



Balkan Public Agenda

*A Focus Group Study
in Sofia and Cherna Gora*

February, 2000



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I. TECHNICAL REPORT

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

IIDEA assigned to Vitosha Research the administration of a series of focus groups. Four focus group discussions were carried out as stipulated in the up-dated Action Plan based on the Action Plan of 15 December 2000. The main objective of the focus groups were:

- 1.1. To explore the public opinion on the main problems in Bulgaria in the current situation, and the basic fears, considerations and hopes with regard to the perspectives to be solved;
- 1.2. To identify the public images of the concepts "market economy" and "democracy" and their relevance to the current situation in Bulgaria;
- 1.3. To explore the public attitudes and level of trust towards the Bulgarian political institutions and the International community;
- 1.4. To explore the public images of the role of the civil society in Bulgaria;
- 1.5. To collect information on the public evaluation of some of the public services in Bulgaria;
- 1.6. To explore the public attitudes and expectations towards the role of the international institutions for the development of Bulgaria;
- 1.7. To identify the individual characteristics and attitudes of the participants.

The Group Discussions were conducted as follows:

| Group | Date |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| First Focus Group Discussion | 14. 02. 2001 |
| Second Focus Group Discussion | 15. 02. 2001 |
| Third Focus Group Discussion | 17. 02. 2001 |
| Fourth Focus Group Discussion | 23. 02. 2001 |

The duration of the discussions was approximately 140-150 minutes. Video and audio recordings were made and served as the basis for full transcripts of the discussions. Moderator of the four focus group discussions was Emilia Chengelova. She is a Expert in Vitosha Research and Associate Researcher in the Institute of Sociology, Sofia.

2. LOCATION

The first, the second and the fourth focus groups were carried out in Sofia. The third focus group was conducted in the village of Cherna gora situated near the town of Pernik. Pernik is about 38 kilometers far from Sofia.

3. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

First Focus Group Discussion: young educated (university level), 22-39 years old, major ethnic group, M&F, higher than average income;

| № resp. | Sex | Age | Current occupation |
|----------------|------------|------------|---|
| 1 | Female | 25 | E-business specialist |
| 2 | Female | 26 | TV films interpreter |
| 3 | Male | 32 | Philologist |
| 4 | Female | 27 | Ads specialist |
| 5 | Female | 39 | Sociologist |
| 6 | Female | 26 | Teacher in German |
| 7 | Female | 27 | Post-graduate in Bulgarian Academy of Science |
| 8 | Male | 26 | Legal adviser |
| 9 | Male | 40 | Analist |

Second Focus Group Discussion: mature, medium level of education, major ethnic group, 40–55 years old, M&F, medium income, married with children;

| № of resp. | Sex | Age | Current occupation |
|-------------------|------------|------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Female | 45 | Dentist |
| 2 | Female | 51 | Teacher |
| 3 | Male | 46 | Professor |
| 4 | Male | 48 | Chauffeur |
| 5 | Male | 43 | Printer |
| 6 | Male | 49 | Dental mechanic |
| 7 | Female | 54 | Teacher |
| 8 | Female | 55 | Trader |
| 9 | Male | 43 | Driving instructor |

Third Focus Group Discussion: rural, mixed age, major ethnic group;

| Nº of resp. | Sex | Age | Current occupation |
|-------------|--------|-----|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Female | 29 | Unemployed |
| 2 | Female | 55 | Farmer |
| 3 | Male | 53 | Chief of a transportation department |
| 4 | Female | 57 | Pensioner |
| 5 | Female | 56 | Pensioner |
| 6 | Male | 45 | Unemployed |
| 7 | Female | 58 | Deputy mayor |
| 8 | Male | 52 | Farmer |
| 9 | Male | 60 | Farmer |

Fourth Focus Group Discussion: mature, medium/high level of education, minor ethnic group, 40-55 years old, M&F, medium income, married with children.

| Nº of resp. | Sex | Age | Current occupation |
|-------------|--------|-----|---|
| 1 | Female | 38 | Chief expert in Turkish language in the Ministry of education |
| 2 | Female | 50 | Manager |
| 3 | Male | 39 | Post-graduate in Bulgarian Academy of Science |
| 4 | Male | 58 | Pensioner |
| 5 | Male | 55 | Worker |
| 6 | Male | 39 | Builder |
| 7 | Male | 40 | Construction specialist |
| 8 | Male | 44 | Unemployed |

Sex

| Sex | Number |
|---------------|--------|
| Male | 17 |
| Female | 18 |
| <i>Total:</i> | 35 |

Age

| Age | Number |
|----------|--------|
| Up to 39 | 12 |
| Over 40 | 23 |

| | |
|--------|----|
| Total: | 35 |
|--------|----|

Education

| Education | Number |
|-----------|--------|
| Secondary | 13 |
| Higher | 13 |
| No answer | 9 |
| Total: | 35 |

II. EXECUTIVE REPORT

1. GENERAL IMPRESSIONS OF THE MODERATOR FROM THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Focus-group participants responded to the topics put up for discussion with extraordinary interest. We were pleasantly surprised by people's earnest approach to the task of acting like experts of sorts on transition issues in this country. All of the participants gave their input under the various sections. There were many interesting opinions and valuable insights. Each participant, depending on his/her potential and disposition, offered an individual interpretation of the most important problems of transition in this country. People were deeply concerned by the problems in the various spheres. Some of them went even further, seeking the causes for the negative developments and trying to identify the factors that are to blame.

As was to be expected, each of the focus groups had its distinctive characteristics. The nature, direction, and depth of the opinions shared were largely determined by the socio-demographic profile of the participants. They identified the major problems in the economic, social, and the political spheres based on their own needs and personal experience. Interesting interpretations were suggested in the evaluation of the activity of the political institutions. The ten years of reforms and the accompanying social upheavals were also reflected in the treatment of the problems under consideration.

2. MAIN PROBLEMS, FEARS AND CONCERNS ABOUT THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY

Unemployment, low incomes, mass impoverishment, inadequate social welfare, and corruption were the problems that tended to come up first in the minds of the participants. These problems were discussed in each of the focus groups with a varying degree of urgency.

