



Role of Religion in the Western Balkans' Societies

SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE
PROCEEDINGS
OF 11-12 JUNE 2019



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Institute for Democracy and Mediation
Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim

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Introduction to the conference

The conference “The Role of Religion in the Western Balkans’ Societies” was a regional conference organised by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) from Albania, Analitika Center for Social Research from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgrade Open School from Serbia, and the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities Skopje (ISSHS) from North Macedonia. The conference aimed at exploring threats and opportunities for the role of religion in the Western Balkans societies and to contribute to enhancing societal and policy mechanisms to better respond to future challenges in this regard. Central to the conference were the presentations of the papers that were delivered to the conference. In addition, the conference was an opportunity to present the results of the elite survey conducted in the Western Balkan countries on the role of religion in society.

Not only did the conference gather religious community leaders, academics, government officials, media and civil society representatives from the Western Balkans, but it opened a wider discussion among them on the potential for enhancing the role of religion in their societies. In light of the general challenges Western Balkan countries are facing, such as low economic development, slow transition, and issues with rule of law, the participants placed special emphasis on the implications and contributions of religion to these matters. The conference was organised with the generous support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, and with the participation of the President of the Republic of Albania, His Excellency, Mr Ilir Meta.

Opening ceremony

The opening ceremony was organised in the Palace of Brigades in Tirana and hosted by **the President of the Republic of Albania, His Excellency, Mr Ilir Meta**. It gathered participants of the conference, the political elite of Albania, and representatives of religious communities in Albania. His Excellency, President Meta and **Her Excellency Ms Guusje Korthals Altes, the Dutch Ambassador to Albania, welcomed** the participants and the guests, and commenced the proceedings by saying that Albania has a long tradition of interreligious coexistence and interfaith harmony that continues until today. His Excellency, President Meta, said that religious harmony is one of the biggest values that Albania has inherited from its history, a value that is for future generations to be strengthened and preserved. The President also highlighted Albania's recent history, in which the country experienced a totalitarian regime that propagated atheism. The President noted that this past serves as a reminder of the importance of rights and freedoms, including religious freedom.¹ Her Excellency, the Dutch Ambassador to Albania, also reminded the participants of the value of religious freedom in democratic societies that is a fundamental human right for everyone. The Western Balkan has a diverse religious and ethnic structure, a value that needs to be embraced and promoted due to the ample role religion plays in all aspects of society today.

The welcoming words were followed by the opening speeches of the five members of the Interreligious Council of Albania: Orthodox Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania; Mr H. Bujar Spahiu, the leader of the Muslim Community in Albania; Catholic

Archbishop of Tirana – Durrës, George A. Frendo; the Headfather of the Bektashi Order, Hajji Dede Edmond Brahimaj; and Pastor Ylli H. Doçi, Chairman of the Evangelical Alliance Albania.

Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania welcomed the participants and began his speech by emphasising the fundamental role of religion in formation of culture, self-conscience, and national self-identity in the Western Balkans. According to Archbishop Anastasios, 'it is time to correct our erroneous, often distorted image formed of "the other", which are often filled with xenophobic stereotypes and created by a variety of nationalistic groups through various methods'. In order to correct that image, he urged religious communities in the Western Balkan to familiarize themselves with the positive aspects of other religious communities in the region and learn how to collaborate with them. In particular, Archbishop Anastasios stressed the need for religious communities to condemn every type of war or violence in the name of religion is an offense against religion.

