

# **Role of Religion in the Western Balkans' Societies**

*Conference Volume*

**Country snapshots,  
elite survey reports and  
papers delivered to the conference**

Tirana, June 2019



Kingdom of the Netherlands



Institute for Democracy and Mediation  
Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim

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## Foreword by Sotiraq Hroni

*Executive Director, Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM)*

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In April 2018, IDM launched its benchmark study on religious tolerance in Albania. The study found that an overwhelming majority of Albanians welcome religious diversity, accept interreligious differences and reject the notion of supremacy of a given religion above others. This religious tolerance is a core value of Albanian society that, according to even Pope Francis, should not be taken for granted.

Indeed, continuous efforts are made to preserve the good interreligious relations in the country. A prime example is the work done by the Interreligious Council of Albania, which has made tireless efforts to promote interfaith dialogue both at home and abroad. Its unique experiences, challenges and lessons learned may find cross-border applicability. Individual input derived from the experience elsewhere, could play a similar role for neighbouring countries or contribute to interfaith dialogue at a global level.

This opportunity to learn from each other's experiences and discuss how religion can play a positive role in our societies, was one of the main catalysts to organising this regional conference. It offers a unique opportunity to discuss among religious leaders, politicians, academia and civil society leaders of the region, how we can enhance societal and policy mechanisms to better respond to future challenges with regards to religion in society. To foster the debate, IDM and its regional partners have drafted this conference volume, which explores the role of religion in Western Balkan societies. Given the uniqueness of our project, the first of its kind in the region, our call for evidence-based analysis garnered a high level of interest from researchers and practitioners from the region and beyond. Their findings are complimented by contextual research carried out by partner organisations in individual countries. Combined, this research enhances response mechanisms for policymakers and the society to face challenges, explore opportunities, and foster stakeholder capacities. While this study marks an important development, we believe the role of religion in our societies deserves further efforts of this kind.

It is important to note that this event would not have been possible without the generous support of the Netherlands Foreign Ministry and its efforts to furthering reconciliation and Europeanization of the societal relations in Western Balkans. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the President of the Republic of Albania, HE Ilir Meta, for his continuous support to initiatives that foster cooperation and understanding, in the country and in the wider region.

## Foreword by Guusje Korthals Altes

*The Ambassador of the Netherlands to Albania*



For the Netherlands, freedom of religion is a fundamental freedom and an important part of our foreign policy on human rights. The focus of this policy is at international cooperation, promoting the universality of individual human rights and strengthening the resilience of society.

The Netherlands is firmly committed to promote and protect the freedom of religion and belief, and does not distinguish between religious groups when doing so. Enjoying fundamental rights and freedoms is an essential part of an open and free society. A society that understands and embraces differences, that tolerates and respects without judging or discriminating. It is up to every individual to have a theistic or non-theistic belief, to change one's religion or choose not to believe.

Religious harmony and peaceful coexistence is an asset of Albania and its people. A characteristic to cherish and strengthen. Albania is an important example of a country where people of different faiths have the ability to coexist peacefully and with mutual respect for one another. An inspiring example to countries around the globe.

Religion has long been an essential element in the societies of the Western Balkan region. It has achieved a prominent role in almost all aspects of society in the post-communist era. Differences in religious diversity and interreligious dialogue can be observed in the region's multi-ethnic societies. The Western Balkans have a recent history of conflict in which religion played an important role. For ongoing reconciliation processes in the region, for the strengthening of democracy and for building resilient societies, the interfaith dialogue is essential.

It is for that reason that we are pleased to see so many of the religious and other leaders from the region gather in Tirana for the regional Conference "Role of Religion in the Western Balkan societies". We look forward to an active and open discussion.

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**snapshots**

# Country snapshot Albania

By Leonie Vrugtman

Albania has a long history of peaceful religious coexistence and tolerance. Over the centuries, Albanians embraced and assimilated a variety of monotheist religions under the influence of a series of occupying powers; be it Rome, Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire. Aware of this longstanding religious diversity, leaders of the National Renaissance movement in the nineteenth century sought to emphasise an overarching national identity by removing religion from the identity of Albanians. From 1912, when Albania gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, state institutions have embraced secularism. Enver Hoxha, the communist dictator who ruled the country from 1944–1985, suppressed religion through legislation. Organised religion was banned through a 1967 constitutional reform, which prohibited religious literature, initiated the further destruction or repurposing of places of worship and leading to the arrest or execution of religious leaders.<sup>1</sup>

Following the collapse of communism in 1991, religious institutions in the country were in an abominable state. Foreign religious foundations, eager to train a new generation of clerics and finance the (re)construction of religious sites, came to the rescue. Some of these had a conservative outlook, which was at odds with the mainstream moderate religious traditions in the country, or they were connected with foreign governments that aimed to advance their influence in the region. During the 1990s, these groups were able to operate in Albania without any restrictions due to weak state institutions, lax borders and high crime rates.<sup>2</sup> In the early 2000s, the Albanian government and the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH) took measures to tackle the issue of foreign-backed religious groups. A national action plan against terrorism was adopted in 2002 leading to sweeping enforcement measures.<sup>3</sup> Also, to facilitate the re-establishment of religious communities, the government promised compensation for religious buildings, land and other property that was confiscated by the communist regime. The Agency for the Treatment of Property (ATP) was established to manage restitution claims; however, most remain unresolved.<sup>4</sup>

## Religious composition of the country

Today, most Albanians lead a secular life. According to a 2018 IDM study on religious tolerance, Albanians have limited knowledge of religion and rarely condition their everyday lives according to religious norms. Instead, the study argues, 'Albanians welcome

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- 1 B. Tönnes, 'Religious persecution in Albania', *Religion in Communist Lands*, 1982, 10(3), pp. 242–255. doi:10.1080/09637498208431032
- 2 S. Woehrel, 'Islamic terrorism in the Balkans', *Congressional Research Service*, 26 July 2005, p. 7
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016 – Albania', 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268782>



the religious diversity that is present in the country and strongly reject the idea of the supremacy of a given religion, irrelevant of the size of the religious community'.<sup>5</sup> Religious coexistence and tolerance are considered a fundamental value, which is also embedded in the country's constitution. There is no official religion, the state is neutral on questions of belief, and freedom of religion is guaranteed.<sup>6</sup> The state recognises the equality and independence of religious groups and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The four largest religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Bektashi)<sup>7</sup> also receive financial support from the state, which is mainly used to cover administrative expenses and the salaries of educational staff.<sup>8,9</sup>

According to the latest official census in 2011,<sup>10</sup> Sunni Muslims constitute 56.7% of the population; Roman Catholics 10%, Eastern Orthodox adherents 6.8%; members of the Bektashi Order (a sect of Shia Sufism) 2.1%; and the Protestant Evangelical community 0.14%.<sup>11</sup> Approximately 2.5% of Albanians identify as atheist, and there are a small number of Jehovah's Witnesses, followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), in addition to around 40 or 50 Jews living in Albania.<sup>12</sup>

## Interreligious issues

Unlike its neighbours, Albania has not been subject to major interreligious conflict. Nonetheless, in the last three decades, some isolated cases of tension have been recorded. In early 2000s, the Bektashi community outside Tirana was the target of vandalism, intimidation and threats of violence, which, according to Bektashi leaders, was the result of the division created by foreign-influenced, intolerant interpretations of religion.<sup>13</sup> In

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- 5 Institute of Democracy and Meditation, 'Religious tolerance in Albania', 25 April 2018, p. 5, available at: <http://idmalbania.org/religious-tolerance-albania/>
- 6 Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 28 November 1998, Art. 10, translated into English by OSCE, available at: <https://www.osce.org/albania/41888?download=true>
- 7 The Evangelical community does not yet receive financial support, despite being recognised as a religious community.
- 8 See the recognition agreements between the state and religious communities via Albanian State Committee on Cults, available at: <http://www.kshk.gov.al/legjislacioni-per-fene-pas-vitit-1990/>
- 9 Council of Minister Decision 245, 'Agreement on the allocation of funds from the state budget to religious communities', 9 May 2018, available at: [www.qbz.gov.al/](http://www.qbz.gov.al/)
- 10 Representatives of all religious communities have stated that the 2011 census presents an inaccurate picture of the religious demographics of the country, not least because the question was optional. The census is available in Albanian and English at: [http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3058/main\\_results\\_\\_population\\_and\\_housing\\_census\\_2011.pdf](http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3058/main_results__population_and_housing_census_2011.pdf)
- 11 At the time of the 2011 census, the Albanian Evangelical Community (VUSH) was not yet an official religious community and has grown significantly since. According to unpublished research conducted by VUSH, the Evangelical Community consisted of approximately 68,000 people in 2014, or 2.2% of the population. See the report 'Raport kërkimor për Ungjillorët në Shqipëri 2003 – 2014' by Reverend Akil Pano.
- 12 World Jewish Congress, Albania (Report), <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/AL>
- 13 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2003 – Albania', 18 December 2003, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2003/24328.htm>

2005, media reports targeted Jehovah's Witnesses for being involved in a series of juvenile suicides, although it remains unclear what the involvement of the religious community was, if any.<sup>14</sup> A year later, Shkodra's municipal decision to place a statue of Mother Teresa in the city centre was opposed by a small group of local Muslims. A local Catholic church was vandalised after the installation of the statue. Tensions were lifted with the announcement that the Albanian Muslim Community recognised Mother Teresa as a national rather than religious symbol.<sup>15</sup> In recent years, the majority of complaints regarding religious tolerance have concerned schools banning female students that wear a headscarf.<sup>16</sup> Most public educational institutions do not allow students or staff to wear religious symbols, which has led to several female students being prevented from attending high school or university classes. As a result, many parents and students instead choose private educational institutions, where headscarf are allowed.

In response to current and future challenges, religious communities, in concert with state institutions, have made efforts to enhance interfaith cooperation. A good illustration of this is the increased visibility of the Interreligious Council, which was established in 2007 to promote dialogue and interfaith harmony in the country through joint projects and activities.<sup>17</sup> Over the past few years, the Interreligious Council has met more frequently and has been more broadly engaged, for example by issuing statements on the political situation in Albania and on the EU accession process.<sup>18</sup>

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14 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2005 – Albania', 8 November 2005, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2005/51536.htm>

15 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Albania', 15 September 2006, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71364.htm>

16 See, US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Reports for 2003, 2009, 2010 and 2015, at: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2003/24328.htm>; <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127295.htm>; [https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168289.htm](https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168289.htm); <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256157>

17 Interreligious Council of Albania, 'History of the Interreligious Council of Albania', <http://knfsh.al/en/historiku-i-knfsh-se/>

18 Interreligious Council of Albania, 'Press Releases', <http://knfsh.al/en/category/deklarata/>

# Country snapshot Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Lejla Hodžić

Since it emerged as an independent state in the 12th century, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been home to a great variety of religious groups: members of the Bosnian Church, which largely disintegrated after the Ottoman conquest; Catholics; Eastern Orthodox Christians; Muslims, Sephardic Jews (following their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the late 15th century), and Protestants who settled after the Austro-Hungarian occupation in the 19th century.<sup>19</sup> Being at the crossroads of different confessions and ethnic migrations, defined Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multireligious and multi-ethnic country. During the socialist regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as one of the republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), religion was propagated as retrograde leading to the exclusion of religious communities from socio-political matters, and atheism was endorsed, but not violently imposed, by the political regime.<sup>20</sup> Despite being officially excluded from the state-building process under the socialist regime, religion was and continues to be a pillar of ethnic identity and ethnic differentiation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This has had a substantial impact on the creation of a strong relationship between political affairs and religion, which intensified in the years preceding its proclamation of independence in 1992.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, religion was a decisive element in victimisation during the armed conflict that ensued, since it was the key element of ethnic identity. Despite this context, in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina religious doctrines are often used to support national political ideologies and legitimise new political establishments,<sup>22</sup> which have largely been characterised as ethno-nationalist.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, this has instigated a religious revival particularly among younger generations,<sup>24</sup> and has strengthened the relationship between politics and religion in present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>25</sup>

## Religious composition

According to its legal framework on religious communities, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a secular state where none of the dominant religions or religious communities can be

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- 19 A. Alibašić and N. Begović, 'Reframing the Relations between State and Religion in Post-War Bosnia: Learning to be Free!', *Journal of the Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 19:1, 3 January 2017, p. 20.
- 20 D. Abazovic, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina', *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, vol. 7:1, 2010, p. 321
- 21 Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence from Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) after a positive referendum vote on 3 March 1992.
- 22 D. Abazovic, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics', p. 323.
- 23 *Ibid.* p. 323
- 24 US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: International Religious Freedom Report for 2006'.
- 25 D. Abazovic, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics', p. 323.

given official status.<sup>26</sup> The state may not interfere in the internal organisation and affairs of the religious communities, while the representatives of the communities may not formally participate in political affairs.<sup>27</sup> Taking into consideration the religious diversity of Bosnian society, the law allows the state to provide equal financial support for the cultural, heritage, educational, social and charitable services of all religious communities, provided that these services are supplied in a non-discriminatory manner.<sup>28</sup> Freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion are constitutionally protected categories,<sup>29</sup> which may be limited in accordance with the law and international standards for the purpose of protecting public security, health or morality, or the rights and freedoms of others.<sup>30</sup>

The religious demography of Bosnia and Herzegovina makes it one of the most diverse countries in the region and on the continent as a whole. According to the 2013 census, Muslims constitute 50.7% of the population, Orthodox Christians 30.7%, Catholics 15.2%, while the remaining 3.4% belong to religious minorities (Jews and Protestants primarily) or consider themselves as having no religious belief.<sup>31</sup> Due to a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion, the three dominant religious groups broadly correspond to the three dominant ethnic groups – Bosniaks are predominantly Sunni Muslims, Serbs are predominantly Serbian Orthodox, whereas Croats are mainly Roman Catholics.<sup>32</sup> This strong correlation is demonstrated in the census results, where the ethnic composition correlates almost directly with the religious composition of Bosnian society, with Bosniaks constituting 50.1%, Serbs 30.8% and Croats 15.4%.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, changes in the territorial distribution of religious groups after the wars of the 1990s also correspond to equivalent changes in ethnic composition.

There have been no comprehensive surveys on religious observance recently, but according to the US Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report in 2006, the rate of religious observance varied among different religious and age groups, with higher observance recorded among Catholic Croats, and the younger generations of all three dominant religious groups.<sup>34</sup> This is some evidence of the religious revival in post-conflict

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- 26 Bosnia and Herzegovina Official Gazette, Law on Freedom of the Religion and the Legal Position of the Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, No. 5/04, Art. 14(1), <http://www.mpr.gov.ba/biblioteka/zakoni/bs/ZAKON%20o%20slobodi%20vjere.pdf>
- 27 Ibid. Arts. 14(3) and 14(4).
- 28 Ibid. Art. 14(4). Emphasis is placed on prohibition of discrimination based on religion.
- 29 Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Art. II(3)(g) and Art. III(4), available at <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ba/ba020en.pdf>
- 30 Bosnia and Herzegovina Official Gazette, Law on Freedom of the Religion and the Legal Position of the Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, No. 5/04, Art. 14(7).
- 31 BiH Agency of Statistics, Final results – Census 2013: Religion, via <http://www.statistika.ba/?show=8#link3>
- 32 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 August 2017, p. 2.
- 33 BiH Agency of Statistics, Final results – Census 2013: Nationality, via <http://www.statistika.ba/?show=8#link1>
- 34 US Department of State, 2006 International Religious Freedom Report – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1 September 2006, available via <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71372.htm>.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was partly triggered by the role played by religion during the conflict itself.

## Interreligious issues

Given that religion had played a major role in defining ethnic and cultural groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it became the key element in the victimisation of ethnic groups during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, despite the conflict being characterised as ‘ethnic’, religious identity played a defining role in what we understand as ‘ethnic cleansing’ during the war. For instance, Bosnian Muslims used the designation ‘Muslims’ to express nationhood in the former Yugoslavia’s legal framework, which meant that the term became primarily a cultural and ethnic one, instead of religious.<sup>36</sup> For these reasons, the policy of ethnic cleansing was directed at ‘Muslims’ (or Bosniaks today), regardless of their actual religious observance. Moreover, the destruction of mosques and other Muslim buildings during the conflict, has been considered as evidence of the intent to destroy Bosnian Muslims as an ethnic group.<sup>37</sup>

This historical background has defined interreligious issues and obstacles towards reconciliation in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Crucial interreligious issues nowadays include the lack of constructive dialogue between groups, religious segregation in education and discrimination of religious communities – primarily returnees. Besides from the creation of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) in 1997 to promote the shared values of all of Bosnia’s religions, religious leaders have not been sufficiently involved in the peacebuilding processes, especially at the grassroots level.<sup>38</sup> The absence or underutilisation of interfaith dialogue at the local level has been detrimental for members of religious minorities returning after the conflict. Most returnees have reported selective enforcement of their rights by authorities, while religious leaders have reported discrimination by local law enforcement agencies in their investigation of acts of violence, vandalism and threats, and in providing protection to victims.<sup>39</sup> Religious segregation in primary and secondary education is another important obstacle in achieving an inclusive education system. Religious education is provided in schools, but it usually involves classes on the religion of the majority religious group within the community, compounding discrimination towards pupils belonging to minority faiths.<sup>40</sup>

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- 35 M. Oddie, ‘The relationship of religion and ethnic nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 32:1, February 2012, pp. 34–42.
- 36 M. Sells, ‘Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion and Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 64:3, 2003, pp. 309–331.
- 37 Morgan, *Op. Cit.* p. 40.
- 38 J. N. Clark, ‘Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia & Herzegovina: Are Religious Actors Doing Enough?’ *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62:4, 5 May 2010, pp. 677–678.
- 39 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 August 2017, p. 7.
- 40 OSCE, Institute on Religion and Public Policy, *Religious Freedom in Bosnia*, 7 October 2008, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/34244?download=true>

## Country snapshot Kosovo

*By Leonie Vrugtman and Diori Angjeli*

Located in the centre of the Balkan Peninsula, Kosovo is of great historical and political importance for the entire region.<sup>41</sup> As with most Balkan countries, the dominant religion of Kosovo has fluctuated over time, in accordance with its cultural and political contact with its neighbours. Christianity first reached the area during the Roman period, and Eastern Orthodoxy eventually became the state religion in the ninth century, amid competition in the Balkans between the Bulgarian and Byzantine empires. Later, under the Serbian Kingdom, the church split with Greece and the Serbian Orthodox Church was established in Kosovo. When the Ottoman Empire took over, Islam became the official religion and gradually supplanted Christianity as the largest faith by the seventeenth century.<sup>42</sup>

Kosovo experienced major demographic changes between the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and its declaration of independence in 2008. During the Kosovo War (1998–1999), a large number of ethnic Albanians were forced to flee or were expelled from the area. In a subsequent resurgence of civil unrest a considerable proportion of ethnic Serbs were also displaced.<sup>43</sup> Today, Kosovo has a population of approximately 1,830,700 people.<sup>44</sup> According to the 2011 official census, 95.6% of the population is Muslim, 2.2% is Roman Catholic, and 1.4% is Serbian Orthodox.<sup>45</sup> However, this census was boycotted by ethnic Serbs, resulting in the underrepresentation of this ethnicity and of Orthodox Christians.<sup>46</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church, the representative of the Orthodox community in Kosovo, claims that the actual Serbian Orthodox community in Kosovo is composed of 120,000, or 6.3% of the general population.<sup>47</sup> Other religious communities, including the Tarikat (a branch of Sufi Islam) and Protestant populations, also contest the census data. The Protestant community claims 20,000 followers throughout the country, or 1.1% of the population.<sup>48</sup> Judaism is listed as one of the five traditional religions of Kosovo, but there

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41 T. Judah, *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, 2008).

42 G. Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (London, 2000), p. 14.

43 Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Minorities and indigenous peoples*, March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/kosovo/>.

44 World Bank, *Population, total – 2017*, via <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=XK&view=chart>

45 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 'The final results of Population, Households and Housing Census Released', 26 September 2012, <http://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/the-final-results-of-population-households-and-housing-census-released>

46 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, *Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011 - Final Results: Quality Report*, via <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/censuskb20/KnowledgebaseArticle10700.aspx>

47 US Department of State, *2017 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo*, 30 May 2018, p. 2, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281166.pdf>

48 *Ibid.*



are currently only 56 Jewish people living in Kosovo.<sup>49</sup>

## Religious communities and the State

Kosovo is a secular state and its constitution guarantees the freedom of belief, conscience and religion.<sup>50</sup> Expressions of faith are only limited ‘to ensure public order and safety, to protect public health and morals, human rights and fundamental freedoms of others’.<sup>51</sup> In 2017, under this provision, the former imam of the grand mosque, Shefqet Krasniqi, was arrested on grounds of encouraging terrorism and religious extremism but was later cleared of all charges.<sup>52</sup> While Kosovo is multi-confessional, the government does not have a designated ministry or department responsible for religious affairs and current legislation prevents religious communities from registering as legal entities. This has the effect that the concerns of religious communities often remain unaddressed; that religious communities receive no financial support from the state; and that they are not able to conduct administrative activities such as buying or renting properties.<sup>53</sup> As a result, religious communities seek funding from elsewhere, including foreign governments and non-governmental organisations, whose support often comes with caveats. In recent years, concerns have been raised over Turkey’s religious influence in Kosovo,<sup>54</sup> and the further spread of conservative Islam through activities funded by Gulf countries.<sup>55</sup>

## Religious tension

Although religion was not the primary driving force behind the war, it was an inseparable part of how the conflict parties identified each other. Since most Albanians are Muslim and most Serbs are Orthodox Christian, political leaders in the region emphasised

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- 49 L. Luxner, ‘With US help, Muslim-majority Kosovo plans its first synagogue and Jewish museum’, *Times of Israel*, 22 December 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-us-help-muslim-majority-kosovo-plans-its-first-synagogue-and-jewish-museum/>.
- 50 Republic of Kosovo Official Gazeta, Law No. 02/L-31 on Religious Freedom in Kosovo, 24 August 2006, Preamble, available at: [http://www.gazetazyrtare.com/e-gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=28&lang=en](http://www.gazetazyrtare.com/e-gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=28&lang=en).
- 51 Ibid. Art. 1.3.
- 52 ‘Kosovo court clears Grande Mosque imam of inciting terrorism’, *Reuters*, 23 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-terrorism-verdict/kosovo-court-clears-grande-mosque-imam-of-inciting-terrorism-idUSKBN1GZ14P>
- 53 J. Mehmeti, ‘Faith and Politics in Kosovo: The Status of Religious Communities in a Secular Country’, in A. Elbasani and O. Roy (eds.), *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*. (London, 2015) pp. 62–80; and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018: Kosovo*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/kosovo>
- 54 M. Edwards and M. Colborne, ‘Turkey’s gift of a mosque sparks fears of “neo-Ottomanism” in Kosovo’, *Guardian*, 2 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/02/turkey-is-kosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque>
- 55 C. Gall, ‘How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS’, *New York Times*, 21 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>

religious differences even if it had little or nothing to do with faith itself.<sup>56</sup> This had a significant effect on how ethnic groups perceived each other and fuelled tensions between communities of different faiths. Following the withdrawal of Serb and Yugoslav forces, some Kosovo Albanians engaged in acts of retaliation such as destroying churches and other Orthodox sites between 1999 and 2004<sup>57</sup>. In the last ten years, such incidents have declined, but the country remains vulnerable to incidents of religious – or ethnically – motivated violence, hate speech and vandalism, especially between Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians. The government has stepped up its efforts to respond to ethnical or religiously motivated violence and vandalism, including protecting religious and cultural sites. Despite this protection, theft and vandalism continues and there have been some instances of attacks being planned on Serbian Orthodox.<sup>58</sup> In 2016 for example, four ethnic Albanians with firearms, suspected to have links to the Islamic State, were arrested in front of the Visoki Decani Monastery.<sup>59</sup>

Cases of religiously motivated incidents impact other denominations as well. Islamic sites, including mosques, have been vandalised by ethnic Serbs during and after the war – most notably the Ibar River Mosque in North Mitrovica, which was never rebuilt.<sup>60</sup> In some cases, rival Muslims groups have launched attacks on each other's religious leaders.<sup>61</sup> In the past, the Protestant and Jewish communities have raised concerns over Kosovo's freedom of religion provisions, especially over discrepancies in their ability to obtain construction permits for places of worship or their properties becoming subject to vandalism.<sup>62</sup>

Both the Muslim community of Kosovo and the Serbian Orthodox Church have also accused the government of discrimination towards their communities, albeit for different reasons. The Muslim community has complained that, due to rules prohibiting religious dress in public schools, female Muslim students wearing headscarves had been sent home and thereby denied access to education.<sup>63</sup> The Orthodox community claims it has received no financial support to rebuild destroyed religious sites. Meanwhile, the government has

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56 G. Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (2000); and L. Dunn, 'The Roles of Religion in Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. 16 no. 1, January 2015, available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol16/iss1/3/>

57 Amnesty International. (2006). *Kosovo (Serbia): The UN in Kosovo - a Legacy of Impunity*. Retrieved via: <https://www.amnesty.org/>

58 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269074.pdf>

59 K. Rexhepi and E. Qafmolla, 'Kosovo Gunmen Arrested Near Serb Monastery', 1 February 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/02/01/terror-incidents-distress-kosovo-mosques-and-monasteries-02-01-2016/>

60 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269074.pdf>

61 US Department of State, 2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 30 July 2012, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193037.pdf>

62 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo, 30 May 2018, p. 1, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281166.pdf>; and US Department of State, 2015 International Religious Freedom Report – Kosovo, 10 August 2016, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256417.pdf>

63 Bashkia Islame e Kosove, *Deklaratë për Opinion*, 24 October 2013, <https://bislame.net/prsdntj/>



expanded its Interfaith Kosovo programme to promote religious tolerance by organising conferences and workshops on the topic,<sup>64</sup> with state officials and religious representatives also attending the consecration of the Catholic St. Theresa Cathedral in Pristina.<sup>65</sup>



64 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kosovo's interfaith initiative echoes around the globe, June 2015, <https://frantic.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/kua-peacemakers/2015/06/Kosovos-interfaith-initiative.pdf>

65 P. Çollaku, Pristina Inaugurates Cathedral for Mother Teresa, 7 September 2010, <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/09/07/pristina-inaugurates-cathedral-for-mother-teresa/>

# Country snapshot Montenegro

*By Belgrade Open School*

The history of religion in Montenegro is similar to the rest of the region. Christianity was present in the cluster of territories which comprise modern Montenegro from around the 4th century, with authority fluctuating between Rome and Constantinople, before Eastern Orthodoxy became established in the late 9th century. In June 1920 the Orthodox Church in Montenegro officially united with that of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians to form the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>66</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church was in the rank of the Patriarchate, and it was subsequently accepted by other Eastern Orthodox Churches in 1922. In 1993 the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was founded, and was registered as an NGO in 2001. Its leadership claims that Montenegrin churches were illegitimately annexed by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1920 and that it is the sole legal representative of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro. However, the decision to unify was accepted by all of the bishops from Montenegro, and the metropolitan Gavriilo Dožić was among the most prominent candidates for the first patriarch of the united Serbian Church, a role which he eventually took on (1938–1950). As such, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church is not recognised by any other official Eastern Orthodox Churches. Islam was introduced into the area with the Ottoman conquest in the late 15th century, whose influence in the region lasted until the Balkan wars of 1912/13 when the Kingdom of Montenegro gained independence and united with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians in 1918. The Islamic Community claims that significant part of the Muslim population was deported after the country gained independence from Ottoman rule.<sup>67</sup>

## Religious composition

According to the 2011 census, about 72% of the population declare themselves to be Orthodox Christian. The Orthodox population in Montenegro is divided between two Orthodox communities – the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC). Their mutual relations are complicated, and they have worsened since Montenegro became an independent state in 2006. Local media outlets have estimated that about 70% of the Orthodox population are adherents of the SOC, with around 30% in the MOC. However, these estimates should be taken with caution since there have been no official studies conducted. About 3.5% of the population identify as Roman Catholic, and reside mostly in the coastal area.

The second largest religion in Montenegro is Islam, forming around 16% of the total population and are represented by the Islamic Community of Montenegro (ICM). The

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66 Đ. Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve: Od početka XIX veka do kraja Drugog svetskog rata*, Vol. 2, (BIGZ: Beograd, 2002), pp. 369–376.

67 Islamic Community of Montenegro, 'Historical development and organisation', <https://www.monteislam.com/islamska-zajednica-u-crnoj-gori>

majority of Montenegrin Muslims live in the northeastern part of the country in Rožaje, Plav and Gusinje, which neighbour the Serbian predominantly Muslim municipalities of Sjenica, Novi Pazar, and Tutin. A further 1.24% identified as atheists and 2.61% who did not want to declare. The rest of the population (about 4.5%) are members of other smaller religions such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Judaism, and various branches of Protestantism and Buddhism.<sup>68</sup>

## Interfaith relations

According to Article 14 of the Constitution of Montenegro, 'Religious communities are separated from the State. Religious communities are equal and free to worship and do other religious tasks/works'.<sup>69</sup> The government has agreements with the Islamic and Jewish Communities and the Holy See further defining the legal status of the respective groups and regulating their relationship with the state. There are no similar agreements with the SOC, MOC, or the other recognised religious groups.

By law, religion may not be taught in public primary or secondary schools. The SOC operates one secondary school in the historical capital of Cetinje, and the Islamic Community operates one private madrassa at the secondary school level in the capital Podgorica – both follow the state curriculum in non-religious matters.

There are 21 recognised religious groups in the country and all applied for official registration except the SOC.<sup>70</sup> The interior minister from May until November 2016, Goran Danilovic (a member of the opposition party Demos), wrote a letter to the SOC supporting the SOC's assertion that it was not required to register because it had legal status before 1977 and was therefore not a new religious group.<sup>71</sup> As a result, the SOC has experienced regular difficulties with the issuing of residency permits,<sup>72</sup> and visas for its clergy. There is an ongoing dispute between the SOC and MOC, particularly over the ownership of 750 Orthodox sites.<sup>73</sup> Police have prohibited members of the MOC from performing the liturgy in churches on several occasions because of the security concerns, while numerous members of the SOC were already in churches performing liturgies. Police have continued to provide

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68 Montenegro Statistical Office, 'Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011 – Population of Montenegro by sex, type of settlement, ethnicity, religion and mother tongue per municipalities', pp. 14–15, via [https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje\(1\).pdf](https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje(1).pdf)

69 Montenegro Official Gazette, 'Sl. list CG', br. 1/2007 and 38/2013 - Amendments I–XVI', via <http://www.sluzbenilist.me/pregled-dokumenta/?id={F25BEBC5-97DF-43CC-A22B-D3BA57194B23}>; and <http://www.sluzbenilist.me/pregled-dokumenta/?id={67D9E04D-FEB0-4ECD-9122-6FA8A209B35F}>

70 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, May 2018, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dclid=280940>

71 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dclid=268848>

72 See International Religious Freedom Reports prior to 2015, via <https://me.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/official-reports/>

73 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, May 2018, p. 7, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dclid=280940>

protection around churches for events conducted by both groups.<sup>74</sup> In recent years there have also been tensions among the Islamic Community, with a dispute arising between the head of the ICM, Reis Rifat Fejzic, and one of the two leaders of the Islamic Community in Serbia, former Mufti Muamer Zukorlic, over who represents the Islamic community in the Sandzak region (a historical term for a former Ottoman region now divided by the border between northeast Montenegro and southwest Serbia).<sup>75</sup>

Religious groups have continued to complain that the laws regulating their legal status are outdated and inadequate because they were created based on the demographic conditions of the former Yugoslavia. The government has been working on a new law regulating the legal status of religious communities since 2015.<sup>76</sup> After three years of preparation, a draft version was completed. However, during an international academic conference on 'Freedom of Religion or Belief in Montenegro' held in Montenegro on 3–4 May 2019, the new draft law was heavily criticised.<sup>77</sup>

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74 Ibid. p.5

75 US Department of State, 2015 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, October 2016, p. 6, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=256223>

76 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, May 2018, p. 6, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280940>

77 See more on the official webpage of the Council of European Churches, <https://www.ceceurope.org/conference-reviews-draft-law-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-in-montenegro/>

# Country snapshot North Macedonia

By Mariglen Demri

Many religious beliefs and cultures have existed on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM). Orthodox Christianity has been present in the geographical area of the modern RNM since the first century AD and is the largest religious denomination of North Macedonia. According to the most recent census, conducted in 2002, 64.8% of citizens identify as Orthodox Christians.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, it has been inscribed into cultural memory that the region of 'Macedonia' is cited in the Bible – its roughly 25 mentions are a source of particular pride amongst Orthodox believers.<sup>79</sup> As such, the followers of the RNM Orthodox Church consider themselves to be the successors of the first Christians on the Balkan Peninsula.

However, North Macedonia is also characterised by its religious diversity, having been under the religious and cultural influence of the Bulgarian, Serbian and Ottoman empires, as well as experiencing a major influx of Sephardic Jews from Iberia in the fifteenth century. Positive interfaith relations have generally been preserved in the modern era although at times they have experienced moments of tension. According to the 2002 census, the religious distribution of RNM is as follows: 64.8% are Orthodox Christians, 33.3% are Muslims, 0.35% Catholics, and 0.03% Protestants. A more recent study by Brima and WIN-Gallup<sup>80</sup>, found that only 1% of citizens identified as atheists, while 88% declared themselves as members of one of the religious communities. Similar to other countries in the Balkan region, members of the largest ethnic groups in North Macedonia tend to belong to distinct religious communities. According to research conducted by Abdul Gaffar Mughal using data from the State Statistical Office, over 90% of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia identify as Muslim.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, more than 90% of ethnic Macedonian identify as Orthodox.<sup>82</sup>

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- 78 Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, *Census of Population*, available at: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/publikacii/knigaX.pdf>
- 79 T. Tordsson, 'How Do Religion And National Attitudes Coexist In Contemporary Macedonia?'. Unpublished Master's Thesis 2013, Humanistic Faculty, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway. Available at: <http://bora.uib.no/bitstream/handle/1956/6940/106778789.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> Accessed 12.05.2019
- 80 WIN-Gallup International, *Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism – 2012*, accessed at: 07.05.2019, available in: <https://sidmennt.is/wp-content/uploads/Gallup-International-um-tr%C3%BA-og-tr%C3%BAleysi-2012.pdf>
- 81 A. Gaffar Mughal, 'Muslim Population of the Republic of Macedonia: A Demographic and Socio-economic Profile', *Balkan Social Science Review*, Vol. 5, June 2015, p. 90, [js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/BSSR/article/download/1021/1032](http://js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/BSSR/article/download/1021/1032)
- 82 Ruzhica Cacanaska, "The Process of De-Secularization in Macedonian Society", (2003) Available on: <https://newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/item/The-Process-of-De-Secularization-in-Macedonian-Society#.XN6rKY4zaM8> Accessed on: 15.05.2019

## Politics and religion

Given this historical context and the particular geography of North Macedonia, religion is often interwoven with daily politics. More often than not religious representatives openly communicate political positions on issues that fall out of the scope of their capacity as religious communities. The ethnophyletism<sup>83</sup> – the conflation of national and religious identities – of the Orthodox Church enables it to claim certain responsibilities regarding ethno-national issues. For example, during negotiations in the Macedonia naming dispute with Greece (and the law on the use of languages, where Albanian was supposed to become an official language of state), some bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) joined public protests claiming that the MOC is strictly against changing the name and the constitution of the country.<sup>84</sup>

Considering that the theory and practice of politics in the region is often framed in ethnic terms, such ethno-political conflicts have a major effect on the religious cohesion of North Macedonian society, such as in the armed conflict between the government and Albanian separatists in 2001.<sup>85</sup> The principle basis for the conflict was inter-ethnic disagreement, but inevitably involved a religious element too. The inter-ethnic conflict in this case grew into an interreligious conflict between the two main religious communities. During the armed conflict, objects of religious and cultural-historical significance from both sides were demolished or destroyed.<sup>86</sup>

Even after the Ohrid Agreement ended the conflict, tensions have persisted. According to the US State Department's 2016 Religious Freedom Report the reconstruction of the mosque in Prilep called 'Charshi Mosque' was facing obstructions by the government.<sup>87</sup> Also, in 2011 a government decision to build a museum in the shape of church inside Kale Fortress in Skopje led to a violent confrontation between young members of the two main ethnic communities, Albanians and Macedonians.<sup>88</sup> Albanians were angry for building the so called church-museum on location which they claimed should have been a mosque. Macedonians, however, felt the need to defend the 'church'. All Albanian ethnic political parties were against this project, calling it a provocation.<sup>89</sup>

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83 See G. Papathomas, *Course of Canon Law – Appendix VI – canonical glossary*. (Paris, 1995).

84 (Video) The Bishop Petar: MOC is against change of the Constitution and the name of country. [(Видео) Владиката Петар: МПЦ е против промена на Уставот и името на државата], MakFax, 27 February 2018. Available on: <https://makfax.com.mk/daily-news/...> accessed on: 12 May 2019

85 The 2001 insurgency in the Republic of Macedonia was an armed conflict which began when the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) militant group attacked the security forces of the Republic of Macedonia at the beginning of February 2001, and ended with the Ohrid Agreement.

