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ALL IN THE FAMILY

Accusations of nepotism continue to plague EU educational programs in Macedonia, even as the country starts receiving aid from the most generous initiative to date

“I am a citizen of the world, known to all and to all a stranger,” Erasmus famously said, inspiring the European Union to name, in 1987, its most ambitious student mobility program after the Dutch philosopher and theologian. Since then, millions of students have had the opportunity to study abroad and learn about different cultures through the program. And young Macedonians are holding their collective breaths to see if their country, banned from similar programs in the recent past, can manage to avoid suspicions of corruption and nepotism this time around.

Macedonia’s reputation for overseeing youth programs started to decline around five years ago when local NGOs and the media started to poke into grants awarded through the “Youth in Action” program. That mobility and non-formal education program, since discontinued, targeted young people aged between 13 and 30 years with the aim to “inspire a sense of active European citizenship, solidarity and tolerance among young Europeans and to involve them in shaping the Union’s future.”

Macedonia’s National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility (NA) took part in selecting local groups to implement “Youth in Action” programs in two ways: through a grant scheme that took place locally and through evaluating organizations that applied directly via other calls for proposal issued by the European Commission.

However, in both cases, Macedonian civil society groups started to uncover what they said was a pattern of selectively financing organizations that appeared to be closely connected to either NA officials or their family members and friends. The most thorough examination was conducted by the Macedonian Center for European Training (MCET), an NGO based in Skopje that has monitored EU integration for over a decade. According to a MCET report, over the period of 2008 until 2010, the NA awarded more than 1.3 million Euros to 11 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that NA officials had either established themselves or were led by close relatives.

Two of the most glaring examples included *Mladinski forum Oko* (Youth forum-Okko), which was headed by NA President Boshko Nelkoski and received a series of grants totaling at least 330,000 euros for 16 projects over the past few years, and *Centar za ruraren razvoj* (the Center for Rural Development), founded by Nelkoski’s father and awarded more than 92,000 euros.

TRANSPARENCY ISSUES

“It was obvious that there was link between the organizations that were constantly receiving awards and the NA, and their network

works perfectly,” said Bojan Maricic, MCET’s director. “What is more suspicious is that the largest Macedonian NGOs, which are well known for actively participating in the creation of public policy, never got any grant from the NA. Some of them never applied because of the lack of information about the grants.”

Suspicious were also raised over grants made to organizations with no permanent addresses, no offices, and not even websites (the above-mentioned *Centar za ruraren razvoj*, for example).

After the public outcry generated by the MCET revelations and other NGO and media reports, the State Audit Office investigated the NA’s finances and reported that the agency’s books weren’t in order and had been led only by one person, which is against the law.

The State Commission for Preventing Corruption appealed to the public prosecutor to open a case against NA officials, but the initiative led nowhere and charges were never filed. Some, such as MCET, alleged that NA’s political connections (Nelkoski was a member of the ruling political party, VMRO-DPMNE) had helped quash the investigation.

However, Nelkoski did end up soon resigning, saying, “After all those lies that were spread about me, I am de-motivated to work as chief of the NA in the future.”

Despite the lack of formal charges, the European Commission came to its own conclusion: the local Youth in Action program would be suspended for Macedonia for two years, and on top of that, the country’s students wouldn’t be able to apply for scholarships via the popular Erasmus program, cutting off many opportunities to study abroad.

A FRESH START?

Over the next two years, the government set about ostensibly reforming the NA, with various Macedonian and NA officials claiming that things would be different.

“The NA has improved its organizational structure, internal procedures, and work efficiency, including transparent financial management and internal control,” then-Minister of Education Pance Kralev told the media at the end of 2011, saying that would lead to “more ethical operation”. He said that the NA and EC had been working together to build up national capacity for the management of EU funds, in order the end the suspension.

