



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:

The Zagreb Nightclub Shooting: An Accident or a Planned Conflict?

Valentino Petrović


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

The Zagreb Nightclub Shooting: An Accident or a Planned Conflict?

Summary

This article will present the information that is known to the Croatian public about the incident that happened in Zagreb on the night of 22 April which involved the murder of a former convict Tomislav Sabljo in a nightclub full of people. The police investigation is currently underway, but some information about the incident has already leaked. Nevertheless, what should be concerning is the fact many people in the club were in danger of becoming victims of the shootout which brought forward the question of how safe the country really is.

Introduction

Once again, the topic of safety of the Croatian citizens broke the newspaper headlines after an incident happened at turbo folk nightclub in the country's capital Zagreb. In the early hours of 22 April, Tomislav Sabljo, a man well-known to the Croatian investigative authorities due to his criminal past, was killed in the Ritz club by a security guard following a physical conflict that included several people. The security guard, who was not carrying a gun but was given one by a suspended police officer who was also present at the club, surrendered after the incident and was put into custody with the investigation about the details of the shootout underway. Since the nightclub was crowded by other people, especially young people having fun, the news began circulating about how safe Croatia really is, considering that only a few months ago a physical confrontation took place at a family ski resort with several people injured. While Minister of Interior Davor Božinović assures that the level of safety in Zagreb and Croatia was never bigger, the question can be posed whether that is the case and to what extent parents should be worried for the well-being of their children.

The Background of Tomislav Sabljo

To put some context behind the incident, a few words shall be said about the man who was killed. Tomislav Sabljo was part of criminal organizations that smuggled drugs, burned cars, and collected debts. Together with his 17 companions, Sabljo was arrested in July 2019 for marijuana smuggling from Albania and Montenegro, through Bosnia and Herzegovina, all

the way to Croatia, with the help of a border police officer¹. Apart from the marijuana business, the group was involved in the purchase of cocaine, earning over EUR 10 million (84.6 million HRK). With much information about his criminal activities going through the media, this all could be discussed in a separate article. For the purpose of this one, it is important to notice that Sabljo left the Remetinac prison in December 2021, but was arrested again only a week later, and once again in September 2022, both times over extortion or attempted extortion², as reported by the Croatian newspapers. At the moment of the nightclub incident, Sabljo was carrying a gun, and apparently, threatened to other people. He was left to enter the premise due to his reputation, even though the reports claim that personnel knew that he was armed and ready to provoke a conflict.

Known Details about the Case

With no information still confirmed due to ongoing police investigation, only with the leaked media accounts, Sabljo pointed his gun toward bodybuilder Jadranko Jurković he knew from before and told him: You'll get what you deserve. The situation got worse when other people tried to react, but it was security guard Kristijan K. who went to face Sabljo. As mentioned above, he did not possess a gun but asked a suspended police officer who was there to give him one. The verbal conflict between Sabljo and Kristijan K. erupted, with Sabljo threatening the security guard after which the latter fired several shots at Sabljo. The questions remain if the two knew each other from before and whether this was an outcome of some prior or current conflict, as well as to what extent the use of force by Kristijan K. was justified; was it a necessary defense from raging Sabljo or was it a classic murder. What should be worrying for everyone is the possibility that this incident will result in further gang clashes in Zagreb, mostly in the revenge-seeking attempts of Sabljo's group; along the lines of something that was already in place during the mid-1990s and early 2000s³. Therefore, the police still need to clarify if this was an accident or planned.

¹ N1info.hr. 2023. Suspected leader of major drug smuggling gang killed in Zagreb nightclub <https://n1info.hr/english/news/suspected-leader-of-major-drug-smuggling-gang-killed-in-zagreb-nightclub/>.

² N1info.hr. 2023. Suspected leader of major drug smuggling gang killed in Zagreb nightclub <https://n1info.hr/english/news/suspected-leader-of-major-drug-smuggling-gang-killed-in-zagreb-nightclub/>.

³ Međugorac, Iva. 2023. ČEKA LI ZAGREB OBRAČUN MAFIJAŠA? Ubojstvo u noćnom klubu probudilo je zle duhove zagrebačkog podzemlja. Zagreb.info <https://www.zagreb.info/crna-kronika/ceka-li-zagreb-obracun-mafijasa-ubojstvo-u-nocnom-klubu-probudilo-je-zle-duhove-zagrebackog-podzemlja/512566/>.

The Reaction of Competent Authorities

But according to the words of Minister of Interior Davor Božinović, there is no doubt about the nature of the case. In the aftermath of the incident, the minister said: "At this moment, we can conclude that this is not a pre-planned murder or an agreed-upon conflict between the individuals involved; it is likely that an argument, a situational crime, took place earlier. Therefore, there is a crime, but crime is solved efficiently in Croatia"⁴. When asked about the night club presence of a suspended police officer who gave a gun to Kristijan K., Božinović said that he has no comment. Taking into account that a criminal investigation is in process, Minister's words are expected, as well as the fact that he was defending the reaction of police authorities. What has been leaked by the media is the information that cameras outside of night club filmed Sabljo who showed signs of aggressive behavior even before entering the premise, and that unconfirmed conflict took place in the outside environment. A few days later, the lawyer of Kristijan K. told the media that his defendant will remain in detention for a month due to the fear of influencing witnesses and repeating the crime, while the prosecutor has 30 witnesses whom all need to be questioned to shed light on the event of 22 April.

How Safe the Country Really Is?

Amid the police investigation, the social aspect of the case was predominantly oriented toward the issue of the safety of Croatian citizens. While the country is generally considered to have high grades when it comes to safety, especially if compared to other countries in the Western Balkans region, some recent examples shown that certain individuals or groups of people still behave as if they are protected by a higher power, or in the Croatian case, political network. This is exemplified mostly at the local level where such political networks and interest groups are firmly established over the course of several years or even decades. Unfortunately, they are often in tacit agreement with various stakeholders involved in illicit activities which results in the proliferation of scandals that are not resolved due to the fear of authorities that they would lose political power. Many young people, therefore, rely on party membership cards of their fathers or relatives and put themselves unilaterally in the dominant position. Needless to say, the issue of safety is also related to the international perception of Croatia. Apart from the warm climate and beautiful beaches, many tourists visit Croatia because they consider the

⁴ N1info.hr. 2023. Božinović o ubojstvu u Zagrebu: Policija je uhitila dvije osobe <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/bozinovic-o-ubojstvu-u-zagrebu-policija-je-reagirala-promptno/>.

country safe, with a small chance that they will become victims of financial or any kind of fraud⁵. This should only bring incentive to decision-makers to sustain such perception.

Conclusion

While little has been said by the police about the incident that happened in the Zagreb nightclub, it definitely brought the attention of the media and politics. Nevertheless, the interest lasted only for some time. During the time this article is written, the last post in the media about the case dated back to a few days after the shootout occurred. Unfortunately, as long as such cases are neglected by those who should warn about deviant behavior among individuals, especially young people, we should not be surprised if similar events happen.

⁵ Jokić, Boris. 2023. Osjećaj lažne sigurnosti: Trebaju li djeca nositi pancirke kad idu u klub?. Tportal.hr https://www.tportal.hr/komentatori/clanak/osjecaj-lazne-sigurnosti-trebaju-li-djeca-nositi-pancirke-kad-idu-u-klub-foto-20230429?meta_refresh=1.