What were the specific issues singled out by the participants in each of the four focus groups?

The participants in the first focus group – young people with higher education – placed special emphasis on the absence of career opportunities, the inadequate remuneration, shortage of jobs, the cumbersome administration as a factor giving rise to

corruption and impeding small and medium-sized business and the blocked emergence of a middle class:

- In their opinion, there exists a huge **disproportion** between young people's desire to find professional fulfillment in a given sphere and the available opportunities. After they have invested in themselves and have gained the confidence of very well educated young specialists, they expect to find suitable career opportunities. Instead, they are faced with the need to seek jobs by resorting to personal contacts and connections. But even if they succeed in finding a suitable vacancy they come up against the other serious problem – the socially inadequate financial equivalent of their labor. Young people are greatly disappointed by the way society evaluates their work. That is one of the reasons why they are inclined to seek fulfillment abroad.
- **The lack of adequate remuneration** leads to gradual alienation and mistrust in the state as an institution. There is widespread disappointment about the manner in which state institutions are functioning and complete lack of trust. But the gravest consequence is the loss of confidence in their own abilities, which can be disastrous for young people.
- Another problem is the complete **absence of any sense of consolidation and social cohesion**. The average citizen is insulated and tries to solve his problems on his own. This deepens the process of alienation and drives people into “internal emigration”.

The respondents from the higher age group (second focus group) offered a deeper view of the ongoing processes in this country. They believed it was hard to point out one or even several issues since there are more problems than ever before. Their opinions converged around the formulation of the economic and social problems, and they singled out the **deplorable financial situation of Bulgarians, the increasing unemployment rate, and the devastated economy**.

- The chief reason for the abounding problems was found in **the lack of clarity about where the country is going**. The failure to work out a general strategy for the future economic and social development of the country as early as 1990-91 was deemed to be a grave mistake. All the efforts have been aimed at destroying what was old without any clear vision about what is to follow. In fact, our only achievement in the past ten years of transition is the destruction of everything valuable that we ever had.
- Some of the respondents suggested that the reason for all this may be found in external factors, which have no interest in an economically strong country. Therefore they first bring it to a state of utter poverty and then start dictating how it should develop:

“It's all directed from the outside and in fact, the government – they're just actors obeying the director. That's the idea – to destroy the strong intellectual potential, to completely destroy the economy, the industry... This has been done deliberately and the wrecking continues... That's the hardest thing – we've been in transition for 10 years and yet nothing good has emerged out of this transition, absolutely nothing.”

- Added to these dismal observations is the concern about the **difficulties** with which **small and medium-sized private business** has to struggle. Powerful groups were said to have emerged in this country and to have taken over all the spheres. *“All small and medium-sized business is inevitably going to be crushed”*. People cannot see any prospects for their business projects and are concerned about the survival of their families.

The participants from the rural group approached the definition of the major problems differently. The first striking thing is their inability to transcend their own closed

community, confined within the limits of their own village. So the major problems from their perspective were the shortage of water in their village, rare buses to the nearby town, the relatively poor living conditions, there being a single store, the impossibility to take up a profitable livelihood, the thefts of cattle. Only after they had shared their own concerns could they move on to the general problems of the country. In this respect they noted crime, corruption (especially among the police and the judges) and the complicated bureaucratic machine.

- According to these people, **all the problems revolve around the transition**. Views of the latter were diametrically opposed: to some it is a golden age, but to most people it is a period of stagnation.
- The blame was mainly laid on **those governing the country**. They were entrusted with this task and were supposed to lead the country into better times. This does not seem to be happening. People are starting to wonder whether it might be time to end their silent resignation and voice their discontent. However, they miss a leader. They would be willing to support initiatives by citizen associations fighting to have the problems in this country addressed.
- The **paid medical care** is another serious concern of the people in the countryside. They feel they can only pray for good health or else they would not be able to afford treatment. They have personal impressions from the healthcare reform and were not optimistic. They were upset by the level of corruption among the medical staff.
- These people **do not particularly trust the international institutions** because “*we know what their favors are like*”. This was a reference to the import of American corn that became notorious as a case of import of a product of bad quality and as a shady deal concluded by public officials.

The discussion in the group of the **Turkish minority representatives** stressed the need for agreement among the political parties. According to them, Bulgaria’s problems are entirely of an economic nature, but solving them calls for national consensus among the principal political powers in the country. At present there is discord among the parties, which is being reproduced on a grassroots level, leading to discord among the people. The respondents in this group quite firmly believed that the country’s fundamental problem is the political one. All that is being done are but empty declarations without any tangible results. Added to this is the missing link between the political class and the masses – there is no dialogue, no contacts to provide feedback and make sure the transition is proceeding in the right direction. The following aspects of the present situation were deemed to be particularly alarming:

- **The high unemployment rate**. Shutting down the enterprises has led to unprecedented unemployment. Doubts were even expressed that the officially reported statistics do not reflect the real rates, which are actually higher. The people from the small towns are fleeing to Sofia and the other big cities expecting to find a way to make a living, only to find their last hopes shattered.
- The situation of **the retired** is critical. It is an outright crime on the part of the state to pay them such pitiful small change instead of a proper equivalent to their length of service.
- **Corruption** was cited as the next big problem. It is virtually everywhere and of such proportions that it is actually blocking the activity of a number of sectors.
- **The crime rate** has reached such heights that people no longer feel safe in the streets and in their homes.
- **The education system** was also subject to criticism on the part of the representatives of the Turkish ethnic group. According to these respondents, the state should provide opportunities for mother tongue instruction. At present the children living in Sofia are

deprived of this right. Formally the issue has been settled – there is a decree by the Council of Ministers allowing this opportunity. But putting it into practice has proved problematic because the children of Turkish origin are scattered and it is difficult to provide the instruction they are entitled to. The issue provoked intense reactions on the part of all the respondents, which is an indication of the gravity of the problem.

The participants in all four focus groups shared the view that the listed problems are all interrelated. It proved difficult, and not particularly productive, to tell **which problem is most likely to be solved and which one is the hardest to solve**. The approach should be comprehensive. The first step in tackling the problems should be to reach national agreement about where the country is going and exactly what is to be built. Only when there is a clear vision of the country's economic development can the other problems be addressed. Because they are the consequence of the devastated economy, destroyed assets, and lost markets.

