

Macedonia: Church Rage Over Political Reforms

Author: [Gordana Stojanovska](#)

The Macedonian Orthodox Church is battling with politicians to retain its primacy over other religions in the constitution.

At the top of Vodno mountain, an 86-metre high cross is being constructed complete with an elevator to carry people aloft for breathtaking views over Skopje.

The project is costing 2.7 million German marks, the greater part of which has been donated by the government, at a time when the country's finances are in such dire shape that it cannot afford to help thousands of people left homeless by months of ethnic conflict.

The donation illustrated the government's reluctance to cross swords with the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which is now threatening to blacklist politicians who support proposals to reduce clerical authority in the country's constitution.

At the meeting that decided on the cross donation, the government concluded help for those left destitute by the conflict would have to come from international humanitarian organisations.

Macedonia faces a shortfall of 76 million US dollars in its international balance of payments and is now preparing for a donors' conference to seek funding to repair the wreckage of war. Meanwhile, assistance would be limited to patching up holes in the roofs of damaged houses before the snows fall.

Opponents of the government's two million mark cross donation conceded that it was a small sum compared with the huge amounts needed for helping the homeless. But they argued that repairing even a few hundred roofs would have been better than raising this monument.

The Church accepted the donation with glee. Right after it was announced, top clergymen and government leaders headed by Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski went to the top of Vodno to inspect the site.

Government officials had good reason to appease the powerful Church, as it has plunged vigorously into battle against constitutional changes proposed as part of a peace settlement to improve the lot of Macedonia's Albanian minority.

The Framework Peace Agreement, signed in Ohrid on August 13, stipulated that Article 19 of the constitution should be amended to give other religions parity with the Orthodox Church.

Church leaders flew into a rage and demanded that Article 19 be put back the way it was, warning that politicians who refused to cooperate would be placed on a blacklist. "The names of deputies who vote for the proposed changes will be publicly announced at all Orthodox churches," declared the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, His Beatitude Stefan, at the October 11 meeting on top of Vodno.

Such a move would stigmatise deputies who supported the changes as traitors of the Macedonian people and the Church. "The Church does not interfere with politics but it is forced to defend its dignity, status, position and role in the constitution, even by publicly humiliating treacherous deputies," said the Synod spokesman, His Holiness Timotej.

According to Timotej, this humiliation would be a relatively mild punishment. Unofficially, IWPR knows that some clergymen wanted offending parliamentarians kicked out of the Church, leaving them without rights to any religious ritual.

Some clergymen say they are ashamed of this blatant intrusion into politics, arguing that nobody should be punished for holding an independent view. But Church leaders continue their energetic campaign which has already showed signs of bearing fruit.

This was demonstrated after the recent visit to Skopje by Javier Solana, EU foreign policy chief, to discuss changes in the constitution. After Solana left, the government announced that it had watered down proposed constitutional changes so that Article 19 would give prior mention to the Orthodox Church with Islam and the others tacked on in a subordinate position.

The Church has not stated its official position towards the new version of Article 19. But His Holiness Petar said it does not meet the Church's demands. "The proposal gives an unrealistic image of the Church in the Constitution," he said.

Petar argued that all the other religious communities have churches in their countries of origin and the country of origin for the Macedonian Orthodox Church is Macedonia, therefore it alone should be listed in the constitution.

Critics of the Church say it has become too preoccupied with preserving its status, at the expense of the needs of its followers. They say that right through the conflict the Church did nothing for ordinary people while clergymen continued to drive around in luxury cars and live in resplendent homes.

The Church may force its way back into the constitution. But, critics say, it might lose its place in the hearts of the people.

Gordana Stojanovska Icevska is the deputy editor-in-chief of Skopje based weekly Kapital.

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