




Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia political briefing:
The Enduring (and Increasing) Importance of Leaked Wiretaps for
Macedonia's Politics**

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Introduction

When in late 2014, the then opposition leader Zoran Zaev would announce the existence of countless recordings of wiretapped conversations (so called “bombshells”) that revealed grand corruption and other forms of abuse of office of the government led by Nikola Gruevski, little who could have known that the political field in the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) would experience a profound change in which leaks would become the central instrument of political power. In the first half of 2015, Zaev went on to publicly broadcast and curate (“detonate”) dozens of leaked (“bombshell”) recordings as part of the campaign titled “The Truth About Macedonia,” which led to a deep political crisis that ended with a government change in 2017. These and other similar recordings then became key evidence in a number of legal cases led by a Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO, whose full name is *Public Prosecutor's Office for Prosecuting Criminal Offences Related to and Arising from the Content of the Illegally Intercepted Communication*).

Zaev's “bombshells,” nevertheless, were quickly followed up by similar (albeit smaller in scope) campaigns of publishing leaked audio tapes from wiretapped recordings, or audio and video footage obtained via surveillance by various actors. In general, whenever such a “bombshell” material is published, it quickly spreads on social media and takes over the public debate. New leaks dominate the news cycle for a certain period of time, they serve as a material for memes and jokes among the public, and as a material for information warfare among political activists. Sometimes they have political and legal consequences, but this is not a rule. Some of the leaks have more shocking and remarkable content than others, and usually remain ingrained in the collective memory and used as reference points in future discussions. Their cumulative imprint on Macedonia's politics is thus multi-faceted.

While the 2015 leaks campaign was certainly a game-changer, new leaks in the forms of audio recordings of phone conversations and of actual in-person conversations were published with a renewed intensity in Summer 2019. Most of these new leaks, however, targeted SDSM and its partners. It is expected that even more leaks will follow in the period to come, that will once again leave a deep imprint on Macedonia's political trajectory. In this paper, therefore, we overview the history of the political use of leaked tapes in Macedonia, with

particular emphasis of the latest episodes of “bombshell” politics, while in a forthcoming Society paper, we discuss the impact of these processes on the political culture and society as a whole.

“Bombshell” Politics before 2019

Zaev's “bombshells” campaign in 2015 was not the first revelation of large-scale surveillance material. In early 2000, the then president of SDSM and leader of the opposition, Branko Crvenkovski has presented the public with a number of transcripts from the wiretapping of politicians, journalists and diplomats, claiming that this was an outcome of an illegal surveillance operation led by the Minister of Interior Dosta Dimovska of VMRO-DPMNE. Dimovska and her accomplice were sentenced, but they were pardoned by former President Boris Trajkovski. Nevertheless, a group of 17 journalists have taken the Macedonian government to the European Court of Justice in Strasbourg, which found the Macedonian government guilty in 2013. The content of the leaks was never published in its entirety.

In 2015, Zaev carried out the campaign “Macedonia's Truth” which lasted from February till June, during which Zaev published and curated fragments of dozens of intercepted conversations. The campaign revealed an unprecedented level of surveillance (allegedly of more than 20.000 people). The recordings were carefully selected and curated so as to reveal a particularly dark side of the rule of VMRO-DPMNE and DUI (i.e. with VMRO-DPMNE and DUI officials being the main protagonists of the leaked materials) and fuel public anger, goals in which they succeeded. These recordings spread online in a viral manner. Many of them featured indications of illicit and illegal activities, while revealing a particularly vulgar and belligerent communications style among the former government officials. After the establishment of the SPO, these recordings were now considered evidence in legal procedures, and as such the SPO requested that they are removed from the public domain, proscribing sanctions for those that would publicly use them in the future. Nevertheless, the material in those recordings remains referenced in everyday political discussions until today, leaving a lasting imprint on Macedonian politics.

During the period of the protracted political crisis 2015-2017, there were “counter-bombshells” as well, published by opponents of Zaev. One such video recording was taken during a meeting between Zaev and a local businessman from Strumica (at the time when the former served as Strumica's mayor), in which it was alleged that Zaev asked for a bribe. While this video became popular among the opponents of Zaev, the court procedure regarding this

case found Zaev innocent. Other similar recordings were proliferated as well, including one from a meeting between Nikola Gruevski and Zoran Zaev, in which Zaev allegedly told Gruevski that he has external support to bring down the government. However, they had a limited political effect at the time.

