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STATEMENT

by Mr. Ferid Bulić, Deputy Director, Directorate for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia

at the Working session 7:

Fundamental freedoms I, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

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Starting from the tradition that the right to freedom of thought, belief and religion is guaranteed in the Republic of Serbia, everyone is free to express religion or belief by performing religious ceremonies, attending religious service or teaching.

For the Republic of Serbia, the fight against intolerance, discrimination based on religion or belief, including members of all churches and religious communities, is of key importance. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia states in Article 1 that the state is "based on the rule of law and social justice, the principles of civil democracy, human and minority rights and freedoms and belonging to European principles and values." Article 21 of the Constitution states: "Any discrimination, whether directly or indirectly, on any ground, and in particular based on race, gender, nationality, social origin, birth, religion, is prohibited."

The state body in charge of religious issues in the Republic of Serbia is the Directorate for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, which belongs to the Ministry of Justice. The head of this body is Dr. Mileta Radojević with two assistants, one member of the majority Christian Serbian Orthodox Church and another member of the Islamic faith.

There are seven traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia, which make up 95% of the total population of our country. Traditional churches and religious communities are those that have a long-standing historical continuity in Serbia and whose legal subjectivity was acquired on the basis of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities in 2006, namely: Serbian Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Slovak Evangelical Church, Reformed Christian Church, The Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic Community, the Jewish Community and the Romanian Orthodox Church. In addition to 7 traditional churches and religious communities in the Register, 21 more confessional churches and religious communities

are registered in the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Accordingly, this law is among the most liberal laws in the field of practising rights relating to religious freedoms that allow the registration of new churches and religious communities. It should be in particular noted that the fact that the law has highlighted seven traditional churches and religious communities does not mean that these churches and religious communities have more rights than other registered churches and religious communities. They are only emphasised because they have a centuries-old tradition on the territory of the state, but they are completely equal in terms of exercising the rights of a registered church and religious community.

In 2006, the state passed the Law on Restitution of Property to Churches and Religious Communities, which regulates the return of seized property that was seized by the Communist authorities after the Second World War.

In 2012, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted a Decree on the payment of contributions for pension, disability and health insurance for priests and religious officials and it applies to all churches and religious communities.

The state allocates funds for project activities of churches and religious communities related to construction, education, culture, assistance to clergy and monks and religious officials, support for clergy and monks in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as for protection, religious, cultural and national identity.

Budget funds are allocated to all churches and religious communities in proportion to their proportional representation in Serbia according to the latest 2011 census. There is a principle of positive discrimination when religious communities with a very small number of believers receive a higher amount in relation to the percentage in the census.

The state seeks to completely eliminate the damage done by the communist authorities to the religious communities through the restitution of property, affirmation of the freedom of religion, the preservation of the identity and culture of religious communities, and the respect of their role in the process of democratization of society.

The Directorate for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities has initiated with the Government of the Republic of Serbia the establishment of a sector for interreligious dialogue in order to promote inter-religious dialogue between traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia, the region and abroad in order to interlink different cultures, promote religious tolerance, dialogue and cooperation and the protection and promotion of human rights.

In this regard, the results of the implementation show that religious rights in Serbia are based on the affirmation of religious and human freedoms, and the promotion of the "value significance and influence" of religion in society, as a powerful factor in democratisation and the process of European integration of our country.
