



Kingdom of the Netherlands



ALBANIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE  
KOMITETI SHQIPTAR I HELSINKIT

# RESEARCH STUDY REPORT

Promoting religious harmony,  
tolerance and religious freedom in Albania

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*This report was prepared in the context of the project “Promoting religious harmony, tolerance and religious freedom in Albania”, with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Albania.*

*The contents of this report is the responsibility of the Albanian Helsinki Committee and does not necessarily reflect the positions of the experts engaged in this study, or the position of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Albania.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was carried out by the Albanian Helsinki Committee in the framework of the initiative *“Promoting religious understanding, tolerance and religious freedom in Albania”*, supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Albania. It aims to explore religious freedom, interfaith harmony and coexistence, as fundamental values of Albanian society and their role among young people. This model is considered a useful instrument to prevent the dissemination of extremist ideologies.

This research study is based on extensive literature on interfaith harmony in Albania, as well as on the exploration of the dimensions of religious freedom in Western democratic countries, including Albania and the Western Balkans from a comparative perspective. From a methodological standpoint, this study is based on an extensive survey with youths aged 15-35 (on a national scale) on the values of freedom of belief among this category. The analysis is further enriched by in-depth interviews with key institutional and public actors, representatives of religion and education, in order to understand their perception and role with regard to religious freedom among youth. Young people constitute one of the most important variables of the model of interfaith harmony of Albanian society. They may contribute not only to the sustainability of this model in future, but also to its promotion in the region and Europe. Religious beliefs concepts and practises are encountered by the young people in their daily activities, in the public areas, school, and university or at work. Youth's approach towards religions in Albania has not been thoroughly researched in the past. Therefore, to better explore it, a survey was developed, to understand the perceptions of young Albanians on religion beliefs. Special attention was paid to the exploration of their perceptions about the interfaith model harmony in Albania. It also serves to identify the best ways to cultivate this cultural value, so that religion does not become a source of confrontation. It can be seen instead exclusively through the lens of religious understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of other religions.

The research focuses first on the historical dimension and significance of peaceful interfaith religious coexistence in Albania throughout history. It explores how this was materialized and integrated into national identity through centuries-long processes, and the challenges this historical value faces in today's global era. It also provides an interpretation of the legal framework of religion in Albania from a historical perspective. This is followed by the assessment of the significance this value has among young Albanians. Furthermore, survey results conducted with young people from schools and universities are examined in depth in order to dwell into the spirit of religious tolerance and harmony among young people. Our research analysis encompasses three main dimensions: i) freedom of belief among youth in families and communities; ii) the state of education on religious freedom in education institutions; and iii) the perception of this segment of Albanian society about radicalization and extremism, thus identifying a set of components that may be conducive to countering the spread of these phenomena among young people in Albania.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

This research study employs a methodological approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis, to thoroughly explore religious freedom, harmony and peaceful coexistence among religious communities in Albania. It focuses on the role that this model can play among youth to prevent phenomena such as the spread of religious intolerance or radicalization leading to extremism.

As such, this is an exploratory study, which combines the examination of primary and secondary sources to understand the state of: i) interfaith harmony and coexistence in Albanian society; ii) freedom of belief among young people, in their families and communities; iii) the importance of educating young people about the fundamental freedoms and religious freedom in the Albanian education system; as well as iv) the degree of understanding among young people about extremist ideologies.

This study carries out a detailed research of existing literature on the evolution of religious beliefs in Albania and the historical patterns of harmony and coexistence in Albanian society. Literature research focuses primarily on data analysis, reports, policy documents and strategies. The literature examined also includes Albania's legal and strategic framework on religious freedom, youth challenges, and the phenomena of radicalism and violent extremism. A number of European benchmarking and comparative instruments are also used to deliberate on the factors influencing the concept of tolerance among young people in other Balkan countries and European Union member states. Literature analysis aims to provide a clear historical framework of the interfaith coexistence model in Albania, the evolution of this model especially during the twentieth century and at the present age. It also serves the purpose of qualitatively evaluating the level of religious tolerance and freedom among young people. Combined with data from a national survey and in-depth (semi-structured) interviews with key stakeholders, the literature analysis is also useful to design an embryonic set of indicators to interfaith harmony among youth.

For purposes of this study, a national survey targeting young people aged 15-35 was conducted.<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted at national level, with open participation. Sample selection was carried out focusing on students and youth at schools and universities in the cities targeted by the project. In order to ensure a representative sample distribution, the survey questionnaire was also completed online, through AHC website (distributed also through social media).

**The sample** consists of a total of 1,114 respondents, 32% of whom belong to the 15-17 age group, 60% belong to the 18-25 age group, and 7% to the 26-35 age group (*Chart 1*). About 58% of the respondents are students, 35% are pupils and the rest are not part of education system (*Chart 2*).

<sup>1</sup> Based on the official use of this measuring instrument of agegroups by the National Population Census (2011). [www.instat.gov.al/en/temat/censuset/censusi-i-popullsis-nd-wellings/#^tab2](http://www.instat.gov.al/en/temat/censuset/censusi-i-popullsis-nd-wellings/#^tab2) (last accessed on 17/05/2019)

### 1. What age group do you belong to?

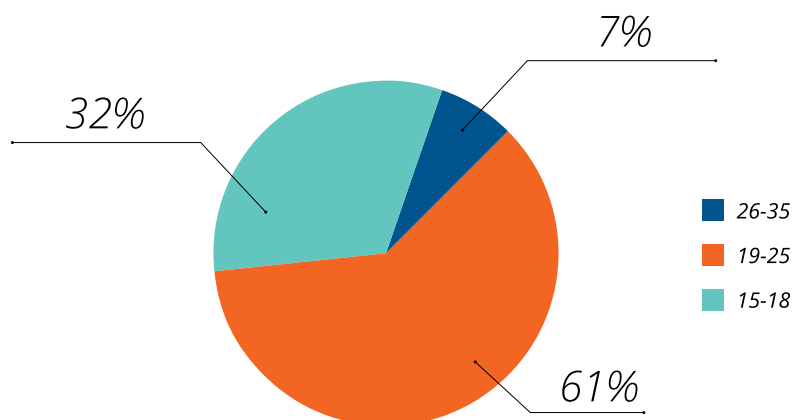


Chart 1: Composition of the sample

### 2. You are currently.....:

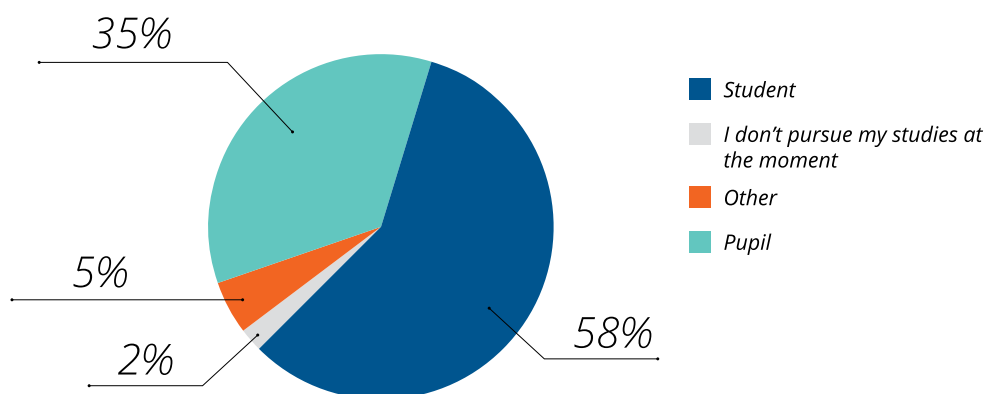


Chart 2: "Student/Pupil" Distribution.

Sample's gender composition is: 67% female and 33% male respondents (Chart 3).

### 3. Gender:

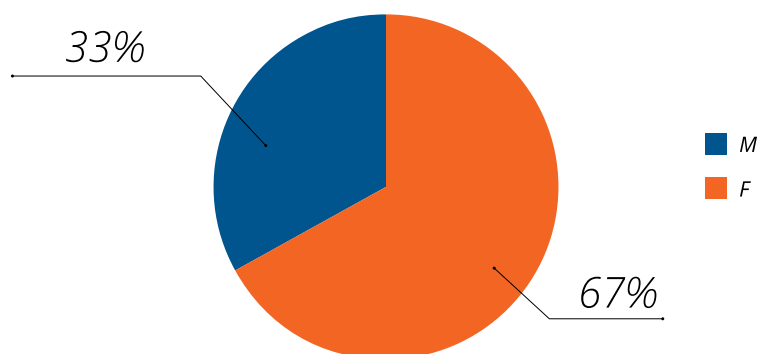


Chart 3: Gender composition/breakdown.

**Survey questionnaire** is structured in four components: i) first, general information about respondents; ii) second, the questionnaire seeks to collect more structured information about young people's religious freedom in their families and community (regarding religious beliefs), frequency of practice of religion, youth contacts with other religions, and the meaning of religion to young people; iii) third, the questionnaire seeks to explore young people's access to religious freedom education at school, understand their level of knowledge about these topics, the frequency of discussions about these issues in schools and education institutions, and their sources of information on religious matters; iv) fourth, it seeks to address issues related to the phenomena of radicalism and extremism among young people, their perception and access to religious symbols, including their perception of the challenge extremism (not just religious) poses to society.

The study's methodological framework is complemented by **in-depth (semi-structured) interviews** with a wide range of stakeholders, including: representatives from institutions (such as State Committee on Cults), from religious communities (such as Muslim Community of Albania, and Catholic community), from Interfaith Council of Albania, from Center for Interfaith Cooperation, from Regional Education Directorate of Tirana, from high schools ("Isa Boletini" and "Ibrahim Rugova", in Kamza), from religious scholars and analysts, and pre-university education and university specialists.<sup>2</sup> In total, 10 such interviews were conducted and they aimed to explore more in depth the topics of:

- i) frequency and type of activities conducted within educational institutions (with pupils and youth/students) on religious freedom, as well as the involvement of parents' community;
- ii) the presence/absence of manifestations of religious prejudice or intolerance in education institutions;
- iii) the need to inform students about religious beliefs;
- iv) informing stakeholder groups on National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism and the role of institutions in implementing the strategy;
- v) The qualification of (academic, civil servants, teachers or even policymakers) staff related to their understanding of interfaith harmony and coexistence in Albania.

The key interviewees and stakeholders were selected and identified following a collection of preliminary data from: i) literature review; ii) the analysis of the strategic and legal framework; and iii) after identifying responsible institutions.

At this point, it is also important to highlight some **methodological constraints** to this study, such as the difficulties in ensuring a more representative sample distribution of respondents based on a rigorous statistical methodology. However, sampling was deliberately selected among youth targeted by the project, and by several universities (in Elbasan, Durrës and Tirana), to provide valuable information for data processing and analysis. Another statistical difficulty is linked to the fact that the last National Population Census was conducted in 2011, because over the last decade demographic dynamics have endured significant changes, making it difficult to select a statistically accurate representative sample.

<sup>2</sup> A complete list of interviewees for this study may be accessed at the end of Annex 2.

## I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND COEXISTENCE IN ALBANIA

Interfaith harmony and coexistence, perceived as admittance and peaceful coexistence, is generally considered one of the three most prominent cultural values of Albanian society, in addition to hospitality and 'besa' (the pledge of loyalty). In today's age of numerous global challenges, with the misuse and misinterpretation of religion for other purposes particularly standing out, peaceful religious coexistence in Albanian society may serve as a unique model that can be promoted as a distinguishing feature of a historically tolerant society.

The model of peaceful coexistence and interfaith harmony in Albania has served as an example and distinct value of the society and as part of its cultural and social identity, drawing the attention of religious authorities of different countries. Thus, in 2014, Pope Francis during his visit to Tirana, stated that *"There is a beautiful characteristic of Albania, which fills me with great joy: I am referring to the peaceful coexistence and cooperation that exists here between different religious faiths"*. In 2017, UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom Ahmed Shaheed visited Albania and stated, among other things, that *"religious freedom or religious faiths are a reality in Albania"*, and that *"from the Albanian experience, there is much to learn with regard to respecting the freedom of thought, religion and interfaith harmony"*. However, he would warn that *"[...] such a unique coexistence and mutual respect between the different religious groups should not be taken for granted or as irreversible [...] as the situation may change faster than many might imagine."*<sup>3</sup>

The peaceful coexistence of three of the largest Albanian communities Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox, together with smaller religious communities has constituted a feature of Albanian identity, an outstanding feature in Balkan and European history. History of international relations in the last two decades, especially in Europe and the Balkans, has proved that religious balances are often difficult to maintain, easily manipulated, and their consequences are astringent. The disruption of these balances carries the potential to give birth to extremist movements on all sides of political spectrum, create resentment and deep clashes within Western societies. When such balances are destroyed, they might form social stereotypes difficult to eliminate, thus impeding social development and isolating large social groups.

Peaceful coexistence between religious communities in Albania, complementing each other, has served as a unique model not only during previous centuries, but increasingly more in today's era of global challenges. This coexistence is particularly evidenced by the presence of religious worship sites, such as mosques, churches and monasteries, intertwined over the centuries, as proof that religion has always had a pacifying role in national identity.

However, this tradition of peaceful interfaith coexistence among Albanians, as a value that comes to modern times through a centuries-old process of formation, cannot be considered eternal and unchangeable, and it must be therefore preserved and cultivated in people's mentality.

<sup>3</sup> Tirana Times (2017). *UN praises Albania on freedom of religion, urges solutions for property issues*. <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=132499> (last accessed on 9/10/2018).



This element of Albanian identity has been addressed by a large number of scholars, not only during the twentieth century, but also earlier. They have extensively referred to the separation of national identity from religious identity in Albania. Thus, for example, in early nineteenth century, Lord Byron wrote, *"I love Albanians, they are not all Muslims; some of their tribes are Christians. Religion doesn't change their habits"*.<sup>4</sup> Another contemporary Englishman, cleric Hygens, wrote, *"The Albanian Muslim is isolated in his religion. Often he marries a Christian woman, takes the boys to the local Mosque, and allows the girls to go to church with their mother. He goes himself to both cult centers."*<sup>5</sup> Another historical interpretation comes from Edith Durham, has explored in depth Albanian identity in "Concerns of the Balkans", describing it as both secular and beyond religion.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it may be argued that when it comes to Albanian identity, the sense of national belonging has historically prevailed over differences in religious affiliation. Ethnic self-determination has been superseded by religious self-determination, due also to geopolitical circumstances that history has imposed decisively on the Balkans and Albania in particular. According to G. Kruja, *"Albania has been an area where the two largest empires of the middle ages, Roman and Byzantine met and departed. It has been a land where the authority of two Churches, Roman and Byzantine, met and separated. The two Empires and Churches, although rivals and strong opponents of one another, never managed to become a reason for conflict among Albanians"*.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, from a historical and geopolitical perspective, interfaith harmony can be considered an ethnological feature of Albanians. This is reinforced by Albania's geopolitical position as intersection of two worlds, where East meets the West.

This long historical process has shaped the notion that religious, cultural, geographic, or other differences, do not pose a danger, but rather an asset. This has been cultivated as well with other identity components. Peaceful religious pluralism has served as a unifying element between people, families and different groups in society. Religious communities remain faithful to their original inspirations of good and peace, and are committed to playing a vital role in overcoming social problems, youth socializing issues, strengthening the role of the family, culture and national identity. Thanks to their special contribution, Albania represents a rare case of a country with different religious beliefs, where all the political factors of society, including religious communities, are strong supporters of the country's integration into the European Union and NATO.

Values are not eternal; these features of religious diversity in Albania must be preserved and nurtured in the citizens' mentality and democratic culture. It is similarly essential to transform the culture of dialogue between different religious faiths and communities into a bridge of communication, exchange and stronger connection between people and countries.<sup>8</sup>

4 Faik Konica "Letter from Lord Byron from Preveza, October 13, 1809" to "Lord Byron's Journey to Albania". Albania, Year 9, Nr. 8, 1905. <http://www.gazetatema.net/2015/10/03/letter-byron-206-years-ago-albanians-don't-give-importance-to-religion> (last accessed 27/05/2019)

5 Berisha, Sh. (2005), "Albania and Albanians in the works of 19th century travelers", Tirana.

6 Durham, E. (1990) "Balkan Concerns", Tirana. In one of what may be considered one of the most direct evidence of foreigners' perception of religious coexistence in Albania, she mentions "When I was crossing Rumeli I asked the people. What religion do you belong to? Catholic, one replied. Protestant, the other. In Bulgaria, what religion do you belong to? Orthodox. Entering Albania, I asked, what are you here for? - Albanians answered me bluntly. Finally I said. Here I got rid of the maniacs"

7 Kruja, G. (2017). "A Sociological View on interfaith coexistence and understanding among Albanians", at <http://www.nacionalalbania.al/2017/09/negative-sociological-mbi-collection-and-meaning-of-the-Albanians/> last accessed on 20/05/2019

8 Kruja, G. (2017), *idem*.



But should coexistence and interfaith harmony in Albania be understood rather as religious tolerance or indifference to religion? Researchers seem to be skeptical about the use of tolerance as an explanatory concept in the Albanian case. This is because tolerance is an analytical tool that describes the connection between a strong and a weak group, putting them in a relationship of power with one another.<sup>9</sup> This is not the case in Albania, where the analysis of numerous historical examples reveals a rather peaceful and harmonious coexistence, more than the need of one religious community to tolerate another.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, throughout this study we shall use the concepts of harmony, coexistence and peaceful coexistence between religious communities in Albania.

