

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

## POLICY BRIEF

### ON STRENGTHENING THE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES IN THE FIELDS OF EDUCATION, HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL ISSUES IN SERBIA

The nongovernmental organisations, Belgrade Open School and the Christian Cultural Centre, supported by the Delegation of the European Commission to the Republic of Serbia, conducted the Project “Strengthening Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia”, in the period December 2008 – February 2010. This policy paper is one of the Project’s results.

**Executive Summary:** The system-based cooperation between churches, religious communities and public authorities in the fields of education, social and health care is underdeveloped in Serbia, due to insufficient experience of the potential participants and a lack of adequate institutional framework and mechanisms.

With the return of religious education in public schools, the partnership in education was established and the respect of religious rights without forcing religiosity was re-established, in spite of the opposite interpretation in one part of public and the discussions that have been also led in other countries. Numerous problems which appeared in practice, due to lack of experience in teaching religious education in public schools, such as problems with the lack of religious education teachers, curricula, methods, status of religious education teachers, equality of the religious education of all traditional churches and religious communities, relation of religious education to the alternative subject (civic education), determination of students and pupils and their parents, the influence of religious education on inter-religious and interethnic relations and other questions – were resolved in accordance with the experience of the European countries and newly acquired experiences.

Activities of faith-based charitable organisations that are referred to the cooperation with the authorities in health and social care field are based on the teachings of churches and religious communities. The needs of the population, increased with the social and historical circumstances, often exceed the capacities of public services in those fields where churches and religious communities have precious experiences, especially in work with the most vulnerable groups. The main problems were emerging in organizational issues, establishing mutual trust, defining of authorisations, jurisdictions and responsibilities, technical and financial conditions, sustainable financing of activities as well as in the specific features of certain vulnerable groups and the attitude of one part of the public towards them. Churches and religious communities also renewed cooperation with the armed forces in the issue of exercise of religious rights by their members, using the experiences of the European and other partner countries, accompanied with the extensive changes of the normative acts and with the introduction of new practical measures.

Due to improvement of the situation in mentioned areas a series of measures are to be taken.

Effective exercising of right to attend classes of religious education of all traditional churches and religious communities has to be provided to all pupils/students that are willing to attend it, in all parts of country. Basics of religious education should be introduced in the pre-school educational system. The precondition for religion teachers’ full-time employment should still be approval by their respective religious authorities, but their status has to be equal to the status of any other teacher in the public education system in Serbia. Data on implementation of religious education should be systematically collected and analysed, in order to use analyses to formulate recommendations for the respective public authorities for its improvement. Regular evaluations of religious education by religious education teachers, respective bodies within of Ministry of Education and churches and religious communities themselves should be introduced, in accordance with evaluation procedures implemented in other school subjects.

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

Public authorities should not only allow the presence of priests and other religious representatives in public institutions (hospitals, military units, prisons, social-care institutions, etc), but also make their presence systematically sustainable. Churches and religious communities should objectively present results of cooperation with other actors to public, and they should put the stronger emphasizes on solving social and other problems, primarily those of vulnerable groups of the population. Having in mind that churches and religious communities offer and provide assistance to everyone, regardless of their religious background, their charitable work should be, whenever possible, conducted jointly, building and supporting mutual trust and solidarity among believers and other citizens.

The state should complete the restitution of properties of churches and religious communities, enabling them to be in a position to conduct charitable work for the benefit of vulnerable categories of population and the society as a whole.

## Context

Due to the specifics of modern Serbian history, in Serbian society there is not an adequately developed, continuous and systematically founded cooperation between churches and religious communities, and public authorities in the fields where it could provide benefit to the society. During decades of single-party communist regime, all institutional and other relations between churches, religious communities and public authorities were abolished, even though they had been previously functional in the fields of education, social welfare and health care. After the ending of the radical atheistic communist system and the limitations set by it, cooperation in these fields is still insufficient, due to the lack of experience of all its potential actors. This cooperation still lacks adequate institutional framework and mechanisms, which significantly diminishes its effects in dealing with and solving social problems.

