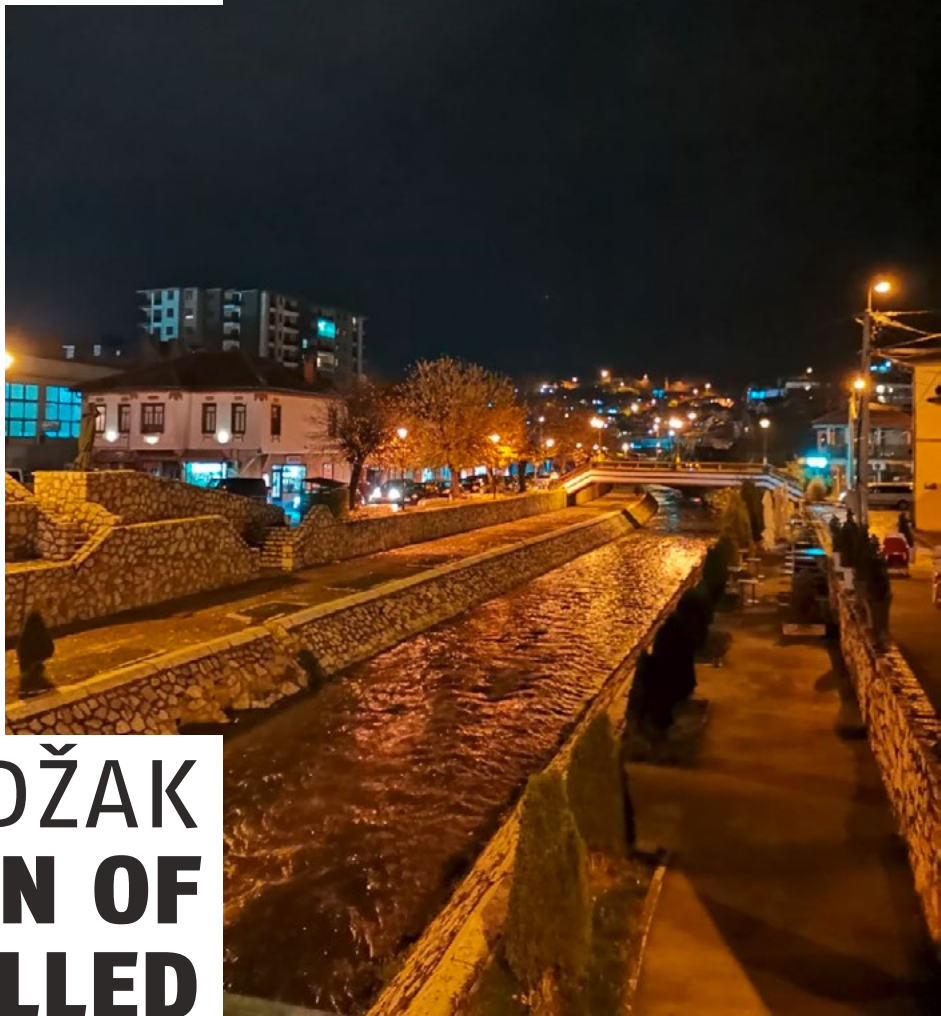




HELSINKI COMMITTEE FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA

SANDŽAK REGION OF CONTROLLED TENSIONS



SANDŽAK: REGION OF CONTROLLED TENSIONS

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SANDŽAK: REGION OF CONTROLLED TENSIONS



Library in Novi Pazar

Sandžak is the border and cross-border region of Serbia and Montenegro, extending from northern Kosovo to the Republic of Srpska, that is, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It covers an area of 8,409 sq.km of which 4,504 sq.km are in Serbia and 3,905 sq.km in Montenegro.

The Sanjak of Novi Pazar was the administrative unit of the Ottoman Empire with its seat in Novi Pazar. That is how the Sandžak got its name. The Sandžak was part of the Bosnian eyalet/vilayet until the Austro-Hungarian occupation in 1878. After the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1908) it was again handed over to the Ottoman Empire. Four years later (1912), Sandžak was occupied by the Kingdom of Serbia (1882–1918) and the Kingdom of Montenegro (1910–1918) and then divided between themselves.

Elizabeth Roberts and Kenneth Morrison, the authors of the book “The Sandžak – A History”, believe that Sandžak has gained great political and diplomatic significance. As they say, from the Berlin Congress in 1878 to the Balkan Wars 1912–1913), it occupied a central position in the Balkans being located between Serbia and Montenegro, on the one side, and Bosnia and the road to Istanbul, on the other side.¹

During the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Sandžak administratively belonged to the Zeta Banovina. During the Second World War, under Italian occupation, it was part of the Kingdom of Montenegro-Independent State of Montenegro (1941–1944), while a smaller part was annexed to Albania. After the end of the war, the old borders of Serbia and Montenegro became the borders of the two constituent republics of SFR Yugoslavia and after May 2006 they became the international borders. The historical centre of Sandžak is the city of Novi Pazar, which was founded by Isa-beg Isaković, who was also the founder of Sarajevo.

1 K. Morrison-E. Roberts, *The Sandžak: A History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

However, as part of Yugoslavia, region was always a neuralgic point due to the attitude towards Muslims. Between the two world wars, Sandžak was one of the least developed regions. There was only a small number of educational institutions and was still a region affected by infectious diseases and epidemics. During the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Bosniaks in Sandžak were subjected to terror and violence which, during World War, assumed the dimension of genocide.² After the war, in 1945, Sandžak was divided among Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. One historical entity was divided into three parts, which especially affected the part that went to Serbia. The municipalities within Serbia were considered more developed, so that they could not use the funds earmarked for the underdeveloped. This changed only in the 1960s when the funds for the underdeveloped parts of the Republic of Serbia were formed. Since then, this region has started to develop. The part of Sandžak in Serbia was administratively divided: some municipalities were connected to Užice and some to Kraljevo in order to avoid the Muslims being the majority.³

Emigration to Turkey during the 1950s and 1960s is one of the traumatic themes from the Sandžak past. Muslims emigrated not only for economic reasons but also because they felt insecure. During the 1950s, about 15,000 Muslims emigrated from Novi Pazar, Sjenica and Tutin. Mass emigrations occurred in several waves, until 1970; the state encouraged emigration. After renouncing the Yugoslav citizenship, they would obtain a passport for single use. They sold their property very cheaply and could visit Yugoslavia only after living five years in Turkey. Since Turkey did not provide the most adequate living conditions, many wanted to return, but were not allowed. Only after the Brioni Plenum (1966) were they allowed to return⁴.

2 R. Crnišanin, *Političko-istorijska percepcija Sandžaka u modernoj Srbiji*, in: *Sandžak: identitet u procepu starog i novog*, Belgrade 2008, pp. 53–54.

3 Ibid.

4 Interview with Ramiz Crnišanin in "Ramiz Crnišanin: Čovjek i vrijeme",

THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS MUSLIMS IN THE BALKANS

The position of Bosniaks in Sandžak cannot be understood without considering the broader context of the attitude towards Muslims in the Balkans. The fate of Muslims in the Balkans is closely linked to the perception of “other” Balkan national elites about them. The history of Muslims in the Balkans after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was marked by persecutions, overt or covert discrimination, genocide and wars. The occasional periods of relative peace were only an introduction to new repression and suffering. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire created the so-called “Eastern Question”, which re-emerged under the new international circumstances after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia generated the process of forming new states. The process was accompanied by new mass persecutions, crimes and genocide against Muslims. Propaganda against Yugoslav Muslims began with well-known stereotypes about their “corruption”, “laziness” and “fickleness”. Already in the early 1980s, the Serbian media began propaganda against Muslims, using the speech from the past and the terms like “Turks”, “Janissaries”, “Fundamentalists” and “Jihadists”.

The huge majority of Muslims in the Balkans were Sunnis. They were concentrated in several regions some of which are of geostrategic significance – which had an impact on the behaviour of the Balkan governments. They were mostly perceived as the potential source of problems. Belgrade had an extremely discriminatory attitude towards Albanian Muslims in Kosovo and Muslims in Sandžak. They were exposed to pressure, while Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) was most frequently the bearer of anti-Albanian and anti-Muslim propaganda.

Bosnian Muslims resisted pressures and, as the result of more liberal trends during the 1970s the national characteristics of all peoples and nationalities were recognized. Thus, Muslims were recognized their national specificity, that is, the status of people. The political recognition of Muslims in the 1970s did not automatically imply national equality. Serbian nationalists were especially dissatisfied and argued that the constitution of the Muslim nation directly endangered the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that it is an “artificial nation whose identity originates from their religious specificity”.

According to historian Branko Petranović, Muslims in Sandžak in Serbia were viewed as a group that did not have the characteristics of a people, that is, a nation. However, their way of life, historical circumstances under which they have evolved, mentality, psychology and religion have formed a specific ethnic group, but a people “cannot be inaugurated by an enactment or decree”.⁵ Attempts to make Muslims “nationally aware” and become “Serbs of the Muslim faith” have not succeeded. In preparation for the war of the 1990s, this thesis gained significance, because it was claimed that Muslims were “Serbs of Muslim faith” or that Serbs and Muslims are the people having the same language and origin or, as pointed out by Vuk Drašković at one time, one people.

In the 1960s, when economic development started, several industrial facilities were built and the building of community infrastructure (roads, water supply, sewerage, transmission lines, electrification) also started. Greater attention was devoted to education, health, trade, hospitality and tourism. The educational system was raised to a higher level – dozens of new schools were built and new secondary schools were opened. Apartment houses were built, while the inflow of educated staff raised the educational level of the whole region. The establishment of cultural institutions also contributed to the development of Sandžak.

5 B. Petranović, *Jugoslovensko iskustvo srpske nacionalne integracije*, Belgrade 1993, p. 114.

The people of Sandžak showed high entrepreneurial skills during the Slobodan Milošević regime, when almost everything built up to then was destroyed. At that time, the people of Novi Pazar were developing their own business, launching the production of clothing and footwear, and reviving trade and the like.

At that time, however, they were also exposed to enormous pressures, including intensive repression, propaganda and demonization. They were proclaimed to be a disruptive factor, whose religion orders them to destroy the state and commit violence against Serbs, thus forcing them to emigrate. They were also labelled as fundamentalists, fanatics, separatists linked to the “green transversal” and dumb, and that they can no longer live with Serbs and Croats. Such propaganda prepared the ground and justification for violence, massacres, kidnappings and plundering not only in Bosnia but also in Sandžak. A total information blockade of Sandžak was imposed and even radio amateurs were banned from broadcasting.⁶ The Serbian government, nationalists, dominant media and the Serbian Orthodox Church promoted open hostility towards Islam. Such an attitude towards all Muslims was justified by the argument that Muslims are not a European people.

