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SERBIA: "Heavy pressure" forces postponement of first Macedonian Orthodox church

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

Soon after news emerged that an ethnic Macedonian association had bought a plot of land in Novi Sad to build Serbia's first Macedonian Orthodox church, religion minister Milan Radulovic declared publicly that the state has a duty to prevent the building of the church. "Radulovic's statements deny us one of our most basic rights – the right to freedom of confession," Dragan Veljkovski, president of the Association of Macedonians in Vojvodina which bought the site, told Forum 18 News Service. He complained of "very heavy pressure" since the news became public which has led to the building plans being postponed. Macedonians contrast the Serbian government's strong defence of the persecuted Serbian Orthodox Church in neighbouring Macedonia with its moves to restrict non-Serbian Orthodox jurisdictions at home.

In the wake of religious tensions between Serbs and Macedonians and remarks by Serbia's religion minister Milan Radulovic that the state has a duty to prevent the Macedonian Orthodox Church building a church in Serbia, plans to build such a church in Novi Sad, the capital of Serbia's northern Vojvodina province, have been put on ice. "In the light of the very difficult relationship between Serbia and Macedonia after the imprisonment of [Serbian] Archbishop Jovan [in Macedonia], we have decided to halt preparing the building application," Dragan Veljkovski, president of the Democratic Party of Macedonians in Serbia and Montenegro and president of the Association of Macedonians in Vojvodina, told Forum 18 News Service on 9 September. "We are a peaceful nation and do not want to make tensions higher than they are already. We will wait for a better time to do it."

Veljkovski is highly critical of the minister's comments. "Radulovic's statements deny us one of our most basic rights – the right to freedom of confession. After the information was made public that we bought a plot to build a church and the minister's reaction, we have faced very heavy pressure."

His outrage was shared by Jovan Radeski, president of the National Council of Macedonians in Serbia and Montenegro. "Radulovic's comments caused feelings of inequality and insecurity among the Macedonian national minority in Serbia," he complained to Forum 18 on 9 September.

Sonja Biserko of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia echoed the criticism, telling Forum 18 on 12 September that the minister's remark is "in collision with Serbian law".

Veljkovski said that the site in Novi Sad had been bought by his association with donations from abroad. Although the motivation for building the church is what he says is the need to counter assimilation of ethnic Macedonians in Serbia, he insists this is a religious freedom issue. He painted a wider picture of difficulties for Macedonians in Serbia, including a lack of education and school textbooks in Macedonian.

Jugoslav Velickovski, a Belgrade-based historian, told Forum 18 that many Macedonians migrated to Serbia after the Second World War, though he believes about a third may have left again since the early 1990s. Many of those that remain have been assimilated into the Serbian population. "For this reason, the question of religious freedom, together with the questions of education and media in the mother tongue, are the biggest prerequisites for preserving the national identity of Macedonians in Serbia," he told Forum 18 on 9 September. "Until now, the Macedonian Orthodox have not had a single church in Serbia."

He said that as news of the proposed church building in Novi Sad emerged soon after Serbian Archbishop Jovan was imprisoned in Macedonia (see F18News 27 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=618), a "very stormy reaction" greeted the news. "What is disturbing is the reaction of the Serbian authorities. Minister Radulovic announced that it will not be permissible for the Macedonian Orthodox to build a church, since the Macedonian Orthodox is not recognised as an Orthodox Church, which is exactly the viewpoint of Serbian patriarch Pavle."

News of the purchase of the plot of land in Novi Sad to build a Macedonian Orthodox church - and of an agreement that the Montenegrin Orthodox could build a church in Lovcenac in Vojvodina - provoked an immediate reaction from minister Radulovic. "If new churches in Lovcenac and Novi Sad are going to be built without the permission of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the

government has the duty to prevent it," he told the Belgrade daily Danas on 10 August. "The local authorities should not give the necessary building permissions and other documents and should prevent building."

Members of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church in Serbia were likewise outraged by Radulovic's remarks, though the local authority told Forum 18 that it sees no reason to refuse a building application for a Montenegrin Orthodox church (see F18News 12 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=648).

The Macedonian Orthodox Church is not recognised as canonical by the other Orthodox patriarchates, who argue that it was established in the 1960s under the sponsorship of the communist government. Talks between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox in recent years to try to find a resolution of the dispute came to nothing, after which the Serbian Orthodox Church established a branch in Macedonia, which has been heavily persecuted by the Macedonian government.

Macedonians and human rights activists in Serbia point out the bitter irony that while the Serbian government has tried to pressure the Macedonian government to free Archbishop Jovan and to end the harassment of the Serbian Orthodox Church there, it is at the same time unwilling to allow other Orthodox jurisdictions – including the Macedonian, Romanian, Montenegrin and Old Calendarist Orthodox – to function freely.

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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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