

Macedonia: Scenario of A Ukraine Style Protest Movement and Coup d'Etat?

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Additional details from the investigation over Zoran Verusevski, the former head of Macedonia UBK State Security agency, reveal that he was discussing the possibility of a Ukrainian style protests that would bring down the Government in Macedonia and bring the opposition SDSM party in power.

Verusevski, who held high positions in the security services appointed by SDSM, is charged, together with SDSM leader Zoran Zaev and several others, of trying to blackmail the Government to bring SDSM into the ruling coalition, and also of cooperating with foreign intelligence agencies.

 Former Head of UBK State Security Agency Zoran Verusevski. Photo: Dnevnik

Police confiscated Verusevski's computers and other electronic devices when he was arrested in mid-January, and since, several leaks from the investigation revealed details about his correspondence with Zaev and with Gjorgji Lazarevski, another former high ranking UBK official who is also charged. Zaev confirmed some of the leaks as authentic. Several media outlets reported on Saturday about a cache of Skype messages exchanged between Verusevski and Lazarevski, in which the two former security officials are mentioning Ukraine, as a political disturbance scenario that they could develop in Macedonia. In one message Lazarevski says that SDSM leader Zaev should move his "old behind" and be more like Vitaly Klichko, the Ukrainian boxer who energized the Maidan protests.

Verusevski responds that Zaev does not have the credibility, because "an amnestied politician is like a released pedophile". Zaev was amnestied in 2008 by then President and leading SDSM politician Branko Crvenkovski over the charges that as mayor of the city of Strumica he allowed a corrupt real estate deal that benefited him and his business associates. In another batch of Skype messages, Verusevski says "Ukraine has collapsed", with Lazarevski replying that "we are not far behind", only to add that "SDSM doesn't have the capacity for a coup". An earlier leak from their correspondence showed Verusevski and Lazarevski discussing that what they are preparing could lead to a civil war in Macedonia.

The two are charged with recruiting an UBK surveillance system technician Zvonko Kostovski to wiretap phones from leading Government and opposition officials, and of preparing English language reports they then gave to a foreign intelligence service, which paid them substantially. Verusevski is charged with joining forces with Zaev, and planning to use the cache of information his rogue spy ring has gathered in an attempt to pressure VMRO-DPMNE leader and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski into bringing SDSM to the Government. Gruevski responded by asking the Public Prosecutor's office to investigate the case, and currently Zaev and Verusevski are charged, while Zaev is holding press

conferences at which he is presenting audio files he claims prove corruption and election irregularities perpetrated by VMRO-DPMNE officials. VMRO-DPMNE insists that the material is taken out of context and fabricated.

Verusevski had a day long hearing at the Prosecutor's office on Friday, with the entirety of the evidence gathered against him presented, likely for the first time. Zvonko Kostovski was already sentenced to three years in prison, in exchange for his confession, the details of which were likely presented before Verusevski on Friday as well.

The fear that political and inter-ethnic tensions could appear as result of the political situation was often discussed by commentators on both sides. Macedonia experienced an armed insurgency by ethnic Albanian rebels in 2001, which ended with international mediation and a political agreement. That insurgency was preceded by a 2000 wiretapping scandal in which then opposition leader Branko Crvenkovski blamed then VMRO'-DPMNE leader and Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski of mass wiretapping, and presented transcripts of conversations he allegedly got from insiders in the UBK service. Crvenkovski's source was never revealed, as the country became engulfed in the 2001 insurgency, with commentators close to VMRODPMNE saying that, both in 2000 and in 2015, Verusevski was the main source of the wiretapping charges.

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For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca