

# BALKAN ISLAM

## A BARRIER OR A BRIDGE FOR RADICALISATION?

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BULGARIAN DIPLOMATIC SOCIETY

**BALKAN ISLAM**  
**A BARRIER OR A BRIDGE FOR RADICALISATION?**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Foreword – Helene Kortländer, PhD; Lyubomir Kyuchukov, PhD; Philip Bokov .....	3
2. Balkan Islam and Radicalisation: a Barrier in front of the Bridge – Lyubomir Kyuchukov, PhD .....	5
3. Albania: Both a Bridge and a Barrier for Islamic Radicalism – Bobi Bobev, PhD .....	20
4. Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Lyubcho Troharov .....	34
5. Islam in Bulgaria: Most Muslims in Bulgaria Practice Traditional Islam – Prof. Iskra Baeva, PhD .....	48
6. Kosovo: a Collision Between Traditional Tolerance and Radicalism – Bobi Bobev, PhD .....	61
7. There is No Internal Islamic Threat in Macedonia, Foreign Forces Import Radical Islam – Lyubcho Neshkov .....	73
8. The Muslim Communities in Serbia: Between Integration and Radicalisation – Biser Banchev, PhD .....	86
9. Islam in Turkey – Peter Vodensky .....	99

## FOREWORD

There are sizeable Muslim communities in many of the Balkan countries. As a whole, the region is characterised by the moderate nature of the Balkan Islam and tolerant relations among religions. In the last years, however, wars and political confrontation have drawn new dividing lines within local societies on ethnic and religious basis. The actions of the “Islamic State” and the terrorist acts in Europe placed additional strain on the local Islamic communities. Available evidence confirms the fact that a sizeable number of Islamic fighters in the Middle East originated from South-eastern Europe.

The purpose of this study is to make a political assessment of the role of the local Islamic communities in the Balkans in these processes, to analyse the tendencies among them in the different countries, the risks of radicalisation and external interference. The outlining of the region-wide dimensions of the problem would help to stimulate the dialogue among the religious confessions and regional cooperation with a view of preventing possible radicalisation of the Islamic communities in the region

The study encompasses seven Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey and tries to adhere to a unified approach, reflecting the significance of the following issues in each of the countries:

- general outline of the picture of the religious beliefs in the respective country and the role and place of Islam;
- the Islamic communities – legal status, relations with the institutions of the state, existence of different Islamic trends, religious organisations, Islamic schools;
- political parties on a religious or ethnic basis and their relations with Islam (if any), their influence in the country;
- processes and tendencies among the Islamic community in the country – risks of radicalisation, possible influence of the ideology of the “Islamic State”;
- foreign influence on the local Islamic communities (if any) – origin, objectives, methods, financing;

- recruitment of jihadist fighters from the respective country, including returnees from the Middle East – dynamics, problems, manifestations;
- risk assessment related to radical Islamist groups;
- measures against Islamic radicalisation after the year 2000 (if any);
- the local Islamic communities – a barrier or a bridge for radicalisation.

The country reports were prepared by Bulgarian experts with in-depth professional knowledge about the respective countries – ambassadors, academics, journalists. The texts are the authors' analyses of the complex and contradictory processes and tendencies in the region and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the "Friedrich Ebert" Foundation, the Economics and International Relations Institute and the Bulgarian Diplomatic Society.

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## **BALKAN ISLAM AND RADICALISATION: A BARRIER IN FRONT OF THE BRIDGE**

***Lyubomir Kyuchukov, PhD***

### **Religious Beliefs in the Region, Role and Place of Islam**

There is a substantial variety of religious beliefs in the Balkan region, but with a single dominating religion in most of the countries. The countries whose population is primarily Christian predominate, Eastern Orthodoxy being much more widespread. Catholicism is present mainly in the western part of the peninsula. Islam is the dominant religion in Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina with a growing influence also among the Albanian population (in Albania proper, Kosovo, and among the Albanian minorities in the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and the other post-Yugoslav states).

Islam was brought among the Balkan peoples at a relatively later stage and arrived on the peninsula with its conquest by the Ottoman Empire after the 14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. This created a specific historic religious-state linkage of Islam with the Turkish state, which exists until now as a public attitude. That is why even at present traditional Balkan Islam preserves its link with Turkey.

Within the Ottoman Empire Islam was a state, dominating religion, defining the status of the subjects – the “faithful” and “rayah”. Its expansion was taking place both voluntarily by virtue of economic and political factors (mainly in the Albanian ethnic area) and by force – through the Islamisation of the local population. Subsequently this process stimulated internal division and separation within the different ethnoses on the basis of religion, creating conditions for the formation of new ethno-religious groups - Bosniaks<sup>1\*</sup>, Pomaks, etc.

At the same time, albeit with a different, not fully equal status in the Ottoman Empire, Christianity preserved its serious presence and influence among the Balkan peoples during all those centuries. This created certain traditions of common and parallel existence of the two religions,

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\* *Note of the translator:* Due to the extremely complicated ethnic and national situation in the Balkans, where ethnicity does not always coincide with citizenship, several conventions for the terms used have been adopted here in order to avoid confusion. E.g. Bosniak, Serb, Croat denote ethnicity; Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian denote citizenship.

expressed in a fairly high degree of religious tolerance among Balkan societies after the collapse of the empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Muslims in the Balkans are mainly Sunni (in Turkey – 80%), while the rest are Shia (mainly alevi) and representatives of different sects.

### **Islamic Communities – Legal Status, Relations with the Institutions of the State, Religious Organisations, Islamic Schools**

In all Balkan countries religion is separated from the state constitutionally. The executive has no legal right to interfere in the organisation and operation of the existing religious structures and in many countries it is neutral by definition *vis a vis* them (in certain cases – Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, etc. the leading or traditional religion in the country is specified).

A specific example of a more unequivocal commitment of the state to the affairs of religion is the activity of the Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in Turkey as a state instrument for influencing the organisation (and indeed the beliefs) of the Muslims – not only of the ongoing Islamisation processes in the country but in the entire Balkan region.

The Islamic communities are clearly distinct (in most cases both ethnically and geographically) and well organised, with their own religious structures, elected religious leaderships, as well as the necessary infrastructure and financial capabilities to perform their activities. With certain exceptions (Bulgaria, Serbia) they are also sufficiently internally consolidated.

In the last two decades mass construction of mosques can be observed in all countries with prevailing Muslim population in the region – in the ones, where the role of Islam in politics is growing (Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as in the Albanian area (Albania, Kosovo, Northern and Western Macedonia, Preševo and also in Sandžak in Serbia). There is also another tendency – the shortage of sufficient Islamic educational establishments and a vacuum in the training of local imams and preachers created the conditions for the infiltration of organisations and ideas foreign to the Balkan Islam.



## **Processes and Tendencies Among the Islamic Communities in the Balkans**

A sufficiently clearly identified process of expansion of the territory of religion, including of Islam, is observed in the region as a whole. The main dynamic here is in Turkey and within the former communist countries: Albania, Bulgaria and most of all in the countries of the post-Yugoslav area. On the one hand, this is a result of the effect of lifting the restrictions on religion, which, on the other hand, leads to a sharp increase of the number of citizens declaring their religious affiliation. In a number of cases this is more a declarative position, defining primarily societal affiliation and identity, rather than genuine religiousness – in particular among the Orthodox population in these countries. Things are different in the cases where the matter concerns the definition of a certain minority ethnic or religious community, where religion (practically everywhere this turns about to be Islam) becomes a basic delineation and identification factor.

This process is particularly distinctive in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it is state-building, insofar as the separation of an independent state was the result of the ambition to reassert Bosniak identity on the basis of the historically formed religious divisions. And there exists a sufficiently clear specificity of confrontation: while between Serbs and Croats the dividing line is ethnic, the one between the Bosniaks and the rest of the population is religious. The transformation of Islam in a key political factor in the country creates conditions for domestic fundamentalism in the country itself, as well as for the penetration of external factors; at that, with very important specifics – alongside the radical religious aspect they bring in with them a militarised presence through the jihadist volunteers.

A slide towards Islamisation is observed in Turkey in the last two decades – as an element of strengthening Erdoğan's power, a reduction of the influence of the army as a guarantor of the secular state and erosion of the Atatürk's legacy, exoneration of the Islamic traditions and symbols, distancing and confrontation with the West. At the same time this state-controlled Islamisation performs also a certain protective function with regard to the penetration of foreign religious influences in the

country and to a large extent restricted the processes of import of Islamic radicalism from the Middle East, but on the other hand it expanded substantially the basis and the significance of Islam in society.

As a whole, one might ascertain that local Islam is gaining strength and is expanding its influence in a number of countries in the Balkans. From the point of view of scope, Islam gradually encompasses ever wider strata of the population, narrowing the field of the atheist or religiously indifferent part of the population in the countries where it dominates (Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo) and engulfing ever tighter the ethnic minorities practicing this religion in other countries (Bulgarian Turks, Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, etc.). The penetration of Islam in new territories is also characteristic – mainly among the Roma population, which due to its social marginalisation in the majority of countries, is more susceptible to eventual radicalisation.

### **Political Parties on Religious (or Ethnic) Basis, Connected to Islam**

In the majority of the countries in the region (Turkey, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Republic of Macedonia) there are ethnic parties and part of them represents the interests of the respective Islamic communities.

In the countries with predominantly Muslim population Islam is incorporated to different degrees in the ideological basis of the governing parties (Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina). In Turkey Islam, alongside with nationalism, is used as a primary consolidating factor of power. They both are the very base on which the ruling Party of Justice and Development constructed the concept of political Islam. In Bosnia and Herzegovina practically all political formations are on ethnic basis but only in the Bosniak parties the religious element is strongly expressed, the leading Party of Democratic Action having as its ideological base the ideas of conservative Islamic democracy and Bosniak nationalism, reflected in the views of the “Islamic Declaration” of Alija Izetbegović, which formulated the incompatibility of Islam with non-Islamic systems and the impossibility of peace and coexistence between it and non-Islamic social and political institutions. It is because of this that the ideological foundation of political

Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on these ideas and intensified by the bloody ethnic and religious confrontation, is rather more radical than the one in Turkey. In Albania and Kosovo Islam is not present in the platforms of political parties and the attempts to create Islamic parties there were halted by the governments.

In the countries where the Islamic communities are in a minority (and they to a large extent coincide with the respective ethnic minorities) the existing ethnic parties do not dwell on Islamic ideas in their political platforms either. Islam is exerting a certain influence only on the political representation on the Bosniak (but not Albanian) minority in Serbia.

As a whole it may be noted that with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey Islam and politics are separated in the Balkan countries.