From a historical perspective, the development of religion in Albania is better understood through three main periods:

- i) the last decades of 19th century, during and after the declaration of independence;
- ii) the communist era;
- iii) the post-communist period.

During the first period, religious faith served as an additional mechanism to cultivate the new Albanian identity that was emerging. Under communism religion suffered the pressure of a dictatorial system, which initially weakened its role, before completely abolishing it. This was followed by demolition of churches and mosques, giving birth at 1967 to the world's first and only atheist state. Damage and dissolution of every tissue of religion in Albania during communist had major consequences that are still visible nowadays. In addition to the destruction of religious worship sites, a whole generation of religious leaders was also eliminated. This had a huge impact in the years following the fall of communism, leading to a significant lack of well-educated theologians, who could in turn rebuild the foundations of religion.

After the fall of communism freedom of religion was restored in Albania. This process was accompanied by penetration of many new religious doctrines or schools of thought. These new versions of religion were substantially different from the traditional and moderated interpretations, thus provoking doctrinal clashes within religious communities. This highlighted the need for a new generation of theologians. This gap was filled by those who studied at religious centers abroad and returned by late 1990s, gradually meeting the needs of religious communities. Their return was often accompanied by religious doctrines incompatible with the traditional Albanian interpretations of religion, thus creating the first frictions within religious communities.<sup>11</sup> According to data available from State Cults

9 Not only the Albanian experts interviewed for the purpose of this study agree with this approach, such as Mr. Fitim Zekthi, Mr. Genti Kruja, Mrs. Elona Mehmeti, but also the former head of the Albanian Muslim Community, Mr. Skender Bruçaj.

10 As mentioned by one of the researchers of religious coexistence in Albania, Kahraman Ulqini (1999), in his study "Cultural and Religious Factors", "[...] in the Fifties, there were many churches abandoned for hundreds of years, which were left so that no one touched a stone. "They are vacuums," the residents [...] said. Ulcini, K. (1999). Cultural and religious factors. Shkodra 29.

In another case, "the Austro-Hungarian consul in Durres wrote on July 13, 1881 that in that city, in Kavajë and Tirana, it was an old door for Muslims to attend Christian burials. [...]"" While Faik Konica often recalled that when his mother died, Christians mourned the bells. [...] "Ulcinj, K. Ibid., pg. 32.

Ulcinj also brings up some other examples of peaceful coexistence in Albania, where since the second half of the sixteenth century (1568), an Italian traveler (Pagafeta) visits Albanian settlements and observes that Christian monks lived freely in among the Muslims and in no case were hindered by the shrines or the people. In another case, another French traveler (Palerine) testified during a visit to Malisheva almost in the same period (1582) that the catalogers enjoyed great wealth, freedom and protection from the Muslims. Ulcinj, K. Ibid., pg. 25

11 Hide, E. (2016). *Emerging Security Issues: Countering Violent Extremism*. Strategic Study, Center of Excellence, Tirana: Ministry of

Committee, there are currently 241 registered religious organizations in the country (100 of which are Baptist churches, each registered as a separate organization).<sup>12</sup> Besides, the long Albanian transition highlighted the difficulties Albanian state faced to support financially all religious communities. To date this remains an unsolved issue, making religious communities increasingly dependent on foreign donations. On the other hand, Albania lacks a comprehensive legal framework for financing religious communities, because the current one is not adequate to cover the financial needs of religious communities.<sup>13</sup>

The legal framework regulating the organization and functioning of religious communities has been historically developed through three periods. Until 1939 legislation on religious communities was mainly based on their statutes (that constituted the fundamental law of Albanian state) and on the laws for religious communities. During this period, state reforms to improve the legislation on religion in Albania played an important role. Thus, based on 1924's Statute of Religious Communities, a new Law for the Establishment of Religious Communities was adopted in 1929. *"The law clearly demonstrated a strict nationalization of religious institutions in Albania, as well as significant control of state institutions over religious ones"*.<sup>14</sup> Ahmet Zogu emerged as the reformist king and its government undertook a series of reforms. A high-profile event was the adoption in parliament of the law on the prohibition of hijab's use among Muslim women in 1937, as well as the Autocephaly of the Albanian Orthodox Church.<sup>15</sup>

From 1951-1967, before religious institutions were banned in Albania, relations between state and religious communities were regulated by the law of 1951 on religious communities.

Following the collapse of communism, religious freedom was restored by the Law "On Basic Constitutional Provisions of the Republic of Albania" (1991). It established a comprehensive legal framework for religious communities, through a series of laws and regulatory agreements.<sup>16</sup>

Albania's constitution doesn't recognize any official religion and proclaims equality between religions. Constitution is the highest guarantor of fundamental freedoms, including religious freedoms, excluding any form of discrimination on religious grounds. These constitutional provisions make the modern Albanian state secular and neutral towards religious faiths (Article 10). Article 24 (paragraphs 1, 2 and 3) guarantees:

- i) freedom of religion;
- ii) public or private expression of religious beliefs individually or collectively;
- iii) and affirms the right of affiliation with a religious community.<sup>17</sup>

Foreign Affairs of Albania.

12 Kruja G. (2008). *Albanians in front of challenges of interfaith common understanding*. Tirana Arberia, p. 142.

13 Interview with Mr. Genti Kruja, Executive Director of the Interfaith Council of Albania, May 15, 2019.

14 See: Aurela Anastasi, *History of Constitutional Law in Albania (1912-1939)*, Tirana, 2007, p. 196

15 See further here, p. 196-206.

16 Such as: Law 8902 on the Agreement of the Republic of Albania with the Holy See; Law 9365, on the Procedures for Recognizing the Legal Capacity of Legal Persons of the Catholic Church; Law 10056, Agreement with the Muslim Community of Albania; Law 10057, Agreement with the Orthodox Church; Law 10058, Agreement with the World Bektashi Archdiocese; Law 10140, On the Financing of Religious Communities; and Law 10349, Agreement with the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania. Further on the regulation of the legal framework of religious communities in the Republic of Albania, see <http://kshk.gov.al/legislation-on-religion-during-the-period-1939-1945/> (last accessed 15/06/2019).

17 Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Article 24, paragraphs 1, 2 and 3.

Since 1990, the state has guaranteed not only political and ideological pluralism, but also religious freedom. Therefore, in a legal sense the relationship between Albanian state and religion can be considered “*active neutrality*” consistently ensuring equality. As Karl Popper argued, “*absolute freedom and tolerance without boundaries risk leading to denial of freedom and tolerance itself*”.<sup>18</sup>

Restoration of religious freedom in Albania during and after the 1990s was accompanied by major theoretical debates to better understand the context of cooperation and the process of coexistence between religious communities. These debates were undoubtedly influenced by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Such influences can be mostly seen in the misuse of religion to justify acts of violence, or in the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations based on Samuel Huntington’s theory (1993) as a model of future conflicts.<sup>19</sup>

This debate has been particularly intense during the last decade (after 2012 and the conflicts in Syria and Iraq) due to the involvement of a number of citizens from the Western Balkans in these conflicts and the public debate that followed this process.<sup>20</sup>

Albanian society offers the most interesting example of interfaith harmony not only in the region, but also in Europe and beyond. Interfaith harmony constitutes a model of social organization and a tool that prevents social division on religious grounds. As Faik Konica once argued “[...] *Albanians are known to be tolerant to other faiths and perhaps this is the only place in Europe where wars of religion never occurred. [...]*”<sup>21</sup>

**Radicalism and violent extremism.** Despite numerous debates on the terms “radicalism” and “violent extremism” at both theoretical and policy-making levels, national and international, for the purposes of this study an EU approach towards these terms will be used. Therefore, radicalism will be understood as the embracement of a radical ideology or approach to socio-political-religious issues that might lead to extremism and violent extremism will be understood as the use of violence to promote ideological and/or religious beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Since 2012, Albania has been dealing with a new security challenges, violent extremism and radicalism. As of 2018, 148 Albanian nationals have travelled to Syria (mainly during 2012-2016) to engage with and assist armed groups there, including 31 children and 13 women.<sup>23</sup> If not addressed in its early stages, radicalization leading to violent extremism has the potential to undermine the model of interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence in Albania.

During the last years, Albania has developed a set of instruments, both internal and external, to deal with cases of violent extremism. The country has established a domestic legal, institutional, and strategic framework to counter violent extremism and deal with citizens engaged in conflict zones abroad. The legal provisions on countering terrorism and violent extremism have been introduced into the criminal legislation. Since November

18 Popper, K. & Gombrich, E. H. (2013). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

19 Huntington, S. (1993, Spring). *Clash of Civilizations?* Foreign Affairs.

20 Azinovic, V. (2018, June). *Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*. Regional Report. Extremism Research Forum.

21 Konica, F. (1993). Works I. Tirana: Naim Frashëri Publishing House, pg 431.

22 [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation_en) (last accessed on 06/10/2019)

23 Hide, E. & Llubani, M. (2018, July). *The Role of Albania's Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Tirana, Albania.

2015, Albania has adopted a National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism and an Action Plan (No. 930, dated 18/11/2015). In terms of external mechanisms and instruments, first, as a NATO member state, Albania has been involved in international coalitions against extremist violence for more than a decade.<sup>24</sup> The country has been diplomatically very active in international forums and organizations, becoming a party to such conventions, treaties or initiatives within UN,<sup>25</sup> OSCE, Council of Europe,<sup>26</sup> as well as vis-à-vis obligations before the European Union,<sup>27</sup> as a candidate country aspiring membership. In the context of countering violent extremism, a number of individuals have also been arrested on charges of terrorism, terrorism financing, participation in combat outside the country, etc. These individuals are currently convicted and are serving sentences following court proceedings.<sup>28</sup>

**Young people.** Young people constitute one of the most important variables of interfaith harmony model of Albania. They can contribute not only to the sustainability of this model in future, but also to its promotion in the region and in Europe. Religious faith is an issue that most young people face in their daily lives, in the public space, at school, university or at work. The study of young Albanians' relationship with religion has not been thoroughly explored before. Studying young Albanians' perception of religious belief, and especially the model of interfaith harmony in Albania, serves to identify the best ways to cultivate this cultural value so that religious faith is not a source of conflict, but exclusively seen through the lens of understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of other faiths. It can therefore serve as a model to tackle the challenge of violent extremism spreading among young people.

According to the Population Census (2011), young people aged 15-34 constituted 31.51% of the country's total population.<sup>29</sup> They are also one of the most sensitive components for the country's development. According to 2017 data, national unemployment rate was 13.9%. This level was even higher among young people.<sup>30</sup> One of the most important mechanisms used in Albania to strengthen the role of youth in community and community inclusion at the local level is the "Schools as a Community Center" model. This model, launched by the Ministry of Education and Sports in 2013 aims to give schools a new role as community centers, with an all-year activity agenda, guaranteeing the participation of a large number of local stakeholders, including civil society and religious communities, thereby promoting religious harmony and coexistence.<sup>31</sup> Another important instrument of youth inclusion in socio-cultural life is National Youth Action Plan (2015-2020).<sup>32</sup>

Education on human rights is crucial, especially among marginalized youth groups,

24 For this see: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224822.htm> (last accessed on 12/04/2019).

25 A full list of the treaties Albania has signed with the UN on combating international terrorism is available at [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/DB.aspx?path=DB/studies/page2\\_en.xml](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/DB.aspx?path=DB/studies/page2_en.xml) (07/06/2019).

26 In 2007 Albania signed and ratified the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism. It is also part of the Council of Europe's Expert Committee on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Measures.

27 Albania is a member of the Council of Europe's European Convention on the Fight against Terrorism (2005).

28 Hide, E. (2016). *Emerging Security Issues: Countering Violent Extremism*. Strategic Study, Center of Excellence, Tirana: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania. Also, for more on this issue: <https://sot.com.al/aktualitet/gjyqi-i-xhihadist%C3%ABve-prokuroria-imam%C3%ABt-t%C3%AB-q%C3%ABndrojn%C3%AB-n%C3%AB-burg-t%C3%AB-siguris%C3%AB-s%C3%AB-lart%C3%AB-t%C3%AB> (last accessed on 4 August 2019).

29 See 2011 Census Data Table 1.1.1, at: [www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/censuset/censusi-i-popullsis%C3%AB-dhebanesave/#tab2](http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/censuset/censusi-i-popullsis%C3%AB-dhebanesave/#tab2) (last accessed on 17/05/2019).

30 See data available from "Labor Force Questionnaire, Quarter 2017", INSTAT, ff. 3-4. <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/2539/anketa-tremujore-e-forcave-t%C3%AB-pun%C3%ABs-t2-2017.pdf> (last accessed on 17/05/2019)

31 See, <http://www.arsimi.gov.al/al/newsroom/lajme/shkollat-si-qendra-komunitare&page=23> (last accessed on 24/04/2019)

32 [http://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/plani-kombetar-i-veprimit-per-rinine-2015-2020\\_Shqip.pdf](http://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/plani-kombetar-i-veprimit-per-rinine-2015-2020_Shqip.pdf) (last accessed on 25/04/2019)

in rural and remote areas, which may oppose extremist ideologies. Increasing the capacity of young people in some crucial topics such as critical thinking, dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution, are essential in strengthening the model of coexistence and respect for all rights, including religious freedom, among young people. Educating young people on these issues is essential for developing and promoting shared discourse of tolerance and understanding, against discrimination and hate speech, including religious ones. As Sinani argues (2017), *“Religious education can be understood in the context of civic education, but religious education is not the same as civic education. In terms of the relationship between the two, there are two things on which agreement is reached at European level; religious education should be seen as complementary to civic education, which has the potential to incorporate global and European ideas of citizenship and to assist in school’s debate on issues related to a pluralistic society. Religious education, in the form of interfaith education, can contribute to inter-cultural understanding, as well as to social tolerance and harmony”*.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, the model of peaceful coexistence among Albanians should also be cultivated among young people, at all levels of education, as a historical product and as a social and cultural value.

33 Sinani, Gj. (2017). *Religion and Education*. Tirana: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, f. 3.



## II. FREEDOM OF BELIEF AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

One of the most important components of this study is freedom of belief among youth and their relationship with family and community regarding faith. To understand these socio-cultural links, benchmarking instruments have been used, and they have been compared with general population data (based on the 2011 Census), with previous time spans and other countries. These instruments include both qualitative (self-declaring) and quantitative (categorizing) components of religious beliefs among youth.

Methodological instruments include: self-declaration of religious belief; the frequency of practicing religion; young people's interest in practicing their religious beliefs, curiosity or interest in acquainting themselves with other religious beliefs (especially through visits to religious worship sites); young people's perception of religious freedom in Albania; the importance of religion in the family and community; equal treatment of religions in schools; community influence on youth; the extent of discussions about religious freedoms and rights in schools, communities, etc.; youth's perception of marriage between individuals belonging to different religious faiths (mixed marriages); as well as the more general challenges young people face in the communities they live in.

**Religious affiliation.** As shown on *Chart 4* below, 55% of respondents self-proclaimed belonging to Islam (including Bektashi), followed by 14% belonging to Catholic faith, and 12% Orthodox. It is worth noting that a significant percentage of respondents, or about 15%, were self-declared not affiliated to any religion. When comparing survey results with data from 2011 Census, it is obvious that these results reflect 2011 Census data, according to which 58.79% of population self-declared belonging to Islam, 10% Catholics and 6.75% Orthodox.<sup>34</sup> Almost 20% of population during the last Census either declared themselves atheists or refused to respond. This figure is similar to the data retrieved from this survey, showing a tendency of young people to be identified with the general trends of Albanian population.

