

SANDZAK – A REGION THAT IS CONNECTING OR DIVIDING SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO?

Sandzak is a region that is divided among Serbia and Montenegro. Six municipalities are in Serbia (Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Prijepolje, Priboj and Nova Varoš) and six in Montenegro (Bijelo Polje, Rožaje, Berane, Pljevlja, Gusinje and Plav). On the basis of the 1991 census the number of the inhabitants of Sandzak included 420.000 people – 278.000 in Serbia and 162.000 in Montenegro, of which 54% are Muslims by ethnicity.

Sandzak, which is carrying its name after a Turkish word for a military district, constituted a part of the Bosnian Pashalik within the Ottoman Empire until the year 1878. On the Berlin Congress, which was held at the same year, the great powers decided to leave Sandzak within the framework of the Ottoman Empire, but have allowed Austro-Hungary to deploy their forces in a part of this region. Through an agreement between the kings of Serbia Peter I. Karadjordjevic and of Montenegro Nikola I. Petrovic, but thanks to Russia, Serbia and Montenegro took control over Sandzak in the First Balkan War of 1912. Up to the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913, Sandzak represented a separate administrative unit with the administration and cultural center being in Novi Pazar. After the end of the Balkan Wars the process of emigration of the Bosniac population to Turkey continued and through the port of Bar left for Turkey in the period between April and June 1914 some 16.500 Bosniacs from the Montenegrin part of Sandzak and some 40.000 from the Serbian part.

In the area of Sandzak in the vicinity of Novi Pazar there are roots of the medieval Serbian statehood (State of Rashka of Nemanja), while today Sandzak is in ethnical sense populated by Bosniacs, who represent a majority population, Serbs and Montenegrins. The Sandzak question rose in importance in the period of the Yugoslav crisis, when new national questions were opened in republics became independent.

On the 11th of May 1991, the Muslim National Council of Sandzak (MNVS), which was in 1993 renamed into the Bosniac National Council of Sandzak (BNVS), was formed. MNVS quickly afterwards issued a memorandum about the special status of Sandzak. At that time also Bosniacs from Montenegro were present within the MNVS. The MNVS issued a memorandum about the special status, which includes elements of statehood, and the document is still officially valid and has not been revoked. On these two documents the authorities in Serbia and Montenegro reacted with accusations of secessionism and endangerment of the sovereignty of Serbia and Montenegro, which resulted in a political process, in which the leaders of SDA Party in Serbia and Montenegro were accused and arrested (Harun Hadžić and others).

The referendum on Sandzak was held on the 25th - 27th of October 1991, on which the people of Sandzak (mostly Bosniacs) were declaring their will on the issue of autonomy with the possibility of joining some of the republics (without specifically stating which of the republics). It is important to state that there were no incidents on the national basis during this period.

On the basis of Bosniac National Council of Sandzak's (BNVS) decision a referendum has been held on the political autonomy of Sandzak. All together the voting body counted 264.156 voters. On the referendum 185.473 voters participated, which represents 70.19 % of the total. 185.284 voting ballots were valid, against the autonomy of Sandzak voted altogether 1.982 voters or 1.069 %, while 183.302 voters or 98.90 % of the total voted for the political autonomy of Sandzak. The results of the referendum were published in a form of demands, but only when it became clear that the SFRY is falling apart and that the creation of new states was legally formulated by the international community. Since the referendum for the autonomy of Sandzak was being held at the time of Yugoslavia's disintegration, the Bosnian National Council of Sandzak has in the middle of 1993 adopted and published a memorandum calling, according to the model of the Hungarians in Vojvodina, for a »special status of Sandzak«.

The politically-court process against a group of 25 Muslims from Novi Pazar, Sjenica and Tutina, who were accused of an attempt to destroy the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and to create a republic of »Sandzak«, started on the 31st of January 1994. In January, February and March 1994 also started arrests against Bosniacs-Muslims in Bijelo Polje, Rožaj and Plevlje under the same accusation.

