

## **POLITICS AND RELIGION IN WESTERN BALKAN**

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### **Abstract**

Religion has been an important factor by attracting continuously the interest in terms of international politics during the recent decades. Referring its influence and role in the political climate in the Western Balkans region, it can be said with conviction that religious differences play a crucial role in decisions of domestic politics and on international political intervention. In the case of the Western Balkans, various scholars emphasize the important role of religion in the politics of this region but they disagree on its exact role. There are scholars who, referring to the various activities of some extremist religious groups, describe religion as a divisive factor. While at the same time, there are other arguments that religious actors have a very positive effect, which contribute and help in preventing and mitigating conflicts in the region. Proponents of this view point out that the closeness of local religious actors to the public and their knowledge of their daily needs make them ideal for forging closer ties between displaced communities. Most of the research done on relation of politics and religion in this region emphasizes that religion represents an important factor with great impact on Western Balkan politics and that the role of religion cannot be underestimated. The religious component has been part of foreign policies of some global and regional actors in Western Balkans. Use of the religion by Russia or Turkey as soft power in their diplomacy toward this region has been openly realized especially during the last decade. On the other hand EU and USA has been continuously emphasizing on the religious freedom improvement as a process of democratization. Taking in consideration the role that religion has played in other multiethnic and conflicting parts of the world in recent years, there is reason for optimism about the important role that religious actors can play in the Western Balkans, as well as in the future of this region.

This paper analyzes the approach of domestic and international politics in Western Balkans in regard of religious dynamics during the last decades.

**Keywords: Domestic politics, International politics, Western Balkans, Religion, Religious freedom.**

## ***Introduction***

### ***Western Balkans: demography, religion and politics***

The territory of the Western part of the Balkan Peninsula has been previously covered by the socialist states of Yugoslavia and Albania, which since the beginning of the 1990s, were created step by step into eight independent nation-states. For centuries, the population of this region has included ethnic groups with different religious affiliations and languages, where as a result their coexistence has not been easy; it has been associated with conflicts.

The wars that took place as the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia disintegrated are only the last evidence of this reality. Albania and the successor Yugoslav states of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia today number more than 18 million people.

Slovenia and Croatia, with a population of over six million, were also part of the former Yugoslavia and are now members of the large European family. While in other countries, the majority of the population lives in poverty where the level of prosperity is low compared to the rest of Europe.

The global economic and financial crisis had a negative impact, giving a blow to the economy of the Western Balkan countries. While between 2000 and 2008, their annual growth rates averaged more than 5%, since 2008 this figure has been only about 1.5%.

Referring to the progress over the years, it seems unlikely that the Western Balkans will be able to achieve an economy in the same level with that of EU countries in the near future. Unemployment and informal employment are widespread in the region. In Serbia and FYR Macedonia, about 20% and in Albania as many as 63% of working-age people earn their living in the informal sector and have no social security. For this reason a large number of people decide to work abroad.

According to United Nations data during the period 2010–2015, emigration rate from the Western Balkans reached 200,000 people. Most of these migrants were qualified young citizens who were settled in different EU countries. Emigration is not a new phenomenon in the Western Balkans region. In the 1960s, many new workers left their countries in recruitment agreements with Western European countries. Subsequently, they were pursued in the 1990s by hundreds of thousands of people fleeing war and violence. Although many returned after the war ended, some remained in places where they had found temporary shelter.

The regions have their own respective dynamics which is semi-autonomous, and not independent from the system of great powers and domestic politics.

The Balkan region, referring to political developments over the years, remains a region that generates constant conflicts and instability as a result of global competition between the great powers. Western Balkans before the era of national country has always been a border of division for great empires such as Rome, Byzantine and Ottoman Empire. Overall, the Balkan countries have lived in relative stability and peace under the imperial regime, while the dose of conflict has been heavier at the time of the exchange of hegemonic energy. This relative autonomy has been constantly infiltrated by the Great Powers, and at certain moments of conflict, the Balkan countries have been used as representatives in the conflicts of the great powers, and sometimes as opportunistic countries in an attempt to maximize their benefits. The interest of the Great Powers in the Balkans is mainly limited to the interest of the security of the Great Powers; this interest is not permanent, as it varies depending on international conditions.

The number of citizens of the Balkan countries living outside the borders of this region is large. The six Western Balkan countries have a Diaspora of 4.5 million, roughly equivalent to a quarter of the region's current population. Since 1990, these countries have lost about a tenth of their population. They could lose even 14 % of their current population by 2050.

