

Serbia



Stable / Unchanged ▬

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **89.4%**
- Muslims : **7.1%**
- Agnostics : **2.9%**
- Others : **0.6%**

6.718.000

88.499 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 11 of the constitution provides that “no religion shall be established as a state or mandatory religion”. Article 21 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion. Article 43 guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to convert.^[1]

After decades of suppression under Communism, religion began to flourish again in the 1990s. The break-up of Yugoslavia brought about a need both for new values and the restoration of religion and tradition. Religion and ethnicity are inextricably linked in Serbia and Orthodoxy remains central to the Serb identity. In the 2011 census, the population identified its ethnic identity as follows: Serb 83.3 percent, Hungarian 3.5 percent, Romany 2.1 percent, Bosniak 2 percent, Croats 0.8 percent, Slovak 0.7 percent, Montenegrins 0.5 percent, Vlachs 0.5 percent, other 6.6 percent.

The Law on Churches and Religious Communities recognises seven “traditional” churches and religious communities that have a “historical continuity of multiple centuries in Serbia”: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic community, and the Jewish community.^[2] The legal status of these communities dates from the days of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In addition to these communities, the government grants “traditional” status to the Diocese of Dacia Felix of the Romanian Orthodox Church, with its seat in Romania and administrative seat in Vrsac in Vojvodina. Under the 2005 Law on Finance, only these seven religious communities benefit from tax exemptions. The state also provides funding for religious instruction in public schools in these religions. 0.12 percent of the state budget is allocated to finance the activities of churches and religious communities.

Other religious communities have to follow cumbersome and often incoherent registration procedures. Article 18 of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities states that religious communities that are not considered “traditional” have

to supply a memorandum with the names and signatures of at least 100 members. The law prohibits registration if the group's name includes part of the name of an existing registered group. The Law on Churches and Religious Communities was challenged before the Constitutional Court on 5th October 2010, but on 16th January 2013 the court declined to assess the constitutionality of ? number of provisions of the law.

There are 17 "non-traditional" Churches that have been officially registered in Serbia : 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 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.^[3]

The Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches are not registered but they are recognised by the state and allowed to operate freely. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church has still not been able to register, on the grounds that, under Orthodox canon law, territorial overlap between dioceses has to be avoided. The Romanian Orthodox church has no right to operate in certain parts of Serbian territory and the Romanian minority does not always have access to worship in the Romanian language. The members of the Bulgarian national minority have also requested access to worship in their mother tongue.

Religion made its first entry into public schools in July 2001, when the Government passed a decree on the implementation of religious instruction in elementary and high schools.^[4] Pupils may attend either religious instruction or civic education classes, but attendance is mandatory once a week. Religious instruction is taught by priests and laypersons who are selected by the churches and religious communities and appointed and paid by the Ministry of Education.

In February 2016, the Serbian Parliament legislated for the restitution of Jewish property expropriated during the Holocaust. In 2017, Serbia extended compensation to former Serbian survivors living abroad. According to the World Jewish Restitution Organisation, around 1,000 Holocaust survivors from Serbia are living in the USA and Europe.^[5]

According to Strahinja Sekuli?, Serbia's Restitution Agency's General Manager, previously confiscated forests, agricultural and construction land were returned in full to the Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Romanian Orthodox, Evangelical Christian, Greek-Catholic, Reformed Christian, and Slovak Evangelical churches and to the Jewish Community.^[6] Real estate was also returned to Roman Catholic, Serbian Orthodox and Evangelical Christian Churches and to the Jewish Community.

Divisions among Muslims in Serbia have meant that there has been no restitution for the Islamic Community. Both the Islamic Community *in* Serbia (ICiS) and the Islamic Community *of* Serbia (IcoS) have filed requests for the restitution of identical properties as they both claim to be the legitimate successor of the Islamic Religious Community of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as registered in 1930.^[7]

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is the largest church of the country and has an important place in public and political life. It is one of the most influential national institutions and has the clear support of the current state authorities, as well as broad media access.^[8] Article 11 of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities states that "the Serbian Orthodox Church has played an exceptional role in the historical, state-building and civilisation that led to the formation, preservation and development of the identity of the Serbian nation."^[9] The SOC is divided into 6 metropolitanates, 40 eparchies, and 1 autonomous arch-eparchy.^[10] According to the Government Office for Religion, the SOC has 1,962 priests and 1,065 monks and nuns.^[11] The main educational institution for the Orthodox in Serbia is the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade. Serbian Orthodox believers celebrate their feasts according to the Julian calendar.

Roman Catholics in Serbia live mostly in northern Vojvodina, which is home to minority ethnic groups such as Hungarians, Croats, Slovaks and Czechs. The Catholic Church is organised into four dioceses: the Archdiocese of

Belgrade, and the Dioceses of Subotica, Zrenjanin and Srijem.

