

'Macedonian Watergate' Inquiry Launched

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The Macedonian government is rocked by wire-tapping accusations.

The Macedonian government is under threat after being implicated in an alleged wire-tapping scandal.

The largest opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM, claims the government tapped about 100 public and political figures. This figure included 25 journalists.

It's claimed the illegal surveillance took place on two occasions: in the run up to local elections in September, and in the following three months when the government was struggling to defend its parliamentary majority.

The scandal, dubbed the 'Macedonian Watergate' by local media, broke on Jan 17 at a press conference at which Branko Crvenkovski's SDSM produced 140 pages of transcripts of allegedly monitored telephone conversations.

Crvenkovski said they represented just one tenth of the material he had managed to unearth.

The day after, the prime minister agreed to set up a parliamentary committee to investigate the allegations. The European parliament has also called for an independent inquiry into the affair.

Former state security head Slobodan Bogoevski says he has evidence that the transcripts are authentic and that he is prepared to testify in court.

Interior Minister Dosta Dimovska's first reaction to the revelations was that the transcripts were the "result of tapping carried out by the SDSM and True VMRO (formerly part of the VMRO-DPMNE)".

The former interior minister Pavle Trajanov said this was simply not possible. Tapping on that scale could only have been conducted with the sort of equipment under the direct control of Dimovska, Trajanov insisted.

Dimovska then attempted to shift the blame by claiming that the tapping could have been carried out by the Defence Ministry. This was denied outright by Defence Minister Ljuben Paunovski.

The Interior minister then fell back on what she called Macedonia's long history of wire-tapping, saying that she herself had been tapped during her time in opposition.

The opposition assert it is the timing of the tapped conversations - coinciding with a period of crucial instability for the VMRO-DPMNE coalition - which points the finger at the government.

Following the local elections in September, the Democratic Alternative, DA, left the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition.

DA's departure threw the government into crisis.

A power struggle followed in which Vasil Tupurkovski's DA allied with opposition parties to try to overthrow the government. The attempt failed.

The ruling coalition survived with a slim majority, holding 64 out of the 120 parliamentary seats.

This, claim the opposition, had only been possible as a consequence of the alleged surveillance campaign.

Macedonian journalists whose conversations are said to appear in the transcripts believe the timing "clearly shows political motivation."

Slobodan Bogoevski claims that after the departure of DA from the coalition, the government resorted to eavesdropping in a bid to ensure their majority.

The transcripts include apparent conversations even between members of Georgijevski's own cabinet. Authenticated, they would show just how worried Georgievski was about his support base.

The media, who have covered the scandal in depth, were appalled to find that they themselves had seemingly been the targets of a surveillance operation.

Most of those presented with transcripts of their alleged conversations at the January 17 press conference confirmed their authenticity.

Gordana Stosic from SKY net TV threatened to take legal action after seeing excerpts from a conversation she had with Crvenkovski.

"I was shocked. It was an exact transcription of the conversation I had with Crvenkovski around the time of the local elections," she told IWPR.

Reading over what he recognised immediately as a phone call he had made, A1 TV journalist, Borjan Jovanovski, commented that this was "a scandal of incredible proportions".

Denes journalist Julijana Kocovska-Krtolica considered the affair "a sign that our rulers have become so paranoid they're scared of anything that resembles democracy".

The International Federation of Journalists, IFJ, followed up reporters' concerns in a letter on January 22 urging Interior Minister Dimovska to hold an independent enquiry.

The IFJ says the timing of the recorded conversations "further suggests that the initiative for this surveillance has come from the authorities and is politically motivated".

The letter also points out that the journalists and editors allegedly targeted by the authorities are from 12 privately owned media which have all made "critical observations of the government".

The media have speculated that DA leader Vasil Tupurkovski had leaked the transcripts to Crvenkovski. Although he failed in his bid to topple the government at the end of last year, some of the press have suggested that Tupurkovski had prepared the ground for a further challenge.

While in power, the DA controlled the State Security Service. Though, under Macedonian law, surveillance is illegal, anyone involved in surveillance would have fallen under the State Security's authority.

Consequently, Tupurkovski would have had direct access to any transcripts of tapped conversations.

The pro-government paper New Macedonia goes further, speculating that the DA had been working against its partner VMRO-DPMNE whilst still in power.

The reason, according to the paper, was that VMRO-DPMNE had not, according to a coalition agreement, supported the candidacy of Vasil Tupurkovski in the 1999 presidential election.

The VMRO-DPMNE had instead put up its own candidate Boris Trajkovski.

Trajkovski, elected president in 1999, was shocked to find his own conversations amongst the Crvenkovski's transcripts.

He described the scandal as "a highly serious assault on the rights and freedoms of citizens and the Macedonian democracy". He immediately requested a thorough investigation by public prosecutor Stavre Dzikov.

"It becomes clearer and clearer that with the current authorities only two out of the 2.1 million citizens of Macedonia are assured of their privacy," said Crvenkovski. It seems he was alluding to the prime minister and his interior minister.

And they had the capacity to eavesdrop on whomever they wanted according to reports published by the independent Skopje daily, Dnevnik.

The paper said that the Macedonian police can simultaneously tap 2,000 telephone conversations on land lines and an unknown number of the 100,000 mobile phones currently operating in Macedonia.

The daily Utrinski Vesnik reported that immediately prior to last year's local election Macedonian police had purchased five million dollars worth of mobile phone tapping equipment from Israel.

The wire-tapping affair has shocked the Macedonian public, but few believe that the government will fall as a result of the scandal.

Former state prosecutor Stevan Pavlevski said Dzikov is incapable of conducting a thorough and fair investigation into the affair because he was appointed by Dimovska.

Many suspect that Dzikov will merely prolong the inquiry and water down its findings, letting the government off the hook.

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