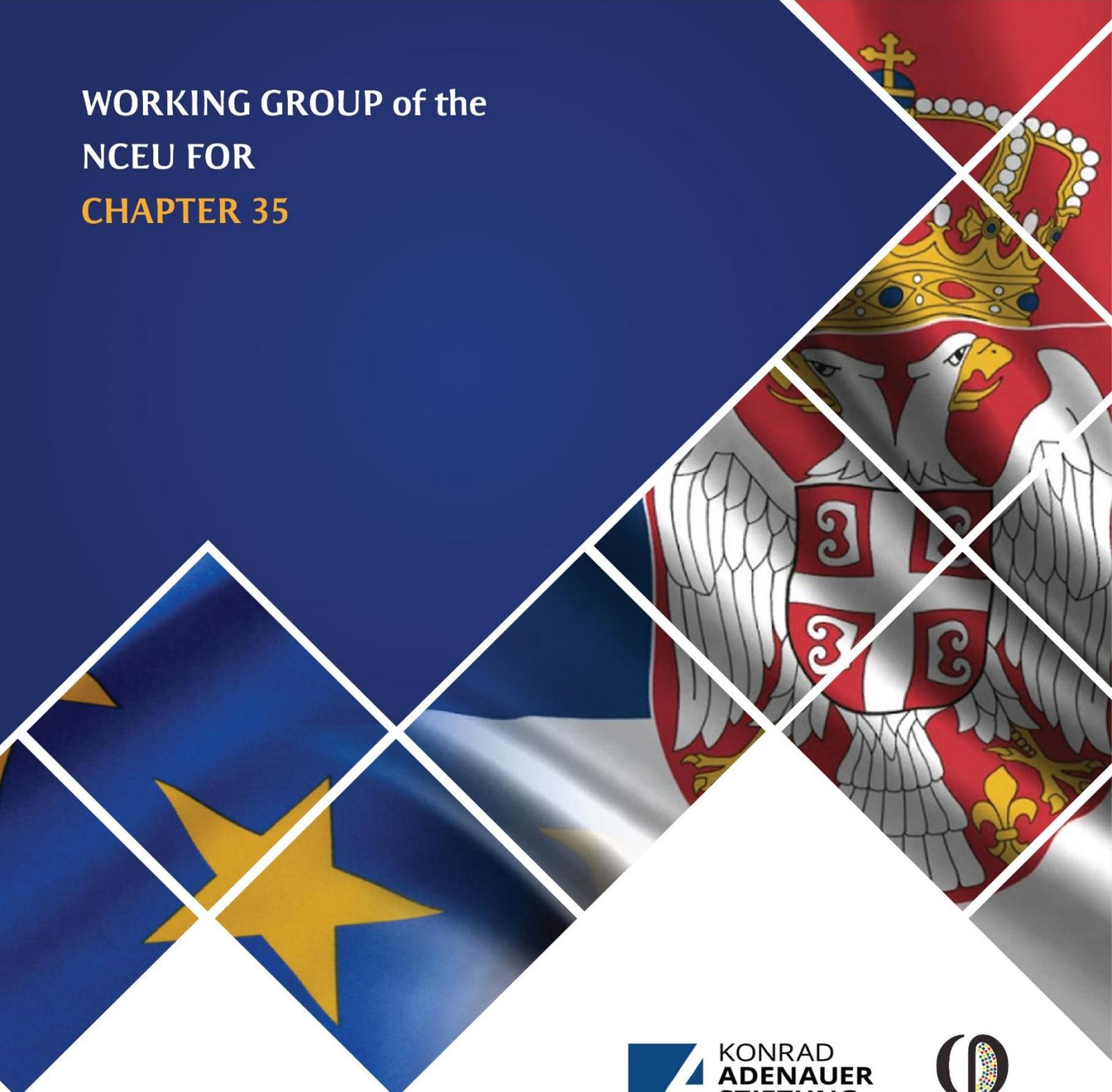


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 **KONRAD
ADENAUER
STIFTUNG**



**POSITION AND ROLE OF
RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND CHURCHES
IN THE RECONCILIATION AND
NORMALISATION OF RELATIONS
BETWEEN BELGRADE AND PRISTINA**

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ABBREVIATIONS

CV	Competitive Victimhood
EU	European Union
CC	Catholic Church
SOC	Serbian Orthodox Church
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Position and role of religious communities and churches in the reconciliation and normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina

“I also believe that the term reconciliation is a very Christian or a biblical term. I do not think it belongs to the secular world. At the same time, I am not advocating a position that reconciliation is (to be clearly monopolised by the churches) only a religious concept but I think that the depth of it could be missed if it is not looked at from its roots”¹

INTRODUCTION

Following the proclamation of Kosovo's* independence² (2008), international actors have been trying to stabilize relations between Belgrade and Pristina and become an everyday part of the political and social context. With the mediation of the European Union, the “Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina” begins, where the positive outcome is expected by all three parties - Brussels, Belgrade, and Pristina, and the common goal should be the normalization of relations. On that occasion, in April 2013, the representatives of Belgrade and Pristina signed the “First Agreement on Principles Governing Normalization of Relations” in Brussels - the “first” Brussels Agreement with principles that frame normalization.

