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Bulgaria needs a safety plan

Boris Bonev explains why virtuous NGOs might be the "secret weapon" against corruption in Sofia

Interview by Valerio Evangelista

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Valerio Evangelista interviewing Boris Bonev — Jeffrey Raza/Frontiere News

Are virtuous NGOs the “Bulgarian secret weapon” against corruption?

For many Bulgarians, Boris Bonev's "Plan for Sofia" is the last answer to save the Capital from collapse. Will it be enough to eradicate bad government, racism and social injustice?

by Valerio Evangelista

Only a few months ago, the head of the Bulgarian anti-corruption commission resigned due to a scandal over luxury property purchased at favorable prices. That gives some context to the gravity of the corruption issue in Sofia.

Poised between the burdensome socialist past and a faint dream of modernity, the Bulgarian capital will soon elect a new mayor. The spotlight is on the young candidate Boris Bonev, a multi-graduate at the Sorbonne in Paris and a point of reference for local associations. He is the head of the city's main NGO, "Spasi Sofia" ("Save Sofia!"), which was founded ten years ago to fight the corruption of traditional parties.

To *Frontiere*, he talked about their plan for Sofia.

In the last 10 years, Spasi Sofia has given voice to the opinions of those living in Sofia, analyzing practical problems and issues that were compromising the life in the Capital. Would it be fair to say that corruption is the main problem in Sofia, nowadays?

That is, corruption is the main issue we encounter in everyday life. Every other problem—the bad quality of the repairment works, not sufficient public transportation, not enough public kindergartens... everything comes from the fact that the members of our government in Sofia are driven by their political parties' interests, or the oligarchs' interest, or their economical personal interest. We have a deadly combination of incompetence and corruption that has taken over the Sofia municipality. And the results are all over the place. To me, the government of a city must include people who are new to politics, who are part of the civil movement, who are citizens. We should follow the good practice of many other European cities, which has elements of civil society as mayors and members of the municipal council. After 10 years of work on these issues, we have developed the answers to this situation. It's crucial to define rules, working principles, and very clear sanctions for those who don't follow those rules and working principles.

Are you suggesting that honesty and transparency are enough to govern a city like Sofia?

Especially when you've so many problems, it's essential to be honest and not corrupted. But you also need to be competent and hard working. We had these examples many times before, of people and parties who are very transparent, they've got very good ideas, but they're lazy. You need to combine those two qualities to achieve acceptable results. Our team is made of very competent young people, many of whom have studied abroad and returned to Bulgaria with the idea of implementing here what they've learned abroad. For ten years, this group of people have worked for free to solve the problems of the city they love. They were not moved by other stimuli like power or money. This purity is very important to succeed.

