

Excerpts from press articles published in 2005 and 2006 in the Macedonian daily VREME, all by Aleksandar Bozinovski (unofficial translation)

First article published by VREME on El Masri case on 10 January 2005

Khaled El Masri, German citizen of Lebanese origin, was captured by Macedonian counter intelligence services (UDBK) under allegations that he took part in the terrorist attacks of 9/11, VREME reported referring to anonymous sources in UDBK. After a couple of hours of questioning, El Masri, was transferred to CIA agents from the CIA office in Skopje. The same sources told VREME that later on the CIA agents transferred El Masri through the Skopje airport in a camp of the CIA in Afghanistan. It is not known what happened with El Masri afterwards.

The Skopje CIA office wanted that the information about El Masri's detention remains secret. CIA Agents expected to learn from him how many Al Qaeda cells were there in the Balkans. The Ministry of Interior refused to confirm the information about El Masri's detention, the reason being that they never comment on intelligence information.

Following the detention of El Masri, George Tenet, the then CIA director, expressed his gratitude in a phone conversation with Siljjan Avramovski, former director of UDBK. Tenet considered that the success of the Macedonian intelligence services is even bigger, given the fact that El Masri crossed two countries before being captured by UDBK.

Afterwards, when Avramovski was nominated for the post of Minister of Interior, Tenet, gave a statement to the US media saying that the new Macedonian Interior Minister is "among the top ten analysts of world terrorism".

Intelligence sources told VREME that El Masri was travelling in the afternoon of December 31, 2003 with a bus from Istanbul to Belgrade. UDBK agents already have spotted him at Deve Bair, a cross-point at the Bulgarian-Macedonian border. Right afterwards the headquarters of UDBK were informed. UDBK subsequently contacted the CIA office. The Americans confirmed that El Masri is one of the suspected persons for organising the 9/11 attacks.

The same day, El Masri was taken off the bus from a different group of agents from UDBK. They questioned him for couple of hours about his participation in Al Qaeda, Al Haramain, Islamic brotherhood and other terrorist organisations. El Masri denied the allegations. He stated that he was on holidays in Turkey, after previously visiting his family in Lebanon.

Moreover, CIA had information that El Masri visited a mosque in Ulm, Germany, where Al Qaeda supporters use to gather. El Masri was followed for a long time by the German Intelligence Service (BND). He was living in Ulm, where previously he had a car-sales store.

Al Qaeda in Kondovo (a village near the capital city of Skopje)?

Intelligence services believe that an Al Qaeda cell exists in Kondovo, but it was never proven by UDBK. Apparently, for the propagation of the wahhabism (an extreme form of Islam), as well as for recruitment of new Al Qaeda members among the young Albanians in Kondovo, a madrassa, Islamic school in this village, was used. The agents from UDBK focused on this point when they questioned El Masri, but he did not say anything to them, UDBK sources told VREME.

Khaled El Masri: If only Macedonia listened to me, I would give up the charges brought against the country in front of the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg

"For everything that happened to me, I blame Macedonia to the same extent as the US," says El Masri.

A year and a half after his abduction and couple of months since the process has started, El Masri yesterday agreed for the first time to speak to Macedonian media. The day before El Masri and his lawyer asked for a meeting with the Macedonian ambassador in Berlin, but did not receive any answer.

El Masri is taken aback by the Macedonian attitude.

I am shocked that such things can happen in a democratic country that has friendly ties with the USA. One would not expect from a friendly country not to allow a German citizen to contact his diplomatic and consular representation abroad. After all, that is why these representations exist. Maybe what was more important for Macedonia, were good relations with the USA. For a smile on the face of the Americans, the Macedonian government violated all existing procedures and citizen's rights, says the angry man El Masri.

After his release, he found himself in Albania in May last year, and then he went back to Germany to see his lawyer Manfred Gnjidic. According to the lawyer Khaled came to see him and he informed the German Chancellor and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The two offices replied that the inquiry is being initiated. Very quickly the police questioned Khaled and he gave the police all the details on abduction.

As to the reasons of his travel and stay in Skopje, Khaled explained that he wanted to spend a week end off at a low budget destination. The German auto club ADAC advised him to go to Macedonia saying that this was a fairly cheap country. Khaled said that he travelled with a bus and the price of the travel was indeed rather low. He also said he had some problems with his wife because at that point they were living in a one room flat together with their four kids.

