

УДК 323.1::28(497.11-14)(091)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.31212/tokovi.2025.3.min.45-96>

Original scientific paper/Оригинални научни рад

Received/Примљен: 3. 8. 2025.

Accepted/Прихваћен: 19. 12. 2025.

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The Formation of the Ethno-National Consciousness of the Muslims of Southwestern Serbia*

ABSTRACT: Islam in the Balkans represents the most important imperial legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Among Muslims, unlike Christians, there is a noticeable delay in building a national identity. The first significant forms of the formation of common ethnic consciousness and nationalization followed in contact with the administration of Christian countries. The aforementioned logic was also followed by the small Muslim community in southwestern Serbia. At the very beginning, that identity was characterized by the practice of the religion and religious principles of Islam, as well as the protection of its heritage, so that in a later period of time, due to secularization, that identity took on the character of emphasizing cultural heritage, customs and patterns of behavior created in the previous period. The paper presents and analyzes the process of development and formation of the ethno-national consciousness of the Muslims of southwestern Serbia through a *longue durée*.

KEYWORDS: modernity, ethnicity, nationality, Muslims, Bosniaks, Sandžak, Raška area

* The paper was presented in the form of an announcement at the scientific conference *Cercec / Cetobac International Graduate Conference in area studies "Modernities Debated. Crossed perspectives from Russian, Soviet and Ottoman (post-)imperial spaces: Central and Eastern Europe, Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean, Caucasus and Central Asia"*.

Introduction

Ethnic identity is a complex concept that refers to a person's identification with a particular group of people based on one or more shared characteristics, which may include origin, language, religion, tradition, or nationality. It is shaped by various historical, political, social, and cultural factors through interactions between individuals or groups.¹

Nationalism is an ideology based on the assumption "that an individual's loyalty and commitment to the nation-state outweighs other individual or group interests."² It emerged in the West and is closely linked to the state. The foundations and framework for the construction of modern Western states were provided by absolutist states that functioned as a melting pot with the aim of creating a single nation from people who belonged to different social, political and economic strata, and very often spoke different languages. In short, modern Western nation-building began "with the state, in order to proceed through the constitution of a political nation that was inclusive of all citizens and a bearer of homogeneity and cohesion."³

Growing internal social and political tensions and the emergence of modern nation-states in the West led to the reforms in the Ottoman Empire. The Tanzimat reforms, symbolized by the Edicts of 1839 and 1856, guaranteed equal rights for Muslims and non-Muslims and consolidated the organization of non-Muslims through the institution of millets, or sovereign religious communities that enjoyed broad autonomy in legal and educational matters.⁴ The Edict of Gülhane (1839) and the Imperial Reform Edict (1856) overturned the fundamental principle on which the Ottoman Empire was founded – they implicitly denied the superiority of Islam. To persuade Muslims to relinquish their political and social primacy and to deter Christian millets from pursuing

¹ August Samie, *Ethnicity* (London: Britannica, 2025), accessed on 19 November 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnicity>

² Hans Kohn, *Nationalism* (London: Britannica, 2025), accessed on 19 November 2025, Nationalism | Definition, History, Examples, Principles, & Facts | Britannica.

³ György Péteri, „Between Empire and Nation-State: Comments on the Pathology of State Formation in Eastern Europe during the 'Short Twentieth Century'", *Contemporary European History*, vol 9, no. 3 (2000): 369.

⁴ Xavier Bougarel, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Surviving Empires* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 8.

irredentist aims, Tanzimat reformers promoted the creation of a multi-ethnic Ottoman identity,⁵ tied to the modernizing empire.⁶

However, the development of Ottoman identity failed. Balkan Christians opted for nationalism, i.e. the creation of their own nations and nation-states. Initially, identity referred to religious affiliation. Over time, linguistic and mythic differences fostered divisions that paved the way for “exclusive nationalism,” turning former co-religionists against one another and enabling the rise of separate nations.⁷

Muslims, unlike Christians, were slower to form a national identity, largely because Islam was the Ottoman Empire’s official religion. This religion, at least theoretically, privileges religious feelings over ethnicity and nationalism. In addition, religion was the strongest integrative factor in the Ottoman Empire, if not the only one. Therefore, ideas of ethnicity and nationalism remained secondary and non-dominant with regard to self-determination among both the Ottoman elites and the wider population. This meant that Balkan Muslims began to accept the concept of national identity and develop it only at those moments when the Ottoman Empire was no longer able to protect the interests and identities of the Muslim population.⁸

The first significant forms of the nationalization of Balkan Muslims came after exposure to the Christian Habsburg administrative system. The Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina enabled a more intense collective identification of the Muslim population vs the new occupying authorities and towards national movements and religious-confessional segments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is supported by the fact that movements for educational and religious autonomy emerged only after Austro-Hungarian occupation.⁹ Religious autonomy granted in 1909 laid the gro-

⁵ See: Natalie Clayer, Xavier Bougarel, *Muslimani jugoistočne Evrope* (Novi Sad: Akadem-ska knjiga, 2020), 61.

⁶ Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great powers: 1804–2011* (Toron-to: House of Anansi Press Inc, 2012), 91–92.

⁷ Ibid, 93–94.

⁸ Florian Bieber, „Muslim Identity in the Balkans Before the Establishment of Nation States”, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2000): 13; Peter Mentzel, „Conclusion: Millet, States, and National Identities”, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2000): 203.

⁹ Kasim Suljević, *Nacionalnost Muslimana: između teorije i politike* (Rijeka: Otokar Keršo-vani, 1981), 88.

undwork for identity formation but, as Bougarel notes, turned the Bosnian Muslim community into a kind of “neo-millet.” The creation of a “neo-millet” meant allegiance to a non-Muslim community, which in return received protection of religious rights.¹⁰ This structure kept Bosnian Muslims operating within the framework of religious identity and institutions, limiting their efforts to build a distinct national identity.

The small Muslim community of southwestern Serbia also followed this logic. Therefore, the ethno-national consciousness of Muslims in southwestern Serbia began to develop in earnest only after the Balkan Wars, when these regions became part of the Kingdom of Serbia. From then to today, their ethno-national identification has remained fluid and changeable, with Islam as the only constant.¹¹ In this paper, “ethno-national consciousness” denotes a historically formed collective awareness of belonging to a people that is both ethnic and national in character. It combines shared markers such as religion, language, historical experience and territorial attachment with a sense of common political destiny. This consciousness is not produced solely within broader political and institutional frameworks (empires, states, political parties, international actors), but is also shaped through religious life, family socialization, schooling, literature, the press, artistic production and other everyday cultural practices. The geographical focus is the area historically known as Raška / Stara Raška and later as the Sanjak of Novi Pazar, today most often referred to as Sandžak. This analysis primarily concerns the Serbian part of this region, above all the area of today’s municipalities of Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš and Priboj.¹²

¹⁰ Xavier Bougarel, „Od “Muslimana” do “Bošnjaka” : pitanje nacionalnog imena bosanskih Muslimana”, u *Rasprave o nacionalnom identitetu Bošnjaka*, ur. Husnija Kamberović (Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju u Sarajevu, 2009), 120.

¹¹ Religion was the basis for ethnic differentiation. Thus, in his work on the genesis of the national question of Bosnian Muslims, Muhamed Hadžijahić concludes that there is no doubt that belonging to the Islamic religion primarily determined the ethnic differentiation of Bosniaks, since Islam “is not only a religious and moral teaching that is also manifested through established rituals, but it is an entire system of behavior.” – Muhamed Hadžijahić, *Od tradicije do identiteta. Geneza nacionalnog pitanja bosanskih muslimana* (Zagreb: Muslimanska naklada „Putokaz”, 1990), 102.

¹² In this paper, we have opted for the term southwestern Serbia. The term southwestern Serbia is very rarely used, given that it represents a significantly different territorial entity and encompasses areas that had a different historical development than the

Muslim identity was initially characterized by the practice of religion and religious principles of Islam, as well as the protection of its heritage, but it later became largely secular due to the population's secularization. Under socialism, ethno-national identity centered on religious origin but shifted toward cultural heritage, customs, and behaviors, largely without religious practice. The last significant change in ethno-national determination occurred in the 1990s, when Muslims in the vast majority accepted the national name Bosniak.

The late, incomplete formation of local Muslim ethno-national consciousness motivates our attempt to trace its development. Through a *longue durée*, we will try to explain how it was formed and shaped.

*Ethnogenesis of Muslims in southwestern Serbia –
from their origins to the formation of the first Yugoslav state*

Today's southwestern Serbia was the center of the medieval Serbian state, known as Raška, from which the Serbian kings of the Nemanjić dynasty ruled. Within decades of arriving in the Balkans, the Ottomans conquered the Serbian state, established stable rule, and introduced Islam, beginning the Islamization of the local Slavic population. At first, Islamization was a slow process. There were very few mentions of the Islamized population in the countryside.¹³ The Islamized population grew faster in urban areas.¹⁴ Religious

areas where Muslims predominantly live today. In public and scholarly discourse, the terms Sandžak (by Bosniaks) and Raška (by Serbs) are predominantly used. However, their territorial scope also includes the area of Montenegro, where the process of building a national identity differs to a certain extent from Serbian regions. For more on the administrative-territorial development of Old Raška, i.e. the Raška oblast and Sandžak, see: Драгица Премовић-Алексић, „Историјат територијално-административне организације Рашке области/Санџака”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 40 (2017): 65–83.

¹³ For example see: Салих Селимовић, „Карактеристике порекла, миграционих и демографских процеса на сјеничко-пештерској висоравни”, *Зборник Мајнице српске за друштвене науке*, год. 68, бр. 163 (2017): 431; Ејуп Мушовић, *Туџин и околина* (Београд: Етнографски институт САНУ, 1985), 29.

¹⁴ See: Olga Zirojević, „Novi Pazar u turskim izvorima do kraja XVI veka”, *Novopazarski zbornik*, god. 1 (1977): 115; Ејуп Мушовић, *Етнички процеси и етничка структура становништва Новог Пазара* (Београд: Етнографски институт САНУ, 1979), 61.

differentiation was accompanied by a process of ethnic differentiation.¹⁵ Ejup Mušović determined that the separation of Muslims into a separate ethnic community in these areas was “influenced primarily by the preservation of awareness of their ethnic origin, then the preservation of the Serbian language as a means of mutual understanding, then the retention of some elements of South Slavic material culture and oral folk art that was nurtured in the South Slavic ethnic area.”¹⁶

The key event for the further Islamization, the change of social relations and ethnic structure of the regions of southwestern Serbia was The Great Turkish War (1683-1699). The consequences of the war for the local population are most vividly described by the fate of Novi Pazar. The city was burned to the ground in 1689. Its previously large population, about 30,000 people, almost completely disappeared. Muslims retreated eastward in a mass migration, and a large number of Christians joined “The Great Migrations of Serbs” led by Arsenije III Čarnojević.¹⁷ Migration left the region deserted, thereby diminishing the Christian element.¹⁸

The appearance of the Muhajirs,¹⁹ the Ottoman policy of planned settlement of these regions and increased Islamization led to enormous demographic changes, both in ethnic and religious terms. There is a specific case of forced settlement of the Klimenti when 274 houses on Pešter were settled in 1700. Due to dissatisfaction with life and longing for their homeland, most of them left these regions by 1911. They were the first Albanian Muslim and first

¹⁵ See: Петар Влаховић, „Српска и Муслиманска традиција у пријеполском крају : прилог упознавању етничког идентитета”, *Симпозијум Сеоски дани Срејена Вукосављевића*, год. 15 (1993): 154; Петар Влаховић, „Етничке прилике у пријеполском крају”, *Симпозијум Сеоски дани Срејена Вукосављевића*, год. 4 (1976) 167–176.