In the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia and emergence of the very fragile new states tending to become ethno-national states, Sandžak also sought autonomy. In October 1991, it held an unofficial referendum that was supported by more than 90 per cent of those who voted, but Serbia proclaimed it unconstitutional and brought charges against its organizers. As the main organizer, Sulejman Ugljanin therefore went to Turkey and stayed there until 1996. After his return the charges against him were no longer mentioned.

6 Ramiz Crnišanin, intervju, “Ramiz Crbašanin – svjedok i vrijeme, Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga, 2021.

SANDŽAK IN THE NINETIES

The Sandžak issue, involving exclusively Bosniaks, that is, Muslims, became relevant in the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia. During those years, the Serbian regime led a campaign against Bosniaks. Among other things, it intimidated them by constantly carrying out searches of their houses in search of alleged weapons, police torture and military shelling of villages. It was the period of repression in Sandžak and the mass emigration of its population to European countries (Germany, Scandinavian countries, Turkey). About 70,000⁷ people fled before the terror.

Although Sandžak was not directly affected by the war of 1991–1995, it was under siege and repression. Semiha Kačar, President of the Sandžak Committee for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, points out that this period was characterized by serious violations of human rights: murders, kidnappings (Štrpci, Sjeverin), intimidation, mass police torture, politically motivated trials and various discriminatory actions. Since the regime never completely and resolutely abandoned the policy that caused the deep trauma of the Bosniak community and its insecurity, Semiha Kačar points out that this hinders the integration of Bosniaks into Serbian society. As she emphasizes, trauma and the distrust of institutions hinder the integration of the community fearing that the traumatic experience can be repeated.⁸

In early 1994, there began the marathon mock trials in Novi Pazar and Bijelo Polje against a group of Sandžak Bosniaks who were falsely accused of wanting to create the “state of Sandžak” by violence. The aim was more intimidation of

7 Informator No. 1, Udruženje povratnika Reintegracija, Novi Pazar 2006, p. 6.

8 “Srbija mora da se suoči sa zločinima počinjenim na njenoj teritoriji”, *Danas*, 27 August 2019, accessible at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/suocavanje/srbija-mora-da-se-suoci-sa-zlocinima-pocinjenim-na-njenoj-teritoriji/>.

Sandžak Bosniaks. The trials also served as a showdown with the Sandžak Party of Democratic Action and its leadership.⁹

All forms of terror led to the mass emigration of Sandžak Bosniaks in the period 1992–1995/96, primarily to Turkey, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and other European countries, and also to Bosnia and Herzegovina later on.¹⁰

A significant number of victims sued the state of Serbia for torture, unlawful detention, kidnappings, murders and other human rights violations, but a large number of cases were rejected due to an inadequate interpretation of the statute of limitations on claims for damages. In rare cases, when the right to compensation for damage was exercised, the amounts awarded to the victims were humiliatingly low.

Not one regime in Belgrade distanced itself from the policy of state terror pursued by Slobodan Milošević, nor did it address its consequences for Serbian citizens of Bosniak nationality living in Sandžak. Thus, most citizens of Sandžak feel rejected and marginalized. In the mainstream media Sandžak is always mentioned in a negative context. Tensions were high due to the constantly conflicting interests of its three leaders (Rasim Ljajić, Sulejman Ugljanin and Muamer Zukorlić), which caused numerous clashes. All issues relating to the status of Bosniaks and Sandžak as a region are still open. The administrative services, police and judiciary in Sandžak are still dominated by Serbs, which is not in compliance with the demographic picture as well as the laws that guarantee minority representation in institutions.

9 Muhedin Fijuljanin, *Sandžački Bošnjaci*, Centre for Bosniak Studies (CBS) 2010.

10 Ibid.

GEOSTRATEGIC AND SECURITY CHALLENGES



Landscape near Mileševa Monastery

Serbian geostrategists perceive Sandžak as a zone of Serbia's geopolitical control. For Serbian interests, as they say, the biggest problem is posed by the events in Novi Pazar, as the largest urban environment. Given the fact that Novi Pazar is small according to the Serbian parameters, they point out that its complete geopolitical isolation is possible.¹¹ They also point out that, given the fact that Sandžak is located on the route of the Belgrade-South Adriatic highway, it must be active in connecting central Serbia and the Adriatic by a modern road and railway lines, including a series of accompanying projects.¹² By various announced projects, which would include the areas where Serbs constitute a majority, Novi Pazar, as a neuralgic point of Serbian geopolitics, would be isolated on all sides and unable to use its political-institutional, infrastructural and demographic potential to form a "green transversal".¹³

Sandžak gained strategic importance in the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia, because it is part of the so-called "green transversal" (connecting Turkey and Kosovo to Sarajevo), which was the target of Serbian propagandists during the 1990s. Since the 1980s, Serbian Orientalists (Darko Tanasković, Miroljub Jevtić, Nada Todorov) have been at the forefront of the anti-Islamic movement and have contributed to the genocide against Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Such an attitude toward Sandžak was not essentially changed even 25 years after the war in Bosnia. On the contrary, it gained strength and was interpreted in the subsequent contexts – the terrorist attack on the United States (2001) and the emergence of ISIS in the Middle East in 2011. As a territorially compact region inhabited by Muslims (Bosniaks), Sandžak is therefore continuously in the focus of Belgrade's strategists. It is indicative that the "green transversal" is still treated as a danger not only for Serbia but also for Europe. Thus, for example, on 14 July

11 Dušan Proroković, *Gepolitika Srbije*, Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2018, p. 879.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

2019, the daily newspaper “Politika” published Srđa Trifković’s feuilleton titled “Zelena transversala: balkanski koridor nestabilnosti” (The Green Transversal: The Balkan Corridor of Instability), which is a kind of reaffirmation of the Serbian nationalist narrative from the 1980s, emphasizing the “Islamic threat”, while Albanians and Bosniaks are profiled as a part of the pan-Islamic network aiming to gain victory over Europe. The feuilleton began to be published in the week when Bosniaks in Srebrenica marked 11 July as the genocide remembrance day.¹⁴

With the appearance of the Salafis in the Balkans, Sandžak additionally found itself in the focus of security institutions both in the country and abroad. After a small number of young people joined ISIS on the Middle East battlefield, Sandžak was treated as a risky region. However, there was no mass mobilization or any incident. The local police always kept all those suspicious on any grounds under control.

In light of the current events in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgrade’s attempts to radicalize the situation in the two neighbouring countries are underway in order to challenge their independence and borders, thus achieving the recomposition of the Balkans.

Serbian strategists often point to the Bosniaks’ affection for Kosovo Albanians, whose independence they “welcomed” and emphasize that all three current leaders in Sandžak are of Albanian origin. And since “Bosniaks and Albanians have traditionally good historical, friendly and family relations for centuries”, it is implied that the following also applies to the citizens of Sandžak: welcome to “Kosovo”!¹⁵

14 Harun Karčić and Ivan Ejub Kostić, Media Discourse on Islam in the Western Balkans, Sarajevo: CNS, 2020, p. 72

15 <https://sveosrpskoj.com/komentari/velikobosanske-i-velikoalbanske-pretenzije-na-sandzak-zasto-se-samo-srbi-prave-da-se-nista-ne-dogadja/?script=lat>.

THE BOSNIAK POLITICAL SCENE OF SANDŽAK, THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

THE POLITICAL PAST OF THE THREE SANDŽAK LEADERS

Although they are now in different political parties and often angry political opponents, Ugljanin, Ljajić and the late Zukorlić began their political careers in the same party – the Party of Democratic Action (SDA). In May 1990, the Party of Democratic Action was founded in Sarajevo with the task to gather the Bosniaks-Muslims in the former SFRY and it formed its branches in the then Yugoslav republics. The branch for Serbia, which actually still represents Sandžak's SDA, was founded on 29 July 1990 in Novi Pazar, at a large rally held at the football stadium. SDA leader Alija Izetbegović also attended the rally. Dentist Sulejman Ugljanin was elected President of the SDA for Serbia. Apart from Vuk Drašković, he is the only party leader who has led the same political party since the re-establishment of the multi-party system in the 1990s. The number two of the party became its General Secretary Rasim Ljajić, a doctor from Novi Pazar. The youngest, Muamer Zukorlić, was an SDA youth activist.

At the first multiparty elections in Serbia in 1991, Bosniaks, under the then official national name of Muslims, voted almost plebiscitarily for the SDA, while Ugljanin won the fourth place in the presidential elections with nearly 110,000 votes. The Muslim National Council of Sandžak (MNVS) was established in Novi Pazar in May 1991, which later changed its name to the Bosniak National Council of Sandžak. Ugljanin was also the President of the Council, which was supposed

to represent a kind of assembly, while Rasim Ljajić was elected President of the Executive Council of the MNVS. In October 1991, the SDA and MNVS organized a referendum at which, as they claimed, about 185,000 citizens voted. Mostly Bosniaks went to the polls and 98 per cent of them voted for “full political and territorial autonomy” of Sandžak and, in the event of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, for the right of the region to join one Yugoslav republic. Official Belgrade refused to recognize this referendum, qualifying it as an attempt to destroy the state.

In the summer of 1992, the MNVS adopted the Memorandum on the Special Status of Sandžak, which was banned by the state and declared a separatist document. The Memorandum called for broad autonomy for Sandžak and its legislative, judicial and executive powers. The following year, the state of Serbia filed an indictment against 24 Bosniaks, members and supporters of the SDA, for terrorism, threatening the territorial integrity of the country and the attempt to create the “Republic of Sandžak“. An identical trial was launched in Bijelo Polje against the leaders of the Montenegrin branch of the SDA. The first accused in the Novi Pazar case, Sulejman Ugljanin, went “on an official trip” to Turkey immediately before the filing of the indictment and returned only in 1996. At the trial that began in Novi Pazar in 1994, most of the accused were sentenced to long prison terms. Appeals followed, the trial was repeated, several convicts passed away in the meantime and in 2013, due to the statute of limitations, the Supreme Court of Serbia brought the decision to terminate the court proceedings. Upon his return to the country, although the trial against him was still officially conducted, Ugljanin was elected a member of the Republican Assembly and later became the Mayor of Novi Pazar.

During the long absence of Sulejman Ugljanin, the members of the party rallied around Rasim Ljajić moved in a different political direction, which resulted in their complete rift. Even during Milošević’s rule, Ljajić established a dialogue

with official Belgrade. The first official talks between the SDA and the Serbian Government were held in May 1995 and were attended by Rasim Ljajić, who led this party at that time, and Svetozar Krstić, an official of the New Democracy Party and Vice-President of the Republican Government.

