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The Role of Churches and Religious Communities in Disaster Risk Reduction and Crisis Management in Serbia

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ABSTRACT

Churches and religious communities represent important social actors whose institutional capacities, presence within local communities, moral authority, and connections with citizens may contribute to disaster risk reduction and crisis management. This study aims to examine the attitudes of members of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church toward interreligious cooperation, values relevant to crisis management, and willingness to assist the population during disasters and other emergencies. The study is based on a secondary analysis of survey data collected as part of a broader investigation into the relationships among religious communities, security, and defense in Serbia. The sample comprised 1,334 respondents, including 761 members of the Islamic Community and 573 members of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Descriptive statistical measures and an independent-samples t-test were employed in the data analysis. The results indicate that respondents from both groups generally perceive churches and religious communities as potentially important bridges for cooperation in crisis management, with a higher level of agreement identified among members of the Islamic Community. The findings also demonstrate a high level of willingness among respondents to assist competent authorities and disaster-affected populations during natural disasters, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. Freedom, honor, equality, national security, peace, and solidarity emerged as values of particular importance for collective action during crises. The study concludes that churches and religious communities possess considerable potential to contribute to risk communication, volunteer mobilization, humanitarian and psychosocial assistance, and the strengthening of social cohesion. Their role should therefore be more systematically integrated into local and national disaster risk reduction and crisis management.

KEYWORDS

churches and religious communities; disaster risk reduction; crisis management; social resilience; interfaith cooperation; Serbia.

1. Introduction

Disaster risk reduction has progressively moved beyond a predominantly hazard-centered and technically oriented model toward an integrated approach in which institutional capacity, social relations, public participation, local knowledge, and community resilience are treated as mutually dependent components of risk governance. Contemporary disaster risk management therefore requires more than the existence of emergency plans, professional response services, and physical protection measures. Its effectiveness also depends on the capacity of public authorities to cooperate with communities, civil society organizations, humanitarian actors, volunteers, educational institutions, and other locally embedded stakeholders. Legal frameworks and formally established institutions may provide the basis for action. However, their practical effectiveness is determined by stakeholder participation, institutional legitimacy, coordination, accountability, and the ability to adapt measures to local social conditions (Canete & Biñas, 2025; Goyal, 2019; Guo & Kapucu, 2019; Milenković & Cvetković, 2025). Recent developments in community-resilience research similarly emphasize that resilience emerges from interactions among social capital, economic stability, institutional capacity, infrastructure, cooperation, and risk-related knowledge rather than from any single resource or organizational structure (Milenković et al., 2026). This integrated perspective is also reflected in broader conceptual approaches that connect disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, recovery, and long-term resilience within a unified management cycle (Cvetković, 2019, 2023b, 2023c).

Community-based disaster risk reduction is grounded in the principle that people exposed to hazards should not be regarded merely as passive recipients of protection and humanitarian assistance. Communities possess knowledge, relationships, informal leadership structures, cultural practices, and organizational resources that can substantially influence preparedness and response. Studies have demonstrated that active community involvement can improve local risk identification, strengthen preparedness, support the dissemination of warnings, and facilitate recovery, particularly when community initiatives receive institutional, technical, and financial support (Cvetković et al., 2025; Rico, 2019). Evidence from volunteer-led flood response further shows that decentralized leadership, field experience, adaptability, and cooperation with governmental and non-governmental organizations can enable locally established organizations to provide rescue, relief, health assistance, and early recovery support even under severe resource limitations (Islam et al., 2026). At the same time, volunteer engagement must be supported by clear procedures, training, equipment, supervision, and coordination with professional services, since unregulated spontaneous participation can create additional operational and safety risks (Molnár, 2024). Network-based research also indicates that the existence of organizational connections does not automatically produce an effective response; coordination functions as a critical mechanism through which those connections are converted into operational performance (Masaba et al., 2025). Individual readiness to participate is additionally influenced by self-efficacy, knowledge, prior experience, trust, and perceptions of personal competence (Desalit et al., 2025). These findings correspond with research in Serbia emphasizing preparedness barriers, citizen training, flood-response readiness, expectations of emergency services, volunteering, and the importance of organized protection and rescue systems (Cvetković, 2013, 2016, 2017a, 2017c, 2017d, 2022; Cvetković et al., 2018).

Within this broader network of community stakeholders, churches and religious communities occupy a distinctive position. Their relevance is based not only on religious doctrine or ritual practice but also on their institutional continuity, local presence, moral authority, social networks, facilities, charitable activities, and direct contact with individuals and families. In many communities, religious organizations remain present before, during, and after a disaster, which may enable them to contribute to warning dissemination, volunteer mobilization, humanitarian assistance, psychosocial and spiritual support, identification of vulnerable persons, and restoration of social cohesion. Previous research in Serbia has demonstrated that religion may influence perceptions of disaster causes, preparedness, responsibility, solidarity, and expectations of assistance. Religious beliefs may support collective action and psychological coping. However, fatalistic interpretations may also reduce motivation to undertake preventive measures when disasters are perceived as inevitable or

exclusively determined by divine will (Cvetković et al., 2017, 2023). Accordingly, the contribution of religious organizations should not be assumed to be inherently positive; it depends on whether their activities are inclusive, coordinated with competent institutions, consistent with scientific evidence, and directed toward risk reduction rather than passive acceptance of danger. These issues are especially relevant in integrated disaster management, where effective cooperation must connect formal institutional responsibilities with the actual capacities of local actors (Cvetković, 2021, 2023b).

The quality of institutional coordination also shapes the potential contribution of religious actors. Evidence from the provision of psychosocial support during the 2014 floods in Serbia points to gaps between civilian authorities and religious organizations that limited the systematic use of religious capacities in assisting affected populations (Jurišić & Marceta, 2024). Similar coordination problems have been documented in other crisis contexts. Research on humanitarian interventions in the Gaza Strip found that unclear responsibilities, fragmented information exchange, and limited cooperation between governmental and humanitarian organizations weakened assistance to internally displaced persons (El-Mougher, 2022). More recent research on shelter centers in Gaza identified inaccurate data, insufficient pre-disaster planning, shortages of trained personnel, and weak institutional synergy as major administrative and logistical risks (El-Mougher & Zaydah, 2026). Studies of decentralized disaster governance also show that formal committees and institutional self-assessments may present an overly favorable picture when communities have limited awareness of their activities and low levels of satisfaction with their performance (Tamim et al., 2026). In fragile settings, governance capacity contributes to resilience most effectively when disaster risk reduction is actually institutionalized through functioning procedures, resources, and local implementation mechanisms (Unaam, 2026). These findings indicate that churches and religious communities should not operate as parallel or improvised response systems. Their contribution should be defined through planning, clear responsibilities, shared information protocols, training, and integration into local coordination structures (Goyal, 2019; Guo & Kapucu, 2019; Masaba et al., 2025).

Risk communication represents another area in which churches and religious communities may provide substantial support. Protective information is effective only when it is timely, understandable, credible, culturally appropriate, and accessible to the population. Religious leaders may function as trusted intermediaries, particularly among people who have limited contact with public institutions or who rely strongly on local community networks. Their involvement may facilitate the dissemination of official warnings, clarification of protective measures, correction of rumors, and referral of vulnerable persons to competent services. However, the increasing use of mobile technologies and social media has made the communication environment more complex. Digital platforms can accelerate warnings, facilitate citizen reporting, and support coordination, but they also enable misinformation, contradictory instructions, and emotionally manipulative content to spread rapidly (Mano et al., 2019; Sacyaten, 2025; Yamah & Folorunsho, 2026). Research on Nigeria indicates that the effectiveness of digital disaster communication is constrained by unequal access to infrastructure, low digital literacy, misinformation, and public distrust. At the same time, trusted community figures may attract greater engagement than official institutions (Yamah & Folorunsho, 2026). Research from flood-prone areas of Bangladesh similarly shows that communities may continue to depend on personal experience and indigenous knowledge when timely forecasting information and modern communication systems are unavailable (Aktar et al., 2026). Studies in Serbia confirm that citizens' reception of disaster information is influenced by trust, communication channels, previous experience, and perceptions of institutional competence (Cvetković et al., 2021). Religious networks may consequently complement official risk communication, but only when the messages they disseminate are verified and aligned with the instructions of competent authorities (Cvetković, 2018).

The capacity of religious organizations to support disaster management must also be examined from the perspective of differential vulnerability and inclusive protection. Disasters do not affect all people equally, and vulnerability is shaped by disability, age, gender, poverty, social isolation, access to information, mobility, health status, and the availability of support networks (Canete & Biñas, 2025). Persons with disabilities may face barriers in receiving warnings, evacuating, entering shelters, obtaining assistance, and participating in recovery decisions. Effective inclusion therefore requires accessible communication, participatory planning, trained personnel, suitable infrastruc-

ture, and the direct involvement of persons with disabilities in decisions affecting their safety (Jevtić et al., 2025). Churches and religious communities may possess detailed knowledge of older persons living alone, households experiencing poverty, persons with reduced mobility, and families requiring continuous support. Such knowledge can improve targeted outreach, but it must be used in accordance with privacy, dignity, informed consent, and non-discrimination. The physical suitability of facilities is equally important. Research on evacuation centers demonstrates that a building may be relatively safe from particular hazards but remain inaccessible to parts of the population, meaning that safety and accessibility must be assessed simultaneously (Aniñon & Oreta, 2026). This principle also applies when religious buildings are considered for temporary reception, humanitarian distribution, community meetings, or psychosocial support (Cvetković, 2022, 2023c).

Religious buildings themselves may also be exposed to disaster risks. Churches, monasteries, mosques, and other religious facilities often combine cultural significance, older construction, high visitor concentrations, open flames, complex electrical systems, valuable interiors, and limitations arising from cultural-heritage protection. A recent analysis of religious buildings in Serbia found that fire protection is frequently fragmented and insufficiently integrated with legal, organizational, cultural, technical, educational, and financial considerations (Lazić et al., 2026). This finding has two implications for disaster risk reduction. First, religious institutions must protect their own users, staff, heritage, and facilities through risk assessment, preventive measures, evacuation planning, training, and cooperation with emergency services. Second, religious buildings should not automatically be designated as shelters or aid-distribution centers merely because they are centrally located or socially accessible. Their structural safety, fire protection, sanitation, capacity, accessibility, and exposure to hazards must be assessed before they are incorporated into emergency plans (Aniñon & Oreta, 2026; Cvetković, 2013, 2022).