The Balkans are perceived as a crossroads between the world's major monotheistic religions - Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches of the Christian faith, Islam and remnants of what were once important Jewish communities in urban centers such as Istanbul, Sarajevo and Thessaloniki. Slovenes and Croats belong mainly to the Catholic faith, Slovenia also contains a Protestant minority. Autocephalous branches of Eastern Orthodoxy predominate in Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. About 80% of the Albanian population in the Balkans belongs to the Islamic religion, but there is also a Catholic minority in the northern part of Albania as well as an Orthodox minority in the southern and central areas. Bosnia and Herzegovina's Muslims represent the area's largest Slavic community. In the Balkans, religion has been a promoter of conflict, but it has also served as a force for empathy and mutual understanding. However, religious diversity remains an important part of the cultural specificity of the region.

### ***Geopolitics of the Western Balkans region***

The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia has had a major impact on the creation of a new geopolitical reality, which has brought the collapse of ideological blocs in the Western Balkans region. This led to the reduction of doses of conflicts of great powers. But in addition to this aspect, another negative phenomenon prevailed for almost a decade, where the break-

up of Yugoslavia was accompanied by divisive inter-ethnic conflicts, including the first NATO intervention, but also many regional and European diplomatic initiatives as well. At the end of the Cold War between the two blocs and the violent dissolving of Yugoslavia, the Balkans appear with a new geopolitical reality, where in addition to the main classical countries, which existed in the region after World War II, new countries such as Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo were created. Various well-known scholars have claimed that the Balkans or Southeast Europe are defined and divided within them in different forms. The EU in relation to its interests has configured a certain region, as in the case of the "Western Balkans", which expresses more the creation and evolution of a political concept than a geographical concept.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts***

One of the main characteristics of the Balkan states is their multinational and multicultural composition. Throughout history, unfortunately, these values were not used as advantages, but on the contrary, as causes for occasional disputes and conflicts between citizens and states.

Within the Western Balkans there are several hotspots such as Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the southern part of Serbia, western Macedonia. Peace in the Western Balkans, and especially in these areas, is ensured by the presence of foreign military forces. The peace, maintained in strongly way can hardly be considered a true and stable one. Withdrawal of international troops, before disputes between nations and states are resolved, would be a serious threat to peace and stability in the region. This situation, where economic and social problems are not lacking, dictates the need to strengthen all efforts towards easing tensions between ethnic and religious groups and preventing new conflicts.

Within the Balkans exist three major Euro-Asian and African religious, such as: Christian Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam. Unfortunately, during the history is noticed that the followers of those faiths have not lived in harmony with each other. Mutual respect and tolerance among them has lacked. Nowadays, the situation is getting even worse. However, the problem, as it has been stressed, is extremely complicated and it requires systemic research in finding the ways and making conditions for mutual understanding and living in tolerable neighborhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Metushaj, M. Western Balkans, Some Reflections on the Geopolitical Dynamics of the Great Powers. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 7, 3, (2018): 141

As in many other countries of the world, also in the western Balkans, different socio-historical conditions have influenced the development of different concepts of state and religion and their relationship. Politics and religion are often tightly connected with each other. Religions have created countries, but states have also supported and strengthened religions. Religious beliefs through revolutions and gradual influence have changed social structures, country or state policies. Communist, atheist ideology left deep traces at all levels, politically, culturally, nationally and religiously. Suddenly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he faced a massive ethno-mobilization, the ghost of nationalism, and the politically imposed identification of religion and nation. This society also faced its half-reading on religious issues, thus providing a safe haven for ecclesiastical nationalism and nationalist populism. Therefore, it was possible that in this region, in the conditions of a fratricidal war and long-term politicization of religion, someone witnessed a later, secondary "religion" of politics and interethnic conflict. However, they mainly resulted from political and interethnic conflicts. Religion emerged as an important element of ethnicity, and this is probably why these wars have sometimes been labeled as interfaith conflicts.

One of the hottest conflicts that still today remains without a stable solution is the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. In 1999, NATO bombed the Serbs in Serbia and Kosovo in the name of preserving a multicultural Kosovo.<sup>2</sup> Since the beginning of this conflict, the United States and the Europeans have seen Serbia and the Serbs generally as "the problem". Resolving the conflict Serbia-Kosovo, would mean a crucial contribution in maintaining peace and stability in the whole region. Nongovernmental organizations can bring their respective ideas and suggestion on this issue, but resolving the problem in a satisfactory level, now is under the International Community's responsibility.

### ***Albania: From Communism to Political and Religious Pluralism***

Communism is based on historical data and is destined to reshape human society anywhere in the world as an intermediate stage between dictatorship and democracy. This is achieved through a model that emphasizes equality and permanent confrontation. In a political system based on this essentially totalitarian ideology, it is impossible to achieve reconciliation between those who believe in this ideological principle and those who seek different modes of government. For 45 years (1941-1985), the Albanian dictatorship made the lives of Albanians dark and creepy. This is a cruel tragedy that cannot be described in words. It has

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<sup>2</sup> Sletzinger, M. (January 01, 2011). A Glimmer in the Balkans. *Wilson Quarterly*, 35, 1, 42-48.

not only caused irreparable consequences in terms of crimes against humanity, torture, and persecution of a large part of Albanians, but also caused irreparable consequences in the isolation and poverty of the entire country, and still caused painful wounds.