¹⁶ Петар Влаховић, „Етничка историја у научном делу Ејупа Мушовића”, *Новојазарски зборник*, књ. 29 (2006): 61.

¹⁷ Ејуп Мушовић, „Нови Пазар у прошлости”, *Новојазарски зборник*, књ. 2 (1978): 10.

¹⁸ Иван Косанчић, *Новојазарски санџак и његов етнички проблем* (Београд: Књижара Геце Кона, 1912), 38–39.

¹⁹ See: Safet Bandžović, *Bošnjaci i deosmanizacija Balkana: muhadžirski pokreti i pribježišta “sultanovih musafira”: (1683.–1875.)* (Sarajevo: S. Bandžović, 2013); Safet Bandžović, *Deosmanizacija Balkana i Bošnjaci: ratovi i muhadžirska pribježišta: (1876.–1923.)*, (Sarajevo: S. Bandžović, 2013); Safet Bandžović, *Bošnjaci i Turska : deosmanizacija Balkana i muhadžirski pokreti u XX stoljeću* (Sarajevo: S. Bandžović, 2014).

foreign ethnic group in southwestern Serbia.²⁰ They would later be joined by other tribes from northern Albania. In addition to the Albanian tribes, the ethnic picture of the region was also changed by the mass immigration of the people from Brda (Hills) and Herzegovina.²¹ Islamized Albanian tribes, through intermarriage with Muslim settlers, mostly Serbs, and indigenous people, gradually adopted the Serbian language and many folk traditions, thereby practically becoming Slavicized.²²

The new settlers in southwestern Serbia moved frequently from one place to another. The settlements were small and unstable, and often abandoned. They were consolidated only after 1737, but the stable situation lasted for a relatively short time.²³ Significant ethnic upheavals were initiated again during the First Serbian Uprising. Units of Serbian rebels, Ottoman armies led by Sulejman Pasha of Skopje and Numan Pasha Mahmudbegović, roamed the region, causing great casualties among the local population, both Orthodox and Muslim.²⁴ Despite the large-scale abandonment of the area, it remained a place of immigration. It was permanently populated by people from the Montenegrin hills – the Vasojevići, Kući, Bratonožići and other tribes, from Drobniak and other parts of eastern Herzegovina.²⁵ This again brought about an ethnic change in the population. During the 19th century, individuals from immigrant families

²⁰ Јован Томић, *О Арнаућима у Сјарој Србији и Санџаку* (Београд: Просвета, 1995), 70–74.

²¹ Милисав Лутовац, „Етничке промене у области Старе Рашке,” *Описак из Гласа СССР Сръске академије наука уметности Одељење друштвених наука*, бр. 20 (1978), 226.

²² Селимовић, „Карактеристике порекла”, 432.

²³ Лутовац, „Етничке промене у области Старе Рашке”, 216.

²⁴ See: Богумил Храбак, „Српски устаници и Новопазарски санџак (Рашка) 1804–1813. године”, *Историјски часопис: оріан Историјскої инстиијуїа САН*, год. 40–41 (1993–1994): 95–136; Есад Рахић, „Први српски устанак и његов утицај на прилике у Новопазарском санџаку”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 32 (2009), 63–95.

²⁵ Миомир Дашић, „Административно-територијални положај Старе Рашке у доба турске владавине и настанак имена Санџак”, у *Обласїи Сјаре Рашке крајем XIX и почетком XX века: (зборник радова са научної скупїи њоводом осамдесетїоїодишњице ослобођења милешевскої краја од турске власїи*, ур. Петар Влаховић и Слободан Гојковић (Пријепоље: Установа за културу и образовање „Дом Револуције”, 1994), 27.

converted to Islam, and most of them did not even change their old Christian surnames.²⁶

The decisions of the Berlin Congress initiated new migration and immigration movements. The ethnic structure of the region underwent another change. The muhajirs had a decisive influence on ethnic and confessional change.²⁷ By the decisions of the Berlin Congress, Austria-Hungary was granted the right to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro was granted the right to occupy the surrounding Brda, which triggered huge waves of emigration. The number of immigrants was very large. Thus, the population of Novi Pazar and its surroundings increased by 15%. Among the muhajirs, those from Nikšić and Kolašin stood out. As Mušović states, they were “great religious fanatics, which means that their faith was above ethnicity, one might say, above everything else.”²⁸ The Muhajirs, with the support of the Porte, after 1878 transformed the entire Old Raška into a true Krajina. In addition to the Slavic settlers, Circassians, a completely new ethnic element, also arrived in Novi Pazar.²⁹

The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina triggered a new wave of emigrants. They were now mainly settled in the Pljevlja Sandžak, and only later in the Sjenica Sandžak.³⁰ And not only did it trigger a new wave of immigrants, the annexation also caused a stronger Albanization among the local population. The Albanization was felt in the Sjenica and Pazar kazas,³¹

²⁶ Salih Selimović highlights the Islamization of the Papić family as a characteristic example. The Papić family originate from Papa near Bijelo Polje, from where they went to Buče near Priboj. During the Karađorđe Uprising, fleeing the oppression of Sulejman Pasha of Skopje, they arrived in Kladnica. Their stay was conditioned by their acceptance of Islam. Some accepted it, while others who did not want to went further towards Užice and Takovo – Салих Селимовић, „Неке карактеристике порекла и миграционе динамике становништва на подручју Сјенице”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 24 (2000): 132.

²⁷ According to the 1875 census of male military conscripts, there were more Christian men than Muslim men in this area. See: Fehim Ličina, Selim Šaćirović, *Novi Pazar: geodemografska kretanja*, (Novi Pazar, Rožaje: Institut za historiju, demografiju i antropologiju, 2024), 120.

²⁸ Ејуп Мушовић, „Никшићани и Колашинци у Санџаку”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 7 (1983): 92.

²⁹ Мушовић, „Нови Пазар у прошлости”, 11.

³⁰ Богумил Храбак, „Новопазарски санџак у последњој етапи отоманске владавине (1908–1912)”, у *Обласни Сјаре Рашке крајем XIX и почетком XX века*, 108.

³¹ Косанчић, *Новопазарски санџак*, 21–22.

and it had an impact on the local population because, as Jovan Cvijić at that time noted, they represented a “floating mass” without a clearly established identity.³²

From the abovementioned, it can be clearly concluded that local Muslims did not have a strongly developed ethnic consciousness. It is almost impossible to talk about a national one. The only important component of Muslim identity was religious, and it always stood out in the foreground. Even the term “Turk,” which dominated the identification and self-identification of local Muslims, had primarily a religious, not an ethnic and national character.³³ On the other hand, numerous contemporaries of the time wrote about the local population and its identity, defining its form based on facts, their own observations and convictions. Gaston Gravier defines Muslims as a population of “Serbian blood, type and language,”³⁴ Teodor Ipen as Bosnians,³⁵ Ivan Kosančić as “Turkified Serbs” who completely “have the type of Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims”³⁶ and Jovan Cvijić as Dinaric Serbs whose characteristics were changed “under the influence of the Quran and Islam.”³⁷ Among contemporaries at the time, the dominant view was that Muslims were “Islamized Serbs.” This was especially expressed by authors of Serbian origin. However, until the Balkan Wars, Serbia in these regions carried out exclusively national propaganda towards the Orthodox population. Immediately before the start of the Balkan Wars,

³² Јован Цвијић, *Основе за географију и геологију Македоније и Сјаре Србије : с промајрањима у Јужној Бујарској, Тракији, суседним деловима Мале Азије, у Тесалији и Епиру: (са 24 географске и геолошке карте и фототрафије изван текста и са 71 профилем и скицом у тексту)*, књ. 3 (Београд: Српска краљевска академија, 1911), 1166.

³³ Милисав Петровић, „О чифчијском питању у Старој Рашкој (Санџаку) уочи Балканских ратова са освртом на Милешевски крај”, у *Обласни Сјаре Рашке крајем XIX и почетком XX века*, 45–80.

³⁴ Гастон Гравје, *Новопазарски санџак* (Нови Пазар: Завичајни музеј, 1977), 10.

³⁵ When talking about nationality, it should be borne in mind that, in accordance with Kalaj's idea of an integral Bosnian nation, Ipen considers all residents of southwestern Serbia, both Muslims and Christians, to be Bosnians – Теодор Ипен, *Сјара Рашка* (Београд: Службени гласник, 2022), 32. More about Kalaj ideas of Bosnian nation in: Томислав Краљачић, *Калајев режим у Босни и Херцеговини* (Београд: Catena mundi, 2017)

³⁶ Косанчић, *Новопазарски санџак*, 20–21.

³⁷ Јован Цвијић, *Балканско полуострво и јужнословенске земље: основе антропогеографије* (Београд: Марсо, 2011), 287.

the press in Serbia and the surrounding Christian countries called on governments and peoples to lead the fight for the liberation of their compatriots, emphasizing that “the final hour of the showdown between the cross and the crescent” had come.³⁸

The Balkan Wars were over, but there was no “final showdown with the crescent moon.” The Serbian elite of the time, at least in public discourse, opted for a tolerant policy expressed through the motto “a brother is loved, no matter what his religion” (*Brat je mio ma koje vere bio*).³⁹ Yet contemporary investigations, such as the report of the Carnegie Commission, as well as later historiography, documented widespread violence against Muslim civilians, forced migrations and other forms of pressure exercised by Serbian and other Balkan armies in 1912–1913.⁴⁰ This discrepancy between inclusive public rhetoric and exclusionary practices reinforced among local Muslims the feeling that they were an unwanted and insecure group in the new Serbian state, which would later facilitate the strengthening of a distinct ethno-national consciousness.

Considering them Serbs, Muslims now had to be brought closer to Serbian national thought. Not much could be done on this issue due to the rapid

³⁸ One of the reasons for such a stance can be found in the direction in which the construction of Serbian national identity was taking place. Namely, Miller states in his study that until 1878, Serbian national consciousness contained certain anti-Ottoman elements, but it clearly lacked anti-Islamic elements. The direction of expansion towards the south after the Berlin Congress caused this identity to develop “anti-Muslim elements into a clear anti-Islamism with an Orientalist structure” over time – Dietmar Müller, „Orientalism and Nation: Jews and Muslims as Alterity in Southeastern Europe in the Age of Nation-States, 1878–1941”, *East Central Europe*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2009), 71; Авдија Авдић, „Општи поглед на миграциона кретања муслиманског становништва на Балкану од краја XIX века до закључења југословенско-турске конвенције (11. јула 1938. године)”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 9, 1985, 154.

³⁹ Among other things, newspaper articles speak about the correct stance and direction of Serbian politics. See: Глиша, М., „Из Новог Пазара: Телал виче: ђуј и пођуј”, *Балкански рај у слици и речи*, 27. 1. 1913, 27; Глиша, М., „Трче ка’ манити. Сличица из ослобођеног Новог Пазара”, *Балкански рај у слици и речи*, 3. 2. 1913, 43; Аноним, „Наши у Пријепољу”, *Балкански рај у слици и речи*, 3. 3. 1913, 109; Аноним, „Србија слободија”, *Балкански рај у слици и речи*, 17. 3. 1913, 132.

