

THE ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE PREŠEVO VALLEY. THE ROLE OF THE ORTHODOX RELIGION IN THE CONFLICT

Radosław Zenderowski, Rafał Wiśniewski

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

r.zenderowski@uksw.edu.pl

r.wisniewski@uksw.edu.pl

Rezumat: Conflictul etnic din Valea Preševo. Rolul religiei ortodoxe în conflict.

Scopul acestei lucrări este să determine rolul creștinismului ortodox în conflictul inter-etnic sârbo-albanez din așa-numita Valea Preševo. Acest conflict între societățile divizate din punct de vedere etnic și religios, a escaladat către o fază militară la sfârșitul secolului XX. Datele referitoare la rolul creștinismului ortodox în acest conflict și perceperea caracteristicilor sale de către localnicii sârbi au fost dobândite prin cercetarea de teren efectuată în septembrie 2011. Lucrarea este împărțită în patru secțiuni. Prima dintre ele cuprinde o descriere generală a conflictului sârbo-albanez în așa-numita Valea Preševo; a doua parte constă într-un cadru teoretic asupra rolului religiei în conflictele inter-etnice; a treia secțiune conține metodologia cercetării de teren, iar a patra parte se referă la analiza datelor obținute pe teren. Analiza datelor dobândite a fost organizată în patru fluxuri tematice: (a) caracterul defensiv al religiei ortodoxe, (b) Biserica Ortodoxă Sârbă ca instituție națională și religioasă, (c) percepția musulmanilor localnici și nou-veniți, (d) perceperea rolului religiei și a altor factori în conflictul inter-etnic local. Concluzia desprinsă din acest articol este aceea potrivit căreia religia joacă un rol neglijabil în conflictul discutat, care a fost în mare parte influențat de factori economici și ideologici. Cu toate acestea, religia poate fi folosită, în mod ingenios, drept instrument într-un conflict. În plus, în discursul părții sârbe este vizibil gradul crescut al victimizării (iar sârbii sunt victimele), acesta conținând atât motive naționale, cât și religioase.

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to determine the role of the Orthodox Christianity in the ethnic Serbian-Albanian conflict in the so-called Preševo Valley. This conflict between ethnically and religiously divided societies escalated to a military phase at the end of the 20th century. The data on the role of the Orthodox Christianity in the conflict and the perception of its characteristics by local Serbs was acquired through the field research conducted in September 2011. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section includes a general description of the Serbian-Albanian conflict in the so-called Preševo Valley; the second part consists of a theoretical framework of the role of religion in ethnic conflicts; the third section contains a field research methodology; and the fourth, main part consists of the analysis of the field data. The analysis of the acquired data was organised in four thematic streams: (a) the defensive character of the Orthodox religion, (b) the Serbian*

Orthodox Church as a national and religious institution, (c) the perception of local and newcomer Muslims, (d) the perception of the role of religion and other factors in the local ethnic conflict. The conclusion coming from this article is that the religion plays a negligible role in the discussed conflict which was mostly influenced by economic and ideological factors. However, religion can be cleverly instrumentalised in a conflict. Additionally, on the Serbian side, there is visible an increased victimisation discourse (where Serbs are the victims) containing both national and religious motives.

Résumé : Le conflit ethnique de la Vallée Preševo. Le rôle de la religion orthodoxe dans le conflit.

Le but de l'ouvrage ci-joint est celui de déterminer le rôle du christianisme orthodoxe dans le conflit inter-ethnique serbo-albanais de l'ainsi-nommée Vallée Preševo. Ce conflit entre les sociétés divisées du point de vue ethnique et religieux, escalada vers une phase militaire vers la fin du XX-ème siècle. On avait acquis les données faisant référence au rôle du christianisme orthodoxe en ce conflit et la perception de ses traits par les autochtones Serbes à l'intermédiaire des recherches de terrain effectuées en septembre 2011. L'ouvrage est divisé en quatre sections. La première de celles-ci comprend une description générale du conflit serbo-albanais de l'ainsi-nommée Vallée Preševo; la seconde partie consiste dans un cadre théorique sur le rôle de la religion dans les conflits inter-ethniques; la troisième section contient la méthodologie de la recherche de terrain, pendant que la quatrième fait référence à l'analyse des données y obtenues. On organisa l'analyse des données acquises en quatre flux thématiques: (a) le caractère défensif de la religion orthodoxe, (b), L'Eglise Orthodoxe Serbe en tant qu'institution nationale et religieuse, (c) la perception des musulmans autochtones et récemment arrivés, (d) la perception du rôle de la religion et des autres facteurs dans le conflit inter-ethnique local. On tira de l'article ci-joint la conclusion que la religion joue un rôle négligeable dans le conflit qu'on vient de discuter et que les facteurs économiques et idéologiques l'influencèrent. Malgré cela, on peut utiliser la religion, de manière ingénieuse, comme instrument dans un conflit. De plus, on peut apercevoir dans le discours de la partie serbe le degré élevé de la victimisation (les Serbes sont les victimes), contenant des motifs nationaux, mais aussi religieux.

Keywords: Preševo Valley, ethnic conflict, religion, Serbs, Albanians

Introduction

The ethnic conflict in the so-called Preševo Valley (it is not an official name as it being used mostly by Albanians) and the Medveđa (Медвеђа) municipality, contrary to the Kosovo conflict (especially during its military phase in 1999) or the civil war in Macedonia (2001), did not engage wider public attention. However, this was very much 'real' conflict, which despite its smaller scale, turned out to be an armed conflict. Because two parties engaged in the conflict

were constituted of two ethnic groups of different religious affiliations, during our field research conducted in 2011¹, we wanted to examine whether the Orthodox religion (we did not examine Islam – our interviewee group did not include Albanians) is a relevant independent variable explaining causes and the dynamics of the conflict. This issue is particularly interesting because of the common opinion that the most of Balkan conflicts has a clear religious aspect. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part refers to the general characteristics of the conflict, the second part includes theoretical discussion on the role of religion in ethnic conflicts, the third part consists of a brief methodology of the field research, and the last part is to discuss the field research results.