In his speech, **Mr H. Bujar Spahiu**, leader of the Muslim Community in Albania, highlighted that religious leaders were the main actors in the national awakening and the formation of a national Albanian identity. Religious leaders of all denominations were the main supporters of events like the League of Prizren, the Independence of Albania, and other important milestones in Albania's state-building efforts. Mr Spahiu noted that the religious leaders in Albania are proud of the tolerant legacy that they inherited from their predecessors and feel responsible for preserving this legacy for future



1 President's Office of Albania, 11 June 2019, President Meta welcomes the Regional Conference on "The Role of Religion in Western Balkan Societies", <http://president.al/presidenti-meta-pershendet-konferencen-rajonale-mbi-rolin-e-fese-ne-shoqerite-e-ballkanit-perendimor/>

generations. Therefore the Albanian Muslim has promoted values such as morality, hospitality, generosity, and peaceful coexistence among religions and ethnicities in the country since its establishment in 1923. Today, the Muslim Community in Albania still plays an important role in youth education through the schools founded by the Community. Mr Spahiu also reflected on the importance of the Interreligious Council of Albania as the institution that allows religious communities to express their concerns, ideas and contribute to Albanian society as a whole.

Archbishop of Tiranë – Durrës George A. Frenco welcomed the participants of the conference by saying that peace is an inherent characteristic of every religion. However, peace is not attained automatically and must be constructed over time with a persistent commitment to it. Therefore, religious leaders should promote peaceful coexistence and interreligious harmony, as well as education for peace. Archbishop Frenco reminded the participants about the importance of human rights and human dignity, and the responsibility of civil authorities to ensure equality of religious communities and prevent discrimination among them. Finally, Archbishop Frenco emphasised the need for religious leaders to express solidarity towards other religious communities in times of challenges.

Hajji Father Edmond Brahimaj greeted the participants and stressed that Western Balkans represent a diverse religious mosaic that is the result of historical events, exchange of culture and of a tolerant religious tradition. He noted how different cultural groups traded elements among each other in the process of forming states, and how religion made a significant contribution in the process of shaping identities in the Western Balkans. Hajji Father Brahimaj also familiarised the guests with the history and importance of the Bektashi community in the Western Balkans and invited participants to learn about other religious communities besides their own. In addition, he invited the leaders of religious communities to unite against politicisation of religion in the region.

President of the Evangelical Alliance of Albania Pastor Ylli H. Doçi commenced his speech by inviting the participants of the conference to be open for respectful debate on controversial issues surrounding social relationships. Being a representative of the youngest Albanian religious community, the Evangelical Protestant community, Pastor Doçi emphasised that Albania is a country where religious communities live in harmony and atmosphere of togetherness and demonstrate strong sense of national unity. Pastor Doçi noted that the Albanian inter-religious social harmony is worth exploring further and a conference as this one can be an invaluable contribution to affirm the common vision of a democratic society that lives in harmony despite religious diversity.

Societal

Religion, communities and citizens

1

Session 1: Religion, communities and citizens

The opening session of the second day of the conference introduced the speakers with the aim of the conference. **Mr Sotirag Hroni, Executive Director of Institute for Democracy and Mediation** and **Milorad Bjeletić Executive Director of Belgrade Open School** greeted the participants and welcomed them to the second day of the conference. They invited participants to discuss the role of religion in the Western Balkans societies and some of the broader issues related to religion such as interreligious tolerance, religious freedom and the role of religious values in the society. Subsequently, IDM Program Manager Gjergji Vurmo, the moderator of the first session, explained that every session of the conference will consist of impulse speeches and presentations of the papers published in the Conference Volume.

The first impulse speech was held by **Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community in Belgrade, Mr Isak Asiel**, who spoke about the religion in transitional societies of the Western Balkans. In his impulse speech, Chief Rabbi Asiel referred to our societies as the societies in transition, like in the Bible when the people left the desert in search a Promised Land. Then and now, people in transitional societies spent a lot of time transitioning from regressive society to a society with better living conditions. Rabbi Asiel stressed that due to the misuse of power by some politicians in the region, Western Balkans societies were ruled by fear, corruption and a lack of rule of law. This caused these societies to spend a lot of time in transition, primarily because they did not know what to do with freedom and their newly acquired rights. To not let this happen again, Rabbi Asiel's key message was that "We (religious communities) have to be among the givers, and not among the takers". This would make the Western Balkans prosperous societies that can be a Promised Land for all.

