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Survey report Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Lejla Hodžić

Survey sample

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

Religion and society

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

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

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

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

119 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

120 *Ibid.*

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

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

The relationship between religion and politics became stronger in all countries of southeastern Europe after the fall of communism as religion recovered the influence it had before.¹²¹ 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.¹²² 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.¹²³ Interestingly, of the 19.4% who believe that religion should have a stronger role in politics the majority are from younger generations.¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵

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

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121 Ognjenović and Jozelić, p. 311.

122 Ibid.

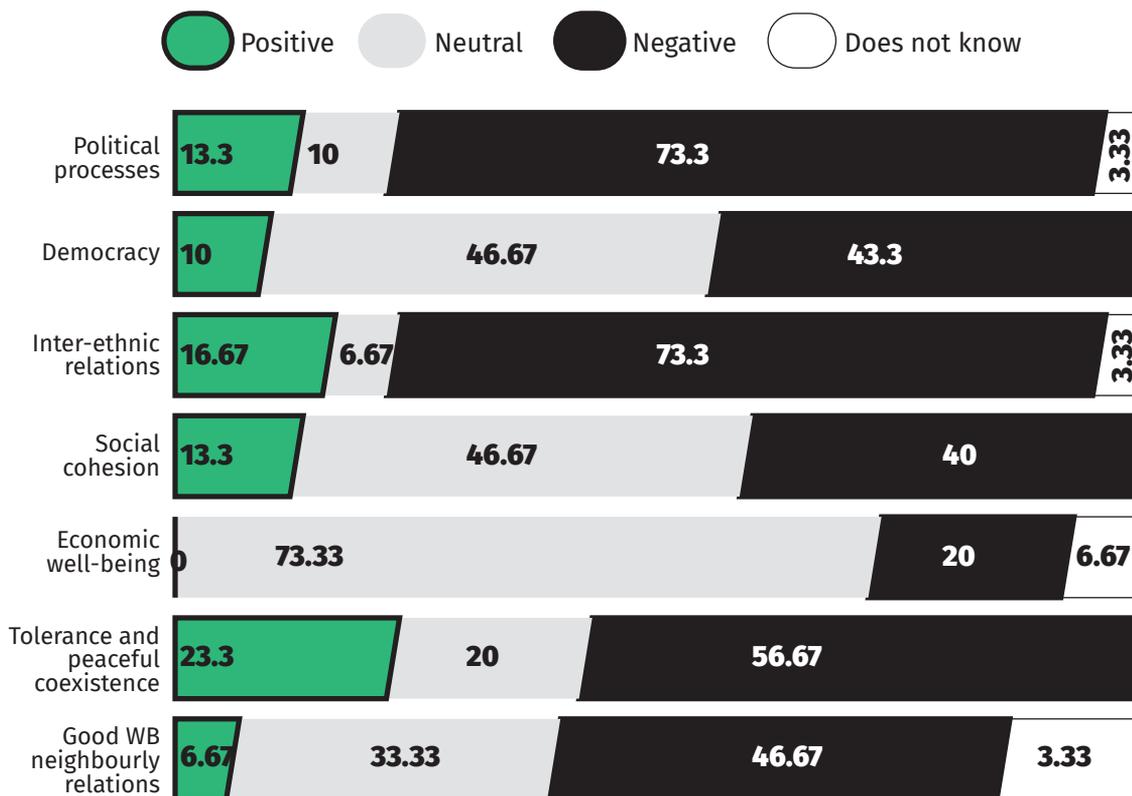
123 Kukić and Čutura, p. 20

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid, p. 20.

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

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



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

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126 Silvestri and Mayall, p. 68

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

Religious diversity – threats and opportunities

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

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

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127 Ibid.

