

# History and Identity within the Sandžak Region

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## CREES-FMSO 2011-2012 Research Assistantship

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Open Source, Foreign Perspective, Underconsidered/Understudied Topics





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#### **Author Background**

Since January 2011, Sandra King-Savic has been working as Graduate Research Assistant in a collaboration program between the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies (CREES), University of Kansas and the US Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth. The intent of this program is for select students to learn more about Eurasian security and military operational environment analysis and discover how open-source foreign language materials are used in developing informative research products.

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## **Introduction by Ray Finch, FMSO**

*As Yugoslavia began to fall apart in the 1990s, ethnic conflict broke out among some of the constituent republics (particularly Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia). After much death and destruction, the US, NATO, and other countries finally intervened to stop the bloodshed and force the warring sides to the negotiation table, culminating in the signing of the 1995 Dayton Accords. While open hostilities may have largely ceased, unresolved issues continue to fester in the region.*

*In this brief study, Sandra King-Savic examines the current situation in the predominately Muslim region (inhabited by Bosniaks) of Sandzak in Serbia. One might have assumed that after the ethnic-cleansing of the 1990s, Serbian leaders in Belgrade would have forced the Bosniaks out of this area or severely restricted their rights. As the author describes, however, Serbian leaders (from different ethnic backgrounds) have learned to co-exist and resolve their differences with dialogue and at the ballot box. Confronted today with severe economic strains, there are serious doubts whether they will be able to maintain these decent relations. This study provides valuable background in understanding this complex region.*

# History and Identity within the Sandžak Region

By *Sandra King-Savic*  
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## *Introduction*

The war that tore apart the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia during the 1990s seems long past as new, more pressing conflicts dominate the news.

Yet, 17 years after the Dayton agreements, signed in 1995, questions about political alliances, religious developments and ethnic identity still dominate the agenda of regional lawmakers and the peoples of Southeastern Europe, perhaps more than ever before. Preoccupations with nationality indicate the processes of defining one's ethnic identity and identification with place did not end with the Dayton Peace Accords. An examination of Serbia's Sandžak region shows that differing interpretations of the recent past, most notably the war, contribute to diverging regional identifications that hinder the region from becoming more economically stable and democratic, in addition to resulting in ethnocentric politics. This brief paper will examine some of the history of this region and the challenges Southeastern Europe, and specifically Sandžak, faces today.

## *History: A Synopsis*

Southeastern Europe lies at a crossroad between the western and eastern hemispheres, where diverging religious identification draws a fault line between Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs; or



Đurđevi stupovi, Orthodox Church dedicated to Saint George, in the ancient city of Ras in Serbia. Built during the 12th-century by the Serbian King Stefan Nemanja. Photo by NeroN BG [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons



Map of Sandzak region by  
Aaron Perez (Own Work)  
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political boundaries from  
www.gadm.org

Catholicism, Islam and Orthodoxy respectively. By the 15th century, Southeastern Europe was fully incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, at which time a considerable number of Bosnians converted to Islam. Why and how this conversion transpired in large numbers, mostly among Bosniaks<sup>1</sup>, is yet a subject of debate.<sup>2</sup> Under the auspices of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbs practiced their traditions within the parameters of the millet system.<sup>3</sup> Within the parameters of the millet system, each religious community was able to practice their own traditions. The millet system served as a structure that organized the relationship between the religious community and

- 1 Bosnians are part of the Slavic Tribe that came to the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th century, they were referred to as Bosnians prior to the arrival of the Ottoman Empire, however, after the war, Bosnians agreed to the term Bošnjak (Bosniak) as the best description of their ethnic identity
- 2 For information on Islam in the Balkans and conversion please refer to:
  - H. T. Norris. *Islam in the Balkans, Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World*. University of South Carolina Press: South Carolina (1993).
  - Banac, Ivo. *The National Question in Yugoslavia – Origins, History, Politics*. Cornell University Press: Ithica and London, 4th edition (1994).
  - Friedman, Francine. "The Muslim Slavs of Bosnia and Herzegovina (With Reference to the Sanžak of Novi Pazar): Islam as National Identity". *Nationalities Papers* 28:1 (2000).
  - Perica, Vjekoslav. *Balkan Idols – Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. Oxford University Press: New York (2002).
- 3 Judah, Tim. *The Serbs – History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*. Yale University Press: New Heaven and London 3rd edition (2009). 18.

the state.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Croats and Serbs were able to practice their religion, as, being Jews, Christians, and Muslims, they are considered a people of the book (the Qur'an).

Sandžak was then an integral part of both Bosnia and the Ottoman Empire, and the citizenry of Novi Pazar, the capital of the Sandžak region, identified themselves as part of the Bosniak population.<sup>5</sup> The word Sandžak is a Turkish term that translates into banner and, for the duration of the Ottoman Empire, denoted administrative districts. With the onset of the Ottoman Empire's demise, Bosnia became part of the Habsburg Empire following the treaty of Berlin in 1878. Sandžak, however, was not annexed until 1908, when it was returned to the Ottoman Empire. Finally, in 1918 Sandžak was divided between Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>6</sup> These borders have remained in place ever since and received a new, and perhaps contentious character when Sandžak was divided with Montenegrin and Serb independence in 2006.

