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SERBIA: Minister admits but downplays attacks on religious minorities

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

As physical and verbal attacks on religious minorities continued over the summer, Serbia's religion minister Milan Radulovic has challenged Forum 18 News Service's documentation of the extent of such attacks over the past year and a half. While Forum 18 listed over 100 attacks on religious minorities in 2004, Radulovic put the number at 82, dismissing all but two as resulting in no more than "minimal" damage. He claims the number of such attacks this year has fallen by half. This is the first time a Serbian government minister has admitted such attacks have taken place, even if few attacks ever lead to prosecutions. "The very fact that in 2004, the police registered 82 attacks but brought only four criminal charges for inciting religious hatred, while in the first six months of 2005 police registered 20 attacks but launched only one criminal case for inciting religious hatred gives cause for concern," Vidan Hadzi-Vidanovic of the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights told Forum 18.

Serbia's religion minister Milan Radulovic has challenged Forum 18 News Service's documentation of the extent of physical and verbal attacks on the country's religious minorities over the past year and a half. Drawing on information from the Interior Ministry, Radulovic dismisses all but two of the 2004 attacks as resulting in no more than "minimal" damage and claims the number of attacks has fallen by half. However, this is the first time a Serbian government minister has admitted such attacks have taken place. "Reality is far from what we would like to see in our country," Zdravko Sordjan, general secretary of the Belgrade-based Centre for Tolerance and Interreligious Relations, told Forum 18 on 7 September. "One could perhaps say some rather mild improvement has occurred, but there are always focal points where more trouble is brewing." Others point to the authorities' failure to prosecute the overwhelming majority of the attackers.

Despite the minister's claims of falling numbers of attacks and to the distress of members of religious minorities, arson, criminal damage and physical attacks on members of religious minorities have continued in July, August and September (see F18News 9 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=647).

In his 24 August letter to Forum 18, Radulovic revealed that on 12 July, a month after Forum 18 had published its listing of over 100 attacks on religious minorities in 2004 and more than 25 in the first five months of 2005, his religion ministry requested that the Interior Ministry compile its own list – the first time the Serbian government has produced its own data on attacks on religious minorities. The government appears to have been stung into reacting to Forum 18's report by inquiries to embassies of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro from several international organisations concerned at the continuing attacks on religious minorities.

In its June survey documenting the upsurge in attacks, Forum 18 reported attacks ranging from slander and vilification of religious minorities in the media to physical attacks on places of worship and individuals. Baptists, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Pentecostals, Reformed, Catholics, Assemblies of God, Mormons, Brethren, Christian Church, Lutherans, Christian Community, Old Calendarist Orthodox and Romanian Orthodox are among the religious communities to face attacks, which show how widespread religious intolerance remains in Serbia (see F18News 9 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=581).

In earlier years the numbers of such attacks fluctuated but were equally high: 73 attacks were reported in 2001, a total of 37 in 2002, and more than 50 in 2003.

Radulovic told Forum 18 that his ministry had written to Serbia's interior minister, Dragan Jovic, requesting that his ministry provide "detailed information regarding all incidents against religious freedom, especially against religious minorities" and summarised for Forum 18 the ministry's findings.

"During 2004, 82 cases of damaging religious sites and writing graffiti on them were registered. Of these, 69 were cases of damage and 13 were cases of graffiti and slogans on the walls and windows of objects. Evident damage is minimal, except in the cases of the [March 2004] burnings of the mosques in Belgrade and Nis. In these 69 cases, the breakdown is as follows: the Christian Adventist Church had 13 cases of damage, Serbian Orthodox Church 7, Catholic Church 7, Islamic community 8, Slovak Evangelical Church

2, and on the objects of other religious minorities 34." (The minister's figures appear not to include data for Kosovo, which has been under international administration since 1999.)

Radulovic said in six cases graffiti had been scrawled on religious sites belonging to "various minority religious groups" (which he failed to list), in four cases on Catholic property and in three on Serbian Orthodox churches.

