

Religion and Politics in the Balkans: the case of Mufti Muammer Zukorlic in Sandzak (Serbia)

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Introduction

The following article seeks to bring under attention the rather unusual case of the Mufti Muammer Zukorlic in the region of Sandzak in Serbia, who has become increasingly politically assertive, challenging both Belgrade's authority and "traditional" politicians who claim to represent the Bosniak constituency in the specific region. It is an "unusual case", as despite its turbulent post-1990 period, the ex-communist Balkans still haven't experienced Muslim clerics who have managed to become powerful enough to challenge both the state's power and politicians who exercise influence over their "Muslim constituencies". The text is structured into three parts: the first part deals with Sandzak's recent history, from 1918 until 1990, and the policies followed by the Yugoslav state in the region; the second with the main political developments in the 1990s in the region of Sandzak, and the emergence of Zukorlic; and the third with political developments between 2000 and 2010 and Zukorlic's growing assertiveness. Finally, there are some concluding remarks.

1. Short historical review

The region of Sandzak refers to the old Ottoman sandzaks (administrative units) of Pljevlja and Novi Pazar that came under Serb and Montenegrin control during the First Balkan War of 1912-1913. The region had a mixed ethnic and religious population and following its establishment in 1918, the Kingdom of Serbs, Slovenes and Croats - that would be renamed as Yugoslavia in 1929 - regarded the Muslim Slavs in Sandzak, as well as in Bosnia, not as an *ethnic* but as a *religious group*. The official name of the region of Sandzak was *Raska*, and

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the Yugoslav authorities treated with suspicion the Muslim Slav population, implementing, what is widely regarded as a discriminatory policy against them²; the Yugoslav authorities even encouraged a Muslim Slav exodus from the region, and more specifically towards Turkey, as Belgrade was seeking to alter the population make-up of the region, while the new Turkish Republic was following a policy of attracting Muslim immigrants from the Balkans, regarding them as culturally “appropriate” to be integrated into the Turkish nation³.

During the Second World War, the *Anti-Fascist Council for the People’s Liberation of Sandzak*, established by the communist-led partisans, demanded political autonomy for the Sandzak region⁴, in an obvious effort to approach the Muslim Slav population. However, no political autonomy was provided to Sandzak: in March 1945, the *Communist Party of Yugoslavia* (CPY) decided that the region of Sandzak would remain divided between the Republics of Serbia and Montenegro, while the Muslim Slavs continued to be treated as a religious group by the Yugoslav state. In fact, during the first post-war population censuses the Muslim Slavs could state themselves as “non-declared Yugoslavs”, if they didn’t want to identify with the Serb or the Croat identity⁵. Nevertheless, the wider state policy towards the Muslim Slav population, in Sandzak as well as in Bosnia, improved after 1945. Based on the official ideology of “brotherhood and unity” (“bratstvo i jedinstvo”), CPY sought to integrate the Muslim Slavs into the Yugoslav, socialist society. Muslim Slavs joined the party and state apparatus, while a policy for the economic development of the Sandzak region was implemented⁶. The most notable feature of the post-1945 period was, however, the emergence of a distinct Muslim Slav ethnic identity. As the French writer Xavier Bougarel has noted, the communist period “encouraged the formation of

² “Serbia’s Sandzak: still forgotten”, *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report 162, 8 April 2005, p.5.

³ For example, according to Serbian sources, Yugoslavia and Turkey signed in 1938 an agreement allowing for the emigration of around 40,000 families of “ethnic Turks” to emigrate to Turkey from Yugoslavia and more specifically from the region of Sandzak. Bogdan Szajkowski, *Encyclopedia of Conflicts, Disputes and Flashpoints in Eastern Europe, Russia and the Successor States* (Longman Current Affairs, Essex 1993), p.369.

⁴ *ibid*, p.369.

⁵ Alexander Lopavic, “The Muslims of Bosnia”, in G. Nonneman, T. Niblock, B. Szajkowski, *Muslim Communities in the New Europe* (Ithaca Press, Reading 1996), p. 106.

