

## WESTERN BALKANS THROUGH THE PRISM OF STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICE, AND RELIGION: LESSONS FROM NORTH MACEDONIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, AND KOSOVO

Angelovska Sanja, PhD Student<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Multiple-holistic analysis conducted in the Western Balkans has shown that context(s) in the Western Balkans are overflowed with stereotypes, prejudice, and religious intolerance. These three phenomena were included in extensive multiple-holistic case study by conducting interviews and open-ended surveys among peace activists, journalists, politicians, as well as members of the civil society, in the countries of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Kosovo. The research findings draw a picture of a still deeply prejudiced and divided societies. People categorize each other according to their religion and ethnicity. The group they identified themselves with represents the reference for what is good or bad. Stereotypes and prejudice are deeply rooted in and transmitted in early childhood experiences, in most cases as a result of family trauma as a consequence of an earlier conflict. Also, ethnic prejudice are deeply rooted in state systems. Religion in these contexts plays a crucial but subtle role in designing unstable and divided contexts. It keeps to its own communities and values through exclusion of the others instead of using its power for unifying and tolerance purposes. The presence of deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudice create uncertain societies and uncertainty among people. The conflict contexts in the Western Balkans require a serious and sustainable strategy for building relationships among people regardless of their ethnicity and religious affiliation in the long term.*

**Keywords:** *Western Balkans, stereotypes, prejudice, religion, conflict contexts.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Ss. Cyril and Methodius, North Macedonia, email: angelovskas26@gmail.com

## Introduction

This multiple holistic analysis discusses the influence of stereotypes, prejudice and religion through the narratives of the Western Balkans. The method of the multiple-holistic case study presents one of the robust research methods in the field of qualitative research (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). The analysis explores the role of stereotypes, prejudice and religion as social-psychological variables with a potential to cause and lead to conflict conditions and different conflict dynamics between different groups, moreover they are being considered as the root causes for intergroup conflict. The influence of SPR<sup>2</sup> is investigated in three different contexts in the Western Balkans the context in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo. Lessons learned are identified and analyzed from this extensive qualitative study. This multiple holistic analysis offers an innovative approach and insight into the field of IR-Conflict Management. It reflects on the actual situation in the Western Balkans by describing the ongoing contexts filled with stereotypes, prejudice, trauma and unmet collective psychological needs. The works presented here highlights only the lessons learned from the multiple study, since presentation of the full findings needs a bigger format.

### 1. Stereotypes, prejudice and religion in conflict contexts

This analysis is theoretically based on the constructivist research method led by the philosophical view that there is not a single reality, moreover the reality can be multiple (multidimensional) and determined by different societal factors. As Bar-Tal puts it, this is wide but, in the meantime, crucial area. Hence, through this approach there is an attempt for thoughts to be revealed, feelings and behaviors which are essential for conflict resolution and reconciliation (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). This interdisciplinary approach includes sociological theories, social-psychological, political psychology theories and partly security and anthropological theories.

Majority of psychological theories recognize the social categorization as the basic cognitive or discursive process in the identity and intergroup relations (Huddy et al., 2013). When the socio-psychological constellation of stereotypes, prejudice and religion is being set in particular socio - psychological context it creates a specific socio-psychological dynamics of the intergroup conflict. This area of the study of conflict emerges after World War II and since then a numerous analysis have been published. The literature offers serious data related to the intergroup conflict before and after it escalates. But, data related to the root cases, early identification and conflict prevention are not present yet.

The psychological theory and research have a serious contribution toward better understanding and reducing of the violent manifestation in the frames of intergroup and international conflict. Moreover, the psychological concepts and results are more frequently being used in the study and analysis of international conflict, including here international relations, with the aim a new approaches to be generated into conflict resolution (Kelman, 2008). This approach is a socio-psychological analysis created to advance (but not to replace as well) approaches based on the strategical or structural analysis, by creating new perspectives towards international conflict, and revealing less analyzed dimensions of international conflict.

