

Twenty two killed during Albanian terror group border post attack in Macedonia

Paul Mitchell
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A 16-hour gun battle over the weekend in the northern Macedonian town of Kumanovo ended in the deaths of 14 gunmen and eight members of the anti-terrorist Tigers police unit. Over 37 officers were wounded and some 30 gunmen surrendered.

Police spokesperson Ivo Kotevski told reporters that the battle had involved “one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the Balkans, whose founders are former NLA [National Liberation Army] members.”

The NLA claimed responsibility for the attack, declaring it was part of an “ongoing fight for freedom and national dignity.” It follows another attack last month on a border post 10 miles from Kumanovo, in which policemen were held hostage.

Macedonia’s population of 2 million includes 64 percent Slav Macedonians, 25 percent ethnic Albanians as well as ethnic Turks, Roma and Serbs.

The NLA, an offshoot of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), was disbanded after the Ohrid Agreement in 2001 ended months of fighting with Macedonian police and army. Sponsoring the KLA and NLA provided the United States with a means of continuing to pressure the new regime in Serbia, following the ousting of President Slobodan Milosevic.

The NLA leaders were brought into mainstream politics, sidelining more established ethnic Albanian leaders, as the US had done with the Rambouillet accords in Kosovo, using the KLA.

NLA leader Ali Ahmeti, a founder member of the KLA, now heads the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) party, which is in a coalition government with Nikola Gruevski’s right-wing Macedonian nationalist VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity).

Following the weekend attack, Ahmeti declared that

the DUI “wants to be a part of the solution, not a part of the problem.” He insisted, “Albanians in Macedonia have to work within the Ohrid agreement,” before criticising the time it is taking for them to feel “like equals among their fellow citizens.”

The Kosovan and Albanian governments condemned the violence, while Serbia sent troops to reinforce its border area with Macedonia.

Macedonian President Gjorgje Ivanov, a supporter of the VMRO-DPMNE, appealed for calm and called on the European Union and NATO to restart Macedonia’s stalled accession process to the two organisations, saying, “This situation is risky for the country and the region.”

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and European enlargement commissioner Johannes Hahn both expressed “great concern” and called for a full investigation.

Gruevski accused the gunmen of attempting to destabilise the country, saying some had been “participants in several conflicts, some in the Middle East, which points to their big experience in guerrilla fighting.” He criticised “some opposition politicians and so-called journalists” of an “utterly cowardly act” for making “political points on the backs of the killed and wounded.”

This was a reference to the comments of opposition Social Democrat (SDSM) leader, Zoran Zaev, who suggested that Gruevski was orchestrating ethnic unrest to distract from Macedonia’s growing economic and political crisis.

Before the weekend’s events, Zaev had called for a mass protest on May 17 with the intent of toppling Gruevski. “This will not be a protest where we gather, express discontent and go home. We will stay until Gruevski quits,” Zoran Zaev declared.

Since February, the SDSM has been releasing wiretapped tapes of the conversations of senior government officials. Last week, one provoked a demonstration of several thousand, mostly young people, in the capital Skopje against police brutality. The recording suggested Gruevski and other top officials conspired to cover up a high-profile police killing in 2011, which sparked two months of protests.

Gruevski has accused Zaev of being a “traitor” in the pay of unnamed “foreign centres” who acquired the wiretaps and leaked them to the SDSM. Foreign Minister Nikola Poposki told reports, “There is foreign intelligence in this scheme...There is no proof of who the foreign power is but the people in the affair have admitted that a foreign power is involved.”

The Russian Foreign Ministry has come to the defence of Gruevski, accusing the SDSM and “Western-inspired” NGOs of attempting to destabilize the country. The Macedonian government maintains friendly relations with Russia. It refused to join EU/US sanctions on Russia following the coup in Ukraine and has agreed to the construction of a new “Balkan Stream” pipeline to replace the South Stream project, cancelled after put US pressure on Bulgaria.

“The eruption of anti-government activities in Macedonia over the last days is worrying,” a Russian statement said, “The choice of many opposition movements and NGOs, inspired by the West, that favour the logic of the street and the known scenario of a ‘coloured revolution’, is full of dangerous consequences,” it continued.

Regime change in Macedonia, along Ukrainian lines, is indeed being pursued, with the EU brokering talks between the VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM, believed by many commentators to be a prelude to Gruevski resigning, the calling of snap elections and the creation of a technocratic government opposed to Moscow. At a recent DUI conference, the former EU representative in Macedonia, Erwan Fouere, warned that the longer the DUI remained in the coalition the more it would be seen as Gruevski’s “accomplice.”

The weekend attack is a sign of the simmering ethnic tensions fuelled by the country’s economic and social crisis.

Promises from local politicians and the “international community” that liberalisation of the economy and wholesale privatisation of state assets after

independence in 1991 from Yugoslavia would lead to a golden future have not materialised. Macedonia now has Europe’s largest gap between rich and poor. Workers have experienced continuous mass unemployment, officially at 28 percent, and poverty—the minimum wage is a paltry €130 per month.

The Ohrid Agreement has enshrined almost total ethnic separation between Macedonia’s Slavic and ethnic Albanian communities. There are only a handful of intermarriages a year.



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