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The Portrayal of Religious Freedom in Media Discourse: Evidence from Kosovo

Ilmije Kuqi[1], **Lulzim Esati**[2*]

[1]Faculty of Islamic Studies, Prishtina, Kosovo ✉ ilmijekuqi1@gmail.com
[2]Faculty of Islamic Studies, Prishtina, Kosovo ✉ lulzimesati@gmail.com

Abstract
This study examines how religious freedom is portrayed in Kosovo's media and how citizens perceive related tolerance and hate speech. A quantitative survey (N = 150) was conducted from March to April 2025 across six regions using simple random sampling. While 90% of respondents affirmed that religious freedom exists in Kosovo, only 35% rated media coverage as very good or excellent. Sixty percent believed Muslims receive the most media attention, and half noted that ethical standards in religious reporting are only partially upheld. The findings reveal a gap between the legal guarantee of religious freedom and its representation in the media, with negative narratives and online hate speech undermining democratic values and social cohesion in post-conflict Kosovo.

Keywords
Religious Freedom; Media Discourse; Kosovo; Hate Speech; Public Perception; Post-Conflict Society; Social Cohesion

INTRODUCTION

Human rights are the rights considered to be universal, inalienable, and inviolable rights with which every human being, as a social and biological entity, is born. They are deeply embedded in our political consciousness (Depre 2012). Since ancient times, humans have sought to establish mechanisms for promoting human rights and freedoms, a pursuit that has accompanied them throughout various historical periods. Human rights are inherent rights that are vested in every individual by virtue of being human (KWIRC 2005). When viewed through the lens of history, it becomes apparent that the origins of human rights are deeply rooted in both Greek philosophy and various world religions. During the Age of Enlightenment (18th century), the concept of human rights emerged as a distinct category of thought. Man/woman came to be seen as an autonomous individual, endowed by nature with certain inalienable fundamental rights that could be invoked against a government and should be safeguarded by it. Human rights were henceforth seen as elementary preconditions for an existence worthy of human dignity (Sepúlveda et al. 2004). However, one must not forget the early documents on human rights, which are fundamental and have served as a starting point for this long journey up to the present day, including the rights and freedoms related to religion.

The first were the Magna Carta Libertatum of 1215, the Golden Bull of Hungary (1222), the Danish Erik Klippings Håndfaestning of 1282, the Joyeuse Entrée of 1356 in Brabant (now Brussels), the Union of Utrecht of 1579 (The Netherlands), and the English Bill of Rights of 1689. These documents outlined rights that could be claimed under specific circumstances (e.g.,

threats to freedom of religion), but they did not yet present a comprehensive philosophical concept of individual liberty (Sepúlveda et al. 2004). Later, with social changes and developments, and the establishment of the United Nations, the first internationally oriented documents were introduced, aimed at promoting and advocating for human rights. In this context, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has now been translated into over 500 languages worldwide, emphasizes in Article 1 that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948). This reflects the evolution of human rights. Today, human rights are a reality, not a myth; they have developed into various categories and are actively promoted and advocated worldwide. Although they are often violated or abused in practice by national, regional, or local governments, or in various contexts such as sports, it can nonetheless be said that they have progressed compared to the past. Studies have emphasized that human rights are categorized into the following types: a) Civil and Political Rights, such as the right to life, the right to a fair trial and the right not to be subjected to torture; and b) Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, such as the right to work, to join a trade union, to health, to education, and an adequate standard of living (IHREC 2015).

Meanwhile, the authors Myrtezani, Hoxha, and Kamberi (2015) cite T.H. Marshall, who emphasized three types of rights: civil rights, which relate to the legal rights of individuals; political rights, particularly the right to participate in elections and hold public office; and social rights, which concern everyindividual's entitlement to enjoy a minimum standard of economic welfare and security. Nonetheless, the manifestation of freedom of belief and more broadly, religious freedom falls within the scope of human rights and is guaranteed not only by international legal instruments but also by domestic legislation. In Kosovo, as well as in other countries of the region, religious freedom remains a vital issue for the communities that live and operate within these states. On the other hand, the media are compelling entities that exert a considerable social influence on citizens. Through the media, people can be educated, informed, and form political, social, economic, religious, or other convictions, as well as understand the issues that are important in their lives. Recently, not only in Kosovo, but also in other countries of the region, a social discourse has emerged in the media concerning the extent and degree to which religious freedom is exercised.

