

CROATIA

*Dino Mujadžević*¹

Introduction

The good relationship between the State and the Islamic Community in Croatia (*Islamska zajednica u Hrvatskoj*, ICC), continued in 2020. This body represents, by and large, the majority of Muslims in the country and is officially recognised and funded. The COVID-19 caused major temporary disruptions of the religious life in the ICC, including the halting of Friday prayers. The ICC, in collaboration with the World Muslim League (*Rābiṭat al-‘ālam al-islāmī* - WML) and the Catholic Church in Croatia organized in February 2020 an international conference with most important Croatian political and religious dignitaries attending.

There were no significant, visible tensions between the resident, mostly Balkan-rooted, Muslim population and the majority Croatian Catholics. Violent acts targeting domicile Muslim population remained extremely rare. The plans to construct the Islamic cultural centre in Pula were met with protests by a group of inhabitants of that city and prompted ICC to try to calm tensions.

The public debate on the influx of non-European Muslims into the country lessened further in comparison to previous years when it was a major topic due to the massive transit of refugees and migrants, partially due to COVID-19. Still, the allegations about the mistreatment and forced returning of migrants and refugees, many of them from Muslim countries, at the

¹ Dino Mujadžević is Gerda Henkel Researcher at the Department for Slavic Studies at Humboldt University Bochum. He is the author and editor of the volumes *Annotated Legal Documents on Islam in Europe: Croatia* (Leiden Brill: 2015) and *Digital Historical Research on Southeast Europe and the Ottoman Space* (Berlin Peter Lang 2021) as well as the author of the book *Asserting Turkey in Bosnia 2002-2014* (Wiesbaden Harrassowitz: 2017).

Croatian border were reported by primarily international media and humanitarian media while Croatia denied these allegations. The Islamist terror attacks in France and Austria caused major interest of media and prompted the representatives of the ICC to once again publicly condemn the violence and stress that Islam had no connection with terrorism.

Public Debates

In 2020, despite the presence of significant number of refugees and migrants from Muslim countries near the Croatian border, in the Western parts of Bosnia, and their constant attempts to enter Croatia seeking to reach Western Europe, this public debate was limited compared to previous years, largely overshadowed by the very lively debates and pressing problems associated with COVID-19 pandemic. Although negative views may still be prevalent among the majority in Croatia as it was the case in 2019, in 2020, there were several major governmental and NGO initiatives seeking to help socialize and employ refugees in Croatia.²

In 2020, the greatest public controversy in Croatia related to refugees and migrants continued as in few previous years: the allegations of forcible “pushbacks” of persons seeking international protection, mostly from non-European Muslim-majority countries. In this year also, several international and Croatian human rights organisations and media outlets accused the Croatian border police of the systemic praxis of violently mistreating and returning refugees and migrants who attempt to enter Croatia, usually from Western Bosnia, and called for immediate international action to stop them. Croatian authorities deny these allegations. The Croatian Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA) deemed the terrorist threat from Islamist

² Anja Vladislavljevic, “Southeast Europe Countries Still Oppose Migrants, Poll Finds”, *Balkan Insight*, 23 September 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/23/southeast-europe-countries-still-oppose-migrants-poll-finds/>; “HUP i isusovci potpisali sporazum, pomagat će u integraciji izbjeglica”, [Croatian association of employers and Jesuits sign a deal to help integrate refugees], *Index.hr*, 25 November 2020, www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/hup-i-isusovci-potpisali-sporazum-o-suradnji-pomagat-ce-u-integraciji-izbjeglica/2233414.aspx. See also <https://www.irh.hr>, all accessed 7 December 2020.

terrorism in Croatia as low in its report for 2019 (published in 2020).³ Nevertheless, the public association of jihadi terrorism with Islam in general in the media landscape seems to be on decrease in comparison with previous years. To further avoid this association, media featured ICC's appeals not to use the adjective "Islamic" in relation to such terrorist crimes.⁴ Aziz Hasanović, the president of the Meshihat (governing council) and the Mufti of the ICC, insisted in an interview that terrorist acts are the result of ignorance about Islam and performed by renegade groups and individuals, often, he claimed, manipulated "from various centres".⁵ The mainstream media also occasionally commended the ICC for its successful integration into Croatian society, its cooperation with the authorities in radicalism prevention, and for its public condemnation of terrorism and violence.