Ljajić's Sandžak Democratic Party (SDP) was formed in 1994 by breaking away from the SDA. It went first under the name "Coalition for Sandžak" and from 2000 onwards as the Sandžak Democratic Party. Before the 5 October regime change, Ljajić undoubtedly had better relations with the then Serbian opposition. He was a member of the Presidency of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), but Esad Džudžević, a member of Ugljanin's party, won a seat in the then Federal Parliament on the DOS list. It turned out that this was agreed between the DOS, that is, Zoran Đinđić and Ugljanin, while Ljajić was given the "consolation" position of the Federal Ministry for Human and Minority Rights. Ljajić later became the head of the Coordinating Body for Southern Serbia and the National Council for Cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, so that he seemed to be Belgrade's main actor in Sandžak and favourite Bosniak politician. He also remained in power and held various ministerial positions during the time of Prime Minister Koštunica and the governments of the Democratic Party (DS), but also after the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012. He retired only after the 2020 elections as the minister with the longest tenure in Serbia. Although he is no longer a minister, both of his parties are part of the ruling coalition led by Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party.

In the early 1990s, the youngest of the three Sandžak leaders, Muamer Zukorlić, was not politically active, because he attended Islamic studies in Algeria and Lebanon, and graduated in 1993. The following year, he was elected the first President of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community of Sandžak. He also became the Chief Mufti. His election was certainly not possible without Ugljanin's approval, but the two of them came into conflict ten or so years later. The conflict led to the

division of the Muslim religious organization and the formation of two Islamic communities: the Islamic Community in Serbia, led at first by Zukorlić, and the Islamic Community of Serbia, which is believed to be under the influence of the SDA. The division was based on political and not religious reasons. Ugljanin sought unreserved support from the Islamic Community, while Zukorlić began to harbour political ambitions.

TOGETHER IN THE GOVERNMENT

Conflicts and quarrels alternated with reconciliations and, due to a strange combinatorial politics, in the Government of Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković and the first government of Ivica Dačić, the then fierce political opponents, Ljajić and Ugljanin, found themselves as ministers. It seemed to Belgrade that all problems in Sandžak were solved by the entry of the two leading politicians and the two main Bosniak parties into the republican government. However, the dissatisfaction of Bosniaks, caused primarily by a disastrous economic situation, continued to smolder. The dissatisfaction of the people in Sandžak coincided with the dissatisfaction of Mufti Zukorlić, who supported Boris Tadić, Rasim Ljajić and the single list “Together for European Serbia” at the 2008 elections. According to Zukorlić, Tadić and the Democratic Party (DS) betrayed the pre-election promises, especially when it came to the advocacy for a unified Islamic community, which was a sufficient reason for the Mufti to become a sharp critic of the DS Government. He soon established contact with the newly formed SNS and, to the surprise of the entire Serbian public, in early October 2011 in Novi Pazar, he met with the then opposition leader, Tomislav Nikolić, President of the Serbian Progressive Party and then Serbian President. Zukorlić and Nikolić said that their first meeting in Novi Pazar “opened a new page”¹⁶ and that the Bosniak problems could be solved

16 https://rtv.rs/sk/politika/zukorlic-i-nikolic-otvorili-novu-stranicu_277104.html.

through dialogue and in the interest of all citizens. They claimed that they discussed all open issues and problems afflicting Serbia's Bosniaks and not politics or any coalition.¹⁷

In 2016, due to his entry into politics, Zukorlić first froze his religious function and then withdrew from it. In December 2017, the Bosniak Democratic Union of Sandžak was renamed into the Justice and Reconciliation Party (SPP) with an aim to expand its activities beyond Sandžak and offer a programme acceptable to Serbs, Bosniaks and members of other national communities in Serbia. Zukorlić also established close ties with Aleksandar Vučić, so that at one moment it seemed that he would take the unofficial title of “Belgrade’s favourite Bosnian” from Ljajić. At least it seemed so if all his functions were considered. Namely, during the period 2016–2021, Zukorlić served as a member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Vice-President of the National Assembly and Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Education, Science, Technological Development and Information Society.

LOOKING TOWARDS BELGRADE

Muamer Zukorlić died suddenly in early November 2021, which opened a new chapter in the political calculations within Sandžak and with Belgrade.

The premature death of the leader of the Justice and Reconciliation Party, Muamer Zukorlić, will affect the situation in Novi Pazar, Sjenica and Tutin where Bosniaks make up the majority of the population. Since Zukorlić was the only true authority in the party and that the public does not see anyone among his associates with even the slightest charisma, it is realistic to expect factional struggles for the leadership position. At the session of the Presidency of the Justice and

17 Ibid.

Reconciliation Party (SPP), convened in an extended composition, Zukorlić's son Usame was unanimously elected Acting President.

...

The elections expected in the spring of 2022 may also bring changes on the Sandžak political scene. However, one thing is certain: Bosniaks may have their hearts in Sarajevo or Istanbul, but at least those who live in the part of Sandžak that belongs to Serbia know that Belgrade is the city where decisions are made. That is why they will always listen and prefer to vote for those who have closer ties with Belgrade. Emotions are something else, while pragmatism has always been a Sandžak trait. And Bosniak political representatives will always look towards Belgrade or, more precisely, what they can get from the connections with the ruling structures in Serbia.

This opens up space for other two Bosniak parties: SDA and SDP, in the forthcoming campaign. It is difficult to predict in which direction the events will unfold. The collocutors of the Helsinki Committee had different assessments about the fate of Zukorlić's party, but the conclusion is that it is too early to forecast the outcome.¹⁸

18 Interviews made by the Helsinki Committee in November 2021.

*MESSAGES OF THE 2020 ELECTIONS

After the parliamentary elections and the elections in the majority of local governments (21 June 2020), the Bosniak parties in Sandžak started celebrating immediately after the announcement of the preliminary results. Flags, trumpets, chanting and fireworks could be heard and seen in Bosniak-majority areas and all three leading Sandžak Bosniak parties seemed to have won. The supporters of all three parties celebrated in different places and at a different time, some more quietly, some more loudly. And no one paid attention to the then still valid epidemiological measures against the spread of the corona virus, which “came due” a few weeks later when Novi Pazar became “Serbian Bergamo” and a hotbed for epidemics.

The loudest celebration was organized by the Sandžak Democratic Party (SDP), whose founder is the former longtime minister Rasim Ljajić and its President Nihad Hasanović, Deputy Mayor of Novi Pazar. They celebrated because they retained their longtime rule of the largest Sandžak city Novi Pazar and whoever rules Novi Pazar rules Sandžak or, more exactly, Sandžak Bosniaks. At the elections the *European Novi Pazar – Rasim Ljajić* list, along with smaller coalition partners, won nearly 19,000 votes and 21 seats in the City Assembly (out of 47). Muamer Zukorlić’s second-ranked Justice and Reconciliation Party won slightly less than 10,000 votes and 11 councillors, while Sulejman Ugljanin’s Party of Democratic Action won a record low number of nine councillors and about 8,000 votes. “This is the purest victory that anyone has ever achieved in Novi Pazar. We did not say a single ugly word, we did not tear a single poster. Our results speak about us, we have the best results, the best people, members, supporters”, Ljajić said to his supporters.¹⁹

19 <https://dev.nedeljnik.rs/ljajic-ovo-je-najcisitija-pobeda-u-novom-pazaru-nismo-rekli-niti-jednu-ruznu-rec-niti-jedan-plakat-pocepali-nismo/>.

The SDA also lost an absolute majority in its bastion, the municipality of Tutin, where it ruled for decades. By the way, Tutin is known as the “most Bosniak municipality”, because Bosniaks constitute about 95 per cent of the population. In Tutin, the SDA won 18 seats, Zukorlić’s SPP 11, the Citizens’ Group Bajro Gegić (the former member and SDA MP who gathered dissatisfied Ugljanin’s supporters) five, Ljajić’s SDP two and the SNS one seat. However, SDA candidate Salih Hot was elected President of the Municipality of Tutin by the votes of his party, the SDP and SNS. The SDA celebrated in Sjenica, where it won the most, 25 per cent of the vote, SPP 21 and SDP was the third with 17 per cent of the vote. It was Ugljanin’s “Pyrrhic victory”, since a representative of the SPP (Munib Mujagić) was elected President of the Municipality of Sjenica, with the votes of the SNS and Citizens’ Group.

Muamer Zukorlić also celebrated in Novi Pazar. Zukorlić, President of the SPP and MP, said after the announcement of the results that his party scored a “convincing victory over the SDA of Sandžak at the parliamentary elections” and that it fared better at the local elections in the Sandžak municipalities than in the previous ones. “As of today, there is no doubt who is the real, legal, legitimate and convincing representative of the Bosniak people in the Serbian Assembly,” Zukorlić said.²⁰

On the same day, 21 June, parliamentary elections were also held. They were boycotted by the majority of the Serbian opposition parties, but not by the Bosniak parties. Their major parties appeared in three columns. Although he was the target of criticism and attacks for months by Vojislav Šešelj, the leader of the Serbian Radical Party and political mentor of Serbian President and SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić, to which the “Progressives” reacted very mildly, both Ljajić’s parties (the SDP, founded him and de facto led by him, and the Social Democratic Party of Serbia, whose President he is) appeared again on the SNS – Aleksandar

20 <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/19050/>.

Vučić list. The SDP got two MPs on Vučić's list. The SPP list, reinforced by a Macedonian party, won 32,000 votes and four seats. The SDA participated alone in the elections and won about 25,000 votes and three seats. A few days after the elections, Ugljanin, due to poor results, replaced the Party Secretary, Ahmedin Škrijelj, Director Merfid Kamensčanin, as well as the members of the SDA Executive Committee.

FROM TWO ANGLES TO A TRIANGLE



"Kanjon" Restaurant

What do the results of last year's declaration of Sandžak Bosniaks show? The long-standing Ugljanin-Ljajić "duo" of the Bosniak political scene turned into the Ugljanin-Ljajić-Zukorlić triangle a few years ago, which was confirmed by the June elections. All three parties and their leaders got their share of the pie. The smallest share, the rule in Tutin, obviously went to Ugljanin, the only critic of the current government in Belgrade. Apart from Novi Pazar, the SDP also holds several positions in the republican government, at the level of state secretaries. The same is the case with the SPP, which also has several state secretaries and got (uncertain) power in Sjenica.

It is interesting to note that, although Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica have a convincing Bosniak majority, Vučić's SNS still participates in the local government or has influence on it. This is justified by the desire to respect their multiethnic character, but there is also politics in it. It is interesting to note that the SNS had a decisive role in having the SDA remain in power in Tutin, although it sharply criticized this party and often called out its leader Ugljanin because of his disloyalty to the state and separatist ideas. The election of the SDA members for the municipality and municipality council heads would not have been possible without the support of the local SNS.