Therefore, this paper explores and analyzes the role of religious freedom within media discourse, with a particular focus on the media's analytical approach to the religious freedom of communities. Therefore, this paper explores and analyzes the role of religious freedom within media discourse, with a particular focus on the media's analytical approach to the religious freedom of communities. The research questions posed in this study are: Does religious freedom exist in Kosovo's social environment; how is religious freedom reflected in social and media discourse; and what ethical standards guide the reporting of religious issues?

The main objectives of this paper are to identify the approaches to religious freedom within social discourse in Kosovo and to assess citizens' perceptions of hate speech related to religious freedom in the media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious freedom is a philosophical concept that, in essence, relates to the expression of beliefs, thoughts, values, ideals, and the individual's right to articulate or manifest them. It is protected by the highest international legal instruments as well as by the laws of respective states. The foundational statement, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, provides the most precise articulation of this recognition: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief, and the freedom, either alone or in communities with others, and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance (Hertzke 2012). As implied by this declaration, religious freedom is a potent human right that simultaneously encompasses the freedom of conscience and association, the right to own property, to publicly worship, publish, speak, petition government, and raise children according to family desires. Therefore, it can be said that religious freedom goes beyond mere participation in mosques, churches, synagogues, or other places of worship. It implies that individuals should not be required to go against their core values and beliefs in order to conform to cultural, societal, or governmental norms and policies. Hence, such protections are considered part of religious freedom. One of the prominent theories that has significantly addressed the role of religion within social systems is undoubtedly Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. He highlights that, from a systems-theoretical perspective, the most important aspect of modern world society is the emergence of a plurality of differentiated and autonomous societal domains. Niklas Luhmann identifies these as society's primary "subsystems," such as politics, economy, science, law, and others. Systems theory suggests that these domains function as "operationally closed autopoietic systems" (Stausberg 2025). Luhmann also observes that highly specialized, symbolically generalized communication media contribute to the growth of inequalities between these functional systems. It appears that systems such as the economy, which utilize highly effective symbolic media and can further refine these (e.g., money into stocks), gain influence.

Niklas Luhmann views the media as a closed system that constructs reality according to its logic (e.g., news values), often simplifying religious freedom into binary oppositions, such as "secular vs. fundamentalist." In local contexts, the media can also contribute to the production of hate speech, which may serve as an indicator of religious intolerance, especially in the Western Balkan countries. In "A Systems Theory of Religion," Luhmann (Stausberg 2025) proposes a theory of religion as part of a general theory of society. His focus always lies on if, when, and how religious communication comes to form an autopoietic, differentiated society. This "basic idea of religion as one of multiple function systems enables comparisons based on a broad range of concepts: communication, functions, (binary) codes, programs, contingency formulas, symbolically generalized communication media, organizations, and secularization" (Stausberg 2025). The theory emphasizes the inseparable nature of religion within society. In this context, religious freedom emerges as one of the most important segments of both religion and society. As can be observed, Luhmann paid attention to questions of the organization of religion. Early on, he proposed a distinction between interaction, organization, and society as a second key aspect of societal differentiation.

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Regarding media discourse and religious representation, contemporary media studies emphasize the crucial role of the media in shaping public perceptions of religious communities. Research demonstrates that media representation of religion significantly influences public attitudes toward religious freedom and tolerance. Studies have shown that media coverage often reflects societal biases and can either promote interfaith understanding or exacerbate religious tensions. The concept of media discourse analysis, as developed by van Dijk (2008), provides a framework for understanding how religious topics are constructed and presented in media narratives. This approach examines not only the content of media messages but also their ideological underpinnings and potential effects on audience perceptions. According to Muhammed Latif (2024), the media's censoring and selective reporting serve as the most potent tool for influencing public perception and reporting on reality. As a result, people obtain their knowledge from biased and mediated sources. The media outlets have assembled legions of pundits and reporters whose task it has been to malign and discredit Islam by linking it to terrorism, a societal ill in the world. However, research on religious freedom in post-conflict societies reveals unique challenges in balancing secular governance with religious diversity. Studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Ireland, and other post-conflict regions demonstrate that the media plays a crucial role in either promoting reconciliation or perpetuating divisions between religious communities.