"In the first six months of 2005, a total of 20 incidents were registered against objects of all religious subjects in Serbia, of which 11 represent damage and 9 graffiti. A comparative review of 2004 and of the first six months of 2005 shows a significant decrease of all kinds of incidents in which religious freedom has been harmed and attacks on religious sites or religious clerics carried out. To be precise, 82 incidents were registered in 2004, and a total of 20 in the first half of 2005. This clearly shows that the number of such incidents has been reduced by 50 per cent."

Vidan Hadzi-Vidanovic, researcher at the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, says the minister's statistics show there is no place for complacency. "The very fact that in 2004, the police registered 82 attacks but only four criminal charges for inciting religious hatred, discord or intolerance were brought, while in the first six months of 2005 police registered 20 attacks but launched only one criminal case for inciting religious hatred gives cause for concern," he told Forum 18 in Belgrade on 7 September. "Our historical context of civil wars in the region, intertwined with religious hatred and intolerance as the background to the events happening here, should not allow such actions to go unpunished. This is a serious concern, indeed."

Hadzi-Vidanovic told Forum 18 that the memory is "still vivid in my mind" of those found guilty in July 2005 of the March 2004 arson attack on the mosque in Nis singing "death to Muslims" at the court entrance (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=620). "The system is not working well - something is wrong."

Radulovic also objected to Forum 18's inclusion in its listing of media attacks, claiming that this "significantly" inflated the number of incidents. "The question is whether such criticism, even unsubstantiated, is a result of discrimination on a religious basis or a matter of legally protected freedom of speech and expression of opinion," he told Forum 18. "If your aim is to count the newspaper texts and individual statements as verbal misdemeanours of which the essence and intention is religious discrimination, it is advisable to register also, with the same zeal, all the verbal statements against the Serbian Orthodox Church, and also against other traditional religious communities. By not publishing such data, the unsubstantiated conclusion might be that the majority Church is protected, and that the others are not. This is not correct." He claims that "in most cases" it is the Serbian Orthodox Church that is subject to public criticism.

Aleksandar Birvis, president of the Baptist Union of Serbia, rejects Radulovic's assertion. "Very often we face the misuse of the right to publish an opinion," he told Forum 18 on 5 September in Belgrade. "Some of these authors allow themselves to link unrelated issues and use them out of context, and then they manipulate them the way they see fit." He cited a recent example of a journalist attacking a particular individual for being a Baptist while also being an ethnic Serb. "Another issue is the tendency to conflate the state, the Orthodox Church and the nation into one entity. If a Serbian Orthodox bishop is in the public eye in court for dubious behaviour, such scrutiny is different from the flat statement: 'Sectarians, get out of Serbia!'," he declared. "It is one thing when articles and TV programmes are aimed at criminal or anti-social behaviour, another when attacks are premeditated and aimed at religious minorities unable to defend themselves."

Also disagreeing with the minister's views is Hadzi-Vidanovic. "You cannot put in the same category, for instance, calls to exclude Mormons totally from public life, and reporting on an Orthodox priest who blessed war criminals in the last war," he told Forum 18.

Sordjan complains of what he says are recent attempts to put verbal or printed attacks against religious minorities into a "scientific bracket", such as linking such religious minorities with drug addiction among young people. "Almost always the headlines are followed by an attack on Protestant churches and movements as 'subtle sects that are destroying families' and even 'Satanic groups'. Not a single opportunity is missed to underline such false scientific statements."

For this he blames "the original division of religious communities into traditional, historic communities, with merits and privileges, and others". And Sordjan concludes: "Although this is not in the form of a law yet, public debate in the last two years has clearly shown that the state is making such a division. This is the source of our troubles."

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For a personal commentary by a religious freedom lawyer arguing that Serbia should not follow Austria's system of dividing religious communities into different categories with differing legal rights, see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=403

For more background, see Forum 18's Serbia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=387 and survey of attacks on religious minorities in 2004 and early 2005 at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=581

A printer-friendly map of Serbia and Montenegro is available at

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

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