

Macedonia: Media Intimidation Claims

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Journalists are threatening to strike after threats and assaults by alleged supporters of the main ruling political party

A spate of violent attacks on Macedonian journalists has raised fears over press freedom in the run-up to parliamentary elections in September.

In the most serious incident to date, a female television correspondent was punched while being pursued by eight thugs.

And several journalists claim they have been warned about what they publish about members of the governing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, VMRO-DPMNE, which has not been performing well in pre-election surveys.

Katerina Blazevska, a representative of the Journalists Association of Macedonia, JAM, and editor at the daily newspaper Dnevnik, called the incidents "a message to reporters" in the run up to the elections. JAM has now threatened to strike if steps are not taken to allow its members to report without fear or restriction.

"They want to frighten journalists into staying in their offices and not researching articles or asking difficult questions that do not suit the politicians," she claimed.

A1 TV correspondent Mare Stoilova was attacked in the eastern town of Vinica on July 16. She was set upon by a gang of eight men, took refuge in her car, which then had its windows smashed and its bodywork extensively damaged, before driving away to safety.

Stoilova believes the men were supporters of the town's mayor, VMRO-DPMNE politician Goran Angelov, and that they were angered by an A1 TV investigation into the alleged misuse of funds earmarked for a local water supply system.

The journalist has since learned the names of some of the men alleged to have staged attack and the public prosecutor's office has launched an investigation. Analysts say this is an unprecedented move and one entirely due to public pressure as such attacks on the press are usually met with official indifference.

JAM has registered around 40 cases of physical attacks and intimidation against journalists in the past two years - although many more go unreported.

In another recent incident, Simon Ilievski, a reporter for the pro-opposition daily Utrinski Vesnik and Kanal 5 television, was having dinner in Ohrid when a full bottle of beer was thrown at his head. "The guy who threw it later approached me and told me that he would cut my throat with the broken glass because my writing had been against VMRO-DPMNE," he said.

"He warned me not to mention the name of the prime minister in future because it was 'sacred'." All police records on the incident have since mysteriously disappeared and no charges have been brought.

A1 Television correspondent Nina Kepeska was sitting next to Ilievski when he was attacked. "If only the prime minister knew what kind of people are guarding his integrity. By protecting the party interests in this manner, they will cause greater damage to VMRO-DPMNE," she said.

The party, meanwhile, has strongly and publicly condemned the wave of press intimidation. "Those who attacked the journalists should be discovered and punished," said party spokesman Vlado Gorcev.

The condemnation, however, has not impressed Nikola Popovski, spokesman for the opposition Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia, who believes the ruling coalition is behind the attacks.

"They all have been well planned by the organs of the ruling parties. It is a demonstration of power - not only do they control the state newspapers and broadcasters but now they want to force the independent media to write the way they want them to," he said.

The press watchdog the Macedonian Media Advisory Council has called the intimidation "a threat against the personal integrity of citizens and the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech" and warned that it did not bode well for fair and democratic elections.

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