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MACEDONIA: Priests and police raid and threaten Serbian Orthodox believers

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

Nearly a hundred members of the Serbian Orthodox Church's (SOC) Archbishopric of Ohrid in Macedonia were questioned by police and searched, after they backed its failed registration application, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Some were threatened they would be kicked out of their jobs. Police also tried to pressure them to sign a declaration that they had left the SOC for the rival, government-backed Macedonian Orthodox Church. When police questioned church member Goran Bogatinoski in Prilep in early January, they asked him why he allowed SOC monks to stay in his house and why there were icons in his home. Father David of the SOC Ohrid Archbishopric complained to Forum 18 of a "new wave" of police intimidation launched last December. The Interior Ministry denies that police questioned anyone just for signing the registration application.

Following the rejection by the Macedonian authorities of the registration application of the Archbishopric of Ohrid of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), Forum 18 News Service has learnt that dozens of those who signed the registration application were visited by priests of the rival Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) and the police to pressure them to abandon their adherence to the Church. Father David of the Archbishopric complained to Forum 18 on 9 February of a "new wave" of intimidation he says the police launched in December 2004 against Serbian Orthodox believers in Prilep and Resen, in southern Macedonia. Police have attempted to pressure individual believers into signing a formal declaration that they have left the SOC and joined the MOC, which enjoys government backing.

The head of the state religion committee, Cane Mojanovski, has vowed "never" to give the church registration (see F18News 4 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=505).

It appears that after the Archbishopric lodged its registration application, the religion committee passed a copy to Metropolitan Peter of the MOC. Priests of the MOC then visited about 30 families who signed the application, and following the MOC visits, police questioned and searched 97 people.

Goran Pavlovski, spokesperson of the Interior Ministry, denied to Forum 18 that police had questioned and searched the application signatories, insisting that they only questioned people "suspected of illegal acts". He also told Forum 18 from the Macedonian capital Skopje on 9 February that the situation of the Archbishopric of Ohrid "was given too big a meaning".

The Skopje office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declined comment for now on the problems facing the SOC in Macedonia. "The OSCE is much concerned by the difficulties believers might face in the country," mission spokesperson Maxime Filandrov told Forum 18 from Skopje on 7 February. "We are doing work on this with the different stakeholders, mainly via our Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw, but we would not go public on this issue at the moment in order not to 'overexpose' the ongoing efforts to find a solution."

In December 2004 and January 2005 police tried to pressure Riste Risteski from Prilep and his family into evicting SOC monks from a house inherited from his parents which he owns in the village of Lagovo. The monks had been expelled by police on 13 January 2004 from the MOC monastery of the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God – Treskavec, near Prilep, after the monastery attempted to be reconciled with the SOC. The MOC is not recognised by any canonical Orthodox church in the world and monks who sought "canonical unity" with the Serbian Church have been expelled from their monasteries by police (see eg. F18News 13 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=228).

On Sunday 11 January 2004, police expelled nuns from the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God convent near Resen and from the St. Elijah – Chardak convent, as well as monks from the St. Demity – Marko's monastery near the capital Skopje.

Risteski told Forum 18 on 8 February that on the morning of 10 January 2005 he was taken from his home to Prilep police station. There he was interviewed for between 6 to 7 hours, his mobile phone was taken from him and he was denied any contact with a lawyer or his family. He said police also denied him food and water. Officers tried to get Risteski to sign a statement evicting the SOC monks and threatened that he would "have problems" because the monks are "Serbian spies who want to spread hatred between

Serbs and Macedonians". After these threats, Risteski was taken to the house where the SOC monks are, which was searched without a warrant by police, and filmed. Although Risteski has legal documents proving ownership, the police threatened to destroy the house, and questioned Risteski about his property and finances.

On each of the next three days, Risteski was summoned to the police station, verbally threatened that he and his children would lose their jobs, and on the third day asked to sign a statement that he would not give the house to the Archbishopric of Ohrid. When Risteski asked that he be permitted to take the statement home and consult his lawyer, the police took the statement from him and have since left him alone.

Goran Bogatinoski from Prilep was also visited by police at the beginning of January 2005, as they wanted to question him why he allowed SOC monks to stay in his house, as well as why there were icons in his home. Bogatinoski was taken to the police station and threatened that "if he made people angry, people could stone his house and the police will not be able to help him". He was also threatened that the police would prevent him from getting work. In 2004, Bogatinoski had been questioned by police about who his friends were.

On 27 January 2005, police singled out the car of an SOC priest entering Macedonia for a detailed search and verbally insulted him. As the priest is a Macedonian citizen, he could not legally be refused entry. Similar border incidents, including refusal to allow SOC priests to travel through Macedonia on the way from Kosovo to Greece, took place in 2003 and 2004 (see F18News 24 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=113).

The Skopje-based Macedonian Helsinki Committee has noted that the state's active support for the Macedonian Orthodox Church is contrary to the constitution, restricts religious freedom, and calls into question the secular character of the state.

Among other incidents during 2004, Monika Dodova from Veles in central Macedonia was invited for an "informal talk" by police inspector Elica. Dodova told Forum 18 on 9 February that she is a philologist studying Latin and Classical Greek, and that Inspector Elica questioned her about why people study Greek, the names of her students and whether she discusses the SOC with them. Dodova refused to give the police her students' names. Later, in June 2004 on her way to the monastery of St. Prohor Pchinski in Serbia, where she was going to take part as a godmother in a baptismal service, police interrogated her closely. After Dodova returned from Serbia, Inspector Elica rang her to say that "she know that Dodova had travelled to Serbia and why."

Also in 2004, the Macedonian parliament passed a resolution supporting "the autocephalous status and the unity of the Macedonian Orthodox Church" (see F18News 28 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=238) and a paramilitary "state security" unit attacked an SOC monastery with machine guns (see F18News 24 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=259). The monastery was subsequently demolished by workers helped by about 500 police armed with machine guns (see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=437).

Metropolitan Jovan, the head of the SOC Archbishopric of Ohrid, is awaiting the results of an appeal against an 18 month jail sentence imposed on him (see F18News 4 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=505). (END)

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=macedo>

Note that the formally recognised name of Macedonia in international law is "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

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