⁶ “Serbia’s Sandzak: still forgotten”, p.6.

new Muslim elites (professors, teachers, physicians, engineers, and so on) and the crystallization of national identities that until then had remained unclear and fluid, as shown by the case of the Bosnian Muslims and the Albanians”⁷. Following constitutional reforms in 1968 and in 1971, the Muslim Slavs in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in the region of Sandzak were recognized as a separate ethnic group, Muslims with capital M - a resolution that was also included in the last Yugoslav constitution of 1974, where the Muslims were recognized as a “constituent nation” of Yugoslavia. In 1991, during the last census before the dissolution of the SFR of Yugoslavia, the Muslim population had an absolute majority of 51.2% of Sandzak’s total population, divided over eleven municipalities, six in Serbia (Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Nova Varos, Prijepolje, and Priboj) and five in Montenegro (Rozhaje, Berane, Bijelo Polje, Pljevlja and Plav); in the six Serbian municipalities in a total population of 258,000 the Muslims numbered 156,000, while in the five Montenegrin municipalities in a total population of 182,000 the Muslims numbered 73,000⁸.

2. Political developments in the 1990s and the emergence of Muamer Zukorlic

By the end of the 1980s the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had entered into a multi-faceted crisis, with among others, worsening inter-ethnic relations⁹. In the region of Sandzak itself, Serb media were depicting the Muslim Slavs, as “fundamentalists” and “extremists” that were preparing to wage war against Serbia, seeking to form the so-called “green corridor”, connecting Bosnia, via Sandzak and Kosovo, with other Muslim-inhabited areas in the Balkans, and eventually with Turkey¹⁰. The dissolution of the SFR of Yugoslavia in 1991-1992 had negative repercussions for the Muslims of Sandzak. The combination of war,

⁷ Xavier Bougarel, “Islam and Politics in the Post-Communist Balkans (1990-2000)”, in D. Keridis, E. Elias-Bursac, N. Yatromanolakis *New Approaches to Balkan Studies*, The IFPA-Kokkalis Series on Southeast European Policy, Vol. 2 (Brassey’s, Virginia 2003), p.346.

⁸ Milan Andrejevich, “The Sandzak: A Perspective of Serb-Muslim Relations”, *RFE/RL Research Institute*, paper presented at the conference on the Muslim Communities in post-bipolar Europe, hosted by the Universities of Durham and Exeter, 23-25 September 1993, University of Durham, p.16.

⁹ With most notable case that of Kosovo.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.7, also “Serbia’s Sandzak: still forgotten”, p.8.

dismantling of the internal Yugoslav economy and the imposition of sanctions by the UN against Serbia and Montenegro in May 1992, affected hard the economy of Sandzak, that was anyway one of the least developed regions in Yugoslavia. Thus, during the 1990s the region of Sandzak had some of the highest rates of unemployment and lowest GDP per capita all over Serbia¹¹. Furthermore, the outbreak of violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina in March 1992 will undermine even further inter-ethnic relations in the Sandzak, as it intensified Serbian suspicions over “Muslim loyalty” to the Yugoslav state. During the 1992-1995 period there will be repeated claims about human rights violations in Sandzak, even including ethnic cleansing¹², while a significant number of young male Bosniaks will leave the region and Yugoslavia all together, seeking to avoid the draft in the federal army¹³. The deteriorating circumstances for the Muslim population became evident over another issue: with the declaration in April 1992 of the new Yugoslav state, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, comprised of Serbia and Montenegro, the Muslims lost the legal status they had enjoyed since 1968, as neither the new federal constitution nor the Serbian republican constitution recognized the Muslims as a “constituent nation”. At the same time, both federal and republican authorities refused to recognize the new ethnic definition “Bosniaks” adopted by the Muslims of the region of Sandzak, especially its Serbian part, following the decision of the Bosnian Assembly in September 1993 to replace the ethnic definition “Muslims” with that of “Bosniaks”¹⁴. During the 1990s, Belgrade will treat the Muslim Slavs of Sandzak as simply a religious minority¹⁵.

