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## Islamic community in Serbia – the Sandžak case

While analyzing the situation of Islam and, generally speaking, Muslim communities in former Yugoslavia, either from the political, cultural, sociological, or any other point of view, one has usually in mind the largest and the most widely known population, that is the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Bošnjaci, Muslimani*<sup>1</sup>). Although they are the most recognized and the largest group (the population of about 3 million, out of which 2.2 million live in the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina; CIA 2011), there are several less known ethnic groups which are living in the Balkans and whose confession is Islam.

What is interesting, many of them are ethnic Slavs who changed their confession during the years of the Ottoman rule in the Balkan Peninsula. This was the case of the Bosnian Muslims, but not only theirs. Each of the neighboring states of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the east and south, that is Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, as well as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have their own homogeneous and indigenous communities which have been confessing Islam for several hundreds of years and are of Slavic ethnic origin (which means that we do not take into consideration the Albanian and Turkish populations of these countries nor the newcomers from the Middle East). These are the Gorans (*Gorani*) in Kosovo, Torbeshs (*Torbeši*) in Macedonia and the Bosniaks (*Bošnjaci*) of Sandžak, which is the historical region in both Serbia and Montenegro. All those communities are extremely interesting, no matter whether the history or the contemporary times are taken into consideration; still, I decided to devote this paper to the Muslim community of Sandžak – its history and current situation seen from many angles – historical, economic, ethnic, religious and many more. Firstly, the brief history of the region will be presented, and then I will look into the current matters and will outline the most important problems with which the Muslims in Sandžak deal, concentrating on the most important one, i.e. the threat of Islamic fundamentalism from the Middle East which is penetrating the traditional community. To start with, I will present a brief outline of the situation in the province, then I will look into the specific traditions of the Balkan Islam, and finally the most interesting and important issue as mentioned above will be analyzed.

<sup>1</sup> Both names are used in different contexts describing the same community; *Muslimani* (Muslims) as the official name of one of the six constitutional nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1971 and 1991, nowadays this term is used in foreign works; the members of this nation refer to themselves as *Bošnjaci* (Bosniaks).

### Sandžak throughout the history

Nowadays neither Serbia nor Montenegro has officially a region called Sandžak or similar. This name refers to the historical region covering 8,403 km<sup>2</sup> on both sides of the Serbian-Montenegrin border, with the administrative and cultural centres in Novi Pazar and Pljevlja, which was known under that name (Sandžak, Sandžak of Novi Pazar) during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (CIA 2011). The name is of Turkish origin and comes from the word *sançak*, which meant “the flag” and was used in the Ottoman Empire to refer to the first level of administrative division. In the current administrative division of Serbia the region belongs to the Raška district and partially to Zlatibor district, while in Montenegro it covers the whole northern part of the country and consists of five municipalities.

The region has a very complex history. It was colonized by the Slavs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and during the Middle Ages rose to be one of political and cultural centers of the Serbian State under the names of Raška and Zeta between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since the political centre of the Serbian state moved northwards as a result of the wars with Turkey, the region’s importance declined, and finally in 1455 it fell into the hands of the Ottoman Empire which transformed it into a separate province. Thus it remained until the advent of Austro-Hungarian occupation in the year 1878.

During the Ottoman rule, similarly to the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, many of the inhabitants of the province converted to Islam. The conversion was caused by a number of factors, mainly economic – since Muslim landowners and craftsmen paid lower taxes, and the elements of social discrimination in the Ottoman Empire, as far as the Christian and Jewish minorities were concerned, ceased to exist.<sup>2</sup> Such conversions could be observed in all Christian provinces of the Empire, while on a large scale only in Bosnia, Sandžak, Kosovo and Albania, where – according to the 19<sup>th</sup> century reports – between 50% and 90% of the population changed their faith to Islam, retaining certain elements of the Christian tradition in their everyday life (Zirojević 2003). The second factor which caused the Islamization of this territory was the migration of population throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. After a series of wars with Turkey on the losing side, in which the Christian population of the Empire collaborated with Turkey’s opponents, the Ottomans started to force Christians out these regions northwards, and at the same time the Islamic population of the newly created Serbian state was uprooted and transferred to the Turkish territory. The lands abandoned by the Serbian population were repopulated by those immigrants from Serbia (mostly ethnic Serbs who confessed Islam, as well as Turks) and other Muslims from the Caucasus, Middle East and Asia Minor, who looked for new opportunities or the possibility to practice Islam. These movements were called *Velika Seoba Srba* in the Serbian historiography, and the new colonists from the Asian part of the Empire and the Caucasus were called *muhadžeri*<sup>3</sup> (Stanojević 2003: 178). Finally, another

<sup>2</sup> These were for example the compulsory military service (*yeni ceri*).