Very strong public reaction in Croatia to jihadist terror ensued after the series of attacks in France in October 2020, especially regarding the murder of the teacher Samuel Paty who was targeted for showing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to his pupils. The media reported in detail the circumstances of Paty's murder deeming it as an attack on the freedom of speech and expression.⁶ Mufti Hasanović condemned these attacks as unjustifiable acts of violence, but also at the same time condemned unspecified "insults" against French Muslims "that are insincerely billed as freedom of speech".⁷ The terrorist attack in Vienna (November 2, 2020)

³ "Javno izvješće 2019/2020" [Public report 2019/2020], 2020, www.soa.hr/files/file/Javno-izvjesce-2019.pdf, accessed December 2020.

⁴ See for example, "Zašto bih ja iz Zagreba bio na meti vandala zbog zločina terorista" [Why would I from Zagreb be targeted by vandals due to crimes of terrorists], *NI Hrvatska*, November 8 2020, <http://hr.n1info.com/Vijesti/a573123/Zasto-bih-ja-iz-Zagreba-ili-Pariza-bio-na-meti-vandala-zbog-zlocina-terorista.html>, accessed 5 December 2020.

⁵ "U Njemačkoj imate 2000 imama koji ne znaju njemački. Možete zamisliti kako će oni integrirati" [In Germany there are 2000 imams who doesn't speak German. You can think how they will integrate], *Jutarnji list*, November 8 2020, www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/u-njemackoj-imate-2000-imama-koji-ne-znaju-njemacki-mozete-zamisliti-kako-ce-on-integrirati-15030251, accessed 6 December 2020.

⁶ See for example, Gordan Duhaček, "Francuska brani slobodu govora u ime cijele Europe [France defends the freedom of speech in the name of entire Europe], *Index.hr*, 30 October 2020, www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/francuska-brani-slobodu-govora-u-ime-cijele-europe/2226302.aspx, accessed 7 December 2020.

⁷ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/osuda-teroristickog-napada-i-vrijedanja, accessed 4 December 2020.

also attracted a lot of media attention due to geographical proximity and historical connection of Croatia with Austria.

In November 2020, the preparations to start with the building of the new ICC's Islamic cultural centre with masjid in the town of Pula were met by public demonstration from the part of local inhabitants of the neighbourhoods near to the planned building site. The controversy has been reported by the major Croatian mainstream media as well as international media in Croatian language. The local opposition to this project continues for several years and the opponents of the project usually claim that they object not the presence of Muslims but the lack of transparency in its preparation and possible disruption of daily routine in a quiet neighbourhood, especially the possibility, denied by the ICC, that minaret will be a part of the object. Nevertheless, they insist on the relocation of the project. As of the end of 2020, the Pula city authorities were claiming that the project would go ahead.⁸ In December, Mufti Hasanović appeared in the central news programme of the Croatian public television (HRT) and attempted to calm the atmosphere and clear misunderstandings about the project.⁹

Transnational Links

The most important transnational link for the ICC remains its adherence to the international network of Bosniak, or Bosniak-dominated, Islamic communities centred around the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini* - ICBH). Organised visits by ICC dignitaries and to the ICBH communities and institutions in Bosnia and other countries, as well as sister Islamic organizations in Kosovo and Macedonia – all parts

⁸ “Prosvjednici u Puli zbog islamskog centra: 'Ne smetaju nam muslimani nego lokacija’” [Protesters against Islamic centre in Pula: We don't mind Muslims but the location], *Radio slobodna Evropa*, November 27 2020, www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mje%C5%A1tani-naselja-u-puli-ne-%C5%BEele-islamski-centar-u-svom-susjedstvu/30972198.html, accessed 7 December 2020.

⁹ “Islamski kulturni centar izazvao podijeljene reakcije u javnosti” [Islamic Cultural Center caused divided reactions in the public], *vijesti.hrt.hr*, 9 December 2020, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/687644/islamski-kulturni-centar-izazvao-podijeljene-reakcije-u-javnosti>, accessed 20 December 2020.

of the former common Yugoslav Islamic Community – were common in previous years but due to the restrictions caused by COVID-19 there were fewer of them in 2020. For example, Mufti Hasanović visited the mufti of the Bosnian town Bihać Mehmed Kudić in February and visited ICBH’s branch in Serbia and met its mufti Mevlud Dudić in November.¹⁰ Alongside his collaborators, he was present at the inauguration ceremony of the new *rais al-ulama* of the Islamic Community of Northern Macedonia, Shaqir Fetahu.¹¹ The *rais al-ulama* of the ICBH, Husein Kavazović, publicly expressed sympathy with citizens of the Croatian capital Zagreb and Muslims in that city after the 22 March earthquake caused large material damage.¹²