At the same time the regime in Serbia and Montenegro was leading a campaign against the Bosniacs through searching for weapons and a large part of the population underwent special tortures of the security services. This is a period of repression in Sandzak and of a massive emigration to the European countries (Germany, Scandinavia) and some 70.000 people left due to the terror. Because of the secessionism charges, the president of MNVS Sulejman Ugljanin left to Turkey and came back before the elections on the 3rd of November 1996, when he became a candidate on the elections, on which SDA in coalition with all the Bosniac parties wins. The coalition won the power but already after six months Milošević introduced temporary administration over the municipality on the 10th of July 1997 under a pretense that the local authorities led by Sulejman Ugljanin supposedly »provoked national and religious intolerance by hanging out on the municipality building a flag of SDA, and more so between the flag of Serbia and Yugoslavia«. In the explanation of the Government of Serbia of that period it is also said: »SDA has organized the authority in an improper manner, they introduced to the leading positions only people of their own, they were provoking discomfort among the Serbian population, declined cooperation with the Republic.« One of the Bosniac parties, the Reform Democratic Party of Sandzak under the leadership of Izudin Sušević, also left the coalition with SDA accusing Ugljanin of naming to the leading positions of Pazar's institutions people according to the party key. After some turbulent political events that characterized the period of 1996/97, the president of Helsinki Committee in Sandzak Šefko Alomerović spoke out stating that in Sandzak »the condition of the human rights was devastating.« (at the time of temporary administration by SPS and JUL).

In the unity period of all the Bosniac political parties up till the year of 1999, a Memorandum about the autonomy of Sandzak and special relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina has been adopted by the Bosniac National Council on their 8th regular session on the 19th of July 1999. At this time, Serbia was facing the loss of Kosovo and

the declared departure of Montenegro from the common state. Instead of working together on the realization of the declared will of the citizens from the referendum in 1991, Bosniacs and their party leaders were occupied exclusively with the party issues and by this they missed the opportunity to exert public pressure on the authorities in Podgorica and Montenegro to start coping with the question of returning the refugees into the 28 Bosniac villages in the community of Plevlje and bringing to justice the war criminals who abducted 12 Bosniacs from the village of Bukovica. The SDA who was at that time still undivided, hasn't basically done anything on the occasion of kidnapping of 19 Bosniacs on the railway station in the village of Štrpci on the 27th of February 1993, who were in the village of Prelovo close to Višegrad in a garage of one of the burnt houses on the banks of the river Drina itself, brutally killed. Due to the pressure of The Hague Tribunal, Montenegro performed abolition and paid damages to the families of the kidnapped, which was an important moment for the return of the Bosniacs' faith in the government, while in front of the court in Bjelina for the crime committed in Štrpci, only Nebojša Ranisavljević was held responsible. He was sentenced to 15 years of prison, while the commander Milan Lukić (awarded general of The Republika Srpska) is still at large. In 2003 he was sentenced in absence to 20 years of prison, but not for kidnapping and killing of Bosniacs from Štrpac, but rather for killing of 16 Bosniacs in the town of Mioče, case Severin. In case Montenegro did not start fulfilling her obligations towards The Hague Tribunal, the families of the tragically deceased Bosniacs in the villages of Montenegro would never learn the whole truth, especially if taken into consideration that the SDA branch in Montenegro slowly started to divide itself due to the departure from the party of Harun Hadžić and the arrival of Rasim Šahman. Such a division of the Montenegrin branch of SDA resulted in neglecting the disenfranchised Bosniac parties before the creation of the »Let's live better« coalition, led by Mile Djukanović. The new power in Serbia is sending a clear message that the cooperation with The Hague Tribunal is not a priority and claims that cases like these in Štrpac and Sjeverin can be solved at domestic courts. Meanwhile, not a single criminal proceedings case against the criminals killing Bosniacs in the mentioned villages commenced.

