

# WhistleWire

The Southeast Europe Whistleblower Journal



## COALITION CELEBRATES HEROES AND WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTION PROGRESS

Welcome to **WhistleWire**, the magazine of the Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection



For the first time in its history, the Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection has bestowed the Free Speech Award to every nominee who was considered for the prize. As a sign of appreciation and acknowledging the diverse contribution of all five nominees, the Award was given equally to these courageous activists and journalists:

- **Lejla Bicakcic** of the Center for Investigative Reporting
- **Maida Bilal** of Krug života Kruščica (Circle of Life Foundation)
- Journalist **Rubina Čengiđ**
- **Amila Tatareviđ** of the Association Baby Steps, and
- **Balkan Investigative Reporting Network**

It is worth noting the work of the two activists recognized at the Coalition's annual meeting in Sarajevo on February 3. Bilal is one of the women from the Bosnian village of Kruščica who blockaded heavy machinery and equipment for 503 days, which resulted in the cancellation of permits for two proposed dams on the Kruščica River. Tatareviđ is leading the national campaign to expose and stop the corruption and abuse in Bosnia's maternity wards, including doctors who demand bribes from women literally during childbirth.

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The Coalition grants the Award to journalists, activists and organizations in the country where the Coalition's annual meeting is held. Meeting co-host Alma Fejzić of the Center for the Development of Youth Activism congratulated the recipients on their commitment to democracy, integrity and active citizenry.

The need to build on Southeast Europe's recent advances in whistleblower protection was stressed by Coalition Co-coordinator Arjan Dyrmishi and Desislava Gotskova, head of the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI), which co-sponsored the meeting. The Coalition and RAI have been close partners since the Coalition was founded in 2015.

Also delivering an important message was Sarajevo Canton Minister of Justice Darja Softic Kadenic. In passing the Canton's first-ever whistleblower protected law in August 2022, Kadenic incorporated most of the recommendations suggested by RAI.

Tom Devine of the Government Accountability Project, the world's most experienced non-profit whistleblower rights attorney, spoke about the immense role whistleblowers have played and continue to play in society. He talked about specific cases across the region as well as the US, where whistleblowers have exposed countless corruption cases, public health dangers and other scandals.

## Baby Steps: Ending 'Slaughterhouse' Conditions in Bosnia's Maternity Wards

Imagine you are a woman having a baby in a maternity ward. While in the throes of labor, the doctor demands a bribe from you – otherwise he will walk out the door and leave you alone and in agony. As difficult or impossible as it is to believe, these scenes are commonplace in Bosnian hospitals.

Association Baby Steps, a Coalition member, has exposed these horrible deeds by doctors and is working to end them. Corruption, abuse and mistreatment in Bosnian maternity wards is a widely known problem that has been condoned by hospitals and ignored by public officials for decades.

Half of the women the organization has interviewed said they gave money or a gift before or after childbirth. One-third said this happened in secret, which allows doctors and nurses to deny their misconduct. The average bribe is €70. This means bribery in maternity hospitals nationwide is estimated at €1 million annually.

"I started to lose my breath," one woman told Baby Steps. "They cut me and later sewed without anesthesia, using vicious primitive remarks, and permanently damaged my spine. Never again would I go to that slaughterhouse."

"I gave the money to the doctor myself, €250," said another. "He took the envelope. Believe me, I barely survived even with my 'connection'."

Baby Steps' groundbreaking report on the corruption and mistreatment – "Borba protiv korupcije u porodilištima" – is available at: <http://www.babysteps.ba/borba-protiv-korupcije-u-porodilistima/>

Responding to this evidence, prosecutors in Zenica Dobož Canton are investigating the mistreatment of mothers and pregnant women in hospitals. The evidence includes videos and first-hand accounts of dozens of women who were left screaming in agony in the midst of childbirth by doctors who refused to treat them unless they paid a bribe. Some women said they were abused and mistreated despite having paid a bribe.



**Amila Tatarević**  
*Baby Steps founder*

In May, Baby Steps reported that a doctor had been sentenced to prison following the death of a baby during childbirth in Zenica. Still, the organization has been unable to get the full story about what happened.

"The doctor is protected by the hospital and medical chambers," Baby Steps founder Amila Tatarević said. "The hospital refused to provide us with an answer. We filed a complaint in accordance with the law, through a lawyer, but we still haven't received an answer. Also, the medical chambers did not provide us with any answers even though we submitted a request for information."

## The Coalition in Action: Promoting, Educating, Protecting

The Coalition's more than 40 activist and journalist member groups are at the forefront of the democratization and accountability movement in Southeast Europe.

