

Serbia's Sandžak: Caught Between Two Islamic Communities

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Abstract

At present, two Islamic communities compete for legitimacy in Serbia. The resulting difficulties are particularly evident on the Serbian side of the *Sandžak* region – home to a majority of the Muslim population of Serbia where religious and political leaders instrumentalize religious divisions to garner political support. A great majority of the population, meanwhile, seeks economic progress in the neglected region.

Key words: Islam, Serbia, Instrumentalization, Sandžak

Political Borders and the Creation of Regions

The *Sandžak* is a region that stretches from southwestern Serbia into northeastern Montenegro and a colloquially used term that symbolizes a common foundation among local Bosniaks. The region is, in other words, not a legal entity, but rather a mind-map that reflects the common history of local Bosniaks. As such, many locals identify as *Sandžaklije* even though Montenegro and Serbia split in 2006. Within the context of the institutional split that characterizes the Islamic community in Serbia, the mind-map and non-legal entity known as *Sandžak* illustrates the political, religious, and social consequences locals face as a result of the recurring territorial re-, and division. The existence of two Islamic Communities in Serbia must thus be understood from two perspectives. The first relates to the shifting borders, and the way in which the subsequent state destruction and reconstruction affected local Muslim communities. The second, and related factor is the question of trust regarding the legitimate representation of the Islamic community in Serbia.

Shifting Borders

With the occupation of Bosnia in 1878, the *Sandžak* also came under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1908, Vienna returned *Sandžak* to the Sublime Porte, until Serbia and Montenegro recaptured and divided the *Sandžak* during the Balkan Wars of 1912/13. Between 1918 and 1929, the Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian monarchy (KSHS) subsumed the *Sandžak* into the „province of Southern Serbia“. In 1941, the Axis powers attacked Yugoslavia and rewarded the southern region of *Sandžak* to the Kingdom of Albania – a satellite state of Italy. The *Sandžak's* legal character was since on the backburner so long as SFRY, and the subsequent Federation of Yugoslavia (FRY), existed.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire not only heralded repeated modifications of regional borders, but also dictated that local Islamic communities reform accordingly. With the onset of the royal dictatorship in 1930, for instance, the Austro-Hungarian decree for religious autonomy stipulated a reorganization of the Islamic community. Within this structure, the KSHS leadership transferred the seat of the *reis-ul-ulema*¹ from Sarajevo to Belgrade, while

1 Supreme religious leader.

keeping both the *vakuf*² and *medžlis*³ in Skopje and Sarajevo. A new organizational structure was introduced following the formation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which, to a certain extent, reflected the federal structure of the newly created state. The seat of the Islamic community was now re-transferred to Sarajevo. With the onset of the Yugoslav Succession Wars, the organizational structure of the Islamic community disintegrated in tandem with the destruction of SFRY. Henceforth, Islamic Communities represented the Muslim *ummah*⁴ according to the newly established Yugoslav successor states. The question of legitimate representation in Serbia, however, was contentious from the outset.

Two Competing Islamic Communities in Serbia

Muslims on the Serbian side of the *Sandžak* region identify as Bosniaks, and as constituent members of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Founded in 1993, the *mešihat* of the Islamic community in *Sandžak* represents this attitude with its institutional orientation toward the *rijaset* in Sarajevo, the highest religious and administrative body of the Islamic community of BiH. In 1994, mufti Hamdija Jusufspahić of Belgrade founded a new Islamic community to illustrate Serbia's institutional split from Sarajevo. Belgrade thus supported the

Islamic community of Serbia (Islamska zajednica Srbije, IZS) in view of territorial integrity. Three constituent *mešihats*⁵ represent the IZS, including the *mešihat* in Serbia, Preševo, and Novi Pazar. The *mešihat* of Novi Pazar is further affiliated with the madrassa in Prijepolje (Bakije-hanume), and Novi Pazar (Sinan Beg). In 2007, Adem Zilkić, a native of Tutin on the Serbian side of the *Sandžak* region, succeeded Jusufspahić as Reis-ul-ulema of the IZS. Zilkić, however, repeatedly faced accusations of being a fraud, and an alleged lackey of state security services until his final release from office in 2016. Sead Nasufović from Novi Pazar serves as the current Reis-ul-ulema of the IZS. In 1993, Mufti Muamar Zurković headed the *mešihat* in Novi Pazar with political backing from Sulejman Ugljanin, leader of the Democratic Action Party, SDA. In 2006, the *Mešihat* adopted a new constitution under its new name, the Islamic Community in Serbia (*Islamska zajednica u Srbiji*, IZuS) because of Belgrade's adoption of a law that recognized only "traditional" Islamic communities hereafter. Zurković was elected to lead the IZuS in the presence of Mustafa Cerić, then head of the Islamic Community of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The IZuS is subdivided into four muftiates, including Belgrade, Novi Sad, Preševo, and Novi Pazar. The muftiate in Novi Pazar is further connected to the International University of Novi Pazar.