1. The Serbian-Albanian conflict in the so-called Preševo Valley – general characteristics.

The main point of the analysis included in this paper - the Serbian-Albanian ethnic conflict stretched over areas of the so-called Preševo Valley and the Medveđa – a town located to the North of the Valley. These are Serbian territories bordering with Kosovo and Macedonia (they are located in a ‘sack’ between Kosovo, Macedonia and Bulgaria) inhabited by a numerous Albanian population which constitutes a vast majority in Preševo itself. The focus of this article is on the ‘hottest period’ of the discussed conflict, which took place at the end of the 20th century. This paper presents the main preconditions and causes of the conflict together with the characteristics of its dynamics.

A. The causes and preconditions of the conflict

The Serbian-Albanian conflict needs to be analysed in a wider context of a line of wars fought from 1991, in the areas of former Yugoslavia. They were symbolically started by a (in)famous speech by Slobodan Milošević given to his compatriots in April 1987 in Kosovo. Responding to complaints regarding the abuse from the Albanians, he said: “*No one should dare to beat you again!*”². Since then the Serbian-Albanian conflict simmering since 70-ties entered a new phase. The main arena of the conflict was Kosovo; however, it also influenced greatly Albanians living in Macedonia and in the so-called Preševo Valley. Analysing the

¹ The research was conducted in order to fulfil aims of the Grant no. NN 116117639 (2010-2012) from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education: *The role and meaning of religion in ethnic conflicts in Balkans. The case of the Orthodox Church in the Serbian-Kosovian-Macedonian border territories.*

² K. Wydra, M. Żyła, *Hotel Prisztina*, in „Znak”, 2007, nr. 628, p. <http://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/Tekst/pokaz/9571/3>).

development of the insurgency in Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac (Valley), it needs to be noted that despite the hostilities being an offshoot of the Kosovo conflict, it had also direct local preconditions and causes.

Firstly, the fact of discrimination of the Albanian population by the local and regional authorities (less likely by ordinary Serbs) in the public sphere seems undisputed. The manifestation of this was sacking Albanians from public administration jobs, education and cultural organisations and replacing them with Serbs (few years later this situation was reversed). For example, in 1989, 11 Albanian teachers were fired from their respective schools and were accused of supporting an irredenta and subversive actions.

In addition, functioning of Albanian political parties and social and cultural societies was severely obstructed. For example, in 1990 a candidate of the first Albanian party in the Valley – Ramadan Ahmeti from Bujanovac, was sacked from his workplace on the basis of his one day absence due to his political campaigning³.

Secondly, there was an issue of the regional authorities' politics regarding the public investment. Over a long period of time transport routes and other public infrastructure was modernised, but only in areas populated by Serbs, at the same time allowing for continuous degradation infrastructure in regions inhabited by Albanians. The same case was with locating new workplaces where mainly Serbs were employed⁴. The 'economic discrimination' seems to be very significant, if not the most important cause of the disused conflict. Despite of the extent of the 'economic discrimination', it needs to be noted that the area of the Preševo valley and Medveđa is affected by structural unemployment which at the beginning of the 21st century equalled about 40% (registered unemployment) compared to the national average of around 20%. An indicator of the economical deprivation in the discussed municipalities is GDP *per capita*. In 2004 in the Medveđa municipality it was €329, €546 in Bujanovac and €307 in Preševo compared to the national average for Serbia of €1553⁵.

³ M. Styrzczula, *Konflikt serbsko-albański w tzw. Dolinie Preszewa i Miedwiedzi* [Serbian-Albanian Conflict in the so called Preševo Valley and Medveđa], in R. Zenderowski (ed.), *My już jesteśmy zjedzeni... Rola i znaczenie prawosławia w konflikcie etnicznym w Dolinie Preszewa* [We Are Already Eaten... The Role and Significance of Orthodox Church in The Ethnic Conflict in Preševo Valley], Warszawa, 2012, p. 328; A. Berljajoli, *Albanci u Srbiji. Preševo, Bujanovac i Medveđa* [Albanians in Serbia. Preševo, Bujanovac i Medveđa], Fond za humanitarno pravo/ Sweedish Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2003, p. 13.

⁴ M. Styrzczula, *op. cit.*, p. 329; A. Berljajoli, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁵ M. Seroka, *Region tzw. Doliny Preszewa (Preszewo, Bujanowac) oraz Miedwiedzi* [Preševo Valley (Preševo, Bujanovac) and Medveđa Region], in R. Zenderowski (ed.), *My już jesteśmy zjedzeni... [We Are Already Eaten...]*, Warszawa, 2012, p. 317-320.

Thirdly, some role in stirring mutual, Serbian-Albanian antagonisms was played by the nationalistic discourse that was – it seems - initiated by the top political elites from Belgrade and Pristina. Both sides gradually escalated the rhetoric. This way, both - Serbs and Albanians, on the one hand profiled the image of the enemy (so the ethnic difference acquired the feeling not as much as strangeness but hostility), on the other hand Serbs and Albanians both showed their respective nations as victims (victimisation discourse).

Fourthly, there existed religious differences in the area, which, perhaps, were not a direct cause but a readily available 'supply' for the escalation of the conflict. The vast majority of Albanians inhabiting Kosovo, Macedonia or South Serbia, despite the presence of Christians and Muslim sects, are Sunni Muslims (contrary to Albanians from Albania who declare the faith in Islam, Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism together with a high percentage of atheists)⁶. Then Serbs, usually profess to be Orthodox Christians, even though sometimes they consider themselves non-believers (This case of non-believers is mostly explained by the heritage of the confessional communities in the Ottoman Empire (Millet system) where the declared faith de facto denoted the national identity). The religious aspect of the conflict was especially visible in a form of a deliberate destruction of places of worship and cemeteries. It was also expressed as fear of growing influence of a religion (in this case - of Islam) which resulted in a rising number of believers and building new churches treated as a demarcation line of the ethnical territory, as well as an increased presence of the religion in the socio-political life.

