

SANDŽAK  
BOSNIAKS

# Between **Extremism** and Fighting for Respect for Human and Minority Rights

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## A SHORT HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE SANDŽAK REGION AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The Sandžak region is located in the southwest of Serbia. According to the 2022 census, the six Sandžak municipalities have 233,091 inhabitants of whom 150,941 declared themselves as Bosniaks, 62,478 as Serbs and 6,433 as Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The largest city in Sandžak is Novi Pazar with 106,720 inhabitants. It is followed by Tutin with 33,053 inhabitants, Prijepolje with 32,214, Sjenica with 24,083, Priboj with 23,514 and Nova Varoš with 13,507.<sup>2</sup> The aforementioned six Sandžak municipalities are divided into two districts: the Zlatibor District with its seat in Užice, and the Raška District with its seat in Kragujevac. In addition to these six municipalities located in the territory of Serbia, the Sandžak region also includes eight municipalities in Montenegro – Pljevlja, Bijelo Polje, Berane, Plav and Rožaje. Out of a total of 11 Sandžak municipalities Muslim Bosniaks constitute the absolute majority of the population in five of them, while Serbs constitute an absolute majority in five municipalities.<sup>3</sup> The demographic composition of Sandžak was significantly affected by crimes, that is, ethnic cleansing committed against the Muslim population by Serbs and Montenegrins during the past century. The latest and more significant exodus of Muslim Bosniaks from Sandžak took place during the aggression of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia against Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period 1002–1995,

<sup>1</sup> In addition to these ethnic groups, there are also 335 Gorani, 250 Albanians, 247 Yugoslavs, 21 Hungarians, 19 Macedonians, 13 Bulgarians, four Germans and two Vlachs.

<sup>2</sup> For more details about the census in the Sandžak municipalities see: <https://popis2022.stat.gov.rs/sr-Latn/>

<sup>3</sup> Bosniaks constitute an absolute majority in Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Rožaje and Plav, while Serbs constitute an absolute majority in Pljevlja, Priboj, Prijepolje and Nova Varoš. Serbs constitute a relative majority in Berane and Bijelo Polje

and the violence and crimes committed against Kosovo Albanians a little later, in period 1998–1999. In order to understand the current situation in Sandžak, it is necessary to take a short look at the history of this region and its regional importance. The Sandžak we know today, began to take form as a geographical and administrative entity before its conquest by the Ottoman Empire (in the 14th century). After seizing power from his older brother Tihomir (in the 12th century), Stefan Nemanja chose the Raška valley as a base for the creation of the medieval Serbian state, which was significantly strengthened and expanded to the neighbouring lands during the 11th and 12th centuries. In the vicinity of present-day Novi Pazar and the Ibar and Lim Rivers, Stefan Nemanja and his sons built some of the oldest Serbian churches and monasteries. The most famous among them are the monasteries of Studenica and Đurđevi stupovi.<sup>4</sup> Thus, over time Raška has become a very significant territory for the construction of Serbian national identity, because it has sublimated the original medieval statehood that has also been linked with the Serbian Church. In other words, apart from Kosovo and Metohija, the Raška region has also represented and still represents the most significant determinant to which Serbian national identity refers.

For the mentioned reasons, the arrival of the Ottoman Empire is perceived negatively in Serbian collective memory and historiography. In other words, the Ottoman rule is perceived as an occupying force which, after conquering the Raška region and Kosovo and Metohija, enslaved and abolished the medieval Serbian state.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, the

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Morrison and Elizabeth Roberts, *The Sandžak: A History*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2013), 18.

<sup>5</sup> These territories are often referred to as “Old Serbia”. The term appeared in the 19th century to denote the territories that were once part of medieval Serbia,

town of Novi Pazar (“New Bazaar”) was built in the region of Raška, in the vicinity of the former trading centre of Trgovište, after the arrival of the Ottoman Empire, between 1450 and 1463. The new administrative and geographical entity was named after it – Sanjak of Novi Pazar.<sup>6</sup> The town was founded by Isa-Beg Isaković, the Ottoman commander who also founded Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, around 1460. At that time, the location of Novi Pazar was of great strategic importance, because the Bosnian road connecting the eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire with Bosnia and Herzegovina, passed through it.<sup>7</sup> Novi Pazar soon became a very dynamic trading centre and began to gain importance in the entire region. The development of Novi Pazar into an urban centre of that time was accompanied by the increasing Islamization of the population, especially from 16th century onwards. Thus, according to the 1516 data, there were 502 households in Novi Pazar of which 405 were Muslim and 97 were Orthodox.<sup>8</sup>

However, although the Ottoman Empire was a multicultural state, the minority non-Muslim population was in a second-class position,

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but outside the borders of the Principality of Serbia. The content of this term has changed over time, but has mainly included Raška, Kosovo and Metohija and Macedonia.

6 At the time of the Ottoman Empire, the term “sanjak” was used to denote a separate administrative unit, that is, a subregion of a vilayet. The Sanjak of Novi Pazar was part of the Bosnian vilayet and later the Kosovo vilayet. This territory was also under Austro-Hungarian rule from 1878 to 1908. This term is now in “informal use”, namely it is not legally recognized by the Serbian state.

7 In addition to the Bosnian road, the important Dubrovnik and Zeta roads also passed through it. Sandžak is also important because of the major routes running through it and connecting the Adriatic coast with the northern parts of Serbia.

8 In 1468, the ratio was quite different. There were 276 households in Novi Pazar, of which 201 were Christian and 75 were Muslim. See: Kenneth Morrison and Elizabeth Roberts, *The Sandžak: A History*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2013), 31.

which caused its substantial dissatisfaction. Thus, due to their subjugated position, the intolerance of Serbs towards the Ottoman Empire was growing. This was especially evident at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century when national independence movements began to emerge under the influence of the French Revolution.<sup>9</sup> With the emergence of the Serbian national awakening movement, whose goal was the liberation from the Ottoman Empire, the myths in its service were also created. One of their main characteristics was a strong anti-Ottoman narrative that will have a far-reaching impact on the perception of Islam and Muslims. In that mythological opus, the most prominent place was given to the Battle of Kosovo.<sup>10</sup> In his works, the American Islamologist and historian Michael Sells offers a very inspirational reflection about the mythic narratives and epic cycles dedicated to the Battle of Kosovo. He points out that the consequence of this mythological narrative is that “Turk” – used as a synonym for Muslim – was identified as the ultimate “Other”, the archetypal enemy of the Serbian people, because he was responsible for the killing of Prince Lazar, who was assigned a “Christ-like character” in the nineteenth-century national mythology, while his death was equated

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9 The First Serbian Uprising broke out in 1804 due to the brutality of the Ottoman Janissaries who massacred about a hundred Serbian chiefs in Belgrade.

