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Survey Report Kosovo

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Survey report Kosovo

By Romario Shehu

Survey sample

During April and May 2019, approximately 120 surveys were distributed to high-level individuals involved in political, economic and cultural spheres in Kosovo. A total of 19 respondents completed the survey. The respondents include influential individuals from civil society (N=7), government and the political elite (N=5), religious communities (N=5), and academia (N=1). One respondent did not state his occupation. As regards the gender of survey respondents, 15 were male (79%) and four female (21%). Of the respondents, half of them have MA degrees (N = 9), six have BA degrees, and the remaining hold PhD or postdoctoral degrees. The average age of the respondents is 31 years old, with the youngest 27 and the oldest 58 years old. It is important to highlight that this report suffers from two major limitations. First, is the low number of respondents compared to other countries, and second, that all respondents are ethnic Albanians. Both of these limitations were caused by low responsiveness to the surveys we distributed.

The role of religion in Kosovo

In Kosovo, there is a strong sense of secularity in the political and intellectual sphere. In former Yugoslavia, Dr. Bashkim Iseni argues, integration and modernisation policies implemented in some Muslim-populated areas gave birth to an atheistic political and intellectual elite, as well as to a radical marginalisation of the Muslim clergy.¹³³ Islam was reduced to the private sphere: reserved only for worship practices, annual religious feasts and traditional ceremonies for weddings and deaths. According to a 2016 study on the impact of religion on ethnic identity in the state-building period of Kosovo, the quest for the country's independence was not religiously motivated¹³⁴. Most Kosovars envisioned a secular state, particularly because of the absence of a unitary religion. It was only after the Kosovo War and the subsequent NATO intervention in 1999 that religion became more important due to a combination of circumstances such as a weak economy, political instability, and societal disorientation.¹³⁵ As a result, religion became more visible in all public spheres, from personal lives to the society at large. Especially since the introduction of mass media and increased access to the internet, public debates about religion, have

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133 B. Iseni, *National Identity, Islam and Politics in the Balkans* (Stuttgart: Akademie der Diözese, 2009).

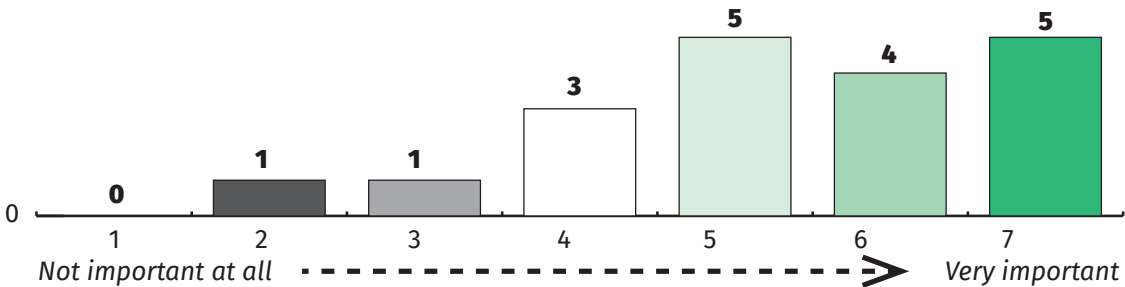
134 A. D. Peci, *What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period* (Prishtina: KIPRED, 2016).

135 Ibid.

increased over the years.¹³⁶

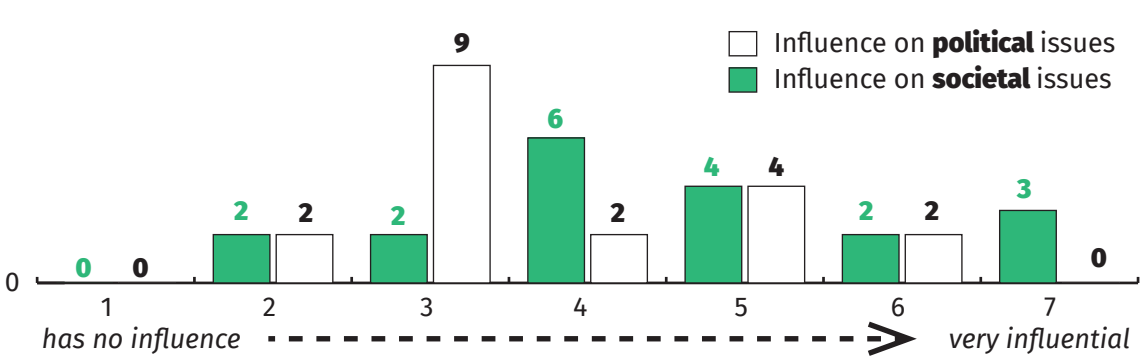
In the current survey, respondents were asked how important religion is for most people in Kosovo. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important), the importance of religion today for most of people. The average answer was 5.3, where five respondents considered religion very important and nine other respondents considered religion to have a moderate to strong importance (see Figure 10). There is a mix of opinions and no common trend among individuals with similar occupations. Some of the respondents from a specific occupation think religion is important while their colleagues are more sceptical. For example, a respondent working in government has rated religion as not important (2), while another respondent working in government has rated religion as very important (7).

