

September 10th 2004

PEOPLE DON'T KNOW THEIR RIGHTS

The success of the ongoing struggle against bribery and corruption depends on citizens, but unfortunately they are still not aware that by paying for free services they will only lose more

KRALJEVO/ BELGRADE, (Beta) - Can occasional anti-corruption campaigns in Serbia truly make citizens to turn against bribery, protectionism and corruption in general, or are they just a drop in the sea when it comes to combating this social ill? Radovan Milicevic, director of Lingua, an NGO, believes that if politicians cannot produce results, people should take matters into their own hands.

"Unfortunately, for a decade we lived in a state that refused to respect even a minimum of democratic norms and standards. The ordinary citizen has thus lost all sense of normality and instead of perceiving corruption as a negative trend that needs to be eradicated, he accepts it as an easier and sometimes only way of attaining a certain goal. That all segments of society are corrupt has thus become something expected, logical, normal, that surprises no one, and causes envy instead of indignation. Most people see it as a way to survive, even without being aware of it. This is what makes the fight against this evil even more difficult and serious. If politicians are inefficient in curbing corruption, ordinary people should take the initiative," says Milicevic of Lingua, which last March launched its anti-corruption campaign under the slogan "Have courage, say no to corruption!"

Since then, citizens have filed about one hundred complaints, 90 percent of which pertain to inefficiency in the judiciary. The remaining complaints mention corruption in the health care system, education, local government bodies and privatization.

At the beginning of the year Lingua activists polled 300 randomly selected residents of Cacak, Kraljevo and Vrnjacka Banja in order to find out how they think corruption should be tackled.

It turned out that they consider corruption one of the country's biggest problems, coming immediately after poverty and unemployment.

In their view, the most effective way to take on corruption is repression on the part of the government. The least effective way, according to them, is changing one's own attitude toward corruption and fighting it personally.

What was also revealing was that despite being aware of negative consequences of corruption, only 40 percent of those polled believe curbing corruption could lead to direct improvement of their standards of living.

"All this shows that citizens are not aware that they themselves are a part of the problem and that the fight needs to start at their level in order to get to the top," Milicevic tells Clean Hands.

It is unrealistic to expect that by removing several highly-placed corrupt officials from office the problem will be solved, says Milicevic, adding that thanks to its complexities, the issue of corruption means that all people have to help fight the problem.

Acting Responsibly

Lingua has been in the business of fighting corruption and providing the public with information about corruption for five years.

Its one-year projects, supported by the Swedish Olof Palme International SIDA Foundation, according to Milicevic, aim at developing public awareness that individual efforts in opposing corruption are essential.

Center representatives believe that an institutional framework, a national anti-corruption strategy, and the will to enforce regulations with as little compromising as possible are crucial for success.

Stjepan Gredelj, a member of the Anti-Corruption Council, tells Clean Hands that corruption is a disease that mostly affects poor societies, destroying their moral fiber, social and legal norms.

Commenting on the results of the survey taken by Lingua and particularly the fact that only 40 percent of respondents were convinced they could do something to reduce corruption, Gredelj says this confirms the findings of other organizations that investigating the level of corruption in Serbia and the region.

He goes on to say that in all such surveys conducted in Serbia-Montenegro's seven neighbors, the judiciary was perceived as the most corrupt sector of society, followed by health care, politicians, and prosecutors. Journalists were also on the list, although far behind the others.

According to Gredelj, citizens should report any form of and attempt at corruption.

"But when asked whether they would report attempts at corruption, they mostly say that somebody else, the authorities for instance, should do that. That surely is not going to change anything," Gredelj explains.

"In the past 15 years corruption has become a way of life, a way to accomplish what you need in Serbia," says Gredelj, who is also a fellow at the Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory, adding that national customs also play a role.

"If someone gives to an official a package of coffee in order to get a service or receive a document, this also is corruption, bribery in fact. But it is so deeply entrenched in our society that nobody perceives this as a problem," Gredelj adds, and says the biggest difficulty is that all attempts at corruption take place far from the public eye, because they occur between two persons and without any witnesses.

"The problem is also in that we have good legislation, but it is not enforced. Our Penal Code was substantially revamped two years ago and now envisages very specific penalties, but its provisions are not being implemented," Gredelj says.

He stressed that a national strategy for combating corruption, indispensable to any organized approach by the state, is "being prepared for the nth time."

Nemanja Nenadic, executive director of the international anti-corruption organization Transparency International, believes that for a successful fight against corruption all citizens, public representatives, officials, and specialized institutions must work together.

"The responsibility cannot lie on one party alone, because then there would be no results, and this is why state institutions should join in with citizens, and the news media ought to help as well," Nenadic believes.

"If the anti-corruption struggle were left the the state alone, the results would not be good because the concept has to be fully explained to the citizens while asking them to take an active approach to the problem," he says.

Stop Corruption, Say No

According to Gredelj, one way for citizens to actively join the anti- corruption struggle is to emphatically say "no" to giving and taking bribes. By giving a bribe to get a service before someone else, a citizen is harming his fellow citizens, the state, and the treasury because he is increasing salaries of administrative officials.

He believes that much more time is needed before people finally understand that corruption is something that needs to be fought.

"Overall, corruption is part of the grey economy, and this is where ordinary people are being robbed of their money the most," he stresses.

According to Nenadic, the judiciary as a rule tops all lists of most corrupt state services in the countries of the region, but these result should be taken with a grain of salt.

He believes that what investigators need to know whether respondents derived their opinion of corruption from personal experience or hearsay.

"If such statements are based on general perception of the problem in our society, for instance when the judiciary is in question, it must be taken into account that lawyers frequently contribute by asking their clients for bribes allegedly meant for judges, whereas in fact they pocket the money themselves," he said.

Nenadic added that there is no doubt that corruption is widespread and truly disturbing, but that frequent inefficiency and neglect on the part of judicial bodies is equally dangerous because it reduces the trust of citizens in the rule of law and prevents companies from exercising their rights.

Lingua director Radovan Milicevic stresses that major corruption, both in Kraljevo and the Serbian government, must not be neglected.

"Is there any more fertile ground for corruption that when one political group controls the judiciary, police, finances and healthcare? It is widely known that a political group will not go after its own for such transgressions. Usually, there is a clear, financial interest and it all looks like a group of people splitting the spoils," says Milicevic.

This is why he believes institutions run by one political group must be kept in check by other groups.

On the other hand Milicevic points out that years, maybe even decades, of encouraging and educating citizens about the devastating effects of corruption are needed before the first positive results appear. He adds: "We have years to go."

(BETA) By Dragana Batas and Predrag Markovic