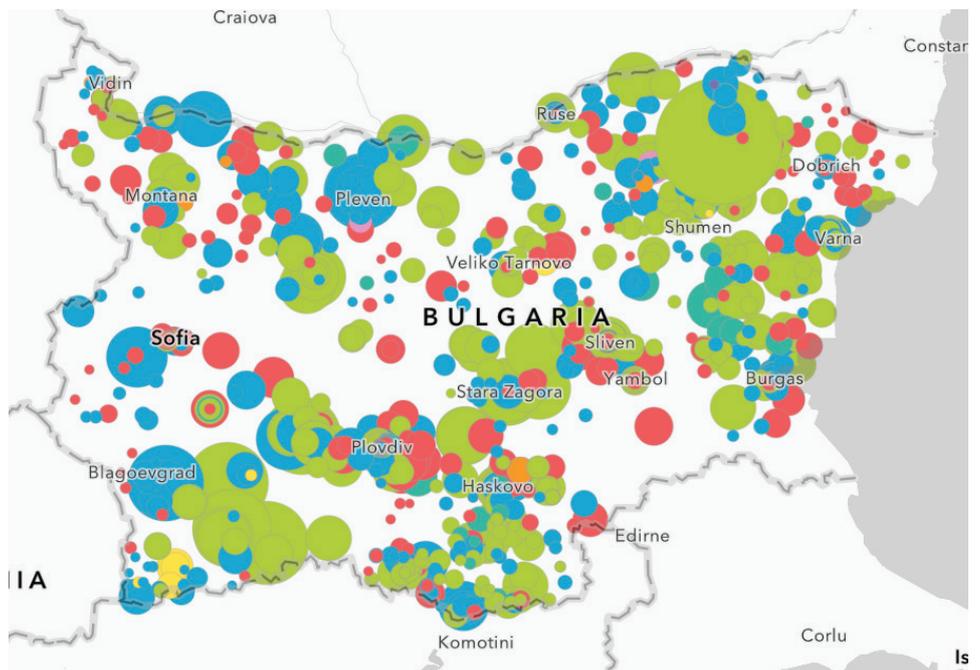


Fig. 5: Polling stations in high risk of electoral manipulation in the country⁹



⁸ Source – Election Fraud: prevalence and impact in Bulgaria | ACF
⁹ Ibid.

Fig. 6: Correlation between the manipulated vote and the ethnic composition of administrative units¹⁰

Population of Turkish ethnicity (Correlation)	Population of Roma ethnicity (Correlation)	Population that does not self-identify (Correlation)	Population comprising Turkish, Roma, and non-self-identified (Correlation)
0.478636346	0.347653384	0.21046353	0.55363311

The impact of the manipulated vote

Measuring the actual impact of the manipulated vote is a complex task. Our team performed a basic simulation of how the purchased vote would have affected the distribution of mandates in the 2017 parliamentary election, by discounting the polling stations at risk. The model demonstrated a redistribution of eight mandates. Since the redistribution of mandates is a zero-sum game, this translates into a loss of 8 mandates for the other competing parties. In a fragmented parliament these mandates can have a crucial significance for cabinet formation, but also for the adoption of specific legislation.¹¹

Fig. 7: Simulation of mandate distribution when all polling stations at risk are discounted

Party	Mandate distribution in 2017	Mandate distribution without the votes from high-risk polling stations	Mandate distribution without the votes from all polling stations at risk
BSP for BULGARIA	80	81	83
VOLYA	12	12	13
Movement for Rights and Freedoms – MRF	26	23	18
UNITED PATRIOTS– NFSB, ATAKA and VMRO	27	27	28
GERB	95	97	98
Total voters	3 420 489	3 155 348	2 715 121

Looking at the purchased vote, it should be noted that the largest remainder method (also known as Hare-Niemeyer method), which is used for calculating the distribution of mandates, makes it extremely difficult for parties to anticipate how many votes they would need to win a particular number of mandates. Therefore, the purchased vote is more useful for ensuring that parties reach the threshold for receiving subsidies – 1%, or the threshold to enter Parliament – 4%. In addition, higher vote results benefit the image of political actors.