10 The Battle of Kosovo took place on the Kosovo field in 1389. However, there are very few historical sources about it. The data on its outcome are not entirely reliable, which is why there is no agreement about it. What is known is that the Serbian army was led by Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović. Vuk Branković and the detachments sent by Bosnian King Tvrtko I also fought on the Serbian side. The Ottoman army was led by Sultan Murad I, who was accompanied by his two sons. It is also known that both military leaders were killed in the battle and that, in general, the casualties on both sides were very big. See more about the Battle of Kosovo in: Sima Ćirković, *Istorijski izvori o kosovskom polju*, in: *Bitka na Kosovu polju 1389. godine*, Belgrade: Galerija SANU, and Olga Zirolević, *Iz osmanske baštine*, (Belgrade: Balkanski centar za Bliski istok, 2018).

with the death of the entire Serbian people. According to these narratives, the resurrection of the Serbian people will not be possible until Lazar himself is resurrected one day and the descendants of his killers are not physically eliminated.<sup>11</sup> In this case, the descendants refer not only to ethnic Turks, but also to South Slavs who embraced Islam during Ottoman rule. Therefore, they were perceived and presented as being morally and spiritually deficient due to "the betrayal of their ancestors for opportunistic reasons".<sup>12</sup>

Such a Serbian national idea with a strong anti-Ottoman sentiment began to emerge with the First Serbian Uprising in 1804 and work toward the liberation of the Serbian lands from foreign rule. Over time, with the attainment of independence, that is, the formation of the Principality of Serbia, there began the persecution of Muslims, which was especially intensified during the First Balkan War in 1912, but also after the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and, later, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup> As for Sandžak, Serbia and Montenegro occupied it during the First Balkan War in 1912 or, more precisely, in October of that year. Muslims were less persecuted in the Serbian part of Sandžak, while in the Montenegrin part of Sandžak, especially, in Bijelo Polje, Plav, Gusinje and Rožaje, they were

exposed to substantial terror.<sup>14</sup> Although the level of physical violence in the Serbian part of Sandžak was not high, the position of Muslims in the region was significantly affected by the land reform and radical economic restructuring, which led to the impoverishment of Muslims, primarily landowners.<sup>15</sup>

Over time, the unfavourable economic situation, endangerment of their religious and cultural specificities, frequent incidents and physical abuse of Muslims in the Sandžak region made them to contemplate leaving their homeland and settling in the regions where they would feel safer.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the 20th century was marked by the mass emigration of Sandžak Muslims to Turkey, in particular. Justin McCarthy, an American demographer and historian, presented the data showing that between 1911 and 1923 the number of Muslims declined from

11 Michael A. Sells, „Christ Killer, Kremlin, Contagion”, in: *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, prepared by Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 352–389.

12 Vuk Branković, Prince Lazar's son-in-law, was assigned an important role in the stigmatization of Slavic Muslims. The epic literature dedicated to the Battle of Kosovo portrayed him as an anti-hero, a traitor, a man who sided with the "Turks" and thus became "the symbol of the ancestral curse of all Slavic Muslims".

13 Miloš Jagodić, "The Emigration of Muslims from the New Serbian Regions 1877/1878", *Balkanologie Revue d'études pluridisciplinaires* 2/1998.

14 In addition to their persecution, the Montenegrin army also committed considerable crimes in the villages of Upper Pešter in 1912 as well as in Plav and Gusinje in 1913. See more in: Harun Crnovršanin i Nuro Sadiković, *Sinovi Sandžaka*, (Novi Pazar: El-Kelimeh, 2016), 90–95.

15 It is important to note that during the First World War, especially after the return of Austria-Hungary in 1915, the Serbian population was faced with discrimination, while Muslim landowners exacted revenge. For more details see: Kenneth Morrison and Elizabeth Roberts, *The Sandžak: A History*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2013), 93.

16 The massacre in the village of Šahovići in Sandžak can serve as a paradigmatic case for the circumstances in which Sandžak Muslims lived after the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The massacre of Muslims took place in 1924, in the night between 9 and 10 November. During that night, about 2000 Montenegrins (their number depends on the sources) killed between 350 and 1000 Muslims from that village. The motive for this massacre was revenge for the murder of Boško Bošković, Governor of the Kolašin County. In fact, Montenegrin komitadji were responsible for his murder, not Muslims and the falsely accused Jusuf Mehonjić. See more about the Šahovići massacre in: Šerbo Rastoder, *Kad su vakat kaljali insani: Šahovići 1924*, (Podgorica: Almanah, 2011).

1,241,076 to 566,478, which means that during this period even 674,598 Muslims left the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.<sup>17</sup>

The additional reasons for their emigration and reconsidering the possibility for peaceful coexistence with Serbs and Montenegrins became especially relevant during the Second World War and the horrible massacre of the Muslim population in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandžak. The crimes were committed by Pavle Đurišić's Chetnik detachments. The Muslims in the Priboj, Pljevlja, Foča and Čajniče districts were systematically killed during the first half of February 1943. According to Đurišić's report sent to Dragoljub Draža Mihailović in February 1943, about "1,200 fighters and 8.000 other civilians: women, old people and children," were killed.<sup>18</sup> Otherwise, it is believed that this crime was committed in accordance with the Greater Serbia ideology with which the members of the Chetnik movement fought and which, in a modified form, gained momentum once again in the 1990s, when Slobodan Milošević came to power.<sup>19</sup>

17 Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922*, (Feltham: Darwin Press, 1995), 162.

18 In his book, after Smail Čekić was the first to do that, Radanović pointed to the crimes committed in Priboj, which are neglected in Serbian historiography. In addition to the mentioned districts, both Priboj and Pljevlja are part of Sandžak. Priboj belongs to the Serbian part of Sandžak and Pljevlja to the Montenegrin part. See: Milan Radanović, *Kazna i zločin. Snage kolaboracije u Srbiji: odgovornost za ratne zločine (1941–1944) i vojni gubici (1944–1945)*, (Belgrade Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 2016), 81–82.

19 The political doctrine of "Greater Serbia" is a complex amalgam of historical claims, self-victimization and nationalist aspirations and expectations, as well as religious and psychological elements. In essence, the doctrine is based on the ethnic and religious exclusivity and dominance of Serbs over other groups in some areas. In other words, the idea of Greater Serbia is the generator of intolerance and negative attitude towards other ethnic and religious groups, thus inciting violence if it is politically manipulated, as it happened several times in recent history.