Like Zilkić of the IZS, Zukorlić continually faced various accusations, including his alleged protection of local *vehabije* (wahabites), corruption and self-aggrandizement. In his position as mufti, Zukorlić repeatedly used his religious tenure for political purposes, which led to widespread antipathy against his person in Novi Pazar and beyond. Zukorlić

2 *Vakuf* is a modified word from the Arabic word *al-waqf*. The *waqf* (*khairi*) is a charitable trust that belongs to Allah. As such, it cannot be sold or used in a different capacity, except for the development of the Muslim community.

3 *Medžlis* is a modified word from the Arabic word *majlis*. Within this context, the word *medžlis* stands for Ulema council.

4 *Ummah* is an Arabic word, and means community.

5 Territorial, organizational units.

abdicated his office in 2014, and was succeeded by Mevlud Dudić. Dudić previously served as the dean of the International University of Novi Pazar that was founded by Zukorlić.

Fusing Political and Spiritual Interests: On the Heels of the Yugoslav Succession Wars

In light of the prewar barrage of propaganda and full-blown violence in BiH during the 1990s, a group of political actors strove for political and territorial autonomy for the *Sandžak* region. Though disparate in their views, they united behind Sulejman Ugljanin within the Stranka Demokratske Akcije (SDA) – an offshoot of Alija Izetbegović's party in Bosnia. Among Ugljanin's recurring rallying points was the creation of a special status for a common *Sandžak* – the unification of the Montenegrin and Serbian sides of the territory. In 1991, Ugljanin finally launched a referendum for autonomy within the umbrella organization of the Bosniak National Council of *Sandžak* (BNVS).⁶ A total of 70.2 percent of all 264,156 eligible voters turned out in support of autonomy, especially residents of Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica.⁷ Belgrade meanwhile denied the validity of the memorandum and charged Ugljanin with violating the constitutional order of Serbia and terrorism. As a consequence, Ugljanin fled and found political asylum in Turkey.

An elder resident of Novi Pazar appreciated Ugljanin's political activism as a

necessary tool to ensure regional continuity: *We were sitting ducks here in Serbia. We thought it was our turn after Bosnia. We knew people were killed and harassed in BiH; just because they were Muslims. We saw what was happening over there. People fled Bosnia and came to Novi Pazar, and we took them in. But we were afraid of the authorities. So, in response to the extreme nationalism of Milošević, Drašković, Šešelj, and all those people, we created our own political platform to protect ourselves – because we thought they wanted our physical annihilation.*⁸ At the time, Ugljanin was recognized as a strong leader for the political movement of the Bosniak population in Sandžak. Ugljanin was not only a vociferous advocate for the rights of Sandžak Bosniaks, he also supported the creation of a separate Islamic Community that recognized the rijaset of Sarajevo as its spiritual center. Muamer Zukorlić became the first mufti of this new Islamic Community in 1993.

Locals understood the implications of the above move, though some considered the establishment of the second Islamic Community as a political strategy. A young interlocutor considered Ugljanin's support of the Islamic Community in Novi Pazar as a ploy. *Ugljanin supported the creation of this new Islamic Community because he had his own political interests. Those were not the interests of Muslim believers. It was a political decision because the other Islamic Community stood in unison against Sulejman Ugljanin. So, he literally created his own Islamic Community, and in turn this split amongst believers. But the Muslims are not divided in their beliefs. At least I don't think so. We believe in one god. I have only one gamija (mosque), I don't need a middleman. As a believer, I do not need a mufti to represent my needs before god. We don't have a pope or some patriarch we are supposed to rely on*

⁶ The assembly was registered as the Bosniak National Council of Sandžak (BNVS). Since 2003, the council is known as the Bosniak National Council.

