

Introducing Skopje Transport Police – Way Forward For Tackling Public Transportation Crime

The frequency of physical violence (as a form of crime) in Skopje's public bus transportation showcases worrying patterns. Recently three attacks involving dozens of people occurred, leaving number of passengers requiring medical treatment.

The Police, according to the Minister of Interior (MoI) are performing their usual tactics in dealing with such a crime activities and it is expected that the offenders will shortly face sanctions. However, so far there is no publicly available data showing the number of cases related to public transportation violence and the actual performance of the MoI in these cases. This is something that MoI should address immediately noting that their track record affects greatly the possibility for future attacks and may motivate or discourage people committing such crime.

Just recently the Minister also announced reorganisation of the police stations across the capital city, directed towards greater representation of police officers on the streets or in her words "something which should result in 50% of increased police visibility".

This step should contribute in addressing the problem of the transport violence but is it enough?

The intensified bus violence can be related to different factors. Some even try to pinpoint the recent multi-ethnic incidents behind such behaviour. Though one cannot fully disregard it as a possibility, the bus violence has been present since many years and does bring in question the credibility of the police. With the decision of the Public Transportation Company (JSP) to activate the night shift bus lines (meaning from 0000 - 0500hrs) the risk for such anti-social and criminal activity has become evidently higher.

Unfortunately the worrying increase of attacks did not ring the bell among the different stakeholders in

the whole process and a new approach in tackling this form of threat to our security is required.

JSP has so far not gone public in expressing their dissatisfaction with the recent development nor it has offered any concrete proposals to MoI. This also applies to the JSP Unions who should (among other) represent and fight for the right to safe work environment. When the intensity of the attacks rises sharply as in the past couple of weeks it is simply a prerequisite to have the City of Skopje, Skopje's Police and JSP on board coordinating their activities and working on developing models that should address these criminal activities.

With the delivery of the new line of buses this problem (at least for the bus drivers) could have been addressed in similar fashion as in other Western-European countries. In the case of the double deckers the drivers' seat is actually a cabin which has its own door and if used properly can serve well and protect the live of the bus driver. Unfortunately the bus drivers do not this thus exposing themselves to possible threats. The other set of new buses (produced in Ukraine) completely lack such a cabin system which is a fundamental mistake from the very start. Additionally JSP bus drivers do not undergo special information sessions on how to handle and react to antisocial behaviour.

JSP should address this immediately by developing rulebook and equip their employees with information on how to react when such behaviour does occur. This should be done in partnership with MoI and the Skopje police units. JSP even though it is a public entity and heavily subsidised by the city of Skopje should not stay idle to these developments. Raising the awareness among the public through printed material, e-notices on their new electronic boards, notices throughout the buses etc. should be implemented without further delay. Information on safety and other useful information (such as travelling at night, reporting crime etc.) should be also available on their website.

Interestingly enough, even though there are many cameras installed in the buses, so far very little is known on whether they actually record and more importantly whether these recordings are used by the police.

The history of the public bus transportation in the city of Skopje coupled with the recent developments has confirmed once again that the city requires introduction to Transportation Police Units. These should be mobile police officers tasked to patrol in the buses and the bus stations throughout the city of Skopje having police authorisations. Such an example can be found in the United Kingdom in the so called "Safer Transport Teams", tasked to provide visible police presence and deal with the crime occurring in the buses. In this line some experience can be also drawn from the "British Transportation Police" which provides security in the trains and the tubes.

This unit should not be big in number nor should it consist of new police officers. Number of them can be drawn from the existing police structures. Intensified courses on dealing with transport crime and violence should be included in their training schemes. Special attention should be also put on the multi-ethnic character of Transport Police Units thus providing greater sensibility among the different local communities they will operate in. This activity should be complimentary to the efforts of the Ministry of Interior to introduce the concept of community policing. Lastly all these measures should be also applicable to the private bus operators in the city of Skopje.

With the above recommended three folded approach - introducing Skopje Transportation Police, awareness raising campaign and trainings among the bus drivers, the citizens of Skopje should enjoy greater security while using the public transportation.

Please note that the text is published first at author's personal blog www.securewhat.wordpress.com on March 8, meaning that it may not directly reflect the developments taking place afterwards.

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