Corruption and distortion of justice are two key issues in the society of Serbia, and according to Rabbi Asiel, religious leaders have space to reach out to people regarding these issues. Rabbi Asiel took as an example former Belgrade Mufti Muhamed Jusufspahić, who became the ambassador of Serbia to Saudi Arabia. On the occasion of a TV show, Mufti Jusufspahić convened leaders of the religious communities in Serbia to discuss a number of issues in the Serbian society. According to Rabbi Asiel, the leaders had many common ideas and solutions to diverse issues, despite of their different backgrounds and religious affiliation.

Keynote presenters of this session were Ms Leonie Vrugtman, researcher at IDM Albania, who presented the results of the elite survey on role of religion in the Western Balkans, and Mr Ylli H. Doçi, Chairman of the Evangelical Alliance of Albania who presented the role of Interfaith Council in Albania. The importance of the religious leaders and religion in general in the Western Balkan was reaffirmed in the findings of the survey report that was presented by **Ms Leonie Vrugtman**. This survey, conducted among political, economic and cultural elite in the Western Balkan, found that for most people in the region, religion plays a role in everyday life. The survey also looked at the influence of religion on societal issues, political issues or public opinion. On societal issues, religion and religious leaders were not seen as having a strong influence, but on political matters (such as democratic participation, voter behaviour or political parties) and on public opinion, religion did have an influence – in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina. When assessing the interreligious relations in the respective countries, elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia perceived them as 'average': not good, but also not bad. In

Kosovo and Albania, interreligious relations were perceived as the closest to religious harmony. Interestingly, the cross-country analysis of surveyed elite members' opinions suggests that in – ethnically – more heterogeneous countries (such as North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), the influence of religion on societal issues such as peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, interethnic relations, and democracy is seen as more negative than in ethnically homogeneous countries. This could be a result of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, and the armed conflict in North Macedonia in 2001, which have affected the interethnic relations in these two countries. However, the elite see a great opportunity for religious leaders to improve interreligious relations and social cohesion in the region. According to the elite, religious clergy can have an instrumental role in promoting universal and ethical values and fostering interfaith dialogue, in which they should “lead by example” and “show genuine practices of interreligious cooperation, and respect”.

Some of the means to improve interreligious relations through institutional practises were presented by the **Chairman of the Evangelical Alliance of Albania, Mr Ylli H. Doçi**. In his paper, titled “The Interfaith Council for Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans”, Doçi tackles the role of interreligious councils or similar institutions in establishing and promoting dialogue among religious communities. Referring to Albania's Interfaith Council as a positive example of a functioning interreligious institution, Doçi emphasised that religious diversity in the Western Balkans is a valuable characteristic, but tolerance does not simply come along with diversity. Tolerance is not a given value, but has to be cherished and developed throughout the generations.

During his speech, Mr Doçi also explored plausible reasons for the failure of interreligious institutions in the region. He highlighted that a lack of willingness or initiative by the largest religious community in a country can make it difficult to establish an interreligious council. The discussion that followed Mr Doçi's speech raised the issue of meaning of a “dominant” religion

and to what extent is the “dominant” religion hindering utilization of interreligious institutions. According to Doçi, dominant religion refers to the religion most prevalent in one country. During the session, participants concluded that it was challenging to define “dominant” religion, as well to define what characteristics such religion needs to acquire in a particular society. Some of the participants believed that a “dominant” religion is not necessarily the one which is dominant demographically. Taking into consideration the importance of terminology, participants discussed on the potential challenges in the use of “domination” in the context of religion and religious communities because it may insinuate dominance of one religion over another. In the context of interfaith or interreligious institutions, such terminology may particularly raise concerns considering that all religions are equal. For these reasons, prevalence should be used rather than dominance, especially considering history, development of religion and their future. Nevertheless, it was important to consider the role of leaders of religious communities which form the majority in the society, because they carry much more responsibility in initiating common platforms for action than minority religious communities.

