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SERBIA: Religious freedom survey, August 2004

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

In its survey analysis of religious freedom in Serbia, Forum 18 News Service notes the problems caused by a proposed draft religion bill, religious education in schools, and physical attacks on religious minorities. However, alternative civilian service regulations have been introduced, so conscientious objectors to military service are not now prosecuted. In a listing of attacks on religious minorities in 2003, Forum 18 records that Evangelical-Methodists, Jews, Seventh Day Adventists, Serbian Evangelicals, Jehovah Witnesses, Lutherans, Romany Pentecostals, Baptists, Hare Krishna devotees, Catholics, and Muslims were all victims of different types of attack in 2003, ranging from hate speech and graffiti to physical assaults. A noted church-state commentator, Mirko Djordevic, has told Forum 18 that "we cannot say that the religious freedom of Serbian citizens is threatened, but different confessions limit each others freedom." Pavel Domonji, from the Helsinki Committee, observed to Forum 18 that "Small religious communities are often under attack. It is probably because they form trans-national communities, where every believer is a member, regardless of their ethnic background."

According to the latest state census (2002), 96% of the Serbian population of 7.5 million people claims a religious affiliation. Roughly 84% belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church, 5.5% to the Catholic Church, 3.6% to the Islamic Faith Community, and 1.1% to the various Protestant and Evangelical churches and communities. There were more than fifty religion-based attacks in 2003 known to Forum 18 [see list of attacks at the end of this article], the victims being members of the minority religious communities. The attacks have continued in 2004. For example, between 1 and 3 August this week, at least ten large and expensive windows were broken at the Baptist Church and Christian Community Church in Novi Sad, which is renowned as a tolerant city in Vojvodina (northern Serbia). Some commentators blame the large number of attacks on the absence of a religious freedom law in Serbia, but others blame adolescents and teenagers engaging in irresponsible behaviour. There is no Religion Law in Serbia, the previous communist law having been repealed in 1993.

The Serbian Ministry of Religion in July 2004 presented a draft religion bill for public consultation until 10 August. Many religious communities responded negatively (see F18News 30 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=380). Muhamed Zukorlic, Mufti of Sandzak, of the Islamic Faith Community, which is included in the bill's list of 'traditional' religions, told Radio Free Europe on 28 July that "it is obvious that the text suffers from shortcomings, especially not being clear in using the terms church, religious community and religious association (...) from the perspective of the Islamic Faith Community, it is unacceptable to use Christian terminology, and it is obvious that the draft gives primacy to the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is for the Islamic Faith Community, and possibly for other minority churches and religious communities, unacceptable."

"We consider the attempt to have a religion law a very good development," Atmabhy das (Aleksandar Peric), representative of the Hare Krishna community in Serbia and Montenegro, told Forum 18 on 3 August from Kladovo, in eastern Serbia. "However, there are some proposals that are not really good, for instance the proposed requirement for a minimum of 1,000 believers before a new religious association can be registered. We have never been consulted about any issues in this country, and we have not even been sent this draft bill, although we have been registered as a religious community in Serbia since 1989." In contrast to this attitude, "our sister communities in the former Yugoslavia have received not only state recognition, but in Croatia they will be given 500 square meters of space in the centre of Zagreb for humanitarian work, in Slovenia we have an agreement with the state, and have received about 1,500 Euros (12,587 Norwegian Kroner or 1,806 US Dollars) from the [Slovenian] state this year, and in Macedonia, the state invites us whenever there is an occasion for various religious bodies to meet together. The deceased President Trajkovski invited every time he met other religious leaders."

