





Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia political briefing:
Eruption of corruption scandals erodes
the legitimacy of the Government**
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Eruption of corruption scandals erodes the legitimacy of the Government

Summary

Several major corruption scandals involving high ranking Government officials were revealed in the timespan of only several days in March. In the midst of a serious undersupply of vaccines, the Government was implicated in severe misconduct in the procurement of vaccines from the Chinese company Sinopharma. Only several days later, the former Secretary General of the Government, was implicated in corrupt purchases and conflicts of interest dating back to his time in office. Meanwhile, the Government was also accused of failing to apply for support funds, resulting in the country receiving zero support from a 530 million EU fund, aimed at supporting the management of the coronavirus.

Within the timespan of only 3 days between the 10-13 of March, three major scandals embroiling high-ranking Government officials were revealed to the Macedonian public. Taking place in the midst of an ongoing pandemic, they cast a dark shadow over the legitimacy of the Government and its will and capacity to govern the political community.

Scandal involving the purchase of Chinese vaccines

On the 10th and 11th of March, the Italian weekly La Verita, published two news stories, which implied that high-level Government officials had attempted to profit from the purchase of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, resulting in the cancellation of the order. The news story which was first published on the 10th of March was titled “A battle between Russia and China in the Balkans.”¹ The second news-story, published on the following day is titled: “The letter by PM Zaev to China.”² The stories include details about two letters (dated 25.12.2020 and 25.01.2021), which Health Minister Filipche had sent to Sinopharm. Additionally, it includes

¹ La Verita (2021). A battle between Russia and China in the Balkans, published on 10th of March 2021 available at https://www.laverita.info/sfida-tra-cina-e-russia-sui-balconi-2650996366.html?fbclid=IwAR205sjNFUH3bv6IAAqinv2ops-CU-a4RXsALWtscsmCciA47_HMirYkQ1E accessed on 07.04.2021

² La Verita (2021). The letter by PM Zaev to China, published on 11th of March 2021, available at <https://www.laverita.info/lettere-ministro-zaev-vaccini-2651008926.html> accessed on 15.03.2021

information on Starbi International, the firm which had been authorised by the Macedonian Government as the mediator for the vaccine purchase. It further suggests that the company had been registered in 2017, and does not have a medical or pharmaceutical portfolio. As a result, according to La Verita, the Government's decision to include a suspicious "phantom" company sank the deal and prompted Sinopharm to withdraw, leaving the country again without much-needed vaccines. The revelations quickly spread across Macedonian media sending shockwaves amongst the public, as it emerged that the Government not only failed to provide any vaccines, but it had tried to profit from their purchase. In response to the allegations the Ministry of Health stated: "The procurement of Covid 19 vaccines by the Ministry of Health is done in a legal way, respecting the contracts for ordering the vaccines from the producers. The procedure for the purchase of vaccines from Sinopharm has not been terminated, the 200,000 doses have been secured and we will receive them".³ In the days that followed both the Anti-Corruption Commission and the President stated that the allegations must be thoroughly investigated. However, it took another week before the Anti-Corruption Commission requested the documents regarding the purchase from the Ministry of Health.⁴ What is more, the past record of the Anti-Corruption Commission left many to doubt its capacity to thoroughly investigate and expose the Government's (mis)handling of the procurement process. By the end of March many questions remained unanswered regarding both the status of the investigation as well as with regards to the status of the order from Sinopharm.

Scandal on the state's failure to obtain EU support funds

On the 11th of March, the European Commission put forward a package of almost €530 million in additional financial support under the EU Solidarity Fund aimed at contributing to the efforts deployed by 17 Member States and 3 accession countries (Albania, Montenegro and Serbia) to safeguard public health in fighting the coronavirus. According to the EC the funding will support part of their public expenditure on medical and personal protective equipment,

³ Mkd.mk (2021) "Ministry of health: We respected all the demands by the chinese authorities" published on 10th March 2021, available at <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/obrazovanie-i-zdravstvo/ministerstvo-za-zdravstvo-ispochituvavme-sje-shto-od-nas-pobaraa> accessed on 13.03.2021

⁴ Radio Free Europe (2021) Anticorruption commission has requested the documents regarding the "Chinese vaccines" published on 18.03.2021, available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%83%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8-/31156340.html> accessed on 07.04.2021

emergency support to the population, and measures of prevention, monitoring and control of the spread of the disease.⁵ N. Macedonia was excluded from the package, which raised several questions for the Government. According to the Secretariat for European Affairs the reason for the exclusion was that “North Macedonia did not have enough expenses to allow it to qualify for support through the EU Solidarity Fund”.⁶ What is more the press release issued on this matter stated that due to the high quality and timely management of the health crisis during the first wave of the pandemic, the institutions weren’t able to incur the minimum expenses which would enable it to qualify for support from the EU.⁷ The statement provoked mass outrage, not only due to the Government’s incompetence but also due to the arrogance demonstrated in the response.⁸ Namely, throughout the first wave of the pandemic medical workers continuously complained about the deficit in medical and personal protective equipment. Instead of admitting responsibility the Government refused to acknowledge its failure to organise the procurement of protective equipment and all other resources necessary in order to prepare the public healthcare system in the fight against the pandemic. These developments in turn underlined both the dire state of the public institutions, but also the disinterest and complete absence of political will in the Government to take coordinated and competent action in the fight against the pandemic.