⁷ For more information on the council, see: "Bošnjačko nacionalno vijeće Sandžaka 1991-2011". Sandzak News.com, 24. 12. 2011. <http://www.sandzaknews.com/kolumna/73-bosnjacko-nacionalno-vijece-sandzaka-1991-2011.html>

⁸ Interview held in Sandžak in June 2012

*for communication with god. No. This Community was set up with political goals in mind. But I must say the split is bad. We need a united Islamic Community. Just one.*⁹

In 1996, Ugljanin returned from Turkey a compromised politician. Once seen as a vocal advocate, he now seemed subdued compared to his former self. He no longer supported autonomy, let alone independence or unification with Bosnia. A number of locals considered him suspicious, based on his alleged collusion with Belgrade to split the local vote. Others, however, still perceive him as their legitimate political leader. At any rate, Rasim Ljajić, another politician from the SDA ranks, filled the political void during Ugljanin's absence. Disagreeing with Ugljanin's politics and course of action, Ljajić established the *Socijaldemokratska Partija Srbije* (SDP). Ljajić subsequently pursued a conciliatory course with Belgrade due to his conviction that cooperation would improve the standard of living in the *Sandžak* region. While some in the region disagree with Ljajić, others support his cooperation with Belgrade. *There is no other way out but collaboration with Belgrade. Both politicians, Sulejman Ugljanin and Rasim Ljajic realized they needed to cooperate with Belgrade if they wanted to improve the standard of living, the political, and the religious situation here in Sandžak. Both ministers tried to improve life here as best as they could.* Though their political and spiritual platforms and positions transformed over time, Ugljanin (SDA) and Ljajić (SDP), as well as the (now) former mufti Zukorlić remained high profile actors in the *Sandžak* region.

⁹ Interview held in Sandžak in June 2012.

The Montenegro-Serbia Split: Another Border is Drawn

Bosniaks in Montenegro were less suspicious of and looked toward Podgorica for political leadership. Besides breaking with the Milošević regime openly in the late 1990s, Milo Đukanović also included Bosniaks into the political fold.¹⁰ In 2006, a substantial majority of Bosniaks supported Podgorica's move for independence. Pro-independence sentiments were especially strong in Rožaje and Plav, though less so in Bjelo Polje. Berane and Pljevlja rejected Montenegrin independence by a small margin.

Both Ljajić and Ugljanin opposed the referendum at the time, though neither of them held substantial sway over the Montenegrin Bosniak population. The dream of a unified *Sandžak* was now over, a reality that sunk in quickly at the local level. *I think the idea of an autonomous Sandžak lost its support among the Bosniak population. Sandžak is already divided between Montenegro and Serbia, and I don't think that Bosniaks of Montenegro are even interested in merging with us to create an autonomous region. All that is left are five, maybe six municipalities... we would be very weak, economically speaking. Not to mention our infrastructure... Novi Pazar can only prosper within a larger community – even Serbia is too small. We are waiting to be part of the European Union. We need open borders, fewer borders, and not more of them.*¹¹ Many Bosniaks share his point of view and look to a future in which Serbia becomes a member of the European Union.

¹⁰ "Serbia's Sandžak: Still Forgotten". Europe Report No 162. International Crisis Group, April 8, 2005. 14.

¹¹ Interview held in Sandžak in June 2012.

United in Division

Both Islamic communities claim to represent all Muslims of Serbia, and disagreements reached a high point in 2007 when Zilkić demanded that Zukorlić relinquish his position as mufti. Believers who showed up in support of either Zukorlić or Zilkić, respectively, shot in the air and threw rocks and bricks at each other during the subsequent clashes.¹² Since this incident, the Bosniak population has become internally divided. And yet, local Bosniaks and/or Muslims abhorred these clashes and considered the growing fusion of religion and politics an obstacle to a constructive social, and political progress. *The rift between the two Islamic communities has influenced the political process negatively and had harmful consequences for the town. People have simply stopped talking to each other in a normal manner. The community is divided, even though they are all Bosniaks. It is bizarre, but I think this is perhaps the first time in history that Bosniaks and Serbs get along better than Bosniaks amongst one another.*¹³

Mufti Zukorlić has, much like Ugljanin, as many supporters as opponents. Supporters agree with the former Mufti's arguments regarding a lack of prospects in the region, higher unemployment among Bosniaks when compared to unemployment numbers of Serbs, the generally high unemployment in *Sandžak*, the violations of human rights, and Belgrade's failure to care for historic Islamic landmarks.¹⁴

