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Religion and Politics in Thirty Days: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

*Vera in politika v tridesetih dneh: študija
primera Bosne in Hercegovine*

Abstract: The subject of research in this paper is the relationship between religion and politics in the current Bosnian moment. The research sample is limited to the appearance and analysis of cases/examples of the relationship between religion and politics in a period of one month of the current year. More precisely, from the end of January to the end of February 2023. The paper follows and analyzes the dynamics of three characteristic phenomena of the relationship between religion and politics in the public space, with an emphasis on the relationship between religious themes and political actors.

Keywords: religion, politics, Islam, Christianity, Bosnia and Herzegovina, human rights

Izvleček: *V prispevku raziskujemo razmerje med vero in politiko v današnji Bosni. Raziskovalni vzorec je omejen na pojav in analizo primerov odnosa med vero in politiko v obdobju enega meseca tekočega leta, natančneje od konca januarja do konca februarja 2023. Prispevek spremlja in analizira dinamiko treh značilnih pojavov razmerja med vero in politiko v javnem prostoru s poudarkom na odnosu med versko tematiko in političnimi akterji.*

Ključne besede: *vera, politika, islam, krščanstvo, Bosna in Hercegovina, človekove pravice*

For the purposes of this paper, we will present the issue of the relationship between religion and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina in its current manifestation and media coverage. It should be emphasized that the time pattern of this research is completely random. It includes a period of one month, from the end of January to the end of February of the current year. Namely, during this month the issues of the relationship between religion and politics were opened up in the Bosnian public in a way that best illustrates the state and dynamics of the problem in question. Therefore, we focus on the analysis of media monitoring and presentation of religio-political issues in the public space and only in the indicated time frame. The spontaneity of the problems and questions that appeared is a

reflection of deeper, historically accumulated questions about the relationship between religion and the nation in the multi-religious environment of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which we originally intended to deal with (Džaja 1992). We gave up on such an idea when we encountered a one-month research sample produced by the social practice itself. We believe that it is the most plastic contemporary illustration of the assigned subject of research. Thus, we will not deal with theoretical or historical aspects of the relationship between religion and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as there is already a lot of literature on this, but with life in Bosnia and Herzegovina today. Recent events best illustrate the relationship between religion and politics and show which questions and which methods of posing and expected solutions dominate the current scene in there. Since the choice of disputed or controversial »cases« of the intertwining of religion and politics that we will analyse is completely random – it is a product of the socio-political practice of Bosnia and Herzegovina and that these issues are being discussed before our eyes while we are writing this paper – we will only follow the temporal dynamics of their media appearance.

In the monitored, presented, and analysed time period of one month, three disputed problems spontaneously appeared. The first refers to the crisis of the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the issue of the signing of the contract between the Islamic Community in BiH and the state. The second problem relates to the disputed sermon, addressed on Fridays during prayer, by imam Amir Mahić from Kozarac, Prijedor municipality, about the character of the Orthodox religion. The third problem is related to the contestation of the religious practice of Bosniak Muslims in the municipality of Neum, on which occasion their mosque was closed/sealed by the municipal authorities. In all three cases, the focus is on members of the Muslim faith, their status and religious rights, and the interweaving of national-political and religious topics.

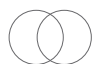
1 The crisis of the interreligious council

On January 26, Metropolitan Hrizostom of the Eparchy of Dabrobosanska informed Interreligious Council of BiH (MRV BiH) that on January 31 he regretfully terminates his membership in that interreligious body, until



the Council returns to its original principles. The MRV Metropolitan cites six reasons for the protest withdrawal from further work. Each of the reasons, according to his argumentation, points to discrimination against Serbs in Sarajevo and physical attacks on them, which the Council did not react to. According to the first reason, the Council was inappropriately unresponsive about the punctures of car tires with Serbian license plates after the New Year holidays. »Pictures from Sarajevo in January 2023 reminded us of the most terrible pictures from 1990 that we carry from Skradin in Dalmatia.« (Jević 2023, 1) MRV did not react to such »nationalist and chauvinistic rampages in Sarajevo«. Another reason cited is the Council's non-publicity regarding the incident at the children's sports competition, during which the crowd shouted »kill the Serb« (Jević 2023, 2). The third reason is »the direct and indirect interference of MRV members in the electoral and judicial processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina« (Jević 2023, 3), which obviously applies to the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action, although its name is not stated. We listen to »terrible words at the official meetings of religious officials of the IZ, which is visible on public portals. The outpouring of hatred towards the Serbian people is shocking and terrifying. This has exceeded every measure of taste and serves the lowest growths and urges of Nazism and chauvinism,« is the fourth stated reason. As the fifth reason, they cite pictures of children from Cazin and Krajina carrying war flags and shouting »kill the Serb«. »We are well aware [...] of the influence of the Islamic community in Krajina on Mohammedans, and we freely conclude that these children were abused, and previously poisoned with hatred and exposed to the public.« The sixth reason states that they were »forced« to split as long as MRV does not become an active driver of community, dialogue and moral coordinator of good neighbourly relations. The silence of the MRV in regards to such serious criminal acts in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a direct reason for us to withdraw from the existence and work of the MRV of Bosnia and Herzegovina, until the problem is »healed« (Jević 2023, 3).