The relevance of churches and religious communities can further be understood through the concept of community resilience. Resilience is not limited to the physical capacity to resist hazard impacts; it includes the ability to organize, communicate, learn, adapt, maintain essential social functions, and recover without reinforcing pre-existing inequalities. Contemporary resilience frameworks consequently incorporate social capital, institutional capacity, community competence, economic resources, infrastructure, information, and cooperation (Milenković & Cvetković, 2025; Milenković et al., 2026). Social identity may also influence whether people perceive collective action as a shared responsibility and whether they are prepared to assist members of their community during crises (Cvetković, 2023a). Religious affiliation may provide a strong sense of belonging and mutual obligation, but it may also create boundaries if humanitarian assistance is limited to members of one group. The resilience-enhancing potential of religious identity therefore depends on whether it supports inclusive solidarity and cooperation across religious and ethnic divisions. Methodologically, this requires context-sensitive research capable of distinguishing formal religious affiliation, intensity of religiosity, institutional trust, value orientations, perceived social responsibility, and actual preparedness behavior (Cvetković, 2017b). Serbian research on preparedness has repeatedly demonstrated that knowledge, risk perception, previous experience, socio-demographic characteristics, and trust in institutions affect citizens' readiness to respond, making it inappropriate to explain behavior through religious affiliation alone (Cvetković, 2017a, 2017c, 2017d).

The Serbian context is particularly suitable for examining these questions because churches and religious communities have long-standing institutional structures, substantial social visibility, and strong connections with cultural and collective identities. Previous studies have investigated the association between religiosity and preparedness, the influence of religion on disaster risk reduction, attitudes toward volunteering and assistance to vulnerable persons, citizen risk communication, and the safety of religious buildings (Cvetković et al., 2017, 2018, 2021, 2023; Lazić et al., 2026). Existing findings suggest that religious organizations may provide psychological, financial, humanitarian, and social support during different phases of disaster management. At the same time, the literature identifies fatalistic beliefs, fragmented coordination, insufficient institutional integration, and inadequate protection of religious facilities as significant limitations (Cvetković et al., 2023; Jurišić & Marceta, 2024; Lazić et al., 2026). Earlier national research also demonstrates that citizens may display considerable willingness to assist vulnerable persons and volunteer during disasters, although

such willingness varies according to demographic, social, and experiential factors (Cvetković et al., 2018). These findings provide an important foundation, but they do not directly establish whether members of different religious communities perceive churches and religious communities as shared platforms for crisis-management cooperation.

A clear empirical gap therefore remains. Existing studies have examined religiosity and individual preparedness, the broader influence of religion on disaster risk reduction, civil-religious coordination in psychosocial support, and the physical vulnerability of religious buildings. However, limited research has comparatively examined how members of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church understand the potential role of religious institutions in crisis management, which values they associate with collective action, and whether they express readiness to assist competent authorities and disaster-affected populations across religious and ethnic boundaries. This distinction is important because individual religiosity, institutional affiliation, value orientations, interreligious trust, and willingness to participate in disaster response represent related but analytically separate phenomena.

Accordingly, the present study examines the attitudes of members of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the potential of churches and religious communities to function as bridges for cooperation in crisis management. It also analyses the moral, social, religious, cultural, and security-related values that may support collective action, as well as respondents' stated willingness to assist civil authorities and disaster-affected populations during natural disasters. By comparing the two groups, the study seeks to identify both differences and shared normative foundations that may support interreligious cooperation. Its contribution lies in connecting research on religion with community resilience, disaster governance, volunteer mobilization, inclusive humanitarian assistance, and crisis communication. The findings are intended to support the development of evidence-based mechanisms through which churches and religious communities can be incorporated into local and national disaster risk reduction frameworks without replacing the statutory responsibilities of public authorities or compromising the principles of neutrality, equality, and non-discrimination.

2. Normative, Religious, and Social Context of Serbia

Understanding the role of churches and religious communities in disaster risk reduction and crisis management requires consideration of their legal position, institutional characteristics, social functions, and capacity to act within local communities. Contemporary disaster risk management is not limited to the activities of formal protection and rescue institutions. It increasingly relies on cooperation among public authorities, local governments, civil society organizations, humanitarian actors, professional associations, volunteer networks, religious organizations, and citizens. Such an integrated approach is based on the understanding that disasters are complex social phenomena whose causes and consequences cannot be effectively addressed through technical and institutional measures alone (Cvetković, 2021, 2022, 2023a; Goyal, 2019; Pradhan et al., 2025).

Community resilience therefore involves more than the capacity of infrastructure and public institutions to withstand disruption. It also encompasses social cohesion, mutual trust, collective identity, local leadership, access to information, adaptive capacity, and the willingness of community members to cooperate before, during, and after disasters. Churches and religious communities may contribute to these dimensions because they maintain relatively stable social networks, possess institutional continuity, and often enjoy considerable moral authority among their members and within the wider community (Cvetković, 2023b; Milenković & Cvetković, 2025; Milenković et al., 2026).

The significance of these organizations is particularly evident in socially diverse and territorially dispersed communities. Religious institutions may facilitate communication between public authorities and citizens, mobilize volunteers, identify vulnerable individuals, distribute humanitarian assistance, and provide psychosocial and spiritual support. Their involvement should nevertheless be based on clearly defined responsibilities, professional standards, humanitarian principles, and coor-

dination with the competent institutions of the disaster risk reduction and emergency management system (Cvetković et al., 2025; Guo & Kapucu, 2019).

2.1. *Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities in Serbia*

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia defines Serbia as a secular state in which churches and religious communities are separate from the state and equal before the law. Citizens are guaranteed freedom of thought, conscience, belief, and religion, including the freedom to have or not to have a religion, to maintain or change their religious convictions, and to manifest their beliefs individually or collectively, publicly or privately (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006).

The Law on Churches and Religious Communities further regulates the subjects of religious freedom, their legal status, and the principal forms of their activities. Article 4 identifies traditional churches and religious communities, confessional communities, and other religious organizations as subjects of religious freedom (Law on Churches and Religious Communities, 2006). This legal formulation confirms the formal equality of different forms of religious organization while simultaneously requiring their precise and consistent differentiation in legislation, institutional practice, and scientific research.

Terminological precision is particularly important in the present study because it examines organizations with different historical, theological, and institutional characteristics. The term “churches and religious communities” is broader and more inclusive than the term “church” alone, since the latter cannot be applied in the same manner to the Islamic Community or the Jewish Community. The combined expression therefore provides an appropriate legal and analytical framework for the consideration of Christian churches, the Islamic Community, the Jewish Community, confessional communities, and other legally recognized religious organizations.

The legal status of churches and religious communities is also relevant to disaster risk reduction because contemporary disaster governance requires coordination between governmental and non-governmental actors. Comparative studies indicate that the effectiveness of disaster management depends on institutional preparedness, clearly allocated responsibilities, public participation, transparent decision-making, and developed mechanisms of cooperation and accountability (Guo & Kapucu, 2019; Mohamed Kalakaan, 2025; Salam et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may consequently be considered complementary actors within the disaster management system. Their inclusion does not imply transferring statutory responsibilities from public authorities to religious organizations. Rather, it involves using their organizational, humanitarian, social, and communication capacities within clearly regulated partnerships and in accordance with the principles of equality, neutrality, and non-discrimination.

2.2. *Conceptual and Institutional Definition of the Church*

The term church has several meanings. In its narrowest sense, it refers to a sacred building in which Christian religious services and rituals are performed. In a broader institutional sense, it denotes an organized community of Christian believers characterized by a developed structure, hierarchy, doctrine, rules, and historical continuity (Rečnik stranih reči, 2007).

According to the *Rečnik religijskih pojmova*, a church is an established community of Christians formed based on a shared faith. It is characterized by stability, hierarchical relationships, a relatively centralized decision-making structure, and the inclusion of followers from different social groups. In spatial terms, a church is also understood as a place where believers gather to participate in spiritual, ritual, and community life (Rečnik religijskih pojmova, 2009).

The Law on Churches and Religious Communities primarily uses the term church in relation to traditional Christian churches, while also recognizing confessional communities and other religious organizations. Article 19 regulates the naming of religious organizations in order to prevent confu-

sion with churches, religious communities, or other organizations that have already been registered (Law on Churches and Religious Communities, 2006).

Churches, however, do not perform only liturgical and ritual functions. Their activities may include education, cultural preservation, charity, humanitarian work, social assistance, counseling, and support for marginalized population groups. During disasters, such capacities may become operationally significant because churches may assist in disseminating warnings, mobilizing volunteers, collecting and distributing assistance, providing premises, identifying vulnerable individuals, and offering psychosocial and spiritual support.

Research on community-based disaster risk reduction emphasizes that trusted local organizations can facilitate public participation and connect formal institutions with populations that may otherwise be difficult to reach. Their contribution is especially important when institutional capacities are insufficient, public trust is limited, or official communication channels do not reach all sections of the population equally (Cvetković et al., 2025; Rico, 2019).

For this study, a church is defined as an institutionalized community of Christian believers that, in addition to its religious function, possesses organizational, social, humanitarian, and communication capacities relevant to disaster risk reduction and crisis management.

2.3. Conceptual Definition of a Religious Community

In sociological literature, a community is generally understood as a form of human connectedness based on belonging, shared values, common interests, and relatively stable interpersonal relationships. Tadić defines community as a condition of social relations characterized by strong interpersonal bonds and spiritual or social closeness (Tadić, 1996).

Ferdinand Tönnies viewed community as a natural and lasting form of human association based on kinship, language, customs, religion, neighborhood, and friendship. Unlike formal and interest-based social relations, community is characterized by continuity, emotional closeness, and a sense of mutual belonging (Tönnies, 1912, as cited in Parsons, 1992).

Weber similarly defined community as a form of social relationship based on the subjective sense of belonging shared by its members (Bešić & Đukanović, 2000). Parsons described the social community as a complex network of collectivities and collective loyalties in which families, churches, governmental institutions, educational organizations, and other social bodies perform distinct but interconnected functions (Parsons, 1992).

A religious community represents a particular form of social community whose members are connected by shared beliefs, religious practices, traditions, identities, and value systems. Its social strength does not arise solely from its formal organizational structure. It also derives from informal networks of trust, solidarity, mutual assistance, collective memory, and shared moral commitments.