The literature suggests that in post-conflict contexts, media coverage of religious freedom often reflects broader societal tensions and unresolved conflicts. This is particularly relevant for Kosovo, where the intersection of religious and ethnic identity creates complex dynamics in media representation. In a world fraught with conflict and instability, the media often finds itself at the forefront of shaping public perception and influencing global responses to crises. Through a series of case studies spanning different regions and historical contexts, which can be purchased here, we have explored the profound impact of media on conflict dynamics, from serving as an early warning catalyst to advocating for peace and reconciliation (Orfanau 2024).

In the regional context, comparative studies of religious freedom in Southeast Europe reveal common patterns across the region. Research indicates that, while legal frameworks generally protect religious freedom, implementation varies significantly. Media representation of religious communities often reflects historical tensions and contemporary political dynamics. Studies from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia show similar patterns in media coverage, with the majority religious communities typically receiving more favorable treatment than minority groups. Several relevant studies from the Western Balkans provide important comparative insights for this research. For instance, Frendo (2018) examines religious pluralism and interfaith relations in Albania, highlighting the coexistence model and its challenges in a post-communist context. Similarly, Ali et al. (2024) analyze religious identity and societal cohesion in North Macedonia, revealing how media narratives shape public perceptions of religious diversity. These studies are particularly significant for the present research because they address countries with historical legacies, cultural contexts, and transitional political systems comparable to those of Kosovo.

Many religious leaders representing religious minorities across the region claim that issues within their communities are underreported or ignored. Franciscan priest Marko Oršolić from Bosnia and Herzegovina noted in an interview for the weekly "Vreme" that when someone

is a minority, they are often more interested in starting a dialogue. However, the majority rarely engage in it authentically and sometimes criticize minorities for benefiting from such dialogue (Kisić 2020). This regional context provides an important comparative perspective for understanding Kosovo's situation. Each of the theoretical frameworks plays a key role in the development of communication, particularly regarding the expression of religious freedom.

In the case of Kosovo, religious freedom is guaranteed by the highest legal and political act, the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (2008), which explicitly states in Article 8 that "The Republic of Kosovo is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs." Article 38, titled "Freedom of Belief, Conscience, and Religion," further states:

> 1. Freedom of belief, conscience and religion is guaranteed. 2. Freedom of belief, conscience and religion includes the right to accept and manifest religion, the right to express personal beliefs and the right to accept or refuse membership in a religious community or group. 3. No one shall be required to practice or be prevented from practicing religion, nor shall anyone be required to make his/her opinions and beliefs public. 4. Freedom of manifesting religion, beliefs and conscience may be limited by law if it is necessary to protect public safety and order or the health or rights of other persons.

The freedom to manifest one's belief is exercised following the Constitution and other applicable legal instruments. Upon further analysis, it becomes evident that Luhmann's examined theory plays a crucial role in the relationship between the state and religious organizations, which are largely secular in modernity. However, religious freedom transcends this relationship, a dynamic that is not emphasized in Luhmann's studies. Therefore, this paper aims to explore and further analyze the portrayal of religious freedom in media discourse, including the media space allocated to religious denominations and the role of media in building bridges for interreligious harmony.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology encompasses many dimensions, and research methods constitute one key component of it. The scope of research methodology is broader than that of research methods (Kothari 2004). Regarding the research methodology, the process began with the analysis and review of the relevant literature for this study. A comparative method was employed to examine various scientific theories, and an empirical study was also conducted, involving respondents (citizens). A research design is simply the framework or plan for a study, used as a guide for collecting and analyzing data (Pandey and Pandey 2015). To strengthen the research framework, a broader context was incorporated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the findings. A quantitative survey was conducted using a virtual format via Google Forms. The study had a total of 150 respondents. A simple random sampling method was employed, and the research was conducted from March to April 2025. Of the total respondents, 60% were men and 40% were women, and the study included participants from various regions of Kosovo (Pristina, Peja, Mitrovica, Gjilan, Prizren, and Gjakova). The research instrument used was a questionnaire, while the data collection technique was virtual due to time constraints. The questionnaire consisted of biographical data and a set of 10 main questions

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designed to measure perceptions of religious freedom representation in media discourse. After the data had been collected, they were carefully analyzed and organized into a database, with additional cross-tabulation analysis conducted to examine differences between religious groups.