The tone and spirit of the letter exude the atmosphere of mass »persecution« of Serbs in Sarajevo, which is factually incorrect and which is not even possible to comment on. The fact is that during the New Year holidays there were individual excesses on an international basis, a car tire on a car with Serbian plates was punctured, and children from Croatia, at an international youth sports competition, shouted inappropriate exclamations



about Serbs, but in any case it was about individual excesses that were investigated by the police, documented and politically condemned by the city authorities. It was by no means a matter of a mass appearance or a mass state of hatred and intolerance towards Serbs, so the reasons for leaving the MRV BiH are extremely exaggerated and unfounded. The letter was obviously created for certain political reasons, it exudes a tone of exaggeration about the general danger the Serbs are supposedly in, and it is difficult to connect it with concrete events that clearly served only as a good reason for this act. It is symptomatic that the letter uses harsh qualifications, such as the one about Nazism, which irresistibly resembles the current Russian qualifications of the Ukrainian authorities, and in one case Muslims are called with the derogatory name »Mohammedans«, which is surprising.

This letter damaged the relations within the Interreligious Council and probably caused a short-term crisis in its functioning. The Interreligious Council in BiH was founded in 1997 by the joint efforts of Reis-ul-ulema Mustafa ef Cerić, head of the Islamic Community in BiH, Metropolitan Nikolaj of Dabrobosna, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Cardinal Vinko Puljić, head of the Catholic Church and Mr. Jakob Finci, president of the Jewish communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The original idea of the creation of the Council, which was the first in the world under such a name, was reconciliation between the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where only a year and a half before the creation of the Council, war was raging. With the establishment of the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, numerous interreligious projects are launched, through which work is done on reconciliation, but also on the construction of civil society through interreligious dialogue, which becomes the guiding idea of the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Inter-Religious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina acts as a local, non-governmental organization, which is not a superior body, but a body through which the goodwill of traditional churches and religious communities appears, to jointly contribute to the construction of civil society in areas where the influence of churches and religious communities is unassailable.

Bishop Hrizostom's letter drew attention to himself, and that was negative within the Bosniak public. The portal Istraga brings, and



Herceg-Bosna conveys, part of the wartime past of Metropolitan Hrizostom. In December 1994, he spoke in the following words about the need to liberate the city of Bihać from the Muslims and the RBiH Army: »We must advocate for the complete liberation of the municipality of Bihać from Islamic fundamentalists, meaning the 5th corps [...]. When that is over, when we liberate Bihać, then the Serbian church and the entire Serbian state will do a lot to really establish Bihać, to become a strong cultural, national and religious centre of our western Serbia.« (Herceg-Bosna 2023)

The attitude of the largest Bosnian and Herzegovinian so-called national parties towards matters of religion and religious institutions is basically instrumental (Markešić 2010). At the same time, religious institutions often behave utilitarianly towards political actors, which in practice often demonstrates the unbreakable unity of religious and political institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The issues of religion and politics are inextricably linked which is also illustrated by the many years of waiting for the signing of the agreement between the Islamic Community (IZ BiH) and the state of BiH.

The relationship between political actors and the Islamic community is burdened by years of non-signing of contracts between this religious community and the state. The State of Bosnia and Herzegovina signed the Basic Agreement with the Catholic Church, that is, the Holy See, in 2006. After that, the Serbian Orthodox Church also signed an agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Basic Agreement between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina was signed in 2007. Such a negotiated and agreed proposal for a contract between IZ and the state was adopted by the BiH Council of Ministers in September 2015, and it was submitted to the Presidency for adoption. In April 2018, the then Chairman of the Presidency Bakir Izetbegović proposed that this item entitled »Acceptance of the Basic Agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina« be on the agenda of the Presidency session. However, the other two members of the Presidency, Dragan Čović and Mladen Ivanić, voted for its removal from the agenda. Therefore, the Presidency has never put the adoption of this contract on the agenda, and therefore for consideration. IZ hopes today that the current convocation of the Presidency will sign the contract that has been pending for years.