## 1. Cooperation in education

Introduction of religious education in public schools in Serbia (by the Government of Serbia in 2001) was practically the first serious test of relations between public authorities and other social actors with churches and religious communities after the democratic changes in 2000. Relations between the state and churches and religious communities in the field of religious education in Serbian public schools can be characterised as cooperative. During school year 2001/2002, religious education was an optional subject, the following school year it became a constrained option, i.e. pupils and students had to choose between religious education and civic education. This solution was seen as to provide respect of religious rights without forcing religiosity.

Having no experience in providing religious education in public schools (apart from those before World War II, and educational paradigms have significantly changed since), churches and religious communities faced several large and unexpected problems. Fifty years of communist ideology after World War II made a significant and deep impact on the educational system and defined its major parameters, threatening some of the basic elements of human rights to education. Rights and freedoms for religious denomination were limited at the beginning of communist rule, which was just the beginning of the long period of adjustment of churches and religious communities to these new conditions.

Despite all this, part of political and wider social public thought was that religious education was introduced to the educational system too quickly, as a political compromise primarily to the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as other traditional churches and religious communities. These statements mainly came from circles claiming that contemporary concepts of democracy and human rights are closely connected to secular, even atheist point of view. These circles see the introduction of religious education in public schools not as part of exercising religious rights, but rather as violating the rights of the atheists and

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

believers of non-traditional churches and religious communities. However, traditional churches and religious communities always comment that religious education was not introduced but returned to public schools in 2001, allowing citizens to exercise one of their basic human rights. In line with this statement, the following arguments are often used: census results from 2002 claim that 95% of citizens of Serbia belong to some church or religious community, while there are only 0.5% declared atheists. In addition, churches and religious communities have been violently deprived of a large part of their material wealth, which was for decades used for financing public education which was extremely atheistic. Despite this, parts of the Serbian public see the social influence of traditional churches and religious communities as too large, while their historical merits are neglected and underestimated.

The controversies that usually occur alongside the discussion of these issues are often caused by the different understandings of particular concepts held by the confronted actors. Churches and religious communities understand freedom of religious education not only as allowing the teaching of religious education in public schools, but also as enabling churches and religious communities to establish official full-time educational institutions which will fulfil all legal and other criteria necessary to teach other subjects. This situation exists in number of democratic societies; a number of arguments have been used to support it. It is underlined that in last decades a tradition of classical European education has been neglected by non-selective adjustment of educational system to current market and technological development needs. Therefore, public schools founded by churches and religious communities are today guardians of heritage of classical gymnasias, which put the emphasis on classic languages, literature, mathematics and other fundamental subjects. Additionally, it is said that pedagogical functions of schools, also highly neglected in modern times, can be revitalised by introducing gymnasias that would be doctrinally integral, in a sense of educating students for life in communities in a spirit of active personalism and other religiously founded values, but also with presenting key elements of secular views during the educational process.

The section of the public which is not supportive towards traditional churches and religious communities, believes that the freedom of religious education implies only to their right to conduct this education in their own, religious institutions, outside of public schools, which they should not have any institutional relations with. These attitudes find their roots in minimalist concept of state that existed in some countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A tendency noticeable during the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often neglected – spreading the competence of state authorities for meeting the growing needs of population, including educational and cultural. Within this process the public educational system was developed. In most of the countries in the world it is used as a tool for exercising the human right to education in one's own belief and preserving ethnic identity, which is especially important in multiethnic and multi-religious communities. It is interesting that the opponents of religious education in public schools in Serbia hardly ever advocate for rejection of ethnic component in relevant subjects (language and literature, history, arts, etc).

These discussions in Serbia are only partly unique, since similar ones have been held in European countries for decades, even centuries. In some countries these discussions are still current, renewed within debates on character of European society and civilisation.