According to the respondents, we should not pin all our hopes for a better future on the **international institutions**. They may help us with ideas and advice, with investments and loans. But the real work has to be done by us – the population of the country. In this respect “those in power” appeared to be a very significant factor. The members of our government are not doing a good job, people said. The promises have not been kept. And all we need are **nationally responsible politicians**, truly concerned with the general welfare in the country. And proving it with the decisions they make.

3. ECONOMIC ISSUES

The task of defining the economic problems our country is facing provoked animated discussions in the focus groups. In some cases the economic issues were pointed out already in the listing of the general concerns.

The participants in the various groups shared similar views on these issues. Here are the major problems they stressed:

- **The total destruction of the country's economy.** According to the respondents, in these past ten years there has not remained a single sound economic sector. All of the large plants and enterprises have either been completely liquidated or are on the verge of shutting down. Nobody expected such mass destruction of everything valuable in the country. This is not how they imagined the transition.
- **Privatization** in this country started out with great hopes but has become synonymous to liquidation, unemployment, robbing of public property. Some believed that the privatization processes have not proceeded right and the collapse of whole sectors was allowed to happen only to benefit small groups of people.
- **The ruined agriculture** is another grave problem of the country. As a result of its fragmentation, nowadays Bulgaria is forced to import raw materials that traditionally counted among our “strengths”. Supporting sectors, such as the manufacture of agricultural machinery, have also been suppressed.
- **The policy that gives priority mainly to developing small and middle private business** was deemed completely wrong. First of all, “*you don't build a stable economy on the basis of small business*”. It should have an additional, supporting role. The state needs a clear strategy for the development of powerful industries since they are the ones that account for GDP growth and for raising the standard of living. And secondly, small and medium-sized business development remains in the realm of wishful thinking as everything possible seems to be done to hamper it. Cited in illustration was the continuing profusion of fragmentary “little laws”, hindering even the hardiest businesspersons.

- One consequence of all this is the **delayed process of emergence of a middle class** in this country. Since we have adopted the Western development model, we need to make some efforts and create the very backbone of the new society, namely the middle class. According to the respondents, this seems to be the last concern of the state. At the moment there is deep differentiation, with the large part of the population gravitating towards the bottom end. It is impossible to build a market economy in this way.
- The economic crisis is further aggravated by the **lack of appropriate environment for foreign investments**. The state should do everything in its power to attract viable investors. Unfortunately, so far we have been witnessing the opposite. The case of Balkan Airlines was cited as an example of irresponsibility on the part of the state.

Respondents' notions of the market economy significantly differ from the present realities in this country. "Street vending" is what we can boast to have achieved, as some of the respondents mockingly put it. They were bitter about the fact that this concept is being inadequately implemented, just like other social ideas before it.

Respondents identified the following fundamental **obstacles** to economic development: the lack of statesmanlike thinking, non-observation of the existing legislation, the complex and cumbersome administration, corruption.

The chief factors for overcoming the economic crisis were sought mainly inside the country: adequate intervention on the part of the state, which should not relinquish its influence over the economy but pursue a sound policy for the development of the various economic sectors; to make adequate use of the available human resources; not to depreciate the thousands of well trained specialists but rely on their potential; a more flexible credit policy with regard to small and medium-sized business – providing interest-free loans.

If ordinary people could unite around **the idea of national prosperity** this would greatly help cope with the economic problems. Presently people are divided into "blue" and "red", depending on their political affiliation. This politicization is equally obstructive with regard to solving the most basic everyday problems and the more complex economic issues. In this sense, respondents believed that, instead of speeding up the process of democratization of society, the "thousands of parties" are a negative factor with adverse social implications.

4. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

According to the respondents, we live in a presumably democratic country. Formally, all the fundamental elements of a democratic society are in place – people enjoy freedom of speech and of religion, everyone can freely exercise their right to vote, there is political pluralism. The actual extent of democratization of society, however, remains debatable:

- Respondents claimed that **public awareness of the workings of the democratic system is still inadequate**. Most people associate democracy in Bulgaria with freedom from any responsibility whatsoever, with lawlessness and impunity. The possibility to do what you want without having to bear any responsibility for your actions – that is how the population seems to understand democracy, in the opinion of the respondents. Regretfully, this wrong conception is sustained by the ruling class, which was the first to set the example of impunity and double standards.
- Some of the respondents actually said **this was not democracy but "complete lack of any rules whatsoever"**. Instead of being adopted as a more advanced system of human organization in which everyone has clear obligations and responsibilities,

democracy has been substituted for anarchy and laxity. Such opinions were equally supported by all age groups.

- According to the respondents, **the observation and application of the law is an important indicator of how democratic a given society is**. At present in this country the laws only apply to the common people. At the same time, the members of the political class flagrantly flout the law. Focus group participants resented this practice of double standards. They pointed to it as the reason for the gaping chasm between the governing class and the people. According to the respondents it is the impunity enjoyed by those in power that people find most exasperating.
- In our country the idea of democracy is **adversely affected by the spreading poverty** – *“poverty distorts democracy”*. People generally associate the democratization of society with new opportunities for development and fulfillment. But the present reality is exactly the opposite. This shakes people’s initial faith and inevitably raises the question: is that what democracy really is? Or, as the participants in the rural group put it, *“is that democracy – unemployment and crime?”* There is a striking discrepancy between the participants' perceptions of the democratic idea and the manner in which it is put into practice.
- The typical phenomenon of **“collective irresponsibility”** was identified as another consequence of the poor realization of the concept of democratic society. The institutions shift the blame to one another for the work not done, taking advantage of the low public awareness of the functions of the various institutions.
- At the same time, citizens **still fear the institutions**. The awe of officials and of state institutions, which was inculcated for years, is still alive and nowadays few people venture to vindicate their rights in a dispute with an institution. This indicates the slow pace of the process of emancipation from the old ideas of statehood and the efforts that need to be made to attain a new conception of the interrelations between citizens and the institutions.
- There were also some who noted the **incompatibility between the democratization of society and the emergence of semi-legal economic groups**, which use their economic power to seize policy-making prerogatives:

“... because society is far too poor, because the political elite only emerged fairly recently and there are no traditions in civil society itself, there exist such distortions, for instance the way certain groups are managing to exert influence over politics and are doing it without any rules.”

