

INTERRELIGIOUS COUNCIL IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA - INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND MEDIA-MEDIATED REALITY

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Abstract: *In BiH, in 1997, a year after the constitution of the state on the basis of the Dayton Agreement and the end of the civil war, the Interreligious Council was formed on the initiative of religious leaders and it was the first one under that name in the world. The path to reconciliation among people and development of a stable society in BiH should lead through interreligious dialogue, and the Interreligious Council strives to achieve that goal, in areas where the influence of churches and religious communities is inviolable. The area of indisputable influence of the Interreligious Council should be sacred objects within which specific communication takes place between religious leaders and believers. In that space, thoughts and views were expressed by members of the Islamic Community in BiH, imam Amir Mahić and theologian Muharem Štulanović. After the prayers in the mosques, imams called the Serbian Orthodox Church a sect, its first enlightener, Saint Sava, the originator of fascism, with derogatory terms about the Serbian people. The public was informed about the events in the mosques in Kozarac and Bihać through the media, with different narratives, while the Interreligious Council failed to represent the proclaimed goals and ideas of interreligious dialogue. After more than two and a half decades of existence, there is no representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Interreligious Council in BiH, because Metropolitan Bishop of Dabar-Bosna Hrizostom resigned from the Council, and the interreligious dialogue died down. The statements and analyzes presented in this paper are based on data obtained from research conducted through in-depth interviews with members of the Interreligious Council in BiH, analysis of the content of texts published in the media about the aforementioned cases in January 2023, and comparative analysis, with the aim of elucidating the possibility of reviving interreligious dialogue, mutual understanding and the role of the media in those processes.*

Keywords: *Interreligious Council in BiH, media, interreligious dialogue.*

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Introduction

In BiH, in 1997, one year after the constitution of the state on the basis of the Dayton Agreement and the end of the civil war, the Interreligious Council, the first in the world under that name, was formed on the initiative of religious leaders. The path to reconciliation between peoples and the development of a stable society in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be an interreligious dialogue, and the religious leaders of the three confessions in Bosnia and Herzegovina agreed to achieve this goal through the Interreligious Council, in areas where the influence of churches and religious communities is unassailable. The area of indisputable influence of the Interreligious Council should be sacred objects within which specific communication takes place between religious representatives and believers, where, along with the peculiarities of theological teachings and prayer rituals, the thought about the necessity of respecting others should be established and developed, and distrust, fear and animosity towards another ethnic community should be suppressed.

For centuries of fragile inter-ethnic relations in BiH, at the end of the 20th century, the idea of establishing an inter-religious dialogue should have been a reliable and acceptable model in the process of reconciliation between peoples. The determination of the religious leaders gathered in the Interreligious Council to overcome conflicts and misunderstandings between people, religions, and cultures by developing awareness of the need for mutual understanding and tolerance through dialogue, and especially religious dialogue, should have grown into a social need on which everyone's future depends.

The analysis of the results of the activities of the Interreligious Council in BiH requires a wider scope of research and this paper will not generalize their effect from the aspect of the frequency of interreligious contacts, openness towards each other and the level of interreligious dialogue and tolerance achieved. Observing the events of the past year in the framework of inter-religious relations, in religious objects, which means, in that area of undisputed influence of the Interreligious Council in BiH, the absence of practical and purposeful action was observed. After prayers in mosques, imams call the Serbian Orthodox Church a sect, its first enlightener, Saint Sava, the originator of fascism, and speak derogatorily about the Serbian people. In their speech to the believers after the prayer, they publicly call for violence and resistance, with the crudest insults to the Serbian people and Republic of Srpska. The public was informed about the events in the mosques in Kozarac and Bihac through the media, with different narratives. The Interreligious Council, in a post on the social media twenty days after the speech in the mosques, condemned the unacceptable speech directed against the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers. The events in the mosques in Bihac and Kozarac caused that, after more than two and a half decades of existence, there is no representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the BiH Interreligious Council. Metropolitan Bishop Hrisostom of Dabar-Bosna informed the members of the IRC Assembly that on January 31, 2023, he will cease membership in the existence and work of the Council until, as he stated, the Council recovers. In the response of the IRC, published the day after the address of the Metropolitan of Dabar-Bosna, it is emphasized that the stated reasons for the SPC and IRC's resignation "are not directly related to the activities of the IRC in BiH, that dialogue is a moral obligation and that the IRC in BiH continues to work for the benefit of all believers and of all religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina". The exchange of the mentioned statements ended the discussion on the mentioned incidents, and the inter-religious dialogue at the level of the three largest confessions in Bosnia and Herzegovina died down.

