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Survey report North Macedonia

By Viktorija Borovska

Survey sample

One of the activities of the project 'Role of Religion in Western Balkan Societies' was an elite survey that enabled us to gain an insight into views and perceptions on issues related to religiosity, the role and influence of religion, threats and opportunities of religious diversity and suggestions on how religion can contribute to the different social aspects of the various countries of the region. The survey in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) was conducted in the period April–May 2019 with a targeted sample comprising 39 representatives from 7 categories: government and political elite (6 respondents), civil society leaders (5 respondents), journalists and opinion-makers (5 respondents), cultural elite (7 respondents), religious communities (6 respondents), academia (5 respondents), and young leaders (5 respondents). The respondents gave qualitative and quantitative answers to the questions.

The gender structure of the sample comprised 22 males (or 56.4%) and 17 females (43.6%). The average age of the respondents was 38.5 (the youngest 26 years and the oldest 68 years old). In terms of education 14 respondents hold BA degrees, 12 respondents hold MA degrees and 13 hold a PhD degree.

Religion in North Macedonia – context

North Macedonia is multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country. According to the 2002 census, the religious map of North Macedonia is as following: 64.8% are Orthodox Christians, 33.3% are Muslims, 0.35% Catholics, 0.03% Protestants.¹⁴³ However, the current demographic map is expected to be different bearing in mind the fact that the last census was in 2002, while the next has been announced for 2021. According to a Brima/WIN-Gallup international survey, Balkan countries, with the exception of Bulgaria and Albania, remain in the group of the most religious countries in Europe, and Macedonia, with 88% of people being religious,¹⁴⁴ is the regional leader in terms of religiosity.

Regarding interreligious 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 practise their faiths, and a relatively high percentage of them have no

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

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

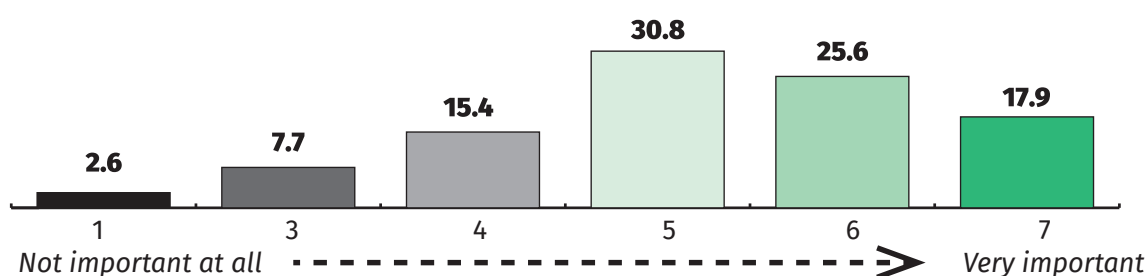
problem communicating with members of other religions, that is to say, there seems to be a high degree of interreligious tolerance in the country.¹⁴⁵ The interreligious tolerance and peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups in North Macedonia was recognised by Pope Francis when he made his first foreign visit to North Macedonia.¹⁴⁶ However, multi-religious character of the RNM was always intertwined with the multi-ethnic composition of the country. This has always been indicator of the mutual tolerance and an indicator of possible fragility and sensitivity when facing political crisis or tensions in the country.¹⁴⁷

The role of religion in North Macedonia

On the question, ‘how important is religion today for most of the people in your country’, the results show that the opinion of the majority of the respondents is that religion is rather important for the citizens of RNM. Only 10.3% (cumulative from answers rating 1 to 3) of the respondents think that religion is to some extent not important, but 74.4% (cumulative from answers 5 to 7) of the respondents consider that in North Macedonia religion is important or very important to the people.

On the scale of 1 to 7 measuring the importance of religion in society, where 1 marks complete irrelevance and 7 marks significant influence, the mean was 5.21, which again shows that the opinion of the respondents is that religion is of great importance today for most of the people in North Macedonia.