The following problems occurred as the most important ones in teaching religious education in public schools:

**1.1. The existence of adequate teaching personnel, curricula and methods:** After the initiation period, in which churches and religious communities had an insufficient number of religious teachers that possessed, aside from theological education, an adequate education

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

in contemporary pedagogy and educational methodology, today's situation is much better. An increasing number of religious teachers are being educated in churches' and religious communities' educational institutions, of which some are already part of state universities, while others are also adjusting to European educational standards. This is highly important, since the quality of religious education depends on the personality of religious teachers to a greater extent than in other subjects. Religious teachers are appointed by their respective church or religious community, based on their competences and personal abilities, and recommended to the Ministry of Education which then decides on their appointment and oversees the educational process.

One of the first and most successful examples of institutional cooperation between public authorities and churches and religious communities has been completed within the Government Commission for the Introduction and Supervision of Religious Education in Public Schools in Serbia. All traditional churches and religious communities are represented in this Commission and none of them initiates the implementation of its religious education curriculum without the approval of all the others. Each religious education curriculum involves presentations of other traditional churches and religious communities in it. This Commission work positively affects their mutual cooperation in other fields.

Educational programmes and methods are improved and adjusted to the needs and interests of pupils and students, according to the experiences gained during the implementation and suggestions provided by teachers of religious education. Besides theological topics, which are for many pupils and students abstract and difficult to understand, there are a number of different ones. Issues related to sexuality and identity are also covered, bringing excellent results in working with secondary schools' students. Competitions in religious education show the students' high quality knowledge and supported their interest for the programme.

One of the problems is the rather low level of students' initial knowledge, caused primarily by their parents' lack of religious education. Experiences from other countries in preventing the antipathy of some students towards religious education are not well known in Serbia. In Austria, for example, priests start giving religious instructions in preschool, in a manner adjusted to children's age, in order to prepare them to take part in religious education in primary schools. In Serbia, however, the introduction of such a practice is complicated by institutional causes, bearing in mind that preschool institutions are under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and therefore there is no obligation of adjustment of their programs with primary education curricula. In certain parts of Serbia, however, children in preschool are thought basics of faith.

**1. 2. The status of teachers of religious education by Labour Law;** Instead of indefinite contracts, teachers of religious education sign one-year contracts with the Ministry of Education. This practice puts teachers of religious education in an unequal position in comparison to other educational workers. Female teachers of religious education are in a particularly difficult situation, having no right to paid maternity leave. Without the mutual efforts of the respective church bodies and religious communities and the state, it is impossible to solve this problem which directly impacts not only on the right to practice religion, but also the right for work and employment.

**1. 3. The organisation of churches' and religious communities' religious education in local communities where they have small number of believers;** According to the principle that the right to education is one of the basic human rights, Regulation on the Organisation and Realisation of Religious Education and Alternative Subjects in Primary and Secondary Education (2001) and the Law on Changes and Amendments to the Secondary

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

Education Law (2002) state that school directors have to provide conditions for the teaching of religious education of each traditional church and religious community, even in schools where there is only one student who belongs to it. In practice, the situation varies from school to school and solution of this problem usually depends on the decision of the director. In some cases, teachers of religious education come from neighbouring schools, while in others pupils and students of one confession from various schools gather in one school and attend classes of religious education. This problem, therefore, is not systematically solved.

**1. 4. Alternatives to religious education;** One may often hear criticisms of the existing solution, as it prevents pupils and students attending both religious education and civic education. In some schools it is, however, possible for children to take both classes (unless they are conducted at the same time), but without their attendance being formalised. The complaints are mainly based on the argument that the religious and the civic spheres within people's lives do not oppose one another, and therefore should not be presented as alternatives to children, since this would contribute to tendencies that create artificial conflict between them. Some claim that this solution resulted from the attempt to present religious education and faith in general as phenomena inappropriate to civil society. Churches and religious communities often say that in most cases the basic values of civil society are incorporated into the curricula of other subjects, while religious ones not.