Apart from consolidating the power of three Bosniak leaders and their parties, the June elections (2020) also showed that most Bosniaks no longer voted for the parties and politicians offering ambitious nationalist projects, but rather for those solving their everyday problems. War crimes committed against Bosniaks in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as those in Sandžak (Sjeverin, Štrpci, Kukurovići...) are only occasionally mentioned, usually at the time of their anniversaries.

The SDA and its leader persevered in demanding special status and autonomy for Sandžak and resolving the constitutional status of Bosniaks. Unlike Ljajić and Zukorlić's parties, which form part of Aleksandar Vučić's ruling coalition, this

party has not only remained in opposition, but also fiercely criticizes the current government's attitude towards Sandžak and Bosniaks. Ugljanin even spoke of a "fascist state",²¹ much to the dismay of Belgrade. Ugljanin's harsh rhetoric and attempt to connect the issues of Sandžak Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians, advocated by the SDA, do not seem to be favoured by the majority of Bosniaks. That is why they preferred to vote for Ljajić and Zukorlić and their options which, thanks to ties with Belgrade and the republican authorities, can help them solve at least some local problems. It seems that Bosniaks are no longer interested in special status and autonomy, but they are very interested in road and other infrastructure.

Over the decades, the idea of Sandžak autonomy has been the "mantra" for getting votes, especially for the SDA and Ugljanin, who are now the only ones to consistently advocate it. Naturally, during their short participation in the Serbian Government, they did not talk much about the autonomy and status of Bosniaks. The other two Bosniak political leaders, Ljajić and Zukorlić have long since abandoned the rhetoric of Sandžak autonomy, although Zukorlić sporadically mentioned it, especially when he wanted to irritate neighbouring Montenegro. Then he talked about Sandžak as a modern European cross-border region, naturally, without mentioning the interstate borders.

The SDA of Sandžak marked the 28th anniversary of its existence and activity with a solemn session and the adoption of the Declaration of the SDA of Sandžak in Novi Pazar on 29 July 2018.²² The Declaration emphasizes that Bosniaks are an autochthonous people in the region of Sandžak and form part of the single Bosniak national corps together with Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other

21 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bosnjak-ugljanin-saveti-nacionalnih-manjina-izbori-srbija/29583926.html>.

22 <https://sandzacke.rs/featured/sda-sandzaka-usvojila-politicku-deklaraciju-rijesiti-status-bosnjaka-i-status-sandzaka/>.

states created after the collapse of the SFRY. They have the right to establish and develop all forms of relations and cooperation with Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which cannot be lesser than special, parallel relations and cooperation of the Serbian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina with their people in Serbia, while the status of Sandžak must be in compliance with the 1991 referendum. The other two parties, SDP and SPP, dismissed these demands as unrealistic and anachronous.

The special ties of Sandžak Bosniaks with Bosnia and Herzegovina are a vain story in which neither Novi Pazar nor official Sarajevo have shown interest, not even in response to the separatist ideas of Milorad Dodik and other Serbian politicians. Everyone is aware that the smaller entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Srpska, and Sandžak cannot be compared and, unlike Serbs on both sides of the Drina, Sandžak Bosniaks have not established stronger political ties with their native Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are many reasons and it seems that the Sarajevo authorities are not interested in this kind of ties, which can be partly explained by the rather negative image of the people from Sandžak who emigrated to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

OTHER SANDŽAK MUNICIPALITIES

In the Serb-majority municipalities of Sandžak, Prijepolje, Priboj and Nova Varoš the political scene is rather uniform. The exception is Prijepolje, a municipality where the percentage of Serbs and Bosniaks is about 50:50. After the recomposition of the local government, Prijepolje is currently (2021) ruled by almost all parties, that is, the coalition of SDP, SNS, SPP and DPS. Only the SDA with one councillor is in opposition. In Priboj and Nova Varoš a convincing victory was won by the coalition rallied around Aleksandar Vučić's SNS. In Priboj, among Bosniaks the SDP won a majority vote – 7.71 per cent. It was followed by the SDA of Sandžak – 5.76 per cent and SPP with 5.68 per cent. In Nova Varoš, the percentage of Bosniaks is about 10 per cent, but the Bosniak parties did not participate in the local elections.

DECLARATION ON STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Of 120 or so political parties being officially in the Register of Political Parties, 11 are Bosniak. Cooperation among them is rather rare, but the two oldest, SDA and SDP, signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership in 2016 and agreed on coalition rule in all three majority Bosniak communities: Novi Pazar, Sjenica and Tutin. The signing of the Declaration and reconciliation between Ugljanin and Ljajić was also influenced by official Ankara, whose former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, mediated in reconciliation between the SDA and SDP leaders in 2012.²³

The Declaration states that these two parties support Serbia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, the rule of law, legal security and equality before the law, market economy and competitiveness. In the statement issued after the signing of the Declaration it is written: "At the same time, the conditions have been created for the harmonization of the national structure in the prosecutor's office, judiciary, police and other public bodies with the national composition of the Sandžak municipalities".²⁴ The problem is still posed by the harmonization of the national structure of employees in state bodies, which is also the legal obligation of Serbia. This especially applies to the police.

An earlier inquiry made by Radio Free Europe to the Novi Pazar Police Administration about the ethnic composition of its employees, was answered that they do not keep such records, since the employees are not obliged to declare their national and religious affiliation. According to the unofficial data, in Novi Pazar,

23 <https://www.sda.rs/vijesti/1902-sda-sandzaka-i-sdp-potpisale-deklaraciju-o-strateskom-partnerstvu.html>.

24 <https://sandzakhaber.net/ekskluzivno-tekst-deklaracije-koju-su-potpisale-sda-i-sdp/>.

where Bosniaks constitute 80 per cent of the population, only about 30 per cent of them are in the police force. The situation in the judiciary is much better: out of 17 judges of the Novi Pazar Basic Court, eight are Bosniaks. Even more than by the inadequate ethnic composition of the state bodies, Bosniaks in Sandžak are bothered by the fact that the state, which boasts of big foreign investments, has not opened a single factory in Bosniak majority areas.

This year, ten Tax Administration employees retired and 10 new persons were employed. However, all of them were of Serbian nationality.²⁵

25 Collocutors of the Helsinki Committee, November 2021.

THE PANDEMIC IN SANDŽAK

The already difficult situation was further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Sandžak was one of the hotspots of the pandemic during the summer of 2020. A large number of citizens were infected and many died. Reporting on the number of people infected with Covid-19 in Novi Pazar upset its citizens, because the figures provided by the Director of the Novi Pazar General Hospital, Meho Mahmutović, differed from the actual situation. Many more serious patients were taken to hospitals in Kragujevac and Belgrade.²⁶

The visit of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar to the Novi Pazar Hospital in order to hand over additional medical equipment was met by dissatisfied citizens, primarily SDA supporters. On that occasion, they stated that the situation was under control. The Prime Minister accused Sulejman Ugljanin's supporters of being political activists who took this opportunity to politicize the situation and show lack of disrespect for medical workers by whistling to the Belgrade delegation. Lončar denied the figures that appeared in the social media and pointed out that only 28 patients died of coronavirus in Novi Pazar and that there was enough medical equipment.²⁷

President Aleksandar Vučić also spoke out. He said that the situation in Belgrade was ten times worse than in Novi Pazar but the situation in Novi Pazar was suitable for politicization due to a large number of Bosniaks.²⁸

The President's accusations that Bosniaks were to blame for the escalation of the coronavirus and that a large number of people were infected during the

26 Sandžak Danas, 26 June 2020. "Bolnica puna novozaraženih".

27 Kurir, 1 July 2020. "Suljina bruka, Brnabićeva donela pomoć u Novi Pazar, Ugljaninovu ljudi napali državni vrh!"

28 Politika, 2 July 2020. "Predsednik Srbije o politizaciji situacije u Novom Pazaru".

religious holiday Eid, were denied by Dr Rešad Plojović, Vice-President of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia. He pointed out that the Islamic Community – even before the proclamation of a state of emergency and the imposition of lockdown – adopted a series of measures to protect the health of believers, so that it was absurd to blame the mosques for spreading the disease. He said that such an accusation was an escape from one's own responsibility and emphasized that the escalation of the coronavirus disease in Novi Pazar started immediately after the elections, so that the Islamic Community could not be blamed for the escalation, because it did not participate in them. Effendi Plojović told the President that it was deplorable that he did not know the basic customs of his "Muslim friends" for whom Eid is the greatest holiday. And that the responsibility for the situation with the coronavirus must be sought on the other side.²⁹

There were protests in Novi Pazar due to the situation in the General Hospital. The citizens were also joined by doctors who signed a petition for the removal of Acting Director Meho Mahmutović due his inadequate protection of citizens from the coronavirus. The petition for Mahmutović's dismissal was signed by 37 out of 108 specialists working in the General Hospital. The doctors sent this petition to three addresses: Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar. The signatories clearly emphasized that there was no political interest or political party behind their request, and that their motive was to restore the honour and reputation of "white coats".³⁰

After a very bad situation with the coronavirus disease, the General Hospital in Novi Pazar got 40 residents and about 100 new workers, mostly Bosniaks. The building design for the Clinical Centre in Novi Pazar was also finished. The Public Health Institute, which was based in Kraljevo, is now in Novi Pazar. Thus, Novi Pazar is now a larger regional centre than Kraljevo in this respect.

29 Danas, 10 July 2020. "Sramota je, Vučiću".

30 Danas, 14 August 2020. "Traže se smene i odgovornost".

A GENERAL IMPRESSION OF THE SITUATION IN SANDŽAK



Center of Novi Pazar

Most of the interlocutors of the Helsinki Committee point out that the marginalization and general control of all actors in Sandžak have been intensified, so that it seems as if the region has lost any importance. Sandžak is getting poorer and the most capable young people are leaving because there is no place for them. The policy of the current regime is very skilful in controlling the main actors, in particular. Due to the fragmentation of three centres of power, the capacity to resist Belgrade's levelling policy has been weakened.