⁴⁰ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1914).

onset of World War I. The war also showed the double standards of the state towards the population of Old Serbia. The local population was deprived of political rights and freedoms, due to the validity of emergency measures in the liberated areas, but was required to fulfill military obligations. Damjan Popović, commander of the New Areas Troops, considered the recruitment of Muslims a process of emancipation.⁴¹ Certainly, a significant number of them were recruited, and during war operations, “the Muslim detachments thus shared the fate of the Serbian soldiers, both in the heroic defense and in the subsequent retreat from the Belgrade positions.”⁴² The depicted heroic struggle of Muslims can certainly contribute to the development of a sense of belonging to the state of Serbia and Serbian national identity. In addition, during the withdrawal of the Serbian army, the local population did not remain passive, and Muslim soldiers played a significant role in the withdrawal as guides of the army.⁴³ However, these instances of rapprochement were few. As J. Šaljić points out, the result of Muslim participation in the Serbian army was devastating.⁴⁴ The vast majority of Muslims from the Serbian army joined the Austro-Hungarian army.

When it came to the issue of protecting the rights of the Muslims in World War I, “Serbia was reluctant and used the war as an excuse to confiscate the land, property, and the animals of the Muslims and force the Muslim population to enter military service, contrary to the Istanbul Treaty”⁴⁵ which further alienated the population from Serbia and pushed it closer to Austro-Hungarian state. Under Austro-Hungarian occupation, ethnic tensions resurfaced and were often exacerbated by the occupiers, deepening divisions.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Danilo Šarenac, Aleksandar Miletić, *Između diskriminacije i neplanirane integracije: Albanci i Bošnjaci u srpskoj uniformi 1914–1918* (Novi Sad: Centar za istorijske studije i dijalog, 2020), 7–8.

⁴² Ibid, 15.

⁴³ Речеп Шкријељ, „Неколико аустро-угарских докумената из времена окупације новопазарског и сјеничког краја (1915–1918),” *Војноисторијски гласник*, год. 71, бр. 1 (2021), 237.

⁴⁴ Јована Шаљић, „Муслимани нових области Србије у српској војсци током Првог светског рата” у *Срби и Први светски рат 1914–1918: зборник радова са међународној научној скупштини одржаној 13–15. јуна 2014*, ур. Драгољуб Живојиновић (Београд: Српска академија наука и уметности, 2015), 349–363.

⁴⁵ Gürsoy Şahin, „Impact of the World War I on the Muslim Population of Serbia”, *Journal of Ottoman Legacy studies (JOLS)*, vol. 3, issue 5 (2016), 78.

⁴⁶ See: Миодраг Радовић, „Убирање четвртине у Дежевском срезу за време Првог и Другог светског рата”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 22 (1998), 266.

The short-lived administration of the Kingdom of Serbia could not eliminate the feeling of connection with the Ottoman Empire. The Austria-Hungarian occupier exploited these sentiments. In 1916 and 1917, volunteers were recruited for the war effort of the Central Powers. Recruitment propaganda claimed “the world war was started to destroy Muslims.” and instilled hope among the Muslim population about the return of the Ottoman Empire, prompting many to volunteer.⁴⁷

A key event in the contemporary identity of Bosniaks in southwestern Serbia was the Sjenica Conference, held in August 1917 with the mayors of Sandžak municipalities in attendance. All the mayors were Muslim, and the decisions were non-plebiscitary, as the Serbian population was not consulted. The conference resolved to request annexation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, or, if denied, autonomy for Sandžak. If this request was not met either, it was concluded that the only reasonable solution was the departure of Muslims from this area.⁴⁸ Today, there are conflicting views regarding the conference. Bosniak authors stress that the Sjenica Conference confirmed Sandžak as a historical entity and reflected Bosniaks’ desire to preserve their identity and view Bosnia and Herzegovina as their homeland.⁴⁹ In contrast, Serbian authors view it as reflecting Austro-Hungarian interests, aiming to strengthen their position in annexing the strategically vital Novi Pazar Sandžak while negotiating a separate peace with Serbia.⁵⁰ The demands did not have a significant impact, and the following year saw the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the establishment of the first common state of the South Slavs – the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

⁴⁷ Redžep Škrijelj, „Đurumlje iz Sandžaka na Galiciji (1916-1917)”, *Historijski pogledi*, god. 1, br. 1 (2018), 89.

⁴⁸ *Okrugli sto “Sjеничка konferencija, 1917–2017”: Sto godina Sjеничке rezolucije* (Novi Pazar: Bošnjačko nacionalno vijeće, 2017), 3–4.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Вуле Брашанац, „Политичке, економске и просветне прилике у пријеполском округу за време аустроугарске окупације”, *Симпозијум Сеоски дани Срејшена Вуко-сављевића*, бр. 15 (1993), 195–196; Чедомир Антић, „Сјеничка конференција“, *Видовдан*, датум приступа 1. 8. 2025, <https://vidovdan.org/istorija/cedomir-antic-sjenicka-konferencija/>.

The Yugoslav experience

The newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes experienced a crisis throughout the entire interwar period due to the conflict between Serbs and Croats. Muslims also became the subject of that conflict. Both Serbs and Croats tried to incorporate them into their national corpus. In such circumstances, Muslim political parties insisted on “the confessional distinctiveness of Muslims as the primary factor of collective identification, leaving the national component of the political program unused, and therefore susceptible to manipulation by Serbian and Croatian ideologists.”⁵¹

The national task of Serbian ethnology of that time was to resolve the dilemma of “how to define the population which, according to the understandings of that time, was ethnically (predominantly) Serbian, and culturally (mainly) Turkish”.⁵² A model of unproblematic coexistence within the new state was to be established. The project of nationalizing Muslims was successful to a certain extent, but was largely limited to the intellectual and political elite.⁵³

However, the activities of political parties with a Serbian national designation and their attitude towards Muslims completely contradicted the nationalization project. Antagonisms from earlier periods were now systematically and constantly fueled. As time went on, the already existing contradictions between Serbs and Muslims intensified. A significant role in all this was

⁵¹ See: Jovan Hadži Vasiljević, *Muslimani naše krvi u Južnoj Srbiji* (Beograd: Štamparija „Sv. Sava,” 1924); Čedomil Mitrinović, *Naši muslimani: studija za orijentaciju pitanja bosansko-hercegovačkih muslimana* (Beograd: Biblioteka društvo, 1926); Dragiša Lapčević, *O našim muslimanima (sociološke i etnografske beleške)* (Beograd, Geca Kon, 1925); The work of Jovan Cvijić is also of exceptional importance; in this context, we would single out his previously mentioned work *Balkansko poluostrvo*; Marko Pišev, „Između “azijatskog” islama i “pravoslavnog” slovenstva: jugoslovenski muslimani u ranoj srpskoj etnologiji”, *Antropologija: časopis Centra za etnološka i antropološka istraživanja (CEAI) Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu*, god. 19, br. 3 (2019), 177.

⁵² Ibid, 177.

⁵³ Ana Ranitović, „Why do they call it Raška when they mean Sandžak? On the synchrony and diachrony of identities in Southwest Serbia?” (Phd Thesis, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2016), 80.

played by the economic backwardness of these regions,⁵⁴ mass illiteracy,⁵⁵ the tradition of old feudal relations⁵⁶ and the religious division of Serbs and Muslims fueled by strong religious fanaticism.

The Serbian elite's distrust of the local population was fueled by the knowledge that during World War I, the vast majority of Muslims had voluntarily joined enemy military units.⁵⁷ Administration in the southern provinces of the new Kingdom functioned as a de facto military regime. Belgrade issued government decrees, but military officers selectively enforced them and often ruled at their own discretion.⁵⁸

Harsh treatment of Muslims by the authorities was widespread, and murders and robberies were not uncommon. Such disorder created conditions for the rise of komitas, which was closely tied to the Kosovo Committee, whose aim was to annex Albanian-inhabited areas to Albania.⁵⁹ The most famous outlaw was Jusuf Mehonjić.⁶⁰ The komitas were supported by the local population, who considered them "national fighters for Islamic rights and their protectors."⁶¹ A certain part of the outlaws moved to Turkey by 1924, which, in combination with the socio-political situation on the ground, trig-

⁵⁴ More about this: Милић Петровић, „Рашка област у југословенској држави 1918–1941. : стање и проблеми”, *Архив*, год. 8, бр. 1/2 (2007), 90–107; Милић Петровић, „Рашка област у југословенској држави 1918–1941. : стање и проблеми”, *Архив*, год. 9, бр. 1/2 (2008), 33–49.

⁵⁵ See: *Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 31 marta 1931 godine* (Beograd: Državna štamparija, 1938), 121, 126–127, датум приступа 1. 8. 2025, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G1938/Pdf/G19384001.pdf>

⁵⁶ See: Љубица Кандић, „Аграрно питање и Устав СХС из 1921. године”, *Анали Правној факултету у Београду*, год. 16, бр. 2 (1968), 265–278; Богумил Храбак, *Цемијећ: организација муслимана Македоније, Косова, Метихије и Санџака: 1919–1928* (Београд: Б. Храбак, 2003)

⁵⁷ Jovo Miladinović, „Heroes, Traitors, and Survivors in the Borderlands of Empires Military Mobilizations and Local Communities in the Sandžak (1900s–1920s),” (Phd thesis, Philosophischen Fakultät der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, 2021).

⁵⁸ Храбак, *Цемијећ*, 64.

⁵⁹ Ејуп Мушовић, „Хајдучије и комите у Санџаку” у *Симпозијум Сеоски дани Срећена Вукосављевића*, год. 6, (1978), 85–93; Авдија Авдић, „Хајдучка и комитска делатност у Санџаку (1878–1925)”, *Новојазарски зборник*, бр. 11 (1987), 145–164.

⁶⁰ Naka Nikšić, „Jusuf Mehonjić u pjevanju Sandžačkih Bošnjaka”, *Historijski pogledi*, год. 1, br. 1 (2018), 122–124.

⁶¹ Šerbo Rastoder, „Trideset i sedam neobjavljenih dokumenata o muslimanskim odmetnicima iz Crne Gore i Srbije 1919/1929 (I dio)”, *Almanah*, br. 9–10 (2000), 223–271.

gered the first significant wave of emigration from these areas in 1925.⁶² Waves of migration continued, mostly driven by private initiative. In 1938 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia reached an agreement with Turkey and signed a convention on further emigration, bringing the state into the process. The outbreak of the Second World War prevented its implementation. Emigration continued after World War II, and Josip Broz reached a similar verbal agreement in 1953. During the socialist period, religious and economic reasons were listed as the most common reasons for emigration.⁶³

The political actions of these parties significantly hindered efforts to integrate Muslims into the Serbian national corpus. The years 1919-1922 were relatively calm. Political competition on the ground was mainly between the Radicals and the Democrats, with no sharp inter-confessional party conflicts. In that initial political period, on December 17, 1919, the Founding Congress of Muslims from the South - the Džemijet was held. The founding congress defined the organization's platform and ideological basis. Its goals centered on religious matters, demands for religious and educational autonomy, and the issue of agrarian reform.⁶⁴

In the 1920s, the Džemijet's radical orientation became evident. The Radicals expected it to form a religious organization and, as such, join the Radical Party—a highly pragmatic arrangement. Džemijet members, however, believed they could cooperate with the Radicals only on the question of agrarian reform. On the other hand, the Radicals used the Džemijet to suppress the Democratic Party, which had achieved significant success in the municipal elections in the Sandžak municipalities, and the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (JMO), whose influence was felt in Priboj, Nova Varoša and Prijepolje.⁶⁵

⁶² Istorijски arhiv „Ras”, Novi Pazar (IARNP), Zbirka hronika (ZH), Miodrag Mijo Radović: Hronika Novog Pazara u NOB-u, 68; Авдић, „Хајдучка и комитска делатност у Санџаку”, 160.

