

CIVIC

When are those with titles afraid of knowledge

By: Daliborka Uljarević

If you grease the palms, you will slip. If you look for shortcuts, you will lose your way. If you cheat, you will be outsmarted. If you think you can buy everything, than nothing will seem worth to you. If you do not have honour, all education is in vain. If you don't have the knowledge, titles are worthless. Let it be a lesson. Only knowledge is a title.

Corruption is a widespread phenomenon in Montenegro. Even those who have long denied it have now acknowledged the fact, mainly pressured by arguments from the outside, rather than out of genuine consideration for the opinions of their citizens. And that is another indicator of the level of accountability of decision makers in Montenegro towards those they represent.

What is corruption?

Etymologically, the word has a root in Latin *corrumpo*, meaning to spoil, to distort, to bribe. **Plato, Aristotle, Polybius** and **Montesquieu** defined corruption as decay of government, governance which is not in the interest of the political community, i.e. state. **Machiavelli** and **Rousseau** saw it rather as moral decay of individuals, undermining the values of the society and virtues of its citizens. Today, the definitions branch into three headings: administrative (individual behavior deviating from their formal role), economic (profit maximization via violation of laws and morals) and those focusing on public interest (using public resources for individual interests).

Corruption in education is the red line we must not cross. The quality of the educational process is essential – it will determine the fate of our country. Bad students and those who passed through the holes in the system will sooner or later lead us to a dead end, and we are already tragically paying the price of such education both as individuals and as a society. We cannot and must not be indifferent to the level of knowledge of the doctors who are supposed to cure us, lawyers who ought to represent our interests, judges who will decide upon them, engineers who projected the buildings in which we live and so forth, all the way to the politicians who are supposed to set the strategic goals for the development of our society.

Have we reached that red line in Montenegro?

Judging by the perceptions and experiences of our citizens, and by the behavior of the University of Montenegro – unfortunately, we have. Here are a few illustrations.

For several months, CCE has been unsuccessfully trying to obtain copies of 23 contracts signed between the University of Montenegro and its organisational units (faculties) with third persons, and whose value exceeds 10 000 and 100 000 EUR respectively. The University has refused the copies, explaining that “making these documents public would entail substantial economic harm to the University, greater than the overall public interest in having access that information”, although the higher instance (Ministry of Science and Education) ruled that these documents as well as some other we requested must be made available. Everybody sees that the University is trying to hide information on its financial transactions and it is unacceptable that one educational institution which is financed from the public budget maintains utter lack of transparency and defiance for the laws. The question is then: which and whose economic interests will be harmed if the citizens get to know how their money was spent? If everything is in accordance with the laws, why is showing it a problem?

Further, Rector **Predrag Miranović**, who refused his accounts to the public, also got into the headlines with a question mark posed over the legality of his appointment. And the procedure was not initiated by the “malicious” NGOs but by his own colleagues, on account of the “violation of the rules of procedure, flaws in the application of the substantive law and incorrect and incomplete establishment of facts” as stated in the charges brought against him with the Administrative Court. The court consequently declared the decision of the University Board on the appointment of the Rector void.

Rector is not terribly concerned with the laws. He continues to violate even the statutory framework set for the University of Montenegro. If unable to attend personally, he was supposed to send a Provost to the conference on corruption in education “Only Knowledge is a Title”. Instead, the University sent a “special envoy” **Miloš Bešić** who is an employee of the University but has no mandate to speak on behalf of the Rectorate. He has other qualities: a passion to try to discredit the findings of the research, since they indicate disconcertingly high levels of corruption in education. Not that the university worker Bešić denies the existence of corruption in education – he is just questioning our research methodology.

Recently he also wrote a longish elaboration on the issue, sent from the Rector’s e-mail address, demanding that CCE and CEMI comply with the Law on free access to information (to which, unlike the University of Montenegro, they are not bound) and supply him with complete documentation of the research to be checked by him, whose opinion is supposedly the ultimate authority on the matter of the quality of research. The e-mail also announced a new conference organised by the University of Montenegro and Faculty of Political Science – “Only title is a guarantee of knowledge”?!

The problem is not to make this research public. An extended version of it has long existed on the website of CEMI, more detailed with regard to methodology than any research Bešić ever conducted in Montenegro, and not a few of them sparked substantial controversies.

But it would perhaps be fair if first the University of Montenegro and its Rector finally complied with the law which obliges them to reveal to the public the partners and terms of their business transactions, the way they are spending the taxpayers’ money, to disclose these much “disputed” contracts as well as property lists of the University staff and heads of administrative units, to ensure that its students can attend the same exam with at least two professors in order to eradicate monopolies and possibilities of abuse, to regulate the conflict of interests and to introduce sanctions for the professors who pressure their students into taking additional private tuition hours with them or their colleagues etc.

University worker Bešić can perhaps help with that as well. But only when he choses to really stand in defence of every legal act in Montenegro, which was not entirely the case during his appearance at the said conference. The public would also perhaps be interest to hear about the number of MA defence committees and other committees in which he participates at the Faculty of Political Sciences. Compliance with the law and some elaboration on the form and status of his employment with the University would certainly lift the suspicion that he enjoys a certain privileged if not monopoly position, and would also enable him to contribute in full capacity to the very important business of combating corruption in higher education.

Sustainable anti-corruption mechanisms should lead to diplomas and titles which are the result of one’s knowledge, instead of titles, as the few examples seem to suggest, being afraid of knowledge.

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