

8 June 2005

MACEDONIA: Why is state interfering in Orthodox dispute?

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

When the Serbian Orthodox Church granted its embattled branch in Macedonia full autonomy in late May, the Macedonian prime minister rejected the move "with indignation". The government has stepped up its hostility to the Church and reaffirmed its support for the rival Macedonian Orthodox Church, which is not recognised by the rest of the Orthodox world. Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid – who heads the Serbian Church in Macedonia – complained of a new state-backed media campaign against his Church. "They are creating an unstable, explosive atmosphere among the population and are virtually inviting people to lynch us," he told Forum 18 News Service. The government has denied his Church registration, attacked its places of worship and launched two criminal cases against him. Macedonian government leaders have been unable to tell Forum 18 why they are interfering in the dispute between the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox Churches in Macedonia and why they are denying full legal rights to Serbian Orthodox believers.

Macedonian government leaders have been unable to tell Forum 18 News Service why they are interfering in the dispute between the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox Churches in Macedonia which intensified after the Serbian Church upgraded its branch in the country in late May. Within days of the move, the Macedonian government wrote to the head of the Orthodox Churches worldwide, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, to promote the Macedonian Church's own claim to autocephaly (full canonical independence), while the Macedonian president and prime minister both vocally supported the Macedonian Church and attacked the Serbian Church move. Serbian Orthodox representatives in Macedonia have complained to Forum 18 that their government has renewed its campaign of denigration against Serbian Orthodox believers.

Reached several times on 7 and 8 June, prime ministerial spokesperson Marjan Gurovski was each time in a meeting or too busy to explain why the government was intervening in the dispute. Cane Mojanovski, head of the government's Committee for Relations with Religious Communities who has previously told Forum 18 the Serbian Church "will never get registration" in Macedonia and defended the denial of its rights (see F18News 23 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=418), refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 8 June about the latest government interference.

Reached on 7 June, presidential spokesperson Valentin Nikoloski told Forum 18 that the dispute was an issue for the Macedonian state because, he claimed, the Serbian Orthodox Church has not recognised the Macedonian nation and state. He promised to pass on to President Branko Crvenkovski Forum 18's questions as to why the state was involved in a dispute that concerned two religious communities and why Macedonian citizens do not yet enjoy the right to join religious communities of their choice. Nikoloski told Forum 18 on 8 June that he was travelling in southern Macedonia with President Crvenkovski and had been unable to put Forum 18's questions to him.

Archbishop Jovan (Zoran Vranisskovski) of Ohrid – who heads the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia – rejects Nikoloski's assertion that his Church denies the legitimacy of the Macedonian state. "The Serbian Orthodox Church fully recognises the Macedonian state and the Macedonian nation," the archbishop told Forum 18 from the southern Macedonian town of Bitola on 8 June. "[Serbian] Patriarch Pavle stated exactly that in 2002 – that the Serbian Orthodox Church recognises the Macedonian republic and the Macedonian nation as an indigenous nation. It would be ridiculous not to recognise a state that is in the United Nations and that we are trying to serve in its territory. I believe our government is making much out of issues that are not true issues." He stressed that his Church's struggle to gain legal status is fully in accord with Macedonia's laws.

The latest dispute broke out after the Serbian Orthodox synod, meeting on 22-24 May, elevated Jovan to Archbishop of Ohrid and granted his Archbishopric a tomos (proclamation) of full autonomy. This recognition was earlier reserved for the Macedonian Orthodox Church in case of an eventual reconciliation and return to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

"Ever since the tomos was issued," Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18, "there has been a continuous campaign against us in all printed and electronic media." He mainly blamed the Macedonian Church, but maintained the campaign is also supported by the state. "They are creating an unstable, explosive atmosphere among the population and are virtually inviting people to lynch us – me and the rest of the priests of the Ohrid Archbishopric," he complained. "If something occurs, it will not be possible to control it – and then they will be able to blame the crowd. However, the state itself is tolerating this kind of attitude against us. The situation is serious and grim."

Immediately after the Serbian Church move, a Macedonian government statement declared that prime minister Vlado Buckovski "rejects with indignation the decision of the Serbian Orthodox Church to declare the so-called Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric of defrocked bishop Zoran Vranisskovski autocephalous". Buckovski wrote to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew seeking his support for the autocephalous status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to be recognised by other Orthodox Churches and asking him to mediate in the dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Churches.

