

SERBIA

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1 MUSLIM POPULATIONS

Muslims are one of the traditional religious communities that have been present in Serbia for centuries. Serbian Muslims are almost all Sunnis following the Hanafi school of Islamic law. Islam started to spread in the territories of Serbia with the Ottoman conquest of the late fourteenth century and parts of Serbia remained under the Ottomans for three to five centuries. After the incorporation of the medieval Serbian state into the Ottoman Empire, Islam over time became the majority religion in some regions mainly due to the voluntary conversion of the local population, as well as to migration. The Ottomans withdrew from the territories of today's Serbia slowly over centuries, starting with the Treaty of Karlowitz (*Sremski Karlovci*) in 1699. The withdrawal process was completed after the Balkan wars in 1912–13, when Serbia doubled its territory by taking over the Ottoman regions of Sandžak, Kosovo and Macedonia. At that time there were about 500,000 Muslims in Serbia. In the territories left by the Ottomans prior to 1912, Muslims were in various ways very quickly reduced to insignificant numbers. Soon after the first phase of Ottoman withdrawal in 1834, only 12,000 Muslims remained in the then Serbia (much smaller than today's Serbia), and by 1866 there were only 5,000 Muslims, mostly Roma. Many of the expelled Serbian Muslims settled in Bosnia and Sandžak, which were then still under the Ottomans. Some migrated all the way to Anatolia, where there is today a significant Bosniak community. The migrations continued after World War I but on a smaller scale, so that most Muslims in the territories acquired by Serbia after 1912 and 1913 stayed where they were.²

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² Zirojević, Olga, *Srbija pod turskom vlašću 1459–1804* (Serbia under Turkish Rule 1459–1804) (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2007); Bandžović, Safet, *Iseljavanje muslimanskog stanovništva iz Srbije i Crne Gore tokom XIX stoljeća* (Migration of the Muslim

According to the latest census of 2002, there are 239,658 Muslims among a total Serbian population of 7.4 million. As 3.2% of the population, they constitute the third largest religious group in Serbia after Orthodox (6,371,584) and Catholics (410,976).³ As a result of historical developments, the Muslim population today is concentrated mostly in south-western Serbia, known as Sandžak (where according to the 2002 census there are 142,685 Muslims, or 60.67% of the local population) and in south-eastern Serbia, Preševo Valley (municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac i Medveđa, where there are 58,903, or 66.2% of the local population). In addition to these two regions, significant Muslim communities are present in Belgrade (20,366 or 1.3%), central Serbia (10,000 or 0.3%) and Vojvodina (8,000 or 0.4%). Sandžak is home to 60% and Preševo Valley to 25% of Serbia's Muslims. They are a majority in the municipalities of Tutin (97%), Sjenica (83%), Novi Pazar (80%), and Prijepolje (51%) in Sandžak, and Preševo (89%) and Bujanovac (55%) in south-eastern Serbia. If Belgrade Muslims are added to those of Sandžak and Preševo, it appears that around one-ninth of Serbian territory hosts over 90% of its Muslim population. Ethnically speaking, Bosniaks make up 56% (136,087), Albanians 25% (61,647), Roma 8%, and other ethnic groups 7%, of the total Muslim population, which amounts to about 96% of all Muslims in Serbia. Most of the few thousand Arabs living in Serbia, mostly in Belgrade, are also followers of Islam. Conversions to Islam today are rare but do happen. Some Muslim representatives question the accuracy of the 2002 census data and refer to much higher number of Muslims, up to 700,000.

There are no surveys on levels of practice but, generally speaking, the Muslims of Sandžak and Preševo Valley are much more religious than those in other parts of the country. Of all ethnic groups, Roma practise the religion least.

Population from Serbia and Montenegro during the Nineteenth Century) (Sarajevo: no publ, 1998); Avdić, Hakija, *Položaj Muslimana u Sandžaku* (The Status of Muslims in Sandžak) (Sarajevo: Biblioteka Ključanin, 1991); Karčić, Fikret, *Muslimani Balkana 'Istočno pitanje' u XX vijeku* (Muslims of the Balkans: The 'Eastern Question' in the Twentieth Century) (Tuzla: Behram-begova medresa, 2001).