<sup>3</sup> This term has been known in Islam since its beginnings, at first it was the name given to the group of Muhammad’s comrades and supporters who flew from Mecca to Medina; in the

reason of the fast Islamization of this territory was, according to Anna Parzymies, its geographical location, which allowed Sandžak to become a local trade centre, facilitating conversions among traders, who found it easier to deal with customers throughout the Empire (Parzymies 2005).

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was very important in terms of shaping the current ethnic and political situation of Sandžak. Austria supported the separation of Sandžak province from Turkey, or at least its autonomy within the Ottoman State. This would prevent Serbia and Montenegro from unifying and, on the other hand, could be a reason for further expansion of Austria in the Balkans (in those plans Sandžak would become a part of Bosnia). The Muslim factor was very important, since the Austrians claimed they had to support the idea of Sandžak region in order to protect the Muslim minority from the Orthodox Serbs and Montenegrins (Terzić 1997: 319–329).

All this led to the creation of a completely new ethnic situation in Sandžak. After the World War I the region was included in the newly established state of Yugoslavia, being a link in the chain of areas settled by Muslims which starts in the Western Bosnia and ends in Kosovo and Eastern Macedonia. Although not being an administrative unit, it has been a significant area, since it was the only place in Serbia settled by ethnic Slavs who adhered to Islam. During the Communist era there was a problem of describing the ethnic identity of Slavs confessing Islam, since Serbs perceived them as “Muslim Serbs”, Croats as “Muslim Croats”, while they defined themselves as “Yugoslavians” in official censuses. Finally, in 1971 Muslims were granted the status of the sixth constitutional nationality in Yugoslavia, though not all of those who declared this were practicing Islam (it was the way of avoiding the granting of the right to self-determination to Bosniaks). The Muslims of Sandžak also declared to be Muslim, while many of them consider themselves to be Bosniaks.

As far as the ethnic map of Sandžak today is concerned, the region is divided almost evenly between the Serbs and the Bosnians. The Western part is mainly inhabited by Orthodox Serbs and the Eastern part by Muslims who, after 1991, self-determine themselves as Bosniaks (*Bošnjaci*), identically as the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>4</sup> However, in the international publications “Muslim” is commonly the term referring to Bosniaks, especially in discourse related to the wars of the 1990s. The municipalities with the largest percent of Bosniak population are Tutin, Novi Pazar and Sjenica in Serbia and Rožaje in Montenegro, with the average share of 70% of population being Bosniaks there (Republic of Serbia Office for Statistics 2011).

The Islamic population in Serbia has its own organization called the Islamic Community of Serbia (*Islamska zajednica Srbije*), which takes care of the organizational and religious life of the Muslim community throughout the country. There are over 120 mosques in the country, an Islamic university, *madrasa* and various Islamic

Ottoman Empire this name was given to all those who changed their place of living in order to freely practise Islam.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the Muslims from Sandžak (about 19,300 people according to the 2002 census) still declare their nationality as Muslims (*Muslimani*), not Bosniaks (*Bošnjaci*).

organizations. As for the region of Sandžak, since it has a Muslim majority, it has its own regional organization called *mešihat* headed by mufti Muamer Zukorlić, residing in Novi Pazar (Mešihat Islamske zajednice u Srbiji 2011).

### Muslim traditions in Sandžak

As can be even seen from what is written above, there are numerous factors which influenced Balkan Islam and the way it has been practiced. All that resulted also in a specific approach to Islamic traditions, which merged with many local customs. This came out of a very common practice called in Serbian *dvoverje* – “double faith” i.e. retaining secretly the Christian faith while officially confessing Islam. Such an approach has been confirmed for many European provinces of the Empire from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century (Zirojević 2003: 6–9). The reason was, as Zirojević sees it, the fact that although Islam is strictly adherent to monotheism and observance of the rules provided in holy scriptures, it is also a religion which is quite prone to syncretism and sprouted a plethora of modalities, just to mention Wahhabis on one hand, and Bektashites on the other. There are many elements of Islam (not in the orthodox version, but present in many local variations) which were easily adaptable in the Balkans, since they were in fact taken from the Christian or Jewish tradition, such as the cult of saints, pilgrimages to their graves, cult of relics and many more.

