

# **SERBIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution forbids establishment of a state religion, guarantees equality of all religious groups, and prohibits incitement of religious hatred. Many laws provide special treatment for seven “traditional” religious groups. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) strongly influenced government policies. Some minority religious groups encountered difficulty registering. Some nontraditional religious groups stated government implementation of laws was discriminatory. The government continued restitution of religious properties seized since 1945. In July an appeals court ordered the rehabilitation process of Nazi-era government leader Milan Nedic, under whose rule 90 percent of the Jewish population in Serbia was killed.

Translations of anti-Semitic literature continued to be available. Youth groups continued to denounce minority religions, and the press continued to publish articles critical of nontraditional religious groups. Roman Catholic Archbishop Stanislav Hocevar conducted a Christmas Mass before an interfaith audience, during which he appealed for interfaith harmony.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the Office for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities and the Office for Human and Minority Rights to advocate changes to the discriminatory portions of the law on registration of religious groups and its application. Embassy officials met with representatives of the SOC, the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, Protestant organizations, Muslim leaders, and a wide range of religious minority groups to discuss the concerns of “nontraditional” and minority religious groups and to encourage interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials met with representatives of the two principal Islamic groups and encouraged them to work together.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 7.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2011 census, approximately 85 percent of the population is Serbian Orthodox, 5 percent Roman Catholic, 3 percent Sunni Muslim, and 1 percent Protestant. The remaining 6 percent includes Jews, members of Eastern religions, agnostics, atheists, other Christian and non-Christian groups, and individuals without a declared religious affiliation. Catholics are predominantly ethnic Hungarians and Croats in Vojvodina Province. Muslims include Bosniaks

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(Slavic Muslims) in Sandzak, ethnic Albanians in the south, and Roma located throughout the country.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution forbids establishment of a state religion, guarantees equality of religious groups, and calls for separation of religion and state. It prohibits incitement of religious hatred, calls upon the government to promote religious diversity and tolerance, and establishes a provision for asylum for religious refugees. The law banning incitement of discrimination, hatred, or violence against an individual or group on grounds of religion carries penalties ranging from one to 10 years in prison, depending on the type of offense.

There are laws granting special treatment to seven religious groups defined as “traditional” by the government. These are the SOC, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic community, and the Jewish community. The Islamic community is divided between the Islamic Community of Serbia, with its seat in Belgrade, and the Islamic Community in Serbia, with its seat in Novi Pazar. Religious education is only offered in public schools for the seven traditional groups. Government laws on property ownership and social welfare distinguish between registered and unregistered religious groups. The law treats unregistered religious groups as informal groups, which do not receive any of the legal benefits registered religious groups receive.

The seven traditional religious groups recognized by law are automatically registered in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities. In addition to these groups, the government grants traditional status, solely in Vojvodina Province, to the Diocese of Dacia Felix of the Romanian Orthodox Church, with its seat in Romania and administrative seat in Vrsac in Vojvodina.

There are 17 “nontraditional” religious groups registered: the Seventh-day Adventist Church; the Evangelical Methodist Church; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); the Evangelical Church in Serbia; the Church of Christ’s Love; the Spiritual Church of Christ; the Union of Christian Baptist Churches in Serbia; the Nazarene Christian Religious Community; the Church of God in Serbia; the Protestant Christian Community in Serbia; the Church of Christ

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Brethren in Serbia; the Free Belgrade Church; the Jehovah's Witnesses; the Zion Sacrament Church; the Union of Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement; the Protestant Evangelical Church Spiritual Center; and the Evangelical Church of Christ.

The law does not require registration of religious groups, but only grants value-added tax refunds and property tax exemptions to registered groups. Only registered religious groups may build new places of worship. Registered religious groups are also exempt from paying administrative taxes and filing annual financial reports. The law authorizes the government to provide social and health insurance and fund retirement plans for clerics from registered religious groups.

Registration requirements include submission of the following: the names, identity numbers, and signatures of at least 100 members; the group's statutes and a summary of its religious teachings, ceremonies, religious goals, and basic activities; and information on sources of funding. The law prohibits registration if an applicant group's name includes part of the name of an existing registered group. The Ministry of Justice maintains the Register of Churches and Religious Communities and responds to registration applications. The Directorate for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities handles other procedural issues and conducts outreach to religious groups.

Students in primary and secondary schools are required to attend classes in one of the seven traditional religions or an alternative civic education class. Parents choose which option is appropriate for their child. The curriculum taught in the religion classes varies regionally, reflecting the number of adherents of a given religion in a specific community. The Commission for Religious Education appoints religious education teachers. The commission is comprised of representatives of traditional religious groups, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and the Directorate for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities. The Islamic Community *of* Serbia's representative participates in the work of the commission, while representatives of the Islamic Community *in* Serbia do not.