The mentioned principles and goals should be achieved through a mediated political dialogue on certain points in the first Brussels Agreement, which represent the negotiating areas. The course of normalization of relations, the process of reaching an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina, is generally characterized by civil society organizations as politically non-transparent and socially non-inclusive.

For example, in the publication “*Report on impact of EU engagement on mediation and local level dialogue initiatives in the Western Balkans*” Plänitz and Stojanovic Gajic say that EU mediation without proper involvement of local actors only redirects the causes of conflict from the macro to the micro level, and that the EU should support the inclusion of, among others, the local civil society, civil servants and political actors - those who will implement and monitor mediation and dialogue efforts – “either through *track II* or *track III*³ dialogues as a key factor in promoting sustainable and lasting peace.⁴”.

Neither the Brussels Agreement, nor the relevant documents, and often even the non-governmental sector, mention churches and religious communities as social actors or factors of reconciliation in the post-conflict society of Kosovo.

¹ Charity Majiza, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches

² “This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and ICJ Advisory opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence”.

For this text, after this citation, the term Kosovo is used as a general term for Kosovo and Metohija.

³ These are dialogues that are conducted through unofficial, non-state channels, which, however, contribute to solving or managing certain issues. This type of diplomacy at level 2, i.e. Track II is conducted between influential individuals, non-governmental actors and organizations, and at level 3, i.e. Track III - through messages and attitudes from conferences, public announcements, various types of meetings and advocacy activities.

⁴ Plänitz, Erik & Gajic, Sonja. (2017). Report on impact of EU engagement on mediation and local level dialogue initiatives in Western Balkans, p. 9. 10.13140/RG.2.2.27453.56806.

As originally planned, so-called *track III* diplomacy involves the participation of those actors who are important to a community deeply affected by violence and conflict, such as religious leaders.⁵ There is a growing awareness of the importance of religion in matters of diplomacy, and in *track II*, where new opportunities for communication open up, when the official ones are very small, that is, where the official dialogue is stopped or non-existent⁶.

Kosovo society is divided in different ways, along political, ethnic, social, administrative, and religious lines. The report “*Social Cohesion in Kosovo: An Overview of the Context and Entry Point*”, developed from a workshop with relevant actors, states that “communities live side by side, but not together”⁷, and that “the post-conflict generation in Kosovo is fuelled by conflict narratives that are usually presented as absolute truths, and limited interaction with the original generation from the conflict, an interaction that could provide empirical observation to challenge dominant narratives, while being vulnerable to inherited prejudices.”⁸

The aim of this research is to identify the “tools” by which Belgrade and Pristina society, defined by the same goal of a peaceful and prosperous European future, should consider the role and position of churches and religious communities in the process of reconciliation and normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. And to recognise (insufficiently used) resources for peace. The questions we were guided by when collecting data through interviews, as well as the analysis of existing experiences in other countries are the following:

1. What is the potential of churches and religious communities in Kosovo society today when it comes to reconciliation? How up to date is it, where are the problems, and where is the biggest space for action? How is the work of the churches and religious communities so far perceived in the societies regarding the coexistence of Serbs and Albanians? What further steps are needed?
2. What would the normalization of relations mean for the representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Kosovo and Belgrade? How do they see their role in the normalization process? What else could they do? What support would they need? What is the current cooperation like?
3. What guidelines and good practices can be identified and applied, given the political and social context?

The research includes a brief analysis of the role of churches and religious communities in a post-conflict society, in the reconciliation and normalization processes. The main part of the research is based on interviews with representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Catholic Church (CC) in Serbia and Kosovo, as well as expert interviews, which

⁵ Diamond and McDonald (1993), who coined the concept of multi-track diplomacy, named “religion or peace-making through faith in action” as one of the original nine tracks.

⁶ Petersen, Rondey, L. (2015). Religion and multi-track diplomacy, p. 229. 10.1017/CBO9781316106693.015.

⁷ UNDP na Kosovu i Akademija Folke Bernadot. (2019). Socijalna kohezija na Kosovu: Pregled konteksta i ulazne tačke, p. 10.

⁸ Ibid, p. 11-12.

included interviewees from academia, the NGO sector and the media. The contents of the interview are listed through the institutions, churches, and religious communities, i.e. the institutions that were interviewed.

Although the original plan was to conduct interviews with the interviewees in person, due to the Covid19 pandemic, they were conducted in writing. Unfortunately, members of the Islamic communities in Kosovo and Serbia were not able to participate, and in the end, they could not be included in this research.

The basic sample included 15 interviews:

- Four representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church (from the Diocese of Raska and Prizren and the Archbishopric of Belgrade and Karlovci),
- Representatives of the Catholic Church in Kosovo and three representatives of the Catholic Church in Serbia (from the Belgrade Archdiocese and the Diocese of Subotica),
- Three university professors,
- Two media representatives,
- One representative of the non-governmental sector, and
- One representative of an international organization.

The research does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of this topic, but to offer recommendations based on interviews with relevant church and social actors, in order to make the processes of reconciliation and normalization more comprehensive, inclusive and efficient.

CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS

Reconciliation

Traditional peace diplomacy has limited tools for a comprehensive, broad approach to addressing issues from the past. Reconciliation requires completeness. That is its advantage over the legal institutes of post-conflict relations. Reconciliation is not harmonization of conflicts, but a long-lasting process where the reality of the conflict is transferred to the perspective of the future. The power of reconciliation between the two sides is in the realization that neither side can do without the other in building their society.⁹

In Christian culture, reconciliation lives in religious consciousness. By emphasizing Christian values, churches and religious communities reduce the motives for conflict, and increase the possibilities for reconciliation, without amnestying the crime(s), and without discrediting the morality of reconciliation. Namely, reconciliation is original and related to the religious context, but it has long been seen as part of political and historical discourse.¹⁰ Christian messages of forgiveness, and, in general, the assumptions of the Abrahamic tradition (Judaism, Islam, Christianity), that all people are equal before God, can be a valuable resource when it comes to dealing with emotions towards the other, sorrow, guilt or the need for revenge. Religious communities are tied to memory and identity.¹¹ In this complicated constellation, religious actors can play an important role as those who are able to respond to the needs of common narratives and worldviews.¹² It should be emphasized that the churches and religious communities themselves maintain divisions in society, however, although this is the biggest problem, it is also the biggest room for change.¹³ In a post-conflict society, the distance between individuals and their alienation are natural reactions to injury, emphasizing the need for protection. The social and integrative role of the church and religious communities in post-conflict societies is reflected, as mentioned, in the immediate experience of values characteristic of religion, which support overcoming the personal pain of individuals.

In the process of reconciliation, it is crucial that religious institutions advocate equality and responsibility among people. Both sides in the process, the aggressor - for actions in the past

⁹ Sommerfeldt, Atle. (2000). *Nema prečice do pomirenja*, p. 234–235, u: Teško pomirenje, urednik Enver Đuliman, published by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Norwegian Church Aid, Oslo – Sarajevo.

¹⁰ Schliesser, Christine. (2018). *From “a Theology of Genocide” to a “Theology of Reconciliation”?* *On the Role of Christian Churches in the Nexus of Religion and Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 8. Religions. 9. 34. 10.3390/rel9020034.

¹¹ “Borba sa prošlošću i sa opraštanjem, problemi (pod)sećanja nakon vremena uništavanja, se mešaju sa problemima sećanja i vernosti prošlosti i sa opraštanjem i problemima krivice i pomirenja sa prošlošću“, Petersen, Rodney L. (2015). *Religion and multi-track diplomacy*, p. 231, 10.1017/CBO9781316106693.015.

¹² Ibid, p. 232.

¹³ Van der Merwe, Hugo. (2003). *The Role of the Church in Promoting Reconciliation in Post-TRC South Africa*, str. 276, u *Religion and Reconciliation in South Africa. Voices of Religious Leaders*, urednici Audrey R. Chapman i Bernard Spong. Templeton Foundation Press. Philadelphia and London. p. 269-281.

and the future, when they will seek forgiveness, and the victim - experiencing trauma and overcoming pain, become ready to accept forgiveness in the future. The personal dimension of reconciliation of everyone relieves the society of collective guilt. By experiencing Christian virtues, churches and religious communities confirm themselves as actors who can contribute to peace and conflict resolution.

Of course, the nature of religion is such that it contains those elements that can increase the conflict, but also transform it, and we must not deny and forget that religious institutions have often “caused demons of violence.”¹⁴ However, constantly insisting on this role in the conflict has put aside their peacekeeping action, as well as the potential for reconciliation, and in this research we focus on the latter.

Religious demography and (un)official positions

There are no precise data on religious demography in Kosovo. The 2011 census is not relevant, at least when it comes to Orthodox Christians, both because it was not organised in the northern part and because of the boycott of the Serb community in the southern part. Data from that census show that 95.6% of the population of Kosovo declare as Muslims, 2.2% as Roman Catholics and 1.4% as members of the Serbian Orthodox Church.¹⁵ According to the SMRE (Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe) data, the percentage of citizens of the Islamic religion (most are Sunni Muslims) is 88.8, Orthodox Christians 6.8%, and Catholics 1.7% (2015).¹⁶ Although, judging by the numbers, Kosovo is one of the most religious societies in the world, for most Kosovo Muslims, Albanian ethnic origin is more important than religious identity, so Kosovo society is described as secular. When it comes to the Serbian Orthodox Church, it is of great importance for Serbs in Kosovo, even for those who are not believers. A 2014 survey by the RIINVEST Institute showed that Kosovo citizens have significantly more trust in religious institutions than in the government or political parties.¹⁷ When it comes to the Serbian Orthodox Church, every year, in public opinion polls, it is the first or the second most trusted institution.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has repeatedly stated its position on the issue of Kosovo in parliamentary and synodal statements. In parliamentary statements in recent years, church dignitaries demanded that the refugees and displaced persons be allowed to return and survive in Kosovo, and wrote about the suffering of the Serbian people, the destruction and

¹⁴ Stålsett, Gunnar. (2000). *Pomirenje – ekumenske perspektive*, str. 251, u: Teško pomirenje, urednik Enver Đuliman, published by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Norwegian Church Aid, Oslo – Sarajevo.