⁶³ See: Sava Đurđević, „Između migracija i povratka: iseljavanje u Tursku iz Novog Pazara i okoline tokom šezdesetih godina dvadesetog veka”, u *Nova istraživanja jugoslovenske prošlosti: perspektive sa postjugoslovenskog prostora: tematski zbornik*, ur. Natalija Dimić Lompar, Ognjen Tomić, Nikola Koneski (Beograd: INIS, 2025); Edvin Pezo, „Komparativna analiza jugoslovensko-turske konvencije iz 1938. i „džentlemenskog sporazuma” iz 1953: pregovori oko iseljavanja muslimana iz Jugoslavije u Tursku”, *Tokovi istorije*, br. 2 (2013), 97–120.

⁶⁴ Храбак, *Дџемџет*, 81–82.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 93.

The Radicals' hope that the Džemijet would remain a religious organization was in vain. The proclamation for the elections of November 28, 1920, emphasized that "all Muslims of Macedonia and the Sandžak should stand under the banner of the Džemijet, because this is the only way to realize the religious, national, intellectual and all other needs and goals of Muslims."⁶⁶ The Džemijet only became a separate political organization after the parliamentary elections on 18 March 1923.⁶⁷ During their joint action with the Radicals, the influence of the Democrats and the JMO in these areas was minimized.

The breakup of the Radicals and the Džemijet caused great rivalry, but also enabled national-religious grouping in the area of southwestern Serbia. A key event was the failed assassination attempt on Živko Šušić, the district mayor in Novi Pazar. This event was used to rally Serbs around the Radical Party and to take a tougher course towards Muslims.⁶⁸ During the election campaign, the Radicals expressed intolerance towards Muslims, equating the Muslim population with Turks. In contrast, the leaders of the Džemijet party used religious fanaticism to gain supporters.⁶⁹ Election slogans most vividly represent their agitation. The Džemijet engaged the electorate with slogans that emphasized the religiosity of Muslims, such as: "Muslims unite! For the salvation of Islam, for the religion and the Quran." In contrast, the Radicals rallied around religious slogans such as "For the cross, honorable Serbs unite against the Turks."⁷⁰ The peak of negative electoral intolerance occurred in 1925. When it became clear that the Džemijet would achieve a good result, the persecution of Muslims began on election day, which continued after the election. The persecution was so severe that it caused a mass exodus to Turkey, and the Džemijet was practically destroyed after the election. During the political struggle, Aćif Hadžiahmetović Bljuta emerged as a leader of Muslims. He would continue his political activities with his political comrades even after the Džemijet was destroyed, and his support for Serbian candidates

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 117.

⁶⁸ IARNP, ZH, Miodrag Mijo Radović: Hronika Novog Pazara u NOB-u, 49–50.

⁶⁹ *Нови Пазар и околнина* (Београд: Књижевне новине, 1969), 289–290.

⁷⁰ Hivzo Gološ, *Sandžak u političkom i društveno- ekonomskom životu Jugoslavije (1918–1941)* (Prizren: Utilus, 2014), 115.

in the period up to 1941 was often crucial in the election race.⁷¹ The intense political battles between the two groups were largely confined to the southern regions of Novi Pazar, Tutin, and Sjenica. Since 1923 and the split with the Radicals, the influence of the Džemijet was suppressed in Priboj, Prijepolje and Nova Varoša. This enabled the return of the influence of the JMO, at least for a short time, in these areas.⁷²

In a broader political reconfiguration, the radical Bosnian Muslim faction centered around Gajret sought to extend its influence southward. In late 1920, the society was founded in southwestern Serbia, where it also promoted a Serbian national identity among local Slavic Muslims.⁷³ The Džemijet did not look favorably on its establishment, considering it an exponent of the ruling circles from Belgrade. Therefore, the Džemijet sabotaged the work of Gajret in these regions throughout its existence. The society was active until the beginning of World War II, organizing various cultural and educational activities, Eid parties, picnics, outings and other events.⁷⁴

Low interest in joining Gajret was partly rooted in the community's limited educational background. At the time, many Muslims were reluctant to educate their children, fearing that schooling would lead to their "Serbification" (*da se povlaše*).⁷⁵ The Great Madrasah of King Aleksandar in Skopje was of great importance for national-educational activities during this period. The madrasah was founded in 1924 and was specific in many ways. It was a boarding school that provided free accommodation and meals, and it began operating in 1925. Representatives of the Džemijet opposed the work of the

⁷¹ Milutin Živković, „Aćif Hadžiahmetović Bljuta: prilozi za biografiju 1919–1941”, *Istorija 20. veka*, god. 30, br. 3 (2012), 79–83.

⁷² Буле Брашанац, *Општински избори и избори за народне посланике између два рата у милешевском, нововарошком и прибојском срезу* = *The Municipality Elections and the Parliament Elections Between the Two Wars in the Mileseva, Nova Varos and Priboj Area* (Прибој: Дом културе, 2008)

⁷³ Јована Шаљић-Ратковић, „Осман Ђикић и његов Гајрет”, *Глас. Одељење историјских наука*, том. 428, књ. 18 (2018), 497.

⁷⁴ More about Gajret in this area: Надир Дацић, „Гајрет у Прибоју, Пријеполју, Новој Вароши и Сјеници”, *Историјска баштина: јодинак Историјској архиви у Тито-вом Ужицу*, бр. 21 (2012), 73–90; Nadir Dacić, *Gajret u Novom Pazaru* (Beograd: Fakultet islamskih nauka, 2014).

⁷⁵ Бранко Јовановић, *Основна школа „Јованица” Лукаре: 1920–2022* (Нови Пазар: Историјски архив „Рас”, 2023), 365.

Madrasah, like the work of Gajret. They believed that “Bosniaks would Serbify their children,” that “the school was not religious enough,” that the music section would make students “musicians” rather than Islamic priests, etc. Such propaganda bore fruit. Only 13.7% of the total number of students came from the area of southwestern Serbia. The madrasah did not produce Serbs, as the Džemijet representatives believed, but communists. Communists loyal to the Yugoslav, not the Serbian, national idea.⁷⁶

Religious and political divisions over time caused ever greater and more pronounced divisions between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The divisions were expressed both among the youth and the adult population. Religious hatred, whether latent or open, set the “tone for the entire life in these small towns of Sandžak.”⁷⁷ This hatred escalated into a religious war during World War II.

During the Second World War, archival sources from all sides generally referred to Muslims as a religious group. Only in a small number of documents issued by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KJP) were they described as “Muslims” in a national sense.⁷⁸ The influence and activities of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and Albania in southwestern Serbia would trigger the Croatization and Albanization of the local population. The Croatization of Muslims in southwestern Serbia continued for as long as the NDH government remained in power. Attempts to Albanianize local Muslims began in the first days of the occupation. Muslims, especially those in the city, were “ordered to wear qeleshe instead of fez, to change their surnames by removing -ić, to send their children to Albanian-language schools, display Albanian flags on their homes etc.”⁷⁹ Like Croatization, Albanization did not have significant success. As Živković concludes, “the acceptance or

⁷⁶ Мустафа Мемич, „Ученици велике медресе и револуција”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 6 (1982), 75–129.

⁷⁷ Мухамед Абдагић, „Културно-политички рад студената и омладине између два рата, односно у вријеме од 1935. до 1941. године”, *Зборник Сјенице: наука, култура, уметност*, бр. 6–7 (1990–1991), 66.

⁷⁸ Милутин Живковић, *Сјара Рашка под италијанском окупацијом: 1941–1943*, књ. 1 (Београд: Catena mundi, 2020), 14.

⁷⁹ Милутин Живковић, *Између „Велике Албаније” и окупиране Србије: Нови Пазар, Тушин и Ибарски Колашин (1941–1944)* (Лепосавић: Институт за српску културу, 2018), 44, 46, 56.

rejection of Croatian and Albanian identity was a reflection of political pragmatism depending on the current interests of Muslims.”⁸⁰ Islam remained central to their self-identification, so many emerged from the war identifying once again simply as Muslims in the religious sense.

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia emerged victorious from the war. During the conflict it operated under the motto “brotherhood and unity,” which later became the central slogan of socialist Yugoslavia. The motto aimed to create unity among the Yugoslav peoples in the fight against the occupiers and to stop the fratricidal war. In the later period, as the main slogan of the KPJ, it became the most important state institutional framework. Like other communist parties, the KPJ sought to forge a “new” national identity that would integrate and equalize all peoples. This was to be achieved through political, cultural, and economic equality. Political equality was implemented by federalizing the state and curbing the dominance of the “hegemonic nation,” which in Yugoslavia Serbia. Cultural equality sought to establish federal and republican cultural institutions and to promote local cultures within the education system. Finally, economic equality was pursued through the redistribution of resources from more developed to less developed republics.⁸¹

This institutional framework clearly aided the development of national identity among Yugoslav Muslims. During World War II, the Communists paid special attention to the Muslim population in southwestern Serbia. The Muslim population was called upon to join the fight alongside their “Serbian brothers.” In their speeches, communist ideologists frequently used the term “Muslim” for the population, viewing it as “representing the outlines of the future ethnic configuration under the post-war Yugoslav authorities.”⁸² There was no great success in the recruiting the local population until the summer of 1944. With the capitulation of Italy in the area of southwestern Serbia, the KPJ gained importance. The symbol of the party’s stronger presence is the Founding Assembly of ZAVNOS (National Anti-Fascist Council of Sandžak). The Founding Assembly formed a single political and military

⁸⁰ Живковић, „У потрази за идентитетом”, 134.

⁸¹ Veljko Vujačić, *Nationalism, Myth, and the State in Russia and Serbia: Antecedents of the Dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.

⁸² Живковић, *Сџара Раишка*, 149.

region of Sandžak. Its main importance was propaganda. ZAVNOS was supposed to distance the local population from the German "Muslim National Community," the then highest collaborationist body for Stara Raška.⁸³ At the session of ZAVNOS on March 29, 1945, a decision was made to abolish it⁸⁴ and this body could not have a significant role in shaping the future regional or national identity of the population. After the end of the war, the leadership of the KPJ temporarily abandoned the idea of promoting a Muslim nation. The prevailing view was that Muslims were not a nation.⁸⁵

The ambivalent national identity of Muslims in southwestern Serbia during the first two decades of socialist Yugoslavia is reflected in the 1948, 1953, and 1961 censuses. In 1948, respondents could declare themselves as "undecided Muslims." In 1948, respondents could declare themselves "undecided Muslims"; nearly 90% did so in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but only 3,838 in southwestern Serbia, where most identified as Serbian.⁸⁶ In the next census, in 1953, there was the option to declare oneself as "Yugoslav-undetermined." In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 95% of the population identified themselves as such. The situation in southwestern Serbia was different. The choice of the Serbian nation was extremely reduced, but almost 15,000 citizens chose the option "Turk." There were 58,592 "Yugoslav-undetermined."⁸⁷ The 1961 census left the option of declaring themselves as "Muslims in terms of ethnicity." A significant majority of Muslims opted for this option, which represents a tendency towards closer ties to Bosnian Muslims. More than 14,000 citizens chose the option "Turk" as their nationality on this occasion as well.⁸⁸

The predominance of religious over national identification by the mid 1960's is clearly visible during the emigration of the local population to

⁸³ Milutin Živković, „“Lord” of Stara Raška: War Biography of SS-Standartenführer Karl von Kremler (1939–1945)”, *Istorija 20. veka*, god. 42, br. 2 (2024), 320–323.

⁸⁴ Zoran Lakić, *Partizanska autonomija Sandžaka 1943–1945 (ZAVNO Sandžaka - dokumenta)* (Beograd: Stručna knjiga, 1992), 76–77.

⁸⁵ Safet Bandžović, *Ideja i iskustvo: jugoslavenski socijalizam i bošnjačka pozicija* (Sarajevo: S. Bandžović, 2017), 539.