³ See the details at <http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/axd//en/popis.htm>, accessed 22 April 2009.

2 ISLAM AND THE STATE

The Constitution of Serbia states that religious communities are equal and separate from the state. The Law on Churches and Religious Communities (2006)⁴ has regulated the issue of state-church relations. The law distinguishes between seven traditional religious communities, including the Islamic community, and all other communities. These seven enjoy the privilege of having inherited their legal status from the days of the Kingdom of Serbia, which the Republic of Serbia automatically recognised. This does not prevent the Serbian government from being an actor in the current dispute within the Muslim community (see below). Furthermore, the law particularly mentions the historical role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the development of the national identity of the Serb people. In practice, the Serbian Orthodox Church enjoys a privileged status and plays an important social and political role in the country. On the occasion of the death of Serbian patriarch Pavle on 15 November 2009, the Government decreed three days of mourning.

3 MAIN MUSLIM ORGANISATIONS

The most important Islamic organisation in Serbia is the Islamic Community in Serbia (*Islamska zajednica u Srbiji*, ICiS, Ul. 1. maja 70/b, 36300 Novi Pazar, tel: 020/331-620, fax: 020/331 622, www.islamskazajednica.org) with its headquarters in Novi Pazar, headed by the chief mufti Muamer Zukorlić. The competing Islamic Community of Serbia (*Islamska zajednica Srbije*, ICoS, www.rijaset.rs, www.mesihatsandzaka.rs) was established in 2007 (see below).

Upon the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during 1991–92, the united Islamic Community in Yugoslavia

⁴ http://www.mv.gov.rs/cir/images/stories/pravna_akta/zakon_o_crkvama_i_vz.pdf, accessed 22 April 2009. For the history of church-state relations in Serbia, see Bremer, Thomas, “Relations between the church and the state: The case of the Serbian Orthodox Church”, in Devetak, Silvo et al. (eds), *Religion and Democracy in Moldova* (Maribor-Chisinau: ISCOMET and ASER, 2005), p. 88; Bašić, Goran, “Status of churches and religious communities in Serbia”, in Silvo Devetak et al. (eds), *Legal Position of Churches and Religious Communities in South-Eastern Europe* (Ljubljana: IDSE, 2004), pp. 143–157.

dissolved too. A separate Islamic Community of Sandžak (*Mešihat islamske zajednice Sandžaka*) was established on 30 October 1993, while the Muslim community in the rest of the country remained organised only at regional and local level. Since the Law on Churches and Religious Communities of 2006 envisages the registration of only one organisation, with the words ‘in Serbia’ in its name, for each of the seven traditional religious communities, the unification assembly of the ICiS was held on 27 March 2007 and the ICiS was registered by the state in the registry of religious organisations on 30 July 2007.⁵ The ICiS is organised into four muftiates, which are currently headed by three muftis: the Sandžak muftiate with Mufti Muamer Zukorlić as the chief mufti, Preševo muftiate with Mufti Mumin Tahiri, and Belgrade and Novi Sad muftiate with Rešad Plojović as its mufti. Its executive body is called the *Mešihat*, headed by the chief mufti. Its main institutions are the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Gazi Isa Bey madrasa in Novi Pazar, a monthly newspaper *Glas Islama* (Voice of Islam), El-Kelime publishing house, the International Humanitarian Organization (IHO), a media centre, an agency for halal quality certification, a library, and two kindergartens. It also has three associations: for women, Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and youth. All contact details can be found on the main website of the ICiS given above.

However, this officially recognised community was opposed by the then long-time mufti of Belgrade, Hamdija Jusufspahić and his two sons, both imams. In October 2007, the family was joined by personal opponents of the chief mufti Zukorlić from within the ICiS and, supported by his political opponents, gathered around the Bosniak political leader from Sandžak, Sulejman Ugljanin, a Bosniak nationalist who was once in alliance with Serb nationalists and radicals. The state joined in the dispute by supporting the Jusufspahić family, widely seen as compromised by the positions it took under the Milošević regime. Despite the fact that the Law on Churches and Religious Communities stipulates the registration of only one organisation for each religious community, the state also recognises the ICoS, under the formal leadership of Adem Zilkić. The real mover of events is assumed to be Muhamed Jusufspahić. The website of the Serbian Ministry of Religions

