
ARMENIA BACKS BERLIN ENVOY DESPITE REPORTED TIES TO MAFIA IN GERMANY

- 09.11.2018

Radio Free Europe (9 November 2018)

Armenia says it has no intention of removing its ambassador in Berlin after a German investigative report alleged that the envoy may have ties to a brutal Armenian mafia ring operating in that country.

Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Karen Nazarian told RFE/RL that the ministry is in contact with German officials "to clarify the credibility of the allegations that were made in the media" about Ambassador Ashot Smbatian and the Armenian Embassy in general having links to a criminal group.

"These are certain allegations made in the media. I don't think that we should take steps based on media reports," he added.

The allegations come from a concluding report based on a three-year covert investigation by various German security services into the activities of an Armenian-led branch of the infamous criminal group Thieves-In-Law, which operates throughout Europe and reportedly has tentacles in sports and diplomatic circles.

The magazine Der Spiegel and MDR TV and Radio say they obtained copies of the final report of the investigation, code-named FATIL (Fight Against Thieves-In-Law), which concluded this summer and led to the opening of 14 criminal cases involving 42 people.

In addition, a combined team of Der Spiegel and MDR reporters spent five months investigating the German operations of the notorious Thieves-In-Law -- a powerful, worldwide criminal group that originated in the Soviet prison system and is known for its ruthlessness and for having its own elaborate legal culture.

The reports assert that, in March, Smbatian offered the Armenian Embassy's support in the investigation but that Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office told investigators to reject the offer because it could not rule out "possible fusion" between the diplomatic mission and Thieves-In-Law criminal groups operating in Germany.

Other law enforcement bodies in Germany were also cautioned about cooperating with Armenian authorities, the media organizations reported.

In particular, German security services reportedly suspected that Smbatian -- appointed ambassador in 2015 by then-Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian -- had links to criminal groups, though they offered no specific proof.

'Absurd' Allegations

Smbatian, who was also named Armenian ambassador to Liechtenstein on October 30, has called allegations of his involvement with criminal groups "absurd" and from the "rumor mill," tagesschau.de reported. His lawyer also declared an allegation that Smbatian was a member of the Thieves-In-Law to be "nonsense."

Smbatian obtained a last-minute injunction from a Berlin court on November 6 that barred the broadcast of a Der Spiegel/MDR documentary on the German investigation on November 7.

The film, *The Godfather In Germany*, details the Thieves-In-Law's alleged operations in Germany and other parts of Europe, where it purportedly collaborates with Italian and Russian mafia groups, including in the distribution of counterfeit money.

MDR has said it did not have enough time after the November 6 court decision to make the necessary changes to the documentary as required by the legal order and thus had to postpone its broadcast.

It also added that it will appeal the court order.

It is unclear why Smbatian, 49, wanted to prevent the broadcast.

The Armenian Foreign Ministry says it will take no action against Smbatian until it investigates the media reports.

"We sent an inquiry," said Nazarian. "It concerns very delicate issues, in particular the activities of our diplomatic mission and the reputation of its head. I cannot say more at this stage. Let's wait for the results."

'Sobering' Conclusions

Der Spiegel and MDR claim that, in the investigative report about FATIL, officials established that Armenian mafia groups have developed "deep roots" and created a "strong network" in Germany.

Der Spiegel called the conclusions of the FATIL report and the media outlets' joint research into the criminal groups to be "sobering."

It said those mafia groups -- which it says are involved in everything from manipulating slot machines to extortion and money-laundering and even human trafficking -- have "considerable financial resources" and could be a "threat to the rule of law."

The report is also said to mention Armenian-German IBO world light-heavyweight boxing champion Karo Murat, his brother Koko, and Armenian-German former WBO and IBF middleweight champion Arthur Abraham; but officials said they failed to find any concrete evidence of their involvement in the Armenian mafia group's activities, Der Spiegel and MDR reported.

Koko does admit to being present at a bloody shoot-out between Armenian mafia clans at a casino

in the eastern German city of Erfurt in 2014, but told the Der Spiegel/MDR reporters that neither he nor his brother have any contacts with the mafia.

Abraham did not return a list of questions from the Der Spiegel/MDR reporters about the reported ties to the criminal group, while Karo Murat denied having any business associations with members of the mafia. He also denied being present at the Erfurt incident even though police found his mobile phone and a car registered to him at the scene.

Armenian mafia groups are suspected of having operated in Germany since shortly after the 1991 dissolution of the U.S.S.R., when immigrants from Armenia and other former Soviet republics arrived in substantial numbers.

But German security officials turned greater attention to the groups after the 2014 casino shootout between rival Armenian gangs in Erfurt, where the Thieves-In-Law are suspected of having a base.

The classified report also cites possible suspicions in 2005 when the Berlin Public Prosecutor's Office reportedly investigated Smbatian for money laundering, Der Spiegel reported.

And in 2008 -- when Smbatian was a staffer at the Armenian Embassy in Berlin -- Germany's Federal Intelligence Service began an investigation into whether the future ambassador was engaged in smuggling, but later suspended the probe due to a lack of evidence.

Smbatian said he has no knowledge of any previous investigations of him in Germany.

Albert Weiler, a member of the Bundestag from the German state of Thuringia (where Erfurt is the capital), said he was shocked to hear reports about Smbatian having alleged mafia links.

"I cannot imagine that he is doing anything wrong," Weiler, who leads a German-Armenian Forum, told Der Spiegel. "If he were [involved in such things] that would set back my image of mankind a bit."

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