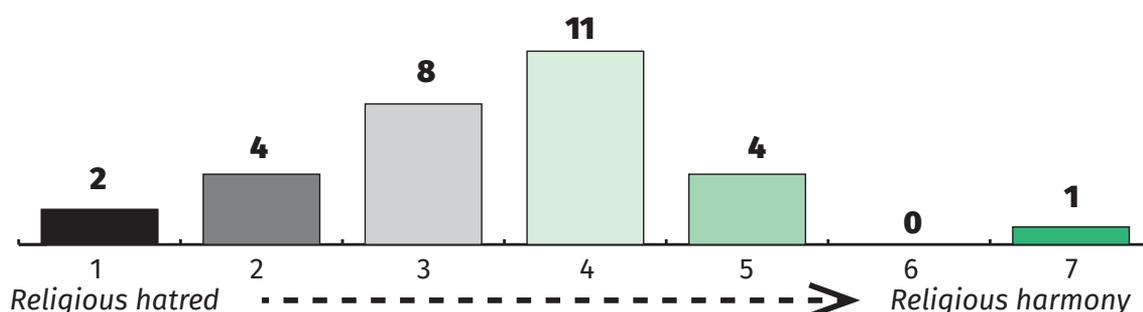
128 Alicino, p. 1.

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

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

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

Figure 8: Interreligious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

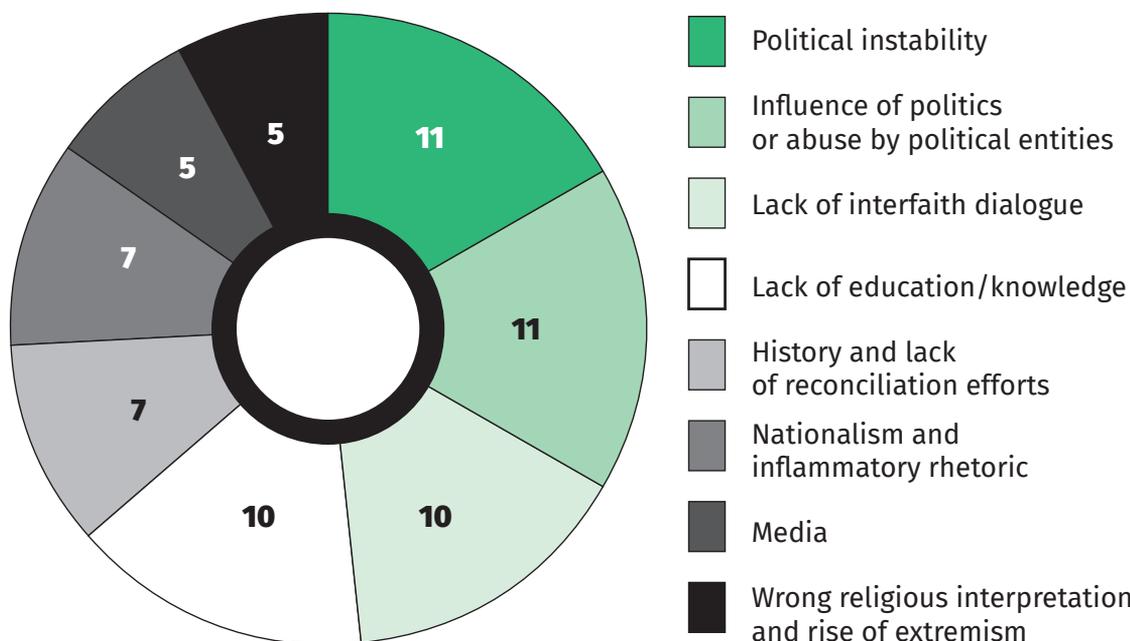
'lack of the curriculum for the subjects of history and religion which would affirmatively speak about value of diversity, common cultural and historical heritage, affirmatively about the other and differences (not the fear of the Turks); lack of projects on interreligious dialogue; and non-engagement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

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

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

Figure 9: The biggest threats to interreligious relations



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

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

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

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

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

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

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