Citizens recognize corruption, but think they have no one to complain to

Journalists are often among those to whom citizens complain about corruption, ask for help or advice. When they are asked what exactly they suspect, they think they have all the information, they often have papers, they have names, but they want to remain anonymous, they won't talk to the media, they are afraid that it will be found out that they reported. And they dream of justice. They complain about the director of the health center who transports furniture in an ambulance, about the lower-ranking clerk who bought a weekend house after two years of work, they ask how it is possible that their company does not pass the tender, even though it has a better offer. Citizens recognize injustice, they know who is advancing with a fake diploma, they heard that someone "loaned" 5,000 euros to the boss, and then got a contract for an indefinite period before everyone else. But, if you happen to ask them if they have complained to someone officially, there is a high probability that they will answer in surprise with a counter question - Who should I complain to?

The institutional fight against corruption is a big unknown for the average citizen of Serbia. If you mention in a conversation that there is an Agency for Prevention of Corruption (APC), you will mostly get a laugh or a hand wave.

And what "institutional path" would a citizen of Serbia who is neither a lawyer nor an attorney-at-law nor a journalist nor an activist take? After 15 years since the establishment of the Agency, is it clear to him what this institution is for? Who is at its head? What was the last thing she did that "resonated" with the public? Is he aware that there are no agents or criminal investigations? And will he give up on the way, before the goal?

After its name was changed, so it does not deal with the fight against corruption, which implied that the Agency also has some repressive powers, it has been officially called the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption for years, so it should prevent corruption from happening in the first place. What does a citizen imagine, and what does he get?

What's on the APC website?

When a citizen learns that the Agency exists, he will look for its website. At the moment when this text was written, the latest news was that the director of the Agency, Dejan Damnjanović, held an online meeting with the ambassador of Uzbekistan in Hungary, who is also the appointed ambassador to Serbia. What did the director and the ambassador discuss, so what is the most important news on the APC website? They agreed that international cooperation is extremely important for the achievement of the mission of institutions dealing with the prevention and fight against corruption. And they exchanged opinions, and concluded that they will develop partnership relations.

It makes sense, given that Uzbekistan has a CPI Corruption Perceptions Index of 32 (out of a possible 100), and Serbia a little better - 35, and both countries are in the last, declining ranking on Transparency International's list.

Among the main news on the site are international conferences, delegations, trainings, for a citizen who is oppressed by suspicion of corruption, mostly not the most interesting reading.

You can find something more specific in the "Decisions" section. Among the last are: the former councilor of the municipality of Žitište was in a conflict of interest, he seriously violated the law and was sentenced to the measure of "public announcement of the decision on violation of the law on the prevention of corruption." Then, another one for Žitište, he was a councilor and arranged transportation for the elementary school - also a measure of publicizing the decision. Well, the same measure for one who hired his brother-in-law to work as an ambulance driver, and the president of the Smederevo city assembly, who was also the head of the football club. Among the decisions, there are a number of those in which the Agency determines the existence of a violation of the law and imposes the measure of publication of the decision. It is by the law.

The situation is similar with decisions on applications against political parties. The Serbian Progressive Party, for example, says the Agency, violated the law on campaign financing, by showing videos on the Instagram accounts of local boards about the reconstruction of the health center or the construction of the stadium, creating the impression that the SNS, and not the state, that is, the local self-government, invested in those facilities. A warning measure was issued. The same applies to other parties, authorities and oppositions, wherever a violation of the law was observed, a warning measure was issued, regardless of the fact that it was a repeated violation, after the previously issued warning measures.

The annual work report states that during the campaign for the June 2024 elections, the Agency received 31 complaints against public officials, and initiated four proceedings ex officio, due to suspected violations of the provisions of Article 50 of the Law on Prevention of Corruption. In seven cases, it found violations of the Law on Prevention of Corruption and issued warning measures. On the basis of the reports submitted due to suspected violations of the Law on the Financing of Political Activities, in connection with the election campaign, the Agency made and published a total of 31 decisions on the website. Of these, in 10 cases a warning measure was issued, in two cases a violation of the Law was established, which is the basis for submitting a request to initiate misdemeanor proceedings, and in 19 cases no violation of the Law was established. In the proceedings initiated ex officio, the Agency adopted eight warning measures.

On the website, in the "Decisions" segment, one decision was published for the first almost full three months of 2025. During the entire year 2024, a total of 25 decisions were published, including those that determined that there were no grounds for initiating the procedure.

In the annual work report, information can be found that due to violations of the Law, in connection with the resolution of conflicts of interest, the Agency issued 73 measures of reprimand, nine measures of public publication of the decision on violation of the Law and one measure of public publication of the recommendation for dismissal from public office. In addition, it passed four decisions on termination of public office by force of law.

The Agency also deals with citizens' reports, that is, as defined by the Law - petitions. The report tells us that in 2024 it received 157 applications, of which 48 were anonymous, and acted on a total of 579 from 2024 and previous years. Of those 579, three proposals were submitted for the supervision of the public authority to which the petition refers, one recommendation was made to the public authority with measures to remedy the situation, and two criminal charges were filed against three persons based on the allegations in the petition.