By the end of 1944, Enver Hoxha's partisans controlled most of Albania and established a provisional government to achieve its goals. Suppression of tribal leaders, collectivization of agriculture, industrialization, migration of people from villages to cities, and oppression of religion.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when Hoxha died on April 11, 1985, he left Albania a legacy of oppression, technological backwardness, isolation and fear of the outside world. Albania was the last country in Eastern Europe that began the transition from a communist regime to a democratic system in the early 1990s.

#### *Political Pluralism after 90ies*

In the early 1990s, after the establishment of political pluralism and the realization of national unity, it marked the mission of establishing the rule of law and a democratic system. At that time, the political representatives did not establish a tradition of freedom and democracy, so they were affected by the conscious or unconscious practice of state centralization. This totalitarian approach also follows the exclusive and conflictive spirit of the one-party system. The political majority representing the anti-communist majority from 1994 to 1996 showed signs of violence and even led to the imprisonment of opposition politicians. These are signs of authoritarianism and are seen as an intermediate stage between dictatorship and democracy.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Religious pluralism after 90ies*

In the activities carried out during the communist period, religion left obvious traces and further consequences. In 1967, the communist authorities launched a violent campaign to eradicate religious activities in Albania, claiming that religion had divided the nation and left the nation in a backward predicament. Students and students combed in rural areas, forcing Albanians to give up their religious beliefs. Although members of the Labour Party did not even complain, by the end of the year, all churches, mosques, monasteries and other religious institutions were closed and turned into warehouses, stadiums or workshops. The culmination of the campaign was the statement that Albania has become the only atheist country in the world, and Enver Hoxha's attempt to sell it as a heroic act is one of his greatest achievements.

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<sup>3</sup> Tarifa, F. (January 01, 1995). Albania's road from communism: Political and social change, 1990-1993. *Development and Change*, 26(1), 133-162.

<sup>4</sup> Krasniqi, A., & Hackaj, A. (2015). Albanians and the European social model: Internal democracy in Albanian political parties : case study applied to Socialist Party, Democratic Party and Socialist Movement for Integration

Historically, Albanians have not been affected by religious beliefs due to their national feeling. Regardless of the religious beliefs imposed on you or they voluntarily accept them, racial self-determination is paramount to them. This is due to the geopolitical environment created by history for Albania. Therefore, historical and geopolitical views indicate that Albania became the key point where the Roman and Byzantine churches met and separated, but despite the conflict between them, the Albanians were not affected. Albanians are located between East and West, established religious harmony, and proposed the idea that various differences (religion, culture, province, etc.) must be recognized rather than dangerous assets. This religious pluralism has already worked.

Thus, after the fall of communism, Albanians were given freedom of religion. They were now free to practice their beliefs. As a result, new currents were introduced in the country, also because theologians educated abroad returned to Albania with religious doctrines that differed somewhat from the traditional one. Being not indifferent to religious belief, not only political and ideological pluralism has been protected, but also religious pluralism.<sup>5</sup>

*The presence of religion in political parties and the role of religious communities in politics and society*

Religion is a mobilization factor. In the vacuum of state power (such as 1997), it may be abused, but unlike other social institutions, religious institutions stand up to condemn violence and manage social tensions. Fortunately, the Albanian religion continues to maintain good relations with the country and strengthen relations with each other. However, the current social structure of Albanian society seems to be a guarantee of peaceful coexistence among religious groups. Political and economic interests became the main interests after 1990, avoiding religious problems. The absence of religious groups and special interest groups is the basis for maintaining such peaceful coexistence.

On the other hand, a reassessment of the historical tradition of religious tolerance and universal relations will promote and enhance the quality of Albanian democracy. The political, social and economic changes that have taken place since the country was opened to the progressive world require more willingness to recognize and accept the diversity of Albanian society. There is nothing harmful, and it will be more useful if the Albanian state and religion reach a consensus on a series of religious and political issues. We hope that the

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<sup>5</sup> Elbasani, A., & Puto, A. (January 02, 2017). Albanian-style laïcité : A Model for a Multi-religious European Home?. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 19, 1, 53-69.

country will remain neutral with respect to the various religious practices that appear in a pluralistic society and protect them equally.

Albania has not been subject to major interreligious conflict.<sup>6</sup> During the last three decades, some isolated cases of tension have been recorded. In early 2000s, the Bektashi community 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.