In the early 19th century, when a great majority of Slavic peoples strove for independence from both the Ottoman and Austrian Empires, political borders did not have the same meaning as they do today. As a result, people with differing religious and national identities arguably more readily mixed with one another, perhaps mostly in order to expel the common enemy. The Balkan Peninsula was a place where one national group rarely dominated another in great numbers.

Not surprisingly, political borders rarely align(ed) with ethnic and religious identities. Josip Broz Tito, the larger-than-life figure and late president of Yugoslavia, knew this. He sought to unite the people of the Balkans by adopting socialist mantras. However, once the supra-national glue of communist doctrine dissolved, the country split violently. In the early 1990s the international community watched this dissolution, and finally elected to intervene militarily to stop the war. For many in the West the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995 meant the West's mission was accomplished, as new threats in other parts of the world redirected its focus.

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4 Gelvin, James. *The Modern Middle East – A History*. Oxford University Press: University of California (2008). 34.

5 Banac, Ivo. *The National Question in Yugoslavia – Origins, History, Politics*. Cornell University Press: Ithica and London, 4th edition (1994). 41

6 Finkel, Caroline. *The History of the Ottoman Empire - Osman's Dream*. Perseus Books: New York (2006). 485.

Although military action and cross border violence subsided following the Dayton Agreement, ethnic, political, social and economic problems continued to fester under the surface.

Under the domination of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires ethnic identity was visible in two broad layers: one common layer under which Slavs sought to expel the common occupier; and an individual layer, which encapsulated their own,— Bosniak, Serb, Croat etc. — ethnic identities. In the process, cultural traditions, religious practices and language influenced these peoples' national self-consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Self-awareness, in turn, shaped people's identities for the duration of the Ottoman and Austrian Empires, while socialism perhaps froze these perceptions in time, or at least kept them simmering under the surface. As in other post-socialist societies, notions of self that found expression in values, beliefs and attitudes led to the dissolution of a common Yugoslav identity and the destruction of the country, most notably during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). This process is continuing to this day.



Map of Serbia Sandzak region by Aaron Perez (Own Work) [CC-BY-SA-3.0], based on political boundaries from [www.gadm.org](http://www.gadm.org)

Sandžak, consisting of the Raška and Zlatibor municipalities on the Serb side, are an ethnically mixed area where Bosniaks and Serbs live side-by-side (in the above map, Zlatibor and Raška are marked orange while Serbia's side of Sandžak is marked in deep red). In contrast, Bosniaks and Serbs in BiH theoretically share the Federation of BiH. In actuality, however, Serbs live in self-imposed isolation and removed from Bosniaks and Croats in Republika Srpska (RS, which is shown in red in the BiH map, while the Federation of Bosniaks and Croats is depicted

<sup>7</sup> Wachtel Baruch, Andrew. *Making a Nation, a Nation – Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*. California: Stanford University Press (1998).  
To be sure, linguistic divisions are not pronounced, though as of late regional peoples are striving to construct and reconstruct linguistic traditions that pertain to their specific location. In other words, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs can without a doubt understand each other though differing dialects are spoken in all three countries.





Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) by Aaron Perez (Own Work) [CC-BY-SA-3.0], based on political boundaries from [www.gadm.org](http://www.gadm.org)

in purple; Brčko district is marked green).

The municipalities of Raška and Zlatibor – or Sandžak – are unique specifically because Bosniaks and Serbs live together. This allows one to explore the continuation of a people's identity and subsequent identification with place, religion and politics within the shared borders of Serbia. At the same time, the region faces problems similar to other regions in the Balkans: high unemployment, a shadow economy, narcotics trafficking, a splintered Islamic Community and political impasse due one's ethnic identity.

### *History and Identity*

The interpretation of the 1990s war and subsequent lack of lustration are the two overarching causes splitting the traditions, ideas, and beliefs – and subsequently identities – in Serbia. Since Slobodan Milošević's ouster from government in 2000, lustration has been on the agenda, but never enforced thoroughly. No real progress was made to identify individuals who abused human rights and/or were otherwise tied to the Milošević regime. No real change occurred, and politicians continued to mandate laws unhindered, despite their involvement with the previous wars. Ivica Dačić, Serbia's Minister for the Interior, often comes up in these discussions. He now heads Serbia's Socialist Party (SPS), Milošević's former powerbase (depicted in the Corax cartoon, in which he is being held by the current Serb president, Boris Tadić).<sup>8</sup> Serbia's government does not have a clean political or moral slate in spite of large-scale demonstrations that finally ousted Milošević on 5 October 2000. Although Serbs came out in

<sup>8</sup> Srbiji I meka lustracija bila tvrda – Događaj – Peti Octobar. B92 Info Specijal. Accessed April 23, 12. [http://www.b92.net/info/petioktobar/dogadjaji.php?yyyy=2010&mm=10&dd=06&nav\\_id=463361](http://www.b92.net/info/petioktobar/dogadjaji.php?yyyy=2010&mm=10&dd=06&nav_id=463361)



large numbers to demand Milošević's overthrow, young people in Serbia are not fully aware of, or simply refuse to believe reports about what exactly transpired in their country during the 1990s.

