



Position Paper

on causes for mutual social exclusion between Bulgarian Christians and Muslims and ways to overcome it

prepared by the participants in project “People to People: social interaction between Christian and Muslim rural youngsters”

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Context



Bulgarian Muslims (or Pomaks) are a confessional minority in Bulgaria. They profess Islam and their mother language is Bulgarian. According to the basic theory of their origin they are descendants of the native Bulgarians who were converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule of the Balkans.

The other main ethno-religious groups in Bulgaria (Christian Orthodox majority and Turkish Muslim minority) have many prejudices towards the Bulgarian Muslims. Because of the five centuries of Ottoman rule, the mainly Christian Bulgarian population has developed a sense of

intolerance towards all Muslims including the Pomaks. In the same time the Bulgarian Turks also distance themselves from the Bulgarian Muslims because of ethnic, cultural and language differences between them.

Usually Bulgarian Christians and Muslims live separately and they avoid social communicating with each other. Many stereotypes and prejudices exist from both sides and this leads to mutual social exclusion and intolerance, hate speech, mutual stigmatization and discrimination (Islamophobia and Christianophobia), risk of radicalization and extremism. At the same time some political parties use this situation for their political advantage without worrying about the tension that is accumulating in the ordinary people. Unfortunately main victims are less educated and poor young people living in the rural areas of the country. They develop intolerance towards people of other religion, although some of them have never met such people.

This Position Paper summarizes the results of collaborative work of equal number Bulgarian Christian and Muslim young people. It reflect their official position on the causes for the mutual social exclusion between the two religious groups and how institutions and young people can contribute to overcome this problem.

Causes for mutual social exclusion



Historical burden: Bulgaria's history is filled with conflicts between Christians and Muslims (five centuries of Ottoman rule and struggles for freedom, forced changes of names and religion, mass murders and exiles, etc.). Innocent people of both religions have been victims. All this has led to accumulation of many mutual prejudices, mistrust and even hatred.

Influence of education: On one hand, less educated people are more susceptible to religious manipulations. On the other

hand, in the Bulgarian kindergartens and schools from early age an emphasis is placed on historical conflicts between Christians and Muslims, and thus bring up hatred between the two religions. Separated classes (on ethnic and/or religious base) also contribute to this direction.



Political interests: Some political parties use long past historical events, and even distorting them, instilling in this way further division among ordinary people. So they easily earn an ethnic and religious vote, but they strengthen the social division between the two religious groups in the country.

Influence of family environment: The family is especially important for shaping personal upbringing and behavior within social communication. Often, parents, and especially older relatives, do not perceive the need for inter-religious integration and

communication. This understanding is naturally passed on to their children also.

Influence of social environment: The surrounding people (friends, peers, neighbors, society, etc.) largely determine the framework of social communication between Bulgarian Christians and Muslims at local level. If the local community is more conservative, it affects each its members.

Media influence: Negative media propaganda, searching of sensational and bad news, non-reflection of the objective truth, private and parties' media - all this hinders the normal communication between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria.

Economic problems: Poorer people are at greater risk of social marginalization and religious radicalization.

Religious and cultural differences: Traditional religious and cultural differences, spread of radical religious doctrines, ignorance of the other religion, and way of preaching of spiritual faces sometimes instill fear and hatred to the other religion, and cause intolerance among people.

Proposals and demands towards institutions



Reforms in education system: It is necessary to be introduced in the curriculum (by some form) a subject "Religion", whereby students will get acquainted with the specifics of all religions in Bulgaria.

Establishment of a special institution for promotion (at national level) the ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity in the country.

Establishment of mixed ethno-religious councils: In multicultural municipalities and districts, authorities to bring together

people from different ethnicities and religions and to discuss together current common social problems and to seek a solution for them.

Creation of mixed public structures and organizations (youth and retirement clubs, parents' organizations, student councils, etc.) involving members of different ethnicities and religions. The common interests and activities will help to improve the social communication between the people.

Organization of common events: Local institutions (municipalities, community centers, schools, sports clubs, employers, etc.) to organize various events (cultural, sporting, entertaining) involving people from different religions and ethnic groups.

Helping of NGOs' work: The government, municipalities, schools and other institutions should support more actively the work of non-governmental organizations working to improve the relationship between religious communities.

Priests to work on convergence of the religions: During performing their duties, spiritual faces of all creeds to appeal and tolerate good interreligious relationships.

Positive media campaign: All types of media should give good examples of inter-religious tolerance and promote active social communication between people.



Actions for improving mutual social communication



Youth exchanges at national level:

Organizing exchanges of young people from different religions within the country, inc. to live for a short time in such families, as well as organizing trips for students to explore regions where people from another religion predominate.

Cultural events: Organizing folklore festivals (inc. songs, dances, culinary arts, handmade items, traditional costumes,

etc.), art exhibitions or installations, theater productions, etc with participation of people from different religions and ethnicities, as well as celebrating together common holidays.

Sport activities: Organizing competitions and tournaments on various popular sports between mixed teams composed of people from different religions.

Eco-activities: Joint participation in activities for nature conservation and protection of natural resources (afforestation, river clearing, sparing use of drinking water and electricity), urban cleaning (public gardens, playgrounds, streets), outdoor entertainments (nature hikes) and others.

Campaigns against harmful addictions: Organizing actions for informing people about the harm caused by drugs, alcohol, and smoking (which affect people from all religions and ethnicities), as well as organizing activities for promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Volunteering: People from all religions and ethnic groups to work together voluntary on public benefit.

Charity: Organizing charity campaigns (donating funds, clothes, food, materials, etc.) in help of sick, suffered or needy people from all religions and ethnicities.

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