### **Foreign Influence Upon the Local Islamic Communities**

In view of the historic roots of Islam in the Balkans it is logical that the main foreign religious influence in the Balkan countries should originate from a source that is internal for the region. It is connected with Turkey and its traditions and ambitions to present itself as protector of the Muslims in the Balkans and is effected along two, often overlapping lines – ethnic and religious. For the time being the line of “pan-Turkism” is predominant, while the one of Islamism plays a supporting role. This approach has been elevated to the rank of state policy, which has been most thoroughly motivated in the ideas of neo-Ottomanism, where a wider role of pan-Islamism can be discerned. This policy possesses the necessary administrative and financial set of tools: the state Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which commands very substantial financial (more than US\$ 2 billion in 2016) and personnel resources, the Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), etc. Turkey’s attention is focused primarily on the Turkish ethnic population in Bulgaria, as well as the Muslim communities in Albania, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Greece. Special attention is devoted to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which Turkey regards as a brother country, a sort of a foothold for the restoration of its historic influence in the Balkans. From the point of view of substance, the Turkish

state tries to influence the leaderships of the Islamic communities in the respective countries, including through sending Turkish Muslim officials and supporting (financially and organisationally, through textbooks and teachers) the education of local imams. Additionally, Turkey tries to affect the political processes in some countries in the region (Bulgaria primarily) and in other European countries through stimulating the creation and supporting parties on a Turkish ethnic basis. It should be noted, however, that the priority of the Turkish policy in the region remains to serve the state ambitions of Turkey for its transformation into a regional leader and a global player, while the exploitation of the religious communities falls for the time being within the arsenal of tools for the attainment of these objectives. From this point of view at this stage a claim of a direct influence of this Turkish policy in the direction of a possible radicalisation of the Islamic communities in the region would not be sufficiently justified. Concurrently, the interference of Turkey in the domestic affairs of the countries creates conditions for additional divisions in the Balkan societies, stimulating as a counterweight the emergence of rather powerful nationalistic tendencies in some countries and the generation of domestic confrontational processes, which increase the threat of isolation of the Islamic communities there.

Alongside the traditional Turkish influence over the Muslim communities in the peninsula, exercised within the frame of moderate local Islam, the presence of non-traditional and foreign for the region factors was intensified in the last decades. They originate primarily from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, etc. This happens mainly through dozens of non-governmental organisations – as humanitarian aid (in the form of food and medicines) and financial support, bound initially by soft conditions (that men should visit regularly mosque services and women should go out veiled and properly dressed), which later include the construction of mosques and schools for the study of Quran, ensuring scholarships for higher religious education abroad, etc. Such are, for example, the International Islamic Relief Organisation and the Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina (expelled from the

Republic of Macedonia for the dissemination of radical Islam), the “Al Haramain” Islamic foundation of Saudi Arabia, etc. At variance with the traditions of Balkan Islam, historically related to Turkey, dozens of young people have received religious education in the Arab world in the spirit of a more conservative canon.

It should be noted that for certain countries the external influence of radical Islam does not necessarily penetrate directly from the Middle East, but also through channels that are internal for the region – through Bosnia and Herzegovina (for Serbia), through Kosovo and Albania (for Serbia and the Republic of Macedonia).

A number of circumstances contribute to such a penetration in the region. First, this is the direct result of the wars and the ethnic confrontation in former Yugoslavia – primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, where religious affiliation became an element of national delineation and the formation of a new state identity and where the risk of intensive foreign religious influence and unregulated advance of ideas incompatible with traditional Islam is the greatest. In Bosnia and Herzegovina this process was accompanied both by a degree of radicalisation within the Bosniak population, and the advance of outside radical religious elements and military (jihadist) structures, which probably have preserved their presence even after the end of the hostilities. Other factors for the penetration of influence that is alien to the region are: the freeing of the spiritual space from atheist control by the governments and from ideological taboos (in Albania, the countries of former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey); the withdrawal by the state from the training of Islamic clerics (Bulgaria), which brought about their mass training in the Arab countries specified above through offering scholarships by local organisations but in alien for Balkan Islam traditions; the social marginalisation of certain ethnic groups (Roma); the political confrontation and the use of Islam as a tool for political (Turkey) or ethno-national identification (Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Macedonia, etc.).

It could generally be stated that the influence of foreign factors in the region is more discernible in the states where stronger confrontational

processes are generated and where a more serious domestic dynamics of delineation and development of the Muslim communities is observed.

### **Risks of Radicalisation, Influence of the “Islamic State” Ideology, Recruitment of Jihadist Fighters**

The first information about the intensifying propaganda in the region of fundamentalist ideas and radical Islam (Wahhabism and Salafism) imported from the outside may be attributed to the early 1990's. Territorially this tendency is concentrated in the post-Yugoslav space and substantially it germinated on the objective processes of expansion of the influence of religion, Islam respectively, among the Muslim population there.

It should be noted that only in Bosnia and Herzegovina domestic conditions for the penetration of more radical Islamist ideas were created earlier, already in the 1960's. In all remaining states this resulted from the processes after the dismantling of the bipolar world. The influence of radical Islamist ideas (including Wahhabism – with the advocacy of Sharia rule and the idea of a “holy jihad”) in the Western Balkans reached its peak after the start of the armed conflict in Syria. It is much more limited among the traditional, established and integrated in the respective societies' Islamic communities, which are more sustainable and resistant against it.

The main channels for the infiltration of radical Islamist ideas in the region are related to the training abroad of local Islamic clerics (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait) as well as to the sending of foreign preachers in the Balkans. Territorially this activity is directed primarily towards the Western Balkans but in a more limited scope concerns Bulgaria too. Available information indicates that, for a start, penetration is sought in smaller localities with more isolated and poorer population through the imams in local mosques, around whom Islamist nuclei are gradually formed. Veterans from the military conflicts in the respective countries or unemployed young people are mainly targeted. More substantial groups of radical Islam supporters exist only in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo but even in these countries they remain small and isolated.

Information varies but it could be assumed that about one thousand fighters have been recruited for participation in the fighting in Syria and Iraq – along ethno-religious lines. Assessments indicate that one half of them came from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the rest – from Kosovo and Albania, as well as a certain number from the Republic of Macedonia (from the Albanian population) and Serbia (Bosniaks from Sandžak, but not Albanians from Preševo).

According to public information it is assumed that camps for recruitment and training of Islamist fighters might exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and the official Albanian authorities do not exclude the possibility that in Albania they might have existed too. Timewise this process was most articulated in the 2012-2015 period while after that there is no information of movement of volunteers from the Balkans to the Middle East. Originally, they joined “Al Nusra” and at a later stage moved into the ranks of the “Islamic State”. Available information indicates that these are people under 35 years of age, often related with one another with family ties (as a result of the strong clan links in these societies). There are grounds to conclude that there is a certain specificity in the motivation of the Islamist fighters from the Balkans. One could speak about indoctrinated jihadists in relation to citizens from Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the ones from the Albanian area are mostly mercenaries whose motivation is financial and economic.

As a whole the Balkans provided a relatively sizeable contingent of jihadist fighters, originating from the countries, where wars, military action and conflicts took place in the last two decades. At the same time there is no reason to assume that at this stage radical Islamist ideas have penetrated widely the local Islamic communities,

### **Risks of Terrorist Acts, Related to Radical Islamist Groups**

According to most assessments the degree of risk of terrorist acts on the territory proper of the majority of the Balkan countries is relatively low compared to a number of Western countries. Exception to a certain degree are the countries with more serious domestic ethnic tensions. But

in them too, (Turkey in the first place) terrorist acts are motivated not by radical Islamist ideas but are a result of domestic ethno-national conflicts. The main risks of radical Islam are related to the returning fighters of the “Islamic State” in some countries in the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania), to the eventual creation of their networks and attempts at destabilisation of neighbouring countries (Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia), as well as to their transit. How the local authorities will deal with the reintegration of the fighters returning from the Middle East (including also the tracing of those hiding from the authorities, who present a potential threat for further terrorist activity) will be of paramount importance for lowering the risk of radical action in the region. For the time being, however, there is no information of the existence of a critical mass for the deployment of a jihadist infrastructure in the region.

### **Measures Against Islamist Radicalisation**

Express legislation against the risks of transnational terrorism was adopted in the majority of countries in the region in the last years and particularly after 2014-2015. There are several main factors that lead to this: the terrorist acts in a number of European countries, the spread of radical Islamist ideas from the Middle East, the participation of Islamist fighters from the Balkans in the fighting there and their return after the territorial defeat of the “Islamic State” and, last but not least, in response to the public opinion concerns about an eventual infiltration of Islamist fighters through the refugee and migrant channels.

Legislative measures were adopted in a number of countries in the region (Albania, the Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Bulgaria) incriminating the advocating of radical ideas. Substantially, this legislation encompasses two spheres – the fight against terrorism and the prevention of radicalisation and extremism. The measures include criminal prosecution for actions like the recruitment of volunteers, financing the propaganda of radical Islam (Kosovo), ban on the participation in armed conflicts outside the country, etc. In some countries there are already cases of court convictions on this basis of persons whose activity had been at variance with these



laws, as well as prohibition of the operation of religious structures advocating radical Islam.

In most countries serious attention is paid to prevention, focusing on attacking the causes for this phenomenon. Internal consolidation of societies, prevention through the education system, improvement of social and economic conditions and, in particular, social security and the prospects for young people are of significant importance in this respect. It is the social sphere, however, that will continue to be the most vulnerable in the future, generating alienation, aggression and radicalism.

The authorities in the counties with a more serious presence of political Islam (Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina) are also taking adequate measures against the spread of radical ideas in order to prevent both destabilisation of the state and a shift of political attitudes beyond government control. Certain specificity here stems from the fact that state authorities are inclined to tolerate the expansion of the influence of religion as a means to consolidate society, i.e. when they feel domestic or foreign threat, but, at the same time they take serious measures for the elimination of possible external influence: because then the risk by radicalisation comes to the forefront and threatens the local governments themselves – both as a vehicle of the interests of external factors and as a generator of a domestic political counterweight.

Governments try to maintain good institutional cooperation with the Muslim communities in all countries of the peninsula, based on the understanding that the struggle with radical Islam may be successful only in an alliance with the wider Muslim communities. They rely on the fact, that public beliefs in their overwhelming majority are linked to traditional moderate local Islam, but active commitment by the religious leaders and preachers is also sought for opposing radical Islamist ideas. Governmental political, organisational and financial support for the religious communities and for their activities is of major significance in this respect. On the other hand, the internal divisions in the leaderships of the Muslim religious communities (Serbia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia) harbour a certain degree of risk of disorientation of the very communities. In

several countries (Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia) a stand-off can be observed between the older and traditionally inclined leadership and the young more radical generation.

It might be concluded that governments in the region, although not always sufficiently effective, realise the risks from the penetration of radical Islamist ideas from the outside and gradually generate the political determination and public support for more decisive measures against them.

### **Barrier in Front of the Bridge**

The analysis suggests that Islam in the Balkans *per se* is rather a barrier to the penetration of radical Islamist ideas from the Middle East towards Europe. It is moderate by nature and there is a longstanding tradition in the region of coexistence and tolerance among the different religions. In most countries there is no accumulation of political or religious confrontation in society, which might create conditions for radicalisation of wider Muslim communities.