In the public debate the suggestion has been made to introduce a non-confessional, i.e. a multi-religious subject on religion (entitled "history of religion", "religious culture", etc). Almost all churches and religious communities oppose this suggestion, explaining that the replacement of confessional religious education with one of these subjects would challenge the authentic expression of faith and the ability to adequately teach religion to pupils and students. A key argument for churches and religious communities is that religious education is not an informative but forming subject, whose primary goal is not to transfer a certain system of values, but assist pupils and students in the practice of their own religion, hence, making a supra-confessional approach unachievable.

In answer to this argument it is suggested that teaching religion as a multi-confessional subject should be introduced not instead of religious education, but as its alternative. This subject could therefore replace civic education, enabling pupils and students to take both religious education and civic education classes.

Some churches and religious communities recommend their teachers of religious education to present the curriculum and methods to pupils and students and their parents at the beginning of each school year, inspiring them to opt for religious education. Parents make the final decision during primary education, while students in secondary schools choose themselves, with the knowledge of their parents. Pupils and students attending religious education do not necessarily have to be believers of that very church or religious community. Pupils and students and parents make the choice three times: at the beginning of primary education, in the fifth grade and at the beginning of secondary education. The possibility to re-select the subject is provided in order to avoid jeopardising freedom of choice, although a possibility for discontinuity in education is opened with this approach.

In some local communities pressures on pupils and students and parents during the opting procedure for religious education or civic education are recognised. In these cases teachers of civic education are often in better position, already having experience in school system functioning and already being part of school personnel. Fortunately the cases of fair cooperation and relations between teachers of religious education with other school staff, including teachers of civic education are more frequent.

Besides issues of whether teachers of religious education have received an adequate pedagogical education, experts and the wide public also often question the educational

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

profile of teachers of civic education, having in mind there is no formal educational institution that trains for this particular subject. Teachers of civic education participate and complete special training programmes, and teachers of civic education in secondary schools specialist course on the Faculty of Political Sciences. The Ministry of Education developed curricula, manual and trainings in cooperation with number of NGOs involved in civic education. Teachers of any subject completing these courses are entitled to teach civic education.

**1. 5. Risks of students' separation:** Since 2001, part of public have been speculated that religious education would contribute to segregation of students based on religious background, which in Serbia mainly correlates to the ethnic one, and hence endangering the already fragile inter-ethnic relations, or even causing conflicts. There is no evidence supporting such speculations and this is probably due to the activity of the above mentioned Commission for Introduction and Supervision of Religious Education, which decreases a possibility of abuse of religious education by using it to spread religious and ethnic hatred. However, it is very difficult to calculate the causes of fluctuation of such a complex social phenomenon as intolerance on only one component. Besides ethnic and religious background, social condition of individuals, groups and society as a whole also has large part, as well as influence of media, political context, etc.

Representatives of churches and religious communities bring arguments to challenge this thesis. They claim that religious education will not contribute conflicts and separation; it will even more contribute to their overcoming. In initial phases of the European integration the crucial role was played by highly religiously determined politicians, even more faith, besides economy, was one of fundamentals of these integration processes. One may add that strong tendencies of overcoming conflicts and supporting dialogue (including ecumenical) are present in inter-religious relations for a long time.

**1. 6. Systematic institutional trend analysis;** Data on attending religious education in various parts of Serbia and within individual churches and religious communities are not collected systematically and their follow up is not institutionalised and continuous. This makes studying the tendencies of pupils' and students' opting process for religious education or civic education more difficult.