⁸⁶ Saša Mrduljaš, „Izjašnjavanje sandžačkih Bošnjaka o nacionalnoj pripadnosti u popisima stanovništva (1948–2011)”, *Migracijske i etničke teme*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2018): 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 23.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 25.

Turkey, and the lack of definition of the national and the dominance of religious feeling is also expressed in the discussions of the District Committee of the League of Communists of Novi Pazar (in 1952 Communist Party of Yugoslavia changed its name to League of Communists of Yugoslavia – SKJ).⁸⁹ However, during the 1950's due to the secularization of the local population,⁹⁰ the construction of a separate national identity begins. It coincides with the process of recognition of Muslims as a nation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then in Yugoslavia.

As H. Kamberović points out, “this process went through several phases, but we could conclude that the period from 1961 to the 1963 Constitution was a preparatory period for the recognition of Muslims as a nation, that from 1963 to 1966 the thesis of their national identity was scientifically argued in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that from 1966 to 1968 this position was also realized at the Yugoslav political level. Mostly since the beginning of the 1970s, their national identity has been indisputable, although there were challenges in some intellectual and political circles.”⁹¹ In order to further emphasize the difference, which is reduced to the capital and lowercase letter M (“muslim” being a religious and “Muslim” a national category), the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia decided in 1971 that Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandzak who speak the Serbo-Croatian language could be considered Muslims, but not others.⁹²

The attitude of the members of the Communist Party of Serbia toward the question of the nationality of Muslims has been divided ever since the end of the Second World War. At the founding congress of the Commu-

⁸⁹ IARNP, Sreski komitet Saveza komunista Srbije sreza Novi Pazar (235), kutija 1, Zapisnik sa II redovne opštinske konferencije SKS sa područja opštine Novi Pazar od 13. X 1957, kut. 1, 34–35; IARNP, 235, kutija 1, Zapisnik sa I sednice opštinske konferencije SKS NP od 26. I 1968, 20–23; IARNP, 235, kutija 3, Zapisnik sa sastanka OK SKS NP od 11. III 1960, 6–7.

⁹⁰ For more on the secularization in this period, see: Ratko Minić, „Sekularizacija u Deževskom, Sjeničkom i Štavičkom srezu (1944–1955)”, u *Nova istraživanja jugoslovenske prošlosti*.

⁹¹ Husnija Kamberović, „Josip Broz Tito i nacionalni identitet Muslimana u Bosni i Hercegovini – dva viđenja”, u *Tito – viđenja i tumačenja: zbornik radova*, ur. Olga Manojlović Pintar (Beograd: INIS, 2011), 275.

⁹² Dejan Jović, „Identitet Bošnjaka/Muslimana”, *Politička misao: časopis za politologiju*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2013), 137.

nist Party of Serbia in May 1945, Velibor Ljujić stated that “Muslims should remain Muslims” and should not be absorbed into the Serbian nation, while Sreten Vukosavljević warned that it was futile to attempt to nationalize the Muslims. By contrast, in 1953 Moša Pijade advanced the view that the term Muslim had nothing to do with the question of nationality, and that the term itself denoted adherence to the Muslim faith. The key period in the approach to the national question of Muslims in Serbia began after the Brioni Plenum. Following this plenum, the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, and in particular the Commission for Relations among Nations and Nationalities of the Central Committee, raised numerous issues concerning the position of nationalities in Serbia.⁹³

The political leadership of Serbia, headed by Dobrivoje Radosavljević, acted in the spirit of the new political orientation toward the national question. In May 1968, the leadership of the of the Serbian communists convened the 14th session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, at which it intended to “launch a new phase in the policy on the national question.” The League of Communists now decided to proceed from the position “that the Muslims, with their national individuality, their history and their culture, and their wishes and aspirations, are one of the peoples of Yugoslavia and – like all other peoples of Yugoslavia – are inseparably linked to them through a common life, the revolutionary struggle and the building of socialism.” Such a stance represented a clear break with the previous line of the Serbian LC, which had started from the premise “that in Sandžak there lived exclusively Serbs of Muslim religious affiliation.”⁹⁴ At the very session, there was also a certain degree of resistance, coming from two delegates, Jovan Marjanović and Dobrica Ćosić. Marjanović adopted the position of an opponent of further decentralization. In this vein, he declared that the “proclamation of a new Muslim nation in Yugoslavia” was senseless and that it would lead to “an increase in national frictions and animosities.”⁹⁵

After the discussion at the 14th session of the CC of the SK of Serbia, reactions immediately appeared in Priboj, Prijepolje and other places. The in-

⁹³ Ramiz Crnišanić, *Ličnosti i događanja* (Novi Pazar: Sandžački intelektualni krug, 2005), 194.

⁹⁴ Iva Lučić, *Im Namen der Nation: der politische Aufwertungsprozess der Muslime im sozialistischen Jugoslawien (1956–1971)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 243.

⁹⁵ Crnišanić, *Ličnosti i događanja*, 304.

sistence of the CC Commission that, in Serbia, a policy recognizing the national distinctiveness of the Muslims be publicly and officially promoted met with more subtle forms of resistance and opposition. Such positions were mainly initiated “through various scholarly conferences and other institutions and individuals, who at different gatherings raised such questions and described this as stupidity and the invention of a nation, done only in order to spite the Serbs.”⁹⁶

The political elites of Bosnia and Herzegovina⁹⁷ and the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia⁹⁸ (IZJ) were engaged in promoting the new identity. In terms of affirming the national distinctiveness of Muslims in the SR Serbia, Ramiz Crnišanih highlights the works of Husein Hodžić, Mustafa Imamović, Asim Kamešničanin and Bećir Veljović.⁹⁹ In Yugoslavia, a census was organized in 1971, during which 1.729.932 people throughout Yugoslavia, or 8.2 percent of the total population, declared themselves “Muslims”. They were the third largest constituent people in Yugoslavia, and the largest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Three years later, their status as a nation was recognized by the Constitution of Yugoslavia and the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁰⁰ In southwestern Serbia, the new designation was widely accepted: 108,784 citizens declared themselves Muslim. Only about 4,000 identified as Turks, “in keeping with previous tradition.”¹⁰¹

Recognition of nationhood was a key step in shaping the collective ethno-national identity of Slavic Muslims in Yugoslavia. This was effectively realized in the 1981 census, in which the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandžak, the two regions where Slavic Muslims formed an absolute majority, almost unanimously opted for the Muslim designation. The once relatively widespread identification as Turkish in southwestern Serbia had largely lost its significance by the time of the 1981 census.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Ibid, 195–196.

⁹⁷ Husnija Kamberović, „Stav političke elite o nacionalnom identitetu Muslimana u Bosni i Hercegovini sredinom 1960-ih godina”, *Prilozi*, br. 38 (2009), 165–191.

⁹⁸ Драган Новаковић, „Исламска заједница и национално опредељење Муслимана у социјалистичкој Југославији”, *Istorija 20. veka*, год. 26, бр. 2 (2008), 489–504.

⁹⁹ Crnišanih, *Ličnosti i događanja*, 196.

¹⁰⁰ Bougarel, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 83.

¹⁰¹ Mrduljaš, „Izjašnjavanje sandžačkih Bošnjaka o nacionalnoj pripadnosti”, 26–27.

¹⁰² Ibid.

As a result of the recognition of the status of a nation in the 1970's, there was a more open and stronger manifestation of the Muslim national identity. During the 1970's, the form of that identity was essentially secular, and due to the strength of the party, the influence of religion was not expressed. However, due to the general crisis in Yugoslav society during the 1980's, party discipline weakened, which led to the gradual desecularization of society. Religion, although marginalized by Muslim intellectuals and the elite during the initial phase of the nation's constitution, slowly began to gain importance in shaping identity orientations. The practice of Islam and its principles, at least declaratively, the determination of parents to have their children attend religious classes, and the construction of religious buildings were becoming increasingly common in the area of southwestern Serbia.¹⁰³

The crisis of the 1980's also led to the manifestation of aggressive nationalism and the emergence of interethnic incidents. The first outlines of such nationalism among Muslims appeared after the Albanian protests in Kosovo in 1981.¹⁰⁴ At the 14th session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, Serbian and Albanian nationalism were condemned, but Muslim nationalism was also pointed out, which is "particularly felt in areas with a predominantly Muslim population - Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ See: Б. Шкријељ, „ОК ССРН о раду верских заједница”, *Браћство*, 26. 10. 1984; М.Т и Р. Е., „Црква јача утицај на младе”, *Борба*, 30. 8. 1984; Slavka Bakračević, „Slučaj divlje džamije”, *Politikin Svet*, 12. do 25. 7. 1989.

¹⁰⁴ З. М., „Шта дестабилизује безбедност”, *Браћство*, 5. 6. 1981; З. М., „Енергично супротстављање”, *Браћство*, 12. 6. 1981.

¹⁰⁵ In the mid-1980's, a session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia was organized. The economic crisis began to largely determine internal political relations. The problem of the emigration of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija also occupied an important place in the political space. The position was expressed at the session that nationalists and enemies of the party and state were looking for their chance in these economically difficult times. It was emphasized that counter-revolutionary measures had not yet been curtailed in Kosovo and that, therefore, the emigration of Serbs and Montenegrins from these areas represented the most serious political and security problem. The problem of Muslim nationalism was closely related to the problem of migration; Д. Дражић и В. Крсмановић, „Седница ЦК Савеза комуниста Србије”, *Борба*, 30. 3. 1984, 3; A significant influence on this position was the assessment of the Commission of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia for the Development of Interethnic Relations, which established the existence of "nationally centrist migrations" within the SR of Serbia and Yugoslavia. The presence of the resettlement of certain peoples

The aforementioned region soon received significant attention. Thus, during 1984, newspaper articles were written at the republican level on the problem of migration and interethnic relations from these areas, and in August of that year, Žika Radojlović, president of the republican conference of the Serbian Socialist Alliance of Working People of Serbia (SSRNS), and Spasoje Todorović, commander of the Republic Territorial Defense Headquarters, visited Novi Pazar. During the discussion on interethnic relations, significant attention was paid to the problem of migration. On that occasion, it was emphasized that “both nationalists are trying to impose this problem as a burning issue”.¹⁰⁶ In addition, the manifestation of Muslim nationalism during the 1980’s was overshadowed by others, primarily Serbian. Serbian nationalism, in which Islam occupies a significant “other,” grew rapidly after Slobodan Milošević came to power. By evoking some past times, both among Serbs and Muslims, “destructive ways of connecting”¹⁰⁷ prevailed in the early 1990s.

Adoption of the name “Bosniak” in self-determination

The socio-political crisis of the 1980s developed into open interethnic conflicts in the early 1990s, which led to the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The process of disintegration symbolically began with the collapse of the unity of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, which paved the way for a multi-party system. The public space was gradually taken over by parties and organizations based on ethnic, religious and national principles. One such party was the Party of Democratic Action

and nationalities within “national territories” was observed. Among other things, it was stated that Muslims are concentrated in certain parts of Sandzak; P. Kљајић, „Економска изворишта национализма”, *Политика*, 28. 3. 1984, 6.

¹⁰⁶ Ратко Минић, „Питање миграција у Новом Пазару, Тутину и Сјеници осамдесетих година XX века”, *Историја, култура, идентитет: шемајски зборник међународног значаја*. Св. 5, *Социологија и право*, ур. Владимир Боранијашевић, Оливера Марковић Савић, Зоран Недељковић (Косовска Митровица: Филозофски факултет Универзитета у Приштини, 2025), 243–244.

¹⁰⁷ “By evoking one of the lowest aspects of their historical connection and ignoring the significance of their other interactions and integrations (most notably the 45 years of experience since World War II), each group perpetuates not only disparaging rhetoric but also destructive modes of connection”; Milica Bakić-Hayden, „Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia”, *Slavic Review*, vol. 54, no. 4 (1995), 930.