### 4. Do you belong to a certain religious belief?

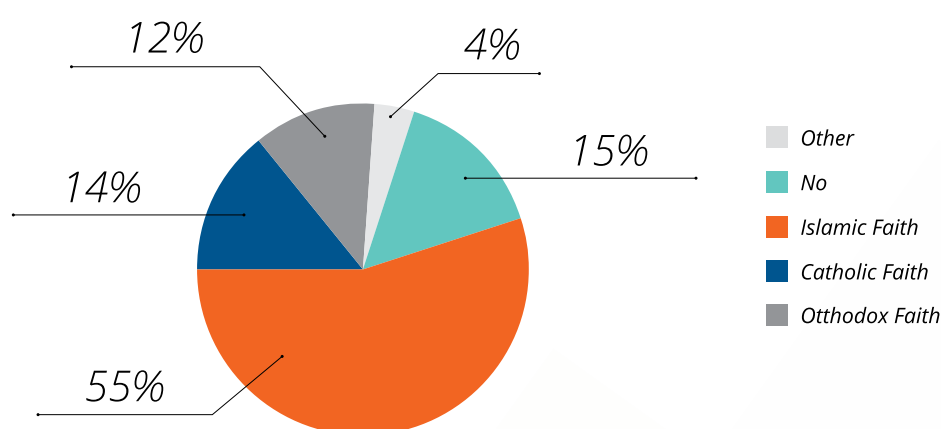


Chart 4: Religious affiliation.

<sup>34</sup> INSTAT. 2011. Population and housing census. pg. 71. [http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3058/main\\_results\\_\\_population\\_and\\_housing\\_census\\_2011.pdf](http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3058/main_results__population_and_housing_census_2011.pdf) (last accessed on 14/05/2019)

If we compare this figure with experiences in other countries, it turns out that there are some similarities. According to a 2018 study, young people around the world are less religious than they were a few decades ago, which is not insignificant. Although a large part of young people still identify themselves with a religion, there is an increasing trend of those who declared they don't belong to any religion. According to the data from the study, 22 out of 35 countries in Europe feature a gap between different generations, with young people being less likely to say they belong to a particular faith.<sup>35</sup>

**Exercise of religion.** Religious identity does not necessarily reflect a person's commitment to that religion. For this reason, respondents were further asked about the frequency of practice of their religion. The vast majority, 70% in total, either didn't practice at all or practiced it only during religious holidays. Only a small proportion of 14% practiced religion daily. The rest, 7% and 9%, practiced it once a month and once a week (*Chart 5 below*). Although we do not have comparative data to identify potential changes in the tendency of practicing religion over time, the high proportion of young people who do not practice their religion, even though in the above question they are identified with a particular religion, is notable. Furthermore, the data collected by the Pew Research Center illustrates that only for 15% of respondents, religion is one of the most important factors in their lives, a very low figure compared to other Muslim populations.<sup>36</sup>

#### 5. How often do you practice your religion?

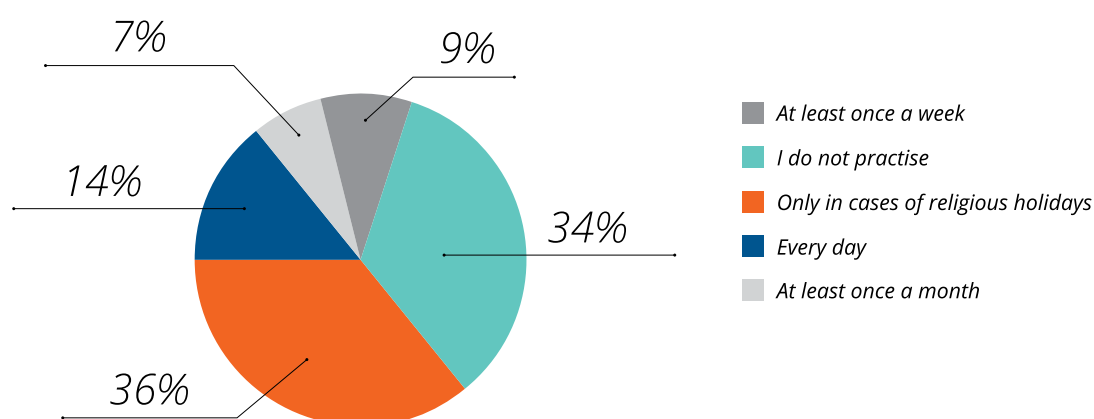


Chart 5: Exercise of religion.

There are a number of different explanations and theories that attempt to explain this gap between different generations. One of these explanations focuses on economic development. Recent studies have identified a direct correlation between increased economic well-being and economic and social development, and youth's lack of attention to religion. This is also directly linked with the increase in educational attainment, which some researchers associate with the reduction of religious identity and the practice of religion itself. Another explanation focuses on a more practical aspect of life. According to this explanation, differences in devotion to religion

35 Bullivant, S. (2018). *Europe's Young Adults and Religion. Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-2016)*. UK: Benedict XVI Center for Religion and Society.

36 Pew Research Center. 2018. Religion and Public Life. Online: [https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/pf-06-13-18\\_religiouscommitment-03-07/](https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/pf-06-13-18_religiouscommitment-03-07/)

can be explained by changes that people experience throughout their lives. So even those adults who have been less religious in their youth may come closer to religion.<sup>37</sup>

**Visiting religious worship sites to perform religious rituals.** In order to understand the extent to which respondents practice their declared religion, they were asked whether they visit the cult sites of their religion, and how often they do so, if at all. Almost half of the respondents declared they visit them only on religious holidays, while a significant part of young people (about 25%) has never visited such sites. **In total, almost 30% visited such buildings regularly, daily, weekly, or monthly** (Chart 6).

**6. How often do you attend religious worship buildings of your religion to perform religious rituals?**

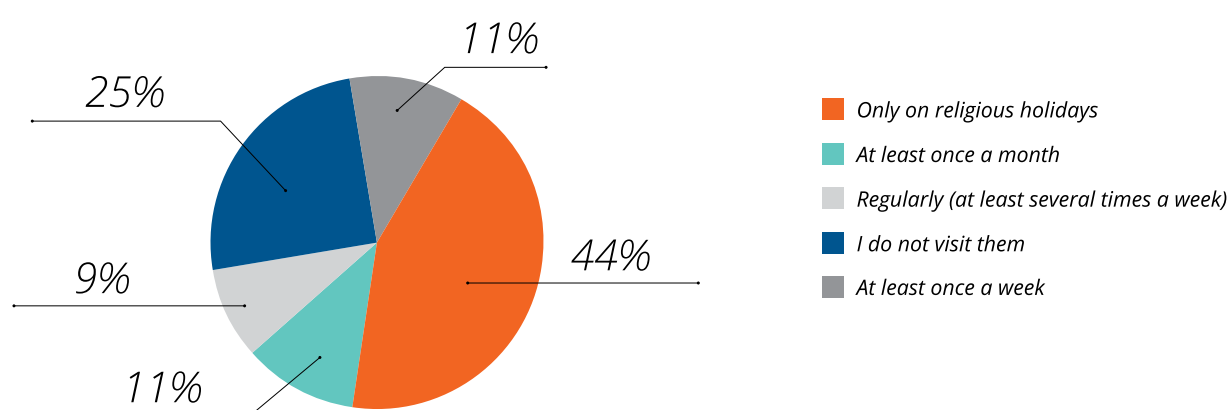


Chart 6: Attending religious worship sites for performing religious rituals.

In order to better understand the extent to which surveyed young respondents practice the stated religion, they were also asked whether and how often they visit the religious worship sites of their respective religion. Almost half of respondents stated that they visit these sites only on the occasion of religious holy days, while a significant proportion (about 25%) of young people has never visited these religious worship sites. **Overall, almost 30% visited these religious worship sites regularly, daily, once a week, or once a month** (Chart 6).

**Contact with other religious beliefs and practice of religion.** Much of the research on interfaith dialogue and harmony in a multicultural society focuses on knowing other religions, overcoming prejudice, and a willingness to understand and put oneself in the position of a person belonging to a different faith.<sup>38</sup> In order to understand the interest and curiosity of young people about other religions, and to understand how open they are to other religious beliefs, young people were asked about their connections with the religious worship sites of other religions they do not belong to. One out of 5 young people surveyed had never visited a religious worship site of other religions. However, most of them resulted to have visited a religious worship site of other religions at least once. Meanwhile, 1 out of 4 often visited religious worship buildings of other religions (Chart 7). This shows that young Albanians are relatively open to other beliefs, that they are interested in understanding more about other religions and do not display prejudices.

<sup>37</sup> Pew Research Center. 2018. *The age gap in religion around the world*: <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/why-do-levels-of-religious-observance-vary-by-age-and-country/>

<sup>38</sup> Walt, V. D. (2014). *Measuring Religious Tolerance in Education*. South Africa: North-West University.



## 7. Have you ever visited the religious worship buildings of other religious beliefs?

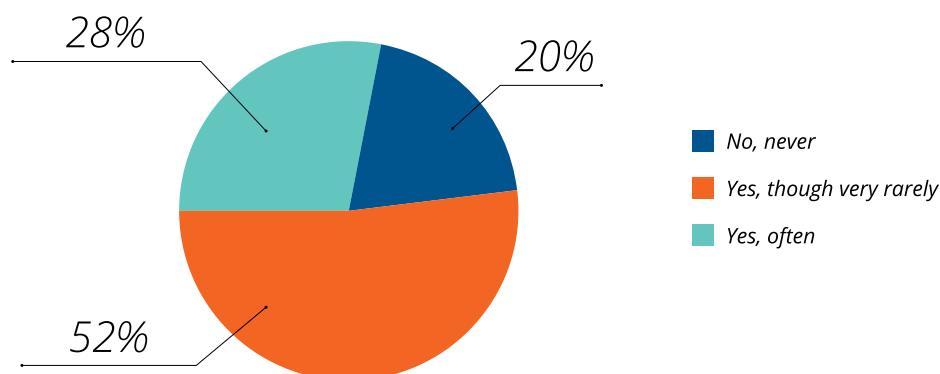


Chart 7: Contact with other religious beliefs and practice of religion

**Guaranteeing freedom of religion in Albania.** Freedom of religion is one of the fundamental and universal human rights expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and a series of other international instruments. In the national context, it is one of the guiding principles of Albanian constitution, provided for in Article 3, Article 24 thereof, which is the classic article on religious freedom, and Article 10, which regulates the relationship between religion and state based on the principle of equality among all religious communities.

Among EU guidelines for encouraging religious tolerance and respecting the fundamental rights of individuals to express and pursue their religious identity, “promoting religious tolerance, respect for diversity and mutual understanding are of primary importance in order to create an enabling environment for all people to have all religious freedom.”<sup>39</sup> Although these principles are stated and present in the basic institutional and democratic structure of a large number of states, including Albania, their application in reality is not always successful. For this reason, the promotion of religious freedom requires the intervention of decision-making institutions. One of these interventions, sanctioned by EU guidelines, is the call for countries to promote respect for diversity and mutual understanding through the education system by encouraging broader knowledge of diversity of religious beliefs within their jurisdiction.

In order to understand youth perspective on how and if religion is practiced in their communities, they were asked about religious freedom in Albania. Thus, the vast majority stated that all Albanian citizens are guaranteed their religious freedom. Meanwhile, almost 1 out of 4 stated that these freedoms are partially guaranteed, while a more than insignificant part of 8% didn't know or refused to answer whether religious freedom is equally guaranteed to all citizens (*Chart 8*).

<sup>39</sup> Council of the European Union, 2013. EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Online: <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/137585.pdf> (last accessed on 11/05/2019)

### 8. In your opinion, are religious freedoms guaranteed for all the Albanian citizens?

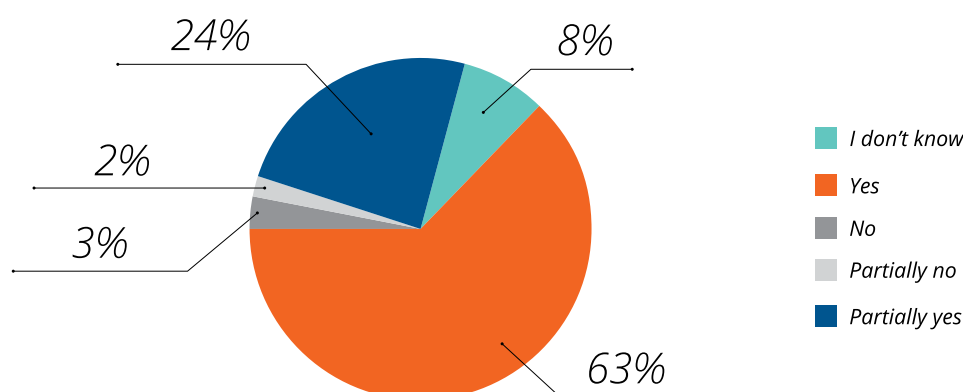


Chart 8: Guaranteeing freedom of religious faith in Albania.

**The place religious belief takes in the family and individually.** In order to better understand the role religion plays in the personal lives of young respondents, it is interesting to note that the same percentage considers religion to have a purely formal role and a very important role (32% each). In addition, 1 out of 5 respondents stated that religion plays a role only in the most difficult moments, where they turn to religion. For the latter, we can re-emphasize one of the theories mentioned above about inter-generational differences on the level of practice of religion, which argues that while among young people religion does not play an essential role, the more time passes the more they return to the practice of religion. A similar trend is observed when asked about the role religion plays in their families. Most of the respondents, about 44%, say that religion has a formal role, so it is mainly related to holy days that are celebrated in the community. About 33%, or about one third of respondents, claim that religion plays an important role in their families, thus being part of discussions about the nature of religion or religious belief in the family. Only 9% of them state that religion has a completely insignificant role, so it is almost never discussed in the family environment (Chart 9).

### 9. What is the role religion plays for you personally?

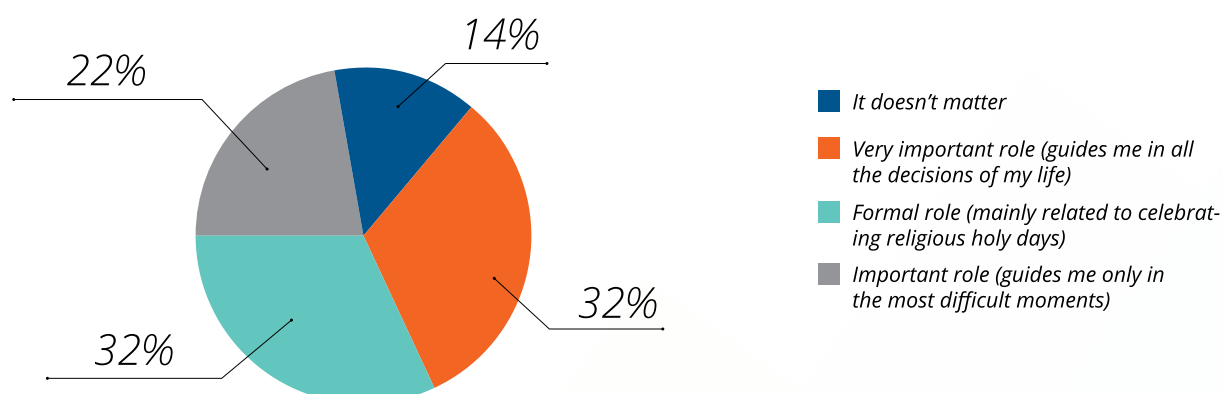
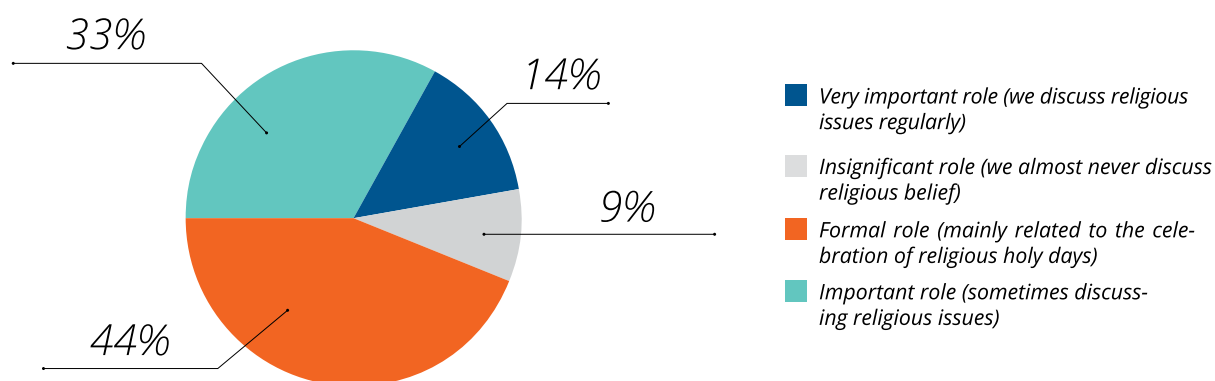


Chart 9: The position that religious faith has in the family and the individual.