Thus even today many links to Christianity are found in the Balkan Islam, also in Sandžak. Olga Zirojević (2003) mentions the following (some of them are historical, but still they influenced the current shape of Balkan Islam):

- visiting orthodox churches and monasteries and caring for their wealth,
- upholding the cult of icons and other holy objects, such as crosses and medallions,
- retaining the rituals such as baptizing the children and giving them double names, a Muslim and a Christian one,<sup>5</sup>
- observing certain traditional holidays, such as *slava* (holiday of the Patron Saint of the family), as well as elements of the Christian holiday traditions (in Serbia such as *badnjak*<sup>6</sup> and *pogača*<sup>7</sup> during Christmas, traditional carnival – *povorke*, coloring eggs on Easter), as well as the pagan ones, later adapted also by the Orthodox Church, the most notable is the Đurđevdan – St. George’s Day, traditional feast of spring, called *al-Hidr* or *al-Hizr* (‘the Green’) among the Muslims,<sup>8</sup>
- unique eating style – e.g. alcohol is not strictly prohibited, eating pork is not unheard of,

<sup>5</sup> It can be even seen in the traditional proverbs, such as *Do podne Ilija, od podne Alija* – Ilija (Orthodox) until noon, Alija (Muslim) in the afternoon.

<sup>6</sup> A bouquet made of oak leaves and grass, which is taken to church on Christmas.

<sup>7</sup> A type of wheat bread eaten on Christmas morning.

<sup>8</sup> This goes back to the tradition of Moses’ friend, mentioned in Qur’an, who discovered spring of water that gave him immortality; in the Balkans associated with Saint George and being the patron of rain and spring.

— different approach to women – they are allowed to work, do not need to wear traditional dresses or cover their hair and may walk alone in the streets.

All these, however have been subject to change. Many Islamic traditions, also the syncretized ones, ceased to exist during the Communist era, when the secularization of the society has influenced also the Muslim part of the community. Since the ties with Islam have not been very strong (as can be seen above) and the population was isolated from the main religious centers because of political reasons, many people (today the generation between 40 and 60 years of age) left Islam for atheism which was supported by the state. As of today, the Muslim traditions and lifestyle are subject to further changes, resulting from the complex situation of the region and its society.

The pace of changes in practicing Islam in Sandžak as well as throughout all the former Yugoslavia has increased after the fall of communism and the breakup of the federal state in 1991. The further part of this article presents the main changes as well as threats to the Sandžak Muslim community at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Muslim population in Sandžak today – the situation, problems and perspectives**

When discussing the Muslim community in Sandžak today, it is necessary to take into consideration three major groups of factors which affect it. These are geopolitical, economic and social factors. I will now try to analyze all of them and highlight the most important problems and issues.

As far as geopolitical issues are concerned, the most important factor is the region's geographical location. Since it borders with Kosovo and has a significant Muslim community, there is a constant threat of following the Kosovo scenario, that is separatism and pursuit of autonomy. This is a threat mainly for Serbia, which fears losing another part of its territory. Another problem is the issue of the rights of the Serbian minority in the Bosniak-dominated areas, which Serbia often sees as threatened. There are some political powers in Sandžak who demand autonomy inside Serbia on ethnic and religious basis, with the most influential being the Party of Democratic Action in Sandžak (SDA), led by Sulejman Ugljanin. They stand in opposition to the second main political party, supported by the Serbs, but also by many Bosniaks, the Sandžak Democratic Party led by Rasim Ljajić. The inner political situation is therefore highly complex, since not all of the Bosniaks support the idea of autonomy, fearing the possibility of economic difficulties and a low level of organization of institutions in a newly created state organism. Political instability and possible ethnic tensions caused by the complex ethnic structure are the first of the dimensions where danger lurks for the future of the region.

