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Survey Report Serbia

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Survey report Serbia

By Nenad Zekavica

Survey sample

During March and April 2019, a survey was conducted as part of a regional project which deals with the role of religion in the Western Balkan countries. The survey was conducted as the research part of the project and it was conducted among members of cultural and political elite members of society. Its purpose is to give a sketch of the religious topography of different societies in the Western Balkans.

The respondents were carefully selected and around 80 surveys were sent to the selected candidates. As a result, we received 30 completed surveys with necessary data. We have tried to follow guidelines and to receive feedback from people with different occupations: politicians and government employees (N=3), religious leaders (N=4), academia (N=7), civil society leaders (N=6), journalists and opinion-makers (N=5) and young leaders (N=5). Of the respondents, 21 were male (70%) and nine (30%) were female. The average age of the respondents was 35.5 years, with the youngest respondent being 25 years old and the oldest one 54 years old. With regard to respondents' education, six respondents have a bachelor's degree, 15 respondents hold an MA, while nine of them have obtained a PhD degree.

The role of religion in Serbia

The questions were designed to show how religion is perceived in Serbia and to see its role in Serbian society, and also in other Western Balkan countries.

The first question was related to the level of importance of religion today for most of the people in Serbia, on the scale, 1–7 where 1 represents 'not at all' and 7 stands for 'very important'. The average grade was 4.37. Overall, we could say that religion is moderately important for people in our society. Additional data which can show the importance of religion for people living in Serbia comes from the census in 2011,¹⁴⁸ when it was shown that more than 94.4% of the population identified as religious – as a member of a church or religious community/organisation. The disparity between these two is quite obvious. Specialised surveys show that a high percentage of people are not believers in terms of practising religion, but they rather choose their religious affiliation on the basis of their traditional belonging to a specific confession. The number of atheists and agnostics is growing. This is the reason for the opinion that in large surveys, such as national censuses, it is hard to get precise data on religious affiliation. Hence specialised surveys are more

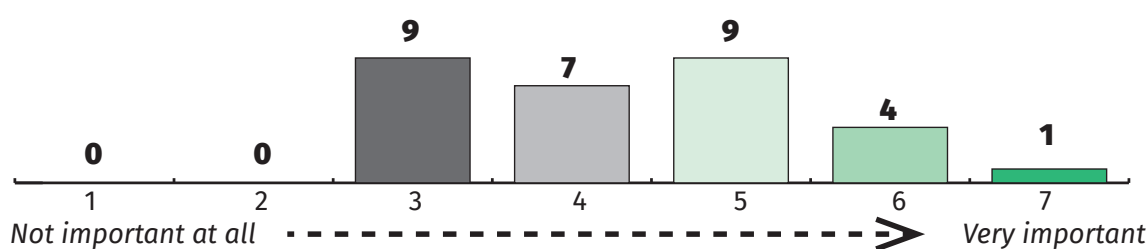
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¹⁴⁸ The special study available only in Serbian, written on the basis of Census in 2011. Etnomozaik 178, retrieved via <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

suitable for collecting that type of data.¹⁴⁹

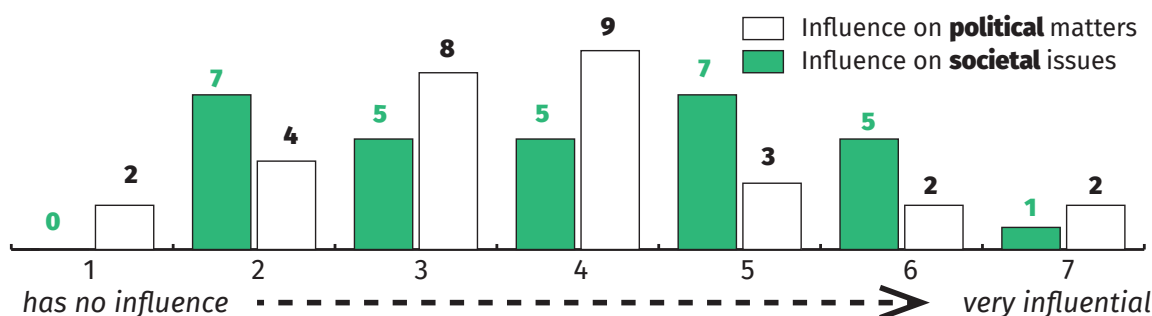
Therefore, the data collected on the census is more connected to the personal feelings of traditional belonging than on active participation in religion, i.e. the activities of a religious organisation or community.