### 9/1. What place does religion take in your family?



Grafiku 9/1: The place of religion in your family and in your self.

**Family role in the religious orientation of young people.** Literature on religious tolerance and harmony considers the family to be the key social institution especially in educating young people with values of religious tolerance, respect for diversity of religious and cultures. Young people were asked about the role their family has played in religious orientation and the practice of religion. The majority of young people surveyed seem to consider the family's opinion in their decisions about their religious choices. Therefore, almost 1 out of 2 respondents stated that despite their desire in making their own choices about religion, they still consult their families. Meanwhile, 1 out of 5 young people declared that family plays a crucial role in their religious orientation (*Chart 10*). However, a significant percentage of around 35%, acknowledged that family plays no role as they make decisions independently. The latter can be explained to some extent by respondents' age, which can often be characterized by a sense of independence from family. However, such data underscore family's importance in educating young people about values of religious harmony and diversity of opinion on this issue.

### 10. The family has played a crucial role in my religious orientation:

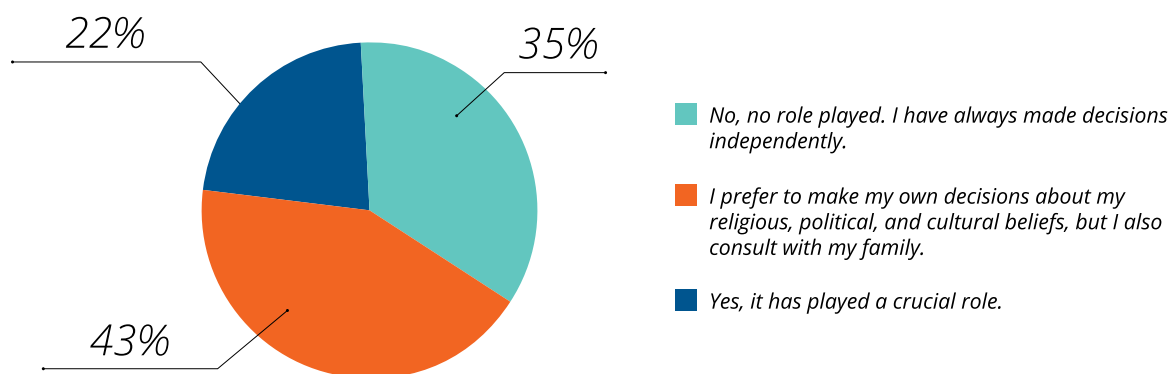


Chart 10: Family role in religious orientation of young people.

***Discrimination and non-discrimination on grounds of religious belief in Albania according to young people.*** As a family extension, the community we live has a significant impact in shaping our religious identity, as well as our approach to religious diversity and harmony. Participants in the survey were asked a series of questions about the relation between individual religious beliefs and their approach to community and society. This set of questions aimed to understand how young people see their role within society in general and their community in particular.

Equal treatment and non-discrimination on grounds of religious affiliation appear to be prevalent among respondents, as the overwhelming majority (86%) declared they are treated the same regardless of their religion. This figure is a strong indicator of religious harmony, something Albania is well known internationally. This role has often been used as an example to follow at international level. Only 6% of respondents think that they are not treated equally because of their religion (*Chart 11*). Although this is a relatively small figure, it is worthwhile to further analyze the reasons for such different treatment due to religious belief, especially of the types of different treatment.

**11. We are treated the same at community/society regardless of our beliefs:**

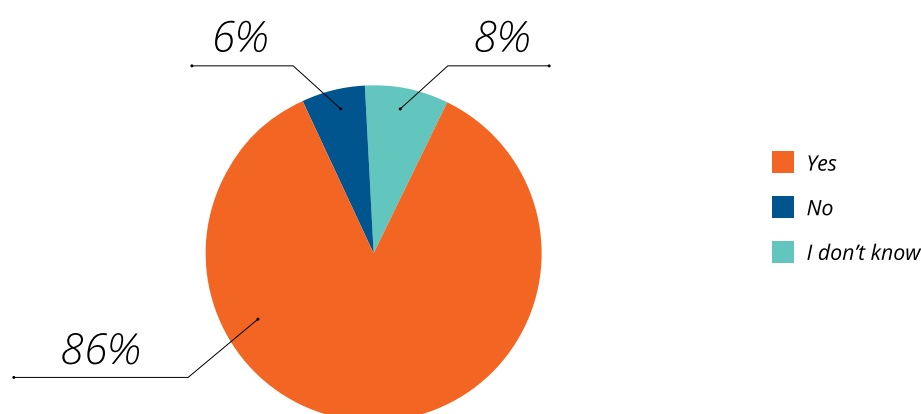


Chart 11: Discrimination and non-discrimination on grounds of religious belief in Albania according to young people.

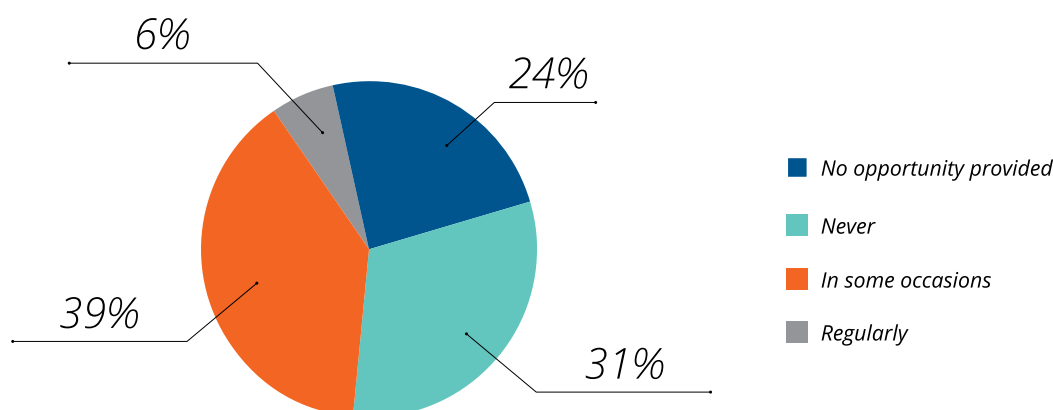
***Youth participation in activities related to religious freedom.*** During the last years, there has been a significant increase in awareness raising activities. These activities have included youth from rural communities and national activities related to religious harmony. They also aim in general to tackle and prevent the spread of radicalism and violent extremism in Albania. A number of civil society organizations throughout the country have undertaken various initiatives in the last 5 years to address these phenomena.<sup>40</sup> To understand the extent of these activities in this realm and the respondents' participation, a series of questions were asked about the number of activities organized in communities and schools.

In terms of prevalence of debates and activities on religious freedom, almost 40%, or most of the youth, state that they have participated in activities of this kind in some

<sup>40</sup> See, Hide, E. & Llubani, M. (2018, July). *The Role of Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism in Albania*. Tirana: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

cases. This is a positive trend in the work that civil society organizations, schools and public institutions have undertaken to raise the level of information and to foster as much discussion as possible about religious identity and harmony. However, it should be noted that a large proportion of respondents, nearly 1 in 4 of them, stated that they had not yet been given the opportunity, despite their willingness to participate in such activities. Meanwhile, 31% stated that they have never participated in these activities (*Chart 12*).

***In my local community I have participated in debates/activities related to religious freedom:***

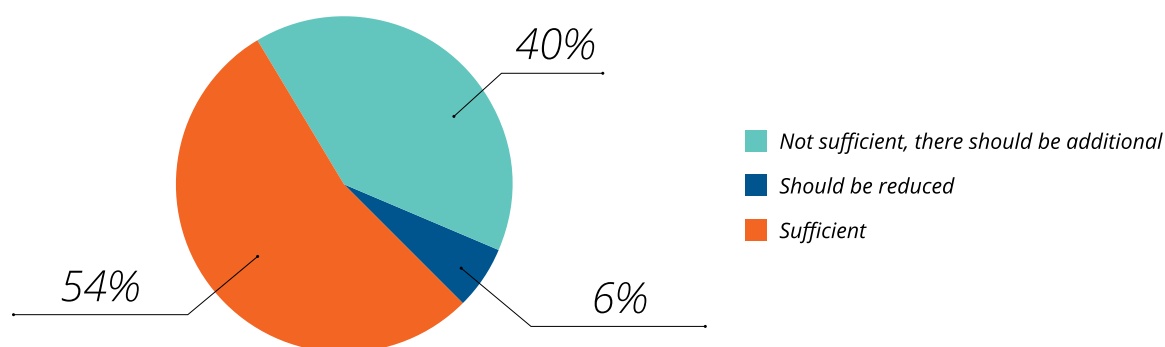


*Chart 12: Youth participation in activities related to religious freedom.*

The data indicate that there is still a need for continued initiatives by all stakeholders involved in youth education in communities, to promote social cohesion and broader discussions. These discussions should be extended beyond school premises and include the role of religion in Albanian society, and what characteristics are needed to promote religious harmony, respect for religious freedom, and diversity of opinion in community.

***The need for awareness-raising activities on religious freedom and human rights.*** Asked whether the current level of activities in their communities is sufficient to address the subject of religious harmony, more than half said they are satisfied with the current level of community engagement. Meanwhile, 40% noticed that these activities should increase, while only 6% think that they should decrease (*Chart 12/1*). This again demonstrates a need to broaden public discussions on religious affiliation, on the scale of religious practice among youth, and on the level of religious harmony among them.

***12/1. Do you think that activities in your community related to religious freedom and human rights, commonly are:***



*Chart 12/1: The need for awareness-raising activities on religious freedom and human rights.*

**Do you agree with mixed marriage (interfaith marriage) between people of different religions?** Marriages between people of different religions are often regarded by social science scholars as the “last taboo” of relationships between different groups. For this reason, approaches to these marriages are often considered the best indicators of social integration of different groups within a society. According to recent studies, similarity in religious values and beliefs makes a marriage work.<sup>41</sup>

Although official statistics on interfaith marriages are lacking, various sources indicate that the phenomenon is acceptable and is thought to be widespread throughout the country. The combination of religious pluralism in the country, along with the approach towards religion under the communist regime, may explain the strong tradition of religious tolerance and therefore why interfaith marriages are common.<sup>42</sup> For example, a 2009 article indicates “interfaith marriages between Albanians are so common that it is no news anymore.”<sup>43</sup>

These hypotheses are also reflected in the survey findings, as the overwhelming majority of young people, respectively 88% of them, state that they fully agree with mixed interfaith marriages (88%). However, even though to a very small extent, it should not be ignored that 6% of respondents stated they would disagree with the mixed interfaith marriages. The remaining 6% stated they do not know.

**The importance of religious belief in contrast to love of your partner.** Survey data show that 11% of respondents agree that for a partner, religion might be more important than love (Chart 13). However, it is interesting to note that 1 in 4 respondents prefer not to answer this question, which creates room for further discussion about the reasons for this choice. One reason for this result may be the young age of the respondents, who may be considered as very young to take such a step as marriage and do not know how they would react to such a decision in the future. However, more than half, about 64% of respondents, state that religious affiliation has no more importance than interpersonal and sentimental relationships between the two partners.

**13. Do you agree with inter-religious marriage?**

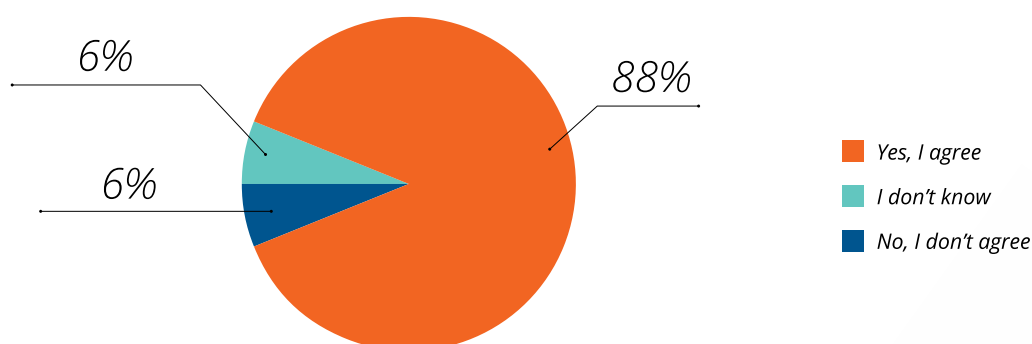


Chart 13: Do you agree with inter-religious marriage?

41 Niekerk, V. J. & Verkuyten, M. (2018). *Interfaith marriage attitudes in Muslim majority countries: A multilevel approach*. The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 28:4, 257-270, DOI: 10.1080/10508619.2018.1517015

42 Australian Government (2010). *Country Advice: Albania*. Online: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4f40da0b2.pdf> (parë për herë të fundit më 22/06/2019).

43 Likmeta, B 2009, “Albania Muslims Can Wear Headscarf In New IDs”, Balkan Insight, 23 January <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/16183/> (last accessed on 11/05/2019).

### 13/1. Do you think religion is more important than the love for your partner?

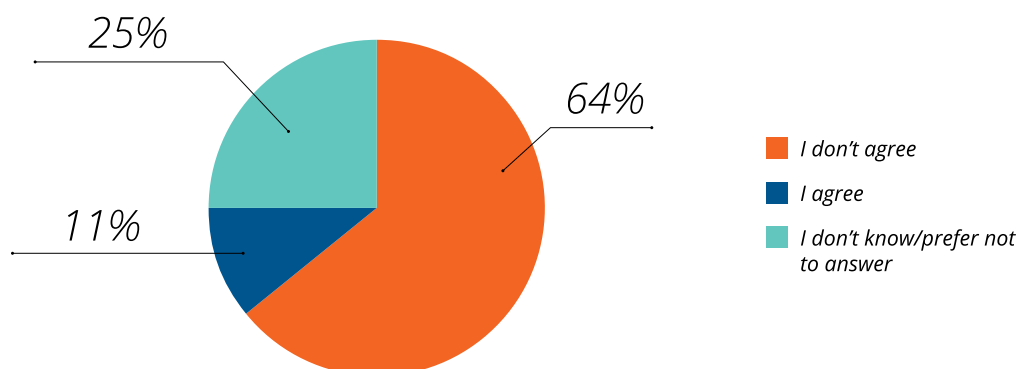


Chart 13/1: The importance of religious belief in contrast to the love for your partner.

**The role of religion and its truths.** A number of questions were asked to measure and evaluate the attitudes of youth regarding the tolerance and acceptance of other religions. First, they were presented with a series of assertions asking them to choose the one that most closely aligned with their opinion. Thus, it turned out that 1 out of 2 young individuals think that all religions lead to the same God and that differences from one another are simply a consequence of the circumstances and contexts in which people live (*Chart 14*). This approach, which represents half of the youth surveyed, shows a pluralistic, accepting and generally tolerant view of other religious and generally tolerant beliefs. The second largest group of respondents believes in genuine dialogue between different religions and their ability to enrich one another. Meanwhile, it turns out that about 1 out of 10 respondents (or 11%) display a relatively intolerant tendency, expressing the belief that “their religious faith is the only truth compared to other beliefs”.

### 14. Which of the following statements would be most appropriate?

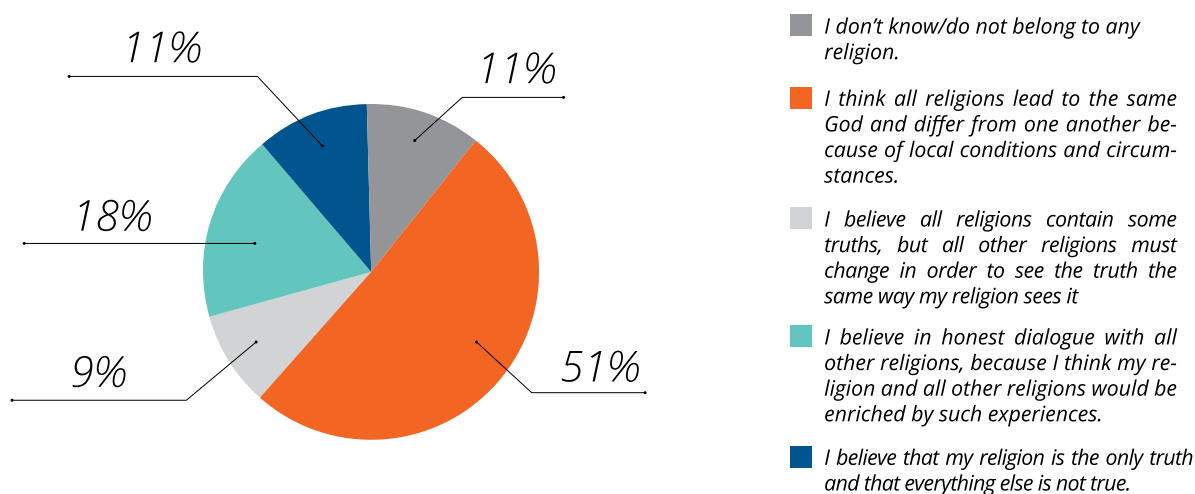


Chart 14: The role of religion and its truths.