The previously mentioned towns of Priboj and Pljevlja recorded the largest outflow of Bosniaks during the wars of the nineties. Just due to the fact that they are located on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was attacked and where the Muslim population was exposed to genocide and ethnic cleansing, a large number of Bosniaks emigrated. Admittedly, apart from the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina, the reason for their leaving can also be found in the atrocities committed by (Bosnian) Serbian paramilitary units during 1992 and 1993. The two biggest crimes took place in the village of Mioče on 22 October 1992, when the bus carrying passengers on the Priboj-Rudo route was stopped by Serbian paramilitary forces. Sixteen men and one woman, all of them being of Bosniak ethnicity, were kidnapped and taken to Višegrad where they were executed on the bank of the Drina River. The second crime took place in the village of Štrpci on 13 February. Twenty non-Serb passengers were seized from a train travelling from Belgrade to Bar and taken in an unknown direction. So far, the remains of only four abductees have been found, while the other ones are still missing. The families of the victims had to wait for (partial) justice as long as 30 years. Both crimes were committed by the members of the Avengers paramilitary group, also known as the White Eagles. The ideologist and founder of this paramilitary group which is, apart from the mentioned two crimes, also responsible for some of the most brutal crimes against Muslim Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was Dragoslav Bokan.<sup>20</sup> He is now one of the most popular guests at TV stations with national frequencies, although he advocates the same views he advocated during the 1990s, which led to the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Muslim Bosniaks. The revision of history and the reaffirmation of ethno-nationalist extremists

20 <https://www.portalnovosti.com/covjek-kao-bokan>

in the public space especially began to gain prominence in 2012, when Aleksandar Vučić and Toma Nikolić, the former members of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), whose leader Vojislav Šešelj is a convicted war criminal, came to power. Professor Hariz Halilovich calls this situation in Serbian society “a culture of triumphalism”, which means that the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians are not only denied, but those responsible for them are openly glorified as national heroes.<sup>21</sup> In such circumstances, Bosniaks in Serbia inevitably feel like second-class citizens and are worried about their physical existence, which is why they often identify with other states (Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Republic of Turkey) rather than with Serbia in which they live.

6 | Everything written in this introduction is essential for a proper understanding of the context in which there appear specific (ethno-) national policies and narratives of Sandžak Bosniak political parties and other social actors, as well as potential extreme events in Sandžak society. Because the politics and thinking of Sandžak Bosniaks cannot be properly understood nor can a correct view on them be formed without bearing in mind that Sandžak Bosniaks have been continuously exposed to discrimination, which has often turned into a direct physical threat since the beginning of the Balkan Wars in 1912.

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<sup>21</sup> Hariz Halilovich, “Globalisation and genocide”, in: *Global Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, prepared by A. Farazmand (New York: Springer, 2017), 1–8.

## **THE SPECIFICITY OF (ETHNO-)NATIONAL POLITICS IN SANDŽAK, THE MAIN ACTORS ON THE SANDŽAK SOCIO-POLITICAL STAGE AND THE ISSUE OF AUTONOMY**

The Bosniak national identity was formed with a significant delay relative to other two “neighbourly” nations – Serbian and Croatian. In the mentioned context, it must be pointed out that both the Serbian and Croatian national identities have also affirmed the overlapping of ethnic and religious affiliation. In addition, both national ideas have been formed in such a way that they both have expansionist tendencies towards the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular.

In such circumstances and caught between the two aggressive and exclusive national identities, Bosniaks initially tried to find a model for their survival and existence. Due to this fact, the formation of Bosniak national identity was guided by different value goals in comparison to the Serbian and Croatian ones. Or, more precisely, it was guided by what Anthony D. Smith called “positive effects of nationalism”. In other words, it sought to defend its culture, save its history and literature from annihilation, inspire its cultural revival and resolve its identity crisis caused by strong pressure from two assimilationist nationalisms denying its existence..<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Bosniak nationalism “worked” on collective mobilization in order to win the right to legitimize its community, which it did by resisting the tyranny and criminal policies to which Bosniaks were subjected during a century and a half.

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<sup>22</sup> Antoni D. Smit, *Nacionalni identitet*, (Belgrade: XX vek, 1998), 36.

At the same time, Mirsad Kriještorac believes that Bosniak nationalism has been conceived in the *transnational key* since the very beginning.<sup>23</sup> In other words, this nationalism has had no clearly defined goals, but has adjusted to the given situations and circumstances unlike Serbian and Croatian essentialist nationalisms, which have mostly been structured around their states, religions, national projects and expansionist aspirations, which has never been the case with Bosniaks. Thus, the current activities of the political parties of Sandžak Bosniaks and prominent social actors in this region must also be understood in the mentioned spirit. Their dominant effort is to achieve, *in the given circumstances*, that Bosniaks are not only guaranteed their human and minority rights by law, but that these are also *resected in practice*, thus ensuring the security and economic progress of the Sandžak region.

In the context of the given circumstances and economic development prospects of the region, it must also be pointed out that the feeling of alienation – due to a non-confrontation with the crimes of the past and the prevalent “culture of triumphalism” – is also present due to the discrimination of Bosniaks in other spheres and aspects of life. So, with its unemployment rate of over 50 percent, Novi Pazar, the largest town in Sandžak, is one of the top ones in Serbia. In addition, the average salaries in Sandžak are also far below the national average, while the state systematically avoids initiating larger capital projects and investments in this region.<sup>24</sup> Sandžak Bosniaks also face great challenges in realizing their right to use the Bosnian language and finding employment in state

<sup>23</sup> Mirsad Kriještorac, *First Nationalism Then Identity: On Bosnian Muslims and Their Bosniak Identity*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 13–14.

<sup>24</sup> See more details at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/novi-pazar-sanzacke-plate-mnogo-nize-od-republickog-proseka/>

institutions where they are significantly underrepresented, taking into account the population composition in this region.<sup>25</sup>

Considering all this, one of the most important demands of political and social actors in Sandžak is autonomy, which is advocated by the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), or decentralization, that is, the regionalization of the state, which is advocated by the Party of Justice and Reconciliation (SPP) and Sandžak Democratic Party (SDP).<sup>26</sup> Regardless of whether it is about autonomy or decentralization/regionalization, all actors agree that the status of Bosniaks has not been solved and that an especially great problem is posed by uneven investments in the development of the Sandžak region. Therefore, they all believe that redefining the state structure as a prerequisite for a more equitable redistribution and solving the problems relating to the protection of cultural, religious and minority specificities.

Otherwise, the SDA has been pursuing an uncompromising advocacy of the autonomy of Sandžak since its formation in 1990 as the branch of the party of the same name, which was formed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and whose leader was Alija Izetbegović, the first democratic president of that republic. In 1991, at the initiative of the Sandžak SDA, the Muslim National Council (MNV)<sup>27</sup> was formed in Novi Pazar. The

<sup>25</sup> Sandžak Bosniaks are less represented than Serbs in the police and other state institutions. The latest example, which was specifically emphasized by the interlocutors during this field research, is the 2022 case concerning training and employment in the fire-rescue unit. See more details at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/spp-mup-da-ponovi-konkurs-za-vatrogasce-u-novom-pazaru/>

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the three mentioned political parties, an important political and social role in Sandžak is also played by two Islamic communities and the Bosniak National Council (BNV).