According to Article 10, paragraph 2, of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities, traditional religious communities are those with centuries-long historical continuity in Serbia whose legal personality was acquired under special legislation. The Islamic Community and the Jewish Community belong to this category (Law on Churches and Religious Communities, 2006).

For this research, a religious community is defined as an institutionally and socially organized group of people connected by common religious beliefs, history, cultural patterns, norms, and a sense of belonging. Such a community may represent an important source of social capital, trust, solidarity, and collective support, particularly during social crises and disasters (Radončić, 2017).

2.4. Religion, Social Identity, and Disaster Resilience

The relationship between religion and behavior during disasters is complex and cannot be reduced to formal affiliation with a particular church or religious community. Religious beliefs may influence risk perception, interpretations of disaster causes, expectations of assistance, acceptance of preventive measures, willingness to volunteer, and attitudes toward vulnerable groups.

Research conducted in Serbia indicates that religiosity may be associated with certain dimensions of citizens' preparedness for natural disasters. However, the direction and strength of this relationship depend on sociodemographic characteristics, institutional trust, previous disaster experience, knowledge, and the specific preparedness behavior being examined (Cvetković et al., 2017).

A more focused study of the influence of religion on disaster risk reduction in Serbia showed that religious affiliation and religious values may shape citizens' perceptions of responsibility, assistance, cooperation, solidarity, and prevention. Religion can therefore function both as a source of social cohesion and as an interpretive framework through which individuals understand disasters and their obligations toward other people and the wider community (Cvetković et al., 2023).

Social identity also affects how individuals perceive belonging, responsibility, and readiness for collective action. A stronger sense of community membership may increase willingness to exchange information, provide mutual assistance, and participate in coordinated response, provided that group identity is not based on exclusion, discrimination, or hostility toward other communities (Cvetković, 2023b).

Contemporary approaches to resilience emphasize that the ability of a community to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disasters develops through social networks, trust, institutional cooperation, local knowledge, access to resources, and collective learning. Churches and religious communities can contribute to these dimensions by connecting individuals, families, informal leaders, humanitarian actors, and public institutions (Canete & Biñas, 2025; Milenković & Cvetković, 2025).

The potential contribution of religious organizations to resilience is not automatically positive. It depends on their openness toward other groups, willingness to cooperate with institutions, adherence to humanitarian principles, and ability to avoid fatalistic, discriminatory, or scientifically unsupported interpretations of disasters. Their social influence should therefore be used to strengthen preparedness, solidarity, and evidence-based protective behavior.

2.5. Churches and Religious Communities as Disaster Risk Reduction Actors

Churches and religious communities perform multiple social functions. In addition to preserving religion, tradition, and identity, they may contribute to social cohesion, the protection of vulnerable groups, humanitarian assistance, and the mobilization of local populations. Their embeddedness in local communities enables them to reach individuals who may have limited contact with formal institutions.

Community-based disaster risk reduction begins with the assumption that residents are not merely passive recipients of assistance but active participants in risk identification, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Effective risk reduction therefore requires the inclusion of local knowledge, social networks, community organizations, and existing human resources (Cvetković et al., 2025; Rico, 2019).

In practical terms, churches and religious communities may contribute by disseminating warnings, encouraging preventive behavior, identifying vulnerable and hard-to-reach individuals, organizing volunteers, collecting humanitarian assistance, providing buildings for temporary shelter or aid distribution, and supporting the restoration of social cohesion after disasters. Their involvement may be particularly important in smaller communities where formal institutional capacities are limited or where religious leaders enjoy substantial public trust.

The cooperation of professional emergency services with volunteer and community organizations can strengthen operational capacities, but it requires prior planning, training, clearly defined procedures, and effective coordination. Unregulated spontaneous volunteering may create additional logistical and safety problems if volunteers are not registered, trained, equipped, and directed by competent institutions (Molnár, 2024).

The psychological preparedness of rescuers and volunteers is also important because poorly prepared helpers may themselves become exposed to trauma, exhaustion, burnout, confusion, or unsafe behavior. Churches and religious communities that mobilize volunteers should therefore cooperate with professional organizations in providing basic safety training, psychological preparation, and post-intervention support (Marceta & Jurišić, 2024).

The importance of religious organizations is particularly visible in the provision of psychosocial and spiritual support. Evidence from the 2014 floods in Serbia suggests, however, that weak connections between civilian authorities and religious actors may reduce the accessibility and effectiveness of such assistance. This demonstrates the need for formalized cooperation, predefined contact points, and jointly developed protocols (Jurišić & Marceta, 2024).

2.6. Institutional Cooperation and Coordination

The effectiveness of disaster management depends on the capacity of organizations to exchange information, coordinate decisions, allocate resources, and avoid duplication. The mere presence of numerous actors does not guarantee an effective response. In the absence of coordination, assistance may be distributed unevenly, certain areas may receive overlapping support, and some vulnerable groups may be neglected.

Research on humanitarian organizational networks indicates that coordination is a central mechanism through which organizational connectedness is converted into effective operational performance. Effective coordination requires clear leadership, information exchange, compatible procedures, shared situational awareness, and an agreed division of responsibilities (Masaba et al., 2025).

Studies of relations between governmental and humanitarian organizations similarly show that inadequate information exchange, unclear responsibilities, fragmented decision-making, and competition among organizations directly reduce the quality of interventions. Such weaknesses may delay assistance, create confusion among affected populations, and prevent the efficient allocation of limited resources (El-Mougher, 2022).

Local and international partnerships may strengthen resilience through joint planning, training, knowledge exchange, and the mobilization of additional resources. Partnership-based approaches may also support institutional learning and help local organizations adopt tested practices from other countries and communities (Dukiya & Benjamine, 2021).

Churches and religious communities should therefore be included in local coordination arrangements in accordance with their actual capacities, territorial presence, organizational resources, and legally permissible activities. Their representatives may participate in consultations during local risk assessments and emergency planning, particularly where religious organizations provide social services or maintain strong connections with vulnerable population groups.

Cooperation may also involve the identification of religious buildings suitable for temporary reception, humanitarian distribution, community meetings, or psychosocial support. Such buildings should be assessed in advance in terms of structural safety, accessibility, sanitation, fire protection, capacity, and suitability for persons with disabilities.

Religious leaders and volunteers may additionally be trained in risk communication, humanitarian principles, psychological first aid, the identification of vulnerable persons, and referral procedures. These mechanisms should be formalized before disasters occur rather than improvised during emergency response.

2.7. Risk Communication and Public Trust

Risk communication is a fundamental component of preparedness, response, and recovery. Information must be timely, clear, accurate, verified, and adapted to the cultural, linguistic, educational, and social characteristics of the target population. Public perceptions of the timeliness and clarity of warnings directly influence trust and willingness to comply with official instructions (Sacyaten, 2025).

Religious leaders may have a particularly important role in transmitting official messages in communities where they enjoy high levels of credibility. Their authority may support compliance with preventive measures, reduce uncertainty, counter rumors, and connect vulnerable persons with competent institutions.

The engagement of religious leaders in risk communication should nevertheless be based on verified information provided by competent authorities. Religious interpretations must not replace professional assessments, scientific evidence, evacuation orders, medical recommendations, or other official instructions.

Social media and mobile technologies further expand the possibilities for disaster communication by enabling the rapid dissemination of warnings, local reporting, and coordination of assistance. At the same time, they increase the risk of misinformation, unverified claims, emotional manipulation, and contradictory instructions (Mano et al., 2019; Yamah & Folorunsho, 2026).

Churches and religious communities should therefore be included in official communication protocols. Messages disseminated through religious networks should be consistent with information issued by competent authorities, scientifically grounded, culturally appropriate, and free from discriminatory, stigmatizing, or fatalistic interpretations of disasters. Their role should be to reinforce credible public communication rather than create parallel information systems.

The use of trusted religious networks may be particularly beneficial in communities in which linguistic barriers, geographical isolation, low digital literacy, or distrust of public authorities weaken institutional communication. However, all communication activities should be coordinated and evaluated to ensure accuracy, consistency, and inclusiveness.

2.8. Citizen Mobilization, Preparedness, and Self-Efficacy

Individual readiness to respond depends on knowledge, previous experience, trust in institutions, available resources, and the perceived ability to act effectively. Research indicates that disaster response self-efficacy is an important predictor of willingness to participate in emergency activities and provide assistance to other people (Desalit et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may contribute to the development of self-efficacy through training, workshops, exercises, volunteer programs, and public education. Their activities should not be limited to the spontaneous collection of assistance after a disaster. A more sustainable contribution would include long-term preparedness, first-aid training, awareness campaigns, evacuation education, family preparedness, and familiarization with local emergency procedures.

Disaster education is one of the most important instruments for strengthening preparedness. Research among university students indicates that higher levels of theoretical knowledge are not necessarily accompanied by adequate practical preparedness. This suggests that educational activities must include exercises, demonstrations, simulations, and operational skills rather than information alone (Barik et al., 2025).

Religious buildings may provide accessible spaces for local education and preparedness activities, particularly in areas where other community facilities are unavailable. Such activities should be developed in cooperation with qualified professionals so that the content is accurate, inclusive, and aligned with the national protection and rescue system.

Religious organizations may also contribute to the development of volunteer databases and networks of trained community members. However, the registration, training, deployment, supervision, and insurance of volunteers should be coordinated with competent institutions to reduce safety risks and ensure accountability.

Citizen mobilization should not rely exclusively on moral appeals. It should be supported by practical knowledge, clearly defined tasks, appropriate equipment, and an understanding of the limitations of non-professional engagement. Volunteers should never be assigned tasks requiring specialized rescue, medical, technical, or security expertise without appropriate qualifications.

2.9. Humanitarian Assistance and Community Participation

Churches and religious communities frequently participate in the collection and distribution of food, clothing, financial donations, medicines, hygiene supplies, and other forms of assistance. Contemporary humanitarian approaches, however, emphasize that affected populations should not be treated solely as passive recipients. They should participate in identifying needs, setting priorities, monitoring assistance, and evaluating its fairness and appropriateness.

Participatory and inclusive programs can improve transparency, accountability, and the extent to which aid reflects actual community needs. Community participation may also reduce dependency, strengthen local capacities, and improve trust between affected populations and humanitarian actors (Canete et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may support needs assessments because they possess local knowledge and often maintain direct contact with households. Nevertheless, such information must be collected and used carefully, transparently, and in accordance with data protection requirements.

Humanitarian assistance must be provided on the basis of need rather than religious, ethnic, political, or organizational affiliation. The activities of churches and religious communities should therefore follow the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and operational independence.