In 2010 Serbian leaders did acknowledge and apologize for the massacre of Srebrenica, yet the word “genocide” was left out.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps, as a consequence of their politicians unapologetic attitude and lack of sufficient

information, a number of Serbs may yet perceive *themselves* as the victims of the 1990s war, which stands in stark contrast to existing accounts, scholarly research and, most importantly, perceptions held by the Bosniak community of BiH, *as well as* Sandžak. More troubling, Vesna Pešić, a known antiwar activist and outspoken critic of Serbia's government, claims that uncensored information may be difficult to come by because Serbia's government still controls the media.<sup>10</sup>

Despite all the nationalist rhetoric, the 1990s war in former Yugoslavia was not of ethnic or religious origin, but rather a conflict over land and political power that became an ethnic clash over time.<sup>11</sup> It is this conflict that continues today, in which recognition of the past plays a vital role. This is evident in the Muslim enclave of Sandžak, as well as in BiH. Sandžak thus serves as a mirror that can illustrate the greater picture relating to relations between BiH and Serbia.



Ivica Dačić, Serbia's Minister for the Interior held by Serbian President Boris Tadić. Political cartoon by Corax via <http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/corax.22.html>

9 Tadić bi na izborima mogao da bude kažnjen. e-novine. Accessed April 23, 12. <http://www.e-novine.com/intervju/intervju-politika/62752-Tadi-izborima-mogao-bude-kanjen.html>; Also see “Serbian Lawmakers Condemn Srebrenica Massacre. Radio Free Europe. Accessed April 30, 2012. [http://www.rferl.org/content/Serbian\\_Parliament\\_Begins\\_Debate\\_On\\_Srebrenica\\_Apology/1997497.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Serbian_Parliament_Begins_Debate_On_Srebrenica_Apology/1997497.html)

10 Serbia: Parliamentary postpones vote on media censorship bill. Adnkronos Culture and Media. Accessed May 6, 2012. <http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/CultureAndMedia/?id=3.0.3604915725>

11 For information on the origins of the 1990's war in Yugoslavia, please refer to  
 - Ramet, P. Sabrina. Balkan Babel. Westview Press: Boulder, Colorado (1999).  
 - Woodward, L. Susan. Balkan Tragedy – Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War. The Brookings Institution: Washington D.C. (1995).

## ***Problems***

### ***Political Paralysis***

Since the 1990s Belgrade has arguably been caught in a political straight jacket in which the Kosovo issue determines much of Serbia's political orientation. This formerly Serb-controlled region declared its independence in 2008 and has been a major headache for politicians in Belgrade ever since. As a result left-right divisions in Serbian politics are blurred, and have affected how Serbian leaders treat other minority areas.<sup>12</sup> The adoption of the 2006 constitution, brought forward by previous president and right wing politician Vojislav Koštunica, serves as a case in point. The International Crisis Group (ICG) noted that the adoption of the constitution in 2006 was a step backward regarding democracy in Serbia. According to the ICG, "It [the constitution] opens the door to increased centralization of the state, curtailment of human and minority rights, destruction of judicial independence and potentially even a parliamentary dictatorship."<sup>13</sup> Though the document is seemingly tailored to prevent legal acknowledgment of Kosovo, the bylaws also affect the Bosniak population, as well as the Vojvodinian population, which is also a minority in Serbia.

While many of the world's states have recognized Kosovo's independence, the issue is not as clear-cut for Serbia's politicians. The current presidential elections, for instance, are once again dominated by mutual accusations of disloyalty and lack of devotion to Kosovo. The seeming lack of interest in Sandžak may be tied to Serbia's fear of stirring up of already existing nationalist propensities, should the Bosniak population receive favorable treatment above other people. Yet this approach results in an overall neglect of the region, even when fighting criminal activity such as the trafficking of opiates.

