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Survey report Albania

By Leonie Vrugtman and Dior Angjeli

Survey sample

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

The role of religion in Albania

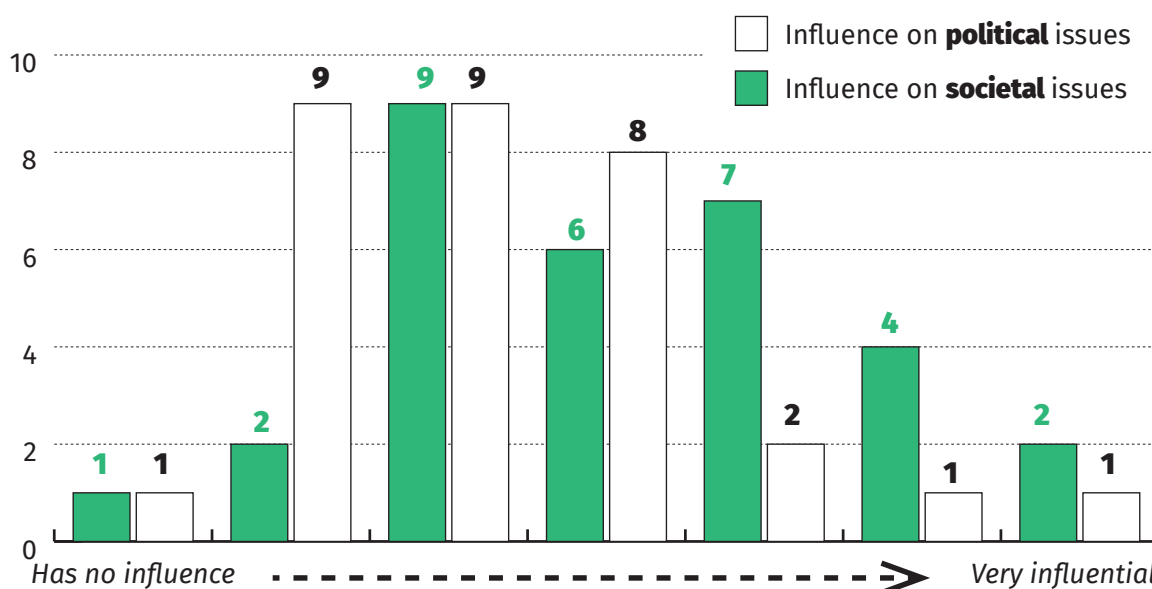
The daily life of most Albanians is largely secular. The majority of Albanians identify as belonging to a religious community, but when asked about religion people often refer to their family's religious affiliation instead of their own choice of faith.¹¹⁰ According to a study on religious tolerance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