The sphere of public activity can be secular and religious in nature, but it is important to clearly separate them and avoid the influence of religion on political laws or beliefs. The coexistence and inter-religious tolerance of the Albanian religious community, more than the spiritual leaders of the religious community, should be attributed to the history, national culture and psychological traditions of Albanians.

#### *Interfaith dialogue and harmony*

Religious tolerance is regarded as an extraordinary achievement, which has withstood the test of the turbulent times experienced by the country. The most important factor in support of religious tolerance in Albania is that it is the common culture united by Muslims, Christians and non-believers. Although traditional religions are regarded as part of a common culture, they are not regarded as insurmountable obstacles to mutual understanding and cooperation between religious sects. The challenge of fundamentalism in religion to religious tolerance is precisely the gap between religion and culture.

The fact that Albania is characterized by religious tolerance is the starting point for inter-religious dialogue. On this basis, inter-religious dialogue strengthens the culture of religious tolerance. In the discourse on religious tolerance, nationalism emphasizes that race and language are the basis of Albanian nation and unity, not just religious beliefs, which are important political and moral factors for maintaining religious tolerance. Ideally, in a democratic society, tolerance should be motivated not only by considerations of ethnic unity, but also by respect for human rights and the rule of law, but in our view, the term "religious tolerance" is more relevant than "religious harmony".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 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>

<sup>7</sup> Interreligious Council of Albania, 'History of the Interreligious Council of Albania', <http://knfsh.al/en/historiku-i-knfsh-se>



### *The challenges of religious communities relating with politics*

During the period of atheism from 1967 to the end of the 1980s, the cruel oppression of society by religion meant that most of the younger generation who grew up at that time had no public contact with religion, nor had they established close ties with religious symbols and etiquette.

Because they recognize the role of religious leaders in promoting religious tolerance today and during this period Historically, Albanians have paid more attention to the legal and practical division between the state and the state Religion; respect for basic human rights and freedom; secularism is a characteristic of society; And national sentiment, this is the key factor in achieving religious tolerance. Religious tolerance as the basic value of Albanian society, it is the unity element of citizens who have citizens various religions in the country.

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Challenges of Politics and Ethno-Religious Differences**

Bosnia and Herzegovina, since it emerged as an independent state in the 12th century, has been composed of great variety of religious groups, such as: members of the Bosnian Church, Catholics; Eastern Orthodox Christians; Muslims, Sephardic Jews and Protestants who settled after the Austro-Hungarian occupation in the 19th century. Different confessions and ethnic migrations, defined Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multi-religious 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. 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.

During the socialist regime, religious communities were excluded from socio-political issues, and atheism was adopted, but not imposed by force. Although religion was officially excluded from the state-building process under the this regime, it was and continues to be a pillar of ethnic identity and ethnic differentiation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This has had a major impact on establishing a strong relationship between political issues and religion, which intensified in the years leading up to its declaration of independence in 1992. Moreover, religion was a crucial element in victimization during the armed conflicts that followed, as it was the main element of ethnic identity. In the post-conflict period, the

religious doctrines of Bosnia and Herzegovina were used to support national political ideologies and to legitimize new political institutions. Consequently, it has fostered a religious revival especially among the younger generations, as well as strengthened the relationship between politics and religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>8</sup>

### *Religious composition*

Referring 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 given official status. So, the state cannot interfere on religious organization and matters and at the same time, representatives of the communities can not formally interfere or participate in political issues.<sup>9</sup>

In the regard of the religious diversity of Bosnian society, the law allows the state to provide equal financial support for all services of religious communities such as: cultural, heritage, educational, social and charitable, all these provided in a non-discriminatory manner. Freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination are constitutionally protected categories, which may be limited in accordance with respective the law and international standards for the purpose of protecting public security, health, morality as well as the rights and freedoms of others.<sup>10</sup>

The religious demography of Bosnia and Herzegovina is distinguished as one of the most diverse in the region level and continent as well. 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) or consider themselves as having no religious belief. Due to a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion, the three dominant religious groups broadly correspond to the three dominant ethnic groups Bosnians are predominantly Sunni Muslims, Serbs are predominantly Serbian Orthodox, whereas Croats are mainly Roman Catholics. 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

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<sup>8</sup> Role of Religion in the Western Balkans' Societies - Full Text.. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 39, 5, (2019): 12

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Arts. 14(3) and 14(4).

<sup>10</sup> 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>

15.4%.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, changes in the territorial distribution of religious groups after the wars of the 1990s also correspond to equivalent changes in ethnic composition.