A demonstration in Sofia against corruption — Source: terminal3.bg

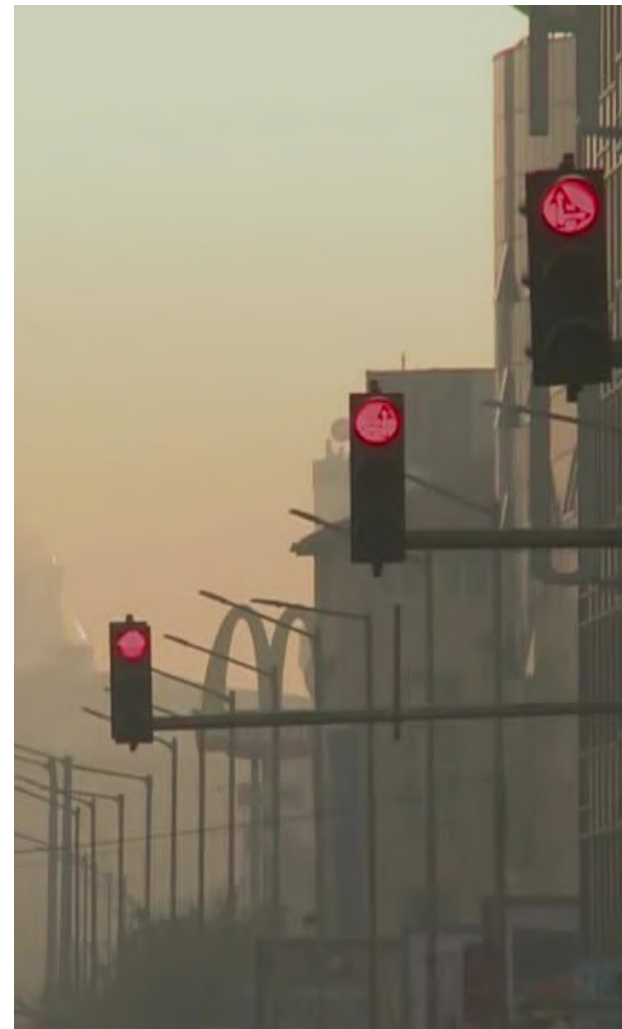


True. However, grassroots organizations often seem to hardly keep that purity, once in power. In Italy and other European countries, we've seen groups that have fought very important causes for the people tending to act differently, once they got in the higher levels.

This could happen to many people of course, as it's in human nature. We have a realistic view of our capacity and what we need to do. We have set very clear goals of what we want to achieve. If you know your path for the next years and you have verifiable indicators to measure whether you succeed or not in your path, the whole situation is much clear. We are not doing this for power or money, but because we love the city. This passion for the place we live in will be a constant warning not to show another face. The last ten years show that we've been extremely consistent. If you look at an interview of mine ten years ago, and then you look at an interview of mine now, I'll be saying the same things, exposing the same problems, and I'll do that in the same way. Unfortunately, many of these problems are still present. This consistency is also very important to reassure the people that we won't change at 180°.

Sofia is a beautiful capital. Yet, the city has still a lot of problems. We mentioned the corruption, which is quite obvious—Italy and Bulgaria share the record as the most corrupted nations in the European Union. Another priority is war to pollution. There are days when the air is unbreathable. What measure have you planned to improve this crucial aspect?

Nobody is taking any real measure to tackle this situation. The main factor is the burning of illegal fuels – plastics, leather, clothes, etc. – for heating purposes. This comes to a whopping 60% of the pollution developed in Sofia. Those who are polluting the most come from problematic neighborhoods. The health of the citizens is the most important thing. Every year, 900 people die prematurely in Sofia because of the air quality. That is a very serious social tax that we all pay. We need to find a meeting point between the need of these people to heat their places, and the need of the whole city to breathe clean air. There's no political will to do so. We want to introduce very strict rules on what we can burn in our chimneys, but the core of the problem is that most of these people can't afford other means of heating. The mere sanction won't solve any problem. We need a social program that provides greener heating facilities for houses to have clean heating. We must provide an alternative that solves the root of the problem.



Pollution in Sofia — Source: namoreto.bg

Another 30% of the pollution comes from transport—the rest is caused by industries and other factors. Sofia has the lowest taxes on polluting cars, despite it being the richest city in Bulgaria. Should we get elected, we will do everything that needs to be done for the good

of the city. Even if it can be unpopular. I don't fear the judgment of the city in saying it. We need to raise the taxes on polluting vehicles, we need to set low emission zones in some areas of the city, we need to close roads and streets to make them only opened to pedestrians, and we need to promote public transport. Sofia has new buses and a developed metro system, but the official statistics tell us that fewer people are using public means. Every day, 600 cars are registered in Sofia. This is an enormous number the city can't cope with. The only way to face the issue is having public transportation that is everywhere, that is fast and reliable.

Some districts in Sofia host a large concentrated Roma population, that lives in the so-called "ghettos" in awful conditions. While it's true that these districts have a high crime rate, most of the Bulgarian population still has a heavy and prejudicial antiziganist feeling. How would your movement protect human dignity in these districts, while taking care of the consequential issues that their condition has on the other areas of the city?