Figure 24: Importance of religion in North Macedonia (in %)



The opinions were quite divided when it came to the question of the extent of religion's influence on attitudes regarding societal issues such as poverty and justice. About 41% (cumulative from answers rating 1 to 3) of the respondents said that religion has no or little

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¹⁴⁵ 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

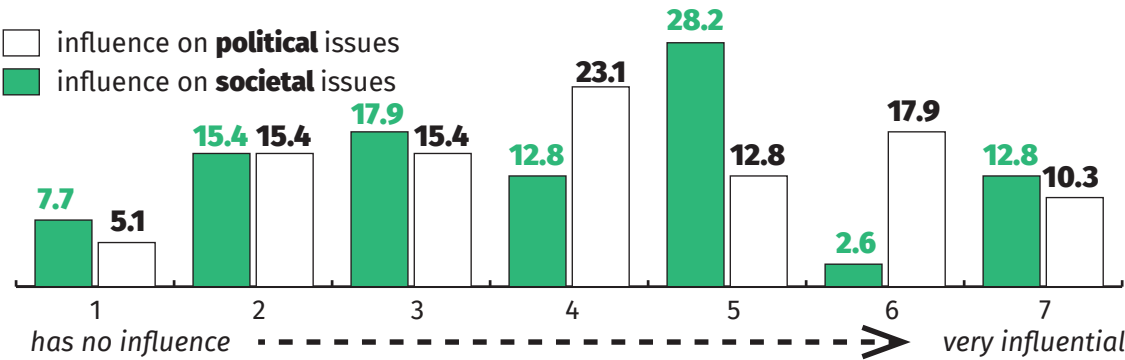
¹⁴⁶ ‘Pope in North Macedonia: respect for human dignity, diversity for a future of peace and prosperity’, 2019, available at: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-05/pope-francis-north-macedonia-apostolic-visit-authoritie-welcome.html>

¹⁴⁷ 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

importance regarding the societal issues, but for 43.6% (cumulative from answers 5 to 7) religion has significant impact on societal issues. Or according to the respondents, religion has a moderate influence on attitudes about the societal issues for the citizens of North Macedonia, with a mean answer of 4 (on a scale from 1 to 7).

The results are similar regarding the extent of religion's influence on political matters. 35.9% (cumulative from answers 1 to 3) of the respondents believe that religion does not have significant influence, and 41% (cumulative from answers 5 to 7) think that the religion's influence on political matters is quite significant. Or according to respondents, religion has moderate influence on political matters for the citizens of North Macedonia, with a mean answer of 4.18 (on a scale from 1 to 7).

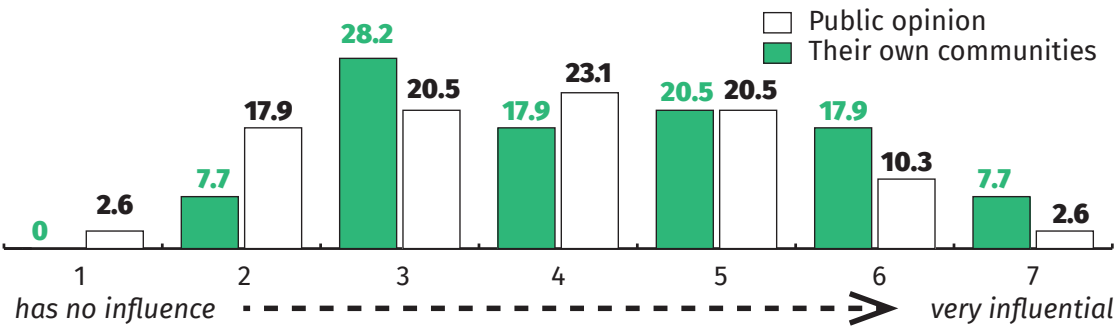
Figure 25: Religion's influence on societal and political issues in North Macedonia (in %)



Religious leaders

According to the survey results, the influence of religious leaders among the respective communities is almost equally distributed between the two extremes of the scale. For 46.2%, this influence is significant (cumulative from answers 5 to 7), while for 35.9% it is insignificant (cumulative from answers 1 to 3). The mean answer was 4.36, which can be assessed as a medium influence of religious leaders on their respective communities.

Figure 26: The influence of religious leaders in North Macedonia (in %)



Although the majority of respondents think that the influence of religious leaders among their respective communities is generally moderate to more significant, the majority of respondents (41%) also think that the influence of religious leaders on public opinion in general is less significant. Cumulative results from those who think that their influence on public opinion is significant is 33.3%. The mean answer was 3.84 (on a scale from 1 to 7), which shows that the influence of religious leaders is slightly lower than medium.

The influence of religion on developments in North Macedonia

One set of questions from this survey was about the opinion of the respondents whether religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse, positively or negatively influences the development of political processes, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. Regarding this set of questions, we have an interesting insight when we compare the answers by religious representatives to representatives from other categories.

Regarding the influence of religion on political development, the majority of the respondents answered that religion has a negative influence, 61.5%. But out of those who think that religion has a negative influence on political development, only 4.2% (or one respondent) is a religious representative.