According to the Serbian Orthodox Church, in the Archdiocese of Belgrade – Karlovci 50% of children attend religious education (which is app. 120.000 children) and 270 teachers of religious education teach in 300 schools in Belgrade. In the Subotica Diocese situation is similar – 50% of children with the Roman-Catholic background attend religious education and 130 teachers of Roman-Catholic religious education teach in 254 schools. In certain regions in the central Serbia, percentage of pupils/students attending religious education is app. 90%. It would be very useful if there would be a possibility for comparative analysis of these trends in space and time and their correlation with the structure of population and other social factors and their changes.

Systematic follow up and evaluation of implementation and effects of religious education is of large importance because of its crucial role in the pupils'/students' personality forming. Evaluation procedures can provide socially relevant data only after longer period of time in which they are systematically implemented, such as after completing education of generations that could opt for religious education at the beginning of their schooling process.

## 2. Cooperation in the area of health care and social welfare issues

Representatives of most churches and religious communities gladly stress that, despite evident doctrinal differences, their teachings are committed to preserving of human dignity

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

and caring for loved ones<sup>i</sup>. This common point related to social welfare and health care is expressed by Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant Christians, but also by Muslims, and could be found in the distant past, in the activities of churches and religious communities<sup>ii</sup>. These activities have resulted in institutional cooperation with public authorities and in faith based charity organisations in modern times. These activities have been developed in the last two decades in Serbia, after several decades of marginalisation. Unfortunately, the causes of their revival are not only connected to the legal opportunities opened-up after the ending of single-party political system, but also to tragic war and conflict situations all over former Yugoslavia, as well as their social consequences, primarily for drastic decline of public service capacities to respond to growing health care and social welfare needs of large part of population.

The current world economic crisis put Serbian society in situation to face problems similar to those existing in number of other countries<sup>iii</sup>, but also worsens still existing consequences of social and economic crash that happened at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is expected that the number of unemployed and socially and existentially vulnerable people will significantly increase. Faith based and other charitable organisations have already recorded a dramatically growing number of requests for help to cover the costs schoolchildren's meals. This is a clear indicator of decline of their parents' income and increased risk for "hidden poverty" to grow into acute poverty. Public authorities will soon have to more actively dedicate themselves to solving these problems. Churches and religious communities and faith based charitable organisations in Serbia do not have the financial or institutional capacity to provide assistance to those in need as respective communities and organisations in some other countries. The primary reason for this is the uncompleted restitution, i.e. return of confiscated churches' and religious communities' property that could be used for the implementation of such activities, but it is also due to limited budget capacities of the state itself<sup>iv</sup>.

The potential for productive work in this field are nevertheless far from negligible. For decades now some sacral buildings in Serbia have been specialised for work with certain vulnerable categories of the population<sup>v</sup>. Today, this practise is becoming more widespread<sup>vi</sup>, and the cooperation of faith based charitable organisations („Philanthropy“, „Caritas“, Catholic Relief Service, „Bread of Life“, „Merhamet Sandžak“, „Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation – EHO“ etc) is increasing.

Some aspects of cooperation of churches and religious communities with public authorities in the area of health care and social welfare demand special attention and commitment of all participating parties, as well as certain changes focused on its improvement:

**2. 1. The institutional framework of cooperation with authorities and the financing of activities:** Due to the lack of experience in cooperation between public authorities, churches and religious communities, and faith based charitable and health care institutions, in the beginning cooperation was marked with difficulties in establishment of contacts and gaining trust. Even today, cooperation is being conducted with certain institutions or their organisational units, whilst it mostly remaining unregulated on the level of health care and social welfare system (on the level of respective ministries). There are examples of good practice cooperation with certain units of local governance, which, in some cases, spread to other communities and become institutionalised<sup>vii</sup>.

Most organisations still depend on international funding for the realisation of activities; this does not offer long-term sustainability in providing services to beneficiaries<sup>viii</sup>. The issue of the financial sustainability of these organisations and their programmes is becoming more important and this trend will probably continue in the future. The authorities and international organisations put Serbia in the group of countries that have overcome the most severe

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

social and health problems of its population, and a large number of international donors have recently been moving the focus of their work to other parts of the world, which have more urgent needs. Additionally, there are more international programmes for financial support that include self-financing or financing from other sources, at least for part of the activities. Objective estimations of organisations' abilities and capacities that seek financial support are of significant importance.