Assistance limited primarily to members of one religious group would undermine social trust and could intensify existing divisions during crises. In multiconfessional communities, transparent and non-discriminatory assistance may have the opposite effect by strengthening interreligious trust, solidarity, and social cohesion.

Financial donations and material assistance should be managed through clear procedures. Religious organizations involved in disaster assistance should maintain records of received and distributed resources, establish criteria for beneficiary selection, and provide appropriate reporting to donors, institutions, and the public.

2.10. Protection of Vulnerable Social Groups

Disasters do not affect all citizens equally. Persons with disabilities, older persons, children, low-income households, migrants, members of minority communities, and residents of remote areas frequently encounter additional barriers in receiving warnings, evacuating, accessing shelters, and obtaining assistance.

Research shows that the effective inclusion of persons with disabilities requires accessible information, participatory planning, appropriate infrastructure, trained personnel, and recognition of diverse functional needs. Inclusive disaster risk reduction cannot be achieved merely by identifying vulnerable people; it requires their meaningful participation in planning and decision-making (Goswami & Ahmad, 2025; Jevtić et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may help identify isolated or functionally dependent individuals because they often maintain direct relationships with local households. Their representatives

may possess detailed knowledge about older persons living alone, families in poverty, persons with limited mobility, or individuals requiring continuous social and medical support.

However, the use of such information must respect privacy, dignity, informed consent, and data protection requirements. Vulnerable persons should not be treated paternalistically or reduced to passive beneficiaries. They should be included in decisions affecting their own safety, assistance, evacuation, and recovery.

The same principle applies to members of minority and migrant communities. Religious organizations may contribute to inclusive outreach, translation, cultural mediation, and the adaptation of messages to different population groups. Their capacity to reach marginalized people should be used to reduce inequality rather than reinforce social boundaries.

Particular attention should be given to the accessibility of religious buildings proposed for temporary shelter or aid distribution. Physical barriers, inaccessible sanitation facilities, narrow entrances, inadequate lighting, and the absence of private spaces may prevent the safe use of such facilities by persons with disabilities, older persons, women, and children.

2.11. The Role of Churches and Religious Communities in Response and Recovery

During the immediate response phase, churches and religious communities may support professional services by mobilizing volunteers, distributing aid, providing information, offering premises, supporting affected families, and assisting with the identification of urgent needs. Such engagement must be coordinated so that spontaneous activities do not interfere with evacuation, rescue, medical assistance, security operations, or official logistics.

First responders and local actors face complex operational, organizational, and psychological demands. Strengthening their capacities requires continuous training, interoperability, coordination, and cooperation across institutional and territorial boundaries (Cvetković, 2025).

Religious organizations may provide valuable support to affected families during events involving fatalities, injuries, displacement, loss of property, or prolonged uncertainty. Spiritual and psychosocial assistance may help individuals cope with grief, fear, guilt, and disruption of social relationships.

Such assistance should not replace professional mental health services. Religious representatives should be able to recognize situations requiring referral to psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, medical professionals, or child-protection services. Cooperation between religious actors and professional psychosocial support teams is therefore essential.

During recovery, religious communities may contribute to restoring social ties, supporting grieving families, preserving collective memory, organizing community activities, and encouraging solidarity. Their role may be particularly important when recovery processes last for months or years and public attention gradually declines.

Churches and religious communities may also contribute to post-disaster learning by participating in evaluations, identifying unmet needs, and helping institutions understand the experiences of affected populations. Their local presence allows them to observe long-term social consequences that may not be immediately visible to external responders.

Churches and religious communities are therefore considered in this study as potential partners of institutions responsible for disaster risk reduction and crisis management. Their relevance derives from their local embeddedness, organizational continuity, social authority, communication networks, and capacity to connect formal institutions with citizens.

In multiethnic and multiconfessional environments, interreligious cooperation may additionally strengthen solidarity, mutual trust, nonviolent communication, and community resilience. However, this potential can be realized only through inclusive practices, institutional coordination, profes-

sional training, respect for human rights, and equal assistance to all affected persons regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation.

Works, religious organizations, and citizens. Such an integrated approach is based on the understanding that disasters are complex social phenomena whose causes and consequences cannot be effectively addressed through technical and institutional measures alone (Cvetković, 2021, 2022, 2023a; Goyal, 2019; Pradhan et al., 2025).

Community resilience therefore involves more than the capacity of infrastructure and public institutions to withstand disruption. It also encompasses social cohesion, mutual trust, collective identity, local leadership, access to information, adaptive capacity, and the willingness of community members to cooperate before, during, and after disasters. Churches and religious communities may contribute to these dimensions because they maintain relatively stable social networks, possess institutional continuity, and often enjoy considerable moral authority among their members and within the wider community (Cvetković, 2023b; Milenković & Cvetković, 2025; Milenković et al., 2026).

The significance of these organizations is particularly evident in socially diverse and territorially dispersed communities. Religious institutions may facilitate communication between public authorities and citizens, mobilize volunteers, identify vulnerable individuals, distribute humanitarian assistance, and provide psychosocial and spiritual support. Their involvement should nevertheless be based on clearly defined responsibilities, professional standards, humanitarian principles, and coordination with the competent institutions of the disaster risk reduction and emergency management system (Cvetković et al., 2025; Guo & Kapucu, 2019).

2.12. Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities in Serbia

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia defines Serbia as a secular state in which churches and religious communities are separate from the state and equal before the law. Citizens are guaranteed freedom of thought, conscience, belief, and religion, including the freedom to have or not to have a religion, to maintain or change their religious convictions, and to manifest their beliefs individually or collectively, publicly or privately (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006).

The Law on Churches and Religious Communities further regulates the subjects of religious freedom, their legal status, and the principal forms of their activities. Article 4 identifies traditional churches and religious communities, confessional communities, and other religious organizations as subjects of religious freedom (Law on Churches and Religious Communities, 2006). This legal formulation confirms the formal equality of different forms of religious organization while simultaneously requiring their precise and consistent differentiation in legislation, institutional practice, and scientific research.

Terminological precision is particularly important in the present study because it examines organizations with different historical, theological, and institutional characteristics. The term “churches and religious communities” is broader and more inclusive than the term “church” alone, since the latter cannot be applied in the same manner to the Islamic Community or the Jewish Community. The combined expression therefore provides an appropriate legal and analytical framework for the consideration of Christian churches, the Islamic Community, the Jewish Community, confessional communities, and other legally recognized religious organizations.

The legal status of churches and religious communities is also relevant to disaster risk reduction because contemporary disaster governance requires coordination between governmental and non-governmental actors. Comparative studies indicate that the effectiveness of disaster management depends on institutional preparedness, clearly allocated responsibilities, public participation, transparent decision-making, and developed mechanisms of cooperation and accountability (Guo & Kapucu, 2019; Mohamed Kalakaan, 2025; Salam et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may consequently be considered complementary actors within the disaster management system. Their inclusion does not imply transferring statutory responsibilities from public authorities to religious organizations. Rather, it involves using their organizational, humanitarian, social, and communication capacities within clearly regulated partnerships and in accordance with the principles of equality, neutrality, and non-discrimination.

2.13. Conceptual and Institutional Definition of the Church

The term church has several meanings. In its narrowest sense, it refers to a sacred building in which Christian religious services and rituals are performed. In a broader institutional sense, it denotes an organized community of Christian believers characterized by a developed structure, hierarchy, doctrine, rules, and historical continuity (*Rečnik stranih reči*, 2007).

According to the *Rečnik religijskih pojmova*, a church is an established community of Christians formed on the basis of a shared faith. It is characterized by stability, hierarchical relationships, a relatively centralized decision-making structure, and the inclusion of followers from different social groups. In spatial terms, a church is also understood as a place where believers gather to participate in spiritual, ritual, and community life (*Rečnik religijskih pojmova*, 2009).

The Law on Churches and Religious Communities primarily uses the term church in relation to traditional Christian churches, while also recognizing confessional communities and other religious organizations. Article 19 regulates the naming of religious organizations in order to prevent confusion with churches, religious communities, or other organizations that have already been registered (Law on Churches and Religious Communities, 2006).

Churches, however, do not perform only liturgical and ritual functions. Their activities may include education, cultural preservation, charity, humanitarian work, social assistance, counselling, and support for marginalized population groups. During disasters, such capacities may become operationally significant because churches may assist in disseminating warnings, mobilizing volunteers, collecting and distributing assistance, providing premises, identifying vulnerable individuals, and offering psychosocial and spiritual support.

Research on community-based disaster risk reduction emphasizes that trusted local organizations can facilitate public participation and connect formal institutions with populations that may otherwise be difficult to reach. Their contribution is especially important when institutional capacities are insufficient, public trust is limited, or official communication channels do not reach all sections of the population equally (Cvetković et al., 2025; Rico, 2019).

For the purposes of this study, a church is defined as an institutionalized community of Christian believers that, in addition to its religious function, possesses organizational, social, humanitarian, and communication capacities relevant to disaster risk reduction and crisis management.

2.14. Conceptual Definition of a Religious Community

In sociological literature, a community is generally understood as a form of human connectedness based on belonging, shared values, common interests, and relatively stable interpersonal relationships. Tadić defines community as a condition of social relations characterized by strong interpersonal bonds and spiritual or social closeness (Tadić, 1996).

Ferdinand Tönnies viewed community as a natural and lasting form of human association based on kinship, language, customs, religion, neighborhood, and friendship. Unlike formal and interest-based social relations, community is characterized by continuity, emotional closeness, and a sense of mutual belonging (Tönnies, 1912, as cited in Parsons, 1992).

Weber similarly defined community as a form of social relationship based on the subjective sense of belonging shared by its members (Bešić & Đukanović, 2000). Parsons described the social community as a complex network of collectivities and collective loyalties in which families, churches, governmental institutions, educational organizations, and other social bodies perform distinct but interconnected functions (Parsons, 1992).

A religious community represents a particular form of social community whose members are connected by shared beliefs, religious practices, traditions, identities, and value systems. Its social strength does not arise solely from its formal organizational structure. It also derives from informal networks of trust, solidarity, mutual assistance, collective memory, and shared moral commitments.

According to Article 10, paragraph 2, of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities, traditional religious communities are those with centuries-long historical continuity in Serbia whose legal personality was acquired under special legislation. The Islamic Community and the Jewish Community belong to this category (Law on Churches and Religious Communities, 2006).