12 "Sukob Ispred Džamije Altun-Alem". B92. November 16, 2012. http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2007&mm=11&dd=16&nav_category=11&nav_id=272509

13 Interview held in Novi Pazar June 2012.

14 "Zukorlić i vlast u Srbiji: Zidanjekrize". Radio Slobodna Evropa. February 17, 2013. http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/srbija_sandzak_zukorlic/2312758.html See also "Zukorlić: Autonomija Sandžaka nužna". Radio Slobodna Evropa. March 3, 2012. <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/archive/news/20120320/500/500.html?id=24522257>

A recurring argument in support of the former mufti relates to local attitudes toward Belgrade. *Why has the government created a situation in which I feel like a second-class citizen? Why did the government allow for this mess to happen around here?*¹⁵ And yet, even those who agree with the former mufti's objections in general disagree with his attempted stranglehold on power. One interviewee explained that *Zukorlić was right about everything he said. But he went too far. He wanted to control everything, how we deal with the international community, the Novi Pazar rijaset, and now he wants to run for political office. He is like a dragon with four heads...it just does not work like that.*¹⁶

Religious and political opinion makers – including Zilkić, Zukorlić, and Ugljanin – still assume that all Bosniaks, too, are practicing Muslims, and vice versa. Former mufti Zukorlić, for instance, used to fly the Bosniak flag over his Islamic community despite there being Muslims of Roma and Albanian background in Southern Serbia. Yet it appears that Bosniak appointees internalized and further perpetuated the concept that Bosniaks approve of all legislation if promoted by and for Bosniak-Muslims. This explains the overtly religious overtones in the political process of the *Sandžak* area and indicates that local politicians and religious leaders emphasize the local Muslim identity to garner votes. The above quote, however, illustrates that religious and political leaders cannot assume that Bosniaks favor all proposals simply because they are couched in religious terms. Bosniaks of *Sandžak*, in other words, look for more sophisticated, and long-term solutions to the very specific shortcomings summarized above.

When you ask average citizens here about

<http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/archive/news/20120320/500/500.html?id=24522257>

15 Interview held in Novi Pazar June 2012.

16 Interview held in Novi Pazar June 2012.

the challenges they face in their daily lives, explained one lady in her late sixties, you will conclude their problems are tied to structural deficiencies, and only secondarily to their demands for minority rights. Her sentiments were echoed by a middle-aged man who argued for a re-evaluation of the negative narrative that defined the Sandžak since the Yugoslav Succession Wars. The entire Serbian media announces whatever Zukorlić comes up with. As if he is that important! But the government, the media, and the politicians all need him. This is some sort of continuance, an unofficial-official policy, and something that all governments have done since Milošević. And this is how it works; the government has one particular region where they can create controlled incidents. And, in Serbia, this is tied to the message that minorities create problems. As if the minorities are the problem. And I think of all minorities here, including the Hungarians, the Albanians, and us (Bosniaks). I mean, what is an average Serbian to think about Serbia's minorities when all he sees in the media are problems created by an allegedly problematic minority. The message then is this; if there were no minorities, there would be no problems. This is a continuous message that is sent via the media from the government to Serbia's citizens. Here we see again that citizens distrust the government in Belgrade. As such, the legitimate representation is very much tied to the governing body in Belgrade – a body that is yet viewed with great distrust among locals.

A young man in his late twenties stressed his desire for political and religious leaders to create some sort of order. I want the government to come down here to work on the infrastructure. I wish the media presented our problems in a different manner. That is what I really wish for. If the situation calmed down... if the Islamic community unified, to kind of... simply to

create some sort of order here. I wish for the election of neutral politicians.

Conclusion

The existence of two Islamic Communities in Serbia must be understood from the perspective of fluctuating border regimes and the way in which altering borders affect local communities. Questions of legitimacy and trust in the government are at the core of the divided Muslim community in Serbia. Both the IZS and IZuS purport to represent the entire Islamic community in Serbia and thus claim Islamic properties. The political leadership in Belgrade, in particular, supports the IZS with regard to Serbia's territorial integrity. The IZuS, by contrast, is oriented towards Sarajevo.

At the local level, disputes that surround the representation of the Islamic community in Serbia serve as a prism through which we understand that locals do not simply endorse decrees because they are couched in religious terms and/or in anti-Belgrade rhetoric. To the contrary, locals oppose the conflation of politics and religion, and seek European Union membership to escape the straightjacket of national boundaries and partisan policy makers.

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