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Cross country comparison

By Viktorija Borovska

Political, economic and cultural elites in the Western Balkans share common views on the role of religion in society, but different perspectives on the challenges and concerns related to interreligious relations. Sharper differences in relation to challenges and threats to religious diversity and interreligious dialogue are observed in the region's multi-ethnic societies.

Albania and Kosovo are more homogenous societies in terms of ethnicity. Although Albania and Kosovo have a heterogeneous religious structure, the structure of ethnicity is fairly homogenous. In Albania 97% are Albanians, and in Kosovo 92.9% of the population is Albanian. North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are ethnically very heterogeneous. In North Macedonia, according to the last census from 2002, 64.2% are Macedonian, 25.2% Albanians. Macedonians are generally Orthodox Christians and Albanians are generally Muslims. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the last census from 2013, the case is even more diverse, 50.11% are Bosniaks, 30.78% are Serbs, and 15.43% Croats. Bosniaks are generally Muslims, Serbians are Orthodox Christians and Croats are generally Catholics.

Also, when we talk about ethnically heterogeneous structure it is important to bear in mind that it makes a difference if there is religious heterogeneity as well. For example, Montenegro has also ethnically heterogeneous structure with 45% Montenegrins, 28.7% Serbs, and 8.6% Bosnians, but Montenegrins and Serbs (which comprise the majority) are both Orthodox Christians. The ethnic diversity in combination with religious diversity seems to have been more prone to political manipulation and tensions even in the post-1990s conflict period in some of Western Balkan countries.

Regarding the importance of religion for most of the surveyed elites in each of the countries, it is obvious that religion plays an important role in society and it is an important aspect for citizens that live in the Western Balkan region. This is most noticeable in Bosnia and Herzegovina (with a mean of 5.63) and least noticeable in Albania (mean 4.1).

Religion has a moderate influence on the attitudes of the majority of people regarding social issues (the highest influence on social issues was observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina with a mean 5.24, and the lowest influence in North Macedonia with a mean of 4 and in Serbia, 4.03).

Sharp differences between ethnically homogenous and multi-ethnic societies are observed in relation to the influence of religion on the attitudes of people regarding political matters. Namely, in Macedonia the mean is 4.18, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is 5.24, which shows that religion in these two countries has a significant influence on political matters. Unlike these results, in Albania and Kosovo the value of the mean is lower (3.26 in Albania and 3.7 in Kosovo) which indicates that religion is perceived as not having a significant influence on political matters.

There are also differences regarding the influence of religious leaders among their respective communities of believers. If we compare the means of these six countries, it is noticeable that Bosnian religious leaders (mean 5.2) and those in Kosovo (mean 5.47) have

a greater influence on their respective communities. This influence is weakest in Serbia (mean 4.47) and North Macedonia (mean 4.36).

Generally, the influence of religious leaders on public opinion in general is lower. However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone (mean 5.2) according to surveyed members of elites there, religious leaders have a significant influence on public opinion. This influence is lowest in Albania (mean 3.43) and North Macedonia (mean 3.84).

The next set of questions from the survey were about the opinions of the respondents as to 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 Balkans countries. The cross-country analysis of surveyed elite members' opinions suggest that in more heterogeneous countries (such as North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) generally the influence of religion on the social aspects mentioned is negative. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia the influence of religion is mostly negative upon political developments, democracy and interethnic relations. Serbia has similar results on this matter, but leaning more toward neutral influence. Montenegro's results are similar with the tendency to see religion as dominantly interpreted and presented in the public discourse as more of a negative influence especially on tolerance and peaceful coexistence and interethnic relations. Unlike these countries, the situation in Albania and Kosovo is quite different. Generally, elite members from these two countries perceive religion's influence in society more positively. The most positive influence religion in Kosovo has is on peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and interethnic relations. In Albania this influence is most positive on peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, democracy, and interethnic relations.

In all of the countries the respondents have assessed the influence of religion on economic well-being as neutral, which can lead us to the conclusion that religion has the lowest influence on economy.