At the same time, both the internal dynamics (national and regional) and the influence of forces alien to the region indicate the existence of certain factors, the development of which has the potential to increase the risk of such a tendency.

As far as **interregional processes** are concerned, one should take into consideration the place of Islam in the individual countries. Here one could add a third group of countries, alongside the ones with prevailing Muslim population (Turkey, Albania) and those, where it is in the minority (Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece) – the specific category of countries, which have acquired their first modern statehood after the collapse of Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, The Republic of Macedonia).

In all *countries where Islam is the prevailing religion* governments take serious measures to prevent radical foreign influences – in view of preserving the stability of the state and their own positions in power. This is valid both for the countries where religion remains practically outside politics (Albania) and for the ones where Islam is an important political (Turkey) of even politico-ideological factor (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The processes in Turkey as a kind of a ‘buffer’ country between the Middle East and Europe are of key importance for preventing the penetration of radical Islam in Europe. This to a large extent depends on the ability of Erdoğan, relying on the “controlled Islamisation” as his political resource, to contain the process within this frame and to prevent it from acquiring its own momentum and getting out of control - in case of internal destabilisation or an international crisis. One should bear in mind that Erdoğan’s neo-Ottomanism and radical Islam are not strategic allies but are rather competitors: neo-Ottomanism is a state doctrine with regional application while radical Islam is a political ideology which aims globally; neo-Ottomanism endeavours to impose Turkish influence on the neighbouring countries and domination in the region, while radical Islam is a sufficiently integral anti-Western ideology aiming to divide and destroy societies from the inside. From this point of view the Turkish state presents a barrier before the unobstructed proliferation of radical Islam towards Europe. On certain occasions, however, there is a coincidence between neo-Ottomanism and radical Islam – not so much of the objectives but rather of the adversaries – Assad, the Kurds, etc.

*The countries that have acquired their first modern statehood* ( Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia) face the difficult task of blending into a harmonious unity two conflicting processes: on the one hand – to separate a long-existing common economic, political and cultural space, to differentiate themselves, to affirm sovereignty, build institutions and consolidate society – all this inevitably accompanied by a strong dose of nationalism (especially after the military conflicts that brought about independence); on the other hand – to preserve normal inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations within the new states. The internal ethnic conflicts in each one of them harbour dangerous destabilising potential not only for a strong aggravation of interreligious confrontation but also create conditions for internal radicalisation and penetration of fundamentalist ideas among the Muslim population from the outside. Their unstable statehood makes Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and in case of a possible destabilisation the Republic of Macedonia too, the countries in the region that are most threatened by infiltration of radical Islam.

The territorial concentration and compactness of the Islamic communities in *the countries where Islam is not the leading religion* (Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia) create conditions for their additional seclusion and isolation. The main risk factor here is the growing intensity of nationalist tendencies in both directions: of the majority against the minority and vice versa – as a reaction to the need for internal cohesion but also as a result of external interference along ethnic (mainly among the ethnic Albanians and Turks) rather than religious lines.

As elsewhere in Europe *the refugee crisis* caused a sharp increase of nationalist attitudes. However, the optic in the region is different: while in Western Europe the debate is focused on the stay (accommodation and integration), in the Balkans it concentrates on prevention (border protection) and transit. This determines a different kind of attitude towards the refugees and migrants: there are concerns about security but they do not grow into hatred against the foreigner and into xenophobia. The fact, that in the mass public perception there is a sufficiently clear distinction between the “own” Muslims (who are not regarded as a security threat) and the “aliens” (about whom fears exist that among them there might be jihadists) is of a particular importance in this respect.

Analyses indicate that *social insecurity* is another and a very significant risk factor for practically all countries in the region. The social consequences of the rapid transition to a market economy, the high unemployment, the deindustrialisation, the lack of stable professional prospects and the enormous emigration, especially among the young population, lead to the disintegration of the social fabric in most of the former socialist countries, which could open floodgates for the penetration of radical movements, including Islamist ones. Especially vulnerable here are the Roma communities.

It is important to note that neither of the above mentioned internal problems in the region leads *per se* to radicalisation of the Muslim population. In its entirety, however, they make it more vulnerable to targeted external influences in case of eventual destabilisation of the countries.

The main risks for the region are related to the possible import of radicalism under the influence of **external factors**.

The Muslim communities in the Balkan countries, as elsewhere around the world, are a logical aim for radical Islamists. The targets for export of fundamentalism, radicalism and extremism may be traced in several directions. First, to the Islamic majorities: in the states that have obtained their first independence as a result of ethnic conflicts (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) and also to the public space freed from atheism in Albania. Second, to the Muslim minorities in the Christian states. Third, to ethnic minorities (Roma) and marginalised social strata (mainly young people).

Two levels, on which attempts for penetration among the Muslim communities in the Balkans are being made, could be identified at this stage. The first one is the interference in the traditional beliefs – through transformation of the moderate version of Islam, which is characteristic for the region, into a more conservative, scholastic variety, which on the one hand would lead to the seclusion of the Islamic communities within themselves, and on the other – would enhance the public perceptions of differentness. The address here are the local Islamic communities, and the aim is their seclusion and consolidation. The second level is the attempt to create, on the basis of such an artificially imported, more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, a fertile soil for transformation of the social frustration and alienation, particularly of young people, into aggression and radicalisation of wider groups. In this case the address is narrowed to the potential radical elements but the aim is widened to destabilisation and confrontation of the entire society. There are no grounds at present to assert that the necessary accumulation is available among the Islamic communities of the Balkan countries, that might give an impetus to the cultivation of local radicalism in the region.

Everything said above allows to conclude that so far Balkan Islam as a whole has played an important constraining role against the transfer of radicalism from the Middles East to Europe. This tendency, however is not necessarily irreversible. The internal destabilisation of the countries, the flourishing of the region's nationalisms and the transformation of the Balkans into an arena of geopolitical confrontation are key factors that might increase the risk of the moderate Balkan Islam barrier being lifted for the penetration of radicalism in Europe.

# **ALBANIA: BOTH A BRIDGE AND A BARRIER FOR ISLAMIC RADICALISM**

***Bobi Bobev***

## **Confessional Structure of Society – Background and Current State. Legal Status of the Islamic Community**

The current confessional structure of Albanian society has a long history and was built under the influence of different factors. In the Middle Ages the boundary between Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity crossed these territories and the absence of an integrated state in this period meant also an absence of targeted and centralised policy in the spiritual field, which contributed to the permanent consolidation of the division between northern Catholics and southern Orthodox Christians. As far as the development of society is concerned, it should be underlined that the family and clan form is deeply rooted in Albanian tradition and dominates all other influences, including religious ones.

In the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and during the 15<sup>th</sup> century the situation in the Balkans was changed dramatically and for a long time to come. The invasion of the Ottoman Turks through the Straits towards the Balkans and the heart of Europe dealt a blow to the existing *status quo* and within several decades wiped out from the political map of the continent the Byzantine Empire, the Bulgarian Kingdom, the Serbian Kingdom and other smaller entities in the region, including several Albanian principalities. In this case, however, the issue was not just territorial changes or the emergence of a new and dominating state and political entity but a general shift of a civilisational nature. The Ottoman Empire, which settled permanently in the Balkans, was the carrier of a new confession and, respectively of a different type of culture with all resulting consequences. Having in mind the medieval age this inevitably meant a collision, or at least opposition – one of main identification dividers at the time was religious confession. The new confession found the best soil for adoption and establishment in the territories of Albania and Bosnia. Moreover, the religious conversion was exclusively on voluntary terms, forceful im-

sition of Islam was a rare occurrence in the Albanian lands. It could be assumed that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century over 50% of the Albanians were already Islamised, and in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the face of Albanian society from a religious point of view had the value characteristics which remain lasting to the present day – approximately two-thirds Muslims, about 20% Orthodox Christians and about 10% Catholics. Such is the information from the censuses during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One should not overlook another feature, characteristic of the imposition of Islam in the Balkans – the strong influence not so much of official Sunnism but rather of the different trends and sects. In general, they were with more liberal postulates, more open and more comprehensible for the subjugated Christians. Among the Albanians most influential and impactful was the Bektashi sect. In organisational terms the Albanian Muslims belong to the Caliphate system imposed throughout the entire Ottoman Empire.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although slightly later than the other Balkan peoples, the ideas of the Renaissance started to penetrate Albanian society and religious differences did not obstruct this process. Moreover, it is precisely at the end of that century that a significant figure like Pashko Vasa aired the thought that the religion of the Albanian was Albanism. It seems that this formula is valid to the present day, it explains the relationships between the different beliefs in society. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at any significant event of a national importance, e.g. at the declaration of an autonomous and independent state on 28 November 1912, representatives not only of the territories populated by Albanians but of all confessions are in attendance.

The 1920's were the time when the foundations were laid of the autonomous modern Albanian religious structures. In view of the undisputed priority of the believers in Islam the developments in this community are important. In March 1923 at a special congress in Tirana a decision was made for the separation from the Turkish caliphate and the existing and functioning today Albanian Muslim Community was established. It included in its structure central management headed by a Grand Mufti and regional mufti districts covering the whole territory of the country.

It should be pointed out that Albanian Islam both then and in the subsequent decades remained traditionally linked with Turkey.

The totalitarian communist regime, established after 1944, dealt a heavy blow upon all religious structures and confessions. With a decree of 1949 loyalty to the regime was required from all religions and their properties were nationalised with the exception of the places of worship themselves. In this way irreparable damage was inflicted on the influence of the individual confessions and they were headed by persons close to the authorities. Much more alarming, of course, was the physical annihilation of a substantial part of the clergy. The confessional structures were debilitated. In 1967 the so called "Atheist State Act" was adopted with which Albania became the only country where religion was formally banned. More than 2 100 places of worship ceased to function, a large portion of the buildings were demolished, others were turned into warehouses, sports halls, clubs.

It may be concluded categorically that during the period of the communist dictatorship Islam – the traditional religion of the overwhelming majority of the Albanians, not only had no real presence in public and political life but was severely persecuted and repressed, together with the other confessions.

"The wind of change" in the 1990's inevitably reached the Albanian mountains and set the start of serious disturbances, of gradual overall transition from a totalitarian regime to parliamentary democracy. Regardless of the leading position at the time of the Albanian Party of Labour (this was the official name of the Communist Party) with a decision of parliament of May 1990 the pernicious atheist state act was annulled. Gradually action was taken in several directions – both towards restoration of the old confessional structures and the places of worship and towards the return of religious services in people's everyday life. So, Albania entered a new stage in its spiritual development, which, however, could not help being influenced both by the decades-long prohibition of religion and by the overall spirit of the time and the vicissitudes of the transition.