1. Bosnia and Herzegovina - national and religious identities

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the social-communist system, political and economic crises and conflicts on the intertwined borders of the great religions, Catholicism, Orthodoxy and

Islam, on the lines of Huntington's war of civilizations (Huntington, 1997), caused wars of religious identities over which cultural and political identities of individual nations clashed. In Eastern Europe, that period appeared as a chance for the revival of state and national sovereignty, which opposed the Western idea of establishing democracy, multiculturalism and civil society, in the sense of civil/Western nationalism. This refers to a dual division of ethno-nationalism into the so-called the western one, which under civil nationalism implies common political and civic values as a national identity, and the eastern one, in which belonging to the nation is defined by ethnic identity, religion, language, and culture (Maksimilian, 2002).

Among the peoples of that part of the European continent, the aspirations for the recognition of the original national identity in the new circumstances, in the sense of ethnic/eastern nationalism, were awakened. The disappearance of large nationally complex, multicultural and multiconfessional communities, the USSR and Czechoslovakia, led to the peaceful separation of republics and peoples, while the process of disintegration of the SFRY was marked by national-religious wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The national-religious conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended in 1996, and in terms of human suffering and material destruction, it was the largest armed conflict between nations in Europe after the Second World War.

The ethnic division among the peoples of BiH, which was the reason for the armed conflict, in November 1995, was legalized by the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement at the American Military Base in Dayton. The Dayton Peace Agreement, Annex 4, which is the Constitution of BiH³, defines BiH as an internationally recognized state, composed of two entities – Republic of Srpska (RS) and Federation of BiH (FBiH) and three constituent peoples, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks⁴. The Republic of Srpska is internationally recognized as an entity, with a Serbian national majority, the Constitution of the Republic of Srpska and separate legislative, executive and judicial powers and authorities. FBiH is a territorially larger entity in BiH, which includes two ethnic communities, Croats and Bosniaks, with 10 cantons divided by national majorities.

The democratic principles of complex state communities suggest that national groups retain identity peculiarities and characteristics, language, religion and culture within the framework of territorial reality, so that the three national communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be organized into the same number of ethnic units. In the case of BiH, and due to the will of the international factor, this was not done, which later caused numerous political and national disagreements, primarily between the Croats, as a minority nation, and the Bosniaks in the FBiH (Radovanović-Šarenac, 2019: 125). From the beginning of Dayton BiH until today, on the social, political and scientific level, there are different interpretations and views on the possibilities of establishing a stable political system in BiH.

Serbian intellectuals mostly discuss the constitutionality and statehood, the constitutional construction and functioning of the Republic of Srpska. "Republic of Srpska has proven that it is capable of functioning, in the first phase, completely independently, and then as a state-forming unit (entity) according to all standards for such a territorial reality." There, the Republic bases its ability and stability on three strong supports. First, on the strength of the people's will expressed several times through plebiscites and referendums; second, on the strength of domestic law - the Constitution and laws, and, third, on the strength of international law - the Dayton Peace Agreement as an international pact" (Kuzmanović, 2012: 35). Defense of the existing condition, return of confiscated competences,

³ Annex IV of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina and "Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina", no. 25/2009 - Amendment I <https://www.paragraf.ba/propisi/bih/ustav-bosne-i-hercegovine.html>, Accessed on: 12. December 2023.

