

What's the price of a passing grade for a university student in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia? 400 euros (US\$500) is what a professor asked from one student, in order to give her a passing grade on an exam required for her diploma. The student knew this was the only way for her to get through the difficult exam. [Editor's note: sources throughout this notebook are unnamed for their protection].

This procedure is the only one that enables many students to continue their studies. Some claim that this form of corruption has become sophisticated. According to Samoil Malcevski, the president of a student organization, students don't pay cash, but rather make payments through a middleman or directly into a professor's bank account. Amounts range from 50 euros (US\$63) up to 2,000 euros (US\$2,503) per exam, says another student. Moreover, it is unspoken public knowledge that some professors require their students to buy the books they authored. They then keep lists specifically indicating which students followed this prerequisite, says a student at one of Skopje's state universities.

The Ministry of Education doesn't know how many students are asked for bribes. The most recent incident that shows a lack of control in this area was the forged diploma of State Secretary Liljana Sterijovska, something the Ministry of Defense discovered in the summer of 2008. She is now being prosecuted.

Perception vs. Reality

Two years ago, Macedonia shared the 105th place on Transparency International's Corruption Index with Swaziland. In 2008, Macedonia ranked 72nd, in front of other countries in the region including Serbia and Montenegro, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The new government has confirmed its determination to fight corruption with a series of public arrests that were shown in the news; a move, according to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Transparency Macedonia (*Transparentnost Makedonija*) that has raised public awareness about fighting corruption. However, experts warn that this doesn't mean corruption has decreased. They point out that the main areas of corruption are big tenders, conflicts of interest, misuse of official positions, and lack of government transparency.

The government is taking measures against corruption, but only in areas where the amounts range from 50 euros (US\$63) to 300 euros (US\$375). When you fight corruption at a level where you can arrest several hundred people for petty bribery, you limit the perception of corruption. But when there are hundreds of millions of euros in question, you hide such scandals from the eyes of the public, says Saso Ordanovski, president of the board of Transparency Macedonia. He claims that in the last two years, only a few of the largest 20 tenders over 1 million euros (US\$1.25 million) have been executed according to lawful procedures.

Government Employment

The owners of the largest four or five TV stations in the country are political leaders who participate in the ruling political coalition. Here, corruption is not only a question of taking money; it is also perpetuated through nontransparent processes. Transparency in politics is one of the first steps to fighting corruption, says Ordanovski, and if the government is allowed to spend 2 or 3 percent of the state budget each year on television commercials, Ordanovski believes that no station owner can stay indifferent.

Zoran Bojarovski, an editor at ALFA TV (*Alfa Televizija*), is skeptical that the new government is making great efforts to fight corruption.

“I say this not as a journalist, but as a citizen concerned by this problem,” says Bojarovski.

His main concerns are about conflicts of interest and the politization of employment in state institutions.

“A friend of mine has been trying to find a job as a profesor for years,” he says. “This year she finally reached a high party official of the ruling party who offered his help. He told her he could help her get a job in a school and directed her to the party’s headquarters. There, party members asked her if she was a member of the ruling party. When she answered, ‘no,’ they told her that could be fixed at once and offered her a party membership card. She turned them down and lost the job.”

NGOs have also expressed concerns about memberships in the executive boards of state companies. The main concern is when one person is a member of the boards of several state companies. Currently, there are at least six cases that are considered to be conflicts of interest, and they are being investigated by the State Commission for

Prevention of Corruption. The people in question are heads of cabinets or other senior government officials, and they are known to be close allies of the vice president and two ministers.

Political Influence

Many citizens are convinced that the most corrupt area of government is the judiciary. This year, 40 of the approximately 150 complaints received by the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption concern the judiciary.

Mirjana Dimovska, president of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, explains that the commission has expressed concerns several times to the government about spending government money on political programs benefiting the ruling party. However, the public doesn't know how much money the government has spent on campaigns. According to Dimovska, deep politization has taken roots in society, and it's being reflected in the cases.

"It is hard in our country to (pursue) cases of corruption because of political influence," says Dimovska. "I suspect that the initiatives for (fighting) corruption have been lost."

Speaking of political influence, Dimovska mentions the case of the then-deputy opposition leader, Zoran Zaev, who was accused of misusing his position as mayor of Strumica by allegedly allowing a developer to build a trade center on state land and embezzling funds. Zaev was arrested in front of cameras, drawing criticism from some local anti-corruption organizations. Zaev's party walked out of Parliament in protest. The case did not go to court due to intervention from president Branko Crvenkovski (who comes from the same political party). Zaev was granted amnesty and the opposition party returned to their seats. Zaev became party leader shortly afterwards.

Despite some progress, Macedonia is not capable of executing corruption investigations or bringing guilty parties to court, according to the Parliamentary Assembly (PA) of the Council of Europe in its annual report for the country, issued in the summer of 2008. In the report, the PA points out that many corruption cases that did go to court were dismissed.

Sweets for Service

A citizen bringing coffee or something sweet when visiting a government institution has unfortunately become a part

of Macedonian tradition. They offer these gifts to government employees to get quicker service.

But if you ask the experts, they will tell you that this is the most naive form of corruption compared to the grander, less visible forms of corruption that pose a greater threat to the country.