⁵ Bećirbegović, Edah, “Organizacija Islamske zajednice u Srbiji” (Organization of the Islamic Community in Serbia), in Karčić, Fikret et al., *Organizacija islamskih zajednica u regionu* (Organising Islamic Communities in the Region) (Sarajevo: Udruženje ilmijje IŽ u BiH, 2008), p. 39.

has web links to both communities on its homepage (www.mv.sr.gov.yu/cir/). Only the ICiS enjoys the support of the Islamic communities in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia.⁶

The two communities have been disputing each other's legality and legitimacy since 2007. The dispute has on several occasions erupted into violent conflict on the ground. The ICiS controls most of the mosques and other Islamic institutions in the country, and is by far the better organised and more active.⁷ At the core of the dispute seems to be the relationship with Sarajevo, and the ambition of some local Muslim politicians and the Serbian government to control the community. The ICiS would like the Islamic Community in Sandžak to stay formally connected to the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (and in the case of Preševo with the Islamic Community in Kosovo),⁸ while the ICoS wants complete independence. During 2009, prospects of possible unification seem less clear after a long year of struggle. Attempts by the Turkish minister of foreign affairs to mediate between the two communities have so far failed to achieve any success.⁹

4 MOSQUES AND PRAYER HOUSES

According to the meticulous research conducted by Divna Đurić-Zamolo before the Great Vienna War (1683–99), Belgrade had at least 73 mosques and other sources give higher figures.¹⁰ However, after the withdrawal of the Ottomans, they were all destroyed, apart from the Bajrakli Mosque, which was torched in March 2004 in revenge

⁶ Jusić, Muhamed, "The split within the Islamic community in Serbia", paper presented at the conference "Administration of Islamic Affairs in Secular States: SE European Experience", Sarajevo, 17–19 April 2009.

⁷ For a summary of ICiS activities in 2009, see "Izveštaj o radu Rijaseta IZ u BiH za 1428/9 HG / 2008" (Report on Activities of the Presidency of the Islamic Community in B&H for 1428/9 AH / 2008"), *Glasnik Rijaseta IZ u BiH*, vol. 71, no. 7–8 (July–August 2009), pp. 714–719.

⁸ Article 5 of the Constitution of the Islamic Community in Serbia.

⁹ Novosel, S., "Prostorije povod za sukobe" (Conflict over premises) *Danas* [Belgrade newspaper], 23 April 2009.

¹⁰ Đurić-Zamolo, Divna, *Beograd kao orijentalna varoš pod Turcima 1521–1867: Arhitektonsko-urbanistička studija* (Belgrade as an oriental town under Turks 1521–1867: an architectural and town-planning study) (Belgrade: Muzej grada beograda, 1977), p. 62. See also: Djurdjev, B., art. "Belgrade", in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, pp. 1163–1165.

for the burning of the Kosovo churches. Today, there are some 190 mosques in Serbia: about 120 in Sandžak, 60 in southern Serbia, and one in each of Belgrade, Niš, Mali Zvornik and Subotica. A number of mosques are under construction. In the last few years the initiative to build a new mosque and eventually an Islamic centre in Belgrade has been widely discussed in the Serbian media, with fierce opposition from Serbian nationalists. During the October 2009 visit to Belgrade by Turkish President Abdullah Gül, the initiative got support from both Serbian President Boris Tadić and President Gül, who promised financial support for the building of an Islamic centre and mosque in Belgrade once legal procedures were completed.¹¹ In some cities, including Novi Sad, Muslims gather in unmarked premises, presumably out of fear of attack.

5 CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Religious education in public schools was introduced in 2002 following joint lobbying by the Orthodox Church and other churches and communities, including the Islamic community. The law guarantees the right to religious education in elementary and secondary public and private schools (Art. 40). In public schools, Islamic religious education is an 'optional-compulsory' subject, which means that pupils may choose the subject but may then not later withdraw. It is taught by Muslims trained and licensed by the Islamic community and paid by the state. The subject is offered once a week in all the grades if there are seven or more interested pupils.¹² With the beginning of 2009/2010 school year in Serbia, the Ministry of Religion started preferring the ICoS teachers in some towns, which caused fierce reaction from the ICiS.¹³ Islamic religious instruction for Muslim children is

¹¹ Bojić, B. "Srbija će imati velike koristi od posjete predsjednika Turske (Serbia will benefit a lot from Turkish's President visit)", *Press*, 28 October 2009.