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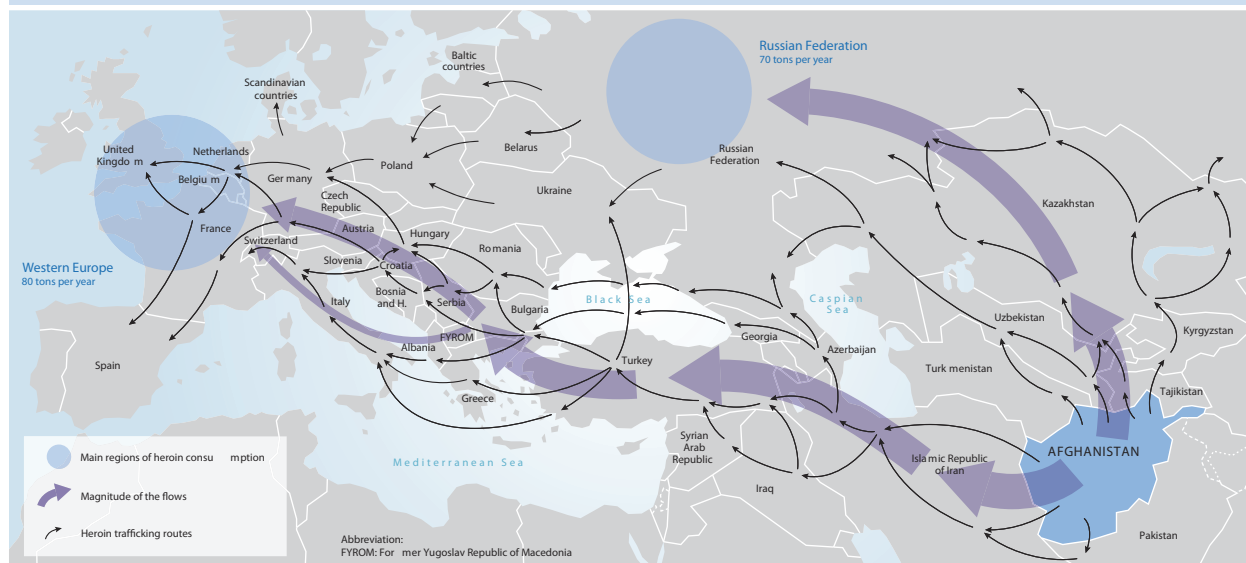
12     Ideologija I Političke Stranke U Srbiji, edited by Zoran Lutovac. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, FPN, Institut Društvenih Nauka, Beograd (2007).

See also Jou, Willy. Political cleavages in Serbia: changes and continuities in structuring left-right orientations. Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 10:2 (2010).

13     Policy Briefing: Europe Briefing N° 44. International Crisis Group. Belgrade/Brussels, 8 November 2006.

### Map 3: The Northern and Balkan routes

Source: UNODC



The Balkan route to West and Central Europe runs from Afghanistan via the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey and south-east European countries. This route and its various branches form the artery that carries high purity Afghan heroin into every important market in Europe. Heroin map route by UNODC, via <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/WDR-2010.html>

A recent headline may be telling, as the news proclaimed that Belgrade refrains from raiding Raška's narcotics trade because of fears of resulting ethnic tensions.<sup>14</sup> Ninety percent of heroin coming from Afghanistan for intended sale in Western European markets arrives there by way of the Balkans.<sup>15</sup> The price for heroin is low and has been relatively stable at \$26.5 per gram.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, due to a combination of unemployment and bleak prospects, addicts are numerous: 10-15% of youth between the ages of 15-30 are addicted to heroin in BiH, while other Balkan states display the largest increase regarding the consumption of other opiates such as ecstasy and cocaine.<sup>17</sup> There are no official border agreements between BiH and Serbia, rendering the smuggling of illegal substances simple, while the governmental structure is weak in both states. Corruption, moreover, prevents proper handling of the situation, as officials and/or border control are affiliated with the trade.<sup>18</sup>

14 Marko Nicović: Droga iz Turske u Rašku uz blagoslov Beograda. Vesti.rs. accessed April 26, 12. <http://www.vestinet.rs/info/marko-nicovic-droga-iz-turske-u-rasku-uz-blagoslov-beograda>

15 Anastasijević, Dejan. Organized Crime in the Western Balkans. HUMSEC, a European Commission project.

16 World Drug Report 2010. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). UNODC Vienna (2010).

17 Anastasijević, Dejan. Organized Crime in the Western Balkans. HUMSEC, a European Commission project

18 Porobić, Jasmin. Arms Availability and its Impact on Drug Trafficking: A Balkan Perspective. Policy Brief Series, Global Consortium on Security Transformation (2010). [www.securitytransformation.org/gc\\_publications.php](http://www.securitytransformation.org/gc_publications.php)

Proper solutions to the illegal trade are difficult to find because ethnic politics often prevent interstate cooperation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that “a number of unresolved conflicts and/or remaining inter-ethnic tensions along sections of this route continue to prevent the emergence of effective regional counterdrug cooperation and to facilitate trafficking.”<sup>19</sup>

The Kosovo question has cast its shadow far beyond the mere subject of independence and contributes to a set of additional unresolved questions. These include Serbia’s friendly relations with RS and this BiH’s rump state’s refusal to acknowledge atrocities committed against the Bosniak population.<sup>20</sup> Political problems are rooted in the war and will not be resolved until Serbia fully acknowledges its part in the conflict.