Figure 10: Importance of religion today for most of the people in Kosovo



When asked about the influence of religion on the attitudes of the majority of people on societal issues such as poverty, justice, equality, crime and social cohesion in Kosovo, respondents had diverse reactions. According to them, religion has a moderate influence on attitudes regarding societal issues in Kosovo with an average answer of 4.57 on a scale from 1 to 7 (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Religion’s influence on societal and political matters



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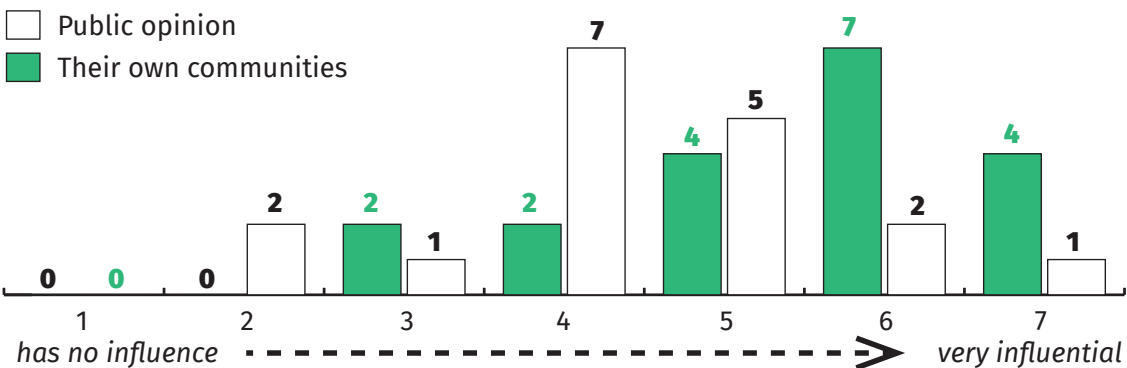
136 J. Mehmeti, ‘Faith and Politics in Kosovo: The Status of Religious Communities in a Secular Country. The Revival of Islam in the Balkans’, 2015, pp. 68–69

Although the respondents perceive that religion may have some influence on societal issues in the country, they appear to be more sceptical over the influence of religion on political matters. According to the majority of respondents (N = 13), the influence of religion on the attitudes of people in Kosovo towards political matters such as democratic participation, voter behaviour, and political parties in Kosovo is very modest. On a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important), the average answer was 3.7. Only six of respondents believe religion has a moderate influence on political matters (see Figure 11).

Religious leaders

The respondents believe the religious leaders in Kosovo are influential among their respective community of believers. Eleven respondents believed religious leaders are either influential or very influential. Six of the respondents believe they have a moderate influence, while only two respondents believe they have modest influence. On a scale from 1 (no influence) to 7 (very influential) the average answer of respondents is 5.47 (see Figure 12). In terms of the influence of religious leaders on wider public opinion in Kosovo, the majority of respondents (N = 12) believe religious leaders have a moderate influence. On a scale from 1 (no influence) to 7 (very influential) the average answer is 4.38 (see Figure 12). Only three of respondents believe religious leaders are influential or very influential on public opinion. Three others believe they have little or very little influence on public opinion in Kosovo. Based on these findings, religious leaders are perceived to be influential within their own community of believers, but have only a moderate influence on society as a whole.