86 V. Petroska-Beska and M. Najcevska, 'Macedonia: Understanding History, Preventing Future Conflict', Special Report 115, United States Institute Of Peace, February 2004, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN017851.pdf>

87 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report - Macedonia, 15 August, 2017, p. 6, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269084.pdf>

88 European Commission. Working Paper, 'The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia 2011 Progress Report', 12 October 2011, Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key\\_documents/2011/package/mk\\_rapport\\_2011\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/mk_rapport_2011_en.pdf)

89 S. Marusic, 'Eight Injured in Clashes over "Church" Construction in Macedonia', Balkan Insight, 13 February 2011, Available on: <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/02/13/albanians-macedonians-clash-over-museum-church/>

## State interference in religious freedom

The Macedonian Orthodox Church (formerly the Archbishopric of Ohrid), which after the Second World War had been reinstated an autonomous diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, declared its independence in 1967. Its autocephality is still disputed by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Besides internal administrative church motives, ecclesiastical inner circles do not reject the possibility that movement for autocephaly has been led by ethno-political and ethnophyletist elements in the Orthodox Church, in general.<sup>90</sup>

In 2002, one of the bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church broke off and joined the Serbian Orthodox Church canon. Bishop Jovan, also known as Zoran Vranishkovski, and his followers then tried to register the Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese (OOA) as a religious community but was rejected by the state commission, which recognises the MOC.<sup>91</sup> In 2017, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled that the blocking of registration was in breach of Article 11 of the convention, and awarded the OOA 4500 euros in damages.<sup>92</sup> Vranishkovski has been charged and served criminal sentences, but the Church is still not officially registered.<sup>93</sup>

Similar circumstances exist within the Islamic community in Macedonia, although with a lesser intensity. Namely, the law on religious communities from 2007 disputes the legal status of the Bektashi Community which registered in 2000 in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as its right to the property of the Arabati Baba teqe (Sufi religious building). With the inability to register itself as a legal entity, and the subsequent denied right to acquire property, the teqe has become the property of the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) of the RNM. Representatives of the Bektashi community consider this to be an instance of the state favouring the IRC at the expense of a smaller community.<sup>94</sup> In 2018, the European Court of Human Rights passed a verdict requiring the state to pay the Bektashi community in North Macedonia compensation for the damages caused by the obstacles imposed by national courts that made it impossible for the Bektashi community to retain its status as religious community.<sup>95</sup>

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90 G. Gjorgjevski, 'Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Context of Balkan and European Orthodoxy', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 37, Iss. 4, Article 2, 2002, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss4/2>

91 Критика и противаргументи за нерегистрирање на ПОА, available at: <https://www.dw.com/mk/критика-и-противаргументи-за-нерегистрирање-на-поа/a-4549834>

92 Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese (Greek-Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese Of The Peć Patriarchy) vs. The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia, App no. 3532/07 (ECHR, 9 April 2018)

93 Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia, 'Annual Report on the situation in the area of human rights in the Republic of Macedonia for 2014', available in: [http://www.mhc.org.mk/system/uploads/redactor\\_assets/documents/1110/Godishen\\_Izvestaj\\_English\\_.pdf](http://www.mhc.org.mk/system/uploads/redactor_assets/documents/1110/Godishen_Izvestaj_English_.pdf)

94 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report - Macedonia, 30 May 2018, p. 6-8, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281176.pdf>

95 Bektashi Community and Others v. the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, App. nos. 48044/10, 75722/12, and 25176/13 (ECHR, 12 April 2018).



# Country snapshot Serbia

*By Belgrade Open School*

The Christian faith has been present in the territory comprising modern Serbia since the Roman period. After the initial spread of Christianity to the area in the 2nd century, religious authority fluctuated between Rome and Constantinople, before Eastern Orthodoxy became established in the late 9th century. Under the medieval Nemanjic dynasty, the Serbian Orthodox Church achieved autocephalous status in 1219, and was elevated to a patriarchate in 1346. Islam was introduced in Serbia with the Ottoman presence in the Balkans from the 14th century onwards. Varying degrees of tolerance between the Orthodox and Muslim populations of foreign and Slavic descent followed. Between 1804 and 1815, a series of Serbian uprisings against Ottoman rule culminated in Serbia gaining autonomy under the rule of Serbian hereditary princes in 1830, and eventually in complete independence in 1878. However, in southern parts of Serbia, a minority population of Slavic Muslims and Albanian Muslims remains.

During the communist regime after 1945 when Serbia was a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, religion was tolerated but discouraged, whilst the property of religious organisations was mostly nationalised. The impact of socialist political ideology on religion in Serbia can be seen in the fact that data on religious affiliation was ignored for ideological and political reasons in the censuses of 1961, 1971 and 1981.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, recent data has shown a decline in the proportion of people identifying as atheist since then by a factor of 10, the underlying reason for which could be the changed political and ideological atmosphere of Serbian society.<sup>97</sup>

The substantial overlap between religious affiliation and ethnic identity played a major role in the wars that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, and continues somewhat to this day. This reflects the role of religion in creating an atmosphere of mutual intolerance among the different nations in the Balkans, with rises in nationalism being reinforced by a rise in expressions of religious identity. This increase in the importance of religious identity in Serbia was also demonstrated by the establishment of the Ministry of Religion of Serbia in 1991, which lasted until 2012.

## Church-state relations

The Republic of Serbia is a secular state according to Article 11 of its Constitution. Churches and religious communities are separated from the state and no religion may be established as a state or mandatory religion. The 2006 state law which regulates churches

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<sup>96</sup> A special study written on the basis of the 2011 Census, the Etnomozaik, is available only in Serbian; Republic of Serbia, 'Census of population, households and dwellings in 2011. Ethno-confessional and linguistic mosaic of Serbia', p. 178, <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p.182



and religious communities grants special treatment to the seven religious groups which the government defines as 'traditional'. These are the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church, Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic Community, and the Jewish community.<sup>98</sup> The law grants these seven traditional religious communities tax exemptions, the right to have their faith taught in public schools, and the right to provide chaplain services to military personnel.<sup>99</sup> Besides the seven traditional religions, there are another twenty religious communities and churches on the state register.

## Religious composition of country

All statistical data on Serbian religious demography is based on the 2011 census, and does not include data for Kosovo,<sup>100</sup> which declared independence in 2008. The data for two municipalities bordering Kosovo is incomplete since a number of Albanian citizens in those areas refused to participate in the census. The majority of the Serbian population identified as Christian (91.22%), belonging to the major denominations – Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and various branches of Protestantism. Of the different Christian denominations, the vast majority belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church (84.59%), while 4.97% identified as Catholics. The majority of Roman Catholics live in the northern part of Serbia – Vojvodina.<sup>101</sup>

The third biggest religion in Serbia is Islam, according to the 2011 census Muslims represent 3.10% of the population. They are organised in two different communities – the Islamic Community of Serbia and the Islamic Community in Serbia. The first has its seat in Belgrade and consists of three mufti units, while the second is located in city of Novi Pazar, a Muslim majority area and is under the riyasat (executive body) of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The traditional Protestant communities constitute around 1%, mostly of the Slovak and Hungarian national minorities. More than 90% of Serbia's 36,000 Jews were killed during the Holocaust, and as a result the Jewish community now has less than 1000 members.

## Interfaith relations

According to independent reports, religious violence has declined in last years, although it is sometimes hard to determine if a violent act has been motivated by religion or ethnic identity. Interfaith relations are generally good in Serbia, but tensions persist between the Serbian Orthodox Church and other unrecognised Orthodox Churches – the Montenegrin and Macedonian – as well as divisions between the two Islamic communities.

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98 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Serbia, p. 3, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=280956>

99 Ibid. p. 3

100 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

101 Republic of Serbia, 'Census of population, households and dwellings in 2011. Ethno-confessional and linguistic mosaic of Serbia', <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

Religious identity continues to overlap with and reinforce feelings of national or ethnic identity.<sup>102</sup> A major outbreak of religious violence took place in 2004 when mosques in the centres of Belgrade and Nis were damaged soon after a series of attacks in Kosovo in which more than 36 Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries<sup>103</sup> were destroyed in rioting by Kosovan Albanians.<sup>104</sup>

## Kosovo

The situation in Kosovo remains very complex<sup>105</sup>, as tensions between the majority Albanian and minority Serbian populations have not abated 20 years after the war of 1998–99.<sup>106</sup> While Kosovo declared independence in 2008, it is still not recognised as a member state of the United Nations and it is not officially recognised by approximately half of its member states – despite the EU’s several resolutions that encourage its members to recognise Kosovo’s independence. What makes the situation especially difficult, is that a significant number of Serbian Orthodox Church properties are located in Kosovan territory.

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102 Ibid.

103 Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, <https://unmik.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s-2004-348.pdf>

104 Human Rights Watch, 'Failure to Protect: Anti-Minority Violence in Kosovo, March 2004', <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/07/25/failure-protect/anti-minority-violence-kosovo-march-2004>

105 On current state of relations, "Serbia-Kosovo relations: Confrontation or normalisation?", [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)635512\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf)

106 Especially see the part on Religious/Ethnic Violence in "Kosovo 2019 Crime & Safety Report", <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=25857>



# **Elite survey reports**



*Bosnia and Herzegovina*



*Serbia*



*Montenegro*



*Kosovo*



*Albania*



*North Macedonia*

# Introduction

Religion has long been an essential element in the societies of the Western Balkan region, primarily because religious affiliation was key to cultural characterisation and ethnic differentiation,<sup>107</sup> but religion has achieved a prominent role in almost all aspects of society in the post-communist era. According to scholars, religion has not only witnessed a revival in these societies considering the increased number of religious activities, but the process of 'de-secularisation' of the public has been present as well.<sup>108</sup> Also, religion played a crucial role in the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s,<sup>109</sup> which came to define contemporary interreligious relations across the whole region. These are only some of the dimensions of the role of religion in Western Balkan society which this cross-country report attempts to analyse.

The goal of this survey report is to gather information and opinions on the role of religion in contemporary Western Balkan countries with regard to different societal issues such as politics, the economy, social cohesion, interreligious coexistence, tolerance, and democracy. In addition, the aim is to get an insight into multi-religious context and identify the role of religious institutions and leaders, their activities and practices. Finally, this survey report identifies areas for improvement, and the ways in which religion could be more beneficial to each society. While the analysis focuses on each country separately, this survey is part of an effort to better understand the role of religion in the entire region of the Western Balkans.

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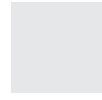
107 Oddie, Morgan, 'The relationship of religion and ethnic nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Religion in Eastern Europe*, XXXII, February 2012, p. 34.

108 Abazović, Dino, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Eur.Y.B. Minority Issues* 7:317, 2007, p. 318..

109 Oddie, (2012). *Op. Cit.* p. 39.



*Bosnia and Herzegovina*



*Serbia*



*Montenegro*



*Kosovo*



*Albania*



*North Macedonia*

# Survey report Albania

By Leonie Vrugtman and Dior Angjeli

## Survey sample

In April and May 2019, more than one hundred surveys were distributed amongst influential figures in Albania. The survey aimed to gather their views on the role of religion in Albania and the Western Balkans. In total, 33 respondents provided quantitative and qualitative answers to questions, including politicians and government employees (N = 3), religious leaders (N = 4), academia (N = 6), civil society leaders (N = 7), journalists and opinion-makers (N = 6) and young leaders (N = 5). One respondent did not state his occupation. Of the respondents, 25 were male (78.1%) and seven (21.9%) were female. The average age of the respondents was 41.6 years, with the youngest respondent being 28 years old and the oldest 54. In terms of education, one respondent was educated to a bachelor's degree level, 18 respondents finished an MA, eight have obtained a PhD and four have completed post-doctoral study as well. One respondent did not state his education.

## The role of religion in Albania

The daily life of most Albanians is largely secular. The majority of Albanians identify as belonging to a religious community, but when asked about religion people often refer to their family's religious affiliation instead of their own choice of faith.<sup>110</sup> According to a study on religious tolerance in Albania (IDM, 2018), the majority of Albanians do not consider themselves as actively practising a religion (62.7%). Instead, most only practise the most important rituals of their religion (42.3%) or do not take part in any of the rituals (26.8%). Religion, for most people, is something personal and their everyday life is not really influenced by faith (71%). 54.1% of Albanians agree or strongly agree with the statement: 'Although I am a religious person, I refuse to let religious considerations influence my everyday activities'; and 65.7% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'Although I believe in my religion, I think there are many more important things in life'.<sup>111</sup>

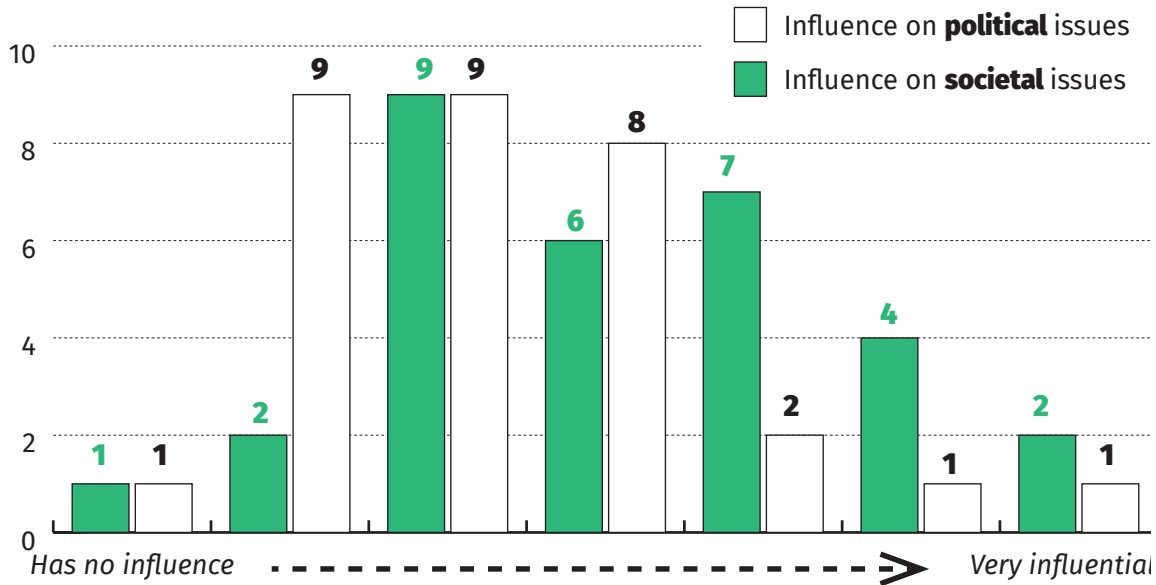
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110 UNDP Albania 'Being LGBTI in Eastern Europe: Albania country report', 2017, available at: <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/albania/docs/ALBANIA%20FINAL%20REPORT%2018.10.2017.pdf>

111 Institute of Democracy and Meditation, 'Religious tolerance in Albania', 25 April 2018, available at: <http://idmalbania.org/religious-tolerance-albania/>



**Figure 1: Religion's influence on social and political issues in Albania**



In the current survey, carried out only amongst influential figures in Albania, answers were largely in agreement with those findings. Respondents were asked to comment on the statement: ‘In your opinion, how important is religion for most of the people in Albania?’ On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 marks complete irrelevance and 7 marks significant influence, the mean was 4.1. This suggests that, according to Albania’s influential figures, religion is of moderate importance to most Albanians. Only three respondents thought of religion as very important in people’s lives, of which two are influential members of one of Albania’s religious communities and one is a youth leader.

Although religion in general may not be perceived as of great importance in people’s lives, it may still influence people’s perceptions of societal or political issues. According to respondents, religion has moderate influence on their attitudes about societal issues such as poverty, justice, equality, crime and social cohesion in Albania. The respondents answered with an average assessment of 4.16 on a scale from 1 (no influence at all) to 7 (significant influence). While journalists and opinion makers valued the influence on societal matters as quite low to moderate, two of the influential members of religious communities answered that religion has a significant influence on people’s perceptions regarding societal issues. When asked the same question about political matters such as democratic participation, voter behaviour or political parties, respondents felt that religion had less of an influence (average assessment was 3.26). Only one member of the religious community and a youth leader perceived that religion had a strong or significant influence on people’s opinions on political matters (a 6 or 7).

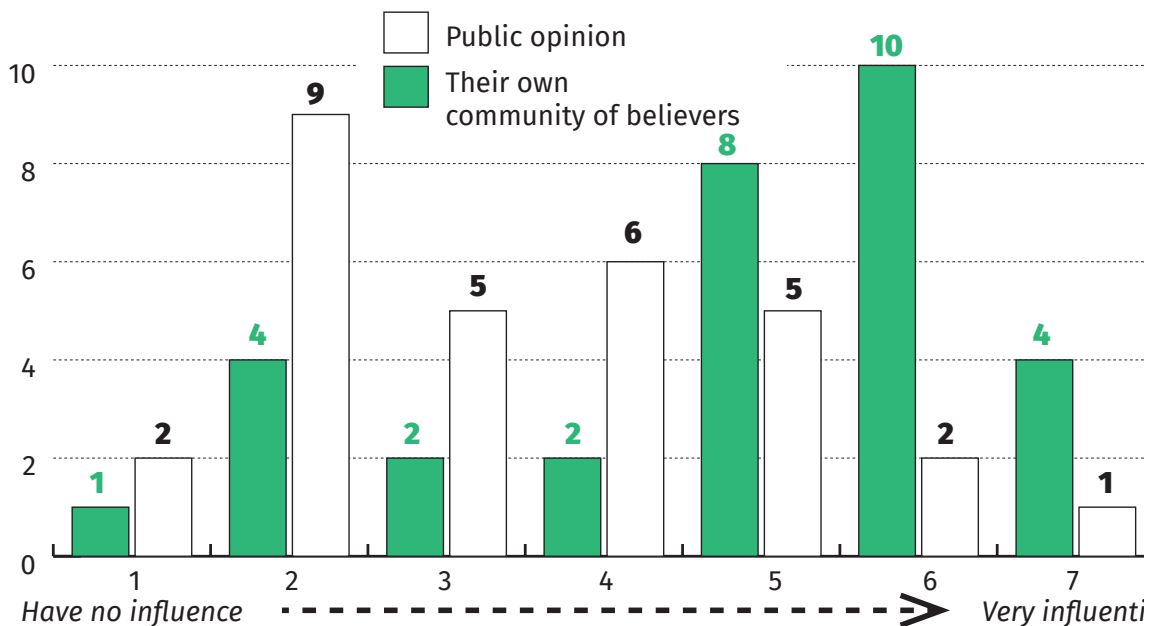
### Religious leaders

Since 2007, the leaders of the largest religious communities of Albania have formed an Interreligious Council that promotes dialogue and inter-faith harmony through joint

projects and activities. Over the past few years, the council has become more visible and has been increasingly engaged with societal and political developments in Albania. The council has received international recognition for its work and was awarded the awarded Sérgio Vieira de Mello Prize in 2018.<sup>112</sup> This sentiment of religious harmony is not only embraced at the highest level. According to the 2018 study on religious tolerance carried out by IDM, 74.4% of the respondents perceived that religious clerics at the local level also embrace values of religious tolerance.<sup>113</sup> In the current survey, the prominent members of Albanian society were asked about the sphere of influence of religious leaders and other clerics. Respondents believe that religious leaders have a considerable influence on their own community of believers. On a scale from 1 (no influence) to 7 (significant influence), respondents gave an average rate of 4.87. This influence sphere creates an opportunity for promoting values of religious tolerance within the community of believers.

Despite their perceived influence on their own community of believers, the respondents do not feel that religious leaders have a strong influence on public opinion in Albania in general. Aside from the representatives of the religious communities responding to the survey, the remainder of the elite were sceptical as to the extent to which religious leaders influence public opinion. With an average answer of 3.43 on a scale from 1 (no influence) to 7 (significant influence), the responses depict that religious leaders have yet to substantially breach discussions pertaining to the public realm.

**Figure 2: The influence from religious leaders in Albania**



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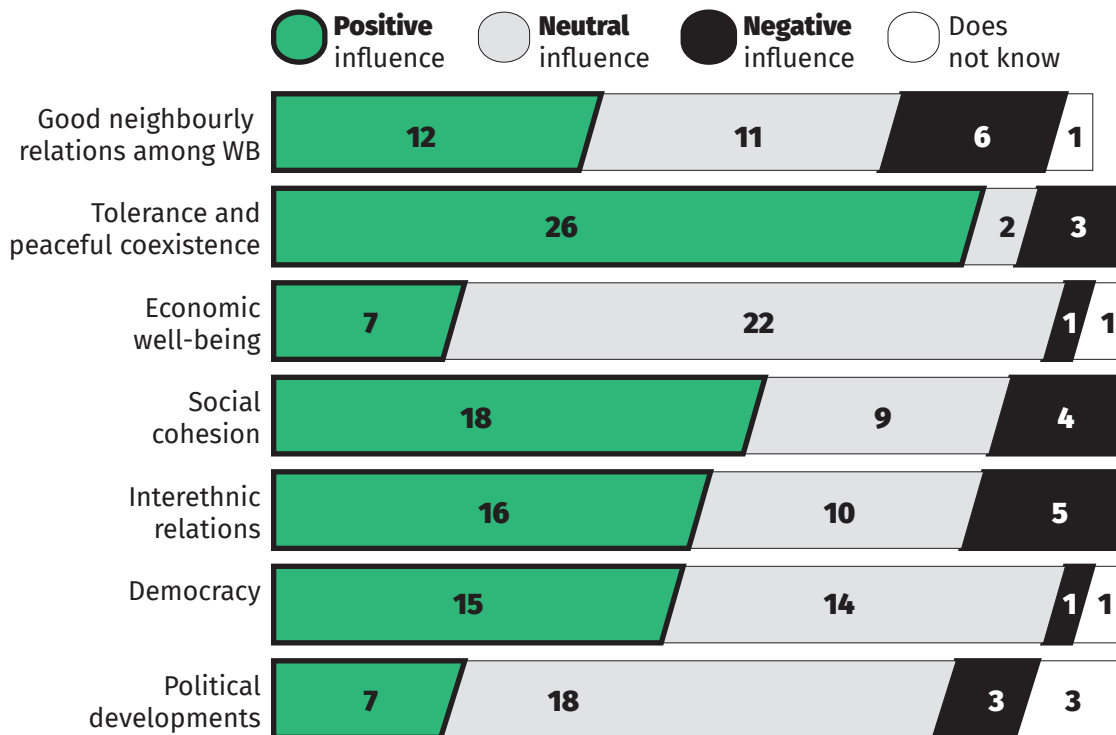
112 'The Interreligious Council of Albania receives human rights award', Tirana Times, 8 November 2018, available at: <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=139119>

113 Institute of Democracy and Meditation, 'Religious tolerance in Albania', 25 April 2018, available at: <http://idmalbania.org/religious-tolerance-albania/>

## The influence of religion on developments in Albania

Respondents were asked whether they felt that religion, as predominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, has positively or negatively influenced developments in Albania. Overall, the influential figures in Albania viewed religion as a positive influence on the developments in the country, rather than a negative one. Respondents saw religion especially as having a positive influence on the tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the country (83.9% or N = 26), the highest frequency out of all the questions. On other developments, such as social cohesion, inter-ethnic relations and democracy, religion was also seen as having a more positive than a negative influence. For social cohesion, 58.1% of respondents answered that religion had a positive influence. For inter-ethnic relations and democracy this was 51.6% and 48.4% respectively. Mostly neutral responses were recorded concerning religion's effect on economic well-being (71% answered neutral) and political developments (58.1% answered neutral), which means that respondents tend to perceive that in Albania, religion does not really have an influence on these developments. Good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries was most-often reported as being influenced negatively by religion. Six respondents believed that religion has a negative influence on relations between Western Balkan Countries.

Figure 3: The influence of religion on politics and society

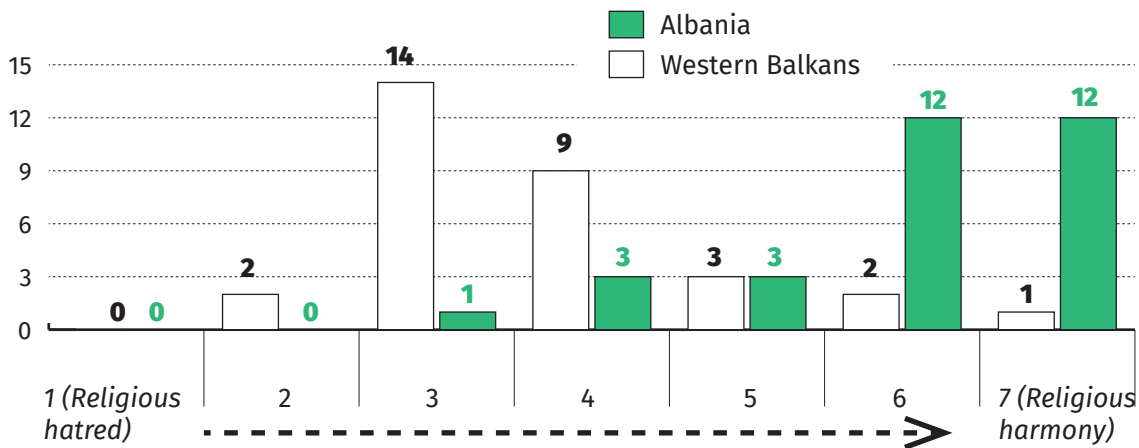


## Religious tolerance

In 2014, Pope Francis made the first of his foreign visits to Albania in order to highlight the interreligious harmony in the country. Pope Francis hailed Albania because of ‘the peaceful coexistence and collaboration that exists among followers of different religions’.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, according to the 2018 study on religious tolerance, the vast majority of Albanians believe that religious tolerance is a fundamental value in Albania (93%).<sup>115</sup> The reason for this is, according to 76.3% of the respondents, that Albanians in general are not very religious. What is more important to Albanians is to lead a moral life (69.5% strongly agrees or agrees) and to be a good person no matter what religion you profess (72.5% strongly agree or agree).

The findings of the current survey agree with some of the major findings of the 2018 study. The respondents were asked to rate the interreligious relations in Albania on a scale from 1 (religious hatred) to 7 (religious harmony). The average answer from the respondents was a 6, meaning that the respondents perceive that in Albania, there is religious harmony. 38.7% of the respondents rated interreligious relations with a 7 and another 38.7% gave a 6. Only one respondent rated the interreligious relations in Albania with less than an average score: a 3 on a scale from 1 to 7. Interreligious relations in the Western Balkans, on the other hand, were rated as being much less positive. On the same scale from 1 to 7, the respondents rated interreligious relations in the Western Balkans with an average score of 3.74. Only one respondent perceived that in the Western Balkans, interreligious relations can be described as harmonious.

**Figure 4: Interreligious relations in Albania and in the Western Balkans**



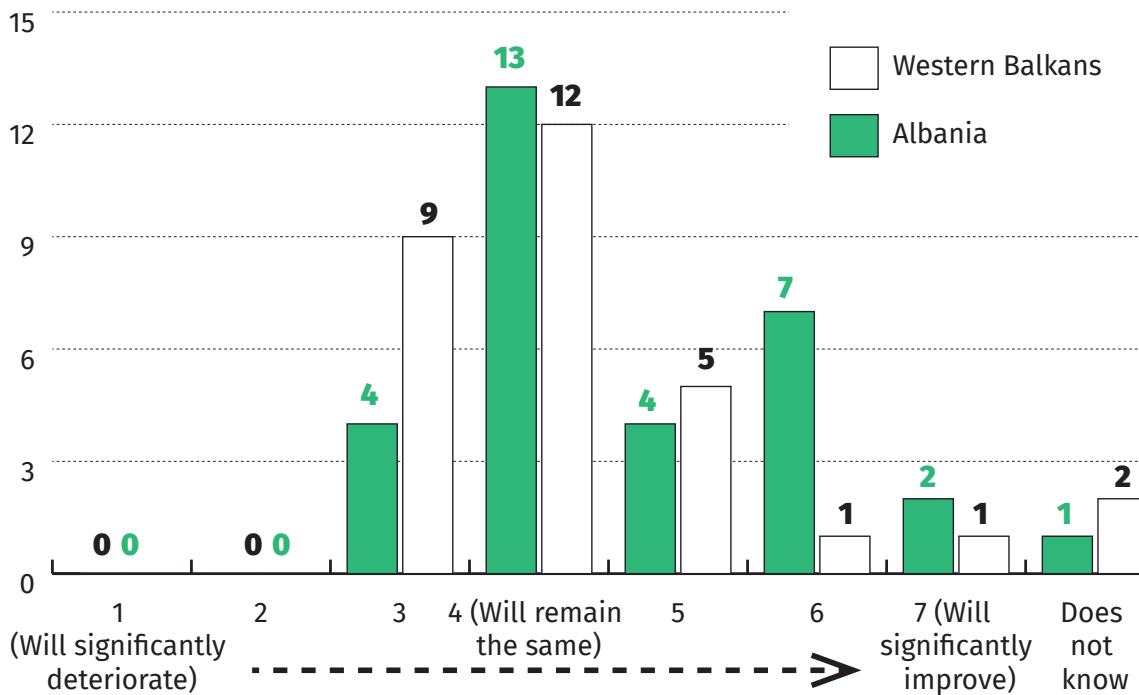
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114 N. Squires, ‘Pope Francis hails Albania as model of religious harmony in attack on religious extremism’, *Telegraph*, 21 September 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/albania/11111600/Pope-Francis-says-Albania-is-a-model-of-religious-harmony-during-first-visit-to-Muslim-majority-nation.html>

115 Institute of Democracy and Meditation, 2018, Op. Cit.

Following the respondents' assessment on the current state of interreligious relations in Albania and in the Western Balkans, they were asked to give their opinion on future developments of interreligious relations. On a scale from 1 (will seriously worsen) to 7 (will significantly improve), respondents rated that over the next five years, interreligious relations in Albania will remain the same (average of 4.5).

**Figure 5: Interreligious relations in the next five years**



Respondents did not think that Albania's deeply rooted values of religious harmony will be affected in the next five years. A civil society leader notes that:

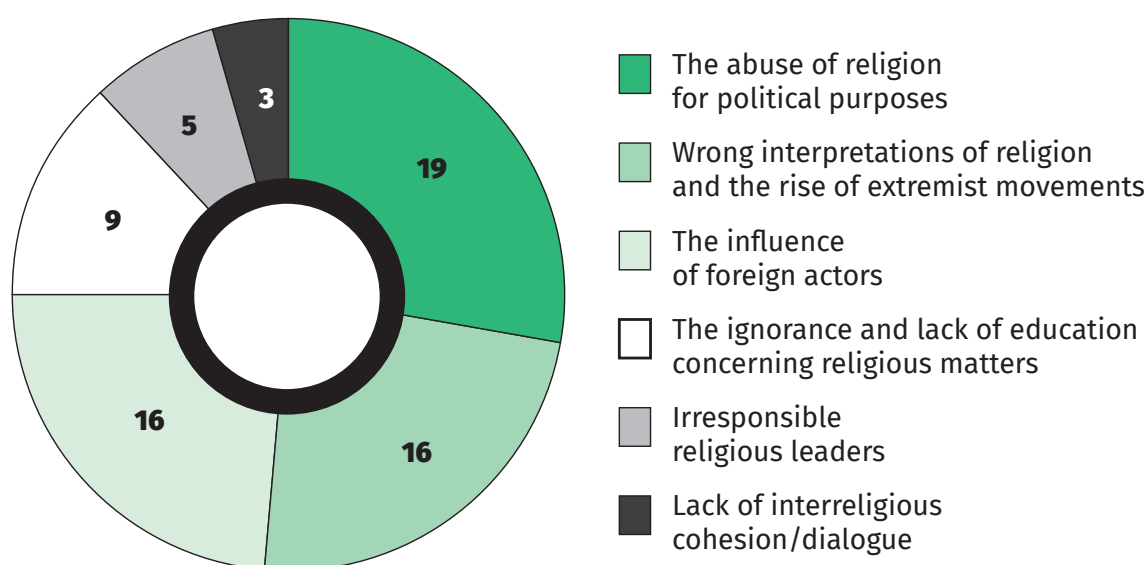
*'the establishment of Centre for Interfaith Cooperation, the continuous work of the Interreligious Council of Albania and the opening of the Balkan Institute for Religious Studies and Democracy will have a positive impact on interreligious relations over the next five years.'*

A high-level cleric also foresees a significant improvement of interreligious relations, especially because the religious communities have such a good relationship with each other. Another cleric does not share this view. He expects that the 'growing awareness of the specific teachings of different religions [...] naturally increases the distance between believers of different religions'. One journalist thinks that it is the 'apparent religious radicalism' and 'foreign agendas of the religious communities' that may cause a slight worsening of interreligious relations in Albania.

In the Western Balkan region, respondents did not predict significant changes in regards to

the interreligious relations. On a scale from 1 (will seriously worsen) to 7 (will significantly improve), the average assessment was 3.76, meaning that interreligious relations will remain difficult (see also Figure 4). According to one respondent, the EU accession process could be the cause of stronger divisions between Western Balkan countries, if it is 'differentiated between the Western Balkan states'. One religious leader noted that, compared to Albania, the situation in the Western Balkans will remain challenging due to the perception of ethnic divisions when speaking about religion. Another high-level cleric points out that 'religious communities have shown readiness to strengthen the relationships between different religious groups', and therefore expects that interreligious relations will improve over the next five years.

**Figure 6: Threats to interreligious relations in Albania**



### **Threats and opportunities for religious tolerance in Albania**

When asked their opinion on the biggest threats to interreligious relations in Albania, the respondents named a wide variety of possible threats. Most often mentioned was the abuse of religion for political gain. Respondents expressed their concerns regarding mixing religious arguments with political discourse, and with politics interfering in what one respondent calls 'the religious domain'. These answers indicate that the respondents think it is important that politics and the state should not interfere with religious affairs and vice-versa, as is also stated in the Albanian Constitution.

Another often-cited threat to religious harmony is the misinterpretation of religion, the rise of religious extremism [not specifically in Albania] and the stereotypes that are built around religious conservatism. In the 2018 study on religious extremism in Albania, it was noted that over 30% of Albanians associate women wearing a veil or men having an Islamic

beard with 'religious fundamentalism and extremism'.<sup>116</sup> According to the respondents to this survey, it is important that (violent) religious extremism is not confused with religious conservatism. Similarly, respondents think that hate speech among different religious groups, especially when based on stereotypes, can be a potential threat to interreligious relations.

The third most-cited threat to religious harmony in Albania, according to the respondents, is the foreign influence that exists in religious communities in Albania. Some respondents cite the institutions economic dependency on foreign funding, while others are particularly concerned with the more conservative teachings that come along with young, foreign-trained religious clerics. The remainder of the most prevalent concerns concerned the ignorance on general or alternate religious cultures, the lack of integrity and professionalism on the part of religious leaders and the absence of interreligious dialogue and cooperation between the main religious institutions.

Despite seeing threats to interreligious relations in Albania, the respondents also noted that religion can have a positive influence on society. Specifically, the vast majority of the respondents said that religion can help improve political developments, democracy, inter-ethnic relations, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence. Social cohesion was believed to be the most prone (N = 27) to positive influence by religion. Respondents highlighted religion's important role as a preserver of a society's morals and existing social values. By preaching good morals, emphasising what unites people, and encouraging believers to lead a moral life, religious institutions and representatives can unite people in communal activities. This, respondents say, can 'strengthen the communal sense' and 'express the message of religious tolerance', despite the potential differences in religions.

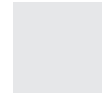
Besides teaching good morals, the respondents also highlighted that religious institutions and representatives can preach democratic values and practices, which would increase active citizenship. One civil society leader argued that religious institutions should become more active 'in protecting the rights of the vulnerable groups by using institutional mechanisms'. A legal expert also sees an opportunity for religious leaders to speak up when there are social issues or misrule, but urges 'religious institutions to distance themselves from political ideologies'. Lastly, another civil society leader suggested that, in order to improve the state of tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Albania, religious institutions and representatives should lead by example, 'by staying neutral, tolerant and away from extremist ideologies'.

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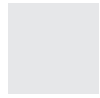
116 G. Vurmo, 'Violent Extremism in Albania', November 2018, The Institute for Democracy and Mediation, available at: <http://idmalbania.org/study-violent-extremism-in-albania-november-2018/>



*Bosnia and  
Herzegovina*



*Serbia*



*Montenegro*



*Kosovo*



*Albania*



*North Macedonia*



# Survey report Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Lejla Hodžić

## Survey sample

In assessing the role of religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina and analysing the multi-confessional context of the country, the report relies on the findings from an opinion survey and a range of secondary sources. The survey, administered during April 2019, aimed at gathering the opinions of influential figures in political, cultural and economic sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the role of religion. It is based on a questionnaire which was distributed to over 50 influential figures, of which 30 provided quantitative and qualitative answers to questions addressing religion's impact on society.

## Religion and society

According to research conducted by Silvestri and Mayall (2015), in Bosnia and Herzegovina people tend to identify with their religion rather than with their state.<sup>117</sup> One of the most comprehensive surveys on the role of religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, conducted by university professors from Mostar, which analysed the importance of religion in transitional societies, found that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a traditional society in which religion and religious communities play a significant role, especially because religious affiliation overlaps with ethnic belonging.<sup>118</sup> Religion plays an important role in everyday life of 66.8% of Bosnians and Herzegovinians, while 17.3% are ambivalent towards the role of religion.<sup>119</sup> It is noteworthy that the importance of religion in everyday life increases among younger generations, whereas it decreases among more educated societal groups.<sup>120</sup>

According to our survey – which was conducted among influential individuals involved in political, cultural and economic spheres in Bosnia and Herzegovina – showed that religion is important to a certain extent. On the scale of 0 to 7 which measures importance of religion in the society, where 0 marks complete irrelevance and 7 marks significant influence, the average answer was 5.63, where 11 respondents considered religion very important and 13 respondents considered religion had moderate importance. The respondents who considered religion as very important were primarily university professors, journalists, and those involved in NGOs.