⁴ The Washington Agreement was signed on March 18, 1994. in Washington between Bosnian Croats and Muslims, which created the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and ended the war between the forces of the Croatian Defense Council and the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/washingtonski-sporazumi>, Accessed on: 12. December 2023.

state independence, unification with the “mother”, asymmetric confederation, are approaches that should always be counted on (Kecmanović, 2012: 69-71). “However, while practical politics must tact and maneuver, bypass and camouflage, simulate and bluff, political theory, on the contrary, enjoys the freedom, but also the obligation to directly and openly critically address each of the listed and unlisted options and offer a strategic base for daily political decisions” (Kecmanović, 2012: 72). In the FBiH, Bosniak intellectuals mostly express their commitment to state and social integration, which main obstacle is ethno-nationalism (Mujkić, 2007, Ćurak, 2004). Among Croats, the prevailing opinion is that the territorial-political autonomy of ethnic components is a desirable reform measure (Žepić, 2000).⁵ “Therefore, it is correct to say that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a divided society in which there is no political or intellectual agreement on the foundations of the political community and the political system (Kasapović, 2007). This indicates a crisis in the legitimacy of the state, and without legitimacy there can be no question of constituting a political community” (Radica, 2016: 10).

The Constitution of BiH, the Constitution of the Republic of Srpska, as well as the Constitution of the Federation of BiH guarantee the protection of freedom of religious thought and practice, prohibit any form of discrimination on religious grounds and promote the freedom of action of churches and religious communities which are, in accordance with the provisions of the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, registered in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities. The constitutional provision on the three constituent nations, as a fundamental principle of the organization and functioning of government at all levels, includes the three largest ethnic communities, the Serbs who predominantly belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Bosniaks who are predominantly Muslims under the authority of the Islamic Religious Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Croats who in the largest number belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Jews and members of other national minorities, according to the current Constitution of BiH, cannot run for individual functions in BiH.

In BiH, as a multi-ethnic state with post-conflict social, political and national features, the Peace Agreement from Dayton regulated inter-ethnic relations, as well as mechanisms for adaptation and management of diversity, in a compromise manner. Violent extremism related to religion, inter-ethnic tension and intolerance, hate speech directed towards the other and different in BiH are still present in a significant number of cases. In addition, it is not rare to witness the statements of religious governors and spiritual leaders who incite national intolerance, strengthen differences between people on religious grounds and call for violence.

2. Interreligious council in Bosnia and Herzegovina

On the initiative of church dignitaries and religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a year and a half after the end of the war, fought on religious and national grounds, the Interreligious Council was formed. Reconciliation among peoples, mutual respect, coexistence and the development of interreligious dialogue, in a war-ravaged country and between yesterday’s enemies, are set as the basic tasks and mission of the IRC. The Council was established by the efforts of Metropolitan of Dabar-Bosna Nikolaj, on behalf of the Serbian Orthodox Church, reis-l-ulema Mustafa ef. Cerić, on behalf of the Islamic Religious Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Archbishop Cardinal of Vrhbosna Vinko Puljić, on behalf of the Catholic Church and Jakob Finčić, on behalf of the Jewish Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

IRC is a non-governmental organization that acts in accordance with the goodwill of traditional churches and religious communities to work together to build reconciliation among the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in spheres where the influence of churches and religious com-

⁵ <http://www.nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/focus/id/1216#.W4pqqc4zblU>. Accessed on: 13. December 2023.

munities is inviolable. IRC⁶ is organized through the Assembly of IRC, which consists of the highest religious representatives of churches and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and decisions are made by consensus. Within the framework of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of BiH, there are also the Executive Committee, the Secretariat and Committees for Interreligious Cooperation, territorially distributed through 15 branches throughout BiH, in which religious officers work with the task of solving various problems in the field of religious life in their local communities and especially promoting inter-ethnic tolerance and inter-religious dialogue.

In 2008, IRC signed a Protocol on cooperation⁷ with the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, among other things, guarantees all the rights and independence of registered churches and religious communities and the Council of Ministers obliges to set aside 100,000 BAM from the budget of institutions for the needs of the IRC every year. A few years later, the IRC signed similar protocols with the governments of the Republic of Srpska⁸ and the Federation of BiH⁹, as well as the Brčko District¹⁰, with a difference in the annual financial obligation of the entity governments towards the IRC of BiH which is 50,000 BAM each, and Brčko District, 20,000 BAM. On the official web site of the IRC, there are no financial reports available on the way budget funds of all authorities levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina are spent.

