
Report on the 11th Sarajevo UN World Interfaith Harmony Week

February 1–7, 2023

International Forum Bosnia, Sarajevo

International Forum Bosnia held its regular programme of events to mark the 11th Sarajevo UN World Interfaith Harmony Week this year on the 1st and 2nd of February. The activities this year were held as a post-covid hybrid event for the first time and consequently involved only two panels, whose members attended via a combination of Zoom and physical presence at the International Forum Bosnia (IFB) premises in Sarajevo. There was no public audience physically present, though members and friends of IFB did attend via zoom link.

IFB has held events to mark World Interfaith Harmony week every year since 2012, making it the only continuous and maintained response in Bosnia and Herzegovina to the appeal issued to UN member-states by the UN General Assembly at a session held on October 20, 2010. The events have varied in size and scope from week-long multi-faceted events, including concerts and art exhibitions, the core of our programme has always been made up of academic colloquia or symposia on interfaith topics. In the absence of reliable support on the part of the UN system or its member organisations present in Bosnia and Herzegovina and given the unsettled political situation in the country following the elections last year, with governments still to be formed at most of the various levels of Bosnia's complex system of governance, this year's event was pared back to a core of two academic panels. Participants were drawn from three of Bosnia's oldest multi-ethnic public universities and from long-term IFB partners within the country and abroad, representing perspectives from three of the four constituent faith traditions of Bosnian religious life. We were particularly pleased to welcome the participation our long-term partner Sonja Biserko from the Serbian Helsinki Committee on Human Rights and Dr Aarif Abraham, a committed human rights activist and barrister with Garden Court North Chambers in the UK, who spoke on the themes arising from his recent book, *The Constitution of the People and How to Achieve It?*, published in 2021 by Columbia University Press. Dr Abraham's book is a very timely examination of the lessons that the UK and Bosnia have to learn from each other, given their recent experiences of constitutional turbulence and the best ways to achieve inclusive constitutional orders under conditions of pluralism.

The key themes of this year's programme were presented in the overall title, *Human Dignity, Social Justice, and the Revival of Communities*.

There were two constituent panels, on the following topics:

- The First Panel on *Individual Dignity and Social Plurality*

The rising role of ideology and of collective modes of thought in the contemporary world requires constant renewal of our shared focus on the nature and rights of the individual and how individuals coalesce to form plural social systems in which all can pursue their personal, familial, and communal development under conditions of mutual respect. The fundamental

value of the individual lies at the heart of all religious and social systems and plurality is our inescapable condition. Any honest academic, philosophical, or policy-related research into or investigation of social and political conditions or action to promote social justice must start from and ultimately return to the perspective of the individual.

➤ The Second Panel on *Financial Policy and Social Justice*

Justice is to speak and realise truth in society. What contemporary humanity lacks most is surely a focus on Justice, in so far as one third of humanity lives under conditions of need and distress. All religious and social value systems place an emphasis on the creation of social justice as the precondition for enabling environments within which individuals and families can pursue their human development. This requires an adequate understanding of the role of money, financial flows, and financial policy as instruments of both inequality and human and social betterment. Under the gathering social storm and the global cost of living crisis, there can be no more urgent topic that how to integrate money and its uses in positive ways into the development of more just societies.

The panels took place as envisaged, with five speakers at the first and five at the second panel, giving talks of approximately 15 minutes each. The first panel was preceded by an address by the president of International Forum Bosnia, while the second panel was closed by a reflection on IFB's 25 years of work, since its foundation in 1996-7 by a group of concerned intellectuals, academics, and public figures from various walks of life and civil society both within the country and from abroad as a concerted response to the degradation of society and intrasocietal and interfaith relations in Bosnia and the wider region during and as a result of the 1991-1995 war against Bosnia.

The programme was initiated as envisaged at 17:00 on February 1, 2023, with a talk by Rusmir Mahmutćehajić on the *Religious foundations of Freedom, Justice and Solidarity*.



This was followed by the panel on *Individual Dignity and Social Plurality*, chaired by Professor Asim Zubčević of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences of the University of Sarajevo and the Chair of the International Forum Bosnia's Centre for Interfaith Dialogue. The speakers were as planned:

1. Sonja Biserko, the President of the Serbian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, who spoke on *Human Rights: Ongoing Challenges*;

2. Prof. Midhat Izmirlija of the Faculty of Law of the University of Sarajevo, who spoke on *Equality and Equal Treatment*;
3. Prof. Ivo Marković of the Franciscan Theological School of the University of Sarajevo and founder of the world-renowned Pontanima Choir, who spoke on *Individual Dignity and the Subversion of Religion*;
4. Prof. Mirjana Nadaždin Defterdarević of the Faculty of Law of the Dzemal Bijedić University of Mostar, who spoke on *Individual Dignity as a Reflex of Self-Determination and Social Recognition*, and
5. Dr Aarif Abraham, who spoke on *The Constitution of the People and How to Achieve It?*



The panel was followed by a discussion of some 20 minutes, which focussed first on the presentation by Dr Abraham and then on the talk by Prof. Marković.

The individual presentations and the discussion will be accessible on the IFB Youtube channel or via the IFB website. The panel was chaired in English, but participants were free to speak in their preferred language, so that they gave their talks in Serbian, Bosnian, Bosnian, Bosnian, and English, respectively. The discussion was in English.

The second panel was on *Financial Policy and Social Justice* and was held the following day, February 2, 2023. It was chaired by Desmond Maurer, the head of the IFB Centre for Historical studies.

While it was intended that the panel should start at 17:30 and last approximately one and a half hours, with five participating panellists, technical difficulties meant that the order of speakers had to be changed, allowing Prof. Čaušević to come physically to the IFB premises to hold his talk in person, so that rather than the first he was the fourth speaker. Difficulties with the zoom connection used by Dr Papić also lead to issues with the quality of the recording, so his presentation was rerecorded after the fact. Finally, Prof. Hodžić, who was until recently the Prime Minister of Tuzla Canton and is currently serving as a member of the Bosnian parliament, was not able to join us live to make his presentation, which was taped separately. The panellists each spoke for approximately 15 to 20 minutes, as follows:

1. Prof. Sabina Silajdžić of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Sarajevo, who spoke on *Financing Growth and Development: an Insight into Western Balkan Perspectives*;
2. Prof. Amina Nikolajev of the Faculty of Law of the University of Sarajevo, who spoke on *Environmental Challenges and Social Justice*;
3. Dr Žarko Papić, founding member of the IFB, minister and governmental advisor on economic and social affairs to various governments of the SFRY and its constituent republics, to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to various UN agencies, as well as former Yugoslav ambassador to the OECD, who spoke on *Poverty and Social Justice*;
4. Prof. Fikret Čaušević the Faculty of Economics of the University of Sarajevo, who spoke on *Social Justice and Growth*; and
5. Prof. Kadrija Hodžić the Faculty of Economics of the University of Tuzla, who spoke on *Challenges of Economic Development*.





The panel's presentations were then followed by a short address by IFB President, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, who also put a number of questions to the panellists, who then answered in turn.

The panel was chaired in English, but participants were free to speak in their preferred language, so that they gave their talks in Bosnian. The discussion was in Bosnian. Again, the individual presentations and the discussion will be accessible on the IFB Youtube channel or via the IFB website.