



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia Political briefing:
The Practice of Unjustified and False Claims of Extremely High Reimbursements for Travel Expenses by Public Officials
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Introduction

According to Transparency International, Macedonia is the most corrupt country in the Balkans (#107 in the world). There are various forms of corruption that plague the country. However, perhaps the most visible and publicly debated, and for a number of citizens the most infuriating form of corruption is the practice of unjustified or simply false claims of travel expenses made by public officials, in the first place Members of the Parliament. For the first time, revelations about the abuse with the travel expenses surfaced in 2015. At the time, they were mostly associated with VMRO-DPMNE, and in particular, one of their leading members, Silvana Boneva, who had claimed tens of thousands of Euros for travel expenses. This has led to politicization of the issue, as it became perceived as one of the hallmarks of the corrupt rule of the Gruevski government. As a result, the abuse of travel expenses was an important part of SDSM's campaign in the elections 2016. SDSM openly called for responsibility, and promised that if it comes in power it will hold Members of Parliament of all abuses related to the unjust claims for travel expenses. However, this practice continued with new intensity after the change of government. Members of Parliament from all leading parties – SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE and their small coalition partners, as well as DUI – have all amassed thousands of Euros in travel expenses in less than a year since the constitution of the new parliament. The travel expenses have been one of the most debated topics in the public sphere, and have led to emergence of a new wave of criticism and online activism directed towards the political elite en masse.

Travel Expenses, Corruption and Public Perceptions

The practice of claiming unrealistic, unjustifiable and sometimes false travel expenses is most widespread among the Members of the Parliament. Macedonian Parliamentarians lead the region in terms of claimed travel expenses.

This is partially owing to the fact that most of the Parliamentarians hail from cities and regions other than Skopje, but their workplace is the capital. Hence, they report that they travel frequently from their place of residency to Skopje using their personal cars. However, critical voices in society have also argued that most of the claims made by officials do not meet the criteria to be considered as travel expenses. Travel expenses are reserved for business trips, not for regular costs of transportation. As Zharko Trajanoski, a renowned columnist and activist argued, going from home to work by car is not a business trip. This activity, in this sense, does not entail usage of the private vehicle for public purposes (and thus, is not eligible for claiming expenses). Moreover, the Members of Parliament have the right for public transportation to travel to work, but no deputy uses this opportunity – they all claim costs for their personal vehicles instead.

At the same time, many of the Members of Parliament who hail from other parts of the country, do own apartments in Skopje and are believed to be spending significant time living in them. When they stay in Skopje they have no grounds to report travel expenses; however there is no way to ensure where they really reside.

What enables the claiming of high amounts for reimbursement of travel expenses is the special legislation that applies to Members of Parliament. As Alon.mk reported, the case of one of the Members of Parliament, Alija Kamberoski of the Party for European Future (a coalition partner of SDSM) is rather illustrative of the scale of exaggeration of travel expenses. For instance, the costs of the road traveled by the deputy in a busy month that can be claimed for the distance Kamberoski travels in all other professions are about 246 EUR. However, the way costs are calculated for deputies, which also include costs for amortization of the vehicle among other things allowed him to claim much higher amounts. In nine months, therefore, he successfully claimed almost 13.000 EUR for travel expenses.

Another issue is that so far there is no control over the authenticity of claims to ensure whether the costs reported (even if not business trips) are really related to the trips Members of Parliament make to travel to their workplace. A significant case is the one of Mirjana Stojchevska, a Member of Parliament from SDSM who in the first nine months of the work, attended only three months' worth of Parliament sessions, but still managed to claim close to 12.000 EUR in travel expenses.

It is important to add that travel expenses are not the only form of suspected abuse of public funding by Parliamentarians. In general, they are believed to be experts in draining the state. In the month of January, for instance, the Members of Parliament started working only in the middle of the month – allegedly after a collective internal cross-party agreement to take extra days off for the holidays – which again attracted the attention in the public debates – why do they receive full month's salary for half month's work? While in the gray zone between irresponsibility and corruption, this is a particular instance that complements the image of petty corruption and irresponsibility of public officials.

The visibility of such behavior has affected the development of the public opinion, and in the general levels of trust of the citizens in the institutions of the system. According to a public opinion poll conducted on a representative sample in the beginning of March 2018, about 70% of the respondents said that the news of the travel expenses of the Members of Parliament makes them feel outraged. Moreover, more than 67% of the respondents believe that the monthly salaries of the Members of Parliament are too high. This means that there is a broad consensus and shared contempt by citizens of various social categories when it comes to the merit and accountability of their deputies and representatives. This is of course not only a result of the high level of (perceived) corruption – the same poll reveals relatively low level of consultation and communication between Members of Parliament and their constituencies.

Finally, Members of Parliament are not the only category of officials that attract disdain because of their behavior. Another such category, quite paradoxically, are the anti-corruption officials. Recently, based on a report by the State Audit Office, the national Public Prosecution Office has ordered an investigation of the national Anti-corruption Commission, which is being undertaken by financial police (the Public Revenue Service). In particular, the auditors and the prosecutors suspect that anti-corruption officials abused and embezzled public funding through the practice of reporting high travel expenses, faking receipts, providing unrealistic rent costs and per diem costs in the course of the past three years. The scandal for corruption in the Anti-corruption Commission has led to the resignations of five out of the seven members of the Commission, even though they still claim that they are innocent, and that the investigation against them is politically motivated.

In the meantime, however, the rage towards those who claim high amounts of travel expenses is gradually increasing. The costs of travel expenses are now used as a reference point when discussing various policy issues. When the government of Japan announced the allocation of 450.000 EUR in aid for Macedonian schools, in the public debate this was compared to the costs of the travel expenses of Members of Parliament (the top twenty claimants of travel expenses together claimed more than 200.000 EUR in a period of about nine months). There are more humorous takes on the issue as well. Some netizens have called travel expenses “the Macedonian Bitcoin” or the Macedonian way of getting rich quickly. Others have argued that the people should be lucky that Macedonia is so small, because if it was a bit larger, it could easily go bankrupt because of the travel expenses of public officials.

Conclusion

The somewhat bizarre problem of extremely high travel expenses illustrates a growing discrepancy between the privileged political elite and the disenfranchised majority of the population. The average salary of the Members

of the Macedonian Parliament is about 1335 EUR, which is three times the average salary of a Macedonian citizen, and puts Parliamentarians in a very solid position among the Macedonian 1% in terms of income. This is the amount without the bonuses for participation in various commissions, and without the extras such as the infamous travel expenses. Among the majority of the people, this is considered a high income that allows rather secure, certain and comfortable lifestyle; however, recently one Member of Parliament has complained that these money are insufficient for having a decent life in Skopje, but also insufficient to cover transportation costs.

The travel expenses issue continues to burden the SDSM government as it is also SDSM officials topping the ranks in travel expenses claims. This obviously hurts the image of an anti-corruption force that SDSM is trying to present in public.

On a deeper level, however, it reinforces the image that in Macedonia – and perhaps in other countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe, people pursue careers in politics and public administration driven by the idea of privileges and tangible material gain that is offered to them. By claiming travel expenses, they make more money than many can make by running businesses. This illustrates a rather sad economic situation, and in itself shows why Macedonia is stuck in a political and economic limbo, despite the end of the political crisis.