



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

---

**SOCIAL ACTIVISM OF FEMALE CIVIL ORGANIZATIONS  
DOES (NOT) INCLUDE RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE<sup>1</sup>**

Dijana Subotički

---

---

<sup>1</sup> For the realization of this work and conducting the research I thank the Ecumenical Women's Initiative from Omiš, which granted my scholarship, and especially the coordinator of the project Julianne Funk. For helping me do this piece of work I especially owe my thanks to Dr Biljana Sikimić from the Balkan institute SANU in Belgrade who influenced the final form of this article by her careful reading and comments.

*All men admit that women were the founders of religion.*

Strabo (64 BC – 21 AD)

### **Abstract**

This article interprets research data conducted thanks to a research scholarship for female scientists via the Ecumenical Women's Initiative (EWI) from Omiš (Croatia) who wishes to encourage women's research and writing activities. This work presents the attitudes of female activists and leaders in non-governmental organizations from Serbia and Montenegro, which used project grants from EWI between 2007 and 2013. It is about organizations that deal mainly with women's human rights, Roma, disabled and young women, women victims of violence, and the like. An online questionnaire and in-depth interview were the methods used. The data showed that only two organizations in Serbia are clearly programmatically committed to the realization of theological activities and interreligious dialogue as ways of establishing peace. The basic hypothesis is confirmed that the relationship between civil society and religious communities on the territory of Serbia and Montenegro is characterized by a lack of dialogue. According to the results of the research, the majority of interviewees expressed readiness to start cooperation with churches and religious communities. A recommendation is given to EWI to encourage projects which have an influence on starting alliances with religious communities.

**Key words:** activism, gender, women's non-governmental organizations, religious communities

## Introduction

The academic community from time to time points out a gap between the civilian sector and religious communities in Serbia and Montenegro, where the Serbian Orthodox Church is respected at the highest state level while non-governmental organizations, even when they unite and ask for something together, face great resistance from the top state level and often are not appreciated. This dual attitude of the government towards these sectors only grows deeper (e.g. when it comes to distancing the Serbian Orthodox Church from the civilian sector in Serbia).

At rare roundtables dedicated to the relationship of the civilian sector and religious communities in the past ten years, many intellectuals pointed out the need to deal with this disagreement (among them Dragoljub Mićunović, Radovan Bigović, Biljana Kovačević Vučo, Milan Vukomanović)<sup>2</sup>. That civil society can help with ‘moderate voices in religious organizations to attract followers which will help the region on its way to integration with Europe’ is also the attitude of some experts and politicians from the region, such as Sonja Rubini, the editor of the portal *Interfaith*, Nikola Knežević, founder of the Centre for the Study of Religion, Politics and Society in Novi Sad, Petrit Selimi, deputy of Kosovo’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>3</sup>.

In research from 2010, the Belgrade Open School acknowledged that the Balkans have often been a battlefield of tragic religious, ethnic and political intolerance, conflict, a lack of dialogue and ignorance towards the other, but also a place of lively encounter between different communities who have managed to survive there for centuries. Civil society organizations,

---

<sup>2</sup> The debate “State, society and religious communities”, on March 30, 2009, held at the Center for Democracy was part of a project “Democratic political forum”, with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation; more at: <http://www.politickiforum.org/?vrsta=tribina&naredba=prikaz&tekst=21>. A meeting in Belgrade from March 6, 2013 about the supervision of public finances raised this question too; more at: <http://www.e-novine.com/drustvo/24435-poboljsati-dijalog-civilnog-sektora-verskih-zajednica.html?print>. The Belgrade Center for the Development of the Non-profit Sector with the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy and the Open Society Foundation indicated the ‘disorder’ of budget allocation for the civil sector on March 10, 2013, at a meeting in the Media Centre in Belgrade; more at: <http://akter.co.rs/weekly/32-ekonomija/33501-nered-u-bud-etskim-davanjima-za-civilni-sektor.html>

<sup>3</sup> More at: <http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/hr/features/setimes/features/2013/08/20/feature-02>

religious communities and governmental institutions should nurture an institutionalized and continuous dialogue between competent and interested representatives at all levels in order to overcome the existing lack of understanding and to work on the prevention and affirmation of mutual values. Among donor organizations working on the promotion of mutual cooperation between the state, its institutions, local authorities, various religious communities and female representatives of civil society is the Ecumenical Women's Initiative (EWI) from Omiš, Croatia. According to its mission statement posted on its website, it is

a non-governmental, non-profit organization which supports women as initiators and agents of change in faith communities and the society. It is done by giving donations and connecting individuals and groups working in the fields of women's rights, peace building and reconciliation, ecumenical dialogue and cooperation between religions and world-views in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia encouraging networking and cross border cooperation.

The vision of the Ecumenical Women's Initiative is to aspire to a more just and peaceful society, in which diversity is the strength and source of creativity and where women have a dignified position and a role in a private and public life according to their abilities and personal choice. 'A society in which religion promotes and encourages full equality between men and women.'<sup>4</sup>

Since EWI believes that women can considerably contribute to the maintenance of peace, stability and the well-being of society and since the postulates on which this activism is based are legally articulated through various citizens organizations, then they can be classified as values essential to humanity corresponding to the basic commandments from God. On the other hand, feminist activists for women rights are often publicly accused of fighting for values opposite to the patriarchal pattern the church fosters (faith is often identified in public discourse with the

---

<sup>4</sup> More at: <http://www.EWI.hr/about-us/mission/>

Serbian Orthodox Church): that woman is a representative of the family whose place is not in public life.

Research on the relationship of religious and gender identities started during the 1980s in gender anthropology and other related disciplines and about ten years later, those questions were initiated by male/female researchers of religion and gender. In that way, Radulović (2006, p. 81) notices the dual nature of gender, in the sense that ‘gender is just a partial factor in the explanation of reality, related to other factors such as race, class, ethnic affiliation, [and] generational differences.’

Radulović (ibid.) notes that recent works ‘deconstruct religious materials from the postcolonial critical point of view, test the impact of imperialism and orientalism on the relationship between religion and gender, use the postmodern paradigm to reach a clearer explanation of androcentrism in the history of religions, [and] apply theories of gender to particular issues of religious historiography and textual interpretation.’ However, the application of a gender approach in the study of religions in the Balkans is present in a small percent in comparison with the advancements in the past decade in linguistics, sociology and feminist theology.

Scientific research that questions the attitudes of male/female citizens about religions has been conducted in the past decades on the territory of the former Yugoslavia (among the most recent are Blagojević, Jablanov-Maksimović and Bajović 2013). However, academic research about the civil sector with a focus on the importance and contribution of female peace activism and women’s relationship with religious communities are very rare and partial (e.g. ‘The relationship of genders in Croatian society and the role of the church’ was a topic of the Franciscan Institute for the Culture of Peace from Split in 2005)<sup>5</sup>. Most often such work refers to accomplishments in key political circumstances (the democratization of society) like the October

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, Tomic-Koludrovic 2007 discusses the development of social capital in Croatian society based on research about the social involvement of male and female citizens in voluntary work; for example, researching their life goals or whose help volunteers seek in difficult situations.

5th changes in Serbia in 2000<sup>6</sup> or the contribution of certain grants in the development of different services primarily offered by state institutions, such as social services, the SOS telephone hotline for women and children victims of violence and the like.

### **Initial hypothesis and the aim of the paper**

In the light of the thesis that the relationship of the civil sector<sup>7</sup> and religious communities on the territory of Serbia and Montenegro is characterized by a lack of a dialogue and that the potential of non-governmental organizations for establishing continuous cooperation and spreading tolerance and peace has not been used, the research has several goals that can be divided the following way:

- The informative goal of the research was to find out the attitudes towards cooperating with religious communities held by 53 female members of 15 non-governmental organizations from Serbia and Montenegro (37 via questionnaire and 16 via in-depth interview) who used donor funds from the Ecumenical Women's Initiative in the previous years;
- The activist goal of the research is to contribute to raising awareness and motivating women from non-governmental organizations to speak without constraints about public matters connected with religions and religious communities and to face challenges like the extreme/patriarchal interpretations of religions which can influence other issues such as the position of women in religious discourses.

### **Methodology of the research and its scope**

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, at the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade there is a study program 'The politics of resistance and civil disobedience'. Also relevant is Vukasin's work (2004), *Civil society and democracy*.

<sup>7</sup> In Serbia over 22,000 civic organizations are registered (data from the National Bureau for Employment), and in Montenegro there are nearly 3,100 (data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs). On the list of those that accomplished their project activities with EWI funds in the period 2007-2013 there are about twenty organizations (three of which are in Montenegro).

Two methods of data collection were applied during the research: questionnaire and in-depth interview.

A questionnaire was posted online ([www.tvojstav.com](http://www.tvojstav.com)), which provided fast technical solutions for gathering answers and also prevented any possibilities of accidentally skipping a question. Women from organizations who have received donations from EWI were invited to complete it anonymously. In this phase of determining attitudes, it is assumed that representatives of all organizations spoken with by phone participated because they all expressed willingness to devote a few minutes to answer the 19 questions. Since this is an online questionnaire, the researcher could not verify this assumption. The recommendation was that up to three people who were not interviewed fill in the questionnaire. Data was registered from 37 questionnaires completed in this way.

In-depth interviews were conducted with female leaders of these organizations (presidents, vice presidents, directors) during an announced visit. The in-depth interview is one of the methods of qualitative research. The approximate time spent with each woman interviewee was between 30 and 60 minutes. This technique allows deeper understanding of behavior, attitudes, motives as well as collecting large amounts of information during a relatively short period of time.