¹⁵ An estimated number of the Serbian Orthodox Church believers in Kosovo is around 120,000 i.e. 6.3%. See: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Kosovo-3.pdf> (accessed on 20 February 2020). Apart from the fact that the number of orthodox believers is lower than in reality, one of the remarks was that in some cases enumerators inserted 'islam' automatically and without asking, See Perry, Maro (25 June 2015). Verski puls ponovo oživljava na Kosovu. K2.0. See <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/sr/kosovos-resurgent-religious-pulse/> (accessed on 27 February 2020).

¹⁶ About religious demography in Kosovo (2006-2015), see: https://www.smredata.ch/en/data_exploring/region_cockpit#/mode/dataset_comparison/region/-99/period/2010/presentation/table (pristupljeno 21. 2. 2020).

¹⁷ Perry, Maro (25. 6. 2015). Verski puls ponovo oživljava na Kosovu. K2.0. See <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/sr/kosovos-resurgent-religious-pulse/> (accessed on 27 February 2020).

desecration of holy places, and violations of human rights and justice. In the parliamentary statement, disagreement was expressed several times with, as it was said in 2013, “direct or indirect recognition” of Kosovo's statehood outside Serbia, calling it a space that has long become a “symbol of division, conflict and suffering.”

Finally, a statement from 2013 contains, for now, the only information about the coexistence of Serbs and Albanians: “One of the few bright spots in it is the life and work of the renewed Theological Seminary of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Prizren, whose citizens, today mostly of Albanian nationality and Muslim religion, enable a smooth operation of this important institution of the Orthodox Church and the Serbian people. Such a relationship deserves our respect and our gratitude.”

The representative of the SOC (Diocese of Raska and Prizren) emphasizes in an interview that the position of the SOC against the recognition of Kosovo as a *de facto* ethnically pure Albanian state in which Serbs have been discriminated for 20 years and the position against ethnic and territorial division of Kosovo is not motivated by political reasons or myths, but the stay and survival of our people and holy places, because in both cases the life of the clergy, monks and believers would be seriously endangered. “The Church supports dialogue, but, above all, the normalization of life, promotion of rights and respect for the law as a necessary basis for discussion about other solutions that should, above all, be in the function of protecting human rights, security of people, and preservation our spiritual and cultural heritage” (Interview No. 1).

To this day, the Catholic Church and the Vatican have not recognized Kosovo's independence. On the other hand, the Bishop of the Catholic Church in Kosovo points out that everyone, as citizens of Kosovo, recognizes Kosovo as a state: “we recognize the Orthodox people as our brothers in faith and we recognize the Muslims as our brothers in blood.” We stand for the rights of all, in the new state we try to look towards a common future, because we are convinced that we cannot allow the past to destroy our future” (Interview No. 2). He further points out that Serbs in Kosovo should understand that social, political and legal needs can be realized only according to the new composition of society in Kosovo, just as it is the duty of the Albanian majority to ensure the rights of Serbs rights and their unhindered realisation. A similar response was received from another CC representative (Interview No. 3), with the basis for recognizing Kosovo based on interpreting the teachings of the Church that teaches truthfulness, accepting the others and those that are different, moving away from any religious or national chauvinism, but also respecting the will of those who do not want to be with us.

The Serbian Orthodox Church strongly opposed Kosovo's entry into UNESCO, and the representatives of the Catholic Church in Kosovo supported the admission of Kosovo to this international organization. However, in spite of this, all the interviewees emphasize the readiness to build relations with the others.

Religious potential

Interviewees describe the reconciliation process itself as significantly conditioned by the (questionable) political will to reach it,¹⁸ as a dispute - as evidenced by post-war Europe - and an extremely complex process. Hence, the potential of churches and religious communities is seen as limited and conditioned by the decisions of political elites as those who have the most power to influence social movements. However, although not crucial, this potential - which can be used in two directions, or used for “good”, towards peace, and on the contrary, provoke conflicts (“We have had the opportunity to see both positive and negative influences of religious leaders in previous years”; “The problem is that they were part of the conflict”; “a word of heads of religious communities would contribute a lot to reconciliation and the conversation itself”) - is assessed as significant and very important when it comes to bringing ethnic communities closer, reducing tensions, changing perceptions of others, as well as building trust, which are all elements undoubtedly important for building social cohesion in a (post-)conflict society. The importance of the religious factor in the local societies is also mentioned, both because the Churches and religious communities are one of the “rare constants in the unstable Balkans”, and because of the experienced suffering for which, in order to overcome it and heal, the religious element would be important.

One of the interlocutors believes that Churches and religious communities, i.e. their leadership, have the potential for positive change, especially because they represent one of the four key factors that have an impact on relations between Belgrade and Pristina, in addition to politics, media and education system (Interview no. 5).

When it comes to the perception of that potential in the public, several respondents believe that the importance of religious leaders in the public is overestimated or underestimated, and it is less often viewed objectively, within the limits of possible and real contributions to reconciliation. How much is it actually relevant in Kosovo today?