<sup>27</sup> The Muslim National Council is today's Bosniak National Council. After the adoption of the new national name “Bosniak” at the Bosniak Congress in 1993,

position adopted at its Founding Assembly was that Sandžak would proclaim its autonomy in the event of the breakup of Yugoslavia. Shortly afterwards, in 1992, the Muslim National Council organized a referendum where 70 percent of Bosniaks turned out and 98 percent of them voted for autonomy. On the basis of this referendum, the Sandžak representatives at the Peace Conference on Yugoslavia in London in 1992 demanded a special status of this region.<sup>28</sup> The basic document in which the demands of Sandžak Bosniaks and the MNV were presented was the Memorandum on the Special Status of Sandžak,<sup>29</sup> The Memorandum clarifies the idea about autonomy and clearly specifies the powers that will be assigned to the Sandžak authorities.<sup>30</sup> Despite very wide powers and demands, which were interpreted by the Serbian authorities as a separatist action, the Sandžak political leaders did not question the territorial integrity of Serbia.<sup>31</sup> At that time, the President of the Party of Democratic Action, Sulejman Ugljanin, and its General Secretary, Rasim Ljajić, emphasized that in no way would the autonomy of Sandžak call into question the borders of Serbia. It was only attempted to secure the human and ethnic rights of Sandžak Bosniaks which,

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instead of the previous designation "Muslim", the Council also replaced "Muslim" with "Bosniak" in its name.

28 Goran Bašić, *Položaj Bošnjaka u Sandžaku*, (Belgrade: Centar za antiratnu akciju, 2002), 57.

29 The Memorandum was adopted on 6 June 1993.

30 In the Memorandum, the powers are demanded in the following sectors: education, culture, information, economy, energy, natural resources, health protection, transport, communications, administration, banking system, judiciary and police. According to the Memorandum, Sandžak was also supposed to have its assembly that would have legislative power, executive power, that is, its governor, government and, finally, judicial power.

31 Sulejman Ugljanin had to flee to Turkey in 1993 due to pressures and an arrest notice. He remained in exile for three years, until 1996, when he took part in the parliamentary elections and entered the Citizens' Council of the Federal Assembly of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

at that time, were threatened by an inadequate policy pursued by the Serbian regime. After the 1995 Memorandum another one was adopted in 1999. In this Memorandum of the Bosniak National Council the demands remained more or less the same, only Sandžak's special relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina was underlined.<sup>32</sup> As rightfully stated by Goran Bašić, the main problem relating to both Memorandums is that the citizens belonging to other ethno-national groups in the region, such as Serbs and Montenegrins, did not participate in their preparation as well as in the 1991 referendum on Sandžak's autonomy, thus calling into question the legitimacy of the referendum declaration and the ensuing decisions.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, three decades after the adoption of the Memorandums, the socio-political circumstances are such that the idea of autonomy is considered to be very difficult to realize and counterproductive for the development of the region.<sup>34</sup>

This is precisely why the advocacy of Sandžak's autonomy started to weaken and such an idea was gradually abandoned.<sup>35</sup> This was espe-

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32 After the Bosniak Congress held in Sarajevo in 1993, when the national name change from Muslim to Bosniak was adopted, The name of the Muslim National Council was soon changed to the Bosniak National Council.

33 Goran Bašić, *Položaj Bošnjaka u Sandžaku*, (Belgrade: Centar za antiratnu akciju, 2002), 61.

34 With the proclamation of Montenegro's independence in 2006, the territory of "historical" Sandžak was divided between the two independent states, Serbia and Montenegro. Bosniaks in Montenegro were overwhelmingly in favour of the independence of Montenegro. This fact testifies that the views of Muslim Bosniaks in Montenegro differ from those of Bosniaks living in Serbia. In other words, Bosniaks in Montenegro have a more positive attitude towards their state than Bosniaks living in Serbia, which is why the idea of Sandžak autonomy is marginal in the discourse of Montenegrin Bosniaks.

35 The weakening of the autonomist narrative can be especially seen from the



cially the case with the SDP, which was formed by separation from the SDA in 1994. Its founder was Rasim Ljajić who became part of the government after the 5 October 2000 changes and started to advocate for a more active participation of Sandžak Bosniaks in the social and political life of Serbia. The SDP now laid emphasis on the promotion of the idea of a civil state and cooperation with the political forces in Serbia which are also guided by such an idea. Such views are still dominant in this party, especially if one takes into account that. In 2009, Rasim Ljajić also formed the Social Democratic Party, which functions at the republican level, not only at the local level like the SDP, and is focused on the promotion of constitutional patriotism.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, the Bosniak Democratic Union, now the Justice and Reconciliation Party (SPP), also adopted the stance that such ideas are anachronistic and counterproductive after its initial flirtation with communitarianism and the idea of autonomy at the time of its formation. Therefore, this party's discourse shifted towards state decentralization and regionalization, putting strong emphasis on the need

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election results of the SDA. This party, which is the only one advocating for autonomy, has been in constant decline over the last ten years. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the SDA won 35,157 votes, in the 2022 elections it won 20,553 votes and in the parliamentary elections in December 2023 it won 21,827 votes. This means that the percentage drop is as much as 42 percent. Apart from the republican elections, the SDA has also been in permanent decline at the local level. This party especially lost its influence in the areas with a higher percent of the mixed population, such as Prijepolje, where its percentage drop was even 84 per cent. Due to the increasingly poor results, Enis Imamović, a SDA deputy in the Republican Assembly for many years and perceived as the "future of the party", left the party in October 2023.

<sup>36</sup> In the 2020 Party Manifesto it is emphasized: "We see Serbia as the state of all its citizens regardless of national, religious or any other difference". In addition, emphasis is laid on the fact that "citizens must perceive the state as their own at all times..." See more at: <https://sdpsrbije.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PROGRAM-SDPS-12.12.2020.-Manifest.pdf>

for a "historical reconciliation" between Serbs and Bosniaks, the idea that was most vocally emphasized by the party leader, Mufti Muamer Zukorlić who suddenly passed away.<sup>37</sup> During the author's field research in February 2023, the then SPP deputy in the Republican Assembly, Jahija Fehratović, pointed out that there would be no future without a partnership with the political representatives of the majority population and dedicated work on coexistence.<sup>38</sup> It is also interesting to note that Fehratović also emphasized that the SPP representatives gained experience in the Republican Assembly thanks to their party activity and that every step towards the political representatives of other (ethno-) national groups bore fruit over a long term. During the conversation, Fehratović also referred in detail to the issue of Sandžak's autonomy. According to him, such an idea is inadequate even from a historical aspect, because the Sandžak region is deeply interwoven with the history of Serbs and Montenegrins, as well as Bosniaks. Therefore, the status and future of this region must be inevitably decided together with others. He believes that "the advocacy of autonomy on these grounds can lead to a situation that Sandžak becomes something like Kosovska Mitrovica, that is, northern Kosovo",

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<sup>37</sup> Article IV of the SPP Programming Principles is entirely dedicated to the importance of "reconciliation". It also points to the need for reconciliation within the Bosniak community itself, but also within the Serbian people in which the SPP also wants to play a constructive role. The importance of inter-ethnic reconciliation within the country and the whole region is also highlighted. The SPP Programming Principles are accessible at: <https://spp.rs/program-2/>