In general, the research methodology consisted of three main phases. The first phase involved content analysis and a review of literature relevant to the study, including a comparative analysis of regional contexts. The second phase involved designing the questionnaire, testing relevant hypotheses, and incorporating questions designed to capture cross-group differences in perception. The third and final phase consisted of implementing the research and collecting data, followed by a comprehensive analysis that included cross-tabulation by religious affiliation and regional comparison. Additionally, in order to further strengthen the quality of this article, a qualitative research study was also conducted.

As part of this study, three (3) semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with experts in social media, who provided their professional insights. The selection of these experts was based on their profession and experience. The research instrument employed, the in-depth interview, excluded biographical data and focused exclusively on questions related to the study topic, specifically the language used on social media regarding religious freedom. This analysis was conducted in April 2025 and examined two social media platforms, which served as sources for citizens' comments containing hate speech.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the sample size of 150 respondents, while providing valuable insights, limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study does not include a direct content analysis of media coverage, relying instead on citizens' perceptions. Third, the research was conducted during a specific timeframe (March–April 2025) and may not capture seasonal variations in media coverage or public perception.

MANIFESTATION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: FREEDOMS AND RIGHTS

The freedom to manifest one's religious beliefs is a constitutional right of every individual in the states where they reside and operate. At first glance, the concept of freedom of religion may appear contradictory: freedom implies the absence of constraints, while religion entails a self-imposed framework of constraints. This makes freedom of religion a unique human right. Religion serves as an all-encompassing, normative system, providing a comprehensive set of values that guide all aspects of life. Therefore, it poses an alternative authority to that of the state. In this regard, religious freedom differs from other human rights (Scolnicov 2010).

Other human rights, such as free speech or privacy, are not associated with an alternative normative system. There is simply no such thing as a normative system of speech or privacy. The construction of the right of freedom of religion must therefore deal with elements of constraint as well as freedom. Therefore, the interpretation and protection of religious freedom as a human right are more complicated than those of other rights (Scolnicov 2010, 36). In this context, the freedom to manifest religious belief is one of the fundamental human rights. In Kosovo, this right is guaranteed by the Constitution and the Draft Law on Amending and Supplementing Law No. 02/L-31 on Religious Freedom in Kosovo, which recognizes six religious communities as official religious communities in the Republic of Kosovo, thereby constituting an integral part of the country's historical heritage, cultural, and social life. These communities are: the Kosovo Islamic Community, the Catholic Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Jewish Religious

Community, the Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church, and the Tarikate Community of Kosovo (Draft Law on Amending and Supplementing Law No. 02/L-31 on Religious Freedom in Kosovo 2022). This draft law also outlines the obligations and relationships between religious institutions and state institutions based on the principle of secularism. In general, religious freedom is guaranteed and publicly exercised in places of worship. Accordingly, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is a fundamental human right, which, in addition to its profound importance for the life of an individual, also holds exceptional significance for society as a whole.

This right encompasses a broad range of beliefs and convictions, thus representing a source of pluralism that is an integral part of democracy (Petrela and Xhepa 2021). The 2023 International Religious Freedom Report, prepared by the US Embassy in Kosovo, emphasizes that the Constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides grounds for religious freedom, subject to limitations necessary to ensure public order, health, and safety, or to protect the rights of others. The law criminalizes the incitement of religious disputes and intolerance between religious groups, as well as other criminal acts in which religion serves as a motivating factor or an aggravating circumstance. However, the law does not provide a mechanism for religious groups to obtain legal status (US Embassy 2023). From this, it can be concluded that the freedom to manifest religious belief is expressed by religious communities that practice their religious rituals. Perhaps the problem lies more with the media, which often, through "sensational" headlines, signal the development of hate speech, primarily through the comment sections. In an interview conducted with F. Kamberi (2025), a professor and media analyst, regarding the question "How much religious freedom exists in Kosovo and how is it manifested?", the professor emphasized:

> Religious freedom is a social construct in Kosovo and a constitutional principle, guaranteed by the Constitution and current legislation. It is manifested through cooperation among religious denominations, interfaith relations, the promotion of religious tolerance, and collaboration between religious and state institutions—particularly in addressing radicalization and violent extremism—which has significantly contributed to enhancing citizens' sense of security and fostering broader societal stability.

