

At least 59 lives lost in nightclub fire in Ko?ani, North Macedonia

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In the early hours of Sunday morning, a devastating fire broke out in a club in Ko?ani, North Macedonia, killing at least 59 young people. A further 155 had to be treated in hospital for burns or smoke inhalation.

The victims are aged between 14 and 24. According to the North Macedonian health minister, the number could still rise, as at least 20 of the injured are in critical condition.

Around 1,500 partygoers were dancing at a concert by the popular North Macedonian hip-hop band DNK at Club Pulse when the ceiling went up in flames at around 2:30 a.m. During a stage show with pyrotechnics, sparks leapt onto the ceiling panelling, which was made of highly flammable material and immediately caught fire. The club burnt out completely and parts of the roof caved in. Many young people tried to escape through the windows.

This tragic disaster could have been avoided. More and more information is coming to light which makes it clear that the fire was the result of criminal neglect of all safety precautions.

The operator did not have a legal operating licence, but a fake one, as Interior Minister Pan?e Toškovski announced, and ordered an investigation into possible “bribery and corruption.” The club, which had a capacity of around 250, was completely overcrowded with over a thousand people. There were too few fire extinguishers and only one emergency exit, which was locked at the time of the concert. Also, no ambulances were available for emergencies, as is mandatory. According to the BBC, the building was a carpet warehouse before it was converted into a club.

Several band members died in the inferno, including the second frontman, Andrej Gjordjieski. As reported by local media, he is said to have returned to the club and tried to save other injured before succumbing to his

own burns. The 43-year-old musician had studied at the music academy in the capital, Skopje, and is survived by his wife and daughter.

The victims also include backing singer Sara Projkovska, a single mother of two who taught piano at the music academy in Skopje, drummer Gorgi Gorgiev, keyboard player Filip Stevanovski and guitarist Aleksandar Kolarov. Co-founder and lead singer Vladimir Blazev, known as Pancho, was hospitalised with injuries.

Based on North Macedonian accounts, *Der Spiegel* reports how desperate parents searched for their children on social media. “Citizens helped out by using their own cars and following the ambulances to take the seriously injured to hospitals.” The hospital in Ko?ani was overwhelmed by the number of emergencies, meaning that the injured had to be transferred to other cities or abroad. Ko?ani, a city of 25,000, is located in the northeast of the country, not far from the border with Bulgaria.

While relatives and the population are in shock and mourning, the government is in damage control mode. At least 15 people have been arrested, including officials from the Economics Ministry who are said to have issued a licence for the club, and the club owner. The government under right-wing conservative Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, which has been in office since June 2024, accuses the previous government of corruption.

In a speech to the nation on Sunday, President Gordana Davkova Siljanovska said: “None of those responsible should escape the law, justice and punishment.”

The government is obviously worried that anger will follow mourning. German broadcaster ZDF quotes a 19-year-old student speaking on the sidelines of

yesterday's funeral service: "This was not an accident, but literally murder, with all the security breaches in this country. We cannot remain silent about this, even if we are afraid."

The ruling class must fear that such a disaster will trigger widespread protests, as happened recently in neighboring Greece after the Tempi train crash in 2023 and in Serbia after the collapse of a station roof in Novi Sad in 2024.

Regardless of what else is known about the background to the accident, it is already clear that the trail of clues leads into the highest circles of North Macedonian politics. It is obvious that entrepreneurs and politicians have stopped at nothing in pursuing their profit interests.

What is usually dismissed and covered up in North Macedonia, like in all Balkan countries, as individual "corruption," has been systematic for years and decades. The destruction of Yugoslavia as a result of the NATO wars in the 1990s has created small mini-states torn by ethnic and political conflicts, where naked capitalist greed reigns.

North Macedonia, which declared independence in 1991, has a population of 1.8 million. Until 2001, civil war-like conflicts escalated between the Slav-Macedonian majority (58.4 percent) and the Albanian minority (approx. 24.3 percent).

Poverty, social inequality and a lack of prospects characterise everyday life for the working class. Although unemployment has fallen slightly in recent years, it still stands at 13.2 percent, with youth unemployment double that figure at 27.2 percent,.

North Macedonia has been a candidate for accession to the European Union (EU) since 2005. German companies in particular benefit from the country's low-cost labour and production conditions. Some 47 percent of all the country's exports go to Germany, one of its main trading partners.

According to a report published in December 2024 by GTAI (Germany Trade and Invest, the federally-owned marketing agency for German business), North Macedonia is closely integrated into the supply chains of carmakers. As a result, the local supply industry is now also feeling the effects of the German auto crisis. At the same time, foreign direct investment has increased significantly. German companies are the largest investors, including automotive suppliers,

electronics manufacturers, Deutsche Telekom and the discount supermarket chain Lidl.

As in all European countries, military expenditure is also increasing in North Macedonia—at the expense of social spending. Since North Macedonia joined NATO in March 2020, military spending has risen sharply more than doubling from \$119.6 million in 2018 to a record high of \$266.6 million in 2023, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

It was the Greek government under the pseudo-left Syriza that cleared the way for North Macedonia's admission to NATO. In the 2019 Prespes Agreement, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras agreed to the renaming of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) as North Macedonia. This settled the decades-long dispute between Greece and Macedonia over the territory's name.

While the Prespes Agreement was celebrated as a major step forward by the bourgeois media and pseudo-left organisations, the *World Socialist Web Site* emphasised that it primarily serves reactionary goals. The renaming was a step towards the rapid integration of the small Balkan state into NATO and imperialist war planning.

The Balkan region is regarded by Germany and the EU as an important geopolitical sphere of influence and is exploited as a low-wage platform, which promotes corruption and benefits from low safety standards. As the Greek train crash at Tempi (57 dead), the collapse of the roof of the Novi Sad railway station (15 dead) and the fire disaster in the Grand Kartal Hotel in Turkey (78 dead) also show, the fire at Ko?ani shows that under capitalism a human life is worth very little.



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