The conclusion of the discussion was that Albania's Interfaith Council is a good example of successful interreligious institution, whereas in other Western Balkans countries, similar institutions at a national level have failed to fulfil their role. Bosnia and Herzegovina was mentioned as one of the countries with a situation in which the Interreligious Council did not succeed in furthering the interfaith dialogue. The question was raised as to whether Bosnia and Herzegovina could learn something from Albania in this regard. According to the speakers, it is important for religious leaders to sit together and exchange their ideas and thoughts, to strive for common action in order to define a common platform for leaders of all religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Taking into consideration that the results of the survey showed that respondents in North Macedonia have the most negative perception

on the interreligious relations in the Western Balkans, the audience raised the question on why the perceptions on the interreligious relations in the regions differ per country. One participant argued that this may be caused by poor economic opportunities and high level of poverty – which are also well-known drivers of radicalisation that leads to violent extremism. However, the speakers did not see a direct link between economic well-being and their perception regarding interreligious relations. The concluding remarks of the session reiterated that religious leaders are not bystanders, but active participants in the society that should be ready to engage and take up a more active role in the society. In addition, the speakers and participants agreed it that without publicly condemning religious that misuse their power, interreligious relations cannot progress.

Session 2: Religion and democracy

The second session explored the relationship between religion and the state in the Western Balkans. Over the course of almost 30 years, Western Balkan countries have slowly transitioned from communism to more modern democratic societies. What are the countries' experiences with religion and advancing democratic values in the democratization processes? In this session, impulse speeches were given by Mr Vedat Sahiti, Adviser of the Grand Mufti of Kosovo and Father Photius, Abbot of Berovo Monastery – Orthodox Church of North Macedonia. In addition, Mr Marko Veković, Assistant Professor of Religion and Politics at University of Belgrade, presented his paper “In pursuit for the “Twin Toleration”: Democracy and church-state relations in Serbia and Montenegro” and Mr Jeton Mehmeti, Research Director at GAP Institute, presented his piece about the way religious communities are regulated in Kosovo today. They provided a brief overview of the current status of relations between the state and religious communities in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro.

Mr Vedat Sahiti, Adviser of the Grand Mufti of Kosovo, addressed the interreligious and multicultural nature of the Western Balkans region, which has been at the crossroad of different influences throughout the history. Religion influenced the creation of the identity, social and ethnic culture of people of the Western Balkans. He emphasised the need for religious leaders to promote family values, as well as the importance of religion in building identity and personality. Referring to the communist regime that suppressed the role of religion in society, Mr Sahiti raised the issue of property rights of religious communities in Kosovo, which have not been resolved despite transition to democracy. Sustainability and development of religious communities in Kosovo is under challenge

because there is improper legislative framework on functioning of religious communities. Beside financial difficulties, Islamic Community of Kosovo cooperated with other religious communities and civil society from the region, international organisations and the government of Kosovo since the Community wants to further its work in peacebuilding.

Father Photius, Abbot of Berovo Monastery – Orthodox Church of North Macedonia, talked about religion and democracy in North Macedonia, as well as the way in which religious leaders in the entire region make efforts in finding their own role in a democratic society. Father Photius emphasised that achieving harmony between different religious communities is a responsibility of all religious communities. In North Macedonia, religious communities were unable to establish good communication and relationship with the state, as well as with other religious communities, but this changed over the course of the years. Today, communication and better relations are established. However, religious communities are facing new challenges due to the negative perception on the relationship between religion and politics. Setting an example and giving back to society is key for the development of a religious community. In addition, Father Photius noted that religious communities need to turn to the youth and orient them towards good ideas and values, and teach younger generations on the role of religious communities in democracy. By saying this, Father Photius reaffirmed the main findings of the elite survey, where respondents pointed out the need for religious leaders to promote universal values and principles and be a role model for the society.