After the departure of Ugljanin for Turkey, SDA was left to the vice-president Rasim Ljajić, who at a certain moment declared himself as the president and afterwards founded his own SDP (Sandzak Democratic Party). Due to continuous pressures on SDA and Sulejman Ugljanin the situation resulted in dispersion and a creation of a large number of parties of Bosniac extraction, which were mainly controlled by Ugljanin and were later gathered in the »List for Sandzak – Dr. Sulejman Ugljanin«. In the political sense, these divisions are still continuing through founding of new parties of former closest colleagues of Ugljanin, such as Party for Sandzak of Fevzija Murić, who was the first democratically elected president of the municipality of Novi Pazar and was later moved from his position by Milosevic. At this time The National Coalition of the Bosniacs in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, later of Sandzak was formed under the inspiration and control of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community. The last years of Milosevic rule were in Sandzak marked on a local level by a conflict of SPS and JUL, who is supporting the changes of politics towards Sandzak, an event that had quite an echo, but also the inclusion of the Islamic community into the politics and inspiring this party as an exponent of opposition towards the politics of SDA.

The political parties of Sandzak (Sandzak Democratic Party of Rasim Ljajić, Party for Sandzak of Fevzija Murić, who separated himself from the party of Sulejman Ugljanin, Bosniac Democratic Alternative, Liberal Bosniac Organization of Sandzak and Bosniac-Muslim Organization), organizations and NGO's (The Sandzak Intellectual Circle, The Sandzak Committee for the Protection of Human Rights and Liberties in Sandzak, The Association of »Damad«, The Associations of Economists of Sandzak, The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Sandzak, The Center for Multiethnic Dialogue) that gathered on the joint meeting on the 3rd of September 2003 in Novi Pazar, adopted a declaration, in which it is among others stated that it is vital to determine the status of the Bosniac community in Serbia and Montenegro, as well as the status of other ethnical groups with Novi Pazar as political, cultural and economical center. The declaration is stating further on that with the new constitutions of Serbia and Montenegro it is vital to take into consideration the interests of all nationalities according to the democratic standards, principles and practice in the democratic countries, but also that with the new constitutions and laws it is necessary to enable »a working participation of representatives of the Bosniacs in the political, cultural and public life on all levels«.

On Friday, the 5th of September 2003, The Electors Assembly in Novi Pazar univocally chose the Bosniac National Council composed of 35 members. In addition to this a decision was made that the function of the president of the National Council should be performed by the president of the coalition »List for Sandzak – Dr. Sulejman Ugljanin«. »By founding of this council everyone is gaining«, said Ugljanin in the official speech to the electors, »but more than all, a state community, which is going to possess legitimate representatives of the Bosniac nation, which is going to participate in further democratization and creation of new conditions in the multinational community«. In the statement for radio B92, Ugljanin said, that this is a great day for the Bosniac community: »Today we are reaping the fruits of years-long work of Bosniacs and Bosniac parties and The Bosniac National Council of Sandzak on the democratization of this country and creating a better climate. With this deed the Bosniacs are beginning to create the conditions for their own national equality in this state«. In the operations of the Electors Assembly, the Sandzak Democratic Party of Ljajić and the Party for Sandzak of Murić, did not participate and they explained that the legal and political conditions for the forming of this council haven't been met yet. It has been considered that since then political conflicts among the Bosniacs started and they represent a direct clash of the official Belgrade and political opponents, who see their base exclusively within Bosnia and Herzegovina, which in fact holds true. In such a clash got involved also the Islamic Community of Sandzak, which is seen by the Belgrade Islamic Community only as a religious organization of the local character, since they are setting their organizational loyalty outside of the Serbian borders. The Islamic Community of Sandzak considers itself in the spiritual sense to be a part of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite being outside the borders of Bosnia and where the jurisdiction is in principle over Sandzak. The Mufti of Sandzak, Muamer Efendi Zukorlić, speaking for different media has said that »jurisdiction is encountering problems when normal functioning in the southern part of Sandzak is in question, and that is the part that is a part of Montenegro«. He also states that »the authorities started to interfere with the work of the Islamic Community«.

The Islamic Community of Serbia has been founded in the year 1868 with the center in Belgrade, when with the order of Duke Miloš Obrenović the state of Serbia committed herself to perform the restoration of Bajrakli mosque as its seat and to materially stand behind the community itself. On the question of the legitimacy of the Islamic Community of Serbia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia gave their opinion: »the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia is confirming that the Islamic Community of Serbia with all its belonging organizational units, according to the founding and other internal acts, is a traditional religious community in the republic of Serbia and is operating legally with a full legal subjectivity«. The Islamic Community of Serbia is classified in the Register of the units with the Bureau of Statistics of the republic under its own identity number and a code of activity.