The term psychological essentialism was coined by Medin, and presents the belief that members of the same category or a group are owning the same identity and that is not something that can be changed according to the personal characteristics (Medin & Ortony , 1989). The psychological essentialism is the main thought behind every distorted thinking, prejudiced thinking, stereotypes and discrimination. Intragroup categorization or identification is in the basis of the intergroup con-

---

<sup>2</sup> SPR in this article stands for stereotypes, prejudice and religion

flict. Namely, each individual has multiple identities that are activated in particular contexts. In the case of the intergroup conflict, the religious and/or ethnic identity become dominant, depending on that which segment of the identity has been threatened – symbolically or directly. Identity and the process of identification along with the activated identity is stronger than any previous experience and stimulates stereotypes and prejudices. Considering rational thinking is excluded in massive conflict contexts.

All social psychological theories recognize social categorization as a basic cognitive or discursive process in identity and intergroup relations (Huddy, et al., 2013 p. 702). Our self – definition in a social context always depends on upon social categorization (Oakes, 2003). Thinking about others in terms of their group memberships is known as social categorization—the natural cognitive process by which we place individuals into social groups (Allport G. , 1954).

Adler and Maslow, and their studies have shown that identification with all humanity is more than just an absence of ethnocentrism and it correlates more with the dispositional empathy (Maslow, 1954). Allport is considered father of the theory of prejudice with his early theory on understanding prejudice as a faulty and inflexible generalization (1954).

The human category also seems to be a platform for in-group projection processes, where distinct attributes of the in-group in relation to a salient outgroup tend to be considered more typically human. Such a process mirrors the phenomenon of infra humanization whereby an in group is perceived to be able to experience complex uniquely human emotions more than a salient outgroup is ( Leyens et al., 2007).

According to Allport, categorical thinking is a natural and inevitable tendency of the human mind (p. 171). Indeed, social categorization allows people to construct and organize knowledge about the social world and to cope with its complexity. Thinking about others in terms of their group memberships is known as social categorization—the natural cognitive process by which we place individuals into social groups (1954). Our self – definition in a social context always depends on upon social categorization (Oakes, 2003).

Bodenhausen suggests that the effects of automatic categorization are typically not consciously intended by perceivers; rather they arise spontaneously because of basic properties of the information processing system (1993). We have the view of categorization as the root cause of unwanted thoughts which might lead individuals to act in ways counter to their real beliefs (to appear prejudiced when they believe that they are not) (Haslam & Wilson, 2010). Another theory that places a strong emphasis on categorization as context-specific process rather than activation of structure is the self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1992). A person`s social category is salient when he or she is perceived, or perceives himself or herself as a group member rather – than as a unique individual. Category salience implies that the impression of and the behaviour towards the person shift from the interpersonal level to the intergroup level (Cruz, 2001).

Lippmann explained the notion further: “People`s stereotypes of human groups cloud reality, distorting actual experience with biased preconception, and added that “For the most part we don`t see, and define, we define and see” (Lippman, 1922, p. 80).

Early in the history of prejudice research, psychologists realized that stereotype reduction by no means is an automatic consequence of exposure to counter-stereotypic information. They found that even in the face of seemingly contradictory evidence, cognitive processes such as subtyping and confirmation bias often preserve stereotypes. They`re preserved too, by individuals` emotional investments in maintaining the difference between `us` and `them` (Dixon et al., 2017).

Research by Bar – Tal along with his colleagues in different phases of his work has proved deep rooted stereotypes and prejudice between the concerned sides.<sup>3</sup> Both sides perceive themselves

<sup>3</sup> Using the Human Figure Drawing Arab (Palestinian) children draw Israelis as ones who are aggressive and

as the one who wants to do evil to the other side, perceiving them as bad and hostile people. As Kelman puts it about conflict as inter-societal phenomenon: "The conflict, particularly in the case of the protracted ethnic struggles, becomes an inescapable part of daily life for each society and its component elements (2009)." Thus, analysis of conflict requires attention, not only to its strategic, military, and diplomatic dimensions, but also to its economic, psychological, cultural, and socio-structural dimensions. Interactions along these dimensions, both within and between the conflicting societies, shape the political environment in which governments function and define the political constraints under which they operate.

