SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

The public opinion on the work of the judicial system and awareness of the reforms

(Alpha Research, 2010)

The third stage (June 2007 – May 2010) of the survey on the opinions and attitudes to the operation of the courts and the reforms undergoing in the judicial system has confirmed the conclusions of the second stage (April 2006 – June 2007) on the progress, made by the courts assisted by the project. At the same time it outlined the several additional trends and gave insight into new nuances.

1. Evaluation of the service and work organization in the courts

As regards to the overall assessment of the court’s work, for the first time there is a slight prevail, although by less, of the satisfaction over dissatisfaction. If in 2007 about one fifth of the respondents thought that the work of the court in their region deteriorates, in 2010 this opinion is supported only by less than 10 % of the respondents (9% in the Model Courts and 6% in the Control group of courts). The 2010 survey shows that the general assessment of the clients in both Model and Control Courts is positive. Although by small margin (about 5%) the positive opinions in Model Courts are more than those in the Control Courts. The most obvious positive changes that contribute to the higher satisfaction of the court’s clients are the more careful and polite service provided by the administrative staff and the lack of excessive delay of cases. Other factors relevant to the higher satisfaction levels are the faster and efficient service, better public access to information for ongoing cases, faster scheduling and completion of cases and easier and quicker obtaining of copies of court decisions. According to the data:

- Procedures for obtaining certificate of conviction received 47% “very good” scores in 2010 and 34 % in 2007. The positive difference in favor of the courts participating in the program compared to the Control group of Courts is significantly high – 62 % to 40.7 %.
- Promptness in providing information to the citizens (24 % “very good” scores in 2010 and 19 % in 2007). This indicator shows general improvement of the situation compared to 2007 in both Model Courts and Control Courts.
- Access to information on court cases (16 % “very good” scores in 2010 against 11% in 2007). Although this indicator shows general improvement in access to information on court cases, we can report higher positive assessments in Model Courts in 2010 compared to 2007.
- Easier and quicker obtaining of court decisions - 19 % “very good” in 2010 against 14 % in 2007)
- Acceptable duration for case procedures (12% “very good” scores in 2010 against 8% in 2007). Although we can see improvement in this indicator, this is one aspect of the court’s work which retains the comparatively high negative assessments. The clients with negative opinions are mostly those whose cases are seen by appellative and regional courts.
The survey convincingly shows that several indicators related to the organization of the work, the administration of cases and the information assisting the orientation in the courts register better scores in Model Courts in 2010 survey than in 2007, but the difference with the 2006 survey is especially evident since these indicators received significantly lower assessments then. These indicators are: information on the location of the different desks servicing the citizens and information about the schedule of court hearings. For four years the percentage of negative opinions on these indicators almost disappeared. This once again shows that consecutive little steps can lead to change in the opinions and the assessment of the various relevant groups.

2. Interest and awareness levels with regard to the reform of the judiciary system

At the same time it must be noted that as far as the judicial reform is concerned, the openness and transparency in the work of the courts is one of the fields where the clients see less positive results. Although these results are more obvious to the respondents from the Model Courts, overall, they are still less visible to the majority of the clients, especially when compared to the other changes resulting from the ongoing reforms. The aspects of the courts’ work in which the positive changes as consequences of the ongoing reforms are more visible remain administrative services and organization of work.

The comparative analysis of the data from the different years (2006, 2007 and 2010) shows changes in some image issues concerning mostly the impartiality of the court and its independence from political and economic pressure. The change of the opinions on these issues is a general tendency concerning all courts rather than a difference caused by specific activities and work with model courts. For example, in both groups the opinions on the impartiality of the courts concentrate on the moderate positive assessments: in Model Courts we have 47% “good” scores which is 13% higher than 2007 and in the Control Courts we have 41% which is 11% higher than 2007. Regarding the independence of the courts, there are no significant differences between the Model and the Control Courts. The differences in the indicators measuring the independence are within or slightly above the statistical error. However, the comparative analysis of all three surveys shows also that the opinions on the level of dependence from political pressure are the highest in the 2010 survey - 70-76% in both groups. While, for example, in 2007 these opinions were significantly lower: only 44-45% of the respondents considered the courts independent and 55-57% - dependent.

Even so, the opinions regarding the dependence of the court from political pressure do not reflect directly upon the assessment of the clients with respect to the fairness of the procedures. On this indicator there are no visible differences between Model Courts and Control Courts, either. This is because such opinions are largely formed as a result of the general public and media environment which generates big expectations for positive changes in probably the most problematic areas in the public life in Bulgaria – judicial reform and law enforcement. Taking into account the commitment of the political elite in this issue the society expects to see soon real results achieved in respect of the judiciary concerning the independence of the courts (Model Courts - 98%, Control Courts – 89.4%), openness and accountability (Model Courts - 98%, Control Courts – 98.6%), protection of civic rights (Model Courts – 98.1%, Control Courts – 96.7%) and reducing corruption (Model Courts – 93.7%, Control Courts – 97.2%).