In a search for the solution of the »case« of the Islamic Community of Serbia, the Sandzak Mufti Muamer Zukorlić demanded from the Prime Minister of Serbia to support his initiative to create unique Islamic Community in Serbia, probably with a request of the Prime Minister supporting him in an attempt to move the center of Islamic Community from Belgrade to Novi Pazar. The only thing that has remained outside the framework of these discussions is the fact that the internal relations and principals of organization of the Islamic Community are being regulated by the Islamic Community. »The negotiations between several existing Islamic communities is our internal question«, said Zukorlić. The former Prime Minister of Serbia Zoran Živković thought that the problem was formed because Serbia still does not have a modern law on the subject of religious freedoms and at a certain occasion he said that »the time when the state had a negative attitude towards religious communities has passed«.

BOSNIACS IN MONTENEGRO

Until the »Žabljak« Constitution of 1992 the Moslems (then still not Bosniacs) were one of the constitutive nations of the former SFRY. The decision of changing the name of Muslim into Bosniac was adopted on the All-Bosniac Assembly in Sarajevo in 1993. Three years later the term Bosniac was accepted also in Novi Pazar, and afterwards in Kosovo, Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia and recently even in Serbia. It was the hardest in Montenegro.

The elections on Montenegro put the Bosniacs in to the position of choosing between the democratic candidate of the time Mile Djukanović and Momir Bulatović as the candidate of Milosevic, which convinced the Bosniacs to vote for Djukanović, even though this resulted in minimizing the political role of SDA. A great number of Bosniacs in Montenegro are joining the Montenegrin parties, such as DPS, Liberals and SDP, a condition that is being continued up to this day, a fact that in great measure eliminates the question of Sandzak on the political scene of Montenegro. In the present period of division of the orthodox population in Montenegro on Montenegrins and Serbs, the position of Bosniacs is playing a role of a decisive political factor between them, which is preserving the rule of Djukanović. In addition to the Albanian population, the Bosniacs are also representing an important factor in the eventual independence of Montenegro. The politics of Djukanović and the subjects from the Bosniac side shattered the unity of the Bosniacs in Montenegro, as well as the possibility of creating a unique spiritual and cultural space of Sandzak with a center in Novi Pazar.

Side by side with this politics in Montenegro operates a Muslim Society of Avdul Kurjepović, a former minister in the Government of Montenegro and the director of the Republican Bureau of Planning, which is negating the national identity of the Bosniacs in Montenegro. Such a situation is being supported by ruling and oppositional structures in Montenegro, which are sending agitators, who are in direct talks convincing the Bosniacs that it is in their greater interest to identify themselves as Montenegrins of Muslim faith and that that is the only way to achieve greater freedom and civil rights. The Muslim Society with a seat in Podgorica is with a mission mostly going to Plav and Gusinje in order to »open the eyes« to the majority Bosniac population that in Montenegro there are no Bosniacs, but only Muslims who have no connection to the Bosniacs in Bosnia. All this is leading to the conclusion that Bosniacs in Montenegro do not possess democratic national rights and freedoms, since their national selfness is being denied, which is the same as under the communist rule when the ruling structures claimed that there is no Bosniac nation. With such a well-considered move the authority created several effects – instead of national recognition, the Bosniacs were pushed into the frameworks of a religious institution and were by thus prevented from integrating into the society.