In the meantime, the non-signing of this contract has become a media topic, but also a target of politicization and instrumentalization. In the case of this contract, its individual segments are often taken out anecdotally and placed in the public in a way that should call into question Muslim civilization and modernity, points out Senada Tahirović, editor of *Revival*, a newspaper from IZBiH (Tahirović 2018). No matter how the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina tried to present what their fundamental demands are in relation to Islam as a religion, the subtext of discriminatory reactions always shows an attempt to create a certain »Muslim issue« that is presented as barbaric, untamed and traditionalist, and continues with the tried and tested image of Muslims as maladjusted Others. In the Islamophobic atmosphere of a part of the surrounding non-Muslim and European public, it is easy to create suspicion on the basis of orientalist stereotypes towards the religious rights of Muslims, which are regulated by the mentioned contract. Ahmet Alibašić, a professor at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, assures us that there is no place for such overly critical concerns about the outcomes of the contract. The contract moves within the framework of normative solutions of European liberal societies, Alibašić points out (Alibašić 2015). It elaborates the mutual obligations of the two parties within the framework that is mainly already determined by the European Convention on Human Rights, the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities from 2004 and the basic contracts of the state of BiH with the Vatican and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The legal framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina on freedom of religion follows these solutions. These generally accepted solutions include the full autonomy of religious communities in managing their internal affairs and external relations, the central role of religious communities in the performance of confessional religious education and religious service in the army. On the list of unresolved issues, there are the recognition of religious marriages, deadlines for the restitution of nationalized property of religious communities, and the government's contribution to covering the costs of pension and health insurance for imams and priests.

With this agreement, the Islamic community tried to establish a list of the most common situations in which Muslims have the opportunity to request or expect that their right to freedom of expression of religion is respected.



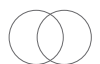
Most of these specifics are in Article 11, which states that in the public and private sector, Muslims will be granted the right to free time (as a rule, an unpaid break) to perform Jumu'ah prayers, as well as the right to free time to perform Iftar and Sehoor during the month of Ramadan, the right on leave from work for the purpose of performing the Hajj, the right to pray, the choice of diet, clothing and appearance in accordance with their religious beliefs. The contract specifies the jurisdiction of IZ for the institutional interpretation of Islam, the jurisdiction for certification of halal products, and the right of IZ to influence the formation of non-governmental organizations whose activities relate to IZ's activities by not/issuing written consent. Certain provisions of this article are most likely not acceptable for the members of the Presidency among the Serbian and Croatian people, which is the reason for not signing it.

2 Instrumentalization of the past

What did imam Amir Mahić say in the sermon, addressing the faithful on Fridays, in the mosque in Kozarac, Prijedor municipality, on January 27, 2023, on Savindan, or the day of Saint Sava, so that his words caused a real political affair in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Saint Sava, as the Orthodox world calls him in the area of the narrower part of the Balkans where we live, is Rastko Nemanjić, whose own brother was crowned Serbian king. He is a very controversial personality, although in our Yugoslav region, he is presented as an educator. Even in the time of communism, he was presented as an educator and a person who brought the light of science to these areas. That was never true in the least. It was and still is a notorious lie, told to the people here, if we paraphrase Mahić's words from the media.

On the relationship between Saint Sava and the Serbian Orthodox Church, Mahić expressed difficult qualifications. This is a man on whose teachings and ideology a Serbian Orthodox sect was conceived, which is a known fact here. This is basically a sectarian teaching of Orthodoxy that does not have the basic connection with the original Christian and Orthodox teaching that it should have, said Mahić.

The two basic ideological propositions on which the sainthood is based, which the Orthodox profess in Bosnia, are based on two



difficult things. The first is nationalism. It is your church or church teaching that advocates nationalism, which has nothing to do with Jesus nor with any church teaching that basically demolishes all nationalist ideologies and considers Christians equal. [...] On the other hand, it is based on fascism. The aforementioned Rastko, whom they call after his monastic name Sava, was the originator of the ideology of hatred towards the other [...]. If we had time to devote ourselves to these foolish things they preach, we could find the absolute roots of today's fascism in our neighbours and the genocide that happened here. (Politika 2023)

In Yugoslav and Serbian historiography, there are no agreed opinions about the Holy Sava, and the presentation of these conflicting views is beyond the scope of this paper. Just as an illustration of these different views, we present the text of contemporary Serbian historian Milivoj Bešlin, *Svetosavlje bez Svetog Sava*. Bešlin in the Belgrade online magazine *Peščanik*, which – not coincidentally – coincides with the outbreak of the case of imam Mahić, points out from the spirit of critical historiography that saintliness is an ideology that has no direct or immediate connection with Saint Sava, except that it misused the name of this historical figure. »Svetosava nationalism is an ultra-right political ideology that combines two elements – Serbian nationalism and Orthodox clericalism in the 20th century.« (Bešlin 2023) Although this text was published three days after the controversial sermon, it indirectly and subsequently gives legitimacy to Mahić's argumentation. Texts of a similar critical nature about Saint Sava must have been known to imam Mahić as an intellectual. The failure of Mahić's role as an intellectual is in the one-sided thematization of this historical figure. When he spoke about Saint Sava, a figure outside the framework of Islam and so important for the Orthodox faith, as an intellectual he should have stated the fundamental positive and negative arguments and counter-arguments related to this figure to give a wider range of judgments about him, and not just stick to his negative portrayal.