<sup>38</sup> In the meantime, Jahja Fehratović left the SPP. At the republican elections, which were held in December 2023, he ran in the coalition called "Together for the Future and Development – Coalition for Peace and Tolerance". The Coalition was made up of minority parties from different ethnic communities, which put multinational society and coexistence at the centre of its pre-election campaign. See more at: <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/310076-fehratovic-treba-da-zivimo-jedni-s-drugima-a-ne-jedni-pored-drugih>

which, would have “unfathomably bad consequences for the citizens of Sandžak”.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of this chapter, it must be emphasized that *there was no radicalization of the political sphere* in Sandžak despite a very negative historical experience of Sandžak Bosniaks with the Serb majority as well as the fact that the Serbian society failed to confront the crimes and is shifting towards the glorification of war criminals and the re-popularization of the exclusivist Greater Serbia ideology. To be more precise, the leading political parties in Sandžak are trying to find the models of cooperation with the authorities and exercise their rights in Serbia. The clearest example of this is that the two leading political parties in Sandžak, the SDP and the SPP, support the ruling coalition and strive to be constructive and state-building factors. On the other hand, the SDA, a party that insists on autonomy and often resorts to harsh qualifications, is in constant decline, which also points to the sentiment of Sandžak Bosnians.<sup>40</sup> However, the question arises as to whether the policy pursued by the ruling populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) will justify the outstretched hand of Sandžak Bosniaks and ensure that they feel as equal citizens of Serbia. In the opposite, Sandžak Bosniaks will once again have the legitimate reasons to turn towards different policies and models for resolving their status and position in Serbia.

39 Fehratović's view is in contrast to what Sulejman Ugljanin, the leader of the SDA, demanded in his letter to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the representatives of the international community. In this letter Ugljanin demanded that Sandžak Bosniaks be guaranteed the same status that the Serbian government demands for Serbs in Kosovo. See: <https://autonomija.info/ugljanin-pisao-vucicu-hoce-za-bosnjake-u-srbiji-prava-po-modelu-koji-se-trazi-za-srbe-na-kosovu/>

40 See footnote 35.

At the end of this chapter it must also be pointed out that during this field research some interlocutors especially pointed to a high level of participacy. Namely, the ruling political parties in Sandžak are steeped in nepotism and clientelism and are not sufficiently engaged in the fight against ubiquitous corruption. Due to nepotism and clientelism, the political parties in Sandžak have an extremely great influence on election results, using pressure on the employed in state institutions and various forms of blackmail.<sup>41</sup>

## THE STATE PROJECT OF COLLAPSING THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY

The Islamic Community (IZ) has been recognized by the 2006 Law on Churches and Religious Communities as one of the traditional religious communities in Serbia.<sup>42</sup> However, despite the fact that it has been included among the traditional religious communities by the state, its legal status has been disputed since the adoption of the Law. Namely, since the breakup of Yugoslavia there have been two organizations in of Serbia striving to be legally recognized as the Islamic Community. It is about the Islamic Community in Serbia (IZuS) with its seat in Novi Pazar and the Islamic Community of Serbia (IZS) with its centre in Belgrade. In essence, a watershed between these two organizations is their activity in the years following the breakup of

41 Political clientelism can anticipate various benefits, such as access to government resources, that is, government contracts, public services, jobs in the public sector, access to social protection programmes, use of social welfare funds, granting of licences, permits and direct vote buying.

42 In addition to the Islamic Community, the Law also recognizes the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church and the Evangelical Christian Church as being traditional. In addition to them, the Jewish Community is also recognized as a traditional religious community.

Yugoslavia, namely their support towards the newly formed states, primarily towards Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>43</sup> The IZuS saw Sarajevo as its spiritual and, to some degree, political centre, while at the same time being somewhat antagonistic towards official Belgrade. On the other hand, the IZS was close to Serbia's top leadership, that is, Slobodan Milošević, and tried to relativize the war events and crimes committed against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. In this way, the IZS became highly alienated from the Muslims from different ethnic communities living in Serbia, especially Bosniaks and Albanians. This alienation and distrust are still present. In other words, Bosniaks and Albanians still look at the IZS with considerable suspicion and caution and are especially reserved towards its two leaders, the Jusufspahić brothers.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the IZS is supported by certain state (and security) structures and also enjoys the favour of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has a strong influence on the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities and bears a great responsibility that the legal status of the Islamic Community has not yet been resolved.

43 That the above mentioned is an essential watershed was also demonstrated by the TV duel between Mufti Muhamed Jusufspahić on behalf of the IZS and Mufti Muamer Zukorlić on behalf of the IZuS in TV show Pošteno (Honestly) of the Radio-Television of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 27 January 2014. The video recording in the author's possession.

44 It is very important to point to the internal division within the IZS. Namely, the Sandžak group led by Senad Halitović is in direct conflict with the Belgrade Muftiship led by the Jusufspahić family. Consequently, during 2023, both groups elected their Reis-ul-Ulema as the supreme head of the Islamic Community, thus being faced with organizational parallelism. It is interesting to note that, after the initial schisms in 2022, numerous Jamaats of the Serbian Muftism came closer to the Sandžak Jamaats for the first time and now cooperate with them, thus significantly marginalizing the Jusufspahić family.

Therefore, it can reasonably be claimed that the state policy, which keeps the Islamic Community – one of the most important institutional bearers of the organizational activity of Serbian Muslims – in a dysfunctional position, is well thought out. That this is potentially the case is also indicated by the fact that property restitution is indefinitely postponed. It is about the significant property that the Islamic Community claims from the state.<sup>45</sup> In addition to the property issue, the Islamic Community's dysfunctionality also has a particularly negative impact on Bosniaks in Serbia, because it plays an essential role in the formation of the Bosniak national community. This fact was especially emphasized by Mufti Mevlud Dudić in the conversation with the author of this text. Stating that the Islamic faith is crucial for the preservation of Bosniak identity and that the Islamic Community is responsible for "saving both religion and national identity" and that the attempts to destroy this institution actually work against Bosniaks "in order not to be what they really are".<sup>46</sup>

45 During the conversation, Mufti Dudić pointed to the restitution of two important IZuS properties. It is about the Novi Pazar Spa and the building housing Islamic institutions in the centre of Novi Pazar. However, when strictly speaking about the property in the Sandžak region, Dudić believes that, in addition to the state, the town authorities, which do not do their job, also bear a great responsibility, because they do not want to bring a decision on the restitution of wakf plots to the IZuS. Instead, they pass the responsibility to the state which, as is known, will never be the first to do that. He believes that the reason for such a behaviour of the town authorities is that the power holders in the Sandžak towns benefit significantly from such a situation.