Along this we have an active society of Bosniac-Muslim intellectuals, who are gathered around the newspaper »Almanah« and are running a debate on the national identity of Bosniacs in Montenegro, which results in a fact that on the last census of the population of Montenegro there are in addition to Bosniacs also Muslims. Of the total 672.656 citizens of Montenegro, Montenegrins represent 273.366 or 40.64 percent, Serbs 201.892

or 30.01 percent, Bosniacs 63.272 or 9.41 percent, Albanians 47.682 or 7.09 percent, Muslims 28.714 or 4.27 percent, Croats 7.062 or 1.05 percent and 2.875 Romany or 0.43 percent. It should be marked that a part of Bosniacs are declaring themselves as Muslims or Montenegrins of Muslim faith. In the total structure of the population there are some 15-20% of Bosniacs a result of which is a general position of the Bosniacs in Montenegro that they are looking for a solution of their problem through a status of a constitutive nation in the case of Montenegro as a civil state. The latest population processes in Montenegro have showed that the ethnical processes are still not finished and that the political identification does influence national identification. Thus a much larger number of Serbs is registered in relation to the previous census, which is in a substantial measure preventing the success of reforms on Montenegro and is showing the importance of Bosniacs and Albanians for the final result of the status of Montenegro. With this, the Albanians see their position in the regionalization of Montenegro, while the Bosniacs are not asking any questions and therefore the 5-6 % of Albanians possess greater rights than 15 % of Bosniacs. According to these data it seems that the authorities in Montenegro are with an inspiration towards the final independence using all the methods to slow down the Bosniac national identity.

A new moment in Montenegro is represented by an attempt of the government (the regime) to introduce the term »mother tongue« into the schools, with which an opportunity could be given for the national communities to call their language Bosnian, Serbian, Montenegrin or Croatian, an idea that is provoking a large reaction of the pro-Serbian circles in Montenegro, who oppose the project. This though still hasn't completely put out the work and certain influence of the Bosniac National Council of Sandzak, who has its protagonists in Montenegro among some intellectuals and marginal Bosniac parties, but the ambitions of the Islamic Community to influence Montenegro have risen and we should also not forget the activities of the Islamic Community of Montenegro. The politics of Djukanović is creating a manifold confrontation within the Bosniac corpus on the relation Sandzak - Bosnia and Herzegovina in the sense of mother-country, but also in locating their own regional identity, which in Montenegro of course is not possible without connection to Sandzak. The question of Bosniac language in Montenegro is also a question of returning of the Bosniacs to their nation and culture. Each move of the regime in Podgorica is leading this nation to a loss of identity and total political disorientation of 15% of the population of Montenegro, the Bosniacs. In order for the Bosniacs to be able to solve their national question, they have to know that for them do not suffice only political proclamations of political parties and leaders, but a force of the spirit and their culture, which is suffocating already for decades in Montenegro as well as in Serbia. Through a path of unity and cultural development, the Bosniacs would succeed in creating a strong political climate in order to solve the problem of constitutional and legal status as the only way for complete integration into the state and the society.

Such a situation in Montenegro is directly leading to the question of an idea of integral Sandzak and is factually reducing it to the space in Serbia, who is also exposed to further fragmentation due to the Serbian politics. With this in Montenegro the part of Sandzak

ceases to have a political subjectivity, which is partially remaining only in the Serbian part of Sandzak.

The tragic events in Kosovo on the 17th of March are without any doubt representing an important moment for Sandzak as well, since with the burning of the mosques in Belgrade and Niš came to a double reaction among the Bosniacs in Sandzak of which one was an increase in the faith in the state, since the objects in Sandzak were not damaged, with which in some way trust in each other on both sides was confirmed in the region. An important moment was a declaration of all Bosniac institutions in the sense of searching for the answer, whether the Bosniacs in Sandzak within Serbia-Montenegro are indeed safe. About the declaration also the European institutions for human rights were informed. It could be said that the position of Bosniacs in Serbia was exposed to variability, from a noticeable improvement in the times of Zoran Djindjić, which resulted in the opening of two universities and all to the naming of Rasim Ljajić for the president of the National Council for the Cooperation with The Hague Tribunal, a deed that represents an extremely cynical position of the Koštunica's government, which has no power to confront herself with the war crimes accusations and with delivering the indicted generals, including Radovan Karadžić.

Up till now the dominant trustworthy position among the Bosniacs was held by Sulejman Ugljanin as a president of BNVS. But this trust was shaken after the local elections in September 2004, on which Ugljanin was closely followed by Rasim Ljajić, the present minister for people's and minority rights of Serbia-Montenegro. In the pre-election fever of Novi Pazar the candidates for the president of the municipality were Ugljanin and Sait Kačapor (SDP). The difference in favor of Ugljanin was small, while there were more than 51% of the voters who went voting. This can from one side mean a beginning of democratization within the Bosniac national corpus, while from the other it opens a question of division within the corpus and a crisis of leadership, which was opened by this.

