



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Social briefing:**  
**The Escape of Nikola Gruevski and the Macedonian Media**  
**Anastas Vangeli**

## China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.  
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin  
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.  
 +36 1 5858 690  
 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)  
 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# **The Escape of Nikola Gruevski and the Macedonian Media**

## **Introduction**

The news of Nikola Gruevski's escape to Hungary have deeply shaken the Macedonian society. In May 2018, the former Prime Minister and leading politician in the period 2006-2015, was sentenced to two years of prison for illegally interfering in the public procurement of a luxurious armored vehicle that he later put to personal use. He is also charged for several other cases based on the illegal wiretaps leaked by the then opposition leader, and current premier Zoran Zaev. In the months following the sentence, he had appealed the decision to various instances, complaining for unfair treatment and publicly arguing that the process against him was politically motivated. However, after his appeals were rejected and he exhausted all the legal means to postpone the prison sentence, he was expected to report to the prison in Shutka at the outskirts of Skopje on the eve of November 9. But this never happened. Instead, in the second week of November, Gruevski disappeared from the public eye, to the astonishment of both the public and the media. On November 13, Gruevski posted on Facebook saying that he is in Budapest, seeking political asylum from the Hungarian authorities. On November 20, he posted on Facebook again, this time claiming that Hungary granted him the asylum, and expanding on the points of his political persecution and death threats.

These developments have had a particularly strong impact on Macedonia's domestic and foreign affairs (and their effect is yet to be seen). At the same time, the escape of Gruevski was a particular media event. During the unfolding of the drama, media reported on the case, processed the information, and provided the links to the regional and international contexts and sources – as the escape of the former Prime Minister turned out to be an international matter. Gruevski's escape thus revealed some of their strengths, as well as their weaknesses. This paper first quickly examines the attitude of the media prior to the news of Gruevski's escape, and the news after that.

## **Before the News of Gruevski's Escape**

Most of the media were not prepared for the drama surrounding Gruevski's escape. In fact, they had been preparing for the opposite outcome. On the cold night of November 9, a number of reporters gathered in front of the prison in Shutka, waiting for Gruevski to arrive and report for serving his sentence. Based on their inside sources, many reporters were firmly convinced that Gruevski will arrive to

Shutka to serve his sentence. Expecting the sensational event of Gruevski walking through the door of the prison, they were hyping the public until late in the night. Gruevski, however, did not appear; thus making the reporters themselves the biggest story of the moment – as well as the subject of a number of jokes in the social media.

That same night, however, a high profile arrest took place, as the tycoon Orce Kamchev, a long time collaborator of VMRO-DPMNE and a suspect in one of the court cases based on the leaked wiretaps, was taken in detention. Orce Kamchev has been listed as Macedonia's richest person by Forbes, whose net worth is officially above EUR 220 million (while rumors put it at a much higher number). In any other country, the arrest of the richest person would perhaps trigger a number of detailed reports and investigations. However, while the media did cover the story, they did it half-heartedly – eager to see Gruevski in prison they framed the arrest of Kamchev as a “consolation prize.”

When it became clear that Gruevski will not report to the prison, media started to focus on his whereabouts. In the lack of authentic sources and official information, his disappearance kickstarted the political rumor mill. Rumors that used to be reserved for fringe internet portals and anonymous social media accounts started gradually making their way to the mainstream media. According to some Gruevski was hiding in the headquarters of VMRO-DPMNE; according to others he was in the residence of President Gjorge Ivanov; some speculated he was on the way to Russia, while some said he is off to the Caribbean. Of course, media do not bear the sole responsibility for the confusion and the uncertainty of those days, as the relevant institutions – the Ministry of Interior, the Special Prosecutor's Office, and the Courts remained silent most of the time. On November 11, the police undertook a raid on the headquarters of VMRO-DPMNE to search for Gruevski, which was another spectacle extensively reported in the media.

On November 13, reality turned stranger than fiction, as Gruevski published his short Facebook status saying he is in Budapest, seeking asylum, repeating his claims that he is a victim of political trial and supplementing them now with claims of having received death threats. Many of the rumors proliferated in between his disappearance and his Facebook post accounted that he may have fled the country, but few of them even argued he may have been in Budapest. This was odd, as the theory that Gruevski may escape to Budapest had been entertained for some time – in August 2018, the magazine Fokus had a cover story explaining why and how this make place. The story was of course republished and its author gained praise for his prescience.