First of all, we need to clarify one aspect of the matter. For many years, unfortunately, the majority of the Roma population in Bulgaria has been used – and it is still so – by the traditional political parties. They have huge interests to keep this population as miserable as possible, as poor as possible, as uneducated as possible because then they can buy votes during the elections. There are a lot of examples in Bulgaria, not only in Sofia, wherein one election the 90% of the population of a Roma neighborhood votes for the left, and four years later they are all voting for the right party. This is a clear indicator that we are talking of politicians buying votes, and not of people expressing their own opinion and political view. This is the reason why for 30 years we've had so many programs, projects, and activities for the integration, with no tangible and durable results. We want our city to develop, and we want all our citizens to improve their conditions.

This is why our goal is to identify and fix the root of the problem, not its symptoms. Racism is often a direct consequence of a personal accident linked to an infrastructure problem or a social problem, which the authority can and must solve. We must remove all obstacles that prevent the development of a safe environment for all. If we remove what causes the social tension between the communities, even this widespread hatred will diminish. In our program, we are including solutions to many problems that the Roma community faces every day, almost all related to infrastructure. I cannot remember when it was the last time the municipality made a new street in a Gypsy neighborhood. I'm pretty sure it was 30 years ago. I cannot remember the last time a repairment work was made in one of the so-called "ghettos". I cannot remember the last time the authorities built municipal homes to relocate people who are living in huts. The Sofia municipality has so far completely abandoned its social duties and responsibilities toward the community, leaving these neighborhoods in self-management. This is the reason why there is a high crime rate in these districts.

We need to invest in the infrastructure of the city, but more of that we want to involve NGOs in the process. The only good example I can see at the moment is given by grassroots organizations that work on the spot, with the people. They operate in these suburbs with the help of health mediators and educators, and often the result is fantastic. In one of the neighborhoods, the school attending rate grew from 30% to more than 70%, only because these NGOs were present on the spot.



The Roma ghetto of Filipovtsi, in Sofia — Credit: Ivan Bonev

They insisted with families on the importance of having their children attending school. They went door to door every morning to see if the children were sent to their classes. They had a goal and they had a plan to reach that goal. NGOs are functioning as a bridge between the institutions and the needs of the people. They have a broad experience in dealing with these issues, and it's only logical that the municipality tells them: "You have the knowledge and the experience. We have the funds and tools. Let's work together to find the best solution for these people. And, most important, let's implement these solutions". I'm not afraid of implementing the needed solutions. I don't depend on their votes. I want them to vote me because they appreciate what I do, and not because I buy their votes. If I want to be a responsible mayor, it will be my duty to do everything possible for them to take part in the vibrant society of our Capital city and have a good life. This is the main difference between us and the traditional political parties.

There is an undeniable structural problem on how the Bulgarian authorities deal with specific categories of human beings. More than once I've seen cops beat homeless for the simple fact of existing.

Every day I talk with a lot of people on the streets. I had the opportunity to meet several homeless people, too. We talked about the issues they face every day. They shared their perspective on the city, I listened to them telling what their most crucial needs are. For instance, the only municipal institution for homeless people in Sofia is a place they don't want to go to. They are not treated well, and the conditions of the building are very poor. Sofia can be freezing in winter, with peaks of -25° at nights; can you imagine how bad the situation is at this refuge if a people with no home prefers to sleep outside? Employees working in this institution receive a ridiculous salary, they are not motivated, they are not even properly trained for what they are doing. And this is a broad and transversal problem, in Bulgaria. The same problem is also with elders, orphans, and people with mental health issues. These people are completely forgotten, no one is taking care of them. In our nation,

having a mental issue is a stigma and everyone is afraid of talking about that. As a result, nobody cares about the well-being of people with this condition.

There is a huge need of a heavy public investment in the social infrastructure as a whole. We need a holistic plan for the social policies in Sofia. Those who work in these facilities must be trained on how to treat their assisted with dignity. They also need to be prepared for difficult situations, and they should know how to behave lucidly when something goes wrong. Again, this can't be done without proper investment and the involvement of NGOs.