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

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

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



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

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

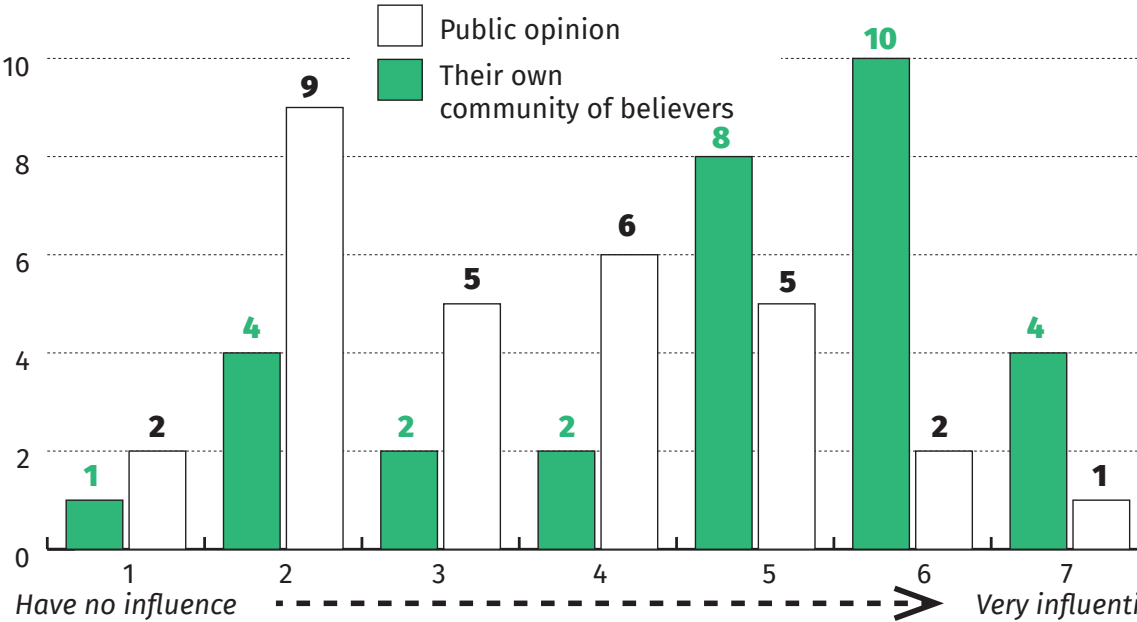
Religious leaders

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

projects and activities. Over the past few years, the council has become more visible and has been increasingly engaged with societal and political developments in Albania. The council has received international recognition for its work and was awarded the awarded Sérgio Vieira de Mello Prize in 2018.¹¹² This sentiment of religious harmony is not only embraced at the highest level. According to the 2018 study on religious tolerance carried out by IDM, 74.4% of the respondents perceived that religious clerics at the local level also embrace values of religious tolerance.¹¹³ In the current survey, the prominent members of Albanian society were asked about the sphere of influence of religious leaders and other clerics. Respondents believe that religious leaders have a considerable influence on their own community of believers. On a scale from 1 (no influence) to 7 (significant influence), respondents gave an average rate of 4.87. This influence sphere creates an opportunity for promoting values of religious tolerance within the community of believers.

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

Figure 2: The influence from religious leaders in Albania



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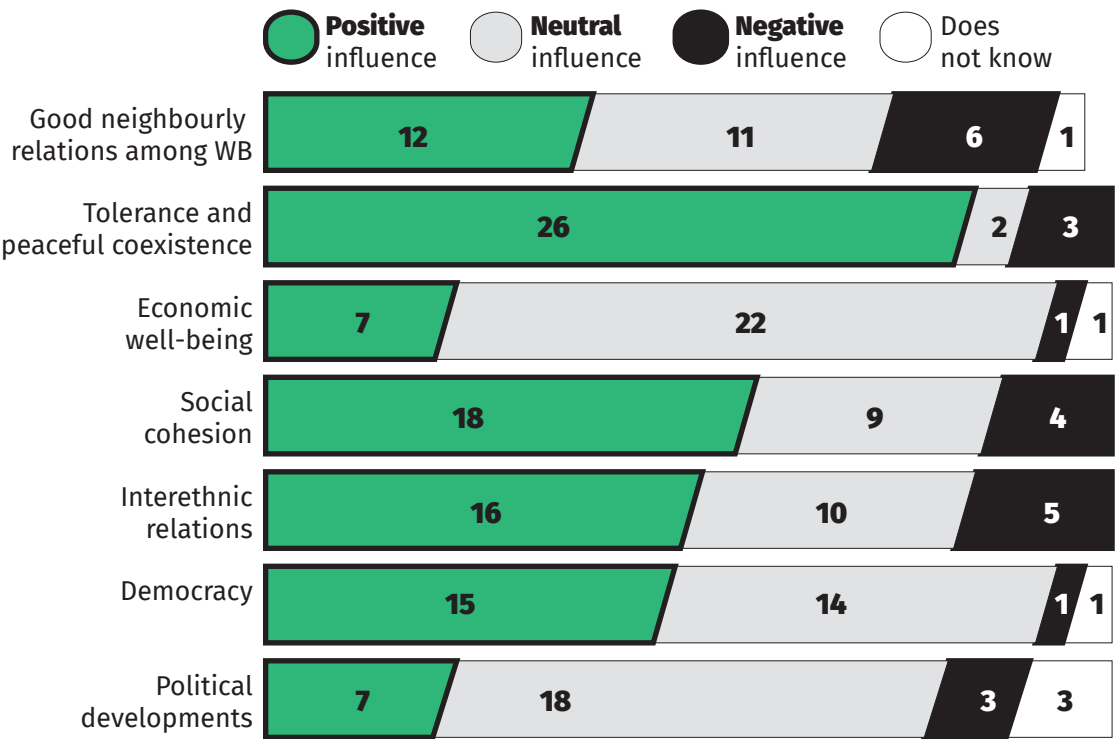
112 'The Interreligious Council of Albania receives human rights award', Tirana Times, 8 November 2018, available at: <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=139119>