El Masri admits that he has no relatives or friends in Skopje. He was abducted by the Macedonian police on a request by the CIA because they suspected him of involvement in the attacks of 9/11.

After several months of interrogation in Afghanistan, the CIA realised they captured the wrong man.

"Macedonian inspectors beat me and took photos of me"

El Masri and Gnjidic accuse Macedonian and American agents of ill-treatment. According to Gnjidic, Macedonian authorities knew how Khaled would be treated.

"The kidnapping was well organised. The organisers knew in advance that it was necessary to kidnap me and they knew what would happen to me. The plane did not come from the US via Majorca just for fun or in order to check if I am a nice chap. The Macedonian services made a video footage of me so that they could prove how well they treated me", says El Masri.

The key proof for the abduction, exclusively for the daily Vreme

Masri holds the flight report from Skopje airport as evidence.

The CIA plane took off in Skopje, made a short stop in Bagdad in order to refuel, and then landed in Kabul

The authentic copy of the flight report for the Boeing 737 with the register number N313P will be used in the legal proceedings against Macedonia, says El Masri's lawyer.

The Vreme newspaper acquired this document yesterday and on it is the stamp of Skopje airport. This flight report is already being used as evidence in the process against the former CIA director Tenet, which takes place in Virginia.

The code for the Skopje airport is LWSK, for Kabul OAKB and for Bagdad ORBI.

From the flight report follows that the plane arriving from Palma de Majorca landed at 15h29 on 23 Jan 2004 in Skopje. This date coincides with El Masri's statement according to which he has been questioned by the Macedonian police for 23 days in a hotel named Skopski Merak. Subsequently he was told that he would be brought back to Germany, however he ended up in the plane to Kabul. According to the report, a flight was scheduled for Kabul at 23h09. But it was delayed because the airport authorities made an assessment that there would not be enough fuel to arrive to Kabul. It was then decided to make a stop in Bagdad. The plane took off for Bagdad on the 24 Jan 2006 at 00.06. "This constitutes one of our most powerful evidences against the CIA and Macedonian Secret Service (UBK)" says Gnjidic.

El Masri says that the only passengers on board of the mysterious plane were 10 people speaking English with an American accent and himself. Gnjidic says that the names of the CIA agents present on the plane are known to him and to the Munich public prosecutor. He gave no further comments on this.

Khaled El Masri, German citizen of Lebanese origin, was abducted on 31 December 2003 at the border crossing Tabanovci between Serbia and Macedonia. At that time the Macedonian secret service (UBK) was led by Siljan Avramovski and the interior minister was Hari Kostov.

The deputies in the national parliament Slobodan Casule and Silvana Boneva (both from VMRO-DPMNE, an EPP party) stated that the case will be investigated by a parliamentary committee.

Macedonian guest workers (Gastarbeiter) are my witnesses

"I am an ordinary, decent citizen and I beg for justice for two years. The Macedonian authorities act as if nothing happened."

"Tell me, who today does not believe me and my misery, with all the evidences and my will to find out the truth, while not having a single thought of making money out of the story? How can the Macedonian authorities treat me as if nothing happened? Are they human beings?" wonders a very emotional Khaled El Masri, the most known German Arab these days, famous for his sufferings caused by UBK (Macedonian secret service) and the CIA.

For the first time El Masri revealed that his witnesses are the passengers on the bus with which he travelled to Macedonia. These were the Macedonian guest workers working in Germany.

After he calmed himself, we asked him to comment on the statements by the head of the Macedonian Delegation in the Council of Europe Igor Ivanovski who denied all allegations. El Masri admitted that the latest developments do give him some hope for justice to be done. Dick Marty is leading the investigation about his case in the PACE, while the Munich public prosecutor started to work on the case already a year ago.

"Of course, denial is also an answer. But I believe the strategy of the Macedonian authorities is wrong. The country will bear the consequences for allowing abduction and ill-treatment," says El Masri.

The Macedonian prosecutor Aleksandar Prcevski also announced an investigation.