The biggest differences between the countries that emerged from the elite survey are those regarding the interreligious relations in Western Balkan countries. Respondents were choosing on the scale with seven degrees, between religious hatred and religious harmony. In countries with a greater ethnic homogeneity, the mean is closer to religious harmony (Albania mean 6, Kosovo mean 5.57). But we have a completely opposite image in the countries with multi-ethnic structure which have experienced the severe consequences of interethnic conflicts. In North Macedonia the mean is 3.82, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina is 3.67. As we can see there is a great discrepancy in the results. One should bear in mind that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, and the armed conflict in North Macedonia in 2001 have affected greatly the interethnic relations in these two countries.

But when we speak about the perceptions of the respondents of the interreligious relations in the Western Balkan region we see a different picture. Surveyed respondents in most of the Western Balkan countries perceive the interreligious relations in the region as leaning towards religious intolerance (North Macedonia mean 3.05, Kosovo mean 4.1, Bosnia and Herzegovina 3.5, Albania 3.74). Results from the Serbian survey show that they are more critical about the interreligious relations in Western Balkan countries. Montenegro is the exception in this matter. Respondents from Montenegro see the interreligious relations in their country in the worst condition (mean 3.02) than interreligious relations in the whole region (mean 4.31).

Respondents from the six countries generally expect that interreligious relations in their respective countries and in the region in general will remain the same, mostly because the period of five years is short and there is no evidence for any major change in the matter.

The elite's perceptions of what the biggest threats of interreligious relations are in these six countries overlap to some extent. Generally, in all Western Balkan countries the biggest threat for religion is politics. They view that relationship or the abuse of religion for political gain, or in other words the shaping of religious relations by political factors as representing one of the greatest challenges for religion today in the region. Even more worrying is that the respondents don't expect this situation to change in the future. For the respondents from Kosovo and Albania one of the biggest threats is religious extremism and Islamophobia. In Serbia one of the perceived threats is returnees from the Syria War, not only as a religious but also a security problem. In Montenegro, surveyed elite members see media reports on religious matters as an additional problem. Namely, they argue that with media focuses mostly on incidents of religious tension while examples of mutual respect and harmonious multi-religious and multiethnic life are less visible in the media. Participants from all six countries complain that there is an absence of interreligious dialogue, as well as lack of religious knowledge and understanding among declared believers from all confessions.

Finally, regarding the positive opportunities or participants' opinion on how religion can help improve certain aspects of society, the majority of the respondents from these six countries agree that religion can actually help in most of the areas mentioned. What respondents suggest is that religion or religious leaders should do more to promote universal and ethical values and strengthen interfaith dialogue. Religious institutions and religious representatives should lead by example especially in terms of acceptance, respect and tolerance towards other religious communities. Also, avoidance of any relationship between religion and politics was mentioned in each country report as one of the steps to improve the state of and opinion about religion.

Concluding remarks

The opinion that religion in Western Balkan countries plays a crucial role in different aspects and spheres of society prevails not only in the answers of the respondents, but also in the previous work and research of academics and international organisations. While it plays an important role, the impact religion has on the economy, politics, democracy and society in general is not necessarily tangible or positive. Religious leaders need to act more vigorously to promote religious values which would assist Western Balkan societies in reconciliation and overcoming the challenges of past conflicts. Moreover, institutionally, religion is perceived to have strong ties to political elites in some of the Western Balkan countries. Overall, religion and its institutions should assume a more proactive role in society in terms of perpetuating universal ethical principles and condemning populist rhetoric that is in breach of democratic values. However, the prospect for such a development is surrounded by scepticism because religion in some Western Balkan countries is abused for political goals and sustaining the divide among ethno-religious groups.

Although religion may be important to people it seems that it has failed to show its positive effects on different social aspects. The general opinion is that religion seen through the practice and the rhetoric of its religious representatives in some of Western Balkan countries it has not actively encouraged tolerance or peaceful coexistence.

Another very important conclusion that emerged from this survey is that religion (through its religious representatives) must show initiatives and genuine practices of interreligious cooperation, understanding, respect and acceptance. Religious leaders in Western Balkan countries should engage more actively in establishing interreligious cooperation both at the institutional and practical level.