On 29 May President Crvenkovski met the head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Stefan (Veljanovski), to demonstrate his support. "The Macedonian Orthodox Church's existence doesn't depend on the position of some other Church, but above all on the faith and trust of its believers and clergy, and the commitment of the Macedonian people," the president declared. "A Church is neither founded nor closed on someone's order, especially not when it comes from someone that has no historical and moral right to do so." He complained that the Serbian Church move represented "a scenario for exerting pressure", linking it with alleged attempts to deny the "existence of the Macedonian nation, national and cultural identity". He described such attempts as "doomed to failure".

The following day prime minister Buckovski also met Archbishop Stefan. "The government fully supports the autocephalous status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia and the laws it will continue to fully stand for protection of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, its autocephalous status and church properties," a governmental statement of 31 May reported the prime minister as telling the archbishop.

The Macedonian Orthodox Church proclaimed its autocephalous status in 1967, with the full support of the then Communist government, but this was not recognised by the other Orthodox Churches. After several years of unsuccessful negotiations, two years ago the Serbian Church made an open invitation to the Macedonian Church to "return to the Serbian Orthodox Church" with full autonomy. The invitation was rejected by most Macedonian Church clerics. However, one of them, the then Metropolitan Jovan of Veles, accepted the Serbian Orthodox invitation to reconciliation, and was defrocked by the Macedonian Orthodox Church as a result. For the last two years he served as exarch of the Serbian Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid. Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18 that full autonomy is a first step towards autocephalous status for his Church.

Macedonian Church leaders argue that independent states have independent Orthodox Churches. "The Orthodox church is one, sacred and apostolic. However, in its administrative function, the church is divided into local Orthodox churches," Archbishop Stefan declared. "Each church is organised on a national base, for Orthodox peoples that have their territory, independent or sovereign state." Dr Petko Zlatevski, professor at the Macedonian Orthodox Faculty in Skopje, echoed these views. "Every nation that has its state, language and church, and also an episcopate and people, has autocephalous status," he told Forum 18 from the capital Skopje. "The tomos given to the Ohrid Archbishopric of the Serbian Orthodox Church negates the Macedonian Orthodox Church, since it states that we are not canonical."

Archbishop Jovan complained of constant state pressure, not least the continuing legal cases against him. "The state is trying to keep me in a state of instability." In the first case he was sentenced to eighteen months in prison on charges of kindling religious and nationalist hatred and intolerance for holding a service in his father's flat in Bitola. A final hearing at the Appellation Court, which is considering his appeal against the sentence, was due to have taken place in Bitola on 8 June, but was again postponed – this time because a judge was ill.

In the second case, Archbishop Jovan was accused of embezzlement during the time when he was a Macedonian Orthodox bishop. "Everyone is rather silent on the accusations against me," he told Forum 18. "It looks as though the investigators do not have a case against me. They cannot prove that I misused the funds or the position I held. It is a ridiculous accusation." He believes the authorities are deliberately letting the case languish so that the threat of prison hangs over him. He blames the "negative campaign in the media" against his Church for provoking a burglary at the end of May on a rented flat the church uses for services in Skopje. A monastery was bulldozed by the authorities last year and other church properties have been threatened (see F18News 21 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=437).

In October 2004, the Ohrid diocese again requested registration as a religious community with the Committee for Relations with Religious Communities, and was rejected on the ground of the constitutional recognition of only one Orthodox Church in the country – the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The latest draft of the proposed new Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups still states in article 3 that: "For one religion there can be only one religious community." This was also the Committee's ground for earlier rejecting the registration application (see F18News 4 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=505).

"Though we sent a complaint to the Supreme Court against this ruling, we still haven't had a response," Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18. "But we are confident we will be able to benefit from the rights given to us by the Macedonian constitution and also by international human rights charters."

There are 25 churches and other religious communities in Macedonia, of which the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Faith Community, the Catholic Church, the Methodist Church and the Jewish community are recognised by the Constitution. When the

Macedonian Orthodox Church was put on an equal footing with the country's other religious communities in 2001, Archbishop Stefan threatened to excommunicate all parliamentary deputies who voted for the constitutional change.

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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