

By Zaklina Hadzi-Zafirova*

With tears in her eyes, 30-year-old Ana (the name has been changed to protect the source) waits to see the newborn baby she had just given birth to at the gynecological hospital of her 50,000-resident town in southeastern Macedonia. But before she could see her baby, she had to take care of something. According to town tradition, after delivering a child a mother must feast the doctors and medical personnel so she and her newborn will receive more attention than other patients. This birth tariff is 3,000 denars (US\$75) for doctors and 1,000 denars (US\$25) for each attendant.

This abuse has received no attention because the mothers have nowhere to turn: They are scared because they live in a small city where everyone knows one another. Corruption is also rampant in other areas of Macedonian society, which can't free itself from various forms of abuses and quid pro quos, despite some government efforts to stop criminal activities.

This year cameras were placed in health-care institutions to prevent abuses. But the program had no better outcome than other government projects, which failed because they contradicted other laws or the Constitution. In this case, some of the cameras were removed because they contravened laws protecting personal information. Along with the removal of the cameras, went the chance that many criminal or corruptive actions would be revealed.

Another case of abuse involved 49-year-old Milan A: He wandered through state bureaucracy for five years hoping to adopt a child. He says there seems to be no end to the corruption that has overtaken state institutions related to labor and social programs.

"Starting in 2004, every year they told me that my documents had become out of date, which cost me money and nerves. During these five years, not once have I received a written response," he explains, expressing disappointment with the behavior of the state institutions. Because of those practices, time went by and he passed the maximum age limit, losing the right to adopt a baby. He says he will sue.

High-level corruption

The government has proclaimed a fight against corruption, and in 2008 there were several public arrests, but most

citizens say they don't feel any real results from that struggle, except in cases that are covered by the media.

“By the end of 2008, 27 verdicts in cases of high-level corruption were brought, and more than 100 persons were sanctioned, most for misuse of their official positions and for taking bribes,” Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski stated in June 2009 while attending the Regional Conference for Europe and Central Asia organized by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Transparency International. “With this, the Republic of Macedonia has shown that the laws are equal for everyone.” He pointed out that the government is continuously improving the fight against corruption and said that in only two years, Macedonia went from 105th place to 72nd place in Transparency International's index. In the 2009 index, it ranked 71st among 180 countries, which caused criticism that the fight against corruption is not progressing.

The prime minister's statement about equal application of law turns out to not include his closest collaborators: government ministers. In May 2009, the opposition alleged that for four months, Minister for Justice Mihajlo Manevski, a member of the prime minister's ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, received pension and salary at the same time, which he later confirmed. The case raised questions about the government's fight against corruption when, several months after the case was discovered, the prosecutor's office investigated the case but did not press charges because the money had been returned and, in its view, that eliminated any damage that could have been caused. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Macedonia asked for Manevski's resignation, but to no avail.

Manevski's case, however, led investigators to find that 148 state officials and individuals also had received a pension on irregular conditions. The charges resulted in the July 2009 arrest of six employees in the Fund for Pension and Invalid Insurance. They were accused of misusing 13 million denars (US\$325,000).

“Manevski's case is an embarrassment,” said Branko Gerovski, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Sega*. “I would accept the excuse that it was not his own mistake that he received a pension and a salary at the same time. But still, he is the minister for justice, so he should be the public face for justice. The fact that he did not resign means that he has no sense of responsibility,” he adds.

Gerovski, also the government controller since May 2008, is a member of the non-governmental organization Platforma. Connected to the opposition Social-Democratic

Party (SDSM), Platforma accuses the government of exercising pressure against those who express different opinions and spreading fear in the media and the population.

Manevski did not leave the government in July 2009, as did several other ministers who mysteriously resigned or were removed from office by the Prime Minister. In one day, the Vice Prime Minister for Economy and three other ministers (Education and Science, Finance and Agriculture) left Gruevski's government without explanation. The Vice Prime Minister for Eurointegration, Ivica Bocevski, had also left the government. His resignation came only two weeks before the European Commission's (EC) recommendation to liberalize visa regulations, so that starting Dec 2009, Macedonian citizens are no longer required a visa to enter European countries.

In the case of Minister for Education and Science, Pero Stojanovski of the State Audit Office (DZR — *Dr'aven zavod za revizija*) announced in November 2008 that he had unlawfully taken 155 thousand denars (US\$3,875) as a commission member in the Ministry for Assignments, a position that was part of his regular duties as a state secretary in the Ministry. He and 90 other Ministry employees took a total of 14 million denars (US\$350,000).

Public arrests continue, but corruption still exists

Last year's public arrests for corruption and crime continued this year but on a much smaller scale. One of last year's biggest arrests was that of the tobacco "boss" from Kumanovo, Bajrus Sejdiu, and at least 29 of his collaborators in October 2008. The group was arrested in a police action called Ashes (*Pepeh*) for illegally producing and smuggling well-known brands of cigarettes, as well as for corruption and not paying taxes. Sejdiu owned several firms and was known as a wealthy man.

The government's campaign for fighting corruption, together with campaigns for education and the promotion of Macedonian products, cost the state 270 million denars (US\$6.5 million) in 2007, the State Audit Office (SAO) revealed. Still, experts think this has not decreased the level of corruption or citizens' perception about it, according to the Transparency International's 2009 Global Barometer for Corruption survey. According to the survey, published in June 2009, more than half of Macedonian citizens believe that the judiciary is extremely corrupt, while more than 80 percent think there is corruption in public administration. However, despite this negative

perception about corruption, 65 percent of citizens say that the government is fighting corruption efficiently.

“Like last year, this year the government continues to project the image of fighting corruption, but the results are worse than last year,” explains Saso Ordanovski, director of the television station ALSAT-M and president of the board of Transparency Macedonia (*Transparentnost Makedonija*). “The SAO reports show troubling situations in the way public money is spent and that the state is becoming less transparent in this area.” He also announced that the state anti-corruption commission is under government control.

Citizens’ hopes rise with expected EU membership

Good news for Macedonian citizens came in October 2009, when, after four years of EU candidate status, the European Commission recommended the start of the negotiations with Macedonia for EU membership. It pointed out that more progress needs to be visible in judicial reforms, the strengthening of the administration and the fight against corruption. In December 2009 the Council of Ministers of the EU prolonged the decision about the start of negotiations.

The main obstacle is the dispute with Greece over Macedonia’s name (Greece opposes the term “Macedonia” as the constitutional name of the country, because there is a Greek region called Macedonia, among other reasons), which the European Commission has said needs to be resolved before the negotiations can start. The Commission also said the country needs to make additional efforts to fight corruption and to have an independent judiciary.

Other obstacles include concerns from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe about voters’ lists in the last presidential election, as well as local elections held this spring. They wonder how it is possible for a country of two million people to have 1.8 million voters, but experts doubt that it will be possible to find the answer in a country where information released by public institutions is limited and strictly controlled.

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