A number of Serbia’s politicians jockey to occupy the role of the nation’s savior. Legitimacy is not reached by way of presenting policies that promise, for instance, a lower unemployment rate or the reduction of Serbia’s high indebtedness. Serbia’s overall unemployment is 23 percent<sup>21</sup> and by the end of the fourth quarter in 2011, Serbia’s foreign debt had reached €24.1 billion. Serbia’s external debt amounts to 74.1 percent of its gross domestic product, lying barely below the World Bank’s benchmark of 80 percent, at which point a state is considered “highly indebted.”<sup>22</sup>

Instead, the most important foundation for legitimacy seems to be achieved by pledging to preserve Serbia’s national interests. Serbian presidential candidate Boris Tadić’s campaign slogan, for instance, “i Evropa i Kosovo” (Europe as well as Kosovo), while his coalition partner and speaker of the house Slavica Đukić-Dejanović affirmed this notion. Đukić-Dejanović explained that Serbia ought to respect the constitution and United Nations Resolution 1244, as well as the interests of the Serbia population.<sup>23</sup> Other presidential candidates, including Tomislav Nikolić and Iвица Dačić, made similar statements.

19 World Drug Report 2010. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). UNODC Vienna (2010). 59

20 Republika Srpska has Serbia’s full support. Serbian Government. Accessed April 30, 2012. <http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/vest.php?id=82834>; See also

21 “Nezaposleno 760,000 ljudi u Srbiji”. B92. Accessed May 2, 2012 [http://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=01&nav\\_id=587122](http://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=01&nav_id=587122)

22 Analysis of the Republic of Serbia’s Debt. National Bank of Serbia, December 2011. Belgrade: March 2012.

23 Dogovor sa Prištinom odbranio nacionalne interese Srbije. Radio Slobodna Evropa. accessed May 2, 2012. [http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/dogovor\\_sa\\_pristinom\\_odbranio\\_nacionalne\\_interese\\_srbije/24495272.html](http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/dogovor_sa_pristinom_odbranio_nacionalne_interese_srbije/24495272.html)





President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić by unknown author [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

To be sure, Tadić, in a recent rally in Novi Pazar, asserted that he will make sure to bring investors to the region and pledged that all peoples, cultures and languages ought to have their place in Serbia.<sup>24</sup> This means that politicians are aware of the difficulties Sandžak's population faces. Tomislav Nikolić and Čedomir Jovanović too spent time in Sandžak to persuade Bosniaks of a new and better future under their leadership should they be chosen to lead Serbia. Yet, it automatically brings up questions about the sincerity of Tadić's (and other politicians') promises. First, why did the Belgrade leadership not bring investment to the region earlier, and second, will his promise outlast the presidential campaign? A cynic might say that it will not. Serbia has thus far failed to improve interethnic relations and regional living standards and get away from ethnocentric politics.

### *Economy: Poverty and Unemployment*

Sandžak's industry is at the proverbial fringe of the state. The once booming textile industry is no longer profitable and thousands of people have been laid off. In 2009, the unemployment rate of Raška county hovers around 60 percent, while Zlatibor county had an unemployment rate of 54 percent, according to a report released by the German Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst (Civil Service for Freedom ZDF) and the local Novi Pazar chapter for EU cooperation.<sup>25</sup> At the end of 2011 the unemployment rate was at 56 percent in Raška and 42 percent in Zlatibor municipality, according to the statistical bureau of Serbia.<sup>26</sup> While there seems to be some disagreement regarding the exact number of unemployed, the difference seems irrelevant when nearly half of the population is without work.

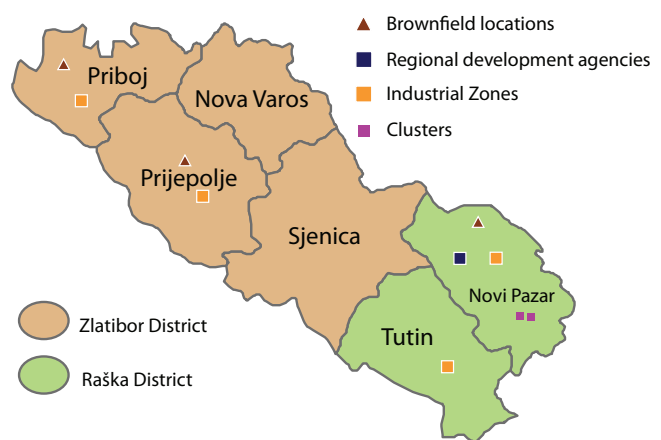
One reason for the chronic unemployment in the area is Sandžak's undeveloped infrastructure. Jelena Kostić, from the Faculty of Organizational Studies at the University of

24 Tadić dovodi investore u Novi Pazar". Kurir. Accessed April 28, 2012. <http://www.kurir-info.rs/tadic-dovodi-investitore-u-novi-pazar-clanak-201216>

25 Percepcija Privatnog Biznis Sektora Sandžaka O Političkom I Ekonomskom Ambijentu. Forum ZDF, Evropski Pokret Srbia – Lokalno veće Novi Pazar. Novi Pazar, RS: 2009. 16.

26 Opštine I Regioni u Republici Srbiji. Republički Zavod za Statistiku. Beograd: 2011. 145-146.

Belgrade, noted that undeveloped regions in Serbia share the following characteristics: declining numbers of young people, as many of them seek employment in the cities; under/undeveloped infrastructure, including a poor network of roads and problems with electricity and undeveloped water supplies; lack of sufficient healthcare and educational opportunities; and high unemployment.<sup>27</sup> Kostić's study indicates that Raška and Zlatibor are two of ten districts that are considered undeveloped.