The Albanian Center for Quality Journalism is producing and distributing two videos that explore the issue of whistleblowing and aim to raise public awareness about whistleblowers' contribution to a democratic society. The videos tackle the relationship of whistleblowers and the media, and the difficulties in achieving a secure relationship with potential information sources. Those appearing in the films include public officials, human rights and legal experts, and international organization that have helped develop whistleblower laws.

In the field of education, CPI Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is collaborating closely with students from the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo. Among the actions are a public event that brings together youth, media and various experts to create a forum for idea exchanges for the younger generation. The Infohouse Foundation is informing the public about the state of Bosnian whistleblowers today, how protected they feel when reporting corruption, and improving systems so whistleblowers suffer less harm.

The Media Development Center of Bulgaria closely monitored the successful effort to pass the country's first-ever whistleblower protection law, which passed in January 2023 to comply with new EU rules. The Center distributed information about the legislative and political process, legal analyses, press releases and targeted mailings. The Center stressed the need for a speak-up culture that values employees and encourages them to share their concerns, give feedback, ask questions and offer suggestions without fearing consequences.

Through its Business Integrity Forum, Transparency International Greece is promoting employees' capacity to report unethical behavior, ask questions and give managers the chance to uncover troublesome hotspots and avert potential catastrophes. The Forum serves as a platform for the top 20 companies in Greece, which have openly declared their commitment to operate transparently and adopt good governance practices.

Internews Kosovo is working to stimulate a whistleblowing culture in private companies and public institutions. The media outlet is shaping public opinion by broadcasting programming on whistleblower issues and cases, drawing attention to whistleblower policies and mechanisms, and holding institutions to account.



**“More changes are happening in the Balkans at a rapid pace compared to everywhere else in the world. Whistleblowers using the power of truth are changing the course of history.”**

**Tom Devine,**  
*whistleblower rights attorney and legal director, Government Accountability Project, Washington, DC*

## TWO-TIME LOSER: European Court Again Rules Against Romania

Romania lost a high-profile whistleblower retaliation case at the European Court of Human Rights last November, marking the second such ruling in a decade, Mark Worth reported in [Whistleblower Network News](#).

The Strasbourg court ruled unanimously that Romania violated Antoniu Poienaru's right to freedom of expression guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, the news outlet reported. Poienaru, an engineer for the Agency for Payments and Intervention for Agriculture in Cluj, was fired in 2011 because of his blog posts about alleged irregularities within the public agency.

"It ate up 11 years of my life, but I'm glad I finally won. Things have to be told as they are," Poienaru told the newspaper Libertatea. "At least it doesn't kill you if you tell the truth, like in the old days."

Before he was dismissed, Poienaru suffered numerous disciplinary actions including warnings, a pay cut and blocking his access to agency



computers, according to the Whistleblower Network News report. The Cluj Court of Appeal upheld the dismissal in 2016, saying it was legal and that his articles damaged APIA and its executive director. Poienaru was not protected from retaliation under Romania's whistleblower protection law, which was passed in 2010.

## RISK, DISTRUST AND APATHY: Measuring Whistleblower Attitudes in Slovakia

When it comes to whistleblowing, about one-fourth of people in Slovakia believe reporting corruption is useless because nobody will be punished, confidentiality cannot be protected, people do not trust investigators to follow up, and people fear being labeled a traitor.

The survey of more than 1,000 people by Transparency International (TI) Slovakia last November also found more than one-third of people fear retaliation at work and think it is difficult to prove that misconduct occurred.

These attitudes highlight many persistent challenges, such as the view of whistleblowers as snitches and the burden on citizens to prove their allegations, rather than just bringing them to the attention of public authorities to investigate.

To counter these perceptions and other issues, TI Slovakia cooperates with Slovakia's Whistleblower Office to improve how citizens are treated when they come forward

to report crime and corruption. Discussions are ongoing on topics including how employees can prepare a witness report on misconduct at work and granting legal protections for whistleblowers.



## Sitting Down with Arrita Rezniqui of the Kosovo Law Institute

The Coalition was pleased to have the opportunity to speak with Arrita Rezniqui of the Kosovo Law Institute (KLI), one of the rising stars in the field of legal advocacy in the Western Balkans.

Rezniqui is a senior legal researcher and coordinator of KLI's Free Legal Aid Center, which provides free legal aid to vulnerable people in criminal, civil and administrative cases. Rezniqui and the Center work to ensure equal opportunities and access to justice for citizens. KLI also is Kosovo's leading NGO for whistleblower rights and protection.

**Coalition:** Once you recognize a potential whistleblower case, what steps do you follow to handle the case?

**Rezniqui:** At first, we inform the potential whistleblower about their rights as provided by the law and how we may support them. Also, we make sure they understand the risks. If the whistleblower decides to continue this process, we give them full support with our whole potential and capacity. We provide free legal aid, by giving advice, drafting legal submissions and representing them in court.

