

VOTE-BUYING, INTIMIDATION RIFE IN BULGARIAN ELECTION

BOBOV DOL: Forced to survive on the minimum wage in Bulgaria of 340 leva (174 euros, \$222) a month, Maya Ivanova is more than ready to sell her vote in Sunday's general election, even for food.

"Who would not take 50 leva nowadays when the misery is dire? Even if they offer me 20 leva (\$13) I would take it," the 51-year-old Roma woman told AFP in the mining town of Bobov Dol.

"But they only give us Roma a meatball and two slices of bread. It's the organisers who take the money," she said, ahead of the October 5 vote.

According to numerous studies and even the government, selling votes-for money, food or firewood-is common in the European Union's poorest country a quarter of a century after communism. So is intimidation. The average monthly salary is the equivalent of 400 euros and one household in five lives below the poverty line. In a recent survey, 69 percent of respondents called the situation "unbearable".

"Our studies show that six percent of the voters say they have sold their vote and another six percent say that they would do under certain conditions," said Antony Galabov from anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International.

"The people do not sell their votes for the sport of it, they have been pushed to the wall," Galabov said. "In the Roma ghettos, people are massively dependent on local money lenders whom they can never repay in full. Parties often contact them to ensure a certain number of votes," explained Vanya Nusheva, an expert at the Sofia-based Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS).

An IRIS study stated: "A certain number of votes for this party is expected from a neighbourhood or a



BOBOV DOL: Women sell potatoes and peppers at an open air market in the town of Bobov dol on September 18, 2014. Ahead of EU elections in May, hidden camera footage by private television channel Nova showed managers instructing miners whom to vote for if they wanted to keep their jobs. — AFP

company. If someone fails to follow the instructions, everyone gets punished-companies by sanctions, people by threats and beatings."

Mining for votes

Bobov Dol is a case in point. Ahead of EU elections in May, hidden camera footage by private television channel Nova showed managers instructing miners

whom to vote for if they wanted to keep their jobs.

"At election time it's always like that... the usual swindle," a 40-year-old miner and father of four, declining to give his name, says with a wink when asked if miners have been pressured again. His hands black with coal, he says he is rarely paid regularly or in full and buys food on credit since he only received 300 leva in his last pay packet. But he denies selling

his vote. Inside the mine itself, owned by a Bulgarian tycoon, the posters of only one party, a new populist formation, are visible on the way to the lifts that plunge 500 metres (1,640 feet) down.

"It's always the same: our husbands and sons get told at work whom the family should vote for," one of two women tell AFP at Bobov Dol's market, afraid to give their names. Bulgaria's government, repeatedly taken to task by Brussels over corruption, says it is aware of the problem. "It is not a question of money at all sometimes," interior ministry commissioner Rumén Bogojev told a recent roundtable discussion.

"Managers themselves are often subjected to blackmail by political parties who tell them that their workers should vote in a certain way if they want the company to have orders and stay open," he said.

Hands tied

Most people who have been pressured or paid to vote refuse to testify in court, tying the hands of the investigators, deputy chief prosecutor Borislav Sarafov said. After the last general election a year ago there was just one suspended sentence. Several hundred other cases were dropped.

The Bobov Dol incident also failed to result in a single conviction, despite an uproar. This time the interior ministry is taking preventive measures by keeping a close eye on 1,000 suspected organisers of vote-buying, criminal police chief Georgy Arabadzhiev said.

Parties are also obliged to state on all their election leaflets and posters: "Vote-buying and selling is illegal". But whether such measures will have an effect is far from certain. — AFP

UKRAINE TROOP WITHDRAWAL IN DOUBT AFTER 12 KILLED

MOSCOW DENIES SENDING TROOPS TO EASTERN UKRAINE

KIEV: The shaky truce between pro-Russian rebels and the Ukrainian military was challenged yesterday when 12 soldiers and civilians were reported killed in a surge of fighting across the separatist east.

A week after talks in the Belarussian capital Minsk yielded an agreement for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons and troops from the frontline, a lasting solution to the conflict which has killed more than 3,200 people seemed no closer. National Security and Defence Council spokesman Andriy Lysenko said rebels had killed nine soldiers over the last 24 hours. Some died in a rebel attack on an armoured vehicle carrying Ukrainian paratroopers.

Three civilians were killed in the main rebel stronghold of Donetsk, according to city hall. A Russian army delegation of some 70 people arrived last week in eastern Ukraine, headed by the deputy commander of Russian ground forces Alexander Lentsov.

Several members of the delegation travelled to Donetsk to urge the separatists to respect the truce. "We are going to convince (the rebels), use reason with them. That is the most important thing," Lentsov told Ukrainian television at the weekend, in rare public remarks by a Russian military commander.

Moscow denies it has ever sent regular troops to eastern Ukraine but Kiev argues that large contingents of soldiers and heavy equipment from Russia were behind a rebel offensive last month that seized control of a large chunk of territory and forced Kiev to agree to a ceasefire.