In addition to property restitution, Dudić publicly expressed his satisfaction with President Vučić's promise that the state would support the renovation of the Altun-Alem Mosque. See more at: <https://sanapress.info/2023/03/31/muftija-dudic-raduje-nas-prihvatanje-zajtjeva-za-pomoc-drzave-u-rekonstrukciji-altun-alem-dzamiye/>

46 Audio recording in the author's possession. The interview took place in Novi Pazar on 2 March 2023.

As for the current government and its attitude towards the issue of the legal status of the Islamic Community, Dudić pointed out that there were some developments, but the whole process was conditioned by many other factors. Dudić's assertion can be taken with some reservation, bearing in mind that the IZuS of which he is the Grand Mufti has close relations with the SPP which is, as we have already mentioned, in power at the republican level, together with the populist Serbian Progressive Party. It is precisely on the basis of the closeness of the IZuS with the SPP, the views of which have already been mentioned in the first chapter, that we can also understand Dudić's reflections that "Sandžak Bosniaks are the citizens of Serbia" and that, as such, "they are obliged to be a constructive element of its social and political life". On these grounds, similarly to Fehratović, Dudić dismisses the idea of autonomy as the "reminiscence of the nineties" as well as the radical rhetoric of the political parties using it to cover up the lack of new ideas, but also their incompetence.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, Dudić believes that the solution for the prosperity of Serbia and Sandžak lies in decentralization and regionalization, while at the same time resolutely advocating for Serbia's accession to the European Union and seeing some positive aspects in the Open Balkans initiative.<sup>48</sup>

As can be noticed, all of Dudić's political views are consistent with those of the SPP, thus resulting in the fact that the IZuS has significantly repositioned itself with respect to the past, that is, to what we have highlighted as an essential watershed between this organization

47 Dudić refers specifically to the SDA.

48 It should be emphasized here that Dudić expressed a reservation regarding the Open Balkans Initiative in the sense that it should not be a substitute for EU accession, but only the solution for a transitional period. If the Open Balkans Initiative is to be a substitute for Serbia's accession to the EU, Dudić will be explicitly against it.

and the IZS. In other words, the IZuS has largely adopted the IZS position vis-à-vis official Belgrade with respect to cooperation with state institutions and bodies. Mufti Dudić's fondness towards Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić was especially evident during the latter's visits to Sandžak, who always tried not only to meet with the Mufti, but also to address the public together with him.<sup>49</sup> If this IZuS position and Mufti Dudić's public support for the Serbian President and the Serbian government are not changed, this can have a certain influence on young Sandžak Bosniaks to change their perception of Belgrade and Serbia over a long term. Naturally, as we have already stated in the conclusion of the previous chapter, it is of utmost importance for such an outcome that the state leadership headed by Aleksandar Vučić improves the position of Bosniaks in the (nearest) future. In the opposite, they will remain on the margins of Serbian society as second-class citizens. Finally, in the context of the Islamic Community's potential religious extremism, it should be pointed out that parallelism at one moment led to a certain ambiguity about which organization manages which mosque in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, thus creating space for the potential activities of radical elements in a certain situation. In the past, the late Mufti Muamer Zukorlić particularly pointed to this danger. He insisted that if the state wanted responsibility from the IZuS, then it should provide it with normal working conditions, that is, to be legally recognized.<sup>50</sup> Although the fear of the activities of suspicious groups was somewhat justified, it eventually turned out

49 For more details about Mufti Dudić's view on the current government, watch the podcast "Muftija Dudić: Zahvaljujući Vučiću odnos Bošnjaka i Srba je napredovao, zahvalni smo" (Mufti Dudić: Thanks to Vučić, the Relationship Between Bosniaks and Serbs Has Progressed, We Are Thankful); accessible at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Go1XZA9aCg4>

50 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/23556/Zukorlic-Druga-faza-pravljenja-problema>

that the IZuS had sufficient capacity for an efficient management of the religious space and life in the territory of Sandžak.<sup>51</sup> In Sandžak, there is no more mosque or masjid for which it can be said to spread violent extremist, ideas.

## THE SECURITIZATION OF SANDŽAK MUSLIMS AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Sandžak has been considered the region where radicalization processes occur for many years. The reason should be primarily sought in the securitization of Muslims, which sharply increased when US President George Bush declared “the war on terror” after the 11 September terrorist attacks (2001).<sup>52</sup> However, the securitization of Muslim believers in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, including the region of Sandžak, already started in the early 1980s. At that time, the attempt to revive religious life was perceived by the Party as a kind of open hostility against the state order for which one was legally sanctioned or, at least, socially ostracized. Such an attitude towards Muslim believers soon got out of control and perversely changed in such a way that Serbian nationalist intellectuals also adopted it. Thus, since the second half of the 1980s Serbian nationalists have insisted that Serbs are in danger from “Islamic fundamentalism”. They have often accused

51 The reason why we exclusively point to the IZuS is because it manages the absolute majority of mosques in Sandžak and is dominant in the Sandžak region in general. See: <https://sandzakpress.net/legalna-islamska-zajednica-ima-potpunu-dominaciju-u-novom-pazaru/>

52 For more details about the securitization of Muslims in the context of the 11 September terrorist attack and war on terror see: Jasmin Zine, *Under Siege: Islamophobia and the 9/11 Generation*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023).

Muslim believers of being responsible for the entire Yugoslav crisis.<sup>53</sup> At the root of such narratives was actually the aspiration to prepare the ground for a showdown with the (ethnic and religious) communities perceived as standing in the way of creating “Greater Serbia”, that uniting all Serbs into one state. The main and most populated community, which hindered the creation of “Greater Serbia”, was that of the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandžak. Therefore, a strong political propaganda machinery was launched against them and its leaders were certain circles of the Serbian intellectual elite and, in particular, the representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>54</sup> The dominant stereotypes created the image of Muslims as being primitive, apostates, traitors, prone to violence and terrorism and, in particular, the enemies of the Christian, European civilization and, thus, the Serbian nation, which stood in defence against the Islamist threat. Such narratives which, over time, penetrated all strata of the population and led to the prejudiced belief that living together with Muslim Bosniaks is impossible. This is why it was necessary to take action to “protect the Serbs” and the “Serbian territories”. In fact, the alleged “protection” meant aggression against the independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It resulted in the genocide of Bosniaks, crimes and torture in Sandžak and ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians.

Negative and stigmatizing narratives and perceptions about Bosniaks, Kosovo Albanians and, therefore, Muslims remained distinctly present

53 The Kosovo riots were attributed to the Islamic fundamentalism of Kosovo Albanians. See more in: Nusret Čančar i Enes Karić, *Islamski fundamentalizam. Šta je to?* (Sarajevo: Mešihat Islamske zajednice Bosne i Hercegovine, 1990), 5–10.

