

In the winter of 2006, more than 30,000 people from the Stolipinovo Roma ghetto in Plovdiv watched TV, cooked, did their laundry, bathed themselves and their babies, and heated their houses with electricity only at night. Why? Because they did not have electricity between 7 am and 7 pm every day. This has been going on for four years. It started on February 18, 2002, when after a sudden electricity cut, residents went out in the streets, police came, windows were broken, a trolley bus was stopped and stones were thrown at a bus carrying foreigners in the other Roma ghetto in the city, Sheker Mahala. In these four years, people have adjusted to this situation - if the weather is warm they are out on the street, since they are jobless anyway. The sun provides light during the day, those who have been lucky enough to find coal stoves enjoy the heat in their communist-built panel apartments, and we all know that television is interesting only in the evening...

This situation is not a novelty to anyone. Moreover, people have started to regard it as the status quo. Nothing can be done, some say - it is a pity but if you do not pay your electric bill, you will not have electricity at your house. That is how a market economy works. However, this is not a case of the market economy; on the contrary, it is a case of economic bargaining.

On one hand there are the thousands of Roma families who are waiting for someone to cut their electric Gordian knot, and on the other hand, there are the politicians who are waiting for the next elections to come. This alone makes the poor and needy Roma people an easy target for manipulation. Every time when elections are pending, the politicians open the bag of promises that the electricity supply will be restored in the Roma neighbourhoods. The result is obvious. Proof that politicians are using this tactic was a 2005 speech by Fikret Sepetchi, local leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. In the June 2005 parliamentary elections, the entire population of Stolipinovo voted for Sepetchi, which got him a seat in parliament. And when the next parliamentary elections come, we'll think of something, the local political players tell themselves. There's time yet.

According to Anton Karagyozov, a popular local Roma leader, this model of communication between the Roma and the politicians started in 1998, when Spas Garnevski, then mayor of Plovdiv and prominent leader of the then ruling Union of Democratic Forces, said in a speech that "the Roma are socially disadvantaged and therefore they do not have to pay their electricity bills". And the wheel started turning... After February 18, 2002,

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there were numerous critical reports in the local press of Roma families who had illegally connected their houses to the electric network using bedsprings as giant heaters. What the media missed was that the authorities, both local and national, as well as the electricity company, had literally approved this or at least had turned a blind eye. In the end, the question was, if someone could use electricity without paying, what would stop him? Another question, however, is why this problem did not exist before 1989. Were the "thievish" Roma more honest then? The answer is simple. They had work then.

In the winter of 2002, several attempts were made to solve the problem. Almost every day, meetings were held between all local leaders - the district governor, the mayor, MPs and the bosses of the local electricity company, the Roma leaders. Not long after this, Roma organizations and the municipality and the electricity company reached an agreement. One aspect was clear - the accumulate debt of the Roma to the electricity company could not be paid at once. Therefore a compromise was agreed. You pay one of the bills and the electricity is restored, and the debt gets paid in time, bit by bit.

According to Syuria Yusuf, a local activist and chair of the Edinstvo [Unity] organisation, the policy of the electricity company has been inconsistent. Yusuf headed a group of four Roma electricity inspectors who were to collect the debts according to the reached agreement. "After the spokesperson of the local electricity company made a televised statement in June 2003 that the Roma from Stolipinovo were still refusing to pay their bills, we presented data showing that, actually, the rate of collected bills was very high. After that statement, however, the policy of the electricity company changed. For example, we had collected 4,800 Leva [2,400 euro] from one of the blocks in Stolipinovo. The next day, we paid the money in, but the electricity company cut off the electricity supply to the whole neighbourhood because there were some people who had not paid. After that, people just stopped believing us when we asked them to pay the bills, and stopped paying. After all, if nothing changes, why should you pay your bill? Besides this, there were inspectors who deliberately caused ten-

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sion by restoring the electricity supply late in the day and then cutting it early in the morning. At the end we had to stop working as Roma inspectors, it was useless. There was also no electricity. But there is certainly a double standard. An example of this is the Krairechna neighborhood, where electricity has not been cut, because the population is mixed - Bulgarians, Turks and Roma. In that neighborhood there are people who do not pay their electricity bills, but the electricity supply continues uninterrupted."

I can talk for hours about the negotiations, the agreements and their subsequent failure; I have extensive records of this, but the conclusion is always the same. When the rate of unemployment goes up, so does the poverty rate, and people's incapability to pay their electricity bills. Gradually, because of the fear of riots and mostly for political reasons, the rate of collection of payments for electricity bills has gone down. There is still electricity for people who continue to not to pay their bills, and little by little, those who do pay regularly come to the conclusion that there is no point, so they also stop paying.

Attempts to find a temporary solution also have a long history. In the end, the electricity company came up with their own solution - they started cutting the electricity supply to the whole neighborhood. An interesting question is who pays for the electricity that people use at night? It is absurd to suggest that the now private electricity company has decided to present a free gift its customers. It is doubtful that there were such gifts in the days when the company was still owned by the state.

The people with whom I have spoken suggested that the so-called "technological losses" have to do something with it. The value of the electricity supplied to Stolipinovo was charged and covered by the company as "technological losses", an expense covered by the state. It is highly probable that this situation continues today. This not hard to do as long as there is a decision behind it. You will never see such a decision, of course, on paper. It is interesting that neither engineer Shutov, former head of the distribution department at the electricity company, nor any one else from the company agreed to meet with me to discuss this.

The head of the public relations department, Ms. Marinova, has an office in Stara Zagora and without her authorization, no one from the company based in Plovdiv dared speak, and cited all kinds of excuses. Mehmed Hasan, deputy mayor of Iztochen region of Plovdiv municipality, turned out to be "extremely busy" on the day when we had a double confirmed agreement to meet in Stolipinovo. Hasan knew that the purpose of the meeting was to talk about the electricity issue in Stolipinovo.

Is there a solution to the issue? Will the events of February 2005 be repeated? Could the problem be solved with a few broken windows this time?

The people who took the last decision - about the electricity being written off as "technology losses", must take the decision. Such people are at the top political level.

There are various ways to solve the problem. One is for the state to help decrease the already accumulated debt although no one can give the exact amount of the debt. Some say that it is close to six million Leva [three million Euro].

The state could find a way to collect this debt step by step, but the most effective solution would be for the state to cover the whole sum. In the 21st century, access to electricity should be considered as peoples' unconditional right - to some extent, of course. In every case the practice of installing the electrometers ten meters above ground level should stop.

Electrical meters should be within peoples' houses. In this way, everyone would be able to protect his own electrical meter and a neighbour would not be able to steal from the electricity supply. At present everyone steals from the "common electricity supply", which can be qualified as "quasi common". It is a simple principle; everyone protects their own property.

Once this is done, there can be a clean start.

At present people get help from the state for their heating, while others rely on social welfare. We must acknowledge that among the thousands of unemployed, there are hundreds of people who actually go to work. Both categories can, to some extent, pay for their electricity consumption. It is not difficult a difficult thing for the company to come up with a technology that registers this consumption from a distance. This will simply cost a certain amount of money. With such technology, the people of Stolipinovo would be the same as any other Bulgarian, and will consume that amount of electricity for which they are able to pay.

However, there is one condition for this to happen. All politicians must give up their ambitions to manipulate the people of Stolipinovo and tempt them with promises before every election. In this "election bargain", candidates for seats in Parliament offer promises and we the people who vote, fall for these promises. There is some cynicism in that because the purchase takes place in advance. One can never be sure that the candidate will actually stick to what has been promised. The cynicism in the electricity issue in the case of the Roma, however, has no boundaries. ■