Recently, have not been done any surveys on religious observance, but referring to the US Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report in 2006, the rate of religious observance depends on different religious and age groups, with higher observance noticed among Catholic Croats, and the younger generations of all three dominant religious groups. This evidence of the religious revival in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina was partly triggered by the role played by the religion during the conflict itself.<sup>12</sup>

### *Inter religious issues*

The religion had played a major role in the regard of ethnic and cultural groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the conflict period, during 1992-1995, it became the key element in the victimization of ethnic groups.<sup>13</sup> Even though the conflict was characterized as "ethnic", religious identity played a defining role in what we understand as "ethnic cleansing" during the war. Bosnian Muslims used the designation "Muslims" to express nationhood in the former Yugoslavia's legal framework. Through this "identification" the term became primarily a cultural and ethnic one, instead of religious. So, the policy of ethnic cleansing was directed at "Muslims" regardless of their actual religious observance. Moreover, the destruction of mosques during the conflict period has been considered as evidence of the intent to destroy Bosnian Muslims as an ethnic group.

Referring to This historical background inter-religious issues have always been present as well as the obstacles towards reconciliation in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nowadays, inter-religious issues are characterized by the lack of constructive dialogue between groups, religious segregation in education and discrimination of religious communities. Besides from the creation of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) in 1997, aiming to promote the shared values of all of Bosnia's religions, religious representatives have not been sufficiently involved in the peace building processes.<sup>14</sup>

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Alisabic. A and Begović. N '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.

D. Abazovic, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina', *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, vol. 7:1, 2010, p. 321

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>

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 2006 - Bosnia and Herzegovina

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Kostrešević, M. Interreligious Dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 26, 2, (2016)

The absence 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. 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. The lack of a worthy interfaith dialogue at the local level has had negative consequences in terms of generating conflicts. Most returnees reported selective enforcement of their rights by authorities, while religious leaders reported discrimination by local law enforcement agencies in their investigation into acts of violence, vandalism and intimidation, and in providing protection to victims. Religious segregation in primary and secondary education is another major obstacle to achieving an inclusive education system. Religious education is provided in schools, but usually includes classes on the religion of the majority religious group within the community, increasing discrimination against students belonging to minority faiths.<sup>15</sup>

Based on a research conducted by Sylvester and Mayan (2015), citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina identified mostly themselves with their religion rather than with their state.<sup>16</sup> Another comprehensive survey on the role of religion in this region, conducted by university professors from Mostar, 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>17</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. It is noteworthy that the importance of religion in everyday life increases among younger generations, whereas it decreases among more educated societal groups.<sup>18</sup> The respondents who considered religion as very important were primarily university professors, journalists, and those involved in NGOs.

Concerning to the influence of religious on attitudes towards societal issues such as poverty, justice, equality, crime and social cohesion, respondents showed mixed opinions. According

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<sup>15</sup> OSCE, Institute on Religion and Public Policy, Religious Freedom in Bosnia, 7 October 2008, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/34244?download=true>

<sup>16</sup> Silvestri, Sara and James Mayall, "The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding" The British Academy, September 2015, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> S. Kukić, and M. Čutura, 'Religija i njezina uloga u tranzicijskom informacijskom društvu' (2012) Informatol. 45: 1, p. 16

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

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). 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. 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. 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. 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.

Respondents were asked to give their opinion on whether religion has positively or negatively influenced the development of political processes, democracy, inter-ethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, and good neighborly

relations among Western Balkan countries. 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 neighborly relations were also negatively affected by religion, according to the respondents' opinion. They think that religion and religious leaders have failed to contribute in areas where religious communities are usually the driving force of change. International religious organizations have provided substantial humanitarian assistance during and after the armed conflict. So, in many international denominational organizations, especially those from North America, have contributed to reconciliation through interfaith dialogue and training on conflict resolution.<sup>19</sup>

### *Religious diversity – threats and opportunities*

The peaceful coexistence of various groups living in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been disrupted by the 1992-1995 armed conflict. The lack of an interfaith dialogue during the post-conflict period brought even more divisions between different religious groups. The transition process in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been described as a "negative peace" situation, seemed by a failed reconciliation between different religious groups. Although religious belief was not the main cause of the conflict, the religious context supports conflict positions and further divisions between the three religious groups. Since the end of the conflict, there has been no substantial effort by religious leaders to both promote coexistence and to reach a unified approach to certain social issues. For these reasons religious leaders have engaged in interfaith dialogue through the Interfaith Council (IRC), established in 1997, as well as several other similar initiatives.<sup>20</sup>

### **Kosovo: Religion, Politics and State Building Process**

In Kosovo, there is a strong sense of secularism in the political and intellectual spheres. In the former Yugoslavia, integration policies implemented in some areas populated with Muslim citizens, brought an atheist political and intellectual elite. Islam was practiced in worship practices, annual religious festivals, and traditional ceremonies. According to a 2016 study on the impact of religion on ethnic identity in Kosovo's state-building period, the country's quest for independence was not religiously motivated.<sup>21</sup> Many Kosovars envisioned a secular state,

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<sup>19</sup> Silvestri and Mayall, p. 68

<sup>20</sup>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.