If a citizen has not read the report or has read it and is not discouraged by these statistics, and decides to report corruption - there is a form. It asks for the name, surname, e-mail address and telephone number, name of the public authority, name and surname of the person against whom the complaint is filed, that is, data from which the identity of that person can be determined, as well as facts that cause suspicion of corruption, time, place and description of the corrupt act or corrupt behavior.

There is no indication of which fields are mandatory and which are not, so the citizen may get the impression that it is not possible to submit an anonymous application, although the report states that almost a third of the applications (applications) that the Agency receives are from "NN persons".

And what does the Law governing the Agency's actions say? It explicitly stipulates that "The Agency acts on anonymous petitions if the allegations in the petition and the attached evidence raise suspicions of corruption." The law stipulates, however, that the Agency is obliged to inform the applicant about the outcome of the application and that, "if the application is irregular, the Agency informs the applicant how to arrange the application within 15 days from the date of receipt of the notification".

And only if a citizen who wants to remain anonymous leaves all the fields asking for information about him empty and clicks the "Send" button, he will receive notifications that he must fill in the "Mail address" and "Phone number" fields.

This would mean that, even if it waives the possibility to edit the application and to receive notification of the outcome of the proceedings, the Agency does not regret putting itself in a situation where it violates the Law. At least not in relation to this provision.

And here we return to the beginning, since citizens generally say that they do not trust the institutions, first of all they do not want to risk that their data will be revealed, even though the Law stipulated that the Agency must "protect the identity of the applicant, so that the data about him cannot be submitted to anyone except the court". And they don't want to, like special agents, acquire secret phone numbers and email addresses so that they can submit an "anonymous" report and receive notification of further action.

And the Agency did not bother to explain on the page with the form which fields are mandatory and why, what the person who submits the application can expect and what the applicant must and can do.

What do the media say?

If a persistent citizen thinks that the problem lies with him because he cannot find his way around the Agency's website, he might decide to check what the media is writing about it.

In a search on "Agency for Prevention of Corruption", after two pages of official websites, orders, regulations and laws, you will find the news that the Agency for Prevention of Corruption rejected criticism in January 2024 after refusing to act on the complaint of Transparency Serbia against the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) regarding the work of the call center in the election campaign. They considered that there is no basis for the Agency to

investigate the role of the Center for Education and Development of Youth in Belgrade (CEROB) in whose premises the fees were paid to those employed in the call center.

About the director of the Agency, after the news that he was appointed in February 2023, there is only news that in 2024 he visited local officials and introduced them to the work of the agency and its competences. It is true that the Agency started working on December 1, 2010, but the familiarization of the officials with its work and their rights and obligations could be interpreted as the fact that there are also new officials who are taking office for the first time. It is unusual that the director of the Agency introduces them to the knowledge of the law, and it is not clear whether the director or the officers of the Agency will organize or organize such familiarization with legal obligations (ignorance of which is not an excuse for violation) for all new officials at all levels. It is not good if the only explanation for this is the need to record with a "pseudo event" that APC exists.

There is no trust if there is no information

Even while the brand new agency was being established, the then president of the Anti-corruption Council, Verica Barać, claimed that it was being created in order to abolish the Council. "If that was not the goal, we would work on making a better form of law and we would not create a new institution that will start working from the beginning, but we would look for a way to make the Council work with more authority and better quality," said Barać in 2008.

The Anti-corruption Council was established as an advisory body of the government in 2001 with the task of reviewing the activities in the fight against corruption, proposing to the Government of Serbia measures that should be taken in order to effectively fight against corruption, as well as monitoring their implementation and giving initiatives for the adoption of regulations, programs and other acts and measures in that area. As it is written on their website even today, they receive a large number of petitions from citizens every day. However, the Council deals with individual cases only if they point to a wider phenomenon, which particularly highlights the sources of large-scale corruption in the economy and politics.

The Agency, on the other hand, was founded as an independent body in 2009. What is important to emphasize is that it does not investigate crime - it makes recommendations, imposes measures prescribed by law and submits misdemeanor or criminal charges. Therefore, suspicion of corruption can be reported to the Agency, but expectations should be reduced to reality.

If the Agency were to advertise more loudly and clearly the possibility of submitting anonymous reports to it and invite citizens to do so, as some investigative media do, it might be overwhelmed with unfounded cases, but perhaps quantity would also give rise to quality, something that the Agency can forward to the prosecution, which must inform it about its steps, and about which the Agency must inform the applicant. And the Agency, as an independent state body, would have the opportunity to make a public statement if it believes that the prosecution and other bodies are not doing their job properly. Which is far more than an individual who "skips" the Agency and reports the suspicion directly, even anonymously, to the prosecutor's office.

If the agency communicated with the media more often, if its warnings were louder - perhaps trust would be greater. Or if it would sometimes speak out about a case that caused public

uproar. In this way, the Agency is not recognized as a body to which a citizen will report suspicions and from whom they will expect help in solving a case of suspected corruption.

Mirjana Nikolić

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