## **After the News of the Escape**

An escape of a former top politician is not an everyday situation. Gruevski's Facebook status – perhaps the most shared status by a Macedonian politician on the social media – has shaped the news agenda in the days to come. Some of the questions that preoccupied journalists, among others, were: a) whether Gruevski was really in Budapest, and if not, where can he be; b) if he is in Budapest, how did he leave Macedonia, and how did he get to Hungary; c) is Budapest his final destination or just a stop en route to another place; d) who in Macedonia was responsible for the escape of the highest profile convict in the history of the country; e) what was the interest of Hungary to take him in, and will Hungary actually grant him an asylum. While some of these questions were answered quite quickly – for instance, it was confirmed the same day that Gruevski is indeed in Hungary, and has filed a request for political asylum – answering the rest of the questions took some more effort.

The most extensively discussed question was how did Gruevski manage to leave the country, and to get to Hungary. Gruevski was not in possession of a valid passport since 2017, which suggested that his escape was a well coordinated action. Some media reported that he had a Bulgarian passport (as a number of people in Macedonia do). Others claimed he left dressed as a woman.

As for the route of escape, the intuitive answer to many was that he has likely escaped by land, through Serbia (the shortest route, as it was not plausible that he had left on a plane). While unconfirmed, this theory made the rounds in the initial period after the news of the escape. However, it was not Macedonian media, but rather media from other countries that started uncovering the details of Gruevski's route, and disproving this theory.

A bombshell story from Serbia claimed Gruevski went not to Serbia but to Albania; however much of the news related to this story contained an element of fake news: it was for instance reported that Gruevski flew from Tirana on a flight by the Hungarian airline company Malev – but Malev has gone bankrupt several years ago. Nevertheless, it soon turned out that part of the story was true – Gruevski indeed left Macedonia to Albania, and from there continued to Montenegro, then Serbia, and ended up in Hungary. He did not have a Bulgarian passport, but left with the Macedonian ID card (as people can travel to Albania, Montenegro in Serbia only with an ID); and he was assisted by Hungarian diplomats. Most of the details of how the escape took place, were however, first reported by the Balkan and Hungarian media, with Macedonian media reporting on the reports of their foreign colleagues.

In fact, Macedonian media had realized that they had better chances to gather relevant information outside Macedonia than in the country. As soon as

Gruevski's Facebook status appeared, they dispatched crews to Budapest; and as other information surfaced, they dispatched crews to Belgrade, Tirana and Podgorica. However, Macedonian journalists have no rich experience from reporting abroad, which has led to a rather limited stream of original news from the ground.

At home, the escape of Gruevski was a topic of a number of televised debates, where policymakers tried to control the damage, while experts posed critical questions and demanded responsibility for his escape. In the days following the news of the escape, former high-profile VMRO-DPMNE officials charged or already sentenced in cases that arose from the leaked wiretaps, appeared on TV for the first time in ages. They criticized the escape of their former boss, but at the same time used the opportunity to have their story heard by the public. The media also interviewed Prime Minister Zaev and the Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski, who were put on the hot seat for having allowed Gruevski to flee the country.

The media realized that the escape of Gruevski had a potential to increase their readership and viewership. They started reporting on his family, on his associates, on his past interactions with Hungary and its Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. They interviewed a number of experts including psychologists and psychoanalysts, in order to touch upon various aspects of Gruevski's personality and the act of his escape. Nevertheless, in the process they also gave in to the temptations of sensationalism: they often times failed to filter out rumors from news, and in some instances consciously took advantage of the public, for example by publishing click-baiting and potentially misleading videos from Gruevski's vacations in tropical destinations from years ago.

Finally, aside from the actual reporting, media also used the opportunity to produce satirical content, and to report on the numerous satirical and cynical comments made by Macedonian netizens on Twitter and Facebook. Perhaps one of the brightest moments for Macedonian media was the production of parody videos featuring a well known Gruevski impersonator, whose satirical interview, in lieu of a televised appearance of the former Prime Minister, made the rounds on social media. Some of the satirical contents, aside from taking jabs at Gruevski, were also expressing criticism towards the Macedonian institutions for failing to prevent the escape.