Regarding the controversial statement of the imam from Kozarac, Amiref. Mahić, Rijaset IZBiH issued a statement admitting and confirming that on January 27, 2023, imam Mahić »uttered [...] several inappropriate sentences about Saint Sava, the great religious authority of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Church itself« (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2023b),



on which occasion he was asked for an official statement. In his public apology, Mahić confirmed that he was aware of the gravity of what he had said, addressed a professional and humane apology to the believers of the Orthodox community, took responsibility for his words, since he was solely responsible for creating sermons at Friday prayers, opposing the involvement of the IZ institution in daily political discussions.

Then why did this imam express controversial views about Orthodoxy? Where and from what motives do they come from? In his statement, imam Mahić points out political reasons, the difficult situation of Bosniaks in the Republika Srpska entity, as the reason for the disputed views: »my sermon [...] is partly a consequence of the overall aggravating circumstances in which Bosniaks in this entity have been since the war« (Tuzlainfo.ba 2023). At the sermon on February 3, that is, on the following Friday, he was aware of his mistake, apologized and repented. Imam Mahić declared: »It was not my intention to hurt anyone's religious feelings, especially my friends and neighbors, clergy and members of the Orthodox Church [...] I was clearly too harsh in some conclusions [...] I express my remorse for that.« (Tuzlainfo.ba 2023) On this occasion, IZ BiH addressed the public with the view that the said imam would have to make a public statement about this before the disciplinary commission of the Rijaset of the Islamic Community in BiH, »because regardless of all the circumstances and reasons: RELIGIOUS FEELINGS MUST NOT BE OFFENDED« (Tuzlainfo.ba 2023). At the same time, the Islamic community rejects all insinuations that this event wants to be presented as part of the planned action of both the religious and political leadership of the Bosniak people. It is, exclusively, a personal position that is not supported by the Islamic community and its official bodies. With this, it was to be expected that the mentioned verbal incident was resolved, the imam admitted the committed mistake, publicly apologized to the believers of the Orthodox faith, and Rijaset reacted by calling him to disciplinary responsibility.

However, in order to understand Imam Mahić's statement, we need to briefly contextualize it. The question is, what aggravating circumstances of Bosniaks and Muslim believers in Prijedor was Imam Mahić referring to in the subtext of his sermon? Without knowing the elementary facts about the wartime events in Prijedor, it is impossible to politically contextualize the speech of the imam from Kozarac, that is, to understand



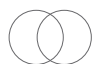
the post-war circumstances in which he lives and works today with his followers. Today, in the courtyard of the Kozarac mosque, where Mahić is the imam, there is a memorial to the 3,176 Bosniaks of Prijedor who were killed during the last war, including 800 civilians from Kozarac, who were killed in the three-day attack on this settlement by Serbian forces. In the Keraterm concentration camp, 124 inmates were killed in just one day, July 24, 1992. (Medić 2012, 69) The brutal and unimaginable scale of the crimes against civilians, women and girls in the Prijedor camps led to a thorough research, and memoir literature was written about them, and everything was documented by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

For years, in the city of Prijedor, we have been witnessing a diametrically opposed culture of memory regarding the key events of the past war, within the minority Bosniak and majority Serb national communities. May 30, 1992 is institutionally marked by the Serbian community and the municipal government headed by its representatives as the day of »liberation« of the city. The Bosniak community marks that same day as the beginning of its persecution, detention in concentration camps, mass murders, genocidal actions and intentions by Serbian military and political forces against their people. In Prijedor, at the beginning of the war in 1992, Serbian forces committed mass crimes against the Bosniak civilian population. In Prijedor and surrounding towns, 3,176 people were killed, including 102 children. About 30,000 non-Serb citizens of Prijedor passed through the Trnopolje, Omarska and Keraterm concentration camps. The non-Serb population of Prijedor, mostly Bosniaks and a smaller number of Croats, celebrates the Day of White Ribbons in memory of May 31, 1992, when the crisis headquarters of Prijedor, headed by the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), issued an order ordering the non-Serb population to stand out white cloth on homes. By the same order, Bosniaks and Croats had to wear white bands on their upper arms in public places. Such a practice was previously seen only in the relationship of the Nazis to the Jews, and it best reflects the character of the Serbian government in these events. For crimes committed in camps in the area of Prijedor, 11 people were convicted in The Hague, and four more before the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, after their case was transferred from The Hague Tribunal to the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