<sup>21</sup> A. D. Peci, *What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period* (Prishtina: KIPRED, 2016).

especially due to the lack of a unitary religion. But after the Kosovo War and NATO intervention in 1999, religion became more important due to a combination of circumstances such as a weak economy, political instability and social disorientation. Thus religion became more visible in all spheres from personal life to society in general. With the introduction of the mass media and the increase in internet access, public debates about religion have increased over the years.

Referring to the last survey, citizens were asked how important religion is for most people in Kosovo. They were asked to rate the importance of religion on a scale of 1 (not important) to 7 (very important). At the end, resulted that the average was 5.3, where five respondents considered religion very important and nine other respondents considered religion to have a moderate to strong importance. So, it was found out a mix of opinions and no common trend among citizens with similar occupations. Some of them with a specific occupation think that religion is important while their colleagues are more skeptical. For example, a respondent working in government has rated religion as not important, while another again a respondent working in government has rated religion very important.<sup>22</sup>

#### *The role of religion on developments in Kosovo*

Respondents were asked in this survey to give their opinions on a very crucial issue, whether religion has positively or negatively influenced political developments, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, and good neighborly relations among the Western Balkans.

According to them, religion had a particularly positive influence such as on tolerance and peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and interethnic relations. It was noticed that respondents gave the “positive influence” answer most often in the aspect of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. They believed that religion has positively influenced tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Kosovo. While only five respondents believed that religion has negatively influenced Kosovo’s tolerance and peaceful coexistence. For both social cohesion and interethnic relations, were 12 respondents that felt religion had a positive influence. More mixed responses were given with regards to political developments, democracy, and good neighborly relations among Western Balkan countries.

In the regard of Kosovo’s political developments, were five respondents that believed religion has positively influenced political developments, and five others believed the

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<sup>22</sup> Shehu, Romario (2019) "Survey Report Kosovo," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 39 : Iss. 5 , Article 13: 2

opposite. Seven respondents believed religion has played a positive role in on good neighborly relations among Western Balkan countries, while five believed that 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 others believed it has negatively influenced it.<sup>23</sup> Almost half of the survey respondents believed that religion has played a neutral role in the aspect of the economic well-being of Kosovo. While five others believed that religion had a positive role and three others believed that it had a negative role.

### *Threats and opportunities for inter-religious relations in Kosovo*

All the respondents participated on the survey were asked to list the top three threats to inter-religious relations in Kosovo. They gave a variety of answers but the most dominant threats that they saw to inter-religious relations were religious propaganda, the country's struggling economy and the lack of opportunities hindering youth prospects. Religious extremism as well as the interplay of religion and politics was also listed as threats to inter-religious relations in Kosovo. Imported religious extremism remains an issue that countries all over the world are facing today. Respondents listed Arab countries, Serbia and Turkey as potential exporters of religious extremism in Kosovo. Religious communities in Kosovo are not officially recognized as legal entities and do not receive any funding from the state to carry out their religious activities, which they carry out through funds requested from other countries by religiously oriented NGOs.<sup>24</sup> Islamophobia as well as unequal treatment of religions was listed as threat by some of the respondents. Although Kosovo is a country with a predominantly Muslim population, it suffers from Islamophobia. Despite widespread religious freedom, studies have shown that there is a stigmatization of religiously conservative believers, especially the Islamic community. Practicing believers are often prejudiced and stereotyped based on their point of view (for example because of Islamic dress). Respondents to the survey claimed through their responses that government is a generating factor of Islam phobia. Unequal treatment of religions is seen as a threat related to

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<sup>23</sup> Shehu, Romario (2019) "Survey Report Kosovo," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 39 : Iss. 5 , Article 13, 5

<sup>24</sup> 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-iskosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque>. (Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> of July 2020)

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> (Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> of July 2020)



the dissatisfaction of the Muslim Association of Kosovo and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which have accused the government of discriminating against their communities.