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

The influence of religion on developments in Albania

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

Figure 3: The influence of religion on politics and society

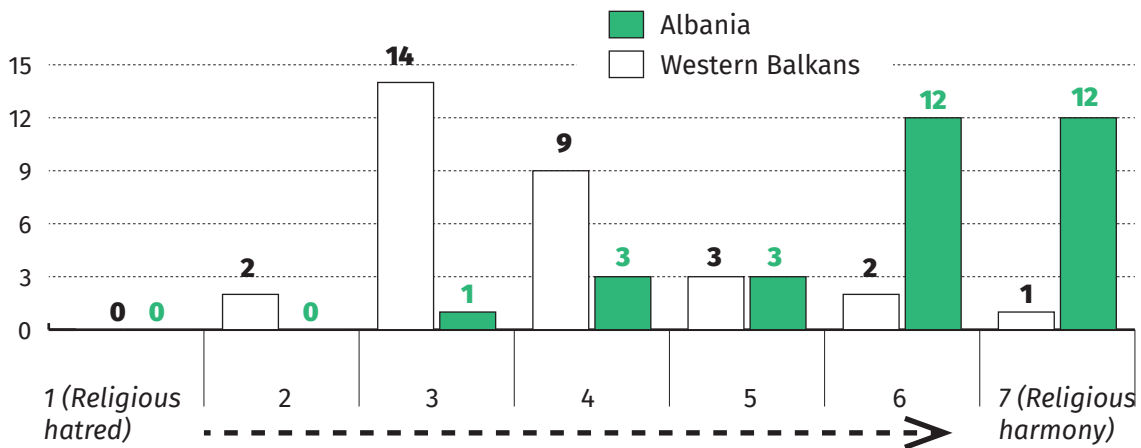


Religious tolerance

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

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

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



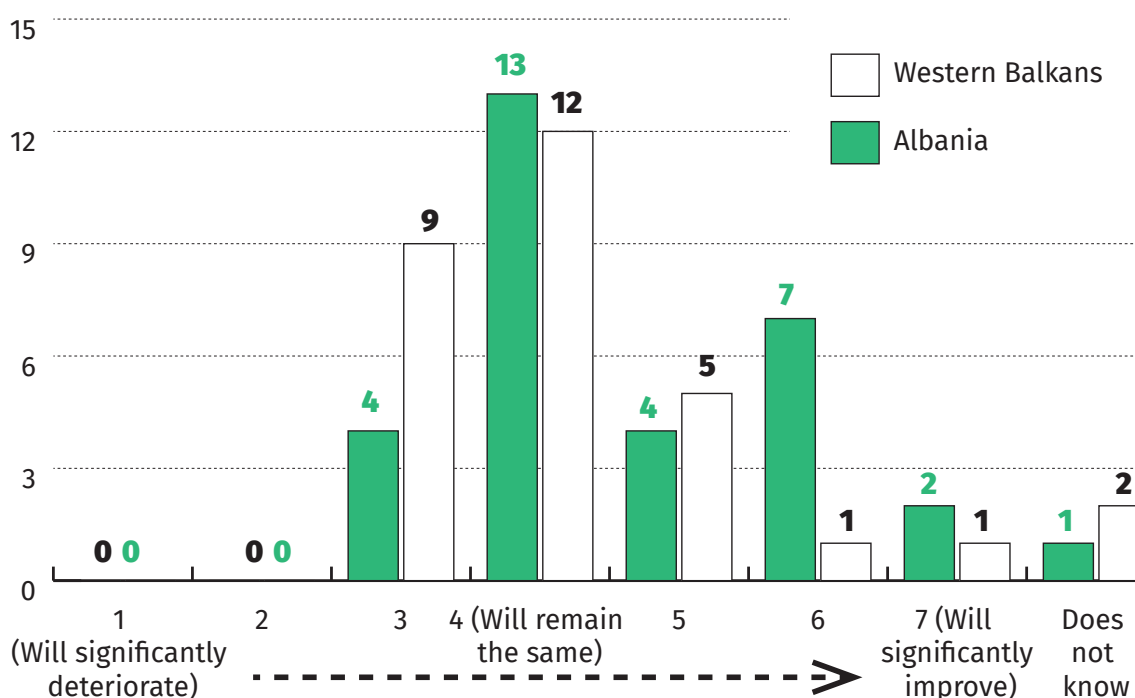
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¹¹⁴ N. Squires, ‘Pope Francis hails Albania as model of religious harmony in attack on religious extremism’, Telegraph, 21 September 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/albania/11111600/Pope-Francis-says-Albania-is-a-model-of-religious-harmony-during-first-visit-to-Muslim-majority-nation.h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

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

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

Figure 5: Interreligious relations in the next five years