Previously, problems were caused for Nazarenes and Jehovah's Witnesses by the lack of legal provision of alternative service for conscientious objectors to military service. This changed in late 2003. Military service or alternative civilian service in Serbia and Montenegro is compulsory. Military service lasts 9 months. Civilian alternative service lasts 13 months and recruits can serve in 580 institutions in Serbia and Montenegro, made up of a variety of hospitals, asylums, NGOs and agricultural farms. Since January 2004 about 1,000 recruits have opted for civilian service. Damir Porobic, a representative of the Jehovah's Witnesses, told Forum 18 that "all cases with our members being tried by military courts have now ended, and all Jehovah's Witnesses are now out of military jails. Based on the governmental regulation under which the status of conscientious objectors was changed, so that they can serve civil service in civil institutions, we are happy with the new situation. At the moment, we have about 20 members serving in hospitals, gerontological [elderly persons] institutions, and rehabilitation centres in Serbia."

In 2004, the Serbian Ministry of Religion, by decree, started paying modest salaries to monks, nuns and priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. It also helped with the completion of the St. Sava cathedral in Belgrade and is actively involved in rebuilding and renewing damaged or decayed Orthodox Churches throughout Serbia. Other 'traditional' churches and communities are often found within a particular region of Serbia. On a recent invitation to submit proposals for construction work in Vojvodina, the Ministry of Religion listed the churches and religious communities whose proposals can be considered. The list consists of the 'traditional' religious communities, with the addition of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

In June 2004, the Ministry decreed that the Orthodox Theological Faculty had rejoined the faculties of the University of Belgrade (it was removed in 1952 by the communists). The curriculum is exclusively Orthodox in doctrine and theology, but this is the only theological institution so far to have been included in the state budget and to have all of its diplomas officially recognised.

"Future religious education in high schools, and at the Serbian Orthodox Theological Faculty, will be implemented in the state educational system," Dr. Milan Radulovic, Serbian Minister of Religion, told a press conference on 27 July in Belgrade. According to him, all theological schools of the 'traditional' churches will be able to receive state accreditation and grants for free education for a specified number of students, according to the size of their religious community.

In September 2001, Serbia introduced optional religious education in the first years of both primary and secondary schools for only six 'traditional' religious communities: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Islamic Faith Community, the Jewish Faith Community, the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches. At that time, both the Orthodox Synod and the Catholic Bishops' Conference condemned the then Minister of Education for giving religious education less favourable treatment than the alternative subject, 'civic education', the Serbian Orthodox Church complaining that parents had not been offered a fair choice. As of October 2001, only 36.2% of the parents of primary schoolchildren had opted for religious education, while 22.4% had opted for civic education, the remaining 41% of parents opting for no extra classes. 15% of primary schools failed at that time to give figures. No official data was available for secondary schools, but the Ministry of Education estimated that less than 30% of secondary school pupils had chosen religious education, with the figure in Belgrade being less than 20%. The Ministry of Religion considered these low figures to be disastrous.

Dr. Zorica Kuburic, a professor in Novi Sad University and President of the Empirical Religious Research Association (CEIR), told Forum 18 on 5 August 2004 that "the number of religious education teachers in Serbia today is 1,700 and half of the children choose religious in preference to civic education. The real results of religious education will be seen after ten years, when this generation grows up. Results are expected in two areas: attitudes towards the nation and tradition, and in the area of morality. However, people's expectations are related more to a wish to see children's ties to their religion and nation being strengthened, along with building a defence mechanism against the challenges of other religions which, as part of the globalisation process, are becoming steadily more accessible to and accepted by young people. In our research, performed in 2003, we found out that 60-70% of pupils regard religious education positively."

In 2003, the Institute for Pedagogical Research conducted a survey of pupils and parents about religious and civic education in Serbian schools. Preliminary results show that, overall, 43% of pupils now attend religious education classes, with 57% attending civic education classes. Most pupils were content with the way the subjects were taught, but some religious groups have difficulties in arranging regular classes.