For this purpose, respondents' perceptions of the presence of religious freedom in Kosovo's social environment were also measured, as shown in Figure 1. As can be seen from the field data, over 90% of respondents from both genders stated that there is freedom to manifest religious belief in the social environment of Kosovo; 7% somewhat agreed, while 3% disagreed. These results suggest that religious freedom appears as a form of tradition that has been carried on from the past. All religious communities freely practice their faith in places of worship, celebrate religious holidays, and often organize conferences, seminars, and other events aimed at strengthening coexistence and interreligious tolerance.

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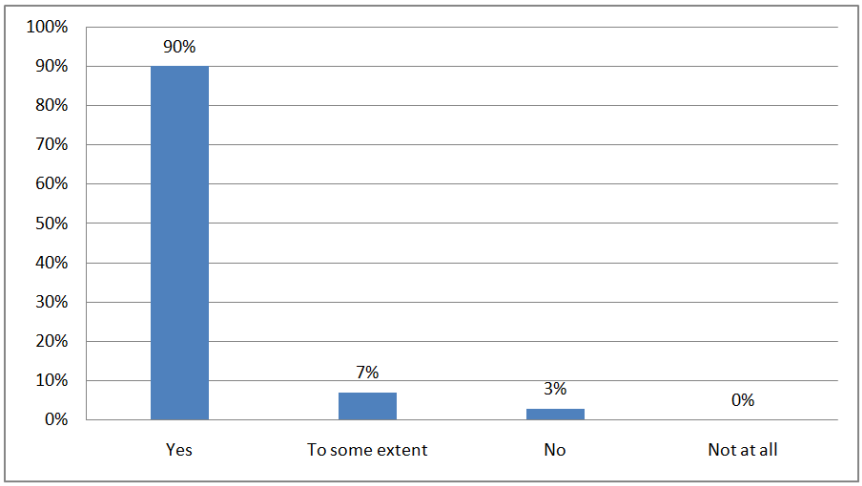


Figure 1: Does religious freedom exist in the social environment of Kosovo? (Source: Kuqi and Esati 2025)

According to a recent study conducted by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo (FES) on youth in Kosovo, approximately 36% of young people in Kosovo can be considered closely connected to religion, as they attend religious services at least once a month. Males appear to be more religious than females. There is a strong correlation between the participation of youth in religious services and their parents' level of religiosity (Spearman's rho = .329, $p < 0.001$). Half of the young people from religious families still demonstrate a high level of participation in religious services, indicating a significant transmission of religious behavior. Moderately religious families seem to show a more neutral distribution in terms of their younger members' participation in religious services (FES 2019). Perceptions of believers are presented in Table 1, as reported in a study conducted by Roman et al. (2020).

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Variables and Countries (Source: Roman et al. 2020)

Observed Variable	Value	Bosnia and Herzegovina (%)	Bulgaria (%)	Croatia (%)	Romania (%)	Balkans (%)
Religious Confession	Christian	39.74	74.07	89.53	97.77	78.13
	Muslim	55.78	15.52	0.47	0.15	15.07
	Other	0.10	0.69	2.53	0.08	0.97
	No religion	4.38	9.72	7.47	2.00	5.83
Frequency of Church Attendance or Mass	Regularly	13.15	5.21	9.07	7.60	8.71
	Often	19.82	11.20	14.47	16.97	15.57
	Sometimes	56.27	63.46	53.07	44.70	53.67
	Never					
		10.76	20.14	23.40	30.72	22.06
Frequency of Observing Religious Holidays	Regularly	72.61	40.18	63.80	23.04	49.65
	Often	15.54	24.95	16.60	37.02	23.65
	Sometimes	9.56	18.66	11.27	24.73	16.11
	Never					
		2.29	16.21	8.33	15.21	10.59

Intention to Emigrate	Very Strong	23.71	6.68	7.27	17.13	13.23
	Much	22.01	24.46	19.20	22.73	21.85
	Some	3.09	29.17	32.07	21.35	22.53
	None	51.20	39.69	41.47	38.79	42.39
Sample Size		1004	1018	1500	1302	4824