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117 Silvestri, Sara and James Mayall, "The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding" *The British Academy*, September 2015, p. 65.

118 S. Kukić, and M. Čutura, 'Religija i njezina uloga u tranzicijskom informacijskom društvu' (2012) *Informatol*. 45: 1, p. 16

119 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

120 *Ibid.*

When it comes to the influence of religious arguments on attitudes towards societal issues such as poverty, justice, equality, crime and social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, respondents showed mixed opinions. According to respondents, religion has a moderate to strong influence on attitudes to societal issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the average answer of 4.76 (on a 1 to 7 scale) given by respondents. Eight respondents said they believe religious arguments have moderate influence, while seven respondents said religious arguments have very strong influence on these societal issues.

Respondents also believe that religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina are influential within their own community of believers. Ten consider them to be very influential, whereas eight respondents consider them somewhat influential, and six respondents consider them influential. Two respondents refused to provide an answer on this question. Overall, the majority of respondents believe they have a strong influence within their community with an average answer of 5.78. Respondents also believe that religious leaders and their representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina have medium to strong influence on public opinion in general, with an average answer of 5.2.

The relationship between religion and politics became stronger in all countries of southeastern Europe after the fall of communism as religion recovered the influence it had before.<sup>121</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, religion and politics are considered as interdependent, but the state has not achieved much in creating an inclusive political community for all religious groups, and especially for minorities.<sup>122</sup> The opinion survey conducted for this report demonstrated that ten respondents believe religion has a significant impact on political questions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and only one respondent believes it has no impact on politics. Overall, respondents believe religion has strong influence on political questions since the average answer was 5.24.

In the opinion survey from 2010–2011 on the relationship of religion and politics in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, the large majority of citizens (74.5%) said that the role of religion in politics should not be stronger.<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, of the 19.4% who believe that religion should have a stronger role in politics the majority are from younger generations.<sup>124</sup> Comparing this to the results of a survey conducted at the end of the 1990s which showed that this generational group had the lowest affiliation towards religious values, the change in the impact of religion is evident. It is indicative of a radical shift in the system of values supported by the younger generation, which is explained by the strengthening of the role of religious communities and institutions in the society.<sup>125</sup>

Previous data indicates that religion plays an important role in society, family and politics and that religious leaders are influential figures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but these findings do not substantiate religion's influence on concrete societal developments. As part of the survey conducted for this report, respondents were asked to give their opinion on whether religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, positively or negatively influenced the development of political processes, democracy, inter-ethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful

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121 Ognjenović and Jozelić, p. 311.

122 Ibid.

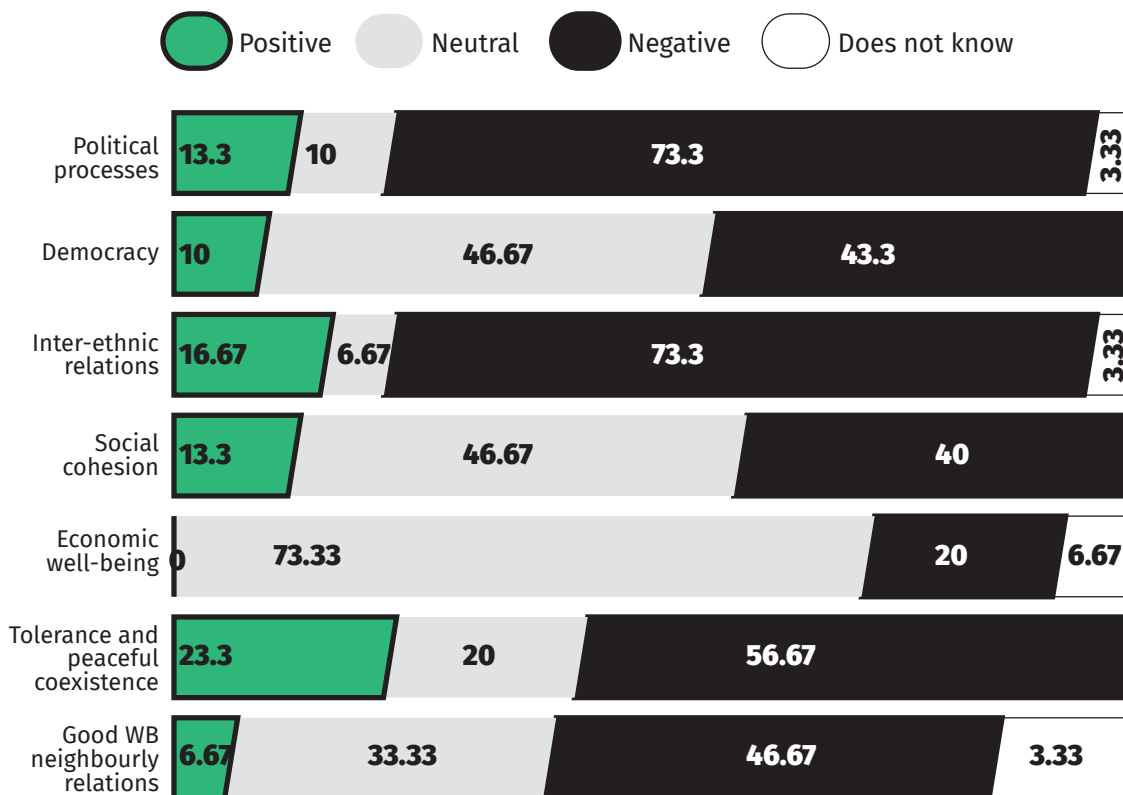
123 Kukić and Čutura, p. 20

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid, p. 20.

coexistence, and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. Figure 7 shows the opinions of respondents on the way religion influences different societal matters. The majority of respondents believe that religion has a negative impact on most spheres in society, or its impact was neutral. The most negative influence of religion is visible in the sphere of political processes and inter-ethnic relations, while tolerance and peaceful coexistence and good neighbourly relations were also negatively affected by religion, according to the respondents' opinion. A small number of respondents believe religion positively influences these spheres. Moreover, many respondents believe religion has no influence on economic well-being, democracy and social cohesion.

**Figure 7: The influence of religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in %)**



Respondents, therefore, consider that religion and religious leaders have failed to positively contribute to areas where religious communities are usually the driving force of change e.g. social cohesion. Efforts of religious leaders to enhance social cohesion and inclusion at the local level have been seldom, whereas international religious organisations have provided substantial humanitarian assistance during and after the armed conflict.<sup>126</sup> In addition, many international denominational organisations, especially those from North

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126 Silvestri and Mayall, p. 68

America, have contributed to reconciliation through interfaith dialogue and training on conflict resolution.<sup>127</sup>

## Religious diversity – threats and opportunities

The peaceful coexistence of different confessional groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been disrupted by the 1992–1995 armed conflict, and insufficient interfaith dialogue in the post-conflict period has sustained the rift between different religious groups. Transition in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been described as situation of ‘negative peace’ (simply the absence of war), indicating a failed reconciliation among different ethno-religious groups.<sup>128</sup> Even though religion was not the underlying cause of conflict, the religious context sustains the conflicting positions of and furthers divisions between the three ethno-religious groups.<sup>129</sup> Since the end of the conflict, there have been no substantial efforts of religious leaders to promote universal values and principles, which would promote coexistence as well as a unified attitude towards some societal matters. While religious leaders have engaged in interfaith dialogue more substantially through the Inter-Religious Council (IRC), formed in 1997,<sup>130</sup> this and similar initiatives tend to focus on religious leaders themselves, students of theology, youth and women’s groups within religious communities, while disregarding other segments of society.<sup>131</sup>

The fact that little has been done regarding improvement of interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina is supported by the answers given by influential figures in the political, cultural and economic spheres. The results of the survey show that, generally, respondents perceive interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina as somewhere between outright religious hatred and religious harmony, but closer to religious hatred. Only one respondent thought there is religious harmony in the country, two respondents thought there is religious hatred in the country, whereas nine respondents thought the interreligious relations were closer to religious hatred than to harmony. On the scale of 1 to 7 where 1 marks religious hatred and 7 marks religious harmony, respondents’ average answer was 3.67 indicating their perception is that interreligious relations in Bosnia are slightly closer to religious hatred, which is depicted in Figure 8 below. However, respondents believe that interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina are slightly better than those in other countries of the Western Balkans. On the scale of 1 to 7, on average respondents believe interreligious relations in the Western Balkans are 3.5, which is lower than their perception on the same issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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127 Ibid.

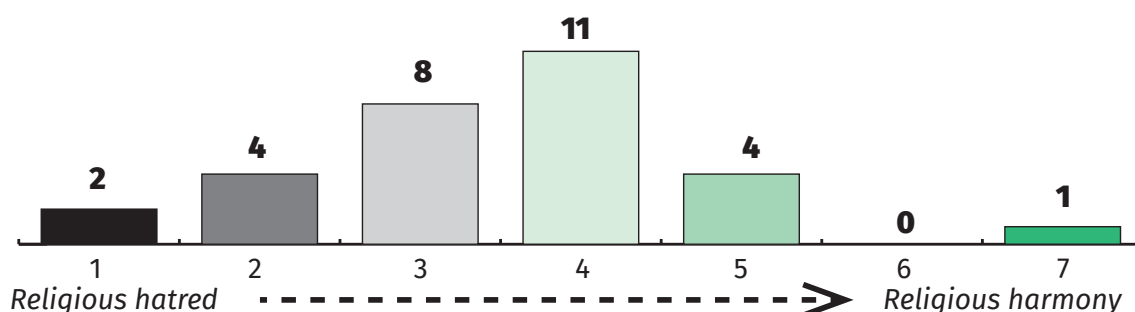
128 Alicino, p. 1.

129 Religion was an underlying factor, but the political and economic situation in Yugoslavia worsened over time causing conflicts over power-sharing among the representatives of different nations in Yugoslavia.

130 J. Natalya-Clark, ‘Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia & Herzegovina: Are Religious Actors Doing Enough?’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62:4, 2010, pp. 677–678

131 H. Fazlić. ‘Perspectives on Building Trust among Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Challenges and the Role of Faith Communities’, (2015) *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 50:2, p. 340.

**Figure 8: Interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina**



When asked about the future of interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the majority of respondents (13) believe they will stay the same. None of the respondents believe that they will seriously worsen, or significantly improve. Based on their answers, three respondents believe that the relations will improve depending on political stability and the economic situation. The reasons that the respondents gave when explaining why interreligious relations will stagnate in the future were varied. Four respondents believe that interreligious relations will not improve because interfaith dialogue is non-existent and there is no willingness among religious leaders to establish the dialogue. Another four respondents recognised the detrimental effect of the relationship between politics and religion, where religious communities continue political relations which have been negative. A journalist who believes there will be no improvement in interreligious relations said that: ‘There is no will of leaders of religious communities and groups to interact with other religious leaders and communities in accordance with the basic moral principles of sacred texts, but that they interact on the basis of political preconceptions and attitudes.’

Other reasons cited by the respondents include failed post-conflict reconciliation and the slow pace of development of an interfaith dialogue, as well as lack of tolerance among the religious groups. Those respondents who believe there will be some, but limited improvement of interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, gave particular importance to the Inter-Religious Council and its activities, as well as to cooperation amongst religious communities. Nevertheless, these respondents also noted that there has been symbolic and formal cooperation between religious communities, but no constructive efforts to build on the interfaith cooperation. Others believe the driving force for the improvement of interreligious relations will come from the international community, and the European Union in particular. One of the respondents, a university professor, said that:

*‘since religious and ethnic identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina coincide, and political goals are conflicting, religious leaders must support the interests of their community, although Islam, Orthodoxy and Catholicism overcome the borders of a state. Religious leaders and religious teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina can raise their own religious leaders in the ethnic and religious plural state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I see such readiness with the bishops, imams, priests and teachers in state schools.’*

The respondents expressed similar opinions on the improvement of interreligious relations in the Western Balkans. The majority of respondents (13) believe that interreligious relations in the Western Balkans will remain the same, three respondents did not express their opinion on the issue, while only one respondent believes there will be significant improvement. A director of an NGO said that he believes:

*'that there will be some improvement because political elites of the Western Balkan countries, taught by previous conflict experiences, have realised that it is impossible to establish a functional democracy in a state with impaired interreligious relations.'*

On the scale of 0 to 7 where 0 marks the deterioration of interreligious relations and 7 significant improvement, the respondents' average answer was 4.14.

According to respondents' opinions, the biggest threats to interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina are related to the political situation, which is shown in Figure 9. Political instability, the behaviour of politicians, the relationship of politics and religion, or the abuse of religion for political purposes were named the biggest threats. The absence of interfaith dialogue, the rise of nationalism and insufficient education and knowledge were named as the three next biggest threats. History and lack of reconciliation, as well as false interpretations of religion and the development of extremist movements were named as additional threats to interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Respondents often cited lack of knowledge and understanding of religion as one of the threats to interreligious relations in the country, indicating insufficient education in this regard. For example, an assistant university professor said the three biggest threats are:

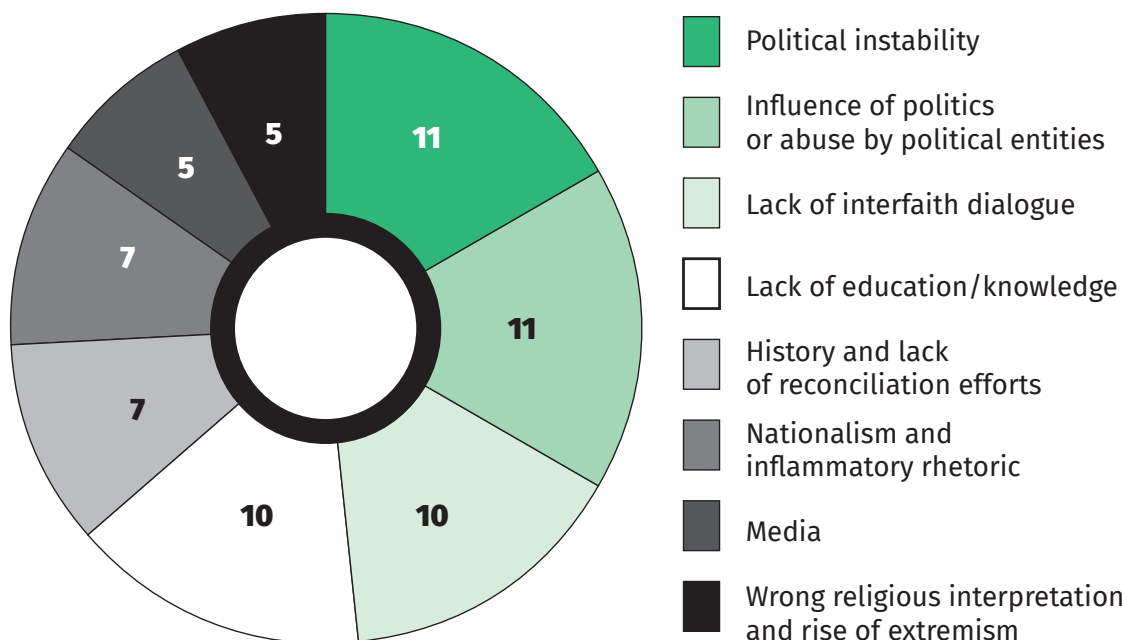
*'lack of the curriculum for the subjects of history and religion which would affirmatively speak about value of diversity, common cultural and historical heritage, affirmatively about the other and differences (not the fear of the Turks); lack of projects on interreligious dialogue; and non-engagement of religious leaders in passing interreligious reconciliation and mutual understanding on to ordinary citizens in all communities/counties throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.'*

According to the Stuebner (2009), there is no comprehensive effort to enrich school curricula with the study of religious culture or history, and the politicisation of education systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina is sustaining the lack of cooperation among religious groups on this issue.<sup>132</sup>

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132 R. Stuebner, 'The Current Status of Religious Coexistence and Education in BiH.' USIP, November 2009.

**Figure 9: The biggest threats to interreligious relations**



In the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to explain the ways religion can improve certain aspects of society such as politics, democracy, social cohesion and others. Overall, respondents consider that religion can attain a more positive role in all of these aspects if religious leaders engage more actively in the promotion of universal and ethical values and strengthening interfaith dialogue at the level of local communities. On the question of how religion can improve political processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the majority of respondents mentioned a total separation of religion from the state, promotion of universal or ethical values among people and condemnation of bad/detrimental political practices. Other suggestions for improving political processes included educating believers on political pluralism, interfaith dialogue and reconciliation, and stimulating active voting among citizens.

Respondents believe that religious leaders should promote more democratic principles and universal values, as well as coexistence and respect of religious groups in order to improve the processes related to democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Respondents also believe that religious leaders need to take a more active role in teaching and promoting tolerance, since the majority of respondents considered this to be the key for the improvement of inter-ethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Religion can improve social cohesion, through the promotion of universal or ethical principles and social equality, while promoting entrepreneurship and social justice would be beneficial for economic well-being in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Considering that the majority of respondents thought that religion negatively influenced tolerance and peaceful coexistence, this is the area where religious leaders should assume a more active role. Generally, respondents think that tolerance and coexistence are insufficiently promoted by the religious leaders. A significant number of respondents consider that the Inter-Religious Council should have a more prominent role, especially in establishing interfaith dialogue.



Without doubt, religion can trigger positive developments in Bosnian and Herzegovinian society, especially in those areas where it is important to reconcile the needs of different groups within society. In addition, respondents felt strongly that religious leaders should promote and teach universal values, as well as condemn negative practices in politics, economics, human rights, and other spheres of society. However, a significant number of respondents said that religion cannot improve these spheres at all, especially in terms of political processes, economic well-being, good neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans, and democracy.

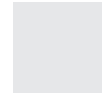
The promotion of interethnic tolerance and coexistence was mentioned most frequently as a way to improve good neighbourly relations through religion. Religious leaders in the region should meet more often, organise visits and events together, and promote peace in the entire region. Notably, respondents believe that good neighbourly relations should be primarily ensured within the borders of respective states, in order to ensure good neighbourly relations across the region. Finally, promotion of peace among the youth is the key in creation of good neighbourly relations in the region, according to the respondents. One of the respondents said that religion can improve good neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans through:

*‘mutual contacts, unofficial and official meetings, visiting memorials for victims of war crimes, joint visits to believers in areas where they represent minorities, working with young people, paying special attention to returnees and minority groups.’*

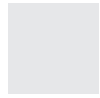




*Bosnia and Herzegovina*



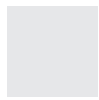
*Serbia*



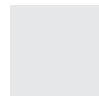
*Montenegro*



*Kosovo*



*Albania*



*North Macedonia*



# Survey report Kosovo

By Romario Shehu

## Survey sample

During April and May 2019, approximately 120 surveys were distributed to high-level individuals involved in political, economic and cultural spheres in Kosovo. A total of 19 respondents completed the survey. The respondents include influential individuals from civil society (N=7), government and the political elite (N=5), religious communities (N=5), and academia (N=1). One respondent did not state his occupation. As regards the gender of survey respondents, 15 were male (79%) and four female (21%). Of the respondents, half of them have MA degrees (N = 9), six have BA degrees, and the remaining hold PhD or postdoctoral degrees. The average age of the respondents is 31 years old, with the youngest 27 and the oldest 58 years old. It is important to highlight that this report suffers from two major limitations. First, is the low number of respondents compared to other countries, and second, that all respondents are ethnic Albanians. Both of these limitations were caused by low responsiveness to the surveys we distributed.

## The role of religion in Kosovo

In Kosovo, there is a strong sense of secularity in the political and intellectual sphere. In former Yugoslavia, Dr. Bashkim Iseni argues, integration and modernisation policies implemented in some Muslim-populated areas gave birth to an atheistic political and intellectual elite, as well as to a radical marginalisation of the Muslim clergy.<sup>133</sup> Islam was reduced to the private sphere: reserved only for worship practices, annual religious feasts and traditional ceremonies for weddings and deaths. According to a 2016 study on the impact of religion on ethnic identity in the state-building period of Kosovo, the quest for the country's independence was not religiously motivated<sup>134</sup>. Most Kosovars envisioned a secular state, particularly because of the absence of a unitary religion. It was only after the Kosovo War and the subsequent NATO intervention in 1999 that religion became more important due to a combination of circumstances such as a weak economy, political instability, and societal disorientation.<sup>135</sup> As a result, religion became more visible in all public spheres, from personal lives to the society at large. Especially since the introduction of mass media and increased access to the internet, public debates about religion, have

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133 B. Iseni, *National Identity, Islam and Politics in the Balkans* (Stuttgart: Akademie der Diözese, 2009).

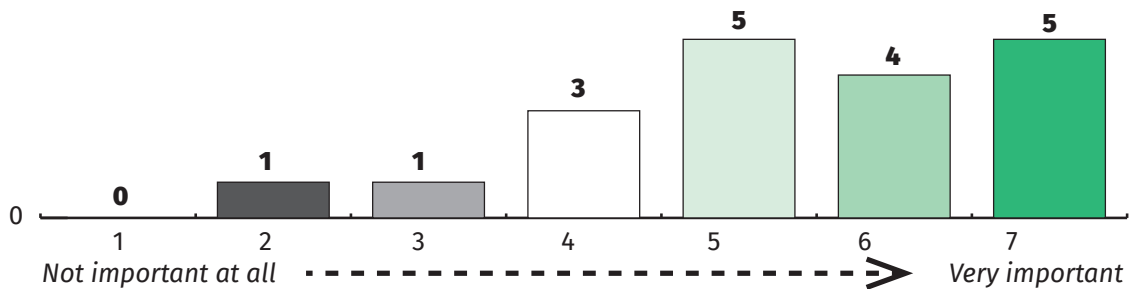
134 A. D. Peci, *What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period* (Prishtina: KIPRED, 2016).

135 Ibid.

increased over the years.<sup>136</sup>

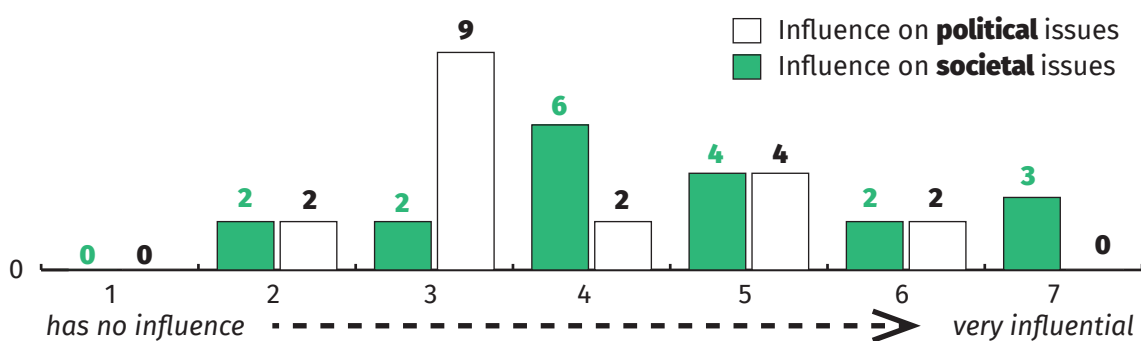
In the current survey, respondents were asked how important religion is for most people in Kosovo. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important), the importance of religion today for most of people. The average answer was 5.3, where five respondents considered religion very important and nine other respondents considered religion to have a moderate to strong importance (see Figure 10). There is a mix of opinions and no common trend among individuals with similar occupations. Some of the respondents from a specific occupation think religion is important while their colleagues are more sceptical. For example, a respondent working in government has rated religion as not important (2), while another respondent working in government has rated religion as very important (7).

**Figure 10: Importance of religion today for most of the people in Kosovo**



When asked about the influence of religion on the attitudes of the majority of people on societal issues such as poverty, justice, equality, crime and social cohesion in Kosovo, respondents had diverse reactions. According to them, religion has a moderate influence on attitudes regarding societal issues in Kosovo with an average answer of 4.57 on a scale from 1 to 7 (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Religion's influence on societal and political matters**



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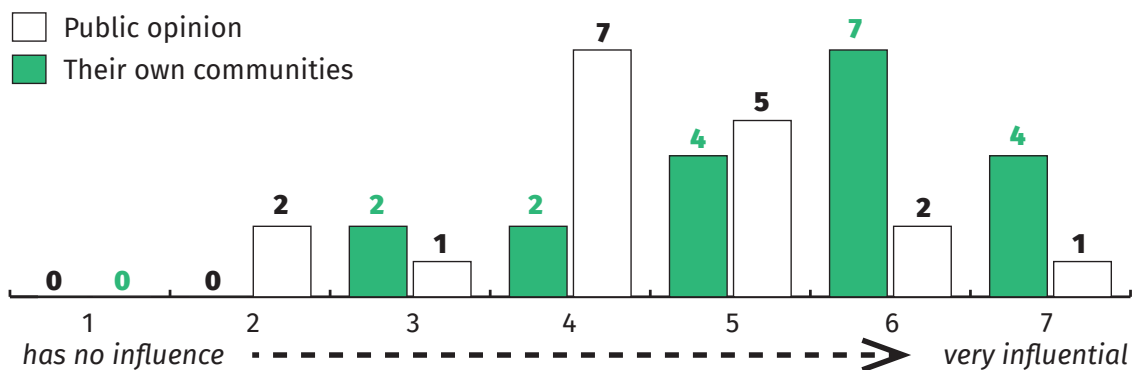
136 J. Mehmeti, 'Faith and Politics in Kosovo: The Status of Religious Communities in a Secular Country. The Revival of Islam in the Balkans', 2015, pp. 68-69

Although the respondents perceive that religion may have some influence on societal issues in the country, they appear to be more sceptical over the influence of religion on political matters. According to the majority of respondents (N = 13), the influence of religion on the attitudes of people in Kosovo towards political matters such as democratic participation, voter behaviour, and political parties in Kosovo is very modest. On a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important), the average answer was 3.7. Only six of respondents believe religion has a moderate influence on political matters (see Figure 11).

## Religious leaders

The respondents believe the religious leaders in Kosovo are influential among their respective community of believers. Eleven respondents believed religious leaders are either influential or very influential. Six of the respondents believe they have a moderate influence, while only two respondents believe they have modest influence. On a scale from 1 (no influence) to 7 (very influential) the average answer of respondents is 5.47 (see Figure 12). In terms of the influence of religious leaders on wider public opinion in Kosovo, the majority of respondents (N = 12) believe religious leaders have a moderate influence. On a scale from 1 (no influence) to 7 (very influential) the average answer is 4.38 (see Figure 12). Only three of respondents believe religious leaders are influential or very influential on public opinion. Three others believe they have little or very little influence on public opinion in Kosovo. Based on these findings, religious leaders are perceived to be influential within their own community of believers, but have only a moderate influence on society as a whole.

**Figure 12: Religions' influence on its community of believers and public opinion**



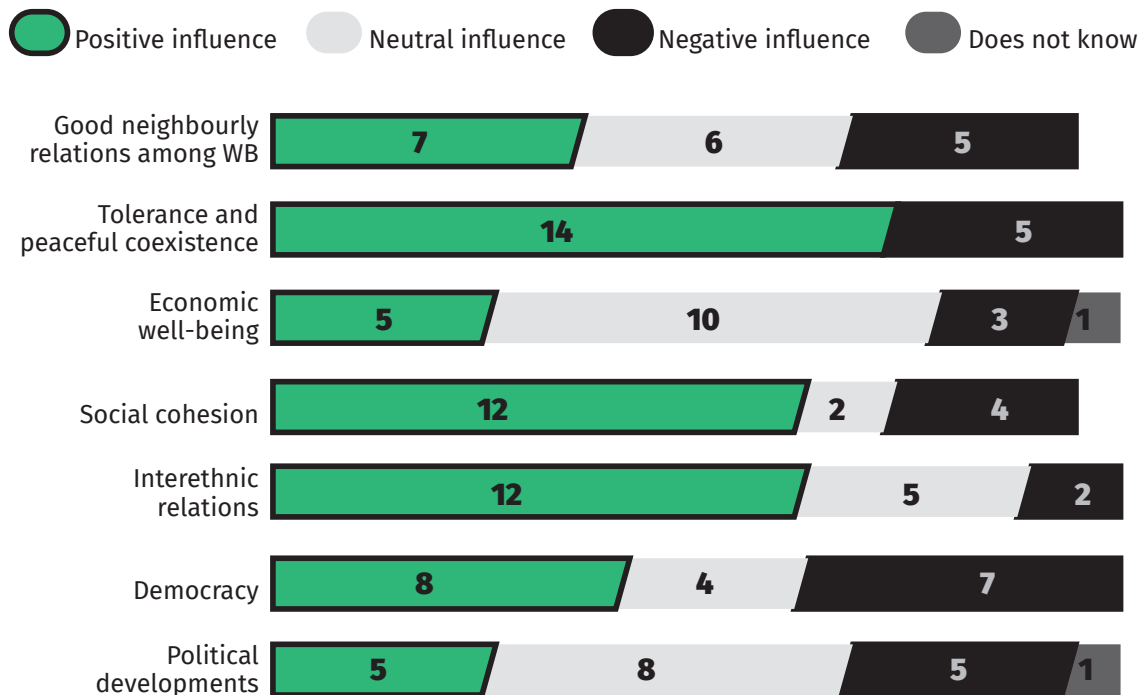
## The role of religion on developments in Kosovo

As part of the survey conducted for this report, respondents were asked to give their opinions on whether religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, positively or negatively influenced political developments, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, and good neighbourly relations among the Western Balkans countries. The

following figure (see Figure 13) shows their responses on all these spheres. Overall, the majority of respondents believe that religion had either a positive or neutral impact on all the spheres.

According to the respondents, religion had a particularly positive influence on tolerance and peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and interethnic relations. Respondents gave the 'positive influence' answer most often in the sphere of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, with the vast majority of respondents (N = 14) believing that religion has positively influenced tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Kosovo. Only five respondents believe religion has negatively influenced Kosovo's tolerance and peaceful coexistence. For both social cohesion and interethnic relations, 12 respondents felt religion had a positive influence. More mixed responses were given with regards to political developments, democracy, and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. In terms of Kosovo's political developments, five respondents believe religion has positively influenced political developments, and five others believe religion has negatively influenced them. As regards the role of religion on good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries, seven respondents believe religion has played a positive role in this aspect, while five believe religion has played a negative role. In terms of the role of religion on Kosovo's democracy, eight of respondents believe religion has positively influenced Kosovo's democracy, and seven believe it has negatively influenced it. Lastly, almost half of the survey respondents believe religion has played a neutral role in the economic well-being of Kosovo. Five respondents believe religion had a positive role and three others believe it had a negative role.

**Figure 13: Religion's influence on spheres of society**

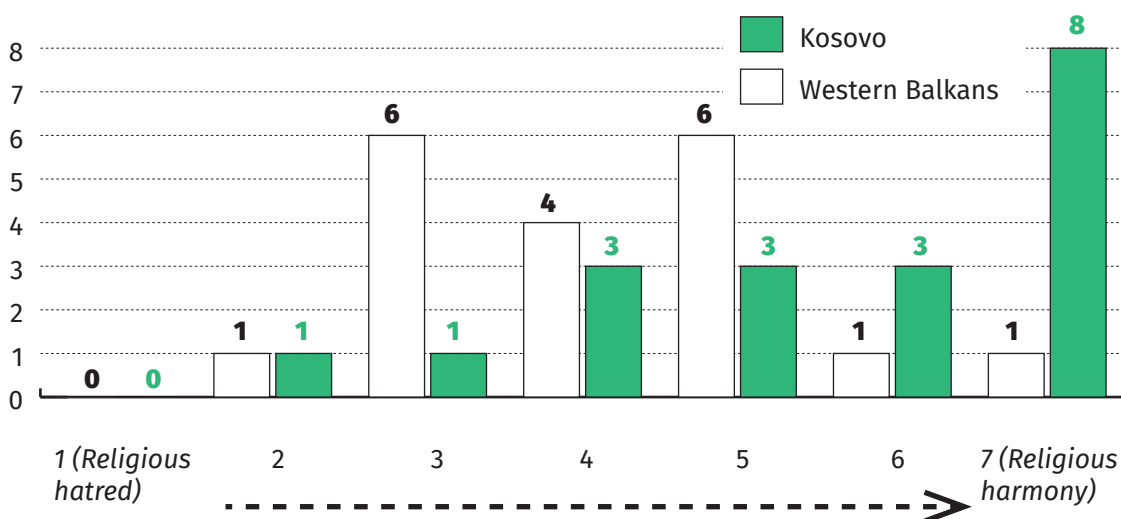


## Religious diversity in Kosovo

Data from the 2011 official census shows that 95.6% of the population in Kosovo identifies as Muslim, 2.2% as Roman Catholic, and 1.4% as Serbian Orthodox.<sup>137</sup> However, this census was boycotted by ethnic Serbs, resulting in the underrepresentation of this ethnicity and of Orthodox Christians in general.<sup>138</sup> Other religious communities include the Protestant community, which claims 20,000 followers (1.1% of the population), and the Jewish community (with only 56).<sup>139</sup> Although the overwhelming majority of its citizens are Muslim, Kosovo has a diversity of religions. Therefore, in a religiously diverse country, interreligious relations are of great importance to the progress of society.

Hence, respondents were asked to rate today's interreligious relations on a 7-point scale from 1 (religious hatred) to 7 (religious harmony). With an average answer of 5.57, the results show that respondents tend to believe the interreligious relations in Kosovo are in harmony (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Religious relations in Kosovo and the Western Balkans**



Eight respondents believe there is religious harmony in the country, six believe interreligious relations are closer to religious harmony. Three responders believe the interreligious relations are neither harmony nor hatred, and only two believe the interreligious relations in Kosovo are closer to religious hatred.

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137 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 'The final results of Population, Households and Housing Census Released', 26 September 2012, <http://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/the-final-results-of-population-households-and-housing-census-released>

138 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011 - Final Results: Quality Report, via <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/censuskb20/KnowledgebaseArticle10700.aspx>

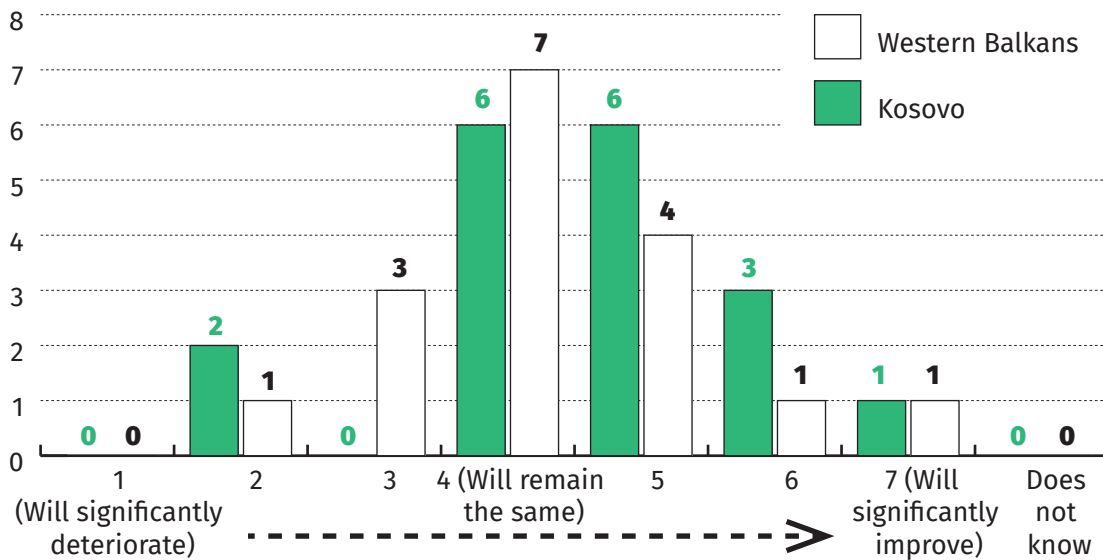
139 L. Luxner, 'With US help, Muslim-majority Kosovo plans its first synagogue and Jewish museum', Times of Israel, 22 December 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-us-help-muslim-majority-kosovo-plans-its-first-synagogue-and-jewish-museum/>

On the contrary, respondents believe that interreligious relations in the Western Balkan are slightly worse compared to interreligious relations within Kosovo. Respondents were asked to rate on a 7-point scale from 1 (religious hatred) to 7 (religious harmony) and they characterise today's interreligious relations in the Western Balkans as moderately harmonious (average answer is 4.1).

### Interreligious relations development in the next five years

When asked about the future of interreligious relations in the next five years in Kosovo, half of the respondents believe these relations will improve. Only two respondents believe they will worsen. The respondents were asked to rate on a seven-point scale from 1 (will seriously deteriorate) to 7 (will significantly improve) and the average answer was 4.6. The most frequent argument supporting the idea that the relations will improve, is that Kosovo's interreligious tolerance is deeply rooted and interfaith coexistence has occurred in Kosovo for centuries. A member of the civil society sector also added that, 'my nationality is more important than my religion, thus, my religious faith will never have an impact on my decisions, but the good sides of religion, such as charity will be conducive to my behaviour.' Sceptical voices in the other hand put an emphasis on radicalisation, the low level of accountability among religious institutions and uncontrolled activities of religious NGOs. Some of the respondents believe that the future of interreligious relations in Kosovo will depend on the political and economic processes taking place in the region.