Although the majority embraces religious harmony and tolerance, there is another group, nearly 20% of respondents, who either see their religion as the only truth (11%), or state that all other religions should adopt the truth of the religion supported by the respondent (9%). This finding makes it even more important to work with young people to address the prejudice and misinformation that often occur between them, both when practicing their religious beliefs and when they are passive believers of a particular religion. Continued work with religious leaders of all faiths in Albania, especially the moderate ones, becomes even more important to address the misinformation and misperceptions that sometimes occur among young people. According to Mr. Skënder Bruçaj, former Head of Albanian Muslim Community, their priority has been to increase the capacities of Islamic clerics to understand and prevent the dissemination of any doctrinal deformation of the Islamic faith in Albania.<sup>44</sup>

Even though the latter are not a sufficient condition to lead to radicalism and eventually violent extremism, they are nonetheless hallmarks that need to be addressed at an early stage.

**Young people's beliefs about individual freedom and religious values.** Another set of assertions was made available to respondents to analyze their attitudes about individual choices on belonging to a particular religious faith. As may be seen from the chart below, the overwhelming majority of respondents, about 71%, believe that the most important thing in life is individual freedom and that people should be free to believe in what they want. This figure reflects the prevalence of values of religious tolerance and harmony in Albania. Furthermore, another significant group of 16% thinks that people do not necessarily have to live by some strictly religious values. Although not in large numbers, a group of respondents think that people cannot follow all the principles of individual freedom, but they should rather follow the principles of a sacred text (13%) while respecting religious beliefs of others at the same time (*Chart 15*). Although we do not have a comparative basis with other years to control for a change in the percentage of those who think in these terms, it may be supposed that fluctuations in Albanian relations with religion since the fall of the communist regime reflect the increased percentage of those who would prefer to follow religious principles by sacrificing where necessary the principles of individual freedom and choice.

**15. With which of the following statements do you identify mostly?**

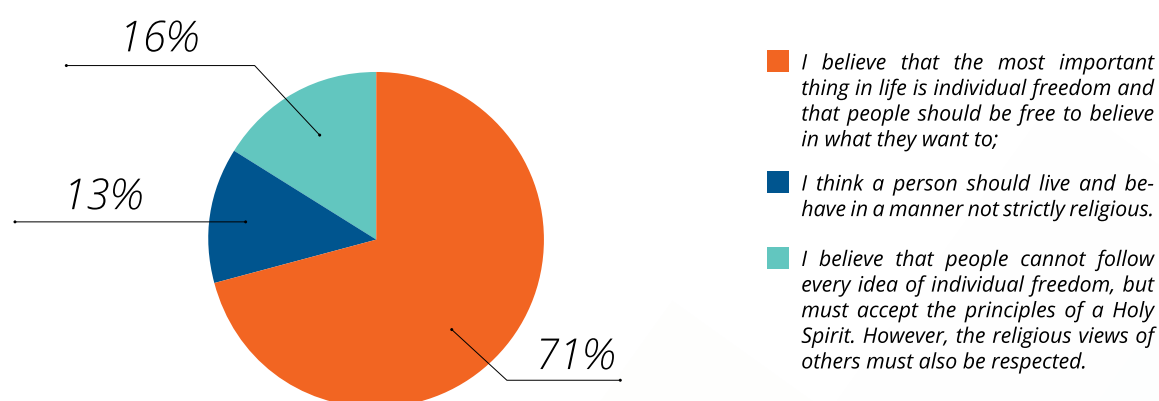


Chart 15: Young people's beliefs about individual freedom and religious values.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Mr. Skender Bruçaj, Theologian and Lecturer at Bedër University, former Head of the Albanian Muslim Community.



**Youth challenges in community.** The biggest problems faced by young people, both in rural and urban areas, are manifold and present a challenge not only to policymaking but also to solving them in practice. Young people were surveyed on what are the most pressing issues they face in the community setting and, to a large extent they identified economic difficulties as the biggest concern. In fact, nearly half of respondents think this is the biggest problem they face. Second, but closely related to the first concern, is the lack of future perspective, which may also explain the rising trends of youth emigration in recent years. Meanwhile, the lack of religious orientation is identified by only 3% of young people as a problem they face in their community (*Chart 16*).

**16. According to your opinion, what is the most significant concern facing young people in the community of the town/village where you live?**

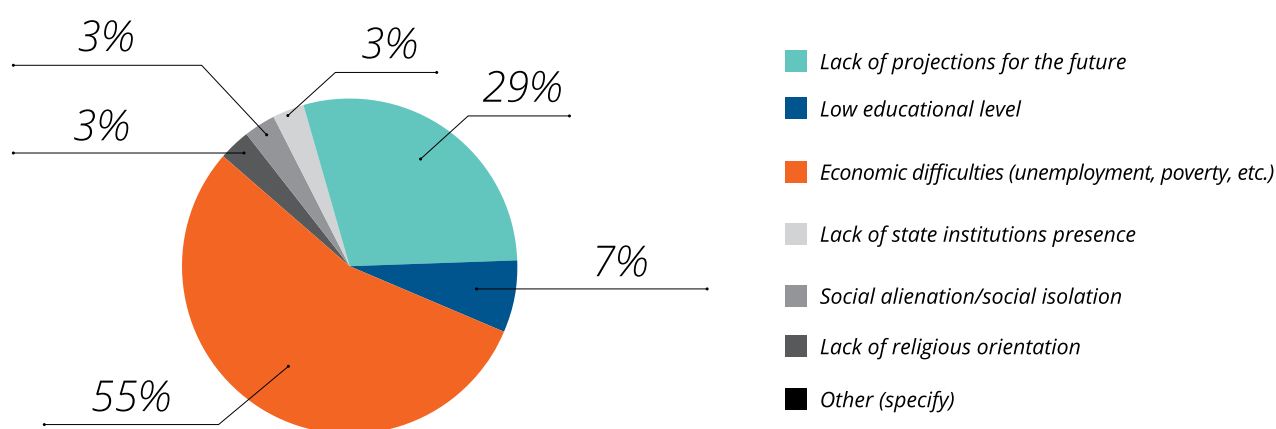


Chart 16: Youth challenges in community.

These findings broadly reflect and confirm findings from other reports and surveys conducted with young Albanians nationally. Therefore, a study on Albanian youth conducted in 2018 shows that respondents are more pessimistic about the future of the country and society at large. Almost half of respondents expect the situation to improve, yet 23% argued that nothing will change, while 15% declared that things will get worse. Similar to the findings of this survey, the main problems identified by youth include the fear of being poor, unemployed and negatively impacted by corruption.<sup>45</sup> Pessimism about the prospects for the future and the economic difficulties identified in this survey are generally reflected in other findings from studies conducted on youth.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Çela, A. & Kamberi, G. (2019). *Albanian Youth 2018/2019*. p. 18. Online: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/15257.pdf> (last accessed on 24/06/2019)

<sup>46</sup> Civic Resistance (2019). *National survey on youth behavior and issues on the political system*. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

### III. EDUCATION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN SCHOOLS

Educating young people about human rights and fundamental freedoms is an essential part of the Western education process, with increasing attention to religious freedom, especially in the 2000s. Albania is not an exception to this approach, as seen in the growing attention to include religious freedom, knowledge of religious beliefs, etc. in the educational process. However, such an approach towards youth education has not been studied in depth before. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to explore in depth the perceptions of young people about education on religious freedom in schools. This is accomplished by measuring the level of community activity, mainly in high schools and universities (as the main target groups); the debates on religious freedoms, initiatives to promote these freedoms; youth information sources on religious belief; young people's perception of the role of religions in Albanian history and Albanian identity; etc.

Equal treatment regardless of religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc. in school is an obligation for any society. Unfortunately though, these environments often turn into carriers of bullying and discrimination because of different affiliations, including religious ones. Therefore, equal treatment and addressing negative phenomena is essential. Also, identifying these issues in the educational system is important in order to design effective interventions.<sup>47</sup>

**Equal treatment in school premises.** One section of the Survey Questionnaire on youth was dedicated to freedom of religious faith and treatment of various issues related to religion and youth. As can be noticed in *Graph 17* below, the overwhelming majority of young people surveyed state that they are equally treated at school regardless of their religious beliefs (91%). However, though a small percentage, there is one group that affirms the opposite. Given such data, it would be efficient to design targeted initiatives specifically for this group of young people in order to better understand the reasons for differentiation, its origin and where differentiated treatment emanate from. This would pave the way to undertaking various interventions to minimize such a phenomenon.

#### 17. We are treated the same at school regardless of our beliefs.

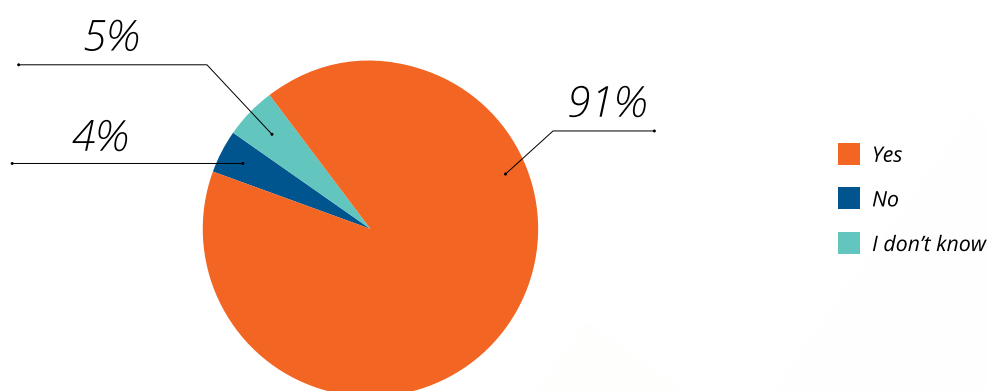


Chart 17: Equal treatment in school premises.

<sup>47</sup> Bullivant, S. (2018). *Europe's Young Adults and Religion. Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-2016)*. UK: Benedict XVI Center for Religion and Society.

**Freedom of expression of religious beliefs.** Young respondents were asked about freely expressing their beliefs and opinions in school and more broadly in their community. The chart below shows there is a shrinking number of respondents who state that they are completely confident that they do not feel prejudiced when expressing their religious identity in school and in society. Thus, 77% of them agreed with this statement. Almost one out of five respondents (or 18%) have faced episodes where they felt prejudiced about expressing an opinion or thought about religious belief (*Chart 18*). As a result, this group states that it partially agrees with the statement that they are free to express their religious beliefs. In a much smaller proportion, only 5% of respondents feel completely pressured and prejudiced about expressing their views on religious beliefs.

**18. I can freely express my religious beliefs at school and in society and do not feel prejudiced. (Do you agree with this statement?)**

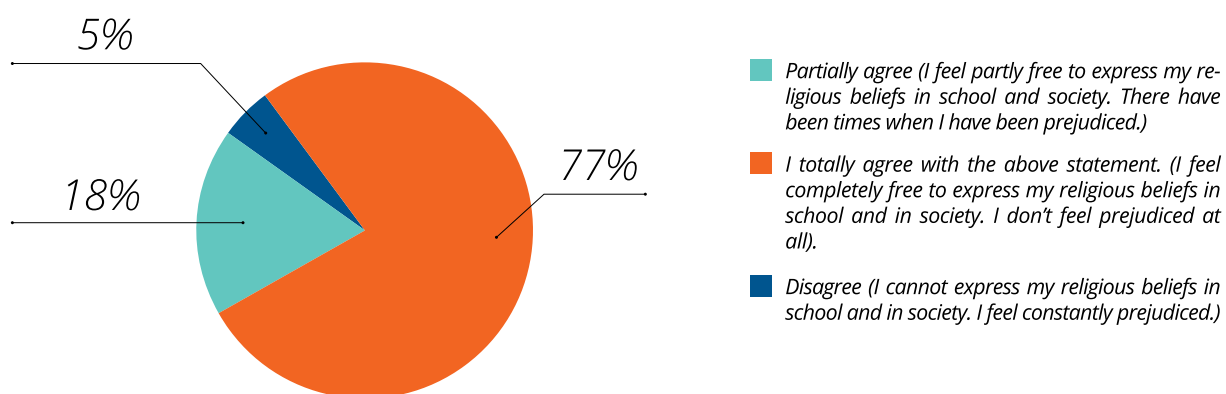


Chart 18: Freedom of expression of religious beliefs

**Developing debates about religious freedom in educational institutions.** Almost half of the young people surveyed said they had at least one activity or debate on religious freedom in school settings. Furthermore, 8% of them stated that this is usually the case in their school premises. This indicates an increased focus in recent years on issues such as bullying, radicalism and religious extremism in Albania. However, a rather significant number of about 32% respondents noted that they have never had such activities in schools or participated in similar activities (*Chart 19*). Yet, a small number of 14% stated that they are not aware of such activities at school, implying a lack of participation.

Addressing issues of religious faith is considered an important responsibility of schools as they prepare young people to live in a society of diversity of thought and origin.<sup>48</sup> However, it should be noted that the important role played by the family and religious organizations should not be ignored. The latter also have the responsibility to educate future generations. Working together can therefore promote mutual understanding by showing respect for the rights of individuals.<sup>49</sup>

48 Collins-Mayo, S. (2012). *Youth and Religion. An International Perspective*. Theo-Web. Zeitschrift fur Religionpadagogik, Nr. 11, H. 1, ff. 80-94.

49 OSCE. (2007). *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religious Beliefs in Public Schools*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true> (last accessed on 29/06/2019)

The benefits of dealing with religious issues in schools are widely recognized by various institutions. For example, according to the *“Toledo Principles”* prepared by OSCE on educating young people about religious freedom, knowledge of different religions is essential as they:

- 1- Further strengthen respect for freedom of belief, promote democratic citizenship and promote social diversity, thereby enhancing social cohesion;
- 2- Can potentially reduce conflicts based on lack of information about other religions;
- 3- Education on religious freedom is most effective when combined with efforts to promote respect for the rights of others, even when there is disagreement over religious approaches.<sup>50</sup>

**19. We have carried out debates in school on religious freedom:**

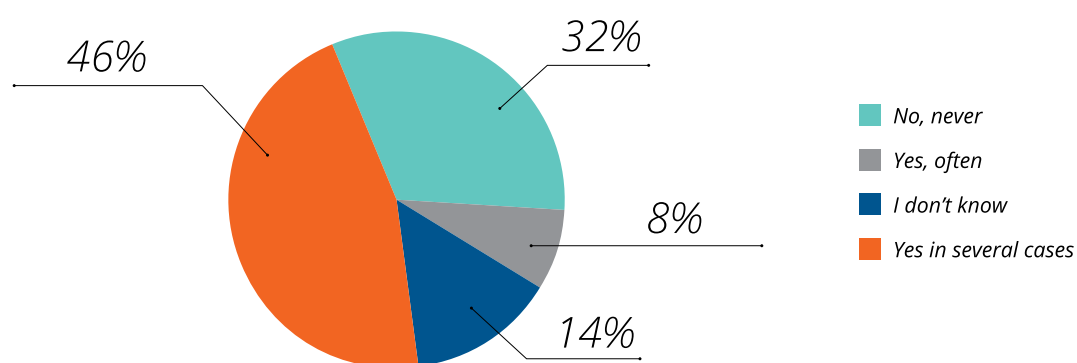


Chart 19: Develop debates about religious freedom in educational institutions.

**Discussions and debates on religious freedom in educational institutions.** To survey respondents, discussions and debates on religious freedom were conducted mainly on other social subjects in 41% of the cases. To 15% of respondents, such discussions were mostly part of extra-curricular activities, while this was not the case for 37% of them. It should be noted that only in 7% of cases, such discussions took place within a religious-themed subject, which is consistent with the current lack of religious education as part of the school curricula (*Chart 20 below*). This also indicates the transient and *ad hoc* nature of addressing this issue in the surveyed schools. While a significant percentage of young people appear to have been exposed to these activities, there still seems to be room for discussion of religious freedom in school curricula.

<sup>50</sup> Idem.