Fifthly, the factor determining the ethnic conflict is demographics, namely the changing ethnic ratio in the area. This refers to two processes: emigration and the population growth rate. Both processes indicated adverse changes for the Serbian ethnic group. Whilst Albanians periodically migrate for work to countries of Western Europe using the earned money to support their families in the home country, Serbs migrate usually to the North of the country – to Belgrade or other big cities. Mostly young and middle-aged people migrate leaving only elderly people. Also, the population growth among Serbs and Albanians varies widely. In 2006 in the Serb-dominated (about 70%) Medveda municipality, the population growth equalled -3.7, whilst in the Albanian-dominated (about 90%) Preševo municipality it equalled 9.8!⁷

⁶ M. Styrzcula, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

⁷ M. Seroka, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

B. The course of the conflict (phases)

The ethnic hostilities in 90s were generally a non-combat conflict, however there were individual incidents such as beatings or abductions. In 2000, it escalated to a combat conflict in a limited area, and it ended a year later. After that, there were noticed again individual disturbances such as beatings, abductions, planting of explosive devices (for example in the area of the railway station in Preševo) and shootings. Thus, it can be concluded that it was a typical simmering tension that could escalate to a military conflict in any time.

It is not the point of this paper to provide a detailed description of every incident or the development of the conflict. However, it is worth mentioning that the key moment is a creation in 1999 of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Preshevës, Medvegjës dhe Bujanocit* - UÇPMB). It took an active role in the military conflict in 2000 attacking Serbian police and military forces. Villages of Veliki Trnovac, Lučane, Končulj and Dobrošin, Leopardice, Oraovica were main battlefields in 2000 and at the beginning of 2011. The aim of the insurgents was the access of the region called by them as 'Eastern Kosovo' to the newly created country with Pristina as its capital. Meanwhile in December 2000 during the military conflict, the Coordinating Body for Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac (Koordinaciono Telo za Preševo, Bujanovac i Medveđu) was created ad hoc on the Serbian initiative which was supposed to be a beginning of the collective administration of the region. The international community was actively engaged in the conflict resolution⁸.

The military phase of the conflict was ended in March 2001 by signing a Končulj Agreement (name deriving from a village where it took place)⁹. According to the Ministry of the Interior of Yugoslavia, in the period from June 1999 until August 2001, 10 civilians died and 45 were injured in the safety zone which was made of a few kilometres long demilitarized zone bordering Kosovo. Also, 24 policemen and servicemen were killed and 78 were injured. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that because of the fighting between 2000 and 2001, 14000 people fled from the South Serbia to Kosovo. The total number of casualties including insurgents does not exceed 100 people¹⁰.

⁸ M. Styrzula, *op. cit.*, p. 329-333.

⁹ Z. Brozović, *Territorial and Border Demarcation Disputes in the Western Balkans Case study: Territorial and boundary disputes between Serbia and Kosovo*, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Belgrade, 2011, p. 7.

¹⁰ M. Styrzula, *op. cit.*, p. 332; A. Berljajoli, *op. cit.*, p. 10, 28; B. Huszka, *The Presevo Valley of Southern Serbia alongside Kosovo: The Case for Decentralisation and Minority Protection*, CEPS Policy Briefs, Issue 1-12, p. 1. More on the subject of the conflict and

2. Religion in ethnic conflicts – theoretical framework

Ethnic conflict and religious conflict can be classified as a wide category, which is conflict of cultures. This means: “animosity, hostility or battle between adjoining groups characterised by dissimilar, culture-dictated ways of life”¹¹. Because these two conflicts – ethnic and religious often coexist together, a part of them can be called as ethnoreligious conflicts. Before describing the qualities of such conflict, it is important to discuss models of relations between ethnic and religious conflicts. Analysing conflict of cultures influenced by ethnic and religious factors, it is possible to distinguish 10 types of possible relationships: 3 models can be described as ethnoreligious conflict, another 3 as religious conflict without ethnic input, further 2 are ethnic conflicts without religious input and 2 last models describe conflict of cultures without ethnic and religious characteristics (see table below).

Table 1. **Religion and ethnos: models of relations in conflicts of culture**

1	E ₁ R _{1a}	E ₂ R _{2a}	Conflict : ethnoreligious between two ethnoeses representing different religions
2	E ₁ R _{1b}	E ₂ R _{2b}	Conflict : ethnoreligious between two ethnoeses representing the same religion but different denominations
3	E ₁ R ₁	E ₂ R ₀	Conflict : ethnoreligious between a ‘religious’ ethnos and a ‘religiously indifferent’ ethnos
4	E ₁ R ₁	E ₁ R ₂	Conflict: non-ethnic, religious (between two religions) in the same ethnos
5	E ₁ R _{1b}	E ₁ R _{1b}	Conflict: non-ethnic, religious in the same ethnos, between for example fundamentalists and the rest of the religious congregation
6	E ₁ R ₁	E ₁ R ₀	Conflict: non-ethnic, religious in the same ethnos, where the religious part wants to convert the atheist part of the ethnos
7	E ₁ R ₁	E ₂ R ₁	Conflict: ethnic, non-religious Between two ethnoeses where the same religion dominates

its consequences in M. Styrzula, *op. cit.* p. 325-347 (The publication is available free of charge in the electronic version from the Internet).

¹¹ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa* [Sociology. The Analysis of Society], Kraków, 2002, p. 254.

8	E ₁ R ₀	E ₂ R ₀	Conflict: ethnic, non-religious Between atheist or religiously indifferent ethnoses
9	E ₁ R _{1a}	E ₁ R _{1a}	Conflict: non-ethnic and non-religious (e.g. economic, ideological) in the same ethnos where one religion dominates
10	E ₁ R ₀	E ₁ R ₀	Conflict: non-ethnic and non-religious (e.g. economic, ideological) in the same religiously-indifferent ethnos

Source: Author's own.