The answers to the question about the positive or negative influence of religion on democracy display the same divergence between religious representatives and the others, but the general results (56.4%) show that religion, as dominantly interpreted and presented in public discourse, has a negative influence on democracy. However, none of the religious representatives think that that is the case, in fact 66.7% of them think that religion has a positive influence on democracy and 33.3% think that it has a neutral influence. But none of the respondents from the other elite categories think that religion has a positive influence on democracy.

It is also interesting that none of the respondents from this survey think that religion has a neutral influence on the interethnic relations. Most think that religion has a negative influence (74.4%), while almost all (5 out of 6) of the religious representatives think that religion has a positive influence on interethnic relations.

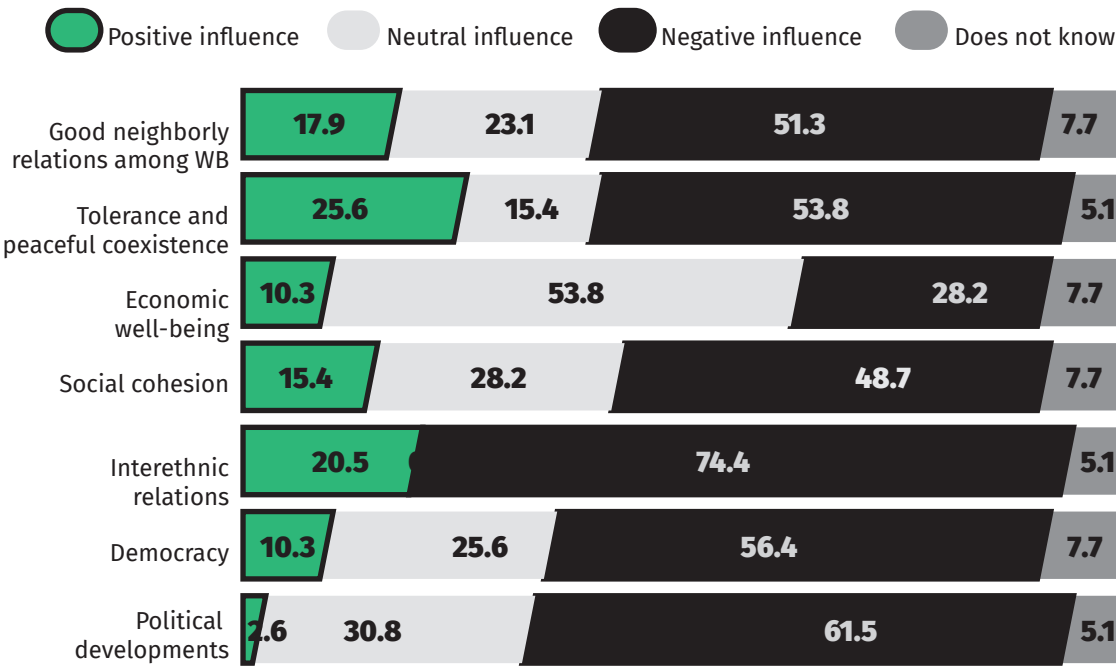
Regarding the question about the influence of religion on social cohesion, answers are similar. Although the percentage of answers that cited religion as a negative influence on social cohesion was lower than in previous questions.

On the question about the influence of religion on economic well-being, the dominant answer is that it has a neutral influence, with 53.8% of responses. Regarding the influence of religion on economic well-being, answers from all categories of respondents are distributed fairly equally.

Again, most of the answers to the question about the influence of religion on tolerance and peaceful coexistence are that it is negative, with 53.8% of respondents sharing this opinion. The answers of the religious representatives to this question are again different from the others. They think that religion in fact has a positive influence on tolerance and peaceful coexistence, but the majority of respondents from the other categories think differently, that religion has a negative influence.

About the influence of religion on the good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries, the majority of the respondents think that religion has a negative influence (51.3%). Again, the answers of the religious representatives differ markedly from the other respondents. None of the religious representatives think that religion has a negative influence on good neighbourly relations.

Figure 27: The influence of religion on politics and society in North Macedonia



From the results of the respondents regarding the influence of religion on different societal issues: development of political processes, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and good neighbourly relations among the Western Balkans countries; one can conclude either that religion and religious leaders have failed to positively contribute to society, or perhaps that their positive influence is not obvious or visible to citizens outside religious institutions.