It is worth mentioning that, as a result of data tests conducted during the research, the variables recording the Frequency of Praying and Having Confession were excluded, since these practices were found to differ across countries and religious denominations. Nevertheless, regardless of the varying perceptions surrounding religious belief and participation in religious services, religion is protected by normative acts and is publicly manifested. It is further observed that this manifestation of belief is sometimes portrayed differently in media discourse, at times generating social narratives with negative connotations—particularly on social media platforms, where hate speech can escalate tensions. Relevant studies emphasize that hate speech "has been prevalent in human interactions in many forms over time in the actual world (such as racism and prejudice), and now it has found a carrier in the virtual world defined by social media Internet" (Nazmine et al. 2021). Furthermore, the four important stages of hate speech, as emphasized by Citron and Norton (2011), are presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Stages of Hate Speech (Source: Nazmine et al. 2021)

The target of hate speech is not based solely on a single identity. It can be based on various factors, including religion, ethnicity, disability, and gender (Seglow 2016). In this article, online hate speech is reviewed concerning gender, race, and religion. Based on these studies, it is concluded that hate speech constitutes a form of expression that manifests through multiple forms and means, producing social deconstruction not only within society but also, more broadly, within the democratic system.

THE REPRESENTATION OF FREEDOM OF BELIEF IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Today, the media are considered a driving force of globalization and are regarded as both an independent entity and a fundamental pillar of democracy; the absence of which would diminish democratic functioning. The role of the media in social change, and potentially in social progress, is often assumed rather than systematically investigated. "Media" are inherently complex, both in their nature and in their consequences. By "media," reference is made primarily to technologies used for the production, dissemination, and reception of communications; however, following the common usage of the term and its equivalents in many languages, content distributed through these technologies and the institutions associated with their production, dissemination, and reception are also included.

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By "social progress," reference is made to the development of societies in ways that progressively enable human beings to fulfil their needs and capabilities (Couldry et al. 2017). Nevertheless, during the research, respondents' perceptions, evaluations, and attitudes regarding the representation of religious beliefs in media discourse within Kosovar society were measured, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Questions on the Social Discourse of Religious Freedom in the Media and Ethical Standards for Reporting on Religious Issues (Source: Kuqi and Esati 2025)

Questions	Answers	Percent
How Is Religious Freedom Reflected in Social and Media Discourse?	Excellent	5%
	Very good	30%
	Average	30%
	A little	25%
	Not at all	10%
What Ethical Standards Guide the Reporting of Religious Issues?	Yes	40%
	To some extent	50%
	No	7%
	Not at all	3%

Based on this table, which includes two important questions, it can be observed that approximately 30% of respondents indicated that social discourse on religious freedom in the media is reflected very well, 30% indicated it is reflected moderately, 5% indicated it is reflected poorly, 5% indicated it is reflected excellently, and 25% indicated it is not reflected at all. Regarding ethical standards in reporting on religious issues, about 50% of respondents stated that such standards exist to some extent, 40% stated that they do exist, 7% stated that they do not, and only 3% indicated that no ethical standards exist at all. Although the sample size is small for measuring such perceptions, it still provides a helpful instrument for further analysis of this segment. During the studies, specifically through media analysis, it was observed that hate speech is manifested through various forms or patterns, which serve as indicators of the presence of negative comments, hatred, xenophobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination, particularly within a religious context.

In a study conducted by the author Jeta Rexha (2023), it is revealed that the majority of hate speech cases are linked to the negative labeling or stereotyping of groups, accounting for approximately 72% of such incidents. Insults account for 49% of the cases, followed by threats and potentially threatening statements to security personnel, which comprise 12% of the total. Furthermore, most of these incidents were carried out by private individuals, representing 68% of all occurrences. Journalists or media personnel constituted the second-largest group involved, contributing to 23% of the identified cases, followed by politicians, members of political parties, and state officials, with 15% (Rexha 2023, 9). The monitoring process identified Facebook as the primary platform where hate speech incidents occurred, with 106 out of a total of 112 recorded cases. During the monitoring period, Facebook was identified as the primary platform for displaying hate speech, accounting for 106 out of the total 112 registered cases. This trend underscores the platform's role in the spread of hate speech, primarily carried out by private individuals. These incidents were observed on both personal pages and the Facebook pages of news portals (Rexha 2023).