54 Norman L. Cigar, *Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of “Ethnic Cleansing”*, (Austin: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 23.

even after the wars and the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević. Such narratives became especially frequent after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, that is, when Vojislav Koštunica became the Prime Minister of Serbia in 2004. The full reaffirmation of the Greater Serbia narrative in the public sphere and the rehabilitation and promotion of convicted war criminals took place in 2012, with the coming of the populist Serbian Progressive Party to power. It controls the newspapers like *Informer*, *Alo* and *Srpski telegraf*, as well as the TV stations with national frequencies – Happy and Pink. The mentioned media regularly link Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians with some forms of Islamic extremism, which very much resembles the reporting and atmosphere before and on the eve of Serbia's aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina and the crimes committed against Kosovo Albanians in the 1990s.<sup>55</sup>

One concept that has been most often used in the Muslim context since the mid-1980s is that of the “Green Corridor”, which implies “the long-term goal of Islamist ideologues, both in the Balkans and in the entire Muslim world, to create one territory that will unite the predominantly Muslim territories stretching from Turkey in the southeast to Bosnia in the northwest”.<sup>56</sup> In other words, according to Serbian nationalists, the “Green Corridor” poses a threat to the idea of “Greater Serbia”, because it attempts to create a compact territory of “Islamistan”, which will stretch from Bosnia to Kosovo through Sandžak. The key role in this project is assigned to the Sandžak region which,

55 For a detailed analysis of how Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians are connected with Islamic extremism see more in: Harun Karčić and Ivan Ejub Kostić, *Media Discourse on Islam in the Western Balkans*, (Sarajevo: Centar za napredne studije, 2020).

56 Srđa Trifković, “The Green Corridor in the Balkans”, accessible at: <http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.com/2009/05/green-corridor-in-balkans.html>

albeit not large, borders on Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, Serbian theorist Dušan Proroković also points to the “Islamist threat” from the formation of the “Green Corridor” and the importance of Sandžak in that context, He also links this project with “neo-Ottomanism”.<sup>57</sup> Otherwise, the term “neo-Ottomanism” and its meaning deeply penetrated the Serbian public after Danko Tanasković published the book *Neosmanizam: povratak Turske na Balkan* (Neo-Ottomanism: The Return of Turkey to the Balkans). Admittedly, the affirmation of this term was also contributed by Turkey's involvement in the region which is, due to the historical legacy, always viewed with suspicion. Turkey's presence in Sandžak is certainly unquestionable, especially due to its influence on the SDA and Islamic theologians close to it.<sup>58</sup> Turkey's role in Sandžak is not always constructive, since it most often supports the forces that are still inclined to advocate the narratives about autonomy as well as the (radically) communitarian ideas that contribute to the isolation of Sandžak Bosniaks and a negative perception of the usefulness of their social and political engagement in the country in which they live. In other words, Turkey often fails to contribute to the relaxation of relations in the society and the active participation of Sandžak Bosniaks in Serbia. Instead, by its actions, it encourages them to isolate themselves, thus remaining on the margins of society.<sup>59</sup>

57 Dušan Proroković, *Geopolitika Srbije: položaj i perspektive na početku XXI veka*, (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2015), 331, and Jurica Botić, “Bošnjaci Sandžaka u kontekstu suvremenih geopolitičkih i sigurnosnih izazova u Jugoistočnoj Evropi”, *Forum za sigurnosne studije* 2/2018, 179.

58 The Sandžak Meshihat, which is nominally a part of the IZS, is under an extremely strong influence of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) which, through the Diyanet, that is, the Directorate of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, significantly supports this institution.

59 Turkey is present in Serbia through several organizations. This is, above all

The situation is similar with respect to (radically) puritanical organizations that are mostly financed by the Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Although these organizations often carry out purposeful activities, at the local level. At a broader level, however, they exert influence on the young population and spread radical conservative beliefs. Such beliefs primarily concern the opposition to the secular state and order, active political participation and democracy, as well as gender roles and minority rights. In addition, these organizations and imams, who are inclined to such an understanding of Islamic sources, spread fatalistic beliefs that are based on radical forms of predestination, thus contributing to a negative attitude towards public health and medical achievements, which was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when these actors were the most vocal opponents of vaccination.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, although puritanical organizations do not advocate violence, they often serve as a kind of entrance to takfir and jihadist organizations. This could be seen in the case concerning the relationship between the Middle Path nongovernmental organization and

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else, the Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which is focused on economic investments, but also on the restoration of the monuments and other cultural legacy from the Ottoman period. In this way, the TIKA is an organization that deals not only with economic investments, but also deals with symbolic capital. In addition to the TIKA, those present are also the Diyamet and Maarif, a chain of educational institutions, which are the direct projects of the AKP and Erdogan's government. In Serbia, Maarif runs kindergartens and high schools. Apart from state projects, there are also Mili Gorush, Hasana and other nongovernmental organizations that are ideologically very close to the conservative AKP currents, especially the religious ones. In 2022, Mili Gorush opened its cultural and educational centre in Novi Pazar. See more at: <https://sebilj.net/u-novom-pazaru-otvoren-novi-kulturno-edukativni-centar/>

<sup>60</sup> With its puritanical and extremely conservative orientation the Middle Path is the most popular organization.

Mesjid Furqan. Namely, with the beginning of the war the Mesjid Furqan, seated in Novi Pazar, came into the focus of Serbia's interest.<sup>61</sup> It rallied individuals who were guided by takfir and jihadist ideology and some of them went to Syrian battlefields. In March 2015, there began the trial of a group connected with the Furqan in Belgrade during which it turned out that Furqan members had borrowed certain contents on social media from the Middle Path.<sup>62</sup> The trial ended with the verdicts handed down to the defendants in March 2018.<sup>63</sup> The defendants were sentenced to a single prison sentence of over 69 years.<sup>64</sup>

There were no other significant cases of radicalization in the Sandžak region. This case shows that, despite some challenges, the ZuS and other social actors, including puritanical organizations, are able to control the direction of religious life and to prevent potential radicalization.

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/ekskluzivno-ovo-je-glavni-stab-dzihadista-u-sandzaku/rwszgqk>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/103534/Od-sutra-sudjenje-optuzenima-za-terorizam.html>

<sup>63</sup> For a critical analysis of the course of the trial and verdicts see: Nikola Kovačević, "Otkrivanje, krivično gonjenje i kažnjavanje stranih boraca" in: *Uspon desnice slučaj Srbija: ekstremizam, terorizam, strani borci*, prepared by Izabela Kisić (Belgrade: Helsinški Committee for Human Rights, 2022), 123–211. Accessible at: <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/Uspon%20desnice%20-%20slucaj%20Srbija.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> Abid Podbićanin, Sead Plojović and Tefik Mujović were sentenced to 11 years in prison each, Goran Pavlović to 10 years, Reihan Plojović and Itudin Crnovršanin to 9 years and 6 months each, Ferat Kasumović to 7 years and 6 months..