Among the respondents from expert circles, as well as representatives of the SOC and CC, the prevailing view is that, given the current circumstances, their previous positive role was primarily to promote coexistence and reconciliation, influence interethnic (mis)understanding, preserve peace and prevent additional divisions and escalation of tensions. Respondents of Serbian nationality especially emphasize the care and support of the Diocese of Raska and Prizren to their believers, but also calming of the situation, among other things through “statements that are measured, refer to the Constitution and laws,

¹⁸ In a UNDP and FBT publication (2019), p. 2, education and lack of political will are cited as controversial points of the society in Kosovo*. Among other things, the Inter-Ministerial Working Group for Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation failed in its proclaimed plan, and much criticism is directed at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, announced last year. In the text “Belgrade and Pristina: lost in normalization?” Donika Emini and Isidora Stakic conclude that the narrative of political representatives intended for the international community - which emphasizes willingness to compromise and care for citizens - is quite different from the domestic narrative, which is nationalistic and identity-related. “It portrays one side as victorious or as a victim of the ‘other enemy side’”. See <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%205%20Belgrade%20and%20Pristina.pdf>

without insulting anybody” (Interview No. 4). “Good cooperation between religious communities and local institutions and the participation of religious leaders in local security committees and direct communication with local governments have, in many cases, prevented the escalation of interethnic problems” (Interview No. 6).

We are working, specifically, on the prevention of interethnic incidents. As pointed out, churches and religious communities use institutional channels of communication through, for example, the Council for Implementation and Monitoring of Special Protective Zones, in order to point out problems to political leaders, but also to the international community (Interview No. 6).

NORMALISATION HAS SEVERAL FACES

For interviewees, representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Kosovo, and even the Catholic Church in Serbia, normalisation does not have the same meaning.

Interlocutors from the Diocese of Raska and Prizren state that, without going into the question of the political character of normalization, it would represent for them a safe and dignified life of clergy, monks and believers, adequate institutional protection of holy places, rule of law and respect for the rights of all citizens. Several interlocutors from the non-governmental sector also point out that it is difficult to talk about reconciliation when there is no respect for human rights.

For there to be progress, these basic conditions for work on reconciliation need to be met. Namely, the Serbian Orthodox Church often has a problem with access to its property, primarily in the municipality of Decani, despite the court decision which returned the property to the monastery of Visoki Decani, the monastery cannot enter into possession because the municipality prevents it. Freedom of movement for the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church is also disputable. “Many destroyed churches in Kosovo have not yet been reconstructed; in a large number of cases, representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbs are not allowed access to cemeteries, which have been destroyed and broken” (Interview No. 9).

Finally, the representative of the Diocese of Raska and Prizren does not see the readiness of the Albanian society to accept the Serbs as people who are autochthonous in this area and who possess their culture and spirituality (Interview no. 1).

Representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and some representatives of the non-governmental sector point out that Albanian religious communities have much less influence than the Serbian Orthodox Church has among Serbs, and could not equally influence relations, while, on the other hand, the trust of other religious communities in the Serbian Orthodox Church is problematic, because it is identified with the Serbian state. The representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church believes that the Albanian religious communities “are not ready to speak more openly” in defence of the protection of the rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

For the High Representative of the Catholic Church in Kosovo, normalization would mean historical reconciliation between Serbs and Albanians, without which it would be only declarative, postponing disagreements and preserving hatred in the long or short term, and it is a great delusion to think that it is possible to build parallel futures where one would please Serbs, and the other Albanians: “Therefore, for us, reconciliation between Serbs and

Albanians would mean mutual recognition, guaranteeing the religious, cultural and life perspective of Albanians in Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo, and enabling unhindered communication between people, exchange of ideas and goods” (Interview No. 2).

Finally, the Diocese of Raska and Prizren points out that they call for reconciliation, that they want to build cooperation, that their views are motivated by the survival of “people and holy places”, emphasizing that the Serbian Orthodox Church is in an incomparably most difficult position, but remains open to any constructive proposal. The representatives of the Catholic Church in Kosovo see their Church in the “passive role of a bridge”, because the Orthodox are “brothers in faith” and Muslims are “brothers in blood”, while the active role belongs to those who want to use the bridge or not. All CC representatives (Interview No. 2; Interview No. 3; Interview No. 11; Interview No. 13) assess their actions as focused on dialogue, togetherness, and reconciliation.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is criticized for not accepting the truth (Interview No. 2; Interview No. 3), and for focusing more on “historical stones or bones, of any emperor, king or their endowment” (Interview No. 2) than on working for faith and coexistence. The Islamic community has been criticized for turning exclusively to itself, ignoring problems and reality, instead of “taking care of its believers not to cultivate hatred towards others and to strive more actively for reconciliation” (Interview No. 2).

The extremely irreconcilable view of the service of the Mass at the archaeological site of the church of St. Nikola in Novo Brdo is also emphasized.

PERSONAL CONTACTS AS CRUCIAL ASPECTS

Relations between religious leaders in Kosovo are most often described as “fine”, “without major quarrels”, good, even cordial, while most respondents assess contacts of representatives of churches and religious communities with believers of other denominations and religions as rare.