While there were numerous visits by diplomatic representatives and religious dignitaries from Muslim majority countries to Mufti Hasanović and the ICC in previous years, in 2020, due to the COVID-19 situation, these contacts decreased in number. In 2020, they included communication with diplomats and religious dignitaries from Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.¹³ Western diplomats and dignitaries from Spain and Vatican also visited the ICC premises.¹⁴

In November, the ICC organized in Zagreb a funeral prayer for the deceased Kuwaiti emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, who has been described as a great friend and generous benefactor of Croatian Muslims.¹⁵ The aid of Saudi royal family to 250 financially disadvantaged Croatian Muslim families, including refugees and migrants, was distributed in

¹⁰ <http://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/naslovnica/muftija-posjetio-predsjednika-mesihata-iz-u-srbiji>, accessed 4 December 2020.

¹¹ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/muftija-akademik-aziz-ef-hasanovic-na-inauguraciji-reisa-hfz-shaqir-fetahua, accessed 4 December 2020.

¹² “Reis Kavazović izrazio suosjećanje s građanima Zagreba” [The reis Kavazović expressed sympathy for the citizens of Zagreb], *Radiotelevizija Tuzlanskog kantona*, 22 March 2020, <https://rtvtk.ba/reis-kavazovic-izrazio-suosjecanje-sa-gradjanima-zagreba/>, accessed 7 December 2020.

¹³ <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/nj-e-fakhraddin-gurbanov-posjetio-muftiju>; for diplomats and religious dignitaries from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey see later in the text.

¹⁴ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/veleposlanik-kraljevine-spanjolske-posjetio-muftiju; <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/apostolski-nuncij-posjetio-muftiju-0> accessed 8 January 2021.

¹⁵ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/obavljena-dzenaza-namaz-emiru-drzave-kuvajt, accessed 4 December 2020.

Zagreb during Ramadan (May 2020).¹⁶ Despite its adherence to Hanafi Sunni Islam, the ICC has warm relations with Iran. Mufti Hasanović met no less than three times with Iranian ambassador to Croatia in 2020.¹⁷

The relationship between the ICC and Turkey seems to be especially close. The contacts include high-level visits and financial assistance. Mufti Hasanović is a member of the presidency of the Euro-Asian *shura*, an advisory institution sponsored by the Turkish state. In January, the members of the parliamentary delegation of the Republic of Turkey (Ziya Altunyaldiz, Ismail Emrah Karayel and Ugur Kilinc) visited the ICC in Zagreb and met with Mufti Hasanović. In February, the call for participants in the Youth School of Leadership and Dialogue 2020, a program implemented by the Center for the Culture of Dialogue (*Centar za kulturu dijaloga* - CCD) in cooperation with the ICC (specifically by its branches in Zagreb and Rijeka) with the support of the Office for Turkish Diaspora and Related Peoples of the Republic of Turkey, was issued. Also, in the same month, the Islamic Center in Rijeka was visited by a delegation of the Republic of Turkey, including Özgül Özkan, Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey, and the ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the Republic of Croatia, on the occasion of the opening of the European Capital of Culture 2020.¹⁸ In 2020, Mufti Hasanović met three times with Turkish ambassadors and representative of the Turkish international aid agency (TİKA).¹⁹

Law and Domestic Politics

¹⁶ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/podjela-humanitrne-pomoci, 4 December 2020.

¹⁷ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/veleposlanik-islamske-republike-iran-nj-e-parviz-esmaeili-posjetio-muftiju; <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/muftiju-posjetio-veleposlanik-irana>; <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/veleposlanik-ir-iran-posjetio-muftiju> 8 January 2021.

¹⁸ <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/delegacija-turske-posjetila-islamski-centar-rijeka>, 8 January 2021.

¹⁹ <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/veleposlanik-republike-turske-kod-muftije>; <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/susret-muftije-i-veleposlanika-republike-turske>; <https://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/parlamentarna-delegacija-republike-turske-posjetila-muftiju>, accessed 8 January 2021.