Your movement has ambitious goals for Sofia, you want to revolutionize the way the common good is administered. All the measures you plan to adopt will require a huge effort, from many perspectives. How are you going to make all this, and where would you take the money from? How can people trust that this is not only mere propaganda?

Our program includes both short-term measures and long-term strategies. A trustable mayor should be a visionary person. We want to start now doing what Sofia will reap in ten years. It should have been done twenty years ago, and this is exactly the reason why change can't be delayed any further. Next year, the current General Urban Plan for Sofia will be changed. At the moment, it has a 10-year validity, and the current urban plan is going to expire in 2020. However, due to a change in the law, the duration of the next urban plan will be doubled.

We are on the edge of a 20-year urban plan for our Capital city, and no other candidate is saying it! This is the greatest opportunity we have to give clear direction on how the municipal funds should be invested for the good of the citizens. This is the moment to believe in our dreams and to implement our ideas. Ten years from now, the time will come when the city will need the application of the ideas we want to start planning today; if we don't act now, we won't be prepared to what needs to be done. We cannot just say: "We'll find a way". When things are not planned, the results are catastrophic. And we see this principle all around us. Many of the big issues need time and money to be solved.

Sofia is not a poor municipality. The yearly budget is 800 million Euros. It may seem ridiculous to big cities in Italy and other Western European countries, but to Sofia, it's a big budget. And it's increasing every year. The point is that this money is being squandered, the corruption in the system is very expensive for the public treasure. We identified three main ways to fund our projects for Sofia. The big issue is having better management of the money of the municipality; we have worked on a lot of very specific possible measures to accomplish this, which I can summarize as "transparency and fight to corruption as priorities". Then we'll need to increase revenues, and we'll do that through a more efficient fine system. Right now, the institution responsible for the fines in the city can't even collect enough money to pay the salaries of the inspectors. The ratio is 1:3.

Many sanctionable illegal acts happen in the city every day, and transgressors need to know that every time they break a rule, they'll be fined. The third way we'll increase the revenue is higher taxes on polluting vehicles and on new construction permits. There is a construction boom in Sofia, and the municipality doesn't have the money to build the infrastructure around the new homes. When you pay 5€ per square meter as a construction permit fee, and then

you sell the apartment for 1300€ per square meter, there is a huge discrepancy. In Belgrade, which is a comparable Capital to Sofia, the construction permit costs 200€, not 5€ like it is in Sofia. We want to follow the vision of a modern and European city, focused on the wellbeing of the citizens rather than the political parties. And we are not afraid of letting the people know how we intend to act financially.



Jeffrey Raza/Frontiere News

Should you become mayor, and should the experience in the Sofia municipality be positive, would you plan to aim to the national political elections? If so, where would you politically align your movement?

This is not something we are discussing now. We want to prove ourselves. I can't even imagine asking trust of the people on the national level if I haven't proofed my reliability on the city level. Sofia is where our expertise lies, it is where our hearts are, and we need to focus on Sofia. We are now focused on Sofia and we will work for Sofia. We hope that we can set an example for other Bulgarian cities, on how to have good governance, to fight corruption, to develop for the people and not for personal interests.

Should we feel the need to act on the national level in the future, when the biggest problems of Sofia are solved, then most probably we will do it, but for now it's not something we have planned at all. Should that happen, we'll be careful about where to align. In Bulgaria the boundary between left and right is definitively smoothed, to say the least. This leads to many paradoxes. Just think that one of the most right-wing economic measures ever taken in Bulgaria – which is the flat tax rate – has been introduced by the former Communist Party. We are not politically sided. Our position is to do what our country needs us to do. If we want to promote the entrepreneurial spirit, we'll need to apply measures that in other countries would be considered as center-right-wing policies. On the other hand, we'll need to adopt left policies to solve social issues. I would define our team as goal-driven and results-oriented technocrats. We want to see things done correctly, because Bulgaria deserves it.