- Some of the respondents cited **specific examples** that they believed to be illustrations of totalitarianism and in this sense, were far removed from democracy. One such example concerns the restitution of the farmland and the forests. People expected to get back their original property. In reality, they were “given” quite different plots while the lands to which they hold title went to “well connected people” or to those who had paid more. This is a flagrant violation of our rights, the respondents claimed. Another example was the implemented health reform. In its present state it is discriminatory against the people with low incomes since it deprives them of the possibility to receive good treatment. These examples show that the respondents' conception of "real" democracy refers to a more fair social order.
- The respondents from the **Turkish minority** added a specific perspective on the idea of democracy. In their opinion, democracy in a given country is measured by the degree of **observation of minority rights**. In this country minorities still face serious

problems in their integration with the Bulgarian majority. It is, for instance, difficult to become part of the academic community - and if you are Turkish, it's far more difficult, one of the respondents shared. Compared to his Bulgarian colleagues he had had to work much harder to assert himself and be accepted as an equal partner. Other respondents believed Turkish and Bulgarian children are treated differently in the schools, which impedes the integration of the Turkish children from a very early age.

- The representatives of the Turkish group also brought up the **“change of the names” issue**. It will always remain painful to them but what they appealed for is some consideration and acknowledgement of their suffering. The Bulgarian people as a whole is not to blame because it was unaware of what was going on. But some day the whole truth needs to come out.

The respondents were not very optimistic on the question of **their actual role in decision-making on a community or national level**. Being realistic, the focus-group participants noted that nobody was interested in their opinion. The political elite seems to exist for its own sake. It very soon forgets that it initially proclaimed itself to be the advocate of the interests of certain social groups. To the politicians we are nothing but voters, the respondents said. So whenever elections are imminent, all of the parties become particularly considerate and concerned about their voters. They start touring all the little towns and villages, meeting with all kinds of people, making all kinds of generous promises. Which are all forgotten as soon as the elections are over. And people are once again left on their own, with their hopes that at least something might change.

- The respondents were skeptically inclined regarding the establishment of public reception offices where they could meet their representatives: it's all a parody, they'll listen to us most kindly and politely and that will be it.
- The respondents from the higher age groups tended to be **more assertive**. They insisted that each voter should have the right to call his/her representative to account:

"Not those who didn't vote for him but those who actually did elect him, they are the ones who should hold him responsible. Whoever is disappointed should tell him "Now look, I elected you, but look how things have turned out". But I don't know where to go. That's the problem."

It is a revealing fact that respondents **found it difficult to say whom they trust most** – the local authorities, national institutions, or the international community. Some of the participants were quite adamant that with the raging corruption they can have trust in nobody. A position maintained most insistently by the Turkish minority and the young Bulgarians. Others expressed highest confidence in local authorities since they stand closest to the people and are most familiar with the problems. And to the country people *“local government is everything”*. It is worth noting that the respondents were surprisingly laconic on this matter.

They appeared relatively more willing to comment **the activity of the political, administrative and judicial institutions**.

- **Parliament** presently has an extremely low public rating, in the opinion of the respondents. The reason for this is the conduct of the MPs. *“It's a disgrace – important matters are up for discussion, and yet the assembly hall is empty”*. MPs display brazen irresponsibility with regard to the country's problems, according to most of the respondents. Citizens are left with the impression that MPs are more concerned about themselves and spend more time in pursuit of their own interests

instead of tackling the critical issues. That is why the public has no respect for parliament.

- **The political elite** was deemed inadequate to the Bulgarian reality. It has failed to live up to public expectations and trust. Extremely manipulative and unfair attitude to the voters – that was how respondents essentially defined the relations between the elite and the people. Focus group participants were weary of empty promises and fine declarations. They wanted real, tangible results. They suggested introducing a property qualification for Bulgarian politicians. As it is, everyone who comes to power is “*hungry*”. They don’t have anything so their first objective is to provide for themselves. Thus for a very short time the idea of national prosperity gives way to plans to secure an Eden of their own, while the needs of the voters are relegated to the background. Until the next elections.
- **The administrative and judicial institutions** were assessed by the respondents as extremely corrupt and ineffective. It was unanimously agreed that the administration is excessively complicated and sluggish. Problems can only be dealt with through recourse to “connections” and bribery. The very system produces and tolerates such relations between the public and the institutions. People are forced to adhere to this scheme if they want to achieve their ends.

In the context of the expressed dissatisfaction with the work of the political institutions, respondents **differed as to whether they would vote** at the coming elections.

- It is worth noting the unanimous position of the **Turkish** minority representatives. They believed that, regardless of the accumulated disappointment, it is their obligation to vote. Because if they forfeit their right to vote, this would serve the interests of some other party.
- The opinions in the group of the **older respondents** were not as straightforward. Some of them were definitely **considering “punishing” the politicians** for their broken promises and unfulfilled obligations. They could not see any point in voting since it does not seem to lead to any positive outcomes. They were in favor of a **majority electoral system**, i.e., they would like to be priorly acquainted with the individual candidates. It is not right, they said, to vote for a party ticket full of unfamiliar names. This is not the way to foster trust between the voters and their representatives.
- **The younger Bulgarians were convinced it is imperative to vote.** Their motives were that if you want to be part of what is going on in this country, the least you can do is participate in determining the political status quo. And the most direct way of doing that is by exercising the right to vote. They expressed the wish to be a more active part of social processes, to have the right to call their representatives to account. Which is something they could not do unless they have helped elect them.

5. CIVIL SOCIETY

The discussions indicated a varying degree of readiness to engage in **volunteer work in the community or for some political party**. The younger respondents thought such activity should be undertaken by the municipality and paid for with the taxpayers’ money. The older respondents were more inclined to spare some time and efforts for a charitable cause.

