

Corruption reigns in Czech Republic

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PRAGUE: In setting up his promotion company in the Czech Republic, Tomas did not think twice about paying his first bribe.

The young Czech was registering a car he bought for his new business and slipped 200 crowns (\$NZ13.68) among documents at a vehicle registration office.

"My partner told me it is better to add a sweetener," he said, declining to give his surname.

Whether or not he needed to pay off an official to get his papers in order, the move reflects the widely held perception in the otherwise successful and fast-growing European Union member that bribes are simply part of life.

From multimillion dollar public tenders to referees at local league volleyball games, Czechs expect to pay a bribe.

In recent months graft revelations have become commonplace on newspaper front pages, turning corruption into a major theme in campaigning ahead of a June 2-3 election in the ex-Communist central European state.

An opinion poll in February by the SC&C agency for Czech Television showed Czechs regard corruption as the main problem they face. SC&C also found a third of Czechs have paid a bribe, and few seem fazed by having to do so.

Bribery has even hit the top soccer league, with more than a dozen referees and club officials being convicted for match rigging. Most of them can still appeal against the rulings.

Leaked police wiretaps of their phone conversations, filled with references to bribes nicknamed "carps" and "apples", were turned into a play that became a hit with theatre-goers.

Throughout eastern Europe voters have been making governments pay for scandal-tainted administrations. Romania and Poland have both seen recent changes in government and corruption was a major campaign battleground.

Andrea Krnacova, head of the Czech branch of corruption watchdog Transparency International, said the Czechs were paying the price for negligence since the end of communism, especially in 1998-2002 when the leftist Social Democrats ruled under a pact with the rightist opposition which kept them in power in return for various perks.

"We are getting the bill now for such irresponsible behaviour," she said, adding that economic and administrative reforms in the Baltic countries and Slovakia showed it was possible to lay the ground for better government.

Transparency International rates the Czech Republic the 47th least corrupt place as perceived by businessmen and analysts looking at the public sector. Poland and Latvia were the only worse-ranked EU countries.

A survey of 50 Czech managers commissioned by Transparency International revealed public sector corruption was the worst.

"Public tenders are completely opaque. Most managers know of corruption in this field," the GfK agency which conducted the survey said.

Another Transparency International study estimated the country wasted at least 32 billion Czech crowns of public funds – about 1 percent of gross domestic product – in 2004 because of poor management of public tenders.

Mainstream political parties have been campaigning on an anti-corruption ticket but their pledges ring hollow with much of the electorate given their history of sleaze.

The state-funded CVVM institute said 70 percent of Czechs thought graft had worsened last year, while only 3 percent saw an improvement.

"Corruption is enormous everywhere. I think people have it in themselves, and it will take a generation to change," said Marie Sarova, a 68-year-old pensioner.

"It is across all of the political parties, it is impossible to say who is better or worse."

But the spate of recent affairs is hurting the ruling Social Democrats most following the resignation of Prime Minister Stanislav Gross last year after he came under public pressure to explain how he funded the purchase of his luxury apartment.

His case has been shelved with no charges brought, but the damage has lingered.

Scandals swirling around the Social Democrats should be a boon for the opposition, but the rightist Civic Democrats, leading opinion surveys, have not been able to distance themselves completely from scandal.

Their government collapsed in 1997 after revelations that a businessman who bought a state company used false names to hide his donations.

"Official politics is becoming a special branch of an opaque business where corruption is rampant," political scientist Michal Klima wrote.

Disillusion with the main parties has boosted the election chances of the Green Party, which boasts an anti-corruption platform supported by the fact it has never been in parliament and is thus scandal-free.

Support for the group has climbed to around 10 percent in recent months – at the expense of both the Social Democrats and Civic Democrats – and it may play a kingmaker role after the elections as polls suggest neither of the main parties will be able to govern alone.

"We have a lot to do in cutting down enormously on corruption," Green Party chief Martin Bursik told Reuters in an interview. "Corruption is the trademark of the Czech Republic."

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