

Inter-religious Institute established in Albania- a pioneer idea to bring together all stakeholders of interreligious dialogue and cooperation



The Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) and the Interreligious Collaboration Centre Elbasan (IRCCE) have recently just established the Institute for Religious Studies and Cooperation – the first of its kind in the country – to provide a positive model for the entire region and beyond. The implementing partners are jointly working to design the next year activities involving all relevant stakeholders from religious communities, community organizations and academia.

The three main objectives of this initiative are first for the institute to conduct scientific religious research and studies, next to support interreligious dialogue starting from the grassroots level and finally to promote the Albanian model of religious harmony whenever it's applicable abroad.

“The reason why we thought this is timely is because whatever has existed so far has been very sporadic, so there is no systematic encouragement of interreligious dialogue; there are only different small projects here and there, which do not really connect the religious community with other stakeholders, so our effort is to create connections with other parts of the society,” said Alba Cela, Deputy Director of AIIS.

The Inter-Religious Centre, in line with this rationale, also aims to build bridges between the country's religious and secular communities in order to create

common social approaches, to conduct studies on the culture of dialogue, intercultural studies, studies on all faiths and religions, as well as their relations to all aspects of social life.

According to the Executive Director of the Interreligious Centre Dr.Arben Ramkaj, what is innovative about this new idea is the cooperation in itself of a well-established think tank likes AIIS with a local centre, in order to bring together national and local knowledge together.

“Our expectations are to eventually turn into a cooperation centre not only for Albania, but the entire Western Balkans, and to promote the country’s harmonic religious model among many communities, including those who once experienced conflicts, and why not eventually produce academic materials which could be used in the field of education,” Ramkaj said.

The project is also supported by the expertise of Open Europe Consulting, which brought its director and one of its experts in Tirana for two days to assist with the initial stages of the institute’s establishment.

The project’s target and phases include phase one, the baseline study, the establishment of an interreligious network and Advisory Board and a draft concept of the institute and envisioned implementation strategy; phase two, which is the institute’s actual establishment, as well as that professional support and scientific backup, the start of regional initiatives at the grassroots level and gaining project funding; phase three, which foresees the institute’s potential inclusion in policy-making and regular funding.

“Albania is the country with the biggest ground for this project’s success – it has tradition, the history, the traces of the past still present, and we found during the mapping that in Albania there is already this tradition of religious harmony and that with communism a big part of that was destroyed, but that there is still place to study and promote it. So to establish this in a country where people are already open to that, is important,” said Andrea Mewaldt, director of Open Europe.

The first brainstorming session held sought to address issues such as radicalization and extremism, the lack of foreign funding – the religious communities in Albania have small financial sources due to the lack of reappropriation by the state – and the education of new clerics.

The education of new clerics, which is a particular problem as a big number of new clerics in Albania study abroad, bringing back home a religious culture that differs from the traditional Albanian one. Different studies have shown that foreign

influences play an important role in the radicalization of vulnerable people.

The Institute for Religious Studies and Cooperation will create a network among the religious communities, government and non-government organizations and different donors to also provide additional support for other grassroots initiatives and to eventually reach a stage to make policy recommendations valid for initiatives of interreligious cooperation.

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