

Macedonia: Row Over DUI Expansion

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Leading ethnic Albanian party's decision to form a branch in an exclusively Macedonian region has bewildered the nation.

Confusion surrounds the apparent creation of ethnic Macedonian branches of the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration, DUI, party in the east of the country.

Weeks after the DUI claimed to have established a branch in the exclusively Macedonian town of Kocani, it has only one verifiable member.

The DUI, which is led by former National Liberation Army, NLA, political representative Ali Ahmeti, comprises many former rebel fighters amnestied at the end of the 2001 conflict.

It had enormous success in the recent parliamentary elections - winning more than two thirds of the ethnic Albanian vote - and was rewarded with 16 positions in the new coalition government, including four ministerial posts.

However, the DUI is still seen as a "wolf in sheep's clothing" by the majority of the Macedonian people, who are unhappy that former Albanian rebel fighters are now in positions of political power.

This has caused tension in the east of the country, following the DUI's announcement at the end of last month that a branch established in Kocani had already attracted 21 ethnic Macedonian members - but so far only one local has admitted to membership of the party.

DUI spokesperson and parliamentary deputy Agron Buxhaku declined to name every member - citing security reasons - saying only that Kocani resident Venco Arsov, a former member of VMRO-DPMNE, had joined the party as branch president.

A row immediately broke out in the town, with prominent figures denying all involvement in the organisation, and one resident who shares the same name as the alleged DUI member receiving death threats from all over the region. "I was forced to change my home phone number because I was being intimidated. My family and I no longer feel safe in this town," he told IWPR.

VMRO-DPMNE, Arsov's former party, has no ethnic Albanians within its ranks. Its spokesperson Vlatko Gorcev was scathing about the news, describing the DUI's decision to form a Kocani branch as "something out of a Monty Python sketch".

"It is hypocrisy - black humour," he added.

Venco Arsov claims that he first made contact with Ali Ahmeti two months before the parliamentary elections. "I met the DUI leader in Tetovo in July, and expressed my wish to become a member," he said. "Later on we established a party branch in Kocani but this was not made public at the time because of security reasons."

The announcement has been greeted with accusations and counter-accusations in the media. When the daily Dnevnik newspaper confronted Arsov with allegations of a criminal past, the branch president blamed his former colleagues in VMRO-DPMNE for trying to blacken his name.

Claims that Arsov's motive for joining the DUI was a financial one have also been hotly denied by Buxhaku. "That's absurd. Such things are made up by people who are against coexistence," he said. "We do not buy our members. Arsov came to us on his own initiative and told us that he was disappointed with VMRO-DPMNE and had grown to support our policies."

But the public appears to doubt the sincerity of these claims. "No intellectual from eastern Macedonia would get involved with this party because we are all aware of its past," Kocani Clinic Centre director Mihail Ivanov told IWPR, referring to the DUI's NLA origins.

Buxhaku told IWPR that the formation of the Kocani branch was designed to boost the party's plans for a "new Macedonia" - a state built on civil society rather than ethnic divisions, as outlined by DUI leader Ahmeti at a recent conference in Switzerland.

Ahmeti reiterated his plans in the weekly Lobi newspaper following the outcry over the Kocani incident. "DUI is an open civil party in which ethnic Macedonians can be members as well," he said. "One should forget the myth that in a party created by Albanians there should not be any Macedonians and vice versa. When we do, Macedonia's credibility will be enhanced on the international scene."

However, the rival Democratic Party of Albanians rubbished claims that such integration could boost the country's standing, calling it "a situation of false brotherhood and unity".

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