First, it is proper to clarify the question about the size of the individual confessional communities in modern-day Albania – including because of



the fact that during the entire period of the totalitarian regime and in the time prior to 2011 no such studies were made. With exact number of the population of 2 800 138, adherence to the Muslim confession has been stated by 1 587 608 persons or 56.70% of the country's citizens, with 2.09% belonging to the Bektashi sect, which means 58 628 Albanians. The numbers indicate also 280 921 Catholics – 10.03%, and 188 992 persons who have identified themselves as Christian Orthodox, or 6.75%. In a certain sense this ratio of two-thirds Muslims and one-third Christians with an almost two-fold prevalence of the Orthodox over the Catholics differs from the one traditionally accepted and based on information from the inter-war period. In 2011, however, one can find other interesting and thought-provoking data. 153 630 citizens of the country have identified themselves as “believers” without specifying the confession. There are 69 995, or 2.5% atheists, as well as 386 024 Albanians, or 13.79%, who have not responded to the question. Assuming that there is the respective number of convinced atheists, there is a reserve of nearly 20% or about 600 000 people who do not specify religious denomination. This undoubtedly changes the situation very much and leads towards a certain type of distortion. Being aware of the attitudes of the Albanians, I believe, that the Catholics have voted in the most disciplined way and the data about them are comparatively accurate, while the presence of more Muslims and Orthodox Christians in the two groups in society that have not specified beliefs is a more widespread occurrence. In this sense the 2:1 ratio between the believers in Islam and Christianity is not far from the truth also at present. However, it should be taken into consideration that the matter concerns first of all the traditional adherence to the respective confessional group and not the active practice of a specific faith.

The Albanian transition actually had its beginnings at the start of 1990 and the country developed for eight years under the old 1976 Constitution. The majorities governing the country decided to create a sort of a set of laws named “constitutional”, which would regulate key issues related to the proper functioning of the state and society under the new conditions. This was particularly relevant to the prohibition of religious denominations,

the destruction of their structures and the persecution of the clergy. The parliamentary annulment mentioned above of the law on the atheist state launched a process of reinstating the structures of the main confessions.

Both individual legal acts and the new Constitution adopted in 1998 provide guarantees both for the complete freedom of worship and for the equality of the different confessions. This entire matter has been resolved fully within the tradition of the relations between a state that is of a secular nature and the existing confessions. A particularly important argument for such assertions is the radically amended course of Albanian foreign policy after 1990 oriented in the first place towards strategic relations with the EU, NATO and the USA.

### **First Attempts to Disseminate Radical Islam in Albania**

There was one case, when in the 1990's Tirana's international partners experienced doubts. In December 1992 Albania became a member of the Islamic Conference Organisation, later renamed to Organisation for Islamic Cooperation. The then president and future premier Sali Berisha was subjected to reproaches of a different nature: both internal (due to not coordinating his actions with parliament) and international (due to the risk of expansion the field of operation of some irregular Islamic structures). The membership was motivated primarily with financial and economic arguments and in this respect, disillusionment set in – the investments from the Arab world turned out to be relatively limited. Politically Albania lowered the level of its participation in the periodic meetings of the organisation to the level of ambassador in the respective or the nearest country, which practically meant freezing the membership. If one adds to this the active integration policy, the full-fledged membership in NATO and the close relationships with the European Union, the arguments against such doubts become really convincing.

There were also other reproaches – that in the 1990's in Albania, reportedly, training camps for fundamentalists had been organised, that investment projects of Al-Qaeda had been realised in the country. It cannot be excluded that individual terrorists visited the country and maybe even hid there illegally.

The reason for such a possibility should be sought not in the policy of the Albanian governments but rather in a simpler fact. It is precisely in the last decade of the preceding century, in the first years of the Albanian transition, that the country looked badly from the point of view of legality and practical action to protect the borders, the security of the state and its citizens. The cooperation with foreign national and international services was insufficiently regulated and active. Things were gradually changing – such were the requirements of the international community. One could give practical examples – about arrests of suspicious persons and their extradition or bringing to justice, respectively, about confiscation of buildings constructed with funds of suspicious origin. This process seems irreversible. As for the large number of mosques being built – there are two explanations here – on the one hand that the Muslims are the most numerous confessional community and on the other that the Islamic world has greater resources. Nobody obstructs the construction of new Orthodox and Catholic churches and this is an undoubted reality.

As a matter of fact, in the 1990's there was one risk factor. At the beginning of the transition dozens of young people obtained religious education in the Arab world. This was at variance with tradition – Albanian Islam had always been related mainly to the Turkish one. A small segment of Muslim believers came into existence who called themselves “the new sons of Allah”, who stuck more to the conservative tenets and were more radically oriented. They worship only in one of the mosques in Tirana and evidently communicate mainly among themselves. I do not believe that this group of people has any future in Albanian society – even the external signs as men with the characteristic beards or veiled women are a very rare occurrence. Besides, a suitable response was found with the opening in 2010 of the Bedër Islamic University with the active and benevolent assistance of the state institutions – it will educate the majority of the future spiritual leaders. Be that as it may, however, both at present and in the future account should be taken of the existence of such a segment of Islamic preachers – and their behaviour in the least years has proven this.

It should be pointed out that already in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the authorities in Tirana undertook successful actions to counteract

the attempts to advocate Islamic fundamentalism and extremism in the country. Four religious structures spreading radical Islam were implicated for illegal activities in 1998 and they were banned with the respective court rulings. Among them was a branch of the notorious “Egyptian Islamic Jihad”, against which an investigation is ongoing for committing an attack against the American Embassy in Tirana.

Following the attacks of 9/11/2001 in the USA Washington practically declared war on Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism worldwide. There was, of course, the reverse process – of intensification of the forces of terrorism, which undoubtedly broadened the territory of their operation and waged a consistent global struggle for the hearts and minds of Muslims in the name of “holy jihad”. This brought about new risks for those Balkan countries where the Muslim confession is dominating, including for Albania. The government in Tirana categorically declared its participation in the global anti-terrorist coalition but this was hardly sufficient under the new conditions. The dominating European notion that the continent is far away from the outbreaks of conflicts and the risks of terrorist actions turned out to be an illusion and in a certain sense the European Union was about to pay dearly for the naïve short-sightedness displayed.

It may be asserted categorically that the government and the political class in Albania in general underestimated the threat of the coming activation of fundamentalism and radicalism. The religious tolerance, traditionally established in society and the absence of serious problems undoubtedly had a soothing effect, but the dramatic surge of the degree of tension globally should have been a warning signal. The role of the EU and the other political factors is not very active either – in the Association and Stabilisation Agreement concluded in 2006 there are clauses on the joint fight against terrorism, but the efforts are obviously directed outside the country, while prevention activities should be targeted towards the existing internal threats. Fundamentalism and extremism have still not started to gain speed and to seek a suitable form for realisation, but there already are serious symptoms. Only the unsuccessful attempt in 2007 to establish an Islamist party would suffice as a serious signal – registration

was refused due to a flagrant contradiction to the Constitution, besides the attempt did not provoke serious public interest, but the fact *per se* is worrisome. Insufficient attention is paid also to another fact: that the official structure of Albanian Muslims – the Muslim Community of Albania has under its jurisdiction between 450 and 500 cult facilities (according to some sources over 700), but between seven and ten mosques (some sources place the number at nine) built by Arab foundations and started operation in the 1990's are beyond the scope of its administration. Precisely they will in the coming years be particularly active and will cause serious problems both to the Community and to the state institutions.

### **Recruitment of Jihadist Mercenaries from Albania, Public Attitudes and Measures of the Authorities**

Approximately at the same time one could spot the first instances of the intensifying propaganda of radical Islam (Wahhabism and Salafism) in some regions of the country – Pogradec, Librazhd, Elbasan, Bulchiza, and later precisely from them the main number of volunteers for the Middle East was recruited. Be that as it may, until the dramatic development of the civil wars in Syria and Iraq there was no serious information of participation of Albanian citizens in these developments, neither of their presence in this region. If there are such cases, they are isolated and are rather an exception. The first reports of the special services about departures to the region of the Middle East were from 2012.

For the sake of objectivity, it should be pointed out that at that time the Albanian authorities gave an example of an adequate reaction to the emerging events. At the end of 2011 there were legislative amendments allowing investigation and criminal prosecution of citizens for participation in armed conflicts abroad. It soon became clear, however, that such acts were not in a position to prevent both the intensifying propaganda and the departure of volunteers to the Middle East. And here once again one is faced by a case of looking outside, of fighting the consequences and not the causes.

Should one assume that the high point of the problem refers to 2013-2014, it would be proper to outline the situation in the country and the

factors impacting in the direction of risk and destabilisation. Here one should point first to the overall social and economic situation with low growth rates and high levels of unemployment. It is indicative that in a later poll 41.3% of the respondents indicated as the main reason for succumbing to religious propaganda the existing poverty in the country, another 21.1% believed that the departure of volunteers for the wars in Syria and Iraq was motivated by "financial reasons". 12.6% of the poll participants saw as an important reason ideological influence and 10% specified the opportunity to obtain religious education. All this demonstrates unequivocally that social and economic factors are determinative for the spread of radical ideas and the recruitment of volunteers for the wars in the Middle East. Another major feature is also symptomatic – the travellers to Syria and Iraq are predominantly from the rural areas or the underprivileged outskirts of the bigger towns. An indication for the public attitudes in Albania in relation to the likelihood of religious confrontation is the categorical opinion of 84.3% of Albanian citizens that there is harmony among the religions in the country while of the opposite opinion are just 7.8% of the population. And more indicative figures – in 2015 53.6% approved the participation of Albania in the fight against religious extremism, 20.3% expressed partial agreement, while 18% were against.

It is obvious that the public in general opposes radicalism and violence and is in favour of measures against their proliferation. Undoubtedly this encourages state institutions to act in the same direction – all the more so, that by 2013-2014, i.e. at the peak of the enlistment of Balkan volunteers with the jihadists, the participation of Albanian citizens in combat actions was beyond any doubt. And if in the period before 2013 they were primarily focused on Al-Nusra, subsequently the overwhelming majority joined the ranks of the "Islamic State". Around that time again it became clear that the advocating of fundamentalism and radicalism was gaining ground and in 2014 brought the foreign minister Ditmir Bushati to the admission that jihadist training camps may exist on Albanian territory. This is confirmed by information of the police that at least in two mosques the religious activity was combined with

military training. Particularly notorious was the one in Mezez, close to Tirana, whose imam Budzhar Hisa had actively campaigned in favour of the "Islamic State". He was believed to have ensured personally the recruitment of over 70 volunteers for the war in Syria.

The fact that precisely the 2013-2014 period was the peak of the enlistment of mercenaries from the Balkans in the ranks of the "Islamic State" is beyond doubt. The information about their precise number vary according to different reports and studies, but it might be said that by the end of 2014 the "Balkan volunteers" were between 700 and 1000, and among them the Albanian citizens were between 140 and 150. Official Albanian sources specify the number at 114 by June 2015. These were people predominantly of the 31-35 age group, often with a criminal record and having family relationships. It may be stated categorically that their main motivation for joining the basically terrorist structures of Al-Nusra and "Islamic State" was financial and economic, i.e. they were mercenaries and not people overwhelmed by religious fervour.