Map of business support infrastructure in Serbia Sandzak region. Map data based on National Agency for Regional Development report *Analysis of Business Support Infrastructure in the Republic of Serbia*, via [http://www.lokalnirazvoj.org/upload/Publication/Documents/2012\\_04/Analysis\\_of\\_Business\\_Support\\_Infrastructure\\_in\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Serbia.pdf](http://www.lokalnirazvoj.org/upload/Publication/Documents/2012_04/Analysis_of_Business_Support_Infrastructure_in_the_Republic_of_Serbia.pdf)

Given that eight other municipalities too are considered undeveloped brings up the question if Serbia is truly negatively predisposed toward its Bosniak population. Even if this is not so, this scenario is still unfavorable, as it would point toward Belgrade's *overall* poor governance and/or weak economic planning. At any rate, Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia Slavica Đukić-Dejanović's comment in an interview on Sandžak is telling, as she stated that the negative economic situation is felt in all of Serbia and is not of a political nature, adding that the Raška and Zlatibor municipalities are a wealth to Serbia due to their multicultural and ethnic characters.<sup>28</sup> Đukić-Dejanović's comments, however, ought to be taken with some caution. She gave this statement during Serbia's 2012 pre-election season, when Sandžak became somewhat of a centerpiece among Serbia's battling politicians. Again, her statement proves that Serbia's politicians are aware of the economic difficulties that many citizens in this region are experiencing.

<sup>27</sup> Kostić Jelena, under the supervision of Dr. Dragana Kragulj. *Seminarski Rad Regionalni Razvoj i Politika Srbije*. Univerzitet u Beogradu, Fakultet Organizacionih Nauka. Accessed March 23, 12. <http://ekonomija.fon.rs/fajlovi/2009%20Seminarski%20Jelena%20Kostic%20261%2009%20m.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> "Raška oblast I Sandžak su bogatstvo Srbije". *Dnevni List Danas*. Accessed March 23, 12. [http://www.danas.rs/dodaci/sandzak/raska\\_oblast\\_i\\_sandzak\\_su\\_bogatstvo\\_srbije\\_42.html?news\\_id=236046](http://www.danas.rs/dodaci/sandzak/raska_oblast_i_sandzak_su_bogatstvo_srbije_42.html?news_id=236046)

While Sandžak's unemployment rate is very high, the overall unemployment rate of Serbia too is high and lies at around 23 percent.<sup>29</sup> The problem of unemployment, however, becomes more complex when considering the high number of young people in the region. The local online newscast sandžakpress.net reported that Novi Pazar – Sandžak's 'urban' gathering point – has the youngest population of Europe. According to their findings, 49 percent of Novi Pazar's population is below the age of 29.<sup>30</sup> While it is difficult to verify this claim, Serbian statistics indicate that Novi Pazar, and by extension Raška and Zlatibor counties do have a ballooning number of young people between the ages of 15-34.<sup>31</sup> The number of young people is consistently greater in these municipalities compared to the rest of Serbia. The combination of high unemployment, a large number of young people and undeveloped infrastructure is certainly significant and may serve as a basis for existing disillusionment and frustration with the political leadership in Belgrade.

Sandžak is populated by a large number of Bosniaks and/or Muslims. In light of unresolved questions regarding the aftermath of the war and absent lustration in Serbia, economic hardship may potentially take on ethnic dimensions and, in turn, increase tensions. In other words, Bosniaks may interpret insufficient investment and inattention of the region as a continuing aversion against Serbia's Muslim and Bosniak population.

### *Religious and Political Power-Games*

Into this pivotal mix of involuntary idleness, relative poverty and postwar trauma faced by many Bosniaks, Middle Eastern and Turkish aid organizations arrived with employment, education and religious opportunities. They helped build schools and mosques. A number of these organizations not only arrived with monetary aid and emotional support; they also came to spread the word of Islam and their interpretation of the Qur'an. Those who practice the old

29 Opštine i Regioni u Republici Srbiji. Republički Zavod za Statistiku. Beograd: 2011. 144

30 "Novi Pazar – najmlađi grad u Evropi!". Accessed March 29, 12. <http://sandzakpress.net/novi-pazar-najmladi-grad-u-evropi>

31 Opštine i Regioni u Republici Srbiji. Republički Zavod za Statistiku. Beograd: 2011. 38-59.

traditional version of Islam today find themselves at odds with those who proselytize novel or what they consider ‘true’ interpretations of the faith.<sup>32</sup>

### *Background Information on Islam in Bosnia*

Upon conversion in the 15th century, the most common school of Islam practiced on the Balkan Peninsula was the Hanafi *madhhab* (school of thought, jurisprudence), which is considered the most liberal and flexible among the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence.<sup>33</sup> Sufism was among the most widespread orders, adding a layer of mysticism to local Islamic practices in the Balkans. Sufis, for instance, construct shrines and tombs so as to mourn their dead, while believing that visiting them substitutes for Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia) – one among the five pillars of faith a Muslim ought to accomplish.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Sufis practice Islam by focusing on one’s personal relationship to Allah, leading conservative schools such as the Hanbali to discredit Sufism.<sup>35</sup>