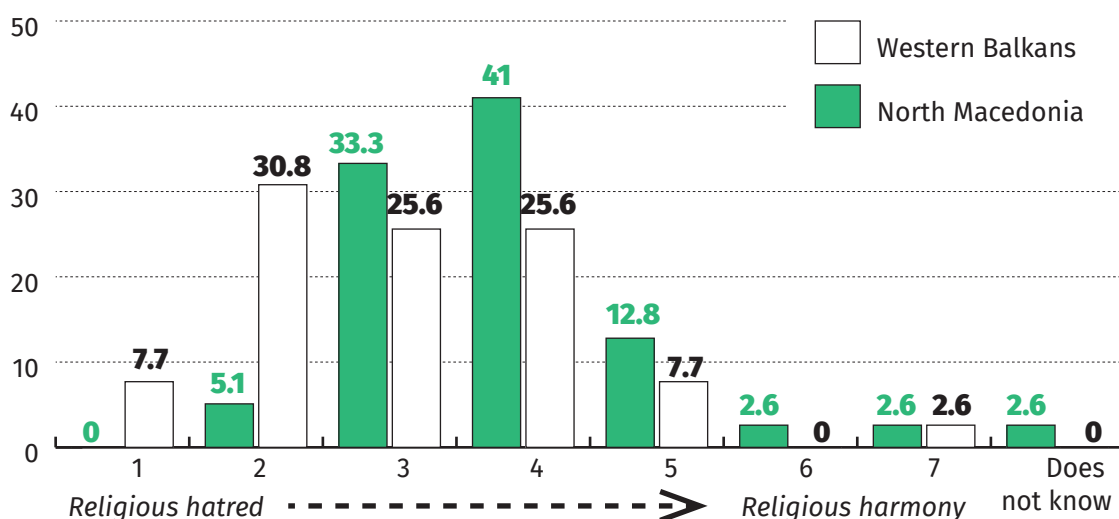
Interreligious relations

Regarding the question about interreligious relations in Republic of North Macedonia on a scale between religious hatred (1) and religious harmony (7), the majority of respondents think that interreligious relations are somewhere in between, but slightly inclining towards interreligious 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 when it came to interreligious relations in the broader region. Respondents predominantly thought that religious hatred or intolerance is generally present in Western Balkan region. The mean of this question (from the scale

of 1 to 7) was 3.05, which is lower than a medium grade, and therefore is closer to the assessment that it is slightly inclining toward religious hatred.

Figure 28: Interreligious relations in North Macedonia and in WB countries (in %)

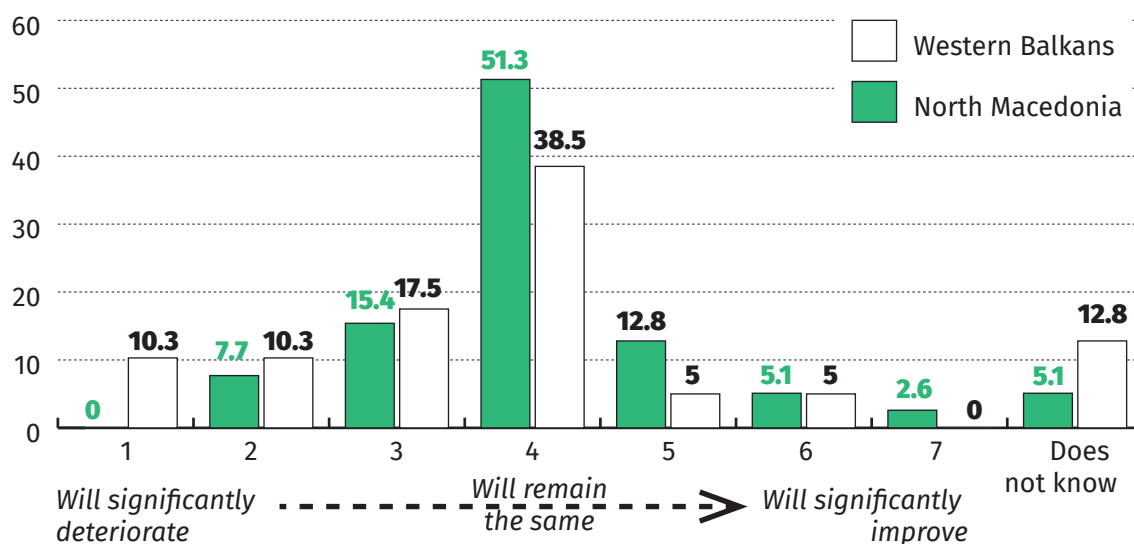


About the opinion on how the interreligious relations will develop in our country, the majority of the respondents think that they will remain the same (51.3%).