During 2020, the influx of refugees and migrants coming to Croatia via the so-called Balkan route, most importantly via Western Bosnia, continued albeit in small numbers and through illegal crossings, sometimes assisted in their attempts by smugglers. Border controls remained very strict, and the Government continued to take a firm stance, defined in the earlier period, that further uncontrolled immigration, or the transit of such persons, would not be allowed.²⁰ Those that managed to enter into Croatia undetected in most of cases attempted to reach Slovenia and later other EU countries. A minority sought to obtain international protection in Croatia.²¹ While vehemently denying the allegations of systematic violent pushbacks presented by among others some members of the European Parliament, the representatives of the Government claimed the police is proceeding in accordance with the EU and Croatian law, and that most of the people attempting to enter the country illegally were economic migrants, not refugees.²² An official inquiry by the EU ombudsman has been launched into the European Commission's alleged failure to protect the rights of migrants and refugees said to have been robbed and abused by the police at Croatia's borders. The EU ombudsman is investigating the potential complicity of the EU's executive branch in the maladministration of funds that should have been spent on supervising the behaviour of border officers working at the scene of some of the violence.²³

The number of people from non-European Muslim background settling or attempting to settle in Croatia in recent years was low. In the period 2015-2019 only 777 persons were

²⁰ "Božinović: Hrvatska neće dopustiti ilegalne migracije" [Božinović: Croatia will not allow illegal migrations], *Vlada RH*, 1 September 2019, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/bozinovic-hrvatska-neze-dopustiti-ilegalne-migracije/26678>, accessed 8 January 2021.

²¹ "Hrvatska lani odobrila 155 zahtjeva za azilom" [Croatia approved last year 155 applications for asylum], *Tportal*, 25 April 2019, www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/hrvatska-lani-odobrila-155-zahtjeva-za-azilom-20190425, accessed 8 January 2021.

²² "Božinović odbacuje optužbe na račun postupanja hrvatske policije prema migrantima" [Božinović rejects allegations concerning the actions of the Croatian police towards migrants], *Vlada RH*, 27 January 2020, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/bozinovic-odbacuje-optuzbe-na-racun-postupanja-hrvatske-policije-prema-migrantima/28648>, accessed 7 December 2020.

²³ Lorenzo Tondo, "Inquiry launched into EU commission's protection of migrants at Croatia border", *Guardian*, 10 November 2020, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/nov/10/inquiry-launched-into-eu-commissions-protection-of-migrants-at-croatia-border, accessed 7 December 2020.

granted international protection and in 2020 there were 436 persons in the process of seeking international protection.²⁴

During 2020, Croatia was governed by the centre right Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*; HDZ) party in coalition with smaller political partners. This party confirmed its parliamentary majority at the general elections held in July 2020 in the aftermath of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall situation in the country was stable but the general decrease of economic activity due to lockdowns and travel restrictions created huge burden to already delicate public finances. The HDZ government is also responsible for strict border control aimed at preventing the influx of migrants and refugees associated with alleged excessive police violence and abuse.

Activities and Initiatives of Main Muslim Organisations

The ICC and the Catholic Church in Croatia, to which the large majority of Croatian population belongs, continued to keep traditionally good relations in 2020. In Zagreb, 4-5 February 2020, the Meshihat of the ICC in Croatia and the World Muslim League organised a conference *Human Brotherhood - the foundation of security and peace in the world* in cooperation with the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in Croatia, and under the auspices of the President of the Republic, the Croatian Parliament, the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the City of Zagreb. The opening speeches were delivered by Mufti Hasanović of the ICC, Secretary General of the World Muslim League (Rabita), Muhammed bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, and the Archbishop of Zadar and President of the Croatian Bishops' Conference, Želimir Puljić as well as Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, the President of the Republic, and Andrej Plenković, the Prime Minister. The conference, was also attended by many other prominent

²⁴ Migrants i izbjeglice u Hrvatskoj teško do škole i posla [Migrants and refugees in Croatia have a hard time to go to school and get a job], *Deutsche Welle*, 28 February 2020, www.dw.com/hr/migranti-i-izbjeglice-u-hrvatskoj-te%25A1ko-do-%25A1kole-i-posla/a-52558232, accessed 7 December 2020.

persons from Croatian political, religious and academic life. It resulted in the adoption of the *Zagreb Declaration on Human Brotherhood for Strengthening Peace and Security in the World*, in which conference participants pointed out the importance of promoting the value of human brotherhood as the most important points for achieving peace and harmony in society.²⁵

