

KESTON NEWS SERVICE, 30 October 2000

Yugoslavia: New Religion Minister Signals New Religious Policy

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service

The newly-appointed acting religion minister in the interim Serbian government has signalled a new departure in the Balkan state's religious policy.

In an exclusive statement faxed to Keston News Service in Belgrade on 27 October, three days after she and the rest of the new government were sworn in, Gordana Misic-Anicic signalled that she would reverse a decade of Serbian government refusal to hand back religious property confiscated from the Orthodox Church in the communist period as a move 'to start to urgently correct all the historical injustice done to our Church'. She also signalled that she would look favourably on the Orthodox Church's desire for religion to be taught in schools. However, she also stressed that she intends to improve the government's relations with other faiths in the country, of which she singled out the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran communities 'and other religious communities which legally operate in the Republic of Serbia'.

Rejecting the 'ideological state' which for 55 years 'systematically and without mercy broke the connection between the Serbian people and its spiritual base - the Serbian Orthodox Church', Dr Misic-Anicic declared that it was right for the state to help the Orthodox Church which, in turn, would help Serbia 'stand up and proudly move toward the community of the Christian nations of Europe, where it always belonged'.

Recognising that as interim minister 'my office will be rather short', she was keen to set her new policy in motion. 'As our first priority we should consider the return of church property confiscated and nationalised on various pretexts after the Second World War,' she told Keston. 'We will also carefully consider all the modalities of the return of the Orthodox Theological Faculty to the University of Belgrade.' She also rejected the policy of the previous government in the area of religious education within the state system. 'I believe that now we have the conditions to carefully examine the great and important question of the religious education of our youngest generations. The ideological hurdles are removed and now we have the conditions for this legitimate request of the Serbian Orthodox Church to be resolved.'

Dr Misic-Anicic pledged that the Serbian Orthodox Church would receive back the right to maintain registers of births, deaths and marriages, something removed from it after 1945. She also expressed her support for priests as chaplains in hospitals, prisons and military institutions. She also believed that the Orthodox Church should be an 'equal partner' with the state in bringing together the Serbs within Yugoslavia and the diaspora.

While maintaining that her 'greatest attention' will have to be paid to solving the problems of the Orthodox Church, she stressed that 'this does not mean that I will in any way neglect cooperation with other religious communities'. 'We will also contact the humanitarian religious organisations, for I believe that their activity in helping our population is very important and useful.'

Previous governments in Belgrade largely failed to respond to the Orthodox Church's demands. Two years ago the government allowed the Church to have its own FM radio station, the Voice of the Church, in the city of Valjevo, 60 miles south of the Serbian capital, although the station is now encountering financial problems. Bishop Filaret of the Diocese of Milesevo, a supporter of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, received a former police building in the town of Prokuplje to be his residence, as well as finance to restore it. Some Church property was returned in Kosovo. But these were exceptions.

In her statement to Keston, the new minister put the return of confiscated Orthodox property in first place - implying the importance of the issue. The Orthodox Church has been trying for many years to receive back its confiscated monasteries, lands, forests, foundations and other properties. Despite the limited success in recent years, most requests have not been met. The Orthodox Faculty was expelled from Belgrade University in 1950 and since then its degrees and diplomas have not been recognised by the state. The Orthodox Church has been preparing for the re-establishment of religious education in schools for the last ten years, and at the Belgrade faculty there is an institute providing two-year courses for religious education teachers, but up till now the Church has failed to persuade the government to allow religious education in schools.

Misic-Anicic, who described herself in the statement as a 'humanist', is a medical doctor and specialist obstetrician by training. She is a deputy in the Federal Yugoslav Assembly and a member of the presidency of the Serbian Renewal Movement, which is led by Vuk Drascovic. She serves in the three-party coalition which will run Serbia until elections scheduled for 23December. (END)