Religious leaders meet - there is a permanent working body that gathers them regularly, and citizens from Serbia and abroad are mostly not informed about them, which is also an important indicator of the absence of *public attention*. The representatives themselves emphasize that they have been meeting regularly for twenty years, and there is no accusation or hatred in their public statements.

“There, we talk honestly, openly and clearly about our situation, although we do not agree on many things” (Interview No. 2).

“It is really good that we have not had negative texts or statements of representatives of one religious community about another for almost 20 years, and that the meetings have been held almost continuously” (Interview No. 1).

However, it seems to several experts that this dialogue has not come down from a high level. As one of the exceptions, they mention the monastery of Visoki Decani, which is visited by both Albanians and Serbs, and the abbot Sava Janjic. In several answers, mostly in expert interviews, the importance of personal contact as the one that, despite all the difficulties, can prevail in relation to the sluggishness or even the reluctance of churches and religious structures, is mentioned.

“For religious leaders, as well as for academics, professors and people in other institutions, it is ultimately a matter of personal integrity, and how much an individual is willing to go against a generally accepted discourse” (Interview No. 4).

GOOD EXAMPLES

Several respondents cited specific examples that they felt could serve as a model for both communities. We list some of them, both because of the importance of the example and because of the respondents' perception of its importance.

During the war, in 1999, the monastery of Visoki Decani also helped Albanian refugees, and received 200 endangered Kosovo Albanians. As a recent example, one respondent states that the Serbian Orthodox Church was collecting donations to help the population in Albania affected by the devastating earthquake several months ago (Interview No. 9). It is also stated that the nuns of the Catholic Church from Peja/Pec are helping to take care of Serbian returnees in that city.

Representatives of the Church who speak the language of another community publicly also stand out as important examples. At a large conference in Ljubljana, the abbot of the Draganac monastery, Iraliron, stood up and began speaking in Albanian, sending messages of reconciliation. The same abbot is a guest on an Albanian-language media show “politely and civilly talking to other religious representatives in Kosovo, but also to people from the non-governmental sector and the media,” which the respondent considers an important gesture for relations (Interview No. 4).

A Catholic representative mentions a visit to an Orthodox church and a prayer with several hundreds of pilgrims, the welcome of Bishop Teodosije's associates and a nice time spent together (Interview no. 2).

They also remind of the reconciliation process that existed between Germany, France, Poland and Great Britain after the Second World War – decades of gathering of religious representatives and exchange of students that succeeded, because religious representatives carried those experiences to their communities and their environment. (Interview No. 12).

MEDIA BLACKOUT

Several interviewees from the non-governmental and media sectors emphasize the importance of sending symbolic messages publicly - whether representatives of Christian denominations and Muslims sit at the same table, visit each other on major holidays, or organize rallies, but all with public visibility. It is important that this image and that the message of dialogue, of “normal conversation”, go public. It is considered that some of the representatives of the Church would not like that, but, for the most part, the media are seen as responsible for the absence of such images.

But the conclusion is that, because of the media selection of news, which is often based on the “desirable” stereotyping of good and bad and the black-and-white presentation of “us” and “them”, as well as under the direct or indirect control of political elites, or because of the decision of religious representatives, it stays away from the public. It is necessary for professional journalism, in accordance with the standards, to give the opportunity for Serbs and Albanians to be presented as people with everyday problems, and not as members of two irreconcilable sides, which is emphasized in the interviews. Several respondents also criticized the media for the absence of certain voices, and, as mentioned, for keeping silent about what does not fit into official policy.

“It is not appropriate for the media with a national frequency and those that fit into the political agenda of Belgrade to see any other picture from Kosovo than 'poor Serbs and Albanian villains.' Despite the complex Serbian-Albanian relations in Kosovo, some sort of life is taking place far from the eyes of the Belgrade public. There are good relations in Kosovo to a certain extent, probably not enough, but only what fits into official policy is visible in the public space” (Interview No. 4). The interviewee points out that this is also the case when inter-religious gatherings are organized, i.e. gatherings in which religious leaders from Kosovo participate.

SELF-CRITICISM AS AN IMPERATIVE

The dominant public discourse of several interviewees who look at the bigger picture and the *general climate* is described as unfavourable, for which the main responsibility, apart from the media, lies primarily with politics. Interviewees from the church, as well as experts, note that it is important not to politicize views, and not to allow politics to instrumentalize the church. This is especially emphasized by the representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and several experts estimate that this distance from politics is successful. The mentioned climate is characterized by mutual accusation, shifting of guilt and aggressive rhetoric, as summarized in an answer (Interview no. 7).

In addition to calming tensions and supporting their people, in order for the traditional churches and religious communities in Kosovo to significantly realise their potentials for reconciliation and normalization, and, leading by example, significantly *shift* from the dominant conflict framework, respondents first primarily emphasize self-criticism, facing the truth about their past and the past of their ethnic community, and talks about conflicting historical narratives “about everything that has happened in Kosovo in the last hundred years.” The answers deal with causes and consequences, and possible practical steps to help reconciliation processes.