Mr Marko Veković, Assistant Professor of Religion and Politics at University of Belgrade, presented

his paper on democracy and church-state relations in Serbia and Montenegro, which was a part of the Conference Volume that was developed for this conference. Mr Veković explained how political science rarely tackles and analyses the role of religion in politics, which causes the lack of literature on the issue. While asking the question whether religious communities hinder or enrich democracy, Mr Veković explained the types of relationships between the state and religious communities we may encounter. In his paper, he examines the development of 'twin toleration' in Serbia and Montenegro. The concept of twin toleration suggests that church-state relations 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. Mr Veković argues that both the Serbian and Montenegrin states 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. Mr Veković states that such a situation does not contribute to the further development of democracy, making it indispensable to set up institutional and legal framework for functioning of religious communities.

Mr Jeton Mehmeti, Research Director at GAP Institute, continued by saying that providing a legal framework is in fact the minimum that a state can provide for religious communities. This legal framework and recognition of the religious communities allows religious communities to carry out their basic function such as employing clergy and administrative staff, acquiring property, and so on. However, according to Mr Mehmeti, Kosovo authorities have failed to do so because of obstacles with regards to the adoption of a new law on religious communities. One challenge, for example, lies in the framing of religious freedom in Kosovo's constitution, which requires that any amendments to the legal framework on religious freedoms be approved by a majority of the parliament. The draft law has been in the procedure for nine years, but never succeeded to pass the parliament's voting. This leaves religious communities with the existing law on freedom of religion, which is very broad and has

many deficiencies (e.g. does not provide religious communities the legal status).

The audience initiated the discussion on the relation between the state and religious communities, referring to it as a sensitive issue because it demands regulation as well as separation of both institutions. Some of the participants mentioned that the separation of state and religious communities gives them possibility to operate within their own fields. To achieve this, the participant noted that institutions should be established that regulate the position of the religious communities in the state. Institutions, he argued, are also the means for ensuring that religion enriches democracy and democratic processes. While religion can contribute to the society, the best way it can contribute to democracy is institutional separation from the state. The participants and speakers also addressed the need for religious communities and their leaders to adapt to the challenges of contemporary time, especially because religion has resisted and overcome fall of numerous ideologies. Therefore, religion can still affect people and shape identities, but this needs to be recognised in democratic societies. Besides building a relationship with the state, religious communities should build relationship with the society and promote universal values.

Participants went on to discuss the new draft law regulating religious communities in Montenegro. This draft law states that the property of all religious communities built before 1911 will become state property. Some of the participants discussed the apparent intention to establish a new religious community in Montenegro that would replace the existing religious community in this country. The draft also law stipulates that the seat of the religious community has to be in Montenegro. This would mean that the government does not recognise the Serbian Orthodox Church that is present in Montenegro as the representative of Montenegrin Orthodox people, but the Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

A participant raised doubts if this new proposal is in line with European standards being implemented in Montenegro and raised

concern about the fact that this is an action proposed and implemented by the executive branch of the government. Moreover, he states that the government's move raised suspicion of manipulation of religion for the purpose of creation of a new national identity. The speakers of this session noted that there are similar tendencies in the entire Western Balkan region: in all countries (to a lesser or more extent) the state interferes with religious matters, religion is manipulated for political gain, and neither is independent from each other.

Participants agreed that it is necessary to differentiate between regulation and interference because a good model of regulation allows religious communities and the state to divide fields of interest and define the activities that each institution is allowed to perform. However, it is hard for Western Balkans societies to surpass the communist legacy and increase cooperation and division of activities. There are different ways of cooperation between the state and religious communities, but the foundation of all of these means of cooperation is a legal framework in which religious communities are able to operate.