The ICC adjusted its operating to the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. In early March 2020, first measures were undertaken to tackle the spreading of the virus: during the congregational prayers disinfection of hands was encouraged and hand-shaking was discouraged; symptomatic persons were asked not to attend communal prayers; Friday prayers were shortened; the religious instruction in the spaces under the control of the ICC was suspended. Nevertheless, due to the worsening of the situation, the national lockdown in Croatia was introduced and the ICC complied introducing restrictive measures on religious life of the ICC. On 11 March, Mufti Hasanović, in accordance with the measures undertaken by the Croatian government and the recommended practices of the leadership of the ICBH, ordered the halt of all congregational prayers, including Friday prayers, in the ICC mosques and masjids; funeral prayers were to be held exclusively by the members of immediate family; “all holders of religious authority” were asked not to utilize “absurd, trivial and irresponsible interpretations of the appearance of this pandemic”;²⁶ the ICC congregation was asked not to spread fake news, panic and disinformation.²⁷ After 11 May, prayers in congregation in mosques and masjids of the ICC were again organised but under special rules including ritual ablution to be taken at home, mandatory disinfection of hands and two meters distance, the prohibition of hand-shaking etc.) and again on 3 December, the ICC decreed that Friday communal prayers within its organisation will be performed only by the ICC personnel and

²⁵ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/zavrsena-konferencija-donesena-zagrebacka-deklaracija, 5 December 2020.

²⁶ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/nove-upute-o-ponasanju-u-dzamiyamamesdzidima-obustava-aktivnosti, 4 December 2020.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

that other members of the congregations should follow Friday sermons via the ICC Youtube channel.²⁸

In recognition of the work of Croatian health professionals against the pandemic, the Zirat (humanitarian wing of the ICC), launched in December an action under the motto *Hvala Vam!* (Thank You!). With this action, Zirat handed over food and drink packages to the medical staff of the Dubrava Clinical Hospital in Zagreb, currently converted into a COVID-19 Hospital, to thank all its health workers for the great help they give citizens.²⁹

The ICC property endured severe damage during the 22 March 2020 earthquake that hit Zagreb and surrounding areas. The offices of the ICC on Tomašićeva street were heavily damaged and officially declared unusable until further notice.³⁰

The ICC has engaged in frequent communication with the Croatian government and local politicians. In June 2020, Mufti Hasanović visited the new president of the Republic of Croatia, Zoran Milanović and in November he met PM Andrej Plenković.³¹ The vice-president of the government for social activities and human rights, Boris Milošević, and the commander of the Main Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia, Mirko Šundov visited the Mufti in the ICC premises.³² The collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems especially strong: Mufti Hasanović gave a lecture to the attendees of its diplomatic academy and exchanged visits with the minister of foreign and European affairs. During these meetings,

²⁸ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/muftija-odrzao-predavanje-za-polaznike-diplomatske-akademije; www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/zbog-epidemioloskih-mjera-hutba-se-moze-pratiti-putem-youtube-kanala, both accessed 4 December 2020.

²⁹ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/kroz-akciju-hvala-vam-istaknut-znacaj-zaposlenih-u-zdravstvu, accessed 4 December 2020.

³⁰ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/u-potresu-tesko-ostecena-zgrada-u-kojoj-je-smjesten-mesihat, 4 December 2020.

³¹ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/muftija-dr-aziz-ef-hasanovic-se-sastao-s-predsjednikom-republike-g-zoranom-milanovicem, www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/susret-muftije-i-predsjednika-vlade-rh, accessed 9 December 2020.

³² www.islamska-zajednica.hr/index.php/izdvojeno/nacelnik-glavnog-stozera-osrh-posjetio-muftiju, accessed 8 January 2021.

the ICC's interreligious initiatives and the efforts promoting Croatia in Islamic world were lauded.³³

The ICC participated as a partner in the *Novi susjedi* (New Neighbors) project which was implemented by the CCD within the scheme of the Ministry of the Interior. It is co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Commission (AMIF) and the state budget of Croatia. It aims to increase the success of integration of persons who have been granted international protection in Croatia. In June, the ICC and the CCD hosted an 'Id-al Fitr dinner in the Zagreb Islamic Center for persons under international protection and publicly presented this project in the Islamic Center of the ICC in Zagreb.³⁴ This project was the main topic of the November meeting between Mufti Hasanović and PM Plenković.

The construction of the mosque in Sisak (Islamic Cultural Centre in Sisak, *Islamski kulturni centar u Sisku*) is currently in its final stages and, in November 2020, the ICC website reported that the peak at the top of its minaret was erected.³⁵

In 2020, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Croatia and associated humanitarian organization Humanity First distributed on several occasions, partially in association with the Catholic *Caritas* organization, humanitarian aid to the economically disadvantaged citizens of Zagreb, including Qurbani meat, food packages, and school supplies.³⁶

Muslim Population: History and Demographics

³³ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/ministar-vanjskih-i-europskih-poslova-rh-posjetio-muftiju, accessed 4 December 2020.