¹¹ Safeta Bievac, *Bosniaks in Sandzak and Interethnic Tolerance in Novi Pazar*, 1999, .388, <http://igi.osi.hu/publications/books/mmcpxyu/26.pdf>, accessed 20/5/2011.

¹² Thus, the *Helsinki Committee* claimed that during 1992-1994 34 Bosniaks were murdered, 51 were kidnapped, 105 Bosniak houses were destroyed and in that in 27 villages the Bosnian population was cleansed. For the issue of human rights violations in the region of Sandzak during that period see Bievac, op. cit, p.391, “Serbia’s Sandzak: still forgotten”, p.10-12, Jonathan Fox, Lyubov Mincheva, *Muslims in the Sandzak Region of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)*, 7/1/1999, www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/mar/yugsandz.htm, access 17/1/2002, James Ron, *Frontiers and Ghettos. State Violence in Serbia and Israel* (University of California Press, Berkeley 2003), p.70.

¹³ Bievac, op. cit., p.390.

¹⁴ Bougarel, op.cit., p.351.

¹⁵ Bievac, op. cit., p.390.

Back in 1990 the introduction of a multi-party system in the SFR of Yugoslavia had led to the establishment of newly formed parties that sought to represent the interests of the Muslim Slavs. Among them was the *Party of Democratic Action* (PDA) established in June 1990 as the local branch of the PDA in Bosnia-Herzegovina, that had already been set up in May 1990, as the main political force representing Muslims (with capital M) in Yugoslavia, with a declared interest in the region of Sandzak as well¹⁶. Suleyman Ugljanin was elected as President of the Sandzak PDA, and Rasim Ljajic as its Secretary. In May 1990, PDA established the *Muslim National Council of Sandzak* (MNCS), as an umbrella organization, including other, smaller political groups. The recognition of a united, autonomous Sandzak that could potentially unite with Bosnia-Herzegovina will become the central political aim of PDA. Thus, on 26 and 27 October 1991, MNCS organized an, unofficial, referendum concerning the “full political and territorial autonomy” of Sandzak and its “right to integration with one of the sovereign republics”¹⁷. Belgrade described the referendum as unconstitutional, aiming at altering Serbia’s and Montenegro’s borders and interrupting their territorial continuity. Furthermore, it argued that Sandzak could hardly be considered, or ask to be recognised, as an administrative or territorial unit, as it was never before in the past¹⁸. Following the organization of the referendum, the leadership of PDA once more talked in favour of autonomy, arguing that as a constitutionally-recognised nation the Muslims had the right to declare their autonomy, “as the Serbs had (already) done in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina”¹⁹. In November 1991, MNCS established a *shadow government* in Sandzak, while on 1 December 1991, Ugljanin repeated his position for “Sandzak’s secession from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”²⁰.

¹⁶ Thus Alija Izetbegovic, the leader of PDA in Bosnia-Herzegovina, declared during the 1990 pre-election campaign that “Bosnia had legal territorial interests in the Sandzak”, “encouraging the Sandzak Muslims to demand autonomy from Serbia and Montenegro”. Lenard Cohen, *Broken Bond: Yugoslavia’s Disintegration and Balkan Politics in Transition* (Westview, 1993), p. 279, cited in Ron, op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁷ Andrejevic, op.cit., p. 6.

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ ibid, p. 4.

²⁰ Hugh Poulton, *The Balkans. Minorities and States in Conflict* (Minority Rights Group, London 1993), p.219

PDA continued to fight for Sandzak's political autonomy following Bosnia-Herzegovina's independence in March 1992, even seeking to attract international support²¹. In the summer of 1992, MNCS adopted the so-called "Memorandum on the Special Status of Sandzak", which talked about the provision of extended legal, political and economic autonomy for the Sandzak²². In 1993 Ugljanin published a new political platform which, without excluding the possibility of secession from the FR of Yugoslavia, concentrated upon "a status of quite extensive autonomy inside the remains of Yugoslavia"²³. It was unavoidable though, that PDA's preoccupation with the aim of "autonomy", and its efforts to attract international support, would complicate relations with Belgrade. In the summer of 1993, Ugljanin together with other 44 PDA members and supporters were accused, by the Yugoslav authorities, of participating in a "conspiracy to commit hostile actions"²⁴. In July 1993, just before the conclusion of the trial, Ugljanin would escape to Turkey, where he will remain until September 1996.