Sociology 3

Religion, states and security

Session 3: Religion, states and security

The third session invited participants to discuss the challenges of interreligious coexistence in the Western Balkans, and the contributions of religion to regional cooperation. An important theme was the role of foreign influences on religion in the Western Balkans, and how this affected cooperation and security in the region. The discussion began with an impulse speech held by Mr Mladen Mrdalj, Director of International Center for Governance Studies Belgrade, who spoke about political engagement of religious communities and leaders, and the way they could contribute to regional cooperation and peacebuilding. Mr Valon Dasharami, Secretary General of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights of Republic of Montenegro also delivered an impulse speech, in which he spoke about the role of religious communities in Montenegro's history and their relationship with the state. The keynote presenter of this session, Julianne Funk, research fellow at Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, presented her paper on peacebuilding initiatives by religious clergy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which delivered implications on how religious leaders can contribute to peaceful coexistence between religious communities.

Mr Mladen Mrdalj, director of International Center for Governance Studies Belgrade spoke about how religious communities should adjust to the needs of contemporary time and engage more with the society. According to Mr Mrdalj, religious communities need to find a way to function in liberal democracy and contribute to the values of such a society. Freedom of speech is, according to Mr Mrdalj, a test of tolerance for religious communities as it demonstrates how religious communities treat criticism and open debate. Religious communities and their leaders should condemn detrimental practices in the society, such as corruption and degradation of

environment.

Unfortunately, he states, they are not criticising such practices as most of the religious leaders do not want to engage in conflict with government or with politicians in general. When considering interreligious or interethnic relations in the Western Balkans, Mr Mrdalj concluded that religious communities should bridge the gaps between groups, promote coexistence and encourage cooperation in face of the rising nationalist rhetoric in the region.

The importance of regulating the relation between the state and the religious communities in Montenegro remains unregulated due to a variety of issues that were encountered in the draft law, as we saw in the previous session. During this session, **Mr Valon Dasharami, Secretary General of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights of Republic of Montenegro**, brought up that issue again as he spoke about the new draft law on religious communities. The government of Montenegro has recently submitted this draft law to the Venice Commission, requesting its opinion on the proposal. Serious concerns were raised in the previous session as to the interpretation of the property rights of religious communities in Montenegro. In his speech Mr Dasharami addressed these concerns and recognised that an additional dialogue would be needed between the parties involved in order to solve this issue.

Some of the participants raised the question about overall dissatisfaction of religious communities in Montenegro with regards to the content of the law. For example, as was highlighted in the previous session, the law stipulates that the seat of the religious community has to be in Montenegro. With regards to the Orthodox Church this raises a question of favouritism. Another issue is that this requirement

is not in line with the reality of the Catholic Church, whose world leadership is based in the Vatican. This means that the draft law imposes an impediment for registration and functioning of some of the religious communities which have their seat outside of Montenegro. While Mr Dasharami agreed that religious communities expressed dissatisfaction with the draft law, he said that religious communities and the government established a dialogue to reach consensus on the disputed matters. In addition, Mr Dasharami assured the participants that once the comments prepared by the Venice Commission in regard to the proposal are ready, they will be taken into consideration by the government to ensure protection and representation of all interests and rights in the future legal framework.

Ms Julianne Funk, research fellow at Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy,

presented the work of peacebuilding camps organised by civil society organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the role of religion in their peacebuilding activities. Ms Funk explained how civil society activists work locally and cooperate with local religious leaders in order to break stereotypes about different ethno-religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina and create foundation for peaceful life and coexistence. Ms Funk's presentation opened the discussion on the willingness of religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to cooperate with civil society activists in peacebuilding activities. According to Ms Funk, in the previous years the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina has neither stopped nor supported the engagement of the civil society in peacebuilding through faith. As the work of activists continues, irrespective of the support of the religious communities, it is important to discuss how the backing of the religious communities could further strengthen and grow peacebuilding through faith in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ms Funk emphasised how the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina was previously engaged with peacebuilding efforts, but only by giving symbolic statements. The Council has not provided support to, or active engagement with, these activities – and there is little indication

that this will change in near future. This opened a broader discussion among participants of the conference regarding the potential cooperation between religious communities and civil society, as a platform for exchange of knowledge and practices. According to Ms Funk, in the late 1990s, there was an aversion towards religious communities or any form of cooperation with them, but this changed over the years. There is little cooperation at institutional level, but much more at local level, especially with the youth organisations and associations. When considering potential for cooperation between civil society and religious communities, perhaps cooperation at the local level is the best way to get the necessary support from the religious communities. At this level, religious clerics are still willing to participate and work together with the community s/he lives in.