The table shows that the notion of ethnoreligious conflict refers to 3 described cases. The key point of ethnoreligious conflict is a coexistence of the correlation between ethnos and religion 'ascribed' to this ethnos. In practice, it is difficult to distinguish between ethnic and religious conflicts. John R. Hall emphasises that religion is not a phenomenon, which could be precisely distinguished and distilled from any other social occurrences. There is not – he says – some kind of 'firewall' between religion and the rest of social processes and phenomena. Thus, very often people are under illusion that the cause of ethnic conflicts is religion, whilst in reality its source is elsewhere¹². In fact, there are no 'pure' religious or 'pure' ethnic conflicts. To prove this point, it is enough to consider thoroughly an issue disused earlier: is the mass destruction of Orthodox churches in Kosovo by local Albanians and incoming Muslims the result of religious or ethnic hostilities? It seems that both perspectives are correct, however opinions on the subject are divided even amongst academics interested in the subject¹³. Further, it needs to be noted that there is a possibility of sacralisation of ethnic conflicts as well as ethnicisation of religious conflicts.

Sacralisation of ethnic conflict that is based on the economy, class or politics is extremely dangerous as the conflict itself, which can turn to be extremely bloody and cruel, acquires the aura of sacral, Manicheistic confrontation between good and evil, which is accompanied by narratives justifying the worst cruelties towards the demonised enemy. It is possible to kill the enemy fulfilling the 'God's will' or fighting for 'saint cause'¹⁴. Generally, the (*quasi*)religious argumentation is the most

¹² J.R. Hall, *Religion and Violence: Social Processes in Comparative Perspective*, in M. Dillon (ed.), *Handbook for the Sociology of Religion*, Cambridge, 2001.

¹³ C. Marsh, *The Religious Dimension of Post-Communist "Ethnic" Conflict*, in "Nationalities Papers", 2007, nr. 5, p. 820; S. Rock, *Introduction: religion, prejudice and conflict in the modern world*, in "Patterns of Prejudice", 2004, nr. 2, p. 104.

¹⁴ C. Marsh, *op. cit.*, p. 822; M. Juergenmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of*

effective motivation for sides of a conflict. An extreme sacrifice for the national cause including willingness to give up own life is possible nearly always only for the religious argumentation. A good example proving this point is Stalin's decision in 1941 to stop for a period any repressions towards the Orthodox Church. Further, Stalin hurried to bring army chaplains to the war front in order to motivate soldiers to defend the 'sacred' territory of Soviet Union. Stella Rock says that Stalin knew that: "(...) the power of religiously motivated nationalism is much bigger than motivated by the Marxist ideology". Fighting in the war under the slogan: "Workers of All Lands, Unite!" was rather ironic as there were mostly workers on the other side as well¹⁵. Another, historical example are crusades which are usually interpreted in religious categories as 'fighting with non-believers'. Meanwhile, here religion was a form of justification for the economical expansion and attempt to acquire wealth. It is obvious that crusades were mostly a solution to the demographic crisis (overpopulation) in Western Europe¹⁶. Of course another aspect was the fact that expansionist Islam was seen as a real danger in contemporary Europe.

Another facet of the problem – ethnicisation of religious conflict – is a situation where two religions within the same ethnos fight with each other for exclusivity in the nation to achieve cultural homogenisation. If it is not possible to 'convert' over a period of time fellow countrymen, usually a group begins a process of alienating itself and developing new ethnos. According to Filip Tesař, fights for ethnic-religious homogeneity, very often lead to genocide, imprisonment and/or radical social marginalisation¹⁷.

Religion as a factor influencing a course of ethnic conflict may be considered in three aspects as: **(a)** a strengthening (or even initiating) factor for ethnic conflict; **(b)** a weakening factor for ethnic conflict; **(c)** a neutral factor (or of negligible meaning). This distinction allows for the development of a matrix

Religious Violence, Berkeley, 2000, p. XI; J. Fox, *Is Ethnoreligious Conflict a Contagious Disease?*, in "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism", 2004, nr. 27, p. 89-106; Idem, *The Ethnic-Religious Nexus: The Impact of Religion on Ethnic Conflict*, in "Civil Wars", 2000, nr. 3, p. 6-7; Idem, *Are Religious Minorities More Militant than Other Ethnic Minorities?*, in "Alternatives", 2003, nr. 28, p. 91-114.

¹⁵ J. Fox, *Is Ethnoreligious Conflict a Contagious Disease?*, in "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism", 2004, nr. 27, p. 103.

¹⁶ P. Crépon, *Religie a wojna* [Religions and War], Gdańsk, 1994, p. 98-104.

¹⁷ F. Tesař, *Etnické konflikty* [Ethnic conflicts], Praha, 2007, p. 111-112; A. Świdlicki, *Walka o tron. Buddysta – tak, katolik – nie*, [The struggle for Throne. Buddhist – yes, Catholic – no], in "Decydent & Decision Maker", 2000, nr. 6 (http://www.decydent.pl/archiwum/wydanie_40/walka-o-tron_1064.html, 29.07.2011); B. Wilson, *Religion and the Affirmation of Identity*, in "Revista de antropologia social", 1994, nr. 3, p. 118.

illustrating 21 models/variations of relationships between religion and ethnic conflict (see table below).

Table 2. Religion in the ethnic conflict

Variations	The way of understanding religion as an element of the ethnic conflict		
	(a) Religious doctrine	(b) Clergy ⁽¹⁾	(c) Believers ⁽²⁾
I.	+	+	+
II.	+	+	—
III.	+	—	—
IV.	+	—	+
V.	—	—	—
VI.	—	—	+
VII.	—	+	+
VIII.	—	+	—
IX.	+	+	0
X.	+	0	0
XI.	+	0	+
XII.	—	—	0
XIII.	—	0	0
XIV.	—	0	—
XV.	0	0	0
XVI.	0	0	+
XVII.	0	+	+
XVIII.	0	+	0
XIX.	0	0	—
XX.	0	—	—
XXI.	0	—	0

Source: Author's own.