Figure 30: Importance of religion in Serbia



However, when it comes to the level of influence of religion on people and their attitudes, things change. The influence of religion on societal issues, such as poverty, justice, equality, crime, social cohesion tends to drop significantly. It drops down to an average grade of 4.03. It drops even further down when respondents were asked to scale the influence on people's attitudes when it comes to political issues, such as democratic participation, voter behaviour, political parties. Our survey has shown that the average grade is 3.77. When we compare the two questions which deal with the influence of religion on people's attitudes on both societal and political issues we can observe that respondents opted for an above average grade of 43.29% for societal and only 23.31% for political issues.

Figure 31: Influence of religion on societal and political issues in Serbia



Religious leaders

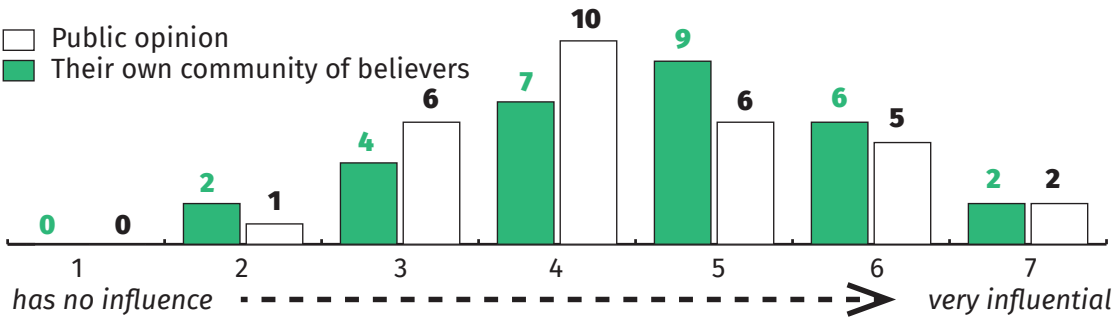
When asked about the influence of religious leaders in their respective communities and their influence on public opinion in general the results changed a bit. Interestingly enough,

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¹⁴⁹ See Etnomozaiik 82, (Нада Радушки, Методолошки аспекти и проблеми у истраживању етничке структуре становништва), Теме, 31, 4, 2007, pp. 698–699.

one would expect that the influence in religious communities would be seen as significantly higher than in the general public. However, the difference between the average grades of the two is almost insignificant. The reason for this could be the fact that the majority of the people declared as religious and that there is not much difference between the religious communities and society in general. However, the influence is not equally distributed throughout the scale, showing that around a third of people in religious communities are not highly influenced by their respective religious leaders. Despite that fact, religious leaders are still pretty influential. The significant difference is with the average grade of the influence of religion and of religious leaders. We can see that the average grade in the questions dealing with the role of religion is somewhere between 3.77 for political and 4.03 for societal issues. However, when it comes to the religious leaders' influence, it is notably higher – somewhere between 4.47 and 4.63.

Figure 32: The influence of religious leaders in Serbia



The influence of religion on developments in Serbia

The next question is designed to show if religion influences different developments in society and to show to what extent it is influential. The respondents were asked to say if religion has a positive or negative influence on specific developments or has no influence at all. The specific areas of influence of religion they were asked about were political developments, democracy, interethnic relations, social cohesion, economic well-being, tolerance and peaceful coexistence and development of good neighbourly relations among countries in the Western Balkans.