Respondents generally realized that **civic organizations are a potential** resource able to have an impact on an institutional level, to exert real influence over the politicians and the government. However, there appeared to be a one-way connection – NGOs are clearly active but the readiness to engage in dialogue seems to be lacking on the other side.

This brings up the problem of the **rather low rating of non-governmental organizations**. Most people still do not seem to believe in the charitable mission of these organizations. They regard them as money-laundering foundations rather than as associations of citizens led by the will to have specific social problems solved. They are therefore highly reluctant to get involved in such campaigns, even ones with very specific objectives – addressing problems related to life in their own community, for instance. It is therefore necessary to first enhance the image of NGOs and only then can broader sections of the population be expected to volunteer their time and efforts for certain types of activities.

The trade unions were deemed to be institutions with dwindling functions. The respondents were quite positive that the labor movement in Bulgaria is now undergoing “terrible decline”. There abound instances of labor disputes and flagrant violations of the rights of various professional groups. Yet the intervention of the trade unions has been inconsequential. The respondents made keen comments on the protests in the companies Plama and Balkan Airlines. Despite the displays of some organized activity – rallies, protest marches, etc., the results have been insubstantial. This was leading respondents to believe that the trade unions are either too weak to be taken into consideration by anyone, or else these organizations “*go hand in hand with those in power*”. In any event, this undermines public confidence in the capacity of the trade unions to act as a corrective factor for government social policy.

The topic of **religious organizations** also provoked respondents’ interest. The comments were disparate:

- **The Turkish group**, for example, was reluctant to probe into the subject. Referring to their own religion, they stressed they only expected moral support from the religious organizations and nothing more. They were reserved and laconic. According to them, religion has negligible influence over the younger generations.
- The discussion took a different bent among the **Bulgarians**. The younger group, for instance, thought that the potential of the religious organizations was not used to the full. According to the respondents, the Orthodox idea could be a unifying factor and could at the same time help cultivate the moral values that are so necessary in modern society. And this is how the fact that the sects are finding followers among young people can be explained - people are starved for moral guidance and if the Orthodox Church will not offer it to them, there are others more eager to do it. At the moment one can hardly speak of any role of the official church, since it is too busy with its own schism and internal contradictions.

6. PUBLIC SERVICES

The respondents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the principal public services and utilities in the country. These included healthcare, education, social assistance, transport, central heating, electricity supply, water supply, the military service.

The basic criteria used by the respondents in evaluating the public services were **price, general accessibility, and quality**. There appeared certain differences in the manner in which the various groups rated the public services. Nevertheless, lowest grades (1 and 2) were received by **social assistance, healthcare, the military service, and heating**.

TABLE 1. MEAN RATINGS OF THE LISTED PUBLIC SERVICES/UTILITIES

| | | <i>1st group</i> | <i>2nd group</i> | <i>3rd group</i> | <i>4th group</i> | <i>TOTAL</i> |
|----|-------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| 1. | Healthcare | 4.22 | 3.22 | 4.11 | 3.88 | 3.86 |
| 2. | Education | 6.67 | 6.67 | 5.56 | 5.38 | 6.09 |
| 3. | Social assistance | 3.00 | 2.67 | 3.33 | 3.25 | 3.06 |
| 4. | Transportation | 4.00 | 3.56 | 5.33 | 3.63 | 4.14 |
| 5. | Heating | 2.38 | 3.56 | 4.22 | 4.00 | 3.56 |
| 6. | Electricity | 5.44 | 3.78 | 8.89 | 6.00 | 6.03 |
| 7. | Water supply | 6.56 | 2.89 | 3.22 | 4.00 | 4.17 |
| 8. | Military service | 2.89 | 3.00 | 5.56 | 2.63 | 3.54 |

Respondents' **arguments** for the low rating of the respective services were:

- **Social assistance:** the size of the social benefits is simply ridiculous; government pensions for the disabled and the retired and the maternity benefits are below the critical minimum;
- **Healthcare:** there is no clear-cut regulation of the rights and obligations of the Health Service; the patients receive unsatisfactory medical care from their GPs; the prices of medications are exorbitant; there is excessive corruption among the medical staff;
- **The military service:** complete disorganization; poor discipline, high rate of drug addiction and suicide; mediocre military training;
- **Water supply:** High prices, mismanagement; the notorious leaks in Sofia; in the rural region people did not even have running water;
- **Heating:** High price; quality that does not match the price; "*fierce monopoly*" of the Central Heating Company – people have no alternative and have to put up with the terms imposed on them.

The education system and electricity supply were rated highest:

- **Education:** the respondents were satisfied with the quality of instruction at the schools and believed that, with some personal efforts, everyone can receive a very decent education and be competitive in the labor market;
- **Electricity supply:** relatively affordable prices and regular supply.

Regarding some spheres, the rating and arguments advanced by the respondents tended to vary depending on the specific needs and the possibilities to meet them. For example, the water supply was cited as a problematic and ineffective utility by all of the groups. With the rural group the reason was the actual lack of running water, whereas to the city residents the chief argument was the high price.

Respondents were not unanimous regarding the possible **privatization** of these services. Both pros and cons were advanced. Those in favor of privatization referred to the need to break up the monopoly. Citizens need to be able to choose between different prices and quality on offer. It was considered a good idea to privatize the electricity supply and

transport. At the same time, the social aspect of some of the sectors was deemed too pronounced and they should remain a government responsibility.

It was suggested to maintain **mixed ownership schemes**:

“entirely private education and healthcare are just as ineffective as the entirely public”.

Public ownership is necessary in order to guarantee the access of the lowest standing social groups to the respective service. On the other hand, private ownership provides a possible choice for those able to afford it.

The evaluation of the public services indicated that the **idea of the “mothering state”**, obliged to take care of its citizens, was still strongly present in the minds of the respondents. This stereotype also proved characteristic of the younger respondents, whose chief objections concerned the weak concern and inadequate social policy of the government with respect to the students and the young graduates.

7. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Respondents’ attitude towards the international institutions is part of the existing public perceptions of the international community in general. A considerable number of the respondents regarded our accession to the European Union as a **necessary step in the right direction**. They believed this would facilitate foreign trade and banking activity. By becoming part of the community we will adopt a uniform system of rules and legal regulations. This will make us more sought-after trade partners. All of these considerations were shared by the respondents in the context of the urgent need for investments and economic growth. Asked whether the assistance of the international institutions is visible to the public at large, respondents gave divergent answers. The younger ones were convinced that a lot is being done for our country. Yet the older respondents defined the assistance provided as inconsequential – they were dissatisfied and claimed we are being neglected while the aid largely goes to the population of Macedonia and Kosovo.

The rural group supported the view that the problem is not in the actual size of the aid – it is sufficient. It is its distribution, however, that is unscrupulous but that is our own, domestic problem.

The Turkish group gives priority to the positive aspects of our accession to EU. But they stressed the need to **preserve the national values**. It is important for us not to lose our own identity – national, ethnic and cultural, religious – in the process of our integration.

The respondents had just **general idea of the Stability Pact**. They had heard about it but were unaware of its exact functions or its possible impact on our country. Some of the focus-group participants associated the Stability Pact with Asen Agov’s statements (“if the visa requirements for Bulgarians are not cancelled, we’ll leave the Pact”). The respondents thought that this is a matter of relations on a government level and is therefore not extensively covered by the press. According to the older respondents, the Pact declares political will and readiness to provide assistance but in fact has not; and furthermore, that:

“our population is regarded as a buffer between the less civilized part of the globe and their own highly organized civilization”.

Our affiliation with NATO was defined by the focus-group participants as a logical move in today’s uncertain world. Joining NATO would guarantee stability and that is of

critical importance to us. Not because we are threatened by war, but because this would enhance international trust in Bulgaria. In turn, this could be expected to help attract more serious investors.

Respondents were quite positive that our army now is in a deplorable state. And in order to join NATO, it is necessary to harmonize the armament, staff training and other standards. This requires huge investments, inevitably at the expense of the population's standard of living.

Greatest awareness of these matters was demonstrated by the respondents from the first two groups – the younger and the older Bulgarians. In the other two groups the comments were of a more general nature and tended to reiterate media cliches.

8. INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTITUDES

Associations with the countries of South-East Europe:

In order to identify respondents' attitude to the countries of South-East Europe, we prepared a special map. The respondents were asked to write down their associations with each of the countries listed. All of the focus-group participants approached the task with marked interest. The most typical associations are presented in Table № 2, Appendix 1

The associations of the focus-group participants were broad-ranging. There was highest concentration of responses related to the economic situation and standard of living in the respective country. Next came the associations with the complex economic and political problems involved in the transition and the ensuing phenomena, such as poverty, unemployment, fear, pessimism, disappointment. A considerable share referred to the danger of armed conflicts and ethnic tension, and consequently, NATO intervention.

The basic structure of the associations with the individual countries of South-East Europe is the following:

- **Albania:** There appeared no significant differences in the associations among the first, second and the fourth groups of respondents. The largest share of the participants in these groups cited associations with economic backwardness – misery, poverty, aridity, chaos, collision. Next by importance is the share of respondents in whose minds Albania proved synonymous to shady deals, mafia, terrorism. The religious fanaticism and Islamic fundamentalism occupied the third place. Only the respondents from the third focus group (the village people) associated Albania on the first place with religious fanaticism and the Islamic fundamentalism while economic backwardness occupied third place.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** in the minds of the respondents this country appeared to be associated mainly with the war and its consequences, with economic wreckage, as well as the Bulgarian participation in the peacekeeping forces. Here too, there emerged similar tendencies in the different focus groups.
- **Bulgaria:** The representatives of the first three groups demonstrated relatively stronger pessimism and their associations centered around: crisis, poverty, instability, fear, pessimism, disappointment, uncertain change, painful efforts, and failures. By contrast, hopes (for a better life and advancement) and the wish for positive changes were the most frequent associations among the Turkish minority. In other words, whereas Bulgarians were more inclined to complain, the element that

stood out among the Turks was hope. Another interesting aspect is the relatively high share of respondents from the higher age group according to whom Bulgaria is a country of corrupt and weak leaders. A similar cluster of associations is to be found among the rural group.

- **Kosovo:** The predominant associations were related to danger of armed conflicts, bitter hostility, arms, bombings, fear, threat for the entire region and NATO. In this respect there were no notable differences among the various groups.
- **Macedonia:** The structure of the associations was specific for the different groups. The younger respondents associated this country with ethnic instability, covert nationalism, on the one hand, and a friendly, kindred people, on the other. The people of a more mature age and those from the Turkish minority associated it mainly with confusion, slow development, looking for the right way, as well as an independent country of enthusiasts, aspiring to join Europe. The responses were similar in the rural group, excepting the higher share of associations with beautiful nature.
- **Romania:** The respondents perceived our northern neighbor mainly as a country with complex economic and social problems, economic vacillation, and poverty. A considerable part of the remaining associations were of a rather disparate character – from a meek country and strong lobby, to competition, bridge over the Danube, and neighbors.
- **Serbia:** It was widely associated with war, nationalism, chauvinism, Miloshevitich. Among the mature respondents and the Turkish group there was a considerable share of associations referring to attempts to build a new identity, a country just emerging from a conflict, yet with very good prospects.
- **Croatia:** Definitely pointed out as the first country with some achievements within a new European space, characterized by rapid modernization and transformation, the richest in the Balkans, in a better situation.
- **Montenegro:** It was predominantly perceived as a country striving to be independent, implementing gradual reforms, and not too implicated in the central conflicts. On the other hand, the older respondents associated it mainly with looming conflicts.

Relations between the ethnic groups

The respondents' opinions on the relations between their own ethnic group and other ethnic groups (Romas, Bulgarians/Turks, Jews and Armenians) were registered by separate forms. In the forms for the Turkish group the options "Bulgarians-Romas", "Bulgarians-Jews", "Bulgarians-Armenians" were replaced with "Turks-Romas", "Turks-Jews", "Turks-Armenians".

- **Bulgarians-Roma:** The predominant opinion in the Sofia groups was that relations between Bulgarians and Roma are extremely negative and antagonistic, with lack of tolerance on both sides. The experience of the rural group is different, which is why they defined them as generally good, normal, and tolerant.
- **Turks-Romas:** The attitudes of the representatives of the Turkish minority were equally divided between tolerance and lack of respect.