Figure 15: Interreligious relations in the next five years



In their responses concerning the future of the Western Balkans' interreligious relations the 'will remain the same' option was the most selected one (N = 7). Six respondents believed interreligious relations in the Western Balkans will improve, while four others believe they will deteriorate. The average answer was 4.23, which is lower than for Kosovo. The optimistic arguments were the impact of international community and civic awareness over their religion. Negative expectations consisted in the interplay of religion and politics and the radical interpretation of religion. Just as in the case of Kosovo, respondents

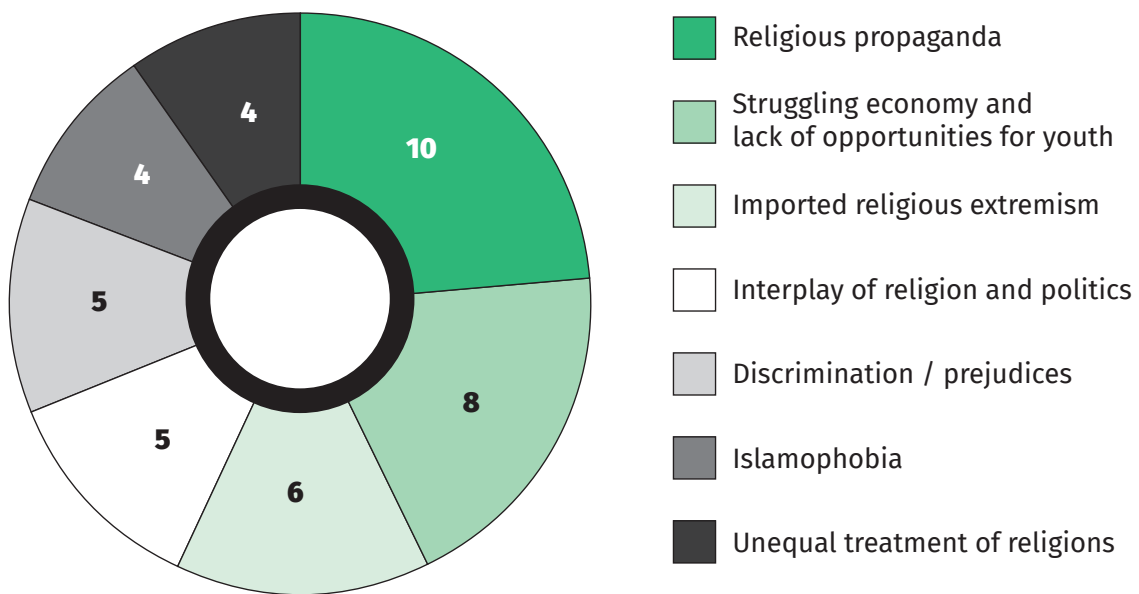
believed that interreligious relations in the Western Balkans will reflect the future political and economic conditions of the region.

### Threats and opportunities for interreligious relations in Kosovo

Respondents were asked to list the top three threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo. They offered a variety of answers (see Figure 16), but the most dominant threats that they saw to interreligious relations were religious propaganda, the country’s struggling economy and the lack of opportunities hindering youth prospects. Religious extremism imported from outside, and the interplay of religion and politics were also listed as threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo. As regards to imported religious extremism, this is an issue that countries all over the world are facing today. However, what is particularly pressing about the situation in Kosovo is that the religious communities are not formally recognised as legal entities and do not receive any funding from the state to conduct their activities, train clergy or to maintain or (re)build property. Consequently, religious communities seek funding from elsewhere, for example from foreign governments or religiously oriented NGOs.<sup>140</sup>

As regards to this threat, the respondents listed Arab countries, Serbia, and Turkey as potential exporters of religious extremism to Kosovo. Islamophobia as well as unequal treatment of religions were listed as threats by some of the respondents.

Figure 16: Biggest threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo



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140 M. Edwards and M. Colborne, ‘Turkey’s gift of a mosque sparks fears of “neo-Ottomanism” in Kosovo’, *Guardian*, 2 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/02/turkey-is-kosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque>. See also C. Gall, ‘How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS’, *New York Times*, 21 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>



Although it is surprising to see that a Muslim-majority country suffers from Islamophobia, this finding is confirmed by other literature on the topic. Despite widespread religious freedom, studies have shown there is a stigmatisation of conservative religious believers, especially of the Islamic community. One study argues that practising believers are sometimes prejudiced and stereotyped based on their outlook (for example because of Islamic dress).<sup>141</sup> Respondents of our survey pointed to the media and government as generators of Islamophobia. Some of the respondents emphasised the role of religious leaders in dealing with threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo. A respondent from one religious community argued the ‘inadequate inclusion of religious leaders in dealing with the negative phenomena, especially with those who have to do with extremism and radicalism may be a potential threat to the interreligious relations in Kosovo.’ In terms of the unequal treatment of religions, this threat was listed four times, and it corresponds with the discontent of both the Muslim Association of Kosovo and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which have accused the government of discrimination towards their communities, albeit for different reasons.<sup>142</sup>

After expressing their opinion on the biggest threats for interreligious relations, respondents also listed what they saw as opportunities for a positive role of religion in society. Overall, respondents were optimistic about the role of religion and believe that it can have a positive impact on interethnic relations, social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. However, respondents note that this can only be achieved if religious leaders engage more actively in the promotion of moral values (such as mutual respect, harmony, friendship, solidarity and tolerance) and work on strengthening interreligious cooperation and dialogue.

Another respect in which respondents believe religion can have a positive impact is democracy. The most frequent response was that religion can help by promoting democratic values such as dialogue, sympathy, justice, democracy, and human rights. Additional ways in which religion can improve democracy include encouraging citizens to take part in public hearings and decision-making. One respondent argued:

*‘Religions preach peace and tolerance, which are per se very compatible with the values of democracy, and if they are correctly explained, they can play an important role in the successful implementation of democratic values.’*

The only two aspects where responses were neutral or argued that religion can have a limited role were political developments and economic well-being. Nevertheless, some respondents believe that religion can also improve the political development in Kosovo by increasing the public presence of adequate religious leaders and by preventing the interplay between religion and politics. One of the respondents said that religion can help improve the political developments by ‘encouraging their audiences to take part massively in elections.’ With regards to economic well-being, a few optimistic respondents argued that religion can have an impact on this aspect by encouraging people to work, refuse corruption and nepotism, as well as by doing charity and helping those in need.

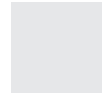
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141 B. G. Kamberi ‘The practice of religion and respect of religious freedom in Kosovo’, *Studime Sociale*, 2017, pp. 35–36.

142 The Muslim community has complained about the rules prohibiting religious dress in public schools, while the Orthodox community claims it has received no financial support to rebuild destroyed religious sites. See also: Islamic Association of Kosovo, Press declaration, 24 October 2013, <https://bislame.net/prsdntj/>



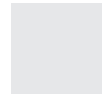
*Bosnia and Herzegovina*



*Serbia*



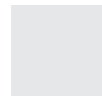
*Montenegro*



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*Albania*



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# Survey report Montenegro

By Nenad Zekavica

## Survey sample

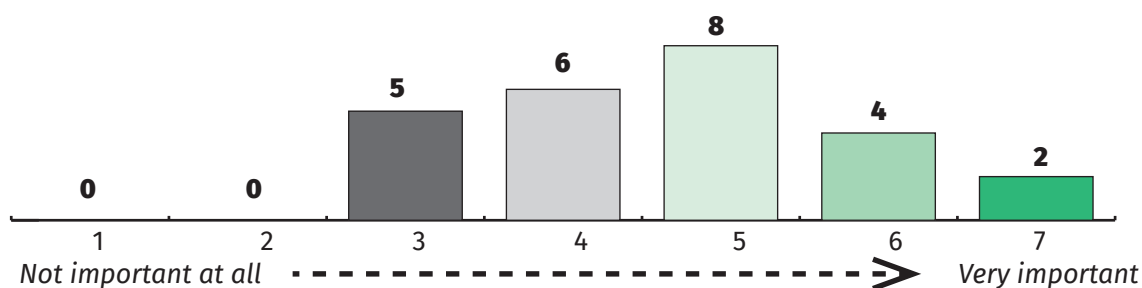
During March and April 2019, a survey was conducted as part of the regional project that deals with the role of religion in Western Balkan countries. The survey was conducted as part of a research project and was conducted among members of the cultural and political elite of society. Its purpose is to give a sketch of the religious beliefs of different societies. The survey itself was developed as the result of the mutual cooperation among four partner institutions in the Balkans.

After the selection of respondents, around 60 surveys were sent to the candidates. As a result, we received 25 surveys with the data. The respondents included politicians and government employees (N=3), religious leaders (N=3), academics (N=5), civil society leaders (N=6), journalists and opinion-makers (N=4) and young leaders (N=4). Of the respondents, 19 were male (76%) and six (24%) were female. The average age of the respondents was 39 years, with the youngest respondent being 24 years old and the oldest 58 years old. With regard to respondents' education, seven respondents have a bachelor's degree, 13 respondents hold an MA, while five of them have obtained a PhD degree or above.

## The role of religion in Montenegro

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked to estimate the importance of religion for most people living in Montenegro on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 marks complete irrelevance and 7 marks significant influence, the average mark was 4.56.

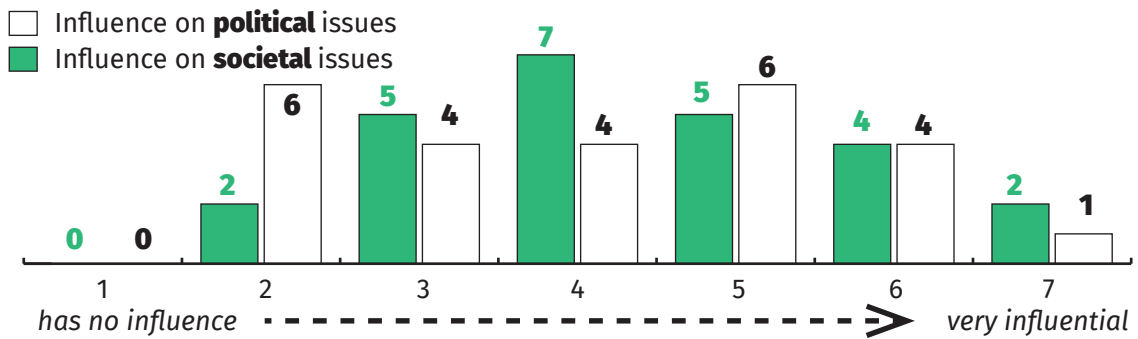
Figure 17: Importance of religion in Montenegro



Respondents were then asked to grade the influence of religion on societal issues, such as poverty, justice, equality, crime, social cohesion etc. The respondents answered with an average assessment of 4.4 on a scale from 1 (no influence at all) to 7 (significant influence). This is only a small drop from the average grade in the first question.

But when asked about the influence of political issues in Montenegro, such as democratic participation, voter behaviour, political parties and others, respondents distributed differently along the same scale as in the previous question and gave the average grade of 4.04.

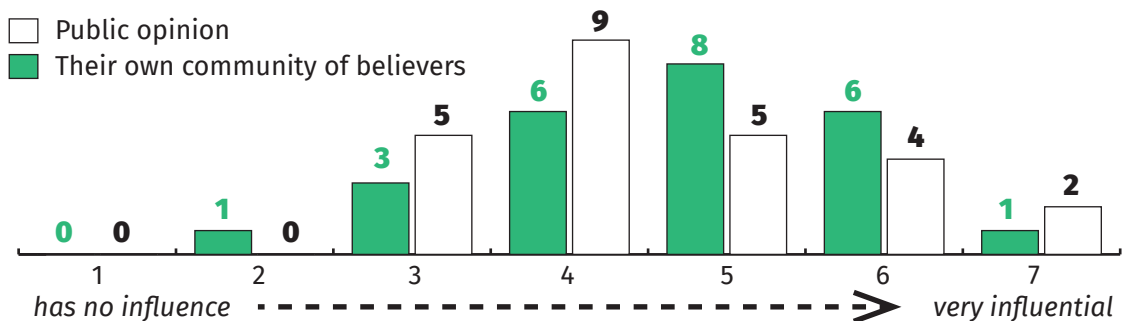
**Figure 18: Influence of religion on political and social issues in Montenegro**



### Religious leaders

The next segment of the survey dealt with the influence of religious leaders in their religious communities in Montenegro on the one hand and their influence on wider public opinion on the other hand. As in the previous questions, respondents were asked to rate this on a 1–7 scale, where 1 stands for ‘no influence at all’ and 7 marks ‘very influential’. When it came to the influence within their respective communities, the average was 4.72. With regard to the influence of religious leaders on broader public opinion, the average was a bit lower at 4.56. The difference between the two is not as large as in some other countries in the Western Balkans. Based on these survey results, it seems that religious leaders in Montenegro are influential to some extent in their respective communities but in public opinion also.

**Figure 19: Influence of religious leaders in Montenegro**

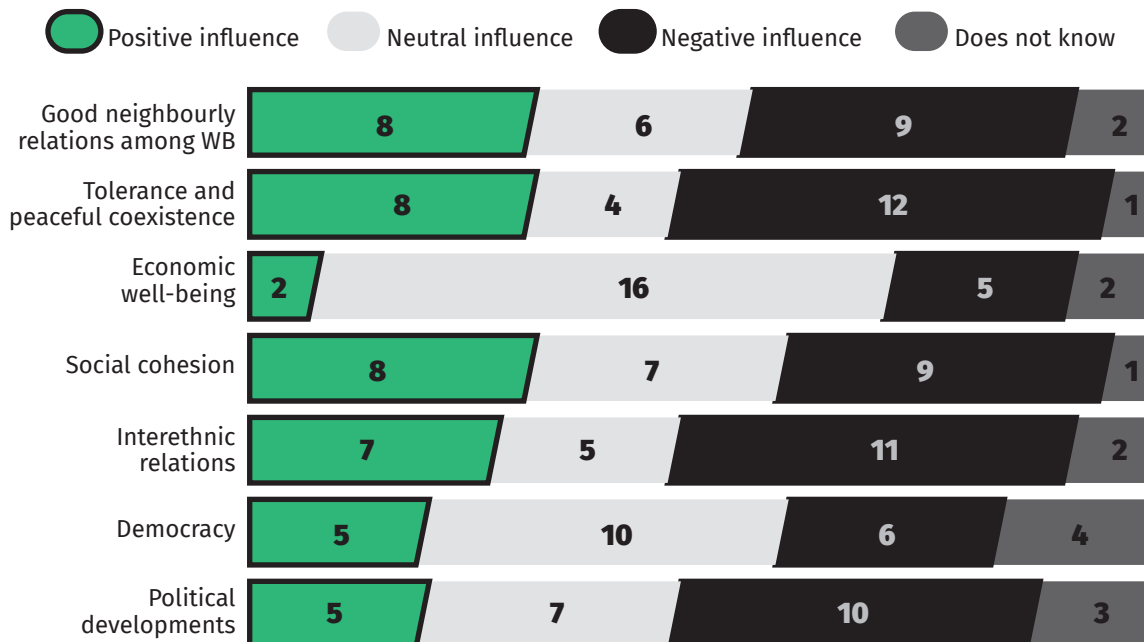


## The influence of religion on developments in Montenegro

Respondents were asked whether they perceived that religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, has positively or negatively influenced developments in Montenegro. The specific kinds of developments influenced by religion they were asked about are political developments, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful coexistence and development of good neighbourly relations among countries in the Western Balkans.

Concerning the political developments, people mostly see religion as a negative influence (N=10), a smaller number did not see an effect of religion (N=7) and only five saw a positive influence (two of were religious leaders), while three respondents marked that they do not know. The answers related to the development of democracy show similar results. Out of 25 respondents, ten of them did not see the influence on this, while five saw positive and six saw negative consequences for the development of democracy. The section regarding interethnic relations showed us that respondents (N=5) tend to believe that religion does not affect the development of those relations; 44% of respondents saw religion as having a negative influence on the development of interethnic relations; with an additional 28% of respondents who claimed that religion has a positive impact. When asked about the influence of religion on social cohesion respondents seem to be almost equally divided on positive influence (N=8), neutral influence (N=7) and negative influence (N=9). It is interesting to note that religious leaders all saw the positive impact of religion on social cohesion, while the four out of six members of civil organizations see it the other way around. The attitude of the respondents is pretty much the same as in other Western Balkan countries when it comes to economic well-being. The largest part of the respondents saw no active influence on the economic state of the people (N=16), while five respondents saw the negative impact and only two the positive one. Among those two are one young leader and one religious leader.

Figure 20: The influence of religion on politics and society in Montenegro

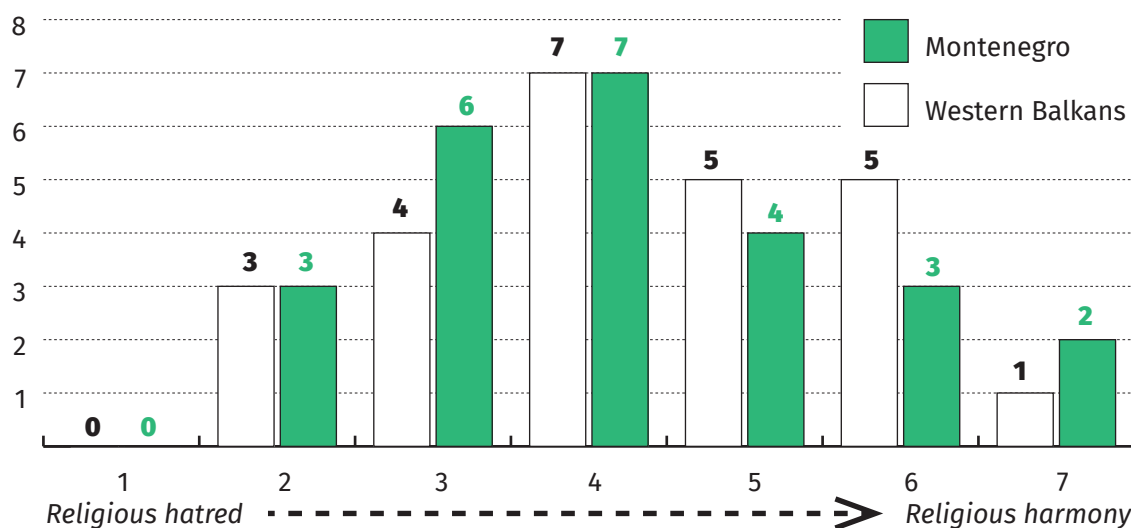


The next section of this question dealt with the development of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. When asked about the influence of religion on the development of tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Montenegrin society, respondents depicted that as predominantly negative (N=12). However, there were eight who believed that religion helps with the development of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, while four respondents said that religion does not influence this development and one respondent who answered 'Don't know'. The last part of the question dealt with the religion's influence on the development of good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. It seems that a small majority of the respondents recognised the negative (N=9) influence of religion on relations between Western Balkan countries, with an additional six respondents who did not recognise the influence of the religion in this matter at all. Eight of the respondents claimed that religion positively influenced this development.

## Religious tolerance

The next part of our questionnaire dealt with the issues of religious tolerance and interreligious relations in Montenegro and in Western Balkans. Participants of the survey tried to assess the state of today's interreligious relations. They were first asked to give their answer on a 1-7 scale, where 1 represents religious hatred and 7 represents religious harmony. Based on these two questions we can see that the respondents see interreligious relations in Montenegro in a worse condition than they are in the Western Balkans as a whole. The average mark of the state of interreligious relations in Montenegro was 3.92 according to our respondents. When it comes to the present state of the interreligious relations in the Western Balkans the results seem to point to slightly better relations with an average score of 4.32.

**Figure 21: Interreligious relations in Montenegro and the region**

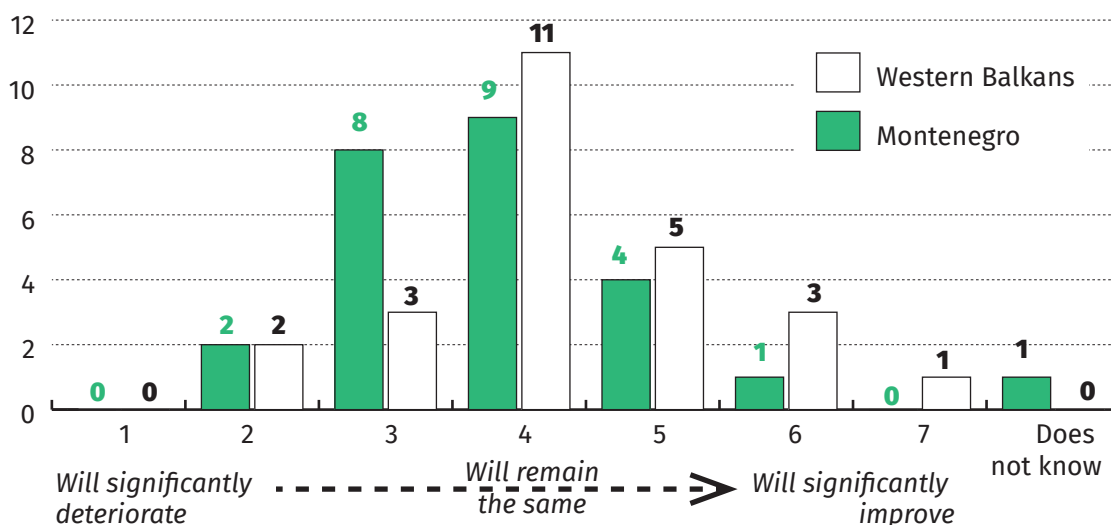


The respondents were then asked to estimate the future development of interreligious relations over the next five years in Montenegro and in the Western Balkans and to further

explain their selection. Once again they had to choose from the scale 1–7, where 1 indicated ‘will significantly deteriorate’, 7 indicated ‘will significantly improve’ and 4 indicated ‘it will remain the same’.

Our respondents doubt that any significant change will happen over the period of the next five years. The majority of respondents tended to think that relations will stay exactly the same. In the case of Montenegro, nine respondents do not see any kind of change in those relations, while in the case of the Western Balkans 11 respondents feel that relations between different religious organisations and communities will not change to a large extent. The respondents seem to be a bit more optimistic when it comes to interreligious relations in the Western Balkans compared to Montenegro. Eight respondents (32%) believe that mutual relations in Montenegro will further, but not drastically deteriorate, while nine respondents believe that those relations are going to improve to some extent in the Western Balkan countries. Some of the stated reasons for the unsatisfactory state of their relations is connected with the new draft law on freedom of religion and the problems between Serbian Orthodox Church and Montenegrin Orthodox Church on the one hand, but also an increasing level of problems between the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and members of the Albanian minority lately.

**Figure 22: How interreligious relations will develop in the next five years in Montenegro and the region**

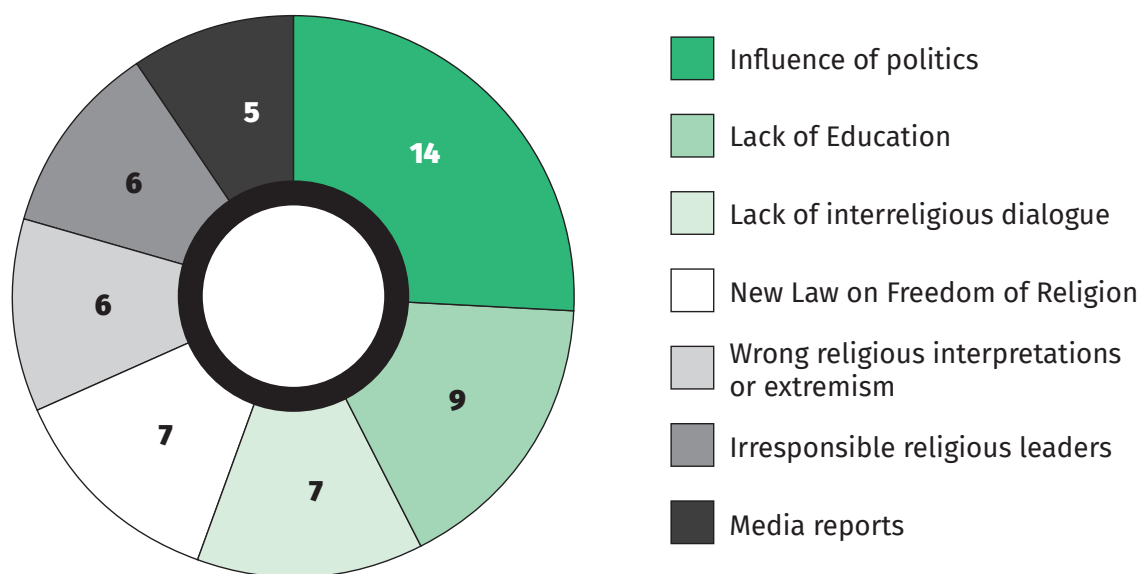


### Threats and opportunities for religious tolerance in Montenegro

The final part of the conducted survey explored the possible threats for the further development of religious tolerance but also explored possible opportunities for the development of religious tolerance in Montenegro. The last question dealt with the possible areas of influence for religion in Montenegro. Our respondents were asked to list the three potential threats to religious tolerance. Most of the respondents’ mentioned politics in some form to be the biggest threat to the religious picture of Montenegro. For example, one of the members of academia claims that the ‘new draft law could be very

problematic in terms of the property of religious communities, it could create problems and tension in the region and not only in the religious picture of Montenegro'. Some respondents also noted that authorities tend to influence religious affairs and that some politicians capitalise on the religious feeling of Montenegrins in order to recruit potential voters. One representative of an NGO saw other factors including: 'Religious leaders and communities lack openness and readiness to have an honest dialogue with members of other communities'. One religious leader, besides political influence, saw education as one of the problems for better understanding between the distinctive religious communities in Montenegro: 'It would be good to include some kind of formal religious education in primary and secondary schools in order to raise the level of knowledge about one's own religion, but also about the religion of others. It seems to me that it is the easiest way for people to make a distinction between their religion and ethnic identity'. One of the religious leaders also pointed out the way media reports shape public opinion: 'For them [media], the essence is not about the story itself, but rather in the bringing as many readers or viewers to read or watch them. With that kind of approach, all good initiatives and good examples of mutual respect and life in multi-ethnic parts of the country will stay less visible than incidents'. Although the situation regarding religious tolerance and interreligious relations in Montenegro is not without difficulties, respondents recognise the existing potential for things to change. However, there are many limiting factors which tend to change slowly and gradually, and stop the positive development of them.

**Figure 23: The biggest threats to interreligious relations in Montenegro**

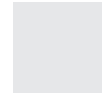


Despite that, one academic said: 'There is plenty of room for the upgrade of capacities for democracy by applying twin toleration in mutual relation between state and religious organisations'. Another member of academia sees the unused potential in religious communities when it comes to tackling different social issues from poverty to other inequalities in Montenegrin society. Interreligious initiatives focused on this could lead to a higher level of social cohesion.

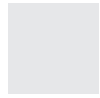




*Bosnia and Herzegovina*



*Serbia*



*Montenegro*



*Kosovo*



*Albania*



*North Macedonia*



# Survey report North Macedonia

By Viktorija Borovska

## Survey sample

One of the activities of the project 'Role of Religion in Western Balkan Societies' was an elite survey that enabled us to gain an insight into views and perceptions on issues related to religiosity, the role and influence of religion, threats and opportunities of religious diversity and suggestions on how religion can contribute to the different social aspects of the various countries of the region. The survey in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) was conducted in the period April–May 2019 with a targeted sample comprising 39 representatives from 7 categories: government and political elite (6 respondents), civil society leaders (5 respondents), journalists and opinion-makers (5 respondents), cultural elite (7 respondents), religious communities (6 respondents), academia (5 respondents), and young leaders (5 respondents). The respondents gave qualitative and quantitative answers to the questions.

The gender structure of the sample comprised 22 males (or 56.4%) and 17 females (43.6%). The average age of the respondents was 38.5 (the youngest 26 years and the oldest 68 years old). In terms of education 14 respondents hold BA degrees, 12 respondents hold MA degrees and 13 hold a PhD degree.

## Religion in North Macedonia – context

North Macedonia is multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country. According to the 2002 census, the religious map of North Macedonia is as following: 64.8% are Orthodox Christians, 33.3% are Muslims, 0.35% Catholics, 0.03% Protestants.<sup>143</sup> However, the current demographic map is expected to be different bearing in mind the fact that the last census was in 2002, while the next has been announced for 2021. According to a Brima/WIN-Gallup international survey, Balkan countries, with the exception of Bulgaria and Albania, remain in the group of the most religious countries in Europe, and Macedonia, with 88% of people being religious,<sup>144</sup> is the regional leader in terms of religiosity.

Regarding interreligious tolerance, the survey conducted by IPIS-Skopje in 2017 shows that citizens who belong to the two largest religions in Macedonia are religious and to a lesser or greater extent practise their faiths, and a relatively high percentage of them have no

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143 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia 2002, available at <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaX.pdf>

144 'Religion Remains Powerful in Balkans', Balkan Insight, 15 January 2018, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/15/religion-remains-powerful-in-balkans-survey-shows-01-15-2018/>

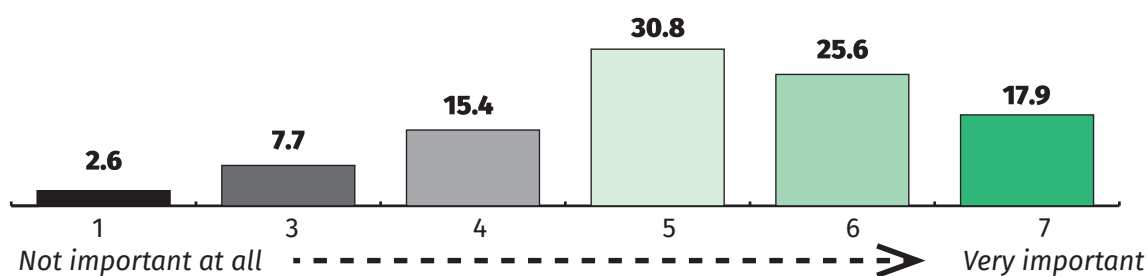
problem communicating with members of other religions, that is to say, there seems to be a high degree of interreligious tolerance in the country.<sup>145</sup> The interreligious tolerance and peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups in North Macedonia was recognised by Pope Francis when he made his first foreign visit to North Macedonia.<sup>146</sup> However, multi-religious character of the RNM was always intertwined with the multi-ethnic composition of the country. This has always been indicator of the mutual tolerance and an indicator of possible fragility and sensitivity when facing political crisis or tensions in the country.<sup>147</sup>

## The role of religion in North Macedonia

On the question, ‘how important is religion today for most of the people in your country’, the results show that the opinion of the majority of the respondents is that religion is rather important for the citizens of RNM. Only 10.3% (cumulative from answers rating 1 to 3) of the respondents think that religion is to some extent not important, but 74.4% (cumulative from answers 5 to 7) of the respondents consider that in North Macedonia religion is important or very important to the people.

On the scale of 1 to 7 measuring the importance of religion in society, where 1 marks complete irrelevance and 7 marks significant influence, the mean was 5.21, which again shows that the opinion of the respondents is that religion is of great importance today for most of the people in North Macedonia.

Figure 24: Importance of religion in North Macedonia (in %)



The opinions were quite divided when it came to the question of the extent of religion’s influence on attitudes regarding societal issues such as poverty and justice. About 41% (cumulative from answers rating 1 to 3) of the respondents said that religion has no or little

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145 Institute for Political Research – Skopje, Macedonia as multiconfessional society-perceptions of the influence between religion and the state, 2017, Available at: [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=93e2a101-c2d7-7896-2cfe-213ba7e4c804&groupId=281657](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=93e2a101-c2d7-7896-2cfe-213ba7e4c804&groupId=281657)

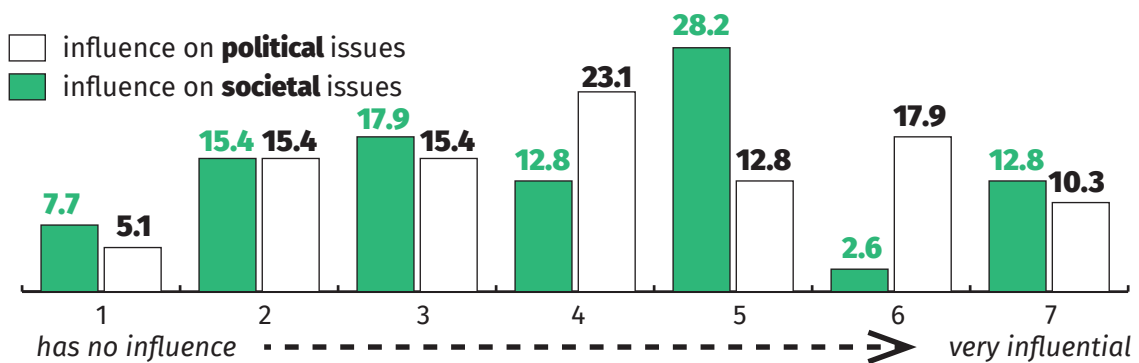
146 ‘Pope in North Macedonia: respect for human dignity, diversity for a future of peace and prosperity’, 2019, available at: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-05/pope-francis-north-macedonia-apostolic-visit-authorities-welcome.html>

147 Institute for Political Research – Skopje, Macedonia as multiconfessional society-perceptions of the influence between religion and the state, 2017, Available at: [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=93e2a101-c2d7-7896-2cfe-213ba7e4c804&groupId=281657](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=93e2a101-c2d7-7896-2cfe-213ba7e4c804&groupId=281657)

importance regarding the societal issues, but for 43.6% (cumulative from answers 5 to 7) religion has significant impact on societal issues. Or according to the respondents, religion has a moderate influence on attitudes about the societal issues for the citizens of North Macedonia, with a mean answer of 4 (on a scale from 1 to 7).

The results are similar regarding the extent of religion's influence on political matters. 35.9% (cumulative from answers 1 to 3) of the respondents believe that religion does not have significant influence, and 41% (cumulative from answers 5 to 7) think that the religion's influence on political matters is quite significant. Or according to respondents, religion has moderate influence on political matters for the citizens of North Macedonia, with a mean answer of 4.18 (on a scale from 1 to 7).

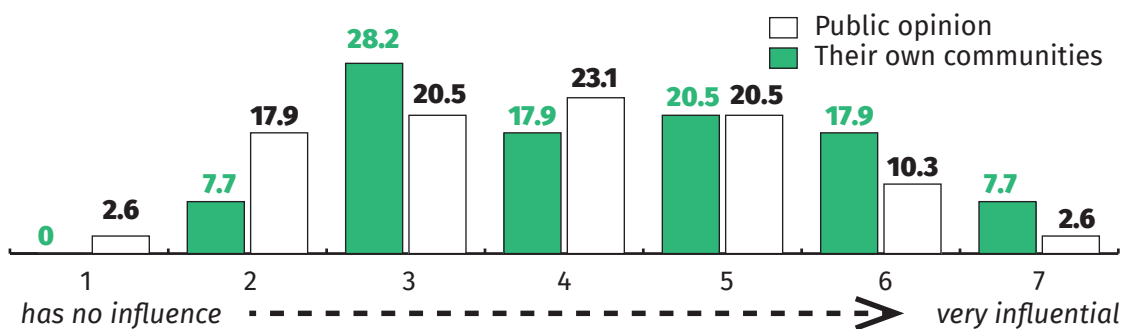
**Figure 25: Religion's influence on societal and political issues in North Macedonia (in %)**



### Religious leaders

According to the survey results, the influence of religious leaders among the respective communities is almost equally distributed between the two extremes of the scale. For 46.2%, this influence is significant (cumulative from answers 5 to 7), while for 35.9% it is insignificant (cumulative from answers 1 to 3). The mean answer was 4.36, which can be assessed as a medium influence of religious leaders on their respective communities.

**Figure 26: The influence of religious leaders in North Macedonia (in %)**



Although the majority of respondents think that the influence of religious leaders among their respective communities is generally moderate to more significant, the majority of respondents (41%) also think that the influence of religious leaders on public opinion in general is less significant. Cumulative results from those who think that their influence on public opinion is significant is 33.3%. The mean answer was 3.84 (on a scale from 1 to 7), which shows that the influence of religious leaders is slightly lower than medium.

## **The influence of religion on developments in North Macedonia**

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One set of questions from this survey was about the opinion of the respondents whether religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, positively or negatively influences the development of political processes, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. Regarding this set of questions, we have an interesting insight when we compare the answers by religious representatives to representatives from other categories.

Regarding the influence of religion on political development, the majority of the respondents answered that religion has a negative influence, 61.5%. But out of those who think that religion has a negative influence on political development, only 4.2% (or one respondent) is a religious representative.

The answers to the question about the positive or negative influence of religion on democracy display the same divergence between religious representatives and the others, but the general results (56.4%) show that religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in public discourse, has a negative influence on democracy. However, none of the religious representatives think that that is the case, in fact 66.7% of them think that religion has a positive influence on democracy and 33.3% think that it has a neutral influence. But none of the respondents from the other elite categories think that religion has a positive influence on democracy.

It is also interesting that none of the respondents from this survey think that religion has a neutral influence on the interethnic relations. Most think that religion has a negative influence (74.4%), while almost all (5 out of 6) of the religious representatives think that religion has a positive influence on interethnic relations.