In the section *About Us* on the official website of the IRC, the advantages and appreciation of diversity are highlighted as the main directions of action, and that „every one of our traditional priests and religious communities is taught that the dignity and value of man is a gift from God. Our faiths and religions, each in its own way, call for tolerance, respect for diversity and respect for the fundamental human rights of every person. Our religious and spiritual traditions have many common values that can serve as a credible basis for mutual respect, cooperation and free coexistence in BiH“¹¹. At the same time, they emphasize the intention to establish interreligious dialogue as a daily need of society and the individual and the only agent of solving problems and tensions between members of different faiths and confessions in BiH.

2.1. Interreligious dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina - between theory and practice

The history of Bosnia and Herzegovina is full of examples of conflict and misunderstanding among peoples who have lived in this area for centuries and periods of lack of dialogue and tolerance. At the same time, throughout history, peoples in BiH of different faiths and confessions have developed extremely close relations, mutual tolerance and respect for the other and the different. Only by encompassing the history of conflict and intolerance, on the one hand, and nobility and tolerance, on the other, it is possible to see the reality and essence of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a place of conflict and encounter. “Culturally and religiously, it is at the same time a visible West in the southeast and a striking Constantinople-Islamic and Constantinople-Christian East in the West of Europe. This country is, therefore, a meeting place and a place of conflict at the same time. As a place of conflict, it is a realistic assumption of sharp competition and confrontation, and as a meeting place it is a real possibility of healthy communication, coexistence, cooperation, i.e. healthy cooperation.” (Ikić, 2012: 243).

⁶ <https://IRC.ba/o-nama-2/>. Accessed on: 25. December 2023.

⁷ https://IRC.ba/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/protokol_Sqh.pdf. Accessed on: 27. December 2023

⁸ <https://IRC.ba/lat/clanci/vijesti/dokumenta/protokol-o-saradnji-izmedu-vlade-republike-srpske-i-medureligijskog-vijeca-u-bih-sarajevo/>. Accessed on: 27. December 2023

⁹ https://IRC.ba/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/protokol_fbih_pKv.pdf. Accessed on: 27. December 2023

¹⁰ <https://IRC.ba/lat/clanci/vijesti/dokumenta/protokol-o-saradnji-izmedu-blade-brcko-distrikta-i-medureligijskog-vijeca-u-bih-sarajevo/>. Accessed on: 27. December 2023

¹¹ <https://IRC.ba/o-nama-2/>. Accessed on: 25. December 2023.

Through inter-religious contacts on an institutional, but also spiritual and personal level, emphasizing common religious and spiritual values, IRC wanted to contribute building peace, tolerance and non-violence. In the political sense, the effects of the activities of the IRC in BiH should not be measured, although incidents and violence caused by religious intolerance most often occur in periods of opposing political relations and harsh rhetoric between government representatives at the institutional level. In periods of developing fear of an uncertain future, which the elected political leaders promote with their public appearances by insisting on diversity, dialogue in the general sense, and especially religious dialogue as its important part, should awaken awareness of the need for mutual understanding and tolerance. The culture of dialogue, which was often absent in the past, in modern conditions should grow into the need of the individual, and then of the community, to reach a level of equal meeting and rapprochement from the positions of different ideas and points of view. "A true conversation does not require any rules, but honest meetings of people with different views on the world, and only from these spiritual meetings to have a sense of tolerance and valuing other people's attitude born" (Šušnjić, 2005: 31).

Interreligious dialogue has an extremely important role in establishing a dialogue that must not turn into a defense of one's own convictions and the desire to defeat the one with whom one is talking. Faith and religion live in every individual and encounters with other individuals belonging to different religious traditions and practices are inevitable. Even the great world religions are tolerant and dialogic in their initial teachings, yet, centuries ago, the most terrible suffering and conflicts were waged in the name of faith and religion. Inter-religious dialogue should be established as an opportunity for learning about historical traditions, connecting, mutual respect, but also listening to others and different ones. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, from the aspect of the intertwining of faiths, religions and confessions, and also because of its difficult past, the importance of interreligious dialogue is gaining even more importance, thus also the IRC that proclaims the aforementioned ideas. Otherwise, genuine interreligious dialogue could become official and fruitless.