During Ugljanin's self-imposed exile his relations with PDA's number No 2, Rasim Ljajic will deteriorate, as the latter would seek a rapprochement with the Serbian authorities, favoring a less confrontational stance²⁵. In the summer of 1995, the rift between the two men will become official with Ljajic abandoning PDA and establishing his own political party. Ugljanin's absence will also provide an opportunity for Mufti Muammer Zukorlic to develop an autonomous political presence and influence in Sandzak. Following religious training in Algeria,

²¹ PDA will ask for the mobilization of the international community in relation to developments in Yugoslavia, and especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Thus in April 1992, a PDA delegation led by Ugljanin visited Turkey where PDA's leader reputedly asked Turkey to provide arms to Bosnian Muslims, to cut all relations with Belgrade, and even to intervene militarily in Bosnia. *Radio Belgrade*, 22 April 1992, in *British Broadcasting Corporation*, Summary of World Broadcasts, EE/1363 C1/7, 24 April 1992.

²² According to the memorandum, Sandzak should enjoy "a regional parliament as a lawmaking body, a governor and a cabinet as the executive body, full authority over the educational, social and health systems, independent cultural and media policy, a judiciary completely independent from the Serbian state, local police and the right to independent international contacts – all these rights to spelled out in detail in a Sandzak constitution". Dejan Guzina, "Nation-Building vs. Minority-Destroying; Majority-Minority relations in the Post-Socialist Serbia", *Southeast European Politics*, Vol. 1, No 1, October 2000, p.37.

²³ Mihailo Petrovic, «Ράσκα 1900-2000». Η επιστροφή του «ζητήματος του Σαντζάκ»; ("Raska 1900-2000 the return of the 'Sandzak issue'"), in Στέφανος Γεράσιμος, *Le Retour des Balkans 1991-2001*, special issue of the French magazine *Autrement*, 2003, translation into Greek by Ειρήνη Τσολακέλλη – Άννα Τσέα (Agras Publishing, Athens 2004), p. 87.

²⁴ "Serbia's Sandzak: still forgotten", p.13.

²⁵ Petrovic, op.cit., p. 88, also Bievac, op.cit., p.393.

Zukorlic returned in Sandzak, where in 1993 he was installed by Ugljanin as mufti of the newly-formed Islamic Community of Sandzak²⁶, becoming one of the youngest muftis in world, as he was just 23 years old at the time (born in 1970)²⁷. It should be noted that from 1945 until 1991, Yugoslavia's Islamic communities had been organised into a single federal body, the Islamic Community of the SFR of Yugoslavia, based in Sarajevo. However, following the declarations of independence by the individual republics, and especially by Bosnia-Herzegovina, "the Islamic Communities began to reorganize themselves as national bodies"²⁸. In October 1993, the *Mesihat Islamic Community of Sandzak* was formed, with PDA's political backing, recognizing the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina as the central Islamic authority in the region²⁹.

Personal relations between Ugljanin and Zukorlic changed during Ugljanin's absence in Turkey. "Young, energetic and resourceful, Zukorlic helped (to) build and consolidate a stronger and more unified Sandzak Islamic Community"³⁰. Furthermore, Zukorlic strengthened his position, particularly by cultivating close relations with Novi Pazar's emerging Bosniak business elite - becoming in fact something more than a religious figure³¹. Zukorlic managed "to forge a degree of financial independence for the Sandzak Islamic Community, whilst simultaneously nurturing strong relations with the Mesihat (Islamic Community) of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This awarded the latter a significant influence upon Sandzak Muslims"³². Relations between the two men will never be the same, following Ugljanin's return to Sandzak in 1996: although Ugljanin remained leader of PDA, and a "powerful political figure"³³ in Sandzak, his personal relations with Zukorlic will become competitive, indicative of the power and influence that Zukorlic now enjoyed among the Bosniaks. Ugljanin will seek,

²⁶ "Serbia's Sandzak: still forgotten", p.9, also Kenneth Morrison, "Political and Religious Conflict in the Balkans", *Defence Academy of the United Kingdom*, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Balkan Series 08/13, April 2008, p.8.