A decade long conflict of former leading people of SDA Ugljanin and Ljajić is today resulting through open hostility and investment into the game of their closest colleagues Fevzija Murić, the president of the Party for Sandzak. The present position of the two Sandzak leaders is in great measure caused by the division within the Serbian political parties. A plebiscitary support the Bosniacs gave to Boris Tadić, the present president of Serbia, because the people of Ugljanin found themselves on the list of candidates of DS for the Parliament of Serbia (Bajram Omeragić, Esad Džudžević). Vojislav Koštunica kept Rasim Ljajić on the position of the Minister for people's and minority rights, who has with his list »Together for tolerance« became an extra-parliamentary party due to the election census of 5%, which was only after the parliamentary elections reduced to 2%. Ljajić by this created a considerable influence in Sandzak since by now towards this Bosniac leader economic and other lobbies started to gravitate. During the local elections evidenced support from Sarajevo was given to Sulejman Ugljanin, while Ljajić was supported by Belgrade. In such a manner the civil option in Sandzak became completely marginalized, a fact which created a double effect – national homogenization and

polarization inside the Bosniac and the Serbian voting body, but division within the national corpuses as well.

The International Institute IFIMES considers that in the situation, when in Serbia national questions are becoming actualized, it is necessary to solve the question of relations between the majority nationality and the national minorities, especially in the sphere of participation of the minorities in the political life, which is not a case at the moment. National minorities are politically discriminated, since there is no political document, which guarantees the national minorities with adequate representation in the political life. The space of Sandzak became also a space of possible actualization of the Bosniac question in Serbia. The newest actions of the Ministry of education and sport of the Republic of Serbia, who came out with a position that there is no Bosnian language, represent a big step backwards on the issue of national minorities, since the previous minister, or rather the same ministry, had a favorable stance towards this question, which even resulted in a creation of textbooks for the Bosnian language. Lack of recognition of the Bosnian language is at the same time a step that denies the existence of the Bosniac nation, with which the politics is returning into some old and dark ages. The question of language is obviously in the current political context saying more through a change in the political course towards the minorities in a negative sense. In Serbia and Montenegro national values of the majority nation are superimposed on the minorities as values of the general society, which means that the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro isn't ready for multiculturalism, or rather interculturalism and civil society. In Montenegro, where we are witnessing a modern and awoken nationalism, Bosniacs are brought into the situation where in case of not supporting Djukanović on the elections, they would be labeled as pro-Serbian, since in Montenegro indirect support for preserving the state union because of a desire to preserve Sandzak is seen as a »Serbian thing«. In such a manner the authorities in Montenegro are directly preventing the realization of elementary human, civil, national and political rights and liberties of the Bosniac nation in Sandzak. The independence of Montenegro would bring even greater instability to the region, especially if taken into account the fact that in the independent Montenegro, the Montenegrins would themselves be a minority, while Serbs, Bosniacs, Albanians and Romany would literally be a majority.

The International Institute IFIMES considers that in the adoption process of the new Constitution, it is impossible to minimize the fact of urgency of responsible natural regionalization of Serbia, by taking into consideration geographical, economical, ethnical and other foundations, according to which the region of Sandzak would have its own place and affirmation, and through it the state of Serbia as well.

The International institute IFIMES considers that the question of status of the Sandzak region is a central question of Serbia-Montenegro relations and should be due to its importance treated as such. The preservation of the ethnical picture as well as of the multi-ethnical territory of Sandzak with its traditional and modern mosaic is a very important question in the goal of political, social and economic solution of the crisis in this area. The preservation of the territory of Sandzak is a condition for the preservation of Bosniacs between the two fires of Serbia and Montenegro. In addition to this, the

international community should have more understanding for the actual problems of Bosniacs in Serbia and Montenegro as to finally place the question Sandzak on the agenda with a goal of creating conditions for the democratic national rights, which in itself is a civil democratic question par-excellence.