"In parishes of the Belgrade archdiocese we have 400 children attending religious education classes in their local churches," Sister Emmanuela, of the Catholic Media Centre of the Belgrade Archbishopric, told Forum 18 on 4 August 2004. "However, in the public education system, we only have 50 students, both in the elementary schools and in high schools. Work with them is hard, because of their small numbers. Sometimes we teach 1-2 students, but recently we have organised block courses, most being for some days, usually during a state or school holiday. We have yet to find the best way to conduct religious education in public schools, mainly because of the small numbers."

Commenting on the place of religion in Serbian society, Mirko Djordjevic, a noted church-state affairs commentator from Simanovci, near Belgrade, told Forum 18 on 2 August that "one feature is visible when we observe today's situation, a clericalisation of society and our complete public life. The Serbian Orthodox Church, instead of being engaged in evangelisation, which would be of benefit to both church and society, is instead in the business of clericalisation - from the schools to the media."

"Religious life in Serbia today is indeed rough and sometimes dramatic," Djordjevic went on to say. "We have seen many aggressive acts and statements for religious reasons recently. Usually, they are verbal, in the mass media, or in publishing books, but more recently there have also been physical attacks [see eg. F18News 17 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=34 and 11 August 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=122], desecration of graveyards and holy places, etc. These incidents sometimes become more serious, especially as the state does nothing to prevent or solve them."

In an attempt to find out why there are religiously-based attacks in Serbia, Forum 18 in May 2004 spoke to Pavel Domonji, from the Helsinki Committee in Novi Sad. He noted that "Small religious communities are often under attack. It is probably because they form trans-national communities, where every believer is a member, regardless of their ethnic background."

"We are in a better situation now than we were two and a half months ago, when the authorities came to demolish our tent," Rev. Selim Alijevic, leading pastor of the Romani Evangelical Church in Leskovac told Forum 18 on 2 August 2004 (see F18News 30 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=311). "We have had problems in the recent past, when several of our members were beaten up by local Serbs, or were harassed by the police, but, recently, most of the problems have calmed down. We did have the a problem with the local municipality about our tent, but it seems that they are, after all, genuinely willing to help us relocate to another piece of land. This process is still continuing and the local directorate for construction land in Leskovac is preparing papers for us that would prevent any future political turmoil, or changes in the political control of the council, affecting our situation."

"Our largest problems are often with the media defamation of us as a Satanist religious community," says Atmabhu das of the Hare Krishnas. "The printed and electronic media often portray us in very pejorative terms, and this situation is not changing. We go to them, claim our right to respond, to reprimand, and they often promise but never deliver. The latest problem was with the Belgrade daily newspaper Vecernje novosti, who do not hesitate to defame us."

Hostile graffiti or media defamation are not the only problems religious minorities face in Serbia. Another issue is the 'silence of the administration'. "We have problems in our daily life", said Muhamed Jusufspahic, chief imam for Belgrade, to Forum 18 on 2 August 2004. "We still do not have an official graveyard in Belgrade. During the Kingdom (1918-1941) every city graveyard had several plots of land for Muslim burials. You understand that we have specific rites and that we need a separate building to perform what is required by our faith - and these rites are not a pleasant view for our neighbours near the Bayrakli mosque in Belgrade, where we are forced to perform the rites. Every year we submit a new request, and every year they postpone solving the problem."

The Bayrakli mosque in Belgrade and the Islam-aga mosque in Nis were sent on fire and badly damaged during the riots that occurred in March 2004, probably as a result of the incidents in Kosovo where more than 30 churches and monasteries were burned or demolished by Albanian mobs a day earlier (see F18News 24 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=286). The damage done to the two mosques was estimated to be 50 million dinars (5,726,894 Norwegian Kroner, 682,191 Euros, or 821,360 US Dollars), not counting the furniture and a medieval library that were completely burned down.

"We have received many promises but little funds," says Jusufspahic. "We allocated everything we received to the Nis mosque, where the new roof will be completed this week. We hope that all will be ready for the month of fasting that starts in the middle of October. The Bayralki mosque in Belgrade is under the protection of the state, and more parties are involved: the city council, the monument protection institute and other organisations. It requires cleaning, restoration and some architectural changes. During these building works, we will use the adjacent building as a mosque."