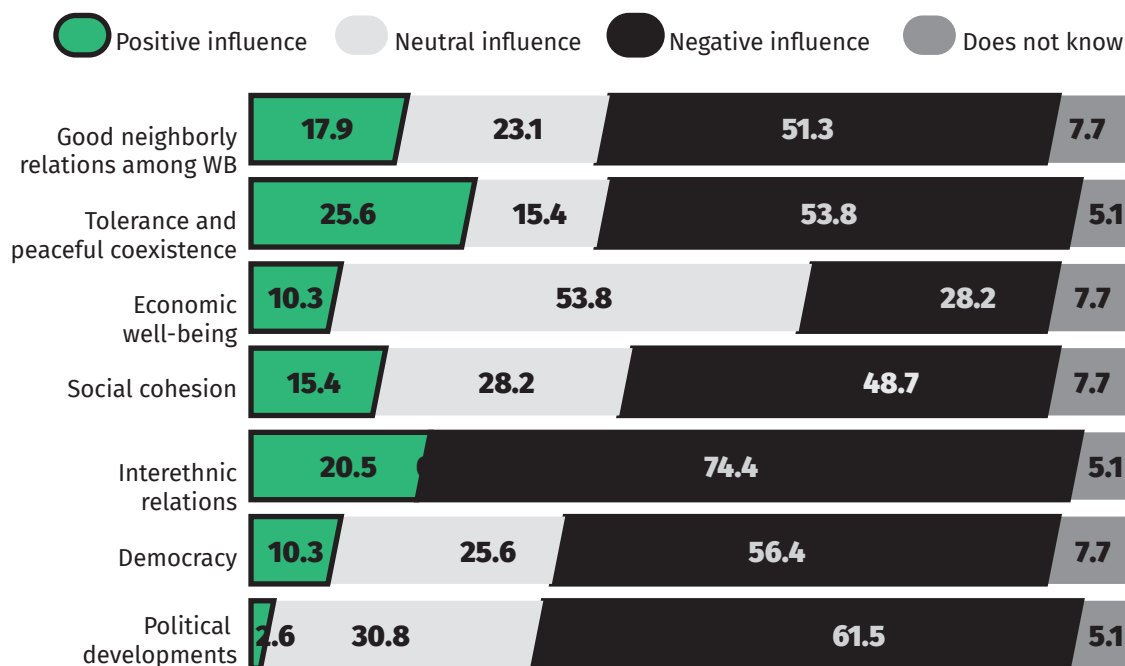
Regarding the question about the influence of religion on social cohesion, answers are similar. Although the percentage of answers that cited religion as a negative influence on social cohesion was lower than in previous questions.

On the question about the influence of religion on economic well-being, the dominant answer is that it has a neutral influence, with 53.8% of responses. Regarding the influence of religion on economic well-being, answers from all categories of respondents are distributed fairly equally.

Again, most of the answers to the question about the influence of religion on tolerance and peaceful coexistence are that it is negative, with 53.8% of respondents sharing this opinion. The answers of the religious representatives to this question are again different from the others. They think that religion in fact has a positive influence on tolerance and peaceful coexistence, but the majority of respondents from the other categories think differently, that religion has a negative influence.

About the influence of religion on the good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries, the majority of the respondents think that religion has a negative influence (51.3%). Again, the answers of the religious representatives differ markedly from the other respondents. None of the religious representatives think that religion has a negative influence on good neighbourly relations.

**Figure 27: The influence of religion on politics and society in North Macedonia**



From the results of the respondents regarding the influence of religion on different societal issues: development of political processes, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and good neighbourly relations among the Western Balkans countries; one can conclude either that religion and religious leaders have failed to positively contribute to society, or perhaps that their positive influence is not obvious or visible to citizens outside religious institutions.

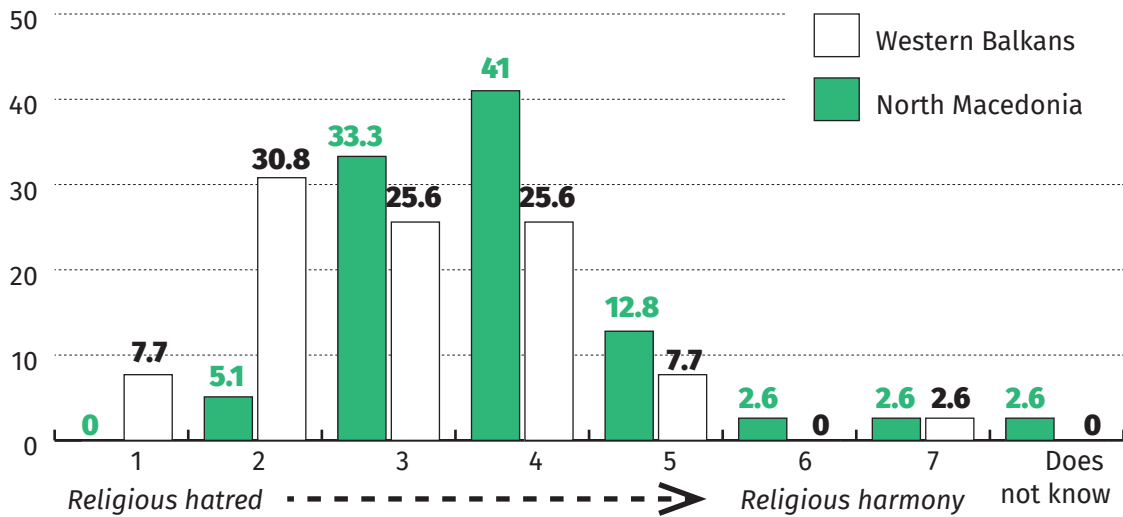
### Interreligious relations

Regarding the question about interreligious relations in Republic of North Macedonia on a scale between religious hatred (1) and religious harmony (7), the majority of respondents think that interreligious relations are somewhere in between, but slightly inclining towards interreligious intolerance (41%), but none of the respondents think that the RNM is in a state of religious. The average grade for this question is 3.82, which confirms what has previously been stated.

Respondents had a slightly different opinion when it came to interreligious relations in the broader region. Respondents predominantly thought that religious hatred or intolerance is generally present in Western Balkan region. The mean of this question (from the scale

of 1 to 7) was 3.05, which is lower than a medium grade, and therefore is closer to the assessment that it is slightly inclining toward religious hatred.

**Figure 28: Interreligious relations in North Macedonia and in WB countries (in %)**

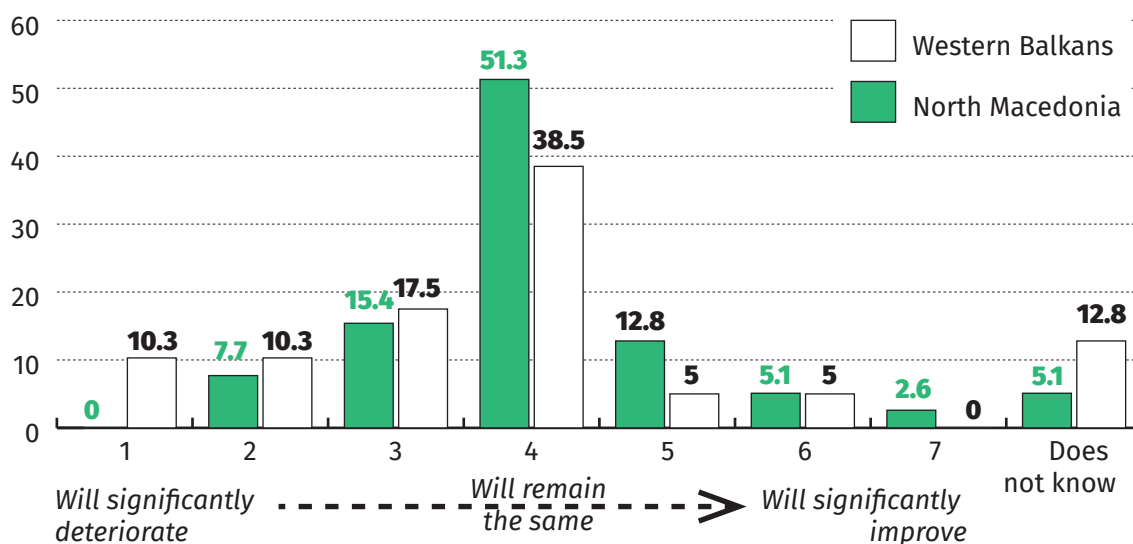


About the opinion on how the interreligious relations will develop in our country, the majority of the respondents think that they will remain the same (51.3%).

The explanations of the respondents to this question were that they do not expect changes because the period of five years is too short for any major changes, and there are no indications that religious leaders will change their behaviour or rhetoric. Here again respondents complain that there is no sufficient contact between different religions, that prejudice and ignorance of religions are persistent, that there are only formal contacts between religious communities and that religious leaders do not promote interreligious relations. A few of the respondents think that interreligious relations will worsen due to an ethnic and religious gap which will increase because religious communities will still be under the influence of politics and that polarisation between the people in North Macedonia after five years. However, there are few more optimistic expectations regarding this and hopes that the new generation of religious leaders will be far more willing to cooperate and ready for coexistence than the previous ones, and that there is also an expectation for a substantial manifestation of mutual respect and help between different religions.

Respondents' opinions on how they expect interreligious relations to develop in Western Balkan countries in the next five years are less optimistic than expectations for North Macedonia. 38.5% (cumulative % from answers 1 to 3) think that they will worsen, and 38.5% that they will remain the same. Only about 10% of respondents think that interreligious relations in the region will improve. This more pessimistic views on the matter are explained on the grounds that there are still existent and active political issues among Balkan countries, and fear that that the different religions in the Balkan countries divide people more than they unite them. Namely, political elites would not give up their tendency to abuse the religious communities for political purposes.

**Figure 29: How interreligious relations are expected to develop in the next five years in North Macedonia and in the region**



## Threats and opportunities

Regarding the respondents' opinion about the top three threats to interreligious relations in the Republic of North Macedonia today, we can summarise the answers in these categories:

- Interference of religion with politics in terms of interference of religion in politics and politics in religion;
- Poverty;
- Ethno-religiosity;
- Hate speech, interreligious intolerance, bad religious leaders, using religion to spread interreligious and interethnic intolerance and violence, interreligious polarisation, threatening rhetoric of religious leaders;
- Being uninformed about their own and other religions; and
- Media propaganda and social media influence.

And finally, respondents of this survey were asked to give ideas about how religion can improve certain aspects of the society such as politics, democracy, social cohesion, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, interethnic relations, economic well-being and good neighbourly relations. For each of these aspects, a certain percentage of respondents think that religion cannot help in any way. But here are the categories that can be distinguished from their answers.

Regarding the question of how religion can help improve political developments in the country, the summarised answers of this open-ended question can be divided in these categories:



- Religion should not interfere at all in politics, nor give opinion on the issues, and should stay away from political parties;
- By promoting tolerance and neutrality towards political parties;
- By showing proactivity in addressing issues of general interest and public interest; and
- Religious leaders should calm the rhetoric, and should educate their members about faith's truth, promoting human and ethical values.

Opinions about whether and how religion can help improve the state of democracy in the country, the summarised answers can be divided in these categories:

- By promoting human and ethical values, tolerance, acceptance of diversity;
- By supporting democratic processes and promoting democracy as a value;
- With real secularisation, separation of the state from religion; and
- To separate religion from politics and political parties.

The question as to how religion can help improve the interethnic relations in the country, the summarised answers are as follows:

- By building bridges of trust;
- With direct participation in resolving interethnic conflicts;
- Preaching human values, tolerance, respect, understanding;
- By not getting involved in daily political activities; and
- By intensifying interreligious dialogues and promoting values that bring different groups closer.

Opinions on how religion can improve the social cohesion in the country are summarised in these categories:

- With the joint celebration of the main religious holidays;
- Promoting acceptance, discussion and dialogues between different religions;
- Through mutual introduction of different religions and interreligious forums; and
- By helping the disadvantaged and poor with humanitarian aid.

Although the general opinion of the respondents regarding the influence of religion on economic well-being showed that religion has a neutral influence, they also gave opinion on how religion can improve the economic well-being in the country:

- By fostering ethics in the economy and encouraging ethics in ecology;
- Promotion of labour as a source of happiness, peace and well-being;
- Taxation, regulation and transparency of economic transactions for religious services; and

- Religious leaders to try not to enjoy material goods (e.g. expensive cars) and dispatch them in favour of the poor.

Respondents were asked to give their opinions on how religion can improve the state of tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the country, and their answers were summarised in these categories:

- By promoting human values that are common to all religions, and by encouraging believers to practice tolerance toward other religions and ethnic communities;
- By rejecting prejudice towards different religions;
- Spreading messages of coexistence;
- By intensifying interreligious dialogues; and
- By teaching tolerance.

The summarised answers to the last question on how religion can improve the good neighbourly relations among WB countries are as follows:

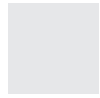
- To promote tolerance and peace, acceptance of others;
- To show respect instead of directing hate speech to other countries or groups;
- To develop real cooperation and encounters between religious leaders/religious groups; and
- To abandon xenophobic discourse and development of ecumenical tendencies.



*Bosnia and  
Herzegovina*



*Serbia*



*Montenegro*



*Kosovo*



*Albania*



*North Macedonia*

# Survey report Serbia

By Nenad Zekavica

## Survey sample

During March and April 2019, a survey was conducted as part of a regional project which deals with the role of religion in the Western Balkan countries. The survey was conducted as the research part of the project and it was conducted among members of cultural and political elite members of society. Its purpose is to give a sketch of the religious topography of different societies in the Western Balkans.

The respondents were carefully selected and around 80 surveys were sent to the selected candidates. As a result, we received 30 completed surveys with necessary data. We have tried to follow guidelines and to receive feedback from people with different occupations: politicians and government employees (N=3), religious leaders (N=4), academia (N=7), civil society leaders (N=6), journalists and opinion-makers (N=5) and young leaders (N=5). Of the respondents, 21 were male (70%) and nine (30%) were female. The average age of the respondents was 35.5 years, with the youngest respondent being 25 years old and the oldest one 54 years old. With regard to respondents' education, six respondents have a bachelor's degree, 15 respondents hold an MA, while nine of them have obtained a PhD degree.

## The role of religion in Serbia

The questions were designed to show how religion is perceived in Serbia and to see its role in Serbian society, and also in other Western Balkan countries.

The first question was related to the level of importance of religion today for most of the people in Serbia, on the scale, 1–7 where 1 represents 'not at all' and 7 stands for 'very important'. The average grade was 4.37. Overall, we could say that religion is moderately important for people in our society. Additional data which can show the importance of religion for people living in Serbia comes from the census in 2011,<sup>148</sup> when it was shown that more than 94.4% of the population identified as religious – as a member of a church or religious community/organisation. The disparity between these two is quite obvious. Specialised surveys show that a high percentage of people are not believers in terms of practising religion, but they rather choose their religious affiliation on the basis of their traditional belonging to a specific confession. The number of atheists and agnostics is growing. This is the reason for the opinion that in large surveys, such as national censuses, it is hard to get precise data on religious affiliation. Hence specialised surveys are more

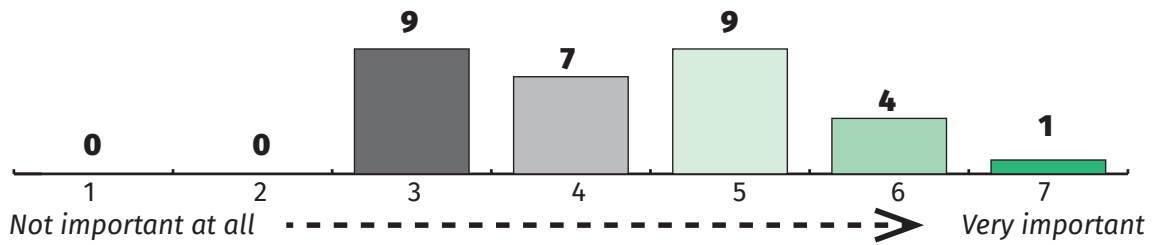
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148 The special study available only in Serbian, written on the basis of Census in 2011. Etnomozaik 178, retrieved via <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

suitable for collecting that type of data.<sup>149</sup>

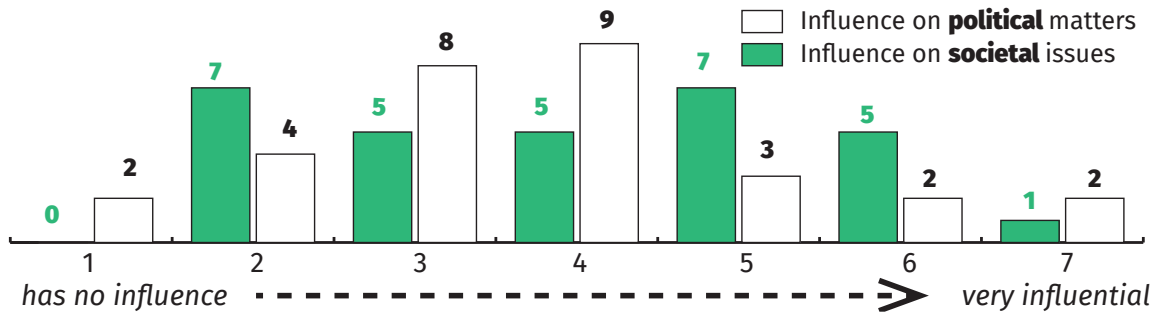
Therefore, the data collected on the census is more connected to the personal feelings of traditional belonging than on active participation in religion, i.e. the activities of a religious organisation or community.

**Figure 30: Importance of religion in Serbia**



However, when it comes to the level of influence of religion on people and their attitudes, things change. The influence of religion on societal issues, such as poverty, justice, equality, crime, social cohesion tends to drop significantly. It drops down to an average grade of 4.03. It drops even further down when respondents were asked to scale the influence on people’s attitudes when it comes to political issues, such as democratic participation, voter behaviour, political parties. Our survey has shown that the average grade is 3.77. When we compare the two questions which deal with the influence of religion on people’s attitudes on both societal and political issues we can observe that respondents opted for an above average grade of 43.29% for societal and only 23.31% for political issues.

**Figure 31: Influence of religion on societal and political issues in Serbia**



## Religious leaders

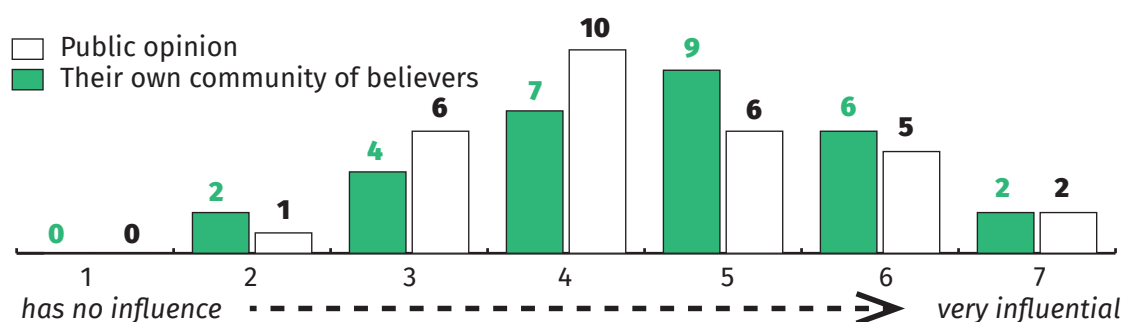
When asked about the influence of religious leaders in their respective communities and their influence on public opinion in general the results changed a bit. Interestingly enough,

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149 See Etnozojaik 82, (Нада Радушки, Методолошки аспекти и проблеми у истраживању етничке структуре становништва), Теме, 31, 4, 2007, pp. 698–699.

one would expect that the influence in religious communities would be seen as significantly higher than in the general public. However, the difference between the average grades of the two is almost insignificant. The reason for this could be the fact that the majority of the people declared as religious and that there is not much difference between the religious communities and society in general. However, the influence is not equally distributed throughout the scale, showing that around a third of people in religious communities are not highly influenced, showing that around a third of people in religious communities are not highly influenced by their respective religious leaders. Despite that fact, religious leaders are still pretty influential. The significant difference is with the average grade of the influence of religion and of religious leaders. We can see that the average grade in the questions dealing with the role of religion is somewhere between 3.77 for political and 4.03 for societal issues. However, when it comes to the religious leaders' influence, it is notably higher – somewhere between 4.47 and 4.63.

**Figure 32: The influence of religious leaders in Serbia**



## The influence of religion on developments in Serbia

The next question is designed to show if religion influences different developments in society and to show to what extent it is influential. The respondents were asked to say if religion has a positive or negative influence on specific developments or has no influence at all. The specific areas of influence of religion they were asked about were political developments, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful coexistence and development of good neighbourly relations among countries in the Western Balkans.

According to this question only, people tend to see religion as a phenomenon which affects different areas of society in Serbia. If we combine all of these sections together we have 47 votes for positive influence, 73 for neutral and 70 opted for negative influence, while 20 did not choose to respond. These results are similar to those in the previous questions. Religion has only relative influence – and it is more perceived as negative than as positive. We will now get more details about particular areas of development.

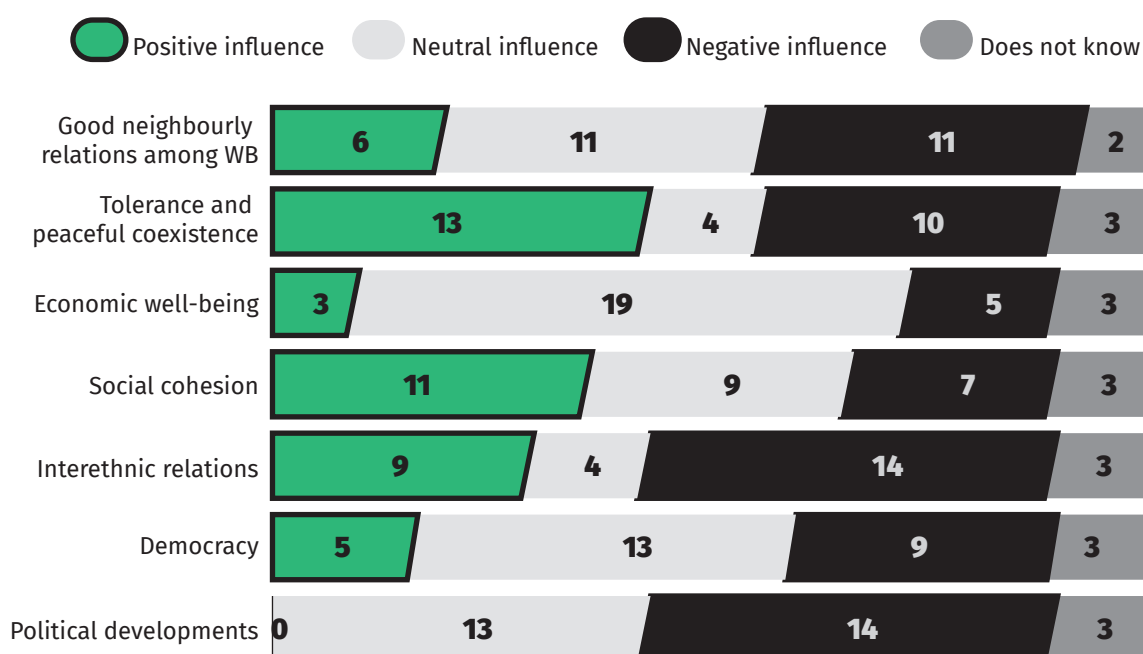
According to the first section of the tenth question, which deals with political development, people do not see any kind of positive influence of religion. They tend to see religion as predominantly negative (N=14), or neutral to a lesser degree (N=13). However, strikingly enough, there was not a single respondent that sees religion as having a positive effect on political development.

When it comes to the development of democracy the situation is pretty much similar, although there were few (N=5) who tend to believe that religion has a positive influence on the development of democracy. The vast majority once again opted for either neutral (N=13) or negative (N=9) impact of religion on the development of democracy.

The issue of interethnic relations showed us that only a few people (N=4) tend to believe that religion does not affect its development. Contrary to the previous questions where a high percentage of respondents did not recognise the influence of the religion on political developments and on the development of democracy, the role of religion in the development of interethnic relations seems to be significant. However, this influence is mostly recognised as negative (N=14), with an additional nine respondents who see a positive influence for religion on interethnic relations. Therefore, religion is seen as one of the reasons causing problems in interethnic relations in Serbia. The underlying reason for such a negative impact could be the fact that ethnicity and religion almost completely resonate with each other in Serbia.<sup>150</sup>

Based on this survey people seem to see more of a negative influence for religion on various aspects of society – only tolerance and peaceful coexistence and social cohesion were recognised as being positively impacted by religion. But even these two developments are not univocally seen as such. Both of them are almost equally considered to be negatively influenced by religion. When it comes to tolerance and peaceful coexistence we can see that there is quite a small difference between the positive (N=11) and negative (N=9) influence. Social cohesion was similar, where most people (N=13) tending to see positive aspects of religion. However, with a very small difference in number, other respondents said it has no impact (N=4), or that it has a negative impact (N=10). In all other developments, the negative role of religion seems predominant, or respondents have opted almost equally for neutral and negative aspects of religion.

**Figure 33: The influence of religion on politics and society in Serbia**



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150 The special study available only in Serbian, written on the basis of Census in 2011. Etnomozaik 187, retrieved via <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

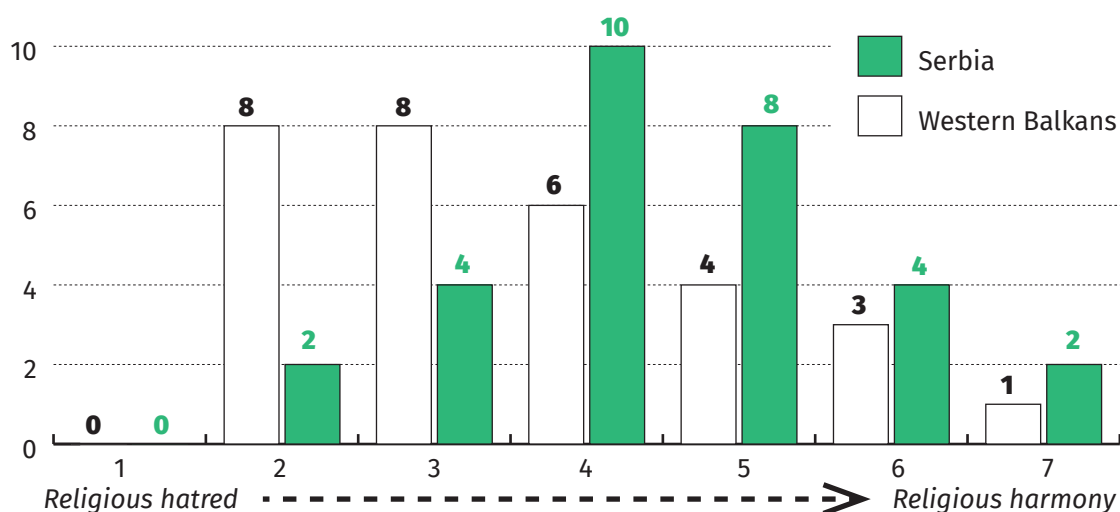
However, when it comes to economic well-being the respondents in the vast majority (N=19) stated that religion does not impact it, five opted for negative influence and three for positive one.

The last section of question number ten dealt with religion's contribution to the development of good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. It seems that the majority of the respondents recognise a negative (N=11) influence of religion on relations between Western Balkan countries, with additional 11 respondents who do not recognise the influence of the religion in this matter at all. Only 20% (N=6) of the respondents claimed that religion positively influenced this development.

## Religious tolerance

The next part of the survey dealt with interreligious relations in Serbia on the one hand and in the wider region of the Western Balkans on the other. We asked our respondents to describe the current situation in Serbia and the Western Balkans as a whole. They had to choose on scale 1–7, where 1 stands for religious hatred and 7 for religious harmony. As we can see from the graph below, people are very critical of the current state of the interreligious relations in the country. Regarding the situation in Serbia, the majority (N=16) do not see those relations as harmonious and good. The remaining respondents (N=14) claimed that religious relations are leaning toward the positive side of the scale. When asked about Western Balkan interreligious relations, our respondents seem to be even more critical about it. A fairly large number of respondents (N=22) described current religious relations as poor at the moment. Only eight respondents think that relations are good at the moment, and only one claimed that they can be described as religious harmony.

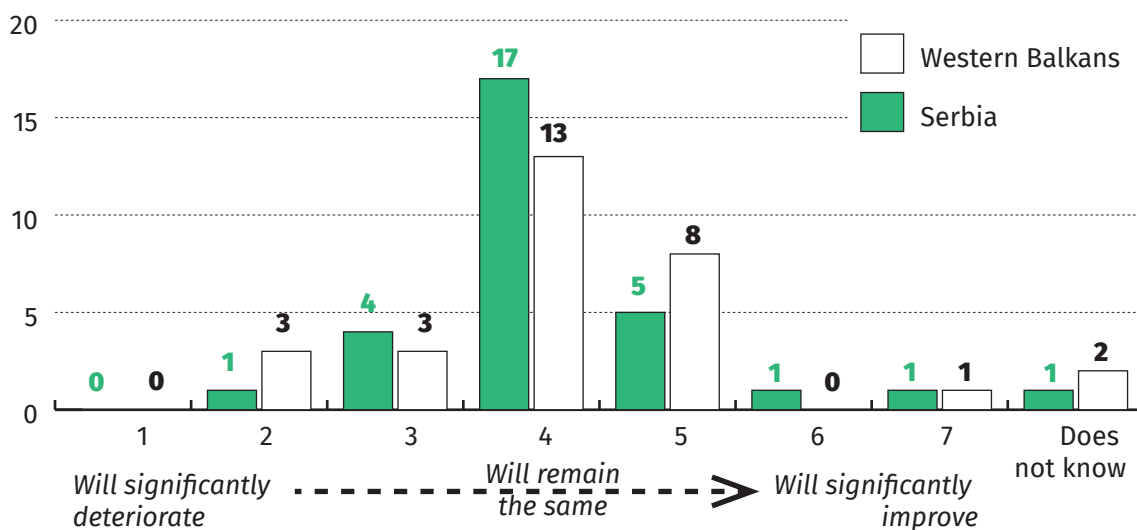
**Figure 34: The state of interreligious relations in Serbia and the region**



The respondents were then asked to estimate the future development interreligious relations in the next five years in Serbia and in the Western Balkans (see graph below) and to further explain their selection. Once again, they had to choose from the scale 1–7, where 1 stood for 'will significantly deteriorate', 7 for 'will significantly improve', and 4 for 'it will remain the same'.



**Figure 35: Development of interreligious relations in Serbia and the region over next five years**



Our respondents showed doubt in high percentages that things will change significantly in any direction. The majority of 56.67% (N=17) do not see any incoming change in terms of interreligious relations in Serbia, four respondents see the relations deteriorating a bit, and five see those relations slightly improving. When asked about the future of interreligious relations in Western Balkan countries, respondents seem to be a bit more optimistic. Namely, only six of them think that relations will deteriorate, while the majority sees relations as staying the same (N=13) or improving at some level (N=11). However, the small differences are only in the distribution of the respondents. Overall, the vast majority of respondents feel that relations will remain the same or slightly improve or deteriorate (N=26 for Serbia and N=24 for Western Balkan countries).

When asked about the rationale behind their selection, a few responses stood out by their frequency: influence of political factors (in the context of the Western Balkans in the first place) and lack of initiative for interreligious cooperation.

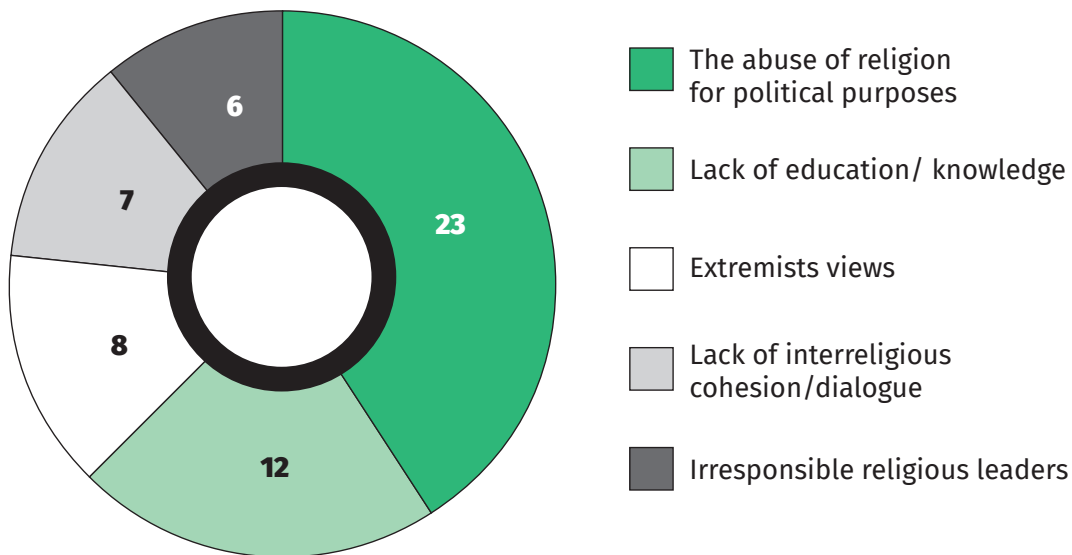
The main reason for relations staying more less the same is because of the influence of regional politics, or politics in general, on the religious institutions at some level. Political influence was recognised either as a rise of the right across the Western Balkans or as an entanglement of nationalism with religion, or at the highest frequency as an influence of daily politics on religion, i.e. religious institutions and representatives, or as one member of academia phrased it: 'The inter-religious factors are determined by political relations in WB. They will continue to develop along those lines'. On the other hand, one of the representatives of an NGO claimed that 'the 5-year time period is too short for any significant change - there can be only small changes toward religious harmony or otherwise. The reason for this is the historical burden which lies on the top of our interethnic and inter-religious relations in region'. Another respondent pointed to the gap between the formal interreligious meetings between leaders of distinctive religious communities and other believers. In his opinion: '...those meetings do not have any significant influence on believers'.

## Threats and opportunities for religious tolerance in Serbia

The last part of the survey deals with the threats and opportunities for interreligious relations in the country and in the whole region. An absolute majority (N=23) repeated their concerns from the previous questions. The religious relations in the Western Balkans and in Serbia will continue to be determined by political factors in Serbia and in other Western Balkan countries. Some of those political factors are the rise of the right and nationalism, interests of political elites etc.

People were also worried by the low level of knowledge about religion in general (due to the long heritage of communism), but by a low level of education in general, which affect one's critical approach.

Figure 36: Biggest threats to interreligious relations in Serbia



Some of the respondents (N=8) were worried by the fact that people who were involved in the war in Syria have returned to their homes in the Western Balkans and that they present an imminent threat, not only to the religious relations, but to general security.

One of the recognised potential threats (N=7) is the fact that there are not many initiatives which work on improving religious relations or on improving of mutual respect and knowledge about other religious communities.

Despite the low level of influence of religion as a whole and predominantly negative influence of religion on different areas in society people also seem to be rather positive and open about the potential role of religion in Serbia and wider. For example, its benefits could be seen in the areas of economic well-being, especially when it comes to helping the poor and those who need help by organising special programmes of assistance.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Current study quote. This kind of interreligious initiative has been seen by three respondents as a way of improving not only economic well-being of the poor but also interreligious relations.

## Cross country comparison

By Viktorija Borovska

Political, economic and cultural elites in the Western Balkans share common views on the role of religion in society, but different perspectives on the challenges and concerns related to interreligious relations. Sharper differences in relation to challenges and threats to religious diversity and interreligious dialogue are observed in the region's multi-ethnic societies.

Albania and Kosovo are more homogenous societies in terms of ethnicity. Although Albania and Kosovo have a heterogeneous religious structure, the structure of ethnicity is fairly homogenous. In Albania 97% are Albanians, and in Kosovo 92.9% of the population is Albanian. North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are ethnically very heterogeneous. In North Macedonia, according to the last census from 2002, 64.2% are Macedonian, 25.2% Albanians. Macedonians are generally Orthodox Christians and Albanians are generally Muslims. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the last census from 2013, the case is even more diverse, 50.11% are Bosniaks, 30.78% are Serbs, and 15.43% Croats. Bosniaks are generally Muslims, Serbians are Orthodox Christians and Croats are generally Catholics.

Also, when we talk about ethnically heterogeneous structure it is important to bear in mind that it makes a difference if there is religious heterogeneity as well. For example, Montenegro has also ethnically heterogeneous structure with 45% Montenegrins, 28.7% Serbs, and 8.6% Bosnians, but Montenegrins and Serbs (which comprise the majority) are both Orthodox Christians. The ethnic diversity in combination with religious diversity seems to have been more prone to political manipulation and tensions even in the post-1990s conflict period in some of Western Balkan countries.

Regarding the importance of religion for most of the surveyed elites in each of the countries, it is obvious that religion plays an important role in society and it is an important aspect for citizens that live in the Western Balkan region. This is most noticeable in Bosnia and Herzegovina (with a mean of 5.63) and least noticeable in Albania (mean 4.1).

Religion has a moderate influence on the attitudes of the majority of people regarding social issues (the highest influence on social issues was observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina with a mean 5.24, and the lowest influence in North Macedonia with a mean of 4 and in Serbia, 4.03).

Sharp differences between ethnically homogenous and multi-ethnic societies are observed in relation to the influence of religion on the attitudes of people regarding political matters. Namely, in Macedonia the mean is 4.18, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is 5.24, which shows that religion in these two countries has a significant influence on political matters. Unlike these results, in Albania and Kosovo the value of the mean is lower (3.26 in Albania and 3.7 in Kosovo) which indicates that religion is perceived as not having a significant influence on political matters.