According to this question only, people tend to see religion as a phenomenon which affects different areas of society in Serbia. If we combine all of these sections together we have 47 votes for positive influence, 73 for neutral and 70 opted for negative influence, while 20 did choose to respond. These results are similar to those in the previous questions. Religion has only relative influence – and it is more perceived as negative than as positive. We will now get more details about particular areas of development.

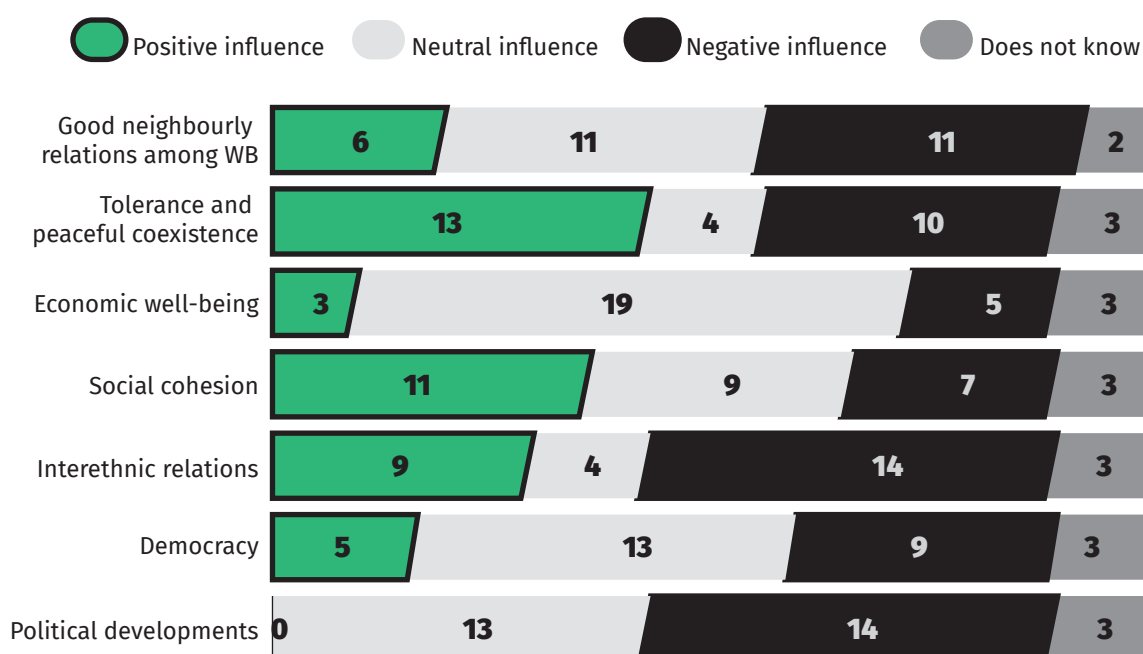
According to the first section of the tenth question, which deals with political development, people do not see any kind positive influence of religion. They tend to see religion as predominantly negative (N=14), or neutral to a lesser degree (N=13). However, strikingly enough, there was not a single respondent that sees religion as having a positive effect on political development.

When it comes to the development of democracy the situation is pretty much similar, although there were few (N=5) who tend to believe that religion has a positive influence on the development of democracy. The vast majority once again opted for either neutral (N=13) or negative (N=9) impact of religion on the development of democracy.