(SDA). The activities of the SDA and its main political actors during the 1990s would be significant for the shaping of the contemporary ethno-national identity of Muslims in southwestern Serbia.

The Party of Democratic Action was formed on 26 May 1990 in Sarajevo. The initiative to form the party came from the people with pan-Islamist background. Among the forty founders of the party were former members of the “Young Muslims” organization, convicts from the 1983 trial, as well as several leaders of the Islamic Community. At the founding assembly, the pan-Islamist movement prevailed, gaining a majority in the party’s Executive Board, and Alija Izetbegović was elected president of the party. Bougarel cites the political capitalization of the 1983 convicts, who were presented as “martyrs” or “victims of the communist regime,” and the reluctance of non-religious Muslim intellectuals to join the political race as the main reasons for the dominance of the pan-Islamist movement. At the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the only significant intellectual figure to join the work of the SDA was Muhamed Filipović. In addition to the pan-Islamist current, which dominated the top, the party was joined by Adil Zulfikarpašić, Fikret Abdić, and numerous Muslim nationalist protagonists during the communist era.¹⁰⁸ Such a composition gave a different ideological tone. This led to it not becoming a pan-Islamist party, although according to its founding act it claimed to be,¹⁰⁹ but a national party of Muslims. A review of the party’s program makes it difficult to identify any pan-Islamist tendencies. The party advocated political pluralism, the abolition of censorship, protection of property, the affirmation of basic human rights and freedoms, a more substantive democracy, free enterprise, a market economy, the unrestricted activity of religious communities, and improved social welfare for Yugoslav citizens etc.¹¹⁰

In southwestern Serbia, the party first publicly presented itself on July 8, 1990, by organizing a meeting of the expanded board in Novi Pazar.¹¹¹ The

¹⁰⁸ Bougarel, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 104.

¹⁰⁹ According to Article 1 of the program declaration, the SDA is defined as “a political alliance of citizens of Yugoslavia who belong to the Muslim cultural and historical circle, as well as other citizens of Yugoslavia who accept the program and goals of the party”; „Programska deklaracija SDA“, SDA, datum pristupa 19 novembar 2025, SDA | Zvanična stranica Stranke Demokratske Akcije

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ С. П., „Странка демократске акције и у Новом Пазару“, *Братство*, 13. 7. 1990, 2.

founding assembly of the SDA Sandžak was held on July 29, 1990. According to the testimony of Adil Zulfikarpašić and Muhamed Filipović, preparations for organizing the assembly were undertaken by “a clerical group of the SDA” in cooperation with Ugljanin and “carefully selected people” who arrived in the city before the most important figures of the party.¹¹² Sulejman Ugljanin, a member of the SDA Executive Board in Sarajevo, was elected president. During this time, Ugljanin was associated with a right-wing Islamist faction within the SDA, which included Hasan Čengić and Omer Behman, and whose vision aligned with his regarding the Sandžak issue.¹¹³ With his election, the dominant place in the ideology of the SDA Sandžak went to a right-wing current with pronounced pan-Islamist tendencies.

The “Sandžak question” came to the fore as early as 1991. That year, the process of the breakup of Yugoslavia began. The leaders of the SDA Sandžak wanted to link the fate of local Muslims to the fate of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. To achieve this, it was necessary to build institutions and a national consciousness that would create a clear border between “Sandžak” and the Republic of Serbia and strengthen ties with Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims. In May, under the auspices of the SDA Sandžak, the Muslim National Council of Sandžak (MNVS) was established as the supreme national institution of Sandžak Muslims.¹¹⁴ During this period, the differentiation towards Serbia and Serbs deepened. The party initiated discussions on many taboo topics that could harm interethnic relations, and at public gatherings often openly advocated the rehabilitation of convicted World War II collaborators.¹¹⁵ Thus, Aćif Hadžiahmetović Bljuta was officially rehabilitated by the SDA and the MNVS on May 11, 1991.¹¹⁶ During the celebration of the anniversary of the Founding Assembly of the SDA, a new anthem of the Muslim

¹¹² Milovan Đilas, Nadežda Gaće, *Bošnjak Adil Zulfikarpašić* (Zürich : Bošnjački institut, 1996), 143; Muhamed Filipović, *Jedno dugo, dugo putovanje uz Lim i oko Peštera* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 2001), 61.

¹¹³ James Lyon, „Serbia’s Sandžak Under Milošević: Identity, Nationalism and Survival”, *Human Rights Review*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2008), 71–92; Kenneth Morrison, *The Sandžak: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 135.

¹¹⁴ И. Слезовић, „СДА оформила национално веће”, *Брайцтво*, 24. 5. 1991.

¹¹⁵ Morrison, *The Sandžak*, 137.

¹¹⁶ Harun Crnovršanin, Nuro Sadiković, *Sandžak – porobljena zemlja: Bosna, Sandžak i Kosovo kroz historiju* (Nemačka: Sandžačka riječ, 2007), 408.

people was announced, a nominal distinction between the Bosnian and Serbo-Croatian was introduced, and the possibility of creating two new republics, Sandžak and Kosovo, in the new Yugoslavia was raised.¹¹⁷

At the beginning of October, an initiative on the Law on Cultural Autonomy of Muslims in the Republic of Serbia was submitted to the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia,¹¹⁸ but it was soon abandoned, given that during the Eighth Session of the Assembly of the SR BiH,¹¹⁹ a decision was made to organize a referendum on the autonomy of Sandžak. The referendum was held from 25 to 27 October. The organization, election commissions, and vote counting were carried out by SDA activists and supporters. The ballot paper asked: "Are you in favor of full political and territorial autonomy for Sandžak with the right to join one of the sovereign republics?"¹²⁰ As Rasim Ljajić said in a later interview, the main reason for organizing the referendum was "to secure the best possible position in the event of negotiations to resolve the Yugoslav crisis."¹²¹ For the SDA elite of Sandžak, Bosnia and Herzegovina was considered a "motherland" with which they had strong cultural and historical ties and therefore wanted to continue their common life. Therefore, they hoped to carry out a "reunification with Bosnia" through a referendum, given that Sandžak had been part of the Bosnian Pashalik during the Ottoman period. According to the results, 183,301 out of 264,156 registered voters chose the "yes" option. However, the referendum decisions remained a dead letter. Its legality was contested by the republican institutions, and due to the entire electoral process, its legitimacy is questionable. After the referendum, at the end of November 1991, a "shadow government" was formed that was almost

¹¹⁷ И. Слезовић, „СДА прославила годишњицу оснивања”, *Брайстиво*, 2. 8. 1991, 2.

¹¹⁸ Rizah Gruda, *Sandžak u sjenci topova* (Novi Pazar: DAMAD, 2000), 13–16.

¹¹⁹ The session began on October 10 and lasted, with interruptions, until October 15. The session adopted the SDA Memorandum on the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. SDS and SPO deputies resolutely rejected the SDA Memorandum, warning that the path to sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina leads to secession from Yugoslavia, and thus to civil war; Јован Алексић, „Пут у рат: пресек политичке ситуације у Босни и Херцеговини између 1990. и пролећа 1992. године”, *Зборник радова Филозофској факултету* = *Recueil de travaux de la Faculté de philosophie* = *Buletin i punimeve të Fakultetit filozofik*, год. 48, бр. 2 (2018), 139.

¹²⁰ Anonim, „Гласачки листић”, *Борба*, 25. 10. 1991.

¹²¹ Vera Didanović, „Kako sam od ministarstva napravio brend”, *Vreme*, Accessed 19 November 2025.

never announced until the London Conference in August 1992.¹²² In December, the book *Sanjak and Sanjak Muslims* was published, which was intended to serve as a “historical justification for autonomy” towards the international community.¹²³

A significant internationalization of the “Sandžak issue” occurred after the start of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During this period, representatives of the SDA Sandžak and the MNVS visited various international addresses - London, The Hague, Geneva, Brussels, the USA, Turkey, Albania, etc.¹²⁴ A key statement is the participation of Ugljanin, Ljajić and several other people as a “Sandžak delegation” at the London Conference on the former Yugoslavia.¹²⁵ Their presence at such an important conference led to the announcement of the “coat of arms of Sandžak,” the first “in the historical self-identification of the Sandžak people,” as emphasized in the *Sandžak: nezavisna mjesečna revija*.¹²⁶ The current coat of arms as the national symbol of the Bosniaks of southwestern Serbia represents a slight change from the original one.¹²⁷ Apart from declarative statements, the international engagement of local representatives has not led to real support. The greatest achievement of internationalization is the inclusion of this area in the first OSCE mission and the operation of the aforementioned mission in this area.¹²⁸

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina had a twofold impact on the ethno-national consciousness of the local population. On the one hand, the difficult fate of Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims created a deeper connection on an emotional level. In addition to words of support, concrete actions

¹²² Milan Andrejevich, „The Sandžak: A Perspective of Serb-Muslims Relations”, in *Muslim Identity and the Balkan state*, eds. Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki (London: Biddles Ltd, 1997), 175, 177.

¹²³ Morrison, *The Sandžak*, 142–143.

¹²⁴ Redakcija, „Delegacija Muslimanskog nacionalnog vijeća Sandžaka na međunarodnoj sceni”, *Sandžak*, jun-jul 1992; Š. Krcić i I. Dupljak, „Čovjek ne smije ostati po strani”, *Sandžak*, oktobar 1992.

¹²⁵ Morrison, *The Sandžak*, 143.

¹²⁶ Anonim, „Grb Sandžaka”, *Sandžak*, avgust–septembar 1992.

¹²⁷ *Obiležja*, BNV, Accessed 19 November 2025, <https://www.bnv.org.rs/obilezja.php>; Based on the above, it can be concluded that the main difference lies in the color of the shield, while the symbols of the coat of arms have essentially remained the same.

¹²⁸ *Survey of OSCE Field Operations* (Vienna: The Secretariat Conflict Prevention Centre, 2021), 47–48.

were also carried out as an expression of connection. Muslims from these areas, mostly people who had settled in Bosnia and Herzegovina earlier participated in the war on the side of Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims.¹²⁹ Many of them occupied prominent positions in the Bosnian political and military structure. There was even talk of a “Sandžak Lobby” within the newly formed Bosnian state. However, there are conflicting opinions about whether such a group existed, and if so, how it was organized and how much influence it had.¹³⁰ Assistance was also provided in other ways. During the war, the humanitarian organization “Merhamet Sandžak” “received, cared for and provided assistance to refugees from war-torn areas.”¹³¹ The expressed unity was confirmed by the acceptance of the decision of the First Bosniak Assembly from September 1993, which changed the national name Muslim to Bosniak.¹³² The Muslim National Council of Sandžak changed its name to the Bosniak National Council of Sandžak on May 10, 1998,¹³³ and the majority of the population declared themselves Bosniaks in the 2002 census.

On the other hand, due to the war, every form of communication between ordinary people was reduced to the lowest possible level. The Yugo-

¹²⁹ As Kahrović emphasizes, this migration of Sandžak Bosniaks, which reached its full expansion during the late socialist period, confined their settlement in Sarajevo predominantly to the peripheral areas of the city, which in turn resulted in their “defensive self-organization, since the peripheral areas were the most exposed to provocations, threats, and the actions of the aggressor, and it was there that, from the very first days of the aggressor’s armed assault, the first line of defence – i.e. the lines of contact with the enemy – was established.” In addition to the Sandzak Sarajevans and volunteers from Sandzak there were also volunteers from Turkey and others western European nation of Sandžak origin that participated in war; Murat Kahrović, *Bošnjaci Sandžaka u odbrani Bosne: 1992.–1995.*, (Sarajevo: Udruženje građana porijeklom iz Sandžaka u FBiH, 2006), 61; See also: Kahrović, *Kako smo branili Sarajevo: Prva sandžačka brigada* (Sarajevo: Udruženje građana Bošnjaka porijeklom iz Sandžaka, 2001).

