Building a Coalition against Corruption

by Nafisul Islam

Bulgaria’s transition to democracy and a market economy in the 1990s was severely constrained by corruption. As state resources were privatized, institutional weaknesses left openings for corruption and allowed the influence of former communist nomenklatura and organized crime. Corruption reached every sphere of life and weakened public confidence in democracy. According to a survey by the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), 57 percent of adult Bulgarians believed that politicians were primarily interested in securing special privileges for themselves and their friends. Eighty-six percent of the survey respondents believed they had to bribe doctors in order to receive medical services.

CSD, a Bulgarian public policy institute, looked to curb corruption through initiatives in certain key areas. Among their strategies were promoting corporate governance, engaging private businesses in anti-corruption efforts, and advocating for institutional reform in the privatization process. CSD had partnered with the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) in policy advocacy and public-private partnership initiatives since the early 1990s, including the development of a pilot anti-corruption campaign. The success of those initiatives prepared CSD to lead the establishment of an anti-corruption group, Coalition 2000.

In 1997 CIPE provided CSD with the seed money to establish this coalition, which aimed to create a cooperative platform of public and private institutions. This all-inclusive platform combined the input and efforts of various stakeholders irrespective of their political or institutional affiliation. Since its inception, Coalition 2000 has been the most prominent example of a public-private partnership in the area of anti-corruption in Southeastern Europe.
Structuring a Solid Foundation
The institutional structure of Coalition 2000 was designed to ensure transparency, efficient implementation, and optimum partnership between stakeholders. The three major bodies of the coalition are the policy forum, the steering committee, and the secretariat.

The policy forum is perhaps the most important element of Coalition 2000. The forum comprises around a hundred prominent representatives from state institutions, non-governmental institutions, and international partners. The forum convenes once a year to review progress and set guidelines for future work. These meetings work toward building political and social consensus between public and private institutions on the implementation of the larger initiative. The steering committee is charged with coordinating the activities and output of the coalition. This committee is composed of representatives from both the public and private sectors, including senior government officials, members of parliament, senior judges, trade union leaders, and business representatives. The secretariat is responsible for providing day-to-day operational management for the coalition’s programs and activities. The secretariat also surveys developments and initiatives – both locally and internationally – in the field of anti-corruption and informs the steering committee of these trends. Together, the three bodies oversee the activities of Coalition 2000.

Creating a Plan for Action
The Anti-corruption Action Plan for Bulgaria was one of the first initiatives of Coalition 2000. The plan’s goal was to reform the design and implementation of anti-corruption policies in Bulgaria. It laid out a detailed explanation of the coalition’s approach to reform: creating a favorable institutional and legal
environment, increasing transparency, enhancing civic control, and changing public perceptions. The plan was a cooperative effort from the beginning. Key stakeholders – including government ministers, foreign ambassadors, heads of NGOs, and members of inter-governmental organizations – participated in the draft preparation of the plan before it was endorsed by the policy forum in November 1998. The Action Plan is assessed and revised annually to include any changes in the strategy or policies of the coalition.

The policy agenda set by the Action Plan allowed the coalition to comprehensively address policy areas most vulnerable to corruption. It outlined steps to reform public administration, the judicial system, the privatization process, and regulation of private enterprise. Antonio Vigilante, Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Sofia, described the Action Plan as “more than an anti-corruption plan; this is a plan for good governance as well.”

Regulatory regimes were identified as one of the primary causes of the high incidence of corruption between businesses and government. CSD’s main initiatives against corruption aimed to make licenses, permits, and registrations fewer in number and easier to obtain. CSD’s advocacy work on legislative reform in the field of privatization, supported by CIPE, was instrumental to the success of the regulatory reforms in the 1998 Action Plan.

**Cutting Corruption, Monitoring Progress**

One notable achievement of the coalition has been bringing anti-corruption to the forefront of the policy agenda. There had been virtually no discussion in Bulgaria about this issue prior to CSD’s work. Due to CSD’s activism in this area, the public is now less tolerant of rent seeking and demands increased accountability from public officials. This widespread awareness and vigilance largely explains why administrative corruption has been slashed to half its 1998 level.

Measuring corruption, through CSD’s Corruption Monitoring System (CMS), was an important method the
coalition used to raise awareness. The system is a set of quantitative and qualitative monitoring instruments designed to generate information about the scope and dynamics of corruption. The CMS also measures related perceptions about corruption among the public, public sector officials, and other professional groups. The system’s main product is the Coalition 2000 Corruption Index (CI), which summarizes the general dimensions of corruption and corrupt behavior, and is published on a quarterly basis. The qualitative and quantitative surveys of the CMS have confirmed that political elites as well as the public recognize corruption as a major impediment to democratic and free market systems.

Anti-corruption is now a strategic concern of the Government of Bulgaria. The government’s first comprehensive anti-corruption document – the National Anti-corruption Strategy – was prepared with the active participation of Coalition 2000 and was largely based on the 1998 Action Plan. In early 2006, CSD was the primary institutional participant in drafting the government’s three-year anti-corruption strategy, which called for a comprehensive mix of prevention and enforcement. The national strategy also led to the development of a system of indicators to monitor progress and actual impact, based on CSD’s monitoring system.

Coalition 2000 was a strong proponent of the institution of the ombudsman, now accepted as a key element of a transparent governance mechanism. Since the election of Bulgaria’s first ombudsman in April 2005, this office has investigated a significant share of complaints received. Within the first year and a half, the ombudsman received nearly 2,500 individual complaints and alerts. In almost 97 percent of the cases, the ombudsman took action regarding the specified matter. Most complaints referred to property issues such as land restitution, but there were considerable numbers of complaints pertaining to social issues, public services, and administrative services.

Coalition 2000 has made great strides in establishing the fight against corruption as a mainstream concern on the policy agenda, and in evaluating its progress. Today, government
in Bulgaria no longer denies that corruption exists, and is implementing an active strategy against it. The public, once accepting corruption as a matter of fact, is now verifiably less tolerant, demanding increased accountability in public service. CSD’s Corruption Monitoring System has demonstrated that corruption can be measured and that measurement is crucial to developing successful solutions.

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Sources


Coalition 2000, “Creating an Enabling Anti-Corruption Environment” (Sofia).