Carrying out discussions and debates on this topic on a regular basis provide other benefits as well. According to a Stanford University study, introducing religious freedom education in the curricula can foster some values such as collaboration and understanding that affect students' further success in other subjects.<sup>51</sup>

Due to the sensitivity of this topic, there can be observed a need to organize regular discussions or to design curriculars. Hence, these discussions should be conducted fairly, accurately and based on serious research. They should be carried out within the framework of respecting human rights, fundamental freedoms and civil values. Those who handle such discussions in school settings should contribute to a school environment that promotes mutual respect and understanding among members of school community.<sup>52</sup>

## 20. Discussions on religious freedom in school have been carried out:

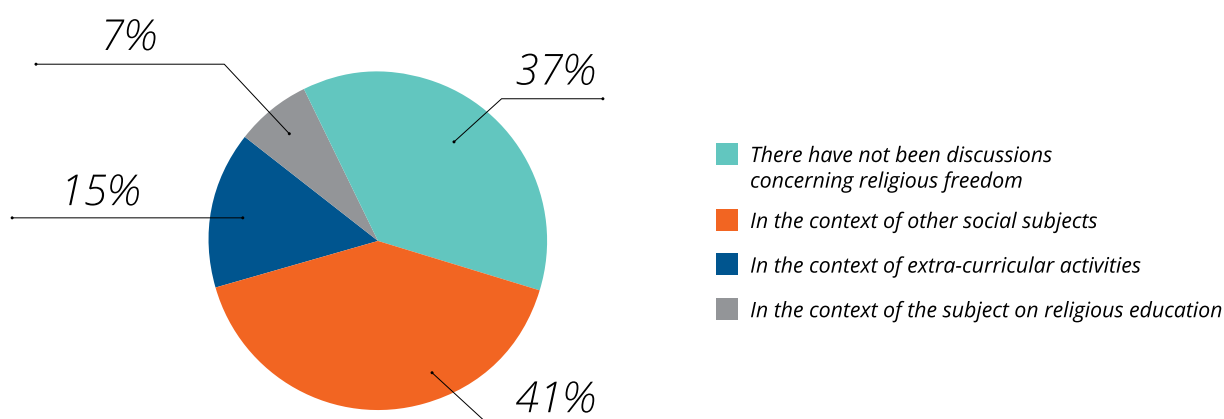


Chart 20: Discussions and debates on religious freedom in educational institutions.

## Should the number of debates on religious freedom in educational institutions increase?

The positive approach and acceptance of regular debates and discussions on religious freedom in schools by students and pupils facilitates further engagement, not only of schools, but also of civil society organizations, in addressing this issue. As a result, the majority of young people surveyed, about 44%, think that debates about religious freedom should be included in the curricula or extra-curricular activities. Meanwhile, 15% think that these debates should not be carried out in their schools at all, supported by 9% of respondents who would like to reduce such activities. From the chart below, it is also worth noting that a significant part of respondents (about 32%) had no idea whether these should increase, decrease or not be developed at all (*Chart 21*). Such ambiguity must be taken into consideration as it demonstrates the need to openly talk to young people in schools about the benefits of discussions and debates on religious freedom and belief.

51 Spector, C. (2018). Religiously engaged adolescents demonstrate habits that help them get better grades, Stanford scholar finds. Stanford Graduate School of Education. <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/religiously-engaged-adolescents-demonstrate-habits-help-them-get-better-grades-stanford-scholar> (last accessed on 29/06/2019).

52 OSCE (2007). *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religious Beliefs in Public Schools*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true> (last accessed on 29/06/2019).

## 21. In my opinion, debates on religious freedom as part of human rights at school:

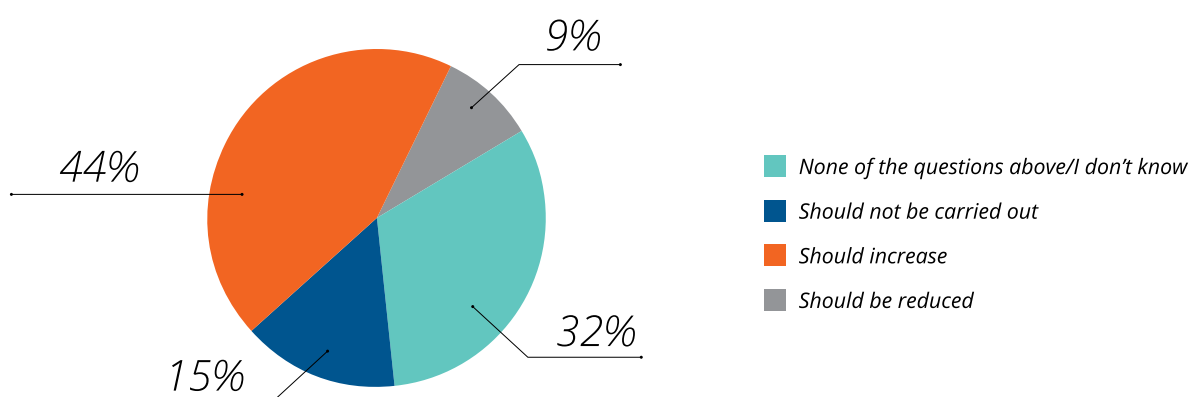


Chart 21: Should the number of debates on religious freedom in educational institutions increase?

**Do religious freedom debates contribute to interfaith harmony?** While the benefits of discussions about religious freedom in schools are well-documented and researched around the world, the chart below shows respondents' acceptance and affinity toward the phenomenon. Almost 40% of respondents declared that discussions about this topic increase their knowledge about interfaith and intercultural harmony at school, supported by the same percentage of respondents (40%) who think that in order to achieve such a result these discussions must be carried out in the right spirit. 1 out of 10 respondents appeared reluctant on the outcomes of such debates. They think that they would not help or seem unsure whether they would lead to better understanding of interfaith and intercultural harmony in their community (Chart 22).

## 22. Do discussions about religious freedoms in schools contribute to increasing your knowledge of inter-religious/interfaith and intercultural harmony?

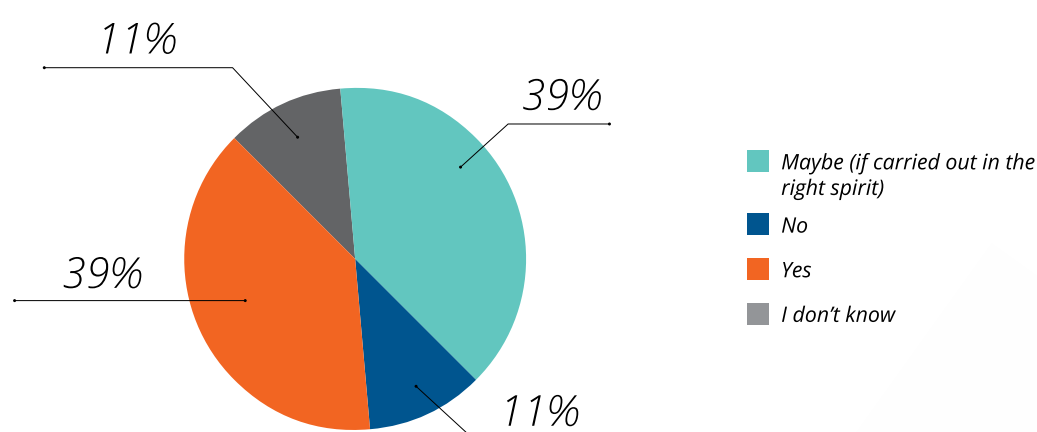


Chart 22: Do religious freedom debates contribute to interfaith harmony?

**Sources of information for youth on religion.** The sources of information that respondents use to obtain information about religion listed in the chart below indicate



that young people are highly focused on relationships with their peers. Hence, 33% of the respondents stated that they are provided with information while discussing with friends. On the other hand, Internet is the second most important source of information, with 20% of respondents using this instrument to obtain and exchange information on religious matters. It is to be noted with concern that school and university are placed last in the hierarchy of sources of information. Consequently, only 11% of respondents use school or university as the main source of information (*Chart 23*). Because 1 out of 5 young people use the Internet as a source of information, it becomes a potential risk for young people's religious misinformation or their manipulation and further radicalization, exposing them to extremist groups developing their propaganda online.

**23. What sources of information do you use in general concerning issues of religious belief?**

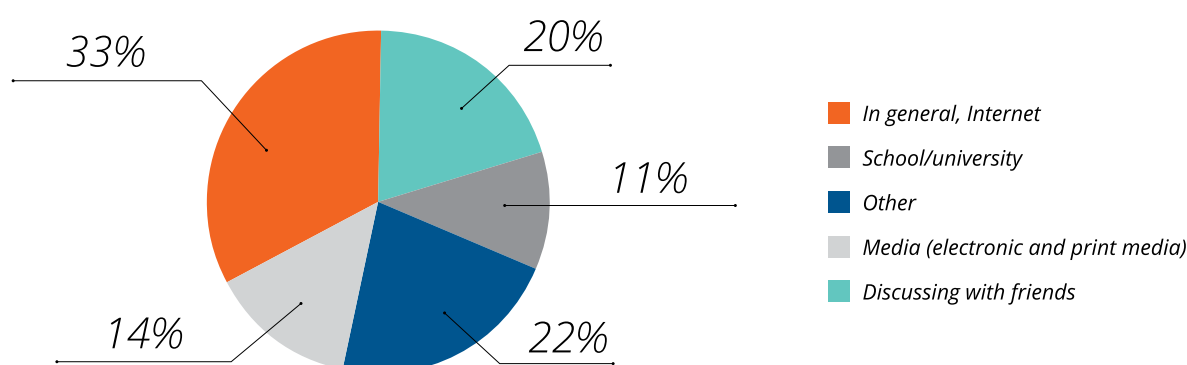


Chart 23: Sources of information for young people on the religion.

The minimal use of the education system/schools as a source of information should serve to further identify and understand the gaps that need to be addressed in order for the school to become an open and valuable arena for discussions on religious issues. As deliberated earlier in this chapter, the role of schools and academic environments is crucial for fostering values of respect for human rights and religious harmony among young people.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, the design of innovative activities in school and university settings would increase the importance of this institution in discussions about religious beliefs. As shown in the chart below, Internet in general is the most popular form of education and commonly used by youth. As for Internet and interpersonal relationships, media's ranking as a source of information remains poor, with only 14% of respondents stating that they use this tool to improve their knowledge on various religious beliefs.

**Young people's level of information about religious beliefs.** Based on an individual assessment of the level of knowledge, most respondents (one in two) feel that they have sufficient information on religious beliefs in general. A significant proportion of nearly 34% had partial information, indicating the need for more targeted efforts toward activities and discussions on religious freedom and related topics. Meanwhile, a smaller percentage considers that there is a complete lack of information and one portion stated that there is comprehensive information on religious beliefs, with the latter prevailing. (*Chart 24*).

<sup>53</sup> UNESCO. 2008. Learning to live together: An intercultural and interfaith program for ethics education. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001610/161059E.pdf>. Also refer to: Thorup, C. (2003). *What Works in Building Tolerance Among Balkan Children and Youth*. International Youth Foundation & Balkan Children and Youth Foundation.

## 24. In your judgment, what is the amount of information you have about religious beliefs?

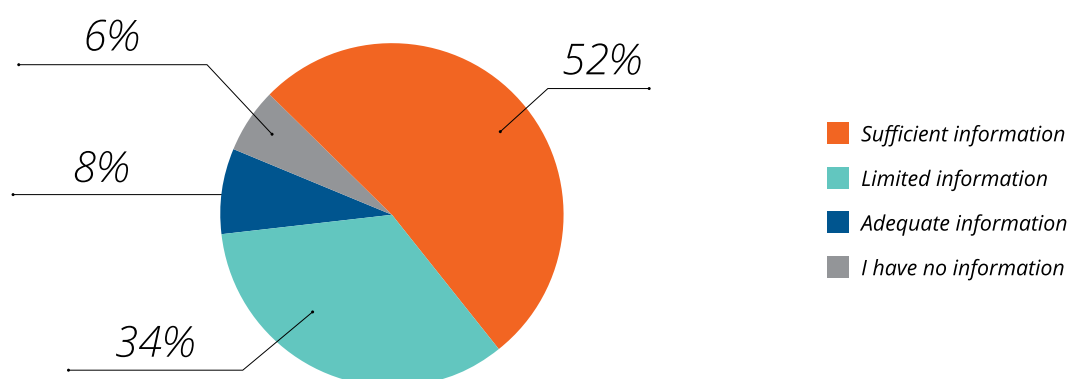


Chart 24: Young people's level of information about religious beliefs.

Religion is an integral part of young people's lives, albeit at different levels. Particularly for young people who are active in the community or through civil society, it is very important to be well informed on religious matters.<sup>54</sup> Given the plurality of religious beliefs, knowing the characteristics, practices and rituals of different faiths, it is extremely effective and important to inform young people and the community at large. Furthermore, a level of sensitivity to religious diversity in a particular group might create a positive and motivating approach and promote youth curiosity about different religious practices and beliefs of others. This can help promote mutual respect and a level of understanding while helping to overcome prejudice related to different religious beliefs.<sup>55</sup>

**The role of religious beliefs in the Albanian society.** Respondents' perceptions also tested the widely accepted principle that Albania is a model to follow in terms of religious harmony and coexistence among different groups.

Respondents were asked whether they agree with the statement that in Albania, religion has served to create a culture of peace and mutual understanding. Data from the chart below (*Chart 25*) reveal that the majority of respondents agree with this statement. So, nearly 40% of them agreed, while 27% fully agreed. Only 9% of respondents disagreed with this statement. Exporting these principles from Albania to other countries seems to have had an impact on young people's perception of the harmony and culture of peace in the country. Highlighting Albania's example as a good practice of religious harmony by national and international media may have had an impact on young people's perception of this harmony. Such a view creates the space for stimulating open discussions and debates on religious affiliation and religious freedom in school settings in the country.

<sup>54</sup> Turjacinin, V. & Zezelj, I. & Maloku, E. & Brankovic, M. (2017, September). *Taming Conflicting Identities: Searching for Youth Values in the Western Balkans. Në Changing Youth Values in Southeast Europe: Beyond Ethnicity*. Trost, T. P. & Mandic, D. (ed.), Oxford, UK: Routledge, ff. 151-176.

<sup>55</sup> Council of Europe. *Religion and Belief*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/religion-and-belief> (last accessed on 25/06/2019)



**25. Religious beliefs in Albania have served to create a culture of peace and mutual understanding in the society.**

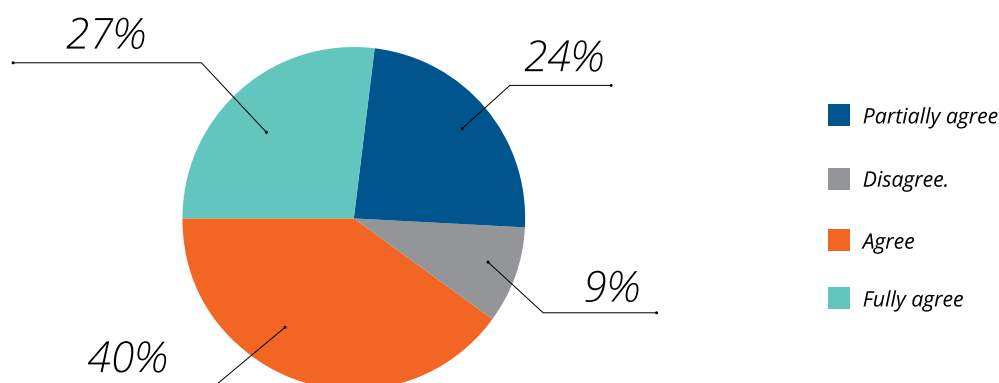


Chart 25: The role of religious beliefs in the Albanian society.

**Youth perception of religious coexistence in Albania.** The existence of religious harmony, however, should not be taken for granted and as unalterable. On the contrary, maintaining these balances requires constant work to ensure that the values of coexistence and religious harmony remain unaffected, especially among youth. Therefore, respondents were asked about the improvement or deterioration of religious harmony values in Albania in recent years. As may be seen from the chart below (Chart 26), about 66% of the respondents stated that these values do not risk being harmed as they are deeply rooted in the Albanian culture and history, and in the last 5 years they have improved even, (47 and 19% of respondents respectively). A significant percentage (24%) didn't provide an answer to this question and are unclear about the situation in Albania. Meanwhile, 10% thought that these values have deteriorated. Although not a very high percentage, it is important to further understand how and why, according to some young people, these values have deteriorated. To that end, better education on issues of religious freedom could help inform and create a stronger idea of the situation of religious harmony and coexistence in the country.

