

SERBIA: Low Religious Education Enrolment Sparks Bias Accusations

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 12 October 2001

After enrolment began in Serbian schools for newly-instituted religious education classes, the Orthodox Synod and the Catholic Bishops' Conference issued separate statements fiercely attacking the ministry of education and sport for what they complained was the 'antidemocratic and illegal behaviour' by the minister and a group of his close associates 'against the basic democratic principle of equal treatment of religious education and the alternative subject, "civic education".' As preliminary results showed that few pupils had opted for religious classes, the Synod complained that parents had not been offered a fair choice. However, Serbia's education minister Gaso Knezevic denied to Keston News Service any accusations of bias, insisting that school principals had been instructed to be 'visibly neutral'.

This autumn the Serbian government introduced the religious education in the first grades of both primary and secondary schools for six religious communities: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Islamic Faith Community, the Jewish Faith Community, the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches (see KNS 22 December 2000). Such classes were introduced despite opposition from many intellectuals, university professors, non-governmental organisations and human rights groups. For those not interested in the religious classes another subject was created, 'civic education', although pupils could opt for no classes at all.

In the event, only 36.2% of primary parents opted for religious education, while 22.4% opted for civic education, a statement issued by the education ministry on 2 October declared. The rest chose no extra classes. Some 15% of primary schools had failed to send in data. No official data were given for secondary schools, but preliminary results show that a large number of secondary pupils also opted for no classes at all. The education ministry estimated that fewer than 30% of secondary pupils had chosen religious education, with the figure in Belgrade at less than 20%. Serbia's religion ministry considers these low figures a disaster.

'The results of our survey are not completed yet... but we accept the position of "scapegoat" and are prepared for any result,' Knezevic declared in a statement sent to Keston by the education ministry on 4 October. 'The ministry of education and sport - identified in advance as the guilty party for the eventual, expected weak response from pupils to religious education - has from the beginning withheld any statements taking sides,' Knezevic's statement declared. 'Our every instruction to school principals contained the sentence: "You are instructed to be visibly neutral (in decision making)," which itself called for impartiality.'

Several days before the official figures were made public, the Orthodox Synod issued its strongly-worded statement attacking the 'injustice' done to the Serbian Orthodox Church and other religious communities. 'The short informative bulletin [about the religion classes] was not distributed evenly (in many cases it was removed) and prominence was given to the bulletins for the alternative subject... the period of time given to parents and pupils was only two-three days,' the Synod complained. 'By this the government decree [inaugurating the classes] is devalued in practice, our preparation of the syllabus and textbooks was rudely diminished, public opinion

manipulated and our believers deceived and humiliated.' The Synod declared it was lodging 'the strongest protest' against officials of the education ministry 'who misused their official position'. 'We appeal to the Serbian government to implement religious education in the educational system in accordance with democratic principles and its own decree.'

Other religious communities have joined the Orthodox Synod's criticism of the education ministry. In its statement, passed to Keston by the Belgrade Catholic Archdiocese on 1 October, the Bishops' Conference complained that the ministry had failed to fulfil its obligations. 'Pupils and their parents did not receive the bulletins,' the bishops complained, adding that 'many school principals and teachers misused their positions to speak against religious education'. They pointed to what they said was discrimination against Catholics in towns such as Palic, Bogojevo and Senta. 'Injustice has been done to our Church by the false accusations, non-objective statements and a specific campaign against religious education. We support the Orthodox Synodal statement in full.'

In the statement - signed by Archbishop Stanislav Hocevar of Belgrade, Bishops Janos Penzes of Subotica, Laszlo Huzsvar of Zrenjanin and Djuro Gasparovic of Srem and by Archpriest Holosnjaj of the Greek Catholic Diocese in Krizevci - the Bishops' Conference demanded a meeting with the prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, and an extension of the deadline for enrolment.

'At the moment, we are not prepared to give any response to this new statement by the Catholic church,' Sladjana Popovic, a spokeswoman of the education ministry, told Keston on 4 October. 'We were absent when this happened and we have to see what the Cabinet will decide.'

There are 1,239 primary schools in Serbia (of which 323 are in Kosovo, mostly outside the control of the Belgrade government) with about 90,000 first grade pupils.
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