By that time the process of returning volunteers was already well under way and by the end of the year their number reached 40 persons, 15 of them were in hiding from the authorities and represented a potential threat of further terrorist activity. A poll from this period studied the public attitudes on the question of the status of the returning jihadists. It is indicative that over half of the Albanians - 51.9% - were of the opinion that the returnees should be reintegrated in society, while 24.3% thought that they must obligatorily serve a term of punishment. According to available information it is from 2015 on, that the stream of Albanian volunteers to the Middle East practically ceased – this was due both to the developments there and to the measures undertaken by the authorities. It is believed that in the same 2015 only one jihadist from Albania departed to Syria and Iraq, while in 2016 and 2017 there were no records of such movement. A role was played also by the fact that the judicial system already reacted adequately and was undertaking prosecutions in the spirit of applicable law.

The country was undoubtedly facing new circumstances – the return of the volunteers from the Middle East and this development was accom-

panied by multiple and serious risks for the public and the state. Because jihadists on their own territory may be particularly dangerous in several fields - spread of radical Islam, terrorist activity, maintenance of contacts with the returnees from the neighbouring countries, particularly Kosovo and Macedonia. In this relation the authorities acted adequately and took a number of measures.

A regional conference on the problems of countering radical Islam and the fight against terrorism was held in Tirana in June 2018. The Albanian deputy-minister of the interior outlined the overall approach of the authorities and the forthcoming actions in this respect. A very repressive law directed against radical Islamism and terrorist activity was adopted back in 2014. It envisaged measures like criminal prosecution, withdrawing the possibility to travel, criminalisation of travels to areas of military activities, criminal prosecution after the return from there. This law actually deepened and made more detailed the ban on participation in military activities on foreign territory adopted in 2011. An amendment was made to article 230 of the Penal Code envisaging imprisonment of 15 years for involvement in terrorist activity, including through spreading panic among the population, and the same punishment for financing terrorist structures. In compliance with Resolutions 1267 and 1373 of the UN Security Council Albania adopted and implemented a number of measures in the international field related to the active combat against terrorist activities and the attempts to advocate radical Islam.

A National Inter-Sectoral Strategy and an Action Plan were adopted in 2015 which envisage the implementation of a series of measures preventing violent extremism by identifying the communities which may fall under radical influence and which use education and employment as methods to exert influence, including for the recruitment of terrorist groups. Besides, the strategy identified the cooperation with partners on local, national and international level through state agencies involved in this field, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, religious communities and the media as an important step in the fight against violent extremism both inside the country and abroad.



This strategy takes account also of the general change in the situation in view of the process of volunteers who had participated in the conflicts in the Middle East and had started to return, some of them accompanied by their families. Earlier, a key element was the raising of obstacles to the possibility of radicalisation and recruitment of individuals by terrorist organisations but nowadays at the centre is the question of the reintegration of these persons. As of now a plan has been approved for inter-institutional action for meeting and dealing with Albanian citizens returning from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq and in parallel with it a draft government decision has been drawn up for their reintegration. In addition, the structures of the Anti-Terror Directorate of the national police perform their duties pursuant to the plan on the measures for monitoring the returnees from the Middle East conflict zones and other citizens, for proving and control over the activities of individuals and groups, which appear to have terrorist and extremist inclinations that may lead to terrorist actions of Albanian or foreign citizens. Prevention, detection and combatting any criminal activity originating in Albania is a priority in the fight against terrorism after 2017 through enhancing cooperation and coordination of the national structures of the police, the serious crimes prosecution authorities and the regional prosecution offices, the Intelligence Service, the Republican Guard, the Prison Directorate and all institutions whose activity has any relation to the fight against terrorism.

One of the main elements in the work of the government structures and the special services is the enhancement of the cooperation with the strategic partners from the USA (FBI and CIA), with the respective structures from the countries in the region, with police missions accredited to the country's police as well as the security offices of the embassies accredited in Albania, in order to ensure the required monitoring of terrorism on the territory of Albania of Albanian and foreign citizens suspected of participation in armed conflicts abroad, as well as of individuals with a potential to present a threat to the country. The cooperation of the national police with the National Centre for combatting violent extremism takes place through the structures of the Public Security Department and its work is very dynamic. Aware of the great role of prevention in the field of terrorism among the

different communities, the Public Security Department has specified the duties and responsibilities of the employees and amongst the tasks of the greatest importance is the detection of individuals with extremist, radical or terrorist behaviour tendencies and the exchange of information about the persons of this category with the "Anti-Terror" Directorate. Special training and events for preventing radicalism and violent extremist phenomena are organised in cooperation with the leaders of the Security Academy, the Public Security Department, the Sector for communication with public media. The organisation of prevention aims at enhancing the capacity of all police offices primarily in the field of detecting the signs of emerging violent extremism, of being able to identify them, to link them to the relevant clauses of the law and to be able to cooperate with other institutions in order to overcome the existing challenges.

It is undoubted that Albania has a clear vision that the risks for the country and the public are far from exhausted by a single success of the international community against the "Islamic State". And if at the initial phase of the outside pressure upon the Balkans the Albanian authorities were insufficiently adequate and acted with substantial delay in relation to the attempts at radical Islamist propaganda and at recruitment of volunteers for Al-Nusra and the "Islamic State", at present Albania acts with resolution and determination and may serve as an example in this respect. No peace of mind is allowed by the fact that Albania according to some studies is not directly threatened by terrorist acts on its own territory and is in the same risk group as Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, as opposed to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina where the degree of risk is higher.

It should be pointed out that the country's authorities have the advantage in this respect of working in very favourable conditions from the point of view of the public attitudes and the possibility to receive actual support. The polls results, that 83.7% of Albanians disagree with the ideology of the "Islamic State" and that approximately the same is the percentage of citizens of the opinion that under no circumstances they should join its structures, are of the utmost significance for a Balkan country, in which almost two-thirds of the population is practicing Islam.

Of course, there are also other respects in which the state should invest the necessary efforts. First, the coordination with the work of the Muslim Community should be improved and its efforts to obtain control over the mosques beyond the reach of its administration and the teaching of theological disciplines in the country should be supported. For the sake of justice, it is the state which should do what is needed in order to reconstitute all properties claimed by the Muslim Community – in Albania this issue is not resolved definitively. The media and the academic community should also play their preventive role. Credit should be paid and the fact should be reminded that it was the Muslim Community, particularly during the peak of the events in 2013-2014, that acted in a sufficiently determined way against the advocating of radical Islam and appealed categorically that what was happening in the Middle East and the behaviour of the “Islamic State” there had nothing to do with true faith and its tenets. One should not underestimate also the presence of the Islamic Community in the so-called Interreligious Council where discussions are held on extremism and the behaviour of the “Islamic State” and the negative conclusions are made public knowledge and enjoy government support. Such approach is fully within the spirit of Albanian religious traditions.

## **Conclusions**

And finally, if one looks for an answer to the main question – whether the Balkans are a bridge or a barrier to radical Islam, one should take into consideration all that has been said so far. If taken for granted, it is the Muslim communities in the Balkans that are the nutrient medium for advocating fundamentalism and extremism. In this respect there is a risk that the region may turn out to be a bridge for the penetration of radical ideology. At the same time, especially in Albania, the government and religious structures and the public attitudes are sufficiently clearly oriented in the opposite direction – towards raising a real barrier for such phenomena – alien to religious traditions and the primary political objectives of the country, and corresponding to the international requirements. Simply both of them should continue to adhere to the same behaviour.

# ISLAM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

*Lyubcho Troharov*

## **History, General Characteristics, Place and Role of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

In order to determine the place and role of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina today, an unprejudiced look is required on the history of the country and specifically on the relations between the confessional communities formed on its territory. Numerous historic documents indicate categorically that on the territory of medieval Bosnia and Herzegovina cohabitated Slavs – Christians under the influence of three churches – Catholic, Orthodox and the so-called Bosnian Church. It is maintained that the Bosnian Church was formed due to the specific conditions in which the population of Central Bosnia lived, as well as on account of its distance from the big Catholic, respectively Orthodox, centres which suggests lesser influence of Catholicism and Orthodoxy over this territory. There are studies of serious scholars from the Balkans (Croats, Bulgarians, Bosnians) and beyond, who think that this territory offered the necessary favourable conditions to the Bogomil heresy (known in the West as Patarini) coming from Bulgaria, of which there are traces even today, mainly in the mountainous part of Central Bosnia and Southern Herzegovina. These traces are the big Bogomili tombstones called by the local population “stechki”. The biggest number of them, well preserved today, are in the Bjelašnica mountain and in the region of the town of Stolac. The presence of three confessions persisted regardless of which bans or kings governed the territory of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of the incessant aspirations of Catholicism and Orthodoxy to expand their influence.

With the final conquest of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Ottomans (1463) and its transformation into a border front zone, the Islamic religion settled in with its sharia canons, strong administration, large army garrisons. The widespread view among historians is that in the first decade of Ottoman occupation of Bosnia mass conversion was carried out of the Christian population to the Islamic faith. It is believed that the first to be

converted were the leaders of the poor mountainous population, which had remained under the influence of the Bogomil heresy. Mass conversion to Islam was noted also of the peasants – farmers and livestock breeders, who were forced to work for the beys coming from the East. Islam found fertile soil also among the town population, which was looking for a more favourable status with the adoption of the new religion, ensuring access to military service or to the administration of the Empire.

The first madrasa in Bosnia and Herzegovina was opened in Sarajevo in 1537 by Gazi Husrev Beg, bearing his name, which in the course of almost five centuries has trained imams from the local Bosniak residents. With its settlement in Bosnia and Herzegovina Islam acquired a privileged status in relation to the Christian Churches, which however, preserved their existence and influence among the local population. The parallel existence of the three confessions, permitted by the Ottoman authorities, allowed the formation in the course of several centuries an attitude of tolerance among the representatives of the different confessional communities, their free movement and communication on everyday level and freedom of settlement in hamlets, villages and towns. For a long time on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina a dominating influence for the status and relationships among the population had the faith and not the ethnicity. According to certain academics this fact was taken into consideration by a large contingent of Sephardic Jews after their expulsion from Spain and they settled in Bosnia and Herzegovina where they enjoyed good reception.

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the withdrawal of its army as well as the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary in 1878 had a profound fateful significance for the Bosniaks and for Islam as a confession. What was most important was that they lost their privileged status in relation to the Christian Churches of the Croats and the Serbs. The new authorities, taking into consideration the complicated political situation in the occupied territory and the threat of the occurrence of conflicts on ethnic and confessional basis, and intent to terminate any influence upon the Islamic community from the outside, took measures to reform its leadership and functioning.