The explanations of the respondents to this question were that they do not expect changes because the period of five years is too short for any major changes, and there are no indications that religious leaders will change their behaviour or rhetoric. Here again respondents complain that there is no sufficient contact between different religions, that prejudice and ignorance of religions are persistent, that there are only formal contacts between religious communities and that religious leaders do not promote interreligious relations. A few of the respondents think that interreligious 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 polarisation between the people in North Macedonia after five years. However, there are few more optimistic expectations regarding this and hopes that the new generation of religious leaders will be far more willing to cooperate and ready for coexistence than the previous ones, and that there is also an expectation for a substantial manifestation of mutual respect and help between different religions.

Respondents' opinions on how they expect interreligious relations to develop in Western Balkan countries in the next five years are less optimistic than expectations for North Macedonia. 38.5% (cumulative % from answers 1 to 3) think that they will worsen, and 38.5% that they will remain the same. Only about 10% of respondents think that interreligious relations in the region will improve. This more pessimistic views on the matter are explained on the grounds that there are still existent and active political issues among Balkan countries, and fear that that the different religions in the Balkan countries divide people more than they unite them. Namely, political elites would not give up their tendency to abuse the religious communities for political purposes.

Figure 29: How interreligious relations are expected to develop in the next five years in North Macedonia and in the region



Threats and opportunities

Regarding the respondents' opinion about the top three threats to interreligious relations in the Republic of North Macedonia today, we can summarise the answers in these categories:

- Interference of religion with politics in terms of interference of religion in politics and politics in religion;
- Poverty;
- Ethno-religiosity;
- Hate speech, interreligious intolerance, bad religious leaders, using religion to spread interreligious and interethnic intolerance and violence, interreligious polarisation, threatening rhetoric of religious leaders;
- Being uninformed about their own and other religions; and
- Media propaganda and social media influence.

And finally, respondents of this survey were asked to give ideas about how religion can improve certain aspects of the society such as politics, democracy, social cohesion, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, interethnic relations, economic well-being and good neighbourly relations. For each of these aspects, a certain percentage of respondents think that religion cannot help in any way. But here are the categories that can be distinguished from their answers.

Regarding the question of how religion can help improve political developments in the country, the summarised answers of this open-ended question can be divided in these categories:

- Religion should not interfere at all in politics, nor give opinion on the issues, and should stay away from political parties;
- By promoting tolerance and neutrality towards political parties;
- By showing proactivity in addressing issues of general interest and public interest; and
- Religious leaders should calm the rhetoric, and should educate their members about faith's truth, promoting human and ethical values.

Opinions about whether and how religion can help improve the state of democracy in the country, the summarised answers can be divided in these categories:

- By promoting human and ethical values, tolerance, acceptance of diversity;
- By supporting democratic processes and promoting democracy as a value;
- With real secularisation, separation of the state from religion; and
- To separate religion from politics and political parties.

The question as to how religion can help improve the interethnic relations in the country, the summarised answers are as follows:

- By building bridges of trust;
- With direct participation in resolving interethnic conflicts;
- Preaching human values, tolerance, respect, understanding;
- By not getting involved in daily political activities; and
- By intensifying interreligious dialogues and promoting values that bring different groups closer.

Opinions on how religion can improve the social cohesion in the country are summarised in these categories:

- With the joint celebration of the main religious holidays;
- Promoting acceptance, discussion and dialogues between different religions;
- Through mutual introduction of different religions and interreligious forums; and
- By helping the disadvantaged and poor with humanitarian aid.

Although the general opinion of the respondents regarding the influence of religion on economic well-being showed that religion has a neutral influence, they also gave opinion on how religion can improve the economic well-being in the country:

- By fostering ethics in the economy and encouraging ethics in ecology;
- Promotion of labour as a source of happiness, peace and well-being;
- Taxation, regulation and transparency of economic transactions for religious services; and

- Religious leaders to try not to enjoy material goods (e.g. expensive cars) and dispatch them in favour of the poor.

Respondents were asked to give their opinions on how religion can improve the state of tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the country, and their answers were summarised in these categories:

- By promoting human values that are common to all religions, and by encouraging believers to practice tolerance toward other religions and ethnic communities;
- By rejecting prejudice towards different religions;
- Spreading messages of coexistence;
- By intensifying interreligious dialogues; and
- By teaching tolerance.

The summarised answers to the last question on how religion can improve the good neighbourly relations among WB countries are as follows:

- To promote tolerance and peace, acceptance of others;
- To show respect instead of directing hate speech to other countries or groups;
- To develop real cooperation and encounters between religious leaders/religious groups; and
- To abandon xenophobic discourse and development of ecumenical tendencies.