Croatian Muslims or Bosniak Diaspora?

Two competing identities in contemporary Islamic Community in Croatia

Dr. Dino Mujadzevic, Alexander von Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow at Ruhr University, Bochum

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues

Firstly, I would like to thank organizers for their kind invitation to this conference.

This paper, based on written sources such as documents of the Islamic Community in Croatia, and national census data, as well on the interviews with the participants, my personal observation and even participation in the events in recent years, aims to illuminate the inner, yet still not formal and public, ongoing internal strife in the only Islamic organization in Croatia – Islamic Community in Croatia (henceforth ICC). Division line in this conflict is the future concept of the Community: to be a part of Bosniak Islamic transnational network or multiethnic Croatia-centered Muslim organization.

In order to grasp the origins of this confrontation in the ICC there are three main factors to account for:

1st factor: Historical Bosnian Muslim dominance in Muslim population in Croatia, membership and leadership of the ICC (and its organizational predecessors), as well as strong organizational, educational and personal connections to Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth ICBH).  

2nd factor: Muslim population in Croatia is multi-ethnic. People of Bosnian Muslim origin have been the largest group ever since, although since 1990s split in several parallel ethnic self-identification categories: Bosniak, ethnic Muslim, Croat of Muslim faith. In addition, there is a strong presence of Muslims of Albanian ethnicity. 

3rd factor: Strong tradition of positive relations between Islam and Croatian state and Croatian nationalism in 20th c., although the opposite tendencies also existed.

The 2000s proved to be a very successful period for Croatian Muslims which represent between 1 and 2% of country's population, evenmore for Islamic Community in Croatia. Besides, finally regulating the relationship with the state to its satisfaction and enjoying the positive attitude from political elite, media, other religious communities, Community leadership had now the time and resources to regulate its internal situation, especially to reassess the identity of the ICC. The adoption of the Statute of the Islamic Community in Croatia in 2005, represented the culmination of the process of formal stabilization and internal regulation within the Community. Issues of relationship towards Sarajevo

---


3 See, Hasanbegovic, Muslimani u Zagrebu, passim.
and Bosniak dominance in the Community were among the most important issues this document tried to solve.4

The Bosnian Islamic leadership during the 1990s was first to acknowledge close ties with Muslims in Croatia and include them in its newly emerging organisational framework. In 1993, on a session in besieged Sarajevo, assembly of the representatives of former Islamic Community in Yugoslavia adopted Constitutional Decision of Islamic Community of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which accepted the fact of dissolution of Yugoslavia and proclaimed the organizational independence. The document declared that “all Bosnian Muslims, temporarily or permanently residing in foreign countries … belong to Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Finally, Sabor of the Bosnian Islamic Community passed its first Constitution in November 1997 in Sarajevo. Article 1 of the Constitution proclaims, that Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina is (quotation) “the one and unique community of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosniaks abroad and other Muslims that except it as its own. Mešihat of the Islamic Community in Sandžak, Mešihat of the Islamic Community in Croatia and Mešihat of the Islamic Community in Slovenia are constitutive parts of the ICBH” (end of quotation). By this, Bosnian Islamic leadership defined its role as the Islamic organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In other countries, it would play this role only for Bosniaks or in Bosniak-dominated communities, such was, one assumed, the case in Croatia. Bosnian Islamic leadership has been since mid-1990s very enthusiastic about accepting the Bosniak ethno-political identity among Bosnian Muslims. Most of its officials have been ever since modeling themselves as Bosniak national activists, some, the most prominent former reis-ul-ulema Mustafa Cerić and Novi Pazar mufti Muamer Zukorlić. The Constitution very clearly expects from allied Islamic organizations abroad to follow the leadership in Sarajevo, which is, it is implied, spiritual center of all Bosniaks. It is, of course, assumed that all Bosniaks are, or at least should be, Muslim by religion. In addition, the Article 80 says that Islamic communities in Sandžak, Croatia and Slovenia are to regulate (quotation) „the organization of the religious life themselves”, but „in concordance with the ICBH Constitution” (end of quotation). Still the Constitution doesn’t give the Bosnian Islamic leadership any real control over ICC.5