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Hate speech is manifested in social discourses, particularly on social media. It often appears in various forms, especially with the emergence of the "Decani Movement"—a movement that calls on all Albanians of Islamic faith to return to Christianity. In an interview for the media outlet Observer.al, the presence of hate speech in the media and Kosovar society was highlighted by Besnik Sinani, a doctoral candidate in the study of history, societies, cultures, and Islamic religion at the Freie Universität in Berlin (Germany), with particular emphasis on the significant presence of Islamophobia. According to Sinani, the existence of Islamophobia in Albania or Kosovo, despite available evidence, is still debated—even, surprisingly, by some Muslim activists who deny the possibility of Islamophobia in a country with a nominal Muslim majority. However, Islamophobia is not determined by numerical majorities but rather by power relations and dynamics, as defined by Michel Foucault's disciples among post-colonial scholars. Among Albanians in general, Islamophobia is identity-based, and Islamophobic discourse is intended to be all-encompassing and totalitarian. This is also the reason why school textbooks have been identified as among the most distinctive elements of Islamophobic policies (Observer.al 2020). Consequently, the presence of hate speech is reflected not only toward the Islamic faith but more broadly within society. Hate speech has been incorporated into hybrid strategies or hybrid wars, which have notably increased in recent times and are intended to generate social insecurity, panic, fear, and various forms of societal division.

In social discourse, religion is often portrayed negatively, particularly in the context of relations between Islam and Catholicism, sometimes accompanied by social media comments that contain hate speech. Democracy, both as a political and philosophical concept, is arguably the best possible system that allows all citizens to express their thoughts, beliefs, and values, up to the point where the thoughts or values of others are infringed upon. In this context, the findings of this study, despite its limitations, indicate that the current media discourse in Kosovar society does not fully or adequately address religious belief. In practice, it often takes on a different connotation. For this reason, respondents expressed moderate or partial agreement with the existence of ethical standards in the media concerning this topic. While freedom of belief is generally exercised freely, media discourse often tends to favor one religion over another, lacking the rational balance that should ideally be present. This may be due to various factors, including geopolitical shifts, the targeting of Islam as a religion in contrast to others, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, religious prejudices and stereotypes, the absence of a specific law on religious freedoms, and the lack of clearly defined positions for religious communities, among others.

Based on the research findings, as shown in Figure 3, it was indicated that approximately 60% of respondents believe that Muslims (Sunnis) currently have the most significant media presence, 20% indicated Catholics, 15% indicated Protestants, 2% indicated Orthodox Christians, and 3% indicated Bektashis. This suggests that, regardless of respondents' perceptions, all religious denominations are represented in Kosovar media, including broadcasts in their respective languages, such as Serbian, which are transmitted through various television channels. Media discourses addressing topics involving religion, however, are often presented from different perspectives, with statements or opinions, whether from religious clerics or legal analysts, frequently taken out of context. Consequently, discourse on social media platforms often includes hate speech, creating an unhealthy model for society. Headlines in the media are frequently designed to increase clicks, and such headlines often reflect a tone of panic,

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contributing to the proliferation of negative or stereotypical comments, particularly toward Islam. Examples include: "Albania and Kosovo fear the rise of Islamism" (Balkanweb 2016) and "From today on, we are not Muslims / the movement that 'troubled the waters' in Kosovo – the initiators reveal their purpose, BIK (Islamic Community of Kosovo) representatives also speak" (Rugova 2023). Such headlines, often containing divisive elements or lacking structural and substantive rigor, can nevertheless influence the development of social discourse in Kosovo.