The author of the research, as an EWI fellow, contacted and visited 12 out of 17 organizations in Serbia and all three in Montenegro that EWI financed between 2007 and 2013. This means that she met a representative at each one and conducted a thematic interview in order to understand the woman's/organization's experiences, strategies etc. Results of in-depth interviews cannot be generalized for these two countries because the sample is too small. As Milinović concludes in a similar research activity about female leaders: 'For this research it was necessary to get this information and data which are, if not statistically, then sociologically important' (Milinovic, 2014, p. 6). However, considering that the interviewees were chosen according to pre-determined criteria (those organizations listed by EWI as grant recipients/partners), the opinions given should be regarded as typical for this segment of the

population. The data is put into a context of wider theoretical discussions and questions from the area of their activity in order to enrich theoretical thinking with their experiences.

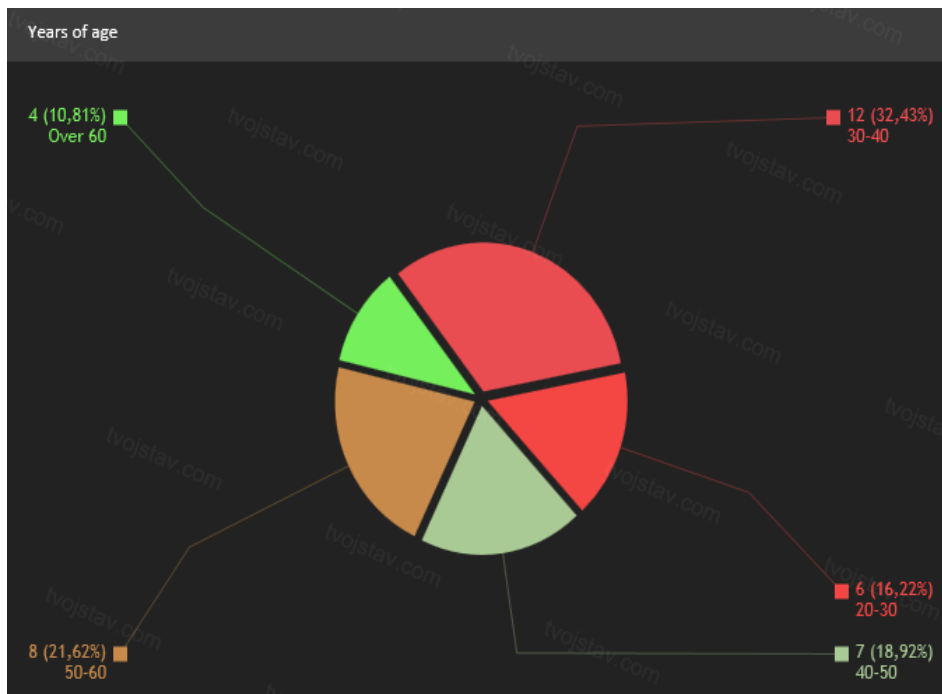
The interviews were performed with female leaders of following organizations (and informal groups) from the territory of the Republic of Serbia: Svet reči' (World of Words) in Velika Plana, Hera in Bačka Topola, Centar za teološka istraživanja (Center for Theological Research) in Belgrade, EksPozicija (ExPosition) in Pančevo, Inkluzivni pokret (Inclusion Movement) in Belgrade, Interkultivator in Belgrade, Kontrapunkt (Counterpoint) in Belgrade, Romski centar za žene i decu Daje (Roma Center for the Women and Children of Daje) in Belgrade, Romani cikna in Kruševac, Ženske studije i istraživanja (Women's Studies and Research) in Novi Sad, Iz kruga (From the Circle) in Novi Sad and Ženska alternativa (Women's Alternative) in Sombor. From the Republic of Montenegro, the following organizations: Luč (Light) in Nikšić, Nova centar za feminističku kulturu (Center Nova for a Feminist Culture) in Podgorica and SOS telefon za djecu žrtve nasilja (SOS Hotline for Children Victims of Abuse) in Podgorica.

## **Research results**

### ***Demography & civil society engagement***

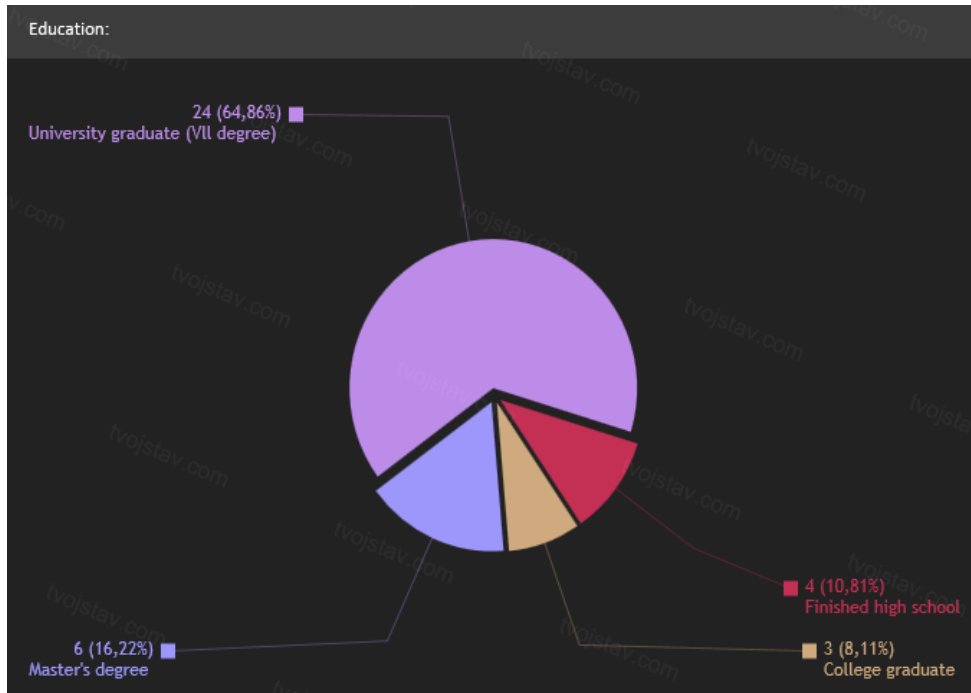
The questionnaire included a total of 37 female respondents, ten of whom (27.03%) are from Montenegro and 27 (72.97%) from Serbia. The questionnaire initially determined each respondent's age, education and position in her non-governmental organization. The data showed that organizations gather a variety of generations of women, thus they are active in all ages of life. The majority of respondents were between 30 and 40 years old (32.40%), then between 50 and 60 years old (21.62%), 18.92% between 40 and 50, 16.22% between 20 and 30 years of age, while 10.81% of respondents were over 60 (see Figure 1).





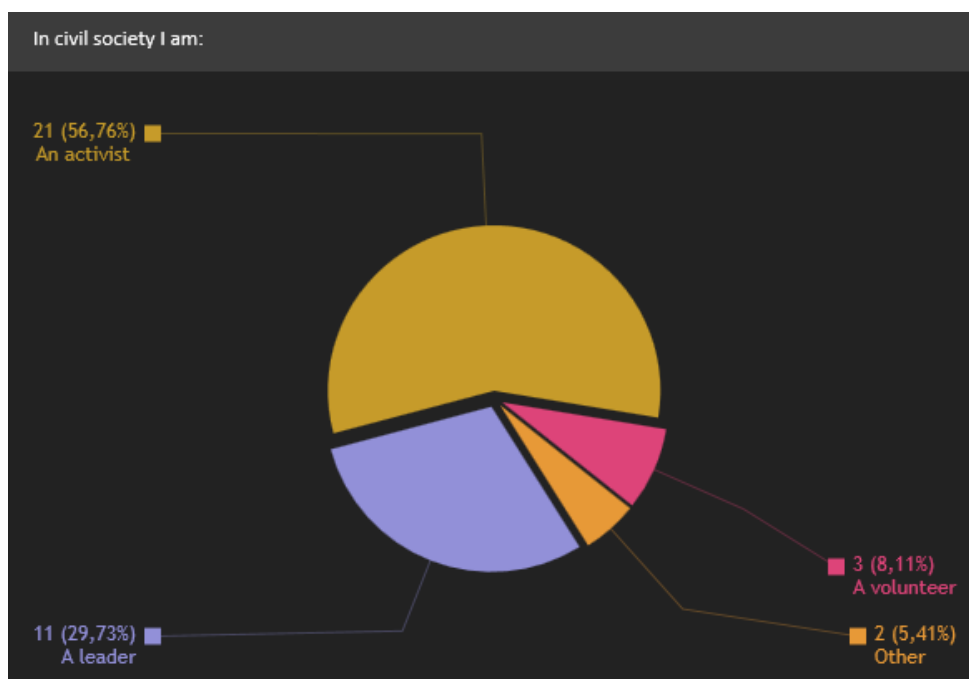
**Figure 1: The ages of women respondents**

The vast majority of female interviewees are highly educated, i.e. almost 90% of them have either a college or university degree. The questionnaire did not contain a rubric for filling in items concerning education unrelated to standard educational institutions, yet in the course of visits performed by the female researcher, as well as judging by the scope of the work (the profile of each organization), it can be seen that the majority of representatives has significant competence which have been acquired and developed owing to informal education such as seminars, training workshops, etc. 64.86% have a university degree (VII degree), 16.22% have a master's degree, 8.11% have a college degree (VI degree of education), while 10.81% have a high school diploma (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Educational background of women respondents**