Figure 12: Religions’ influence on its community of believers and public opinion



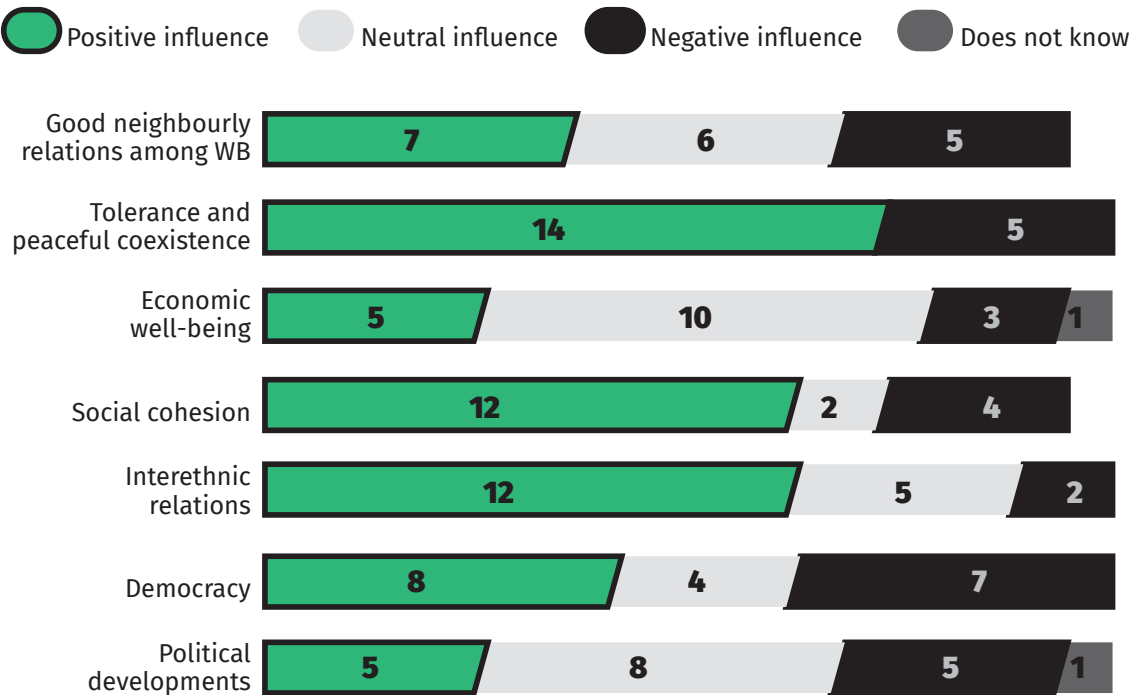
The role of religion on developments in Kosovo

As part of the survey conducted for this report, respondents were asked to give their opinions on whether religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, positively or negatively influenced political developments, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, and good neighbourly relations among the Western Balkans countries. The

following figure (see Figure 13) shows their responses on all these spheres. Overall, the majority of respondents believe that religion had either a positive or neutral impact on all the spheres.

According to the respondents, religion had a particularly positive influence on tolerance and peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and interethnic relations. Respondents gave the ‘positive influence’ answer most often in the sphere of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, with the vast majority of respondents (N = 14) believing that religion has positively influenced tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Kosovo. Only five respondents believe religion has negatively influenced Kosovo’s tolerance and peaceful coexistence. For both social cohesion and interethnic relations, 12 respondents felt religion had a positive influence. More mixed responses were given with regards to political developments, democracy, and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. In terms of Kosovo’s political developments, five respondents believe religion has positively influenced political developments, and five others believe religion has negatively influenced them. As regards the role of religion on good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries, seven respondents believe religion has played a positive role in this aspect, while five believe 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 believe it has negatively influenced it. Lastly, almost half of the survey respondents believe religion has played a neutral role in the economic well-being of Kosovo. Five respondents believe religion had a positive role and three others believe it had a negative role.