¹² Savić, Svenka, "Some notes on Islamic education in Serbia", in Ednan Aslan (ed.), *Islamische Erziehung in Europa/Islamic Education in Europe*, Wiener Islamisch-religionspädagogische Studien, 1 (Vienna: Böhlau, 2009), pp. 449–456. See also Kuburić, Zorica and Milan Vukomanović, "Religious education: The case of Serbia", in Zorica Kuburić and Christian Moe (eds), *Religion and Pluralism in Education: Comparative Approaches in the Western Balkans* (Novi Sad: CEIR, 2006), pp. 107–138.

¹³ Center for Protection of Human Rights and Tolerance—Polimlje, "Izveštaj o stanju vjerskih sloboda u Sandžaku za 2009. godinu s posebnim osvrtom na Prijepolje (Report on Religious Freedom in Sandžak 2009 with special reference to Prijepolje)", *Prijepolje*, 23 December 2009.

also organised within the Islamic community's mosques and *maktabs* and the ICiS also runs two kindergartens.

6 HIGHER AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

The ICiS is the founder of the Gazi Isa Bey madrasa and the Faculty of Islamic Studies. The madrasa (<http://medresa.net/>) is an Islamic high school whose male section was established in 1990 while the section for girls was established in 1996. Another girls' section in Rožaje (Montenegro) was opened in 2001. The Faculty (www.fis.edu.rs) was established in 2001 as a two-year Islamic Educational Academy. Today, it provides four-year training for imams and Islamic religious education training for school teachers. Programmes are offered at undergraduate, MA and PhD levels. The language of instruction is Bosnian. Many of the teaching staff are visiting lecturers from Bosnia and Macedonia. In addition to these two institutions, the ICiS runs the International University of Novi Pazar (www.uninp.edu.rs), which is formally registered as a *waqf*. It is a secular university with several faculties and branches in four other towns in Serbia, which are attended by both Muslim and non-Muslim students.

7 BURIAL AND CEMETERIES

As the status, history, problems, and ethnic and social composition of the Muslim community differ from one region to another, so does the situation with cemeteries. In Sandžak, Preševo Valley and some other parts of the country, Muslims have no difficulty in carrying out burial according to Islamic tradition. In some towns where there are no Muslim cemeteries, Muslims choose to be buried in the nearest city where there is one. Belgrade Muslims have been complaining for a long time about the need for a new cemetery, but to no avail. During the socialist period, most cemeteries were taken from the Islamic community and are now managed by the municipal authorities.

8 'CHAPLAINCY' IN STATE INSTITUTIONS

There are no chaplains in state institutions in Serbia. There have recently been statements suggesting that this may be introduced and legally regulated.

9 RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

The two 'Ids/*Bayrams* are the two main Muslim festivals in the country. On the occasion of both holidays the chief mufti holds an official reception. The manner in which the *bayrams* are celebrated varies significantly between Muslim majority and Muslim minority areas. In addition, Muslims in Serbia celebrate the Islamic New Year, the Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, and the five sacred nights.

10 HALAL FOOD

Halal slaughter is permitted. In cooperation with the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ICiS has started its own Halal Quality Certification Agency which operates on a commercial basis. Halal products can be found in some supermarkets. In addition, Muslims often slaughter animals privately following the halal practice.

11 DRESS CODES

There are no legal restrictions on wearing hijab, but few women would do so outside the Muslim majority regions of Sandžak and Preševo Valley. Hijab is now allowed in photographs for personal documents.

12 PUBLICATION AND MEDIA

Most of the Muslim media in Serbia are religious. *Glas islama* (Voice of Islam, www.glas-islam.info) is a biweekly newspaper published by the ICiS since 1996. The Faculty of Islamic Studies issues an annual collection of articles called *Islamska misao* (Islamic Thought) while students at the Gazi Isa Bey madrasa publish their own magazine called *Softa*. A private *Sandžačke novine* (Sandžak Newspaper) has been issued with various degrees of regularity, depending on the financial resources of the owners.