Citizens are optimistic about the role of religion and believe that it can have a positive impact on interethnic relations, social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and in good neighborly relations between the countries of the Western Balkans. According to them, this can only be achieved if the leaders of religious communities are actively involved in promoting moral values and work hard to strengthen interfaith cooperation and dialogue. They also think that religion can have a positive impact in terms of democracy. According to them, religion helps promote democratic values such as dialogue, justice, human rights and others.<sup>25</sup>

### **Serbia: Politics, Religion and National identity**

The Christian faith has been present since the Roman period, in the territory that includes modern Serbia. With the spread of Christianity in the 2nd century, religious authority fluctuated between Rome and Constantinople, before Eastern Orthodoxy was founded in the late 9th century. Under the medieval Nemanic dynasty, the Serbian Orthodox Church achieved autocephalous status in 1219, and rise to a patriarchate in 1346. Islam was introduced to Serbia for the first time, with the Ottoman presence in the Balkans at the beginning of 14th century. Between 1804 and 1815, many Serbian uprisings took place against Ottoman rule in Serbia gaining autonomy under the rule of hereditary Serbian princes in 1830, and finally in complete independence in 1878. But in the southern parts of Serbia, remained small population, Slavic Muslims and Albanian Muslims.

During the communist regime when Serbia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, religion was tolerated but it was discouraged, while the property of religious organizations was largely nationalized. The influence of socialist political ideology on religion in Serbia can be seen in the fact that data on religious affiliation were ignored for ideological and political reasons in the censuses of 1961, 1971 and 1981.<sup>26</sup> The essential overlap between religious affiliation and ethnic identity played a major role. In the wars that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, and continues to this day to some extent. This reflects the role of religion in creating an atmosphere of mutual intolerance between different nations in the Balkans, with the rise of nationalism reinforced by an increase in expressions

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<sup>25</sup> Quality Report, via <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/censuskb20/KnowledgebaseArticle10700> helping those in need.

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

<sup>26</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>

of religious identity. This increase in the importance of religious identity in Serbia was also demonstrated by the establishment of the Serbian Ministry of Religion in 1991, which lasted until 2012.<sup>27</sup>

### *Church-state relations*

According to Article 11 of the relevant Constitution, the Republic of Serbia is a secular state. Churches and religious communities are separate from the state and no religion can be established as a compulsory state or religion. The state law, drafted in 2006, regulates churches as well as religious communities, giving special priority to seven religious groups that the government defines as "traditional." These are: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic Community and the Jewish Community. According to this law, these seven traditional religious communities are exempted from taxes and the right to teach religion in public schools. In addition to these seven communities, there are twenty other religious communities and churches.

### *Religious composition of country*

Statistical data collected about Serbian religious demographics are based on the 2011 census. These data do not contain information about Kosovo. The data for two municipalities on the border with Kosovo are not completed as a number of Albanian citizens refused to participate in this census. The majority of the Serb population was identified as Christian (91.22%), belonging to the main denominations - Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and various branches of Protestantism. The majority of citizens belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church (84.59%), while 4.97% identified it as Catholic. Most Roman Catholics live in the northern part of Serbia, Vojvodina. Referring again to the 2011 census, Muslims in Serbia resulted to represent 3.10% of the population. They are organized in two different communities, the Islamic Community of Serbia and the Islamic Community in Serbia. The first is headquartered in Belgrade and consists of three mufti units, while the second is located in the city of Novi Bazar, a Muslim-majority area and is under (the executive body) of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Traditional Protestant communities make up about 1%, mostly of the Slovak and Hungarian national minorities. More than 90% of Serbia's 36,000 Jews were killed

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<sup>27</sup> Open School, Belgrade (2019) "Country Snapshot Serbia," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 39 : Iss. 5 , Article 9.

during the Holocaust, and as a result the Jewish community now has less than 1,000 members.

### *Interfaith relations*

Based on independent reports, the level of religious violence has declined in recent years, although it is difficult to determine whether a violent act was motivated by religion or ethnic identity. Interfaith relations are generally good in Serbia, but tensions continue between the Serbian Orthodox Church and other unknown Orthodox Churches - Montenegro and Macedonia, as well as divisions between the two Islamic communities. A major outbreak of religious violence occurred in 2004 when mosques in central Belgrade and Nis were quickly damaged following a series of attacks in Kosovo in which more than 36 Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries were destroyed by Kosovo Albanian rebellions.

The situation remains very complex, as tensions between the Kosovo Albanian majority and the Serb population have not eased 20 years after the 1998–99 war. What makes the situation particularly difficult is that a considerable number of Serbian Orthodox Church properties are located in the territory of Kosovo.<sup>28</sup>

Serbia is one of the countries where religious beliefs especially orthodox one has had a lot of negative influence. The war with Kosovo proved that the faith influenced its further progress and continuation.

### **Politics and Religion in Montenegro**

Referring to a survey dealt with the influence of religious leaders in their religious communities in Montenegro, 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.