¹³⁰ Morrison, *The Sandžak*, 155; Steven Burg and Paul Shoup, *The War in Bosnia–Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 194; Bougarel, Xavier, „Bosnia and Hercegovina – State and Communitarianism”, in *Yugoslavia and After: A Study in Fragmentation, Despair and Rebirth*, eds. David Dyker and Ivan Vejvoda (London: Routledge, 1996), 105.

¹³¹ „O nama“, Merhamet, Accessed 19 November 2025, O Nama, Merhamet-Sandzak | Novi Pazar | Srbija.

¹³² Mirsad Kriještorac, *First Nationalism Then identity*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 42.

¹³³ Morrison, *The Sandžak*, 153.

slav Army, accompanied by Serbian and Montenegrin paramilitary and police forces, played a major role in all of this. Namely, during 1992 and 1993, a campaign to secure the border on the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) towards Bosnia and Herzegovina began. The goal was clear: to prevent potential aid to Bosnian Bosniaks. The cities of Priboj (Serbia) and Pljevlja (Montenegro) were most severely affected by the campaign. During the border security operations, three cases attracted significant public attention.¹³⁴ The cases of kidnapping and murder of Bosniaks in the villages of Mioče, Štrpci and the Bukovica region¹³⁵ caused significant concern among Sandžak Bosniaks at the time, and the prolonged intractability of the cases, coupled with the light sentences handed to the perpetrators, deepened distrust and widened the gap between Bosniaks and the state. Due to poor relations with the republican authorities, the impossibility of normal communication with Bosnia and Herzegovina and the bias towards the newly created FRY, in which there was socio-political disengagement between locals and Belgrade, Bosniaks turned to the significant diaspora in Turkey. As Sandra King-Savić notes, an awareness of transnational belonging was created through informal trade. The awareness that the local population was part of the former Ottoman Empire, in which they had a privileged position, and that all subsequent states marginalized the position of Bosniaks and Muslims. Local historical monuments and the state's negligence towards them during this period sup-

¹³⁴ Lyon, „Serbia's Sandžak Under Milošević”, 82–83.

¹³⁵ In the village of Mioče, on 22nd October 1992, a bus travelling from Rudo to Priboj was stopped. Sixteen Bosniak civilians from Sjeverin (15 men and one woman, all Yugoslav/Serbian citizens) were taken off the bus, transported to a hotel near Višegrad, tortured and killed, and their bodies were thrown into the Drina. Four members of the unit were convicted in a Belgrade war-crimes trial, but the victims' remains have never been found and the families still have no full redress. This massacre is usually referred to as the “Sjeverin massacre.” In Štrpci, on 27th February 1993, a train on the Belgrade–Bar line was stopped by Serbian paramilitaries. They abducted 20 passengers, took them to the Višegrad area and killed them. Several perpetrators have been convicted in Bosnia and Serbia, but proceedings have been slow and incomplete even into the 2020s. Both crimes were carried out by the paramilitary unit commanded by Milan Lukić. Bukovica was a rural region in northern Montenegro, near Pljevlja along the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the war, several people were killed, and dozens were tortured and expelled; See: Semiha Kačar, *Hronologija zla i neizvjesnosti: pregled kršenja prava i sloboda u Sandžaku u SR Jugoslaviji (Srbiji i Crnoj Gori): 1991–2000* (Novi Pazar: Sandžački odbor za zaštitu ljudskih prava i sloboda, 2020).

ported the aforementioned thesis in the eyes of the locals.¹³⁶ This also led to the strengthening of regional identity.

Other parties also helped to strengthen regional identity. During the 1990's, the influence of other parties such as the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the Muslim-Bosniak Organization (MBO), the Alliance of Reform Forces of Yugoslavia (SRSJ), the Yugoslav Left (JUL), and the Party of Democratic Parties (SDP) remained without visible support among the local Bosniak population.¹³⁷ However, their actions represented an alternative to the SDA Sandžak. An alternative both in political terms and in terms of shaping ethno-national consciousness. The aforementioned parties tied the fate of local Muslims to Belgrade. In return, they demanded guarantees for preserving their cultural traditions and an identity distinct from the Serbian one. In addition, the dominant view among most of its leaders was that Muslims were an integral part of the Serbian state and its political and historical development with the specifics of their own identity, and that the connection with Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina was primarily based on religious grounds.

The only thing that was not in dispute was the religious origin of Bosniaks/Muslims. In this regard, as the central religious institution of Muslims, the Islamic Community also played a significant role in this period. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, played a key role in the re-Islamization of national identity and the consolidation of the name Bosniak.¹³⁸ Something similar happened in Sandžak, where the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Sandžak was active. Local imams were important for promoting the new identity. Along with the SDA, the main task of the Islamic Community was to maintain the "orientation of Bosniaks in Sandžak towards

¹³⁶ Sandra King-Savic, *Forging Transnational Belonging through Informal Trade: Thriving Markets in Times of Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2021), 65–115.

¹³⁷ See: Ратко Минић, „Избори на подручју општине Нови Пазар почетком деведесетих година XX века”, *Зборник радова Филозофској факултету* = *Recueil de travaux de la Faculté de philosophie = Buletin i punimeve të Fakultetit filozofik*, год. 53, бр. 4 (2023), 255–276.

¹³⁸ See: Bougarel, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 146–151; Edin Radušić, „Stav Islamske zajednice prema raspadu Jugoslavije”, *Prilozi*, br. 36 (2007), 200–201; Jahja Muhasilović, *Turkey's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandžak (2002–2017)* (Istanbul: Union of Turkish World Municipalities (TDBB), 2020), 136.

Sarajevo.” To achieve this goal, the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the leader of the SDA, Ugljanin, elected the energetic and young imam Muamer Zukorlić as the mufti of the Meshihat in Sandžak. Zukorlić expressed unquestionable loyalty to Sarajevo from the very beginning, which corresponded to the national paradigm of the SDA and the Bosnian riyaset, in whose eyes “Sandžak is part of the Bosniak national hinterland.”¹³⁹

On the opposite side of the views and actions of the SDA and the Islamic Community of Sandžak Meshihat regarding the national affirmation of Muslims in southwestern Serbia stood the state of Serbia. In response to the creation of the Islamic Community Meshihat in Sandžak, in 1994 in Niš, by decision of the Belgrade Mufti, Hamdija Jusufspahić, a new Islamic Community was created. Jusufspahić refused to recognize the institutional superiority of the Bosnian Riyaset over his Meshihat. For many local believers, the Islamic Community Meshihat in Serbia was seen as relatively close to the Milošević regime and passive regarding the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such perceptions did little to enhance its appeal in southwestern Serbia, and its influence there remained modest until 2007.¹⁴⁰ In addition, the official position of the Serbian state since 1991, i.e. since the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, has been to discredit the claims of Muslims that they are a separate national group. The state and the Serbian national intelligentsia considered that the Muslims of Serbia were primarily Serbs, who had converted to Islam in the past.¹⁴¹

The October 5th changes were followed by a change in the state’s attitude towards national minorities. In 2002, the federal state adopted the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities.¹⁴² As a

¹³⁹ Muhasilović, *Turkey’s Soft Power*, 137, 140.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 140.

¹⁴¹ Мирольуб Јефтић, „Муслиманске мањине на Балкану”, у *Положај мањина у Савезној Републици Југославији: зборник радова са научној скупи одржаног 11, 12. и 13. јануара 1995*, ур. Милош Мацура и Војислав Станојчић (Београд: САНУ, 1996); Мирко Барјактаревић, „О народносном и националном одређивању”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 19 (1995), 205–217; Богумил Храбак, „Муслимани или Бошњаци у Старој Рашкој (Новопазарском санџаку)”, *Новопазарски зборник*, књ. 21 (1997), 265–273.

¹⁴² Tamas Korhecz, „Evolving the Legal Framework of Non-Territorial Autonomy in Serbia. Interaction between the Legislator and the Constitutional Court – Steps Forwards and Steps Backwards”, in *Non-Territorial Autonomy as an Instrument for Effective Participation of Minorities*, eds. Balázs Vizi, Balázs Dobos, Natalija Shikova (Budapest: Centre for Social Sciences, 2021), 183–197.

reaction to the law, in 2003, instead of the Bosniak National Council of Sandžak, the Bosniak National Council was formed as the supreme institution of Bosniaks in Serbia.¹⁴³ Serbia accepted the national determination of the local population. A change also occurred among Bosniak leaders somewhat earlier. Namely, after the Referendum on the autonomy of Sandžak and the Memorandum on the special status of Sandžak,¹⁴⁴ documents that did not fundamentally recognize state borders, on July 19, 1999, the BNVS adopted the Declaration on the Bosniak Right to Political and National Equality, which emphasized that any further “disintegration of Yugoslavia is unacceptable,” but the issue of autonomy remained the main goal of the BNVS. In the declaration, the BNVS also demanded the right for Bosniaks to maintain special ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina, because they belong to the same nation.¹⁴⁵

With the formation of the BNV in 2003, Bosniaks definitively returned to the institutions of Serbia. This began an institutional struggle for national rights that resulted in a stronger self-identification. In the period from 2003 to 2009, the BNV made its most significant decisions: “on national symbols (coat of arms and flag), national holidays, national awards and recognitions, and national events of Sandzak Bosniaks.”¹⁴⁶ On February 21, 2013, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia approved the introduction of preparatory classes, and as of September 2, 2013, it introduced regular classes in the Bosnian language.¹⁴⁷ The efforts of the BNV strengthened the aspiration for a Bosniak consensus, and Bosniakism established itself as the basic cultural basis and dominant spiritual matrix of the local population.¹⁴⁸ Of all Bosniaks in Serbia, 98% live in southwestern Serbia. The campaign to declare oneself Bosniak instead of Muslim in the rest of Serbia has had significantly less success.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ „O nama“, BNV, Accessed 19 November 2025.

See: *Sandžak na putu autonomije* (Sarajevo: Vijeće Kongresa bosanskomuslimanskih intelektualaca, 1995), 8.

¹⁴⁵ Goran Bašić, *Položaj Bošnjaka u Sandžaku* (Beograd: Centar za antiratnu akciju, 2002), 173–177.

¹⁴⁶ „O nama“, BNV, Accessed 19 November 2025.

¹⁴⁷ Redžep Škrijelj, „Problem kulturnog identiteta sandžačkih Bošnjaka (1913–2013)“, *Godišnjak Bošnjačke zajednice kulture Preporod*, br. 1 (2013), 283.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 279.

¹⁴⁹ Ličina, Šaćirović, *Novi Pazar*, 170.