Figure 13: Religion’s influence on spheres of society

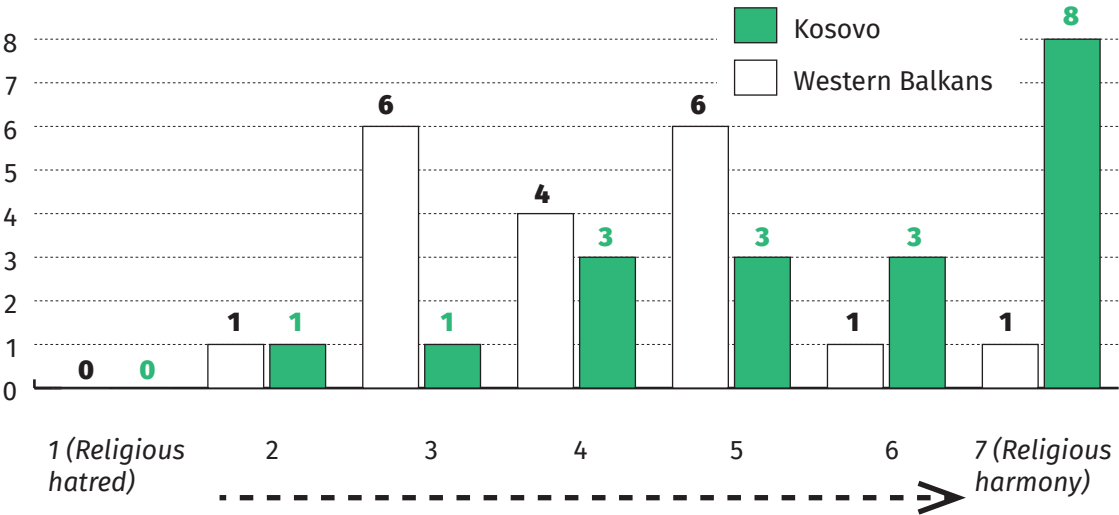


Religious diversity in Kosovo

Data from the 2011 official census shows that 95.6% of the population in Kosovo identifies as Muslim, 2.2% as Roman Catholic, and 1.4% as Serbian Orthodox.¹³⁷ However, this census was boycotted by ethnic Serbs, resulting in the underrepresentation of this ethnicity and of Orthodox Christians in general.¹³⁸ Other religious communities include the Protestant community, which claims 20,000 followers (1.1% of the population), and the Jewish community (with only 56).¹³⁹ Although the overwhelming majority of its citizens are Muslim, Kosovo has a diversity of religions. Therefore, in a religiously diverse country, interreligious relations are of great importance to the progress of society.

Hence, respondents were asked to rate today’s interreligious relations on a 7-point scale from 1 (religious hatred) to 7 (religious harmony). With an average answer of 5.57, the results show that respondents tend to believe the interreligious relations in Kosovo are in harmony (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Religious relations in Kosovo and the Western Balkans



Eight respondents believe there is religious harmony in the country, six believe interreligious relations are closer to religious harmony. Three responders believe the interreligious relations are neither harmony nor hatred, and only two believe the interreligious relations in Kosovo are closer to religious hatred.

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137 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, ‘The final results of Population, Households and Housing Census Released’, 26 September 2012, <http://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/the-final-results-of-population-households-and-housing-census-released>

138 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011 - Final Results: Quality Report, via <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/censusb20/KnowledgebaseArticle10700.aspx>

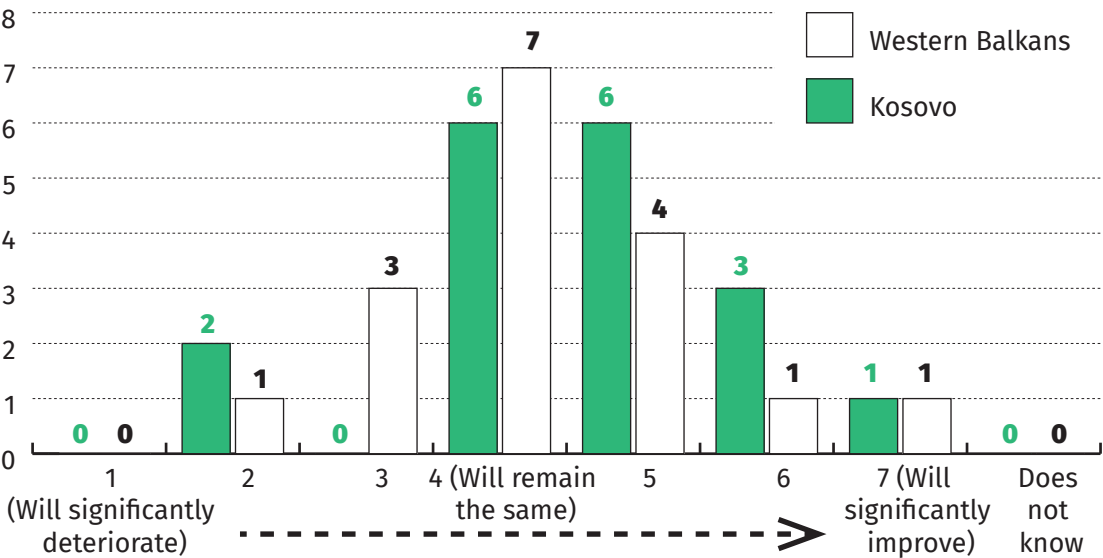
139 L. Luxner, ‘With US help, Muslim-majority Kosovo plans its first synagogue and Jewish museum’, Times of Israel, 22 December 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-us-help-muslim-majority-kosovo-plans-its-first-synagogue-and-jewish-museum/>