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

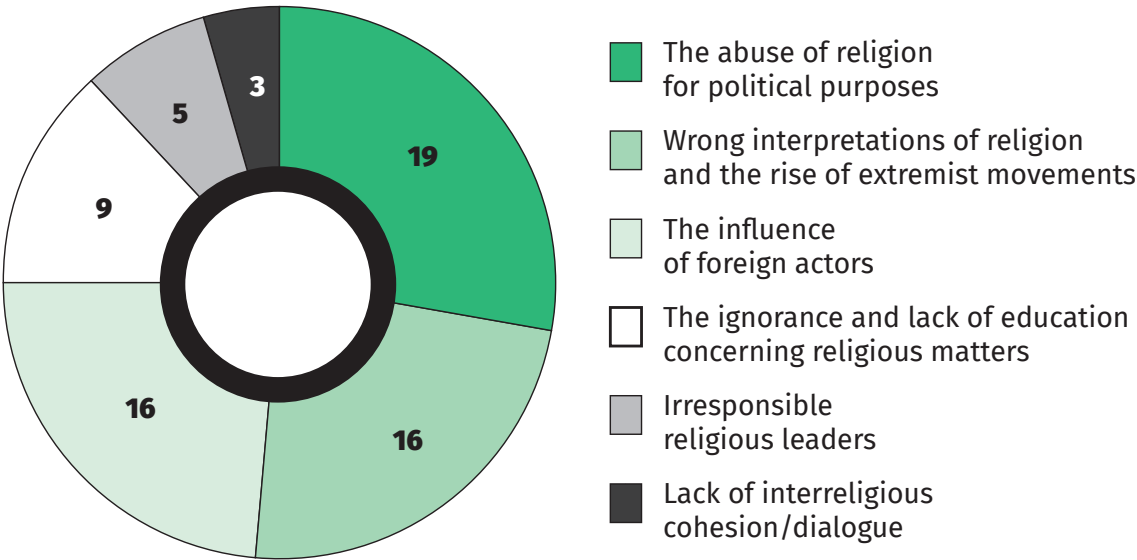
'the establishment of Centre for Interfaith Cooperation, the continuous work of the Interreligious Council of Albania and the opening of the Balkan Institute for Religious Studies and Democracy will have a positive impact on interreligious relations over the next five years'.

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

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

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

Figure 6: Threats to interreligious relations in Albania



Threats and opportunities for religious tolerance in Albania

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

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

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

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

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

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

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