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Sandzak: Inevitable Radicalization

For over two decades Sandzak – a part of Serbia bordering both on Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, and mostly populated by Bosniak minority – has been exposed to the state orchestrated, repressive policy aimed at minimizing this minority community. The attitude towards Islam and Muslims in ex-Yugoslavia became harsh and hostile back in 1980s when the Serb elite launched the campaign against Muslims, along with the thesis about “Islamic fundamentalism threatening to destroy Yugoslavia.” The terrain was so prepared for the ensuing genocide in Bosnia the effects of which haven’t bypassed Sandzak Bosniaks either. The attitude towards Muslims has not basically changed since. However, under the pressure from European organizations such as Council of Europe, OSCE and EU, the state has been refraining from overt repression but not from other methods like criminalization of individuals or groups (Vehabits) and, above all, from constant undermining of the Islamic Religious Community as the only Bosniak institution, crucial for their identity.

For Bosniaks, the Islamic Community manifests their need for the religion that enhances their identity and contributes to their social integration. Their need for a stronger identity is understandable as a response to years-long discrimination and marginalization, police terror, abductions and murders during the Bosnian war. In the absence of other institutions, the Islamic Community

stands for an identity matrix for the entire community. That is why the official Belgrade and Belgrade “services” have assaulted it, intent to destabilize it fundamentally. This resulted in a schism and tensions within the Bosniak community – all of which, if necessary, can be easily turned into a crisis point.

Due to the so-called conflict within the Islamic Community, as well as the rivalry between two local parties, i.e. their leaders – Sulejman Ugljanin and Rasim Ljajic, the Bosniak national minority in Sandzak has been in the focus of public attention for some time now. That also implied a conflict between the Ministry of Religions and the Islamic Religious Community lead by Muamer Zukorlic.



Moamer Zukorlic and Adem Zilkic

After the schism in 2007 (the factions of Zukorlic and Zilkic)¹ and acts of violence involving the two leading Bosniak parties – Party of Democratic Action /SDA/ and Sandzak Democratic Party

¹ Zukorilic looks upon Sarajevo and recognizes it as a spiritual center of Muslims in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, whereas Zilkic advocates the Islamic Community’s independence from Sarajevo.

/SDP/ - the situation in the region became highly inflammable and unpredictable. The Meshihat of the Islamic Religious Community in Serbia, headed by Muamer Zukorlic, sided with Rasim Ljajic.

After the turmoil in May and June 2009, the two party leaders – both members of the incumbent cabinet – made peace on July 24 with mediation of Serb and Turkish Foreign Ministers, Vuk Jeremic and Ahmet Davutoglu.

Visit by Reis-Ul-Ulema Musafa Ceric

The developments preceding the reconciliation between the two leaders laid bare the problems plaguing Sandzak. The authorities banned a meeting in Tutin where Reis-ul-Ulema of Bosnia-Herzegovina Mustafa Ceric was supposed to address citizens and believers during his visit to Sandzak, whereas the Ministry of Religions and the Islamic Religious Community in Serbia exchanged strong accusations.



Reis-ul-Ulema Mustafa Ceric

Prompted by Mustafa Ceric's announced visit, the head of the Islamic Community of Serbia, mufti Adem Zilkic – enjoying support from the official Belgrade though not exactly in Sandzak – strongly condemned the upcoming visit in a letter to the Ryaset of the Islamic Community in Bosnia-Herzegovina. “/This visit/ further contributes to the divisions in the Islamic Community, and notably among Sandzak Bosniaks,” he quotes in the letter. Further, as mufti Zilkic put it, the visit “is not welcome in Sandzak” for “not being in the interest of peace among

believers.”² The government of the Republic of Serbia promptly followed in the letter's footsteps: Minister of Religions Bogoljub Sijakovic gave a statement along the same lines, whereas local authorities in Tutin banned the planned meeting in downtown square.

In Sandzak, the leader of the Islamic Community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mustafa Ceric, pointed out that “Sarajevo is a spiritual center of all Bosniaks.”³ He also said that Muslims' human rights were being violated, a statement the Ministry of Religions called “unjustified and brazen.” For his part, Zukorlic spoke about alarming facts indicative of discrimination against Bosniaks – i.e. about 80 percent of Serbs work for local police forces in the towns with over 85 percent of Bosniak population. The situation is about the same in the domain of judiciary and other public services.

Declaration on Human and Religious Rights of Bosniaks in Serbia

In line with the information about breaches of Bosniaks' human and religious rights, the Islamic Community in Sandzak on July 4, 2009, adopted the *Declaration on Human and Religious Rights of Bosniaks in Serbia*. SDP and SDA alike denied supporting the declaration, which, among other things, appeals to Bosniak representatives in Serbia's parliament and government “to oppose further administrative disintegration of the Sandzak region.” The issue itself is most important for development of the Sandzak being divided into two administrative wholes both of which belonging to two different regions. The idea behind such division was to prevent Bosniaks from turning into an ethnic majority in Sandzak. Bosniaks are, therefore, much concerned with the announced process of Serbia's regionalization – actually, whether or not, once ended, the process will round off the six towns in Serbia's part of Sandzak into a single regional whole. Branko Ruzic, president of the

² http://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/mustafa_ceric_nepozeljan_u_sandzaku.55.html?news_id=160856

Zilkic also requested the state authorities to arrest Zukorlic and ban „any public meeting in the open during Ceric's visit.“

³ *Danas*, May 19, 2009.

Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of Serbia /SPS/ messaged there would be no ethnic regions. “Those looking forward to it will be badly disappointed. All citizens of Serbia enjoy equal status and no one should hope for the right to establish an ethnically homogenous region on the grounds of being an ethnic minority,” he said.

According to Dejan Jovanovic, state secretary at the Ministry of Economy, stressed that a governmental decree would precisely define the municipalities to be included in each region. “Guided by expert criteria, the Bureau of Statistics will make a draft. The said criteria will be quantitative, relating to numbers of residents, and qualitative, relating to each municipality’s degree of development. Be it as it may, such criteria are applied in the European Union as well.”⁴

UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Asma Jahangir⁵ assessed that Serbia still had to improve the situation in the domain of religious freedoms. Wrapping up her six-day visit to Serbia where she toured several multiethnic and multi-religious municipalities, she told reporters in Belgrade that she took back with her “both positive and negative impressions that are backed by first-hand information.” “I am aware of the painful history of this region and fully understand that the Serbian people – and indeed others in the region – have deeply suffered on account of violence, atrocities and wars. Fortunately, it seems that Serbia has taken a new turn towards a democratic process in which I believe freedom of religion or belief should play a central role,” said Ms. Jahangir.⁶



Asma Jahangir

⁴ *Vecernje Novosti*, July 16, 2009.

⁵ At the government’s invitation, Ms. Jahangir paid a visit to Serbia in April 2009.

⁶ *Borba*, May 5, 2009.

Darko Tanaskovic, Belgrade’s well-known Islamologist and member of the former Truth Commission established by Vojislav Kostunica, interprets the statements about violations of Serbia Muslims’ human rights as “scheming campaigning against alleged violation of Serbia Muslims’ human rights.” “This /campaigning/ will not crucially influence policies of Muslim states but will certainly produce some adverse effects. It’s hardly imaginable that this could serve real-life interests of the Muslims, who live in Serbia, but domestic protagonists of radicalization and internationalization of the ‘Muslim question’ are evidently reasoning along the lines ‘the worse, the better,’” he said.



Darko Tanaskovic

Reactions to Ceric’s Visit

Adem Zilkic interpreted the visit by the Reis-ul-Ulema of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the context of Ceric’s ambition to become the Mufti of Europe with Zukorlic’s support, which would simultaneously promote Zukorlic the Mufti of the Balkans. He also said that the Islamic Community in Serbia was not autonomous but a branch of Bosnia-Herzegovina’s community. “Albanians in Serbia and other Muslims /other than Bosniaks/ are, therefore, forced to look upon Sarajevo by national principles,” he explained.⁷ The Ministry of Religions of the Republic of Serbia gave its contribution to those allegations. In a release, it accused Ceric of “supporting the secession of Kosovo and Metohija.” Hence the public “with good reason wonders whether or not Reis Ceric threatens the Republic of Serbia with a war by Bosnian or Kosovo scenario,”

⁷ 7 May 2009 - www.novosti.rs

quotes the release.⁸ Opposition parties and nationalistic circles reacted as well – their mouthpiece was mostly Darko Tanaskovic.

According to Tanaskovic, Mufti Muamer Zukorlic needed Ceric's visit to pass on "eminently political and notably less tactful messages than Reis's" to Belgrade but also to the Muslims in Serbia, who recognized not his leadership.⁹ He takes that, unlike Christianity, Islam is an uncompromising religion and that a genuine dialogue between Christians and Muslims is practically impossible because, throughout the history, one side has never been ready for a compromise, whereas the other would not give up its rigid stance. For him, the visit by the Turkish Foreign Minister is not a positive development since Turkey's interests in the Balkans do not exactly correspond to our interests. "We can remind ourselves that Turkey was among the first countries to acknowledge Kosovo," adds Tanaskovic. As for Muslims' rights, he says, not only are they not violated but Muslims or Bosniaks in Serbia "enjoy positive discrimination in line with the highest standards for minority rights."¹⁰

Speaking of Ceric's activism, Tanaskovic says, "It would be rather strange should a politically skillful manipulator such as Ceric allow himself the luxury of overtly supporting Vehabits in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the moment he tries to tie his boat strongly to the American ship. What response he would get from, say, Jewish and American participants of the recent meeting in Paris, dedicated to the memory of Holocaust, which he attended as a special guest just to capitalize on the Srebrenica misfortune for the umpteenth time and for propagandist purposes?"¹¹ At the time, hate-mongering messages and headlines dominated in daily papers – "The Guest from Bosnia Incites Quarrel

among Muslims,"¹² "Tutin on Powder Keg,"¹³ "Warmongers,"¹⁴ "Ceric Spreads Religious Hatred,"¹⁵ and the like.

