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MACEDONIA: Religious communities still face building problems

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

Baptists, Serbian Orthodox, Adventists, Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have all told Forum 18 News Service of problems they have faced from the authorities in obtaining permission for building projects in Macedonia. Some religious minorities however, such as Catholics and Jews, have not experienced any problems in obtaining building permission. Methodists are pursuing the alternative approach of reclaiming confiscated property. A particular problem facing the Serbian Orthodox is that, without state registration, they do not even have the right to apply for building permission. Other religious minorities do have the right to apply for permission, even if some – such as Baptists – have told Forum 18 that they doubt that it may ever be granted. Under Macedonia's discriminatory approach, the Serbian Orthodox Church has been told that it will "never" be registered. Building problems faced by some religious communities in the country are long-standing.

Some religious minorities in Macedonia continue to face problems in building places of worship in the country. Baptists, Methodists, Serbian Orthodox, Adventists, Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have all told Forum 18 News Service of problems they have faced from the authorities in obtaining permission for building projects.

Building problems faced by some religious communities are on-going, state officials having a history of obstruction (see F18News 12 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=703).

"I am not optimistic about this situation. Many newer churches in Macedonia have given up on the possibility of getting building permission," Ivan Grozdanov, a pastor of the Good News Baptist Church, in the capital Skopje, told Forum 18 on 10 August. "We have been here for 20 years and, ever since then, our building permission request has kept being passed between the local municipality and state institutions. Everybody claims that another institution is responsible," Grozdanov maintained.

In Skopje there are two Baptist churches, Good News and New Voice. Good News has over double the number of regular members it has space for. Grozdanov is concerned that the authorities' obduracy poses a hazard to worshippers. "We just pray that we do not have to quickly evacuate the church, as this would be very hard to do because of the numbers," he commented. Because of the numbers attending, the church has had to resort to using a video system to relay the service to an overflow room. New Voice rents its premises.

Good News Church has been asked by the state to install a lightning conductor and fire exit lights, which it has done. The state also asked for a fire hydrant to be installed, which has not been done, as "there is no technical possibility to do this in the street where the church is," Grozdanov told Forum 18.

Other organisations have been able to obtain building permission for construction work around Good News Church, Toma Magda, Vice-President of the European Baptist Federation, observed to Forum 18 on 10 August. "At the same time, the Macedonian Orthodox Church is able to build new churches. This makes the Baptists' problems a clear example of religious intolerance and lack of religious freedom," he stated.

"As soon as we change the Detailed Urban Plan, we will do our best to give them building permission," Violeta Alarova, Mayor of the Centar district in Skopje told Forum 18 on 23 August. She could not say when the Plan will be changed. "It is very hard to say when. I hope we will receive permission from the Ministry by the end of this year". The Detailed Urban Plan was stated in the past to be the reason for problems (see F18News 12 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=703).

But Mayor Alarova could also see other obstacles in the way of the Baptists. "There is not enough space, the street is small and there are no parking places. Our church [the Macedonian Orthodox Church] should also be built nearby," she told Forum 18.

Pastor Grozdanov pointed out that it is far more difficult and expensive for religious communities to convert existing buildings, such as houses, than to build new places of worship. This makes problems with gaining permission for new building a large obstacle for communities.

This is an obstacle which faces the Hare Krishna community. "We have not yet asked for building permission, and we are thinking

about either buying a piece of land or a house in Skopje," Aleksandar Uskokov, President of the Hare Krishna Community in Macedonia, told Forum 18 on 19 August. He did not expect that there would be problems obtaining building permission, but there might be "with the neighbourhood, who always complain when we start a temple."

"Most of our churches have been 'built' by renovating houses that we have bought," Dehran Hajder, of the "mainstream" Seventh-day Adventist Church in Macedonia told Forum 18 on 23 August. (There is also a separate "reform" Adventist community in the country.) "I cannot tell how what the situation would be if we applied for building permission. But some churches have a better status than others under Macedonian law," he pointed out (see F18News 4 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=505).

Afrim Alija, head of the office of the Islamic Reis ul Ulema in Skopje, also identifies inequality as an issue. "Our main problem is that all religious communities in Macedonia are not equal," he told Forum 18 on 24 August. He acknowledged that in some places, for example in Nerezi near Skopje, new mosques had been included in the Detailed Urban Plan. However in other places, such as Lazec near Bitola, "we cannot receive building permission. We very often find obstruction and procrastination from different state officials."

An official in Bitola Municipality, who preferred to remain anonymous, did not think that the complaint about Lazec was valid. "The village is half Orthodox and half Islamic, with an Orthodox church at one end of the village. But the Muslims would like to build a mosque in the centre of the village," he told Forum 18 on 24 August. There has been the archaeological discovery of the remains of a Christian church on the site, he continued, and these remains "are still being studied."

