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Forewords and Frontmatter to Role of Religion in the Western Balkans' Societies

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Role of Religion in the Western Balkans' Societies

Conference Volume

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

Tirana, June 2019



Kingdom of the Netherlands



Institute for Democracy and Mediation
Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim

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Foreword by Sotiraq Hroni

Executive Director, Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM)



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

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

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

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

Foreword by Guusje Korthals Altes

The Ambassador of the Netherlands to Albania



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

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

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

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

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

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