Scandal involving the former Secretary General of the Government

Similar arrogance was demonstrated in response to another scandal involving the former Secretary General of the Government, Dragi Rashkovski. Namely, it was revealed that Raskovski organised the procurement and purchase of a software system, which he himself had owned and patented. Over 400 thousand euros had been paid out by the State Secretariat to the firm “Invoka Group”, which is connected to Raskovski.⁹ In response to the allegations, the

⁵ EC Press Release (2021). EU Solidarity in action: Commission proposes to mobilise almost €530 million to support emergency measures against the coronavirus pandemic, published on 11.03.2021, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1111 accessed on 07.04.2021

⁶ Secretariat for European Affairs Press Release (2021). Published on 11.03.2021 available at <https://sep.gov.mk/post/?id=5747#.YG1oCBQzYdX> accessed on 04.04.2021

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Antropol (2021). Dimitrov, here are the victims of your successful management of the crisis, published on 11.03.2021 available at <https://antropol.mk/2021/03/12/poveli-dimitrov-zrtvite-od-uspeshnoto/> accessed on 07.04.2021

⁹ Slobodna Evropa (2021). It’s not only the software for the Ministry of Interior, the Government paid out around 400 thousand euros to Invoka, published on 10.03.2021 available at

Prime Minister stood in defence of the former Secretary General, failing to acknowledge the palpable clash of interests and stating that “inventive people (*such as Rashovski*) are necessary for the country”. In the days that followed, it emerged that the Ministry of Interior had not requested the software which had been purchased from “Invoka Group” and it did not intend to use it. Following pressure by the media the Government promised to publish the documents pertaining to the purchase, however it ultimately failed to do so. The State Prosecution Office passed the responsibility over the case to the Ministry of Interior and the Financial Police.¹⁰ On the 10th of March, the Anti-Corruption Commission opened an investigation: “We believe that there are enough elements to investigate the reasons for purchasing that software on the one hand and on the other hand why it is still not in use. And what was risky from our point of view was the inadequate communication by the institutions and the lack of a systemic approach to determining the needs. Following the revelations we opened a case,” the President of the State Anti-Corruption Commission Biljana Ivanovska informed at a press conference.¹¹ Nonetheless in the weeks that followed no information was revealed on the status of the investigation. Moreover, at the end of the month, Ljupco Nikolovski, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the fight against corruption and crime, stated that he will not request the dismissal of the former Secretary General of the Government and current Secretary in the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, Dragi Rashkovski.¹² This in turn further eroded the Government’s will to tackle and fight corruption. Adding insult to injury, in the midst of the scandal, and whilst the country is facing the third wave of the pandemic, both Rashkovski and Nikolovski took private trips abroad, the first to Mexico and the latter to Dubai. In response to the ensuing public outrage

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%B6%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%84%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%83%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8/31142128.html>
accessed on 07.04.2021

¹⁰ Slobodna Evropa (2021). The state prosecution passes the ball to the Ministry of Interior and Financial police, published on 17.03.2021, available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%B2%D1%80-%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0/31154259.html> accessed on 07.04.2021

¹¹ 360 Stepni (2021) Anti-Corruption Commission has opened an investigation into the software purchased by Rashkovski, published on 10.03.2021, available at <https://360stepni.mk/antikoruptionska-otvori-predmet-za-sofтверot-shto-go-kupil-rashkovski-a-ne-e-vo-funksija/> accessed on 07.04.2021

¹² Slobodna Evropa (2021). Nikolovski won’t request the dismissal of Raskovski for the software case, Published on 30.03.2021 available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31178161.html> accessed on 07.04.2021

Rashkovski stated “Mexico has never been cheaper”, whilst Nikolovski stated that he deserves a holiday for all his hard work in office. Both statements served to illustrate the carelessness and disregard of high-ranking officials towards the public, which they are meant to serve.¹³

The eruption of scandals combined with the nonchalance demonstrated by Government officials, reveals their understanding of politics and government. Namely, the Government’s daily (in)actions imply that the control over the state is not viewed as a responsibility, an obligation or an instrument for serving the public interest. Instead, it is understood as a privilege which enables the (ab)use of state institutions and resources for the advancement of private interests. In such a context, the Government draws its political legitimacy not from the political community which it is failing to serve and govern, but from the support and endorsement which it receives from the Euroatlantic international community.

¹³ 360 Stepeni (2021). Rashkovski for Tv24-Mexico has never been cheaper, published on 17.03.2021, available at <https://360stepeni.mk/rashkovski-za-tv24-vo-meksiko-nikogash-ne-bilo-poevtino-odmorot-go-planirav-pred-nekolku-mesetsi/> accessed on 07.04.2021