¹⁰ We used the most current and comprehensive database of the last population census, performed in 2011. The data are available at: Ethnic composition of Bulgaria 2011 (mashke.org)

¹¹ The simulation of the mandate redistribution was performed by discounting the votes cast in polling stations at risk under the model.

Furthermore, the existence of internal rivalry within a party provides another impetus for resorting to the practice of vote buying. This happens when candidates in party lists pay for votes in order to move ahead in the rankings. The sought effect of this tactic is two-fold: on the one hand, candidates aspire to collect enough votes to reach the threshold for entering Parliament; on another hand, achieving good results will help them secure a better position on the party list for the next election.

Taking into account the “corporate vote” (resulting from the dependence of local businesses on procurement orders and from the fear of being subjected to constant inspections as a form of repression) and the vote of the local administration,¹² the impact of the manipulated vote becomes significant and able to alter the outcome of the election. Moreover, the legal instruments for affecting election results, such as paying poll watchers, etc., should not be underestimated.

Examples of polling stations at risk

Figure 8 illustrates voter behavior in one polling station, selected on the basis of voter turnout volatility. The polling station is located in the village of Dolni Tsibar, Montana Province. The village has a population of multiple ethnicities. In 2014, when there was probably no irregular influence on people’s voting inclinations, the polling station witnessed a record low voter turnout – only 1.07%. At the next parliamentary election in 2017, however – when the political stakes were higher, as the Government had just resigned – the turnout suddenly spiked to 62.71%. Thus, it can be concluded that in certain places the degree of political alienation is so high that people only flock to the polling stations when provided with an incentive, most likely of a financial nature.

Fig. 8: Voter turnout in Dolni Tsibar, Montana, 2014 and 2017 parliamentary elections

Dolni Tsibar, Montana. Polling station №121100019	Turnout	Winner-party	Proportion of votes for the winner-party in the polling station	Proportion of votes for the winner-party within the province	Number of voters according to the voter list as presented to the REC ¹³
2014	1.07%	GERB	62.5%	27,34%	747
2017	62.71%	MRF – Movement of Rights and Freedoms	62.63%	12.35%	751

¹² In the absence of opportunities to pursue a different career path within the same settlement, officials in municipal enterprises or in the local administration may feel pressure to vote for the party, with which the senior municipal officials are affiliated.

¹³ Regional Election Commission

The next example is from a polling station in the village of Cherna Gora, Pernik Province (Fig. 9). What grasps the attention in this polling station is the serious volatility in voters' political preferences. It is particularly noteworthy that each election is won by a different party, and by one that occupies the opposing end of the political spectrum.

Stark discrepancies are also observed between the proportion of votes for the winner-party in that precinct and the proportion of votes for the party within the entire province. For instance, in 2009 the party Red, Zakonnost i Spravedlivost won that precinct, surpassing the winner-party in the entire province by over 30 points. The voter turnout in that polling station — 65% — was also above the average for the province. At the next election, the precinct-winner and province-winner recorded similar results, but the voter turnout decreased by 17%. This can be indicative of a lack of vote buying at this election. In 2014, the situation was similar to 2009, the one difference being the winner-party — Bulgaria Bez Tsenzura. The 2017 election witnessed a new shift in political preferences, accompanied by a surge in voter turnout — 60%. This time the winner was GERB.