The issue of interethnic relations showed us that only a few people (N=4) tend to believe that religion does not affect its development. Contrary to the previous questions where a high percentage of respondents did not recognise the influence of the religion on political developments and on the development of democracy, the role of religion in the development of interethnic relations seems to be significant. However, this influence is mostly recognised as negative (N=14), with an additional nine respondents who see a positive influence for religion on interethnic relations. Therefore, religion is seen as one of the reasons causing problems in interethnic relations in Serbia. The underlying reason for such a negative impact could be the fact that ethnicity and religion almost completely resonate with each other in Serbia.¹⁵⁰

Based on this survey people seem to see more of a negative influence for religion on various aspects of society – only tolerance and peaceful coexistence and social cohesion were recognised as being positively impacted by religion. But even these two developments are not univocally seen as such. Both of them are almost equally considered to be negatively influenced by religion. When it comes to tolerance and peaceful coexistence we can see that there is quite a small difference between the positive (N=11) and negative (N=9) influence. Social cohesion was similar, where most people (N=13) tending to see positive aspects of religion. However, with a very small difference in number, other respondents said it has no impact (N=4), or that it has a negative impact (N=10). In all other developments, the negative role of religion seems predominant, or respondents have opted almost equally for neutral and negative aspects of religion.

Figure 33: The influence of religion on politics and society in Serbia



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150 The special study available only in Serbian, written on the basis of Census in 2011. Etnomozaik 187, retrieved via <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

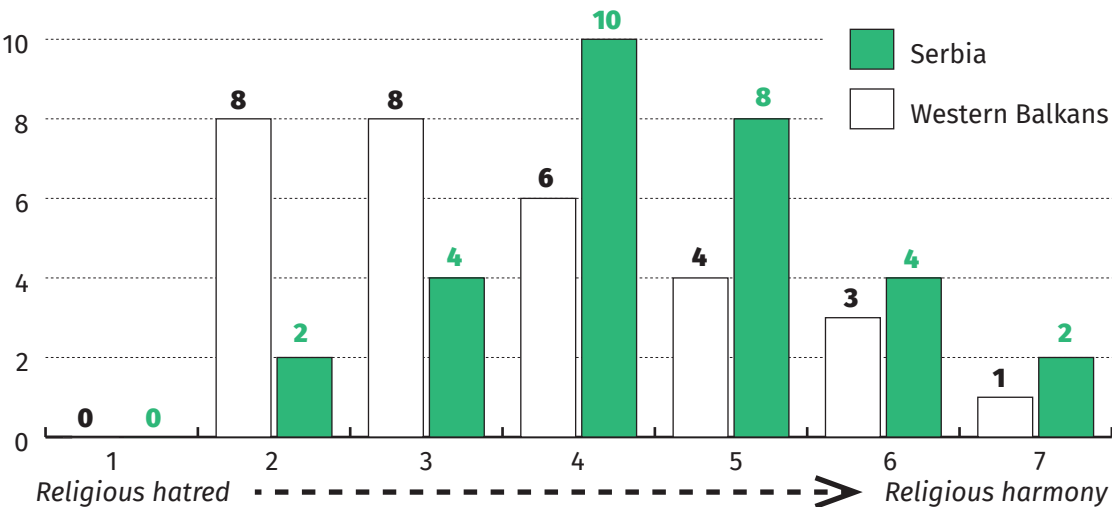
However, when it comes to economic well-being the respondents in the vast majority (N=19) stated that religion does not impact it, five opted for negative influence and three for positive one.

The last section of question number ten dealt with religion's contribution to the development of good neighbourly relations among Western Balkan countries. It seems that the majority of the respondents recognise a negative (N=11) influence of religion on relations between Western Balkan countries, with additional 11 respondents who do not recognise the influence of the religion in this matter at all. Only 20% (N=6) of the respondents claimed that religion positively influenced this development.