Mr Mrdalj also reiterated the need for stronger cooperation and exchange of knowledge between youth in the Western Balkans. In the context of reconciliation efforts and cooperation between Western Balkans countries, it is necessary for the youth to engage with other ethnic and religious communities living in the region and learn about their history.

The session concluded with a statement from the audience, saying that cooperation between religious communities and civil society is very important for long-term peaceful coexistence of different religious groups in the Western Balkans. Additionally, participants concluded that it was important to engage different stakeholders that aim at regulating religious freedoms or functioning of religious communities in the legislative processes, to ensure that proper protection and guarantees are put in place.

Secularism

Islam and secularity in the Western Balkans

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Session 4: Islam and secularity in the Western Balkans

The last session of the Conference welcomed Muhamed ef. Hadžić, Chief Imam of Belgrade and Mr Mariglen Demiri from the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities Skopje, who both contributed with an impulse speech, and keynote speaker Ms Zora Hesovâ, who presented the Islamic tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The session opened the discussion on the position of Islam in the Western Balkans societies and its role in fighting extremism and radicalisation under foreign influences. In addition, participants discussed if the Islamic tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina could be transposed to other European societies as a model of Islam to adhere to.

Muhamed ef. Hadžić, Chief Imam of Belgrade

spoke about the importance of interreligious dialogue in contemporary society and the role of religion in secular democratic societies. While the process of secularisation brought the influence of religion on societal, political and other affairs in question, religion and religious communities remained important factors in society. Whereas the importance of religion in the public sphere is crucial, we are faced with increased instrumentation of religion in various political purposes, according to ef. Hadžić. In light of these events, it is necessary for the religious communities to have a common attitude on peaceful coexistence and respect of others. Ef. Hadžić raised the question on whether traditional model of separation of the state and church is the proper avenue for functioning and cooperation of the state and religious communities, where they operate independently and separately. There is no definite answer as to the models of cooperation, but the important thing is that religious freedoms and rights are provided to all citizens.

Muhamed ef. Hadžić raised an important matter

of media reporting on matters related to Islam and emphasised that there is a disproportionately higher number of media reports on terrorist attacks and connection of these to radical Islam groups, in comparison to reports on attacks on mosques in Western Europe and elsewhere. The tendency of the media to report about negative examples of interreligious relations, where they highlight incidents and problems, was recognized as a threat by the survey respondents in Montenegro as well. They said that media never reports on the examples of harmonious coexistence of different religious groups, as this is not “news-worthy”. Mr Hadžić said that this could distort people’s perspective of believers and of religion in general.

Mr Mariglen Demiri from the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities Skopje

agreed that religion has an important role in the public sphere, but argued that religion must not be politicised or placed under monopoly by politicians. Mr Demiri made an overview of the current issues that Islam is facing in North Macedonia, particularly in light of foreign influences. According to Mr Demiri, North Macedonia knows traditional and the “new” Islam – both of which have their own implications in the society of North Macedonia. While traditional Islam has been present much longer, it is being attacked in connection to poor socio-economic situation of North Macedonia’s society. For this reason, people with grievances, for example due to a lack of socio-economic opportunities, look for a meaning or escape from their situation. Some people turn to religion, and try to find an explanation for their situation in religious texts. However, due to the perceived connection between traditional religious interpretations and the status-quo, they may look for new interpretations of religious teachings. These

interpretations can be a strict interpretation, something that by traditional Islamic clerics is seen as conservative or even extremist. These new interpretations of Islam can lead to extremism and radicalization. Traditional Islam is much closer to the people and, therefore, allows politicians to make moral interventions and mobilise the masses. However, North Macedonia is faced with recruitment for combats abroad as well as the return of fighters to the country. The state is not interested to resolve this issue, or to assist people who have returned from foreign war zones in overcoming challenges and reintegrating in the society.

