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CROATIA: Free Churches unhappy over government agreements

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

The Alliance of Baptist Churches has refused to sign a joint agreement with the government together with other Protestant denominations, complaining about the way the process has been handled and the way the agreement is phrased. It has decided to ask the government for an individual agreement. "We will insist on this," Giorgio Grlj of the Baptist Alliance told Forum 18 News Service. Earlier this year the government excluded some Protestant denominations previously involved in negotiations – including the Baptists - from the possibility of signing individual agreements, and is pressuring them to join larger denominations in a joint agreement. While the Free Churches remain unhappy over the whole process, other religious communities are prepared to accept the government's offer. "No-one is really happy about the agreements, but we have to be realistic," Bishop Endre Langh of the Reformed Church – which expects to sign its joint agreement with the Lutherans in May - told Forum 18. "At least we'll have a clear situation where we're recognised by the government."

The Alliance of Baptist Churches has refused to sign a joint agreement with the Croatian government together with other Protestant denominations, complaining about the way the process has been handled and the way the agreement is phrased, Giorgio Grlj, president of the Assembly of the Baptist Alliance, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Zagreb on 25 April. The government claims the dispute focuses only on how the agreement handles the issue of the return of nationalised church property. Earlier this year the government excluded some Protestant denominations previously involved in negotiations – including the Baptists - from the possibility of signing individual agreements, and is pressuring them to join larger denominations in a joint agreement.

Grlj reported that in late April the Baptist Alliance executive board decided to ask the government for an individual agreement. "We will insist on this."

On 28 April Forum 18 asked government officials in Zagreb why the state needed to sign agreements with individual religious communities, given that the country already has a law on religious communities adopted only last summer, and why the state was pressuring some religious communities to sign joint agreements, while apparently denying the right to sign any agreements to other religious communities. However, despite several requests, there was no response as of 1 May.

The government signed agreements with the Vatican (on behalf of the Catholic Church) some years ago under the government of the late president Franjo Tudjman and with the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Muslim community last December. After that there was a proposal to do the same with six Protestant denominations, Grlj told Forum 18. He said the state invited the Baptists, Adventists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Churches of Christ and Churches of God for discussions.

"However, we soon realised that the proposed text was not drawn up carefully," he declared. "There was a host of absurd mistakes - one was that our six churches would regulate some issues of returning the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church!" He said that after the initial phase, the state desired to "somehow join us all together". "We indeed have a Protestant-Evangelical Council, but it is an advisory body and not a representative one."

The proposed agreement regulates state-church relations in various fields. It gives religious communities the right to provide religious education for children, to perform legally recognised marriages, broad access to radio and TV, and humanitarian ministries, allows ministers to be legally employed by the religious community and to have a retirement plan, to receive substantial annual grants from the state and to obtain work permits for missionaries.

Bishop Endre Langh of the Reformed Church said his Church and the Lutherans hope to sign their joint agreement later in May. "Everything is prepared," he told Forum 18 from Vinkovci on 1 May. "No-one is really happy about the agreements, but we have to be realistic. At least we'll have a clear situation where we're recognised by the government. This will make things much safer."

He said he believes in an ideal world there would be no need even for a specific religion law, let alone agreements with individual religious communities. "But since we're an overwhelmingly Catholic country and the previous government brought in the Catholic Church by the back door with their agreement, the state has to maintain – at least formally – that it is secular. That's why it decided to introduce agreements with other communities." He said the government is also due to sign an agreement with the Jewish

community.

Grlj reported that after a series of meetings, "where virtually all our proposals were turned down", the government invited only three communities - the Baptists, Evangelicals and Adventists - to sign one joint agreement. But he complained that the agreement did not regulate relations between the three and did not list the parties signing the agreement.

"We also raised the question of proper representation of the smaller denominations because, as of last week, the state says it will sign an agreement only with denominations that have more than 20 parishes," Grlj told Forum 18. "This clearly pressures the smaller denominations to join us, the larger, in order to be recognised, but it also opens another host of issues: our mutual relations with others who might quickly join our Alliance."

The Adventists have 70 local churches in Croatia, the Baptists and the Evangelical church 41 each, the Church of Christ 6, the Churches of God 8 and the Pentecostal churches 5.

At the meeting on 8 January, the governmental Commission, chaired by deputy prime minister Goran Granic, it was stated that the state expected the six invited denominations to sign an agreement. No limit to the number of parishes was mentioned. Croatia's law on religious communities only requires one hundred registered believers and five years of existence for a religious community to be state recognised and registered.

Members of other Protestant Churches are reluctant to speak about whether they plan to sign agreements jointly with other denominations. One Protestant, who asked not to be identified, told Forum 18 from Zagreb on 28 April that the three main Pentecostal denominations – the Pentecostals, the Evangelicals and the Church of God - decided on 25 April to sign a joint agreement and would visit Granic soon to discuss this. Another Protestant, who likewise declined to be named, told Forum 18 that the Churches of Christ have already discussed with the Baptists whether to sign a joint agreement.

One community that claims not to be worried by the way the agreement process has been handled is the Adventist Church. "We are not so particular about the form – whether we sign alone or with others," Dragutin Matak, president of the Adventists' Adriatic Union Conference, told Forum 18 from the northern town of Varazdin on 28 April. "We appreciate the opportunity to have our needs regulated, to help us function in a more proper way." He says the Adventists recognise they are a minority faith in Croatia. "Everyone says we have the same rights as Catholics but we're smart enough to see we can't have the same status as the Holy See. We don't envy anyone else."

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