The Prijedor commemorations of the victims of the past war, as we will see, are not about a conflict between two narratives of the culture of memory, but about the effort from those in position of power and authority to suppress the truth about the war and forbid the public highlighting of the victim's narrative. The problem surrounding the narrative is complicated by the fact that two diametrically opposed manifestations, Serbian and Bosniak, are being held practically on the same date. Last year, in 2022, on the eve of the White Ribbon Day, a program was held in Prijedor on the occasion of the »30th anniversary of the defense« of the city. By laying wreaths at the »For the Holy Cross« memorial, honour was paid to the »Serbian soldiers and policemen« who died and were wounded on that day during the 1992 war. The mayor of Prijedor said on that occasion that the city respects all victims equally, that »[...] our city was attacked then, that the Serbs did not attack anyone, but defended their houses«. However, this kind of falsification of facts did not stop that year. On the eve of the Day of White Ribbons, in Prijedor marked »30th anniversary of defense« (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2022a) Serbian non-governmental organizations tried at all costs, and in a formally legal way, to disrupt the traditional protest walk on the occasion of the Day of White Ribbons, planned for May 31. Namely, the Prijedor Police Department had previously received an official request to hold a public celebration of the birthday of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and the owner of Belgrade's Pink television, Željko Mitrović, on May 31, the day when the city commemorates those killed in the last war. What connection do the Hungarian prime minister and the owner of Belgrade's pro-regime television have with Prijedor? Using such an excuse, the police banned the protest walk, for the first time after nine years of its reflection. The walk was held despite the ban, with the bitter taste of the conviction that time does not affect dealing with the past.

The essential content of the commemoration of this crime refers to the idea of Bosniak parents to erect a memorial for the 102 children killed in the last war in the centre of the city of Prijedor. The municipal authorities of Prijedor have been obstructing the erection of such a memorial all the time, despite the fact that representatives of the international community support such an idea. The Prijedor Municipal Council, exposed to numerous pressures, held a public debate on the monument on May 25, 2022, but without final results. The idea of the municipal authorities is to erect a joint memorial in the city to all the children of the area who died in the



wars during the 20th century, and they operate with the figure of 30,000 children killed. Bosniak civilian associations of war victims do not accept this idea, considering it a form of relativization and concealment of crimes against children during the last war, since the names of 102 children would be »lost« in the alleged mass of those killed throughout the century (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2022a).

Let's go back to Imam Mahić. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republika Srpska entity has launched an investigation against Imam Mahić for the criminal offense of public incitement to hatred and violence. After the first hearing, his lawyer stated that there were no grounds for the proceedings because a public apology was sent to all those who felt offended from the same place where the controversial views about Saint Sava were expressed. On this occasion, the Deputy Minister of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH, Duška Jurišić, called on the MUP of the RS to suspend the investigation.

The selective, discriminatory approach of the MUP of the Republika Srpska towards one person, in this case an official of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is unacceptable, while examples of hate speech and denial of war crimes in the Republika Srpska are a daily occurrence and often come from the highest representatives of that entity. (Dnevni Avaz 2023c)

This is another reason to sign the Agreement with IZ, which would, as in the cases of religious officials of the Orthodox and Catholic faiths, ensure that the judicial authority of the state in the event of a criminal offense first informs the competent authorities of the religious community. On top of that, the whole matter with Imam Mahić becomes the subject of further politicization with the tendency to turn it into a kind of a political campaign. Namely, the President of the Prijedor City Assembly convened a Special Session for February 16, 2023, with only one item on the agenda, »taking positions, making conclusions regarding the statements of the chief imam of the Majlis of the Islamic Community in Kozarac, Amir Mahić, on January 27, 2023« (Dnevni Avaz 2023h).

The Prijedor Assembly strongly condemned imam Mahić's statement. With such messages, Mahić »invoked the language of hatred towards the



Orthodox people, distorting historical facts,« states the Conclusion of the Assembly. Reisu-l-ulema from BiH called this decision of the assembly shameful (Dnevni avaz 2023a), while Milorad Dodik, president of the RS entity, qualified Reisu's statement as a »continuation of anti-Serb hysteria« (Oslobođenje 2023a). Reisu-l-ulema responded to Dodik's statement with the words that he and Dodik are on opposite sides: »I am on the side of the victim, and he is on the other side« (Oslobođenje 2023b); every torture against Bosniaks begins with the persecution of imams, »in this case it is persecution on a religious basis [...] by all standards, this is primarily a political issue« (Oslobođenje 2023b). BiH Presidency member Željka Cvijanović answered Reis Kavazović. »We don't have a bright common future if hate speech will be brought under freedom of expression, and Serb neighbours will be called 'Vlachs',« accusing Kavazović of being on the political side, not on the religious side (Glas Srpske 2023). Željko Komšić, another member of the BiH Presidency, joined the controversy. The persecution of imam Amir Mahić from Kozarac has all the elements of political and religious segregation that has been carried out continuously in the RS entity since its inception, said Komšić. (Dnevni avaz 2023f) Further on, Komšić pointed out that IZ BiH has a subordinate position in the state, and one of the reasons for this is the failure to sign a contract with the state. He also criticized the international community for its passivity and silence in this case, »because if this happened to anyone other than Bosniaks, that is, Muslims in the smaller entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they would probably hear condemnations from international officials« (Dnevni avaz 2023f).

Meanwhile, on February 15, the Police officers of the Prijedor Police Department submitted to the Prijedor District Public Prosecutor's Office a report on the crime of »publicly inciting violence and hatred against AM from Kozarac« (Klix 2023f). Freedom of thought and speech, guaranteed by national and international conventions, is threatened by this condemnation and session, said the dean of the Faculty of Law in Tuzla, who defended the imam. Mahić's statements about Saint Sava should and can be contested in public scientific discourse, and never with political conclusions, comparing the practice of convening a public representative body that judges the opinion of an individual with the fascist practice once seen in Europe (Klix 2023b).



Deputy Minister for Human Rights and Refugees Duška Jurišić spoke publicly about this case again on February 20, 2023. Carrying out a recapitulation of her activities regarding this act, and in a timely manner she sent a request to the municipal authorities of Prijedor for the suspension of the investigation, she visited Imam Mahić in Kozarac, she sent a request for engagement to the representatives of the international community in the country, she had an interview with Reisu-l-ulema Kavazović, she had an interview and with the representatives of the Prijedor municipality the day before their special session on this issue, she pointed out her belief that all this is »small, insufficient, frustrating«. She invited other actors to get involved in the defence of the imam, because »long-term the fight has just begun.« (Klix 2023d) On the same day, Nermin Ogršević, the leader of one of the »Osmorka« parties, a coalition that formed the government with the national parties of Croats (HDZ) and Serbs (SNSD) just after the parliamentary elections, called out the key internal coalition partners for silence on the occasion of, as reported by the media, organized raids on Bosniaks and their religious institutions. This turns the problem into a coin for mutual bribery of political parties. It is transferred from the religious and legal domain to the inter-party domain, to the medium of the struggle for power. Ogršević's party, although a member of the ruling coalition, has reservations about many political solutions, and is using the opportunity to highlight and gain personal and party credibility in the Bosniak public. »Obviously, there is an organized hunt for Bosniaks and their religious institutions on the scene [...] the silence of state ministers Konaković and Forte, who together with Dodik make up the government, is worrying«, was announced when the state government was formed (Klix 2023a). In the subtext of such criticism is the accusation of the internal coalition partners that, as participants in the government on behalf of the Bosniaks, they do not protect the interests of that people, that is, that the Bosniaks are weak.

In those days, the authorities of the Republika Srpska entity also opened an investigation against Muharem Štulanović, a professor at the Islamic Pedagogical Faculty in Bihać, since he called that entity a »genocidal creation« in a video posted on social networks. In their protest statement, Rijaset IZBiH states that it is inadmissible to persecute people for speaking the truth, and the court established the fact that the military forces of Republika Srpska committed numerous crimes during the aggression



against BiH, including the crime of genocide, which was also confirmed by the International Court in Haag. At the same time, it is said in the press release, »we appeal to all our imams and khatibs to adapt their speech and narrative to the reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina and direct it to the religious education of people, raising people in the spirit of neighbourly solidarity, coexistence and tolerance, and encouraging goodness and piety« (Dnevni Avaz 2023c). The form of ordering imams about the content of the sermons or the imam's address to the faithful during Juma, the Friday prayer, is not in the tradition of Bosniaks, because each imam freely determines his address. Therefore, on this occasion, Rijaset appeals, rather than strictly recommends, to his officials to contextualize the speech on Fridays, depoliticize it and keep it within the framework of religious topics. This implicitly acknowledges that the address of imam Mahić in Prijedor went beyond religious and moral topics, that it was not contextualized, and that it could have hurt the feelings of neighbours of the Orthodox faith. Indeed, the mistake of imam Mahić, as an Islamic official, is that the very content of his sermon, the speech about Saint Sava, was inappropriate for the place and function of the address. And IZ did not strictly emphasize that. It is not in the tradition of Muslims to question anything, let alone the beliefs and ecclesiastical teachings of their Orthodox and Catholic neighbours, regardless of what opinions they had about these religious beliefs. Especially sermons are not a place for that. It remains to be seen whether this public appeal will turn into a special binding instruction for imams on the principles of the relationship between politics and religion in the current Bosnian and regional moment, but in any case, there is room and need for such action within the framework of all religious communities, which would be feasible through the aforementioned MRV, which is currently in a functional crisis.

3 The politicization of religion

In the south of the country, in the same indicated period of time, disturbances and sparks appeared in the relations between Bosniaks and Croats. On the Franjo Tuđman bridge in Čapljina, graffiti appeared with Ustasha symbols and calls for violence and murder of Bosniaks, which are derogatorily called *balija*. After reporting to the competent services, the graffiti were painted over according to the decision of the City Administration



of Čapljina. The incident in the south of our country was strongly condemned by the Presidency of the Croatian National Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, calling on the competent authorities to investigate and severely punish the perpetrators. »We unreservedly condemn every form of violence and threats, regardless of whether they came from an individual or a group, whether these were an intentionally planted graffiti, aiming to disrupt interethnic relations, or a heinous act by an individual,« they stated from HNS (Dnevni Avaz 2023g).

