

Hungary: asylum for ex-prime minister of Macedonia

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Nikola Gruevski, who served as the prime minister of Macedonia in 2006–2016, fled his country at the beginning of November and submitted a request for asylum in Hungary, which was granted. The former prime minister, whose passport was confiscated in 2017, reached Hungary via Albania and Montenegro with support from Hungary's embassy in Tirana. According to the border guard services of these countries, Gruevski crossed the border holding just an identity card, and these services have no grounds for arresting him because the international arrest warrant concerning him was issued only on 13 November. On 8 November, Gruevski was expected to begin serving a two-year prison sentence for abuse of power. Four other proceedings are pending against him. One of them concerns the illegal wiretapping which affected over 20,000 people while he was in office.

Commentary

- The Macedonian minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikola Dimitrov, announced that Macedonia would insist on Gruevski's extradition. A formal request for extradition was sent to Budapest on 20 November. However, the Macedonian government will most likely not risk a dispute with Hungary. The government in Skopje has been making efforts to launch accession negotiations with the EU, and the decision to this effect must be unanimously approved by all member states. Therefore, the government led by Zoran Zaev hopes that pressure from the USA and the EU member states on Budapest will help resolve this issue. However, a significant section of the public insist that the previous government be held accountable. The government has decided to detain the key politicians from VMRO-DPMNE, against whom proceedings are pending, arguing that this decision will help prevent more spectacular escapes.
- The outbreak of the political crisis in Macedonia in 2015 led to the left-wing party SDSM taking over power in 2017. Viktor Orbán's government supported Nikola Gruevski and his right-wing grouping VMRO-DPMNE from the beginning of this process. The Hungarian government did not change its policy even after the publication a report ordered by the European Commission which proved that Gruevski's team had abused power. Orbán is backing VMRO-DPMNE in sabotaging the Macedonian-Greek agreement which, if implemented, may offer a chance to unblock the process of Macedonia's integration with the EU and NATO and improve the region's stability. Orbán's and Gruevski's inner circles do not only have political views and co-operation as part of the European People's Party in common—they also share business connections. In 2017, oligarchs linked to the

Hungarian prime minister took over shares in some Macedonian media outlets which have stood in defence of Gruevski and his party.

- A situation where a politician convicted under a binding verdict is granted political asylum in an EU member state (which Hungary is) undermines the reliability of the EU's policy in the Balkans with regard to residents of this region. It is worth noting that Hungary did not bring any objections to the Macedonian judiciary that might provide grounds for its recent decision to grant asylum. Hungary's policy also differs from the stance taken by the EU and the USA which want not only Gruevski's team to be held accountable but which have also taken measures to support the implementation of the Greek-Macedonian agreement. Therefore, further tension between Budapest and Washington may be expected as may the strengthening of the position of the faction which opposes Orbán inside the European People's Party.

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