For the purposes of this research, a religious community is defined as an institutionally and socially organized group of people connected by common religious beliefs, history, cultural patterns, norms, and a sense of belonging. Such a community may represent an important source of social capital, trust, solidarity, and collective support, particularly during social crises and disasters (Radončić, 2017).

2.15. Religion, Social Identity, and Disaster Resilience

The relationship between religion and behavior during disasters is complex and cannot be reduced to formal affiliation with a particular church or religious community. Religious beliefs may influence risk perception, interpretations of disaster causes, expectations of assistance, acceptance of preventive measures, willingness to volunteer, and attitudes toward vulnerable groups.

Research conducted in Serbia indicates that religiosity may be associated with certain dimensions of citizens' preparedness for natural disasters. However, the direction and strength of this relationship depend on sociodemographic characteristics, institutional trust, previous disaster experience, knowledge, and the specific preparedness behavior being examined (Cvetković et al., 2017).

A more focused study of the influence of religion on disaster risk reduction in Serbia showed that religious affiliation and religious values may shape citizens' perceptions of responsibility, assistance, cooperation, solidarity, and prevention. Religion can therefore function both as a source of social cohesion and as an interpretive framework through which individuals understand disasters and their obligations toward other people and the wider community (Cvetković et al., 2023).

Social identity also affects how individuals perceive belonging, responsibility, and readiness for collective action. A stronger sense of community membership may increase willingness to exchange information, provide mutual assistance, and participate in coordinated response, provided that group identity is not based on exclusion, discrimination, or hostility toward other communities (Cvetković, 2023b).

Contemporary approaches to resilience emphasize that the ability of a community to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disasters develops through social networks, trust, institutional cooperation, local knowledge, access to resources, and collective learning. Churches and religious communities can contribute to these dimensions by connecting individuals, families, informal leaders, humanitarian actors, and public institutions (Canete & Biñas, 2025; Milenković & Cvetković, 2025).

The potential contribution of religious organizations to resilience is not automatically positive. It depends on their openness toward other groups, willingness to cooperate with institutions, adherence to humanitarian principles, and ability to avoid fatalistic, discriminatory, or scientifically un-

supported interpretations of disasters. Their social influence should therefore be used to strengthen preparedness, solidarity, and evidence-based protective behavior.

2.16. Churches and Religious Communities as Disaster Risk Reduction Actors

Churches and religious communities perform multiple social functions. In addition to preserving religion, tradition, and identity, they may contribute to social cohesion, the protection of vulnerable groups, humanitarian assistance, and the mobilization of local populations. Their embeddedness in local communities enables them to reach individuals who may have limited contact with formal institutions.

Community-based disaster risk reduction begins with the assumption that local residents are not merely passive recipients of assistance but active participants in risk identification, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Effective risk reduction therefore requires the inclusion of local knowledge, social networks, community organizations, and existing human resources (Cvetković et al., 2025; Rico, 2019).

In practical terms, churches and religious communities may contribute by disseminating warnings, encouraging preventive behavior, identifying vulnerable and hard-to-reach individuals, organizing volunteers, collecting humanitarian assistance, providing buildings for temporary shelter or aid distribution, and supporting the restoration of social cohesion after disasters. Their involvement may be particularly important in smaller communities where formal institutional capacities are limited or where religious leaders enjoy substantial public trust.

The cooperation of professional emergency services with volunteer and community organizations can strengthen operational capacities, but it requires prior planning, training, clearly defined procedures, and effective coordination. Unregulated spontaneous volunteering may create additional logistical and safety problems if volunteers are not registered, trained, equipped, and directed by competent institutions (Molnár, 2024).

The psychological preparedness of rescuers and volunteers is also important because poorly prepared helpers may themselves become exposed to trauma, exhaustion, burnout, confusion, or unsafe behavior. Churches and religious communities that mobilize volunteers should therefore cooperate with professional organizations in providing basic safety training, psychological preparation, and post-intervention support (Marceta & Jurišić, 2024).

The importance of religious organizations is particularly visible in the provision of psychosocial and spiritual support. Evidence from the 2014 floods in Serbia suggests, however, that weak connections between civilian authorities and religious actors may reduce the accessibility and effectiveness of such assistance. This demonstrates the need for formalized cooperation, predefined contact points, and jointly developed protocols (Jurišić & Marceta, 2024).

2.17. Institutional Cooperation and Coordination

The effectiveness of disaster management depends on the capacity of organizations to exchange information, coordinate decisions, allocate resources, and avoid duplication. The mere presence of numerous actors does not guarantee an effective response. In the absence of coordination, assistance may be distributed unevenly, certain areas may receive overlapping support, and some vulnerable groups may be neglected.

Research on humanitarian organizational networks indicates that coordination is a central mechanism through which organizational connectedness is converted into effective operational performance. Effective coordination requires clear leadership, information exchange, compatible procedures, shared situational awareness, and an agreed division of responsibilities (Masaba et al., 2025).

Studies of relations between governmental and humanitarian organizations similarly show that inadequate information exchange, unclear responsibilities, fragmented decision-making, and competition among organizations directly reduce the quality of interventions. Such weaknesses may delay assistance, create confusion among affected populations, and prevent the efficient allocation of limited resources (El-Mougher, 2022).

Local and international partnerships may strengthen resilience through joint planning, training, knowledge exchange, and the mobilization of additional resources. Partnership-based approaches may also support institutional learning and help local organizations adopt tested practices from other countries and communities (Dukiya & Benjamine, 2021).

Churches and religious communities should therefore be included in local coordination arrangements in accordance with their actual capacities, territorial presence, organizational resources, and legally permissible activities. Their representatives may participate in consultations during local risk assessments and emergency planning, particularly where religious organizations provide social services or maintain strong connections with vulnerable population groups.

Cooperation may also involve the identification of religious buildings suitable for temporary reception, humanitarian distribution, community meetings, or psychosocial support. Such buildings should be assessed in advance in terms of structural safety, accessibility, sanitation, fire protection, capacity, and suitability for persons with disabilities.

Religious leaders and volunteers may additionally be trained in risk communication, humanitarian principles, psychological first aid, the identification of vulnerable persons, and referral procedures. These mechanisms should be formalized before disasters occur rather than improvised during emergency response.

2.18. Risk Communication and Public Trust

Risk communication is a fundamental component of preparedness, response, and recovery. Information must be timely, clear, accurate, verified, and adapted to the cultural, linguistic, educational, and social characteristics of the target population. Public perceptions of the timeliness and clarity of warnings directly influence trust and willingness to comply with official instructions (Sacyaten, 2025).

Religious leaders may have a particularly important role in transmitting official messages in communities where they enjoy high levels of credibility. Their authority may support compliance with preventive measures, reduce uncertainty, counter rumors, and connect vulnerable persons with competent institutions.

The engagement of religious leaders in risk communication should nevertheless be based on verified information provided by competent authorities. Religious interpretations must not replace professional assessments, scientific evidence, evacuation orders, medical recommendations, or other official instructions.

Social media and mobile technologies further expand the possibilities for disaster communication by enabling the rapid dissemination of warnings, local reporting, and coordination of assistance. At the same time, they increase the risk of misinformation, unverified claims, emotional manipulation, and contradictory instructions (Mano et al., 2019; Yamah & Folorunsho, 2026).

Churches and religious communities should therefore be included in official communication protocols. Messages disseminated through religious networks should be consistent with information issued by competent authorities, scientifically grounded, culturally appropriate, and free from discriminatory, stigmatizing, or fatalistic interpretations of disasters. Their role should be to reinforce credible public communication rather than create parallel information systems.

The use of trusted religious networks may be particularly beneficial in communities in which institutional communication is weakened by linguistic barriers, geographical isolation, low digital literacy, or distrust of public authorities. However, all communication activities should be coordinated and evaluated to ensure accuracy, consistency, and inclusiveness.

2.19. Citizen Mobilization, Preparedness, and Self-Efficacy

Individual readiness to respond depends on knowledge, previous experience, trust in institutions, available resources, and the perceived ability to act effectively. Research indicates that disaster response self-efficacy is an important predictor of willingness to participate in emergency activities and provide assistance to other people (Desalit et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may contribute to the development of self-efficacy through training, workshops, exercises, volunteer programs, and public education. Their activities should not be limited to the spontaneous collection of assistance after a disaster. A more sustainable contribution would include long-term preparedness, first-aid training, awareness campaigns, evacuation education, family preparedness, and familiarization with local emergency procedures.

Disaster education is one of the most important instruments for strengthening preparedness. Research among university students indicates that higher levels of theoretical knowledge are not necessarily accompanied by adequate practical preparedness. This suggests that educational activities must include exercises, demonstrations, simulations, and operational skills rather than information alone (Barik et al., 2025).

Religious buildings may provide accessible spaces for local education and preparedness activities, particularly in areas where other community facilities are unavailable. Such activities should be developed in cooperation with qualified professionals so that the content is accurate, inclusive, and aligned with the national protection and rescue system.

Religious organizations may also contribute to the development of volunteer databases and networks of trained community members. However, the registration, training, deployment, supervision, and insurance of volunteers should be coordinated with competent institutions to reduce safety risks and ensure accountability.

Citizen mobilization should not rely exclusively on moral appeals. It should be supported by practical knowledge, clearly defined tasks, appropriate equipment, and an understanding of the limitations of non-professional engagement. Volunteers should never be assigned tasks requiring specialized rescue, medical, technical, or security expertise without appropriate qualifications.

2.20. Humanitarian Assistance and Community Participation

Churches and religious communities frequently participate in the collection and distribution of food, clothing, financial donations, medicines, hygiene supplies, and other forms of assistance. Contemporary humanitarian approaches, however, emphasize that affected populations should not be treated solely as passive recipients. They should participate in identifying needs, setting priorities, monitoring assistance, and evaluating its fairness and appropriateness.

Participatory and inclusive programs can improve transparency, accountability, and the extent to which aid reflects actual community needs. Community participation may also reduce dependency, strengthen local capacities, and improve trust between affected populations and humanitarian actors (Canete et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may support needs assessments because they possess local knowledge and often maintain direct contact with households. Nevertheless, such information must be collected and used carefully, transparently, and in accordance with data protection requirements.

Humanitarian assistance must be provided on the basis of need rather than religious, ethnic, political, or organizational affiliation. The activities of churches and religious communities should therefore follow the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and operational independence.