3. Research

3.1. Methodological framework

In drafting the paper, a case study is foreseen as a methodological approach, because it is the only one that offers the study of a very wide range of diverse features of the subject we are researching, so, in addition to the analysis of the content of the public speeches of the members of the Islamic religious community in BiH, we also performed a comparative analysis of parts of those speeches and the legal framework, addressed the IRC with a request¹² to provide us with more information about the work and activities of this body after the resignation of the SOC and their sources of funding. Instead of answering the questions and the opportunity to, as relevant factors, explain the current context and opportunities in relations between churches and religious communities in BiH, IRC, in a terse statement, rejected the possibility of further discussion on the mentioned topics. In response

¹² The questionnaire consisted of the following questions: Considering that one of the constitutive members, Metropolitan Bishop of Dabar-Bosna Hrizostom, resigned from the IRC, we are interested in how the IRC functions after that? There is no information available on the official website of the IRC about the Council's work rules/statute, according to which rules does the decision-making process takes place? Do you think that in BiH, after the resignation of the SOC, the work of the IRC is satisfactory and to what extent is its existence justified after that event? Did the IRC members try to establish the full capacity of the IRC Parliament after that? What are the sources of funding for IRC? What are the most significant results of IRC when it comes to interreligious dialogue? What needs to be changed in the approach of IRC and what could affect the revival of interreligious dialogue in BiH?

to the clearly stated data that the research is being carried out within the methodological framework presented at the Conference, IRC points out that, in their opinion, the work has already been completed and expresses regret because “you did not contact us earlier during the preparation of this scientific work”. With the aim of shedding light on the current situation in relations between the members of the two largest religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we also addressed the Metropolitanate of Dabar-Bosna, directly, Metropolitan Bishop of Dabar-Bosna Hrizostom, but we did not receive any answers to the questions¹³. During the period of our research procedure, we noticed that IRC was actively publishing various contents on the official Facebook page. As a result of the statement of religious officials from the Islamic community in BiH in January 2003, the statement of the IRC issued on that occasion and the decision of Metropolitan Bishop of Dabar-Bosna to withdraw from the IRC, as one of its constituents, we observed a complete breakdown of communication between the aforementioned factors. Since then, IRC has continued with its usual activities, although in an incomplete structure, and we are also registering new incidents with characteristics of religious intolerance.

3.2. Statements by members of the Islamic religious community in BiH about the Serbian Orthodox Church

Individual members of the Islamic Religious Community in BiH, theologian Muhamer Štulanović, retired full professor of the Faculty of Islamic Pedagogy in Bihać, and Amir Mahić, the chief imam of the Mejlis of the Islamic Community in Prijedor, expressed their thoughts and attitudes about the SOC and the Serbian people on several occasions, in public, in speeches after prayers.

On the You Tube channel *Imanski podsjetnik*¹⁴, on January 13, 2023, a video entitled “Vampirized evil was spawned”¹⁵ was published, lasting around 25 minutes, in which professor Muhamer Štulanović publicly calls for violence and resistance, with the crudest insults of the Serbian people and Republic of Srpska. We transcribe part of the speech in its entirety: „Exactly because of that genocidal creature, which was born and came to life on that January 9th, in the form of the genocidal creation RS... and over Sarajevo they celebrate that genocidal creature. So, brothers, we should do everything in our power, and only then rely on dear God, on the international community or someone else... Brothers, if something in your stomach didn't turn over after listening to this kind of Serbian activity, then we don't realize what our neighbors can do. This is why every Bosniak should be disgusted by this adjective “Serbian” and everything that represents RS.” Furthermore, professor Štulanović speaks from a political standpoint, condemning the ruling structures in BiH. “And while our politicians, like rabid dogs, are fighting over their prey, over armchairs and ministries, it seems that those embodied in the eight will now give and gift almost all the levers of power to the two biggest nationalists, the