Religious tolerance

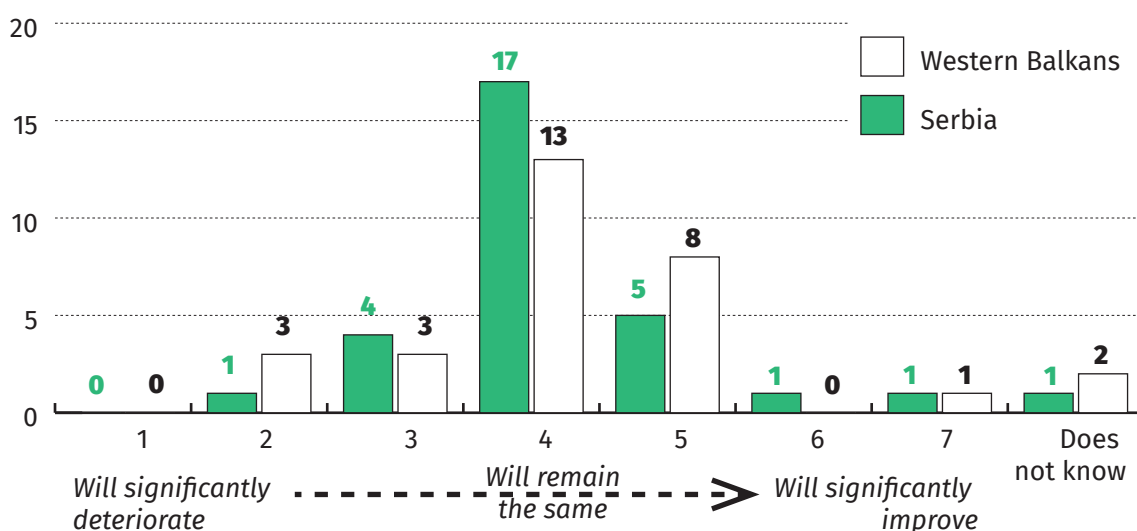
The next part of the survey dealt with interreligious relations in Serbia on the one hand and in the wider region of the Western Balkans on the other. We asked our respondents to describe the current situation in Serbia and the Western Balkans as a whole. They had to choose on scale 1–7, where 1 stands for religious hatred and 7 for religious harmony. As we can see from the graph below, people are very critical of the current state of the interreligious relations in the country. Regarding the situation in Serbia, the majority (N=16) do not see those relations as harmonious and good. The remaining respondents (N=14) claimed that religious relations are leaning toward the positive side of the scale. When asked about Western Balkan interreligious relations, our respondents seem to be even more critical about it. A fairly large number of respondents (N=22) described current religious relations as poor at the moment. Only eight respondents think that relations are good at the moment, and only one claimed that they can be described as religious harmony.

Figure 34: The state of interreligious relations in Serbia and the region



The respondents were then asked to estimate the future development interreligious relations in the next five years in Serbia and in the Western Balkans (see graph below) and to further explain their selection. Once again, they had to choose from the scale 1–7, where 1 stood for ‘will significantly deteriorate’, 7 for ‘will significantly improve’, and 4 for ‘it will remain the same’.

Figure 35: Development of interreligious relations in Serbia and the region over next five years



Our respondents showed doubt in high percentages that things will change significantly in any direction. The majority of 56.67% (N=17) do not see any incoming change in terms of interreligious relations in Serbia, four respondents see the relations deteriorating a bit, and five see those relations slightly improving. When asked about the future of interreligious relations in Western Balkan countries, respondents seem to be a bit more optimistic. Namely, only six of them think that relations will deteriorate, while the majority sees relations as staying the same (N=13) or improving at some level (N=11). However, the small differences are only in the distribution of the respondents. Overall, the vast majority of respondents feel that relations will remain the same or slightly improve or deteriorate (N=26 for Serbia and N=24 for Western Balkan countries).

When asked about the rationale behind their selection, a few responses stood out by their frequency: influence of political factors (in the context of the Western Balkans in the first place) and lack of initiative for interreligious cooperation.

