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Book Abstract

Religious Education in Serbia
Originally *Veronauka u Srbiji* (Niš: JUNIR, 2004)

The book is the extended version of the empirical study into religious education (RE) in public schools in Serbia undertaken as part of a fellowship from the Open Society Institute – International Policy Fellowship. In the introduction I review the debate on the model and status of RE in the Serbian educational system and compare it with developments in other European countries. Despite polarization among education experts and general public the Government of Serbia introduced a confessional model of RE. The decision won support of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the most staunch advocate of confessional RE, but left many issues unresolved. In the analysis of legal acts which define RE, I point to discriminative, imprecise and inadequate solutions, or in some cases the complete absence of legal regulation. While religious communities are equal in front of the law, only the so-called traditional religious communities enjoy the right to RE in public schools. Even among them there is an indirect and tacit discrimination based on the size and capacities of a religious community to provide teachers and teaching material. According to the existing model, the state and educational authorities do not participate in the creation of programs and do not have any means of supervision.

Observation of RE in fifteen schools throughout Serbia and numerous interviews I had with students, parents, teachers, educational authorities and representatives of religious communities revealed many other problems in relation to the practical implementation of RE in schools. There are no approaches to integrate RE in the educational system. RE and its alternative, civic education, are considered rivals to the detriment of both subjects. There is a serious lack of teaching materials and aids, and the existing textbooks are not adjusted to the age and previous knowledge of children. Teachers are insufficiently prepare, most particularly as regards their pedagogic qualifications. Most problems arise where teachers of RE are at the same time parish priests, who are frequently absent because of their parish duties. The aforementioned deficiencies together with organizational and technical problems to provide for the new subject in schools lead to poor student motivation.

In the final part, I offer recommendations as to how to solve the problems analyzed. They range from pointing to solutions in other countries and devising models how to apply them in Serbia, to proposing changes both in legislation and day-to-day matters directed to the Ministries of Education and Faith, religious communities, schools and policy makers. Special emphasis is laid on proposing solutions as to how to position and possibly integrate RE within the existing educational structures and enhance its role in the formation of democratic and tolerant society. Short version of the study in English language is attached.