Beneath the ostensible peace there are the ongoing dual processes, capacity implosion and the potential explosion of accumulated discontent. Since the civic conceptions of political actors have been eliminated, the framework for relaxing these issues and processes has disappeared. As it is pointed out, the biggest problem is the decline of the intellectual and critical dimension without which societies and communities are doomed to dryness and extinction. The collocutors of the Helsinki Committee have pointed out that the situation has "never been worse" and that they do not expect anything from Belgrade, bearing in mind that it has forsaken all their expectations.³¹ Sandžak Bosniaks are becoming more and more distant and ghettoized, and it is becoming increasingly less important to them what Belgrade says and does. Citizens have started to distance themselves and organize themselves, while politicians have taken the line of least resistance.³²

Belgrade's policy towards Sandžak is based on continuous divisions and control, because Sandžak is the region of controlled tensions. One of the indicative examples of Belgrade's attitude towards Sandžak refers to the signposts on the main roads near Kraljevo: in the 1990s there was no signposts pointing to Novi Pazar, which was changed during the construction of the "Miloš the Great" highway, but soon returned to the previous state. Thus, instead of pointing to Novi Pazar, these

31 Interviews made by the Helsinki Committee, November 2021.

32 Ibid.

signposts now point to the nearby but smaller town Raška. Similarly, the map of cultural and historical monuments in Serbia, which was made in 2007, does not point to the sites of Peter's Church and Sopoćani Monastery just to avoid mentioning Novi Pazar.³³

The Novi Pazar Handball Club withdrew from the Arkus League of Serbia due to the events during the match against Crvena Zvezda in Belgrade (10 October 2021) when the hosts insulted the handball players from Novi Pazar on national and religious grounds. An insulting banner was also displayed at the stands of Crvena Zvezda fans, who also chanted to Ratko Mladić, shouted “poturice” (converts to Islam) and sang chauvinist songs.³⁴ The decision on the withdrawal from the League was made unanimously. The Novi Pazar Handball Club acted preventively. When the police warned it about possible riots during the match, it wrote to the Crvena Zvezda Club and the Handball Federation, asking for additional security, but they did not respond.

Banners with nationalist and chauvinistic inscriptions also appeared at matches in Novi Pazar, but they were a response to provocation. For example, when at one match Rad fans unfolded the banner with the inscription “Solve the puzzle: knife, wire, Srebrenica”, at the next match Novi Pazar fans unfolded their banner with the inscription “The puzzle solved: Yellow House”. At the moment of an incident situation at the match in Belgrade, the Novi Pazar team also included the players of Serbian nationality who said after the match that they were ashamed. Apart from Bosniaks, in the songs sung by fans all the time, Turks were also insulted.³⁵

The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs also reacted to this incident, stating that “it is a question of racist slogans and posters with the images of war criminals

33 Ibid.dovde

34 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rukomet-turska-novi-pazar/31510977.html>.

35 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

which were displayed by Crvena Zvezda fans. Those slogans insult not only our Bosniak brothers and sisters, but also the memory of our common history with this region. We hold that sport should be the instrument of strengthening peace and friendship among communities and we believe that those responsible for this incident will be punished as soon as possible”.³⁶

This incident upset Bosniaks in Sandžak, because Serbian nationalism has exploded in recent years, reminding them of the atmosphere in the 1990s. Due to the incident in Belgrade, Ministers Vanja Udovičić and Tomislav Momirović visited Novi Pazar to pay tribute to the male and female athletes who won gold medals in the preceding period, but they actually came to relax the situation involving the Novi Pazar Handball Club. However, at no point did they publicly distance themselves from Crvena Zvezda fans. None of the fans was arrested nor was any procedure initiated. Crvena Zvezda was fined 20,000 dinars for having its fans throw pieces of paper on the field and not because of the incident due to which the Novi Pazar Handball Club left the League. If they were someone else’s fans the state would have found a solution. However, the state does not have it for Crvena Zvezda and Partizan fans.³⁷

Another recent incident involves Adela Melajac Karahmetović, a teacher at the “Rifat Burdžović Tršo” Elementary School in Novi Pazar, who put on the Bosniak anthem “I Am Your Son” for students on 1 September. The teacher put on the anthem “God of Justice” for first graders in the first class and the Bosniak anthem in the second class, as part of the welcome programme for first graders, which is performed every year. Due to the coronavirus pandemic there was no big gathering, so that she put on these anthems only for her students. The teacher was questioned at the Novi Pazar Police Department, while citizens gathered in front of its building to protest. Enis Imamović, an MP of the SDA of Sandžak, pointed out that the

36 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rukomet-turska-novi-pazar/31510977.html> .

37 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

“Bosniak anthem played on by her for her students is part of the curriculum in the Bosnian language and part of the advancement of Bosniak identity, which is to be achieved through education. We received the explanation from the police and the Prosecutor’s Office that the proceedings were initiated on the basis of a video on social media. And it shows the teacher doing her job in accordance with the Constitution and the relevant laws”.³⁸

Ratko Mladić’s murals in Serbia and his glorification have particularly upset Bosniaks in Sandžak. After the protest by a number of citizens demanding the removal of Ratko Mladić’s mural painted in the city centre and the reaction of right-wing groups against it, some MPs raised the question about war crimes and the glorification of war criminals. Thus, Enis Imamović, MP of the SDA, asked in the Serbian Assembly what the prosecutors did when the genocide was celebrated in Serbia under police protection, war criminals were glorified and religious and national hatred was spreading, and whether they would react to the rise of fascism which is prohibited by law. He also called on them to answer “whether Ratko Mladić is a criminal or a hero for them”.³⁹

According to Hajrudin Balić, Professor at the Faculty for Islamic Studies, Sandžak is a region where Bosniak-Muslims constitute the majority of the population, but they have been living in harmony and maintaining good inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations with other peoples and confessions for centuries. However, as he points out, violent extremism occurs in Sandžak in many forms. It is most evident in the form of extremist organizations that promote Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism. These are the organizations that bring together

38 <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/imamovic-odgovorio-vulinu-himna-ja-sin-sam-tvoj-je-deo-skolskog-programa/>.

39 Danas online, 16 November 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/imamovic-danas-je-opasno-biti-bosnjak-u-srbiji-ministar-organizator-huligana/>.

right-wingers and extremists from among the Serbian people. In Sandžak there are also groups of routers who often have extremist and violent outbursts.⁴⁰

The collocutors of the Helsinki Committee hold that the Serbian Progressive Party will probably never be able to have Bosniaks vote for it again due to all these messages sent to them and, in particular, the behaviour of Milorad Dodik, Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin and routers, as well as the protection of Ratko Mladić's murals. Therefore, Rasim Ljajić is certainly in trouble. Either the voter turnout will be reduced or the people will cancel their ballots. They also state that nobody from the opposition ever came to Novi Pazar, or talked to them, except Saša Janković, who himself ended up with Aleksandar Vučić.⁴¹

The incident at the Novi Pazar–Crvena Zvezda handball match as well as the incidents associated with Ratko Mladić's murals in Belgrade are interpreted by many of them, especially the representatives of the opposition parties, as part of the April 2022 election campaign. However, the explosion of Serbian nationalism has a deeper meaning and is based on numerous official government documents. Those are above all else the Strategy of the Relations of the Homeland with the Serbian Diaspora (2011), Charter on the Serb Cultural Space, signed by the Ministers of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (2019), the Law on the Cyrillic Alphabet (2021) and the Cultural Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2021–2029 (2020). Belgrade holds that the current international context provides a historic chance for the implementation of the “Serbian World” project, which anticipates an ethnic state. Belgrade's attitude towards Bosniaks should be viewed in that light. The escalation of Serbian nationalism is turning Bosniaks away from Belgrade and their mistrust and fear are growing. In such an atmosphere that lasts too long, the Bosniak National Council and Islamic Community are gaining importance as the pillars of identity.

40 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/nacionalizam-kao-najopasniji-ekstremizam/>.

41 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

According to the interlocutors of the Helsinki Committee, the death of Muamer Zukorlić will certainly affect the political scene in Sandžak. One can already sense certain moves such as, for example, the announcement of the SDP that it will directly participate in the elections for the Bosniak National Council. It is obvious that the SDP sees a chance to regain its monopolistic position on the Sandžak political scene. The Justice and Reconciliation Party must solve its internal problems, thus opening up room for other two parties.⁴²

The parties of Ljajić and Ugljanin are already using the new situation. The fact that the SDA did not attend the Janazah prayer for Muamer Zukorlić on the pretext that “like any other prayer, praying the Janazah prayer depends on the personal decision of every individual and their attitude and practice are well known”, testifies to the political struggle for new positions. All newly elected members of the bodies of the branches and new members of the SDA of Sandžak have been informed that the SDA of Sandžak is an opposition parliamentary party that represents and protects the interests of the citizens of Sandžak and the Bosniak people in Serbia. Since the Justice and Reconciliation Party is a member of Vučić’s Geater Serbian coalition, which denies the genocide against Bosniaks and glorifies war criminals, the SDA of Sandžak did not want to send its delegation to the funeral or authorize anyone to appear there on behalf of the SDA of Sandžak.⁴³

The collocutors of the Helsinki Committee also pointed to many other details that testify to the fact that nobody is interested in this region. Thus, Novi Pazar does not even exist on the RTS weather forecast map.

42 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

43 https://indeksonline.rs/2021/11/sda-niko-u-ime-nase-stranke-nije-isao-na-dzenazu-zukorlicu/?feed_id=22243&_unique_id=618e7c71028ee&fbclid=IwAR3XaEfqsdlmTOJG8Bx27K3_chhZgSWqEAckCLsTK7ERqZE--h3RA8Yw43o.

THE CONSTITUTION OF BOSNIAK IDENTITY

The process of Bosniak national constitution lasted for a very long time – from the Ottoman Empire to the Congress of Berlin (1878), then from the Congress of Berlin to the end of the First World War, then during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and SFR Yugoslavia and, finally, until the post-communist era.

After the collapse of Yugoslavia and the collapse of the value system, in the created vacuum, the emphasis on religious affiliation and its observance as the main element of identity, became more widespread than 50 years ago. Namely, religion has become a spiritual and identity refuge for all peoples in the post-Yugoslav space. However, the collapse of Yugoslavia has turned many peoples, including Bosniaks, into minorities. In essence, Bosniaks do not accept the minority status and refer to their previous status as people. Like Croats, Bosniaks became a minority upon adoption of the Law on Minorities (2003).

The traumatic experience of Bosniaks from the 1990s, constant attempts to assimilate and reduce Bosniaks to a religious community, as well the territorial division of the Bosniak municipalities into two districts, make it difficult to consolidate the Bosniak minority and stabilize its infrastructure. In 2003, the Bosniak National Council adopted the Declaration on the Status of Sandžak Bosniaks in the Republic of Serbia, which calls for the fulfilment of the defined standards in the area of advancing minority rights. The adequate representation of Bosniaks in republican institutions (such as the judiciary, police and others) is required in proportion to their percentage of the population. It is also required that six Sandžak municipalities (Priboj, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš, Sjenica, Tutin and Novi Pazar), where there is a significant number of Bosniaks, become a part of one region and form one district.

BOSNIAK NATIONAL COUNCIL

The Bosniak National Council, as an institution of the Bosniak National Council, is the most important Bosniak institution through which Bosniaks, as a national minority, exercise their rights to self-government in the areas of culture, education, information, and the use of language and literature. The Councils were established upon adoption of the Law on the National Councils of National Minorities in 2009.

