

# **Report on the UPF Conference in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina**

December 15, 2016 – by Jacques Marion

On December 15, 2016, at the Holiday hotel in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), UPF organized a conference in partnership with the International Institute for Middle East and Balkans Studies (IFIMES) and the Association for BiH-Asia Cooperation, Understanding and Sophistication (ABACUS).

With the theme of “Social consensus, interreligious understanding and regional cooperation for a new Europe”, the conference was a follow up of the International Leadership conference held in September in London where the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace had been inaugurated. It aimed at developing a network for the Parliamentarians for Peace initiative in the Balkans.

About 70 participants attended, including religious leaders, political leaders, several ambassadors and members of diplomatic missions, scholars and NGO representatives.

Putting an end to the Bosnian war, the 1995 Dayton agreement divided the country into two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serb Republic, and established multiple levels of government and administration. The burden thus imposed on development, the scars of the war and the unsatisfying division of the country, make the theme of social consensus and interreligious understanding a central concern.

Professor Anis Bajrektarevic, Head of the Mission of IFIMES in Vienna, opened the conference with greetings, followed by Jaques Marion, UPF Europe Secretary General, who introduced UPF's Parliamentarians for Peace Initiative and the vision behind the UPF proposal of an Interreligious Council at the United Nations.

Then H.E. Milan Dunovic, the Vice President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, gave greetings to participants, introducing briefly his country's multireligious nature and experience.

The first session, on the theme “Interreligious Council – model for peace and reconciliation in Europe”, was moderated by Peter Haider, president of UPF Austria. He introduced the three top religious leaders in the country, representing Judaism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism, who were on the panel, and who have set up since 20 years an Interreligious Council to overcome the divisions that plague the nation.

H.E. Jakob Finci, President of the Jewish community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of its co-founders, said the Interreligious council was created to show that “if religions were not the cause of the war, they should prove they could be part of its solution”. He then went on to describe their activities, emphasizing the ethical, not theological nature of their discussions.

The next speaker was His Eminence Cardinal Vinko Pujic, the Catholic Archbishop of Sarajevo, Head of the Catholic Church, another co-founder of the Council. He recalled the painful war circumstances during which they decided to create the Council, eventually formed in 1997. “Europe will not overcome the challenge of diversity unless Bosnia and

Herzegovina does it”, he said, deploring the widespread mood of hopelessness among the population, and adding that the key for the future was to keep a sense of responsibility, honesty and morality.

H.E. Grigorje, Bishop of Zahmulje-Herzegovina, Head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, underscored the courage it took to establish the Council. War is possible with religion, he said, but peace without religion is not. There will be no integration in Europe without an integration of religion. He remarked that there was little resistance to interreligious dialogue in the country, but thought it should be institutionalized, and expressed the wish to get more support from government authorities.

Several questions, including challenging ones, came from the audience, who seized the unique opportunity to meet three top religious leaders of the nation. Peter Haider concluded by recommending them to “export” this experience to other nations in Europe, which would certainly benefit from it.



Opening speech by Jacques Marion



Orthodox Bishop, Catholic Cardinal and Jewish Leader on the panel, with Vice President of BiH and Brazil Ambassador looking on



Prof. Anis Bajrektarevic opening the conference



View of the audience

The second session on the theme “Building consensus for a new Europe” was moderated by Camilla Habsburg-Lothringen, the IFIMES Director for Euro-Med Diplomacy and Intercultural Affairs. As a direct descendant of the Austrian Imperial dynasty, Camilla Habsburg’s presence in Sarajavo – her first visit – raised interest and curiosity: there, in 1914, her family ancestor,

Archduke Ferdinand, was killed by a Serbian nationalist, triggering the beginning of World War I.

Speakers included:

Dr Walther Lichem, former Director of the Department of International Organizations at the Austrian Foreign Ministry, who underlined the importance of societal integration in our modern era, recalling experiences from his long diplomatic career.

Prof. Shekjerinka Ivanovska, Dean of the Faculty of Economy of the International Slavic University in Macedonia, who gave an assessment of the economic situation and future in the Balkans.

Dr Sam Osmanagich, an Anthropologist, Director of the Bosnian Valley of the Pyramids, who described his interdisciplinary project to unearth secrets of early Bosnian history.

Then Ms. Ivana Tihi-Babic, a youth leader of BiH Tomorrow's People Platform, who gave a positive, hope-filled presentation on the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The multicultural nature of Bosnian society, she affirmed, was the best asset of the country to lead the way toward a brighter future in Europe.



3 Religious leaders with Camilla Habsburg-Lothringen and Peter Haider

Second panel: Camilla Habsburg-Lothringen; Prof. Shekjerinka Ivanovska; Dr Sam Osmanagich; Prof. Dr Walther Lichem and BiH Youth Leader Ivana Tihi-Babic

The third session, on the theme: "Parliamentarians for peace and regional cooperation", moderated by Jacques Marion, began with a keynote speech by H.E. Valentin Inzko, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Office of High Representative was created as part of the Dayton Agreements with the mission to supervise its implementation). Dr Inzko described the challenges and potential of the country he is supervising since 2009. He described its cultural traditions, its political system, saying the specific multicultural challenge of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans as a whole, made this region a real training ground for a peaceful Europe.



Third panel: from left. Jacques Marion, H.E. Valentin Inzko, Hon. Sead Sahman, Hon. Gaqo Apostoli; Dr. Zlatko Hadzidedic

High Representative to BiH H.E. Valentin Inzko

Other speakers included:

Hon. Sead Sahman, a young Member of Parliament of Montenegro, who shared about his country's inclusive policy toward minorities, its imminent inclusion into NATO, its candidacy to join the EU.

Hon. Gaqo Apostoli, former Minister of Transport, Member of Parliament for three legislatures and current chairman of the UPF Peace Council of Albania, who reflected on regional cooperation among parliamentarians and spoke about the achievements of UPF in his country of Albania.

And Dr. Zlatko Hadzidedic, former Political Advisor to the Minister of Human Rights and Refugees and a current Professor of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo, who gave an analysis of what he considers a basic flaw in the political set up of Bosnia and Herzegovina: the fact that national sovereignty is being divided and transferred to lower echelons of power controlled by ethnic groups, at the expense of Bosnia's national sovereignty.

A discussion on this sensitive and passion-filled topic ended the conference, which Jacques Marion concluded with a few words on UPF future plans in the Balkans.