²⁷ Morrison, op. cit., p.8

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ ibid, p.9

³¹ Muhamed Jusic, "Muslims in Serbia: Two parallel Islamic Communities in Serbia", *Globalia magazine*, 5 December 2008, www.globaliamagazine.com/?id=509, access 25/01/2011.

³² Morrison, op. cit., p.9

³³ "Serbia's Sandzak: still forgotten", p.12

unsuccessfully, to undermine the credibility of Zukorlic, using the newspaper *Sandzacke novine* “to launch attacks and smears” against Zukorlic, as ‘it was a strategy that met with little success. Zukorlic had gathered significant support among Sandzak Bosniaks, and his message that Ugljanin was attempting to rule both “municipalities and mosques”, in contradiction of the constitutional principle of the separation of religious institutions and the state was well received”³⁴.

3. Political developments since 2000 (2000-2010) and Zukorlic’s intensified activism

Serbia’s political changes in 2000, with the victory of the *Democratic Opposition of Serbia*³⁵ signaled the beginning of a new period in Belgrade’s relations with the Bosniak population, which continued to be the majority in the Serbian Sandzak. According to the 2002 census in a population of 235,000 for the six municipalities of Serbian Sandzak 142,000 or 60% declared themselves Bosniaks and 90,000 Serbs or Montenegrins. The Serbs were the majority in the three western municipalities and the Bosniaks the majority in the three eastern, including Novi Pazar, Sandzak’s main urban center³⁶. Basic demands of the Bosniak population, for example in education, were satisfied, overall relations between the authorities and the Bosniak population improved, and Belgrade officially recognized them as *Bosniaks*. In 2002, under a new law concerning national minorities in Serbia, the *Bosniak National Council of Sandzak* was recognized, making it the “highest organ of the Bosniak national minority inside Serbia”³⁷.

PDA continued after 2000 to enjoy considerable support among the Bosniak population, with Ugljanin retaining the leadership of the party and maintaining his demand for “special autonomy status” for the “historical Sandzak”, i.e. the Serb and Montenegrin part of Sandzak, although support for the idea of autonomy appeared to be much smaller among the Bosniaks in

³⁴ Morrison, op. cit., p.9

³⁵ Following V. Kostunica’s victory in Yugoslavia’s presidential elections, in September 2000, DOS won also a victory in the parliamentary elections that were held in December 2000 in the Republic of Serbia, with 64.7% of the vote.

³⁶ “Serbia’s Sandzak: still forgotten”, p.18-19.

³⁷ *ibid*, p.18

Montenegro, where PDA also enjoyed less support³⁸. Ljajic would also continue to play an important political role in Sandzak, enjoying local support and close relations with Serbia's political establishment; thus Ljajic who became minister of human and minority rights in the federal government of Vojislav Kostunica would retain his position after December 2002 and Yugoslavia's replacement by the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Political relations between Ugljanin and Ljajic would be competitive and even tense at times - in 2005 Ljajic would even accuse supporters of PDA of attempting to murder him³⁹ - but would improve following the 2008 elections in Serbia⁴⁰, when both men joined the coalition government of Mirko Cvetkovic, Ljajic as minister of labor and social policies and Ugljanin as minister without portfolio.