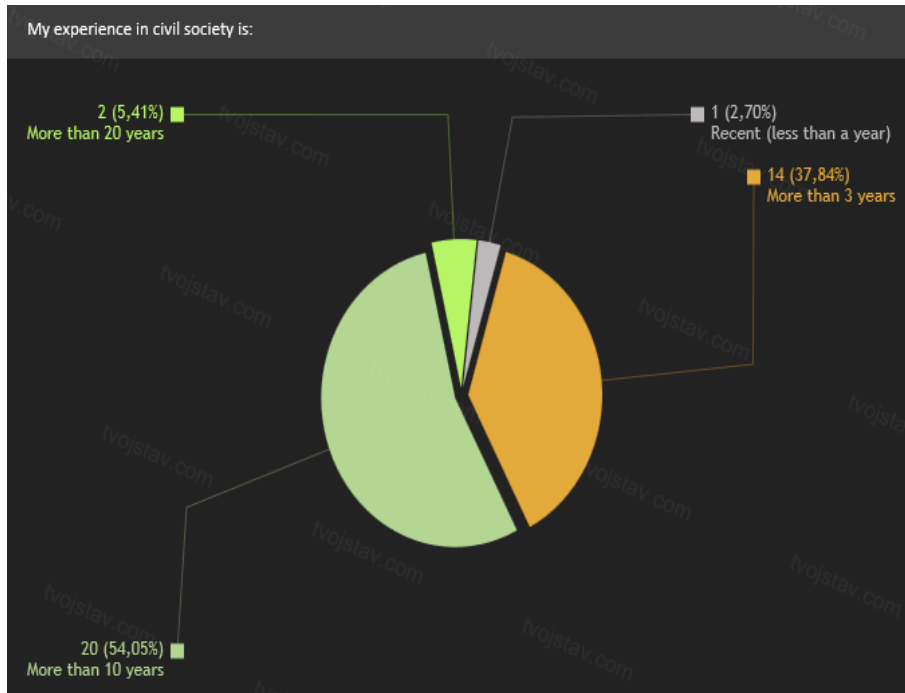
In answer to the question ‘how would you define your status in civil society?’, more than half of 37 female respondents defined themselves as activists (56.76%), 29.73% as leaders, 8.11% as volunteers, while 5.41% defined themselves another way (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Role of women respondents in the civil society sector**

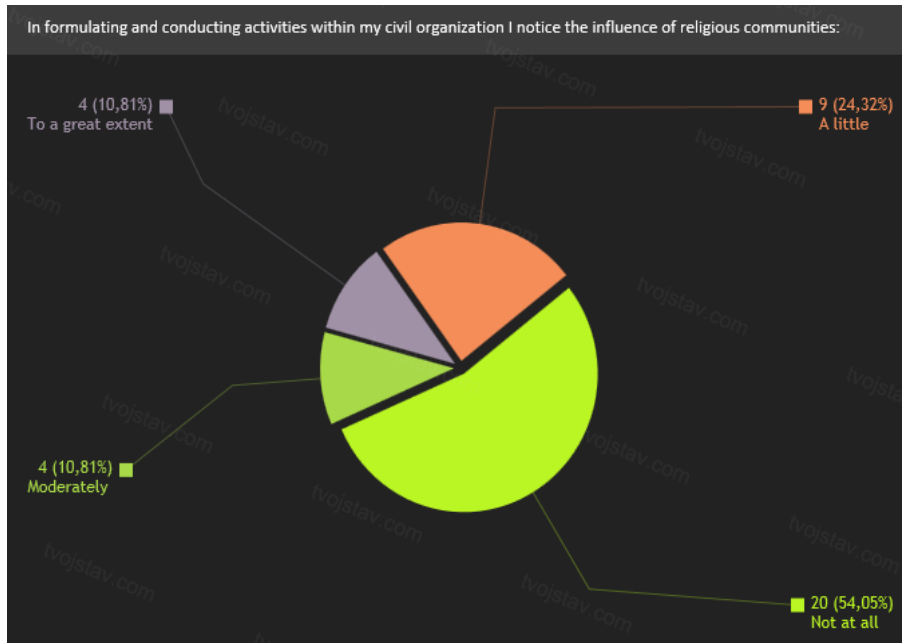
### *Civil sector involvement with religion*

The second set of questions sought data concerning the experience of female respondents in the civil sector as well as any connections of non-governmental organizations with religious organizations to date. When it comes to employment status, engagement with non-governmental organizations plays an important role in the current reality that in the majority of these cases, employment is not formally or legally recorded, but instead can be calculated in relation to various projects. When answering the question of how much experience they have in the civil society, more than half of respondents (54.05%) said that it is a period that exceeds a decade, 37.84% have been active more than three years, 5.41% for more than 20 years, while 2.70% has been with an organization for less than a year (Figure 4). Since only organizations with low budgets (under 50,000 Euros per year) are eligible for EWI funds, women active in such organizations are mostly engaged in volunteer activities, i.e. their positions are not salaried, which was later confirmed in the in-depth interviews.



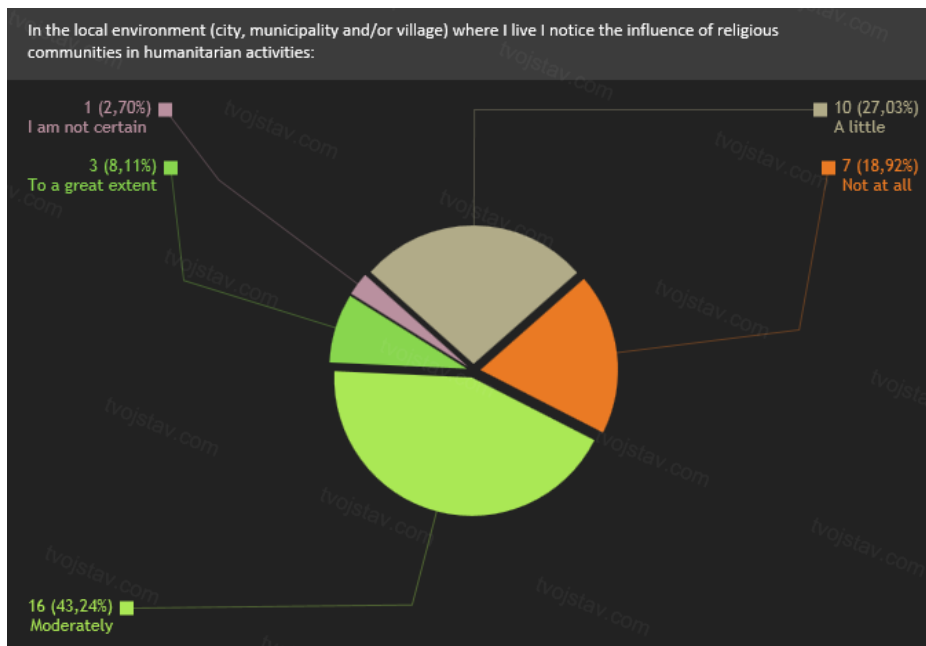
**Figure 4: Experience in the civil society sector**

While formulating and conducting activities within their civil organizations, most of the respondents have not noticed the influence of religious communities at all (54.05%), one quarter (24.32%) have noticed a small influence, while an equal number (10.81% each) notices a moderate influence or a great influence (Figure 5).



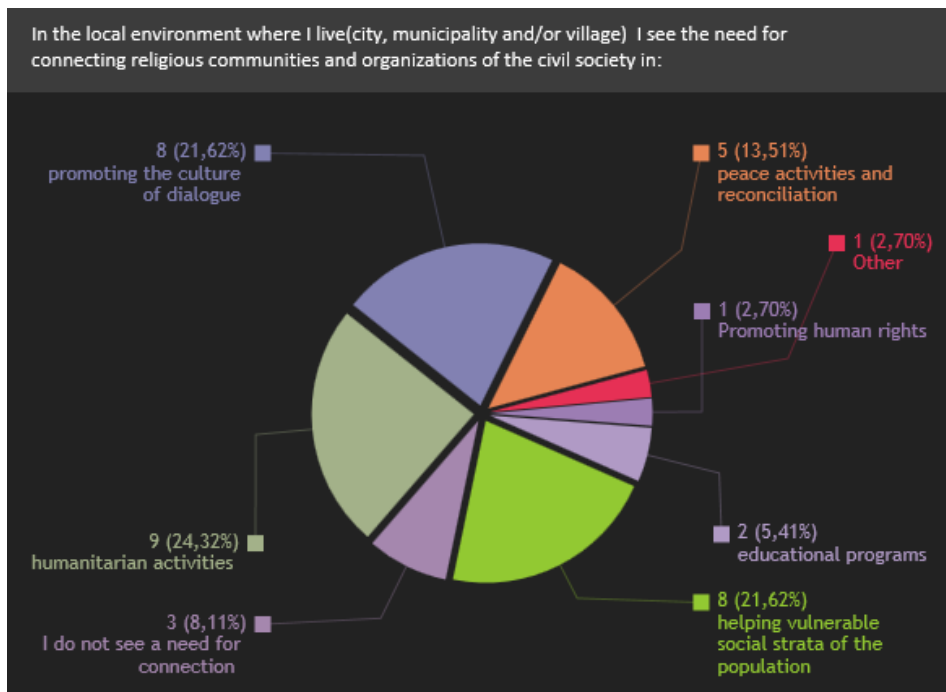
**Figure 5: The influence of religious communities on the activities of one's organization**

In the local environment where they reside (city, municipality and/or village), 43.24% of women respondents expressed moderately noticing the influence of religious communities in humanitarian activities, 27.03% state that they barely notice it, 18.92% does not notice it at all, 8.11% considers the influence to be visible to a great extent, while 2.70% is not certain (Figure 6).



