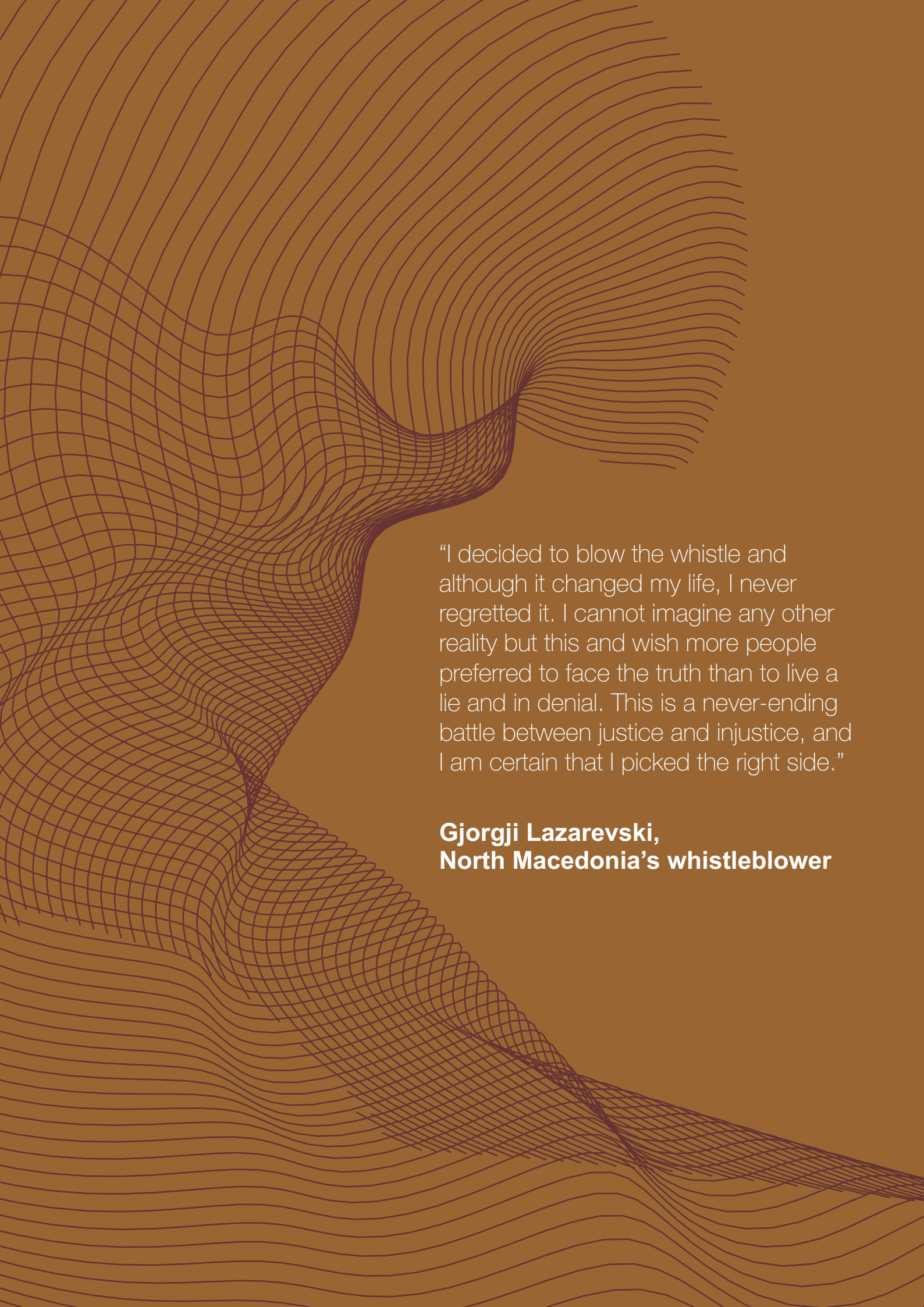




Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection

Newsletter

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The background is a solid brown color with a complex, abstract pattern of thin, dark brown lines. These lines form a grid that is distorted into a series of overlapping, wavy, and undulating shapes, creating a sense of depth and movement. The lines are most densely packed in the center and become more sparse towards the edges.