### *1.1. The subtle role of religion in relation to prejudice and stereotypes*

The idea is not to simplify context of Western Balkans as only violent and conflict one, but the contrary to offer an insight from the contexts themselves, fresh and updated, precisely on individual beliefs, attitudes and finally these packed in narrations that (may) emerge for other members regardless of the group identification. SPR is the common socio-psychological narrative for conflict contexts. Within these processes there are as well other intra-processes – within the groups themselves, that lead to certain conditions of stereotyping and prejudicing other groups or members of these groups. One of these processes is the inter and intra-group categorization, namely a process of identification. In order, to perceive the other group as a different from the ones we belong to, we first need to identify with it. Once, we identify with a certain group, that group becomes for us the reference, of how we perceive everything else that it seems different to the referent group.

The Balkan Peninsula is a place where different religions meet: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Interestingly, despite the fact that all these religions are essentially similar to one another, being derived from a common ancient basis in Judaism and all preaching peace as an ideal, the Balkans have always been considered among the most conflicting regions in the world. These religions are also very collectivistic. They claim that their adherents make a special and morally superior community. Connections with them easily become a sign of political or national loyalty. The greatest danger lies in the connection between nation and religion. Moreover, if the Abrahamic religions become factors in politics, they, because of their uncompromising positions, essentially lead to a constant conflict with the religious others (as cited in (Matevski, 2012). As Matevski claims, it is a doubtless fact that religion and nation are two powerful forms of identification (2012). These are strong mechanisms through which each person seeks for its identity. Great numbers of sociological examinations, which refer to this subject, indicate an interesting data. They show that religion and nation do not have logical connection. Additionally, here is the fact that religion is national and universal category (2007). But, besides these strong facts, these social phenomena are in an unbreakable psychological connection and secret union. The last statement is very relevant to this research. He further claims that religion is one of the answers of the real challenge - crisis-which is symbolic force with which help young individuals and groups of the person of the same age are solving their problems, or they easily adjust. The crisis is teaching youth to pray not just to think. Faith is teaching youth to made distinction between the feeling of fear, which comes from unpleasant, and danger natural and social phenomena from feeling of difficulty which sources is not known and clear. In the time of tensions and extreme crisis the society is divided on two confronted sizes, some are believers and others nonbelievers. Social crisis disturbs stability and with it is calling every individual to

---

armed whereas Israeli children draw Palestinians as terrorists. The difference is that Israeli children draw Palestinians mostly as peasant, illiterate people, which at some point might be an indicator for the feeling of superiority by Israelis, since the hypothesis is the young children have never had the chance to interact with some Arabs but the already have the generalized image in their mind, which is absolutely a stereotype.

think about itself and community in which he lived. In the time of crisis differences are begging to hinder - who is different is danger! Crisis is suitable for racial, national and religious conflicts (2012).

That nationalism with some chauvinistic elements is already noticeable in R. Macedonia in the Albanian groups. Intolerance in relation to ethnic and religious affiliation culminates with frequent fights on ethnic grounds between the younger populace. In the regions where the Albanian ethnic group is the majority (Northwestern and Western Macedonia), we can notice disrespect of the state and state symbols (the burning of the Macedonian flag, displaying only the Albanian flag in institutions), the Albanian mayors “forgetting” to display the Macedonian flag during national holidays, “ethnic cleansing” of Macedonians employed in local power etc.<sup>4</sup> If we add to this the demographical increase of Albanians which is the biggest of all ethnic groups in Europe and similar problems which the Serbians faced with Kosovo during the 70s, we can conclude that the intention is to create an ethnically pure territory in the cities wherein the Albanian population dominates (Tetovo, Gostivar, Kichevo, Struga and Debar) and already have Albanian mayors (2007).