The antagonism between the main political parties in Sandžak is also a subject of political games in Serbian politics. The government of Serbia supports the Ljajić's party, which is a member of the ruling coalition and Ljajić himself holds the position of the Minister for Labor and Social Policy in the Government of the Republic of Serbia. The SDP is perceived as a "clan party", which points to nepotism and corrup-

tion in its structures, and its activities are not always considered legal; the party structure is sometimes compared to organized crime structures, but it obtained support from the Serbian authorities because it does not demand autonomy or separation from Serbia. That policy is also supported by the religious leader of the Sandžak Muslims, who sees co-operation with Serbia as a chance to avoid the influence of radicals from Bosnia and Sandžak itself (Parzymies 2005: 119).

I have already mentioned that after the solution of the Kosovo problem there is a fear in Serbia concerning a possible secession of Sandžak. It is not only because of political issues, but also, above all, economic ones. After the secession of Kosovo, the region has become the least developed one in Serbia, although it has not been much affected by the wars of the 1990s (there are some minor problems which afflict the western municipality of Priboj related to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina). At the same time, it was not the war which was the problem, but the structure of the economy. As the region remained a Turkish domain nearly until the World War I, as well as due to its peripheral position to the capital city and economic centers, the structure of economy remained archaic, with agriculture depending on the feudal or semi-feudal relations (which was the Ottoman heritage) and without developed industry (excluding traditional craftsmanship). During the Communist era, similarly to Kosovo, the authorities tried to develop heavy industry on the basis of mining and manufacturing, mainly textile industry. These were based predominantly on extensive labor and old machinery, and as a result of technical underdevelopment and the economic crisis deteriorating Yugoslavia from the beginning of the 1980s, as well as political situation after the Balkan wars, the industrial output fell sharply and there is little hope for redevelopment. Another problem is related to the *de facto* centrally steered economy in Serbia in the 1990s, which for Sandžak meant further underdevelopment, peripheral importance in business and its lower flexibility. This was also somehow connected with the presence of Muslim community which was treated as hostile by the Milošević regime. Political instability in the region impacts the economy, as it causes such problems as a degree of lawlessness, which results in corruption and black market on a local scale, and the presence of other global problems, such as drug and gun trafficking (Bielska 2009). The impact of all this on local population is such that the unemployment rate is the highest in Serbia (41.5%, more than two times higher than the Serbian average; CIA 2010) resulting in migration of the inhabitants, who look for work in other regions of the country.

As far as social and ethnic problems are considered, the biggest of them is the presence of a large Muslim community. We can divide this one into two branches, one of which is the level of integration of this group with the rest of the Serbian population, while the second is the potential danger of fundamentalism, which is observable in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both issues are tightly interrelated. In terms of the first one, because of a different denomination, Serbian government treats the region as inferior, not caring to render any support in development and locating few investments there. The Muslims of Sandžak, despite having their representatives in the National Assembly of Serbia, are considered by the conservative part of Serbian politicians as another threat to the unity of the state, and the region is neglected.<sup>9</sup> On

the other hand, due to the strong opposition to the pro-European government, the minorities take part in the coalition, and this makes for an opportunity to achieve some goals of the local community. However, since it is not homogeneous itself, this is probably not enough to achieve success. Loosening the links with Serbia and tightening them with Bosnia is also a goal of some of the political and religious leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, starting from the Great Mufti of Bosnia, *effendi* Mustafa Cerić, who openly supports co-operation with radical movements of Sandžak and the unification of it with Bosnia and Herzegovina (Militant Islam Monitor 2005). The mentioned Sulejman Ugljanin's SDA party, the main political power in opposition, stands on the positions of fighting for autonomy, since 1992 it has issued several documents called Memoranda, in which it claims even separation from the Serbian state or joining Bosnia and Herzegovina. SDA co-operates with another organization called National Council of Bošnjaks in Sandžak, which is even more radical; in addition, we should mention that many of the radical Muslim politicians are also members of the Bosnian political parties or organizations which seek restitution of the Islamic state in Bosnia (see also Parzymies 2005: 120).