Following Serbia's political changes in December 2000, Muamer Zukorlic will initially enjoy good relations with the new political power in Belgrade. It is interesting to note that Zoran Djindjic, Serbia's Prime Minister between 2001 and March 2003, even treated Zukorlic as his "main political partner in Sandzak", establishing privileged relations with him that enabled Zukorlic to open a private, university in Novi Pazar in 2002⁴¹, the International University of Novi Pazar. In 2006, the introduction of the new *Law on Churches and Religious Communities in Serbia*, according to which there should be one *Islamic Community in Serbia* (ICS), as the supreme organ of the Muslim community in the country, became the catalyst for a deterioration of relations between Zukorlic and Belgrade. In February 2007, Belgrade's mufti, Hamdija Jusufspahic, was self-appointed as leader of ICS and religious leader, *reis-ul-ulema*, of the Muslim population of Serbia, claiming that the chief mufti in Sarajevo, Mustafa Keric, could no longer have religious authority over the Muslim population in Serbia, including the Serbian Sandzak. Zukorlic openly disputed Jusufspahic's decision, describing as a

³⁸ *ibid*, p.19.

³⁹ Igor Jovanovic, "Serbia: Trouble in Sandzak", *International Relations and Security Network (IRSW) Watch*, Belgrade, 17 September 2010, www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/layout/set/print/content/view/full/73?id=121220&lng=eg, access 25/01/2011.

⁴⁰ The winner of the May 2008 parliamentary elections in Serbia was the party *For a European Serbia*, winning 38.42% of the vote. Following the elections a coalition government was formed by the party *For a European Serbia*, the *Socialist Party of Serbia*, the *Party of United Pensioners of Serbia*, the *United Serbia* party and six minority representatives.

⁴¹ Jusic, *op.cit*.

“family affair”, as Jusufspahic “lacked the legitimacy and international recognition” to represent the Islamic Community of Serbia⁴². On 27 March 2007 Zukorlic organized a conference for the election of a new constitution and president for ICS, with the participation of Bosniak, Albanian and Muslim Roma clerics. The conference elected a 54-member Assembly, a constitution and Zukorlic as the president of ICS⁴³. Zukorlic’s success to acquire control over ICS did not remain unchallenged: during a (Zukorlic) trip to Morocco, on 3 October 2007, a group of clerics, members of the ICS’ Assembly, that were reputedly close to Ugljanin, decided to “depose” Zukorlic, to elect Hasib Suljovic as new president of ICS and Adem Zilkic as *reis-ul-ulema* of the Muslim population of Serbia. In a statement they issued, they called upon Zukorlic to resign from all the positions he held in the ICS, “in the name of unity”, justifying their decision to move against him, as a result of accusations leveled against Zukorlic, concerning among others “political interference”, “attempts to intimidate them”, and “violation of their right of free speech”⁴⁴. Returning from Morocco, Zukorlic called for a new assembly-meeting of the ICS, where a majority of its members participated. The Assembly described Zilkic’s election as “illegal” and an “attack on ICS’s sovereignty”, canceling the decisions of the October 3rd meeting⁴⁵. A few days later, on 11 October 2007, Jusufspahic gave the so-called *menshura*⁴⁶ to Zilkic, in an obvious attempt to strengthen his position vis-à-vis Zukorlic. The confrontation between the two opposing camps of Muslim clerics continued after 2007, becoming even violent with clashes taking place in Novi Pazar, Sjenica and Tutin⁴⁷. On the one side Zukorlic and his supporters, who have continued to recognize the chief mufti of Sarajevo as *reis-ul-ulema* of the Muslim population of Serbia, and on the other Zilkic and his supporters who have argued that the

⁴² ibid

⁴³ ibid

⁴⁴ ibid

⁴⁵ ibid

⁴⁶ *Menshura* is called the special document appointing Muftis, that until 1924 and the dissolution of the institution of the Caliphate by Kemal Attaturk, was issued by the *Sheikh Ulema*, in Istanbul. From 1930 and onwards in Yugoslavia the *Menshura* for the appointment of the *reis-ul-ulema*, the supreme religious leader of the Muslim community in Yugoslavia, was issued by a body of senior Muslim clerics. For the history and development of the *Menshura* see “Raisu-I-ulama”, *The Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 07 October 2008, www.rijaset.ba/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article

⁴⁷ See Morrison, op. cit., p.10-11

Muslim population of Serbia should have its own *reis-ul-ulema*, and not being under the religious jurisdiction of Sarajevo. In an interview to the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje*, Zukorlic explained why he could never accept Belgrade as a spiritual centre for the Muslims of Serbia:

„The issue of a spiritual centre is not a matter of decisions, it is an issue of traditional-historical facts. Someone cannot sit down and say that Belgrade from now is the spiritual centre of Muslims... it would be the same if someone were to decide that Tehran is a spiritual centre for Protestants. It could be done but would be unsustainable and ridiculous. Belgrade can only be a centre for Muslims relative to their numerical strength and their spiritual infrastructure there“⁴⁸.