Assistance limited primarily to members of one religious group would undermine social trust and could intensify existing divisions during crises. In multiconfessional communities, transparent and non-discriminatory assistance may have the opposite effect by strengthening interreligious trust, solidarity, and social cohesion.

Financial donations and material assistance should be managed through clear procedures. Religious organizations involved in disaster assistance should maintain records of received and distributed resources, establish criteria for beneficiary selection, and provide appropriate reporting to donors, institutions, and the public.

2.21. Protection of Vulnerable Social Groups

Disasters do not affect all citizens equally. Persons with disabilities, older persons, children, low-income households, migrants, members of minority communities, and residents of remote areas frequently encounter additional barriers in receiving warnings, evacuating, accessing shelters, and obtaining assistance.

Research shows that the effective inclusion of persons with disabilities requires accessible information, participatory planning, appropriate infrastructure, trained personnel, and recognition of diverse functional needs. Inclusive disaster risk reduction cannot be achieved merely by identifying vulnerable people; it requires their meaningful participation in planning and decision-making (Goswami & Ahmad, 2025; Jevtić et al., 2025).

Churches and religious communities may help identify isolated or functionally dependent individuals because they often maintain direct relationships with local households. Their representatives may possess detailed knowledge about older persons living alone, families in poverty, persons with limited mobility, or individuals requiring continuous social and medical support.

However, the use of such information must respect privacy, dignity, informed consent, and data protection requirements. Vulnerable persons should not be treated paternalistically or reduced to passive beneficiaries. They should be included in decisions affecting their own safety, assistance, evacuation, and recovery.

The same principle applies to members of minority and migrant communities. Religious organizations may contribute to inclusive outreach, translation, cultural mediation, and the adaptation of messages to different population groups. Their capacity to reach marginalized people should be used to reduce inequality rather than reinforce social boundaries.

Particular attention should be given to the accessibility of religious buildings proposed for temporary shelter or aid distribution. Physical barriers, inaccessible sanitation facilities, narrow entrances, inadequate lighting, and the absence of private spaces may prevent the safe use of such facilities by persons with disabilities, older persons, women, and children.

2.22. The Role of Churches and Religious Communities in Response and Recovery

During the immediate response phase, churches and religious communities may support professional services by mobilizing volunteers, distributing aid, providing information, offering premises, supporting affected families, and assisting with the identification of urgent needs. Such engagement must be coordinated so that spontaneous activities do not interfere with evacuation, rescue, medical assistance, security operations, or official logistics.

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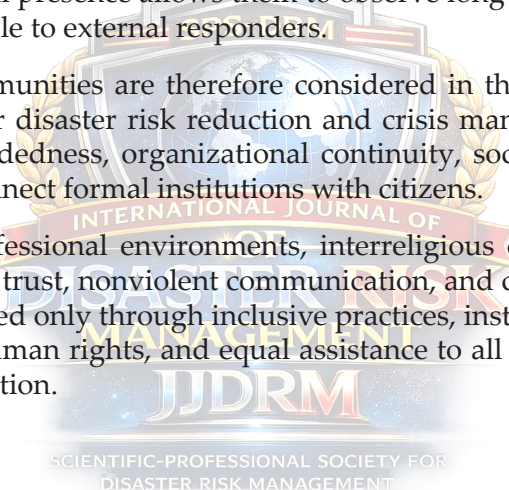
Such assistance should not replace professional mental health services. Religious representatives should be able to recognize situations requiring referral to psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, medical professionals, or child-protection services. Cooperation between religious actors and professional psychosocial support teams is therefore essential.

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Churches and religious communities are therefore considered in this study as potential partners of institutions responsible for disaster risk reduction and crisis management. Their relevance derives from their local embeddedness, organizational continuity, social authority, communication networks, and capacity to connect formal institutions with citizens.

In multiethnic and multiconfessional environments, interreligious cooperation may additionally strengthen solidarity, mutual trust, nonviolent communication, and community resilience. However, this potential can be realized only through inclusive practices, institutional coordination, professional training, respect for human rights, and equal assistance to all affected persons regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation.



2.23. Demographic and Confessional Context of Serbia

The religious composition of Serbia has developed within a complex historical, political, and demographic context. Although the censuses conducted in 1921 and 1931 provide valuable evidence of the confessional diversity of the population, direct comparisons between historical census results are methodologically problematic because territorial boundaries, administrative divisions, census categories, and rules for declaring religious affiliation changed over time. The same limitation applies to comparisons involving the censuses conducted during socialist Yugoslavia and those conducted after its dissolution. For this reason, historical census data should primarily be used to illustrate the long-term presence of different religious communities rather than to establish uninterrupted demographic trends. The contemporary confessional context is more reliably illustrated by the 2011 and 2022 censuses. Between these two censuses, the total population of Serbia decreased from 7,186,862 to 6,647,003. The number of persons who identified as Christian declined from 6,555,931, or 91.2% of the population, to 5,758,719, or 86.6%, while the number of persons who identified with Islam increased from 222,828, or 3.1%, to 278,212, or 4.2%. Orthodox Christians remained the largest religious group, accounting for 84.6% of the population in 2011 and 81.1% in 2022. These changes describe the demographic setting in which the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community, and other religious organizations operate, but they should not by themselves be interpreted as evidence of changes in religiosity, institutional influence, or disaster-related behavior.

Table 1. Religious Affiliation of the Population of Serbia According to the 2011 and 2022 Censuses/

Religious affiliation	2011, n	2011, %	2022, n	2022, %
Christians, total	6,555,931	91.2	5,758,719	86.6
Orthodox Christians	6,079,396	84.6	5,387,426	81.1
Catholics	356,957	5.0	257,269	3.9
Protestants	71,284	1.0	54,678	0.8
Other Christians	3,211	<0.1	59,346	0.9
Muslims	222,828	3.1	278,212	4.2
Total population	7,186,862	100.0	6,647,003	100.0

Note. Percentages were calculated in relation to the total population enumerated in the respective census. Differences in classification and response patterns should be considered when interpreting changes between census years. The 2022 Census was not conducted in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.

3. Methodological Framework

This study examines the potential role of churches and religious communities in disaster risk reduction and crisis management in Serbia through a comparative analysis of the attitudes of members of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The empirical material originates from a broader survey conducted by the author on the relationship between religious communities, security, defence, social values, and citizens' readiness to respond to different forms of societal threat. For the purposes of the present article, only variables directly related to disaster risk reduction, interreligious cooperation, crisis management, humanitarian assistance, social cohesion, and willingness to support affected populations were selected for secondary analysis.

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, and comparative research design. The quantitative approach was selected because the research focused on measuring respondents' attitudes, identifying the distribution and intensity of their responses, and determining whether statistically significant differences existed between members of the two religious communities. The cross-sectional design enabled the examination of attitudes at a specific point in time, while the comparative component provided a basis for identifying similarities and differences between respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community and those affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The individual respondent constituted the primary unit of analysis. The study did not assess the formal policies, emergency plans, operational resources, or actual institutional capacities of churches and religious communities; instead, it examined respondents' perceptions of their potential contribution to crisis management and disaster response. The findings should therefore be interpreted as evidence of perceived social, humanitarian, and mobilization potential rather than as a direct assessment of institutional preparedness or operational effectiveness.

3.2. Research Objectives and Questions

The principal objective of the study was to determine how members of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church perceive the role of churches and religious communities in disaster risk reduction and crisis management in Serbia. The study also sought to examine the values that respondents associate with collective action, social responsibility, security, solidarity, and assistance during crises, as well as their willingness to support competent authorities and affected populations during natural disasters and other emergencies. Because the empirical analysis was primarily ex-

ploratory and comparative, it was structured around several research questions: whether respondents perceive churches and religious communities as bridges for closer cooperation in crisis management; whether members of the two religious groups differ in the intensity of this perception; which moral, social, religious, cultural, and security-related values they consider most important; and to what extent they express readiness to assist competent authorities and affected populations during disasters regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation.

3.3. Study Population and Sample

The total sample consisted of 1,334 respondents, including 761 members of the Islamic Community and 573 members of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The inclusion of these two groups enabled a comparative examination of attitudes among members of a minority religious community and members of the numerically dominant church in Serbia. The sample size allowed the application of descriptive and comparative statistical procedures; however, the final manuscript should additionally specify the exact period and geographical scope of data collection, the municipalities or regions included, the sampling strategy, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the procedure used to recruit respondents. These details should be presented in the following form: "Data were collected between [month and year] and [month and year] in [locations], and participants were recruited using [probability, stratified, purposive, convenience, snowball, or another sampling procedure]." Unless the original study used a probability-based sampling design, the sample should not be described as nationally representative, and the findings should be interpreted as comparative evidence relating to the surveyed respondents rather than as population estimates applicable to all members of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia.

3.4. Research Instrument and Variables

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing items related to religious affiliation, social and security-related values, interreligious cooperation, crisis management, disaster response, and willingness to support public authorities and affected populations. For the present article, three groups of variables were extracted from the broader instrument. The first group measured perceptions of churches and religious communities as actors of cooperation in crisis management through a statement assessing whether they represent a bridge for closer cooperation, with responses recorded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from complete disagreement to complete agreement. The second group comprised 13 values considered relevant to crisis management and collective action: freedom, religion or faith, honour, equality of people, pride, the future, world peace, national security, people or nation, tradition, courage, patriotism, and the state; respondents evaluated each value on a five-point scale ranging from no importance to very high importance. The third group examined willingness to participate in activities related to disaster response, civilian assistance, national security, and collective responsibility, with particular emphasis on willingness to respond to calls from competent authorities during natural disasters and support for engaging the population regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. Higher scores indicated stronger agreement or greater importance, while the "no answer" category was treated as missing data. The final manuscript should additionally report whether the questionnaire items were developed by the author or adapted from previous studies, whether the instrument was pilot-tested, whether its content validity was assessed by experts, and, where multi-item scales were used, their internal consistency expressed through Cronbach's alpha.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church under standardized conditions. Participation should be described as voluntary, and respondents should have been informed about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their answers, and their right to refuse participation or withdraw without consequenc-

es. The author should specify whether the questionnaire was administered in printed or electronic form, whether respondents completed it independently or with the assistance of trained researchers, whether religious institutions or local representatives facilitated access to participants, how long completion took, and which measures were used to prevent duplicate responses. Since the original survey had a broader focus than the present article, the current study represents a secondary and thematically restricted analysis of the existing dataset, including only variables directly relevant to the role of churches and religious communities in disaster risk reduction, crisis management, social cohesion, humanitarian assistance, and civic mobilization. Items related exclusively to military engagement, defence motivation, and broader political attitudes should be clearly separated from disaster-related variables and interpreted with particular caution.