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**Gjorgji Lazarevski,
North Macedonia’s whistleblower**

INTERNATIONAL

Whistleblower Day



On May 12, 2022, Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection celebrated International Whistleblower Day in a two-day event co-organized with Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative and Youth Education Forum and hosted by Coalition member Center for Investigative Journalism – SCOOP.

Celebrating the International Whistleblower Day is an annual tradition of the Coalition. Previously, the event was held in different cities throughout the Balkan region such as in Pristina (2018), Tirana (2019), Sarajevo (2020), and Podgorica (2021). This day is not only an opportunity to celebrate whistleblowers but also to celebrate and acknowledge the work of our members and partners in enhancing rights of whistleblowers in the region and continue to promote this practice as one of the most effective practices in the fight against corruption.

In his opening remarks, David Geer, Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of North Macedonia mentioned that whistleblowing is one of the strongest patriot acts of a person. “Whistleblowers are always representing public interest, and are motivated to do something good for the public interest.” He said that in his 25 years of experience he has seen a lot of improvement in the field of whistleblowing. “Whistleblower protection mechanisms have to provide a safe ground for whistleblowing because whistleblowers are generally an object under attack after they ‘blow the whistle.’” Ambassador Geer talked about the increased awareness about whistleblowing, reflected also in the adoption of the EU Whistleblower Directive in 2019. He concluded that this conference “is really important to hear the voice of whistleblowers and what they need”.

Minister of Justice in North Macedonia, professor Nikola Tupancheski talked about the process of adoption of the whistleblowing law in November 2015 in



David Geer, Ambassador of the EU to the Republic of North Macedonia during the event

North Macedonia until the start of its implementation in March 2016.

Desislava Gotskova, head of RAI Secretariat spoke about RAI's involvement in whistleblower protection. RAI has been working closely with governments and eminent experts in the field ever since. "Early on we realized that this work is very complex and multi-layered that we need to engage not only public sector experts but different stakeholders including civil society. This is when we met good people from different CSOs, some of them in this room, Mark Worth, Aleksandar from SCOOP, Arjan Dyrmishi together with our colleagues from CSOs we established the Southeast Europe Coalition for Whistleblower Protection, and for this, we are very proud. We are very happy that the Coalition is active and growing and that our excellent partnership continues" – she said. She spoke of some of RAI's projects in the field like the EU-funded regional project on whistleblowing 'Breaking the Silence: Enhancing Whistleblowing Policies and Culture in the Western Balkans and Moldova', to promote whistleblower protection and disclosure channels and to increase public awareness, especially among youth.

Gotskova also shared details of future projects. "Under the Whistleblowing project, we will organize a master class on anti-corruption campaigns and advocacy, with a special focus on whistleblowing. Experienced communication experts, together with Mark Worth will deep dive into how to create attention and catching ideas; mechanisms for delivery of a successful advocacy campaign; the role of media and institutions in the campaigns, and so on" – she said.



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- **Desislava Gotskova**,
head of RAI Secretariat

Arjan Dyrmishi, Coalition co-coordinator talked about citizens who spoke up and exposed corruption in the region as the source of inspiration behind the formation of the Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection. He mentioned for instance two brave men, Gjorgji Lazarevski and Zvonko Kostovski who, with their heroism have become the most prominent whistleblowers in the Balkan by exposing the government's corruption affairs in controlling part of the media, hiring people based on party loyalty, negotiating election fraud, retaliation of political opponents, and money laundering.

“We started this journey here in Skopje, five years ago when for two years, the North Macedonian citizens and the whole world were learning with dismay how the government had illegally intercepted conversations of about 26,000 citizens, which included: opposition, journalists, judges, prosecutors, businessmen, MPs, ministers, academics, religious figures, non-governmental organizations” – Dyrmishi stated. He concluded by pointing out that “in this global clash between democracy and authoritarianist forces, the fight against corruption, as well as promoting and upholding freedom of speech and human rights, and building a strong and resilient governance system is more relevant than ever.”