The Muslim National Council of Sandžak (MNV Sandžaka) was formed on 11 May 1991; in 1993, it was renamed the Bosniak National Council of Sandžak (BNV Sandžaka), while in 2010 it changed its name to the Bosniak National Council (BNV). The Bosniak National Council of Sandžak organized a referendum calling for a political and territorial autonomy. This mostly remained the main topic of this organization. The constitution of the Bosniak National Council was also a reason for the clashes over its political control, which also involved Belgrade, the Islamic Community in Serbia, the Meshihat of Sandžak and the Islamic Community of Serbia, which was also supported by the authorities. Subsequently, 11 May was declared the Day of the Bosniak National Flag.

At the 2014 elections, the SDA gained control of the Bosniak National Council. However, at the 2016 elections, the SDA lost its monopoly on it, which significantly affected its activities.

The official use of the Bosnian language partially gained ground in the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica. Their local governments use the Bosnian language and Latin script in their services, with the exception of the municipalities of Prijepolje (which adopted the name of the language as Bosniak-Bosnian, but is still not used in local-government enactments) and Priboj (where there is no mention of introducing the Bosnian language). They point out that teaching in

the Bosnian language is conducted in 39 educational institutions in the Sandžak municipalities and include 16,500 students.⁴⁴

Like other councils, the Bosniak National Council failed to resolve the problems relating to Bosniak identity. The Bosnian language was introduced in schools, but without adequate preparations, including specifically teaching staff. However, the situation with textbook is not any better. That is why parents prefer to enrol their children in Serbian classes.

The representatives of the Bosniak National Council express their discontent with the Law on Minorities, because it generalizes the minorities and does not respect the specifics of the Bosniak minority. They also point out that discrimination is constant. They also complain that Belgrade does not recognize the Bosnian language. Instead, it emphasizes the Bosniak language, thus violating the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. They are also dissatisfied with the Action Plan for Exercising the Rights of National Minorities, because it did not upgrade the minority issues. Since the coming of the SNS to power, the situation has suddenly worsened. The Bosniak National Council submitted 400 proposals for the Action Plan which were not considered, nor did they receive any response. It is claimed that they are a disruptive factor, while about 30,000 young people in Novi Pazar have no perspective and Serbia wins gold medals thanks to Bosniak athletes.⁴⁵

The Bosniak National Council also complains that Belgrade treats them exclusively as a religious group, denying their national identity. They advocate the position that, if they cannot obtain autonomy, the status of the region can be satisfactory, although, as they point out, Article 182 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia talks clearly about the establishment of new autonomous provinces. They also point out that Belgrade applies a double standard. Thus, it is

44 Sandžak Danas, 2 April 2021. "Više đaka se obrazuje na maternjem".

45 Interviews with the BNV representatives made by the Helsinki Committee.

considered legitimate for Serbia to seek the Association of Serbian Communities in Kosovo, while such a request by Bosniaks would be considered disruptive.⁴⁶

They especially point out that the competent institutions do not take care of Bosniak cultural heritage. The Bosniak National Council submitted numerous requests to the inspection, especially when something was illegally demolished or renovated. They never received answers to their complaints. They consider the Cultural Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2021–2029 to be deficient and the same applies to the Action Plan. They also complain that the names of the famous Bosniaks were not used sufficiently or were not used at all for various institutions. They gave the example of Prijepolje where the national composition is 50:50, but none of the eight elementary schools bears the name of a famous Bosniak.⁴⁷

The international community is not present to such an extent as before. The Bosniak National Council cooperates with the OSCE, which has the office in Novi Pazar.

However, the interlocutors of the Helsinki Committee point out that the Bosniak National Council is completely under the monopoly of one political party. They especially criticize the fact that there are no textbooks in the Bosnian language. They state that the Bosniak National Council is a very important institution, but became a caricature of itself, because it deals with everything except identity. The Matica Bošnjaka councillors emphasize that they actively participated in the work of the Bosniak National Council in the past. However, it is now completely closed for any cooperation with external actors, including various experts. For example, the International University of Novi Pazar (IUNP) was never invited by the Bosniak National Council for any cooperation relating to the development of the Bosnian language, although it has a high-quality Bosnian Language Department.⁴⁸

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY AND THE FACULTY FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES



Islamic Center Gazilar

The Faculty for Islamic Studies in Novi Pazar holds a prominent place in the educational system of the Islamic Community in Serbia. In 2016, the Faculty became a full member of the Union of Islamic Universities of the World, which operates under the auspices of the Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture, founded by the Islamic Conference Organization, which enables it to maintain intensive contacts with almost all renowned Islamic universities in the world⁴⁹.

In essence, apart from the Bosniak National Council, the Islamic Community is the only Bosniak institution. In Serbia, however, there are two Islamic Communities: the Islamic Community in Serbia and the Islamic Community of Serbia. The Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia retained the status and structure it had in SFR Yugoslavia, with its seat, that is, the Riyaset in Sarajevo. The politicization of the Islamic community and its leadership comes from the support of the Belgrade authorities (that is, Vojislav Koštunica), which led to an open interference in the internal relations in the Islamic community and its split.

The Islamic community in Sandžak has been politically passive for decades. Its political activation and the renewal of its influence were contributed by the collapse of the socialist values and the restoration of religiosity in all Yugoslav republics (which is also observed in other regions in the world). As the religion in the Balkans is equated with ethnicity, radicalization on this basis was characteristic of all Balkan communities. It was especially intensive in Serbia due not only to the construction of new identities, but also due to its preparations for redefining Yugoslavia according to its idea, which ended in the brutal breakup of the state.

The need to strengthen identity is also an understandable response to the long-standing discrimination and “invisibility”, as well as police terror, abductions and killings during the war in Bosnia. The Islamic Community is the key identity matrix for the Bosniak community in the absence of other institutions.

49 Ibid.

This is why it was under attack from Belgrade and its “services” with the aim to destabilize it completely. This resulted in the split of the Islamic Community and rising tensions within the Bosniak community, which can turn quickly into a crisis point if necessary.

In early 2014, Mevlud Dudić, Zukorlić’s close associate, formally took over the role of the President of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia (IZuS) from him. He enjoys some reputation among believers, has organizational skills and is considered Zukorlić’s successor. However, the premature death of Muamer Zukorlić opened the question of both his successor in the party (his 22-year-old son was temporarily appointed to this position) and the relationship between the two Islamic Communities.⁵⁰

Several attempts to reconcile and unite the parallel religious Islamic communities in Serbia proved to be unsuccessful, even in the case of direct mediation by Turkey and Serbia. The Turkish Diyanet, the supreme religious authority that recognizes the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, proposed general elections within the Islamic Community in Serbia, which was resolutely rejected by the then Mufti Zukorlić. Zukorlić’s death and possible weakening of Dudić open up the scope for reopening the issue of unification of the two Communities.

The interlocutors of the Helsinki Committee hold that the revival of old antagonisms that led to the division is possible.

The interlocutors from the Islamic Community of Serbia (IZS) expressed their concern over the disturbing developments in the region causing fear among Bosniaks. They state that the crisis has been going on since the 1990s and that the incidents occurring on a daily basis are not accidental.⁵¹

50 <https://sandzacke.rs/stav/previranja-na-vidiku-sandzak-nakon-muamera-zukorlica/>.

51 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

They point out that the IZS is apolitical and does a lot of humanitarian work, but not because it is its main activity, but because it is greatly needed due to rising poverty. Their religious rights are not much endangered, religious education is regularly taught in schools. There are numerous challenges – ideological divisions, economic crisis and extreme currents – and they wish to achieve reconciliation, but have not yet found an interlocutor in the other Islamic Community.⁵² In addition to the Diyanet, the Gulenists also tried to be the mediators in the dialogue with Muamer Zukorlić on a number of occasions, but he was fastidious from the beginning and did not want to talk. The influence of the Gulenists in Serbia is insignificant.⁵³

Wahhabism was rather represented, but that is no longer the case. There were 5–6 Salafist groups, which are under police surveillance. The members of these groups do not come to mosques; they have their own tekkes. They used to lease them in the past. As they pointed out, one group is now building its own tekke, which is not very encouraging.⁵⁴

They believe that there is no political option which can represent the Bosniak interests. Such an atmosphere was created so as to have Bosniaks kill each other over the issue of waqf property. It would be necessary to determine which of the two Islamic Communities has historical continuity. Both Islamic Communities have been registered, but it has not been specified which one lays legitimate claim to the restitution of waqf property.⁵⁵ Without solving the status of the Islamic community it will not be possible to solve the question of wakf property.

The Islamic Community of Serbia maintains very good cooperation with Turkey's Diyanet; it fights against extremism and radicalism. It also maintains good

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

cooperation with the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which renovated the Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica and Bajrakli Mosque, and organized numerous seminars. Erdogan is regarded as a great leader, but they also state that Turkey is not the only one to be interested in the Balkans. They hold that the Islam offered by Turkey is “tested” and that it has not had any negative influence, which is why there is no place for radicalism where such an understanding of Islam is present.⁵⁶ Institutionally, they have no common ground with Sarajevo. The other Islamic community, the Islamic Community in Serbia, is more attached to it.⁵⁷

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

THE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF NOVI PAZAR

The International University of Novi Pazar is the project based on Zukorlić's "specific weight" and political influence, which began at the time of Zoran Đinđić's Government and has remained to the present day.

In 2002, the Minister of Education in Đinđić's Government personally brought the work licence for the Faculty in Novi Pazar. However, Zukorlić promoted it very quickly into the University, which has never been recognized by the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Serbia. The University continued to work and still exists only on the basis of the Decree of the Republic of Serbia arising from the political agreement on support in the Serbian Parliament between Vučić and Zukorlić.⁵⁸

The fate of the International University of Novi Pazar will depend on its ability to overcome the chaotic situation caused by the sudden loss of its founder and the balance of political power in the future.

Apart from the International University, there is also the so-called State University founded in 2006 (it includes the Faculty of Philosophy, the Faculty of Law and Economics and the Faculty of Technical Sciences). There are also several centres such as the Centre for Quality Assurance, the Computing Centre, the Research Centre and the Regional Centre for Energy Efficiency.

58 <https://sandzacke.rs/stav/previranja-na-vidiku-sandzak-nakon-muamera-zukorlica/>.

MATICA BOŠNJAKA

Matica Bošnjaka is one of the four institutions – in addition to the Bosniak National Foundation, the World Bosniak Congress and the Bosniak Academy of Sciences and Arts (founded by Muamer Zukorlić), which are oriented towards the supranational preservation of the cultural identity of Bosniaks. Matica Bošnjaka already had several important projects and its main focus is currently on publishing major works. Its first journal, “Letopis”, is also being prepared. It also represents the last legacy of Muamer Zukorlić.

