



## SUCCESS STORY

# “You Choose!” Becomes Household Phrase in Bulgaria



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

*Get-out-the-vote campaigns continue to energize voters in marginalized communities.*

“You rarely have a chance to see what happens afterwards with NGO capacity building, but here we saw that our money was well spent,” says National Democratic Institute (NDI) Bulgaria Director Sevdalina Voynova.

In the latest Bulgarian election cycles, NGOs that participated in USAID-supported get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns since 2001 continued to pursue voter education activities using some of the original techniques. Eight NGOs from the original NDI network were joined by two other organizations in a national campaign during the presidential elections held in October 2006. During local elections in October 2007, 7 NGOs from the original network conducted local activities.

“The target groups we worked with over the years continue to have representation,” says Voynova proudly, citing campaigns by NGO IKAR in Haskovo to mobilize disabled voters, an initiative by the Youth Center of Sevlievo to encourage youth participation, and an effort by Association Naya in Targovishte to counter vote-buying.

NDI’s early efforts to encourage citizen activism and participation began during the 2001 election cycle of parliamentary and presidential elections. NDI recruited a network of 70 NGOs, ranging from large consortia to small community groups, selected with careful effort to assess their potential to reach marginalized groups such as youth, women, disabled, and minorities. The GOTV 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. 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. Techniques for recruiting volunteers that worked well in the U.S. needed to be adapted to the Bulgarian environment. NDI discovered that “first-generation idealists,” young people who were the first in their families to go to college or move to a big city, were an ideal group of volunteers. “They have some trust in the system and believe it can be made more perfect,” explains Voynova.

In later election cycles, funding decreased to encourage greater NGO independence. 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 TV quiz show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” recently used the campaign slogan “Ti Izbi-rash!” (“You Choose!”) in one of its questions for contestants.

“The seeds were planted and it’s here to stay,” Voynova concludes, even as both NDI and USAID prepare to close operations in Bulgaria.