

Abductions Rattle Macedonians

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Government and opposition blame each other over spate of kidnappings

A series of audacious abductions has presented Macedonia's rulers with a challenge: tightening law and order without upsetting fragile inter-ethnic relations. Fortunately for the ruling coalition, the new crime wave appears to have been financially rather than politically motivated.

On December 2, an ethnic Albanian boy was snatched from a shopping mall in central Skopje. His father, a wealthy businessman, was asked for a ransom of one million euro. He decided to pay it, and the boy was handed over in the town of Blace, on the western border with Kosovo.

The incident is still under police investigation and they are keeping the details secret. However, the media has revealed that the boy was abducted by a gang from Gostivar and Tetovo, in Albanian-dominated western Macedonia, in league with Albanians from Kosovo.

Two weeks later, on December 18, an ethnic Macedonian teenager was kidnapped in Skopje. He escaped after being taken to a nearby village. The identity of his abductors and their motives remain a mystery. On the same day in Debar, two policemen were also kidnapped.

In another incident, a Muslim priest from Gostivar was kidnapped in November and released soon afterwards without any ransom being paid. His captors are thought to have mistaken the Albanian imam for his brother, a wealthy local businessman.

These incidents have created a climate of fear amongst ordinary citizens. Kidnapping was almost unheard of in Macedonia until civil strife broke out two years ago. During the conflict, Albanian guerrillas from the National Liberation Army, NLA, abducted twelve Macedonians. Their fate is still unknown.

The conflict between the NLA and government forces ended in late 2001, with the signing of the Ohrid peace agreement. In elections held in September last year, voters backed the peace deal by rejecting the then ruling nationalist VMRO-DPMNE in favour of the less hard line Social Democrats.

Despite a convincing election victory, new prime minister Branko Crvenkovski faces a mountain of worries. The economy is in tatters after years of strife and corruption, the rule of law is collapsing and the crime rate has exploded.

Zoran Matkovski, a sociologist and professor of philosophy in Skopje, is not surprised by the spate of abductions, given the economic downturn and rise of gangsterism following the war. "When a country is in the post-conflict phase, kidnapping becomes a ready source of profit for criminals. Citizens have begun to feel less secure as they've become more frequent," he told IWPR.

VMRO-DPMNE, now in opposition, has been quick to capitalise on the increased insecurity in Skopje. Party spokesman Vlatko Gjorcev said government incompetence and police corruption has allowed the kidnappers to get away with their crimes, and warned that, if nothing was done, Skopje could come to resemble Belgrade or Moscow in the Nineties, when abductions were rife.

In December, Pavle Trajanov, the leader of the small opposition party the Democratic Union, called on the government to exert control over the whole country. Analysts have interpreted this as an implicit demand for the tightening of law and order in western Macedonia, where some of the kidnapers are believed to be based.

However, Ali Ahmeti, the former NLA commander who now leads the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration, DUI, part of the ruling coalition, is keen to play down any ethnic dimensions to the abductions. Emira Mehmeti, a spokeswoman for the party, which draws its support from Albanians in western Macedonia, told IWPR, "In two recent cases, for example, a Macedonian and an Albanian were kidnapped. This is a problem for both the communities, which has resulted from the lack of law and order. "

Karolina Ristov-Aristud, a Social Democrats deputy, says previous government did little to strengthen the rule of law in the country, which is now suffering the consequences.

Responding to its critics, the interior ministry has tried to restore confidence by announcing that it will beef up policing in former crisis zones. "Only in this way will the ministry be able to oppose the activities of certain criminal groups in the region," it said in a statement last month.

But some analysts say that although the government is under a lot of pressure to impose its will in western Macedonia, it will be reluctant to do so as this could antagonise the Albanians and destabilise the ruling coalition.

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