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## **MACEDONIA COURT ACQUITS ZAEV OF BRIBERY CHARGE**

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A Macedonian court has ruled that Prime Minister Zoran Zaev was not guilty of having solicited a bribe of 200,000 euros to help a local businessman buy land in his home town of Strumica.

I am happy about the acquittal and that I finally proved my innocence and received justice, Zaev said in front of the court after the ruling was issued.

The charges were raised in 2015 amid a deep political crisis in Macedonia, when Zaev was an opposition leader and mayor of Strumica.

He was charged shortly after he started releasing batches of illegally wiretapped conversations that pointed to widespread corruption in the previous government of Nikola Gruevski.

The compromising tapes sparked a political crisis and eventually led to the fall of Gruevski's government last year.

Initially, Zaev was accused of taking a 200,000 euros bribe in order to help privatise the public land that the businessman wanted to purchase.

However, the prosecution later changed its charges from taking to merely soliciting bribes – a milder offence.

Zaev insisted that Gruevski's government had framed him, to discredit both him and his allegations of widespread corruption.

The case was widely exploited in public, including the use of police video surveillance footage, that Gruevski's VMRO DPMNE party insisted offered proof of Zaev's wrongdoing.

The footage depicted Zaev's conversation with the businessman over certain financial transactions.

But Zaev insisted that the leaked video was cut several times to make it look as if he was soliciting bribery, while he insisted he was only asking for donations to build a church in his home town.

The court this year played the entire uncut video at one of its sessions. However, the public was excluded from this session.

Zaev on Monday said that he would demand that the court permit the publication of the entire video, and said that he would publish it himself if he receives it from the authorities.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-pm-acquitted-in-bribery-case-05-21-2018>

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