Discussing religion more closely to stereotypes and prejudice, Al Kire has done a series of research on this topic. He opens the following discussion and accordingly conclusions: “It remains an open question whether there is anything unique about religion’s role in prejudice beyond known causes or correlate to intergroup prejudice — such as competition for limited resources, salient social-group identities, dehumanization, ideological conservatism, or system-justification”. But, understanding these and other predictors of prejudices provide insights into associations between religious dimensions and prejudices. Further, he discuss identity fusion and explains that people strongly fused with a group are more likely to perform extreme, even sacrificial behaviors for the group. Infusing intergroup conflicts with religion seems to be like spraying gasoline on a fire (Al Kire, et al., 2022).

Religion is a particularly powerful social identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010), which could simultaneously drive pro-sociality toward and animosity or dislike toward others. To the extent religious identity is made salient, biases toward racial minority groups may increase (Johnson et al., 2010). This implies on the generalized prejudice.

Rowatt and Al Kire in their most recent research they highlight how social identity fusion, intergroup emotions, perceived value – conflict threat, and system – justification contribute to degrees of prejudice. They reviewed the connection between religiosity and attitudes toward – specific cultural groups (e.g. immigrants, atheists, and religious minority in groups), which is again in relation to prejudice (2020). Typically, researchers study social identity by focusing on dual in-group/out-group dynamics. However, multiple aspects of identity intersect or are nested within the self – such as gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality or identification with a religion, political party, sports team and more. How does the intersection of multiple facets of identity influence prejudices? Are people who simultaneously identify with multiple disadvantaged groups at increased risk for religious or political prejudices? Could interventions aimed at broadening perspectives to see a singular shared superordinate identity (i.e. we are all human) reduce prejudices rooted in non-shared identities (2021)? This questions are yet to be answered. The analysis below offers a scientific glimpse into the stereotypes, prejudice and religion in the region of Western Balkans.

---

<sup>4</sup> This can be supported with evidence from the field research I did back in 2019 in the municipalities of Tetovo and Jegunovce among the Albanian population of students and teachers almost no one spoke – or knew the Macedonian language, which is the official language of the country.

## 2. Multiple holistic case study

This multiple holistic studies was implemented in the period between 2022-2023, by conducting half-structured interviews with peace activists, journalists, academics and partly political representatives from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo. From each country 4 interviewees participated, for the entire region of Western Balkans 12 interviews were conducted. The questionnaire consisted several sections such an introductory, a section whereas a conflict context is included, section for the stereotypes and prejudice and section for religion. I conducted the interviews online, although the entire process of getting a consent and completing the interviews took more than 6 months. The main method I used for the analysis is multiple holistic study, which requires an in-depth theoretical knowledge and it is used for scientific explanations and making analytical generalizations.

### 2.1. Research Questions

The research questions that are the basis of this study are as follow: The research investigates stereotypes, prejudice and religion in intergroup conflict in countries from the Western Balkans. Accordingly, since this a multi-case study the following research questions are considered:

- How stereotypes and prejudices influence intergroup conflict in the Western Balkans?
- How stereotypes and prejudices influence intergroup conflict in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina?

The goals of the research are to study the role of stereotypes, prejudice and religion in inter-group conflicts from sociological and socio-psychological perspectives; further to make an analysis of how their constellation creates conflict contexts.

## Conclusion

Stereotypes in Western Balkans in most of the cases are learned in the early childhood. Societies are being categorized in few – ordinary categories which are in their nature ethnic or religious, whereas recently very often emerges the category of social class. Children from an early age have acquired knowledge about the members who belong to those categories, although they have never been in contact with the members of the other group. The strongest identification or category in Western Balkans is where the individuals self-categorize or identify with is the religious and/or the ethnic. While these two categories are extremely important in the Western Balkans especially for the countries which are cases in this multiple holistic case study. Further, stereotyping of entire societies is being achieved through different tools, instruments and factors. The family, schools, media and religious objects together with the religious leaders are the places where stereotypes can be learned and internalized. The absence of contact with members of other groups at an early age is an additional circumstance which enhance a context of nurturing stereotypes.