The law recognizes restitution claims for religious property confiscated in 1945 or later for registered religious groups only. The private property restitution law permits individual claims for properties lost by Holocaust victims during World War II, but religious groups may not claim property confiscated prior to 1945. Legally registered endowments can apply for restitution. Religious communities

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who were beneficiaries of seized endowments can apply for restitution of their benefits.

### Government Practices

Minority religious groups stated the government's application of the law on registration made it difficult for "nontraditional" groups to register and placed burdensome restrictions on unregistered groups, including difficulties in opening bank accounts, purchasing or selling property, and publishing literature. Protestant churches and civil society organizations continued to call on the government to repeal the parts of the law categorizing religious groups as either "traditional" or "nontraditional." These organizations also continued to advocate removal of the prohibition on registering new religious groups with names similar to those of previously registered groups, which would allow for other Orthodox churches to register.

Nontraditional groups stated that, in implementing the registration law, government authorities were placing additional requirements – not specifically called for in the law – on those religious groups. For example, missionaries for both the Mormon Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses reported difficulties in renewing their residency permits.

The Romanian Orthodox Church, which the government recognized as a traditional group solely in Vojvodina Province, could hold services in the Romanian language in eastern Serbia. However, the government would not approve construction permits for new buildings for the Church there because it was not a registered religious group. The government allowed the Church to repurpose buildings for religious use outside of Vojvodina.

The Macedonian and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches, whose autocephaly the SOC has not recognized, remained unregistered. Government officials stated they would not become involved in an "internal schism" within the SOC by registering the two groups.

Government officials continued to state these unresolved issues among Orthodox churches were governed by the canons of the Orthodox Church rather than secular authorities. Although the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches were not registered, members of these churches stated they were able to practice their religion without restriction.

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The government provided minimal pension and health care benefits for clergy of registered religious groups.

The government continued restitution of religious properties seized in 1945 or later. By the end of the year the government had returned land in Palic to a religious community. For cases in which restitution claims were rejected because the religious community filing the claim was not the initial owner, but rather the beneficiary or administrator of an endowment, the government informed churches and religious communities about the separate benefit restitution application procedures.

In July the Belgrade appeals court made a final and binding ruling ordering the rehabilitation process to begin for Nazi-backed, World War II-era puppet-government leader Milan Nedic, under whose rule 90 percent of the Jewish population in Serbia was killed. The decision followed a long court battle during which Nedic's descendants argued that he was charged unjustifiably with crimes against Jews and that he was later himself killed by the communist authorities who took control of the country following the war. According to the *Blic* newspaper, the Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, Efraim Zuroff, called the court's decision "shocking, but not surprising" and said "attempts to wash the role of those who are active and/or participated in the destruction of the Jews is particularly shameful."

The government designated 10 new places of worship on military premises for SOC believers. The government did not provide access to religious services for members of the armed forces who were adherents of other faiths.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Translations of anti-Semitic literature, such as the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," continued to be available from ultranationalist groups and small publishing houses.

Some youth groups, including Obraz, the Serbian National Movement, Nasi, and their related web portals, continued openly to denounce minority religions, which they referred to as "sects."

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The press, mostly the tabloid media, including private and government-owned outlets, continued to publish articles critical of nontraditional religious groups, referring to them as “sects.”

Roman Catholic Archbishop Stanislav Hocevar conducted a Christmas Mass at the Co-Cathedral of Christ the King in Belgrade attended by an interfaith audience that included SOC Patriarch Irinej and Vicar Bishop Arsenije and Mufti of the Islamic Community of Serbia Muhamed Jusufspahic, as well as government officials and members of the diplomatic corps. During his homily, Hocevar appealed for interfaith harmony, encouraging those present – regardless of their religious orientation – to avoid misunderstandings, clashes, and hatred by praying for one another, according to the press.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials continued to advocate with the director of the Office for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities and the Office for Human and Minority Rights to eliminate discriminatory elements in the law on religious registration and its application and to convey the concerns of minority religious groups. Embassy representatives met regularly with representatives of the SOC, the Jewish community, Protestant organizations, leaders of the Muslim communities, and a wide range of religious minority groups. During these meetings, embassy officials discussed the concerns of nontraditional and minority religious groups, as well as how the groups themselves could foster increased interfaith dialogue.

The Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar, which was attended by the leaders of a wide variety of religious communities and facilitated discussions on how their communities could foster improved interfaith dialogue.

Embassy officials reached out regularly to the Islamic Community in Serbia and the Islamic Community of Serbia to encourage dialogue between the groups. The embassy met regularly with senior government officials, leaders of the Restitution Agency of Serbia, and Jewish community leaders to help them reach consensus on draft legislation to provide for restitution of heirless property taken from Jews during World War II.