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## **Archbishop Jovan sentenced to 3 years in prison, all Church property confiscated, 18 others sentenced**

Center 9 (02.07. 2013) - On 2 July 2013, the First Municipal Court of Skopje, Macedonia, under the leadership of Judge Ivica Stefanovski, sentenced the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitane of Skopje Jovan (Vraniskovski) to three years in prison. The judge also ordered that all property of the Archbishopric of Ohrid is to be confiscated. Bishops Marko of Bregalnica and David of Stobi and additional 14 priests, monks and nuns were all sentenced to two years and then suspended to five years of probation. Among sentenced are Archbishops mother and sister as well.

All convicts were sentenced in the case initiated by the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) that is not canonically recognized by any canonical Orthodox Church in the world, and of which all the accused were not members.

The MOC does not have a status of the state church in Macedonia, however, de facto extols all the power as if would be.

The Archbishop Jovan was arrested on 12 December 2011 and since then was held in Suto Orizari prison, among the criminals and other serious law offenders. In May 2012 Macedonian police has arrested monks, nuns and believers: This is the sixth imprisonment of Archbishop Jovan in the last 10 years.

At its annual conference in May 2013, all the Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church issued an appeal to all democratic institutions in the country and internationally to help release Archbishop Jovan who is in prison under torture, as stated in a release by Bishop Irinej, the SOC port-parole officer.

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## **Questionable involvement of the state in the internal conflict of Macedonian Orthodoxy**

### ***Press release of the Information Service of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric***

Information Service of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric (28.03.2013) – On 28 March 2013, for the fifth time, the trial of Bishop Marko of Bregalnica, Bishop David of Stobi, two priest-monks, two abbesses and ten layman of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric (1), who are accused by the state organs of R. Macedonia, together with His Beatitude Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje, for the alleged crime of “money laundering” is postponed! The court is not officially stating for what reason there has not been any court hearing for whole four months, since the last court hearing held on 11 December 2012.

Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid for more than one year is being placed in detention, he has been denied the right to be visited, not even by his mother nor his sister, who have been accused for the same deed. Hence, it is very hard to authentically learn about his health condition in the current moment. But, from the last contacts we had with him, on the court hearing four months ago, we know that his health has been seriously deteriorated!

Recently, from certain people of good will in the prison, we found out that Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid is being by various means put under constant pressure to waive the service of Archbishop, which has been entrusted to him by God, for the benefit of the schismatic archbishop Stefan. A proof for this is also visible in the frequent continuous postponements of the court process, which have their purpose of causing disheartenment and disappointment due to the uncertainty of the situation not only to Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid – who has no one to encourage him in the prison, but God himself – but as well to the rest of the accused, whose pastor has been imprisoned.

These methods are not unknown to the totalitarian regime which has governed our homeland for decades, and it is more than certain that it has not been changed until this day. Nevertheless, it is miserable, meanly and even disgusting that such totalitarian methods are being most likely suggested, and if not suggested, then certainly supported, by the archbishop Stefan of the schismatic MOC (2). While the problem with the schism of his church remains unsolved, he is fighting, using utterly immoral methods, for the place of the archbishop, which he does not deserve by any means. Neither by his abilities, nor by his character, nor by his behavior, and the least by his education. In what kind of misery of the spirit should one be dwelling in order to – by means of imprisonment – force the other one to leave to him something that does not belong to the schismatic archbishop, it is not very difficult to assume. At best, that person could be named obnoxious!

By the means of pressure that is being put upon Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid, through the authorities of R. Macedonia, Stefan is attempting to gain church-wide recognition of his uncanonical election. It is known to everyone that Stefan was not elected canonically for his service, but was set an archbishop of the schismatic MOC by the political party that was at rule at that moment.

We believe and pray that Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid will not succumb to the pressures, but whatever happens, it should be known that the Archbishopric of Ohrid is not only Archbishop Jovan, but it has a full church structure: Bishops, priests, monks and laymen. As for the question for which Archbishop Jovan is being put under pressure, by imposing upon him ruthless terror in a situation in which he is being helplessly imprisoned, the other members of the church structure of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric should also agree. And they would, not only disagree, at least while they have clear minds and strong faith, but they have already, one-heartedly with all Orthodox Churches in the world, stated that without freeing of Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid, there can be no talks for the situation of the schismatic MOC, nevertheless for the position of Mr Stefan in the case of an eventually established unity. The unseriousness of Mr Stefan, in attempt to gain a position for himself, even before the problem with the schism is solved, can be compared with the proverb: "he who is not accepted in the village, asks for the hand of the priest's daughter!"

<http://poa-info.org>  
[kontakt@poa-info.org](mailto:kontakt@poa-info.org)

**HRWF Footnotes:**

- (1) The Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric is an autonomous Eastern Orthodox archdiocese in the Republic of Macedonia. It is the only canonical Orthodox Church in the Republic of Macedonia and is in full communion with all other Orthodox Churches. The Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric has been refused registration by the Macedonian State Religion Commission on the grounds that one group may be registered for each confession and that the name was not sufficiently distinct from that of the [Macedonian Orthodox Church \(MOC\)](#). MOC is recognized by the State Religion Commission but not by any other Orthodox Churches, which consider its unilateral 1967 declaration of autocephaly a breach of canon law. The Archbishopric claims inheritance from the [Ohrid Archbishopric of Justiniana prima and all Bulgaria](#) founded in 1019, by Basil II. (Wikipedia)
  - (2) The Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric or simple Macedonian Orthodox Church is the body of Christians who are united under the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, exercising jurisdiction over Macedonian Orthodox Christians in the Republic of Macedonia and in exarchates in the Macedonian diaspora. In 1959, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church afforded autonomy to the Orthodox Church in the-then Socialist Republic of Macedonia as the restoration of the historic Archbishopric of Ohrid, and it remained in canonical unity with the Serbian Church under their Patriarch. In 1967, on the bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, the Macedonian Church unilaterally announced its autocephaly and independence from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Serbian Holy Synod denounced the decision and condemned the clergy as schismatic. Since then, despite various Orthodox and ecumenical efforts, the Macedonian Orthodox Church has remained unrecognized by all other national Orthodox churches (in defense of Serbian opposition) and by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.
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