**26. Do you think that religious harmony and coexistence in Albania:**

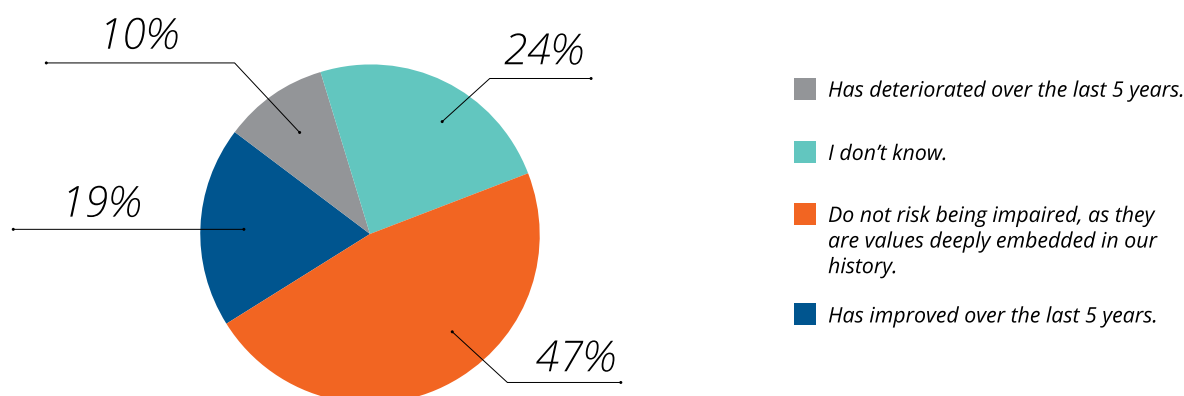


Chart 26: Youth perception of religious coexistence in Albania.

## IV. RADICALIZATION AND EXTREMISM AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

**Perception of young people about extremism and radicalism.** Specifically regarding the understanding that young people have accumulated about extremism, it turns out that one out of four young people does not understand the difference between extremism and radicalism, while about 75% of them understand this difference completely or partially (*Chart 27*). This proves that despite numerous youth awareness initiatives about these phenomena, a substantial part of them still fails to properly understand them. However, this may also be related to the scarce interest that young people have in some topics that they may consider secondary among challenges and difficulties they face in their daily lives. Such problems are also encountered in analyses by international organizations, such as the OSCE, which tend to use a comparative approach to this issue<sup>56</sup>

**27. Do you agree with the statement: “Based on the information I have, I understand the difference between religious extremism and religious radicalism.”**

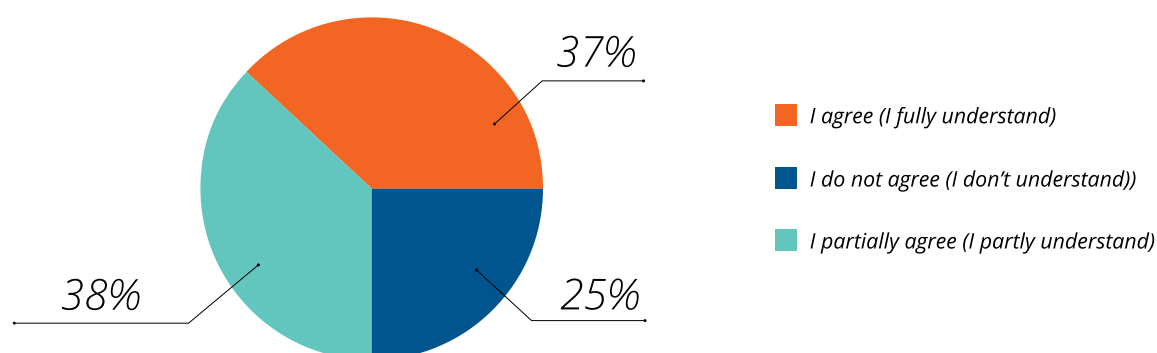


Chart 27: Young people's perception of extremism and radicalism.

**The Role of Conversations among Youth concerning Religious Belief.** Regarding discussions among young people, it turns out that religion doesn't take up an important place in discussions between them, or more broadly in young people's discourse in education institutions. About 60% of respondents admitted that they do not talk often with their friends about religious belief matters, much less persuade them to convert to their faith (*Chart 28 below*). This is an expected result, initiated by the general indifference shown by young people toward issues of religious belief and the lack of incentives to discuss them, except for the context of historical approaches to harmony and religious co-existence in Albania. However, 1 out of 10 young people (or 12% of them) admitted that they show greater interest in discussions on religious beliefs, or have tried to persuade their friends to embrace their beliefs. This indicator could turn out to be disturbing, because trying to convince others about the superiority of a certain religious belief is one of the signs of the presence of radical religious beliefs/ideas. Such cases include recruiting young people into violent extremism and inciting them to take action against the constitutional order of a country, or to encourage them to join combat in other countries, both of which constitute a criminal offense, following amendments to the Criminal Code (see above).

<sup>56</sup> See OSCE (2015). *Working with Youth for Youth: Protection against Radicalization*. Belgrade, Serbia.

**28. Do you agree with the statement: "I often talk with my friends in school about religious matters and try to persuade them to convert to my religion?"**

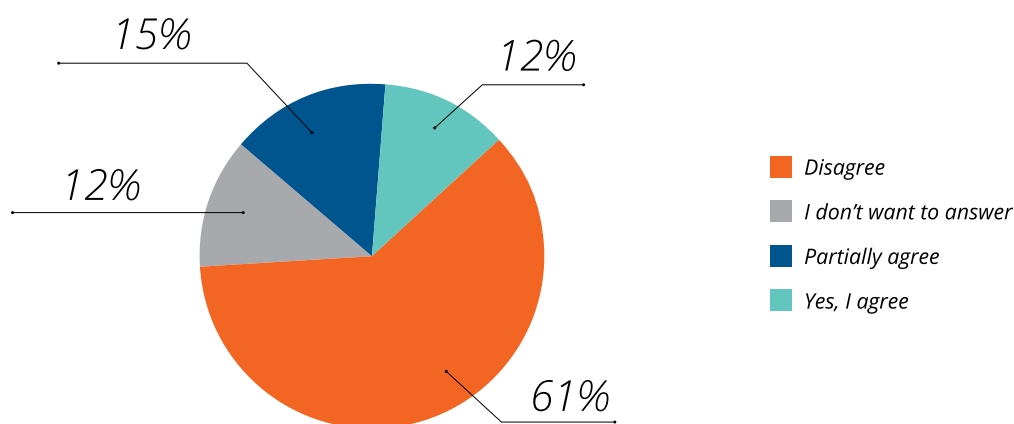


Chart 28: The role of conversation among youth concerning religious belief.

**Religious clothing/dress in schools, universities or other public institutions.** Another question about young people's religious tolerance and their relationship with institutions is related to their attitude toward religious attire in schools, universities and other public institutions (*Chart 29 below*). Not only in Albania but also in Western countries, this has been one of the largest debates in the last two or three decades, which has included not only interest groups, but also institutions, intellectuals and political parties. This debate in some countries has concluded with legislative changes that have also imposed restrictions on specific religious attire. Such changes may include by-laws banning the use of hijab for women in some Western countries, as well as banning certain religious rituals in universities in France.

**29. Do you agree that schools, universities, or other public institutions have regulations in place that prohibit religious clothing (head scarf, cross necklace, hat or other religious rituals)?**

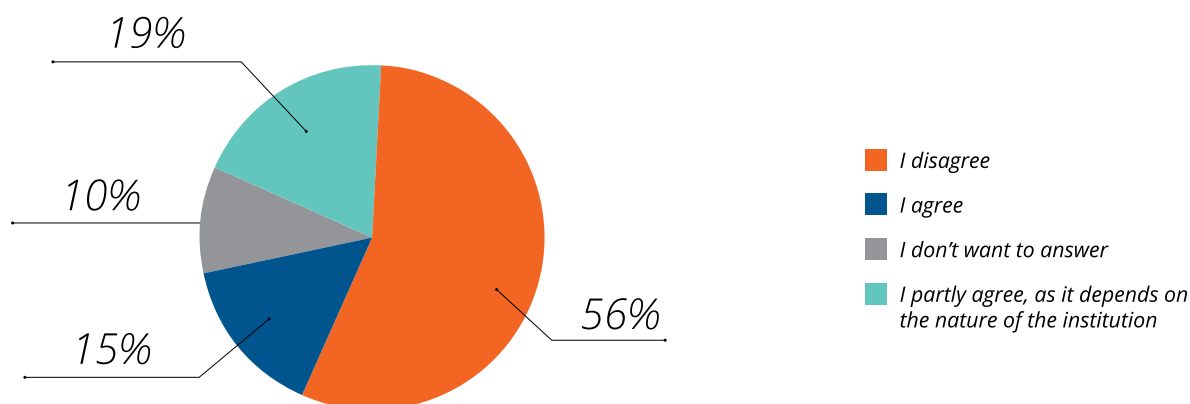


Chart 29: Religious clothing/dress in schools, universities or other public institutions.

In Albania, 56% of young people surveyed generally disagreed with the presence of special regulations prohibiting use of religious clothing in educational or public institutions, which proves a relatively high level of tolerance towards the religious part of the population. However, it is difficult to conclude whether this tolerance is genuine or it derives from youth's indifference to the religious sensibilities of certain communities. On the other hand, nearly one-third of young people (or 34%) expressed complete or partial approval of such regulations, which indicates that the risk of dissemination of religious intolerance may increase in future, in relation to the intensity of presence of these issues in public discourse and the media.

**Presence of religious radicalism in school/university.** Asked about the presence of religious radicalism in educational institutions, 46% of young people (or approximately half of them) do not know how to answer the question (*Chart 30 below*). This primarily indicates that there is an evident lack of information on this issue among young people. Also, such data proves that media campaigns and public discourse, intensified in recent years, have not had proper effects in terms of raising public awareness, especially among young people, related to the typology and manifestation of the phenomenon. On the other hand, it may be argued that the awareness campaigns of civil society organizations, although multiplied in recent years, are still far from achieving consolidated results regarding the identification of manifestation of religious radicalism. This applies especially to educational institutions, where the attention of civil society and state institutions has focused for years.

On the other hand, 45% of the respondents declare that they are not aware of the presence of this phenomenon in their educational institutions, while only 1 out of 10 (or about 9% of respondents) is aware of the presence of this phenomenon. The last indicator, though minor, is disturbing and needs deeper and targeted research to determine whether young people understand or misunderstand the presence of signs of religious radicalism among young people and identify "hotspots".

### 30. Are you aware of the growth of religious radicalism in your school (or university)?

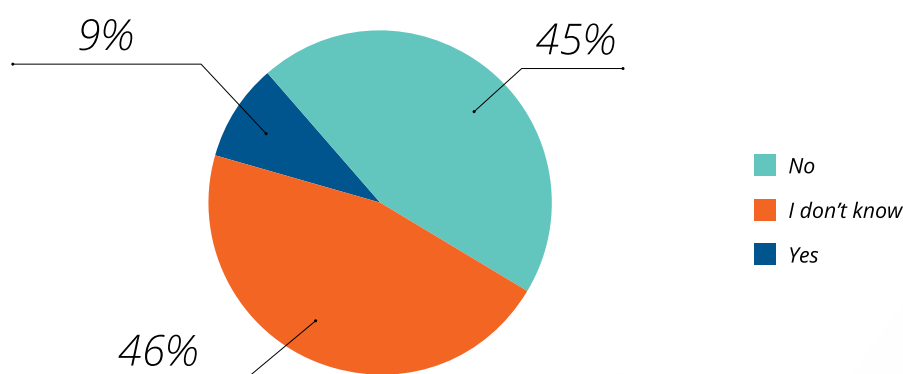


Chart 30: Are you aware of the presence of religious radicalism in your school/university)?

**Young people's perception of the level of risk of radicalism and extremism.** One out of four young people (or nearly 23% of respondents) stated that religious radicalism is not a problem or a challenge for the communities they live in, classifying its risk at "1" on a scale of "1" to "10". Also, 16% said the concern is average, or classified as "5", while only 3% said that they were very concerned about the presence of the phenomenon in their communities. This indicates that this phenomenon is relatively secondary, compared to the socio-economic challenges that young people in Albania face today, such as unemployment and lack of prospects (challenges that they rank at the top of the list of concerns that they face). Also, the answer to this question is influenced by not knowing these phenomena as shown in Chart 28. We noticed that 63% of interviewed individuals lack knowledge about the phenomena of radicalism and extremism and do not recognize the difference between them. Consequently, they find it difficult to perceive the level of risk of their spread to schools or universities. We are convinced of this difficulty even when we look at the outcome of the following question (*Chart 31*).

**31. In your perception, does religious radicalism in the community of your city/village/district constitute a problem/concern/challenge? If so, please rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is the minimum and 10 is the maximum).**

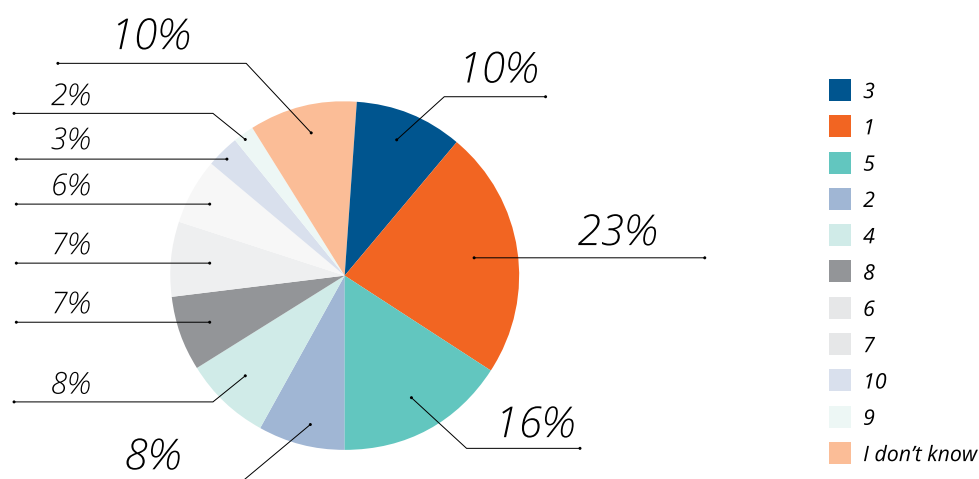


Chart 31: Young people's perception of the level of risk of radicalism and extremism.

**Introduction to radicalism and extremism.** The presence of discussions about the phenomenon of religious radicalism intensified during 2012-2017, mainly in public discourse (38% of the respondents admit that this is when they first heard of this phenomenon). This period coincides with the conflicts in Syria and Iraq when information was present throughout the media, together with problems caused by certain Albanian citizens joining these fights. Meanwhile, a significant proportion (36%) have not heard about this phenomenon before or are not aware of it (*Chart 32 below*), which matches their answers regarding recognition of the issue (*Chart 28*).<sup>3</sup>

**32. When did you first hear about the presence of this phenomenon in your social environment or in your community?**

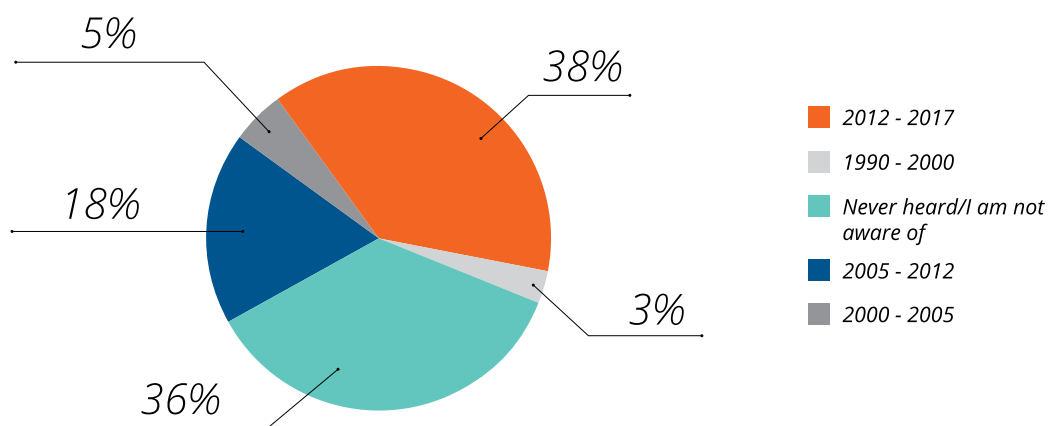


Chart 32: When did you first hear about radicalism and extremism?