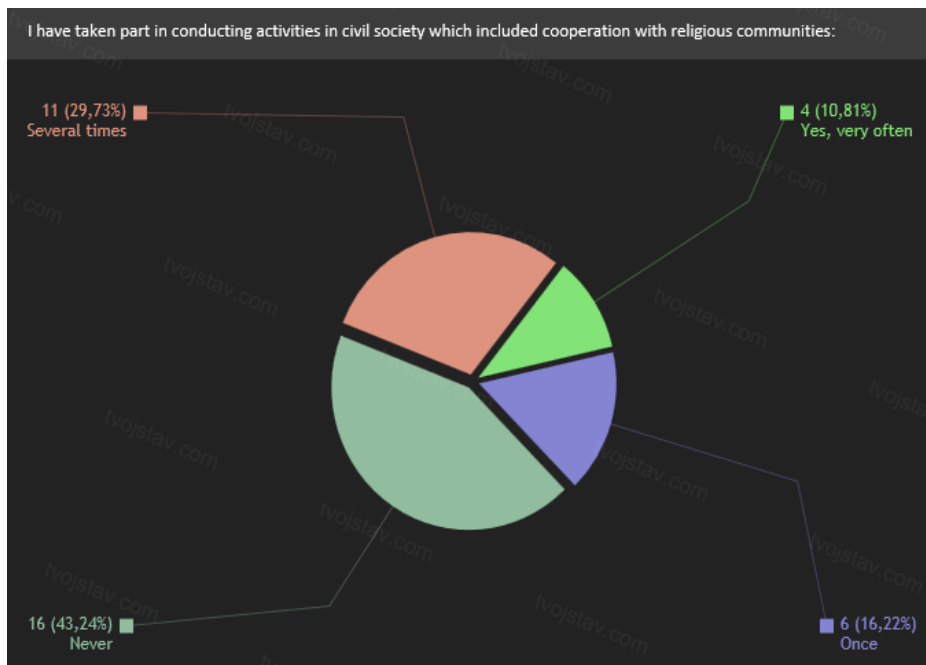
**Figure 6: The influence of religious communities in local humanitarian activities**

In the local environment where they live (city, municipality and/or village) the largest group of respondents (24.32%) sees the need to connect religious communities and civil society organizations when it comes to humanitarian activities; 21.62% of respondents sees the need for this when it comes to aiding the most vulnerable social strata and promoting a culture of dialogue; 13.51% think so in peace related activities and reconciliation; 5.41% believes that joint educational programs should be initiated, while 2.70% points out that they should promote human rights cooperatively. The percentage of those who do not see the need for such a liaison is 8.11% (Figure 7).



**Figure 7: Need for connecting religious communities and civil society organizations in certain realms**

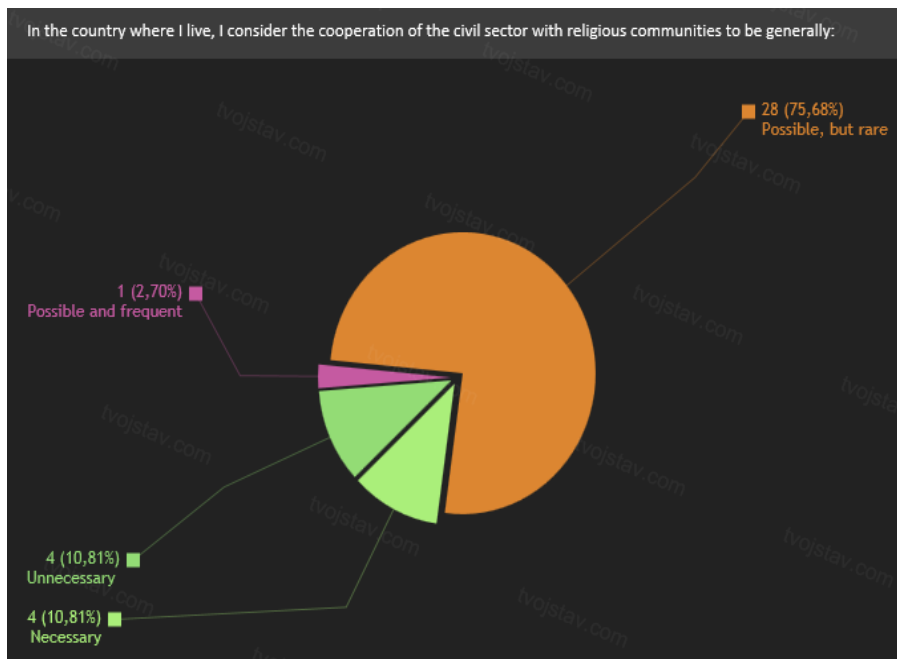
When answering about their participation in civil society activities that included cooperation with religious communities, the largest number of women respondents (43.24%) said they have not done so, while 29.73% have participated in such activities several times, 16.22% have done so once, and 10.81% have done so often (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Participation in civil society activities in cooperation with religious communities**

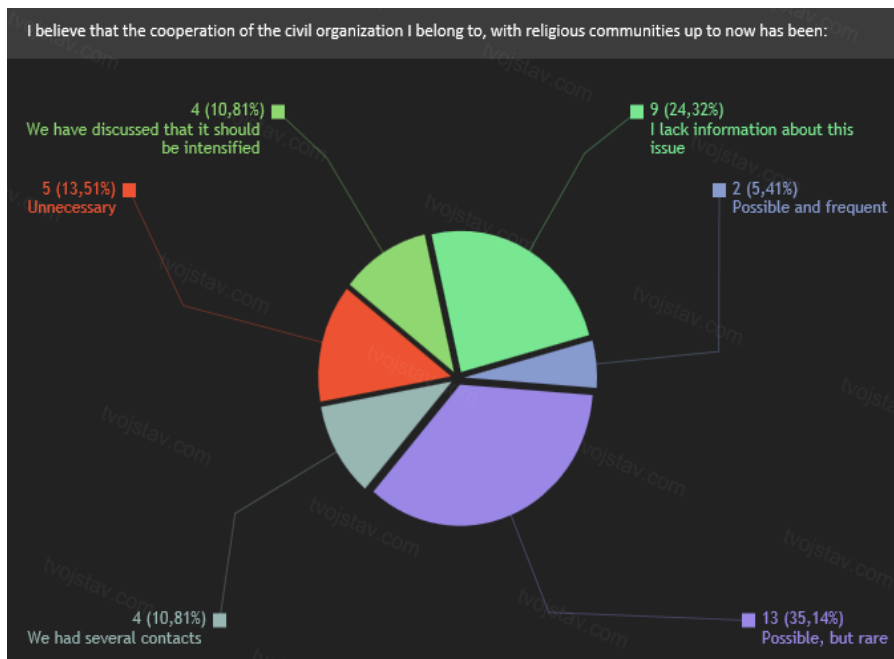
The cooperation of civil society with religious communities generally, in these two countries is possible but rarely happens according to three quarters of the respondents (75.68%), while two equal but smaller groups (each 10.81%) thought such cooperation is, respectively, necessary and unnecessary. Only one person surveyed (2.70%) believes that cooperation is possible and frequent (Figure 9).





**Figure 9: Attitudes towards cooperation between the civil sector and religious communities**

While considering their own organizations' previous cooperation with religious communities, the plurality of those surveyed (35.14%) said that such cooperation was possible but rare, 24.32% lacked information about the issue, 13.51% assessed such cooperation unnecessary, 10.81% had had several contacts, while 5.41% referred to possible and frequent cooperation (Figure 10).

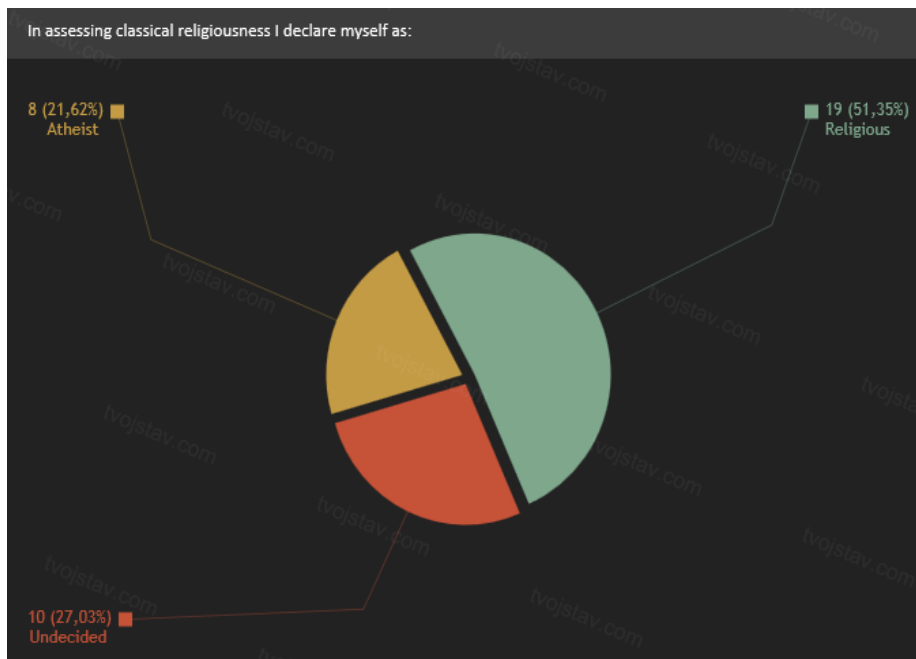


**Figure 10: Organization's past cooperation with religious communities**

### ***Religiosity***

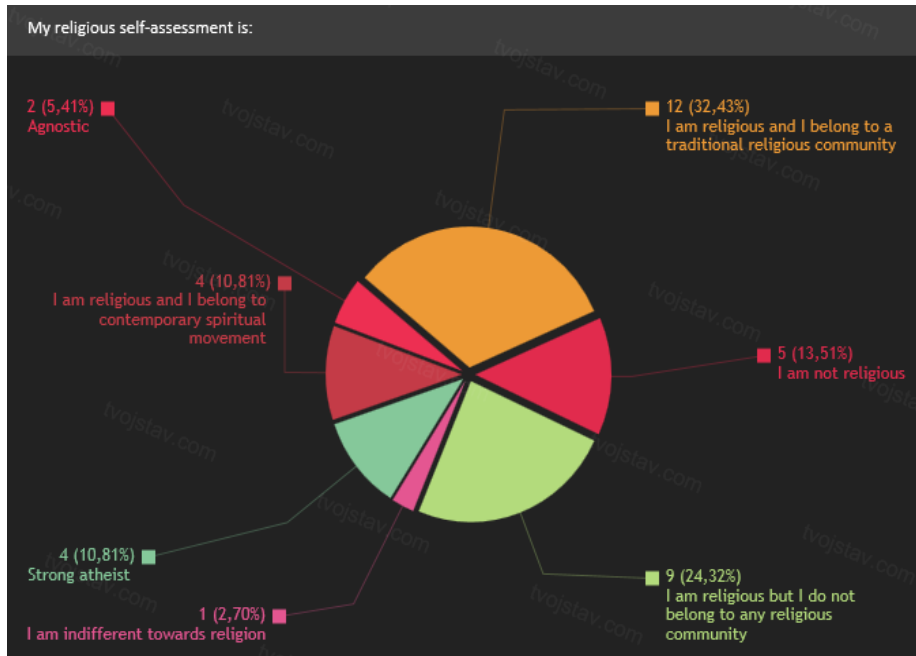
In the third set of questions, female respondents provided data regarding their private religious attitudes, which enabled the researcher to learn that the ones who have a religious way of life are dedicated to the church or another religious community, initiate and have a more positive attitude towards cooperation between their non-governmental organizations and churches or religious communities.