After the burning of the Belgrade mosque, 110 people were arrested, of which 22 are now under investigation. So far only one person has been charged with criminal offences. For the Nis mosque attacks, 11 people were criminally charged for the criminal acts of violence as part of a group, and face possible sentences of up to five years imprisonment. (No arrests have been made or charges brought by the Kosovo authorities for attacks on the churches there – see F18News 6 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=314).

"We cannot say that the religious freedom of Serbian citizens is threatened, but different confessions limit each others' freedom," Mirko Djordjevic told Forum 18. "The state wants religious freedom according to its own needs. The aggressive armed nationalism of the 1990s in Serbia is no more, but nationalism itself survived and gains new life from religious motifs, or rather from fake religious motifs. We need a politics in this country that will make a clear break with the past, and start looking forward to the European future."

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Serbia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=53>.

ATTACKS ON RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN 2003

4 January 2003 – The word "Death" was written on the yard wall of the Evangelical-Methodist church in Stara Pazova. (Forum 18 information).

During February 2003 - Graffiti with anti-Semitic messages was written at several prominent places in Jagodina, according to a town council member demanding that the council should prevent such vandalism and hate speech. There are no known Jewish people living in Jagodina. (Danas 3 February 2003).

During March 2003 - all of the Seventh Day Adventist church windows in Deliblato were completely broken. (Forum 18

information).

20 March 2003 - The entrance gate to the Serbian Evangelical Church in Leskovac was torn down, and a motor cycle stolen. (It was recovered the next day). Three days later, the entrance gate was again torn down and graffiti "You are dead!" written on the yard wall. Police reported that they had arrested a drug addict. (Forum 18 information).

April 2003 - In April 2003 there were two Jehovah Witnesses conscientious objectors serving prison sentences: Dusan Corkovic doing 6 months in Padinska Skela, and Dragan Dimic doing 7 months in the Centralni zatvor (Central prison ward) in Belgrade. At that time, the Jehovah's Witnesses had 15 more cases pending at various military courts. Several people were fined for not answering their military call up. One person in Subotica was fined 15,000 dinars (1,718 Norwegian Kroner, 205 Euros, or 246 US Dollars) fine for the first offence and 30,000 dinars (3,437 Norwegian Kroner, 408 Euros, or 492 US Dollars) for the second offence. (Forum 18 information – see also F18News 3 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=25). Note that alternative civilian service was introduced in late 2003, so this problem has now been resolved.

5 and 8 April 2003 - Demolition of six large windows of the Adventist church in Belgrade. One of the attacks occurred during a worship service. (Forum 18 information)

11 April 2003 - Three people were charged with desecrating ten graves in the Lutheran graveyard in Backa Palanka. After they had pulled down the tombstones, they threw bricks at the Lutheran Church. (Glas javnosti, 22 April 2003).

13 April 2003 - Broken glass was scattered at the entrance door to the Adventist church in Kragujevac, and graffiti written on the wall. The pastor filed criminal charges with the police. (Glas javnosti, 24 April 2003).

15 April 2003 - Several people broke the windows of the Adventist church in Zrenjanin. When Josip Tikvicki, a local pastor, came out of his house, he was severely beaten and ended up in hospital for two weeks with serious body wounds, broken jaws and broken ribs. Tikvicki reported that this was the seventh stoning of the church in the past year and that the police had not found the culprits. On 18 April, three people were arrested in connection with this incident. (Forum 18 information and see F18News 17 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=34).

27 April 2003 - Unknown criminals destroyed tombstones in the 100 year-old Jewish cemetery in Nis. Police also found bones scattered in the graveyard. On some graves there was industrial waste placed, and fires had been burnt on others. (Niske novine on 29 April, B92 on 29 April and Forum 18 information).