The second panel, moderated by **Elmerina Ahmetaj-Hrelja** from RAI, revolved around the topic ‘New challenges of whistleblowing law in line with the EU Whistleblower directive’. Professor **Jovan**

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- **Arjan Dyrmishi**,
coalition co-coordinator



*Arjan Dyrmishi,
Executive Director of Center
for the Study of Democracy
and Governance in Albania
and Coalition co-coordinator*

Jovcevski from Skopje held a long and detailed speech about his case. He was the person that promoted the whistleblower law, becoming later the contact person for receiving complaints at the OTA (Agency for wiretapping), and in the end, he became a whistleblower himself. Two and a half years later he is still waiting to be recognized as such by the authorities. In the meantime, he has been fired from work and now is a single parent of three.

Goran Lefkov, investigative journalist from SCOOP Macedonia talked about three main points that he would like to see reflected in the whistleblower law in North Macedonia. The first is the possibility for people who go public to not lose the status of whistleblowers. Second, he suggested a special fund for whistleblowers, so that if a suspension from work follows, they can rely on financial protection until the end of the court case. Third, a financial award for whistleblowers as a percentage of the penalty that is going to be paid by the institution that they reported on.

Ahmetaj-Hrelja elaborated on ideas on how to get better protection for whistleblowers so that they would not risk their job or suffer pressure from the authorities. **Slagjana Taseva**, head of Transparency International –



Macedonia who wrote the first law for whistleblowing in North Macedonia in 2015, explained that protection of the whistleblowers in the country is still not on the foreseen level.

In the third session 'Heroic implications of the whistleblowers', moderator **Arjan Dyrmishi** talked about the importance to pay more attention to the social implications of the activities of whistleblowers.

Following this discussion, **Mark Worth**, director of the European Centre for whistleblower rights and Coalition co-coordinator emphasized that regardless of advances in whistleblower protection, whistleblowers are not fully shielded from retaliation. For him, the new motto of whistleblower organizations should be 'blow the whistle, but do not become a whistleblower', because not many people have the constitution to become heroes.

Irena Popovska, Secretary General of the State Commission for Preventing Corruption in North Macedonia, mentioned that for the first time in the history of their institution, members of the Commission have been elected in a completely transparent procedure, which has led to increased trust in the institution in the eyes of whistleblowers, and because of that they have 40 reported cases from the beginning of this year. She mentions that in all cases, they are the first contact for whistleblowers because the latter do not trust the institutions they work for to report internally. She mentioned that half of the whistleblowers are so brave as to openly identify themselves to officers in State Commission. "If we want a successful whistleblowing story, all of us as institutions have to do our job properly. Not just one or two institutions", – she said.



The next panel 'Challenges and problems of whistleblowers in North Macedonia', was dedicated to problems that whistleblowers are facing in everyday life.

Some of the issues raised were the weakness of state institutions to respond properly, the lack of information on the kind of protection that the law offers, and the discouragement of potential whistleblowers once they are confronted with the reporting procedure. **Aleksandar Bozinovski**, founder of SCOOP Macedonia and investigative journalist talked about oppositional parties or foreign missions as alternative channels of reporting corruptive affairs, in face of state institutions that are too weak to make a change. **Aleksandar Tumanovski**, a lawyer of whistleblowers, also raised concerns that institutions attack whistleblowers instead of protecting them, which makes court cases very difficult to handle.

Tinka Kiteska, head of NGO for protection of the rights of workers in public administration said that in their NGO, there are more whistleblower cases than in State Commission for Fight Against Corruption and Ombudsman's office taken together. However, potential whistleblowers get discouraged to proceed once they are confronted with all possible scenarios following their report.

In the session 'The importance of the whistleblowers for investigative journalism' investigative journalists spoke about whistleblowing as an institution in their everyday work.

Jasna Bachovska Nedic, professor of Journalistic studies at St. Kiril and Metodi University in Skopje, said that proper media that can fight corruption is lacking. She said that according to Pribe's report, there are only a handful of well-trained and skilled journalists to fight corruption. According to Kristina Atovska, an experienced journalist, journalists constitute a unique 'institution' where whistleblowers are warmly received as heroes. Now some institutions are also open to them. However, in terms of law application, she mentioned that North Macedonia appears to need 10 months to adopt a law, but 10 more years to implement it.

Goce Trpkovski, an experienced investigative journalist from Prizma, said that in his experience, whistleblower reports lead to the best investigative stories. A collaboration of investigative journalists and whistleblowers is the strongest tool in the fight against corruption, because of the pressure that it creates from several sides to the institutions and people involved.