More than half of the respondents declared themselves religious (51.35%), whereas 27.03% are undecided and 21.62% atheists (Figure 11).



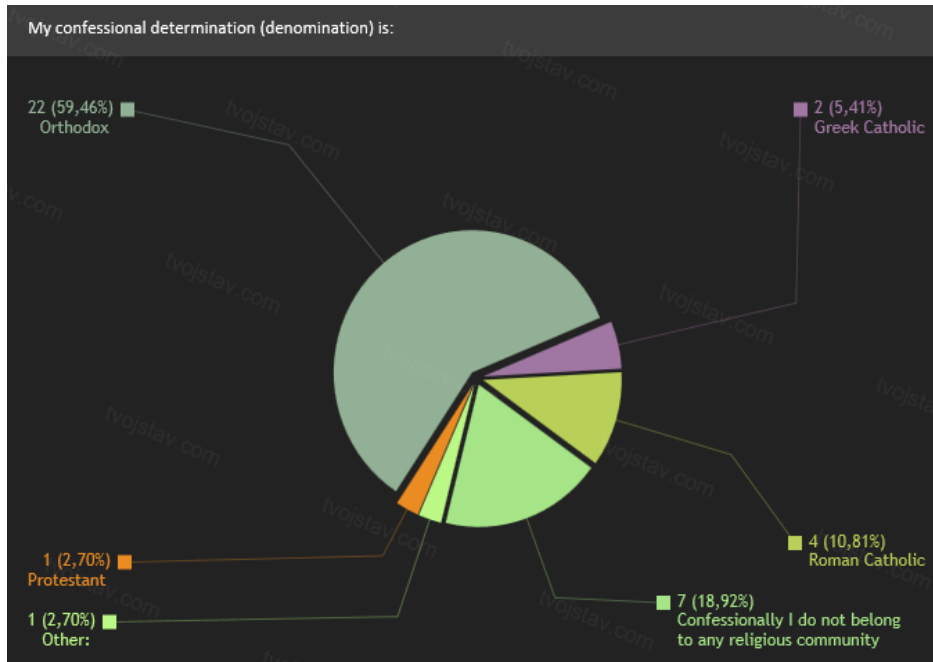
**Figure 11: Personal (classic) religiosity**

Upon the request to self-assess their religiosity in combination with religious belonging: 32.43% of interviewees said they are religious and belong to a traditional religious community, 24.32% are religious but do not belong to a religious community, 13.51% said that they are not religious, 10.81% are religious and belong to modern spiritual movements, 10.81% are strong atheists, 5.41% are agnostic, while 2.70% is indifferent towards religion (one respondent) (Figure 12).



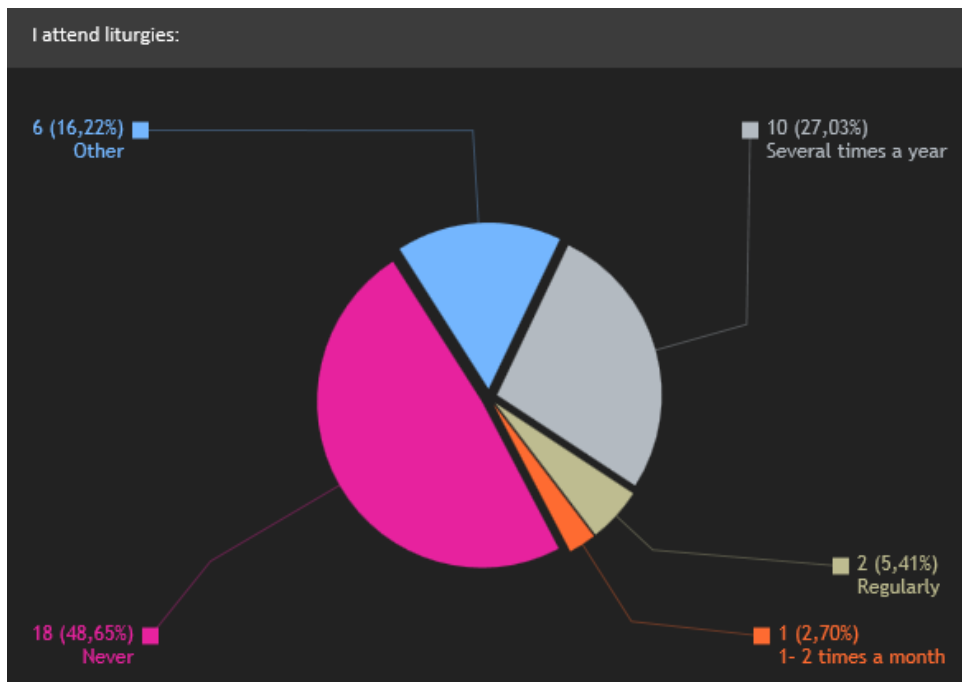
**Figure 12: Religiosity plus religious belonging self-assessment**

By confessional determination, the majority of respondents (59.46%) are Orthodox, while 18.92% said they do not belong confessionally to any religious community, 10.81% are Roman-Catholic, 5.41% Greek Catholic, and one respondent (2.7%) declared herself Protestant and another said 'other' (Figure 13).



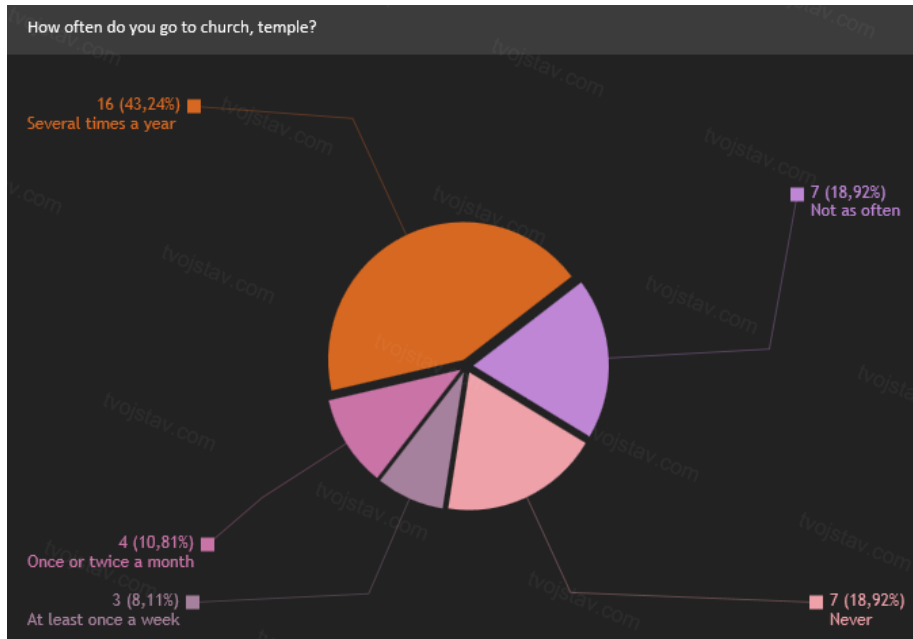
**Figure 13: Confessional determination**

Almost half of the respondents (48.65%) claimed they never attend liturgies, 27.03% visits liturgies several times a year, 5.41% attend regularly, and 2.70% once or twice a month, while 16.22% falls into the ‘other’ category (Figure 14).



**Figure 14. Attendance at liturgies**

When asked how often they go to a religious facility, 43.24% of interviewees answered that they do so several times a year, 18.92% never, 10.81% once or twice a month, and 8.11% at least once a week (Figure 15).

