**Thoughts on Macedonia’s Phone Tapping Scandal**

*This comment by Victor Bivell was broadcast by SBS Radio on 11 March 2015.*

There are many elements to Macedonia’s phone tapping scandal, particularly around the legality and extent of the phone tapping and around some of the apparently corrupt contents. At the political level, for me four issues stand out.

The first one is how much Macedonia could benefit from the strong independence of the investigative and anti-corruption institutions that exist in other democracies. If the phone tapping scandal had occured in Australia, for example, there are several ways for the many claims and counterclaims to be investigated: a Royal Commission, a Parliamentary or Senate Inquiry, the Federal Police, and at the NSW State level the Independent Commission Against Corruption and its equivalents in other states.

A Royal Commission, for example, has the power to summon witnesses, and to compel them to testify under oath and to present documents and evidence. Such powers are essential to get to the truth of what happened in Macedonia. Among the questions are: was prime minister Nikola Gruevski behind the phone tapping of 20,000 citizens or was it a foreign power, did Opposition leader Zoran Zaev try to blackmail prime minister Gruevski into sharing power, did Zaev work with another country to achieve power or to bring on an election, have Gruevski or his government colleagues interfered with the independence of the judiciary, have Gruevski or his government influenced or directed the media, did Gruevski or his party cheat in the last election, and so on.

So serious are these accusations that they call for investigation by the highest independent authority in the state. But does Macedonia have such a body, and is its independence credible? So far accusations against Zaev have been refered to the State Prosecutor, but this deals only with one of the issues. All of the issues need to be investigated and in due course any illegal acts by anyone refered to the State Prosecutor.

The second political issue exposed by the scandal is whether Gruevski, now in his ninth year of office, has been in power for too long? Politicians new to office generally have a positive agenda. And so did Gruevski. But with time politicians can get hooked on power and become unwilling to give it up or to suffer checks and balances. The American system where presidents get a maximum of two four year terms is wise as it solves this problem. In Australia, John Howard was in power for 11 years but this was too long as some of his worst decisions came late in his term as he clung to power, and this is one of the reasons the Budget is structurally unbalanced. In Turkey president Erdogan has been in power, first as prime minister then president, for 12 years. He is criticized among other things for growing authoritarianism and what is said to be a 1,000 room palace that looks big enough to be better used as a state museum or art gallery. In Russia Putin was president for 8 years then played the system and came back, in the process lengthening each presidential term from four to six years. More lately he is seen to be behind the troubles in Ukraine where 6,000 people have died.

The question for Macedonia is whether Gruevski has passed his best and is on the road to keeping power for the benefit of himself and his associates rather than using power for the benefit of the people? The image that the phone tapping scandal presents is of a prime minister who starts the day reading phone taps rather than economic or social reports. The decline of media freedom in Macedonia is not a good sign. Nor are accusations of influencing the judiciary, cheating at elections, and wide-spread phone tapping. Gruevski needs to have these accusations independently investigated. That is the only way to clear the air about himself and his government. But it will take guts to do it.

The third political issue is the judgement of Opposition leader Zaev. Boycotting parliament is always a silly and counter-productive move. It hasn’t worked before and it hurts Macedonia most of all. If Zaev has evidence of electoral fraud, a better strategy would have been to use Parliament to investigate the evidence and to use Parliament to put the evidence before the public. He could also have used parliament to strengthen the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption and the State Ombudsman.

If the accusation is correct that Zaev used the phone tapping to try to get Gruevski to share power, then that would also be a serious error of judgement. If he has evidence of illegal phone tapping and government corruption, the first and best place for that evidence is parliament, the public, the media and the investigative bodies of state. If instead Zaev used the phone tapping to surreptitiously achieve power, he would be unfit to be prime minister.

This brings us to the fourth key issue. Leadership. To be fair to Macedonia, the quality of leadership is an issue around the world. I would go so far as to say it is one of the key issues facing our species. All countries want good leaders. All countries need good leaders. But outstanding leaders are rare, and even good leaders are not common, even though there are good people everywhere.

Good leadership is about good people with good policies. It is not about power for power’s sake. For Macedonia, the good policies are the (relatively) easy part - grow the economy, solve social issues, find and investigate corruption, ensure the independence of the judiciary and the media, develop international relations, guard Macedonia’s name and good reputation, strengthen contacts with the diaspora, and so on. It’s not rocket science.

The hard part can be finding good people to implement these policies. But that is what Macedonia needs. I hope both VMRO-DMPNE and SDSM have succession plans and suitable leadership candidates in place as they may need them. For the Macedonian public, now is the time to encourage a new batch of potential leaders into politics. Whether they are young and talented or middle aged with worldly success or experience, now is the time to encourage them to step onto the leadership ladder.

I’m Victor Bivell. Thank you for listening.

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