There are more than 230 churches, with more than 200 parishes and 170 priests. The Catholic Church offers religious education in churches instead of schools because Catholics pupils are spread sparsely across public schools. The Catholic Church maintains the following educational institutions: the Saint Augustine Theological Seminary, the Theological-catechetical Institute, and the Saint Paul Diocesan Classical Gymnasium and Seminary, all based in Subotica.^[12]

Muslims make up seven percent of the population and form the third largest religious group. They live mainly in Sandzak, a region in the south-western corner of the country. The Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) is based in Sarajevo and the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) is based in Belgrade. Both claim to have a legitimacy which derives from historical continuity. Both organisations consist of Sunni Muslims following the Hanafi school of Islamic Law, and there are no religious differences between them.

The great majority of ICiS's members are ethnic Bosniaks. The ethnic composition of ICoS's followers is very heterogeneous and consists of Roma, Bosniaks, Albanians, Ashkali, Gorani, Egyptians, Turks and others. Today, there are more than 190 mosques in Serbia, of which 120 are located in Sandzak.^[13]

It is understood that by 2016 50 Serbian citizens, including a number of women and children, had travelled to Syria and Iraq to take part in the war. The majority of them were Bosniak Muslims from the Sandžak region but a few of them were recruited from among the Roma population, including the former imam of the Zemun "para-mosque" Goran Pavlovic. According to Serbian intelligence officials, Islamic extremists claim to be linked to Wahhabi communities in Sandzak.^[14] According to the same sources, eight Daesh (ISIS) fighters of Serbian nationality were killed in the conflict. A further seven were jailed for long prison sentences after they returned from the Syrian war zone.^[15]

The Wahabbis are most numerous in Priboj and Sjenica in Sandzak and in Novi Pazar. The exact number of this group is unknown. There have been instances of them causing problems in mosques, by interfering with religious ceremonies and trying to impose their way of prayer. After a number of incidents in mosques, ICiS banned Wahabbis from its mosques. Since then, they have been praying in their homes.^[16]

In 2018, the Islamic Community celebrated 150 years of existence in Serbia.

Incidents

Because of the intertwining of national, ethnic and religious identity, tensions simmer below the surface in Serbian society. The incidents reported below are considered important because they emerge out of this ethnic-religious divide.

On 18th April 2018, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal gave Vojislav Šešelj a 10- year prison sentence for war crimes against the Croatian national minority in Serbia in the early 1990s. The prisoner said then that he was ready to repeat his crimes, but this time against the Ethnic Croatian leader in Serbia, Tomislav Žigmanov.^[17]

On 17th April 2018, during a Serbian National Parliament session, members of the Radical Party surrounded, insulted and threatened the Democratic Party MP Aleksandra Jerkov when she spoke about the sentence given to war criminal Vojislav Seselj. Nemanja Sarovic, an MP from the convicted politician's Serbian Radical Party, called her a liar and denied the crimes for which his leader was convicted at the Hague Tribunal.^[18]

On 24th March 2018, unknown perpetrators attacked and beat to death 63-year-old Nazir Salihovi?, imam of a mosque in the Serbian city Novi Pazar. Imam Salihovi? was attacked when he was going home after leading the night prayer at the mosque. The police launched an investigation to identify the attackers.^[19]

On 26th May 2017, on the eve of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, local Belgrade authorities demolished an illegally built mosque on the outskirts of the Serbian capital. The construction of the two-storey mosque in the Zemun Polje

neighbourhood had started in 2014 even though the authorities had refused to grant it a construction permit^[20]

About 20,000 practising Muslims live in Belgrade and there is only one mosque, which was built in 1575 during the Ottoman Turkish empire. Mufti Muhamed Hamdi Jusufspahic, head of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Community of Serbia, said the Belgrade authorities have not issued a single construction permit to the Muslim community over the past five decades. The Serbian Justice Ministry denied such accusations. Mileta Radojevic, head of the ministry's department for cooperation with religious communities said Serbia fulfils all EU criteria on securing religious rights and liberties, and observes its commitments under the constitution.^[21]

Prospects for freedom of religion

There is progress in the area of property restitution to religious communities. However, there is a resurgence of hate speech in Serbian public discourse, along ethnic lines, and this is amplified by wide media coverage. This problem that shows no signs of subsiding. Incidents such as those occurring in the National Parliament have a significant influence on interreligious relations, as well as relations between national and religious minorities.

There is no significant improvement in inter-faith dialogue. It is rare and mostly led by local religious representatives. It remains to be seen how the latest political tensions will influence the status of national and religious minorities and freedom of religion in this country.

Endnotes / Sources

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