Hence, it is very clear about the way different mechanism emerge in diverse ethnic and religious groups, moreover these communities or groups have established so called invisible territorial border in the frames into a state. These groups are precisely defined and determined in their actions. Religious groups are not persuasive in the public discourse on the Western Balkans, their role is more subtle and it functions at grass root level.

Historical events have a determinative role in forming and strengthening stereotypes in the Western Balkans. In most of the cases, in Western Balkans these so called historical events are related to peace negotiations and finally peace agreements made in the past. Good examples of such historical

events is the case of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. In Kosovo, that is the Yugoslavian regime toward then so called Albanians from Kosovo.

Prejudice is the core around which the main narrative is knitted. Prejudice are quite common or frequent in the region of Western Balkans. For the cases of Bosnia and Hercegovina and North Macedonia the paths for creating prejudice and strengthening them over the time are almost identical. These two countries have the identical educational system of the so called two schools under one roof<sup>5</sup> whereas members of different ethnic groups have no contact at all. This is established within their families and then it continues with the formal education system. Further, prejudice is justified and framed into political ideologies and state systems. Kosovo differs from North Macedonia and Bosnia and Hercegovina, since the ethnic and religious homogeneity is a priority and a state policy.

Ethnic prejudice are deeply rooted in the region of Western Balkans. Narratives, both historical and the present ones are filled with negative emotions and experiences mostly and mainly in the case of Bosnia and Hercegovina, and mostly as I have coined them are inherited as a result of a trans-generational trauma.

As already mentioned above in the Western Balkans, religion has more subtle role in everyday life and in the creation of collective narratives. Namely, it has the power to impose an influence among its members and followers, but in the most cases it does that in function of certain nationalistic ideologies and interest. Considering that fact that in Western Balkans in most of the cases the ethnic identity presumes the religious, and vice versa, with very few exceptions. Having this mechanism established for decades it keeps and maintains a system of constant discrimination.

#### *Main lessons from the multiple holistic case study*

The first lesson of this analysis is that the bigger the ethnic and cultural diversity the higher probability and frequency of stereotypes and prejudice. Often these are ethnic and religious prejudices rooted in the early childhood experiences strengthen through the state system such as schools. In the early experiences of the process of primary socialization very often it happens transferring of negative experiences<sup>6</sup>, so these traumatic experiences are being transferred transgenerational. In such contexts, intergroup contact is reduced or it is absent, or even it happens it being judged by the surrounding, or the group it belongs. In doing so, there is a serious lack of information or knowledge about the other. In some cases, dehumanization and antagonization of the other happen, which poses a serious threat to coexistence that is absent in these contexts anyway.

The second lesson addresses the role of religions. For all three cases, religion represents an important notion for its citizens regardless of be it Christianity or Islam. It is not directly intrusive over its followers, but is subtly and constantly present in intergroup relations. The power that it possesses is almost never used to reduce stereotypes and prejudices, on the contrary, in most of cases religion is in function of particular ethno-nationalistic narrative. Probably, of all the variables religion is the safest in these contexts. It doesn't do much work because it usually has the favor of his followers, even with the exception of those states which according to the constitution are secular.

The third lesson refers to the common past. Namely, all three countries were under Ottoman occupation and later new regimes were coming, so the period of independency has been relatively short compared on a global level. These processes of independence were interfered with intergroup conflict, so later the states became fragile, and after that they have almost lost their capacities to function as independent states, in its literal and political meaning.

<sup>5</sup> In the cases where the strategy of ethnic clean territories is still in process

<sup>6</sup> In some states such as Bosna and Hercegovina these are traumatic experiences, such as trauma from the war

The fourth lesson, but probably one of the most important learned lesson of this multiple holistic analysis is the absence of collective identity. In all three cases, there is no narrative, discourse, symbol or something else that will unite all groups. That is a serious challenge and an identity question that address the collective psychological needs. Without collective identity being foreseen in these states the optimal coexistence among different ethnic and religious groups is almost impossible. Probably, the absence of collective identity represents one of the threatening factors that only confirm the already stereotyped and prejudiced perception and behavior. In that case the gap is irreversible.

