



The religious “others” in BiH public schools - From exclusion to inclusion

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Introduction

The transitional period of BiH society is marked by deep social cleavages which were cultivated in the disastrous civil war during the 1990s, and also manifested in different ways in the postwar period. Religion(s) also have an important role in these social divisions, since the main differences between the three constituent peoples directly involved in conflicts are based on religion. In order to foster peace and cooperation between them, the BiH institutions are functioning on the principles of consociation, which raises different questions and controversies regarding the minorities' issues, and individual rights as well.

There are approximately 2000 Protestant believers in our country, according to their own estimations. This does not include children, since only adults are accepted in the full membership, on the principle of personal choice. There are 35 Protestant churches in 17 municipalities in BiH, and some of them are in the process of getting registered. The most numerous are the Adventists, who have 10 praying homes and the Evangelicals with 11 local churches.

These problems can also be perceived in the current religious educational policy in public schools. It confirms the importance of religions and religious communities in the public sphere, and is framed to meet the values and interests of the three dominant confessions- the Islamic Community, Catholic Church and Serbian Orthodox Church. As BiH Framework Law reads, the religious communities are in charge of the religious education in public schools, and in praxes different obstacles are encountered by religious minorities when they try to be included into the religious educational system in public schools.

In order to overcome the negative consequences of the strictly confessional religious education in public schools, OSCE launched the project *Culture of Religions*, by piloting the introduction of non-confessional religious education in secondary schools. The subject is framed within the human rights standards and values of pluralistic and democratic society. However, the subject is actually not providing the inclusion of small religious minorities, whose representatives actually have not participated in its conceptualization. For that reason, the third policy alternative for the inclusion of the small communities is identified and recommended in this policy research. It is based on the principles of affirmative action, that is to say, smaller and vulnerable groups must be treated differently in a proactive way, in order to affirm their social inclusion. This option does not require any change of legislation, the institutional requisites for its implementation are already there, and face no public disapproval since it does not question the confessional model preferred by different and powerful stakeholders.

Context of the Problem: Exclusion of Small Religious Minorities

Small religious minorities in BiH encounter different forms of social exclusion, mostly due to the small number of adherents, and different stereotypical portrayals they are exposed to by the population and major confessions. The representatives of the Protestant communities and their believers interviewed during this research are well aware of their exclusion- e.g. they are not members of the Inter-Religious Council in BiH, the media rarely inform about their activities, and when they do, they do it so often superficially and unprofessionally etc. The major



Adventist Church, Sarajevo

confessions are under specific protection of the state, for they receive financial support (salaries for the religious teachers, insurance etc.), and are still burdened with the negative images of the Protestant communities mostly due to historical reasons and the fact that the latter are based on the individual, personal choice (Cvitković, 2006: 55, 59) Therefore, the smaller communities are, on the one hand, invisible for the system, and exposed to stereotypical way of thinking and behaving, on the other.

"The feeling of being rejected by society is something that both parents and children have, especially in BiH where religion is equated with nation... But that is something we must accept and live with it. As you've read in the New Testament or perhaps watched the movie, Jesus has done only good to people, he cured them and fed them, and yet they prosecuted and crucified him..."

Pastor Aleksandar Trajkovski, Baptist Church Novi Travnik

Religious educational policy in public schools in BiH systematically excludes these communities. According to the report of the USA Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, the schools organize the religious classes on behalf of the minorities only if a "sufficient" number of students attend particular school (15 in Federation and 20 in RS). Small communities are therefore excluded from the very start, for they have small numbers of adherents living scattered across BiH. As it is also confirmed in this policy research, the minor confessions were not included in the process of the conceptualization and practicing of the religious education system, they cannot question the way they are presented within the curricula of three dominant confessions, and their exclusion tends to expand to other spheres of life. For example, in the textbook for the Orthodox Religious Education, some Protestant communities (Adventists, Pentecostals) are defined as destructive sects and put in the same context with the Satanist and similar groups.

Critique of the Policy Options Restrictiveness of Confessional Religious Education in BiH Public Schools

The introduction of the confessional religious education for three dominant confessions was based on the arguments that these religious traditions are deeply rooted in BiH cultural heri-

tage, and that without religious education the children will be deprived of their cultural heritage and incapable to develop own cultural identity. It was also claimed that the confessional religious education has a clear epistemological and didactical framework (Popov & Ofstadt, 2006: 99) whereas other approaches do not. However, this approach raises serious issues concerning human rights and ethical questions about personal autonomy because of the widespread pressure of teachers and peers in favor of attending the confessional education (Popov & Ofstadt, 2006: 78). Smaller religious communities are especially vulnerable for they are the least equipped to claim their rights, and their problems rarely draw public attention because their exclusion from the BiH society.

"I've attended the elementary school in the Republic of Srpska, where Orthodox religious instruction is obligatory for Serbian pupils. Since I've wanted to withdraw from the classes, I was sent to the school principal who asked me a little bit surprised "why do you want to withdraw if you are a Serbian?". "Oh, he is subotar¹", explained him the priest- Orthodox teacher"...

Pastor Želimir Stanić, the Adventist Church Sarajevo

During this research, different stories from believers belonging to unprivileged confessions could be heard. The pastor from the Baptist Church in Novi Travnik told me a story about a child from his community attending the religious education of other confession, and then revising the material at home with parents. The situation is more complicated in the Republic of Srpska, for the Orthodox religious instruction is obligatory for the Serbian children in this entity. Many Protestant believers in this entity are ethnically Serbs, and face different problems while trying to withdraw their children from the Orthodox instruction. The pastor from the Adventist Church in Sarajevo grew up in the RS and had to attend these classes for being a Serb, until his father finally succeeded to withdraw him from classes when he was 4th grade.