Zukorlic accused the Serbian government of supporting the rival faction of clerics, with the Serbian ministry of religion stating that “it could not arbitrate the dispute between the two communities”, calling upon “the Muslims to find their own way out of this situation”⁴⁹.

In 2010 Zukorlic’s assertiveness moved into a different stage, as he tried to control the *Bosniak National Council of Sandzak* (BNCS) that Belgrade had officially recognized back in 2002 as the supreme organ of the Bosniak minority in Serbia. In elections that took place in June 2010 for the 35-member council, Zukorlic supported his own list of candidates, against two other lists supported by Ugljanin and Ljajic respectively. During the pre-election period, Zukorlic accused Belgrade of “endangering Bosniak rights in Serbia” and talked about the betrayal of the interests of the Bosniaks from their elected politicians (meaning Ugljanin and Ljajic) in order to preserve their positions in Belgrade⁵⁰. The list supported by Zukorlic won most of the seats, 17 of the 35; soon after, the decision by two other elected members of the council, to change sides and join Zukorlic’s list, gave to Zukorlic majority control over BNCS. At this point, the Serbian Ministry of Human and Minority Rights intervened, claiming that a “two-thirds majority” was necessary for the control over BNCS⁵¹. On 4 September 2010, Zukorlic’s supporters clashed with the police in Novi Pazar, during a demonstration

⁴⁸ *Oslobodjenje*, Sarajevo, 28 October 2007, p.27, cited in Morrison, op. cit., p.10.

⁴⁹ Jovanovic, op.cit.

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ *ibid*

organized by the ICS in protest of the “illegal seizure” of land by the local authorities in Novi Pazar. Following the clashes, Zukorlic reacted by calling on Catherine Ashton, the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to send observers to Sandzak; while in an interview to the Montenegro newspaper *Vijesti*, he called for autonomy (for Sandzak), describing it as an “inevitable social process... that should be discussed on time” for the sake of stability of Serbia and Montenegro⁵². Zukorlic’s statements opened a round of recriminations with Sandzak’s politicians. Thus, Meho Omerovic, a close aide of Ljajic, described Zukorlic’s demands for autonomy as “mufti Zukorlic’s dangerous dreams”, adding that international observers in Sandzak would not see discrimination against the Bosniaks but rather “the fixation and desire for power of the leader of the Islamic Community in Serbia”⁵³. Replying, Samir Tandir, Zukorlic’s spokesman, argued that Sandzak’s autonomy was necessary for the protection of the rights of the Bosniak population, adding that “the autonomy we are seeking is in tune with European regionalization standards. I fear that if we don’t get that status, the only solution will be the arrival of foreign monitors in Sandzak”, and repeating the accusation against Ljajic and Ugljanin had forgotten about Bosniak rights for the sake of “positions in Belgrade”⁵⁴.

Concluding remarks

Zukorlic is one of the few cases of Muslim clerics in the ex-communist Balkans that since 1990 has accumulated “enough power and influence to become politically independent” from political parties that seek to politically represent and control the various Muslim ethnic groups. Zukorlic’s power has increased to that point that, since 2006, has challenged, over important issues, not only Belgrade’s central authority but also traditional Bosniak politicians that have dominated Bosniak politics. Mufti Zukorlic has reached a point, where he is effectively claiming for himself the role of an uncompromised political representative and defender of the interests of the Bosniak population in Sandzak

⁵² *ibid*

⁵³ *ibid*

⁵⁴ *ibid*