³⁴ <http://www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/bajramski-rucak-s-osobama-s-odobrenom-medunarodnom-zastitom>, www.islamska-zajednica.hr/izdvojeno/javnosti-predstavljen-projekt-centra-za-kutluru-dijaloga-novi-susjedi, accessed 4 December 2020.

³⁵ www.islamska-zajednica.hr/index.php/izdvojeno/postavljen-alem-na-dzamiji-u-sisku, accessed 8 December 2020.

³⁶ <https://www.ahmadiyya-islam.org/hr teme/humanity-first>, accessed 8 December 2020.

The history of Muslims and Islam in Croatia is very old, but without continuity. The settlement of *Ismaeliti*—a Muslim population of unclear, but probably largely Central Asian, origin (not to be confused with Ismailis as we know them today)—is documented in 1196 in Osijek.³⁷ During the 16th century, the Ottomans established their rule in the Eastern parts of the country (Slavonia, Banija, Kordun, Lika, inner Dalmatia). During the 16th century, according to reliable estimates, about a quarter of the population in Slavonia, the largest and most populous province under Ottoman rule, were Muslims, living mostly in towns. The Muslim population in Slavonia mainly originated from elsewhere in the Ottoman realm, chiefly Bosnia, and the number of indigenous converts to Islam was relatively small. There are no reliable estimates for the Muslim population of other parts of Croatia. Islamic religious infrastructure, such as mosques, *tekkes* and *waqfs*, was fairly well-developed during the 16th and 17th centuries.³⁸ Ottoman rule in Croatia ended after the Habsburg and Venetian conquest of the region at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries. The Muslim population left these areas or were expelled, killed or enslaved. All Islamic religious infrastructure was destroyed or changed for other purposes.³⁹

Muslims started to return to Croatia from 1878, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire occupied present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, so the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bosniaks, were able to settle in other parts of the empire. According to the 1910 census, only 204 Muslims lived in Zagreb and other Croatian towns. The Croatian parliament recognised Islam as an official religion in 1916. After the establishment of the South Slavic state (later

³⁷ Mažuran, Ive, *Srednjovjekovni i turski Osijek (Medieval and Turkish Osijek)* (Osijek: Zavod za znanstveni rad u Osijeku HAZU, 1994), p.50.

³⁸ Močanin, Nenad, *Slavonija i Srijem u razdoblju osmanske vladavine (Slavonija and Srijem in the Age of Ottoman Rule)* (Slavonski Brod: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2005), p.43; Močanin, Nenad, *Turska Hrvatska (Turkish Croatia)* (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, 1999), pp.146-147, 178-179.

³⁹ For the plight of the Muslim population in the lands reconquered by the Habsburgs, including Croatia, see the autobiographical accounts of Ottoman prisoners in Habsburg captivity, such as Osman-Aga of Temisoara, *Der Gefangene der Giauren. Die abenteuerlichen Schicksale des Dolmetschers Osman Ağa aus Temeschwar, von ihm selbst erzählt (The Captive of Infidels. The Adventurous Fate of the Translator Osman Ağa of Temișoara, Told by Himself)* (Graz-Vienna-Cologne: Verlag Styria, 1962).

Yugoslavia) in 1918, Muslims, mostly Bosniaks, began to settle permanently in larger numbers in Zagreb. According to the census of 1931, there were 4,750 Muslims in Croatia, around 3,000 of them in Zagreb. In 1919, a Muslim religious community (*džemat*) headed by an imam was officially founded in Zagreb. Previously independent, this community officially became part of the Yugoslav Islamic Religious Community (*Islamska vjerska zajednica*) in 1934. A shari'a court was established in Zagreb in 1935, adjudicating on legal issues relating to Muslim marriage, family and inheritance.