"Now I finally am beginning to believe that I am on the right path. But I do not know how all this will end. My lawyer requested information from the Macedonian government. If only the government admitted what has been done to me, nothing else matters to me."

Asked what he thought of the proposal by the Macedonian parliamentarian Slobodan Casule calling for the Macedonian state to apologise and pay the indemnity, El Masri replied: "I would like to have a public apology. It is not the money that matters the most to me. I want you to understand me that I only wish that the truth comes out."

We asked El Masri to tell us what happened before and after 31 December 2003, when he arrived at the border crossing Tabanovci.

"I had a fight with my wife. I simply wanted to get out of Germany and forget about all the worries in one of the Eastern countries. I went to the Tourist Agency ADAC and I told them what I wanted. They recommended Macedonia as a peaceful country. I bought a bus ticket for 120 euros. I planned to stay in Skopje one or two days in a hotel and then to go to another place. I do not know anyone in Macedonia. Then they took me off the bus at the border crossing. The rest of the story you know and it is not easy for me to talk about it," he said.

We asked him, if a process was held in Macedonia, would he recognise someone from the country. "Yes. I remember very well the faces of Macedonian inspectors. Especially the one who pretended to be good to me and told me they would send me back to Germany. I remember very well the hotel, I have found its homepage now on the net, I see it has changed in the meantime. There is also a photo of the waiter who brought me food. I remember of the cleaning lady and of some of the passengers on the bus."

El Masri again denied that the CIA has paid him half a million dollars to keep silent. "They are spreading speculations in order to discredit me. Now some German media doubt why I asked for a political asylum in Germany in 1985. The reason is that I fled civil war in Lebanon."

The Evidence

"Among the strongest evidences are the testimonies of passengers on the bus. Prosecutor Hofmann took reservations from the ADAC agency with the addresses of passengers. At first they refused to witness because they were afraid something might happen to them. Mr Hofmann gave them guarantees that they would be protected and that nobody was going to take away their work permits. Then they confirmed they were travelling with me and that the police took me off the bus," said El Masri.

His lawyer Gnjidic added:" On El Masri's passport there is an entry and exit stamp. The prosecutor ordered El Masri's hair to be analysed. It was established that the he was starving for couple of months and that he stayed in a country of South East Asia." El Masri said he was on hunger strike in the prison in Kabul. After they liberated him, he was brought to Albania by plane and then back to Germany.

Helsinki Committee: The silence will not help

Mirjana Najcevska from the Helsinki Committee said that their organisation did not examine the case, because they did not have any information on it, although they do follow the events. "In this case, the government, like it usually does, defends itself with the silence. But given the interest of the international community, this tactic will not be the right solution.

The pressure from the EU on El Masri case

EU ambassador Fouré: Macedonia must give us more information

Following the queries by several MEPs, the answer of the Macedonian government consisting in just few words is far from being satisfactory, said Fouré.

EU once again asked for an answer from the Macedonian government on the case El Masri, and Fouré already arranged a meeting with the interior minister Ljubomir Mihajlovski - Dzango.

This a serious question and the answer which Director General responsible for Western Balkans in the European Commission Reinhard Priebe got from Deputy Prime Minister Radmila Sekerinska, is not satisfactory. When we receive all information we will decide how we will deal with the case, said Fouré.

"Interior Ministry suspected that El Masri was wanted by Interpol and therefore arrested him at the border crossing Tabanovci on 31 Dec 2003. When it was established that there was no arrest warrant issued for El Masri, he has been released. He left Macedonia on 23 Jan 2004," says the statement of the Ministry of Interior given to the EU and to the German government.

Asked if the El Masri case will have any influence on Macedonian EU aspirations, Fouré firmly said: "Absolutely not, in whatsoever way."

Munich Prosecutor August Stern said that an answer has been sought from the governments of USA, Macedonia, Albania and Germany. No answer has been received and without them we cannot build up this case.

Hari Kostov, former interior minister at the time of the El Masri case, was not very willing to give comments. "There are people who are responsible and who are obliged to comment on these matters," he said.

Macedonian Parliament is still waiting for a request from Europe on El Masri case

The Chairwoman of the EU affairs Committee Carolina Ristova Asterud said they were informed about the setting of the TDIP Committee.