Importantly, Islam will often take on characteristics already dominant in the local culture. Leila Ahmed traced this phenomenon in *Women and Gender in Islam* and explains that

By definition, contributions from other religious traditions brought in by converts and the descendants of converts were discrete in that they were either unconscious or traceless, by deliberate intention, to any tradition other than the Islamic. Similarities between prior customs and Islamic ones attest to the fact of Islam’s having absorbed such traditions.<sup>36</sup>

Islam acquired and/or shaped existing cultural practices. For example, eating pork, drinking *rakija* (most often locally produced brandy) and venerating tombs existed on the Balkan Peninsula before the arrival of Islam, which merged with cultural practices found there.

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- 32 For information on Bosnia’s pre-war Islamic traditions, please see  
-Babuna, Aydin. “National Identity, Islam and Politics in Post-Communist Bosnia-Herzegovina”. *East European Quarterly*, XXXIX, No 4 (2006).  
-Bieber, Florian. “Muslim Identity in the Balkans Before the Establishment of Nation States”. *Nationalities Papers*. 28:1 (2000).
- 33 Denny, Mathewson Frederick. *An Introduction to Islam*. Pearson Prentice Hall: New Jersey. 195.
- 34 Sorenson, S. David. *An Introduction To The Modern Middle East*. Westview Press: Boulder, Colorado (2008). 52.
- 35 Williams, Alden. *The Word of Islam*. University of Texas Press: Austin, Texas (2009). 109.
- 36 Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam*. Yale University Press: New Heaven and London (1992). 86.



Islam has undeniably been an intrinsic aspect of everyday life in the Balkans since the arrival of the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century. Religion, however, faded into the background under socialism and was not practiced with great rigor, but it never vanished wholly and remained central to the Balkan social fabric. As proof, the Bosniaks were called *Muslimani* (Muslims) until it was replaced in 1971 by the term Bosniak, which denoted their national identity.

Though the faith regained significance before and during the war in the 1990s, Islam principally re-emerged in the Balkans *after* the war ended. Religion may have since formed an important foundation upon which the backbone of the modern Bosniak identity is based. As each nation seeks to legitimize its existence on the basis of pre-socialist history, Islam seemed to be the logical choice for Bosniak citizens.

For Serbs, meanwhile, Bosniak reconnection with Turkish customs and beliefs may imply the Bosniaks' wish for a return of the Ottoman Empire and intensify already existing nationalist tendencies. To be sure, Turkey and Serbia cooperate on a range of issues that reach from economic investments<sup>37</sup> to Turkish mediation of Serbia's fractured Islamic Community.<sup>38</sup> Yet one will quickly find aversions toward Turkey, specifically the Ottoman past, when following



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comments and chat-threads in Serbian online forums. Darko Tanasković and Andreja Savić, both of whom propagate the theory of radical Islam in the Balkans, echo such sentiments. Tanasković, for instance, maintains that Turkey pursues religious politics while their presence in the Balkans seeks to undermine Saudi and Iranian influence there.<sup>39</sup> Tanasković, however, firmly believes that the war in the 1990s was of religious origin. It is instructive to recall Milošević's anti-Muslim propaganda of the 1990s, which, in turn, calls for caution when analyzing so-called terroristic threats that emanate today from Sandžak and BiH.

37 Stizu prve turske investicije u Srbiju. Economy.rs Vesti. Accessed April 23, 12. <http://www.economy.rs/vesti/19402/Stizu-prve-turske-investicije-u-Srbiju.html>

38 Serbia: split in Islamic community porves had to heal. SETimes.com. accessed April 23, 12. [http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/features/2011/11/03/feature-01](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2011/11/03/feature-01)

39 Radical Groups in the Balkans. Helskinki Bulletin No. 84, Belgrade: November 2011.

Re-emerging Islam in the Balkans: A Threat? A Threat to Whom?

Several articles published in local newspapers, including B92, *Politika Online* and *EMG*, reported on the appearance of *Vehabije* (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian for Wahhabi) in BiH and Sandžak. Kenneth Morrison, professor of historical and social studies at the University of Leicester and regular contributor of policy papers for the British Defense Academy, also stated in his report *Wahhabism in the Balkans* that up to 550 new mosques were built by 2008, mainly in the architectural style of the Saudi Kingdom.<sup>40</sup> Though the numbers vary, the claim is substantiated in Olaf Ihlau and Walter Mayr's *Minenfeld Balkan, Der Unruhige Hinterhof Europas* (Balkan Minefield, Europe's Restless Backyard). The two former reporters who covered the Yugoslav War during the 1990s found that as many as 158 mosques have been built since then. Legacies from the 1990s war in BiH and subsequent Saudi aid to Bosnia are perhaps the main contributors to changing religious traditions.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, donated aid for the construction of hospitals, schools, kindergartens and the support of youth organizations such as the Young Muslims and the Active Islamic Youth (IAO).<sup>41</sup> The Saudi Haramain Foundation, an organization declared by the United States to have sponsored terroristic acts following 9/11, allegedly funds the IAO.<sup>42</sup> Further, Ihlau and Mayr reported that Saudi Arabia contributed up to 1.5 billion dollars in charitable donations to the region.<sup>43</sup>