BOSNIAK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS

The Bosniak Academy of Sciences and Arts (BANU) was founded on 11 June 2011 in Novi Pazar and its Senate was constituted in Sarajevo in December of the same year. It was chaired by Mustafa Cerić, Reis-ul Ulema of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Academy has 21 members, but a small number of them are intellectuals. The establishment of the Bosniak Academy of Sciences and Arts did not provoke overly positive reactions of intellectuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They hold that this institution is neither scientific nor artistic, because it was founded under the auspices of a religious community, that is, Reis-ul Ulema Mustafa Cerić and Sandžak Mufti Muamer Zukorlić.⁵⁹

Some Bosnian academicians have held that the founding of the BANU, in addition to the existing Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republic of Srpska and the Scientific Society of Croats, imposes the question as to whether their role is to split science according to the ethno-principle as well.⁶⁰

In 2015, despite criticism, after four years of existence, the BANU opened the Scientific Centre of the Bosniak Academy of Sciences and Arts in Novi Pazar. The building of the Scientific Centre covers an area of 2,000 square metres and is located in the suburbs of Novi Pazar. After the completion of construction work and equipping it was handed over to the first scientific institution of this Academy.⁶¹

59 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bosnjacka_akademija_nauka_ili_politika/24430736.html.

60 Ibid.

61 <http://saff.ba/otvoren-naucni-centar-bosnjacke-akademije-nauka-i-umjetnosti-u-novom-pazaru/>.

Several well-known members of BANU (Ejup Ganić, Asim Kurjak) left this institution and, according to media reports, are working hard to establish a new academy of sciences and arts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶² It is held that the time has come for the Bosnian academy.⁶³

62 <https://sandzacke.rs/featured/napustaju-zukorlicevu-banu-kurjak-i-kurtcehajic-formiraju-novu-akademiju/>.

63 Ibid.

THE CULTURAL CENTRE IN NOVI PAZAR



The Cultural Centre is the focal point of cultural events not only in Novi Pazar, but also in the entire Sandžak region. During the last few years, cultural production was significantly improved. The Cultural Centre was renovated, which significantly increased the capacity of the Centre for the production and exhibition of artistic contents. Over the past few years, a serious critical audience has been created and, as its Director Husein Memić points out, it is the “most open Cultural Centre in Serbia. Projects and programmes for improving the position of culture in the city are constantly being worked on and three years ago it received an award from the Ministry of Culture for the best Cultural Centre in the country. This was achieved thanks to the programmes of the Cultural Centre and good editorial staff. In October 2021 alone, it had 20,000 visitors”.⁶⁴ They received 11,5 million dinars from the Ministry of Culture and 10 million dinars for audio equipment from the cities in focus. The city of Novi Pazar covers 70 per cent of the Cultural Centre’s budget.⁶⁵

Sandžak has a very significant and respectable intellectual and cultural elite. Many individuals won significant awards for their work. Elena Zajmovič from Nova Varoš won the third prize at the “My European Community” Art Contest, which has been organized in Serbia for ten years under the auspices of the EU through the EU PRO Programme.⁶⁶ The drama “Lavina” (Avalanche) coproduced by the Novi Pazar Regional Theatre and Puls Teatar from Lazarevac was also performed in Novi Pazar.⁶⁷ The collection of poems “Kafkin kalfa” (Kafka’s Apprentice) by Šaban Šarenkapić, who won the “Sulejman Tabaković” Award last year, was presented in Novi Pazar.⁶⁸ The performance “Srebrenica. Kad mi ubijeni

64 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

65 Ibid.

66 Sandžak Danas, 17 January 2020. “Priznanje za kreativnost i empatiju”.

67 Sandžak Danas, 24 January 2020. “Lavina u Novom Pazaru”.

68 Sandžak Danas, 24 January 2020. “Predstavljen Kafkin kalfa”.

ustanemo" (Srebrenica. When We Who Were Killed Rise Up), directed by Zlatko Paković and produced by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, was also shown in Novi Pazar. Enes Halilović from Novi Pazar received the "Zlatno slovo" (The Golden Letter) Award for the best collection of short stories. With this award for his book "Čudna knjiga" (A Strange Book) Halilović became one of the most awarded authors in Novi Pazar.⁶⁹ "Ako dugo gledaš u ponor" (If You Look into the Abyss for a Long Time), a play performed by the Novi Pazar Regional Theatre and the Cultural Centre in Novi Pazar, based on Enes Halilović's novel of the same name, and directed by Zlatko Paković, was proclaimed the best performance of the 66th Sterijino Pozorje Festival.⁷⁰

The funds for cultural events and the protection of cultural monuments have also been planned. The Novi Pazar City Administration will allocate 19.9 million dinars from its budget for the maintenance of the Watchtower.⁷¹

69 Sandžak Danas, 24 January 2020. "Još jedna nagrada za Halilovića".

70 <https://www.novosti.rs/kultura/vesti/1011051/najbolja-predstava-novog-pazara-svecanim-urucenjem-nagrada-novom-sadu-posle-devet-dana-spustena-zavesa-66-sterijino-pozorje>.

71 Sandžak Danas, 5 February 2021. "Za Kulu motrilju 19,9 miliona dinara".

ECONOMY: IT STAGNATES DUE TO THE LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE



*Entrance to
the Fazlić
farm*

The main problem of the stagnation of economic life in Sandžak is the lack of infrastructure, due to which there is almost no investment. The state is building the Novi Pazar-Sjenica road as well as a road near Tutin, with a Turkish loan which is repaid by Serbia. However, as it is emphasized, the road near Tutin is probably in the service of Zvonko Veselinović, because he is building “something” on Mount Golija. Some rural roads are also being built. The most is expected from the Belgrade-South Adriatic highway, which would be the extension of the Miloš the Great highway, through Pešter, up to Crna Gora. It was announced a long time ago, but its construction has not yet started. According to some collocutors, this road will be built because this is in the interest of the European Union and not because Serbia wants to build a road for its citizens in Sandžak. Bosniaks believe that the highway will make a significant contribution to economic recovery.⁷²

The company INKOP, headed by the Kosovo businessmen Zvonko and Žarko Veselinović and Milan Radoičić, bought one of the largest companies specializing in road construction and maintenance, “Novi Pazar put“. They have been linked to numerous scandals and various lawsuits have so far been filed against them.⁷³ However, they have an absolute monopoly on all tenders in Sandžak, so that nobody dares to participate in them anymore.⁷⁴

Otherwise, it is relied a lot on the potential of the Peštar Plateau for the development of animal husbandry and organic food production. Although there are ideal conditions and recognizable products from this region throughout the country, investments in the development of this idea are very small.⁷⁵

72 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

73 Danas, Firma Veselinovića i Radoičića novi vlasnik preduzeća za izgradnju puteva iz Novog Pazara, 10 January 2020.

74 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

75 Sandžak Danas, 24 January 2020. “Potencijali Peštara za organsku proizvodnju”.

There are no foreign investments just due to poor infrastructure. The government is reducing its subsidies for this region when it is a question of foreign investments. So, for example, if a foreign company employs our citizen in Leskovac, it will receive 10,000 euros and if it employs our citizen in Novi Pazar, it will receive 5,000 euros.⁷⁶

Most collocutors complain about centralization which prevents any greater local initiative. They also complain about the lack of marketing education, for example. All collocutors point out that there are no interethnic problems and tensions and that coexistence is very harmonious. However, official Belgrade is bringing unrest into interethnic relations.⁷⁷

In general, the economic situation has not changed much, which can also be judged by the number of young people leaving the region on a daily basis, mostly for the West. The only noticeable activity is construction, which is financed by diaspora money, but the bulk of funds comes from money laundering. One source of funds (although to a much lesser degree than before) includes drugs, which traditionally pass through this region. There is also talk about some circles which are linked to the mafia in Kosovska Mitrovica and Belgrade, as well as Montenegro.⁷⁸

During the last fifteen years, Novi Pazar still started to change: road infrastructure investments were made, while the buildings and centre of the city were renovated. The revival of Novi Pazar already began during the rule of the Democratic Party. After the SNS came to power there was also some progress in other areas, such as public health, for example. It started during the pandemic, because the hospital had a shortage of doctors and other medical staff.

76 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

Private business remained focused on ready-made clothing, jeans and meat production. Since salaries are low, citizens prefer to go abroad for a few months and then come back. It is a question of “circular migration”.

Sandžak also has the potential for tourism, which is just beginning to develop. They still have no tourist guides and agencies that will be able to promote Sandžak tourism. There are no signs in front of cultural and historical monuments that will provide basic information to tourists.

In cooperation with the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Sandžak Economic Development Agency (SEDA) supports the development of small and medium-sized enterprises by awarding grants for the purchase of equipment. One such example is Pazarnica (which produces and sales souvenirs). It received a grant worth \$7,500. Some companies from Serbia do not want to cooperate with it, because some souvenirs have the inscription “Sandžak”. There are also an increasing number of women entrepreneurs, although most women are still entrepreneurs only on paper. The state has a stepmotherly attitude towards women wanting to have children.⁷⁹ The state is implementing the “My first salary” programme, but this programme is inefficient, since the exodus of young people continues.

The largest investments come from the Bosniak diaspora, but they are primarily used in the construction industry, because there is no legal security for more serious investments. There is also a problem of illegal construction in Novi Pazar. There are examples that despite the inspection decisions ordering the suspension of construction it continues. One of the many examples is the building in the centre of Novi Pazar which is located next to one of the symbols of the city, Vrbak Hotel. The building was appropriated by the Islamic Community in Serbia, invoking the Law on the Restitution of Property to Churches and Religious

79 Ibid.

Communities, with the explanation that the building belonged to it before the Second World War.⁸⁰

The entry of Priboj's factory FAP into the Serbian Defence Industry Group will contribute to the revival of this region.⁸¹ A delegation from Sandžak led by Novi Pazar Mayor Nihat Biševac participated in the Economic Diaspora Forum, which was held in Berlin (February 2020).