The writing of offensive and threatening graffiti was treated by the leading Bosniak political party, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), as an attack on Bosniaks. With a strong condemnation from the SDA Cantonal Organization of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (KO SDA), they reminded that this is one of a series of nationalist outbursts that happened in Čapljina, insulting the Bosniaks from that area in the most primitive way. »Bosniaks in the southern part of Herzegovina have been exposed to various forms of pressure for years, their human rights and basic freedoms are systematically threatened, only and exclusively because of their national and religious affiliation,« (Faktor 2023) stated KO SDA.

This nationalist excess is also used for a broader treatment of the political relations between the two peoples in the aforementioned local community. In a press release, these parties claim that in addition to verbal and physical attacks, »the Bosniaks of Čapljina are also subjected to administrative discrimination in the public sector, because they are denied the right to employment in the public sector and their political right to be elected in the bodies of the city where they live is prevented. Čapljina is one of the rare areas that does not allocate funds from its budget for the work and existence of the Islamic community in that area, nor does it in any way support the work of associations with a Bosniak sign. Such negative actions by representatives of the local community in Čapljina should be stopped and eliminated because they evidently reproduce radical rhetoric, attacks, insults and discrimination against the Bosniaks who live there,« the KO SDA states (Faktor 2023).

The political context in which these polemical inscriptions take place is not unimportant for their overall understanding. Namely, in last year's October parliamentary elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the largest Bosniak



national party, SDA, which is traditionally voted for by a significant number of the religious population, was the winner of the election but was pushed out of the formation of the government. In the wider Bosniak public, that act is understood as »punishing« Bosniaks by the international community, which plays a strong role in the country both formally and informally, and »rewarding« Serbian and Croatian national parties whose leaders have expressed unequivocal anti-Bosniak and anti-Bosnian attitudes for years. This perception, whether founded or not, favoured the frustration and emotionalization of a large part of the Bosniak public, which considers the current processes of government formation usurping and unfair to the will of the majority of voters, among whom are a large number of traditional believers.

Parallel to the events in the Prijedor municipality in mid-February, there are legal and political disagreements between the Neum municipality and the Committee of the Islamic Community of Stolac in the extreme south of the country. A day after the installation of the minaret next to the renovated building of the mosque in Rabrani, the only mosque in the municipality of Neum, the municipal authorities, accompanied by the police, sealed the building, arguing that its renovation was illegal. The mufti of Mostar, under whose religious jurisdiction this area is, reacted with a statement presenting a whole series of documented evidence that the municipal government of Neum had continuously obstructed the renovation of the mentioned mosque, for which the competent body IZ Stolac had drawn up and submitted all the documentation according to the formally prescribed procedure. »The Islamic community, in carrying out its fundamental mission in the area of the muftiluk of Mostar, especially in the area where the Croatian Democratic Union is in power, has for years been continuously exposed to numerous obstructions and discriminatory political moves. [...] Due to the deliberate actions of the municipal administration, unfortunately, Neum has become a place of apartheid for Muslims.« (MINA 2023) The requests of the IZ to ensure the religious rights of citizens are continuously politicized by the municipal authorities, the press release states. Representatives of the international community in BiH were asked for help in this matter, since Muslims feel discriminated.

The US Embassy in BiH responded to the Mufti's appeal, and it only responds to important political issues. The American Embassy said that



it supports the right of every person to exercise basic religious rights. The embassy statement addresses both parties with the following words: »While religious communities have an obligation to respect the law, the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina at all levels also have an obligation to ensure a safe and inclusive environment and equal treatment for all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation.« (Dnevni Avaz 2023a) This sent a clear message to both parties, emphasizing equal treatment and respect for the law. The SDA Stolac board also reacted, calling on the mayor of the Neum municipality to solve this problem »in accordance with European values and the norms of civilization generally accepted by the modern world« (Klix 2023g). Giving support to the Mufti of Mostar, Dedović, they point out that the behaviour of the municipal authorities is inappropriate, since they only want to renovate the mosque to ensure basic conditions for the religious practice of Muslims.