+ The support for the ethnic confrontation

0 The lack of support for the ethnic confrontation

— Weakening/solution of the ethnic conflicts

The attitude of the clergy can vary depending on the position in the church hierarchy. For example, the parish clergy may actively support their congregation in the ethnic conflicts, whilst the senior clergy may distance themselves from the nationalist groups or even openly criticise them, (see for

example the Croatian case study regarding the Yugoslav wars in 90s of the twentieth century) or ideological sympathies. This needs to be specified analysing every single example. 'Believers' are understood as both people who believe in a particular faith and attend church, as well as people who identify themselves with a particular religious congregation despite declaring themselves as atheists.

The above figure shows that '**religious conflict**' or '**ethnoreligious conflict**' is a situation occurring in seven variations (1/3 of potential cases). Assuming that the religious doctrine itself (contrary to its nationalistic interpretations) does not call for ethnic hostilities, it is rational to limit the notion of religious or ethnoreligious conflict to two variations (VII and XVII) or maximum to four variations (IV, VII, XVI, XVII) which makes 10-20% of all cases of group conflicts. Further, it needs to be remembered that very often there are ethnic conflicts between ethnos (nations), whose members declare the same religion or even the same denomination. These are conflicts where often a part of clergy/spiritual guides and parts of a society who identify with a somewhat nationalised religious group, engage directly or indirectly with one side of a conflict, however it would make it unclear to call this situation a 'religious conflict'. It needs to be emphasised the meaning of active engagement with one side of a conflict, because the fact of participating of two diverse ethnic groups representing different religions or denomination in a conflict, does not mean that it is an ethnoreligious conflict. The religious factor could be neutral, although this happens very rarely. A significant condition is proclaiming of religious issues (religious identity, promoting doctrine, defending faith) as relevant by at least one side of the conflict¹⁸. On the other hand, if to assume that main religious doctrines include an imperative of the need to respect every person's dignity and not to hurt people in any way, then the number of cases describing the peace-making role of religion varies from seven (cases: III, V, VI, VIII, XII, XIV, XX) to thirteen (cases: II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, XII, XIII, XIV, XIX, XX, XXI).

3. Methodology

Quantitative research methods are not completely sufficient whilst researching problems of ethnic and national groups, because the statistical analysis tends to reduce the research field eliminating facts and processes that do not fit into repetitive social and cultural patterns. At the same time, these discarded or neglected problems still could be researched using qualitative methods, which take into account the socio-cultural context and widen the

¹⁸ C. Marsh, *op. cit.*, p. 817.

researcher's perspective giving more complex answers than survey results¹⁹. Much research on different aspects of ethnicity is based on quantitative methods, however some researchers also combine quantitative and qualitative research methods. Still, only minority results are produced by the use of the mixed approach, despite this being supported by Antonina Kłoskowska who said: "None of the social research can abstain from describing the character of examined subjects. Taking into consideration of the quality of social phenomena is at least suggested also when the main problem of the analysis is searching for the relationship of phenomena through the use quantitative analytical techniques"²⁰. Józef Chałasiński emphasised the value of the statistical analysis, however he warns that that despite its usefulness, the statistical analysis are not sufficient for explaining social mechanisms of the researched problem"²¹. Again, Agata Górny noticed that: „the use of qualitative techniques allows for a better understanding of the context and mechanisms playing leading roles in migration processes. It is a better aspect, especially important for researching migration issues when the researcher comes from a different culture than researched subjects"²².

The aim of this paper to present results of the research on the role of the Orthodox Christianity in the Serbian-Albanian conflict on the Serbian-Kosovian-Macedonian border, in so-called Preševo Valley (the area around Preševo and Bujanovac) and in Medveđa. The questions posed to respondents covered issues of the national-religious auto-identification and the perception of the role of religion in the ethnic conflict. The data was gathered between the 5th and the 13th of September 2011. There were conducted 20 in-depth interviews in Preševo, Bujanovac, Medveđa and Vranje. Interviewees were representatives of the local intellectual elite such as media, local administration, education system, cultural institutions as well as representatives of clergy and political parties. These results are a part of a wider research presented in the publication: "My już jesteśmy zjedzeni... Rola i znaczenie prawosławia w konflikcie etnicznym w Dolinie Preszewa"²³. Despite a limited basis for generalisation, the micro-level

¹⁹ A. Wyka, *Badacz społeczny wobec doświadczenia* [Social Researcher In Face of Experience], Warszawa, 1993, p. 14.

²⁰ A. Kłoskowska, *Jakościowa i ilościowa analiza kultury symbolicznej* [Qualitative and Quantative Analysis of Symbolic Culture], in "Kultura i Społeczeństwo", 1984, nr. 2, p. 39.

²¹ J. Chałasiński, *Wstęp* [Introduction to the] w tenże, *Młode pokolenie chłopów. Społeczne podłoże ruchów młodzieży wiejskiej w Polsce* [Young Generation of Peasants. Social Background of Rural Youth Movments in Poland], tom I, Warszawa, 1984, p. XXVII-XXXI.

²² A. Górny, *Wybrane zagadnienia podejścia jakościowego w badaniach nad migracjami międzynarodowymi* [Selected Issues of Qualitative Approach in The Studies of International Migration], in "Przegląd Polonijny", 2005, nr. 3, p. 164.

²³ R. Zenderowski (ed.), *My już jesteśmy zjedzeni... Rola i znaczenie prawosławia w*

analysis of the interviews with the local intellectual elite provides some insight into the factual state of hopes and expectations of locals that are not visible in official statistics.

4. Result of the field survey

This presentation of the acquired data will focus on four main threads, which came up from the analysis²⁴. They are: **(a)** emphasis of the defensive character of the orthodox religion; **(b)** perception of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a religious as well as national institution; **(c)** view of local and newcomers Muslims and **(d)** identification of the real causes of the conflict.