Fig.9: Volatility in voters' political preferences in Cherna gora, Pernik, PE 2009 – 2017

Cherna Gora, Pernik, Polling station № 143200129	Turnout	Winner-party	Proportion of votes for the winner-party in the polling station	Proportion of votes for the winner-party within the province	Number of voters according to the voter list as presented to the REC
2009	65.00%	Red, Zakonnost i Spravedlivost ¹⁴	41.45%	9,25%	295
2013	47,8%	Coalition for Bulgaria	33,06%	32.01%	259
2014	57%	BULGARIA BEZ TSENZURA	41.89%	9.96%	258
2017	60.88%	GERB	37.74%	34.50%	248

Another example of volatility in voters' political preferences can be seen in the polling station in the village of Rodina, Veliko Tarnovo Province (Fig. 10). According to the available data, the village has a mix of Bulgarian and Turkish population.

This polling station frequently changes its winner, seemingly owing to a transfer of votes from the liberal-centrist party MRF — whose electorate mainly consists of people of the Turkish ethnicity — to the political coalition United Patriots (NFSB, ATAKA, VMRO). Representatives of the latter have, on many occasions, been accused of promoting ultra-right policies and have even been taken to court on account of xenophobic behavior towards representatives of Turkish and Roma minorities.¹⁵ The European Court of Human Rights has also pronounced multiple criticisms

¹⁴ Results from the vote for candidate lists of parties and coalitions

¹⁵ Bulgaria Condemned by Strasbourg Court in Religious Violence Case :: Civil Liberties Union for Europe, ECHR Rules Bulgarian Courts Wrong Not To Penalize Far-Right Nationalist Lawmaker (rferl.org)

of the xenophobic acts of certain far-right Bulgarian politicians towards minority groups. Considering the predominantly Turkish composition of the village population, it is completely illogical that the election there would be won by the patriotic coalition. Consequently, this is a strong indicator for electoral manipulation.

Fig. 10: Volatility in voters' political preferences in Rodina, Veliko Tarnovo, PE 2009 – 2017

Rodina, Veliko Tarnovo Polling Station № 041400004	Turnout	Winner-party	Proportion of votes for the winner-party in the polling station	Proportion of votes for the winner-party within the province	Number of voters according to the voter list as presented to the REC
2009	73,90%	MRF – Movement for Rights and Freedoms ¹⁶	56,43%	8,50%	410
2013	59,37%	Coalition for Bulgaria	35,08%	32,44%	384
2014	60,15%	MRF – Movement for Rights and Freedoms	62,44%	10,76%	394
2017	64,22%	UNITED PATRIOTS – NFSB, ATAKA, VMRO	46,74%	11,04%	383

The final example shows a polling station with a high number of invalid votes (Fig. 11)

Fig. 11: Polling station with a high number of invalid votes

Semchinovo, Pazardzhik, Polling station № 132900028	Turnout	Winner-party	Proportion of votes for the winner-party in the polling station	Proportion of votes for the winner-party within the province	Number of voters according to the voter list as presented to the REC	Number of invalid votes
2009	46,78 %	MRF – Movement for Rights and Freedoms	39,59 %	17,68 %	356	15
2013	20,66 %	Coalition for Bulgaria	53,21 %	27,22 %	783	6
2014	63,01 %	MRF – Movement for Rights and Freedoms	83,65 %	26,42 %	801	90
2017	77,60 %	GERB	72,67 %	34,62 %	817	173

¹⁶ Results from the vote for candidate lists of parties and coalitions

In two consecutive parliamentary elections, in 2014 and 2017, the voter turnout in the village of Semchinovo, Pazardzhik Province increased by over 40 points. At the same time, there was a surge in the proportion of votes for the winner-party — from 53.21% to 83.65%. Curiously, there has been a different winner every time since 2009; first the MRF, then Coalition for Bulgaria, then MRF again, and finally GERB. In 2017, there was an extremely high number of invalid votes — 173.

The present analysis outlined the main characteristics of electoral manipulation, its manifestations at provincial level, its impact on the distribution of mandates, and the reasons why political actor resort to this practice. The employed methodology was demonstrated by way of specific examples, and some conclusions were drawn regarding the correlation between electoral manipulation, GDP per capita at provincial level, the ethnic composition of the population and others.



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