Culture of Religions- without Culture of Religious Others

In the year of 2000 the Mission of OSCE in BiH piloted the introduction of the non-confessional

¹ Subotar-a mockery term for the Adventists in this area for they respect the sabbath - Saturday



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religious subject *Culture of Religions* in secondary schools, which is now in the experimental phase in the Republic of Srpska and being introduced in some cantons in the Federation of BiH. The project raised different controversies, and the proponents of the confessional education, with the Catholic Church playing the leading part, claimed that the new subject promotes religious relativism, syncretism, unitarianism, and saw it as a part of the Marxist' approach towards religion (OSCE, 2007: 5-6).

As for the small religious communities, at first glance it seems that the new subject will provide their inclusion into the religious classes, because the children from these communities will attend them with the children from other confessions. Furthermore, the subject was framed within the Toledo Guiding Principles for teaching about religion/s in public schools, where it states that "it is important to give voice to a wide range of religious beliefs and disbeliefs and to treat them with respect... It needs to be remembered that most well-established faiths in today's world started as small and unconventional and were rejected by the society at large" (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007: 51). However, the representatives of the Protestant communities were not invited to participate in the process of the conceptualization of the new subject, although the principles the subject was framed within read that this subject will build sensitivity and broadmindedness toward different forms of beliefs and religious plurality. The finalization of the subject resulted in teaching "about the beliefs and practices of all the major faiths practiced in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Christianity- Catholicism and Orthodox religion, Islam and Judaism)" (OSCE, 2007: 4) as well as the marginalization of the smaller and non-traditional communities.

Therefore, a different alternative should be recognized in order to acknowledge these groups, enable their inclusion and participation into the public educational system and society.

Affirmative Approach: State Funding for the Religious Education of Minorities in Their Communities

The policy alternative recognized in this study as successful is built onto the principles of affirmative action (or positive discrimination); this means

"Curricula should be sensitive to different local manifestations of religious and secular plurality found in schools and the communities they serve. Such sensitivities will help address the concerns of students, parents and other stakeholders in education, especially with regard to a fair and balanced coverage of different religions and philosophies. The negative impact on the self-esteem and sense of belonging of students who feel excluded has been well documented. Parents who feel that their (religious) beliefs are not respected in the school and school curriculum are also less likely to feel a sense of engagement with the learning that takes place in the schools their children attend..." the Toledo Guiding Principles..., p. 41

that smaller and vulnerable social groups must be treated differently than other groups in order to protect their rights, stop their discrimination and foster their inclusion into the democratic society. For example, in Great Britain, the state started to fund the schools of religious minorities. The main aim of this new policy was to achieve fairness, good community relations and inclusion of these groups into the society (Jackson, 2006: 41).

Within this approach, we are dealing with the so-called weak positive discrimination, since the favoring of minorities does not lead to the disadvantage of majorities who will continue to perform the confessional religious education in public schools. Smaller communities in the BiH society will organize religious classes in their communities, which will be recognized by the educational authorities and schools as an integral part of confessional religious instruction in public schools. That is, the students will bring a written report from their communities about their religious instruction to the schools, which will accept their documents. The educational authorities will support printing textbooks for religious instruction of smaller communities, and provide salaries for their teachers.

This approach is favorable for variety of criteria. It is feasible within a short period, it encourages and provides the inclusion of unprivileged religious groups into the educational system, it does not require additional resources, change in legislation or significant financial means, and institutional capacities for its implementation are already there. It also does not face public disapproval for the three major confessions will continue to organize their religious instruction in public schools. It is also in accordance with the attitudes of many Protestant believers and representatives who think that religion cannot be thought and experienced in schools, but rather in one's family and religious



Celebration of Lord's Supper and children program at the recently opened praying home of Adventist Church in Gradiška



Evangelical Church Koševsko brdo, Sarajevo



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community. The acceptance and implementation of this option will provide the equal treatment for pupils from minor confessions, and these children will be encouraged to exchange their religious knowledge and experience with other students. The teachers from these communities will be encouraged to communicate with their colleagues from other communities, to share their knowledge and will be engaged in religious dialogue. In that way, they will become more equipped to present themselves to others and challenge the vicious circle of stereotypes and exclusion of small confessions in our society.

Policy Recommendations

When it comes to the inclusion of the small religious communities into BiH religious educational system, this option proved the most favorable one, for all the reasons discussed above. BiH educational authorities, together with the religious communities themselves, will be engaged in the realization of this option on the basis of equality, mutual respect and cooperation. The religious values, interests and specific needs of this group will in this way be socially recognized and respected. The children from these communities will in that way fully participate in the school system and become more socially engaged.

More specifically, it is necessary to pass the information onto the institutions important for the implementation of this option, and to define their responsibilities. Religious communities will provide religious teachers, and set the curricula, as the three dominant communities have already been doing. At the first stage, it is recommendable to start this option with those communities who openly opt for it, considering that some communities are for the strict, thorough separation between church and state. It is assumed that after the successful pilot implementation of this option, other religious communities will be encouraged to participate in this policy. Ministries of education (MoEs) will cooperate in publishing textbooks and providing salaries for teachers. Schools will be obliged to accept the written reports from these communities and include them into their own records. Considering that this option does not require any significant additional resources, and that

it provides benefits for the marginalized groups, it is optimal at this stage. At the end, this option can play an important part in the stepping out from the three-confessional into the religiously plural society, and it can encourage the development of other policy options dealing with the minority issues.

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