3.6. Data Processing and Statistical Analysis

The collected data were coded, entered into a statistical database, and analysed using [insert the name and version of the statistical software, for example, IBM SPSS Statistics, Version XX]. Before the analysis, the database should have been examined for missing values, coding errors, inconsistent responses, and potential outliers. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical responses, while arithmetic means and standard deviations were used to summarize the central tendency and dispersion of Likert-type items. Differences between respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church were examined using the independent-samples t-test, with statistical significance assessed at $p < .05$ and $p < .01$. The assumptions of independence, approximate normality, and homogeneity of variances should be examined before interpreting the results, and the Welch-adjusted t-test should be used where the assumption of equal variances is not met. For the statement that churches and religious communities represent a bridge for closer cooperation in crisis management, respondents from the Islamic Community recorded a mean score of $M = 4.19$ and $SD = 1.074$, while respondents from the Serbian Orthodox Church recorded $M = 3.63$ and $SD = 1.085$; the reported value of $t = 9.420$ indicated a statistically significant difference at $p = .01$. In the final manuscript, the degrees of freedom, exact p-values, 95% confidence intervals, and Cohen's d effect sizes should also be reported whenever the original dataset permits their calculation.

3.7. Analytical Framework

The analysis was organized around three interconnected dimensions. The first concerned interreligious and institutional cooperation and examined whether respondents perceived churches and religious communities as potential bridges for cooperation in crisis management. The second concerned value orientations and assessed moral, social, cultural, religious, and security-related values that may support or constrain solidarity, trust, collective responsibility, and coordinated action during crises. The third concerned behavioural readiness and examined respondents' stated willingness to provide assistance, respond to calls from competent authorities, and support affected populations during disasters. These dimensions were interpreted within a community resilience framework: perceptions of cooperation were treated as indicators of relational and institutional potential, value orientations as normative resources that may influence solidarity and collective action, and willingness to assist as an indicator of potential civic mobilization. At the same time, expressed willingness was not equated with actual behaviour during an emergency, and differences between group averages were interpreted as patterns within the surveyed sample rather than as inherent characteristics of all members of either religious community. Sociodemographic characteristics, regional context, previous disaster experience, education, age, and intensity of religious practice may also influence attitudes and should be examined in future multivariate analyses.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

The study should comply with the fundamental principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and protection from harm. Respondents should have been in-

formed that participation was voluntary and that the collected data would be used solely for scientific purposes, while personally identifiable information should not be retained in the analytical database or presented in the results. The final manuscript must state whether the original study received approval from an institutional ethics committee by inserting the following information: "The study was approved by the [full name of the ethics committee or institution], approval number [number], dated [date]." If formal ethical approval was not required at the time the research was conducted, this should be stated transparently, together with an explanation of the procedures used to obtain consent and protect confidentiality. Because the study addresses religious affiliation, identity, security, crisis response, and willingness to participate in collective activities, particular care is required when interpreting the results. The findings should not be used to stigmatize either religious group, attribute collective responsibility, or make unsupported conclusions concerning loyalty, patriotism, institutional reliability, or security threats.

3.9. Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on self-reported attitudes, which may be affected by social desirability, recall limitations, contemporary political circumstances, and respondents' perceptions of socially acceptable answers; therefore, expressed willingness to assist during disasters cannot be interpreted as evidence that respondents would behave identically during an actual emergency. Second, the data were originally collected for a broader study of religion, security, and defence rather than exclusively for disaster risk reduction research, and the present article consequently relies on a secondary selection of relevant variables. Items concerning defence, mobilization, and national security do not directly measure disaster preparedness and should not be combined uncritically with items concerning humanitarian assistance and natural disasters. Third, the generalizability of the findings depends on the original sampling procedure, and the use of non-probability sampling would prevent their extension to all members of the two religious communities. Fourth, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions concerning the effects of religious affiliation on preparedness, values, cooperation, or willingness to assist. Finally, the study measures individual perceptions but does not directly assess the institutional capacities of churches and religious communities; future studies should therefore combine surveys with interviews involving religious leaders, emergency management professionals, local authorities, and humanitarian organizations, as well as analyses of emergency plans, previous interventions, volunteer resources, available facilities, and formal cooperation agreements.

4. Results

The empirical analysis included 1,334 respondents, of whom 761 were affiliated with the Islamic Community and 573 with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Results are presented in four thematic areas corresponding to the central objectives of the study: perceptions of churches and religious communities as bridges for crisis-management cooperation, value orientations relevant to crisis management, willingness to support civil authorities and disaster-affected populations, and broader security-related attitudes included in the original questionnaire. The primary emphasis is placed on disaster risk reduction and civilian assistance, while findings concerning defence, military mobilization, and peace operations are presented separately because they measure conceptually different attitudes.

4.1. Perceptions of Churches and Religious Communities as Bridges for Crisis-Management Cooperation

Respondents from both groups generally recognized the potential of churches and religious communities to serve as bridges for closer cooperation in crisis management, although the intensity of agreement differed substantially. Among respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community, 52.4% completely agreed and 26.1% mostly agreed with the statement, producing a combined positive

response rate of 78.5%. Among Serbian Orthodox Church respondents, 21.6% completely agreed and 38.2% mostly agreed, resulting in a combined positive response rate of 59.8%. Undecided responses were more frequent among Serbian Orthodox Church respondents, at 27.6%, than among Islamic Community respondents, at 13.4%. Negative responses were comparatively infrequent in both groups, although they were somewhat more common among Serbian Orthodox Church respondents.

Table 2. Distribution of Responses to the Statement That Churches and Religious Communities Represent a Bridge for Closer Cooperation in Crisis Management

Response category	Islamic Community, n	Islamic Community, %	Serbian Orthodox Church, n	Serbian Orthodox Church, %
Completely agree	399	52.4	124	21.6
Mostly agree	199	26.1	219	38.2
Undecided	102	13.4	158	27.6
Mostly disagree	36	4.7	41	7.2
Completely disagree	20	2.6	27	4.7
No answer	5	0.7	4	0.7
Total	761	100.0	573	100.0

Note. Percentages may not total exactly 100 because of rounding.

The mean score was higher among respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.074$) than among respondents affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.085$). The reported independent-samples t -test indicated a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t = 9.420$, $p < .001$. On the basis of the reported summary statistics, the standardized mean difference was approximately Cohen's $d = 0.52$, indicating a moderate difference. Although both group means were above the midpoint of the scale, respondents from the Islamic Community expressed more consistent and stronger support for the perception of religious organizations as facilitators of crisis-management cooperation.

Table 3. Group Differences in Perceptions of Churches and Religious Communities as Bridges for Crisis-Management Cooperation.

Religious affiliation	n	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Islamic Community	761	4.19	1.074			
Serbian Orthodox Church	573	3.63	1.085	9.420	< .001	0.52

Note. Higher values indicate stronger agreement. Cohen's d was estimated from the reported group means, standard deviations, and sample sizes. Missing responses were excluded from scale calculations.

4.2. Value Orientations Relevant to Crisis Management

All 13 assessed values received relatively high mean scores in both groups, indicating a broad normative foundation that may support solidarity, collective responsibility, and cooperative action during crises. Freedom was the highest-ranked value in both groups, with almost identical mean scores among Islamic Community respondents ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.765$) and Serbian Orthodox Church respondents ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.606$). Honour was also highly ranked in both groups. Respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community assigned comparatively greater importance to religion or faith, equality, pride, world peace, the future, and tradition. Serbian Orthodox Church respondents

assigned comparatively greater importance to national security, people or nation, courage, patriotism, and the state. Nevertheless, the mean scores remained high across both groups, suggesting that the descriptive differences reflected differences in relative emphasis rather than fundamentally opposing value systems.

Table 4. Comparative Ranking of Values Relevant to Crisis Management

Value	Islamic Community M	SD	Rank	Serbian Orthodox Church M	SD	Rank
Freedom	4.80	0.765	1	4.82	0.606	1
Religion or faith	4.70	0.933	2	4.35	1.003	11
Honour	4.68	0.900	3	4.67	0.750	2
Equality of people	4.68	0.934	3	4.45	0.927	8
Pride	4.65	0.934	5	4.45	1.008	8
Future	4.63	0.941	6	4.53	0.868	5
World peace	4.63	0.965	6	4.34	1.016	12
National security	4.52	1.056	8	4.64	0.770	3
People or nation	4.51	1.009	9	4.54	0.785	4
Tradition	4.50	1.041	10	4.46	0.878	7
Courage	4.45	1.101	11	4.47	0.893	6
Patriotism	4.22	1.216	12	4.38	0.952	10
State	4.20	1.237	13	4.33	0.976	13

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Higher values indicate greater perceived importance.

The reported inferential tests showed no statistically significant differences between the groups in their evaluations of freedom, honour, and people or nation. For freedom, the reported test was $t = 0.509$; for honour, $t = -0.156$; and for people or nation, $t = 0.599$. The absence of significant differences in these values indicates the existence of a shared normative core across the two groups. Exact p -values, degrees of freedom, confidence intervals, and effect sizes were not available in the submitted summary and should be calculated from the original dataset before publication. No claims of statistical significance should be made for the remaining values solely on the basis of differences in their mean scores.

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4.3. Willingness to Assist Civil Authorities and Disaster-Affected Populations

Respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community expressed a high level of readiness to participate in disaster-related assistance. A total of 57.7% completely agreed and 24.0% mostly agreed that they would respond to a call from competent authorities to assist during natural disasters outside the territory in which they lived, producing a combined positive response rate of 81.7%. Similarly, 54.0% completely agreed and 23.3% mostly agreed that the local population should be engaged to assist civil authorities during natural and other disasters regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation, resulting in a combined positive response rate of 77.3%. These findings indicate strong declared support for inclusive civilian assistance and participation beyond respondents' immediate local environments.

Table 5. Disaster-Related Assistance Attitudes among Respondents Affiliated with the Islamic Community

Response category	Engage the population regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation, %	Respond outside the place of residence during natural disasters, %
Completely agree	54.0	57.7
Mostly agree	23.3	24.0
Undecided	10.0	9.5
Mostly disagree	1.8	4.5
Completely disagree	9.9	3.2
No answer	1.1	1.2
Positive responses, total	77.3	81.7

Note. Positive responses represent the combined percentages of “completely agree” and “mostly agree.”