- **Bulgarians-Turks:** the rural group generally agreed that relations are traditionally good, tolerant, of mutual respect and friendship. This position was largely supported by the Sofia groups. However, the latter also expressed some doubts and fears, related to the past negative experience with the artificially created tension. The Turkish group regarded relations between the Bulgarian and Turkish ethnic groups as traditionally good, friendly, tolerant.
- ✓ **Bulgarians-Jews:** It was stated in most emphatic terms that Jews are fully integrated and there simply is no difference; relations are characterized by mutual respect, esteem, and affinity.
- **Turks-Jews:** The relations again are characterized by mutual respect, esteem, and , and affinity.
- **Bulgarians-Armenians:** According to the respondents from the Bulgarian groups the relations are marked by lack of conflicts, a merging of the ethnic groups, well-intentioned and friendly attitude.
- **Turks-Armenians:** The responses were far less straightforward among the representatives of the Turkish minority. They ranged from mistrust, some respect, unfamiliarity, and decline to give an opinion.

The most typical answers are presented in Table № 3 and Table № 4, Appendix 1

Main fears and hopes

There emerged noticeable differences among the various groups in the way they defined their main **concerns and fears**:

- Among the **younger respondents** they were related to the country's economic instability: unemployment, low living standards, poor business environment, stagnation. Next came the political concerns: conflicts between the institutions, polarization of public life, ineffective two-party model, getting implicated into a war. The demographic concerns – negative growth rate, critical levels of elderly people and pensioners, outflow of human resources – held the third place by importance.
- The respondents of a more **mature age** associated their fears mainly with the economic instability in the country and the social insecurity. Some of them also voiced concerns of a moral nature – lack of aspirations, lack of prospects, apathy, reluctance to get involved in addressing the existing problems.
- The fears of the **representatives of the rural population** mostly stemmed from the deepening social insecurity and to some extent, from other natural processes (old age, sickness, death).
- The most pronounced concerns of the **Turkish respondents** were of a political nature. They feared possible conflicts between the institutions and were concerned by the polarization of public life.

Hopes:

- The large part of the Sofia respondents hoped for improved living standards and quality of life, restoring industrial production, developing high quality industries, reducing unemployment. A large share also wished people would display greater personal determination and a more enterprising attitude, they expressed hope in the future generations, the emergence of an elite, the strengthening of civil society.

- The representatives of the rural population focused their hopes on the politicians and the government – that they would put an end to petty political strife and find capable leaders, and on the other hand, they hoped that their living conditions would improve.

The most typical answers are presented in Table № 5 and Table № 6, Appendix 1

APPENDIX 1 (TABLES)

TABLE 2 . ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EEU COUNTRIES.

| Country | Associations | Num I gr. | Num I gr. | Num I gr. | Num I gr. | Num Total |
|------------------------|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| ALBANIA | • Economic backwardness (misery, poverty, wilderness, chaos, collision) | 7 | 8 | 1 | 6 | 22 |
| | • Shady deals, mafia, crime, terrorism, fear | 3 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| | • Religious fanaticism, Islamic fundamentalism, reticent community, conflicts | 2 | | 4 | 2 | 8 |
| BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA | • War, consequences, destruction, Bulgarian contingent | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 15 |
| | • Progress, Stability, They are developing very well, despite of the problems | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| | • Inter-ethnic relations, Islam, Obscurity, Conflicts | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| | • Patriotism, Love of freedom, The first that that have separated, Independence | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| | • Olympiad in Sarajevo, geographic characteristics | 2 | 2 | | | 4 |
| | • Good relations, Identical to Bulgaria, like us | | | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| | • Unemployment, poverty, aggression | | 2 | 1 | | 3 |
| BULGARIA | • Desire for progress and improvement of life, desire for conducting reforms and positive changes, new hopes | 3 | | 4 | 5 | 12 |
| | • Crisis, poverty, instability, fear, pessimism, disappointment, uncertainty in the transition, painstaking endeavors and failures | 4 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 17 |
| | • Beautiful nature, see and things referring way of life. | | 1 | | | 1 |
| | • Corrupted and poor leaders, crime | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 10 |
| | • Motherland, family, adherence, patriotism | 4 | | | | 4 |
| KOSOVO | • Threat for the region, irreconcilable hostility, weapon, bombings, fear, war, NATO, conflicts | 8 | 8 | 6 | 5 | 27 |
| | • Unclear future, instability, poverty | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 9 |
| | • Hunger for peace and calmness; recovering from war | | | 1 | | 1 |
| MACEDONIA | • Beautiful nature, the lake of Ohrid, nice people, Macedonian lass, fruits | | | 3 | | 3 |
| | • Seeking for the way; confusion; slowed downdevelopment; they still don't know what they want, megalomania; claims | 1 | 3 | | 2 | 6 |
| | • Aspirations to become Europeans; independent; enthusiasts; they work more than we do | | 4 | 4 | 3 | 11 |
| | • A sister nation; friendly people; good relations; proximity; neighbors | 3 | | 1 | | 4 |
| | • Something that they took from us; Bulgaria | 2 | | | | 2 |
| | • Ethnic instability, underlying nationalism, refugees, aggression | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| | • Poorer than we are | | | | 1 | 1 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|--|---|---|---|---|----|
| ROMANIA | • Economic vacillation; poverty, misery; complex economic and social problems | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 15 |
| | • Politically unstable; fluctuations between centralism and democracy, Chaushesko, bribes; corruption; fear | 1 | 2 | | 1 | 4 |
| | • Tziganes affairs, thefts | | 3 | | | 3 |
| | • Other (good lobby, calm, competition, bridge over Danube, neighbors, intelligentsia) | 5 | | 3 | 3 | 11 |
| | • Attempt for improvement, annexation/joining Europe | | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| SERBIA | • Attempt for developing new economic and national identity; country with great perspectives; Attempt to become Europeans; going out of conflict | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 9 |
| | • War; chauvinism; nationalism; Miloshevich; separation | 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 16 |
| | • Obscure country, volcano ready to erupt; it never can be known what is going on | | 2 | 1 | | 3 |
| | • Other (dinar; Kosturitsa, Bregovich, party, akin, songs) | 2 | | 3 | | 5 |
| CROATIA | • Firs successes in a new European space; fast modernizing and transferring into something new; The richest country on the Balkans; the better alternative | 3 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 14 |
| | • Small, beautiful, ex-republic, Zagreb, the most eastern Catholics; Yugoslavia | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 3 |
| | • Don't know it, It is not clear what it has been doing in the last years | 1 | 2 | | 3 | 6 |
| | • Other (preserved ruins from the war to remind that....; football, music) | 2 | | 4 | 1 | 7 |
| MONTENEGRO | • Looking for independence, step by step reforms, isolated from the central conflicts; Yugoslavia | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 14 |
| | • Small country, isolated isle on the Balkans, the beaches of the Adriatic see, winter resorts; beautiful nature | 2 | | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| | • Possible conflicts; poverty, instability | | 4 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| | • Don't know it, lacking individuality | 1 | 2 | | 2 | 5 |
| | • Mafia, smuggling | 2 | | | | 2 |