¹³ The questionnaire consisted of the following questions: Your warning that the “vowed silence of IRC BiH” on hate speech and contempt towards to the other coming from mosques and the statement that interreligious work and dialogue are not accomplished were confirmed by the latest events which are marked by the same messages of hatred and intolerance towards the Serbian people and the SOC. Did the members of IRC BiH ever shown the desire and initiative that you return to the IRC Parliament? Is the IRC BiH, after your resignation, even legitimate to continue working on the idea with which it was founded, that is, the building of reconciliation between peoples and stable society in BiH through interreligious dialogue? In your opinion, is the existence of IRC in BiH, since its establishment in 1997. achieved real progress and results in the establishment of interreligious dialogue? You also noticed that there is a “parallel system that functions on behalf of the IRC BiH” and informed the other members of the Parliament of IRC BiH about this in your letter. What knowledge do you have about it? Is there any influence of foreign countries and non-governmental organizations on the work of IRC in BiH and how is it accomplished?

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/c/ImanskiPodsjetnik>. Accessed 10. November 2023.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yt89RF0lhy8>. Accessed 10. November 2023.

opponents and enemies of whole BiH and the Bosniaks in it and the possibility to realize their all-Serbian and all-Croatian interests". The video has nearly 55,000 views and more than 450 comments, most of them supportive ones. On this and the following days, the media in BiH reported conflictingly to the public about the speech of a respected member of the Islamic religious community. The media in the Republic of Srpska condemned this explicit hate speech, with negative reactions from the political public, while in the FBiH the public, the media and the reis-ul-ulema of the Islamic Community in BiH supported these insults, but referring more to the reactions of the Serbian media than to the Štulanović's speech. There were similar media reactions to Imam Mahić's speech¹⁶ on January 20, 2023, in which he called the Serbian Orthodox Church a sect. In his speech, imam Mahić said: „What is that man (referring to St. Sava) from the point of view of the Orthodox? This is a man on whose teachings and ideology a sect was conceived, which we know well here. It is a Serbian Orthodox sect. It is basically a sectarian teaching of Orthodoxy (...) The Saint Sava, which is professed by Orthodoxy in Bosnia, is founded in nationalism and fascism". The imam tried to denigrate the Orthodox world by mentioning Saint Sava as the originator of the ideology of hatred towards the other", cursing him as something diabolically present in people and the human race. (...) If a person had the time to devote himself to those foolish things they preach, we can find the absolute roots of this fascism that we live today at the hands of our neighbors and the genocide that happened here", said the chief imam of the Majlis of the Islamic Community in Kozarac. About twenty days after the speeches in the mosques in Bihac and Kozarac, the Interreligious Council requested information from the Rijaset of the Islamic Community on the official Facebook page about this, how they said, incident. Rijaset of the Islamic Community checked the allegations and, after the procedure, asked Imam Mahić to apologize to the believers and to all those who may have been offended by his performance, according to the publication of the Interreligious Council on February 2. 2023.¹⁷ Due to these events, seven comments were recorded on the official announcement of the Interreligious Council, which are not available for viewing by users, and Interreligious Council limited the comments to this announcement. In the same announcement, IRC „condemns unacceptable speech directed against the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers", referring only to the speech of Imam Mahić in Kozarac, while there was no reaction to the speech of the Islamic theologian and Imam Štulanović in Bihac. From the mentioned announcements, the IRC does not show a commitment to mediate in the establishment of a dialogue between the SOC and the IC due to damaged inter-ethnic relations, to overcome calls for violence and strengthening of religious differences through intensive direct contacts and inter-religious dialogue of the highest church and religious representatives. At the same time, in the public space through the mediation of the media, these incidents acquired a political connotation and clearly emphasized divisions of opinion, considering the residence of the media, that is, the entity and ethnic division.

The Public Prosecutor's Office of the RS responded to the statements of Muharem Štulanović with an indictment, charging him with derision, contempt and harsh disparagement of the Republic of Srpska. The indictment states, among other things, that in his speech, imam Štulanović labeled the Republic of Srpska as a "genocidal creation", thereby committing the criminal offense of "damaging the reputation of the RS and its peoples from Article 280, Paragraph 2, in connection with Paragraph 1 of the Criminal Law of RS."¹⁸ In response to the indictment, imam Štulanović stated that he did not understand the indictment charging him with a criminal offense.¹⁹

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0c-nMyaJ-o>. Accessed 10. November 2023.