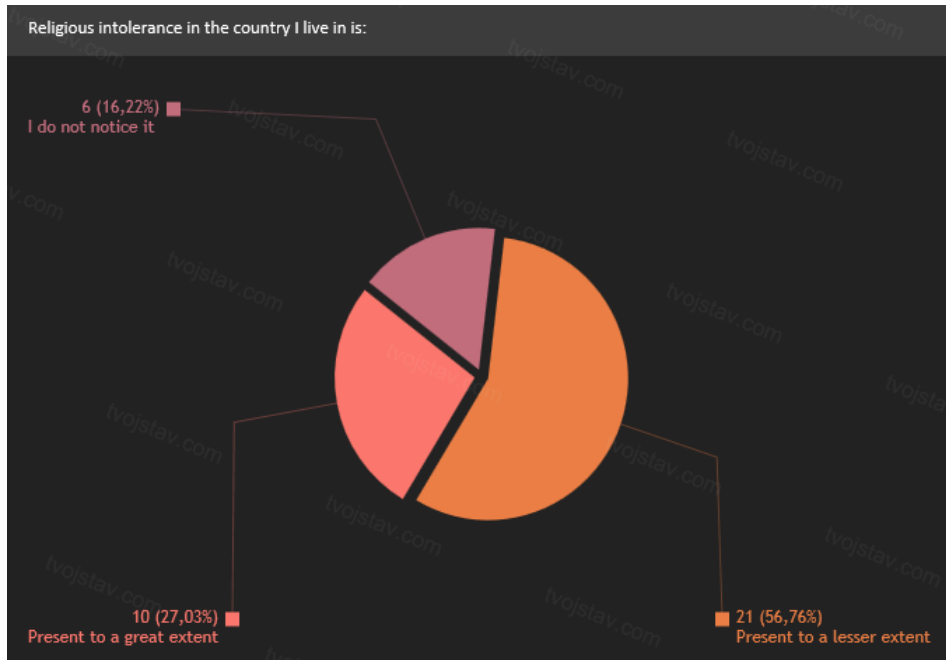


**Figure 15: Visits to religious temples and/or churches**

### ***Religious intolerance & discrimination***

In the last set of questions we identified potential causes for the lack of cooperation between the civil sector and religious communities and churches. The author assumed that some respondents have avoided such cooperation or joint activities (or are hesitant concerning possible future cooperation) on the subject of incorporating religious topics due to a fear of discrimination based not only on gender but also, for those not belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church, of religious discrimination.

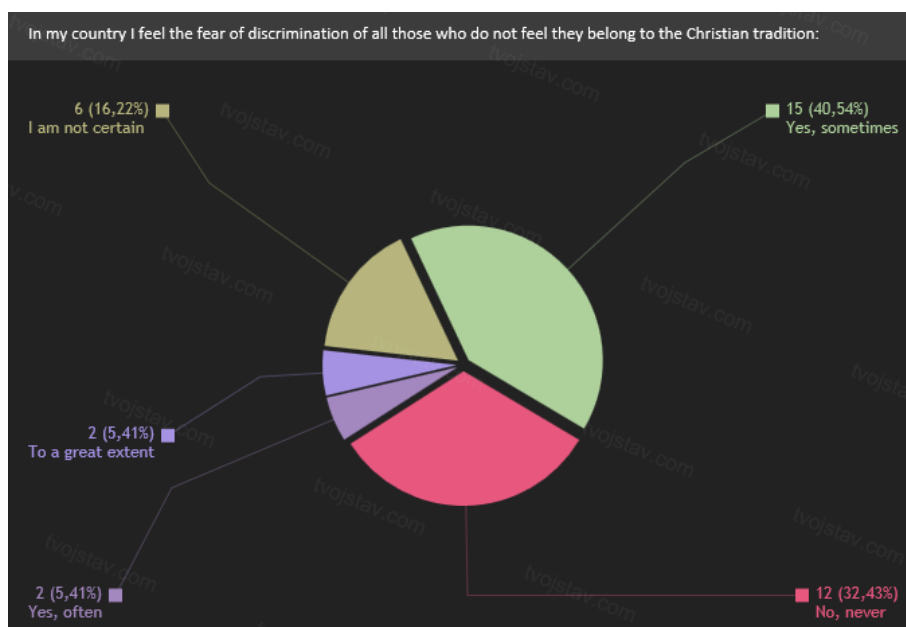
According to the opinion of 56.76% of female respondents, religious intolerance exists in her country to a lesser extent, 27.03% considers it to be present to a great extent, while 16.22% does not notice it (Figure 16).



**Figure 16: Religious intolerance in home country (Serbia or Montenegro)**

In their own country, 40.54% sometimes feel fear of discrimination from others who belong to a Christian tradition, because they themselves do not belong to a Christian tradition, 32.43% never have this fear, 16.22% are not sure, while 5.41% say that they often fear such discrimination (Figure 17).





**Figure 17. Fear of discrimination from people not belonging to the Christian tradition**

### **Interpretation of selected data**

The average questionnaire respondent – a female member of a civil society organization in Serbia or Montenegro and funded by EWI – is a highly educated woman, between 30 and 50 years of age, who has been active for more than ten years in a civil society organization (which deals in the human rights of women and minorities). The average respondent does not notice an influence of religious communities upon her work, while she detects a moderate influence of the leading religious community in the local area – most often of the Serbian Orthodox Church. She believes that religious intolerance in her country is present in small amounts. Although she has not often had the opportunity to conduct non-governmental organization (NGO) activities in cooperation with religious communities, she sees the need for connection regarding charity activities, helping the underprivileged social strata, promoting a culture of dialogue, peace activities and reconciliation, as well as educational programs. She sees cooperation as possible – but notices that it is rarely achieved. She is religious, belongs to a traditional religious

community (most likely Orthodox), although she does not regularly attend liturgies, but goes to church several times a year.

In order to better understand the survey data, which provides insight from a larger number of anonymous respondents (who could therefore be completely honest), the in-depth interviews provide contextual information for each organization on the territory of Serbia and Montenegro. Out of 15 organizations that the author visited in order to do an in-depth interview with its woman leader, only two of the organizations in Serbia (Center for Theological Research and Mah) are primarily oriented towards building peace and reconciliation, followed by ecumenical and interreligious cooperation and promoting the role of women in churches and religious communities. In several more organizations the equality of men and women in all fields, solidarity, pluralism and humaneness are high on the list of emphasized postulates, but the activities through which they are achieved are different and diverse. The founder of Mah explains this:

*We exist to help people meet, people who believe, and by 'people who believe' I mean atheists as well. Reading the signs of the times, we realized that it is very important to observe the position and role of women of faith, because this is a challenge of our time, the place of the contemporary woman believer. We have observed the position of women in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. We have organized speeches by authorities in church, to be more specific nuns [and] working women, who lead a life dedicated to God within their religious communities, regardless of whether they are in a covenant or they are activists. Lately we have been dealing more and more with... I would not say problems, but challenges regarding women, primarily their dignity.*

Small-budget female non-governmental organizations most often have a wide range of functions and various activities and they only sporadically implement projects that directly (basically) promote peace and interreligious dialogue. These facts point to several indicators that are most often overlapping: the organizations have widely defined lists of goals and activities,

they have few members, they depend on donor funding, they do not have employees, and project suggestions (along with certain activities) are realized owing to the enthusiasm of individuals, they have no offices, perhaps implying they are only starting up and require further development. While some organizations, like the Inclusive Movement Association and the Romski centar za žene i decu Daje in Belgrade or Hera in Bačka Topola, are maintained only owing to goodwill and in-kind donations (e.g. the president offers part of her home for the purposes of the organization). Some organizations with a long lists of achievements, great experience and who are academically respected – like Ženske studije i istraživanja in Novi Sad or Luč in Nikšić – are face serious existential problems, because they sometimes do not have project funding for months, nor an office where members and activists can adequately consider their long-term plan of action.

On the other hand, the organizations interviewed indicated that they do not want to change their orientation only to meet the demands of a certain donor, even if it means they will have an uneventful period or a period of ‘frozen activities’, because they value quality and personal fulfillment in achieving the goals they have set (most often voluntarily) more than adapting to donors’ needs.

In the in-depth interview, six organizations achieved practical cooperation with religious communities in the past years (four from Serbia and two from Montenegro), which is less than half of the NGOs studied in this research. Personal contact between individuals in civil society and religious communities are of utmost importance for such cooperation, which the following four examples illustrate.

*We cooperated with the religious communities in which some of our members were active. When A. B.<sup>8</sup> was the president of our Council we had excellent cooperation with the Reformed Church, [and also] when the late K. B. was still among us, with the Ecumenical humanitarian organization .... Since I am with the Franciscan order, we*

---

<sup>8</sup> Names have been replaced with initials to protect their privacy.

*have had good cooperation with them, and we continue to do so, whether they ... gave lectures ... or we organized something for them... The third Friday in March is the international Ecumenical women's day, when women all over the world have prayer on the same day, we take part in it along with all the other organizations. (representative from Ženske studije i istraživanja)*

*When Humanitarian aid was needed from Caritas, which is Catholic, we were at liberty to contact them, because triplets were born in Nikšić. The family lived in extreme poverty, so then we met them and that was the time when they recognized the value of our organization Luč and, via our organization, the family was provided with three cradles and a lot of things for children, which came in very handy. (representative from Luč)*

*For already two years we have been receiving packages from the Evangelical Church. They have been bringing packages for children and giving donations for two years. Let us put it like this: they are not giving us packages - we combined our two interests. We find it difficult to collect money and packages for the large number of children we serve, thus it is frustrating when you have enough for 20 or 30 children, but not for the others. So you provide either for all children or you do not collect at all. That's when they [the church] appeared: they have the packages and no one to help with them. Access to Roma people is hard to organize. Thus we have been successfully cooperating with them for three years now. We schedule it all in advance. They arrive at a Roma settlement and organize the event and transportation. (representative from Romani Cikna)*

*Church World Service in Zemun had an idea for awhile to help us with dividing, distributing and giving production tools, and at that point we cooperated with them in the sense of assessment: we did the research and chose women who expressed the wish, will and talent, and were responsible, so we could provide them with some tools. At present, in a shantytown in Zemun Polje, we have a prefabricated small facility which is a hair*

*salon; there is a photo shop at the other end of the settlement; it is also known where the plumber lives, so some occupations have been arranged. They were obligated to do it, and we were obligated to check in on them and see how it all functions, as well as to report'. (representative from Romski centar za žene i decu Daje)*

The examples of cooperation from Luč in Montenegro and Romani Cikna and Romski centar za žene i decu Daje in Serbia are proof of the importance of the work of civil society organizations (with religious communities) in dealing with social problems related to vulnerable women and their children, where solidarity in providing concrete humanitarian aid is of great importance. 'An important feature of activities within civil society is working for the common good'. (Turniški, 2013, p. 55)