The emergence of the nationalistic forces in the Balkan states and primarily in Serbia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reflected upon the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Serb national doctrine, including the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina within the boundaries of the Serbian state, fell on fertile soil among the intellectuals, the Orthodox Church, organisations and associations of the ethnic Serbs. Croat nationalistic parties and associations, still operating within the border of Austria-Hungary, also had strategies for annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the future Croatian state. At the foundation of the claims of Serbs and Croats to the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina lay the notion that the Muslim Bosniaks were ethnic Serbs, respectively ethnic Croats, who had converted to Islam in the past.

After WWI under the conditions of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and in particular after 1929 in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia Bosnia and Herzegovina became a field of ideological and political confrontation between Serbs and Croats. From the point of view of the King's regime and the Serb Academy of Sciences the Bosniaks were ethnic Serbs, who had become estranged in terms of ethnicity and confession, had become Turkified, and should be evicted from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The programme of the Serb Cultural Club (1937), drawn up by elite professors and academics, attests to this, as do the agreements that the Kingdom concluded with Turkey for the resettlement of the Bosniaks. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Bosniaks from Bosnia and Herzegovina were resettled in Turkey. Pursuant to this programme colonisation was carried out with Serb ethnic population in Bosnia, as well as in Kosovo and Vardar Macedonia.

The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Independent Croatian State (NDH) during WWII created the conditions for mutual annihilation among Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs, for the establishment of concentration camps and genocidal acts. Bosniaks were mobilised in support of the Croatian Ustashe forces – the notorious “Handzar” Muslim Division was formed. The King's forces joined the inter-ethnic confrontation on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the so-called chetnik movement of Draža Mihailović and the partisan resistance led by the Yugoslav Communist Party.

After WWII under the conditions of a totalitarian regime and the new ideology Tito attempted to pacify the Serb and Croat nationalistic forces and to establish an ethnic balance in the leading bodies of the Union of Yugoslav Communists, the state administration and the federal entities. In the course of two decades not a single nationalistic expression was allowed. At the beginning of the 1960's the Serb domination in the state apparatus, the army, the police and in the security services became apparent and this caused displeasure in the republics – Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the autonomous regions Kosovo and Vojvodina. For the growing political tension in the country Tito accused Aleksandar Ranković – the leader of the Serbian communists, minister of the interior and head of the security services after the war, who adhered to the Great Serb idea that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Vardar Macedonia, Kosovo and Vojvodina were part of the exclusive Serb ethnic territory and as such should be governed by a Serb administration. Under the influence of his Croat and Slovene circle Tito took a radical step – removed Ranković from all positions for exceeding his authority and ordered the drafting of a new constitution of the Federation. It was adopted in 1974 with the hope that it would cement the “brotherhood and unity” of the Yugoslav peoples and nationalities. Unfortunately, it was precisely this Constitution that opened the way for the development of processes in the state and the individual federal entities, which led to the disintegration of the federation in the beginning of the 1990's.

The political system and prevalent ideology established in Yugoslavia after WWII and the growing atheism in society dealt a heavy blow on the Islamic confession. In spite of the fact that already in the first Constitution of the state (1946) there was an article obliging the state to respect religious freedom, laws were adopted, one after the other, banning sharia courts, wearing hijab, primary Islamic schools (maktab). The activity of cultural associations (“Gajret” and “People's Hope”), of the Muslim printing shop and the publication of Muslim textbooks. Many of the 119 mosques that had been destroyed during the war were transformed into museums, warehouses and even stables. Most of the waqf properties were nation-

alised and passed under the control of the state. A number of Muslim graveyards were destroyed or transformed into parks or construction sites.

The Muslim Bosniaks tried to resist this policy of the Union of the Yugoslav Communists. Until the 1950's the organisation "Young Muslims" was active but its members were persecuted and punished by imprisonment (among them was the future leader of the Muslims Alija Izetbegović). Islamic texts were distributed secretly and children were taught in mosques with imported textbooks. Dervish groups also operated in private homes.

While in the ranks of the anti-Fascist resistance the Bosniaks accepted to be treated by Serbs and Croats just as Muslims, after the war in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a federal entity, they, falling under the pressure of Serb and Croat ideology and propaganda, were compelled to identify themselves as "unidentified", "Serbs", "Croats", "Yugoslavians", depending on political, social, economic or purely domestic interests.

At the end of the 1950's – early 1960's, due to Tito's ambitions to play a leading role in the Movement of the Nonaligned Countries, an act was adopted which guaranteed religious freedom to all citizens. It was believed that this was a propaganda gesture specifically aimed at the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Islamic world and in particular – Egypt. It was no coincidence that the education of the theology students was redirected from NATO's Tukey to nonaligned Egypt.

In 1968 at a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party a decision was made to give Muslims ethnic and national identity. This decision was legitimised with the Constitution of 1974 and the Muslims became a "state-forming" people on equal footing with the Serbs and the Croats. Although they received the ethnic identity "Muslims" as a constitutional definition, in practice the Serbs and Croats did not recognise this self-identification of theirs as an ethnos, history and culture. They were not given the right to form their own national institutions, to declare their history and literature.

Divisions emerged among the Bosniaks, in their political elite, the intellectuals and the academics on the views regarding the conceptual question about what their true ethnic identity was. For some it was the Slavs,



for others – the Muslim confession (on this occasion an anecdote was spreading in Sarajevo: “born Muslim – atheist by faith”).

Tito's death (1980) and the appearance of the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences on the Serb national question and the Serb statehood (1987) exacerbated to the utmost the political, ideological and inter-nation contradiction on a federal level and within the individual federal entities. A decisive factor for the formation of the new situation became the policy of the Serb leader Slobodan Milošević, based on this Memorandum, at the core of which was the Great Serb claim that Yugoslavia was a Serb state and that Serbia was everywhere where Serbs lived. The last war, however, showed that the Serb claims included half of Croatia, the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and Vojvodina (Milošević avoided publicly to include also Vardar Macedonia). In response to this Serb policy the ethno-national programmes of the Slovenes, Croats, Macedonians, Albanians and Hungarians were activated. The Croatian ethno-national agenda included the claim that 80% of the Bosniaks were Croats (Franjo Tuđman, 1996). The top politicians of the Bosniaks came to the conclusion that the clash between Belgrade and Zagreb threatened the very existence of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the Bosniaks themselves and Islam as a religion. This was the reason why Alija Izetbegović in 1990 officially made public the well-known “Islamic Declaration” (there is evidence that the declaration had been drawn up already at the end of the 1960's). Special attention deserve the following important positions in the Declaration: Islam is incompatible with non-Islamic systems, there can be neither peace, no mutual coexistence between the Islamic faith and the non-Islamic social and political institutions; insisting on its right to organise its own world, Islam excludes the possibility that any foreign ideology on its territory would have the right or possibility to operate; the state should be an expression of the moral principles of the religion and should support it.

In the specific situation of this period the declaration received strong support from different strata of the Republic's population, from representatives of the administration, senior officers in the army and the po-

lice as well as the supreme leadership of the Islamic Community. At the same time prominent intellectuals, representatives of the academic and cultural circles opposed the declaration because it denied the Bosniaks the legitimate right to struggle for preservation of the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and ensuring equal and uncontested rights for all ethnoses and confessions.

On their hand, the authorities in Belgrade and Zagreb, with their intention to divide Bosnia and Herzegovina, about which later specific agreements were negotiated, used the declaration as key evidence of the Muslim threat in the Balkans and in Europe, of the civilisational incompatibility between Islam and Christendom. A propaganda tactic was adopted to persuade the Bosniaks that Bosnia and Herzegovina had no right to existence and that they had to resolve their national question through a national state. At a trilateral meeting of Tuđman, Milošević and Izetbegović (25 March 1991 in Split) Izetbegović was told that Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot survive within its existing borders, that it must disappear as a colonial creation and that a small Islamic state could be a buffer zone between Serbs and Croats. According to available evidence Izetbegović expressed agreement in principle to the formation of "Small Bosnia" around Sarajevo. At the same time some representatives of the great powers in their endeavours to find a peaceful and quick solution of the issue at the lowest possible price expressed agreement with the formation of a "Muslim republic".

### **The Islamic Community – Leadership, Legal Status, Operation**

After WWII with the first Constitution of socialist Yugoslavia of 1946 the Islamic Community received rights equal to the ones of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Such rights it received also with the subsequently adopted constitutions in the 1960's and 1970's, as well as with the last one, adopted in 1974. The Community's activity encompasses 94% of the territory of the republic and includes the Muslim Bosniaks, who comprise, according to official data, 44% in 1991 and 50.11% in 2013 of the population of the country.

The hierarchical structure and activities of the Islamic Community are based on rules established already by the Austria-Hungarian authorities. Elections are held for the leader – Grand Mufti or Reis (Reis-ul-Ulema), for the collective governing body – Riyasat, as well as for regional imams. The aim of the rulers was to make the status of the Muslim denomination equal to the one of the other two Churches, to sever the influence and interference of foreign Islamic centres upon the Islamic Community, particularly from Turkey, and ultimately, to reassert traditional Islam, capable of coexistence with the Christian population in the Empire.

As an independent state after 1992 Bosnia and Herzegovina has signed an agreement with the Holy See on the functioning of the Catholic Church and with the Republic of Serbia – on the activity of the Orthodox Church but still has no agreement with the Islamic Community due to procedural complications. According to available information a draft has been drawn up and proposed for approval by the state parliament.

The leadership of the Islamic Community communicates normally with the authorities on different levels in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and rather rarely with the ones in Republika Srpska, mainly on issues related to the construction and renovation of mosques and the maintenance of waqf properties. The relations of the Islamic Community with the state depend largely on the personality and character of the Grand Mufti, on the positions he supports publicly in defence of the Muslim's interests and the relations with the other confessional communities.

A so-called Interreligious Council was created after the war which comprises the leaders of all denominations. They meet periodically and discuss issues of common interest – primarily of property or financial nature.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) became an important factor for the mobilisation and politisation of the Islamic Community. Its collective leadership, the Grand Mufti and a large part of the regional imams supported the ideas of Alija Izetbegović, laid down in the "Islamic Declaration". The Islamic Community played an important role for the creation of the Muslim Army. It helped in the recruitment of people through sermons (khutbah) in local mosques and in ensuring financial

resources and weapons from abroad, using its international contacts. It is undoubtful that it assisted the arrival and participation in the war of the mujahedeen. Seeing, however, the threat of a military defeat of the Bosniaks and its tragic consequences, as well as the hesitant involvement of the international actors for stopping the war, the leadership of the Islamic Community accepted the idea of a division of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the formation of small independent Muslim state – called “Muslim Fraction”. A small number of imams together with intellectuals, cultural figures and politicians outside the circle around Izetbegović favoured the preservation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the belief that their destiny was inseparable from the destiny of this state, that its division in ethnic parts would mean ghettoisation of the Muslim Bosniaks and that the neighbouring states would continue with new territorial claims (the NGO “Bosnia International Forum” established in 1993 by leading intellectuals is known for its activity).