“To speak publicly about the committed crimes of their national side, and not only the other, as well as not to condition the work on themselves with the work of the other side”. (Interview no. 8)

“Neither ethnic community has shown readiness to understand the suffering of the other side. In these circumstances, reconciliation is almost impossible, but there is a greater tendency towards majoritarianism and ignoring, often in oblivion and concealment”. (Interview No. 9)

“I think that there should be more intense meetings, and the unpleasant ones, in which both sides would be really ready to look into their own past and that historical circumstances are not viewed exclusively through the prism of one or another established narrative of conflict” (Interview no. 12).

Also, “truth” is repeated as a key word - the truth about yourself and others; viewing oneself and others under the light of objective truth; confronting the truth and, finally, the truth as confronting crimes against civilians on both sides and bringing them to justice, while acknowledging the suffering of the civilian population, either during the war or in the years after the war. Of course, repentance and forgiveness are mentioned as important aspects.

Several interviewees criticized or warned of the attitudes of religious leaders who replace the universalism of religious teaching with the particularism of the national, because then the national gained primacy over the religious.

“Religious representatives take on the role of people's tribunes or national prophets, and this is a dangerous phenomenon that has been present in the Balkans since the 1990s” (Interview No. 10).

The consequence of this “departure from the fundamental truth of the holy books” (Interview No. 3) is the absence of the social dimension of religion, i.e. care for the common good, which would include more meaningful interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, but also encouraging believers of different religious communities to interact.

SIDEBAR

USEFUL THEORETICAL CONCEPT - *COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD*

The authors here want to introduce a term that they believe is insufficiently used and reflected in the local academic and public discourse, and it can provide certain answers about ethnic and other conflicts between groups, as well as derive certain guidelines from the corpus of that approach.

Churches and religious communities, as important social actors, in the processes of overcoming or maintaining conflicts, participate or can find ways to try to get out of the spiral of so-called **competitive victimhood**, where, in this case, both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs see themselves as “victims of aggression committed by the other community, and as a result, interethnic animosity and mistrust are always present. In a small society like Kosovo, the conflict has affected most residents directly and personally, and diametrically opposed perspectives on the past have never been addressed in an ingrained national dialogue to address experiences and perspectives and to heal the society.”¹⁹

Competitive victimhood (CV) is defined as the subjective claim of each group in conflict that they have suffered more than an out-group and that they have survived more injustices.²⁰ Simply put, groups compete for victim status which implies that they will be seen as innocent and morally superior. It has been proven that CV is related to the maintenance of conflict, i.e. a positive subjective evaluation of one's own group's violence and inability to forgive an out-group, as well as to justify the revenge that may follow.²¹

Social psychologists have come to the conclusion that the role of the victim is an important psychological resource because it strengthens intragroup cohesion, helps the group not to accept responsibility for the wrongdoings it committed and thus saves it from unpleasant emotions, seeks moral and material support from parties not directly involved in conflict and justifies violence.

All this creates a spiral of conflict, keeps the conflict alive even after it is over, and represents an essential barrier to reconciliation and normalization. Hence, the story of the other side should be listened to and the victims on both sides should be united by the experience of the difficulties they went through.

¹⁹ UNDP na Kosovu i Akademija Folke Bernadot. (2019). *Socijalna kohezija na Kosovu: Pregled konteksta i ulazne tačke*, p. 12.

²⁰ For more about the concept, see Nadler, Ariel, Malloy, Thomas and Fisher, Jeffrey D. (2008). *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*. Oksford : Oxford University Press.

²¹ Shnabel, Nurit; Noor, Masi; Nadler, Arie; Halabi, Samer. (2012). *When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts*. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 16. p. 351– 374.

Research shows some activities and actions that can help to get out of the “vicious circle”, which we believe are important guidelines for the local context: cultivating a common identity of the victim; learning and sharing experiences of suffering (for example, the loss of a family member in a conflict); establishing dual identities; separating responsibilities (those who were responsible) from (shared) suffering; focusing on the cost of conflict; illuminating the common heritage of historical errors and violence; journalism aimed at peace rather than escalation of conflict; intergroup contacts; discuss the similarities between the groups, the similarities of their current problems.

CONCLUSIONS

The crucial issue of joint action by governments, churches and religious communities in an ethical, political and legal approach to reconciliation is “the way in which the issue of gross human rights violations in the past will be addressed” and “it is often crucial to the new democratic government's ability to survive politically and strengthen democracy.”²² The relationship between politics and religious communities should not be a relationship of power, but a relationship of socially responsible actors, who in their domains contribute in a coordinated manner to peace in their own and neighbouring societies, and who strive to contribute to creating a collective memory that does not keep “wounds open”. Failure to face the past brings about the activation of repressed, frozen conflict images and events, and can lead to the return of the war narrative, the creation of new intolerances and obstacles in the relations between Belgrade and Pristina, as the history of the region has shown. Religious communities, by advocating for their values - forgiveness, reconciliation, self-reflection, equality - could positively influence potential tensions. Of course, they would also have to “expose” themselves, that is, re-examine their previous actions and role, and show a desirable social pattern by their example. In that way, reconciliation “by fulfilling the scheme, which will end up in the archives again would be prevented. Most victims cannot count on anything other than, at best, economic compensation.”²³

Experiences from other countries teach us that the processes of reconciliation and normalization conceived by churches and religious communities, or those where Churches and religious communities are active participants, significantly complement the process of political and economic cooperation. Their contribution to the process of political cooperation and reconciliation can be constructive and contribute to the peaceful future of the region.