Still, that process was not without resistance from the Serbian state and its actors. After the BNV adopted the flag, it was raised at the Novi Pazar Fortress on May 14, 2004. The event was interpreted as a provocation by the Serbian public and the media. There was also a problem with studying and teaching in the Bosnian language and its name. Under the Federal Act on the Rights of Members of National Minorities, minorities were given the right to study and learn in their own language and about their culture, at least once a week, if a certain number of people in a certain area declare themselves to be members of the same minority national group. Although Bosniaks met this condition at the very beginning it was not implemented, partly due to the actions of state actors, and partly due to the passivity of the BNV. Official Serbian institutions initially denied the term "Bosniak language". Minister of Education Jovana Čolić refused to approve the introduction of the Bosniak language in Sandžak schools, but her successor, Slobodan Vuksanović, did so following a recommendation from the National Council, the state body representing all national minorities. The Serbian Radical Party held a rally in opposition to the decision while the same decision was being discussed in the parliamentary education committee. The first classes in the Bosniak language were held at the primary school "Ibrahim Bakic," in the village of Leskova near Tutin, on 22 October 2004.¹⁵⁰

Later, schools implemented the Bosnian language instead of Bosniak, which sparked further controversy. Resistance to the name came especially from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU). In 2015, the Committee for Standardization of the Serbian Language at SANU concluded about the non-existence of the Bosnian language. "The name Bosniak language corresponds to the name Bosniak people, while the Bosnian language would correspond to the term Bosnian people, and such a people does not exist. Therefore, in the Serbian language, the only possible way to call the language of the Bosniaks, which is a variant of the Serbian language, is the 'Bosniak language'," the Committee pointed out.¹⁵¹ In 2019, the same Board wrote to the National Higher Education Council, opposing a Bosnian language study program in Novi Pazar, again claiming that there is no separate Bosnian language that is lin-

¹⁵⁰ Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, „Sandzak: Still a Vulnerable Region,” in *Annual Report 2004* (Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2004), accessed on 19 November 2025, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/f/15016.pdf>.

¹⁵¹ „Odbor SANU: Bosanski jezik ne postoji“, Radio slobodna Evropa, Accessed 19 November 2025. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/27200951.html>.

guistically different from Serbian, and that accrediting such a program would damage Serbian language and culture.¹⁵² Nowadays there isn't a legal ban on Bosnian language, but there are still ongoing implementation deficits that Bosniak institutions describe as a form of practical discrimination.¹⁵³

The process of identifying Bosniaks in the first two decades of the 21st century was far from complete. A major problem was that the cultural heritage of the local population remained largely unexplored, with minimal institutional effort devoted to collecting surviving material, let alone its scientific study.¹⁵⁴ The process of desecularization has led to the emergence of extreme forms of Islam, such as Wahhabism, which largely disregard national identification.¹⁵⁵ After the declaration of independence of Montenegro, the issue of territorial autonomy of Sandžak was largely pushed aside. For a time, the idea of Sandžak as a multiethnic European region gained popularity.

Today, Bosniaks are integrated into the state institutions of the Republic of Serbia. Since the October 5th changes, they have had ministers and state secretaries in almost all governments. Interethnic relations have improved greatly. The state investments in infrastructure projects in this region are becoming more frequent. The private sector is also receiving more financial assistance. Bosniaks express their identity clearly and without problems, and there is less and less hostility towards the state of Serbia. They celebrate their holidays and cultural events freely, have their own media, educate their children in the Bosnian language, and observe sunnahs, weddings, and other religious and traditional celebrations. A certain number of residents emphasize their civic and European identity, which creates an even stronger connection with the state of Serbia. However, as noted above, some implementation gaps persist, which Bosniak institutions describe as a form of practical discrimination.

¹⁵² „Odbor za standardizaciju: Ne postoji poseban jezik Bošnjaka“, RTS, Accessed 19 November 2025, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/3594587/odbor-za-standardizaciju-ne-postoji-poseban-jezik-bosnjaka.html>.

¹⁵³ Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, *Fifth Opinion on Serbia*, ACFC/OP/V(2024)5 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2025), accessed on 19 November 2025, <https://rm.coe.int/5th-op-serbia-en-2/1680b65b27>, 31.

¹⁵⁴ Jahja Ferhatović, „Kulturna baština i nacionalni identitet (slučaj sandžačkih Bošnjaka)“, u *Istraživanja Mostar* 2008, https://www.academia.edu/7276729/Kulturna_ba%C5%A1tina_i_nacionalni_identitet_sl%C4%8Daj_sand%C5%BEa%C4%8Dkih_Bo%C5%A1njaka_, 239.

¹⁵⁵ Morrison, *The Sandžak*, 185–187.

Conclusion

Alongside religious differentiation in southwestern Serbia, ethnic differentiation also emerged. As Mušović points out, Muslims built their awareness of their ethnic origin on a common religious origin, the Serbian language as a means of mutual understanding, certain elements of South Slavic material culture, and oral folk art that was nurtured in the South Slavic ethnic area.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslims of southwestern Serbia found themselves under the rule of Christian Serbia, and then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia). This, unlike the Ottoman Empire, was a modern state by the standards of the time. The institutional framework of the Kingdom enabled the preservation, further strengthening and development of the specific identity of local Muslims. An identity that, according to their understanding, differed from the Serbian one. The need to build their own identity appeared at the very beginning. In this sense, awareness was built about the need to preserve Islam and attachment to these areas. Fear of Serbs was emphasized. "Serbs as other" took a central place in the formation of a new identity. The development of such awareness was facilitated by religious division, ruthless political struggle, economic underdevelopment and socio-cultural backwardness of the region. The acceptance of Serbian identity, which the Serbian elite and Serbian ethnology aspired to, was becoming less and less realistic. Certainly, the awareness of identity during this period did not rise above the religious one.

This is confirmed by the archival documents of all actors during the Second World War. Muslims were primarily designated as a religious group, and only in a few documents of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia were they presented as "Muslims" in the national sense. The emergence of Croatism and Albanianism was an expression of pragmatism depending on the current interests of individuals. Therefore, Islam was still a key factor in their self-determination, and therefore a huge part of them would emerge from the Second World War simply as Muslims again.

The institutional framework of socialist Yugoslavia enabled the maturation of their national identity. The promotion of "brotherhood and unity" also aimed to promote all cultures, including the Muslim one. Such an institutional framework enabled the secularized Muslim population, which had

been growing since the 1950s, to grow into a new national group. Both external and internal circumstances played a significant role in the promotion of the new identity. The acceptance of the new identity among the Muslims of southwestern Serbia was fully achieved by the 1981 census. The fluidity in national determination that had existed until then, primarily expressed through declarations of Turkish nationality, was overcome.

During the 1980's, a more open and stronger expression of Muslim national identity emerged. The crisis of the 1980s also led to the manifestation of aggressive forms of nationalism. The two national groups became increasingly distant.'

Under the influence of political, social and war circumstances, the identity of Muslims in southwestern Serbia underwent a profound transformation in the early 1990s. National consciousness was built on the premise of denying their Serbian origin, emphasizing and exaggerating their disenfranchisement, both from the state and the communist party, and suffering in previous wars. The Party of Democratic Action played a central role in the transformation of identity. The issue of the autonomy of the "Sandžak" as part of the SDA program platform became an extremely important political issue. And not only did it become an important political issue, but it also became the basis around which the contemporary ethno-national consciousness of Muslims is being built. In order to promote the "Sandžak issue," the Muslim National Council of the Sandžak was established, a referendum on the autonomy of the Sandžak was organized, and attempts were made to internationalize the "Sandžak issue." All these efforts strengthened the sense of unity.

With the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fate of Muslims in southwestern Serbia was tied to the fate of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to emotional support, support was also expressed through concrete actions, such as active participation in the war and providing assistance to refugees. The expressed unity was confirmed by the acceptance of the decision of the First Bosniak Assembly to change the national name to Bosniak. In addition to the Party of Democratic Action, the Islamic Community in Serbia took an active part in promoting the new identity. By the 2002 census, the national name Bosniak was almost completely accepted.

The October 5th changes reduced tensions between the state and Bosniaks. Bosniaks gradually integrated into the state institutions of the Repu-

blic of Serbia, which enabled them to have an even more pronounced self-identification. Today, Bosniaks express their identity emphatically and without problems, and the hostile attitude towards the state of Serbia is becoming less and less present.

SUMMARY

The paper presents and analyzes the process of development and formation of the ethno-national consciousness of the Muslims of southwestern Serbia through a *longue durée*. Islam in the Balkans represents the most significant imperial legacy of the Ottoman Empire. The emergence of Islam in southwestern Serbia started the process of ethnic differentiation. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslims of southwestern Serbia found themselves under the rule of Christian Serbia, and then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia). The institutional framework of the kingdom enabled the preservation, further strengthening, and development of the specific identity of local Muslims. In this sense, awareness was built of the need to preserve Islam, attachment to these areas, and “Serbs as Other” in their of identity. This created the initial outlines of a collective identity that, due to a common destiny and historical experience, was strengthened during World War II. The institutional framework of socialist Yugoslavia enabled the further maturation of identity. Secularization, as a consequence of Marxist ideology, played a significant role in the identity growing from a religious to a national group. The fluidity present in national identity until the early 1980s was overcome. The key transformation in ethno-national identity occurred in the 1990s. National consciousness was built on the premise of denying one’s Serbian origin, emphasizing and exaggerating one’s disenfranchisement, both from the state and the communist party, and suffering in previous wars. The connection with Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims was expressed in the change of the national name to Bosniak. By the 2002 census, the national name Bosniak was almost completely accepted. Today, Bosniaks are integrated into the state institutions of the Republic of Serbia. They express their identity freely, emphasized, and without problems.

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Резиме

Ратко Минић

**ФОРМИРАЊЕ ЕТНОНАЦИОНАЛНЕ СВЕСТИ МУСЛИМАНА
ЈУГОЗАПАДНЕ СРБИЈЕ**

АПСТРАКТ: Ислам на Балкану представља најважније империјално наслеђе Османског царства. Код муслимана, за разлику од хришћана, приметно је кашњење у изградњи националног идентитета. Први значајнији облици формирања заједничке етничке свести и национализације уследили су у контакту са администрацијом хришћанских земаља. Поменути логику следила је и мала муслиманска заједница из југозападне Србије. У самом почетку, тај идентитет је карактерисало практиковање религије и верских принципа ислама, као и заштита његовог наслеђа, да би у каснијем временском периоду, услед секуларизације, тај идентитет попримио карактер истицања културног наслеђа, обичаја и образаца понашања створених у претходном периоду. У раду је представљен и анализиран процес развоја и формирања етнонационалне свести муслимана југозападне Србије кроз процес дугог трајања.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: модерност, етницитет, националност, муслимани, Бошњаци, Санџак, Рашка област

У раду је представљен и анализиран процес развоја и формирања етнонационалне свести муслимана југозападне Србије кроз процес дугог трајања (*longue durée*). Ислам на Балкану представља најзначајније царско наслеђе Османског царства. Појавом ислама на простору југозападне Србије отпочео је и процес етничке диференцијације. Након слома Османског царства муслимани југозападне Србије нашли су се под управом хришћанске Србије, а потом и Краљевине Срба, Хрвата, Словенаца (касније Југославије). Институционални оквир краљевине омогућио је очување, даље снажење и развијање специфичности идентитета локалних муслимана. У том смислу градила се свест о потреби очувања ислама, везаности за ове просторе и „српство као друго” у идентитетском од-

ређењу. Тиме су створени почетни обриси колективног идентитета који је, услед заједничке судбине и историјског искуства, учвршћен током Другог светског рата. Институционални оквир социјалистичке Југославије омогућио је даље сазревање идентитета. Секуларизација, као последица марксистичке идеологије, имала је значајну улогу у томе да идентитет прерасте из верске у националну групу. Присутна флуидност у националном одређењу до почетка осамдесетих година превазиђена је. Кључна трансформација у етнонационалном одређењу десила се деведесетих година. Национална свест грађена је на премиси негирања српског порекла, истицању и преувеличавању своје обесправљености, како од државе, тако и комунистичке партије, и страдању у претходним ратовима. Повезивање са босанскохерцеговачким муслиманима исказано је у промени националног имена у Бошњак. До пописа из 2002. године национално име Бошњак готово је у потпуности прихваћено. Данас су Бошњаци интегрисани у државне институције Републике Србије. Несметано, наглашено и без проблема исказују свој идентитет.