

Bosnians Consider Balkan Consensus

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Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina -- Consensus and cooperation in the Balkan region were the focus of a conference held on December 15, 2016.

The conference, held at the Hotel Holiday, was organized by UPF in partnership with the International Institute for Middle East and Balkans Studies (IFIMES) and the Association for B&H-Asia Cooperation, Understanding and Sophistication (ABACUS).

With the theme of "Social Consensus, Interreligious Understanding and Regional Cooperation for a New Europe," the meeting aimed at developing a network in the Balkan States for the Parliamentarians for Peace initiative. It was a follow-up to the International Leadership Conference that UPF held in September in London, where the new International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace was inaugurated in Europe.

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, Austria, opened the conference with greetings, followed by Jacques Marion, the UPF-Europe regional secretary general, who introduced UPF's Parliamentarians for Peace initiative and the vision behind the UPF proposal for an Interreligious Council at the United Nations.

Then H.E. Milan Dunovic, the vice president of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, greeted the participants, introducing briefly his country's multireligious nature and experience.



The first session, on the theme “Interreligious Council -- A Model for Peace and Reconciliation in Europe,” was moderated by Peter Haider, the president of UPF-Austria. He introduced the panel for the session: three top religious leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, representing Judaism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Twenty years ago they founded an Interreligious Council to overcome the divisions in the nation.

H.E. Jakob Finci, president of the Jewish community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 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 described the council's activities, emphasizing the ethical -- rather than theological -- nature of its discussions.

His Eminence Cardinal Vinko Pujic, the Catholic archbishop of Sarajevo and head of the Catholic Church, recalled the painful war circumstances during which they decided to create the council, which eventually formed in 1997. “Europe will not overcome the challenge of diversity unless Bosnia and Herzegovina does it,” he said. He deplored the widespread mood of hopelessness among the population and added that the key for the future was to keep a sense of responsibility, honesty and morality.

The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, H.E. Grigorje, bishop of Zahmulje-Herzegovina, 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 said. He remarked that there was little resistance to interreligious dialogue in the country, but thought it should be institutionalized and expressed the wish to receive 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. Moderator Peter Haider concluded the session by recommending that the conference participants “export” this experience to other nations in Europe, which certainly would benefit from it.

The second session, on the theme “Building Consensus for a New Europe,” was moderated by Camilla Habsburg-Lothringen, the IFIMES director for Euro-Mediterranean diplomacy and intercultural affairs. The presence in Sarajevo of a direct descendant of the Austrian imperial dynasty -- on her first visit -- raised interest and curiosity. In 1914, her family ancestor, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was killed in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist, triggering the beginning of World War I.

The speakers of the second session were:

Dr. Walther Lichem, a former director of the Department of International Organizations at the Austrian Foreign Ministry. Recalling experiences from his long diplomatic career, he underlined the importance of

societal integration in our modern era.

Professor 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 Balkan States.

Dr. Sam Osmanagich, an anthropologist and 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 B&H Tomorrow's People Platform, 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.



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 Agreement with the mission to supervise its implementation.) Dr. Inzko described the challenges and potential of the country he has supervised since 2009. He described its cultural traditions and its political system, saying the specific multicultural challenge of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Balkan States as a whole, made this region a real training ground for a peaceful Europe.

Other speakers of the third session were:

Hon. Sead Sahman, a young member of Parliament of Montenegro, who spoke about his country's inclusive policy toward minorities, its imminent inclusion into NATO, and its candidacy to join the European Union

Hon. Gaqo Apostoli, former Albanian minister of transport, a member of Parliament for three legislatures and the current chair of the UPF Peace Council of Albania. He reflected on regional cooperation among parliamentarians and spoke about the achievements of UPF in his country.

Dr. Zlatko Hadzidedic, a former political advisor to the Bosnian minister of human rights and refugees and a current professor of political science at the University of Sarajevo, gave an analysis of what he considers a basic flaw in the political setup 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's future plans in the Balkan States.