On the other side, leadership of the ICC during 2000s acknowledged the ties towards Bosnia according the same lines. It would be formally united with Islamic Community in Bosnia and accept seniority of its leadership in Sarajevo, but de facto it would be the independent organization. Although the Statute of Islamic Community in Croatia adopted in 2005 makes in its first Article a brief but significant reference to the Croatian 1916 Law of Recognition of Islam, showing that it would also like to build its identity on tiny but existing modern Croatian Islamic tradition, the signs of connection to Bosnia were more abundant. Even the titles of their respective internal orders imply hierarchy between the two: the Statute of ICC and the Constitution of ICBH. In addition, the Croatian Community accepts the hijri calendar as regulated by specialists in Bosnia (Article 12). The report about the activities of Community in Croatia is to be given to the Rijaset in Sarajevo (Article 69), and the Sabor in Sarajevo is proclaimed to be the highest representative and legislative organ of the Islamic Community in Croatia (Article 88). Finally, the Islamic Community in Croatia is (quotation) „constitutive part of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (end of quotation, Article 139). Dependancy on Bosnian hierarchy is acknowledged clearly, but there was not a single word on the mechanism by which Islamic leadership in Sarajevo could effectively control Community in

Croatia. It was in reality a completely independent religious organization. Still, the creators of the Statute, clearly accept the notion – prescribed in Article 1 of the Constitution of the Bosnian community – that Islamic Community in Croatia is per se organization dominated by Bosniaks. The Article 13 of the Statute puts it cautiously and somewhat eccentrically, but explicitly: (quotation) „Islamic community is supra-national community, but not the anational one; that means that in its activities it acknowledges the fact that Muslims who are Bosniaks represent the majority. Therefore, the activities of Islamic Community in Croatia are implemented in direct collaboration with the activities of Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina“.

Nevertheless, the Bosniak dominance in the leadership of Croatian community during the 2000s as expressed in its 2005 Statute and distribution of leadership positions, was not reflecting the reality of ethnic identity distribution among Muslims in Croatia as proven by 2001 and 2011 national census data. Significantly less than 50% of Muslims in Croatia (44% in 2011) were identifying themselves as Bosniaks. Although the visibly larger part of Muslim population of Bosnian origin were identifying themselves as Bosniaks, numerous other believers with Bosnian Muslim background were choosing to accept other ethnic identities: decreasingly the ethnic Muslim (7% = one and increasingly Croat one (15% of all Muslims)).

The leadership of Islamic Community in Croatia, has been refusing to recognize in its official documents or hutbas reference to any ethnonim for people of Bosnian Muslim heritage other than Bosniak. The Croatian Islamic leadership (mufti and mešihat) was by far and large Bosniak, with few Albanians, but on the local level, especially in Zagreb, the persons of other ethnic persuasions were tolerated in larger numbers, incuding dissident ethnic persuasions for Bosnian Muslims. The disproportion between Bosniak dominance and the demographic and political reality was too great not to leave severe consequences.

The turning point for the internal relations in the visibly unified, peaceful and successful ICC came in the first half of 2012. As the first Croatian mufti Ševko Omerbašić was about to leave his office due to mandatory retirement, the fight over who's going to be his successor and enjoy the control over the distribution of resources as well as great public esteem, shaked the very foundations of the ICC. Hafiz Aziz Alić, main imam of Zagreb of Albanian ethnic origin and Bosniak Aziz Hasanović came to be candidates for the position, to which one is voted by selected body of representatives of camaats, dignitaries, clerics and Community’s personnel.

From the very start, the group around Aziz Hasanović was seen as representing the forces willing to continue the Bosniak grip over the ICC as well as continuation of the close ties with Bosniak Islamic trans-national network. Hasanović himself was a close ally of two most prominent clerics of ICBH, who were at the same time active as Bosniak nationalist leaders, reis-ul-ulema Mustafa Cerić and Novi Pazar mufti Muamer Zukorlić. It was at the private university in Novi Pazar, owned by Zukorlić and heavily supported by Cerić, where Hasanović successfully defended his Ph. D. thesis in Islamic theology and acquired in just a few years the title of the full „regular“ university professor. As my interviews with the several Hasanović’s supporters and opponents show, the group around Hasanović used anti-Albanian chauvinistic arguments to attract supporters, of course only in private settings. The possibility of mufti of Albanian origin was represented as danger of Albanian take-over of, allegedly Bosniak, ICC. All the supporters of Hasanović, with only one major exception, were of Bosniak ethnic persuasion, heavily from Zagreb Islamic High school, but also from Bosniak

---

6 This document hasn’t been published yet and I was able to study it due to help by assistant to the ICC Mufti for legal matters, Mirsad Srebreniković. The copy of the text is in my private possession. It is due to be published in 2014 in forthcoming volume Legal Documents on Islam in the Republic of Croatia, published by Brill.