A fundamental question raised in the institutionalising of activities' sustainability, which relates to recognition of quality of services that faith based organisations provide to certain categories of population, that make them eligible for budget funds. Executives, employees and activists of these organisations are prepared to get engaged in certain fields and to work in areas in which other actors don't have the capacities or interest to act. This approach emphasises existence and volume of certain problems, publicly insufficiently recognised, problems and the urgency for their solving. Faith based organisations usually would like to have official mandates, which are allocated to them according to measurable, objective and verifiable criteria, for performing the activities they are capable of undertaking in a higher-quality manner than other actors, including public services. Churches and religious communities neither lack the willingness nor the initiative for certain activities, including some very original ones, however these are not recognised in public as appropriate for this type of organisations or are not conducted in Serbia<sup>ix</sup> so far.

**2. 2. Work with the most vulnerable categories of population:** Churches and religious communities and faith based organisations believe that practising their authentic, organic social role implies taking full and not only partial responsibility for that part of population which cannot get assistance from any other source. One idea is to establish hospices – hospitals for palliative care of terminally ill people. Currently existing hospitals do not provide adequate conditions for the dignified ending of life. Due to this, people requiring palliative care become dependent on their families who are already hit by the difficult situation. By providing assistance for this category of patients, faith based organisations would significantly assist and disburden the public health care system and enable it to more efficiently conduct its other functions, such as primary health care. Besides terminally ill people, taking care of elderly people is also a field of natural cooperation between the state and churches and religious communities.

People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) are also often seen as target group for faith based organisations. Most of these programmes are unfortunately still financed by international donors. Cooperation with authorities is mainly coming to allow churches and religious communities to provide support within the state health care institutions, while there are no significant effective assistance of state for certain activities. In working with this group, faith based organisations usually include volunteers, and the work is done in hospitals, in PLWHA homes and community, including in public places. The essence of these activities is not just in providing material assistance and basic health care support, but also in providing psycho-social and spiritual support, since these people face deep existential crises connected to their highly uncertain future and the reasons that led to in the situation they are in. Classes of religious education are attended jointly by PLWHA and volunteers, together with other interested parties<sup>x</sup>. This approach generates significant success.

According to official statistics, most PLWHA in Serbia are homosexuals and drug addicts. Bearing in mind the highly negative, sometimes even aggressive attitude of majority of public in Serbia towards these groups, the situations they face with HIV/AIDS in their social environment is usually classified as deserved punishment. This increases their social marginalisation, limits their freedom of interaction and their social contacts and makes their general conditions even worse. The commitment by churches and religious communities, as

# Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

organisations with high social standing, to working with these people significantly contributes to their reintegration into society and the strengthening of their self-confidence. These effects could be increased with more intense media campaigns.

Work with drug addicts is extremely complex and demands much experience, having in mind that drug addicts frequently are unable to view the world realistically. The absence of adequate accommodation conditions and treatments in a large number of specialised health care institutions, as well as insufficient public awareness of their problems, underlines the importance of faith based and other charitable organisations in this area. Stronger involvement of the state is necessary, particular given that international donors are leaving Serbia. State activity is necessary in the legislative sphere as well.

Working with the most vulnerable groups of the population can increase their social reputation churches and religious communities already have, especially in circles that are not so favourable and often treat them as protagonist of discrimination of certain parts of population. Sensitivity of media towards those topics and problems of vulnerable groups of people is inadequate and they deal with churches and religious communities usually in highly politicised context, covering primarily disputes and controversial issues, instead of revealing and promoting the fields of cooperation.

