

## **Macedonia: Lions Menace Ends**

**Author:** [Todor Stojcevski](#)

Government breaks up notorious special forces unit after its involvement in a two-day armed stand off with the regular police.

The authorities have moved to disband the controversial Lions interior ministry unit, following the latest in a long line of controversies involving the special rapid reaction force set up during Macedonia's ethnic conflict.

The news came after a tense two-day armed stand off between 1,000 Lions forces and the Macedonian police, which blocked the main Skopje-Pristina road at the border crossing of Blace on January 23-24.

The protest followed months of uncertainty over the unit's future, after the VRMO-DPMNE regime lost power in the recent parliamentary elections.

Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski had vowed to disband the unit before his Social Democratic Party of Macedonia took office in September. NATO, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, also recommended that it be broken up.

The unit, which was formed in mid-2001 by the then-interior minister Ljube Boskovski, was the brainchild of nationalist elements close to the previous premier Ljupco Georgievski.

Although set up at the height of the country's inter-ethnic conflict, the Lions, whose personnel are all ethnic Macedonian, had very little contact with Albanian extremists, and were mostly used to provide security for Macedonian villages.

Its units - which are not part of the regular police force or army, and are employed only part-time - soon gained a fearsome reputation, as many of its members have criminal records or have served time in prison.

From November 2002 until the beginning of this year, according to official data from Macedonian police, Lions members were involved in more than 70 criminal acts including weapons offences, pub brawls, murders and assaults on civilians.

"The unit does not comply with the needs of the Republic of Macedonia. For this reason it has to be transformed," Crvenkovski told the media last Friday evening following a three-hour meeting with Lions union representatives and President Boris Trajkovski.

The emergency meeting was called after the Lions' protest ran into a second day, and the situation looked set to escalate. Regular police forces had attempted to prevent the blockade, which resulted in both sides drawing arms. The tension only eased when officers partially withdrew.

While Crvenkovski agreed that everyone was entitled to protest peacefully, he described the Lions unit's behaviour as "outside constitutionally approved rights".

He then announced that the unit was to be broken up, with one section being absorbed into the regular police, another joining the Tigers special police unit, and the others working within the military.

The Lions' superior officers have decided to accept the government's offer. "With this proposal, jobs will be secured for about 600 members of our unit," spokesperson Toni Mihajlovski said last Friday.

The VMRO-DPMNE, which was responsible for setting up the unit, has supported the Lions throughout. "If there is place for 3,000 members of the former paramilitary National Liberation Army, NLA, within the ranks of the army and the police, then there should also be place for 1,000 Lions," party spokesperson Vlatko Gorcev told a Skopje press conference, a reference to the integration of Albanians into the country's military - a condition of the Ohrid agreement, which ended the 2001 conflict.

Boskovski, now a VMRO-DPMNE deputy, also defended his unit just one day before the protest began. Speaking in the Macedonian parliament, the former interior minister said the Lions were badly needed, as the country had been infiltrated by "500-600 mujahedins and 2,000 NLA members" who were preparing to start a new war.

However, this claim was rubbished by Mark Laity, NATO's spokesperson in Brussels, who told IWPR that while there will always be a danger that small groups of people could be politically or criminally motivated to carry out individual attacks, there were "no indications" that there was any kind of medium or large scale threat to Macedonia's security.

Todor Stojcevski is a journalist with the daily newspaper Makedonija denes and the weekly Denes.

**Location:** Macedonia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/macedonia-lions-menace-ends>