

A bag of sugar for your vote?

It's election time in Bulgaria. Gangsters are running for office and voters are taking photos of their ballots to receive payoffs.

By Michael J. Jordan — Special to GlobalPost

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"The government's job is to make life better, but if that doesn't happen, then you either buy votes or lose power," said Georgi Milkov, a community activist in the majority-Turkish city of Razgrad, who on Saturday was training local monitors in how to spot cheating in rural voting stations.

Elsewhere, in some Roma neighborhoods, various parties reportedly bribe community leaders to deliver them hundreds of votes. On occasion, enforcers will hand mobile phones to voters, who enter the booth, vote, photograph the ballot as evidence, then exit to receive their payoff outside.

Despite a practice that cuts across ethnic lines, Bulgarians tend to finger the Roma as prime culprits. One media outlet fueled the perception this week with a sting operation, posing as party activists who allegedly arranged with a Roma leader to buy 500 votes in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second city.

"Only gypsies and other weak people would sell their vote," said one Bulgarian octogenarian, Petar, while drinking beer with his friends in the open-air produce market in the Black Sea city of Varna. "Those who sell their votes, sell their soul. We have ideology, and no one can buy our votes."

In the Shumen mahala — or Roma quarter — impoverished residents observed that the local Socialist-led city administration finally laid blacktop in their clay-and-brick shantytown just two weeks before the election, after promising it for years.

One Roma woman, Magdalena, notes that she receives only 70 leva per month (\$50) in welfare for her two children, including her frail 4-year-old son gleefully playing with a straw broom. He suffers from asthma, his mother said, needs a costly inhaler, and is little more than "skin and bones."

"I'd take the money if someone offered it," she admitted. "No party will make our lives better."

Up against such disillusionment, Isaev remains optimistic and continues handing out materials to encourage honest voting for more accountable authorities. "Money you take may buy bread for four days," read the pamphlets. "But the next four years, people in government will make their bread on your back."

"I don't think we'll have 100 percent success, but even 1 percent change is important for civil society," Isaev said. "Every vote is like a raindrop, and 20 raindrops this time may become 200 next time, which may become a river, then a lake, then an ocean of democracy."