



Position Paper

*on the causes of interreligious conflicts in the Bulgarian rural areas
and ways to prevent them*

*prepared by the participants in project “Stronger Together:
youth collaboration for interreligious solidarity*

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Context

Interreligious conflicts are found throughout the world. The situation in Syria and Iraq, the long-term conflict in Palestine, the recent terrorist attacks in Paris are only small part of a long list of examples in this regard. No country in the world is save from such conflicts and neither is Bulgaria.



For historical reasons, the majority of Bulgarian Christians have developed negative attitude towards Muslims. At the same time about 10% of the population are Muslim, and a growing number of Muslim refugees are entering the country displaced by the wars in the Middle East. Many stereotypes and prejudices exist both towards Christians and Muslims. At the same time, political leaders use interreligious conflicts from the past of the country for their political advantage, not aware of the tension that this accumulates in people. Unfortunately, the main victim of this kind of provocations are young people and in particular those living in rural areas. They develop strong hate against people of other religions, although some of them have never even met such people.

This Position Paper summarizes the results of the project, reflecting participants' official position on the existence and causes of interreligious conflicts, the role of institutions and actions that can be taken by young people to prevent and overcome interreligious conflicts.

Causes of interreligious conflicts



Family: The family occupies a special place in the life of every single person. We grow in it, we live in it, we acquire the moral and spiritual values in it. It creates social relations. It is the main building block of society. The education that we receive in the family is one of the main factors for interreligious conflicts. Lack of religious culture and stereotypes gained from our parents and relatives largely contribute to the creation of conflicts on religious grounds.

Education: The education that we receive at school includes gaining scientific knowledge and specific skills. The main purpose of education is considered to be the transmission of cultural traditions between generations. Education largely determines our behavior in the society. Lack of initiative among students to participate in courses, workshops, extracurricular activities on religious themes and the lack of opportunities for formal and informal education on the topic as a whole are among the causes of interreligious conflict.



Politics: Politics have a universal character and affects all spheres of public life. Nowadays the collapsing trust in politics is resulting in increasingly low political participation of citizens which further makes politicians irresponsible and uncontrolled. People mainly link politics with personal interests, manipulation of elections and corruption. In that regard, it could be seen that the contemporary politics inevitably leads to an artificial injection of hate, intolerance and conflicts. In the last decade conflicts on religious grounds are booming and in most cases they are somehow connected with politics.

Media: How will people understand processes in a country, how they will appreciate them, how they will react to them all this is largely in the hands of newspapers, radio, and television. The selection of news and the words that describe what is happening is forming public attitudes and expectations. Therefore, it can be said that media largely shapes public life. The main power of the media is the possibility to say or withhold certain problem which makes it a new type of power. That's why media is called "fourth power". Well known is the inter-link of political parties and the media. Frequently observed phenomena are paid coverage, lack of impartial news coverage which inevitably leads to conflicts, including interreligious ones. The media should not be viewed as source of power, but as an expression of diverse actions that civil society produces daily.



The role of institutions in the prevention of interreligious conflicts

Institutions are required as they coordinate behavior patterns, limit conflicts, facilitate their transformation and mitigate conflicts associated with them and maintain social order in public life. We present the following requests to :

⇒ **Local and Regional institutions** to pay greater attention to religious issues; to provide public space for activities with religious character; to pay more attention to people and respect their opinion; non-discrimination among the local population by gender, ethnic and religion; to organize information campaigns about minorities and their culture, customs and traditions; empower youth organizations and listen to their opinions and recommendations.

⇒ **National institutions:** the Ministry of Education and Science to introduce religion classes in order to explore religions and beliefs, education of spiritual values, tolerance and prevention of interreligious conflicts; exchange of experience with institutions of other countries to deal more effectively with interreligious conflicts at national level; empower youth organizations and respect their demands.

⇒ **International institutions** to prevent and contribute to the transformation of interreligious conflicts and maintain world peace; to observe and respect the rights of all people regardless of religion; to fund youth NGOs to promote non-formal education and organize events on religious themes.



The role of youth in the prevention of interreligious conflicts

The participation of young people in non-governmental organizations is of particular importance as young people learn important for their future practical skills, gain knowledge and experience. Active involvement in voluntary initiatives enables young people to take responsibility for their local community, to care for each other and to take actions when they have an opinion on an issue. We believe that young people could contribute to the prevention of interreligious conflicts by:



- Learning about the different religions, similarities and differences between them through participation in courses, workshops and informal activities on religious themes;
- Show tolerance and mutual respect to people professing a religion different from their own;
- Elimination of prejudices and stereotypes;
- Respect for the rights of all, regardless of their religious views and beliefs;
- Integration and inclusion of minorities but also preservation of their identity and culture;
- Active participation at local and national level in the social, cultural and political life of the country.

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