Islam and the Bosnian Media
Adnan Rondic

First of all, I'd like to comment on the treatment of Islam in Bosnia in the former Yugoslav media, with the special emphasis on one important event from that period. Media in communist Yugoslavia rarely reported on religions (including Islam). Special religious holiday shows or related newspaper articles were virtually nonexistent, even during the holidays.

Religion was mentioned in sociological or, sometimes, politological context. Within sociological context, culturological approach most prominent. When it comes to Islam, it dealt primarily with the architecture and some ethnological (distinctive Muslim national costumes, specific housing and diet, etc.)

Still, we have to turn our attention to the Islamic media from that period, starting from Islamic Informative Newspaper «Preporod» («Rebirth») and «Glasnik» («Herald»), official journal of the Islamic Community, which managed to tackle wide spectrum of Islam-related issues, despite state control.

1980s in the former Yugoslavia were the decade which saw the development of two simultaneous processes:

- Islamic Community of Yugoslavia showed more interest in religious life of Muslims, which manifested itself primarily through the use of Islam in affirmation of Muslim nation, which was at the time constitutionally recognized for only a decade

- Accordingly, media were more curious about Islam, which they perceived as a major factor for the affirmation of Muslim nation, as well as potential, real enemy of the fundamental values of communist Yugoslavia

- Regardless of whether the fear of Muslim nationalism was justified or not, communist authorities in the former Yugoslavia saw religions (including Islam) as their ideological archenemy. The case of Poland also had impact on Yugoslav communists.

Former Yugoslav media also showed increased interest in Islam in 1983, during the well-known trial of the members of «Mladi Muslimani» («Young Muslims») movement led by Alija Izetbegovic. Media did not question fundamental Islamic values in their reports, but they severely criticized their entering the public discourse, and the aforementioned Muslim intellectuals were labeled counter-revolutionaries, enemies of the state and the champions of religious hatred and intolerance.

The official stance of the authorities in relation to this trial can be illustrated with the help of several headlines from Yugoslav press: «Bent on Destroying the System» (Oslobodenje), «Islamic Republic Is the Goal» (Politika Express), «Against the Enemies of Allah» (Politika), «In the Name of Kor'an, Against the Constitution» (Start), «Declaration of Darkness and Hatred» (Oslobodenje), «Specters of the Past in Terrorist Disguise» (Oslobodenje), «God in Service of War» (Svijet), etc. Former Grand Mufti of the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia, Naim Hadžiabdić, described the affair as «enemy activity».
Media interest in Islam increased shortly before the breakup of Yugoslavia.

One of the reasons for this was the defeat of communists in the first multi-party elections organized in Yugoslav republics, as well as reaction to large-scale media popularization of the Orthodox faith, Saint-Savaism and affirmation of Greater Serbia on one side and intensified promotion of Catholicism, especially in Croatia, on the other.

Media treatment of Islam during the aggression against Bosnia requires broader scope of inquiry into the subject compared to the format of this analysis. But, we need to emphasize the fact that it was the period of affirmation of religious-doctrinal values of Islam. This was the process many people were inclined to describe as re-islamization of Bosnian Muslims. On the other hand, when it comes to the media which operated in the «occupied territories» at that time, Islam and Muslims were defamed and their approach to the religious-doctrinal postulates of Islam was often openly chauvinistic.

Post-war period brought no serious analysis of media treatment of Islam, at least until last year. It is for that reason that we have to mention the research done by a young journalist, Davor Marko, dealing with the treatment of Islam in Bosnian printed media. His research showed the following results:

According to their treatment of Islam, media can be divided into three groups, and the author acknowledges the existence of three public discourses in Bosnia in relation to Islam.

„Apologetic discourse“ of the media closely associated with the Islamic Community of Bosnia-Herzegovina which is dominated by the values and principles close to Islam, as well as prominent individuals from Bosniak religious and political establishment. They use symbols of «Grand Mufti», «Islamic Community», «victim nation» and other political and business circles and create the image of «righteous and just Bosnian Islam, infallible Grand Mufti of the Islamic Community and the nation which is continually victimized by various political schemes». According to the author, the media in this category are «Dnevni Avaz», «Preporod», «Mualim» and «Saff», in which journalists often present more radical views.