A statement issued by the NA claimed more of the same: “There will be no room for manipulation with European money and regularity will be ensured by internal auditors.” The agency assured its doubters

that auditors from the State Audit Offices, the Ministry of Education, the European Commission, and external companies “that operate by international standards” would also be looking into its books.

Such assurances apparently proved convincing, as on schedule, officials in Brussels decided in 2012 to re-open the program.

Soon, the NA announced the first of what would be three open calls for projects in 2012. And then, with little fanfare and with a delay of about six months, the NA released the names of the winners.

The publication of the first list of organizations shattered the illusion of whole new way of operating, say local NGOs and civic activists. Among the grantees were again some of those same NGOs that had raised suspicions before the EC froze the program.

MCET, still on top of the issue, published a report in April 2013 with a detailed analysis of the organizations that had received funding in 2012. Nelkoski's *Mladinski forum Oko* had again received a grant (more than 50,000 Euros) as his father's *Centar za ruraren razvoj* (24,000 Euros). One of *Centar's* directors is Shemsedin Ilajzi, the brother of a NA official. MCET also noted that another organization, *Forum za novi inicijativi-Evropa 2.0*, had been established only a month before receiving a grant – a clear violation of EC rules.

On the 2012 award list were other organizations that are generally thought to be close to *Mladinski forum Oko*, such as *Horizont*, *Pan Evropski Centar*, *Mladinski pres*, and *Koalicija SEGA*.

The European funds awarded to these organizations don't end there. As noted above, in addition to applying on a national level at the NA, groups can also turn directly to the European Commission and its Education, Culture and Audiovisual Executive Agency (EACEA) to participate in various calls for proposal. On the list of those that have benefited from EACEA grant schemes, which generated 2 million euros for Macedonian organizations from 2009-2012, are some of the same groups that did so well on the local level. *Mladinski forum Oko*, *Centar za ruraren razvoj*, *Kvantum*, *Jasna idnina*, *Makedonski mladiski pres* and a few others, received more than 1.3 million euros through 2011, according to MCET. Almost 77 percent of the projects approved by the NA – 35 of 44 projects in the period between 2009 and the first half of 2013 – were made to organizations that MCET judged suspect.

Until now, the NA still hasn't published the results for the organizations awarded grants in the last two open calls of 2013.

As [recently reported](#) by Balkan Insight, another organization that illustrates the inter-related connections of educational NGOs and agency officials is *Volonterski centar-Skopje*, which has received half a million Euros – both directly from Brussels and through the NA – for a total of 23 projects. The founder is Nikola Stankoski, whose sister, Katerina Stankoska, was an NA official in 2012. Before becoming a member of the NA, she had her own NGO, *Sovet na mladinski NGO* (Council of Youth NGOs), which acquired 150,000 Euros from the NA directly and through Brussels-based programs through 2011. Violeta Stankoska, another sibling, worked in the NA until 2010.

YET ANOTHER CHANCE

This year, changes are again in store for Macedonia's youth programs. The EC decided to formally end the Youth in Action program in 2013, integrating its activities into an upgraded “Erasmus +” program, which has a budget of almost 15 billion euros to spend over the next seven years on student scholarships and mobility, as well as grants to NGOs that develop non-formal education projects. Though still just a candidate country, Macedonia will participate as a full member, and will receive 3.5 million – almost three times more than any EU educational grant so far.

“I believe that organizations will be creative and will use finances from the EU for doing good projects,” said Minister of Education Spiro Ristovski, at the beginning of 2014. “I am making a promise that we will be transparent in the process of funding NGOs and individuals with EU money. I hope that we will not misuse the trust that the EU has placed in us.”

With the National Agency still in charge of the implementation of EU projects on a national level, civic activists are less optimistic.

“I am afraid that all the finances that Macedonia will receive from the EU can be easily misused, if we analyze our state institutions,” said Maricik, the MCET director. “We can see that from the past. Yet I do hope that the EU has learned a lesson and will do what is needed to prevent future corrupt practices in Macedonia.”

Imprint

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