Ms Zora Hesová, Research Fellow of AMO Research Center and Assistant Professor at Charles University, presented her paper on the tradition of Bosnian Islam as an example for “liberal” or European Islam, titled: “Islamic Tradition: Questioning the Bosnian Model.” Often, Bosnia and Herzegovina is seen as an example of a secular state that hosts a Muslim majority population. How does a religion that has its own laws coexist with a democratic and secular state? And what can other European countries learn from the Bosnian model? The key conclusions from Ms Hesová’s presentation showed how Bosnian Islam was able to develop in a secular state due to centralised institutions, intellectual reformism, and modernism, with self-regulation and self-financing. Therefore, Bosnian Islam is much more than a model of Islam – it is a tradition of Islam that developed over decades that cannot be directly transferred to other countries.

In a lively discussion, the conference participants and the speakers of different sessions deliberated what Bosnian Islam is and why it could or could not be a model for other countries, especially

Western European countries. According to Ms Hesová, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s tradition of Islam developed over time, slowly and gradually adapting to the needs of society. This eventually resulted in a developed organisation, a system of regulation and intellectualism. When looking at only these elements, Bosnian Islam could serve as an example for Western European countries, as it demonstrates the importance of institutionalisation for religion and religious communities.

Conclusively, Islam and the Islamic Community in the Western Balkans – especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina – play a very important role in understanding history and interreligious relations in the region. It is challenging to perceive the presence and functioning of Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a model that can be transposed to other countries and societies. Islam as we know it in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a result of long and complex processes that were followed by numerous reforms and development of intellectual thought. One of these developments, the participants noted, was the country’s ability to overcome even the most difficult situations, including civil conflict and religious intolerance. It will again overcome the challenges of today, which are the foreign fighters that travelled to Iraq and Syria. However, in order to do so, the state has to address the needs of those who returned from foreign combatting fields and assist them in reintegrating in society. Religious communities, especially the Islamic Community, play a very important role in contributing to their reintegration. They offer religious counselling, are a good example of religiosity without being extremist and can provide counter-narratives. By working together, the participants concluded, the country can overcome this issue as well.

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Conclusions

The conference gathered a wide range of stakeholders interested in the role of religion in the Western Balkans, all of which had fruitful discussions on the influence of religion in different aspects of society. Participants of the conference had the opportunity to hear and share their perception on the role of religion from the perspective of religious communities, government, civil society, media, and academics.

Religion has a moderate influence in majority of the Western Balkans societies, but religious leaders should assume a more active role in the society to be able to contribute to different spheres of life in contemporary societies. Also, religious leaders agreed that interreligious institutions have a potential for establishing dialogue and contributing to coexistence, but this potential has not been fully utilised in most western Balkan countries. In order for religious communities to be engaged and perform their functions properly, it is vital that governments create a legal framework regulating religious communities and dividing the responsibilities

of the communities and the state with regards to religious freedom. Considering the abuse of religion in political affairs, separation of religious communities from the state and regulation of their work is necessary to prevent interference of the state in religion. Regional cooperation and peacebuilding were recognised as areas in which religious communities could do much more, especially in cooperation with civil society and youth. Participants concluded that religious leaders and the state should also assume a more active role in preventing foreign influence and reintegrating returnees from Syria, Iraq, or other foreign combat zones.

Conclusively, the speakers and participants of the conference agreed with the respondents of the survey report in that religious communities and their leaders have an important role in western Balkan societies. Considering their influence, religious leaders have a major opportunity to build on positive interreligious relations and promote interfaith dialogue among all generations, but especially youth. In order to build the dialogue among the religious communities, with the government, civil society and academics, it is necessary to utilise the benefits that conferences and gatherings like this one provide.

