Bulgaria Invites Guests for a Day of Intense Democracy

By NICHOLAS WOOD

SOFIA, Bulgaria — With food, wine and ripples of laughter, more than 200 guests gathered for dinner at a Communist-era hotel on the edge of this capital for what seemed like a wedding party. Heckles pierced speeches, and the alcohol flowed.

But the gathering at the Park Hotel Moskva was part of an experiment in trying to reinvigorate the democratic process as the governments struggle with declining voting numbers and waning interest in public affairs, while better informing leaders about how an educated public would lean on difficult decisions.

The process, devised by a Stanford professor, James S. Fishkin, harks back to classical Greek democratic ideals, bringing together a random representative group, deepening the individuals’ knowledge of an issue and allowing them to debate it. Polls of the group before and after the process provide concrete measures of change for decision makers to study.

Called Deliberative Polling (the term has been trademarked), the process has been used by political groups and private companies, in places as far apart as Greece, China, Italy and Texas, and the European Union intends to use it before discussions on a new constitution this fall. But the debate here was the first try by a national government.

The question was one of the most intractable issues facing society here: how to improve the lives of Bulgaria’s impoverished Roma, who make up around a tenth of the country’s population of seven million. Most live in cramped neighborhoods outside the main towns and cities, a consequence of planning when the Communists were in power.

Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev pledged to use the results to shape policy. That was not a risk-free promise: just as citizens’ assemblies in classical Athens voted to put Socrates to death, Bulgaria’s poll risked producing some draconian measures.

The process began with an initial survey of 1,344 people, covering issues involving the Roma, as many Gypsies refer to themselves, in housing, crime and education. From those surveyed, 255 were selected for the meeting, held in mid-April. They received briefing materials, including proposals from political parties, the government and nongovernmental organizations. In Sofia, the day after their get-acquainted dinner, the participants gathered at the National Palace of Culture, a monolith that dominates a city center park, and divided into groups with trained moderators. Over two days, they debated with competing experts and politicians, posing questions they formed in the small groups.

“Instead of a self-selected group who have an agenda, this is a way of getting a representative group that can get informed and think through issues,” Professor Fishkin said.

At the outset, the discussions tended to drift toward the extreme.

“They should be given just bread and water,” said Mariana Draganova, a woman in her mid-40s, who suggested that Roma families lose welfare payments if a relative were jailed. “And maybe when they come out of prison they will think about turning to crime again,” she said.

A man in the same group suggested all state benefits be cut for parents whose children skip school. One policy under discussion and advocated by a nationalist party proposed that all Roma neighborhoods be enclosed by high walls.

Six hours of the proceedings were broadcast on national television.

When the debate was over, the participants were surveyed again. Those who thought “the Roma should live in separate Roma neighborhoods” declined to 21 percent from 43 percent. Those who wanted to see an increase in the number of Roma police officers rose to 52 percent from 32 percent. Those agreeing that “Roma schools should be closed and all the children should be transported by buses to their new school” rose to 66 percent from 42 percent.

The results were compiled by Professor Fishkin, on hand to help supervise the event, and his colleague Robert C. Luskin of the University of Texas.

They appeared to indicate that most Bulgarians were more willing to support measures to integrate Roma into society, even though nationalist politicians use increasingly hostile language toward them.

“The general feeling from the debates,” Mr. Stanishev said, was that “there is a high level of tolerance, which is the most important condition
for their integration."

He added, “It is much more difficult to gain confidence on the basis of something that has been decided in the party or in the institutions.”

But some say the process may not translate from a local, town hall, environment into the arena of national politics, which is more subject to the rigors of modern media campaigns, interest groups and lobbying.

To those who wonder if Deliberative Polling can represent “true democracy,” Professor Fishkin had this story. In a test in Zhejiang Province, in China, the polling was used to determine public attitudes toward spending priorities. Participants called for the townships’ public works budget to be spent on water treatment, not new roads, as public officials had originally suggested.

Impressed by the process, Jiang Zhaohua, the Communist Party official who authorized the exercise, suggested to Professor Fishkin that it was more democratic than the electoral process in the United States.

The professor recalled their exchange. “Tell me, Mr. Fishkin,’ Mr. Jiang asked me, ‘do you live in a swing state?’ To which I said ‘no.’ He then said, ‘is your Congressional district gerrymandered?’ It is. ‘You see,’ he continued, ‘your votes do not count!’ ”

In Greece, the former foreign minister and current opposition leader George Papandreou helped organize a Deliberative Poll to select a Socialist Party candidate for mayor in Maroussi, an Athens suburb where many of the 2004 Olympic events were held.

Local governments have also found it useful. The Italian region of Lazio, which incorporates Rome, used the process recently to determine health care priorities. Participants decided to scrap hospital beds and spend the savings on other hospital services.

In February, when parents in Northern Ireland were questioned about educational reforms, a majority of respondents showed after deliberating that they were in favor of closer cooperation between Roman Catholic and Protestant education systems. That debunked the long-held view that most parents wanted their children educated separately.

Some of the first experiments were in the private sector. In Texas, eight utility companies used the process between 1996 and 1998 to look at energy use and found support for developing renewable energy sources.

But the polls do not always predict accurately. In Australia in 1999, a Deliberative Poll held ahead of a referendum on the monarchy showed most participants favored a republic. But Australia voted to keep its ties with the queen.

Professor Fishkin put that down to a “modern political television campaign.”

There are other notes of caution. Some observers here suggested that the atmosphere of a debate — in an official hall, with politicians on hand — meant that participants acted in a more broad-minded way, disguising prejudices they might express at home.

And a brief tour of the discussion groups in Sofia showed that the more gifted the speakers, the more they dominated the discussion. In Maroussi, the winner was the most self-assured speaker.

But that, too, harks back to ancient Greece. Plato mocked Athenian democracy as a tyranny of orators, not a redoubt of sound argument.