TABLE 3. RELATIONS BETWEEN BULGARIANS AND THE OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

| Ethnic groups | Relations | Number – I gr. | Number – II gr. | Number – III gr. | Number – Total |
|------------------------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Bulgarians – Roma | • Extremely negative; antagonistic; no tolerance | 6 | 5 | 2 | 13 |
| | • Normal; tolerance; potentially good | | | 7 | 7 |
| | • Ambivalent | 1 | | | 1 |
| | • Lack of desire to be solved their problems, weak desire of the Bulgarians to integrate them | | 2 | | 2 |
| | • To be integrated without assimilating; to be helped to overcome this low level | 1 | | | 1 |
| | • Associations which do not concern the relations, but just the Roma ethnic group | 2 | | | 2 |
| Bulgarians – Turks | • Traditionally; tolerance; tolerance even mutual respect and friendship | 4 | 5 | 8 | 17 |
| | • Artificial tension coming from above, no problems among the ordinary people | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| | • Should be very careful with them in order to avoid the Kosovo "alternative"; cultural/ ethnic differentiation | 1 | 2 | | 3 |
| | • Problems, hatred | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| | • Associations which don't concern the relations, but the Turks themselves | 2 | | | 2 |
| Bulgarians – Jews | • Completely integrated; there is no difference; respect, sympathy | 8 | 7 | 9 | 24 |
| | • Envy | 1 | | | 1 |
| | • No opinion | | 1 | | 1 |
| Bulgarians- Armenians | • No contradictions; Coalescence of the ethnic groups, well-intentioned, benevolence | 7 | 7 | 8 | 22 |
| | • Distrust; irritation | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| | • No opinion, Don't know | | 1 | | 1 |
| | • Associations, which do not concern the relations, but the Armenians themselves | 1 | | 1 | 2 |

TABLE 4. RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKS AND THE OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

| Ethnic groups | Relations | Number – IV group |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------------|
| Turks - Roma | • Little respect, not very good opinion | 3 |
| | • Normal, tolerance, potentially good | 3 |
| | • Different ethnoses | 1 |
| | • Do not have contacts | 1 |
| Bulgarians - Turks | • Traditionally good, tolerance, tolerance, even mutual respect and friendship | 5 |
| | • It should be done more in order to achieve cooperation | 1 |
| | • Cultural/ ethnic differentiation; historically separated | 1 |
| | • The hope for better relations | 1 |
| Turks - Jews | • Completely integrated, simply there is no difference; respect, sympathy | 5 |
| | • No opinion/No acquaintances/ No contacts | 3 |
| Turks- Armenians | • No contradictions, well-willed, good as whole | 2 |
| | • Distrust, irritation | 1 |
| | • No opinion/No acquaintances/ No contacts | 3 |
| | • Perhaps there is little respect | 1 |
| | • We respect them, but they don't respect us | 1 |

TABLE 5. FEARS

| № | Fears | Number of cases - I group | Number of cases - II group | Number of cases - III group | Number of cases - IV group | Total: |
|----|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------|
| 1. | Dissatisfaction of the pace of the reform: Fear of reform failure; of restoration of the past; of wasting of the achieved; of isolation | 1 | 1 | | 2 | 4 |
| 2. | Economic instability: Unemployment, low living standard, poor conditions for business, stagnation | 6 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 18 |
| 3. | Social insecurity: Crime, drugs, chaos, insecurity | 2 | 4 | 11 | 2 | 19 |
| 4. | Fears connected with ethics: Lack of aim, lack of perspective, apathy, fear of dreaming, lack of willingness for including in problem solving processes | 2 | 3 | | 1 | 6 |
| 5. | Political: Conflict between institutions, polarization of social life; ineffective two-party model; to be included in war | 3 | | 3 | 5 | 11 |
| 6. | Demographic: Negative growth of the population; critical level of aged people and pensioners, brain drain abroad | 3 | 1 | | 2 | 6 |
| 7. | Other (old age, decease, death) | | | 4 | | 4 |

TABLE 6. HOPES

| № | Hopes | Number of cases - I group | Number of cases - II group | Number of cases - III group | Number of cases - IV group | Total: |
|----|--|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------|
| 1. | Continuation of reforms Support and assistance by the EU and NATO, to reach the standards of the European countries, to have the freedom to travel | 2 | | 3 | 2 | 7 |
| 2. | Related to Economy Improvement of living standard, restoration of production, high-tech development, decrease of unemployment | 5 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 15 |
| 3. | Mobilization of personal efforts Increase of the entrepreneurship, hope in new generations, formation of elite, strengthen of the civil society | 2 | 3 | | 5 | 10 |
| 4. | Political Struggles to stop, to find / elect the right, appropriate leaders | 1 | 2 | 4 | | 7 |
| 5. | Pessimistic (blighted hopes) | | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| 6. | Other (general improvement in all spheres, fears not to become true) | 2 | | 3 | | 5 |
| 7. | Related to social and everyday problems (no longer fear of crime, better health, etc.) | 3 | | 4 | | 7 |