A mosque in Zagreb was built in 1944 under the pro-Axis Croatian Ustaša regime, which used it for propaganda purposes. Some imams in Croatia collaborated with the regime, and in 1945, when the Communists came to power, were severely punished by execution or imprisonment. After legal reform in Yugoslavia in 1946, the shari'a court in Zagreb stopped working. In 1948, the Communist Zagreb City authorities closed the mosque and destroyed minarets. Under the Socialist regime (1945-90), Muslims in Croatia continued to operate within a renewed Yugoslav Islamic Community, with the community in Zagreb as the centre of religious life. Croatia achieved independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, and, by 1993, the Yugoslav Islamic Community was officially dismantled, and the Islamic Community in Croatia (*Islamska zajednica u Hrvatskoj*, ICC) started to operate *de facto* independently. In 1999, the Chief Imam of Zagreb, Ševko Omerbašić, became the first Mufti of the ICC, and in 2012, Aziz Hasanović, became the second.⁴⁰

The largest Muslim ethnic group in Croatia is Bosniaks (31,479; 0.73% of the total Croatian population), who are also the second largest ethnic minority in the country. Among Bosniaks in Croatia, 88% of them (27,959) identified themselves as Muslims in the 2011

⁴⁰ For the history of the modern Muslim community, see Omerbašić, Šefko, *Islam i muslimani u Hrvatskoj (Islam and Muslims in Croatia)* (Zagreb: Mešihat Islamske zajednice u Hrvatskoj, 2nd edn. 2010); Hasanbegović, Zlatko, *Muslimani u Zagrebu, 1878-1945. Doba utemeljenja (Muslims in Zagreb, 1878-1945. The Foundation Age)* (Zagreb: Međžlis Islamske zajednice u Zagrebu i Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2007), p.31; Marinović Bobinac, Ankica, and Dinka Marinović Jerolimov, *Vjerske zajednice u Hrvatskoj (Religious Communities in Croatia)* (Zagreb: Prometej, 2008), pp.285-286.

Census. This traditionally, exclusively Muslim ethnic group is, in Croatia, composed of immigrants from Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro (who came largely to the country in the second half of the 20th century), and their descendants. The number of Bosniaks has increased sharply in recent years; according to the 2001 census, only 20,755 Bosniaks lived in the country. This change is not the result of migrations and/or high birth rates, but rather the product of a transformation in ethnic self-perception (*narodnost* according to the Croatian classification) among the population with Bosnian, Serbian or Montenegrin Muslim roots in Croatia. The relatively high number of persons who identified themselves as ethnically “Muslim” in 2001 (19,677 according to the census) dramatically decreased in a decade (down to only 7,558 according to the 2011 census).

The ethnonym “Muslim” was used, until 1993, as the official term for Bosniaks in Bosnia and elsewhere in former Yugoslavia and, sometimes, for other Slavic Muslims in Macedonia and Kosovo. The 1991 census listed 43,000 “Muslims” in Croatia. It is fair to assume that most of the “Muslims” of the 2001 census were of Bosniak origin, but due to various factors, such as ignorance about the new terminology or a desire to assimilate into Croatian society by accepting a more neutral ethnic identification, they did not identify themselves as Bosniaks.⁴¹ This situation has changed drastically due to the propagation of a Bosniak ethnic identification, which was one of the main activities of Bosniak minority organisations during the 2001-2011 period. The second largest Muslim ethnic group in Croatia are Croats, the ethnic majority in the country (3,874,321; 90.42% of the overall Croatian population). In the 2011 census, 9,647 Croats (0,002% of their total number) identified themselves as Muslims. The relatively large number of Croat Muslims is the result of ethnic

⁴¹ Tanković, Šemso, *Bošnjaci u Republici Hrvatskoj (Bosniaks in the Republic of Croatia)* (Sarajevo: Vijeće Kongresa bošnjačkih intelektualaca, 1997).

and cultural assimilation by non-Croat Muslim immigrants, and their descendants, from other parts of the former Yugoslavia during the 20th century.

A large number of Muslims in Croatia are to be found among Albanians (17,513; 0.41% of the total population), a community mainly consisting of immigrants from Kosovo and North Macedonia, who settled in Croatia in the second half of the 20th century, and their descendants. More than half of the Albanians in Croatia (54% (9,594)) identified themselves as Muslims, the rest being mainly Roman Catholics. A significant part of the Roma population in Croatia (16,975 in total or 0.40% of the overall population) has Muslim roots (29% of their total population). The Muslim part of the Roma population in Croatia are immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia, and their descendants, who like the others came to Croatia in the second half of the 20th century.⁴² In recent years, especially after Croatia joined EU in 2013, a small number of Muslims of non-European descent settled in Croatia, either as internationally protected persons or otherwise, but their exact number is currently not known. The revised numbers about the Muslim population are expected after the 2021 national census.

Muslim Population 62,977 (1.47% of population in 2011).⁴³

Ethnic Backgrounds Largest ethnic groups among Muslims:⁴⁴

- Bosniak: 44.3%
- Croat: 15.3%
- Albanian: 15.2%
- ethnic “Muslim”: 12.0%

⁴² *Popis stanovništva 2011 (Population Census 2011)*, www.dzs.hr, accessed 4 January 2021.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

Roma 8.0%

Turkish 0.5%.