On the contrary, respondents believe that interreligious relations in the Western Balkan are slightly worse compared to interreligious relations within Kosovo. Respondents were asked to rate on a 7-point scale from 1 (religious hatred) to 7 (religious harmony) and they characterise today's interreligious relations in the Western Balkans as moderately harmonious (average answer is 4.1).

Interreligious relations development in the next five years

When asked about the future of interreligious relations in the next five years in Kosovo, half of the respondents believe these relations will improve. Only two respondents believe they will worsen. The respondents were asked to rate on a seven-point scale from 1 (will seriously deteriorate) to 7 (will significantly improve) and the average answer was 4.6. The most frequent argument supporting the idea that the relations will improve, is that Kosovo's interreligious tolerance is deeply rooted and interfaith coexistence has occurred in Kosovo for centuries. A member of the civil society sector also added that, 'my nationality is more important than my religion, thus, my religious faith will never have an impact on my decisions, but the good sides of religion, such as charity will be conducive to my behaviour.' Sceptical voices in the other hand put an emphasis on radicalisation, the low level of accountability among religious institutions and uncontrolled activities of religious NGOs. Some of the respondents believe that the future of interreligious relations in Kosovo will depend on the political and economic processes taking place in the region.

Figure 15: Interreligious relations in the next five years



In their responses concerning the future of the Western Balkans' interreligious relations the 'will remain the same' option was the most selected one (N = 7). Six respondents believed interreligious relations in the Western Balkans will improve, while four others believe they will deteriorate. The average answer was 4.23, which is lower than for Kosovo. The optimistic arguments were the impact of international community and civic awareness over their religion. Negative expectations consisted in the interplay of religion and politics and the radical interpretation of religion. Just as in the case of Kosovo, respondents

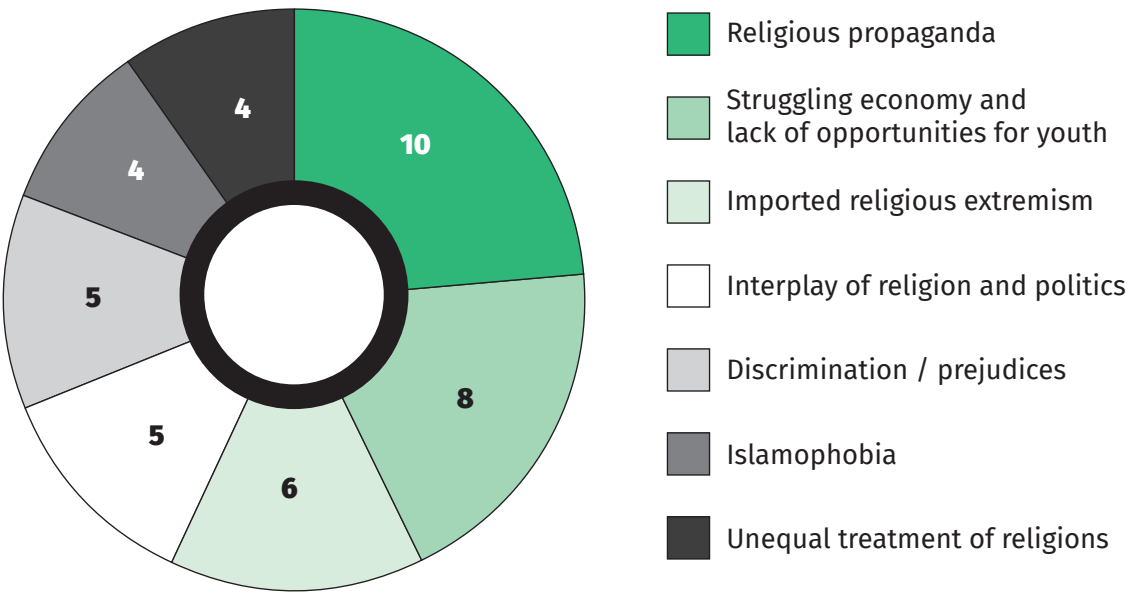
believed that interreligious relations in the Western Balkans will reflect the future political and economic conditions of the region.