She stated that now it was not the right moment for Macedonian parliament to take an own imitative to investigate the case. It should have been done already earlier. Now the Macedonian Parliament will collaborate with the European Parliament Temporary Committee.

However, according to the rules of procedure of the Macedonian Parliament this case can only be dealt with by the committee for the control over secret services.

El Masri's lawyer considered to address the existing inquiry committee for protection of rights and freedoms of the citizens - this committee is chaired by Stojan Andov. But this committee only has a mandate for Macedonian citizens, said Ristova.

But Andov said he would call a Committee meeting if he gets a request by the lawyer.

Parliamentary question was put to the interior minister Ljubomir Mihajovski by deputy Slobodan Casule. The minister answered: "The El Masri case is a speculation. and groundlessly linked to the supposed secret prisons. A certain El Masri appeared in Macedonia on 31 Dec 2003, he entered the country after a passport control. This person left the territory of Macedonia on 23 Jan 2004 to enter the territory of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, specifically he crossed the border with Kosovo."

Deputy Casule reacted: "It is not important whether I am satisfied with your answer. It is important that the citizens of this country and the EU are. The case should be dealt with by an official document of the Parliament at a plenary session establishing the responsibility and presenting guarantees that such a thing would never happen again."

American ambassador to Macedonia Gillian Milovanovic said: "I am of the criticism, I am aware that there is no evidence. I have nothing to say on the case El Masri."

The deadlock in the committee for the control over the secret service (UBK)

Two days after the TDIP Committee has been set up, the deputy Silvana Boneva announced that her political group VMRO-DPMNE will ask for a special committee on El Masri case to be formed. She said that the main problem is the deadlock in the functioning of the committee for the control over the secret service (UBK). She said that the case El Masri must be tackled very seriously in a time when Macedonia is aiming at EU membership.

The diplomats in Skopje, speaking anonymously, warned us that the El Masri can be used on purpose by some European forces as a reason not to grant Macedonia with EU

candidate status, despite the firm statement by EU ambassador in Skopje Fouré that the case would not have such an impact.

On the other hand, if we believe the statements by El Masri, the damage caused to the country could have been easily prevented. El Masri is saying he was looking for a meeting with the then Macedonian Ambassador in Berlin, Goran Rafajlovski. Masri was determined that if Macedonia presented excuses to him, most probably he would not sue the country, because he knew that Washington was mainly responsible for what had happened to him. But the meeting with the Ambassador never took place. Rafajlovski, who is now no longer Ambassador, said: "I never had a meeting with El Masri and I neither want to have one. For such a thing I would have to receive instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I had consultations with the Ministry on this case but I cannot reveal to you what we discussed. I think that this groundless case will not influence our candidacy for the EU membership."

Will the country escape its responsibility?

Macedonia captured El Masri as if the country was an US colony

As the evidence in El Masri case is getting stronger, the reputation of our country is getting worse and worse and our diplomats justify themselves in front of the Europeans that they cannot resist to the US.

"What can we do, we are like a colony of the US, and we cannot refuse such requests. Moreover our secret police signed an cooperation agreement with the CIA in the fight against the terrorism." This is how our diplomats in Brussels respond.

Officially neither the Ministry of Interior nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have commented on the case in last seven months. According to them, the reason for this is that nobody asked for that. It is difficult to believe that this is correct. Last summer the MEPs André Brie and Erik Meijer (GUE) put some very uncomfortable questions to the European Commission. One of them was whether the citizens of the EU can be save while travelling through Macedonia and be sure that the Macedonian secret service will not kidnap them.

There is new evidence from Spain. A Spanish court acquired a report from prosecutor in Palma de Majorca which states that CIA abused a Majorca airport for illegal transport of detainees. A boeing N313P took off from Majorca airport on 23 Jan 2004. Nowadays the Spanish investigators asked CIA for explanations about these activities.

Berliner Zeitung: German secret services participated in the kidnapping of El Masri

According to anonymous sources in the German secret service (BND) El Masri was snatched after the BND gave a tip to the CIA, writes Berliner Zeitung.

Masri says he was questioned by the BND before being captured in Macedonia. Berliner Zeitung also reports that El Masri is close to Seyam Reda, a known Islamic radical in Germany.

The German Government Spokesperson did not want to comment on the report.