It is difficult to brand any of the electronic media as strictly Bosniak or Muslim. Apart from the private Bosniak television station in Novi Pazar there are three other television stations: the regional radio and television station of Novi Pazar owned by the municipality, the private television station *Jedinstvo*, and a television station, *Univerza* (www

.universa.tv) started in 2008 by the International University in Novi Pazar. There are several other private radio stations in Novi Pazar. In Preševo Valley, the municipal radio and television station *Preševo* and two private radio and television stations (*Spektri* and *Aldi*) broadcast in Albanian. There are no printed publications in Albanian in this region. In autumn 2009, *Glas islama* was denied regular financial support from Ministry of Religion. The ICiS criticised this decision as another proof of discrimination against Muslims in Sandžak and as “an attack on freedom of expression”.¹⁴

13 FAMILY LAW

Only marriages conducted by a public registrar are legally valid. The Islamic community encourages ‘Shari’a weddings’ administered by an imam. Such weddings have no legal standing and are usually performed after the civil ceremony. Divorce is usually formalised only by the civil authorities. This is also true of inheritance; families may agree privately to divide an inheritance according to the norms of Islamic law but they must still go to the civil authorities to have it authorised. There have been cases of polygamy, including some involving officials of the ICiS. No formal ‘Shari’a divorce’ procedure has been adopted.

14 INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

There is no permanent interreligious council to bring representatives of religious communities together. Most of the interreligious events in which the ICiS has participated have been organised by Belgrade Open School (*Beogradska otvorena škola*, Masarikova 5/16, 11000 Beograd, Srbija, tel: + 381 11 30 65 800, www.bos.rs) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation office in Belgrade. Besides that, a meeting of students from the Islamic, Catholic and Orthodox theological studies faculties in Serbia is organised in Novi Pazar, Belgrade and Subotica three times a year.

¹⁴ “Uskraćena sredstva ‘Glasu islama’ (Funds withheld from *Glas islama*)”, *Preporod*, vol. 22, no. 912 (15 November 2009), p. 35.

15 PUBLIC OPINION AND DEBATE

The dispute between the ICiS and the ICoS, and related violence and verbal attacks, has dominated public discourse on Islam and Muslims in Serbia during the last three years. On 18–20 May 2009, the Grand Mufti of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina Dr Mustafa Cerić, recognised by the ICiS as its ultimate religious authority, visited Sandžak, holding several meetings and giving speeches during which he accused the Serbian state of interfering in the affairs of the Islamic community and thus infringing the rights of Muslims. The Ministry for Religions reacted by saying that he was not welcome in Serbia.¹⁵

In addition, the issue of Muslim extremism has been on and off the public agenda. Two groups of so called Wahhabis have been prosecuted in separate trials before the Special Court in Belgrade for illegal possession of arms and planning terrorist attacks.

In November 2008, a Belgrade publishing house, *Beobuk*, published a Serbian translation of *The Jewel of Medina (Dragulj Medine)* by Sherry Jones, which the Islamic authorities in Serbia considered insulting to the Prophet Muhammed. The book was briefly withdrawn from circulation at the request of Chief Mufti Zukorlić, but is now on sale again and featured at the Sarajevo book exhibition in neighbouring Bosnia in 2008, where it also provoked sporadic protests, although this did not stop retailers selling it at the exhibition. In 2009, the sequel to *Dragulj Medine* was published under the title *Sword of Medina (Mač Medine)* by the same publisher, with almost no reaction from any representatives of the Islamic community or any other Muslim intellectuals.

16 MAJOR CULTURAL EVENTS

Most Muslim cultural events take place in Sandžak, which is the centre of both religious and cultural life. The most common of these are concerts of religious songs (*ilahije*), literary evenings, the traditional days celebrating Bosniak culture, various exhibitions, and book promotions.

¹⁵ “Potreban srpsko-bošnjački dijalog (There is a need for Serb-Bosniak Dialogue)”, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/63357/Potreban+srpsko-bo%C5%A1nja%C4%8Dki+dijalog.html>, accessed 21 January 2010.