On the other hand, connecting the activities of women's civil society organizations and religious communities was previously welcomed by all participants insofar as it sent a concrete message of peace to one's whole nation during the war in parts of the former Yugoslavia. This can be seen in the words of our interviewee from SOS Telefon in Podgorica, Montenegro:

*When the war in Kosovo started, we organized a performance in the town square, in our city's center. We began the performance in silence, and at that moment, exactly noon the church bells started ringing, not only in Podgorica, but in nearby towns too. Bells were ringing in all churches, Orthodox, Catholic, and in all mosques. Do you have any idea what it means to listen to that for five minutes, how long those five minutes are, and how those five minutes show to every human being with the smallest amount of humanity that we are all united? I am telling you this just as an example that we cannot say that religious communities do not want to cooperate, but our attitude towards them, and by 'our' I mean non-governmental organizations, is different. (representative from SOS telefon za žrtve nasilja)*

The last sentence of the SOS telefon interviewee indicates a certain amount of skepticism in some civil society activists – that they should not cooperate with churches – referring to the postulate that religious communities are separated from the state, which is secular. Some scholars note that some religious leaders demonstrate a certain amount of hesitation as well:

*Members of some religions believe that the acceptance of dialogue means simultaneously giving up some of their own principles and in reality it is the opposite. An interreligious dialogue which determines a connection between religions apart from metaphysical and doctrinal reasons, gains more and more cultural and civil justification and becomes a necessity for a modern society seeking peace. Therefore a dialogue is definitely one of the ways of solving burdened inter-human and interreligious antagonism (Kepeš, 2011, p. 305).*

While the civil sector and religious communities should be separate from the state apparatus, the aforementioned example from Podgorica shows the strength of the message of peace which the women's NGO managed to send in cooperation with all the religious communities in that area at the beginning of war. It is interesting that most examples of cooperation involve smaller religious communities in Serbia and Montenegro, while the Serbian Orthodox Church, the largest, is rarely mentioned. The Islamic community is not often mentioned in examples, as can be expected, since there were no civil organizations from the Muslim majority area of Sandžak interviewed. Since issues related to peace require consensus of vast communities, it is important to include as many as possible constituent elements of society. The most common reason for avoiding cooperation lies in not being familiar with 'the other side'. This conclusion is substantiated by one of the interviewees, who said: 'We have not had the opportunity to cooperate with any religious community. I do not even know how we should go about it.' (representative from Interkultivator).

Observing the list of projects supported by EWI and the diversity of the women's NGOs in Serbia and Montenegro who have partnered with EWI since 2007, it is obvious that this donor organization has given support primarily to women because of their current unequal status in

society and their tendency towards making a just and peace-loving society, respecting the right to difference in culture, customs, ethnicity, nation and gender. However, it is also clear that support for activities based on cooperation with religious communities was secondary to women's rights issues. The following example is an exception.

*It has already been ten years since we started issuing an interreligious calendar - this has to do with the donor organization – EWI. This poses the question how is something such as interreligious dialogue systematically nurtured within our organization since its foundation? ... We print books, give lectures and I have an optional course within gender studies, 'Feminist Theology', here and in Sarajevo, and when they choose this course in Belgrade as well, within the non-governmental organization the Belgrade Open School. Therefore I take most credit for this, but some credit goes to [the organization] Women's Studies and Research as well for making the course part of the academic program. In relation to this, we have individual lectures addressing this issue: how women contribute to peace making using religious postulates. (representative from Ženske studije i istraživanja)*

The reason for planning activities unrelated to the church in women's NGOs is probably the orientation of those same organizations, who propose activities in accordance with recognized problems in their area. Namely, most civil society organizations in the last decade were directed towards cooperation with state institutions (especially ones dealing with victims of violence where cooperation with the police and doctors as well as providing safe houses and social service centers is of utmost importance for saving the vulnerable persons), so all project proposals are written on the platform of those that were successfully realized, not daring to enter 'unfamiliar terrain'. Attitudes where potential cooperation with religious communities is explicitly refused are rare.

*I believe that the civil society and religious communities do not, in fact, have contact, except a negative one, which manifests itself in different ways. Organizations of the civil*

*society in Serbia are very critical, if I may say so, maybe even negative, perhaps more than they should be, towards religious communities. Religious communities are not at all interested in the non-governmental sector. They usurp means meant for non-governmental organizations. I have information that within the Center of Women's Support project that we were a part of, that in Serbia the Serbian Orthodox Church receives the most funding. I have nothing against them, but they do not belong here. One day, I hope, when the budget diversification is performed, and when that specification and transparency are conducted, then such manipulations will not be possible. I find our relationship with the Ecumenical Women's Initiative interesting in that sense. We are an organization that is completely neutral religiously. In fact, we have never had any open religious topics with our members, nor political for that matter. (representative from Ženska alternativa).*

The female leaders interviewed most often pointed out the possibility to cooperate with religious communities, even though the fact that they take no initiative themselves, just like religious communities, is the cause of the lack of cooperation. This can be seen in the following text.

*If we were to answer this question by giving an example from [my organization] Women's Studies and Research, then we had excellent cooperation with religious communities on an informational level, but if we took the Orthodox community institution, which is predominant in Vojvodina, as a parameter, then this is doubtful and not exactly for the best. (representative from Ženske studije i istraživanja)*

*I see religious communities as part of the non-governmental sector. I believe there is a lack of understanding and that they mainly see each other as literally enemies. A complete lack of understanding is present, maybe even worse than that, the lack of desire to learn about what we do, to exchange ideas, experiences. I think there most certainly*



*are points of contact and that this could be improved, especially when it comes to important social topics, but that at present there is not a lot of understanding and no desire at all. (representative from Udruženje inkluzivni pokret).*

If the success of the civil sector is that a significant number of services involving social protection is taken over from state institutions (SeCons data for 2014), before which existed the continuous support of donors, initiating and proving the importance of NGOs work, the question is whether it is a mistake of the civil sector that it has not invested nearly as much effort into cooperating with religious communities.

*We could now say that they are not making an effort either, but I deliberately present a parallel with institutions. The institutions have not made any efforts themselves, so at one point we thought it important to take the initiative, to call them, meet with them, explain what we do and how and the like... When it comes to religious communities, this has lost importance and I believe that there lies the mistake. (representative from SOS telefon za žrtve nasilja)*

Most interviewees were aware that women in civil organizations could contribute more to the building of peace using religious postulates. Among the interviewees, few of them were explicitly opposed to cooperating with religious communities. What follows is one such opinion.

As much as both are in the civil sector, whatever outside observers may think, I believe that they should not be connected, because there is no need whatsoever. There are organizations, even humanitarian ones, that do what they do, we have religious communities that again do what they do and I think these are domains we have no reason to mix. There may be some common values, but I am not certain that, except declaratively, religious communities carry them into effect. I cannot think of any topic that would be a reason to start a dialogue. Especially when it comes to such a balance of power, where you have the church as a leader in everything, overshadowing all others, some which are not even officially acknowledged or if they are, do not

have equal rights like with the traditional ones. Besides all this, you have joint actions of religious communities only when it is necessary to oppose LGBT rights. They never communicate between themselves, they have a common agenda only when it comes to the law prohibiting discrimination, then they realize that the LGBT population bothers them all. (representative from EksPozicija).

### **Conclusion**

Only two of the female leaders from Serbia interviewed (from Center for Theological Research and Mah) came from organizations explicitly based on promoting and affirming values which are a basic component of traditional and acknowledged religious communities in their society (and Ženske studije i istraživanja is the only one to have a significant publication dealing with religious topics). Fewer than a half of the organizations have been in touch with one of the religious communities, while only one female leader is completely against cooperation. General attitude is that there is space for improving the relationship with religious communities because female activists contribute to making peace by religious postulates, to which some of the described examples in the work testify. They point out that many like them who provide services to victims of violence have made an immense, long-term efforts to formulate cooperation with state institutions because the law obliged them to educate the police, exchange information with Social Services and other institutions whereas with religious institutions, there was no initiative from either side for the majority. Religious organizations offering help to the most sensitive groups encountered positive feedback from these organizations.

Religious freedom, as a human rights and interreligious tolerance as a civilizational achievement, gain ever greater importance in the working of a democratic state and are increasingly becoming the subject of scientific/theoretical research and expertise. ‘An individual’s freedom of choice against discrimination and persecution is emphasized. It is at the

same time a basis on which it is possible to make an ecumenical dialogue to which any compulsion is unknown.’ (Janjić, 2008, p. 122).

This research sought to bring light to the actual state of the relationship between civil society actors dealing with the protection of female and minority rights (owing to grants from EWI) and religious communities in Serbia and Montenegro. The author and the article can, in that sense, be viewed as a medium of transition between them. The point can be ‘very radical: by questions in the interview it is indirectly requested from the interviewees to remain at the edge of what they know, to question their own awareness and that through that risk and openness to a [another] way of learning and living, widen their own capacity of imagining what is human’.

(Butler, 2005, p. 202)

One conclusion may be that, on the basis of these results, EWI could insist that the organizations surveyed work in alliance with religious communities (at least through a peaceful dialogue) in future. Only when considering that the source of ‘our capacity for social transformation can be found right in our own capacity to mediate between the worlds, to engage in cultural translation’, as propagated by Gloria Anzaldúa (in Butler, 2005, p. 201), can we expect improved communication between women representatives of civil society and religious communities. As Spivak repeatedly asks, what does it mean not only to listen to the voices of those deprived of their rights, but also to ‘represent’ those voices in their own work?, this research could initiate in EWI a debate on several issues arising from the statement: ‘In the academic framework, two trends are noticeable: contemporary studies on gender matters greatly affect religious studies in which there is significant change in theoretical and methodological paradigms, and vice versa, within gender studies an important place is given to religion as an important social factor in addition to the language, education, upbringing, culture’ (Radulovic, 2006, p. 75). A similar relationship arose through research with the surveyed NGOs: there are those who are clearly committed to programmatic cooperation with religious communities, those who are doing it sporadically to help their socially disadvantaged beneficiaries/members and those who do not see room for cooperation.

