

## **Skopje Bomb Mystery**

**Author:** [Iso Rusi](#)

The bombing of a busy Skopje suburb two weeks ago remains unresolved, leaving the culprits free and Macedonia rife with rumour.

Almost two weeks after a bomb blast rocked Macedonia's capital Skopje, the motive behind the explosion remains a mystery.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bomb, which injured three passers-by on May 19 when it exploded in the middle of the day by the Macedonian capital's largest market, Bit Pazar, opposite the Yaya-Pasha mosque. The police investigation has so far drawn a blank.

Two of the victims - a 12-year-old boy and his 19-year-old cousin - were refugees from Kosovo who had been taken in by ethnic Albanians in the Macedonian capital. Both were seriously injured and the 19-year-old required the amputation of one of his legs below the knee. The third victim, a Macedonian woman, was only lightly injured in the blast.

According to the 19-year-old victim, the bomb exploded when his cousin tried to remove an unidentified object wrapped in black fabric from the street. Considering how crowded the area was at the time, there might have been many more casualties.

Since the blast took place on an unofficial border between ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian suburbs of Skopje, rumours about who planted the bomb and why have been rife.

Macedonian-language media have attempted to link the bombing to the war in Kosovo, suggesting at first that the refugees had probably been carrying the device themselves. Later they tied the explosion to the discovery of arms caches of Albanian origin plundered during the outbreak of anarchy in spring 1997 - and the alleged presence of the Kosovo Liberation Army on Macedonian soil.

Another theory concerning the bombing focuses on the presence of a Lada automobile with Kumanovo registration plates in the area which reportedly contained two women.

According to unconfirmed reports, the two women were wives of two of six Macedonian citizens arrested following a string of attacks on NATO troops around Kumanovo.

Between April 29 and May 11 French soldiers stationed near Kumanovo came under anti-tank fire on several occasions. Although there were no casualties, one military jeep was destroyed.

The Macedonian police rounded up and arrested 10 suspects - four Macedonian and six Yugoslav citizens - and reported that three more Yugoslavs whom they wished to arrest had taken flight.

Kumanovo and Skopje's Crna Gora quarter are viewed as the strongholds of anti-NATO sentiment in Macedonia, a sentiment which has manifested itself in the attack on the US Embassy at the beginning of the bombing campaign and a series of protest meetings throughout Macedonia.

Unresolved bombings are not an unusual event in Macedonia. Almost four years on, the identity of the people behind a car bomb attempt to assassinate Macedonia's President Kiro Gligorov in the centre of Skopje, on October 3, 1995, remains a mystery. Between January 4 and May 25 last year the towns of Prilep, Tetovo and Kumanovo, as well as Skopje, were rocked by bombs exploding in front of a police station, on railway tracks, in a military camp and in the very centre of the city.

Since then, several ethnic Albanians from Macedonia have been arrested and convicted for the explosions in trials which some ethnic Albanian politicians allege were rigged.

Iso Rusi is a journalist with Fokus magazine in Skopje.

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