

Reading Between the Lions

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Who exactly are the well-armed young men strutting through Skopje - and who, ultimately, controls them?

Tall, with strong necks, they walk like athletes. Their camouflage is more robust than regular conscripts', with pouches and pockets for unimaginable gadgets. They move around Skopje like characters from a Bruce Willis movie. Their red berets sport badges showing a lion with two tails. They call themselves "Lions" - and they look dangerous.

While they have been praised for their courage - one senior politician said recently that if they hadn't been deployed around Tetovo, the Albanians would have already reached Skopje - they have acquired something of a notorious reputation. The group is suspected of numerous infringements of the EU-brokered cease-fire, kidnappings and the intimidation of the Albanian population. "When you see these guys fight," said a Tetovo-based journalist, "you can only ask: where were they hired? In Idrizovo or Demir Hisar?" He was referring to the notorious jail at Idrizovo and the Demir Hisar Psychiatric Hospital.

The Lions are at the centre of a troubling debate in Macedonia. No one knows if they are a new paramilitary unit, composed of ethnic Macedonians and controlled by the most nationalist Macedonian party, VMRO-DPMNE, or a "special force" under police control.

The man behind the controversy is Ljubo Boskovski, the hard-line interior minister, and a hawkish member of VMRO-DPMNE. According to some reports, a man known as "Major Death" - one of Boskovski's bodyguards who has the letters "d-e-a-t-h" tattooed on his fingers - leads a Lions unit in the villages around Tetovo. Boskovski denies it, and there has been no independent confirmation.

Boskovski's critics suspect that he formed a paramilitary unit loyal to his political party - which he can use not just to battle Albanian guerrillas if the NATO mission fails, but also to intimidate political opponents in the run up to the election next January. They insist that it is no coincidence that the lion is the symbol of Boskovski's party.

Boskovski is locked in a struggle with the defence ministry, controlled by the rival Macedonian party Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia, SDSM, over the legality of the group. While opponents insist that it is unlawful to create a new special force unit without a government approval, Boskovski explains there's no need as the Lions are only police reservists, getting extra training.

"Everything [about the Lions] falls within the legal framework," Boskovski told IWPR. "There is speculation that some kind of paramilitary structure has been formed, but these allegations are not based on reality ... [The Lions] are a legal reserve police unit.

"If we'd called them Crocodiles or Monkeys no one would have made a fuss. Because we called them Lions, they are treated like VMRO-DPMNE paramilitaries."

But defence spokesman Marijan Gjurovski told IWPR of his concerns at adverts shown on state TV by the interior ministry to attract recruits to the group. "To call for volunteers to rally to the defence of the country is strictly against the existing criminal code," he said.

"Behind these so-called voluntary, patriotic organisations, there are usually criminal groups connected to political circles, seeking to exploit insecurity for racketeering purposes."

His comments highlighted the conflict between the police and the army which started early in the summer, after the Albanian guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army, NLA, started gaining ground.

Confronting them were special police anti-terrorist units, consisting of several hundred well-trained individuals, known as the Tigers and the Special Task Force. Neither, however, had the manpower nor the command structure to fight a guerrilla war.

That's why the National Security Council, headed by President Boris Trajkovski, decided to form an anti-terrorist unit called the Rapid Reaction Brigade, RRB. Comprising professional soldiers, it was intended to recapture NLA-occupied villages and for use in anti-terrorist operations. The plan clearly spelled out that the RRB would be under army command.

But several weeks after the decision, the armed forces had done nothing to make the RRB a reality. Generals protested that all their soldiers were deployed at the front, and no resources were available. That was when Boskovski seized the opportunity and stepped in to fill the vacuum.

A military source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told IWPR that interior ministry officials trawled the provinces in June and July with lists of names. The people on the lists, the source alleges, were to be exempted from military service because the ministry needed them for "special purposes". "Most were members of VMRO-DPMNE," he said.

The 150-200 people on the list formed the hard core of the Lions, the source maintains. Several hundred more were recruited among police reservists already fighting against the NLA. They underwent training at the police base at Idrizovo, near Skopje, and the ski resorts of Bunec and Straza.

Boskovski insists that the Lion recruits will eventually join together with the Special Task Force, to form the RRB, which is what Trajkovski wanted. He hopes to rename the organisation the Lions.

But it could be a while before it becomes a legal entity. Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski, the leader of VMRO - DPMNE, is reluctant to put the matter to a vote, because he knows his coalition partners - two Albanian parties plus the SDSM will not agree to the Lions acquiring the status of a special police unit.

The international community has accepted the idea of the RRB, but doesn't seem to know what to make of Boskovski's Lions.

"The interior minister has given me very clear commitments that no illegal paramilitary groups will be allowed to operate in Macedonia," said NATO secretary general Lord Robertson, at a press conference in Skopje on August 29. "Now that we are returning to law and order, there must be no exceptions for those who break the law and order in this country."

"We are told that the new RRB is under the command of the army," a British diplomat told IWPR. The UK is to assign two experts, one from the army and police, to advise the RRB on how to organise, control and command the new force.

"It will deal with future terrorist incidents and consist mostly of army members, with some elements from the police," continued the diplomat. "If we thought it was a paramilitary unit we would most certainly not support it."

"There are claims that Macedonian paramilitary units exist, but we have not been able to substantiate these allegations," Craig Johns, head of the OSCE mission in Skopje, told IWPR "There are all sorts of allegations but we shouldn't act unless they are based on fact."

But another diplomatic source told IWPR, "It looks like the Lions are a paramilitary unit."

VMRO-DPMNE, according to all opinion polls, is heading for an election defeat in January. And that has many observers worried that the party may be tempted to use the Lions as a force to intimidate voters, or even to kill opposition campaign workers, especially in the countryside.

Recent Macedonian elections have been marred by gunfire at polling places and even the murder of activists.

"There's no chance of that," assured Boskovski. "We don't need them because there's no way that VMRO will lose the elections."

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