The official suggested that the situation in Lazec was comparable to that of the nearby settlement of Velusina, "which was a Christian village until a few years ago Muslims started to move in and today there are almost no Christians. We should understand that the Christian community in Lazec probably has the same fear," he speculated, before stating that the people Lazec "have nothing against the mosque being built at the same end of the village as the Orthodox Church."

The Jehovah's Witnesses think that the situation in Macedonia has not improved in 2006. "The only new case is in Kriva Palanka, in the north-east, where the local authority has refused to give us the ownership document for a house," a Jehovah's Witness representative who preferred to remain anonymous told Forum 18 on 24 August. "Without that document, we are not able to buy the house, which we already use for our religious meetings. The case has been taken to court," the Jehovah's Witness said.

The Executive of the Kriva Palanka department of the State Institute for the Survey of Land and Cadastre was not able to explain to Forum 18 why they are not issuing the ownership document to the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Headquarters of the State Institute, in the capital Skopje, was also unable to explain this. "I do not know why the Jehovah's Witnesses were not able to get the ownership document. It is a public document, and anyone can obtain one for their house or building," Ferdinand Pecaeski, an inspector in the State Institute's Control Department told Forum 18 on 25 August. He speculated that the problem may be that "often a building was not entered in the Register. There is nothing which can be done, if a building is not in the Register." Pecaeski insisted that "this has nothing to do with whether it is the Jehovah's Witnesses or any other religious community, business, other organisation, or civil person."

The Methodists have not built any churches since 2000. They are pursuing an alternative to new building, by regaining property confiscated by the Communist state after 1945. For example, "in Bitola, in the south-west of the country, we are trying to regain a large piece of confiscated building land, which our church acquired during the time of the Ottoman Empire," Mihail Cekov of the Methodist Church told Forum 18 on 23 August. One problem is finding the original documents. "Our church archive was confiscated and part of the state archive was burnt in a fire. We are considering having to search an archive in Istanbul, Turkey to try to find the documents for this property," Cekov noted.

The anonymous official from Bitola told Forum 18 that the restitution problem was a problem for the Ministry of Finance, not the local municipality. "For the last four years this process has been slow. But it is a slow process not only for the Methodists, but also for the Orthodox Church."

This comment raises a question affecting the Orthodox. If confiscated Orthodox property is returned, which Orthodox Church will it be given to? The Macedonian Orthodox Church did not exist when property was confiscated from the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Unsurprisingly, the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has a long history of problems caused by the state, also has building problems. "We still do not have basic rights in Macedonia. According to the law, we cannot receive registration as the Macedonian Orthodox Church is registered," Bishop Marko (Kimev) of the Serbian Orthodox Church's Ohrid Archdiocese told Forum 18 on 23 August (see F18News 4 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=505). The Serbian Orthodox have been told that they will "never" be given state registration (see F18News 23 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=418).

Bishop Marko complained that other communities with two totally independent hierarchies like the Orthodox – such as the two Adventist communities (the "reform" and "mainstream" Adventists) and the two Muslim communities – had been able to gain

registration, but this was not possible for the Serbian Orthodox. "Until we get registration, we cannot receive building permission," Bishop Mark said.

Pecaleski of the State Institute for the Survey of Land and Cadastre confirmed Bishop Marko's statement to Forum 18 "In order for someone to apply for building permission, they must be an adult civil person or registered organisation. It does not matter whether they are a religious organisation, association of citizens, business company, or some other kind of organisation. Without state registration, how can you have legal ownership? Who will have ownership rights?"

Bishop Marko of the Serbian Orthodox Church also noted the 2004 demolition by the authorities of a monastery in Nizepole near Bitola (see F18News 21 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=437), and the demolition of the chapel of "Saint Nectarios of Aegina" in the Skopje suburb of Dracevo on 12 July 2005. "Now we worship in apartments and private houses, so the government cannot demolish anything," Bishop Mark noted.

Some religious communities have not experienced any building problems. "We built a new synagogue in 2000 – which is the only active synagogue in the country – and we did not have problems in obtaining building permission," Zaklina Muceva, General Secretary of the Jewish Community in Macedonia, told Forum 18 on 23 August.

The Catholic Church has also not had any problems. "In the last 15 years we have not had problems with the state in obtaining building permissions. Of course, we need to go through a long procedure, but this is required by the law," Monsignor Antun Cirimotic, of the Catholic Church in Macedonia told Forum 18 on 23 August. (In Macedonia, Roman and Byzantine Catholics are both joined in one hierarchy.) "At the moment, we are building a church near Strumica in the south-east," Monsignor Cirimotic commented.

Macedonia is not the only country in the region where religious communities can face building problems. Legally building a place of worship in Bosnia, for example, can be difficult or even impossible (see F18News 13 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=811).

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia – whose official name is the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" - is available from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=macedo>

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