"I'd better be a vegetarian!" The thought crosses my mind as I start working on the shady serial trade deal, which this time concerns the illegal import of 75 tons of beef, kept at the Bulgarian border on its way from Greece. I'm thinking "vegetarian" because I read a report that said meat can cause cancer, but even more so because this particular meat, coming from far-away Ireland, is 20 years old! The standard in the European Union and in Bulgaria specifies that meat is fit for human consumption no more than two years after it has been produced.

Although the 75 tons of beef had been kept at the border since February 2006, a previous load of 50 tons, imported by the same company, entered the country in December 2005 and was distributed on the market during Christmastime.

Angry questions have flooded the newspapers: Who is the importer? Who allowed the import? Where were the regulators? How long will it continue to be like this? But this story is old and already well-known. For a long time, the scenario has been the same: a Bulgarian phantom company manages to import goods with disputable quality, because it is supported by a group of bribable customs officers, border policemen and veterinarian inspectors at a border checkpoint in Kulata. Such incidents are common at all Bulgarian borders, a practice that threatens the lives and health of ordinary people. And despite authorities’ attempts to change the situation, having in mind the forthcoming accession to the European Union, there are no significant signs of changes for the better.

Eighty office workers have been dismissed for breaking bribery laws during the first six months of 2006, according to a report presented by Rumen Petkov, the minister of Internal Affairs. For the same period, 150 office workers were caught receiving bribes, were involved in venality schemes or showed signs of tolerating corrupt practices. Despite the gravity of charges, their sentences are symbolic. According to data from the Bulgarian nongovernmental organization Center for the Study of Democracy, 75 percent of the punishments for corruption are imprisonment for a maximum of three years.

According to a May 2006 government report on national security, 2,476 crimes connected with corrupt practices were revealed in 2005, including 105 government employees caught taking bribes. A sociological survey prepared by the Center for the Study of Democracy reports that at least 130,000 corrupted deals take place in Bulgaria every year.
I ask myself how many tons of meat have been distributed in Bulgaria under the above-mentioned scheme. The case with the “20-year-old food for dogs,” which was the description of the beef when it was exported from Ireland to The Netherlands, and which was then presented as fit for human consumption at the Bulgarian-Greek border, is just the tip of the iceberg.

During the ensuing investigation, which lasted for several months, I discovered that the owner of the company Bul Impex, the importer of the beef, is Georgy Georgiev. A 35-year-old businessman, Mr. Georgiev appears to be the owner of more than 30 other firms, according to the system for trade register information, Ciela. The same companies have more than Lev35 million (approximately US$22 million) liabilities to the state budget, according to the list of big debtors published on the website of the Ministry of Finance. Georgiev appears to have been playing the role of a post box, where “enterprising” businessmen have just “dropped” their firms by selling them through fake deals. He then made hundreds of contraband deals, robbing the state budget of millions of leva. For such a result to be accomplished, corrupt state office workers at the border are not enough. More players in the team are needed, such as representatives of Bulgarian taxation authorities. They are extremely rigorous and strict when dealing with ordinary people, who count their last cents just to pay their obligations to the budget. Some state employees, though, are particularly servile toward the “businessmen” who are willing to pay a generous bribe in order to protect their real liabilities from the state.

On July 3, 2005, a venal tax collector, who was also an inspector from Territory Tax Directorate in Sofia, was dismissed. She had been detained two months earlier, caught with a Lev5,000 (US$3,300) bribe. An investigation proved something well-known already: The woman owned several apartments, country homes and a nice car, which she could have never afforded from her official income.

A day later, Chief Tax Inspector Nikolai Popov announced that authorities were working on four more similar cases with taxation employees suspected to be involved in corrupt practices or being exposed to a corrupt pressure. For the first time since the General Tax Directorate was established, it officially announced a telephone line where people could report corruption among taxation agents.

I was almost inclined to believe that Bulgarian clerks were ready to make a real effort and fight corruption, when a new case shook my faith. On Jan. 16, 2006, a BMW SUV with an official plate, registered under the name of Svetlin Mihailov, chief of Sofia City Court, provoked a scandal in the Supreme Court Council. It was revealed that Mihailov had received the car for free from the Customs Service, but that subsequently Rumen Nenkov, deputy chief of the Supreme Court of Cassation, appealed that this order be revoked. As it turned out, the SUV was
registered to a German citizen, and it had been stolen from him there. When the
vehicle passed the Bulgarian border, it was detained by a vigilant customs officer
but never returned to its owner. The car became material evidence and had to be
kept until the case was solved (which would take at least three or four years at the
routine pace of the court system in Bulgaria). Through another well established
practice in Bulgaria, customs authorities place such vehicles at the disposal of
high-powered state officials — in this case, Mihailov. The magistrate fought
fiercely for several days to keep the luxury SUV, but the social opinion in Bulgaria
and Germany was so ill-disposed towards him that he finally was forced to give
up.

At the beginning of February, a list with names of 30 magistrates suspected of
corrupt practices was deposited in the chief prosecutor’s office. The existence of
the list was announced by the Director of The National Investigation Service,
Angel Alexandrov. The list contained mostly names of investigators, but also
names of judges from around the country. Imputed were cases of thefts, rapes
and beatings, in which investigators had failed to do their jobs, until and unless
they were paid by the people who were seeking justice.

