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MACEDONIA: Serbian Orthodox "will never get registration"

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The Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia has again submitted a registration application, but this is unlikely to succeed. Such communities "will never get registration", Cane Mojanovski, head of the State Committee for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups, told Forum 18 News Service, as only the Macedonian Orthodox Church can exist in the country. He said the Religion Law allows only one organisation for any one faith. He could not explain why Orthodox Christians could not freely choose their faith. Metropolitan Jovan (Vranisskovski), who heads the Serbian Church in the country, has been convicted of inciting religious hatred, while religious sites have been raided. He complains the state is "in league" with the rival Macedonian Church. "They do not let us perform services, they harass me with these trials, and they do not let foreign Orthodox priests enter or travel through Macedonia," he told Forum 18. An Interior Ministry entry ban list reportedly includes more than 20 Serbian Orthodox bishops banned from entering Macedonia.

Communities of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia "will never get registration", Cane Mojanovski, head of the State Committee for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Skopje on 23 September. "There can't be an Orthodox Church here other than the Macedonian Orthodox Church – our Religion Law says there can be only one organisation for any one faith." While conceding that Macedonian citizens have the right to choose their faith freely – "it is guaranteed in the Constitution" – he was unable to explain why this right does not extend to Orthodox Christians. Nor could he explain how this restriction complied with Macedonia's religious freedom commitments as a member of the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches have been in dispute since 1967, when the Macedonian Church unilaterally declared its independence from the Serbian Church. The Macedonian Church's independence has not been recognised by any canonical Orthodox jurisdiction. The closeness of the Macedonian Church to the state was demonstrated on 9 August, when its leader Archbishop Stefan (Veljanovski) and the Macedonian president Branko Crvenkovski pledged in a joint statement that "the Macedonian Orthodox Church and Macedonian state will remain together".

The Macedonian government has long tried to suppress parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Church and has even tried to imprison its leader in the country, Metropolitan Jovan (Vranisskovski) of Ohrid. "In the state's attitude towards us, nothing has changed," Metropolitan Jovan told Forum 18 from the southern Macedonian town of Bitola on 20 September. "They are in league with the sectarian Macedonian Orthodox Church. They do not let us perform services, they harass me with these trials, and they do not let foreign Orthodox priests enter or travel through Macedonia."

Last February, in the worst incident so far, armed gunmen believed to have been state security officers raided a remote Serbian Orthodox monastery based in a private home near Bitola (see F18News 24 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=259).

In the latest case brought against him, Metropolitan Jovan – who transferred from the jurisdiction of the Macedonian to the Serbian Church in 2002 – was sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment in mid-August by a court in Bitola on charges of inciting national and religious hatred. He has appealed to Bitola's appeal court, but is awaiting a response.

The court found that texts included in the Serbian Orthodox calendar for 2004, which prosecutors suspected Metropolitan Jovan of writing, offended the religious feelings of other citizens. Metropolitan Jovan vigorously rejected the accusations, complaining of a "conspiracy" against him.

"They have no proof that I'm the author of the text in the church calendar," he told Forum 18. "The text was on the life of church in the past Communist times and also on today's problems. And even if they find some proof, a slander indictment can be submitted to a court by a private person. I would love to see any single person who finds himself offended by that little text."

He also rejected accusations that he had broken the law by his involvement in the consecration of two bishops for his Church in Serbia. "They claim I organised the consecration. Yes, I was there, I was invited, and I participated in the service, but in no way was I the organiser of the whole service."

He said prosecutors also objected to a service he held in a private home in January. "There is no law against performing a religious service in a private apartment," he insisted to Forum 18. "There is a law in Macedonia that protects privacy of your home. I fail to see how I support and engage in national and religious hatred."

Metropolitan Jovan faces a separate legal case on allegations that he embezzled 57,000 Euros designated for the reconstruction of the church in Veles while he was still serving as a bishop of the Macedonian Church. He was released by Veles court, but the prosecutor appealed to the court in Skopje and this court has decided to re-open the trial.

The Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia has repeatedly sought registration with the State Committee for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups. "We submitted our latest submission one month ago and are still waiting for their response," Metropolitan Jovan told Forum 18. "We submitted 90 signatures and wrote that if they require 900, they need to give us one day. And if they require 9,000 they need to give us three days. But they are still silent."