**Coalition:** From your experience, are people who approach you aware of the nature of their case? To what extent are they familiar with Kosovo's whistleblower law?

**Rezniqui:** Mostly we deal with people who have heard of whistleblowing, from our reports or public campaigns. But many people have little to no knowledge at all regarding their rights and opportunities. So we are working daily on raising public awareness and encouraging them to exercise their rights.

**Coalition:** What is the major concern potential whistleblowers have? From your experience, what do people expect when they report irregularities to KLI?

**Rezniqui:** The main problem is the lack of trust in justice institutions. People hesitate to follow the necessary steps to exercise their own rights when they lack trust. Because of this hesitation, it is impossible to have proceedings that follow the law. On the other hand, when people report irregularities



**Arrita Rezniqui**  
the Kosovo Law Institute (KLI)

to KLI, they mostly expect a solution. They want to know more about their rights and how to act further.

**Coalition:** Why are people who come to your office not willing to follow up on their whistleblowing cases?

**Rezniqui:** Most potential whistleblowers who do not follow up on their cases fear the retaliation from the institution or authority they are about to expose.

**Coalition:** What do you think are the most pressing issues to be resolved so that the whistleblower law may be applied properly in Kosovo?

**Rezniqui:** First, there needs to be more serious work by public authorities such as the Anti-Corruption Agency and the Labor Inspectorate. They must have the will to implement this law in practice, be bold and courageous, and follow all the necessary steps. Then, there should be more training for public and private institutions, so they fully understand their duty and be able to face all of the challenges. And of course, we need to continue to raise awareness about the importance of whistleblower law.

# OUR GROWING COMMUNITY OF WHISTLEBLOWER ACTIVISTS



The Coalition officially welcomed several new members at its annual meeting in Sarajevo last February. We are proud to have such skilled and passionate people and groups on our team.

## Pomak in Croatia

the Organization for the Promotion of Good Governance and Work – was established in January 2022 to aid whistleblowers by providing legal guidance and emotional support. Pomak aims to shield present and future whistleblowers from dangers and ensure their financial stability.

## Jan Slama, David Spunar, and Pavel Ihm

founded FaceUp in the Czech Republic after witnessing bullying in primary school and being hesitant to speak up. When they were 17 they developed an app that allows children to anonymously report bullying and other problems to trusted teachers. Numerous companies have since approached FaceUp to develop similar platforms to promote a safe work environment. Thousands of organizations across four continents now rely on their services.

## The Center for the Development of Youth Activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

engages young people across the nation in civil society. Its focus areas include activism, volunteerism, combating corruption within schools, preventing peer violence, promoting media literacy and access to information, and advocating for ecological sustainability and energy efficiency.

## The Association Baby Steps in Bosnia and Herzegovina

works to improve the welfare of children, parents and families. The organization distributes educational materials, identifies new areas of improvement and proposes solutions. Its main campaign is to stop the well-known corruption and abuse in maternity wards, including demanding from women during childbirth.

## The Civic Alliance in Montenegro

has helped citizens for nearly a decade by advocating for their civil and human rights. It works in response to the country's inefficient procedures, and poor transparency and accountability in public services. It focuses on weak legal norms and negligence by civil servants.

## Belgrade Center for Security Policy

has increasingly focused on the field of human security over the past three years, due to increasing pressure and attacks on human rights defenders and whistleblowers. The Center has established a Civil Committee to support concerns citizens with practical and legal assistance.

## A team of sociologists founded the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI)

in 2005 with the aim to utilize sociological science to produce and evaluate social transformations. BIRODI monitors policies, elections and media, and has established the social network [www.integrist.net](http://www.integrist.net) and a research portal [www.tvojstav.com](http://www.tvojstav.com).

# Whistleblowing and Gender

## New Viewpoints

On the surface, the risks of reporting corruption from within an organization are the same for men and women. However, what drives a man or a woman to report corruption, and which corrupt practices they might report, seem to depend on gender.

While in the Balkans the level of education and income tend to be the main drivers of the will to report corruption, some studies suggest certain aspects of gender should be taken into consideration.

Some surveys suggest women have stronger attitudes about condemning corruption. But when it

comes to reporting it, they are more afraid of retaliation than men. To this end, anonymous reporting channels should be an option for all people. Additionally, women appear more likely to report if they can interact with another woman. One way to encourage women to speak up is to appoint more female compliance officers in companies and whistleblower caseworkers in public institutions.

Power structures can impact relationships and behavior between men and women within organizations. To adjust for this, psychological and other types of support can be offered, especially with regard to sexual harassment.



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