The second discourse is created by the media closer to «civic» or «irreligious» perception of the Bosnian society. The author claims that these media expose criminal activities and malfeasances of religious leaders, for which they are often qualified as «-phobic», often for no good reason. The media in this category are weekly newsmagazines «Dani» and «Slobodna Bosna» and daily newspaper «Oslobodenje».

Elements of «islamophobia» can be detected in the discourse dominating in the media in Republika Srpska, which is particularly pronounced in the biased reports and articles in which Islam is reduced and represented through its negative aspects like terrorism, fundamentalism, wahhabism and criminal activities. This discourse is not distinctively characterized by the clash between «secular» and «religious» visions of society, but dominated by the notion of clash between «us» and «them», between that which is accepted and the foreign, alien. These tendencies are most easily detectable in case of Banjaluka-based daily newspaper «Fokus».

Without questioning the methodology used in this research and the recognized good intentions of the author, it is, however, obvious that even if we are to accept this tripartite division of the media according to their treatment of Islam, we can easily detect clearly defined subcategories within these three groups (especially in case of the first two). Moreover, it is rather questionable to put «Mualim» and «Saff» in the same group, or even «Mualim» and «Preporod». In addition to this, the claim that antireligious elements are not present among the so-called civic media is not entirely correct.

The best example of this is the ongoing debate on the need for construction of new mosques in Bosnia, especially in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the focus on the city of Sarajevo. Even if we take into account the intention of pinpointing negative aspects of generally noble idea of construction of mosques, we often encounter ignorance with regard to this matter. Practical importance of construction of mosques, their dimensions, architecture and the actual need for them
are discussed by the people who do not go to mosques, have no expertise in civil engineering and fail to understand the concept and daily rhythm of Islamic prayers. Some objections are, therefore, justified, but, they do not stem form, I might say, clear understanding of Islamic way of life, but from antireligious discourse. In this case, new mosques are used to justify the criticism of the more pronounced presence of religion in public life. It is obvious that even in Bosnia they become symbols of the conflict between the religious and the public in a secular society.

This discourse is not negligible in the so-called civic media, in which some authors have the tendency to determine the borders and limits for presence of faith in the public life (manner of clothing, current discussion about “nikab” and “hijab”, manner of feeding).

In viewing the media interest for acts and statements of religious dignitaries in the past decade, there is no doubt that the biggest focus in the past several years has been on Reisu-l-ulema of the Islamic Community in BH, Mustafa effendi Ceric. His often political statements, which largely refer to the political situation in BH, are subject to various types of treatment. There have been different manners of interpreting his statements and analyzing the possible consequences that come from his public engagement. These differences result from different ideological and political convictions in the media, framed by editorial policies. Nevertheless, one should not diminish the significance of those media attempting to give an objective presentation of activities and statements by Reis Ceric. Still, the general impression is that the media in BH, especially those whose consumers are largely Muslims as well as those that belong to the Muslim cultural-historic circle, are greatly polarized. This was particularly notable in Reis Ceric’s several public appearances.

I will mention here three such cases, of which one is relatively clearly limited from the aspect of time and space, while the remaining two cases pertain to the Reis Ceric’s engagement, i.e. the engagement of the Islamic Community.

We shall start with the cases that represent a process, and one of them refers to the establishment of wahlhabism in the BH public discourse. In the beginning, the Rijaset of the Islamic Community in BH mainly either failed to react to greater presence of members of this unit in BH, or these reactions have been based on the importance of preserving Muslim unity, as well as unity within this proclaimed Islamic movement in BH in form of the Haneffi rite - the exception is the Declaration of the Rijaset of the Islamic Community, which appears to have been extorted by certain activities of members of the Wahhabi (Selefi) movement, which had threatened to lead to greater confrontations among Muslims in BH.

The media treatment of wahhabism in BH appears to be similar, but it is largely determined by the geographic position of the media in BH and its audience. This is why it is very important to stress that in BH there is Serb, Croat and Bosniac public as well as the so-called civic public. Each of these four public entireties has its own way of perceiving the matter of wahhabism in BH, which, again, has largely been affected by the media.