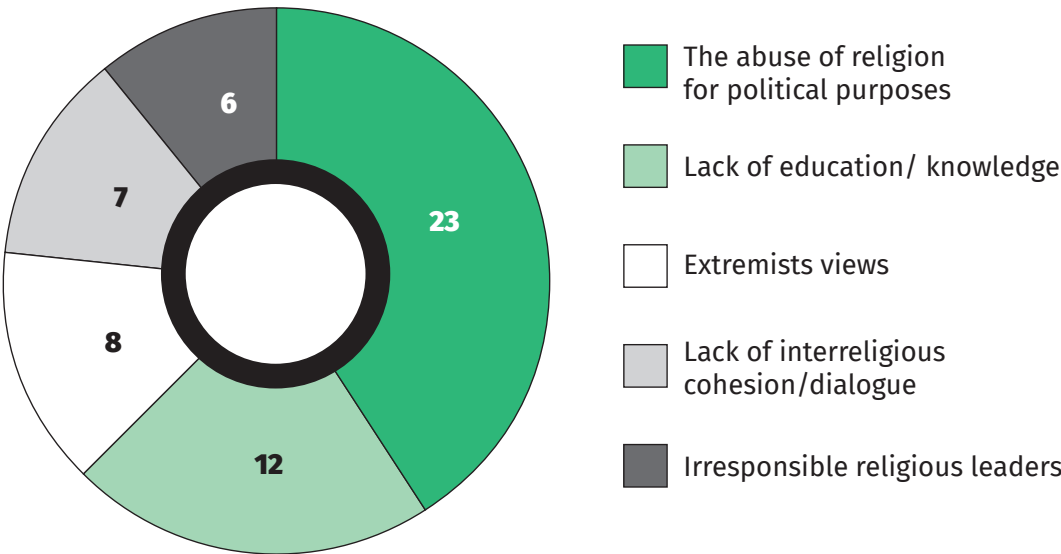
The main reason for relations staying more less the same is because of the influence of regional politics, or politics in general, on the religious institutions at some level. Political influence was recognised either as a rise of the right across the Western Balkans or as an entanglement of nationalism with religion, or at the highest frequency as an influence of daily politics on religion, i.e. religious institutions and representatives, or as one member of academia phrased it: 'The inter-religious factors are determined by political relations in WB. They will continue to develop along those lines'. On the other hand, one of the representatives of an NGO claimed that 'the 5-year time period is too short for any significant change - there can be only small changes toward religious harmony or otherwise. The reason for this is the historical burden which lies on the top of our interethnic and inter-religious relations in region'. Another respondent pointed to the gap between the formal interreligious meetings between leaders of distinctive religious communities and other believers. In his opinion: '...those meetings do not have any significant influence on believers'.

Threats and opportunities for religious tolerance in Serbia

The last part of the survey deals with the threats and opportunities for interreligious relations in the country and in the whole region. An absolute majority (N=23) repeated their concerns from the previous questions. The religious relations in the Western Balkans and in Serbia will continue to be determined by political factors in Serbia and in other Western Balkan countries. Some of those political factors are the rise of the right and nationalism, interests of political elites etc.

People were also worried by the low level of knowledge about religion in general (due to the long heritage of communism), but by a low level of education in general, which affect one's critical approach.

Figure 36: Biggest threats to interreligious relations in Serbia



Some of the respondents (N=8) were worried by the fact that people who were involved in the war in Syria have returned to their homes in the Western Balkans and that they present an imminent threat, not only to the religious relations, but to general security.

One of the recognised potential threats (N=7) is the fact that there are not many initiatives which work on improving religious relations or on improving of mutual respect and knowledge about other religious communities.

Despite the low level of influence of religion as a whole and predominantly negative influence of religion on different areas in society people also seem to be rather positive and open about the potential role of religion in Serbia and wider. For example, its benefits could be seen in the areas of economic well-being, especially when it comes to helping the poor and those who need help by organising special programmes of assistance.¹⁵¹

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¹⁵¹ Current study quote. This kind of interreligious initiative has been seen by three respondents as a way of improving not only economic well-being of the poor but also interreligious relations.