There are also differences regarding the influence of religious leaders among their respective communities of believers. If we compare the means of these six countries, it is noticeable that Bosnian religious leaders (mean 5.2) and those in Kosovo (mean 5.47) have

a greater influence on their respective communities. This influence is weakest in Serbia (mean 4.47) and North Macedonia (mean 4.36).

Generally, the influence of religious leaders on public opinion in general is lower. However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone (mean 5.2) according to surveyed members of elites there, religious leaders have a significant influence on public opinion. This influence is lowest in Albania (mean 3.43) and North Macedonia (mean 3.84).

The next set of questions from the survey were about the opinions of the respondents as to whether religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, positively or negatively influences the development of political processes, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkans countries. The cross-country analysis of surveyed elite members' opinions suggest that in more heterogeneous countries (such as North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) generally the influence of religion on the social aspects mentioned is negative. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia the influence of religion is mostly negative upon political developments, democracy and interethnic relations. Serbia has similar results on this matter, but leaning more toward neutral influence. Montenegro's results are similar with the tendency to see religion as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse as more of a negative influence especially on tolerance and peaceful coexistence and interethnic relations. Unlike these countries, the situation in Albania and Kosovo is quite different. Generally, elite members from these two countries perceive religion's influence in society more positively. The most positive influence religion in Kosovo has is on peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and interethnic relations. In Albania this influence is most positive on peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, democracy, and interethnic relations.

In all of the countries the respondents have assessed the influence of religion on economic well-being as neutral, which can lead us to the conclusion that religion has the lowest influence on economy.

The biggest differences between the countries that emerged from the elite survey are those regarding the interreligious relations in Western Balkan countries. Respondents were choosing on the scale with seven degrees, between religious hatred and religious harmony. In countries with a greater ethnic homogeneity, the mean is closer to religious harmony (Albania mean 6, Kosovo mean 5.57). But we have a completely opposite image in the countries with multi-ethnic structure which have experienced the severe consequences of interethnic conflicts. In North Macedonia the mean is 3.82, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina is 3.67. As we can see there is a great discrepancy in the results. One should bear in mind that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, and the armed conflict in North Macedonia in 2001 have affected greatly the interethnic relations in these two countries.

But when we speak about the perceptions of the respondents of the interreligious relations in the Western Balkan region we see a different picture. Surveyed respondents in most of the Western Balkan countries perceive the interreligious relations in the region as leaning towards religious intolerance (North Macedonia mean 3.05, Kosovo mean 4.1, Bosnia and Herzegovina 3.5, Albania 3.74). Results from the Serbian survey show that they are more critical about the interreligious relations in Western Balkan countries. Montenegro is the exception in this matter. Respondents from Montenegro see the interreligious relations in their country in the worst condition (mean 3.02) than interreligious relations in the whole region (mean 4.31).

Respondents from the six countries generally expect that interreligious relations in their respective countries and in the region in general will remain the same, mostly because the period of five years is short and there is no evidence for any major change in the matter.

The elite's perceptions of what the biggest threats of interreligious relations are in these six countries overlap to some extent. Generally, in all Western Balkan countries the biggest threat for religion is politics. They view that relationship or the abuse of religion for political gain, or in other words the shaping of religious relations by political factors as representing one of the greatest challenges for religion today in the region. Even more worrying is that the respondents don't expect this situation to change in the future. For the respondents from Kosovo and Albania one of the biggest threats is religious extremism and Islamophobia. In Serbia one of the perceived threats is returnees from the Syria War, not only as a religious but also a security problem. In Montenegro, surveyed elite members see media reports on religious matters as an additional problem. Namely, they argue that with media focuses mostly on incidents of religious tension while examples of mutual respect and harmonious multi-religious and multiethnic life are less visible in the media. Participants from all six countries complain that there is an absence of interreligious dialogue, as well as lack of religious knowledge and understanding among declared believers from all confessions.

Finally, regarding the positive opportunities or participants' opinion on how religion can help improve certain aspects of society, the majority of the respondents from these six countries agree that religion can actually help in most of the areas mentioned. What respondents suggest is that religion or religious leaders should do more to promote universal and ethical values and strengthen interfaith dialogue. Religious institutions and religious representatives should lead by example especially in terms of acceptance, respect and tolerance towards other religious communities. Also, avoidance of any relationship between religion and politics was mentioned in each country report as one of the steps to improve the state of and opinion about religion.

## **Concluding remarks**

The opinion that religion in Western Balkan countries plays a crucial role in different aspects and spheres of society prevails not only in the answers of the respondents, but also in the previous work and research of academics and international organisations. While it plays an important role, the impact religion has on the economy, politics, democracy and society in general is not necessarily tangible or positive. Religious leaders need to act more vigorously to promote religious values which would assist Western Balkan societies in reconciliation and overcoming the challenges of past conflicts. Moreover, institutionally, religion is perceived to have strong ties to political elites in some of the Western Balkan countries. Overall, religion and its institutions should assume a more proactive role in society in terms of perpetuating universal ethical principles and condemning populist rhetoric that is in breach of democratic values. However, the prospect for such a development is surrounded by scepticism because religion in some Western Balkan countries is abused for political goals and sustaining the divide among ethno-religious groups.

Although religion may be important to people it seems that it has failed to show its positive effects on different social aspects. The general opinion is that religion seen through the practice and the rhetoric of its religious representatives in some of Western Balkan countries it has not actively encouraged tolerance or peaceful coexistence.

Another very important conclusion that emerged from this survey is that religion (through its religious representatives) must show initiatives and genuine practices of interreligious cooperation, understanding, respect and acceptance. Religious leaders in Western Balkan countries should engage more actively in establishing interreligious cooperation both at the institutional and practical level.

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# The Interfaith Council for Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans

Ylli H. Doci, PhD<sup>152</sup>

## Abstract

With the demise of the communist governments in the Balkan region in the early 1990s, we have entered a phase in which serious religiously related issues challenging the social cohesion of our societies need serious analysis and action at different levels. Interfaith councils as a way of engaging the different religious communities in one society are not new and not the same. Nor are they unquestionably accepted or easily dismissed as ineffective in addressing challenges of peacebuilding and social cohesion in a religiously pluralistic society. There are political, cultural, ethnic and national considerations beside religious and educational ones which figure large in the role of an interfaith council and influence its character and effectiveness, but their contribution to peacebuilding and the social cohesion of our pluralistic societies cannot be ignored. As such this paper will explore, from different perspectives, the role of an interfaith council as a helpful instrument for the wellbeing of our societies.

The virtues of an interfaith council discussed in this paper should give us hope for fruitfully addressing the challenge of different traditions in the same social space, but it remains to be seen if it can win the support of the majority culture's stakeholders with their concerns in providing for a peaceful and harmonious society. The Albanian context with its similarities and differences from the religious pluralistic context of the other countries in the region provides a good case study to evaluate the merits of an interfaith council as an instrument to facilitate tolerance and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** interfaith council, religious pluralism, peacebuilding, tolerance, social cohesion.

## Introduction

The world we live in now in the third millennium is different from the one our parents lived in until 2001, especially with regard to the resurgence of religion in Eastern Europe and the Balkan region (Johnson, 2013), with predictions of secular modernity in need of adjustment

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(Appleby, 1994; Eggemeier, 2012). Our Balkan region has suffered long and even recently from conflicts between different ethnic groups, but the relationship of religion, ethnicity and nationalism deserves much more serious thought (Ruane & Todd, 2010; Poulton & Taji-Farouki, 1997).

Perhaps due to the lasting influence of communist ideology in our region, alongside other factors, it seems as if religion is not taken seriously by Balkan intellectuals and those in positions of leadership. The observation of John Micklethwait in another context sounds like an accurate description of our intellectuals as well: 'If you gather together a group of self-professed foreign-policy experts—whether they be neoconservatives, realpolitickers or urbane European diplomats—you can count on a sneer if you mention "inter-faith dialogue". At best, they say, it is liberal waffle; at worst it is naive appeasement,' (Micklethwait, 2007, p. 22).

Religious pluralism as a social reality is now here to stay, but tolerance as a necessary ingredient of social cohesion in this context is not a given because tolerance is a cultural achievement (Netland, 2001). We cannot afford not to pay attention to the religious dimension of life in our region. This does not mean we only need to empower the state again to deal with it – we perhaps know better than most what happens when the state is overbearing and oversteps its boundaries with regard to freedom of religion, yet the state needs to be involved.

In this paper I discuss the merits of the interfaith council as one important mechanism to engage religious dynamics to strengthen the social cohesion in the Western Balkan states. Methodologically, by virtue of analytic induction the argument of this paper is: (1) Balkan countries need to address their interreligious dynamics by more consciously including the different religious representative bodies within their societies; (2) an explanation for the general lack of enthusiasm for utilising the interfaith council in our region could be due to the dominance of one religion in the national identity and culture of each country; (3) the Albanian Interreligious Council, as an expression of acceptance by all religious communities in Albania of other religious communities as equals, is the dependent variable of the difference in the nature of the role of religion in the make-up of the national identity and culture.

This paper starts by highlighting the religious dimension of the tensions between different groups in our societies that need social cohesion, then describe the form, purpose and function of the interfaith council as a cooperation platform for different religious groups followed by probing its relevance to address the issues of peacebuilding and social cohesion from theological, political and peacebuilding perspectives, to conclude with one illustrative case in Albania observing some potential challenges in other countries of the region.

## **Profile of an interfaith council in fostering social cohesion**

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The interfaith council is not a new idea. The interfaith council is a reflection of the significance of belonging together to the same social entity, some form of a democratic sovereign state or a common society, in which we need to live together respectfully and harmoniously. This implies the prior commitment to a common vision of society defined by tolerance in pluralism, recognising and respectfully engaging religious others who are our next-door neighbours while they also are embodiments of 'the universe next door' (Sire, 1997).

The world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition is called Religions for Peace (Religions for Peace, 2019). Their motto, 'different faiths, common action,' captures well the attitude of respect for people of different faiths seeking to advance the common goal of peace and wellbeing for all. Here we see the concern with ensuring the necessary basis for a cohesive society which is peaceful coexistence.

The vision, mission, principles, structure and method of the Religions for Peace coalition give a good picture of the kind of interfaith council this paper puts forward as a helpful instrument for our societies. The interfaith council or interreligious council (IRC) is the primary mechanism for interreligious cooperation envisioned by Religions for Peace network. I will try to briefly describe aspects of the interfaith council – what it is and what it does – but this is necessarily general, and I will illustrate this with the Albanian Interfaith Council as one concrete example in our region.

The vision or the desired reality for an interfaith council includes 'the vision of a world in which religious communities cooperate effectively for peace, by taking concrete common action' (Religions for Peace, 2019). The mission or the work such a council does which 'bears fruit in common concrete action' includes organising interfaith dialogue, but we should clarify that 'cooperation includes but also goes beyond dialogue' (Religions for Peace, 2019).

Every group that cooperates together needs to be clear on the undergirding principles of their cooperation and it is helpful when they are written down, so Religions for Peace holds up five such principles of interfaith cooperation: '[1] Respect religious differences; [2] Act on deeply held and widely shared values; [3] Preserve the identity of each religious community; [4] Honor the different ways religious communities are organised; [5] Support locally led multi-religious structures' (Religions for Peace, 2019).

With regard to structure, Religions for Peace is a network of self-led interreligious bodies, comprising representatives of the various religions who decide together on the specifics of their organisation with equal deciding power. The function that the council should perform necessitates that its structure is such that helps build trust in the members of diverse communities and thus those elected (or those the respective communities have already chosen as representatives) have the credibility needed to serve in the council as bridges between communities to reduce hostility and create new positive perceptions between them.

Before we look at the specific example of the Albanian Interreligious Council and its relevance for the wider Balkan region, it seems important to anticipate some questions and evaluate the usefulness of an interfaith council from three perspectives; theological, political and peacebuilding perspective.

## **The interfaith council evaluated from three perspectives**

Because of a view of religion influenced by the previous period of communist indoctrination for over a generation, it may be difficult to convince people in the Balkans that religion is very important for the cohesiveness of our societies or that it has already played a much larger role than we thought possible in the conflicts that dismantled Yugoslavia. Part of the difficulty may also be, as Arthur Schneier (Schneier, 2002) indicates, that religion is never alone as a cause of conflict. Other scholars have explored in some depth the relationship of religion, ethnicity and nationalism (Gorski & Türkmen-Derivoğlu, 2013; Flora, Szilagy, & Roudometof, 2005; Duijzings, 2002) revealing the importance of religion in the mix.

### ***The theological perspective***

One of the most important aspects of any religion is its theology and the system of doctrines that governs the understanding of the world according to the specific revelation a particular religious group cherishes. When approached from this perspective, the function of the interfaith council is helpful in providing the safe space to explore different theological perspectives in order to better understand each other better. This perspective emphasises the importance of ideas and the power of ideologies to motivate action. It is not necessary to hold, and here I appear to disagree with Neufeldt, that those who approach the issue of peace and conflict resolution from the theological angle are blind to religion being a cause of conflict (Neufeldt, 2011, p. 348). Furthermore, they are more aware of the religious thought of the different traditions that contribute to peace and harmony, and that is why their perspective is invaluable in peacebuilding as the necessary basis for social cohesion and fostering cooperative action.

Some conscientious believers and religious leaders may be wary of interfaith councils because there is, in the minds of some, another goal for interfaith dialogue, namely 'active theology' (Panikkar, 1978; Kellenberger, 1993; Singh & Schich, 2001). The theological dimension of engagement in the context of the interfaith council, within the accepted boundaries where all feel protected in their specific religious identity, finds much room in the council interactions to develop friendships and appreciation for each other going much farther than just general respect. This effective dimension of the dialogue is very valuable and goes a long way toward finding solutions for problems that might arise in the future (Hanson, 1993).

In such a context of respect, the interfaith dialogue, which may ensue under the auspices of such an interfaith council, may arrive at a common language about shared values that can then be disseminated to the broader base of adherents with the credibility of the leadership that is represented at this level. Such is the value of joint statements that a council may produce in the course of time and events. Thus, from the theological point of view, the interfaith council is an important reference point for the respective communities of faith and helps build trust in being free to live and propagate one's faith, in conversation with the other views and with respect for others in spite of theological disagreements that will remain.

### ***The political perspective***

Politics had to deal with religion after 2001, and many international political peace efforts started then in different places, including our region, which considered the interfaith dialogue important (Mojzes, 2006). Looking at the usefulness of the interfaith council from the political perspective means that the evaluation keeps in mind the goal of peaceful coexistence of different religious communities in the same space. The politicians who have this goal are more pragmatically interested in the interfaith council as a means to an end, but in spite of those motivations and the danger of being used by politicians, the truth is that there is commonality with the political goal of social peace and harmony, and the council is well placed to mediate in the achievement of those goals.

Again, the interfaith council in this context would be very valuable because the representatives are officially recognised by their communities to uphold their exclusive view of reality (Omar, 2005). When such respected and trusted representatives take a moderating stance on a certain issue, they are best placed to communicate in the appropriate language, including through powerful symbolism and ritual, and to be much more effective in convincing members of their community than a political declaration

would be. They would also be better positioned to know how to interact with radicals inside their own communities and bring them along to a better path to live in peace with all by following their religion in an adjusted way.

### ***The peacebuilding perspective***

It bears repeating that our concern with social cohesion starts with the first step, peacebuilding. The conflict resolution typology framed by John Paul Lederach presents four levels where change can occur to create the necessary synergy for conflict transformation (Ledarach, 2003). These four levels include personal, relational, structural and cultural levels, and in each of these levels the interfaith council has a significant role to play. From the theological angle we can see how the focus is on both the personal and relational levels but much less on the structural and cultural levels. The political perspective naturally addresses the personal level less than the relational level, which means the adherents of one religion are motivated to relate more appropriately to the other. The political perspective also is concerned with the structural level, which means that it is possible that policies and processes may be influenced by religious leaders.

The third perspective, the peacebuilding perspective, seems to encompass all four of the levels of change because it seeks to develop or cultivate a culture of peace and tolerance in a sustainable way which can be seen as the basis for a cohesive society. Relating to the levels we discussed above, peacebuilding efforts imply a dynamic process including influence for change in perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and interests of persons and communities – thus addressing both the personal level and the relational level. But beside this level of change, the complex process of peacebuilding also seeks to address the underlying structures where causes of conflict are also found to perpetuate the problems. Religion is naturally seen as integral in this search for peace because there are also reasons to see it implicated in the problem of conflict, and therefore, either way, it cannot be ignored (Appleby, 2003).

The interfaith council provides a platform for joint action to address issues of concern and get to the causes of problems together as well as ways to move forward by mobilising different communities and actors in common action. The interfaith council, simply by virtue of bringing representatives of different religious communities together, is an important step toward the reality of living together in peace. The example set by representatives coming together is a signal of the furthering of the cause to address the perceptions of the religious other and to inform understanding about them.

Probably the most significant contribution of the interfaith council to social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts is its ongoing nature – continuous collaboration not just for occasional crises but as a way of life together, thus helping in different ways and at different levels to cultivate that culture of peace and tolerance that is needed for the social cohesion in our pluralistic societies.

### **Albania as a good case study of the interfaith council's role in social cohesion**

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From the discussion so far it may seem that there are no further concerns to hinder supporting whole-heartedly the creation and proliferation of interfaith councils in our region, but there is much more to deal with in the specific context of each of our countries which goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Overcoming these and other challenges accumulated throughout the uneasy history in the Balkans is not a matter of simple

acknowledgment of what is true and right, therefore we should seek to move forward consistently but with modest expectations from our efforts. It is in this spirit that the upshot of this paper – based on analysing the nature and usefulness of the interfaith council in the context of our need for interfaith dynamics in the region – is to suggest that the interfaith council can be an important factor for the cause of peace and tolerance by fostering social cohesion in our societies of the Balkan region.

As mentioned earlier, more analysis is required of the specific make-up of the situation in each country. Taking Albania as one example might be helpful to illustrate not only the value of the interfaith council in addressing the challenge of religious divisions within one country but also the importance of national dynamics in each case. In Albania there are five religious communities recognised officially by the government accompanied by a formal memorandum of understanding regarding the dynamics of cooperation and relationship. The Albanian Interreligious Council (KNFSh) was established on 22 October 2007 with representatives of four of the major religions in Albania – Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Bektashi. Since October 2018, the council's presidential board has also included Protestant Evangelical representatives on an equal footing with the other four (knfsh.al, 2019).

There have been several occasions when the leaders of the Interreligious Council of Albania have drafted important press releases related to different situations in the political climate of Albania as well as presenting common concerns to foreign heads of state at important junctures in our country's road toward EU integration. On such occasions, it has been important to recognise the way each community approaches the issue of belonging to Europe and what are understood to be European values.

Another occasion that highlights the importance of the council in coming to use a common language was in its expression of sympathy for victims of religiously based terrorism. The form of wording included some discussion of the differences in perspectives about the kinds and the portrayal of this kind of terrorism. Our religious backgrounds inform our perspectives, and it takes hearing how the other perceives the same event to modify and agree on common language in our joint declarations, which has a significant impact on the building of good will between our religious communities.

More important, it seems, is the message that is communicated to Albanians in seeing religious leaders together, visiting each other's centres in formal expressions of good will on occasions of specific celebrations for their communities. It sends a clear message to the broader population that we can live together in social harmony while we remain established in our individual religious commitments. These frequent contacts provide ample opportunity for friendship among the representatives and privately addressing sensitive issues of common concern.

On at least one occasion when the leaders of Albania's three main Christian denominations (Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical) expressed their concern with the unbalanced government support of events at certain religious celebrations, both the prime minister and the president of the republic responded positively and adjusted their policy to include the Christian request in their program of official events. As is also apparent from the website of the Albanian Interreligious Council, there are other activities and exchanges that are invaluable in fostering positive interreligious dialogue and understanding across the theological divides of the different communities in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation of the other's point of view.



## Challenges for the interfaith council in the Western Balkans

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Albania is a Balkan country, and we may assume many similarities with others in the region, but Albania is also somewhat different from most of our neighbours, and this may account for the existence of the interreligious council in Albania. Albanian national identity is understood by Albanians as less connected with any specific religion, while almost all of our Balkan neighbours would seem to have a hard time identifying an individual of their country as a member of the specific nation without the typical religious designation associated with belonging to their nation. An Albanian is not necessarily a Muslim, an Orthodox Christian, a Catholic, a Bektashi or even an Evangelical, and no one in Albania would doubt the Albanian identity of any Albanian-speaking citizen of any of these religious persuasions. This is very important, and it is both a blessing and a handicap. It also may help in understanding some aspects of the attitudes with regard to the interfaith council.

On the other side, in any other Balkan country the typical national of that country is generally considered to be of the majority religion of that country, most likely of a national Orthodox church (Anscombe, 2014, p. 237). Although the communist rule of the last half-century did much to blur the distinctions between nationalities based on religion, it was not difficult for the old distinctions to re-emerge with the resurgence of religion after 1990. This dominance of one religion in one country is also very much a blessing but also a handicap with regard to the cohesiveness of the society (Anscombe, 2014, p. 253).

The blessing of the Albanian plurality of religions is in the country's experience with accommodating the other that is different in the secondary aspect of religion, while being fully one and the same in another more significant or the primary aspect of nationality. The handicap is that, compared to the depths that religious sentiment can plumb in uniting people, there will always be a shallower level of cultural unity between Albanians of different religions. This means that it appears easier to accept the different religious people represented as equals around the Albanian table in the form of an interfaith council and at the same time also more important to facilitate good interaction between different religious communities to preserve a functional national society.

On the other hand, generally speaking for the rest of the Balkan countries, the blessing of a Balkan national is in having the opportunity of a much deeper union with the dominant majority of one's compatriots who also are of the same religion. But here as well, while the blessing is significant, the challenge for the social cohesion of the whole society that includes others of other religious minorities is also significant. In many Balkan countries, the typical perception of a citizen of the majority religion is that a minority-faith citizen of the same country, is twice as far removed from the standing of a typical national of that country; compared to the perception of belonging to the same nation that Albanian citizens of different religions consider as equal between themselves and any other Albanian of any religion. This may mean that it is more difficult to accept religious minorities as equals at the national table and less important in the eyes of the majority to risk giving more credibility to the religious minorities by including them as equals in an interfaith council, all the while imagining it easier to preserve a functional national society without much cooperation between majority and minority.

I insist on these oversimplified generalisations because of the strange juxtaposition between a social life that is deeply defined by religion at the culturally significant level of national identity in our Balkan region, and the apparent lack of urgency for serious interreligious engagement in the form of a helpful common platform such as the interreligious council (Mojzes, 2006, pp. 30–31).

The purpose of this paper was to indicate that the interreligious dynamic in the Western Balkans is significant for the social cohesion of our societies, and that the interfaith council is a valuable platform to include all relevant religious bodies for cooperation. The existence of the Albanian interreligious council, as yet a rare case in the Western Balkans, suggests that more light needs to be shed on the influence and interplay of the dominant religion and the national identity and culture of our societies to explain more fully the attitudes toward sharing a common interreligious platform in our pluralistic context.

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# In pursuit of 'twin toleration': democracy and church–state relations in Serbia and Montenegro<sup>153</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between church and state in Serbia and Montenegro by examining the development of 'twin toleration'. In particular, it aims to explain why there is still no 'twin toleration' in these states, and why it is important to impose such institutional arrangement in church–state relations. The 'Twin toleration' concept suggests that institutional arrangements between the state and religious communities in a democratic society should be based on mutual autonomy, in which the state should not interfere in the matters of religious communities, and vice versa. However, since the fall of communism and resurgence of religion, both the Serbian and Montenegrin states have tended to have close relations with the dominant religious communities in order to achieve their narrow political interests. On the other side, religious communities often interfere in political issues. Such a situation does not contribute to the further development of democracy in these countries. In this paper I employ content analysis in order to investigate constitutions and specific laws on religious communities, if any, in the states mentioned above. Besides its theoretical perspective, aim of this paper is to offer practical suggestions on how to rearrange church–state relations in Serbia and Montenegro in order to make these countries more democratic.

**Keywords:** religion, democracy, 'twin toleration', Church-state relations, Serbia, Montenegro

## Introduction

The collapse of communism all over Eastern Europe, and Western Balkans, triggered two equally important social and political processes. First was democratisation, a 'transition

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from authoritarian towards more democratic regimes'.<sup>155</sup> On the other hand, societies of Eastern Europe, including the Western Balkan states, experienced the resurgence of religion.<sup>156</sup> I believe it is logical to presume that these two processes have been interrelated, as religious communities are important historical, cultural and above all political actors in Western Balkan societies. Did religious communities help or hinder the democratisation process across the Western Balkans?<sup>157</sup> Although this is a very important research question, in this paper I will argue that Western Balkan societies are now in the stage of consolidation of democracy. Therefore, in this paper I will tackle the issue of the role of religion and religious communities in this process, by examining church-state relations in Serbia and Montenegro and their consequences for the consolidation of democracy in these two countries.

Of course, this paper does not argue that the role of religion and religious communities is the single most important aspect of democratic consolidation in Serbia and Montenegro. However, it strongly argues that the imposition of a specific form of church-state relations, namely 'twin toleration', has a strong tendency to help democracy work by providing an institutional environment in which religious communities can use all of their democratic potential to contribute to the society.

## Research design

Rather than focusing on Orthodox Christian political theology, this paper offers an institutional argument for explaining why there is no 'twin toleration' in Serbia and Montenegro, and why the possible implementation of such a church-state arrangement is good for democracy. Such an approach situates this research in the area of institutional comparative politics, which argues that institutions matter when it comes to religion and democracy, and particularly to the question of the consolidation of democracy.

In terms of theoretical rationale, I offer answers on two main research questions. First – why does 'twin toleration' matter for democratic consolidation? And, more importantly, I focus on the question – Is Orthodox Christianity an obstacle to democracy in the first place? Based on content analysis of the most recent and relevant literature in the field, I highlight major contestation points and disputes in this field.

In the second part of this paper, I analyse church-state relations in post-Milošević Serbia, as well as in post-2006 Montenegro. I decided to narrow my analysis to this time frame

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155 S.Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

156 See more about this in: P. Norris and R. Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2011, particularly 'A Religious Revival in Post-Communist Europe', pp. 111–132; G. Evans and K. Northmore-Ball, 'The Limits of Secularization? The Resurgence of Orthodoxy in Post-Soviet Russia', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 51, No. 4, 2012, pp. 795–808; and A. Sarkissian, 'Religious Reestablishment in Post-Communist Polities', *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 51, No.3, 2010, 472–501.

157 I have dealt with this issue in my dissertation, "The Role of Orthodox Christian Churches in the Democratization processes in Greece, Serbia and Russia", doctoral dissertation, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Sciences, Serbia, 2018.

for several reasons. First of all, post-Milošević Serbia represented a relatively stable democratic society in which one religious actor, namely the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), dominated the religious sphere. On the other hand, since 21 May 2006, Montenegro has been an independent state working on its democratic capacities. However, I argue that the incapability of the state to successfully manage its complex and specific religious structure is one of the major deficiencies of its political system. In order to map specific church–state relations in Serbia and Montenegro I will use qualitative descriptive methods, mostly content analysis, by offering insights on how each country institutionally manages its church–state relations. Therefore, I focus on constitutional provisions and other legislation which deal with religion and religious issues.

In the final section of this paper, I will try to explain why there is no ‘twin toleration’ in Serbia and Montenegro, and more importantly, what we can do about it.

### **Institutions matter: theoretical rationale**

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One of the fundamental debates in the field of religion and politics is the relationship between religion and democracy. According to Alfred Stepan, this debate can be encapsulated by the following question: ‘Are all, or only some, of the world’s religious systems politically compatible with democracy?’<sup>158</sup> The vast body literature in the field tries to provide answers on this question. However, it seems that the answer is more complicated than it was expected to be. When it comes to Christianity and its three major branches, Peter Berger argued that, ‘In the cases of Catholicism and Protestantism, the answer is pretty definitely yes. In the case of Orthodoxy, it is maybe. On the whole, this is a far from depressive picture.’<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, religious traditions such as Islam or Confucianism have been seen as major obstacles for democracy.

The relationship between Orthodox Christianity (Orthodoxy hereafter) and democracy is rather complex. For a long time, scholars have claimed that there is a clear link between Orthodoxy and authoritarianism. For example, Arnold Toynbee argued that, ‘Like communism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity is authoritarian.’<sup>160</sup> Mostly based on Toynbee’s work, as well as on Max Weber’s 1922 work *Economy and Society*, Samuel P. Huntington wrote in his seminal, and notorious, work on the ‘clash of civilizations’ that Orthodoxy is ‘much less likely to develop stable democratic political systems.’<sup>161</sup> Therefore, it is logical to ask the following question: is Orthodox Christianity an obstacle for democracy in the first place? There is no straight and simple answer to this question. I would say that Orthodoxy, just like any other religious tradition, is politically ambivalent, or multi-vocal.

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158 A. Stepan, ‘Religion, Democracy, and the ‘Twin Toleration’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2000, p. 37.

159 P. Berger, ‘The Global Picture’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2004, p. 80.

160 R.L. Gage (ed.), *Choose Life, A Dialogue: Arnold Toynbee and Daisaku Ikeda*, (I.B. Tauris, New York, 2007), p. 117.

161 S. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of the World Order* (Simon & Shuster, 1996); Here quoted from, C. March, ‘Orthodox Christianity, Civil Society, and Russian Democracy’, *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2005, p. 450; On incompatibility between Orthodoxy and democracy, as well as modernity, see for example: V. Clark, *Why Angels Fall: A Journey Through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo* (St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2000); D. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994).

This answer is based on research by Daniel Philpott and Alfred Stepan, among others, who say that all religions have a significant political potential. The real question then is not if Orthodoxy is compatible with democracy, but rather how we can use such religious political ambivalence? In his influential work, Philpott argues that any religious actor can be involved in different acts, such as political violence or democratisation. According to him, there are two major mechanisms which can help us explain the political actions of religious actors: political theology (ideas) and differentiation (the institutional relationship between a religious actor and the state).<sup>162</sup> A similar argument has been put forward by Alfred Stepan, who argues that a person dealing with the issue of religion and democracy should take care of several misinterpretations, including ‘doctrinal misinterpretation’.<sup>163</sup> This misinterpretation lies in assumptions of ‘univocality’, claiming that ‘any religion’s doctrine is univocally pro-democratic or anti-democratic’.<sup>164</sup> This is simply wrong due to the fact that all religions are actually multi-vocal, which means that all have the potential to support both democratic and anti-democratic systems (or in other words, religions are politically ambivalent, as Philpott suggested). This particular framework applies to Orthodoxy too, as Elizabeth Prodromou has argued. She claims that, ‘there is ample empirical evidence to suggest that Orthodox Christianity and democracy are generally compatible, in theory as well as in practice. Yet there is no denying that Orthodox churches often display a certain ambivalence about key elements of the pluralism that characterises democratic regimes’<sup>165</sup>.

Now on to the next question: why does ‘twin toleration’ matter for democracy, and particularly for democratic consolidation? Stepan explains twin toleration as ‘the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-a-vis religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-a-vis political institutions’.<sup>166</sup> It is of crucial importance for democracy to impose such institutional arrangements due to the fact that, according to Stepan:

*Democratic institutions must be free, within the bounds of the constitution and human rights, to generate policies. Religious institutions should not have constitutionally privileged prerogatives that allow them to mandate public policy to democratically elected governments. At the same time, individuals and religious communities, consistent with our institutional definition of democracy, must have complete freedom to worship privately. In addition, as individuals and groups, they must be able to advance their values publicly in civil society and to sponsor organizations and movements in political society, as long as their actions do not impinge negatively on the liberties of other citizens or violate democracy and the law’<sup>167</sup>*

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162 See more: D. Philpott, ‘Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion’, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 3, 2007, pp. 505–525.

163 See more: A. Stepan, *Religion, Democracy, and the ‘Twin Toleration’*, pp. 40–46.

164 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

165 E. Prodromou, ‘The Ambivalent Orthodox’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2004, p. 62.

166 A. Stepan, *Religion, Democracy, and the ‘Twin Toleration’*, p. 37.

167 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

Moreover, he argues that all the world's major religions are involved in a 'struggle over twin toleration'.<sup>168</sup> In his further studies he developed this concept, particularly focusing on the cases of Senegal and Tunisia. When it comes to Senegal, Stepan argued that the secular fundamentalist vs. religious fundamentalist conflict in this country has lessened, due to the fact that 'twin toleration emerged as the dominant discourse and practice'.<sup>169</sup> When it comes to the particular case of Tunisia and its democratisation in 2011, Stepan argued that its successful democratisation has been related to the 'adhering to a relationship between religion and politics that follows the pattern of what I have called in these pages and elsewhere the twin tolerations'.<sup>170</sup>

## Church–state relations in Serbia and Montenegro: a descriptive approach

This part of my study provides a brief descriptive look into church-state relations in both post-Milošević Serbia and post-2006 Montenegro. Although one can argue about it, in this paper I refer to both post-Milošević Serbia and post-2006 Montenegro as societies which are still in the process of democratic consolidation.

After the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Serbia was been ruled by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. The subsequent democratisation process in Serbia, in which the dominant religious community (SOC) had an important role, ended successfully in 2000.<sup>171</sup> However, in the immediate aftermath of 2000 Serbian political elites missed the opportunity to impose a twin toleration concept. Even though Serbia has been declared as a secular country where all religions are treated equally and where no religion will be declared as state's religion (Article 11, 2006),<sup>172</sup> it is obvious that a dominant religious actor in Serbia, namely the SOC, has been a significant political actor too, influencing different aspects of social and political life of post-Milošević Serbia. While the current Serbian constitution provided a general framework for religion and religious communities – including the above-mentioned secular nature of the state, granting that all churches and religious communities are equal and separated from the state (Article 44), freedom of religion (Article 43), and the ban on religious discrimination (Article 21)<sup>173</sup> – Veković argued that this specific area needed a deeper and more insightful legal regulation, due to several reasons, including but not limited to 'complexity of religious mosaic in Serbia, issue of returning of the expropriated property by the former communist regime, State's support for clergy's pension insurance, and the introduction of the religious education in Serbian

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168 Ibid, p. 54.

169 A. Stepan, 'Rituals of Respect: Sufis and Secularists in Senegal in Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2012, p. 380.

170 A. Stepan, 'Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Toleration', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2012, p. 89.

171 The role of SOC in the democratisation process in Serbia was a chapter of my dissertation, titled 'The Role of Orthodox Christian Churches in the Democratization processes in Greece, Serbia and Russia', doctoral dissertation, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Sciences, Serbia, 2018.

172 Ustav Republike Srbije, Article 11, *Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije*, br. 98, 2006.

173 Ibid.



school system'.<sup>174</sup> That is why the new 'Law of Churches and Religious Communities' (2006) has been introduced.<sup>175</sup> Although there is a strong argument for regulating the religious life of a country with a specific law, in this case several shortcomings have emerged.<sup>176</sup> In short, another great opportunity has been missed for implementing 'twin toleration' in Serbian legislation.

In the case of Montenegro, the situation is similar and yet different. After the 21 May 2006 referendum, Montenegro has become an independent state. From that moment, all the former Yugoslav republics had become independent states. Just like Serbia, Montenegro is also a secular country. This fact has been confirmed in the Constitution of Montenegro of 2007, Article 14 of which states, 'Religious communities shall be separated from the state. Religious communities shall be equal and free in the exercise of religious rites and religious affairs'.<sup>177</sup> Freedom of religion is guaranteed under Article 46 of the Constitution. In the case of Montenegro, it is particularly important to mention the draft law on religious communities, which is supported by the political elite. The most important critiques of this law are based in how it regulates the property of religious communities. Moreover, according to Article 52 of the draft, all religious buildings built before 1 December 1918 which it can be confirmed were built using state funding or support, becomes state property. This fact will, of course, directly influence the major religious communities in Montenegro, and particularly the SOC which is one of the wealthiest institutions in Montenegro. Support amongst religious communities for the draft law, has only come from the Jewish community and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church.<sup>178</sup>

### **Towards an explanation: why there is no 'twin toleration' in Serbia or Montenegro?**

There are, at least, six approaches for explaining why there is no twin toleration in Serbia or Montenegro. These are: history, stateness, religious structure, identity, (geo)politics and symphonia. We will briefly discuss each of them in the following section.

When it comes to history, it is important to note the long-term historical role played by Orthodox Christianity in both Serbia and Montenegro. Shortly after the foundation of the medieval Kingdom of Serbia in the thirteenth century Serbian Orthodox Church achieved autocephaly. Since then the religious life of many Serbs has been regulated by the SOC,

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- 174 M. Veković, *Uloga pravoslavnih crkava u procesima demokratizacije u Grčkoj, Srbiji i Rusiji*, doktorska disertacija, Fakultet političkih nauka Univerziteta u Beogradu (Beograd, 2018), p. 215.
- 175 Detailed analysis can be found in: M. Radulović, *Zakon o crkvama i verskim zajednicama*, Službeni glasnik (Beograd, 2006).
- 176 It is important to mention that several organisations asked for delay in accepting this law, including the Council of Europe, as well as several Serbian NGOs and political parties. More detailed analysis of this process can be found in: M. Vukomanović, 'The Serbian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in the Aftermath of October 5, 2000', *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2008, pp. 237–269.
- 177 "Ustav Crne Gore", Službeni list Crne Gore, Br. 1/2007, and 38/2013.
- 178 M. Vekovic and M. Jevtic, 'Render unto Caesar: explaining the political dimension of the autocephaly demands in Ukraine and Montenegro', *Journal of Church and State*, published online 29 April 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csz025>

and as a consequence the SOC has become more than a religious actor, and an important historical, cultural and above all political actor in both Serbia and Montenegro. The political potential of the SOC, along with its specific form of church-state relations in the 21st century draws from way back in history. In addition to the historical argument is the 'stateness' problem. Stateness refers to a situation when 'a significant proportion of the population does not accept the boundaries of the state (whether constituted democratically or not) as a legitimate political unit to which they owe obedience'.<sup>179</sup> I use to this term to explain the significant political role of SOC today in both Serbia and Montenegro. When the Serbian state ceased to exist during after the Ottoman conquest, the idea of the restoration of the state survived in the institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Some authors even emphasise the fact that the SOC represented the state itself during the long period of Ottoman rule. Once the Serbian state had been restored, the relationship between the state and the church was very close, and historically, the SOC has held various privileges as a result.