## BOSNIAK SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTORS AND THE SERBIAN FAR RIGHT

From what has so far been written it can be concluded that there is no far right on the Sandžak social and political stage and that there is no fear of the malignant influence of far-right extremism. This conclusion carries weight, especially if one takes into account a significant difference between religious extremism in Sandžak in the past and that which is driven by far-right ideas. Namely, in the first case, religious extremists are motivated by radical interpretations of religious sources, believing that for the implementation of their image of the world it is legitimate to use violence, which is justified by invoking God's Commandments. On the other hand, the extremist activities of the far right are primarily based on political ideologies such as nationalism, xenophobia and racism, the goals of which differ from those of religious extremism.<sup>65</sup> Religious extremism attempts to create a society that will be based on religious precepts where, as a rule, other belief systems are suppressed. By contrast, far-right extremists aim to preserve what they consider as "exclusively their" culture, whose bearer and guarantor of survival is a "chosen" ethnic group or race whose purity is threatened by immigration and multiculturalism.

Bearing the above in mind and on the basis of the previously analyzed situation in Sandžak, it can be concluded that there are no far-right ideas in this region and that the most important political parties and

65 These views are not inherently derived from religious beliefs even if they are linked with them. Namely, despite the fact that far-right extremists use religion as an aspect of their identity, it is still not the guiding value axis for their actions. Therefore, it most often happens that far-right extremists actually transform and secularize religion, thus turning it into cultural and national heritage.

social actors do not harbour extremist, exclusivist, aggressive nationalist, xenophobic and racist ideas. However, this does not mean that there are no political parties and organizations in Sandžak which are guided by ethno-nationalist policies. The most noticeable political party is certainly the already mentioned autonomist SDA, whose leader Sulejman Ugljanin very often gives tactless, populist and inflammatory statements, which do not contribute to a constructive political atmosphere. So, during the last few years he called Serbia "a fascist state",<sup>66</sup> its army and police "hostile armed forces against Bosniaks"<sup>67</sup> and Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the medieval Serbian state "a war criminal", responsible for the extermination of Bosniak ancestors.<sup>68</sup> However, despite its problematic views, the SDA cannot in any way be characterized as a far-right party or the party that calls for violence.

On the other hand, unlike Sandžak which has been the focus of the research dealing with extremism for years, the far right has been flourishing in the rest of Serbia for a long time. As we have already mentioned, since the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party to power in 2012 the systematic rehabilitation of war criminals and nationalist Greater Serbia ideology have been in full swing. This process has been accompanied by the empowerment of far-right movements such as the People's Patrols, Serbian Action, Obraz, Serbian Right, Serbian Honour and Leviathan, as well as by the strengthening of the parliamentary parties that do not belong to the far right, but many of their views coincide with those of the far right. In the religious sphere, like

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

67 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/ugljanin-preti-vojski/nwc0f18>

68 <https://sandzacke.rs/featured/ugljanin-nazvao-stefana-nemanju-ratnim-zlocincem-a-do-jucer-je-svojatao-njegovog-sina-svetog-savu/>



in the political one, the social and political role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) differs significantly from that of the IZuS. The SPC has positioned itself as the most important identity factor in spreading and affirming the ideas of exclusivist Saint-Savian ethno-nationalism and cross-border Serb unity. Such a role is possible due to the fact that it has continued to carry out its activities in the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia, thus cultivating soft power through its churches, dioceses and monasteries. This was best seen in 2020 when the SPC organized “litanies” in Montenegro which, in time, brought about significant changes in Montenegrin society and destabilized the region. The SPC also plays a very important role in forming a position on the Kosovo issue and actively supporting political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina (its minor entity, namely the Republic of Srpska) who are vocal secessionists. Also, unlike the IZuS, the heads of the SPC radically oppose EU and NATO accession and openly express anti-Western ideas and sentiments by promoting ossified and very conservative values. Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, some Bishops of the SPC have repeatedly glorified Vladimir Putin and expressed unequivocal support for the Russian Federation..<sup>69</sup> In contrast to the SPC, in the year in which Russia’s aggression started, Mufti Mevlud Dudić, President of the Meshihat of the IZuS, contacted the Mufti of Ukraine, Dr Ahmed Tamim, and expressed full support for the Islamic Community of Kyiv and the IZuS readiness to help Ukrainian refugees.

<sup>69</sup> Probably the most egregious example is Bishop Nikanor of Banat who, at the meeting against the planned Pride Parade in Belgrade, in August 2022, said that “today’s Emperor of the planet Earth is no one else but Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin”. See more at: <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/vladika-nikanor-na-litiji-za-spas-srbije-putin-primer-odnosa-prema-gejevima/>

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of everything that has been said, it can be concluded that the problematization of (violent) extremism in Sandžak has been significantly exaggerated, especially if it is perceived from a comparative perspective. The main reason for insisting on alleged extremism in Sandžak is that this region is predominantly Muslim, which is why in the atmosphere of the global securitization of Muslims and the perception of Islam as a security threat, as well as the rising Islamophobia and the strengthening of right-wing conservative forces in the West, Sandžak has automatically found itself in the focus of the research on extremist and radical phenomena, while at the same time neglecting the historical heritage, specificity of regional circumstances and complex contemporary political and social trends in Serbia. These trends are especially problematic, because the global Islamophobic atmosphere is very skillfully used by Serbian nationalists for the further ostracization of Muslims in the region. The Islamic ethnic groups in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, primarily Bosniaks and Albanians, as well as Muslim Bosniaks of Sandžak were the victims of the ethno-nationalist ideologies in this region on several occasions during the last 150 years. Violent and expansionist ideologies are regaining strength, especially in Serbia where, as already mentioned, (extremist) far-right organizations and movements are indirectly supported by state structures or powerful cross-border institutions, such as the SPC. This is why it will be necessary in the future to pay much more attention to the actual internal circumstances and specifics when studying extreme phenomena in Serbia and not to use a certain predetermined agenda.

When extreme events took place in Sandžak in the past, the leading political parties, the Islamic community, nongovernmental organizations and the public, namely the entire society showed a high degree of cooperation and the willingness to resolutely fight against them in order to successfully prevent and neutralize such events in the future.

On the other hand, the mentioned reaction and readiness of the society to fight against extreme ideologies are in deficit in the majority Serbian population. Apart from the description of the situation in the SPC and the identification of far-right movements in Serbia, there are no clear actions against them. Therefore, it is necessary to think much more about *how to act concretely in order to actively counter* such forms of extremism. A special challenge will be posed by the fact that the government bodies, security institutions and ruling political elite are actually the patrons of far-right extremist groups and organizations, while the parts of the Serbian intellectual elite provide not only support, but also an ideological basis for extremist, exclusivist and aggressive views.

Finally, due to uneven and disproportionate focus on the extremist phenomena in Serbia, that which was recorded during this field research and conversation with all of the most important social actors in Sandžak was an extremely repulsive attitude towards the projects dealing with extremist phenomena. All interlocutors pointed to the feeling that Sandžak Muslims were exposed to disproportionate pressure from security bodies as well as research projects dealing with extremist phenomena. Such discontent is especially present due to the awareness that Serbian far-right extremist movements and organizations – for which Muslims are regularly the primary target – are not sanctioned, but are even supported by the state and the SPC, which is why all respondents believe that Sandžak Bosniaks need much more help in the fight to protect their human and minority rights than the projects that will contribute to their further stigmatization and securitization.