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<sup>28</sup>Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration Mission Kosovo, <https://unmik.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s-2004-348.pdf>  
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>  
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Especially see the part on Religious/Ethnic Violence in "Kosovo 2019 Crime & Safety Report"

Based on these survey results, it seems that religious leaders in Montenegro are influential to some extent in their respective communities as well as in public opinion too.<sup>29</sup>

#### *The influence of religion on developments in Montenegro*

Concerning the political developments, people mostly define religion as a negative factor in political developments, a smaller number did not see an effect of religion and only five saw a positive influence (two of were religious leaders), while three others marked that they do not know. The answers related to the development of democracy show similar results as well. Regarding interethnic relations showed that respondents 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. It is interesting to mention that religious leaders all saw the positive impact of religion on social cohesion.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Religious tolerance*

Concerning the issues of religious tolerance and inter-religious, respondents see inter-religious relations in a worse condition than they are in the Western Balkans as a whole. The average mark of the state of inter-religious relations was 3.92 according to asked respondents. When it comes to the present state of the inter-religious relations in the Western Balkans the results seem to point to slightly better relations.

### **North-Macedonia: The Challenges of Politics and Religion in multiethnic and multi Religious country**

Northern Macedonia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country as well. Based on the 2002 census, the religious map is: 64.8% Orthodox Christians, 33.3% Muslims, 0.35% Catholics and 0.03% Protestants.<sup>31</sup> This demographic map is different currently as the last census was in 2002, while the other has been announced for 2021. According to a Brima/WIN-Gallup international survey, Balkan countries, with the exception of Bulgaria and Albania, remain in

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29-30 Zekavica, Nenad (2019) "Survey Report Montenegro," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 39 : Iss. 5 , Article 14

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

the group of the most religious countries in Europe, and Macedonia remains with 88% of religious citizens.<sup>32</sup>

Concerning the issue on inter religious 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 practice their faiths.<sup>33</sup> So high percentage of them have not any problem to communicate with members of other religions. This can be “translated” as a high degree of inter-religious tolerance in the country. The inter-religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups in North Macedonia was recognized by Pope Francis when he made his first foreign visit.

### *The role of religion in North Macedonia*

For the citizens of RNM, religion is very important. Based on a survey, has resulted that only 10.3% (of the respondents think that religion is to some extent not important, but 74.4% of the respondents consider religion as important.

In the regard of the importance of religion in society, the respondents have responded that it is of great importance.

### *Inter-religious relations*

Concerning the question about inter-religious relations in Republic of North Macedonia on a scale between religious hatred and religious harmony the majority of respondents think that inter-religious relations are somewhere in between, but slightly inclining towards inter-religious 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 in the regard of inter-religious relations in the broader region. They thought that religious hatred is generally present in Western Balkan region.

Respondents have stated as well that they do not expect changes in a near future there are no indications that religious leaders will change their behavior. They complain that there is no sufficient contact between different religious communities and that religious leaders who do

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<sup>32</sup> 'Religion Remains Powerful in Balkans', Balkan Insight, 15 January 2018, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/15/religion-remains-powerful-in-balkans-surveyshows-01-15-2018/>

<sup>33</sup> 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)

not contribute in promoting inter-religious relations. A few of the respondents think that inter-religious 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 polarization between the people in North Macedonia after five years. Respondents' answers on how they expect inter-religious relations to develop in Western Balkan countries in the next five years are less optimistic. They think that they will worsen, or they will remain the same. While only about 10% of respondents think that inter-religious relations in the region will improve.<sup>34</sup>

These pessimistic views are explained by the reasoning that there are still existing and active political issues among the Balkan countries. For this reason they fear that different religious faiths in the Balkan countries divide people rather than unite them. Thus, political elites would not give up their tendency to abuse religious communities just to achieve their political goals.

## **Conclusion**

The role of religion remains very important in various aspects of society, both by the citizens of the Western Balkan countries themselves and in the work and research of academics and international organizations. The impact that religion has on economic, political, democratic, and social aspects in general is not necessarily tangible or positive. The role of religious representatives is to act more actively to promote religious values that would assist Western Balkan societies in reconciling and overcoming the challenges of past conflicts. While in the institutional aspect, religion is perceived to have strong ties with political elites in some of the Western Balkan countries. Religious institutions should play a more active role in society towards the perpetuation of universal ethical principles. They must condemn populist rhetoric that is contrary to democratic values. But unfortunately the prospect of such a development is questioned as religion has been abused for political purposes in the Western Balkans.

Although religion remains of particular importance to people, it has failed to show its positive effects on various social aspects. It is very important that religion, through its representatives, should contribute to and undertake proper initiatives of interfaith cooperation, understanding, respect and tolerance. An important task for the religious leaders in the countries of the Western Balkans remains their great commitment in order to establish inter-religious cooperation.

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<sup>34</sup> Borovska, Viktorija (2019) "Survey Report North Macedonia," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 39 : Iss. 5 , Article 15.

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