Gjorgji Lazarevski
at the International
Whistleblower Day



In a brief interview for the Coalition, we asked whistleblower Gjorgji Lazarevski about the event, his experience, and thoughts about the law and protection of whistleblowers in the region.

What was your main take from the event?

After a long time of feeling isolated, I had a chance to be among people who understand me and share the same values. I've heard of different experiences and opinions and realized that all the accomplishments so far in my country related to the whistleblower legislation are not enough to provide a normal and safe life for people who feel obliged to stand up against injustice and blow the whistle. I realized that I need to be more informed about the implementation of the law and try to help as best as I can by providing constructive suggestions. It is not enough to have a law, we need a law that will be efficient and encourage whistleblowers. So my main take would be: it's not over yet.

What do you think is the most challenging aspect regarding whistleblowing in your country?

The most challenging aspect is to change the public perception in my country. Unfortunately, according to recent polls, 33% of the population in North Macedonia thinks that whistleblowers are spies who should be sentenced. That negative perception needs to be changed by intensive campaigns that will convince people that whistleblowing is the most efficient weapon against corruption. According to official statistics of the European Union, 80% of solved corruption cases are thanks to reports of whistleblowers. The enemy of our society is corruption, whereas whistleblowers are our friends.



Gjorgji Lazarevski, whistleblower

Compared to your experience, how do you find the current conditions regarding whistleblowing? What do you think has changed positively and what needs to be done/improved?

My experience showed that internal and external reporting is not enough, there has got to be an additional alternative – a secret reporting to the authority that has enough integrity and confidence to stand the rage when the powerful and angry people realize that the truth has come to surface. I believe that after all that happened, my country has strong editorial offices for investigative journalism that can protect their sources and have a big impact on public opinion.

A positive change is that we finally have a law and basic protection for whistleblowers. What needs to be improved is the implementation. I am not convinced that people in institutions have real power to protect whistleblowers or have to take any responsibility if they don't.

Given your own experience, a message that you would like to give out concerning this event.

I decided to blow the whistle and although it changed my life, I never regretted it. I can't imagine any other reality but this and wish more people preferred to face the truth than to live a lie and in denial. This is a never-ending battle between justice and injustice, and I am certain that I picked the right side. Unfortunately, the battle is never over, and we are all going to face many challenges. I am happy to recognize a new approach in whistleblower protection – 'report without reporting', that can provide the truth to be published without revealing the identity of the whistleblower.

Gjorgji Lazarevski received a certificate of acknowledgment for his public service by exposing wrongdoings. It has become a tradition that on the



Gjorgji Lazarevski at the event in Skopje

"My main take would be: it's not over yet. The enemy of our society is corruption, whereas whistleblowers are our friends."

- Gjorgji Lazarevski,
Whistleblower

International Whistleblower Day, the host awards people for their contribution to whistleblower protection and fight against corruption or enhancing freedom of speech. This year, the Center for Investigative Journalism – SCOOP also awarded Certificates for appreciation to Desislava Gotskova, Kristina Atovska, Gjorgji Lazarevski, Arjan Dyrmishi, Mark Worth, and Goran Lefkov.

The celebration continued on the second day with a youth event organized by the Youth Education Forum with the support of RAI Secretariat. The event brought together around 50 participants from the fields of law, political and social sciences, defense and peace studies from universities in Skopje and Tetovo. The Deputy Head of Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of North Macedonia Julian Vassallo, Youth Education Forum's Risto Saveski, and Head of RAI Secretariat Desislava Gotskova welcomed the participants. Part of this event was a Ted-like talk by international expert [Gerard Ryle](#), as well as journalist Tomislav Kezharovski and whistleblower Gjorgji Lazarevski from North Macedonia, followed by the screening of RAI's social experiment video [Whistle For the Brave Ones](#).

The social experiment explores the difficult reality of being a whistleblower. In the experiment, six young people were invited to a mock casting session for a television commercial. The producer, director, and crew were played by actors. As the session unfolds, the participants fall victim to an act of nepotism. They are presented with a clear choice: to speak up against corruption or stay silent. By the end of the video, participants find out what it feels like to be a whistleblower and what drives and encourages people to speak up.

