

Macedonia conflict threatens to destabilise whole of Balkans

Paul Mitchell
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Speaking during a visit to Serbia last Friday, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Western powers of encouraging regime change in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

"We are greatly concerned with the latest events in Macedonia, and the situation in Kosovo does not give us any ground for optimism," Lavrov said. "We are seriously concerned that those were the result of a well-planned terrorist act," he added, referring to the deaths of 14 ethnic Albanian gunmen from the National Liberation Army and eight anti-terrorist policemen in the course of a 16-hour gun battle on May 9 in Kumanovo.

Lavrov warned the European Union (EU) not to "play ostrich and try to present the case as if there were no organizational force behind it". He said "the events in Macedonia are unfolding against the background of the government's refusal to join the policy of sanctions against Russia and the vigorous support Skopje gave to the Turkish Stream gas pipeline project, which many people oppose, both in Brussels and across the ocean."

Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov was one of the few European heads of state at the World War II Victory Day celebrations in Moscow on May 8.

Turkish Stream is a project to bring Russian gas into southeastern Europe to replace the abandoned South Stream project. For years, the EU and the United States tried to stop South Stream, viewing it as an attempt to increase Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies. These moves were accelerated after the US and German-orchestrated coup that toppled the government of Ukraine last year. Bulgaria, a key transit country, was pressured to halt work on the project.

South Stream was a major element in Russia's attempt to reduce its reliance on Ukraine as a transit territory for its gas supplies to Europe. It also served to

retain Russia's influence in the Balkans, as states in the region joined the EU and NATO following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

On Saturday, Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement claiming the arrest of a Montenegrin citizen in Serbia alleged to have "assisted Kosovo-Albanian extremists" in Macedonia was "convincing proof of plans launched from outside to destabilise the internal political situation in this country, an attempt to push it into the abyss of a coloured revolution."

On Sunday, tens of thousands took part in a demonstration demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and his VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) government. Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) leader Zoran Zaev declared, "This will not be a protest where we gather, express discontent and go home. We will stay until Gruevski quits."

Protestors set up a protest camp in front of Gruevski's office.

The SDSM has stepped up its "street" activity and pressure for external intervention since beginning a boycott of parliament in April 2014. It continues to state that elections that month, which the VMRO-DPMNE won for a fourth time with a comfortable majority, were fraudulent, despite the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe concluding they were for the most part "orderly and peaceful" and "the citizens were offered a free choice."

On Monday, an equally large number of demonstrators took part in a pro-government demonstration. Gruevski told the crowd that demands for his resignation amounted to "a dictatorship of a political minority."

“For the last three-and-a-half months, Macedonia has been under serious attack,” said Gruevski. “All this time we were atypically silent and waiting for these attacks to end...We were silent but it was enough. It is time for Macedonia to respond... Macedonia does not give up. Macedonia is strong!”

Gruevski was referring to the SDSM releasing tapes of wire-tapped conversations between himself and senior government officials, which implicate them in serious abuses of power. Zaev says the tapes were leaked by disaffected Macedonian intelligence officials, but the government insists a foreign service was involved. Zaev had his passport confiscated earlier this year after prosecutors accused him of attempting to overthrow the government by violence.

Following the release of the tapes, the US, French, British, German and EU ambassadors insisted that Gruevski investigate the accusations. US ambassador Jess Baily declared, “Continued failure to demonstrate this commitment with concrete action will undermine Macedonia’s progress towards EU and NATO membership,” demanding “appropriate political and legal measures to be taken against those responsible.”

Within two days, on May 12, Interior Minister Gordana Jankuloska, Intelligence chief Saso Mijalkov and Transportation Minister Mile Janakieski resigned.

On May 18, Baily and EU Ambassador Aivo Orav organised talks with Gruevski, Zaev, Ali Ahmeti (Gruevski’s coalition partner from the Democratic Union for Integration), and Menduh Ahmeti, leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Albanians. Zaev continued to insist that Gruevski resign and hand over power to a transitional technocratic government that would impose reforms. Further negotiations are planned for May 26.

The VMRO-DPMNE is a right-wing nationalist party, which is presiding over a country with one-third of the population out of work (including half of the country’s young people) and social and economic inequalities that have grown much faster than in other countries in the region. Corruption is rampant, patronage endemic and repression increasing.

However, the SDSM offers no progressive alternative for workers and youth looking for an answer to the social crisis. Emerging from the Stalinist League of Communists of Macedonia, which ruled the region from 1945 until the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1990,

the SDSM was in government until 1998 and again from 2002 until 2006. During that time it was instrumental in the wholesale privatisation of the economy through the 1993 Macedonian Law on Transformation of Enterprises with Social Capital. Today the SDSM functions as the mouthpiece of one of the factions of the super-rich created by that process.



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