The European-brokered deal finalised a week ago in Minsk commits the Ukrainian army and the rebels to stop firing and establish a 30-kilometre (18-mile) buffer zone between the warring sides. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko stressed that the army would continue fighting if the insurgents failed to silence their guns.

"In 100 days we have saved and reinforced the state," he said Sunday in an address on his first 100 days of office, adding that the army has created a "reliable frontline" in the east.

Military officials said yesterday separatists in tanks staged repeated attacks on a strategic flashpoint on the outskirts of the largest city in the war zone. "Ukrainian soldiers have repelled the attacks," the statement said.



KHARKIV: Ukrainian flags flutter in the place of a Vladimir Lenin statue that was toppled by protesters the night before in Kharkiv yesterday. Ukrainian protesters in eastern Ukraine's city Kharkiv toppled the giant statue seen as a symbol of Soviet legacy and Moscow's control. — AFP

Lenin felled

In a highly symbolic act, activists in Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv, an eastern hub of 1.5 million which avoided the conflict after an initial outbreak of unrest, toppled the country's largest statue of Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in the main square.

Kharkiv, which lies city close to the Russian border, is considered by Moscow as culturally Russian and President Vladimir Putin declared it part of "Novorossiya" (New Russia), which according to him became part of Ukraine artificially in the early 20th century.

Statues of Lenin, seen as symbols of the totalitarian Soviet past, were toppled throughout central Ukraine, including Kiev, during last winter's pro-Europe protests, which led to the ouster of the unpopular former president Viktor Yanukovich. "Lenin? Let him fall. As long as people are not injured. As long as this bloody Communist idol does not add to the toll of his victims," Interior Minister Arsen Avakov wrote on his Facebook page, as a criminal case into the

destruction of cultural monuments was closed despite an outcry from Ukraine's Communist party. The latest felling of a statue in the important Russian-speaking city is viewed as a symbolic gesture towards Moscow, which Ukraine blames for disorder in the east.

The five-month conflict between Kiev and the separatists of Lugansk and Donetsk has pushed Western states to impose unprecedented sanctions on Russia, whose economy is already flatlining.

Striking a more conciliatory tone, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Sunday lamented the deterioration of Moscow's relations with Washington after US President Barack Obama denounced "Russian aggression in Europe" in a speech to the United Nations last week. "We absolutely have an interest in normalising these relations," Lavrov said.

"What's needed is something that the Americans will call a 'reset'," he told Russian television, referring to the 2009 Washington-led drive aimed at improving ties. — AFP



MADRID: Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy speaks during a press conference after an extraordinary cabinet meeting on the Catalonia independence vote yesterday. — AFP

SPAIN ROADBLOCKS CATALONIA INDEPENDENCE VOTE

BARCELONA: The Spanish government yesterday rolled out a legal roadblock to stop the Catalonia region voting on independence, branding the planned ballot an affront to the sovereignty of Spain. After Catalonia's president Artur Mas staked his leadership on the issue by calling the vote for November 9, the national government responded by filing a constitutional challenge.

Conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said he "deeply" regretted Mas's move. "I regret it because it is against the law, it bypasses democracy and divides Catalans, it alienates them from Europe and the rest of Spain and seriously harms their welfare," Rajoy said. He said the government had sent the appeal to the country's Constitutional Court and that Mas's measures would be suspended as soon as that tribunal accepted the appeal, pending a final decision by its judges. Buoyed by mass street demonstrations, Mas has pushed ahead for a vote in defiance of Rajoy's warnings.

"You cannot use the law to prevent people indefinitely from stating their opinion," Mas said in a television interview on Sunday in anticipation of yesterday's appeal. "Voting on November is the best thing for everyone because it will allow us and also the Spanish government to know what the Catalan people's opinion is." Rajoy insisted yesterday that the right to decide on a region's status belonged to "all of the Spanish people" under the country's 1978 constitution — the keystone of Spain's democracy after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. "There is nothing and no one, no power nor institution, that can break this principle of sole sovereignty," Rajoy told reporters after an extraordinary cabinet meeting.

Catalans defiant

The appeal did not put off supporters of independence, who vowed to continue preparing for the vote regardless. "We will not stand by idle after this suspension," said

the spokesman for Mas's government, Francesc Homs, on Catalan television. "We are committed to voting on November 9," said Oriol Junqueras, leader of the left-wing Catalan nationalist party ERC, which is allied with Mas's conservative CIU grouping in the regional parliament. "We are aware of the great difficulties we will face in the coming days but we are ready to face those difficulties." Fired up by Scotland's plans to hold its referendum earlier this month, 1.8 million people turned out in Barcelona on September 11 to demand their own vote. Scottish voters eventually chose not to be independent from Britain. But like Scotland, Catalonia "wants to be heard and it wants to vote," Mas said after he signed a decree on Saturday formally calling the vote.

Rajoy described the independence ambitions of the Scottish National Party and Catalonia as a "torpedo" to European integration. Mas has vowed to let Catalans vote on breaking away but has also promised to respect Spanish law.

