

## **SERBIA: New Religion Bill Imminent**

**by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 4 June 2001**

'The draft of the new law on religious freedom in Serbia has been completed and the text is at the legal-technical preparation stage,' Vojislav Milovanovic, Serbian minister for religion, told Keston News Service, predicting that it will go to a parliamentary vote before the summer. Both he and his deputy, Zivojin Stepic, indicated that what the government regards as Serbia's 'traditional' faiths (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam and Judaism) are likely to be favoured at the expense of newer faiths. It remains unclear how the contentious issue of religious education in schools will be handled, with rising opposition to compulsory classes.

'This weekend I will attend a conference in Berlin dedicated to relations between the state and the Church in Serbia,' Milovanovic told Keston on 1 June in Belgrade, 'and on our return we plan to initiate the legislative process for the draft. It will then go to various committees and public debate, and I expect voting in the Serbian parliament very, very soon, before the summer. The public will get the text of the draft very soon.'

Milovanovic's remarks came just days after Stepic also reported that consultation was imminent. 'We will soon organise wide public discussions of the first draft of the new law on religious communities,' Stepic told Srna news agency on 26 May. 'We expect all religious communities to give their opinion on it as well as the Ministry of Education and the Serbian Academy of Arts and Science.' He added that the law would take into consideration the needs of the four 'basic' religious communities in Serbia: Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic and Jewish.

Milovanovic also indicated that 'traditional' faiths would be favoured. 'With this new law, the traditional religions will get their rightful position,' he told the press in Smederevo on 8 April, 'while the "quasi-religious influences", i.e. sects and cults, will be diminished and eliminated.' Describing the new religion law as 'a top priority for the ministry', Milovanovic commented that Serbia has had no law to regulate this field since 1993, and that even then the relationship between the Church and the state was not good. He added that the state would soon return confiscated property to the Orthodox Church.

Other sources speak of not one but several laws to regulate church-state relations. A statement issued in the wake of the Serbian Orthodox Church's annual Holy Synod meeting in mid-May reported that the Serbian government had informed the Synod about progress on drafting new laws. 'There are several laws prepared and several more in the preparation stage: on return of religious education in primary and secondary schools, on religious freedom, on relations between religious communities and public and private media, on state and religious holidays, on church-issued documents and on the return of nationalised Church land and property,' the statement declared.

The Synod took the opportunity to appeal to the leaderships of Serbia and Yugoslavia for religious education to be implemented with the new school year. 'The Synod

requests that the same right be respected when speaking about other historical churches and [all other] religious communities traditionally present in this region.'

But Milovanovic was specific: 'There will be only one law in addition to the announced law on religious freedom and it is about the return of nationalised property of various traditional churches and religious communities that existed in Serbia in 1941,' he told Keston. 'Other issues will not be regulated in the form of law but in other government acts and documents.'

However, arguments over religious education might hold up the religion law, despite Stepic's remarks in May that religious education would be implemented in Serbia's primary schools as early as September. It is planned that this subject will be obligatory for all students, with studies in ethics for non-Orthodox children.

But recent reports show rising opposition, even from government officials, especially from the Serbian Ministry of Education, which is looking at a longer timescale. The education minister, Gaso Knezevic, his deputy Vigor Majic and assistant minister Slobodanka Turajlic are proposing the introduction of several pilot classes in the 2002/3 school year first, to test the religious education programme and establish whether there are enough qualified teachers.

'We should not forget the fiasco over religious education in the Republika Srpska [the Serbian entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina] and in Croatia, primarily because of the haste over implementation and the failure to introduce the programme step by step,' Knezevic declared in a recent round table on the subject, a transcript of which was passed to Keston by the Helsinki Committee. 'This we are trying to avoid.' Knezevic emphasised the 'multi-confessional nature of our country', complaining about the concept of 'segregation of children on the basis of religious affiliation or non-affiliation, which is contrary to values supported by our Constitution and international law'. (END)