Without going into the field of secularism in Serbia and Montenegro, and recalling the effort that many interviewees made to establish partnerships with state institutions, the question arises whether these organizations could improve their dialogue with religious communities in areas where the state has insufficient capacity. Feminist activists who work with Roma women and their children as well as the poor, those radically deprived of their rights, those who suffer violence and the like, should ask whether combining forces with religious institutional representatives could mobilize all those who are in a position to help their fellow people. How would such a message, with the help of religious communities, reach a wider target group and contribute to improving the situation of their beneficiaries? How many resources are unused, bearing in mind that during the recent restitution process, the Serbian Orthodox Church has regained its land and numerous buildings as well. These capacities could, for example, help open new schools, nurseries and childcare facilities for children whose mothers are unable but would like to work or be educated. As it stands now, the activists surveyed manage merely to guide these women through the process of obtaining identity cards or registering at the National Employment Bureau in order to gain a children's allowance. On the other hand, a certain level of distance is necessary, for example when it comes to the existing performance and effect of religious education, the official role of civil society organizations' staff or that of religious communities. The answers to such major issues could be discussed in a series of roundtables or a conference bringing together representatives of the civil, religious and social services sectors.

The respondents to this research have mostly confirmed the warnings of Nikola Knežević, founder of the Center for the Study of Religion, Politics and Society that the role of the civil sector is smaller than it should be, because the number of organizations which deal with the religious sector in the state is relatively small, that the means for this from international funders are limited, because religious dialogue is not of interest to funders, and religious communities often have that dialogue separately, not within the non-governmental sector. This lecturer from the Protestant Theological Faculty in Novi Sad estimated that the 'question of interreligious dialogue is strongly connected to the question of international relations, and its cause is equating religious and national segments, therefore, religious dialogue is often a matter of normalization

and cooperation in the whole region, thus it should be encouraged by the religious communities and the civil sector alike’.

The research has shown that a certain distrust towards religious communities exists among certain female leaders of civil society organizations, and that they believe representatives of religious communities have antagonism in certain segments towards female activists because of, for example, the traditional attitudes of the Serbian Orthodox Church against LGBT persons and those protected by the law prohibiting discrimination. In that sense, the Ecumenical Women’s Initiative can channel the potential of civil society organizations for encouraging dialogue, tolerance and cooperation with moderate religious voices, because numerous questions about the position of women in religion and society have still not been the topic of public debate.

## References

- Bartulović- Karastojković, I. and A. Cvetković (2011). “Evharistijsko jedinstvo hrišćana”. In M. Sitarski and I. Bartulović- Karastojković (Eds.), *Iščekujući Evropsku uniju: Stabilizacija međuetničkih i međureligijskih odnosa na Zapadnom Balkanu* Vol II (293-301). Belgrade: Belgrade Open School.
- Blagojević, M, J. Jablanov- Maksimović, and T. Bajović (Eds.) (2013). *(Post)sekularni obrt: religijske, moralne i društveno-političke vrednosti studenata u Srbiji*. Belgrade: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (Center for Religious Studies), Konrad Adenauer Foundation and Center for European Studies.
- Butler, Dž. (2005). *Raščinjavanje roda*. Sarajevo: TKD Šahinpašić.
- Đurić, J. (2013). “Postsekularnost i ‘modernizacija s dušom’”. In M. Blagojević, J. Jablanov Maksimović and T. Bajović (Eds.), *(Post)sekularni obrt: religijske, moralne i društveno-političke vrednosti studenata u Srbiji* (95-116). Belgrade: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (Center for Religious Studies), Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Center for European Studies.
- Janjić, M. (2008). “Perspektive ekumenizma u Vojvodini”. *Religija i tolerancija*, 6 (10): 121-128.

- Jevđić, P. (2013). "Istorijsko-religijska uloga žene u borbi za prava obespravljenih". In I. Bartulović (Eds.), *Prevazilaženje tradicionalne uloge žene u crkvama i verskim zajednicama Zapadnog Balkana* (42-47). Belgrade: Center for Theological Research.
- Kepeš, N. (2011). Iščekujući Evropsku uniju: Stabilizacija međuetničkih i međureligijskih odnosa na Zapadnom Balkanu. In M. Sitarski i I. Bartulović- Karastojković (Eds.), *Izgradnja mira kroz međureligijsko razumjevanje*, (str. 303- 313). Beograd: Beogradska otvorena škola.
- Majls, R. (2012). *Ko je spremio tajnu večeru?* Beograd: Geopoetika.
- Maldini, P. (2002). *Građansko društvo i demokracija u tranzicijskim društvima*, *Politička misao*, no. 4, pp. 129–145. Available at: <http://www.hrcak.srce.hr/file/37216>
- Milinović, J. (2014). *Žene u svetu liderstva - karakteristike i perspektive u Bosni i Hercegovini*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis) ACIMSI Centar za rodne studije Univerzitet u Novom Sadu, Novi Sad.
- Nikolić, M. i Petrović, P. (2011). Institucionalne forme savremenog ekumenskog dijaloga. *Medjunarodni problemi*, 63(2), 276-296doi:10.2298/MEDJP1102276N  
Available at: <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0025-8555/2011/0025-85551102276N.pdf>
- Pavlović, V. (2004). *Civilno društvo i demokratija*, Udruženje za političke nauke Srbije i Crne Gore, Čigoja štampa, Beograd, pp. 86-89
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Radulović, L. (2006). *Religija i rod: kritički osvrt na pristupe istraživanju*. *Antropologija*. (1) 75-84.  
Available at: [http://www.anthroserbia.org/content/pdf/articles/radulovic\\_religija\\_i\\_rod.pdf](http://www.anthroserbia.org/content/pdf/articles/radulovic_religija_i_rod.pdf)
- Rimac, I. i Štulhofer, A. (2004). "Sociokulturne vrijednosti, gospodarska razvijenost i politička stabilnost kao čimbenici povjerenja u Evropsku uniju". In K. Ott (Ur.) *Pridruživanje*

*Hrvatske Europskoj uniji: izazovi institucionalnih prilagodbi*, Zagreb: Institut za javne financije, pp. 287-312.

Tešija, J. (2011). Vjernik kao inspiracija. In M. Sitarski i I. Bartulović- Karastojković (Eds.), *Iščekujući Evropsku uniju: Stabilizacija međuetničkih i međureligijskih odnosa na Zapadnom Balkanu, II tom* (str.171-182), Beograd: Beogradska otvorena škola. Available at:  
<http://veraznanjemir.bos.rs/materijal/knjige/II%20tom.pdf#page=171>

Tomić- Koludrović, I. (2007). Društveni angažman hrvatskih građana i građanki kao indikator društvenog kapitala. *Acta Iadertina*, 4(2007), 51-78. Available at:  
<http://www.unizd.hr/Portals/41/acta%20jadertina/acta2007.pdf#page=57>

Turniški, M. (2013). *Komunikacija i zagovaranje vjerskih pitanja u javnim institucijama*. Available at:  
[http://www.eiz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Zbornik\\_Final\\_sadrzaj\\_lekt-za-tisak.pdf](http://www.eiz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Zbornik_Final_sadrzaj_lekt-za-tisak.pdf).

#### **Internet sources:**

*Baza registrovanih NVO u Crnoj Gori*, 22.4.2014. Available at:  
[http://www.mup.gov.me/rubrike/Registracija\\_NVO](http://www.mup.gov.me/rubrike/Registracija_NVO)

Beta, novinska agencija, tekst prenet na portalu *Blica* 25.5.2014. Available at:  
<http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Svet/468427/Papa-Franja-i-patrijarh-Vartolomej-potpisali-deklaraciju-o-ujedinjenju-hriscana>

Kriza pogađa i civilni sektor, *RTS* 23.11.2012. Available at:  
<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/Dru%C5%A1tvo/1216740/Kriza+poga%C4%91a+i+civilni+sektor.html>

Misija Ekumenske inicijative žena, 30.4.2014. Available at: <http://www.eiz.hr/about-us/mission/>

*Nepoznanica kako civilni sektor dobija novac iz budžeta*, tekst objavljen na portalu agencije Beta 6.3.2013. Available at: <http://www.euractiv.rs/srbija-i-eu/5512--nepoznanica-kako-civilni-sektor-dobija-novac-iz-budeta>

*Održana debata o odnosu države, društva u verskih zajednica, 16.12.2013.* Available at:

<http://www.politickiforum.org/?vrsta=tribina&naredba=prikaz&tekst=21>

*Poboljšati dijalog civilnog sektora i verskih zajednica, 30.3.2009.* Available at: [http://www.e-](http://www.e-novine.com/drustvo/24435-Poboljati-dijalog-civilnog-sektora-verskih-zajednica.html?print)

[novine.com/drustvo/24435-Poboljati-dijalog-civilnog-sektora-verskih-zajednica.html?print](http://www.e-novine.com/drustvo/24435-Poboljati-dijalog-civilnog-sektora-verskih-zajednica.html?print)

Redžepi, E. i Jovanović I. (2013, 20. avgusta). Stručnjaci pozivaju na suradnju između vjerskih zajednica i civilnog društva. *Southeast European Times*. Available at:

<http://www.academica.rs/academica/sr/Neprofitni-sektor;>

<http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/hr/features/setimes/features/2013/08/20/feature-02>

Staletović, Lj. (2013. 10. marta). Nered u budžetskim davanjima za civilni sektor. *Akter*. Available at:

<http://akter.co.rs/weekly/32-ekonomija/33501-nered-u-bud-etskim-davanjima-za-civilni-sektor.html>