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/IRCbih>. Accessed 11. November 2023.

¹⁸ "Official Gazette of Republic of Srpska", no. 64/2017, 104/2018 - decision of US, 15/2021, 89/2021 and 73/2023) <https://www.paragraf.ba/propisi/republika-srpska/krivicni-zakon-republike-srpske.html>. Accessed 22. January 2024.

¹⁹ <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/hronika/Imam-ne-razumije-optuznicu-koja-ga-tereti-da-je-Srpsku-nazvao-genocidnom/809922>. Accessed 22. January 2024.

The statements and views expressed by imam Mahić are the subject of investigations by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Srpska (MIA RS). The Islamic Religious Community of BiH responded to the actions of the MIA RS and the judicial institutions of the RS with a statement in which, among other things, it is stated that “for the umpteenth time, we are faced with the hatred and political incorrectness of the current regime of the Bosnian entity of the RS towards Bosniak Muslims and their religious representatives”²⁰. Regarding the speeches of Imam Mahić and the call to violence, the IC in BiH says that these were “recklessly spoken sentences that caused outrage among members of the Orthodox church”. In the statement, they evaluate constitutional and legal order of the RS, through their terminological definition of the „current regime“, while the actions of the religious official are justified by the description of the „recklessly spoken sentence“, without considering the context of the content presented. On the content of imam Štulanović’s sermon and the judicial procedure in the RS, IC in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in an official statement²¹ dated on February 10, 2023, speaks about the character of the war in BiH, expressing the view that in the past war “the army and the MIA RS committed numerous crimes, including genocide against Bosniaks in the name of RS, creating the RS”. In the aforementioned statement, IC in BiH generalizes the events during the war in BiH, interprets historical facts through the lens of the exclusive right to the truth of the Bosniak people, the majority of whom belong to the Islamic religious community in BiH.

In the parts of the speech to believers in mosques that are presented in this paper, we observe violations of the provisions of the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina²². In the mentioned cases, the following provisions of this law were violated:

- General provisions, Article 2, Point 1. „Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief means any exclusion, restriction, preferential treatment, omission or any other form of differentiation on the grounds of religion or belief having for its purpose or which may bring about - directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally - the revocation or diminution of the recognition, equal enjoyment and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in civil, political, economic, social and cultural matters.“
- Freedom of religion and belief, Article 4, Point 2: “Churches and religious communities in preaching their faith and other activities must not spread intolerance and prejudice against other churches and religious communities and their believers or citizens without religious affiliation or prevent them from freely publicly expressing their faith or other belief”.
- Freedom of religion and belief, Article 5, Point : „Any discrimination based on religion or belief as defined in Article 2.1 is prohibited.

The following acts are also prohibited:

- activities or acts aimed at inciting religious hatred against any church or religious community or its members;
- the denigration or ridiculing of any religion;
- causing, supporting or inciting religious intolerance and hatred.“

This law does not prescribe penalties for the aforementioned acts.

²⁰ <https://islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/vijesti/aktuelno/30940-saopcenje-udruzenja-ilmijje-cvrsto-stojimo-uz-hafiza-amira-mahica>. Accessed 22. January 2024.

²¹ <https://islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/vijesti/aktuelno/30955-saopcenje-rijaseta-islamske-zajednice-u-bih-povodom-istrage-protiv-muharema-stulanovica>. Accessed 22. January 2024.

²² “Official gazette of BiH”, number 28/19, <http://sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/ZAwDGWBtmG0=>. Accessed 23. January 2024.