In its contacts with Islamic states during the war (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Iran, Jordan) the leadership of the Islamic Community sought political and financial support for the Bosniaks and, more specifically, assistance for the construction and renovation of Islamic and historic monuments in the country. The greatest support was received from Turkey. It provided funds for the construction of the Madrasa and the library to it in Sarajevo, for the renovation of türbes, bridges and hammams, built already during the time of the Ottoman Empire. This gave the Islamic Community higher self-confidence, its leadership started to defend openly the Bosniak political leadership and the Islamic religion and to deplore the aggressive policy of the neighbouring states. At the same time, it opened itself more resolutely to the outside, seeking contacts with government institutions and the public, with Islamic communities in Sandžak and the Republic of Macedonia, with international organisations. It also opened itself to the inside – for the solution of its own problems, initiating talks and debates on the religious and secular principles of education, the need for training its own personnel, the new curricula of the Madrasa, the question of the foreign Islamist influence and the preservation of the traditional Islam of

the Bosniaks. Among the leadership of the Islamic Community prevails the view that no foreign influence, which might endanger the “existence of the tenets of traditional spirituality or the institutional Islamic teaching” of the Bosniaks, should be allowed (25 August 1997, Reis Mustafa Cerić, Bosnian Grand Mufti).

Apparently, the closest cooperation with the top Bosniak politicians and the Islamic Community so far is being sought by Turkey. This is understandable from its strategic agenda for relations with the Muslim communities in the Balkan countries and its position as one of the guarantors for the implementation of the Dayton agreement and the maintenance of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also from the all-embracing support for the Sarajevo authorities during the war. Turkey actively supports the membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina in NATO and the EU, advocates and sponsors the participation of the Islamic Community in international Islamic fora. It declares itself as a strategic partner of Bosnia and Herzegovina, though this is not approved by the Authorities in the Republika Srpska.

### **Political Parties on Ethnic Basis**

Almost all parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina are formed on an ethnic basis. The ones of the Serbs and Croats are sister parties of and have the same names as the ones in Serbia, respectively Croatia, but with a stronger nationalistic hue. In their rhetoric and attitude there still exists aversion to the representatives of the opposite side during the war – persons and political forces. There are party leaders who had fought at the fronts and now are in the government of the state at different levels.

The first party of the Bosniaks – Party of Democratic Action, was created by Alija Izetbegović immediately before the war. It played the main role in the formation of the “Muslim Army” and in the negotiating process for stopping the war and concluding the Dayton agreement of 1995. This party and its leader had the strongest, almost messianic, influence among the Muslim Bosniaks during the war and in forming the political *status quo* in the country after it. It has dominant positions both in the state bodies and in the cantonal and municipal governments in the Bosniak – Croat

Federation. The present leader of the party is the son of Alija Izetbegović Bakir, currently – member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The second significant party of the Bosniaks is the Union for a Better Future of Bosnia and Herzegovina of the media mogul Fahrudin Radončić. The third purely Bosniak party, but comparatively weaker than the two previous ones, is the Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The only party that emerged with claims for multi-ethnic membership is the Social Democratic Party with leader Zlatko Lagumdžija. Among its members, besides Bosniaks, is a small number of Serbs and Croats, mainly former members of the Union of Yugoslav Communists and the pre-war administration. Its influence among the Bosniaks is negligible and it has almost no presence in the governing bodies.

All Bosniak parties state as their aims the preservation of the united and integral state, a new constitution, equality of political, social, economic and cultural rights for all ethnoses, membership of the country in NATO and the EU.

### **Security, Processes and Threats**

The events in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war, as well as the formation and functioning of the state on a federal-confederal principle pursuant to the Dayton agreement complicate extremely the internal political situation. This is exacerbated by the formulated at Dayton and granted to Belgrade and Zagreb “special relationship” respectively with Republika Srpska and Federation Bosnia and Herzegovina, which obstructs the negotiation process among the ethnoses for the establishment of stable state bodies, including army and police, for the demarcation and protection of the state border and for guaranteeing the security of the citizens. Because of this Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the state with most serious political, social, economic and security problems in the Balkans. Its borders and territory in general remain vulnerable for penetration of refugees from conflict areas, as well as persons and groups that might commit terrorist acts. The risk of internal terrorism, related to radical Islamic groups may be deemed minimal. This conclusion is justified in particular with the good

links and cooperation of the highest political leadership of the Bosniaks and the Islamic Community with almost all Islamic Countries. The probability is slight that there might be groups and organisations inside the country, which would recruit jihadist fighters returning from the Middle East or among the local population.

Regardless of the ethnic cleansing during the war in both entities and the voluntary resettlement and migration the population remains ethnically mixed on the entire territory of the country and the emergence of such groups could not remain unnoticed (according to official data of 1991 the Bosniaks inhabited 94% of the country's territory, the Serbs – 95%, the Croats – 70%). Besides, Bosnia and Herzegovina hosts a strong international presence, including army and police from NATO and the EU, which is additional guarantee for the identification and disarming of such groups.

After the year 2000 on the request of the USA and the EU the authorities in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted jointly with the EU police mission (EUPM) an inspection for the existence of persons from the mujahedeen battalion, which had participated in the war on the side of the Bosniaks against the Serb forces, who had remained in the country. A small number of persons was identified in several mountainous villages, who had married local women and were engaged in farming and stock-breeding. After the inspection monitoring of their behaviour was started. The Presidency, the government and all political parties and the leadership of the Islamic Community have made statements that no presence of any extremist and radical forces will be allowed on the territory of the country. In compliance with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU reforms were carried out in the Bosnia and Herzegovina army and police for their stabilisation and improving their capacity to defend on their own the security of the state.

## **Conclusions**

The state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, its indigenous Bosniak population and its Islamic confession are a European reality which cannot be overlooked or eliminated.

The Bosniaks and Islam in the centuries-old cohabitation with Serbs, Croats and other ethnoses, with the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches have never adopted or followed extremist or xenophobic ideology threatening other ethnoses and religions, different from their own. On the contrary, it is they who during long historic periods and in different social and political environments, have been subjected to discrimination, violence, hatred and resettlement, and in the last war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991-1995) even to genocide.

In its cohabitation with the Christian religions on a common territory under the same political regimes and the influence of European civilisation and culture Bosnian Islam acquired specific characteristics – peacefulness, openness and tolerance towards other, different religious communities, which defines it as traditional. It is no coincidence that in different periods of history Jews, Bulgarians – mainly from the western borderlands and from Vardar Macedonia, and other ethnoses have been welcomed in the country.

The appearance of the “Islamic Declaration” (1990) may be considered a precedent in the history of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an unfortunate and short-sighted step of a limited circle of Bosniaks in response to the aggressive nationalism and the looming threat for the security of their state emerging in Serbia. In the complex situation immediately preceding the war it was supported by a substantial portion of the Islamic community but in the course of the war and after it was rejected. However, it turned out that the apprehensions were real, since the war which Serbs and Croats fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina was for the liquidation of this state, for the division of its territory and the formation of a mini-state of Muslim Bosniaks serving as a buffer zone between the two ethnoses and between Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the future the place and role of Bosnia and Herzegovina will depend primarily on the way in which the state will be built, on the preservation of its integrity and indivisibility, on the possibility for the Bosniaks to have equal political, social, economic and cultural status with the Serbs and the Croats, on ensuring the equal participation of the Bosniaks in the forma-



tion and functioning of the authorities on all levels, on guaranteeing equal right to the confessional communities across the country's territory.

Today the Bosniaks and their parties understand that their rights can be ensured through amendments in the Dayton Agreement, more specifically with a new constitution of the state, with authorities on three levels on the entire territory, elimination of the attempts at separatism and secessionism, with the strong guarantee that the Muslim Bosniaks would receive due rights, which could ensure the admission of the country in the EU.

Ensuring equal status of the three confessions in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most important prerequisite for the preservation of the traditional character of Islam, for its protection from negative development towards Islamic radicalism and terrorism.

In case of a possible destabilisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina or encroachment on its integrity (an attempt at secession by Republika Srpska) that will affect existential interests of the Muslim Bosniaks, there is no doubt that Islamic states will respond in its support with forces and resources as they did during the war of 1992-1995, and the danger of penetration in the territory of the country of radical Islamist elements, including Bosniaks, who have participated in extremist groups in the Middle East and having returned home, becomes a reality. In an isolated two-million community, with uncontrolled borders and in serious economic crisis it would be easy to radicalise persons and groups capable to participate in terrorist acts in the Balkans and in Europe.

The admission to NATO of Bosnia and Herzegovina will be of key importance for its integrity and stability within its recognised borders, for the successful functioning of its state institutions because membership *per se* may restrict the negative influence of the possibility given to Serbia and Croatia with the Dayton agreement for special (parallel) relation with Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively, which feed separatism and secessionism in all three ethnic communities and obstruct the dialogue between the political elites and the functioning of the state institutions.

## ISLAM IN BULGARIA: MOST MUSLIMS IN BULGARIA PRACTICE TRADITIONAL ISLAM

*Prof. Iskra Baeva, PhD*

### **Islam in Bulgaria as a Historic Legacy**

The Bulgarian lands, situated in the middle of the Balkan Peninsula, remained the longest under Ottoman rule – for almost five centuries. This explains the existence in Orthodox Bulgaria of one of the biggest Muslim communities in the Balkans. According to census data of 1887 the Muslims were 500-600 thousand or 19% of the population, and in 1926 – 10.57%. The diminishing share of the Muslims was due to the rapid demographic growth of the Christian population and the periodic emigration of the Muslims (130 thousand in the inter-war period). Only the poorest and the least educated Muslims remained in Bulgaria (illiteracy was 80%) who lived in the outermost rural areas.

The Muslims in the Bulgarian state preserved their religious autonomy and the Sharia, they had private schools with education in the Turkish language with the Arab alphabet, as well as members of parliament from different parties. An attempt at interfering in their faith was made during the Balkan wars 1912-1913 when the Bulgarian Muslims<sup>2\*</sup> (the pomaks) were forced to change their names, but it was short-lived. After the wars the rights of the Muslims in Bulgaria were protected by the Agreement on the rights of minorities signed in Paris on 28 July 1919. Another attempt at integration was made at the end of the 1930's and the beginning of the 1940's by the organisation Druzhba "Rodina".

In the era of socialism, the attitude towards the Muslims in Bulgaria passed different stages. The communist regime was an opponent of religion and restricted both the Orthodox Church and Islam. Regardless of this the Orthodox Church and the Muslim confession continued their activities, which were financed by the state in exchange for strict control.

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\* *Translator's note.* In this text the term "Bulgarian Muslims" denotes Muslims (or Moham-medans, locally called "Pomaks"), who are of Slav ethnicity but have adopted Islam during the Ottoman rule in Bulgaria, as opposed to the term "Muslims in Bulgaria", which comprises all Muslims of different ethnic origin – Turks, Bulgarians, Roma, etc.

