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# LIFETWO – Learning Interculturality From Religions ToWards Outreach activities

## Challenges, needs, expectations

### Introduction

The intercultural environment in Bulgaria is specific due to the enhanced social role of the internal minorities, not because of the influence of emigration waves. Unlike the Schengen countries in the consortium implementing the LIFE 2 project, in which one of the results of globalization can be measured by the importation of new cultural models from outside through migration flows, or Turkey, which is strongly shaken by refugee influx, Bulgaria does not suffer from external pressure. The intercultural environment here is formed by the presence of compact and demographically growing, in comparison to the dominant Bulgarian and Orthodox communities, ethnic minorities - Roma, Turks and religious ones - Bulgarian muslims, the so-called Pomaks.

### Challenges

In the context of the above, on one hand we have a sustainable and traditional model of coexistence and intercultural dynamics that manifests itself in everyday life - cuisine, language, etc. But on the other, we also have established and sustained models of prejudice and fear that draw distinct boundaries between the dominant population and minorities, and often impose taboos that hinder communication. Overcoming them is a big challenge for us.

The growing influence of nationalist parties in the governance of the country is also a challenge. They are currently part of the governing coalition and are regularly featured in the public media space, thus focusing negative public attitudes related to social tensions or criminogenic situations, mainly towards minorities.

On a macro level, educational programs and documents promote intercultural education or related initiatives. Since 2000, we have developed and approved guidelines for the integration of minorities, educational integration strategies, a National Action Plan for their implementation, a National Action Plan for the Decade of Roma Inclusion, etc.

The main challenge here is how these national programs operate on the micro-level: at school, the main place where intercultural communication takes place, which cannot be left out of a public debate dominated by nationalists and

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populists. However, we should emphasize that the Bulgarian school has accumulated considerable project experience in the field of intercultural education and the values of multiculturalism going back to the beginning of the 1990s. The connection to the topic of civic education is self-evident and indisputable. Unfortunately, over the years extensive discussions about how and by whom civic education should be taught have accumulated not only experience but also fatigue and disappointment that we have been going back and forth and repeating the same things over and over again every decade.

Another challenge in the context of the Bulgarian school is how religions are taught - in the curriculum they are represented mainly through cultural and historical viewpoints in History and Civilization and Philosophy classes. Defending zealously the secular nature of education, the school allows the study of religions only as an elective subject, which greatly limits the teacher's capabilities - here s/he is obliged to conform to the wish or unwillingness of the parents and their prejudices. So if we have to define the next challenge, it is the growing role of the parents and the need to involve them as allies.

### **Needs**

Among the needs and priorities that we can always identify are, first, the qualification of teachers and the implementation of adequate programs in the teaching process to stress the importance of religion in intercultural exchange at school. In April 2020, the Center for Educational Initiatives intends to offer the Ministry of Education and Science a training course based on the pedagogical model of the LIFE 1 project, which will provide the necessary credit points for the annual teacher re-certification.

### **Expectations**

We expect that the qualification of teachers and the update of the curricula for religion and intercultural learning will focus on the presentation of functional practical models, which is the purpose of the LIFE 2 Project. We also expect the LIFE 2 project to offer a functional model for the transfer of good practices and encourage the creation of a teaching community that exists in an environment of confidence and tranquility.

We also expect greater commitment on the part of state institutions, which to ensure we have already taken preliminary steps and received support from the Regional Inspectorate of Education in Sofia.

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