Majority of Sarajevo-based influential media, whose consumers are mainly Bosniaks, treat wahhabism as “imported” Islam, which is damaging to the traditional comprehension and practice of Islam in BH. After the Islamic Community attempted to bring wahhabism under the auspices of Islamic institutions, certain media supported this act while others expressed their utter disaccord. At this moment, the media treatment of wahhabism is of a somewhat lower intensity, largely due to different media appearances by representatives of the wahhabi community in BH.

The media in Republika Srpska, and to a somewhat lesser extent the Bosnian Croat media, also have a negative attitude towards wahhabism, but their negative reporting is not the consequence of their concern for “contamination” of Islam in BH, but of their fear of Islam and Islamic terrorism and the
fear that an Islamic state could be created in the entire BH territory. For this purpose, the self-proclaimed Islamic experts are engaged, among them Darko Trifunovic, Miroslav Jevtic, Domagoj Margetic, Dzevad Galijasevic. A private TV station from Bijeljina, BNTV, which is close to the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) is particularly active in this respect. RTRS too often flirts with the said ideas and persons, trying, at the same time, to create an illusion of neutrality and objectivity.

The following example refers to the media coverage of the case “Gluha Bukovica”, where a local imam was accused of molesting several girls under the age of 15. In this case, the Islamic Community acted like certain parts of the Catholic Church and stood behind its official. This resulted in huge interest of the media, especially in several Sarajevo-based weeklies and the political TV magazine “60 minutes”, which is broadcast by one of the entity public services, RTV FBiH.

Open confrontation with the Islamic Community, which did not handle the situation well, to put it mildly, launched an entire series of issues, of which some did not directly pertain to this case. One of the issues that was in the center of media interest was the issue of female adulthood in Islam.

The third case refers to media debates, often initiated by Mustafa ef. Ceric, which discuss the attitude of BH public towards the Ottoman heritage in the country. These media debates actualize the need for defining the relation towards this segment of BH past, in relation to the Ottoman and the Turks, which are characterized by extremes. On one side there is an initiative for supporting the symbiosis of Bosnian and Turkish Muslims, while on the other there is a request for “termination” of indisputable historic links between the Bosniaks and Turks. Some media are in the middle, trying to balance between the two extremes.

The so-called civic media also have a different treatment of officials of the BH Islamic Community and certain professors of the Islamic Theological Faculty in Sarajevo. Considering that the same professors had been subject to sharp criticism in the same media some fifteen years ago (especially professor Mustafa Spahic and Dr. Enes Karic), this can be explained in the following manner:

“Since Islam has irreversibly entered the public discourse, then it is better to support those that are, in opinion of the so-called civic option, a smaller threat to secularism in BH…”

Thus, the media have intentionally provided a platform for criticism of the Islamic Community and its leader on one side, and active participation in such debates on the other. This explanation does not refer to all media of the so-called civic provenance, and the author of this text himself shares many stands with distinguished professors at the Islamic Theological Faculty in Sarajevo. Still, the above mentioned explanation of the distinction could be useful in future analysis.

As we speak there is an open confrontation between the Rijaset of the Islamic Community in BH and the Federal TV. Although the antagonism between the two institutions has been present for a long time, it has culminated in the past several weeks. Namely, a document in which a part of the Bosniak political, religious and business establishment is accused of crime, corruption and supporting radical Islam, has appeared in public. Authorship of the document has been attributed to the Principal Deputy High Representative in BH, Mr. Raffi Gregorian. Public disclosure of this document resulted in sharp reactions of the Islamic Community Congress and Reisu-l-ulama himself in an interview for the State television BHT. These reactions were, again, followed by criticism from FTV targeted at the Islamic Community and Reis Ceric, accusing them of crime and corruption. In conclusion, on November 13th 2009 the Islamic Community requested an intervention from the Federation BH Parliament reiterating that the FBiH Parliament “is the founder of the loudest media exponent of compromisation of Islamic institutions, the Federal television, public service, whose Governing Board is appointed by the Parliament, and whose activities are, among others, paid by Muslims through TV subscription.”
It is important to emphasize there are media that present various attitudes regarding Islam and its use in politics, providing space for opposing opinions to be heard. This usually includes electronic media, and a good example is a private TV station based in Sarajevo, Hayat TV, and to some extent public broadcaster at state level BHT.

