

Scandals Rack Macedonian Army

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Government interference is being blamed for a wave of corruption and indiscipline in the Macedonian armed forces

The effectiveness of the Macedonian army has been seriously undermined by a catalogue of scandals, desertion and draft-dodging.

The crisis is being blamed on the government's attempts to control dissident members of the armed forces. The authorities are accused of filling senior ranks with ruling party activists, possessing little or no military expertise.

The desperate state of the military has prompted the opposition to call for government heads to roll. The Defence Minister, Nikola Kljusev, recently narrowly survived a vote of no confidence called by the Social Democrats.

A government inquiry has implicated senior Ministry of Defence officials in the smuggling of gunpowder to an ammunition factory in neighbouring Yugoslavia. The culprits were fired but just a few months later a bid to export hand-held rocket launchers was exposed.

The military has also been hit by series of lesser but nonetheless damaging scandals. Kljusev's driver was accused of sexual blackmail by a cleaning lady at army headquarters in the town of Bitola; a number of soldiers have been investigated for taking bribes from Albanians wanting to cross into Macedonia; and forty members of an elite battalion were transferred to other units after they took part in a rebellion.

By far the worst incident, however, was the government's apparent decision to exchange the KLA commander Xhavit Hasani for four Macedonian soldiers captured by suspected members of the Kosovo Protection Force. "Terrorism is now endemic in Macedonia," said Vladimir Buckovski, Social Democrat spokesman. "Our government is exchanging our soldiers for a criminal. It's a shame for both the state and its citizens."

At the same time, draft-dodging and desertion are reported to be increasing. The defence ministry denies this, but cannot hide the fact that it has long struggled to recruit conscripts, particularly from wealthy and respectable Macedonian families and the ethnic Albanian community.

Goran K, a computer science student, is among the growing ranks Macedonian youngsters who resent having to do military service. "Serving in the army is just a waste of money. At the moment I work for an NGO in the morning and my father's firm in the afternoon. If I have to go to the army I'll end up with no money. "

An agreement between the Skopje authorities and NATO reduced the size of the Macedonian army from 22,000 to 16,000 men. But the military has such difficulty recruiting that it's lucky if it can draft 10,000 conscripts a year.

Meanwhile, Macedonian army officers are concerned that the NATO agreement will threaten their jobs, as they will have fewer troops to command. The independent military union recently wrote to Kljusev pointing out the concerns. The minister could only pledge to reduce their numbers gradually.

Analysts believe that the crises in the armed forces stem from the ruling coalition's politicisation of the military. The governing parties, in particular the VMRO-DPMNE, have introduced a large number of civilian personnel, in effect party activists, into the defence ministry.

The appointments were made to exert political control over former Yugoslav Army, JNA, officers suspected of opposing Macedonian independence and having close ties with the Social Democrats.

The introduction of civilian personnel, whose knowledge of military affairs is minimal, has significantly undermined army effectiveness. Officers complain that it has also limited their career options. An officer in the Bitola Corps, who preferred not to be named, said, "I know of several high-ranking officers who were in line for promotion but lost out to party favourites."

Such ruinous politicisation is now also emerging in the police force. Interior Minister, Dosta Dimovska, recently sacked over a hundred police officers and replaced them with people affiliated to the ruling parties. The move threatens neutrality and professionalism of the service.

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