

Serbian Clerics Get Their Way

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The Serbian Orthodox Church claims victory in controversial religious education debate.

After fifty-five years of state-sponsored atheism, Serbia has re-introduced religious education in schools. The decision is seen as a victory for the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has deftly exploited the political struggle between Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica and Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic.

However, critics say the move will throw the education system into disarray, and will lead to a clericalisation of Serbian society, just when it should be accelerating democratic reforms.

Kostunica is a self-declared faithful devotee of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Following the extradition of Slobodan Milosevic to The Hague, his arch-rival Djindjic launched a drive to win the sympathies of the influential Church and its followers among the Serbian electorate.

This was seen as an attempt to counter those who view him as a "national traitor" for having surrendered Milosevic to the tribunal.

The decision on religious education follows Djindjic's visit to the Serbian Patriarchate in July 2001, and his meeting with a group of supporters lobbying for the subject's re-introduction. The government move was rapidly adopted on July 27, even though no preparation had been made in schools.

Critics of the decision say it has confused teachers, parents and pupils all over Serbia. Some parents are adamant that their children will not be "kissing the cross". Liberal opposition groups say it will lead to an increased role for the Church, in contravention of the constitution which declares all religious communities equal.

Education professionals say the move is ill-considered and not properly thought out. "Schools will have to organise classes, but we already have problem fitting in all the lessons. It will be a challenge to fit it into the time-table," said Branislav Mincic, acting director of the primary school "Zmaj" in Sremska Kamenica.

Parents too have their doubts. "I am not in favour of religious education," said Milan, a computer programmer from Belgrade. "I think it would have been much better if they came up with a subject such as the history of religion with some sociology. I don't understand why this has not been done."

Even those who support religious education in schools, like Andjelka, are expressing reservations about the proposed optional module.

"I think that the children are too little to make an independent decision about religion - that should happen by itself later," she said. "My friend thinks that it would be better if children had informative classes without any obligations and the freedom not to attend if they get tired or confused."

The education ministry's position was that religious education should not be introduced this school year. Officials called for a trial period in selected schools, that would allow them to evaluate the new subject, and give time to prepare the necessary textbooks and train the new teachers needed.

But under political pressure they gave up.

Fierce debate over religious education has been raging for more than a year. Liberal circles, NGOs and many influential university professors in Belgrade and Novi Sad argue that the Church was one of the driving forces behind the wave of nationalism that kept Milosevic in power. They say that clerics turned away from the former president only when he began to lose wars. An increased role for the Church in education will not further the cause of a democratic Serbia, they say.

Opponents of the Church have started a campaign against the introduction of religious education. "The Habit of Religion" (A pun on the Serbo-Croat pronunciation of religious education), calls for parents to get their children to boycott the classes. Campaigners publish advertisements in newspapers, and have set up a web page at www.geocities.com/veronavika.

An advertisement published in the Belgrade daily Danas proclaims, "Dear parents, can you see the difference in the following views? I want my child to get to know different religions. As opposed to I want my child to get to know only my religion."

Campaigners say that the decision on religious education violates the constitutional principle that Serbia is a secular state. Their statement argues that it will lead to discrimination on the basis of religious faith; that it jeopardises childrens' rights; and will threaten the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional basis of the Serbian state, especially in the northern province of Vojvodina, where there are at least 60 registered religious communities.

However, the real test for the government's decision will be the number of parents who enrol their children for religious education. "I have nothing against it, but when they said that they would baptise the children, I began to oppose it," said Dule, a secondary school student at the technical school in Zrenjanin.

Leaders of Serbia's other religious communities, such as Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Lutheran and other Christian Churches have said they support the government decision, as it will provide state financing for their activities, which they would not receive otherwise.

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