

Bulgarian Bugging Row

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Bulgarian authorities fear a long-running surveillance scandal may threaten the country's prospects of joining the European Union

A bizarre bugging scandal in which government officials are accused of eavesdropping on prominent journalists, politicians and a senior judicial figure is threatening to undermine the Bulgarian authorities.

The ruling Union of Democratic Forces, UDF, fears the scandal will diminish its authority as well as damage the country's international reputation and hamper its efforts to join the European Union.

Some hope that Brussels' decision to waive visa restrictions for Bulgarian nationals will provide the government with some breathing space. The EU decision has overshadowed the tapping saga for now.

The most recent twist in the bugging saga came earlier this month when state prosecutor Nikolay Chiripov, in an interview with the newspaper Trud, accused the Bulgarian Interior Ministry of illegally monitoring telephones of high-profile citizens and impeding prosecution authorities when they tried to investigate the case.

Interior Minister Emanuil Yordanov denied that any phone-tapping had been authorised since he had assumed office seven months ago.

Still the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP, demanded that he and the entire cabinet resign, insisting that intelligence service agents had used sophisticated surveillance techniques to listen in on the calls of politicians, magistrates and journalists.

Government critics have long complained that much of the bugging undertaken by the authorities is unwarranted. Indeed, according to publicly available data on the use of surveillance devices, out of 5,000 tapings permitted during 1999 and 2000, only 30 were presented as evidence in court.

The tapping scandal first came to light in July when an electronic listening device was discovered in the flat of chief state prosecutor Nikolay Filchev. Chiripov was then put in charge of the investigation.

The Interior Ministry defended itself by suggesting the bug may have been placed in Filchev's flat while communists were still in power, and that the targets may have been foreign diplomats who previously lived in the flat.

The excuse was not widely believed and soon afterwards President Petar Stoyanov dismissed the then chief secretary of the Interior Ministry.

The latest victims of illegal tapping, as named by Chiripov in his Trud interview, included Tosho Toshev, managing editor of Trud, Dora Yankova, a Socialist party MP, Ahmed Dogan, leader of the Turkish Minority Party - Movement for Rights and Freedoms, and Boiko Rashkov, head of the judicial investigation service.

The approach of elections, due in June 2001, has imparted political momentum to the scandal. Some saw it simply as a struggle between the executive and judicial branches of government. Others believed it was stoked up by the BSP to damage the ruling UDF coalition.

Those who blamed the Socialists pointed to the party's suspected influence over the security apparatus, whose middle and lower ranks are thought to be loyal to the former communists.

Chiripov reported on November 27 that his office had been broken into and that crucial evidence on the case had been stolen. Results of the police investigation were inconclusive and raised doubts whether the break-in occurred at all. Chiripov proceeded to take 'voluntary' leave of office.

After issuing conflicting statements, the state prosecutor's press office appeared to distance itself from Chiripov. It said he was expressing only his personal opinion in the Trud interview and there was no evidence to support his allegations.

His credibility was then further undermined by government supporters who said revealing sensitive information of national importance in a newspaper interview cast serious doubts on Chiripov's professionalism.

Clearly angered by the tapping saga, Stoyanov called on the executive and judicial powers to end their feuding which, he said, was undermining trust in Bulgarian institutions and damaging the country's international image.

But the BSP is pushing ahead with efforts to exploit voters' dissatisfaction with economic reforms and seems keen to use any opportunity of keeping the scandal going.

Whether the tapping affair may have been orchestrated by the Socialists or not, it threatened serious damage to the UDF coalition's reputation for upholding law and order.

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