In February, shortly after the beef incident at the border checkpoint in Kulata, I
concluded that corruption in Bulgaria had no boundaries. In Sofia, during a special
operation, two employees of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs were detained. They
were suspected of abusing their administrative authority, of organizing and direct
participating in contraband with excisable goods. For almost two months, 35-year-
olds G.M. and A.N. from Sofia Security Police Department of the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs were caught guarding shipments of contraband cigarettes in their
free time. Both sergeants were also actively involved in distributing the goods in
stores and storehouses all over the country, according to a statement issued by
the ministry.

A much more serious case made headlines a few days later. More than 100
employees of the chief directorate for the Fight against Organized Crime made
simultaneous checkups in hundreds of locations, inspecting, among others, 14
warehouses and offices of different companies. A day later, Hristo Grigorov,
director of the Bulgarian Red Cross, was arrested. The checkups had been
caused by a warning sign that food and clothes donations for disaster victims
were illegally distributed on the free market. During the investigation it became
clear that donations passing through the Bulgarian Red Cross were dedicated to
the chief mufti’s (Islamic scholar’s) office in Bulgaria and later distributed to stores.
The profit never reached the destitute people but a limited circle of people from
the charity and chief mufti’s office. After a short period of time spent behind bars,
Grigorov managed to hold on to his job. No one else was punished.
The next scandal that caused tension and angered the public opinion involved thefts from State Reserve and Wartime Stocks Agency. On Feb. 23, 2006, the Ministry of Disaster Management Policy broke the news that Lev200 million (US$130 million) worth of goods were missing from the agency. This included Lev65 million (US$42 million) worth of fuel and over Lev100 million (US$65 million) worth of wheat.

In view of the fact that the EU expects the Bulgarian authorities to adopt anti-corruption measures at the highest level of the power, on March 13, 2006, the government disclosed that 35 politicians charged with taking bribes were under investigation. Thirteen of them were former and current deputies in the National Assembly. The prosecutor’s office introduced 35 indictments, according to a government report for implementation of criteria for joining the EU.

March 6, 2006, was the date of the first coordinating meeting of the anti-corruption commissions in the National Assembly, Council of Ministers and Supreme Court Council. On the agenda was a report for violation of the law in management of the Kozlodui nuclear power plant. Under attack was Yordan Kostadinov, the former director of the plant and also a deputy in the current parliament. The scandal that followed proved the helplessness of this executive body in fighting corruption. Kostadinov is a member of Simeon II National Movement, one of the parties in the ruling coalition. The attempt of the socialists in the commission to investigate a representative of this party provoked united resistance on their part. The situation would be the same if Simeon II National Movement tried to attack the Bulgarian Socialist Party, or if either of them went against the third party in the coalition, the National Movement for Rights and Freedom, which represents the interests of the ethnic Turk population in Bulgaria. From all this we could draw the only conclusion that no disclosure of large dimensions should be expected in Bulgaria during the rule of the three-party coalition, which is in power until the country is scheduled to join the EU in January 2007.

Finally came good news. The court took on a case revealed in the BBC documentary “Buying the Games.” Ivan Slavkov, the son-in-low of former dictator Todor Jivkov and chairman of the Bulgarian Olympic Committee, was suspended in August after being implicated in an alleged corruption scandal. Despite the evident proof brought against Slavkov in the documentary, the D.A.’s office opened a case not against him, but against the BBC journalists, charging them with using a hidden camera, a practice that is not allowed by Bulgarian law.

Several days later, there came more good news. The chief of Municipal Markets Co., Venelin Marinov, was arrested just five minutes after taking bribe in Lev200 marked bills. In a drawer of his desk, an additional Lev3,000 (US$2,000) were found, according to a source from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.
His arrest gave courage to the traders, who had experienced great problems with him, to come forth and officially announce the “fees” they had to pay to receive certain trade areas on the market. The price for a good location in the market, for one year, was Lev2,000 (US$1,300). If one paid for more than one stand at the same time, a discount was applied, and the total amount one had to pay was Lev1,000 (US$650) per year per stand. For stores or booths, the required bribe varied between Lev5,000 (US$3,350) and Lev10,000 (US$6,500).

“I will not hesitate to lift the immunity of a magistrate or a deputy if there are evidences they are corrupted,” said Boris Velchev, the newly elected chief prosecutor. So far Velchev has proven himself as a trustworthy politician who stands firmly on his position. In early April 2006, Velchev withdrew the immunity of seven deputies who had broken the law prior to and during their mandate.

The battle, though, will not be easy. According to Tihomir Bezlov, a representative of Center for the Study of Democracy, between Lev320 and Lev370 million (up to US$240 million) was misused through public orders in 2005. Lev55 million (US$36 million) in bribes alone were paid to gain contracts for public orders during the past year. The average cost of the bribe is 7.4 percent of the total amount of the contract, according to data from a report prepared by the Center. Internal investigation, carried by an undercover employee working with traffic policemen, showed that five of seven representatives of power regularly take bribes while they are on duty.

On Sept. 25, 2006, the European Commission will issue its crucial report on progress made by Bulgaria and Romania. According to Franco Fratini, the European commissioner for justice, Bulgaria still has a chance to join the EU on Jan. 1, 2007.

It is true that corruption at the moment in Bulgaria is far behind the levels of 1990–2000, but it is still high for a state that is poised to become a member of the EU.