### 3. Cooperation with the Serbian Armed Forces

Serbia belongs to a group of countries with mandatory military service, and the issue of religious rights of armed forces members is a current issue. The introduction of completely professional armed forces, which is one of the goals of current military reform, will not diminish this issue. On the contrary, the introduction of religious services is one of the standards accepted by other countries' armies – potential partners.

The majority of the Serbian Armed Forces' members claimed to be believers and the necessity for meeting their religious needs and rights is very obvious. Moreover, officers and soldiers expect the introduction of religious service.

So far, problems have been dealt with on a case by case basis. Normative regulations prescribe an obligation to adjust the armed forces' diet to the rules of traditional churches and religious communities, and this is fully implemented in practice. The introduction of the right to religious ceremony in army premises is a big step forward in comparison to the situation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, Serbia is not going in line with other countries which it wants to make partner-based relation with in the implementation of mechanisms for effective practicing of these rights.

In the last couple of years much more attention has been given to these issues than before; for example Military Gymnasium has had teacher of religious education since 2007. In the second generation, 80% of students attended classes of religious education, confirming the existence of such a need.

Since 2008, Serbian Armed Forces members are allowed to attend places of religious worship and religious ceremonies, wear small religious symbols under their uniform, and freely use religious literature, without the right to promote it. During private visitation to places of religious worship, members of the armed forces are expected to wear civilian clothing or, if in uniforms, to take off their caps or helmets. Since the beginning of 2009, for the first time after World War II, a regular religious service is being conducted in the military facilities – in the Chapel at the Military Medical Academy.

The practice of having chaplains, as professional military staff within the military units, has been developed in the armies of all EU member states, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The chaplains are appointed by the representatives of the Ministry of Defence and the respective churches and religious communities.

## Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

Legislation on those issues exists in Serbia, but not all the bylaws necessary to make it concrete and operable. This process is yet to be completed.

Serbia is marking the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of passing the Law on Army which regulated the functioning of chaplains. This happened during the Prince Milos' rule, in the period when Serbia was not fully independent. At the moment, Serbia is one of few countries in Europe where this field is not systematically and strategically regulated.

Some conscripts serve their military duty in educational institutions, sacral buildings (particularly those located in health care institutions) and faith based charitable organisations. These faith based organisations and institutions supply their needs for conscripts to the Department for Military Obligations, which is an organisational unit of the Human Resource Sector of the Ministry of Defence.

### **4. Suggestions and recommendations for the improvement of cooperation between churches, religious communities and public authorities**

**4. 1.** Normative, organisational and other measures should provide more effective exercise of the right to attend religious education classes, regardless of the number of pupils/students belonging to certain churches / religious communities, in the particular local community. Basics of religious education should be introduced in the pre-school educational system, in cooperation with local and central authorities.

**4. 2.** The status of teachers of religious education has to be permanently regulated. A precondition for their full-time employment should still be approval by the respective religious authorities, but their status has to be equal to the status of any other teacher in the Serbian public system of education.

**4. 3.** Faith based institutions in charge of the implementation of religious education in public schools should systematically collect and analyse data provided by their religious education teachers' reports, so they may formulate suggestions to the respective public authorities based on these analyses. Regular evaluations of religious education by religious education teachers, respective bodies within of Ministry of Education and churches and religious communities themselves should be introduced, in accordance with evaluation procedures implemented in other school subjects.

**4. 4.** Public authorities should not only allow the presence of priests and other religious representatives in public institutions (hospitals, military units, prisons, social-care institutions, etc), but also make their presence systematically sustainable. The implementation of such measures should be based on thorough analysis of other countries' experiences and results.

**4. 5.** The public should be objectively informed (of course, in cooperation with media) on the results of cooperation of churches and religious communities with public authorities in all fields. In particular examples of good practice and challenges and recommendations for overcoming them should be provided. Cooperation with media is very important, enabling adequate response to a number of prejudices, such as religious education being a factor of segregation and conflict. In communicating with media, churches and religious communities should coordinate their activities, such as development of joint productions. Cooperation with media should be long-term and followed by the education of journalists on religious

## Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

issues, as well as capacity building of representatives of churches and religious communities in media communication.