7 Stanovništvo prema narodnosti i vjeri, popis. http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/H01_01_12/H01_01_12.html

8 Description of the inner divisions and groups, as well as the following account of the event in ICC are entirely based on my personal observation and interviews with several of the participants from both currents.
conservative cultural organization „Preporod“, which is itself not part of the Islamic Community, but whose magazines („Preporodov journal“ and „Behar“) are influential among conservative Bosniaks in Croatia. The most prominent mufti’s supporter was Mirza Šabić, entrepreneur and son of one of the most influential Bosniak leaders in 1990s, late Salim Šabić. Mirza Šabić will later in 2012 join Mustafa Cerić and Muamer Zukorlić at the founding congress of their new project: „Bošnjački svjetski kongres“ as the only representative of Bosniaks from Croatia. Paradoxically, the unofficial political sponsor of this group became the left leaning Croatian president Ivo Josipović.

On the other hand, Alili managed to attract supporters from various ethnic backgrounds. His group, with basis around Zagreb medžlis has included prominent Bosniaks Albanians, Croats and people of other ethnicities. The Bosniak support for Alili came mainly from the moderate and fairly secular Bosniak organization „Bošnjačka nacionalna zajednica Hrvatske“. Alili’s supporters, most prominently the Albanian community leader Gzim Rexhepi and president of Bosniak party „Stranka demokratske akcije“ Mirsad Srebreniković, had good contacts with conservative Croatian party „Hrvatska demokratska zajednica“, led by Tomislav Karamarko, but also to the populist mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić. According to my observations and interviews with several participants, the fact that multi-ethnic group of Alili’s supporters of had good connections in conservative Croatian circles, could possibly be connected to the fact that most of them primarily identified with Croatian context, rather than their ethnic community. My observation was that Alili's Bosniak, as well as other, supporters were usually realists who realized the multiethnic situation in the ICC and were themselves very good integrated into Croatian society. The Alili's Bosniak supporters preferred him over Hasanović, who represented the trans-national Bosniak Islamic network, and instead choose a candidate for whom they thought it could better represent the interests of Muslims in Croatia regardless of his own ethnic background. According to them, the interests of Muslims in Croatia cannot be any longer identified with Bosniak interests in Croatia. If done so, they reckon, the ICC would face more tensions on ethnic lines. They were fully supportive of keeping the distance towards ICBH (although not completely break with it).

In May 2012 Hasanović was able to win with narrow majority and to organize mešihat of ICC exclusively with people who support him and to slowly purge some of Alili's supporters who were employed as personnel in Croatian Islamic Community. Although personally bitter, seriously damaging for interpersonal relations and marginally debilitating for functioning of the ICC, the fight never got into the public - and media were not reporting on internal divisions in ICC. Nevertheless, the internal divisions continue to rock it: the next battlefield is Zagreb medžlis controlled by Alili supporters. The elections for this body are due for 2014 and there is no possibility to foresee how will this fight end.

Conclusion

I argue that the main line of the division in ICC lies in the confrontation of the two different discourses in its ranks: the one that sees Islam in Croatia primarily as the part of trans-national Bosniak Islamic network with the center in Sarajevo and stresses the centrality of Bosniak ethnicity for Islam in Croatia; and the other one that creates its identity around the notion of Islam in Croatia and stresses its multi-ethnic nature. In other words, the line of division in Islamic Community in Croatia resembles the one in Serbia (Bosniak ethno-centric Islam versus multiethinic Islam centered on the adherence to Serbian state), but the level of confrontation remains quite different. Contrary to the formal schism between Islamic communities in Serbia, the opposing factions in ICC are informal networks, almost invisible for non-insiders, but with the firmly established narratives, positions, territories, membership, leaderships, international networks of support and important allies in Croatian political life. Nevertheless, the fight between two currents remains discrete, hidden from the eyes of the broader public, and it is mostly focused on the election process inside Islamic Community in Croatia and administrative measures within it. Behind the commonly shared discourse of Islamic ethic and
piety and solidarity with *ummah*, as well as loyalty to Croatian state, rule of law, common European future and multi-culturalism, there is a bitter confrontation that could possibly paralyze ICC in future.

Thank you very much for your attention.