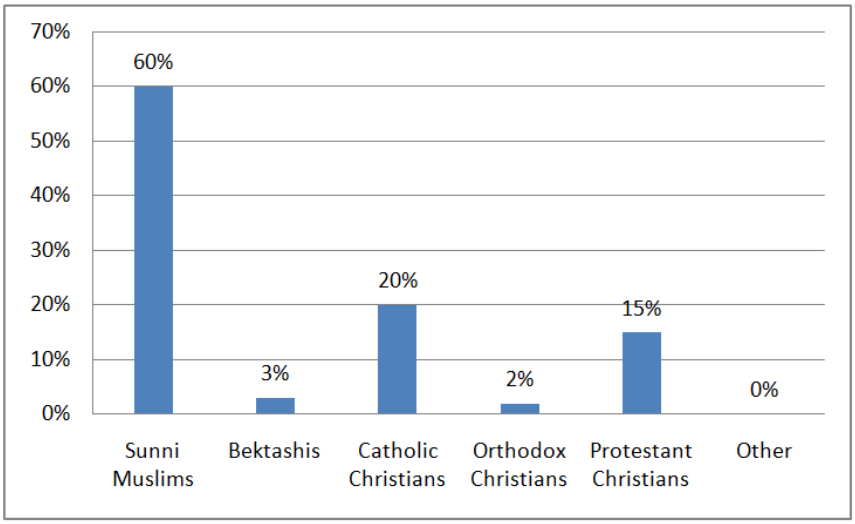


Figure 3: Which Religious Denominations Receive the Most Media Coverage? (Source: Kuqi and Esati 2025)

Finally, it is essential to emphasize that social discourse on religion should foster a culture of communication and dialogue, present rational arguments, ensure equality among participants, and, above all, build bridges between communities. This approach can also serve as a model for younger generations who use social networks and represent the future of society.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above elaboration, it can be concluded that the manifestation of religious freedom is recognized as a human right, guaranteed by the highest international instruments as well as by the legislation of the respective states. The issue of freedom of belief, its public expression, and other rights deriving from international instruments are regulated by each state following international acts. In Kosovo, freedom of belief is exercised freely and is guaranteed for all communities living and operating in the country.

The research findings reveal several key insights regarding the representation of religious freedom in Kosovo's media discourse. At the same time, 90% of respondents confirm the existence of religious freedom in Kosovo's social environment, but only 35% express satisfaction with its portrayal in the media. This discrepancy between legal guarantees and media representation suggests that significant improvements are needed in the media's coverage of religious topics. Substantial differences were observed in how various religious communities perceive their media treatment. Despite representing the majority, Muslim respondents reported

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higher levels of negative portrayal (60%) compared to Catholic respondents (30%), suggesting that media representation is influenced by factors such as editorial bias or societal prejudice rather than demographic size. The finding that 60% of respondents believe Muslims receive the most media coverage, while simultaneously reporting negative portrayals, highlights a disparity between visibility and quality of representation, which poses challenges for interfaith harmony and democratic discourse.

The findings also carry important implications for Kosovo's democratic development and social cohesion. Media representation of religious freedom functions as an indicator of the health of democratic discourse in a diverse society. When media coverage consistently portrays specific religious communities negatively or fails to uphold ethical standards, fundamental democratic principles of equal treatment and respect for all citizens are undermined. Traditional media biases are further amplified through social media platforms, where hate speech and inflammatory commentary can reach broader audiences and create lasting negative impacts on interfaith relations. This digital amplification of religious intolerance represents a significant threat to Kosovo's social fabric and democratic stability. Comparative analysis with regional countries demonstrates that these challenges are part of broader Balkan patterns, while also providing opportunities for learning from best practices and developing collaborative approaches to improve media coverage of religious topics.

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The sample size of 150 respondents, although providing valuable insights, restricts the generalizability of findings to the broader population. The study relies on citizen perceptions of media coverage rather than systematic content analysis of actual media outputs, which may not fully capture the complexity of representation patterns. A lack of longitudinal data prevents assessment of whether media representation patterns are improving or deteriorating over time. Finally, structural analysis of individual religious group perceptions was not conducted in sufficient detail, limiting insights into intra-group variations.

Based on the findings and limitations, several future research directions are recommended. Longitudinal media content analysis should be conducted to identify patterns, trends, and the effectiveness of interventions. Comparative regional studies should be expanded to examine media representation across Balkan countries and identify successful models of balanced religious coverage. The role of social media in amplifying religious intolerance warrants further investigation, alongside strategies to promote constructive online discourse. The effectiveness of training programs for journalists on ethical coverage and interfaith relations should be assessed, and the impact of existing legal frameworks on media coverage should be evaluated to inform policy improvements. Additionally, research should explore how media representation influences younger generations' attitudes toward religious diversity and tolerance.

This study makes a foundational contribution to understanding the representation of religious freedom in Kosovo's media discourse. While significant challenges in media coverage and public perception have been identified, a roadmap has been established to improve media representation of religious communities and strengthen democratic discourse. The research demonstrates that legal protection for religious freedom alone is insufficient; sustained efforts are required to enhance media representation and public discourse regarding religious diversity.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

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