Economic relations with Kosovo are more developed than with Sarajevo. Sandžak has profited a lot since the construction industry began to flourish in Kosovo. They exported construction materials and many workers went to Kosovo to work. The relations with Kosovo are the most natural, and Sandžak will benefit the most from the settlement of Kosovo's status. Otherwise, there is great closeness between them due to similar customs and experience.⁸²

Environmental protection is one of the priorities for Sandžak, especially for Novi Pazar, which is one of the most polluted cities in Serbia. The route of the gas pipeline that should contribute to air pollution reduction was designed but, in general, not much was done to resolve the pollution problem. The city is already subsidizing certain projects for the replacement of individual fireplaces, but insufficiently. There are also several pellet making plants, but since some of them make low-quality pellets, they additionally contribute to air pollution. Many textile and light clothing firms use the remnants of materials for heating, which is extremely detrimental to air quality.⁸³

The increasingly difficult social and economic situation triggered the "self-organization" of citizens within various nongovernmental organizations, primarily humanitarian ones. Thus, the humanitarian organization "Open Hand"

80 Sandžak Danas, 6 November 2020. "Inspekcijska rešenja niko ne poštuje".

81 Sandžak Danas, 17 January 2020. "Spas za pribojsku fabriku".

82 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

83 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

is implementing the project “Improving the Provision of Health Services in the Roma Settlement Blaževo in Novi Pazar” aiming to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic in the substandard Roma settlements. The project is financed by the Swiss Government.⁸⁴

There are an increasing number of humanitarian organizations that have a religious missionary role, which is also a consequence of the negligence shown for this region. The Centre for Humanitarian Work “Hajrat”, for example, helps orphan families and single mothers by sending Ramadan gifts for children.⁸⁵ The “En-Nisa” Association was founded a few months ago. According to the data on its website, it is also known for its project “Make the Orphans Happy”. This group has been operating as an informal group for years. At first, it promoted women for whom the hijab was part of their identity. Over time, it has turned to humanitarian actions such as fighting for a better refugee status and help to refugees accommodated in collective centres in Sandžak, and the activities for children with disabilities.⁸⁶

84 <https://rtvnp.rs/2021/04/19/grad-novi-pazar-i-ho-otvorena-ruka-realizovace-vazan-projekat-za-rome-u-blazevu/102517>.

85 <https://hajrat.org/zenska-mreza-hajrata-u-posjeti-samohranim-majkama-i-jetimima/>.

86 <https://tutinskenovine.com/novopazarke-iz-udruzenja-en-nisa-brinu-o-jetimima-i-samohranim-majkama/>.

THE RELATIONS WITH TURKEY

Turkey is a very present actor in Sandžak. Local political actors often (mis)use it in mutual clashes. The popularity of Turkey and its President was best evidenced by the welcome scene during Erdogan's visit to Novi Pazar in 2017. All three political leaders, who are often in conflict, went to Ankara to support Erdogan after the 2016 coup.

Due to a large Bosniak diaspora in Turkey, the Turkish Consulate was opened in Novi Pazar on 1 September 2021. It covers the territory of the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš and Priboj. On that occasion, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Melvüt Çavuşoğlu, stated: "Our brothers in Sandžak and Turkish citizens of Sandžak origin are a strong link between our countries. This Consulate covers a wide area from Pirot to Užice, so that I hope that after its opening the investments of our companies in this region will increase, which we encourage, and that our relations and cooperation will be enhanced."⁸⁷

Regardless of the orientation towards Turkey, its attempt to form a Turkish minority in Sandžak a few years ago failed. Turkey's tendency to treat Bosniaks as a Turkish minority provokes strong opposition in both Sandžak and Sarajevo. The Association of Turks in Serbia was formed in Novi Pazar in 2015. It called on citizens to register, so that a Turkish national minority could be formed. Although the invitation was allegedly sent only to the citizens of Turkish origin, many Bosniaks saw it as the provocation aimed at undermining Bosniak identity. For the formation of a national minority it is necessary to have 400 registered citizens and there are not so many of them.⁸⁸

87 <https://rtvnp.rs/2021/09/01/cavusoglu-turska-nikada-nec-zaboraviti-podsku-naroda-sandzaka-novi-pazar-u-srcu/111365>.

88 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2015/8/14/poziv-koji-je-uznemirio-sandzak>.

As the General Secretary of the Bosniak Academy of Sciences and Arts, Muamer Zukorlić claimed that the people were surprised and panicked, and that many called them asking why some people call Bosniaks Turks. He claimed that there is not a single Turk in Novi Pazar, not even statistically.⁸⁹

Many Bosniaks consider it as an attempt to “Turkify Bosniaks” and a dangerous idea and brutal aggression against the being and identity of the Bosniak people. Esad Džudžo holds that this idea was directed from “Greater Serbian intelligence circles with the aim to impair the capacity of the Bosniak national community and disrupt good brotherly relations between the Bosnian and Turkish people, as well as the relations between Serbia and Turkey”. Muamer Zukorlić also pointed out that underneath this initiative one could recognize the manuscripts of different policies and ideologies.⁹⁰

Bosniak leaders view the whole situation as a “precedent in interethnic relations in modern history” and announce sending protest notes to both Turkish diplomats in Serbia and the Belgrade authorities, urging Bosniaks to “resolutely reject this assimilative act and humiliating project, and remain true to their national identity”.⁹¹

Despite many promises, Turkey has not significantly invested in Sandžak and is much more focused on other regions in Serbia.

Close cooperation between Turkey and Serbia has been intensified in recent months, both in political and economic terms. The Parliament in Ankara has ratified the Free Trade Agreement between Serbia and Turkey. During 2018, Erdogan and Vučić met five times in connection with numerous projects to be realized by Turkish firms.

89 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2015/8/14/poziv-koji-je-uznemirio-sandzak>.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

Turkey has invested about 20 million dollars in Sandžak through its Agency for International Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA). This Agency mainly helps the restoration of cultural heritage and the reconstruction of buildings from the Ottoman period. Its plans include the building of one bridge, reconstruction of the Isa-Bey's Hammam in Novi Pazar, reconstruction of the court building, etc. A large number of projects are waiting. The reconstruction of the Novi Pazar–Tutin road is underway.⁹² However, it is a question of the loan that Serbia is repaying. In addition, Çavuşoğlu ceremonially opened the Sports Hall in Novi Pazar, the renovation of which was financed by Doğuş Company. The Turkish Ambassador added that the two countries have good bilateral relations and that he expects the realization of a regionally important project, that is, the construction of the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway, which should be done by Taşyapi.⁹³

The benevolent attitude of Sandžak people towards Turkey is the result of historical, religious, cultural and family ties, as well as the consequence of Serbia's attitude towards Sandžak and Bosniaks as a minority people. Bosniaks blame the Serbian Government for the lack of infrastructure and investments, but also because the centre for many things is still neighbouring Kraljevo, despite the fact that, considering the number of inhabitants, it should be Novi Pazar. Bosniaks also add post-war traumas to this list, which is why they are looking for a protector in Turkey.⁹⁴

Regardless of the orientation towards Turkey, the Helsinki Committee's collocutors point out that they do not have a special relationship with Turkey. What

92 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/turska-generalni-konzulat-novi-pazar/31438570.html>.

93 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-i-turska---sve-dubljabliskost/29763206.html>.

94 <https://avaz.ba/globus/region/256697/bosnjaci-u-sandzaku-i-turska-mozda-jesmo-braca-ali-nam-kese-nisu-sestre>.

Erdogan had promised has not been fulfilled such as, for example, the export of meat and “mantije” to Turkey. More is exported from other parts of Serbia. Instead, they send religious officials from Turkey to perform religious services in Sandžak in Turkish. They point out that the second Islamic Community was created by Turks and that they maintain it.⁹⁵

95 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee.

"FRIENDS OF SANDŽAK"

International actors and representatives of international organizations have been present in Sandžak since the 1990s. The presence and interest of international organizations (such as the OSCE, Council of Europe, EU, international and local non-governmental organizations and embassies) point out that the international community is aware of the possible destabilization of this region.

In January 2009, an informal group named "Friends of Sandžak" was formed at the initiative of the then US Ambassador to Serbia, Cameron Munter. The group meets from time to time to discuss the issues related to Southeast Serbia. In addition to the United States and Turkey, its members are also France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Spain and Austria, as well as the EU, UN and OSCE.

The main goal of this group is to provide economic support to Sandžak and its activities are largely coordinated with the Serbian government and local government representatives. Thanks to the help of this group, a series of projects has been implemented, ranging from the renovation and extension of elementary schools and accommodation of internally displaced persons to the protection of human rights. This assistance is provided through several international organizations such as USAID, European Progress and TIKa.⁹⁶ However, the visits of the Friends of Sandžak are now much less frequent than in the previous years and the last time they met was in 2018.⁹⁷

96 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:814750-INTRIGANTNO-DELOVANJE-GRUPE-SA-ZAPADA-Opet-se-aktiviraju-Prijatelji-Sandzaka>.

97 Interview made by the Helsinki Committee, November 2019.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The escalation of Serbian nationalism and events in both Serbia and the region, are reviving fear and uncertainty about their future among Bosniaks. The rise of Islamophobia and constant fixation on Islamic extremism, as well as Belgrade's unwillingness to prosecute the crimes against Bosniaks committed during the 1990s and provide reparations to victims, have contributed to the distrust of Bosniaks and their turning away from Belgrade. They feel betrayed and marginalized.

Sandžak is still one of the most underdeveloped regions in Serbia, with poor infrastructure which discourages foreign investors. Young people are leaving because of high unemployment and the lack of perspective. In addition, the high degree of centralization (which is also a problem for the whole of Serbia) as well as the non-existent rule of law prevent local initiatives and more significant investments by the Sandžak diaspora in production.

The Sandžak issue is a hostage of the still-unsettled, primarily border issues in the Balkans. Therefore, various theories are circulating, which additionally stigmatize Sandžak, because it is perceived as a disputed territory that can be the cause of new instabilities.

Belgrade still succeeds in preventing any more significant resistance and open dissatisfaction with the status of Bosniaks and Sandžak with its manipulations and control of local actors.

The language issue remains open, which essentially denies the existence of the Bosniak nation. The previous government was sympathetic to the issue, which even resulted in the preparation of textbooks for teaching in the Bosnian language.

It is a wrong approach to perceive Sandžak only through the lens of Wahhabism and extremism, because these are marginal phenomena and, above all

else, the consequence of the decades-long situation in Sandžak, which is the consequence of Belgrade's policy.

The ethnification of the post-Yugoslav space and the disintegration of the value system opened up the scope for conservative ideologies (in which religious communities play a key role), repatriarchilization of society and return to very conservative, that is, liberal values.

In order to reduce the exodus of young people and experts, especially builders and other service industry specialists, the state should adopt special measures to alleviate unemployment in Sandžak.

The state should also fulfil its legal obligations and enable the proportional employment of Bosniaks in republican institutions, especially the judiciary, police, tax administration and the like.

Integrating the minorities into a larger political, economic and cultural community remains a key issue for the realization of their rights. Regardless of the existing laws and norms, the Bosniak minority (and others) is marginalized and ghettoized. Their cultural heritage is not included in textbooks nor is it adequately promoted.

The international community paid little attention to education and the creation of new identities in the region, palliatively resolving the burning issues, without entering into the causes of the negative trends and regression of society. The international community should have more understanding for the current problems of Bosniaks in Serbia and finally put the Sandžak issue on its agenda with the aim to create conditions for democratic national rights.