In its issue of May 27, *Kurir* daily run a story headlined "Power Keg," dealing with assessments by security experts and the Security Information Agency /BIA/. "According to security experts, a threat of the members of radical Islamic movement recruiting young Muslims for suicidal actions, who are specifically stationed in Sandzak, hovers over us. In his annual report, BIA Director Sasa Vukadinovic noted the close cooperation between Islamic movements in Sandzak."¹⁶



Sasa Vukadinovic

President of the Parliamentary Security Committee Dragan Todorovic (MP of the Serb Radical Party/ said that, judging by the BIA report, "they are well aware of the developments down there." "Some developments I dread are beyond BIA's control because we have no services to protect the state any longer. As of 2001 those services have been totally destroyed. The Raska region can easily turn into a battlefield, which I fear would happen under the baton of US and EU," said Todorovic. The Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ released that the situation in Sandzak could radicalize as a consequence of Muamer Zukorlic's statements. "Obviously, they are more concerned with politics than with religion. The state much react resolutely at any sign of upcoming conflict," quoted the release.¹⁷

⁸ "The Ministry of the Religions' Stance on Mustafa Ceric's Statements," May 22, 2009.

⁹ 24 September 2009 - www.sandzaknews.com

¹⁰ <http://www.nspm.rs/crkva-i-politika/ceric-dijeli-muslimane.html>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Glas Javnosti*, May 12, 2009.

¹³ *Glas Javnosti*, May 17, 2009.

¹⁴ *Kurir*, May 21, 2009.

¹⁵ *Glas Javnosti*, May 21, 2009.

¹⁶ *Kurir*, May 27, 2009.

¹⁷ Borko Ilic, *Kurir*, 27. maj 2009.

Inevitable Radicalization of Sandzak

Muamer Zukorlic, leader of the Islamic Community in Serbia, underlined, "There is no doubt about radicalization of the situation in Sandzak."¹⁸ *Glas Islama / Voice of Islam/* magazine also referred to a "special war" with the Ministry of Religions and to the need for "national resistance" in Sandzak. People from the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia say, "In the situation when the authorities do not respect the Constitution of their own state, which guarantees us equality, do not respect the Law on Churches and Religious Communities or implement it selectively at the moment when thousands of Bosniak young men and women are jobless, when the culprits for the crimes in Strpci and Sjeverin still go unpunished, when yet another division of Sandzak awaits us under the pretext of the so-called regionalization, while incumbent Bosniak politicians couldn't care less, we cannot but establish a political council of the Main Mufti as an advisory and logistic-lobbyist body to assist our struggle against discrimination against Bosniaks, but also for internationalization of the issue."¹⁹

Many interpreted the establishment of the political council as a proof of Mufti's political ambitions and adding fuel to the fire. Belgrade Mufti Muhamed Jusufspahic said, "Muslims in Serbia are unified by Islam and Serbia. Muslims should not go against Serbia."²⁰ As for Esad Dzudzevic of Bosniak Democratic Party of Sandzak, it is not appropriate for a religious leader to engage in politics.



Belgrade Mufti Muhamed Jusufspahic

¹⁸ *Politika*, 25. maj 2009.

¹⁹ <http://www.islamskazajednica.org>

²⁰ *Pravda*, „Izdali nas Ugljanin i Ljajić“, 9 septembar 2009

The exchange of strong accusations between political and religious leaders, as well as deliberate marginalization of the region by the incumbent regime resulted in internationalization of the Bosniak issue in Sandzak. Besides, radicalization of the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina will unavoidably influence the developments in Sandzak and the state's attitudes towards Bosniaks in Serbia. The presence of and the interest in the problematic displayed by international actors (OSCE, Council of Europe, EU, international NGOs, embassies, etc.) clearly indicate that the international community is fully aware of a possible escalation of violence and further radicalization.

In today's world that is strongly interconnected and divided at the same time, the role of religion is most important – above all, its communicational dimension that should imply readiness for dialogue. This dialogue could be based on universal human rights, respect for human dignity of each and every individual, tolerance and respect for diversity, compassion and human solidarity – all of which are major tenets of every religion. Such a dialogue has not been launched yet in Serbia – though it has not made much progress in other countries in the region either.

Persistence on the Greater Serbia project has postponed the process of Serbia's consolidation as a state. Serbia's nation-building is still in process. Even in the post-October 2000 stage the Serb elite has been focused on the establishment of an ethnic state, excluding all minorities – Bosniaks as well. Therefore, continuation of the process of the state's consolidation and opening of the public debate that would include all ethnic groups without exception should be insisted on imperatively.