During February-May 2003 - The Adventist church in Negotin, eastern Serbia, was stoned four times, and windows were broken. (Forum 18 information).

During May 2003 – The Adventist church in Ruma was stoned. Another attack was attempted later, but the perpetrators of this attack were stopped. (Forum 18 information).

14 May 2003 - During this week, the Evangelical Methodist Church in Vrsac was stoned several times. Stones were thrown into the pastor's apartment and could have hurt his family. Earlier in 2003, graffiti was drawn on the church building, including a cross drawn upside down. (Forum 18 information).

24 May 2003 – The house of the "Sanatan" association for spiritual science in Beli Potok, a suburb of Belgrade, was set on fire with a Molotov cocktail. This association's activities were forbidden in June 2003 by the authorities, as they perform religious activities but are a citizens' association. (Beta, Danas, and B92, in several reports).

25-27 May 2003 – Five to six unknown attackers threw stones during a worship service at the Romany Pentecostal church in Leskovac. Church Elders attempted to stop the attackers outside the church, but the police refused to come to the church. The next day, three people in a car made inquiries about the senior pastor, Miodrag Stankovic, claiming to be from the communal city services. Both incidents were reported to the police. On 27 May, five people beat up a known member of the Romany Pentecostal church. The church filed a complaint against unknown attackers, and also formally requested police protection during their worship times. (Forum 18 information).

30/31 May 2003 - At least ten tombstones torn down and damaged at the Jewish cemetery in Novi Sad. Police searched for the attackers, and suspect that minors were responsible. (B92 on 2 June 2003).

13 June 2003 - Graffiti over the entire wall of the Adventist church in Kragujevac, saying "Who Is Not Orthodox Should Not Live" and "We are the Orthodox". (Beta news agency on 12 June 2003).

15 June 2003 - Last of four attacks in one month on the Evangelical-Methodist Church in Vrsac. The attackers usually destroyed windows, but sometimes they damaged vehicles parked in front of the church and wrote graffiti with Satanist symbols. The local pastor, Jano Sjanta, told Forum 18 that the attacks had been becoming more frequent. The police always blamed drunkards, but the

pastor believed that the reason was religious hatred. (Forum 18 information)

20 June 2003 - Windows broken at the Baptist church in Pancevo (Pancevac, 11 July 2003). The next day, the entrance door to the church was demolished with a large stone (Pancevac, 27 June 2003).

21. June 2003 - Graffiti with religious hate slogans written on the entrance gate and church wall of the Adventist church Sremska Mitrovica. Earlier in 2003, windows were stoned and destroyed, along with decoration at the entrance door. (Forum 18 information)

25 June 2003 - Graffiti at the First Baptist Church in Belgrade reading "Run While You Can" and "Serbia". On this church's wall, graffiti is renewed on a regular basis every three months. (Forum 18 information).

18. July 2003 - Large anti-Hare Krishna article in the Belgrade weekly 'Nedeljni Telegraf'. Request for a correction denied. On BK TV station, a program was broadcast with pejorative allegations against Hare Krishna followers and their religious community. No correction was allowed. (Forum 18 information).

From 24 July to 31 July 2003 - The Serbian Pentecostal church in Leskovac was stoned twice with major damage being caused. The police promised to put more night patrols in the area, but did not bring charges, because the damage was below a certain amount. (Forum 18 information).

29. July 2003 - Police Captain and self proclaimed sect expert Zoran Lukovic published, in the Novi Sad daily newspaper Dnevnik, a series of articles where he portrayed many religious communities in Serbia in pejorative terms. (Dnevnik 20-31. July 2003).

31 July 2003 - Advertisement in NIN magazine portrayed members of minority religious communities in Serbia in a derogatory and demeaning way. Some leaders were named from the Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation, and Pentecostal communities, and the state was criticized for permitting 26 Adventist secondary school pupils to take an exam on Monday instead of on Saturday.