Inner-Islamic Groups

No official data available, but it is assumed that the prevailing majority of Muslims in Croatia are Hanafi Sunnis, with a very small number of other Sunnis, Twelver Shi'is and adherents of the Ahmadiyya group.

Geographical Spread

28.7% of the Muslim population is concentrated in the Zagreb metropolitan area; 16.9% live in Primorsko-goranska, 15.8% in Istarska, 6.6% in Sisačko-moslavačka, 4.6% in Dubrovačko-neretvanska, 4.2% in Vukovarsko-srijemska and 3.4% in Karlovačka counties (*županije*).⁴⁵

Number of Mosques

Four full mosques with minarets (Zagreb, Rijeka, Gunja, Bogovolja) and ca. 25 *masjids*.

Muslim Burial Sites

Only one completely Muslim graveyard exists, in the village of Gunja. Separate

⁴⁵ *Županija* (pl. *županije*) is Croatian term for an administrative region, sometimes translated as 'district' or 'county'. The city of Zagreb is administratively and statistically independent from the *županije* system.

Muslim burial sites can be found in other cities as part of larger city graveyards. These are in: Zagreb, Split, Osijek, Rijeka, Karlovac, Dubrovnik, and Slavonski Brod.

“Chaplaincy” in State Institutions

According to the *Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities* (2002), religious communities have the right to organise a chaplaincy (*dušobrožništvo*) in health and social care institutions, prisons and penitentiaries, the military and in the police. The details concerning the exercising of these rights are left to each religious community to negotiate separately with the Government, through the various agreements made between religious communities and the administrative bodies of these institutions, or local/State authorities.

Halal Products

Since 2010, the Centre for Halal Quality Certification of the ICC has been operating in Zagreb (Tomašićeva 12/2). Since 2011, several Croatian restaurants and hotels were awarded halal certificates by this Centre, (the full list of certified companies, restaurants

and hotels can be obtained at the webpage of the Centre: www.halal.hr). Unlicensed slaughter is strictly prohibited by Croatian law, while *qurban* slaughter is organised by the ICC, together with a local meat processing company. There are no specialised halal food stores or restaurants, nor other Islamic services companies in Croatia.

Places of Islamic Learning and Education *Islamska gimnazija* Dr. Ahmed Smajlović, Zagreb (ICC's private high school; www.islamska-gimnazija.hr).

Muslim Media and Publications www.islamska-zajednica.hr: the official website of the ICC featuring the news and service information about the community as well as articles on various Islamic subjects
www.medzlis-rijeka.org: the official website of the Rijeka branch of the ICC
www.medzlis-sisak.net: the official website of the Sisak branch of the ICC
<http://medzlis-split.org>: the official website of the Split branch of the ICC

<https://medzlis.org>: the official website of the Pula branch of the ICC

www.ahmadiyya-islam.org/hr/: the official website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Croatia featuring news about the movement and other articles.

Main Muslim Organisations

- The Islamic Community in Croatia (*Islamska zajednica u Hrvatskoj*, Tomašićeva 12, 10 000 Zagreb, tel: ++385 1 4614 473, e-mail: tajnistvo@islamska-zajednica.hr). This was, until recently, the sole Islamic organisation in the country, and the large majority of Croatian Muslims associate with it. According to its leadership though, only a small portion of people who frequent mosques and prayer rooms are actually official members. The ICC grew out of the Croatian branch of the Islamic Community in Yugoslavia (ICY), and it is based on the Bosnian Sunni Hanafi tradition. This organisation has had a continuous traditional presence in Croatia since World War I. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the ICY was dismantled and separate Islamic Communities for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia emerged in 1993. The ICC accepts the nominal leadership of the Bosnian Islamic Community (although it is a de facto independent organisation), and is dominated by persons of Bosnian Muslim origin. In 2002, the ICC signed a contract with the Croatian government which has given it generous State support and recognition of its activities.

- Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Croatia (*Ahmadija muslimanski džemat u Hrvatskoj*, Brezovička 122A, 10415, Novo Čiče, tel.: ++ 385 1 4680 979). This organisation is part of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Croatia was

officially registered as a religious community in Croatia in 2013. It is reported that in 2019 the community had only 10 members but it has active humanitarian and publishing operations and online presence. In the same year, the community opened a brand-new centre in the vicinity of Zagreb.