On the other hand, the religious structure of both Serbia and Montenegro seem to represent a problem for twin tolerations. Orthodoxy is the dominant religion in both Serbia and Montenegro (Serbia – 85%; Montenegro – 72,1%).<sup>180</sup> Due to that fact, the SOC does not regard its political interests as equal with those of other religious communities, but rather it seeks from the state to recognise its dominant role via state regulation. However, in the case of Montenegro things are quite different, as the state supports the non-canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church.<sup>181</sup> Although this religious community has a smaller number of believers, it is important to mention in terms of state's relationship with the SOC.

Besides this, the identity of people in Serbia and Montenegro has been deeply rooted in religion, and particularly Orthodoxy. According to various sources and research, there is a strong correlation between national identity and religious affiliation. This fact has been highlighted in Serbia. The consequences of such a situation makes the SOC an important political actor, which has its own political interests and motivations, while individuals tend to shape their political view and values according to their religious affiliation. Therefore, the state tends to have closer and friendly relationship with the SOC, particularly in Serbia, in order to achieve its political goals and objectives.

The Western Balkans region has always been subject to geopolitics, and the political interests of world's powers. In the case of Serbia and Montenegro, one of the key foreign actors is Russia. It is well known that the Orthodox Church is used as one of the 'soft powers' of Russian foreign policy. Therefore, there are reasons to believe that the SOC is regarded as the 'extended arm' of Russian influence in both Serbia and Montenegro. On the other hand, political elites, particularly in Serbia, tend to have close relations with Russia

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179 D. McKay, 'Stateness', Federalism, and Institutional Adaptation, in: *Designing Europe: Comparative Lessons from the Federal Experience*, David McKay (ed), Oxford Scholarship online, 2001, pp. 1-7.

180 Republic of Serbia, 'Census of population, households and dwellings in 2011. Ethno-confessional and linguistic mosaic of Serbia'; and Montenegro Statistical Office, 'Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011 – Population of Montenegro by sex, type of settlement, ethnicity, religion and mother tongue per municipalities', pp. 14-15

181 See more: M. Vekovic and M. Jevtic, 'Render unto Caesar: explaining the political dimension of the autocephaly demands in Ukraine and Montenegro', *Journal of Church and State*, 2019, forthcoming.



and the Russian Orthodox Church. This is why it is not simple for the state to introduce a institutional arrangement with the church on the base of twin toleration.

And last but not least, there is an ideal type of church–state relations nurtured in the Orthodox Christian political theology, namely symphonia. This represents a specific institutional arrangement, which dates back to the Byzantine era, in which neither church or state is held to e dominant but complimentary.<sup>182</sup> Is symphonia in contradiction with the twin toleration concept? This is a very interesting question, which calls for deeper analysis. In short, the answer would be ‘yes, it is but...’

### **What can we do about it?**

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I strongly believe that both Serbia and Montenegro need to use the democratic potential, which Orthodoxy possesses. In order to achieve this goal, it is my firm opinion that the twin toleration concept should be introduced in both states. It would benefit the state, with the flourishing of democratic societies, and it would benefit to the religious actors as well. Although it would not be easy to achieve this goal, it is doable. I offer a very brief description of this process.

One of the first steps is to open a public debate on the role of religion in public life, in which academics, clergyman and political elites are included. This debate should consider major issues arising around this question, but limited by the secular character of the state. The main goal of the debate should be a deeper explanation of the twin toleration concept, its comparative advantages and consequences, based on recent experiences around the globe. Orthodoxy should be given equal treatment with all other religious communities. The registration of religious communities should be regulated by the autonomous state body, and should not discriminate against any religious community. On the other hand, the state should regulate its own policy independent of the influence of religious institutions. However, when specific regulations referring to religious communities are going to be imposed, the voice of religious communities should be taken into account.

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182 A. Papanikolaou, ‘Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 71, No. 1, 2003, pp. 75–98.

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# The struggle of Kosovo policymakers to upgrade the law on religious affairs

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## Abstract

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Apart from guarantees over freedom of religion, in the last two decades, authorities in Kosovo have made little progress in advancing its legal framework to accommodate the emerging needs of religious communities. The only law that regulates religious affairs in Kosovo is the 2006 Law on Freedom of Religion. The law is framed in very broad terms, and has received a lot of criticism for failing to properly regulate the status of religious communities. Representatives of these communities have consistently asked for changes to legislation that would grant them the status of legal entities. Without legal entity status, religious communities can only function at the most basic level. The government has tried to introduce a new law almost every year since 2011, but every attempt to change the law has failed so far. Why? Part of the answer is to be found in the legal complexities of Kosovo's dealing with religion.

**Keywords:** Kosovo, religious identity, secularism, laicism, freedom of religion

## Introduction

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The Muslim presence in Kosovo goes back to the time of the Ottoman's when Islam spread gradually among Albanians. Although the majority of Kosovo Muslims are Albanian, other ethnic groups like Turks and Bosniaks also constitute a large number of the Muslim population. In addition to the Sunni majority, there are small Sufi orders active in Kosovo. According to the latest national population census organised in Kosovo in 2011, the overwhelming majority of the population declared themselves as Muslims. Out of a population of nearly 1.8 million people, over 95% identified as Muslims, 2.2% as Roman Catholics, and 1.5% as Serbian Orthodox.<sup>184</sup> There are other communities too, like Protestants, Jews, and those who did not declare their religious affiliation.

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<sup>184</sup> Kosovo Serbs are predominantly affiliated with the Orthodox Church. Since the 2011 census was boycotted by most Kosovo Serbs, the exact number of Orthodox Christians living in Kosovo is unknown.

The interreligious harmony that was cultivated for a long time in Kosovo was disrupted during the war of 1998–1999. Religious sites and monuments became a target of war and retaliation. To avoid any religious favouritism, the international community introduced a model of strict separation between state and religion. Kosovo was declared a secular state, with no official religion and with a neutral stance on religious affairs. The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo incorporates three models of state-religion relations – the American concept of the secular state, the French concept of *laïcité*, and state neutrality towards religious affairs.

Apart from guarantees over freedom of religion, in the last two decades Kosovo's authorities have made little progress in advancing the country's legal framework to accommodate the emerging needs of religious communities. The only law that regulates the status of religious communities in Kosovo is the 2006 Law on Freedom of Religion. This law, in general, speaks about the freedom to express one's religion and freedom of religious association, and while it emphasises that there is no official religion in Kosovo, the law recognises five religious groups in the country, namely the Islamic Community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Religious Community and the Protestant Evangelical Church. The law is framed in very broad terms, and has received a lot of criticism for failing to properly regulate the status of religious communities. The law does not address, for example, a critical aspect for the normal operation of religious communities, namely the right of religious communities to acquire legal form and to gain status as legal entities. This is of paramount importance if they are to carry out the full range of their legitimate activities. Without legal entity status, religious communities can only function at the most basic level.

An initiative to modify the law was taken for the first time in 2011, when a new Bill on freedom of religion was approved by the government. However, the government withdrew the Bill on the day that was supposed to be discussed in parliament. The same scenario has been repeated almost every year since then as three different cabinets have tried to modify the religious freedom law. But why do religious communities want a new law, and most importantly why is the government failing to deliver? Part of the answer is to be found in the legal complexities of Kosovo's dealing with religion.

This paper proceeds in three parts. The first part elaborates the principles of the secular state in a liberal democratic tradition. The second part provides an overview of the legal framework on freedom of religion in Kosovo. And the last part consists of an analysis of the struggle of policymakers to accommodate the demands of religious communities in any prospective new law.

## **Secular states within the liberal democratic system**

According to a study by the Pew Research Center, Kosovan Muslims, along with their Bosnian and Albanian neighbours are among the most liberal Muslims in the world.<sup>185</sup> Such studies have shown that Balkan Muslims have been able to embrace modernity without abandoning their religious identity, seeing themselves as fully Muslim and fully

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185 Pew Research Centre, *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, 30 April 2013, <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-beliefs-about-sharia/>

European.<sup>186</sup> This explains why the secular model was never contested in the region. In Kosovo, the idea of a secular state was not introduced in 1999 when the country entered a new political era. The origins of the process date back to the early days of communist Yugoslavia, when major integration and modernisation policies were implemented in some Muslim-populated areas, which led to rapid secularisation. This process gave birth to an atheistic political and intellectual elite, as well as to a radical marginalisation of the Islamic clergy. Islam was thus restricted to the private sphere: worshiping practices, annual religious feasts, and traditional ceremonies for weddings and deaths.<sup>187</sup>

However, a secular state within a liberal democratic system is largely different from that in the socialist system. Unlike the socialist regime, which was characterised by enforced separation and an ideological hostility towards religion, in a liberal democratic system the emphasis is more often on the cooperation between the state and religion. To demonstrate this point, we may take the definition of a secular state given by Donald Eugene Smith. According to Smith, the secular state (in a liberal democratic system) is 'a state that guarantees individual and collective freedom of religion, treats individuals as citizens, regardless of their religion, is not constitutionally linked to any religion, and does not attempt to promote or interfere in religion'.<sup>188</sup> From this definition, Smith derives three types of relationships: religion vis-à-vis the individual, the state vis-à-vis the individual, and the state vis-à-vis religion.

The first relationship concerns only religion and the individual, where the principle of freedom of religion is in effect; the individual is free to believe or not to believe in any religion; and where individuals are free to associate in religious groups. The role of the state in this relationship is minimal, only in the sense that it provides legal grounds to guarantee such freedoms. The second concerns the state and the individual, where the principle of citizenship is in effect. In other words, in a secular state, religion becomes completely irrelevant to the definition of civic status and the rights and obligations of citizens are equal. Here citizens are part of the sovereign body, regardless of their beliefs, and together they give legitimacy to the law. The third relationship concerns the state and religion, where the principle of separation is in effect. All religions are separated from the state. Religious groups are autonomous entities; this means they are responsible for their own organisation, they formulate their own beliefs and discipline, establish their own institutions, and finance their own activities.<sup>189</sup> It is this third relationship – 'the separation of state and religion' – which is usually mentioned when defining the secular state, however, Smith argues that the other two are equally important in liberal democratic traditions.

All three relationships can be found in Kosovo's legal framework, as we will see in the next part of this paper. However, one can find ambiguity, if not controversy, as to what constitutional model of state–religion relationship is promoted in Kosovo. Article 8 of the English version of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo states that 'the Republic of

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186 R. Asimovic Akyol, 'Want to Cultivate a Liberal European Islam? Look to Bosnia', *The Atlantic*, 13 January 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/bosnia-offers-model-liberal-european-islam/579529/>

187 J. Mehmeti, 'Faith and Politics in Kosovo: The Status of Religious Communities in a Secular Country', in A. Elbasani and O. Roy (eds.), *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*, (London, 2015), pp. 62–80

188 D. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, (Princeton, 1963)

189 *Ibid.*

Kosovo is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs'. While the English version uses the term 'secular state', the Albanian version of the same article uses the term 'shtet laik' (laik is the Albanian for laïcité). So, is it possible for a state to embrace both the secular and the laicist model? Are they the same thing? Despite similarities, some scholars argue that the two models are different. The laicist model is seen as anti-religious – a model that seeks freedom from religion (as illustrated by revolutionary France and Kemalist Turkey after the demise of the Ottoman Empire), whereas the secular state seeks to protect religions from state intervention (such as in the United States).<sup>190</sup>

## **The legal foundations of freedom of religion in Kosovo**

In June 1999, the Security Council of the United Nations adopted Resolution 1244, which became the juridical foundation for the international administration in Kosovo. According to Resolution 1244, the Secretary-General was requested to appoint an international representative who became known as the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) to Kosovo. He was in charge of a new civil administration in Kosovo, known as United Nation Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which became the main international civil authority. The SRSG was given full legislative, executive and legal authority.<sup>191</sup> In the following years, the SRSG would sign UNMIK Regulations, which were legislative provisions; would make executive decisions and would appoint and remove prosecutors, as well as decide when to arrest and take into custody anyone suspected of violating the law.

*One of the most important documents enacted by the head of UNMIK was the Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government in Kosovo, which was signed by Hans Haekkerup, the SRSG, on 15 May 2001. This document guarantees all the basic human rights, including the right to exercise one's religion. Article 3.1 of the Constitutional Framework states that 'all persons in Kosovo shall enjoy, without discrimination on any ground and in full equality, human rights and fundamental freedoms'. Furthermore, Article 4.1 states that 'communities of inhabitants belonging to the same ethnic or religious or linguistic group (Communities) shall have the rights set forth in this Chapter in order to preserve, protect and express their ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic identities'. In addition, communities and their members were guaranteed the right to preserve sites of religious importance (Art. 4.4.f) and to operate religious institutions (4.4.n).<sup>192</sup>*

From 2001 to 2008 there was a gradual and smooth transition of competences from UNMIK to Kosovo's new domestic institutions and, on 17 February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence. The Constitution, which was adopted two months later, was based on the Ahtisaari proposal – designed to make Kosovo a multi-ethnic and secular state in which no ethnic or religious group would have supremacy. Therefore, to avoid any religious favouritism, first and foremost, the Ahtisaari proposal demanded that the Constitution

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190 R. Hirschl, 'Comparative Constitutional Law and Religion', in T. Ginsburg and R. Dixon (eds.), *The Research Handbook in Comparative Constitutional Law* (2011)

191 UNMIK REG/1999/1, *On The Authority Of The Interim Administration In Kosovo* (July 25 1999), s.1, [http://www.unmikonline.org/regulations/1999/re99\\_01.pdf](http://www.unmikonline.org/regulations/1999/re99_01.pdf).

192 UNMIK REG/2001/9, *On Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government in Kosovo* (15 May 2001) <http://www.unmikonline.org/regulations/2001/reg09-01.htm>



of Kosovo must affirm that Kosovo has no official religion and that it shall be neutral on questions of religious belief. The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, which was ratified on 9 April 2008, prescribes that 'the Republic of Kosovo is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs' (Art. 8). Article 38 speaks about the freedom of conscience for individuals, while Article 39 concerns the rights of religious communities to organise their activities:

*Freedom of belief, conscience and religion is guaranteed. Freedom of belief, conscience and religion includes the right to accept and manifest religion, the right to express personal beliefs and the right to accept or refuse membership in a religious community or group. No one shall be required to practice or be prevented from practicing religion nor shall anyone be required to make his/her opinions and beliefs public. Freedom of manifesting religion, beliefs and conscience may be limited by law if it is necessary to protect public safety and order or the health or rights of other persons. (Article 38)<sup>193</sup>*

*The Republic of Kosovo ensures and protects religious autonomy and religious monuments within its territory. Religious denominations are free to independently regulate their internal organization, religious activities and religious ceremonies. Religious denominations have the right to establish religious schools and charity institutions in accordance with this Constitution and the law. (Article 39)<sup>194</sup>*

Unlike the Constitution, which does not mention any religions by name, the only law that speaks about religious communities in Kosovo is Law 02/L-31 on Religious Freedom in Kosovo that was prepared by UNMIK administration in 2006.<sup>195</sup> Article 1 concerns freedom of religion:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes the freedom to have, not to have, to retain or to change one's religion or belief and the freedom, either alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.<sup>196</sup>*

The law reemphasises that there is no official religion in Kosovo, however the law recognises five religious groups in Kosovo. Article 5 states that:

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193 The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, 15 June 2008, Art. 38, available at: <http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/Constitution1Kosovo.pdf>

194 Ibid. Art. 39.

195 Republic of Kosovo Official Gazeta, Law No. 02/L-31 on Religious Freedom in Kosovo, 24 August 2006, available at: [http://www.gazetazyrtare.com/e-gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=28&lang=en](http://www.gazetazyrtare.com/e-gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=28&lang=en)

196 Ibid. Art. 1



*To all religions and their communes in Kosovo including Islamic Community of Kosovo, Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Hebrew Belief Community, and Evangelist Church, shall be offered any kind of protection and opportunity in order to have rights and freedom foreseen by this law.<sup>197</sup>*

Furthermore, the law stipulates that religious communities shall independently regulate and administer their internal organisation (Art. 7.2).

Looking at the content of the Law on Freedom of Religion, one can come to the conclusion that the primary goal of the UNMIK administration was to acknowledge the existence of various religions in Kosovo rather than to accommodate their needs and interests. It fails to regulate even the most basic need of religious communities – the status of a legal person. A religious community without the status of a legal entity may not exercise its rights, such as owning or leasing property, maintaining bank accounts, employing workers, or providing legal protection to the community, its members and its assets.<sup>198</sup>

Three different governments have tried to upgrade the law so far. The first attempt was in November 2011, when the government of Kosovo approved a new draft law on freedom of religion. On the day that the Bill was expected to be discussed in parliament, the government, as sponsor of this law, requested that it be withdrawn for further consultations. A new version was again approved by the government in 2012. When it was eventually brought to parliament, it failed to receive the necessary votes.<sup>199</sup> In 2016, the government approved yet another draft Bill,<sup>200</sup> which was never submitted to parliament for discussion and voting. A more serious attempt was made by the current government, which submitted another draft to parliament in late 2017. Eventually, in November 2018, the Kosovan parliament approved in principle the draft law. However, the process has stagnated since, and to the day this paper was written, the draft law has not been brought for final approval.

But this is no ordinary law. Under the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo this law falls under the category of ‘legislation of vital interest’.<sup>201</sup> Firstly, laws of vital interest cannot be submitted to a referendum, according to the Constitution. And secondly, the Constitution states that such laws shall require for their adoption, amendment or repeal both a majority

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197 Ibid. Art. 5.

198 OSCE Institute on Religion and Public Policy, ‘Analysis of the Law on Freedom of Religion in Kosovo’, 10 October 2006, available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/21529>

199 ‘Projektligji për Liritë Fetare Kritikohet dhe nuk Kalon’, Kallxo, 30 November 2015, <http://kallxo.com/projektligji-per-lirite-fetare-kritikohet-dhe-nuk-kalon/>

200 Republic of Kosovo Assembly, ‘Draft Law On Amendment And Supplementation Of Law No.02/L-31 On Freedom Of Religion In Kosovo’, [http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001\\_pCErUBna5B.pdf](http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001_pCErUBna5B.pdf)

201 According to Article 81 of the Constitution, legislation of vital interest includes: Laws changing municipal boundaries, establishing or abolishing municipalities, defining the scope of powers of municipalities and their participation in intermunicipal and cross-border relations; Laws implementing the rights of Communities and their members, other than those set forth in the Constitution; Laws on the use of language; Laws on local elections; Laws on protection of cultural heritage; Laws on religious freedom or on agreements with religious communities; Laws on education; Laws on the use of symbols, including Community symbols and on public holidays.

of the Assembly deputies present and voting and a majority of the Assembly deputies who hold seats which are reserved or guaranteed for representatives of Communities that are not in the majority. In other words, any changes require a majority of votes from both the Albanian majority and the non-Albanian minorities represented in parliament. The Kosovo Assembly has 120 seats, of which 20 are guaranteed for representatives of minority communities. Of these guaranteed seats, 10 are guaranteed for the Kosovo Serbs, and 10 for the rest of the minorities. Practically speaking therefore, the minorities can block the amendment of this law.

## **How have religious communities reacted to the current draft law?**

The repeated government attempts to modify the law demonstrates that the law, as contained in the 2006 UNMIK regulation, is at best vague and at worst ineffective and as such it needs to be changed. Although different drafts have been prepared since 2011, here we will only focus in the content of the current draft law that is awaiting a final approval by parliament. This draft law aims to regulate, first and foremost, the legal status of religious communities. According to the current draft, a new state agency will be established for the registration of religious communities as legal persons. It also regulates the manner and conditions for the registration of a new religious community in Kosovo. The condition is that the religious community has to have at least 50 members on the date of its registration who are adult citizens of the Republic of Kosovo.<sup>202</sup>

The new draft law recognizes one more religious community in addition to the five religious communities that are recognised under the UNMIK version – the Tarikat Community of Kosovo. According to the explanatory memorandum of the law, the Tarikat Community has about 60,000 people and has existed for 350 years in Kosovo.<sup>203</sup>

The draft law also regulates the issue of cemeteries and rites of burial. Cemetery places shall be assigned on a neutral and non-discriminatory basis by public authorities without the intervention of other religious communities and religious rites are to be performed in accordance with the wish of the deceased or, in the case of a lack of his/her desire, to be made in accordance with the desire of families/relatives of the deceased unless it is not contrary to public order. Burials and burial rites in cemeteries are also to be organised in a neutral way, and persons belonging to a religious or confessional minority should not depend on persons belonging to a majority religious community for matters related to aspects of their burial. For which the government foresees the need to issue supplementary legislation.<sup>204</sup>

With regard to funding, the draft law says that the government shall not finance any of these

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202 Republic of Kosovo Assembly, 'Draft law on amendment and supplementation of Law no.02/L-31 on Freedom of Religion in Kosovo', Art. 7, 10 October 2016 [http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001\\_pCErUBna5B.pdf](http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001_pCErUBna5B.pdf)

203 Government of the Republic of Kosovo, 'Explanatory Memorandum on Amendment And Supplementation of Law No.02/L-31 on Freedom Of Religion In Kosovo', [http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001Memorandumishpjegues\\_meSxXgzWyG.pdf](http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001Memorandumishpjegues_meSxXgzWyG.pdf)

204 Ibid. p. 3

religious communities.<sup>205</sup> However, various tax exemptions for religious communities are also regulated by other laws. For instance, the law on the taxation of immovable property contains an exemption for the properties of religious institutions that are maintained and used for religious purposes. Moreover, the draft law provides that the government may invite religious communities to apply for funds related to the maintenance of cultural/religious monuments which they own. The draft law also obliges religious communities to ensure that all revenue, including via foreign donations, is processed according to the financial legal system.

Despite its innovative approach, religious communities responded to the draft Bill in different ways. The Islamic Community of Kosovo, for example, which is the largest religious community and has often criticised the government for failing to change the law, eventually objected some of the new provisions. To begin with, the Islamic Community was against the new provision which recognises the Tarikat Community of Kosovo as a separate religious community.<sup>206</sup> Traditionally all Sufi orders in Kosovo have operated under the authority of the Islamic Community, meaning that the proposed change will affect the demographics of the Islamic Community, since Sufi Muslims would in the future register as a separate religious community. The Islamic Community also suggested that the number of adherents required for registration as a religious community should be raised to 500 instead of 50. This suggestion was rejected. They also proposed a new article which would prohibit the activities of non-governmental organisations that deal with religious issues without prior permission from the relevant religious community.<sup>207</sup> This suggestion was also rejected as it conflicts with the law on freedom of association.

With regard to funding, the Islamic Community suggested that the government should allocate funds from the state budget to pay the monthly income of the community's employees and that the government should finance religious communities on a proportional basis according to the number of believers.<sup>208</sup> This request was not taken into account either. Furthermore, the Islamic Community also requested that secondary education include religious education in the form of elective courses. This was also rejected by the government.

The Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church proposed that the article that obliges religious communities to submit an annual financial statement to the Kosovo Tax Administration be removed from the draft law. This proposal was accepted and the article has since been deleted. The Serbian Orthodox Church proposed an article which maintains that 'religious communities freely manage their immovable property, dealing to, but not limited to acts of ownership, construction, building additions, repair, and all other work necessary for free religious life to the preservation of religious and existing

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205 Republic of Kosovo Assembly, 'Draft law on amendment and supplementation of Law no.02/L-31 on Freedom of Religion in Kosovo', 10 October 2016, Art. 12, [http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001\\_pCErUBna5B.pdf](http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001_pCErUBna5B.pdf)

206 B. Bislimi, 'Drejt ligjësimit të bashkësive fetare, BIK-u i pakënaqur', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 October 2016, <http://www.evropaelire.org/a/28026050.html>

207 Government of the Republic of Kosovo, 'Explanatory Memorandum on Amendment And Supplementation of Law No.02/L-31 on Freedom Of Religion In Kosovo', p. 11 [http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001Memorandumishpjegues\\_meSxXgzWyG.pdf](http://ligjet.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/06-L-001Memorandumishpjegues_meSxXgzWyG.pdf)

208 Ibid. p. 13

buildings owned by religious communities. For such actions religious communities do not need special permission or approval by the competent body'.<sup>209</sup> This proposal was not taken into account.<sup>210</sup>

## Conclusions

The secular state is not a new concept for Kosovan society, given that Kosovo operated within the secular system of socialist Yugoslavia for more than five decades. However, as this article has shown, there are differences between a secular state under a socialist system, and a secular state under a liberal democratic system. While the former is characterised by separation – with an ideological hostility towards religion, which relegates religious authorities to the background and protects the state from any religious influence – the secular state in a liberal democratic tradition, while also characterised by the separation of church and state, is also about the cooperation between the two. But the cooperation between the state and religion in Kosovo has not developed beyond formal recognitions. Religious communities are regulated by a law is very broadly defined and therefore ineffective. The law currently fails even to grant communities legal personhood. Operating without the status of a legal entity means facing difficulties in property ownership; in maintaining bank accounts; employing workers; and providing legal protection to the community, its members and its assets. The repeated failures of policymakers to upgrade the law shows the complexities involved in regulating religion in Kosovo. The system introduced by the international community may have been appropriate for protecting the rights of religious minorities in a post-conflict era. Today it raises the question of state pragmatism in delivering the needs of its communities, including religious communities.

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209 Ibid. p. 35

210 Ibid. p. 34. No justification was given in the explanatory memorandum for refusing this proposal other than 'the proposal was not taken into account'.

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# Religions as loci of conflict prevention: local capacities of Bosnia and Herzegovina's religious communities

By Julianne Funk, PhD <sup>211</sup>

## Introduction

Conflict and coexistence remain in a tense balance in the Western Balkans. Latent conflict, in which one's ethno-religious community denotes which side you are on, persist after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. These frozen and potential lines of conflict were laid decades and centuries ago, when religious affiliation diversified. At the same time, these religious, ethnic and national communities have a history of *suživot*: everyday relations with one another, or coexistence. The close geographic proximity of communities makes functional relational systems, which determine when, where and how people tend to interact, a practical necessity.<sup>212</sup> As a result of this necessity to coexist, religions in the Western Balkans usually perceive 'decent', neighbourly behaviour and friendly relations with ethno-religious others as a sign of faith (Funk Deckard 2012, Funk 2013).

Both conflict and coexistence signal relationship; as the peace scholar-practitioner John Paul Lederach puts it, 'relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution' (1997, 26). In the post-war setting of Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, relationship with one's former opponents is generally unwanted and even avoided. Ethnic cleansing in wartime successfully segregated Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethno-religious communities in terms of geography and the violent methods produced emotional segregation. Social segregation, however, fails to engage the basic fact of relatedness within the state structure, not to mention a shared history and future. This choice to not relate may seek to avoid conflict, but it can also limit opportunities for change. Notably, the country is currently stuck in polarised, nationally oriented politics, hindering necessary reforms. Citizens and external observers commonly see these stalled reforms and oppositional politics as a major obstacle to the country's development and the well-being of all its people.

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<sup>212</sup> A well-known example is the practice of visiting neighbours and friends from other ethnic groups on their religious holidays. However, this practice requires particular care: Christians would make halal cakes for their Muslim visitors on Christian holidays or Muslims would attend the Christmas mass, but only after all their Christians neighbours had found space within the church.



### ***Trusted religions in a distrustful society***

On the one hand, relationship-blocking behaviours are often interest-based: a protectionist agenda pitting 'us' against 'them' is a proven strategy for maintaining positions of political and religious power. On the other hand, these behaviours are also based upon and supported by feelings and attitudes remaining from war experiences. A key one of these is a fundamental distrust that pervades the relations that do exist across communities, but also between people from the same ethnic group (UNDP 2009). As such, the social fabric is worn thin. The average local resists considering an 'opposing' perspective as viable and the context is polarised such that one often feels compelled to position oneself against the other or risk losing one's own communal belonging (Volkan 1997). Individual and collective trauma from the war left its imprint of fear and helplessness; some residents would rather cope with the indirect, structural violence of the current political and economic situation rather than risk a return to direct violence by protesting the status quo. Meanwhile, each community has developed and adopted a story of suffering and victimhood at the hands of the other(s), which further distances groups from engaging (Moll 2013).

This distrust extends to public institutions as well. In 2015, around half of Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens continued to distrust government institutions, while 77.2% distrust political parties. On the contrary, religious institutions have the highest level of trust (65.2% of citizens surveyed), with NGOs following close behind (63.4%) (Analitika 2015). The salience of religious institutions, therefore, raises the potential for them to have impact and influence upon the post-war social context. The collectivist and protective characteristics of the three main religions in the Balkans, pointed out by religious scholar Paul Mojzes (2003), may explain this social trust. The collectivist characteristic, in which 'the main relationship is not of the individual with God but the collective with God' (ibid, 5), binds the believer to the community. The protective role of religious leaders being 'pastor or shepherd ... responsible for the flock's survival' (ibid) is likely to inspire profound trust.

### ***Lederach's call for relational reconciliation as conflict prevention***

This paper draws attention to the capacity of trusted and morally authoritative religions to support the necessary transformation of destroyed relationships in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It highlights local religious actors and initiatives working to transform these social dynamics by non-violently and constructively 'engaging' communities rather than 'disentangling' or 'minimizing' contact between groups (Lederach 1997, 26). Lederach's widely accepted assertion in peace and conflict studies/praxis, is that encounter is crucial for truth and reconciliation. An opportunity to not only express one's trauma, loss and grief, the pain of the memories and the anger at the injustice to the other, but also to be heard by the other can provide validation of one's story and emotions. Acknowledgement of the other's suffering 'represents the first step toward restoration of the person and the relationship' (ibid) and is usually missing after armed conflict. Too often such activities of personal expression and listening are limited to high-stakes court cases or public commemorations. Religious actors, on the other hand, are able to host low-stakes encounters without legal repercussions. The focus of sharing is on personal experience rather than collective narratives and positions, however, to avoid the danger of exclusive narratives about the past. Lederach therefore rejects the influential idea that separating parties prevents violence. While separation can provide crucial initial security from direct violence, it is not a sustainable, long-term method for positive peace.

Besides expressing and acknowledging the past, Lederach points further to the need to envision a shared future, since '[i]n all contemporary internal conflicts, the futures of

those who are fighting are ultimately and intimately linked and interdependent' (ibid, 27). Imagining a shared future is next to impossible without an acceptance of relationship and a willingness to relate, both of which require dealing with deep fears and vulnerable hopes. Lederach's 'reconciliation-as-encounter' claims that acknowledging the past (truth) and envisioning the future are 'the necessary ingredient[s] for reframing the present' (ibid). Religious actors and communities can provide a safe and trustworthy environment plus trauma-sensitive methods to foster a meaningful and hopefully transformative encounter. Transforming how residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina relate with each other should help break the cycle of violence, therefore preventing future violent conflict.

### ***Bosnia and Herzegovina's challenge to religious peacebuilding***

While religions are well placed and socially empowered to encourage relational reconciliation, they are also known to have endorsed wartime violence and some continue to shore up divisions and indirect violence through supporting national positions and agendas. Religious institutions rarely oppose national platforms and policies that structurally and culturally discriminate against ethnic others/minorities, even though all three groups' teachings prioritise treating one's neighbour with equal if not greater care and respect than one's own group members. For many secular actors working for peace, religious institutions and actors have therefore been highly suspect in their attempts at multi-ethnic, civic initiatives. Only recently has 'religious peacebuilding' been recognised by secular organisations and governments as a valuable contribution, primarily, again, due to the significant role religions play in people's lives and the trust they inspire.<sup>213</sup> What follows are a small study from Bosnia & Herzegovina of such relationship-building religious peacebuilding (see Funk Deckard 2012 for these and other examples).

## **Religious peacebuilding for conflict prevention in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

This section focuses on four cases of faith-based civil-society initiatives for peace located in an ethnically divided setting, where religions lie at the fault lines of conflict. The author focuses on these 'track three' or grassroots initiatives rather than elite level, track one phenomena primarily due to the all-too-frequent complicity of religious actors in national agendas that do not prioritise rebuilding inter-ethnic relations.<sup>214</sup> As Spahić Šiljak and Funk have noted (2018, 112), there seems to be an overall 'lack of interest among religious communities themselves' to develop religious peacebuilding. For example, the Islamic Community has no office of peacemaking nor does it educate its teachers or imams in conflict transformation, while the Serbian Orthodox Church requires a special blessing

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213 Other characteristics of religions are increasingly being explored for their positive contributions. One example is the benefit of religiosity or faith for resilience, or is the ability to bounce back emotionally and psychologically from extreme stress, which is key for mental health and recovering or healing from trauma. Another is the role of meditation or prayer (e.g. especially in Islamic prayers which include movement) for de-stressing. Yet another is the social connectedness and support that religious traditions and communities can provide. (See Hayward 2018; Taylor 2019)

214 Even at the civil-society level, faith-based actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina have nearly always chosen to situate themselves within secular organisations because of the stigma linking religions with conservative agendas and/or nationalism (and therefore, contrary to social cohesion, dialogue and human rights objectives).



(blagoslov) for any official link of the faith tradition with peace projects (ibid). ‘Practically speaking, therefore, religious peacebuilders must be in line with the church’s position, a position that does not promote peacebuilding and reconciliation’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, two institutional-level initiatives should be noted before moving to the four civil-society cases: one old, with questionable results, and one newer, exhibiting early signs of effectiveness.

The Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina arose soon after the war on the initiative of international actors,<sup>215</sup> (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009) with the idea that the heads of four of the country’s religions (Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish) would represent their communities in interreligious dialogue and negotiations as well as oversee local projects (ibid., 64). For many years, the Council has been known primarily to issue statements against violent acts and to appear together in the media. While not underestimating the significant symbolic power of these acts, the Council is not known for proactive efforts at rebuilding relations in the country. Additionally, as this article goes to print, the author has learned that top religious representatives (the Riyaset of the Islamic Community and the Metropolitan of Orthodox Dobor-Bosnia) have obstructed a USAID-funded local project to train religious teachers and priests/imams from the three main religious communities in peace education. Surprisingly, the Interreligious Council did not assist, intervene, or in any way facilitate the project, whose aims the Council shares, but instead declined to get involved due to the ‘sensitive’ nature of the situation.<sup>216</sup>

A new and promising initiative is a new master’s program on Interreligious Studies and Peacebuilding implemented jointly by three university theology faculties: the Faculty of Islamic Studies; the Catholic Theological Faculty at the University of Sarajevo and the Serbian Orthodox Faculty St Basil of Ostrog of the University of East Sarajevo. This project arose from a query made by the international head of Catholic Relief Services for how best to support interfaith peace in the country. Drawing MA students from a variety of disciplines, the classes are held at the three locations with theology and other professors of relevant fields (especially conflict and peace studies). The programme seeks to provide a ‘unique opportunity for a clear positioning of religions as sources and catalysts of peace and for religious institutions to profile themselves as advocates of a more just and better society’ (ESITIS 2019). One generation has graduated to date.

The rest of this article is dedicated to religious actors who, while not always speaking officially for their religious communities, have a clear influence at the local level and also through their international engagements and with their global religious communities. Given the lacuna at the institutional level, they provide the most notable faith-based activity with the aim of preventing conflict.

### ***A Serbian Orthodox Abbot builds trust in Herzegovina***

Father Danilo was sent by the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Herzegovinian village of Žitomisljić to reconstruct the 16th century monastery destroyed during the war and facilitate the ‘return of Orthodox priests to the Neretva Valley’ (Ramadanović 2011). However, he saw

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215 The World Conference of Religions for Peace was the initiator with the support of the Mercy Corps, the United States Institute of Peace, etc.

216 Another reason given was the level of ‘time and energy’ required with ‘a very questionable outcome’, despite the Council’s acknowledgement that ‘the idea is generally good and bearing in mind USAID’s support to our work’ (as per communication of the Executive Board to the local Country Director of the project).

this not only as a material task, but also recognised the key aspect of simultaneously building relationships within the local community, which carries a history of violence against its resident Orthodox Serbs during the 1990s and the Second World War. Contact between the majority Croats and minority Serbs of the village was consequently minimal to none when he arrived.

Fra Danilo pleasantly surprised locals by attending Roman Catholic Christmas and Mass, inviting Catholic priests to his Orthodox Mass, having Croats and Muslims at Orthodox Christmas and Easter celebrations, visiting the mosque for Bajram and even welcoming the Muslim muftija to speak at his church. These actions broke the status quo of distanced relations and non-interaction and have been generally welcomed. In Fra Danilo's words:

*From the first day we were open to everyone and we tried to make contact with all the people from the surrounding area, considering it the best way for the Church to be a witness. Today Žitomisljić is recognizable precisely by the fact that people are glad to come to here no matter to what religion they belong. ... I am most delighted with the fact that we are fully integrated ... and that people experience us as their own (Pavlović 2012).*

Fra Danilo's accessible Easter messages in Bosnian newspapers, explaining Orthodox traditions and the meaning of the holiday also encourage 'the previously common experience of knowing one's neighbor's religion and traditions and celebrating with him/her on holidays' (Funk 2019, 153). Such actions characterise the local flavour of coexistence called *suživot*, demonstrating engagement with rather than withdrawal from strained relationships. Fra Danilo recognises his influential role, saying religious leaders must be wise and responsible in their political engagement. '[T]he Church is faced with a great temptation, but also the challenge to use its only trump card, which is to be ... the declaration of the kingdom of heaven on earth. More than anywhere else, the Church in Bosnia should preach the gospel truths about the equality of all nations and people' (Pavlović 2012).