The values and virtues of a religious community can be “initiated” through “practical religion”²⁴, in an interventionist way (through prayers, ascetic discipline), in a discursive way (interpretations, explanations, intensification of religious knowledge), and derived way (by translating everyday contents and events into religious). The participation of churches and religious communities in the process of reconciliation is manifested through confession and prayer, when the personal articulation of truth has the effect of liberation and purification: “and all the power of subjective religious feeling is proved through a sense of security.”²⁵ From this personal type of manifestation arises the social engagement of religious institutions and individuals, also with a psychosocial effect.

²² Skaar, Elin; Andreassen, Bård Anders (2000). *Obračun sa teškim kršenjima ljudskih prava na prelazu u demokratiju*, p. 17 and 21, u: *Teško pomirenje*, editor Enver Đuliman, published by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Norwegian Church Aid, Oslo – Sarajevo.

²³ See in: Holtedahl, Jan Petter i Tjønneland, Elling (2000). *Južna Afrika: istina, pomirenje, pravda?*, p. 224, in: *Teško pomirenje*, editor Enver Đuliman, published by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Norwegian Church Aid, Oslo – Sarajevo.

²⁴ See: *Die Relativisierung der Religion als politische Kraft: Martin Riesebrodts Interpretation des religiösen Fundamentalismus* (2004). p. 361 (*Relativisation of religion as political force: Martin Riesebrodts; interpretation of religious fundamentalism*), in: „Religion und Gesellschaft“, published by: Karl Gabriel and Hans-Richard Reute, Schöningh UTB 2150. (personal translation A. Popović).

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 91.

The Church, as a responsible social actor, can help make peace between individuals and society, in the past, by introducing them to the vestibule of a peaceful future.

We believe that in the relations between Belgrade and Pristina, beyond the political and economic levels of cooperation between Belgrade and Pristina, the close-up of the regional “connectivity” agenda must be completed by the participation of churches and religious communities in connecting people (*linking the people – social dimension*, Berlin process). Reconciliation on that level will contribute to shaping reconciliation at other levels, which are valued by legalistic and quantitative methods and measures (transitional justice, dealing with the past, lustration, international courts and institutions, conventions, truth and reconciliation commissions, etc.).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Churches and religious communities

- More frequent meetings between members of different religious communities, both from Kosovo and Serbia,
- Organizing inter-religious gatherings on complex and sensitive issues, the results of which would be available to the public,
- Use meetings of religious leaders with each other, as well as meetings of religious leaders with other social actors, to educate and inform younger generations about the importance of good inter-religious relations,
- Churches and religious communities should reconsider their role and wrong moves in the past, in order to set an example in public,
- Encourage greater interaction of believers and the exchange of their experience, and the search for common ground, both in the field of religion and in everyday life, in the experience of sorrow and loss,
- Strengthening solidarity between churches and religious communities. Respond louder in public in cases of incidents that endanger another religious community, which also applies to social actors,
- When the conditions for reconciliation are met, churches and religious communities could initiate or participate in commissions to address the victims and suffering of all citizens, and by supporting victims, help them overcome trauma or encourage the repentance of criminals,
- Conception of a functional “education for peace”, based on universal religious values and factual historiographical content,
- Start a conversation between churches and religious communities about opposing historical narratives,
- In existing religious educational institutions, work on topics such as social reconciliation, healing, conflict transformation.

Recommendations for the media

- Educate the media to pay more attention to good and constructive events, as well as to publish texts in which “more voices” will be present, in accordance with journalistic standards,
- Provide more media attention to church individuals who are already role models.

Recommendations for international organisations and the civil sector

- Organize more intensive meetings of members of different religious communities from Serbia and Kosovo, as well as involve representatives of churches and religious communities in projects important for society,
- Use the already existing good cooperation between religious communities for track-III dialogue, especially in the process of implementing the agreements reached,

- Organise courses, programs, and schools on these issues, which should involve church representatives,
- Financial support for project and initiatives by international organizations involving churches and religious communities as major actors, or programs aimed at educating religious personnel,
- Provide more support to prominent individuals from churches and religious communities in the implementation of their projects.

Annex 1: List of interviews

Interview 1, representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Diocese of Raska and Prizren

Interview 2, high representative of the Catholic Church in Kosovo, Diocese of Prizren and Pristina

Interview 3, representative of the Catholic Church in Serbia, Diocese of Subotica

Interview 4, journalist, Kosovo

Interview 5, professor, Kosovo

Interview 6, representative of an international organisation, Kosovo

Interview 7, journalist, Serbia

Interview 8, professor, Germany

Interview 9, representative of the non-governmental sector, north Kosovo

Interview 10, professor, Sweden

Interview 11, representative of the Catholic Church in Serbia, Archdiocese of Belgrade

Interview 12, theologian, Serbian Orthodox Church

Interview 13, representative of the Catholic Church in Serbia, Archdiocese of Belgrade

Interview 14, representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Archbishopric of Belgrade and Karlovci

Interview 15, theologian, Serbian Orthodox Church



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