„Criminal legislation recognizes the following criminal acts related to religion:

- violation of equality of citizens (Article 162, CL, RS); violation of equality of a man and a citizen (Article 177, CL, FBH);
- interference or prevention of religious rituals (Article 378, CL, FBH); violation of freedom of religion and practice of religious rituals (Article 178, CL, RS);
- destruction of cultural, historic and religious monuments (Article 183, CL);
- inciting ethnic, racial and religious hatred, dissension and intolerance (Article 136, CL, FBH); inciting national, racial or religious hatred, dissension and intolerance (Article 390, CL, RS).“ (Ikić, 2012: 240-241)

3.3. Resignation of the Serbian Orthodox Church from the Inter-religious council

Frequent inter-ethnic conflicts and rhetoric in religious objects, along with the evident absence of inter-religious dialogue and proactive activities of the IRC in BiH are a serious threat to the processes of building a stable state system and associated social communities. The events in the mosques in Bihac and Kozarac caused that, after more than two and a half decades of existence, there is no representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the IRC.

Metropolitan Bishop of Dabar-Bosna Hrizostom informed²³ the members of Parliament of the IRC that on January 31, 2023, he will terminate the membership in the existence and work of the Council until, as he stated, the Council “recovers”. „We are very sorry about that. Since coming to the throne of the Metropolitan, we have tried to improve the work of the Interreligious Council with our work and suggestions, however, the latest events in the area of the entire Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the silence of the Council, are the last straw that overflowed our patience and forbearance. We realized that the passiveness of the Serbian Orthodox Church indirectly supports all the deviations of our society,” he said in a statement published on February 3, 2023. In the reply of the Interreligious Council, published the day after the Metropolitan statement, it is emphasized that the stated reasons for the resignation of the Serbian Orthodox Church from the Interreligious Council „are not directly related to the activity of the Interreligious Council, that dialogue is a moral obligation and that the Council continues to work for the benefit of all believers and of all religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina“.

The exchange of the mentioned statements ended the discussion on those incidents, and the inter-religious dialogue at the level of the three largest confessions in Bosnia and Herzegovina died down.

Conclusion

Misunderstanding among peoples, cultures, religions, ideologies, policies threatens to become a dominant feature of inter-ethnic and relations between different churches and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In support of this is the fact that a year after the withdrawal of the Serbian Orthodox Church from IRC, there is no sign of goodwill to solve the problems through dialogue and overcome them for the benefit of all. IRC is not an umbrella religious institution in BiH, but a body established on the basis of the goodwill of the highest church and religious representatives who have committed themselves to jointly promote the benefits arising from diversity, while respecting all the peculiarities of religious traditions and spirituality. That body, unique in the world, formed under that name, was supposed to relentlessly and uncompromisingly advocate for the improvement of interreligious dialogue. In a country where three great religions touch and intertwine,

²³ <https://www.mitropolijadabrobosanska.org/vijest2490.html>. Accessed 12. November 2023.

widely recognized as a place of clash of civilizations, almost superhuman efforts are necessary to raise religious encounters, mutual respect and dialogue to the level of a paradigm.

Within the framework of interreligious dialogue, IRC communicates on multiple levels, religious, individual and institutional, and each of its constituents communicates with its believers through traditional rituals. Since its inception, IRC has had encouraging results in the processes of rapprochement and healing on the way to building reconciliation and coexistence among the peoples living in BiH. The intensity of the interreligious dialogue in BiH in the last year is almost barely measurable. The reason is the events presented in this paper, the key moments that influenced that instead of dialogue, especially inter-religious dialogue, the dominant place was occupied by monologue of all factors who became available to the public through media mediation. In the mentioned period, dialogue was left to the spontaneity of events that, one after another, only increased the gap, misunderstanding and ultimately led to a cacophony of different attitudes and opinions. The responsibility for such a situation is partially borne by the media, which constructed the mentioned events into messages with different discourse, depending on the dominant system of values and public perception of reality in the areas of their activity. Government representatives who commented on the mentioned events superficially and uncritically, within the dominant narrative, are also responsible.

The answer to the question about responsibility for the cold, official and fruitless inter-religious dialogue in BiH should be given by those who insisted on true, open dialogue in the past decades. Revival of inter-religious dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina is possible if one accepts the fact that there is no one and only dialogic truth but a mutually acceptable truth, because several persons who are independent and autonomous participate in it, as well as the awareness that no individual or group at any historical moment can be a measure of truth.

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