### ***Krajina imams engaging interreligious leadership and youth in transformation***

After their personal experience of wartime violence in Sanski Most, Vahidin Omanović and Mevludin Rahmanović have sought to turn it into a city of peace. The two imams' own stories of transformation from the pain, trauma, anger, and desire for revenge to openness, trust, hope and courageous activism are the backbone of their work at the Center for Peacebuilding (Centar za Izgradnju Mira, or CIM). For both individually, their Muslim faith was not only key to their individual transformations, but 'Islam and the revelation' continues to be the 'main source' and 'motivation' for their peace work. Mevludin claims he personally 'cannot see a difference between being an imam and doing peace work - except that this peace work is much more important'.<sup>217</sup> Both cite the Prophet Mohammed as an inspiration for non-violent social change and openness to others and the two aim to demonstrate Islam as a path of peace.

After years of effort, CIM initiated an Interreligious Council (with Catholic and Orthodox

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217 These quotes come from an interview with Vahidin and Mevludin over skype, 12 November 2015.

priests and the head imam) in Sanski Most. On the one hand, Vahidin notes that many people do not believe faith and peacebuilding are compatible, and yet when it happens, they are deeply impressed. 'Our example shows that it is not only possible, but [it] is even adding value to the peace work,' he reflects. Mevludin voiced the challenge of drawing non-Muslims into their work in a Bosniak/Muslim-majority town in the Federation. People outside are suspicious and resist. They find it 'hard to accept that we can fight equally for Serb, Croat and Bosniak rights.... [since the dominant] narrative is pro-Bosniak'. Distrust also seems to stand in the way of the Interreligious Council's current attempts to engage with religious leaders in the neighbouring Serb-majority town, Prijedor.

CIM's Peace Camps also stand out as events that are changing the post-war landscape of the country. These annual camps for youths from all ethnic backgrounds provide a safe space to interact across segregated nationalities, the opportunity to consider their own groups' stories, stereotypes and prejudices and also envision a new future of positive relationship. Of particular note is the explicit consideration of religious identity, which tends to function as an ethnic marker more often than as a sign of personal faith. The two imams explain their own, opposite relationships with religion as: a critical stance to ethnic belonging alongside a wholehearted and clear religious vocation for peace. As Vahidin expressed it to me in 2008, 'I believe this [peacebuilding] is one of the reasons why God gave me this breath of life'. CIM's Peace Camps are sustainable in that they not only engage the next generation, making them into leaders, but these young people are often transformed by their encounter with each other and the challenging topics they work through together. Every year, multiple peace activists emerge dedicated to their country and a life together and CIM follows up with them after they go home to continue to have an impact there.

### **A Bosnian Franciscan priest uses music as a 'bridge of souls' (Pontanima)**

Central Bosnian Franciscans have been recognised as the front-runners and 'most vocal faith-based peace activists' (Spahić Šiljak and Funk 2018, 112) in Bosnia and Herzegovina both during and after the war of the 1990s and Friar Ivo Marković is perhaps the most known religious peace activist. Fra Ivo understands the 'experience of conversion and the grace of God' as 'forgotten potentials for peace' within religions, because one can change direction to follow God's 'way of love, peace, forgiveness, goodness and good deeds' (Tanenbaum 2007, 116). Fra Ivo claims his own actions are 'a sign of the experience of grace'.

The 'core' of Fra Ivo's work is cooperating with faith-motivated people from different religious traditions 'to collectively promote peace and spiritual healing' (ibid., 115). This is fundamentally about engaging similarly peace-oriented people, providing a bridge through believers themselves into the ethnic communities.<sup>218</sup> For himself and these believers:

*Faith is a personal experience, and not the passion that comes from belonging to a group ... In my opinion, the tragedy of the Balkans stemmed from replacement of personal faith with the passions of belonging to the group. That is the fundamental question for the traditional Balkan religions of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam' (ibid., 116).*

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218 The author has noted another such bridge formed through the regional network Vjernici za mir (Believers for Peace): <http://www.vjericizamir.org/>

Fra Ivo initiated the Pontanima Interreligious Choir during the war to bring together singers from all religious (and non-religious) backgrounds to sing religious music from various traditions. The choir has sung for audiences all over the world. Pontanima's concerts provide opportunities to hear and be touched by 'enemy songs'. According to trauma healing and peacebuilding experts Randy and Amela Puljek-Shank (2008, 147):

*In listening to the choir the healing enters in the space that is most sacred, i.e. religious identity. These songs create space for listening to the other that otherwise would not happen. The choir brings an especially strong message of healing when it performs in the towns and cities that have experienced massacres on a large scale.*

Fra Ivo claims that audiences are positively shocked when the feared unknown becomes intimate and prompts reflection (Conrad 2009, 5). The music provides a gentle but firm insistence upon the need to change attitudes that are inconsistent with the beauty of this 'mosaic of fine art' (ibid).

### ***A Sarajevo Muslim peace educator pushes believer activism into civil society***

Amra Pandžo became a peace activist during the siege of Sarajevo and her life's work is changing the common characterisation of Islam as violent to Islam as a religion of peace (Funk Deckard 2012). She points to the Arabic letters for Islam – s, l and m – as the same as those for the word peace, selam. 'Islam then means peacebuilding (as a verb), selam (as a greeting) means peace be with you, [and] to be a Muslim – means to be a peacebuilder' (Pandžo 2010, 4).

Amra sees her faith as not only a 'deep motivation and strength,' but she also believes her work for peace is 'the path to be saved' (Spahić Šiljak and Funk 2018, 114). However, like others working from a faith-basis, Amra has struggled against being marginalised in the civic sphere. 'Everything related to nationalism or, God forbid, religiosity was removed from civil society' she reports (Spahić Šiljak 2014, 290). Like others, her NGO 'Small Steps' is officially secular even though she and most of her staff are believers (Christians and Muslims). Like the two imams, Amra sees the mixing of faith and peace activism not only as complementary but something greater in combination, and she explores this in her practice and research.

Amra published a Manual for the Teachers of Islamic Religion on the Peaceful Dimensions of Islam (2008) in Bosnia and Herzegovina containing stories of non-violent action from the Islamic tradition, which she has distributed to more than 900 public school teachers of Muslim religious education along with training them in its classroom use. Her intention with this religious peace education tool is to expose young people to a 'peaceful interpretation of the sacred text of Islam' and encourage an understanding of 'faith as a bridge to others' (Pandžo 2010, 5). While this notable initiative seeks to deal with the controversial issue of confessional religion taught in public schools from within the Muslim community itself, the manual has unfortunately received no official support from the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Funk Deckard 2012).

Amra is also regularly engaged in interreligious projects outside the country. For example, the author discussed her own experience of being welcomed as a Christian to regularly attend prayers at a Sarajevo mosque with Amra's group of Albanian and Serb women from a divided town in Kosovo. We then visited a mosque and a church to learn about and feel comfortable in those spaces together. As such, Amra's work is primarily about relating and

bridging divides between people, in line with Lederach's theory that engagement is more effective at transforming current and preventing future conflict than minimising contact or segregation.

## **Conclusion**

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Highlighted here are the sustained efforts to develop relationships of trust by a Serbian Orthodox Abbot in Herzegovina, two imams from Krajina, a central Bosnian Catholic priest and a Sarajevo Muslim peace educator. Each of these cases demonstrates a method for turning conflict-avoiding behaviour into engagement; they facilitate safe, even healing spaces for encountering the 'feared other', through religious traditions, rituals, music and identities, and providing practices that empower the conflict-averse with non-violent strategies of relating. At the same time, they explain their actions according to their own religious frameworks, which support attitudes and behaviours of trust, forgiveness, and love. Consequently, we can see ways in which religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region as a whole possess a capacity for preventing violent conflict as well as the ability to drive conflict towards violence. As a wise story about two inner wolves reveals at its end, the one who wins this struggle is the one you feed.

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# “Islamic tradition”: questioning the Bosnian model

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## Introduction

Debates over whether there can be a ‘European Islam’ have not ceased since 1990s when the term was coined by Bassam Tibi. Decried as an assimilationist imposition on Muslims for whom Islam does not bear adjectives, it still lives on in other forms, such as in Emmanuel Macron’s ‘Islam of France’. Since the mid-2000s the case of the ‘other European Muslims’ in the Balkans has attracted attention and questioning: are there not already autochthonous European Muslim communities with an experience of existing within secular state?<sup>220</sup> Indeed, the oldest of these communities and its form of the religion, ‘Bosnian Islam’, has since been held up as a potential model for other European Muslims and their relation to modern secular states.<sup>221</sup>

When Riada Asimović Akyol recently wrote in the Atlantic that ‘the history and practice of Bosnian Islam yields a number of noteworthy lessons for those seeking to cultivate a liberal Islam in Europe’, she identified such a liberal version of Islam with the Bosniak’s acceptance of the modern state during Austro-Hungarian rule, in the administrative centralisation of its institutions, in the prominence of Islamic modernism in Bosnia and in history of secularisation – in short, the Bosniak’s adaptability to modernity and secular contexts is a model to be imitated.

This paper aims to question the idea of a ‘progress towards a liberal Islam’ as being too straightforward by providing historical, political and also intellectual context to the practice of Islam in Bosnia and, above all, by analysing the present logic of looking for a particular Islamic identity. I will propose a reflection on what the ‘Bosnian model’ might mean in three steps – defining the Bosnian model; placing it in historical context; and reconstructing the context of the contemporary Islamic community’s efforts to define the Bosnian Islamic tradition and assessing its results.

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220 F. Karčić, ‘The Other European Muslims. A Bosnian Experience’, Sarajevo: Centre for Advanced Studies, 2015.

221 X. Bougarel, ‘Bosnian Islam as ‘European Islam’: Limits and Shifts of a Concept’, in A. Al-Azmeh, and E. Fokas (eds.), *Islam in Europe. Diversity, Identity and Influence*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007); See also Dž. Šuško, ‘Ein Modell für Europa? Geschichte und Praxis des Islam in Bosnien-Herzegowina’, in *Auslandsinformationen* 4|2017, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017; and S. Bektović, ‘European Islam in the Light of the Bosnian Experience’, in N. Vinding, E. Raciuc and J. Thielmann (eds.), *Exploring the Multitude of Muslims in Europe*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018).



## A Bosnian model for Europe?

The attractiveness of the Bosnian model is based on two main factors: first, it represents a modernised sort of Islamic practice while being autochthonous and legitimate, and second, it has the potential to become a template for other Muslim communities. Asimović Akyol points to Bosnian's capacity for 'embracing modernity without abandoning religious identity' and highlights that an 'institutionalized, centralized form of Islam can be highly successful, as seen in the case of the Islamic Community' of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Acknowledging the impossibility of replicating concrete institutions elsewhere, she is nonetheless confident that Bosnia can indeed function as a positive example of how Islam and Europe, are 'far from incompatible – in fact, they have been intertwined for centuries'.<sup>222</sup>

French historian Xavier Bougarel agrees that 'all of these debates can be boiled down to a central issue: that of the relationship between Islam and Western modernity'.<sup>223</sup> In his view, Bosnia clearly presents tendencies towards a kind of European Islamic modernity. Its major proponent, Fikret Karčić, is also the author of the influential definition of the 'Bosnian Islamic tradition', which in his view comprises five key elements: 1) Hanafi–Maturidi doctrinal belonging; 2) Ottoman–Islamic cultural heritage; 3) the Islamisation of pre-Ottoman practices; 4) the tradition of Islamic reformism in the interpretation of Islam; 5) the institutionalisation of Islam in the form of the Islamic Community; and 6) the practice of expression of Islam in a secular state.<sup>224</sup>

In Bougarel's view from the mid-2000s, Karčić's vision of 'individualised Islam in a secular state', represented one possible trajectory among others including, identifying Islam as a 'common culture', and a politicised vision of Islam as a nationalist ideology. These were, implicitly, in competition. In Bougarel's analysis, the first position would not necessarily win out. Karčić's vision was influenced by the former Yugoslav secular and reformist framework, whereas the other visions were motivated by the necessities of the new political context: a need for national identity and for national mobilisation.

Increasingly, Bosnians themselves have presented their Muslim practice as an explicit model for Europe. In Zagreb in 2006, Mustafa Cerić – Reis ul-ulema (the elected leader of Bosnian Muslims) from 1993 to 2012 – presented his vision in his Declaration of European Muslims,<sup>225</sup> in which he called for mutual tolerance and respect and a development of European Islamic institutions. The declaration was noticed in Europe: Bosnian Islam was portrayed in Germany as 'a model for Muslims in Europe'.<sup>226</sup>

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222 R. Asimovic Akyol, 'Want to Cultivate a Liberal European Islam? Look to Bosnia', *The Atlantic*, 13 January 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/bosnia-offers-model-liberal-european-islam/579529/> (Accessed on 22 March 2019)

223 X. Bougarel, 'Bosnian Islam as 'European Islam': Limits and Shifts of a Concept', in A. Al-Azmeh, and E. Fokas (eds.), *Islam in Europe. Diversity, Identity and Influence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

224 F. Karčić, 'What is the Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks', *Preporod*, 7 December 2006.

225 'Islam: Bosnian Cleric Sees Unique Role For Europe's Muslims', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 15 March 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1066720.html>

226 Z. Arbutina, 'Bosnischer Islam als Vorbild für Muslime in Europa?', *Deutsche Welle*, 7 November 2007, <https://www.dw.com/de/bosnischer-islam-als-vorbild-f%C3%BCr-muslime-in-europa/a-2967679>

Reis Hussein Kavazović, his successor, systematically speaks of Bosniaks, as the autochthonous European Muslims. In his lecture at the University of Pécs in 2016,<sup>227</sup> he gave elaborate exposition as to what makes Bosniaks European and Muslim at the same time. Firstly, their Islamic tradition in terms of law, since the Ottomans bestowed 'the most flexible' of the four schools of Islam on the Balkans. Secondly, the fact that Bosniaks did not 'become Turks' but retained local customs such as outdoor prayers and never took to polygamy. Thirdly, the occupation by Austria-Hungary in 1878 meant the end of a 'traditional form of religious and ethnic self-isolation' and the necessity of religious and intellectual dialogue with another civilisation. It meant 'confrontation' with, and 'reflection' upon various styles of thinking, governing and social conduct. It finally resulted into a process of 'securing an autonomy' within this new modern world by building a self-governing religious institution. Finally, since Bosniaks ceased to be subjects of universal empires and became a part of a periphery, European identity has come to represent a 'universal' anchorage for them. Reis Kavazović refers to Bosnian religious intellectuals who highlight the need for the 'meeting between religion and science' (H. Neimarlija), and the necessity of a secular state (F. Karčić) and of a 'dialogical consciousness' (E. Karić).

Another prominent Bosnian Islamic figure, the former director of the Institute of the Islamic Tradition of the Bosniaks Dr. Dževada Šuško, presents a similar self-understanding of Bosnian Islam as European in her German text, 'A model for Europe? History and Practice of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina', from 2017. While echoing the historical background outlined by Dr. Kavazović, she elaborates on two other aspects: the tradition of Bosnian Islamic reformist thought and the nature of the Islamic institutions. Bosnian traditional clerics and modernist intellectuals helped namely to absorb 'the civilizational shock' of losing the status of subjects of a universal religious leader (the caliph) and becoming a religious minority under a Catholic emperor. In 1882 the Grand Mufti permitted Muslims to serve in the Austrian army, and in 1884 the Tuzla mufti declared that it was permitted under Islamic law to live in the Christian state. The social consequences of modernisation, such as the presence of women in public places, the schooling of girls etc. became controversial. Often, a strong Islamic case was made for modernisation and a leading reformist, Džemaludin Čaušević, was elected as reis. The Islamic reformist tradition became the basis of the Islamic revival from 1970s.

The Islamic Community (IC) became a 'substantial part of the religious identity of the Bosniaks' (Šuško 2017). It offers itself as a model: it is self-financed, self-administered and 'half-democratic'. All important positions are filled through elections – direct at the level of the džemat (local community) and indirect at higher levels, including the reis. The IC in Bosnia and Herzegovina is ruled by a modernised constitution. Dževada Šuško also highlights the centralised nature of the IC: all imams are nominated at the local level and appointed directly by the reis. Imams and religious teachers are educated in six secondary Islamic schools and three university faculties. As a result of the representative and centralised nature of the IC, the institution is stable, adaptable and most importantly, she notes, was able to withstand the danger of radicalisation. Indeed, due to its complex and adaptable structure, the IC was largely able to impose its central authority on all mosques and most informal fundamentalist groups, and continues to enjoy concrete legitimacy among the faithful it serves and represents.

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227 Debate in Hungary with Reis ul-ulema: 'Bosniaks have no complex because they are Muslims and Europeans'; 'Mađarska besjeda reisu-l-uleme: Bošnjaci nemaju kompleks zato što su muslimani i Evropljani', lecture at the University of Pécs, 29 April 2016, via <http://bit.ly/2zvzR2D> (Accessed on 22 March 2019)

## Bosnian Islamic institutions in historical context

When Reis Kavazović says that the main heritage of the Bosniaks is their 'religious foundation and institutionalisation within the IC', he may be supporting the optimistic assessments of those who think that Bosnian Islam may be a direct model for Europe. Yet traditions and institutions are organically grown social phenomena. When looking at the 'Bosnian model' in its historical context, it becomes evident that modernisation, institutionalisation, self-governance etc. are results of mostly non-linear, complex and agonistic historical processes that could well have had very different outcomes.

One example is the above-mentioned proposal of former reis Mustafa Cerić. Alongside his declaration of 2006, he engaged in many-faceted public diplomacy and spoke on behalf on European Muslims in the aftermath of dramatic situations, in a moment when the European Muslim diaspora had no recognisable representatives. He made a strong case for the mutual recognition of Islam and secularism, for the institutionalisation of Muslim communities in Europe and even for a single Muslim authority in Europe.<sup>228</sup> The project was unrealistic at the time, which Reis Cerić has since acknowledged. While European states awkwardly work towards institutionalisation, or rather, a 'churchification' of Islam, there is no clear end in sight for this process.<sup>229</sup>

Institutions, as well as theological consensus and identities, develop in conflicts with unknown outcomes. It was not otherwise in Bosnia. Institutional autonomy, reformism and the acceptance of secularism were as much products of circumstance as results of intentional action.

Bosnian Muslims accepted their new existence as a minority within a Christian Empire with reluctance. Even after accepting the Habsburg legacy and modernisation as a part of their identity, Bosniaks continue to speak about the period as an occupation. After 1878, Bosnian Muslim lived through what has come to be known expressively as 'a civilizational shock'. The ceding of administrative control of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Austria-Hungary by the Ottomans at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 was mitigated by promises of religious autonomy and continued attachment to the formal sovereignty of the Ottoman caliph. However, in 1882 the Austrian emperor created the office of reis ul-ulema, in order to detach Bosnians from the control of the Ottoman Sultan-caliph in Istanbul and elevating the pro-Austrian mufti of Sarajevo to the office.

Later, when Bosnian Muslims mobilised for religious and administrative autonomy (1899–1909) alongside Balkan nationalist movements, they wanted to return under the jurisdiction of the caliph. Their demand for autonomy was primarily defensive – spurred on by the Austrian state's exploitation of Islamic endowments, forceful modernisation and by a fear of Catholic proselytising. This mobilisation for autonomy was eventually vindicated after the official incorporation annexation of Bosnia by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1908, and then after the abolition of the caliphate in Turkey by Atatürk in 1924.

Similarly complex was the destiny of modernist theology in the Bosnian identity. The fatwas

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228 M. Cerić, 'The challenge of a single Muslim authority in Europe', *European View* 6, 2007, pp. 41–48.

229 N. Vinding, 'Churchification of Islam in Europe', in N. Vinding, E. Racijs and J. Thielmann (eds), *Exploring the Multitude of Muslims in Europe*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

in favour of continued life under a Christian emperor and serving in his army were responses to almost existential crises – a large exodus of up to a fifth of the Muslim population, and an uprising against a military draft. The ability of Muslim law to pragmatically interpret precedents in Islamic history helped to save Bosniaks as a nation. Even more telling is the later fate of modernist thought. In the effervescent interwar period, young Muslim intellectuals were bringing in modernist ideas from Cairo and Istanbul and campaigned for social reforms. A series of intellectual battles were fought between modernists and traditionalists in their respective spheres. While many outspoken modernists could count among themselves prominent personalities, such as the first Bosnian-chosen reis Čaušević, they by no means were winning the culture war. In fact, Bosnia proved difficult for the Austrian rulers to modernise. While benefiting from Austrian sponsorship of higher Islamic education, Bosnian Muslim institutions managed to resist and stall many modernising policies from traditionalist positions, such as women's schooling (at a time when universal schooling was law in the rest of the Austrian Empire). On the matter of female full veiling, the modernising reis also lost the battle and was criticised for being too impressed by the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.<sup>230</sup> In Bosnia, the fear of losing their identity through changes in social norms was at least as great as the ideals of social development.

The identification of Bosniaks with Islamic reformism in fact comes from a much later period – the last decade of Yugoslavia. In the 1940s, the fascist occupation and the subsequent communist regime repressed or eliminated many Bosnian intellectuals, especially the traditionalists like M. Handžić and M. Busuladžić. Between the 1970s and mid-1980s, the communist regime relaxed its control of religious activities and a limited Islamic revival ensued. Since then, the IC has focussed its limited resources on salvaging Islam as a practice, culture and institution. It has succeeded in renewing educational institutions, such as the faculty of theology in 1977 and a women's madrassa in Sarajevo. Secondly, its leaders, especially Husein Džozo, made rational inquiry, reformist thought and practical legal questions key parts of the faculty's curriculum.<sup>231</sup> Modernised teaching included recognition of the secular framework of Islamic law and practice. Finally, the IC as institution has cemented its role as the umbrella organisation of Bosnian Muslims through new media outlets, through incorporating Sufi lodges and through claiming a monopoly on the wealth tax (zakat) in order to finance Islamic schools to preserve Muslim identity.

Hence, there was no straightforward process towards what makes Islam unique in Bosnia today. Many of those remarkable characteristics of Bosnian Islam hailed today as liberal or progressive were not based on a modernist consensus, but rather crystallised in complex processes and often resulted from necessity. Centralisation, reformism and Islamic education instead became defining elements of Bosnian self-understanding relatively recently – in a moment when Islam became a question of identity.

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230 X. Bougarel, 'Farewell to the Ottoman Legacy? Islamic Reformism and Revivalism in Inter-War Bosnia-Herzegovina', in N. Clayer and E. Germain, *Islam in Inter-War Europe*, (London: Hurst 2008), pp. 6.

231 A. Alibašić, 'Traditional and Reformist Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Cambridge Programme for Security in International Society (C-SIS)*, (Cambridge 2003), pp. 6.

## Defending the tradition

A second characteristic of the Bosnian model is the fact that Bosnians themselves have started reflecting the specificity of the 'Bosnian Islamic tradition' recently and in the context of a new religious pluralism. This has driven institutions to make active efforts to define, strengthen and preserve the Bosniak tradition.

It is notable that what seems to be the basis of the official self-understanding of Bosnian Muslims as defined above is that it is not treated as identity but is usually as 'tradition', specifically, 'the Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks'. This tradition, as defined by Karčić in 2006, became a quasi-official position of the IC. Links to Karčić's 'What is the Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks', which was first published in the fortnightly outlet of the IC Preporod, can be found on the official IC website, on the websites of regional organisations of the IC in Bosnia and Germany and on official think-tanks of the IC.<sup>232</sup> The five elements are consistently echoed by Bosnian Muslim representatives. The reason is that the Bosnian tradition is not only a practical self-definition, but an instrument of self-positioning in a religious context that has suddenly become dangerously pluralistic.

Since the end of communism, Islam has faced three sorts of challenges in the region: the politicisation of religion in nationalist politics of the 1990s; increased involvement by foreign actors from the Muslim world during the war and after independence; and finally, the pluralisation of the Islamic scene in Bosnia itself. All have thrown into question the autonomy and authority of the IC in Bosnia. The IC has gradually learned to answer those challenges. With substantial foreign help, it has rebuilt its infrastructure, opened secondary schools and faculties, educated its religion teachers and imams, founded various organs and publications, and managed a change in the direction of the IC.<sup>233</sup> In the early 2000s, the IC liberated itself from the overwhelming influence of a political party and diversified its financial support from various parts of the world – seeking alliances not only in the Gulf, but also in Turkey and more recently in the EU.<sup>234</sup> But the most demanding challenge proved to be the inner pluralism in Bosnia itself.

Since the late 1990s, the penetration of various Islamic trends into Bosnia via the Internet led to 'a change in Islamic discourse in Bosnia'.<sup>235</sup> Many hitherto absent ideas and types of religious organisation were spreading rapidly: minority sects (Shia, Ahmadiya), Turkish neo-Sufis (Hizmet, Suleymancis) and neo-Salafism.<sup>236</sup>

The last trend represented the only real challenge. Several neo-Salafi groups openly

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232 Islamska Zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini, 30 August 2007, [http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1646:cta-je-to-qislamska-tradicija-bocnjakaq&catid=90&Itemid=222](http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1646:cta-je-to-qislamska-tradicija-bocnjakaq&catid=90&Itemid=222), also available at <https://www.cdv.ba/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Fikret-Karcic-Sta-je-to-islamska-tradicija-Bosnjaka.pdf>

233 See forthcoming publication by Z. Hesová and E. Rašidagić, 'The Changing Role of the Traditional Islamic Organization: three challenges to the restored Bosnian Islamic community'.

234 K. Öktem, 'New Islamic actors after the Wahhabi intermezzo: Turkey's return to the Muslim Balkans', European Studies Centre, Oxford (2010).

235 A. Alibašić, 'Traditional and Reformist Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina', Cambridge Programme for Security in International Society (C-SIS), Cambridge (2003), pp. 14.

236 A. Ross Solberg, 'The Role of Turkish Islamic Networks in the Western Balkans', *Südosteuropa*, 55(4), 2007.



questioned the monopoly of the IC. Neo-Salafi groups started offering alternative fatwas on their websites, separate Islamic education to adults and Qur'an courses to children. Neo-Salafi leaders have also openly disputed the legitimacy of certain traditional religious practices such as outdoor prayers, receiving 'pocket money' for funeral rituals, keeping mausolea, the calculation of Ramadan timings, etc.

A dissident Islamic discourse was disseminated by Saudi-financed translations of religious literature and Islamic centres founded by former mujahideen.<sup>237</sup> Later, a generation of Bosnian preachers took over and initiated an even fiercer attack on the legitimacy of IC's monopoly and its practices. Because dozens were educated in Saudi Arabia, they could base their differing vision of Islamic practice on their mastery of Arabic, on the aura of conservative authenticity and on a corpus of literalist neo-Salafi quranic references. The years 2005–2007 were marked by debates about confessionals belonging within Islam (the madhabs) and they finally escalated in attempts by neo-Salafi groups to occupy or take over mosques.<sup>238</sup> In 2012–2013, dozens left for Syria and threatened the IC from there.

In a belated response, the IC sought to reaffirm its authority and legitimacy. It pursued two main strategies: strict and soft. First in 2006, the IC adopted a 'Resolution on the interpretation of Islam', calling upon imams to 'be consistent in the interpretation of the institutional learning of Islam on the basis of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and our experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina', as well as reaffirmed its sole authority over religious objects and in rules concerning the usage of religious houses.<sup>239</sup> As it became obvious, asserting authority is not the same as possessing it, and conflict ensued. It became necessary to look for other means of legitimising the IC's authority, and by defending that which the challengers attacked – the Bosnian practice of Islam.

Although the 'Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks' was a 'constitutional category' of the IC since 1997 (pace Dž. Šuško), it remained a vague reference. Attempts to give the Bosnian tradition a clear rationale became one of the main strategies for responding to what the IC terms 'exclusive', 'radical' or 'extra-institutional interpretations of Islam'.<sup>240</sup>

Prof. Karčić's definition proved to a useful basis on which the IC could fully reassert its authority. It was able to legitimise the initially empty notion by developing and institutionalising the Bosnian tradition. In 2008, the rijaset (the executive office of the IC) established the Institute for the Islamic Tradition of the Bosniaks (IITB). Under Dr. Šuško, it was tasked with carrying out research into the history of the Bosniaks and engaging in public debates about their tradition. It started research into many of the criticised aspects of the Bosnian popular practice but also into the neo-Salafi criticism itself.<sup>241</sup> The institute started publishing works of Bosnian Islamic thinkers to build a corpus of national Islamic

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237 A. Alibašić, 'Traditional and Reformist Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina', pp. 15-16.

238 A. Kadribegović, 'Vehabije osvajaju Sarajevo!', *Preporod*, Godina XXXVII, broj 5/847, 1. 3. 2007, p. 9

239 Islamska zajednica, 'Odluka o džamijskom kućnom redu', <http://islamskazajednica.ba/images/stories/URADITI/kucni%20red.pdf> (Accessed on 22 March 2019)

240 H. Karčić, E. Subašić, 'Vaninstitucionalna tumačenja islama u Bosni i Hercegovini: djelovanje NVO i medija', *Islamska tradicija Bošnjaka na razmeđu stoljeća: izazovi novih tumačenja islama*, Sarajevo: Institut za islamsku tradiciju Bošnjaka, (2018), pp. 145–166.

241 E. Duranović, S. Ljevaković-Subašić, (eds.) 'Izazovi novih tumačenja islama: islamska tradicija Bošnjaka na razmeđu stoljeća', Sarajevo: Institut za islamsku tradiciju Bošnjaka, 2018.

knowledge production – giving a basis for the claim of a distinct Islamic tradition.

The IC also began to regularly organise public conferences on the notion of ‘tradition’ – considered by some to be ‘the most important academic meeting organised by the IC in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina’.<sup>242</sup> The conferences allow to debate over what makes up the Bosnian tradition, to bring arguments for its Islamic soundness and to discuss the challenges. Their proceedings reflect various trends: the notion of a tradition, the plurality of Islamic discourses, Sunni identity and finally empirical studies neo-Salafi groups and their challenge the authority of the IC in theological argumentation and media attraction. They also reflect a choice of Turkey as a partner in this endeavour.

### **Liberal process of constructing a tradition rather than tradition of a liberal Islam**

While the meaning of the Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks remains somewhat suspended between official and critical discourses that do not always meet, the Bosnian IC succeeded in establishing the notion of a Bosnian Islamic practice worth defending, capable of uniting the community, and open to some degree of discussion.

In his definition, Karčić made sure to say that he does not attempt to add any adjective to Islam: there is no Bosnian Islam to promote against, say, Saudi Islam. He rather sought to theologially locate the Bosnian practice and to list the characteristics that Bosnians care about.<sup>243</sup> Tradition is different from culture: it is based on adherence to certain principles, but it is also a product of a common history and other norms and values (secularity, coexistence and organisation). Talking about ‘tradition’ allows one to talk about a universal system of religious and ethical norms in a specific, local guise. Only from the perspective of tradition can reformism, institutionalisation and secularism become part of what a people may be asked to adhere to. Tradition finally allows one to define one’s identity without creating divisions – Bosnian tradition is a part of a Sunni tradition, and therefore of Islamic tradition.

Even if only IC insiders were included in official events (along with several neo-Salafi insiders who recognize the IC), many groups, including Islamic activist websites, neo-Salafi websites and secular newspapers, participated in a larger societal debate. The last public conference of the IC showed signs of mutual recognition between the official institution and certain critical trends: a distinction was made between those Islamic groups who criticise certain aspects of the IC position from within, that is, who despite reservations do recognize the IC, and those ‘extra-institutional interpretations’ that dispute the IC outright (Karčić, Subašić 2018).<sup>244</sup>

Hence, the process of constructing a tradition has proven flexible enough to slowly encompass diversity rather than create division. It also allowed for changing positions and

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242 A. Smajić and M. Fazlović, ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Vol. 7, (Brill: Leiden, 2015), pp. 118, 205.

243 The other subject of IITB events were history of Balkan minorities, genocide, diaspora and secularism.

244 H. Karčić and E. Subašić, ‘Vaninstitucionalna tumačenja islama u Bosni i Hercegovini: djelovanje NVO i medija’, *Islamska tradicija Bošnjaka na razmeđu stoljeća: izazovi novih tumačenja islama*. Sarajevo: Institut za islamsku tradiciju Bošnjaka, (2018), pp. 145-166.

possibly even for creating a convergence on certain topics, on a moderately conservative basis. For example, the IC seems to have reflected upon neo-Salafi successes. It has taken account of the problematic status of informal payments for funeral rituals,<sup>245</sup> and of the absence of youth work. It has since initiated a series of programs for imams and, with the help of Norway<sup>246</sup> (Perry 2016:32) and the EU,<sup>247</sup> for youths to promote moderation, the Bosnian tradition and its European orientation. On the other hand, it made use of the liberal value of freedom of religion to advance collective religious rights and entered the debate about secularism and courts with a fatwa that defined the hijab as a religious obligation.<sup>248</sup>

The success of tradition as a process does indeed confirm what Dž. Šuško has underlined: the prevention of strife and extremes. The internal challengers have largely accepted the necessity of a common framework for defining common values, identity, tradition, but also recognised their agency in that very process. Nowadays, conservative or neo-Salafi intellectuals are the most active writers on practical subjects of social relations, family issues and religious morality, and they do so within the framework of the IC.<sup>249</sup>

Hence, the open process of tradition-finding does not make the Bosnian practice liberal per se. On the contrary. The need to constantly justify its Islamic legitimacy in the context of the 'defence of a tradition' may have pulled it towards more self-consciously traditionalist, communal or socially conservative positions or at least towards an acceptance of such positions. In this new context, the rational vision of an individualist religion that Bougarel has ascribed to Fikret Karčić may be losing ground after all to more communal, conservative projects of Bosniak Islamic identity.

But the process itself makes the tradition 'liberal' in another sense. The institution proved capable of navigating the plurality of positions, ideologies and influences. The capacity for evolution along a pragmatic set of rules while retaining a link to its foundational norms could be a sign of what Charles Taylor defines as secularity.<sup>250</sup> Bosnian institutions rarely invoke religious authority anymore, but rather seek to gain legitimacy through inclusion and persuasion.

## Conclusion

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- 245 Reis Kavazović and the Fatwa Council have respectively declared giving extra money for funerals unethical and paying for communal meals untraditional. See: 'Od sada zabranjeno davanje "koverte" hodžama', <http://www.kozarac-mutnik.com/index.php/obavijestjenja/510-ekskluzivno-od-sada-zabranjeno-davanje-koverte-hodzama> (Accessed 20 March 2019)
- 246 V. Perry, 'Initiatives to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe: A Survey of Regional Issues, Initiatives and Opportunities', Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo, 2016.
- 247 Počela realizacija projekta 'Moje mjesto u Evropi: izgradnja i promocija dijaloga o EU integraciji', Islamskazajednica.ba, <http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/vijesti/mina-vijesti/27642-pocela-realizacija-projekta-moje-mjesto-u-evropi-izgradnja-i-promocija-dijaloga-o-eu-integraciji> (Accessed on 25 March 2018)
- 248 Al-Jazeera, 'Vijeće muftija: Hidžab je vjerska obaveza', <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/vijece-muftija-hidzab-je-vjerska-obaveza> (Accessed on 22 March 2019)
- 249 See a book on Bosnian tradition published by Muharem Štulanović, the Saudi educated former dean of the Islamic pedagogical faculty in Bihać: Faith and tradition in the Bosniak identity (2017).
- 250 See C. Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard University Press, 2007).



In most Bosnian Muslim self-descriptions, the Bosnian practice of Islam is based on a centralised institution, the IC, and the experience of pluralism, reformism and secularism. Such a self-perception does not reflect an explicit model – that is, a set of ingredients and principles for a liberal, European Islam. Rather it is the sign of successful efforts in finding responses to the multiple challenges of globalisation, religious pluralism, and challenges to confessional authority through the construction of an ‘Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks’.

Some ten years ago, the Bosnian Islamic Community initiated a path to reaffirm its authority and legitimacy through the notion of a Bosnian tradition. Tradition as a process seems to have led to a more pragmatic framing of religious and ideological conflicts. It helped to channel conflict into discursive controversy and institutionalising dispute into a process for open-ended yet controlled identity formation. While the emerging identity cannot be expected to be necessarily liberal or individualistic, it has a procedural character that evolves within a modern, secular framework.

Not every Islamic community has its own ‘tradition’. Diasporic Muslims in Europe are very plural if not divided in their respective national traditions, ideological trends; indeed other Balkan Islamic communities struggle to even define their national traditions in the face strong foreign influences. Bosnian Muslims have the advantage of being attached to an organisation that is complex and adaptable enough to evolve and engage to some extent in self-reflective processes. Rather than a set of principles, its ‘model’ consists in a pragmatic and prudent organising of religious life in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>251</sup>

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251 'Zašto je Evropi zanimljiv 'bosanski islam', Al-Jazeera, 3 June 2017, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/zasto-je-evropi-zanimljiv-bosanski-islam>

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