As for the fundamentalist threat, both in Sandžak and Bosnia, as well as in Albania, there are some fundamentalist tendencies in the religious life of Muslims, inspired by Wahhabism, mainly from Saudi Arabia. The reasons for supporting these ideas are manifold, beginning with the poverty of the society. As shown above, Sandžak's economy is in such a state that any foreign investment, as well as any way of activating the society, is welcome. Aware of this, a number of fundamentalist Muslim organizations works in this manner, and their strategy is clear: on one hand they give people the possibility to earn money (e.g. in the construction of new mosques) and as a result people have jobs after sometimes very long periods of unemployment; on the other hand, the job is often connected with indoctrination, e.g. compulsory meetings with religious leaders. The same situation pertains to the cultural life – the radicals often organize many cultural and even scientific events, which are often connected with various methods of indoctrination. Anna Parzymies states that the level of cultural life in Sandžak is very low and every initiative can earn supporters for its organizers. Thus, the radicals have easy ways of influencing the society. This applies also to charity. The poverty of society, unemployment and no stimuli from the local and central government direct people to charity institutions, also the ones connected with radical Islamic organizations, based mainly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and linked with the Saudi Wahhabis. These are for example: the Muslim World League, Merhamet, al-Kifah, and several others (Parzymies 2005: 123). Not only do they provide humanitarian aid, such as organizing jobs, camps or cultural events for the refugees, children or young people, but are also aimed at reislamization along very radical lines.

The second reason is the swelling of the ranks of fundamentalist groups resulting from growing nationalist tensions. Although Sandžak did not see any ethnic cleansing

<sup>9</sup> The second largest party in the parliament, the Srpska Radikalna Stranka, together with the second largest opposition party, Demokratska Stranka Srbije, stands on the nationalist and anti-integrationist positions and both are openly hostile towards the Muslims.

during the 1990s, the striving for autonomy of a number of Muslim leaders (as shown above) provoked (and at the same time was a response to) the activation of the Orthodox Serbian nationalism. Some Muslim groups organized themselves around the Wahhabi leaders just to stage resistance to the Serbian nationalist movement. The last reason, finally, is seeking tradition. What was not mentioned above, during the Communist era many people, especially those brought up as Muslims, became secularized, did not declare any religion and identified themselves with official state ideology of Yugoslavia. Recently, increasing numbers of people, especially young ones, who do not remember the times of Yugoslavia, join the newly emerged Islamic organizations in search for their ancestors' faith. Although this is not a negative phenomenon per se, there is a threat of these people being recruited into the ranks of fundamentalists. As the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows, since the breakup of Yugoslavia many such groups, usually called mujahideens (*mudžahedini*), were established, and there is a similar threat in Sandžak (Ćosić 2004). The fundamentalist groups pursue their fight for the Islamic state in the Balkans not only by political means, but also often resort to acts of terrorism or vandalism against Serbs or even those Bosniaks who do not support their ideas (Boyd and Avramović 2002). The problem with fundamentalists is, however, not only in the political dimension. As it was stated, Balkan Muslims' traditions and ways of practicing Islam are different than those in the Middle East, especially of the conservative branches of Islam. There were even cases of killing or harassing the followers of the branches of Islam typical for the Balkans, such as Sufism or Bektashism (Parzymies 2005: 121). This breeds conflicts between the newcomers and new believers and the old population on the grounds of the rules of practicing religion, everyday life, etc. Together with the external conflicts with the non-Muslim inhabitants, it is a real threat for this community.

With few opportunities, especially for the youth, also the sector of education is penetrated by the radical Islamic movements. Having little chance to achieve both good job and education on a high level, young people choose religious education and scholarships founded by organizations from the Middle East, especially from Saudi Arabia.

As may be seen, the region's situation is very complex and there are many obstacles and conditions that make its progress harder to achieve. The economic situation, poverty and corruption, together with the unstable inner and outer political situation, the nationalist tensions and a threat of fundamentalism make Sandžak yet another place for a potential conflict to exacerbate. What is more, the Muslim community has problems with its own identity; as the political situation shows, some of the leaders support unity with Serbia on the basis of the multicultural society, whereas the others see multicultural society a threat to the unity of the Muslim population and is searching for autonomy or even joining Bosnia or establishing a new state. This, together with the crisis of tradition stemming from the lack of continuity in practicing religion as well as the change in traditions caused by the percolating fundamentalism, may be a serious obstacle for the region of Sandžak in further development and in avoiding marginalization.



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