Representatives of churches and religious communities should communicate and stress the most crucial and least publicly recognised problems in society, such as increasing poverty, inadequate availability of health and social care services, the situation of highly vulnerable groups – the terminally ill, those with drug addiction problems, people living with HIV/AIDS, people with mental disabilities, etc.

**4. 6.** Churches' and religious communities' charitable work should be, whenever possible, conducted jointly, building and supporting mutual trust and solidarity among believers and other citizens. Churches and religious communities offer and provide assistance to everyone, regardless of their religious background.

**4. 7.** The state should complete the restitution of properties of churches and religious communities more efficiently, in order to enable them to more effectively implement activities they are capable to perform and are expected to perform. Only after full restitution, will churches and religious communities be in a position to perform their social role providing benefit to certain categories of population and the society as a whole.

The nongovernmental organisations, Belgrade Open School and the Christian Cultural Centre, supported by the Delegation of the European Commission to the Republic of Serbia, organised the Conference "Churches and Religious Communities and Civil Society for Empowerment of Human Rights and Democracy in Serbia". The conference was held from 25 to 28 March 2009 in Vrnjaska Banja. The initial version of this document resulted from the presentations and discussions within the working group that covered the theme "Churches, Religious Communities and Public Authorities – Interweaving, Confrontation or Partnership". The working group moderator was Marija Vranesevic, and the introduction notes were provided by Presbyter Vukasin Milicevic, Venerable Vladislav Varga and Proto-Presbyter Professor Vladimir Vukasinovic, PhD.

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### Footnotes:

I „People get in contact with Christ by contacting those in social need“, „Basics of Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church“, Metropolitan Smolensk and Kaliningrad Kiril, Beseda, Novi Sad, 2007.

„Diaconal work is a continuation and integral part of the Eucharist“, Bishop of Backa Irinej, „Pravoslavljje“, No 961, 1 April 2007.

II There are a lot of examples of health and social care activities in the Church: St. John Chrysostom as the Patriarch of Constantinople distributed wealth dedicated to building a temple to the poor; the first European hospital in Constantinople was intended for ordinary people, not for the clergy; the first hospital in Serbia was in the monastery Studenica.

III „Caritas Europe“, the most important Catholic charitable network in Europe, organised a meeting on the challenges raised by the current economic crisis on 24 March 2009. The crisis has caused increased unemployment, raising competition among workers, new waves of migration, a worsening of the position of existing immigrant populations, etc.

## Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

IV The Russian Orthodox Church provides meals for pupils/students in public schools, protecting the youth from genetically modified food. Currently, there are no financial possibilities for assistance of this range in Serbia.

V Disabled female children have been accommodated since 1945 in the Monastery St. Petka. This activity is being implemented and supported by the capacities of Church solely, without any state support.

VI The Monastery Kovilj, near Novi Sad is specialised for work with drug addicts.

VI Local authorities in Kragujevac provide funds for the work of home care-givers that are, through the Philanthropy, the Charitable Fund of the Serbian Orthodox Church Mobile Medical Care Services, being available to those needing assistance and support in their homes.

VIII For example, the only network specialized for work with elderly people in Serbia, „Humanas”, gathering 15 organizations, completely depends on foreign assistance.

IX The Muslim humanitarian association „Merhamet Sandžak” implements development programmes, as well as agricultural and women programmes.  
At the conference in Vrnjacka Banja, an idea was discussed to organise collecting of food from restaurants, that would otherwise be wasted, and distribute it to socially vulnerable.

X Philanthropy – the Charitable Fund of the Serbian Orthodox Church developed an accredited seminar in prevention of addiction and fight against violence. The seminars targets teachers of religious education and so far have been realised in several towns Kragujevac, Belgrade and Vranje.