#### *Future Research and recommendations*

This multiple holistic case study creates a solid basis for further research on stereotypes, prejudice and religion in the Western Balkans. Results show strong presence and influence of these three variables in conflict contexts in the countries of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo. The entire research process was complex and sensitive – since it tackles the private and intimate notions of beliefs, attitudes, traumatic experiences and lack of trust among different ethnic and religious groups in this region. Further, future research show expand its scope and include more sources of information, such as documents, video materials, articles and etc. This will increase the validity and reliability of the study. Results from this analysis should be considered and consulted by state institutions when creating policies and bringing important decisions that tackle the themes of conflict resolution, reconciliation and coexistence.

#### **References**

- Leyens, J.-P., Demoulin, S., Vaes, J., Gaunt, R., & Paladino, M. (2007). Infra-humanization: The Wall of Group Differences. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 139-172.
- Al-Kire,, R. L., Ratchford, J. L., Tsang, J.-A., Rowatt, W. C., & Schnitker, S. A. (2022). Prejudice Among the Religious Majority: A Person-Centered Approach to Prejudice Among Christians in the United States. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.
- Allport, G. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.
- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Perseus Books.
- Bar-Tal, D., & Teichman, Y. (2005). *Stereotypes and prejudice in conflict: Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cruz, P. (2001). The root of all evil in intergroup relations? Unearthing the categorization process. In R. Brown, & S. Gaertner, *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes* (p. 29). USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Dixon, J., Durrheim, K., Stevenson, C., & Cakal, H. (2017). From Prejudice Reduction to Collective Action: Two Psychological Models of Social Change (and How to Reconcile Them). In C. G. Sibley, & F. K. Barlow, *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Psychology*. Cambridge University Press .
- Haslam, A. S., & Wilson, A. (2010). In what sense are prejudicial beliefs personal? The importance of an in-group's shared stereotypes. *British Journal of Social Psychology*.
- Herriott, R. E., & Firestone, W. A. (1983). Multisite Qualitative Policy Research: Optimizing Description and Generalizability. *Educational Researcher*, 14-19.
- Huddy, L., Sears, D. O., & Levy, J. S. (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Huddy, L., Sears, D. O., & Levy, J. S. (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. USA: Oxford University.



- Kelman, H. C. (2008). A Psychological Approach to Conflict Analysis and Resolution. In *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution* (pp. 170-183). Routledge: Taylor & Francis.
- Lippman, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper.
- Matevski, Z. (2007). RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND TOLERANCE – THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES OF DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES. *POLITICS AND RELIGION JOURNAL*.
- Matevski, Z. (2012). NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN R. MACEDONIA IN GLOBAL AGE. *Proceedings from the International scientific conference*.
- Medin, O., & Ortony, A. (1989). *Psychological Essentialism: In similarity and analogical reasoning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Oakes, P. (2003). The root of all evil in intergroup relations? Unearthing the categorization process. In R. Brown, & S. Gaertner, *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Rowatt, W. C., & Al Kire, R. L. (2020). Dimensions of religiousness and their connection to racial, ethnic, and atheist prejudices. *Current Opinion in Psychology*.
- Šušnjic, Đ. (2002). *Religija I, II*. Beograd: Čigoja Štampa.
- Turner, J. C., Oakes, P. J., Haslam, A., & McCarty, G. (1992). Self and Collective: Cognition and Social Context. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 11.
- Al Kire, R. L., Ratchford, J. L., Tsang, J. A., Rowatt, W. C., & Schnitker, S. A. (2022). Prejudice Among the Religious Majority: A Person Centered Approach to Prejudice Among Christians in the United States. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.