A. Defensive character of the Orthodox Church

The local Serbian Orthodox Church is characterised by its defensive character (contrary to the expansive Islam) and seems to have a besieged fortress syndrome. Most interviewees noticed the growing influence of Islam in the region, which makes them worried, frightened and sad. However, it does not generate aggression and does not encourage people to fight for the 'sacred Orthodox territory'. Defenders of the 'besieged tower' are aware that sooner or later will have to go away. They reconciled with the fact that the process of Albanisation of the region, especially Preševo and its surroundings, is inevitable. It is mostly an effect of the greater birth ratio of Albanians, than this of Serbs. For example: *I think personally that we are already eaten. I think that Islam is more populous. I don't think it's better or wiser but much more populous. More of them is being born and we are dying. We don't need face-to-face fighting because, demographically, we will die out one day. I have two kids and my Albanian friend from school has twelve. How am I supposed to win with her tomorrow? I can be whatever but she will 'eat' me eventually by a very simple, natural reproduction. (...) Islam is spread deliberately through this philosophy of reproduction, which is very strong and I am amazed by it. I am amazed by it but I feel sad about it that we haven't used it.* At the end, Serbs sadly reconciled with the fact that more Serbs choose to emigrate²⁵.

konflikcie etnicznym w Dolinie Preszewa [We Are Already Eaten... The Role and Significance of Orthodox Church in The Ethnic Conflict in Preševo Valley], Warszawa 2012.

²⁴ The detailed analysis of the research results is included in R. Zenderowski, R. Wiśniewski, M. Zarzecki, *Religia (prawosławna) w konflikcie etnicznym w tzw. Dolinie Preszewa i Miedwiedzi: wyniki badań terenowych* [Religion (Orthodox) in The Ethnic Conflict in Preševo Valley and Medveda: field study results], in R. Zenderowski (ed.), *My już jesteśmy zjedzeni... [We Are Already Eaten...]*, p. 349-436 (the publication is available free of charge in the electronic form from the Internet).

²⁵ R. Zenderowski, R. Wiśniewski, M. Zarzecki, *Religia (prawosławna) w konflikcie etnicznym w tzw. Dolinie Preszewa i Miedwiedzi: wyniki badań terenowych* [Religion

This feeling of helplessness contrasts strongly with the often-emphasised role of the Orthodox religion as a 'bulwark' of Europe. Interviewees relatively often described Serbia and Serbs as 'gate', 'barrier' or 'shield' protecting Europe and Christianity against the invasion of Turks and Islam in general. Interviewees seemed feeling regretful that European Christians do not appreciate enough Serbian engagement and heroism whilst fighting the progressing islamisation of Europe. For example, interviewees said: It is true-they [Serbs] defended their faith. Perhaps the faith was defended in some places, perhaps people exaggerated sometimes as well. Perhaps, it would have been better to let it go, so that storm would have passed, wind would have blown, retreat and then do the own work. /Martyrs, according to me, one nation of martyrs./(...) Serbia was in fact a gateway to Europe for Islam. / Serbs were like a shield to Europe a long time ago, so the whole territory was inhabited by Serbs – *Serbska Krajina and Dalmatia they were a shield to stop the march of the Ottoman Empire to West*²⁶.

B. Serbian Orthodox Church as a religious and national institution

The Orthodox Church is a spiritual asylum for the local Serbs. It is a place to strengthen their national identity, a symbol of national traditions. Family celebrations permanently connected with the religion are to strengthen the group closeness, social cohesion of local Serbs. Special role in this case is played by *Krsna Slava*²⁷.

It needs to be mentioned that the Orthodox Church is the only significant institution of social life in the area. This social role is strengthened even more because the regional is largely 'forgotten' by the administration far away in

(Orthodox) in The Ethnic Conflict in Preševo Valley and Medveda: field study results], in R. Zenderowski (ed.), *My już jesteśmy zjedzeni...* [We Are Already Eaten...], p. 436.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

²⁷ *Krsna slava* (Крсна Слава) is a compromise between paganism and Christianity. It is a cult of ancestors, celebrating the saint patron of a family. Saint patrons de facto are a substitute of a 'domestic idol, ancestor cult'. Every family has its own saint patron who once a year is paid homage to in a temple. It is accompanied by a set of religious and secular rituals. There is a famous saying amongst Serbs: *Gde je Slava, tu je Srbin* (where Slava is, there are Serbs), proving that this tradition is an indication of Serbness [D. Gil, *Prawosławie – Historia – Naród. Miejsce kultury duchowej w serbskiej tradycji i współczesności*, [Orthodox Church – History – Nation. The Place of Spiritual Culture in Serbian Tradition and Contemporary Culture] Kraków, 2005, p. 31]. Another way of manifesting Serbness is a tradition of wearing the brojanica. This is a prayer rope made of wool or a cord. Similar to the Muslim tasbeeh or tespih or the Catholic rosary, it has knots and it is worn on one hand. Wearing it is very popular both in Serbia and in other Orthodox countries of the region, and it is used not only for religious purposes but also for indicating the identification with the Serbian nation.

Belgrade. The Orthodox Church is universally respected²⁸: *Because of the religion, the nation survived and preserved its identity during the Occupation [Turkish] and Communism. There has always been this opinion here that the Orthodox faith supported Serbs, I mean not only here but in whole Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church is older than the nation itself. Nations were gone, first, second, third and the Orthodox Church lasted and preserved all their achievements and all their values. I mean nation's valuables, state's valuables. And it was possible to find them also after the WWII, they were hidden in churches.* There are common views that the Orthodox Church supports Serbs in the everyday struggle not be displaced from their territory of origin: There is an opinion and it is widely spread that the Orthodox Church is an important factor for preserving Serbia and 'Serbness' in this region. / (...) I think that the Orthodox Church is a fundament for the existence of Serbs in this area. / The Orthodox endorses our culture, defends its existence. (...) It has an enormous role. / If those who hold power these days have ears and listen a bit to priest from the Serbian Orthodox Church, then everything would be different²⁹.