## V. FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

Interfaith harmony and coexistence, perceived as understanding and peaceful coexistence, may be considered one of the three most notable cultural values of the Albanian society, next to hospitality and besa (pledge of loyalty). The model of peaceful coexistence and interfaith harmony in Albania has served as an example and distinct value of the Albanian society and as part of Albanian cultural and social identity. The tradition of peaceful interfaith coexistence among Albanians, as a value coming to present day through a centuries-long process of formation, shouldn't be taken for granted. Instead, it must be preserved and cultivated as a national treasure.

A considerable part of Albanian youth still identify themselves with a certain religious faith, although there is an increasing trend of those who declare they do not belong to any religion, leading a secular life. This tendency of Albanian youth is also in line with the trend observed at European level. However, self-identification with a particular religion does not necessarily reflect one's affiliation with that religious faith.

The European Union has encouraged the promotion of religious tolerance and respect for fundamental rights such as freedom of thought, conscience and religion.<sup>57</sup>

However, for many countries, Albania included, implementation in real life is not always successful. Therefore, the promotion of religious rights requires the intervention of decision-making institutions. One such intervention, sanctioned by EU guidelines, is the call for countries to promote respect for diversity and mutual understanding by encouraging broader knowledge about the diversity of religious beliefs within their jurisdiction, through their education system.

- The data in this study show that the overwhelming majority of young people believe that religious freedom is guaranteed to all citizens of Albania.
- Regarding family's role in religious orientation, 1 out of 5 young people stated that it has played a decisive role in this regard. These data emphasize the importance of family in educating young people about the values of religious harmony and diversity of opinions regarding this issue.
- In terms of nondiscrimination on grounds of religious beliefs, the overwhelming majority of young Albanians (86%) stated that they are equally treated regardless of religious beliefs. This is a good indicator of religious harmony for which Albanian society is well known beyond country's borders, a role often used as an example to follow in the international arena.
- In recent years, there has been a significant increase in awareness-raising activities involving young people from rural communities and activities at national level related to religious harmony and the phenomenon of radicalism and violent extremism in Albania.

<sup>57</sup> Council of the European Union, 2013. EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Online: <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/137585.pdf> (last accessed on 11/05/2019)

- However, the survey showed that when young people were asked about their level of knowledge regarding this issue, lack of awareness and information about the phenomenon remains a concern and work still needs to be done.
- One of the findings is related to the rate of acceptance of religiously mixed marriages, whereby 88% of respondents declare that they agree or fully agree with such marriages, which indicates a high level of tolerance and respect for religious beliefs (or indifference to this matter).
- Addressing religious issues is considered as a responsibility of schools in the course of preparing young people to live in a society where there is diversity of thought and background. Students and pupils interviewed for this survey confirmed that discussions and debates on religious freedom were conducted mainly within the context of other social subjects, such as sociology, history, geography, etc.
- The positive approach to and acceptance of regular debates and discussions on religious freedom in schools by students and pupils themselves facilitates further engagement, not only of schools but also of the civil society organizations in addressing these matters.
- Religion is an integral part of young people's lives, although at different levels. It is very important to be well informed about religious beliefs, especially young people who are active in the community or through civil society.
- When it comes specifically to youth's understanding of extremism, it turns out that about 25% of them don't understand the difference between extremism and radicalism.
- In Albania, 56% of the surveyed young people disagreed with the presence of special regulations that prohibit the use of religious-oriented clothing in educational or public institutions in general. This evidences a relatively high degree of tolerance of youth towards the religious segment of population. However, it is difficult to conclude whether this tolerance is genuine or if it derives from youth's disinterest to religious sensitivities of other communities.
- Nevertheless, the existence of religious harmony should not be taken for granted. Maintaining these balances requires constant efforts to ensure that values of coexistence and religious harmony remain unaffected, especially among youth.

## Recommendations

- The deeper understanding of harmony and peaceful coexistence among religious communities model in Albania is a major concern for youth. Therefore, we recommend an encouragement and intensification of school activities aiming to raise awareness about intercultural and interfaith dialogue, and related phenomena, not only on a national level but also on a local one.
- Youth awareness about equality and non-discrimination legislation remains also a challenge, especially the components related to non-discrimination and religious equality.
- Campaigns promoting interfaith harmony and coexistence on social media targeting youth are recommended, based on one of the finding of youth survey, where internet

was identified as an essential source of information for youth when it comes to religion.

- Developing social inclusion programs for minorities at all levels, paying special attention to young believers, in order to strengthen their sense of belonging and equality.
- Using social media campaigns to raise awareness among young members of marginalized communities concerning principles of respect for religious freedom and non-discrimination against religious beliefs.
- In the midterm youth need to increase their capacities to better understand radical behavior and to prevent extremist tendencies in early stages. These activities should extend to the whole pre-university and university education as well. Based on the main findings from the survey and the identified gaps, there is a need to address the lack of information and knowledge through a series of tailored trainings on these issues.
- Furthermore, we suggest the launch of initiatives aiming to increase youth participation not only in local communities, but especially in local government. These initiatives should be framed within National Youth Action Plan (2015-2020). They can contribute in highlighting to policymakers models and examples of religious coexistence among young people.
- Increasing youth participation in local and national civil society organizations, especially through initiatives that reinforce harmony and coexistence models among youth belonging to different religious beliefs. In the long term, this can lead to instilling the concept of harmony and religious coexistence among young activists, turning them into “agents of change”, to promote interfaith harmony within their communities.
- From the education perspective, Schools as Community Centers (SCC) model should be further strengthened by expanding their number. It is also important to identify a nucleus of schools, especially in suburban areas of major cities, where annual programs of raising awareness activities could be piloted among youth and communities. These pilot SCCs should develop all-year-round agendas about harmony and peaceful coexistence among religions in Albania.
- The involvement of all stakeholders, including religious communities, civil society organizations, in designing relevant programs/curricula on religious education in schools.
- There is a need to promote respect for diversity and mutual understanding through the education system, encouraging the expansion of knowledge about the diversity of religious beliefs within Albanian jurisdiction.

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## ANNEX

### *i) List of interviewees*

#### LIST OF INTERVIEWEES FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS STUDY BY THE ALBANIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE:

**Fitim Zekthi** – Analyst, publicist. Professor of Political Science at the European University of Tirana.

**Ahmed Kalaja** – Imam, Kavaja Street Mosque, Representative of Albanian Muslim Community.

**Don Emilio Vale** – Deputy Chair, Interfaith Cooperation Center, Elbasan. Representative of the Catholic community.

**Genti Kruja** – Executive Director, Interfaith Council of Albania. Former Secretary of Albanian Muslim Community. Lecturer of Islamic Sciences at Beder University.

**Skënder Bruçaj** – Former Head of Albanian Muslim Community

**Elona Mehmeti** – Lecturer in Sociology of Religion, European University of Tirana

**Arjola Byzyka** – Director, RED Tirana (currently Director General of Education in the Municipality of Tirana)

**Loreta Aliko** – Chair, State Committee on Cults

**Shkëlqim Sirika** – Deputy Principal, Isa Boletini High School, Paskuqan, Kamza.

**Elsa Kerraj** – School Psychologist –“Ibrahim Rrugova” High School, Kamza

*ii) National Survey Questionnaire***SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE: “PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND FREEDOM IN ALBANIA”**

During 2019 Albanian Helsinki Committee (AHC) under the framework of “Promoting religious harmony tolerance and religious freedom in Albania” initiative, supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Albania, is undertaking a study on religious freedom, tolerance, harmony and interfaith dialogue as fundamental values of the Albanian society. This study will analyze the role of these values to prevent dissemination of religious extremism among young people.

The essence of tolerance and religious coexistence constitute an important part of Albanian nation’s history and evident identity nation-building elements. They are also stipulated in the preamble of Albania’s Constitution as one of the highest values of humanity upon which it is based.

This historical legacy is still widely present in Albanian society. However, in some cases, it has faced global challenges, such as religious extremism, which Albania may not be isolated from. For this reason, it is important to analyze the Albanian model of tolerance, interfaith harmony, and freedom of religion as a mechanism to prevent the dissemination of religious extremism in Albania. The purpose of this study is to analyze the level of religious tolerance and freedom of belief among young Albanians, through a national survey with youth, which includes this survey questionnaire. It will be further enriched with data from interviews with key institutional stakeholders at national and local level, youth policy makers, youth civil society representatives, representatives of religious communities, etc.

All data collected from the questionnaires will be administered by AHC, adhering to highest confidentiality, and will not be shared with any other individual or organization.

## BOX 1

### ***General Information***

#### **1. What age group do you belong to?**

- ☐ 15-18 years old
- ☐ 18-25 years old
- ☐ 25-35 years old
- ☐ older than 35 years old

#### **2. You are currently.....:**

- ☐ pupil
- ☐ student
- ☐ do not continue my studies
- ☐ other

#### **3. Your current employment status...:**

- ☐ full time job
- ☐ part time job
- ☐ unemployed

#### **4. Gender:**

- ☐ M
- ☐ F

#### **5. The city where you currently live:**

\_\_\_\_\_

## BOX 2

### ***Freedom of belief among young people in the family and community***

#### **6. Do you belong to a specific religion? (This question is based on your voluntary self-declaration and individual beliefs.)**

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, Orthodox
- ☐ Yes, Catholic
- ☐ Yes, Islam
- ☐ Yes, other (please specify \_\_\_\_\_)

**7. How often do you practice your religion?**

- ☐ every day.
- ☐ at least once a week
- ☐ at least once a month
- ☐ only in cases of religious Holy Days
- ☐ I don't practice.

**8. Have you ever visited a worship space of other religions?**

- ☐ yes, often
- ☐ yes, though very rarely
- ☐ no, never

**9. How often do you frequent places of your own religion to perform religious rituals?**

- ☐ yes, regularly (at least several times a week)
- ☐ at least once a week
- ☐ at least once a month
- ☐ only in cases of religious holy days
- ☐ I don't frequent them

**10. In your opinion, are religious freedoms guaranteed for all Albanian citizens?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Partly yes
- ☐ Partly no
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

**11. What role does religion play for you?**

- ☐ very important role (guides me in all the decisions of my life)
- ☐ important role (guides me only in the most difficult moments)
- ☐ formal role (mainly related to celebrating religious Holy Days)
- ☐ it doesn't matter

**12. What place does religion have in your family?**

- ☐ very important role (we discuss religious issues regularly)
- ☐ important role (sometimes discussing religious issues)
- ☐ formal role (mainly related to the celebration of religious Holy Days)
- ☐ insignificant role (we almost never discuss about religion)

**13. The family has played a crucial role in my religious orientation.**

- ☐ Yes, it has played a crucial role.
- ☐ No, no role played. I have always made decisions independently.
- ☐ I prefer to make my own decisions about my religious, political, and cultural beliefs, but
- ☐ I also consult with my family.

**14. We are equally treated at school regardless of our beliefs.**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

**15. I am free to express my religious beliefs at school and in society and do not feel prejudiced. (Do you agree with this statement?)**

- ☐ I totally agree with the above statement. (I feel completely free to express my religious beliefs at school and in society. I don't feel prejudices at all).
- ☐ Partially agree (I feel partly free to express my religious beliefs in school and society. There have been times when I have been prejudiced.)
- ☐ Disagree (I cannot express my religious beliefs in school and in society. I feel constantly prejudiced.)

**16. We are treated the same way in society/community regardless of our beliefs.**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

**17. I have participated in debates/activities on religious freedom in my local community:**

- ☐ never
- ☐ regularly
- ☐ occasionally
- ☐ no opportunity provided

**18. Do you think that activities in your community related to religious freedom and human rights, commonly are:**

- ☐ not sufficient, there should be additional
- ☐ sufficient
- ☐ should be reduced

**19. Do you agree with marriage of individuals belonging to different religions?**

- ☐ Yes, I agree.
- ☐ No, I don't agree.
- ☐ I don't know.

**20. Do you think religion is more important than love of your partner?**

- ☐ I agree
- ☐ I don't agree
- ☐ I don't know/ prefer not to answer

**21. If your partner belongs to another religion and he/she asks you to convert your religion into his or hers, would you accept?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe

**22. Read the following statement: "A value that doesn't belong to my religion cannot guide my life." Please choose one of the options below:**

- ☐ I totally agree
- ☐ I partly agree
- ☐ I agree
- ☐ I don't totally agree
- ☐ I totally disagree

**23. Which of the following statements would be most appropriate?**

- ☐ I believe my religion is the only truth and that everything else is not true.
- ☐ I believe all religions contain some truths, but all other religions must change in order to view truth according to my religion.
- ☐ I think all religions lead to the same God and differ from one another because of local conditions and circumstances.
- ☐ I believe in honest dialogue with all other religions, because I think all religions would be enriched by such experiences.
- ☐ I don't belong to any religion.

**24. Which of the following statements do you identify mostly with?**

- ☐ I believe that the most important thing in life is individual freedom and that people should be free to believe in what they want;
- ☐ I believe that people cannot follow every idea of individual freedom, but must accept the principles of a Holy Spirit. However, the religious views of others must also be respected.
- ☐ I think a person should live and behave in a not strictly religious way.



**25. In your opinion, which is the single most important issue facing young people in the community (town/village) you live? (Choose only one option.)**

- ☐ economic difficulties (unemployment, poverty, etc.)
- ☐ social alienation/social isolation
- ☐ lack of perspective for the future
- ☐ low educational level
- ☐ lack of state institutions presence
- ☐ lack of religious orientation
- ☐ other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**BOX 3**

***Education on religious freedom in schools***

**26. We have carried out debates in school on religious freedom:**

- ☐ Yes, often
- ☐ Yes, in some cases
- ☐ No, never
- ☐ I don't know

**27. Discussions on religious freedom at school have been carried out:**

- ☐ Within religious education subjects
- ☐ In other social subjects
- ☐ During extra-curricular activities
- ☐ There have not been discussions concerning religious freedom.

**28. In my opinion, debates on religious freedom as part of human rights at school:**

- ☐ should increase
- ☐ should be reduced
- ☐ should not be carried out
- ☐ none of the questions above/don't know

**29. Do discussions about religious freedoms in schools contribute to increasing your knowledge of interfaith and intercultural harmony?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe (if carried out with the right spirit)
- ☐ I don't know

**30. My school is or has been part of initiatives and activities that promoted religious freedom and discussions related to these subjects.**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

**31. What sources do you generally use to get informed about religion?**

- ☐ Internet
- ☐ school / university
- ☐ media (electronic and other forms)
- ☐ discussions with friends
- ☐ other

**32. What amount of information do you have about religion?**

- ☐ adequate information
- ☐ sufficient information
- ☐ limited information
- ☐ I have no information

**33. Religion in Albania has served to create a culture of peace and mutual understanding in society.**

- ☐ Totally agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Partially agree
- ☐ Disagree

**34. Do you agree with the statement: "One of the most important features of Albanian national identity has been harmony and coexistence between all religious communities, placing national unity above religion?"**

- ☐ Totally agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Partially agree
- ☐ Disagree

**35. Do you think that religious harmony and coexistence in Albania:**

- ☐ Is not at risk of being impaired. These are values deeply embedded in our history.
- ☐ Has improved over the last 5 years.
- ☐ Has deteriorated over the last 5 years.
- ☐ I don't know.

## BOX 4

### ***Religious-Based Radicalization and Extremism among young people 58\****

**36. Do you agree with the statement: “Based on my information, I understand the difference between religious extremism and religious radicalism.”**

- ☐ I agree (I fully understand)
- ☐ I agree in part (I partly understand)
- ☐ I do not agree (I do not understand)

**37. Do you agree with the statement: “I often talk to my friends in school about religious matters and try to persuade them to convert to my religion?”**

- ☐ Yes, I agree
- ☐ I partly agree
- ☐ I disagree
- ☐ I don't want to answer

**38. Do you agree that schools, universities, or other public institutions have regulations that prohibit religious dress (head scarf, cross necklace, hat or other religious rituals)?**

- ☐ I agree
- ☐ I disagree
- ☐ I partly agree, as it depends on the nature of the institution.
- ☐ I don't want to answer

**39. Are you aware of the growth of religious radicalism at your school (or university)?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

**40. According to your perception, does religious radicalism in your community constitute a problem/concern/challenge? If so, please rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is the minimum and 10 is the maximum).**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

58      \* The questions in this section are based on the information and background knowledge of the youth interviewed on religious extremism and radicalism.

**41. When was the first time that you heard about the presence of this phenomenon in your social environment or community?**

- ☐ 1990-2000
- ☐ 2000-2005
- ☐ 2005-2012
- ☐ 2012-2017
- ☐ Never heard / I am not aware of

**42. According to your perception, has the phenomenon of religious extremism increased or decreased over time in your community/school?**

- ☐ increased
- ☐ decreased
- ☐ I have no information

**43. What factors might influence the embracement of religious extremism by young people in Albania?**

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***Thank you for your opinions!***