Drug rehabilitation centers are also a piece of this puzzle, as they seem to be connected to changing religious practices. Addicted youth are apparently brought to treatment centers from which "almost all sport Wahhabi beards and dress while appearing to adhere to a fundamentalist form of Islam" upon leaving the facility.<sup>44</sup> However, the disposition of the Balkan Muslim

40 Morrison, Kenneth. *Wahhabism in the Balkans*, Balkan Series, Advanced Research and Assessment Group. Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, February 2008. 5.

41 Risto, Karajkov. *Islam: The Young and the Old*. Transitions Online 02/07 (2006). 4.

42 Risto, Karajkov. *Islam: The Young and the Old*. Transitions Online 02/07 (2006). 4.

43 Ihlau, Olaf and Walter Mayr. *Minenfeld Balkan, Der Unruhige Hinterhof Europas*. Siedler Verlag: Muenchen (2009). 123-126.

44 "Serbia's Sandžak: Still Forgotten". Europe Report No 162. International Crisis Group, April 8, 2005. 25.

faith, elucidated above, conflicts with radical interpretations of Islam, as David Cook, author of *Understanding Jihad* points out: “Most of the Muslims in Bosnia [and Chechnya] were not prepared to accept the radical Muslim interpretation of Islam and resisted the association of their struggles for independence with the globalist vision of universal fighting against the enemies of Islam.”<sup>45</sup>

At any rate, economic disadvantages, high unemployment, the legacies of Serbia’s involvement in the 1990’s war,<sup>46</sup> and disillusionment with Belgrade’s failed lustration and inattention toward the region, as well as the trafficking and consumption of drugs, may contribute to the attraction of a sober, and arguably fundamental interpretation form of Islam.

This development is not troublesome by itself. However, in light of tensions among the differing interpretations of Islam among local Muslims, the split of the Islamic community in 2007, and mufti Maumer Zukorlić’s (mufti of Sandžak) assertion that the Serbian leadership seeks to split the Muslims of Serbia, Islam may have to be factored in when addressing potential sources of instability in the region. In addition, emerging regional reports about resurging Islamic radicalization ought to be analyzed with care. Belgrade’s politicians may use the global war on terrorism as a *carte blanche* in dealing with Muslims who *appear* to be radical. The notion of radical Islam in the Balkans was likewise used in the 1990s as a propaganda tool to shore up anti-Muslim sentiments. Conversely, changing traditional religious practices and increasing conservatism may be cause for concern.



The radical Mufti Muamer Zukorlic in his office by Giuliano Koren via [www.giulianokoren.com/bosniaks/](http://www.giulianokoren.com/bosniaks/)

45 Cook, David. *Understanding Jihad*. University of Berkley Press: Berkley, Los Angeles and London (2005). 135.

46 Please note that some forms of more radical interpretations of Islam came with the arrival mujahedeen fighters that came to BiH from Afghanistan. Information on this topic can be found in Wright, Lawrence. *The Looming Tower, AL-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. Vintage Books: New York (2006). Cook, David. *Understanding Jihad*. University of Berkley Press: Berkley, Los Angeles and London (2005).

## *Conclusion*

The Bosniak and Serbian community of Serbia have a different interpretation of the 1990s war. On the basis of this differentiation, the Bosniak and Serb communities have since developed diverging identities. This is amplified as Bosniaks seek legitimation and an acknowledgement that atrocities committed by Serb forces amounted to genocide. Serbia's politicians have not acknowledged genocide and instead apologized for a massacre. Serbia's political and moral slate is thus not clean, a situation that is of special difficulty for Bosniaks who live in Serbia. The continuing conflict in Sandžak must therefore be seen as a continuation of the 1990s war.

Serbia's ethnic politics contributes to this challenge, as policies on Kosovo also affect the Bosniak population of Sandžak. Kosovo casts its shadow across a number of other problems, including high unemployment, insufficient regional investment and Serbia's failure to battle the narcotics trade that affects the region negatively. Fear of stirring up already existing nationalist tendencies seems to serve as Serbia's excuse for its inability to solve some of these problems.

Into this mix of unemployment and inattention comes the fear of developing radicalization in Sandžak. As in other socialist and former communist states, Islam reemerged as a basis of people's identities. This is by itself not a problem, yet, in light of Milošević's anti-Muslim propaganda and Belgrade's current (prior to the elections) inattention to Sandžak, one could argue that Serbia is negatively inclined toward its Muslim population. Yet the Muslim population of Sandžak is split because new and perhaps foreign forms of the faith appeared following the war. Therefore, when analyzing potential threats emanating from Sandžak, one needs to dig deeply for the causes.



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