He has hinted that if the government blocks the vote, he could put his leadership at stake in an early regional election in Catalonia, which could serve as a plebiscite on the issue. Catalonia is Spain's economic powerhouse, accounting for about a fifth of the country's economy. But it suffered like all of Spain from the property crash and ensuing economic downturn sparked by the 2008-2012 global financial crisis. Proud of their Catalan language and culture, many of the region's 7.5 million inhabitants feel short-changed by the government in Madrid which redistributes their taxes.

The independence movement in Catalonia has gathered strength in recent years as Spain's economic crisis has increased unemployment and hardship in the region and swelled its debts. Catalonia formally adopted the status of a "nation" in 2006 but the Constitutional Court overruled that claim. — AFP

BELGIUM TRIES SUSPECTED SYRIAN JIHADIST GROUP

ANTWERP: Forty six people, most of them still at large, went on trial in Belgium yesterday for suspected membership of a group believed to be sending jihadist fighters to Syria. Armed police guarded the court in the northern port city of Antwerp where 16 people alleged to be part of Sharia4Belgium, including its head Fouad Belkacem, are being tried on charges of leading a terrorist organization. If convicted, they could face 20 years in prison. The remaining 30 are being tried on charges of belonging to Sharia4Belgium.

Present for the trial were Belkacem, a Salafist ideologue known for his sermons in the streets and on the Internet and as well as seven others. The defendants who are at large are believed to be in Syria where some of them may have been killed, according to the federal justice office. Investigators said Belkacem never travelled to Syria, unlike most of the members of the group, but he

was the "catalyst" who prompted many to go and fight there. Sharia4Belgium, based in Antwerp, campaigned for the introduction of Sharia Islamic law in Belgium.

In 2012, it said it was disbanding but the authorities suspect that it has continued to recruit dozens of volunteers to fight in Syria. Officials say that up to 400 Belgian nationals may have gone to fight in Syria, with about a quarter having returned home. The trial comes five months after a deadly attack on the Jewish museum in the centre of Brussels raised fears of resurgence of anti-Semitic violence in Europe and of terror strikes from foreign fighters returning from Syria.

The main suspect in the attack which left four people dead is a Frenchman, Mehdi Nemmouche, who spent more than a year fighting with Islamist extremists in Syria and is now also being held in Belgium on charges of "murder in a terrorist context". — AFP

KARADZIC WAS 'DRIVING FORCE' BEHIND BOSNIAN GENOCIDE

THE HAGUE: War crimes prosecutors concluding their case against former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic yesterday said he had been a "driving force" behind a genocidal campaign to rid Bosnia of its non-Serbian population in the 1990s.

Prosecutors are seeking the maximum penalty of life imprisonment against Karadzic, a leading political figure during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia that left 100,000 dead.

Concluding four years of court hearings, prosecutor Alan Tieger told judges at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia that Karadzic had boasted at the time of his intentions to wipe out the non-Serb population. "After hundreds of witnesses, 80,000 pages of transcripts, and 10,000 exhibits, the policy of ethnic cleansing is finally exposed. And Karadzic was its driving force," Tieger said.

Karadzic faces charges of genocide for the killing of more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys from Srebrenica, Europe's worst massacre since World War Two, when ethnic Serb forces gunned down prisoners after trucking them to killing sites.

He is also held responsible for the 43-month siege of the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, in which more than 5,000 civilians died. "He said at the time what would happen and it did. Thousands killed, hundreds of towns destroyed, masses forcefully displaced," Tieger said to the courtroom.

He said Karadzic, now 69, had used violence and terror to carve an ethnic Serb breakaway state out of multi-ethnic Bosnia, starting just days before the country declared its independence from Yugoslavia.

Karadzic, wearing a crumpled grey suit under his trademark mane of silver hair, watched intently from the opposite side of the courtroom as prosecutors presented their closing arguments.

Tieger gave examples of three people for whose deaths Karadzic bore responsibility—a father killed in the Srebrenica massacre, a mother killed in the shelling of a Sarajevo marketplace as she went to fetch milk, and a doctor shot in the notorious Omarska prison camp.

The Yugoslav tribunal is winding down after prosecuting 112 suspects since being established by the UN Security Council in 1993 to punish those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Karadzic is one of four suspects, including Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladic, still in the dock. Just seven suspects have been sen-



Radovan Karadzic

tenced to life. Late Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, also stood trial at the court, but died in 2006 before his trial could be concluded. Karadzic, who has presented his own defence, rejects the court, arguing that it is a tool of the NATO military alliance, whose air strikes brought the war to an end.

He will present closing arguments on Wednesday. Charges were brought against him in 1995, shortly before the war's end. He was finally arrested in 2008 after years on the run in the Serbian capital Belgrade, where he had been living in disguise and working as a new-age healer.

The Bosnian war was part of a larger conflagration in which an estimated 140,000 people died as multi-ethnic Yugoslavia broke up during the 1990s into six successor states. Kosovo, formerly a Serbian province, also later declared independence. — Reuters