Mojanovski of the State Committee confirmed to Forum 18 that his committee had received the application, though he said it arrived "ten or twelve days ago". He said the committee would respond to the application "within the legal period of 30 days from the date of arrival". "The reply will be based on law," he insisted. He declined to say how his Committee will respond to the application, but his clear statement that no other Orthodox jurisdictions will be allowed to register indicates that the application will be rejected.

Despite the many problems, Metropolitan Jovan expressed slight optimism about the situation for his Church. "There is one sign they are letting us perform services in Macedonia," he told Forum 18. "Recently we celebrated breaking the ground for a new monastery in a village near here. Among the 400 people present were Greek Metropolitan Ignatius of Volos, Bulgarian Bishop Kiril of Varna, and a priest from Serbia."

However, the ceremony evoked hostile reactions in "all the newspapers", Metropolitan Jovan reported, while on his return to Greece, Metropolitan Ignatius had difficulties with the Macedonian border police. "They asked him why he was wearing a 'working suit'. He responded to them that it is a suit of 'freedom'. They held him for a half an hour before letting him return home." Jovan reported that Bishop Kiril had encountered problems entering Macedonia, with the border police telling him that he should not visit Bitola. "He responded that he would go wherever he wanted to go, and finally they let him pass and enter the country."

The Greek and Bulgarian bishops went through border formalities in their clerical vestments, but the Serbian priest tried to avoid problems by changing into civilian clothes before crossing. "I clearly remember that only this summer, Macedonian President Crvenkovski promised that clergy will have freedom to travel wherever they desire," Metropolitan Jovan noted.

The Macedonian border police have long obstructed foreign Orthodox clergy from entering Macedonia in clerical robes, but this obstruction appears to have widened. Fr Sava (Janjic) of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo told Forum 18 on 21 September that earlier that day the Macedonian border police at the Djeneral Jankovic crossing point had turned back Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) of Raska and Prizren and Fr Simeon (Vilovski), abbot of Banjska Monastery, telling them that "Bishop Artemije is not permitted to enter or transit through FYR Macedonia". Both were intending to transit through Macedonia on their way to Greece.

When Bishop Artemije asked whether the ban was the result of an official decision or the personal position of the duty border chief, the officers showed him a written order from the Macedonian Interior Ministry, which declared that "at the request of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Interior Ministry of Macedonia has decided to prohibit entry and transit through Macedonia to the persons named on the attached list". According to Bishop Artemije, the list includes the names of at least 20 Serbian Orthodox bishops.

"This unprecedented decision by state officials of FYR Macedonia made on the basis of an explicit request by the so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church represents direct evidence that state officials in Skopje are rendering discriminatory decisions without any legal basis, and doing so at the request of the schismatic bishops of the so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church," the Raska and Prizren diocese complained. "Such a decision and the existence of an entry ban list of bishops who are prohibited to transit through FYR Macedonia solely because of their religious and ethnic affiliation is not only contrary to the laws of FYR Macedonia but represents a gross violation of international human and religious rights conventions."

Interior Ministry spokesperson Goran Pavlovski initially denied to Forum 18 that such an Interior Ministry order existed. "What Mr Artemije claimed was untrue – the order does not exist," he told Forum 18 from Skopje on 23 September. However, on further questioning he conceded that his Ministry had issued an order, not on 2 June 2004 as Bishop Artemije had reported but on 2 June 2003, banning the entry into Macedonia of foreigners wearing uniform without an invitation from a valid government department or institution.

"Would your border guards allow foreign soldiers or police officers into your country wearing uniform?" he asked Forum 18. He failed to see any distinction between foreign law enforcement officers who work for a government and clergy. But he insisted this rule held for all faiths, "not just the Serbian, Greek or Bulgarian Orthodox".

Asked if Serbian Orthodox bishops would be able to enter Macedonia in their robes if Metropolitan Jovan or other Church institutions invite them, Pavlovski responded: "Jovan can't invite anyone. He doesn't have a valid organisation. It has no registration, so it doesn't exist."

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from

Note that the formally recognized name of Macedonia in international law is "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYR Macedonia).

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