12 August 2003 - Three tombstones torn down at the Catholic graveyard in Novi Sad. (Danas 18 August 2003, Politika 17 August 2003).

23 August 2003 - At 3 am, unknown perpetrators broke all the windows at the Adventist church in Stapar. They then threw a Molotov cocktail into the church, causing major damage. (Forum 18 information).

24 August 2003 - Unknown perpetrators set a fire outside the tent of the Romany Pentecostal Church in Leskovac, during a church service. However, the wind blew in the opposite direction, so no damage was done. (Forum 18 information).

27 August 2003 – The Islam-aga mosque in Nis was stoned during the evening by some of a group of more than a hundred sport fans celebrating their team's results. Two windows were broken and three cars were damaged during this 'celebration'. (B92 on 28 August 2003)

During September 2003 – Windows were twice broken at the Adventist church in Kikinda. One week, later graffiti was written on the church wall, consisting of a swastika, the words "Go away!" and a Star of David. Two nights after the wall was repainted, a swastika, 666, and other symbols were again drawn on the wall. At the end of the month, windows were broken again. (Forum 18 information).

Early September 2003 – Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Aleksandar Stosic was sentenced to nine months on 3 September 2003, in a military court in Nis. The accused did not express any doubt in his decision during the trial, which the military authorities took as an indication that Stosic will continue his objection to military service. Another Jehovah's Witness, from Uzice, was fined 1,500 dinars (172 Norwegian Kroner, 21 Euros, or 25 US Dollars) and 3,000 dinars (344 Norwegian Kroner, 41 Euros, or 49 US Dollars). (Danas, 12 September 2003). After Stosic appealed against his sentence, he was released to perform civilian alternative service after the introduction of new governmental regulations in late 2003. Conscientious objection to military service will no longer lead to such problems with the authorities. (Forum 18 information).

19 September 2003 - All the windows and the entrance door of the Adventist church in Novi Sad were attacked with eggs. This church had already been stoned three times in 2003. Another church in Novo Sad was also attacked and its pastor's car damaged. (Forum 18 information).

27 September 2003 - More than 50 tombstones torn down at the Catholic cemetery in Novi Sad. City mayor condemned this incident. (Politika 29 September 2003). Police later reported the arrest of several minors for this incident. At a meeting held in the City Hall in Novi Sad, a police representative stated that since the beginning of 2003 there had been seven graveyard desecrations in the area of Novi Sad: four in Novi Sad, two in Backa Palanka and one in Temerin (Novosti, 30 September 2003).

10 October 2003 – The parish priest of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Pancevo, Milovan Glogovac, in an article in a local weekly newspaper, described all non-Orthodox and non-Catholic religious communities as "sects", stating that this was because only the

Orthodox and Catholic churches have the apostolic succession. (Pancevac, 10 October 2003).

12 November 2003 - Two policemen questioned Simo Ralevic, Baptist preacher in Arandjelovac, about his finances, books he has published, and non-recognition of the Baptists by the Orthodox church. The police then asked him whether it was true that Baptists perform group sex in church, and claimed that Baptists are "anti-Serbian elements". (Forum 18 information).

26 November 2003 - More than 50 crosses were torn down at the Catholic cemetery in Muzlja, near Zrenjanin, and many graves were desecrated. (Novosti, 27 November 2003)

9 December 2003 - Attack on the Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious group in the Belgrade daily Politika, in an article entitled "Udruzenje za borbu protiv sekti" (Association for battle against the sects) (Politika, 9 December 2003 and 17 January 2004)

15 December 2003 - The Jewish cemetery in Nis was again desecrated. In response, the Minister of Religion asked the local municipality to take action to stop these incidents. (Ministry of Religion, 18 December 2003 press statement).

For a list of attacks on religious minorities in Serbia in 2002, see F18News14 August 2003
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=123

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Serbia can be found at
<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=53>.

For information on Kosovo, see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=137

A printer-friendly map of Serbia and Montenegro is available at:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=yugosl>

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