At the same time, it has to be noted that most of the interviewees clearly indicates 'tepidness' of Serbs with regards to their religious engagement. The image of religious observance of Serbs coming from the gathered data is unambiguous. There are four main issues: (a) the religious observance is infrequent, it tends to be limited to important Christian celebrations; (b) rare observance is declared by interviewees afraid for being taken as overzealous, regularly religious practice is attributed to priests; (c) the religious observance comes more from the Serbian tradition than from a real spiritual need; (d) atheists are suspected to be covert believers as if interviewees could not consider atheism to be possible in practice. It needs to be mentioned that the majority interviewees regards the Orthodox Christianity as a natural, proper faith for Serbs and attempts to convert to other religion is – to put it mildly-suspicious and ridiculous. However, the majority of respondents declare that theoretically it is possible for a Serb not to be an Orthodox Christian, at the same time arguing that it would not bring anything positive. Concerning the unbreakable link between the Orthodox religion and 'Serbness' interviewees claimed: *"A Serb is of the Orthodox faith, for me it is unacceptable to be Serbian and not of the Orthodox religion. / The Orthodox Church and the Serbian nation are together. It is not possible to look at this separately. / For me it's logical that a Serb should be Orthodox. / It is unbreakable, because not to be Orthodox and call yourself a Serb is irreconcilable. / The Orthodox Christianity is a centre of identity*

²⁸ R. Zenderowski, R. Wiśniewski, M. Zarzecki, *op. cit.*, p. 436.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 409-410.

for Serbs.” Some interviewees even claimed that converting from the Orthodox faith to another religion equals changing the nationality: “It is not to be separated (...). To be Serbian it means to be Orthodox. To be Orthodox is does not always mean to be Serbian but Serbs and the Orthodox faith is unbreakable. This is one and the same thing. (...) Serbs changing their faith stop being Serbs. / Serbs who converted to Islam some time ago, today they don’t think of themselves as Serbs. They say they are Bosniaks. In the Communism some Serbs considered themselves atheists but afterwards they come back to the Orthodox Church. Serbs, who converted to Catholicism, today considers themselves Croatians. / We are born somewhat ‘pre-programmed’. I’m not guilty that I was born here, that I was raised in this way, you are not guilty either, but it is possible to understand that this is this essence in life, in families, in the nation. Perhaps it is characteristic for Serbs that there are no Serbs outside of the Orthodox Church. Through the conversion they stop being Serbs, because they describe themselves as Croatians, Bosniaks etc. (...) Perhaps, but it’s not comprehensible, because it’s the religion that kept this nation together. This is a unity. The Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian nation go together. It’s impossible to look at it separately. Let’s say that amongst Roman Catholics there are Poles and Croatians who both are Catholics. Then, there is a Greek Orthodox Church for Greeks. The Serbian Orthodox Church is for Serbians. We coexist with this Orthodox Church, with this faith – this is what it’s all about³⁰.

C. Local and new-coming Muslims

The local, Albanian Islam is not considered as dangerous for Serbs or for the Orthodox Church what could result in appeals to defend the nation and the Orthodox Church. Serbs view the local Muslims as very moderate, liberal, open to Christianity and even sharing with Christians some practices. A custom of swapping seasonal greetings and generally wide religious tolerance was especially emphasised by interviewees³¹. For example, some said: “*Jihad is something different but I think that Albanians are not so connected with it. / I personally, when I think of Muslims I think of Turks but no one else. / With regards to modern dangers I wouldn’t say that the Orthodox Church is in danger from these Muslims. / These Muslims are more moderate. Because they live in a close proximity to the Orthodox Church. / (...) Recently, there was a month of fasting – Ramadan. OK. The month is very tough. I don’t know how much you know about it that they don’t take all day any water, or food or cigarettes. No. It’s been changing. They sit in cafés...the elderly explain themselves this way – ‘Well, I can’t. I have hypertension, high (low??) level of blood sugar’. This and that. Which means that*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 400, 406, 408.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

they don't fast (...) They say: 'I fast' and in reality they don't. We had an example like this: 'Hey! Please! Give me a glass of rakija!' despite the fast. It doesn't matter! / Ohh...catastrophe. They are even worse than us. (...) I went once in a field and a mosque was built in Rajnice. We were working in veterinary and regardless whose temple it was, we gave some donation. (...) I spoke to one hodja and he says: 'You know – it is a disaster. Do you know that only 10-15% people come to us? Nobody else wants. Why did we build it?' In the morning when I go out, there is a mosque opposite to mine; I can see no more than 20 people. Disaster (...) / It was that fast, this Ramadan of theirs. And now you can see they attitude to religion. How many people go to pray, how many people fast. And really, I haven't seen so few people as this year to fast. This year it is a disaster. They eat, drink... (...) Islam in Preševo never had a major role. / Young generation doesn't respect the tradition not to eat pork, I sometimes see young people when they sit [at the table] they'll eat. Youngsters reject the tradition of the older generations. / Albanians drink, despite it is forbidden in Islam. They had Ramadan now and they were hiding to drink, to have a smoke but when they are in a group then they pretend that they're fasting"³².

Despite of above views, it needs to be noted that some interviewees express concerns with regards to religious radicalisation of some Albanians: "They all started to fast, nobody knows whether they really fast or just say they do. Earlier, only elderly people fasted. Today everybody fasts. On Fridays at noon, they all go to mosque, leave work and go to mosque. This is a political demonstration. We never did such thing. For me, it's not OK, if somebody works in a factory and all of the sudden, leaves everything to go to mosque. / I don't know where they get the money from but every year there are more and more mosques".

