

The current **Macedonian government** wants to speed up the construction of road infrastructure: to do so, it is changing several laws and awarding the contract without a tender. Procedures which, according to the opposition, mainly damage the treasury in favor of **private interests**.

While the government announced it as the biggest infrastructural project of the century, the opposition claims that it will cost [North Macedonia](#) a lot of money only for the sake of populism. Thus goes the political duel over the announced construction of new 110 kilometres of highway in North Macedonia.

In July 2021, to make its construction possible, the ruling majority of **SDSM and DUI** adopted a special law that allows a foreign consortium – without any public procurement – to receive budget money to build highways. At the same time, government and opposition disagree on the current process of amending parts of at least eight laws – amendments which, according to the government, are needed to speed up the construction of strategic roads and infrastructures in the country.

The special law wanted by the ruling coalition for the construction of the highways – part of the wider corridors 8 and 10d – resulted in the signing of an agreement with American-Turkish consortium “Bechtel and Enka” in March 2023.

Weeks later, the parliament is now trying to pass the amendments and additions to eight laws related to the construction of corridors 8 and 10d, including the Law on Agricultural Land, the Law on Expropriation, the Law on Urban Planning, the Law on Forests, and the Law on Building. Amendments to the Law on Cultural Heritage were withdrawn after protests of the associations of archaeologists in front of the National Assembly.

The special law applies to the sections of highways part of Corridor 8: Tetovo – Gostivar (17.5 kilometres), Gostivar – Bukojcani (30.3 kilometres) and Trebenishte – Struga – Qafasan (21.7 kilometres). Part of Corridor 10d is also a highway connection between Bitola and Prilep (39.3 kilometres). 1.3 billion Euros from the state budget are planned for the construction of the mentioned infrastructures, while 300 million Euros are also planned for the expropriation of the land along the chosen routes. The planned amount of 1.3 billion Euros might increase, though, as the government has already announced.

### **Secrets and allegations of corruption**

The heated quarrels sparked by these decisions are due to the contract with the “**Bechtel and Enka**” consortium, which, according to the authorities, will not be made public, because it is classified as a business secret. Also because of the secrecy, the opposition charged that no info is made available to the public because the agreement is harmful to the state budget.

Main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE claims to have obtained a copy of the contract through whistleblowers, and now asks whether the state has committed itself to pay huge penalties to the contractor if the legal amendments are not finalised within a deadline, from which “Bechtel- Enka” will profit seriously.

Nine VMRO-DPMNE deputies sent a written request to Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski to disclose the “Agreement for the construction of Corridor 8 and Corridor 10d”, but they did not receive any answer.

“The government must explain why it has committed itself to penalties of 53 million Euros for this month and a total of 196 million Euros, only on the basis of changing the law and introducing a 60-hour work week”, said VMRO-DPMNE spokesperson Naum Stoilkovski at a press conference.

The response of the ruling majority was that the opposition is working according to what they say are “pro-Russian guidelines”, and that it deliberately wants to block the project.

#### **For the government, everything is transparent**

**Artan Grubi** from DUI, who holds the position of first vice-president and minister of Political system in the government, has been appointed as the coordinator for the construction of the roads. Grubi holds regular monthly briefings and press conferences on this topic. In his last address to journalists and representatives of the Chambers of Commerce, he said that there are no secrets surrounding the deal.

“Details of the Agreement that are of public interest have never been a secret, such as the value of the Agreement, the method of implementation of the Agreement, how the citizens’ money will be spent. There are no penalties, nor is there a payment of penalties in the contract. The state has the option to build the highways within the time limit set by the government of 57 months, or to accept that the highways will be built for a few more years”, Grubi said.

“So far no funds have been paid to the contractor. The first payment will be the advance for the start of the construction works and every penny paid from the state to the contractor will be accounted for”.

Grubi also pointed out that if there is embezzlement of even one penny, those guilty should be put in prison for life. The opposition ironically answered him that he himself determined the punishment he is going to meet.

At the same time, the **State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption** (SCPC) announced that their team will work on the case that was opened for Corridors 8 and 10d, after doubts arose in the public about the procedure for selecting contractors without a public tender.

President Stevo Pendarovski, answering a question about whether he will sign the decree if the construction law and other amendments to the laws are passed, said that he will wait to see the final content of the laws.

“My team of lawyers is already monitoring the debate and what will come out as a final product”, said Pendarovski. “Regarding the procedure, I think that even though the government is following a shortened procedure, there will be enough time for the opposition to submit amendments, to join the debate and to have a reasoned discussion as befits this important set of laws”.

### **Incomplete infrastructures**

Part of Corridor 8, the construction of the Kichevo-Ohrid highway – with its total length of 57 kilometres – was started 10 years ago, in February 2014, but it is not completed yet. Only 8.5 kilometres from Trebenishta to Ohrid are currently operational.

The then government, led by VMRO DPMNE, took a loan from [Chinese](#) state bank “Exim”, a loan that [North Macedonia](#) has to pay it back in 20 years. According to the plans, the new highway should have been completed in 4 years and opened in 2018. The government changed in 2017, and the highway is still not finished. The current government claims that it will be completed by December 2023.

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