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SERBIA: Police ban Romanian Orthodox commemoration

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

When ethnic Vlachs led by a local Romanian Orthodox priest tried to hold a religious commemoration at the abandoned monastery of Koroglas in eastern Serbia on 21 May, they faced not only an alleged "spontaneously-organised" group of Serbian Orthodox who had pledged not to allow the commemoration to proceed but a ban by the local police. "When I requested them to show me an official document forbidding the procession and commemoration, the police did not have one," organiser Dusan Prvulovic told Forum 18 News Service. The commemoration had to go ahead at a cultural centre in a nearby town. Police have refused to tell Forum 18 if the commemoration at Koroglas had indeed been banned and if so why, and why Prvulovic was charged with inciting religious hatred (the court that convened the following Sunday morning acquitted him). The authorities have meanwhile held off from the threatened demolition of a Romanian Orthodox church in a nearby village which they claim was illegally built.

A commemoration by a group of ethnic Vlachs from Negotin led by a local Romanian Orthodox priest, due to have been held on 21 May in the remote abandoned monastery of Koroglas in eastern Serbia, was banned by local police, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Before the 6 kilometre (4 mile) procession to the monastery began, Negotin police declared that they had not approved the procession and commemoration. They also warned that a "spontaneously-assembled group", who turned out to be Serbian Orthodox, would not allow the Vlachs to hold the commemoration at the monastery. "When I requested them to show me an official document forbidding the procession and commemoration, the police did not have one," Dusan Prvulovic, the secretary of the Vlach Federation of Serbia, who organised the event, told Forum 18 on 8 June. Police hurriedly charged him with promoting religious hatred but he was acquitted. None of the Serbian Orthodox faced prosecution.

The police at local and regional level have refused to tell Forum 18 whether the Romanian Orthodox commemoration at the monastery had indeed been officially banned, and if so why, and why the police charged the organiser with promoting religious hatred. The regional police in Bor told Forum 18 on 16 June that all enquiries about the banned commemoration should be referred to the local police station in Negotin. On 17 June the deputy commander of Negotin police referred all enquiries back to the regional chief in Bor, declaring that his station is just a local police station and that Bor is where the commissioner is based. At the Bor police, the person who answered the phone referred Forum 18 to their press officer, but the phone repeatedly went unanswered.

The service at the monastery was to have commemorated Serbian and Romanian soldiers who died in the 1395 battle of Rovine against the Turks and was to have been led by sub-deacon Bojan Aleksandrovic, a local cleric of the Romanian Orthodox Church (who has since been made an arch-priest).

Prvulovic said that the Vlach Federation did not ask for police approval, arguing that the procession and commemoration were religious events. According to the law, all public activities need police permission. But in practice no-one seeks police permission for processions, weddings and birthdays – or for Orthodox religious processions, as they form a regular feature of Orthodox religious life.

Prvulovic reported that when the procession approached the monastery, a group of people from neighbouring villages, who identified themselves as members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, barred access. Some shouted: "This is a Serbian Monastery - go to Romania!" Prvulovic told Forum 18 that when he asked Serbs why they were there, some answered that they had been encouraged to attend by local Serbian Orthodox bishop Justin (Stefanovic) of Timok.

As tensions were high amid fears that a fight would break out, Negotin police commander Slavoljub Colic asked both sides to disperse, declaring that neither side had registered a meeting, Prvulovic reported. The commemoration was later held at the Vlach-Romanian House of Culture in Negotin.

The following morning, Sunday 22 May, Prvulovic was summoned by phone to the district court in Negotin for an 11:30 am hearing. However, the court rejected police accusations that he had provoked ethnic, racial and religious intolerance. "It is quite unusual," Prvulovic declared, "for a Serbian court to work so efficiently that they even meet on a Sunday morning."

The Committees for Human Rights in Serbia (CHRIS) helped Prvulovic with a team of lawyers, "but we have no information whether the court also summoned the other group which gathered in front of the monastery," Dragan Djordjevic of CHRIS told

Forum 18 from Nis.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has 39 parishes in Serbia, but the government does not recognise the Romanian diocese in Serbia, recognising it only at the lower level of vicariate, with Vicar Mojse Janesh as head. The Serbian authorities have taken their lead from the Orthodox understanding of canonical territory, under which only one Orthodox bishop is responsible for a particular geographical area.

"There is a mismatch between civil and church law, between the modern understanding of human rights and church canons," Serbia's religion minister Milan Radulovic told TV Bor at the dedication of a Serbian Church in the Vlach village of Urovci on 28 May. "The whole problem is that sub-deacon Bojan Aleksandrovic has pretensions to lead services among the Vlach population in eastern Serbia without agreeing this with the canonical bishop Justin. As soon as he harmonises his activities, as soon as he gets the blessing of Bishop Justin, he will of course be able to lead services in Vlach, Serbian or any other language."

So far the local authority has held off from its threat to demolish the Romanian Orthodox church recently completed in the village of Malajnica near Negotin (see F18News 15 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=523). "We still have not received any official document relating to the demolition of our church except that the religion minister Milan Radulovic promised it will not be demolished," Archpriest Aleksandrovic told Forum 18 on 8 June. "Of course, the question arises what will happen when one day a new minister comes to power." However, Aleksandrovic also told Forum 18 that, when he visited a police station in early June to apply for permission for a proposed 9 June procession, he was treated politely unlike on previous occasions.

A regular meeting of Serbian Orthodox bishops in Belgrade in May expressed its "regret over the uncanonical actions of certain representatives of our sister Romanian Orthodox Church on the canonical territory of the Serbian Orthodox Church" and called on such actions to stop.

Serbian Bishop Justin insists that according to church canons, the Romanian Church cannot function in Serbia without agreement from the Serbian Patriarchate. "Romanian bishop Daniil has invaded the Timok diocese, which belongs to the Serbian Church," he told Forum 18 on 10 June. "According to the church's canons, the response to such an action is defrocking." He said that, had the Vlach Federation invited a Serbian priest to lead the commemoration at the Koroglas monastery, no problem would have arisen.

Janesh, who heads the Romanian Orthodox Vicariate of Banat, told Forum 18 on 9 June that a joint committee of the Romanian and Serbian Churches met in the Serbian city of Novi Sad to try to resolve their differences.

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=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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