The presence Wahhabis who appeared in the region recently gives some cause for concern. It is not an exceptional situation in Balkans. Similar concerns were voiced Bosniaks who are worried of Wahhabis trying to convert them to 'proper' Islam³³. Not only Serbs are afraid of the growing influence of Wahhabis – Arab-countries sponsored Islam missionaries promoting one type of orthodox, hostile to Christianity Islam. Even Albanians have a problem with it worried that they would be marginalised by the new political leaders: "(...) recently appeared, there are some Wahhabis in the neighbourhood, I don't know who sponsors them – some Islamist organisation and there is about thirty of them. Twenty near the lower mosque, ten here. They have been paid €300 a month. I live in Preševo and I hear for the first time that it's happening...I knew that they exist but even Albanians are afraid that Wahhabis will take over their mosques. Because they are

³² *Ibid.*, p. 413-414.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

ordering something different...It's not anymore that you're walking and bowing, they would do it for at least two minutes. Job done. They [Albanians] are afraid that they would get rid of hodjas and take over mosques. /In last 5-6 months Wahhabis arrived, they set up their offices here and I see that even Albanians have got a problem with them. (...) They are specifically clothed, wear these beards. There was even an argument with a local hodja, who didn't allow him to enter the mosque. I heard that they give money to people to enlist them, I don't know what it is, some kind of sect. / Wahhabis are visible in the town with beards and long pants. I don't know whether they can influence Albanians, old Muslims. / (...) they are afraid of Wahhabis and these stupidities"³⁴.

Local, Albanian, slightly superficial Islam is considered tamed and moderate contrary to 'other' Islam which may pose a mortal danger to Serbia and Europe. What is interesting, interviewees concerned about the dangerous Islam think that it will not come from the local Albanians but from outside – from Kosovo, Turkey or Western Europe where Islam is successfully settling in: *"I worry about Wahhabis but mostly because their financing. I don't know how much they get. Women [are given] €200, men some money too and they wear scarves on their faces, men wear long pants and beards but it may happen one day that they would be given a task to do something. And perhaps they will do it. / (...) if terrorism is in France, if it appears in Italy and my sister who lives in Italy says that they stubbornly try to promote [Islam] and behave aggressively. If it happens that they want to threaten, terrorist attacks and so on, then probably there are some intentions to use this 'fertile' climate here to spread out. / If you look at Kosovo and Metohija and what happened on 17th march 2004 only where Italians were stationed Serbian churches were saved. Americans, Germans, British, French – nobody nowhere. Whilst Italians put their lives at stake to...because they have faith and respect for what is important. What is the biggest Muslim city in the world? Paris. What else can I say?"³⁵*

D. Religion and real causes of the Serbian-Albanian conflict

Questions regarding the cause of the ethnic conflict aim to establish what the role of religion is in such conflict led to several interesting answers, which we divided, into five categories. What seems the most important considering the aim and the subject of the research, was the fact that the vast majority did regard religion as a very minor or completely negligible factor (determinant) of the local ethnic conflict. Far more significant were outside influences (from Kosovo, the West, Turkey and Arabic countries), political intrigues and what is worth

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 415-416.

emphasising – economic factors which to us are the most important determinant of the ethnic conflict in the region. Actually, some respondents were very surprised that we were asking about the ethnic conflict, whilst for them they were nothing more as incidents and squabbles³⁶.

The detailed analysis of the factors influencing of the conflict is included in the previously discussed publication: R. Zenderowski (ed.), *We Are Already Eaten... The Role and Significance of Orthodox Church in The Ethnic Conflict in Preševo Valley*. The most important issue here is a perceived role of religion in the local ethnic conflict.

It is obvious that according to the interviewees, religion is not regarded as a potential or real cause of the conflict. Even questions about the engagement of religion in various guises in the conflict were treated as completely surprising and incomprehensible. For example: *"The religion is neither the source of the problem nor an important cause, no. The religion didn't play here a leading role. Do you know why? I know one hodja who was beaten up in Skopje because he did not want to follow the political dictate of the UÇK leaders. So a man was battered. And he was a mufti (...). It was mostly political doing but it was pretending to be religious. / So I wouldn't agree that it is religion that influences us to attack one another. I wouldn't agree with this. (...) You know, right now I cannot tell at all whether it was a religious conflict or conflict of interests, I would say it was the latter. /There is no conflict between religions but there are arguments between 'insane heads' who misuse religion. (...) No. Muslims [orthodox Muslims- R.W, R.Z.] are not considered here to be good Muslims. (...) religion does not lead to a conflict but helps to calm things down. (...) With regards to Albanians, it's not about their faith but about the territory. They [Albanians] are used by others to use their [Albanians'] faith for their own purpose. /No, there is none. Generally, there is a lot of politics here. Here is a mixing point for the East and the West. Siptars [Albanians - R.W, R.Z.] suffer and Serbs suffer too. / There some political incidents but I don't know whether religion was involved. I believe that in this whole conflict in relations between Serbia-Albanians, Kosovo, faith had nothing to do with it, it's only about nationalism./ Perhaps in some way yes but I think that mostly not. The religion didn't force anybody to take a machine gun and kill others, I suppose. Neither Islam, nor the Orthodox Christianity. (...) I think this war had very little to do with religion"*³⁷.

"The religion is present in the conflict but afterwards as further cause, a justification. Yes, maybe there is a little bit of it, that's true. The national identity is the first cause of this fighting and religion is maybe too in a very small percent. / I

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 421-422.

think it's the ideology that counted. I think so. And religion is on the second place. First ideology, second religion – it's my personal feeling. / Of course, there were machinations to motivate the fighters by faith but I don't think they were deciding. / I believe, that there isn't, maybe just a little bit. Everybody wants to defend their faith, their religion. There were some political incidents but I don't know whether the religion mattered. I think that in this whole conflict in relations between Serbia-Albanians, Kosovo, here the faith did not matter but only nationalism”³⁸.

5. Conclusion

The discussed conflict is not of religious, but of political and economic nature. It does not mean that orthodox religion does not play any role in the conflict. But if it does, it is of secondary character and it does not refer to the participation of the Orthodox priests or believers in the conflict, but about the instrumentalisation of the religion.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 423.