The comparative mean scores also demonstrated substantial support for both disaster-related statements in the two groups. Serbian Orthodox Church respondents expressed stronger agreement that residents should assist civil authorities regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.921$) than respondents from the Islamic Community ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.329$). Islamic Community respondents expressed slightly stronger willingness to respond to disaster-related calls outside their place of residence ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.123$) than Serbian Orthodox Church respondents ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.141$). Because the submitted material did not include inferential statistics for these comparisons, the observed differences should be interpreted descriptively and should not be described as statistically significant without additional analysis.

Table 6. Comparative Mean Scores for Disaster Response and Civil Assistance.

Statement	Islamic Community M	SD	Serbian Orthodox Church M	SD
Residents should assist civil authorities during disasters regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation	4.07	1.329	4.48	0.921
I would respond to a call from competent authorities to assist during a natural disaster outside my place of residence	4.25	1.123	4.09	1.141

Note. Higher values indicate stronger agreement. Inferential test results were not available for these two comparisons.

4.4. Broader Security- and Defence-Related Attitudes

The original questionnaire also included statements concerning national defence, mobilization, participation in United Nations peace operations, cultural identity, and extremist behaviour. These items are presented separately because they do not directly measure disaster preparedness or humanitarian engagement. Descriptively, Serbian Orthodox Church respondents reported higher mean scores for obligations to defend the country, participation in national defence, defence as a matter of honour and duty, response to military mobilization, and the perception that extremist actions undermine national security. Respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community reported a higher mean score for willingness to participate in United Nations peace operations and for opposition to externally introduced ideas perceived as inconsistent with local cultural identity and tradition. These patterns should be interpreted cautiously because they may be influenced by historical experience, age, gender, political attitudes, military experience, regional context, and other unmeasured factors.

Table 7. Comparative Mean Scores for Broader Security- and Defence-Related Attitudes.

Statement	Islamic Community M	SD	Serbian Orthodox Church M	SD
All citizens are obliged to defend the country when its security is threatened	3.77	1.461	4.47	0.909
I would participate in national defence because I feel responsible for the country's security	3.48	1.470	4.31	1.053
Defending one's country is a matter of honour and pride	3.79	1.358	4.41	1.004
I would defend the country because I consider it my duty and obligation	3.55	1.477	4.28	1.069
I would respond to mobilization in the event of an immediate threat of war	3.26	1.461	4.28	1.086
I would participate in peace operations conducted under the auspices of the United Nations	3.17	1.524	2.59	1.476
I oppose externally introduced ideas inconsistent with local cultural and ethnic identity and tradition	3.93	1.267	3.66	1.353
Extremist actions by individuals or groups undermine the security of Serbia	3.91	1.298	4.29	1.034

Note. These variables were part of the broader original study and should not be interpreted as direct measures of disaster preparedness. No inferential test results were available for these comparisons.

4.5. Summary of the Empirical Findings

The results reveal three principal patterns. First, respondents from both religious groups generally perceived churches and religious communities as potentially important facilitators of crisis-management cooperation, although this perception was significantly stronger among respondents affiliated with the Islamic Community. Second, the two groups shared a broad set of highly valued moral and social principles, particularly freedom, honour, equality, national security, and concern for the future. Third, respondents demonstrated substantial declared willingness to assist civil authorities and disaster-affected populations, including support for assistance that transcends religious and ethnic boundaries. These findings provide evidence of perceived social and mobilization potential, but they do not constitute a direct assessment of the institutional preparedness, operational resources, or actual crisis-response performance of religious organizations.

5. Discussion

The finding that majorities in both groups regarded churches and religious communities as bridges for closer crisis-management cooperation supports the view that religious organizations may function as important relational actors within disaster governance. Their local presence, organization-

al continuity, and capacity to maintain communication with community members may facilitate cooperation between citizens and public institutions. The stronger agreement among respondents from the Islamic Community may reflect greater perceived importance of interreligious cooperation for minority inclusion and social security, although this explanation cannot be confirmed from the available data. The finding is consistent with community-based approaches that emphasize stakeholder participation, local partnerships, institutional trust, and the inclusion of organizations already embedded in affected communities (Cvetković et al., 2025; Goyal, 2019; Guo & Kapucu, 2019; Salam et al., 2025).

The consistently high evaluations of freedom, honour, equality, the future, world peace, national security, and tradition indicate that the two groups share a substantial normative foundation that may support collective action during crises. The absence of statistically significant differences in the importance assigned to freedom, honour, and people or nation is particularly relevant because these values may provide common reference points for interreligious cooperation. Community resilience depends not only on material and institutional resources but also on trust, shared identity, social cohesion, collective efficacy, and the willingness of citizens to act for a common purpose (Canete & Biñas, 2025; Cvetković, 2023; Milenković & Cvetković, 2025; Milenković et al., 2026). At the same time, the results show that the groups differ in the relative emphasis they place on religion, world peace, national security, patriotism, and the state. Such differences should be approached as variations within broadly compatible value structures rather than as evidence of incompatible social identities.

The high level of declared willingness to assist during natural disasters represents one of the most important findings of the study. More than four-fifths of Islamic Community respondents expressed willingness to respond to a call from competent authorities outside their place of residence, while more than three-quarters supported engaging residents in disaster assistance regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. Both religious groups also recorded high comparative mean scores on these statements. These findings suggest that religious affiliation does not necessarily constitute a barrier to inclusive humanitarian action and may instead provide networks through which volunteers, donations, information, and support can be mobilized. Previous research has similarly emphasized the importance of volunteer coordination, citizen self-efficacy, community participation, and local organizational networks in strengthening disaster response (Desalit et al., 2025; Molnár, 2024; Rico, 2019). Nevertheless, declared willingness should not be equated with actual behaviour, which depends on training, equipment, situational awareness, perceived risk, and institutional coordination.

Religious organizations may be especially important in providing psychosocial and spiritual support following loss of life, displacement, destruction of homes, or prolonged uncertainty. However, their contribution depends on coordination with civil authorities and professional psychosocial services. Research concerning the 2014 floods has identified disconnections between civilian and religious authorities as a barrier to the systematic delivery of psychosocial support, indicating that informal goodwill alone is insufficient (Jurišić & Marceta, 2024). Religious representatives should therefore be integrated into pre-disaster planning, referral systems, psychological first-aid training, and long-term recovery mechanisms, while recognizing the boundaries between spiritual care and professional mental-health treatment.

The results indicate potential for religious organizations to support crisis management, but the realization of this potential requires formalized mechanisms of cooperation. Humanitarian networks are effective when actors share information, coordinate resources, understand their respective responsibilities, and operate under common procedures (El-Mougher, 2022; Masaba et al., 2025). Religious leaders may also strengthen risk communication by transmitting verified warnings through trusted local networks, particularly where official institutions face linguistic, geographic, or trust-related barriers. Their communication must remain consistent with official instructions and scientific evidence, especially because social media and mobile technologies can accelerate both accurate warnings and misinformation (Mano et al., 2019; Sacyaten, 2025; Yamah & Folorunsho, 2026).

The differences observed in defence- and security-related attitudes should not be treated as direct evidence of collective loyalty, institutional reliability, or security risk. Such conclusions would ex-

tend beyond the data and could contribute to stigmatization. The questionnaire items concerning military mobilization, peace operations, and national defence measure conceptually different attitudes from those concerning natural-disaster assistance. Moreover, the available analysis does not control for age, gender, education, military experience, region, political orientation, previous exposure to armed conflict, or intensity of religious identification. These findings may be retained as contextual evidence from the broader study, but they should not occupy a central place in an article focused on disaster risk reduction and crisis management.

6. Practical Implications

The findings support the development of formal cooperation between emergency-management institutions and churches and religious communities at both local and national levels. Representatives of religious organizations should be consulted during local risk assessments and the preparation of protection and rescue plans, particularly in municipalities where they maintain strong community networks or provide social and humanitarian services. Competent authorities should map religious buildings that may be suitable for information centres, aid distribution, community meetings, psychosocial support, or temporary reception, while assessing structural safety, accessibility, sanitation, fire protection, and capacity. Religious leaders and volunteers should receive training in risk communication, humanitarian principles, psychological first aid, inclusive assistance, volunteer safety, and referral procedures. Joint exercises should be conducted before disasters, and communication protocols should specify how verified warnings and protective instructions are transmitted through religious networks. Assistance must be distributed exclusively on the basis of need and without discrimination according to religion, ethnicity, gender, disability, social status, or political affiliation. Personal data concerning vulnerable residents should be collected and shared only under clearly defined confidentiality and data-protection procedures.

7. Study Limitations

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The study relies on self-reported attitudes and is therefore vulnerable to social-desirability bias and differences between expressed intentions and actual behaviour. The data were originally collected for a broader investigation of religion, security, and defence, and only a subset of variables was subsequently selected for the present disaster-risk-reduction analysis. Some questionnaire items therefore have only indirect relevance to disaster management. The representativeness of the findings cannot be determined without a complete description of the sampling and recruitment procedures. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions regarding the effects of religious affiliation on cooperation, preparedness, values, or willingness to assist. Exact valid sample sizes, degrees of freedom, confidence intervals, effect sizes, and reliability indicators were not available for all variables. Finally, the research assesses respondents' perceptions and intentions but does not examine the formal plans, personnel, facilities, financial resources, previous interventions, or operational preparedness of churches and religious communities. Future research should combine surveys with interviews, institutional document analysis, case studies of previous disasters, and assessments of actual organizational capacities.

8. Conclusion

Churches and religious communities in Serbia possess considerable perceived potential to contribute to disaster risk reduction and crisis management. Respondents affiliated with both the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church generally recognized religious organizations as possible bridges for cooperation, while expressing high levels of commitment to values relevant to solidarity, collective responsibility, and community resilience. The strongest practical finding concerns

respondents' declared willingness to assist civil authorities and disaster-affected populations regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. These attitudes provide a favourable social foundation for interreligious cooperation, volunteer mobilization, humanitarian assistance, risk communication, and psychosocial support. However, positive attitudes alone do not guarantee effective operational engagement. The contribution of religious organizations should be developed through formal cooperation agreements, professional training, inclusive humanitarian standards, coordinated communication, and integration into local disaster-management plans. When these requirements are met, churches and religious communities may strengthen the connection between formal institutions and local populations and contribute to a more inclusive and resilient disaster-management system in Serbia.

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