In 2016, at the height of the political crisis, an anonymous YouTube account published a series of wiretapped phone calls, some of which included sexually explicit content. These conversations concerned a number of politicians, journalists and business people. There were no particular political and legal consequences. Nevertheless, some of the sexually explicit contents harmed the reputation of the individuals involved. Some recordings appeared in the meantime as well, however, they did have a particular effect on the political trajectory of the country. This changed in 2019, when a series of leaks were published, targeting SDSM and its coalition partners.

“Bombshell” Politics 2019

New leaked materials started to appear in Spring 2019. In April 2019, an anonymous VKontakte account published wiretaps featuring current and former officials from both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, as well as business people. In the same month, Ljupcho Palevski – Palcho, a former high-ranking member of SDSM (now a fierce opponent of the party), and currently leader of the small extra-parliamentary “Third Party” was detained for publicly broadcasting these wiretapped conversations using a stereo system. These recordings did not have a major political or legal consequences yet.

In May 2019, another anonymous VKontakte account published an audio tape of the Member of Parliament Pavle Bogoevski who has allegedly had a phone call with a drug dealer. After a major public outcry, Bogoevski resigned (this case was discussed in the previous report on Macedonian politics).

In late May 2019, an ethnic Albanian activist that goes by the pseudonym El Cheka and allegedly lives in the United States, started publishing leaked wiretaps of DUI officials on Facebook, using a sharp language against the SDSM-DUI coalition and Prime Minister Zaev. El Cheka has in particular blamed the government for covering up two sensitive cases, the shooting between the Macedonian police and ethnic Albanian paramilitary units in Kumanovo in 2015, and the murder of four ethnic Macedonian teenagers (known as the case “Monster”) for which ethnic Albanians have been sentenced, which had raised significant ethnic tensions

on numerous occasions in the past. El Cheka continued to publish leaks in the following months and is still active. His leaks have reverberated in mainstream media and the political debates. However, so far there are no significant political or legal consequences arising from them. Various officials, including Zaev have addressed the attacks and threats issued by El Cheka, arguing that what El Cheka has done is against the law.

In June 2019, the web portal Lider.mk published an audio recording in which allegedly, the mayor of Shuto Orizari and former member of Parliament, Kurto Dudush - Kuco of SDSM, is allegedly beating up an abducted man who had previously offended him. The disturbing content of the recording featured yelling of angry adult men, threats and slurs, sounds of physical violence, moans and pleas for mercy from the individual beaten up (who seems to be tied to a chair), and voices of men trying to restrain the person committing the violence whom they address as Kuco. While the Public Prosecutor's Office has initiated an investigation into the matter, there have been no political and legal consequences. Dudush has disputed the authenticity of the recording and announced that he will take legal action to restore his reputation.

One week later, the same web portal published a leaked recording of a working meeting of the Government of Macedonia in which allegedly the Secretary General Dragi Rashkovski has illegally interfered into public procurement procedures, in a case that involves an Italian company. The recording also features a voice, that allegedly belongs to Rashkovski, using racial slurs about Italians. The case led to a public outcry and harsh reactions by political opponents. However, Rashkovski has not resigned, disputed the accusations against him and announced that he will sue the publisher of the leak. The editor of Lider.mk who published the recording has been investigated and asked to provide information of the origin of the tape. Public watchdogs and anti-corruption agencies have promised to take a closer look into the procurement scandal, but there has been no conclusion yet.

In July 2019, the Russian pranksters Vovan and Lexus published hours-long tapes involving the Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. The pranksters pretended to be the former President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, and the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, and had several phone conversations and frequently exchanged text messages with Zaev under false pretense. This case (to be discussed in the External Relations paper) dominated the domestic news cycle. Zaev held a press conference in which he claimed he was a victim of informational warfare, and in the following period the government has launched a campaign against foreign propaganda, manipulation, disinformation and fake news.

Leaks however did not appear only in the format of audio and video files. In the period May-July, the journalist Branko Geroski, who claimed to have an unparalleled access to sensitive information, published a series of allegorical op-eds in which he described a major extortion operation that involved some government representatives as well as the Special Prosecution Office. It is rumored that a number of tapes related to this case do exist, and will be used as evidence in court, meaning that there may be even more “bombshells” exploding in the course of 2019, perpetuating the atmosphere of political crisis.