Threats and opportunities for interreligious relations in Kosovo

Respondents were asked to list the top three threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo. They offered a variety of answers (see Figure 16), but the most dominant threats that they saw to interreligious relations were religious propaganda, the country’s struggling economy and the lack of opportunities hindering youth prospects. Religious extremism imported from outside, and the interplay of religion and politics were also listed as threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo. As regards to imported religious extremism, this is an issue that countries all over the world are facing today. However, what is particularly pressing about the situation in Kosovo is that the religious communities are not formally recognised as legal entities and do not receive any funding from the state to conduct their activities, train clergy or to maintain or (re)build property. Consequently, religious communities seek funding from elsewhere, for example from foreign governments or religiously oriented NGOs.¹⁴⁰

As regards to this threat, the respondents listed Arab countries, Serbia, and Turkey as potential exporters of religious extremism to Kosovo. Islamophobia as well as unequal treatment of religions were listed as threats by some of the respondents.

Figure 16: Biggest threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo



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140 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-is-kosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque>. 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>

Although it is surprising to see that a Muslim-majority country suffers from Islamophobia, this finding is confirmed by other literature on the topic. Despite widespread religious freedom, studies have shown there is a stigmatisation of conservative religious believers, especially of the Islamic community. One study argues that practising believers are sometimes prejudiced and stereotyped based on their outlook (for example because of Islamic dress).¹⁴¹ Respondents of our survey pointed to the media and government as generators of Islamophobia. Some of the respondents emphasised the role of religious leaders in dealing with threats to interreligious relations in Kosovo. A respondent from one religious community argued the ‘inadequate inclusion of religious leaders in dealing with the negative phenomena, especially with those who have to do with extremism and radicalism may be a potential threat to the interreligious relations in Kosovo.’ In terms of the unequal treatment of religions, this threat was listed four times, and it corresponds with the discontent of both the Muslim Association of Kosovo and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which have accused the government of discrimination towards their communities, albeit for different reasons.¹⁴²

After expressing their opinion on the biggest threats for interreligious relations, respondents also listed what they saw as opportunities for a positive role of religion in society. Overall, respondents were optimistic about the role of religion and believe that it can have a positive impact on interethnic relations, social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. However, respondents note that this can only be achieved if religious leaders engage more actively in the promotion of moral values (such as mutual respect, harmony, friendship, solidarity and tolerance) and work on strengthening interreligious cooperation and dialogue.

Another respect in which respondents believe religion can have a positive impact is democracy. The most frequent response was that religion can help by promoting democratic values such as dialogue, sympathy, justice, democracy, and human rights. Additional ways in which religion can improve democracy include encouraging citizens to take part in public hearings and decision-making. One respondent argued:

‘religions preach peace and tolerance, which are per se very compatible with the values of democracy, and if they are correctly explained, they can play an important role in the successful implementation of democratic values.’

The only two aspects where responses were neutral or argued that religion can have a limited role were political developments and economic well-being. Nevertheless, some respondents believe that religion can also improve the political development in Kosovo by increasing the public presence of adequate religious leaders and by preventing the interplay between religion and politics. One of the respondents said that religion can help improve the political developments by ‘encouraging their audiences to take part massively in elections.’ With regards to economic well-being, a few optimistic respondents argued that religion can have an impact on this aspect by encouraging people to work, refuse corruption and nepotism, as well as by doing charity and helping those in need.

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

142 The Muslim community has complained about the rules prohibiting religious dress in public schools, while the Orthodox community claims it has received no financial support to rebuild destroyed religious sites. See also: Islamic Association of Kosovo, Press declaration, 24 October 2013, <https://bislame.net/prsdntj/>