The focus of Croat-Bosniak relations in Herzegovina is, after all, in the city of Mostar. The divided city of Mostar is a regular stage for measuring Bosnia and Herzegovina's antagonizing positions: pro-Bosnian and anti-Bosnian, anti-fascist and neo-fascist, democratic and totalitarian, Bosniak and Croatian. This year's traditional commemoration of the city's liberation from fascist occupation during the Second World War is the scene of these ideological confrontations. For Sead Đulić, president of SABNOR BiH and UABNOR Mostar, associations that preserve and promote the values of anti-fascism, the arrival of a large number of people in Mostar is not only a celebration of February 14 and the day of the liberation of the city or a memory of something that happened 78 years ago, rather:

Coming to Mostar is a vote against the new fascism, the new Nazism, because they finally realized that Mostar is one of the capitals of neo-fascist activity in these areas. Even Pavelić would envy some of the actions taking place here, such as the destruction of the cemetery. He would have something to learn from them today, and they are inspired by him. We have followers of ideas defeated 75 years ago, they publicly promote and celebrate them, and people have finally realized that only when all this is overcome in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina will be free,



said Đulić. Mostar's current city government is qualified as neo-fascist with these words (Klix 2023c).

The mayor of Mostar, Mario Kordić, a member of the Croatian Democratic Union, felt himself called out and responded with the same harsh words:

While Mostar grows every day, develops roads, infrastructure, tourism, restores the remaining ruins, false moralizers and falsifiers of anti-fascist principles appear. Presenting yourself as anti-fascists while holding the symbols of one of the most heinous totalitarian regimes is absolutely reprehensible. Maybe this year too, the play performed by the same actors for years would pass without reaction, but it is impossible to ignore the heinous calling of Mostar a place of neo-fascism,

Kordić pointed out. This kind of speech »does not belong to the civilized and democratic society to which Mostar women and Mostar men belong« (Klix 2023e). The words of attack and defence, in this case very sharp and undiplomatic, depict the entire ideological background of the current interethnic divisions in Mostar.

Bosniak-Croat disputes from Herzegovina are only a reflex of the so-called Croatian question, that is, the dissatisfaction of Bosnian Croats with their status in the country. Some of the aspects of this question are illuminated by the following two texts, published in the time frame of our research, by authors from the Croatian cultural and political circle. *Katolički tjednik* from February 15 carries an article by Dr. Luka Marković, editor-in-chief, *It is time for some Bosniak intellectuals to understand that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not only theirs* (Nedjelja 2023). In the text, the author expresses a series of critical objections to the representatives of the international community in the country and to individual Bosniak intellectuals, indirectly involving themselves in intensified religious-political disputes on the social scene. Not ruling out the possibility of »a tightening of interethnic relations« (Nedjelja 2023) in the country, Marković complains to the international community that, according to him, it did not clarify to the Bosniaks »that BiH cannot function as a centrally organized state, but also to the Serbs to understand how the separation of the Republica Srbska is impossible without war« (Nedjelja 2023), allowing the High



Representative to make decisions to the detriment of Croats, the third constituent nation. The international community encouraged intellectuals to advocate for a civil BiH, behind which lies the belief, according to this author, that BiH is »only Bosniak, and in the future also Muslim« (Nedjelja 2023). This author/theologian sees the whole polemic about Bosnia and civil or ethno-national BiH as a deliberate manoeuvre by the Bosniak intelligentsia for their domination, while denying the existence of any ideological differences within that intelligentsia. Marković sees the current efforts of the pro-Bosnian coalition »Osmorka« to meet Croatian political demands as a possibility of intra-Bosniak stratification and strife, which could ultimately lead to more serious national conflicts. With these words, the author attributes an implicit anti-Croatian attitude to the majority of Bosniak public, which is not true in any case. Just as it is not true that Croatian political demands are legitimate and true in themselves, but the author obviously considers them as such. If Bosniak intellectuals care about the future of the country, »they should understand that peace and coexistence, and thus the prosperity of BiH, can only be achieved if you truly wish for others what you would wish for them to wish for you« (Nedjelja 2023). With these concluding words, Marković underlines the moral-political level as a place and form of consensual compromise to reach common positions, which gives his text a positive moral perspective.

Ivo Komšić, professor emeritus of the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo and a member of the wartime Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, announced his comments in the media in those days as a comprehensive commentary on the currently heated issues of the relationship between religious and political topics. Komšić considers the current debates about the relationship between the civil and ethno-national principles of state organization and the Electoral Law of the country to be theoretically ungrounded and failed, as they manichaeantly confront these two principles, which, according to him, are in original agreement. Komšić does not see the problem of society in such a dilemma. He sees the clericalization of Bosnia and Herzegovina society as his fundamental challenge. which would be, among other things, »a cover for the clericalization of the state and the sacralization of society« (Dnevni avaz 2023e).



Conclusion

The integration of Bosnian society, even though it is still burdened by the reflexes of past war events, is still a progressing process. Interethnic relations are not in ideal shape, but the stabilization and functioning of state institutions is on the rise. In the relationship between politics and religion, there are occasional excesses, sparks that occupy a significant place in the media space. At the same time, we are witnessing the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes, and the collision of religious and national/party institutions of individual nations. The cases of interweaving of religion and politics mentioned and analysed in the paper are basically a reflection of the unresolved and unfinished constitutional and legal issues of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on which occasion the religious scene is only used to manifest these problems.



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