

## **SERBIA: US Religious Freedom Report and Reactions**

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The US Religious Freedom report published at the end of July created a lot of negative reactions in Serbia, especially from the government officials. The full text is at the following link: [www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dliid=192859](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dliid=192859)

According to this report, the Constitution and laws of Serbia are limiting religious freedom, and the Serbian government is following that line. Serbia received the worst marks out of all former Yugoslav countries. Local commentators and government officials are voicing their anger because of this report.

While some support the report that states for example that...“there were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Leaders of minority religious communities continued to report physical attacks, vandalism, hate speech, and negative media reporting,” others consider report to be a generalization and inaccurate and blame NGOs for slandering Serbia.

The US State Department reminds that in Serbia only seven traditional churches and religious communities are recognized and that there is no state religion, but that the Serbian Orthodox Church has a privileged position. “The government continued to subsidize salaries of Serbian Orthodox clergy working in other countries. Other benefits, such as health care and pensions, were provided by the government to clergies of various churches on the basis of individual arrangements with the state, but these benefits were not universal.” The report states that the state continues to refuse to register the Baptist Union, Hare Krishna Movement, Pentecostal Church and Protestant Evangelical Church of Subotica.

The Belgrade Archbishop Stanislav Hočevar stated on 2 August for Centar 9 that the religious freedom in Serbia is guaranteed on a theoretical-legal field, but that there are problems in day to day life. „Transition in which we live has not been used to promote a general dialogue, to change the standards from the past and to come to a democratic stand. Exactly because of the lack of regular true systematic dialogue between churches and the state, there are problems on a local level. There is no mechanism of dialog between the churches, state, various offices and the Parliament, as it exists in some Western countries. In a public life there is way too little dialogue. When was it the last time that you saw representatives of all religious communities – whether traditional or others – gathered at some round table or on TV? Some are invited to similar gatherings, others are not invited, some can come, others cannot,“ shared the Archbishop.

When it comes to matters of practical life as retirement and health security for the priests, Archbishop stated: „For now, although the dialog just started, the state will pay the social security only for the ‘divinity services’ workers – since not all religious workers are priests. But this is just at the beginning; the matter is not being resolved systematically. Also in the restitution process we are damaged on various levels. When the possessions were being taken away, the state asked for no papers, now we need to spend a lot of time to work on the documentation. Actually, there is no more substantial restitution, except in nature and land – some items are just not possible to get back as their purpose had been changed. At one of our lots there is now a school. It is obvious that we will not demolish a school, but we could be offered another lot of land for that one where the school is now. Insofar the Archbishopric received only one item back, an apartment, and that one only theoretically as party living in it has no intentions and does not want to leave. There are number of problems that require systematic solution.“

„There is not a single school in Belgrade where Catholic faith is being thought as a religious education, even if the Catholic Church has legal right to it. It is simply impossible to fulfill the regulations. As a minority church we do not have enough pupils in one school to have a regular class, and also we cannot request a Saturday class or similar – since schools are not being heated during the winter season. So we have such a solution to hold religious classes in our churches, and work with school directors so that priests are allowed to grade the pupil's work in a register, otherwise we cannot solve the issue. The state religious education council that is comprised of church representatives and ministries of religion and education did not have a session for the last two years,“ ends the Belgrade Archbishop.

The Belgrade based Serbia Mufti Muhamed Jusufspahić does not agree with the report. He stated for Center 9 the following: „It is a shame that such a report does not inform that in the recent past a hundred of religious buildings had been erected in Serbia – of all religious communities, of which at least twenty mosques. A Faculty of Islamic Studies was opened in Belgrade. The faithful Muslim believers meet on at least fifteen places for prayer in Belgrade. Now is much better than under the Communists and during the war-thorn nineties when our mosques were set on fire. I am ashamed that for a long time we did not have a place for an honorable burial, but I am proud to say that in the last five years Belgrade solved this in such a way that in most of the city graveyards we have our separate slots of land.“ In addition, Mufti complained that the report does not speak of other problems the Muslims have: from employment, living conditions, to threats under which they suffer as a community or as individuals.“

At the same time, former Minister of religion Milan Radulović, under which rule the actual Law on Churches and Religious Communities had been voted in, also thinks that the report is not accurate. He stated his critique to a daily *Politika* on the 1 August 2012: „Considering registration these analysis are not correct as our law is far more liberal than any other law in Europe. For example, for a registration we require 100 signatories, and in a majority of other countries this number is significantly higher. As far as Hare Krishna, they submitted a registration request back in 2006, but according to the Statute they submitted, they are not a church or a religious organization, but some sort of a philosophical society, a society of the Eastern thought and philosophy, and this is a reason for not registering them. The Pentecostal church had been registered among the first ones, back in 2006, and also the Evangelical Protestant church.“

However, when Center 9 checked all the 17 entries in the Register of registered non-traditional churches, it could not find either Pentecostal or Protestant-Evangelical church, with the exception of the one from the city of Leskovac, which is not in administrative unity with the Subotica one, mentioned in the State Department report.

Instead of looking for an excuse for itself and accusing various NGOs that they slander Serbia, perhaps a solution could be found in what Archbishop Hočevar stated for Center 9: to sit together and discuss how to establish standards, developing essential and systematic dialogue to overcome numerous problems this report refers to.