

12 December 2005

MACEDONIA: Why can't new non-Orthodox churches or mosques be built?

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

No government official was prepared to explain to Forum 18 News Service why Macedonia's religious minorities are in practice unable to build new places of worship or extend existing ones. "The only permission we can get is to build an ordinary house where we can hold worship services," Stojan Petrovski of the Evangelical Alliance complained to Forum 18, noting that the same problems apply to all small religious communities. The Seventh-day Adventists reported that for three decades they have been denied permission to build a church in Negotino, while the Muslims complain of denial of permission to build mosques. Applications by an Evangelical Church in Skopje to extend its building have been rejected although surrounding buildings have been able to extend.

A wide range of Macedonia's religious communities – including Baptists, other Protestant Evangelicals, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims - have complained to Forum 18 News Service that the authorities routinely refuse to give them permission to build new places of worship or extend existing ones. Forum 18 tried in early December to reach the head of the government's committee for relations with religious communities, Cane Mojanovski, to find out why such a restrictive policy exists, but each time his secretary told Forum 18 that he was not in the office. Nor was any official in the Ministry of Transport and Communications – which grants or withholds such building permission - prepared to explain to Forum 18 why such obstructions persist.

Stojan Petrovski, secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Macedonia and pastor of an Evangelical church, reported that all small religious communities face the same problem trying to get building permission for new places of worship. "The only permission we can get is to build an ordinary house where we can hold worship services," he told Forum 18 on 25 October. "We never receive any answers to our appeals and requests. If we ever received an answer we would be able to appeal to a higher institution or even on an international level."

A Jehovah Witness representative, who preferred not to be named, agreed. "According to the law we have the right to build places of worship, but the problem is in the bureaucracy," the representative told Forum 18 from Skopje on 4 November. "Sometimes local people say that they don't need such a religious building. Officials usually say that according to town planning regulations a religious building is not planned at such a location."

Toma Trajkov, the president of the Adventist Church in Macedonia, says the impossibility for his Church of getting permission to build new churches has forced it to build or buy ordinary houses and try to make the interiors as suitable as possible for worship. "In Karanovci and Negotino we have built houses but inside we made a room big enough to match the needs of the church," he told Forum 18 on 7 December. He said that in Gevgelia and Sutorizari the Adventists bought houses and remodelled them to use as churches. "The authorities know these are churches, but it is some kind of peaceful agreement," he declared. "In Negotino we have been unable to get building permission for the past 30 years – there are always administrative problems."

The daily newspaper Dnevnik reported in August and September on the difficulties the Islamic community faces. It covered the debate over whether mosques in Dolno Nerezi, Lezac near Bitola, Singelik, Asenbegovo and elsewhere built without planning permission should be destroyed or not. In Singelik local Muslims have even started a voluntary tax to collect money to build a mosque, even though it does not have building permission.

"We certainly have problems building mosques," Afrim Alija, head of the office of the Reis ul Ulema in Skopje, told Forum 18 on 8 December. He reported that although earlier complaints over a minaret on the mosque in Donja Nerezi have now been solved, problems continue over a mosque in Lezeca near Bitola and a mosque in Hasenbeg near Skopje where building permission has not been given. Alija also cited the difficulties of getting back property confiscated during the Communist era. "We have a problem with mosques what are used by the state, as with the Husamedin Mosque in Stip and the Jeni Mosque in the village of Manastir, which is now a gallery and which the Islamic community cannot get back."

Alija believes the denial of permission to build places of worship is symptomatic of a wider attitude. "As a basic problem we see that the state doesn't respect all religious communities equally. Some are more respected than others, especially when it comes to the

question of denationalization." He points out that the Jewish community received all its confiscated property back, while the Macedonian Orthodox Church has received even gifts from the government, such as the Biser complex in Ohrid. "The Islamic community of Macedonia holds the position that all religious community should be equal."

Religious minorities which already have places of worship report obstruction trying to extend them to meet new needs. Ivan Grozdanov, who pastors the Good News Baptist church in Skopje, complains that while private houses around his church have been able to extend their buildings freely, his church has long been denied permission to add another storey to their existing church building. He said it is impossible to get building permission to enlarge the Skopje church under the detailed urban plan and so the application to extend the church upwards was rejected. He said it takes four years to change the urban plan.

"The Ministry of Transport and Communications is supposed to give permission, but when we asked for the possibility to locate a site where it would be possible to build a bigger church we received no response," Pastor Grozdanov told Forum 18 on 25 October. "Nor did the municipality respond either." He said church members had asked to meet Mojanovski of the religion committee "but he told us that building permissions are not his responsibility".

Some communities face problems trying to use their own property even when it has been handed back to them by a court. Sofia Trajkovski, administrative secretary of the United Methodist Church in Macedonia, told Forum 18 on 4 November that in the south eastern town of Strumica – where buildings were confiscated from the church during the Communist era – the local congregation is not allowed to use a property next to the church even though it was officially handed back by a court. She said her Church has not applied recently for new building permission.

The authorities have taken a particularly hard line to prevent the construction of places of worship of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which the government and the Macedonian Orthodox Church are seeking to crush. In October 2004 the authorities demolished a Serbian Orthodox Church in Nizepole near the south western town of Bitola because it had been built without permission, although none of the nearby fifty or so houses likewise built without any permission was touched (see F18News 21 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=437).

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=macedo>

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