In case of Hayat TV, there is no necessarily equal amount of time and opportunity for presentation of different attitudes, but, on average, we can talk about a kind of balance in reporting, so for example, within few days, in this station's TV program, you can hear Mustafa Ceric’s opinions (Islamic Community Grand Mufti), as well as those of University of Islamic Sciences professors who are, more or less, his opponents.

Nevertheless, these attitudes cannot often be heard at the same time (if we are talking about dialogue shows), but I will say more about this in recommendations for media at the end of this presentation.

An important space for exchange of opinions is that of new media, especially in the form of internet forums. New media are characterized by the following:

Just like classical media, this media space is divided, which creates more than one public in BH.

Unlike classical media, since forum discussions are anonymous, there is less responsibility for things said, so in these discussions you can find extremely radical attitudes, regardless of ideology.

It is interesting to emphasize an example of recent discussion on Islam in Public Discourse, at one of Sarajevo portals. Different opinions went from suggesting Islamic Community Grand Mufti in BH to take over political leadership over Bosniaks, to suggesting the prohibition of Juma as a form of Muslim interaction because of, as stated, its influence on strengthening political and religious radicalization of BH Muslims.

Although, in comparison to European standards, a relatively small number of BH citizens has access to Internet, this form of informing and communication significantly influences the creation of public opinion on position and attitudes of Islam in BH. This thesis is supported by the fact that classical media often report on opinions of forum participants.

Conclusion:

Islamisation of politics, or politicization of Islam? This is a phrase that can often be heard in BH society today. Nevertheless, none of the two happens completely. Above all, here we have an intent of both, with accent on politicization of Islam.

But, one thing is sure: Islam today is an integral part of public discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Islamic Community representatives, its new forms, and discussions on it. Public discourse is very divided in BH, so there are different interpretations of Islamic activities in BH depending on the public. Nevertheless, the most active discussions, and those with most significant consequences are those led by Bosniak and, the so-called, civic public of the country, the representatives of these two public opinions.

Although media are just a part of public discourse, their role in the process is huge.

The media which report on Islam in political and national context in a positive light, and without too many questions asked, above all through activities and actions of BH Islamic Community leader, should change towards a more critical attitude and point to the negative consequences of certain phenomena and activities that can result from politicization of Islam. This reductionist approach in reporting improves the strengthening the antagonism, and contributes to politicization of Islam,
which lead to further heating of the situation. These media should be much more open to criticism of Islamic Community activities, baring in mind the journalist deontology.

Talking about media which mainly stick to facts, and offer their users possibility to hear all the parties involved, they could make their work in the future more significant if they affirmed the dialogue of those with opposing attitudes. Although they offer its users a relatively big picture, it is necessary to go a step further, provide a possibility to confront attitudes, and avoid a trap of presenting different attitudes in an isolated form, without interaction and opportunity to exchange opinions.

The group of media which almost exclusively provide Islamic Community leader's opponents to speak, leads to politicization of Islam with its reductionist approach, just like the first group of media. They will have to find a measure in their approach, especially because of those BH Muslims who accept criticism of Islamic authorities, and participate in it themselves. Their reporting, as already mentioned, has certain anti-religious feeling attached to it, because sometimes they see the role of religion and religious communities in a reductionist way, feeling that their space in public discourse should be significantly reduced.

General recommendation to all media has to do with one important fact:

It is important to understand that Islam has irreversibly become part of BH public discourse. Misuse of this fact, by using Islam in everyday politics, using it to incite Bosniak ethnocentrism, and using its role in the process of victimization of BH Muslims, only contributes, and will further contribute, to radicalization of the situation in the county. On the other hand, criticizing the introduction of Islam in public discourse, being in favor of reduction of Islamic practice and opinion, propagating the return of Islam to homes and mosques, could lead a great number of Bosnian Muslim into a false dilemma, forcing them to choose between the two options, the two most dominant ideas in BH. It is easy to conclude which of the two would Muslims choose, even if at their own cost.