At the beginning of the rule of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) priority was given to the class approach, according to which special care had to be taken of Muslims in Bulgaria in the field of education, culture and social policy. This continued until the destalinisation carried out by Todor Zhivkov. From the end of the 1950's he replaced the cultural autonomy of the Muslims in Bulgaria with a policy of integration through assimilation. This policy was realised with the change of the names of the Roma-Muslims (about 255 thousand) and of the Bulgarian Muslims (about 200 thousand) in the 1960's and 1970's reaching its peak with the forced renaming of Bulgarian Turks (about 850 thousand) at the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985, called "revival process". This drastic violation of human rights was not accompanied by a change in confession but just with the restriction of certain rituals – that circumcision had to take place only under medical supervision, the burial rituals had to be civic, etc. This policy was terminated after the end of the Cold War. The "revival process" was annulled on 29 December 1989, the Arab-Turkish names of the Bulgarian Turks were restored, even without the endings -ov, -ev, -eva, -ova.

### **Role and Place of Islam in Bulgaria after 1989**

Islam in Bulgaria is the traditional religion of the Bulgarian Turks, Bulgarian Muslims, part of the Roma and some smaller ethnic groups (Karakachans, Tartars). It is the second confession in the country and its ratio with Orthodoxy is 1:7.5 (577 139 or 7.83% Muslims against 4 374 135 or 59.39% Orthodox in 2011).

The Muslims are free to practice their faith. In the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted on 12 July 1991 by the Grand National Assembly freedom of religion is guaranteed. Article 13, paragraph 2 states: *"Religious institutions are separated from the state"*, but in article 4 there is a warning that religion must not be used for political purposes. This was caused by the disputes in the first years of the transition about the place and role of Islam, when the consequences of the "revival proves" were being overcome.

The rights and obligations of Muslims are regulated by the Confessions Act of 29 December 2002. It expresses "respect" towards Islam and

states the freedom of choice of religious convictions and practices. The state undertakes to *“ensure conditions for free and unimpeded enjoyment of the right of confession”* (art. 4, para. 3) and not to allow *“discrimination on the basis of faith”* (art. 4). The right *“to give and receive religious education in a language of choice”* (art. 6, para. 6), while the restrictions are for activities directed against national security and public order and for political reasons (art. 7, paras. 1 and 2)

Since 1990 the Muslims in Bulgaria have been rightful participants in the development of the Republic of Bulgaria but a large section of the Bulgarian public treats them with suspicion and apprehension. There are different reasons for this: their active role in political life (during the first government of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) – 1991-1992); their domination in several regions of the country; their links with neighbouring Turkey. So, in the new circumstances the confrontation between Christians and Muslims is being revived, albeit under a democratic political system and guaranteed rights of Islam in Bulgaria.

The largest Muslim group are the Bulgarian Turks (612 541), the Bulgarian Muslims (131 531), part of the Roma (42 201), the Karakachans (2 556), the Tartars, the Albanians. A special group are the Arab immigrants from different periods (between 11 000 and 17 000). They have a different attitude towards Islam therefore should not be regarded as a single mass and consideration should be given to the judgement who are an obstacle and who are a vehicle for the penetration of radical Islam in the country

### **Islamic Communities in Bulgaria**

The Islamic communities in Bulgaria have equal rights with the other religious communities. The Bulgarian state provides material and financial support to the Muslim organisations. This does not mean that there are no problems between the Bulgarian state and the Grand Mufti office.

In 2011 the Muslims in Bulgaria were 577 139 or 10% of the believers. The tendency of the past two decades is the number of Muslims to drop and this process continues at present. Their numbers diminish absolutely as does the entire population, but also relatively – from 12.2% to

10%. The prevalent part of the Muslims in Bulgaria are Sunni (546 004), while the Shia (27 407) are just 5%. The downward trend for the Muslims is due to their economic emigration mainly to the European Union and Turkey. The Muslims emigrate quicker and more successfully than the rest of the Bulgarians because they have their communities abroad and a suitable employment profile (in construction). The drop is biggest (36.5%) for the Shia, while for the Sunni this figure is just 11%.

The Bulgarian Turks and the Bulgarian Muslims live predominantly in several regions, while the Muslim Roma are spread evenly across the country's territory. The Turks are concentrated in the regions of Kurdzhali (69.6%), Razgrad (53.7%), Shumen, Burgas, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, Targovishte, Smolyan, Silistra, Dobrich and Ruse. Over two-thirds of the Muslims reside there. They predominate in 43 of a total of 262 municipalities in Bulgaria, most of all in the seven municipalities of Kurdzhali region, six of the seven municipalities of Razgrad (excluding Razgrad), half of the municipalities of Shumen region. The largest share is in Chernoochene municipality (Kurdzhali region) – 96.8%, Venets (Shumen region) – 95.9%, Satovcha municipality – 91.3%, Ruen – 90% and Kaolinovo – 90%. The Muslims in Bulgaria traditionally live in the Rhodopes in the southern part of the country, predominantly in the regions, Smolyan, Kurdzhalu, Haskovo, Pazardzhik.

Representatives of the Shia Muslims live mainly in North-eastern Bulgaria: the municipalities Kaynardzha (51.5%), Kotel (16.2%), Dulovo (11.6%) and Kubrat (11.3%).

The religious leadership of the Muslims is effected by the office of the Grand Mufti, which takes care of the confession and maintains contacts with the executive, the judiciary, the government institutions and the public organisations. The office of the Grand Mufti looks after the training of imams, the free practice of the faith, the religious education of children and Islamic charity. It has administration which supports the Grand Mufti and the Supreme Muslim Council. There are regional mufti offices in 18 cities and towns in the country: Aitos, Veliko Turnovo, Gotsse Delchev, Dobrich, Krumovgrad, Kurdzhali, Pazardzhik, Pleven, Plo-

vdiv, Razgrad, Ruse, Silistra, Sliven, Smolyan, Sofia, Targovishte, Haskovo and Shumen. There are also 1 450 mosque boards. At the beginning of the transition the office of the Grand Mufti published the newspaper "Muslim", transformed today into a monthly magazine, which has also a children's supplement "Hilyal" (Moon).

The Grand Mufti is Mustafa Alif Hadji (from the Bulgarian Muslims), who has studied Islam in Jordan and Turkey and has occupied senior positions ever since 1997. The Grand Mufti is elected by a National Muslim Conference. In 2010 the election of Mustafa Hadji was challenged by the former Grand Mufti Nedim Gendjev after the Supreme Court of Cassation declared illegitimate three extraordinary national Muslim conferences. The dispute was resolved with a ruling by the Sofia Appellate Court, which recognised the decision of the extraordinary National Muslim Conference (12 February 2011) and Mustafa Hadji was re-elected also by the subsequent conference in January 2016. The disputes demonstrate the problems within the Muslim confession inherited from the time of the "revival process". One of the sides had cooperated with the authorities at the time as Nedim Gendjev had done, who now accuses the present leadership that it is supporting the radicals. On the other side are the participants in the resistance against the "revival process", who have become members of the new leadership of the Muslims.

In Bulgarian schools there is an optional subject "Islamic religion", which is taught if sufficient number of pupils enrol. In order to support enrolment, the Grand Mufti office organises promotion campaigns among the Muslims during the Ramazan under the slogan "Support Muslim education. Be involved!"

One of the most important activities of the Grand Mufti office is training religious staff for the mosques and the places of worship which in Bulgaria are around 1500. This takes place in the three secondary religious schools in Ruse, Momchilgrad and Shumen, where pupils from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade are taught. There is also a Higher Islamic Institute in Sofia established after the transformation of the existing college on 9 March 1998 with decision No. P-15 of the Council of Ministers. The site of

the Institute describes it as *“high school of the Muslim confession (Grand Mufti office) in Bulgaria with the status of a legal person”*, with a term of education of four years. It awards a bachelor’s degree and qualification “Islamic theologian” and its alumni may serve as imams, vaizes and muftis or work as teachers. The problem of the Higher Islamic Institute is the lack of premises and of accreditation under the Higher Education Act, which prevents its graduates from finding realisation.

The constant deficit of imams compels the Grand Mufti office to organise nine-month courses in Sarnitsa, the selection of the boys for it being conducted by the regional muftis. Imams may qualify and requalify in courses, held in the villages Lyulyakovo, Bilka and Delchevo.

The Muslim communities in Bulgaria practice freely their religion beliefs but their materialisation sometimes brings about organisational problems and public resistance.

### **Political Parties on Religious or Ethnic Basis**

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria does not allow the creation of political parties on religious or ethnic basis. Its article 11. para. 4 stipulates: *“No parties may be formed on ethnic, racial or confessional basis, or parties which pursue forced occupation of state power”*. The constitution was adopted in the summer of 1991 when in the Grand National Assembly sat the Turkish Muslim party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which makes clear the context of the prohibition. It aimed at termination of the existence of the MRF – the first party of the Bulgarian Turks and Muslims in Bulgarian history. Until then the political practice was that the interests of the ethnic groups were realised through the existing political parties. And the creation and establishment of the MRF may be explained with the situation of 1990 when the political system was being restructured and the need to overcome the painful consequence of the “revival process” was at the forefront. The creators of the MRF justified the establishment of the party with the distrust of the Muslims towards the other parties after the Bulgarian state had violated their rights so drastically. Therefore, they wanted to have a party of their own, which would defend their specific rights.

Already at the beginning the MRF succeeded on two occasions to prevent the attempts to challenge the existence of the party before the Constitutional Court (Constitutional case No. 1 of 1991, which ended with Decision No. 4 of 1992). In subsequent years under the leadership of Ahmed Dogan, perennial chairman from 1990 to 2013, the MRF re-asserted itself as the single representative of the Muslims in Bulgaria and became a constant factor in political life, regardless of the serious negative attitudes towards it among wide public circles.

According to the documents the MRF is *“a liberal-democratic party”*, the aim of which is *“to contribute to the unity of all Bulgarian citizens, respecting the rights and freedoms of the minorities in Bulgaria in compliance with the Constitution of the country, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the Framework Convention for Protection of National Minorities, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and other international agreements”*. Regardless of the stated generally liberal character of the MRF, its political practice shows that it is a political representative of the Bulgarian Turks and the Muslims in Bulgaria. This is evidenced by: the membership, the MRF voters, who are almost entirely from the regions with mixed population, the activity of the MRF representatives in parliament, in the local authorities and in their participation in the government of Simeon Saxe Coburg-Gotha (2001-2005), Sergei Stanishev (2005-2009) and Pamen Oresharski (2013-2014).

Ahmed Dogan managed to attract in the MRF a small group of Orthodox Bulgarians, who are members of the leadership and of parliament. In this way he legitimised the party as non-ethnic and non-Islamic, notwithstanding the fact that the presence of the Bulgarians remains purely formal and does not affect the local structures. The electoral presence of the MRF seemed threatened after the Bulgarian Turks started to leave Bulgaria in search of livelihood. Then Dogan oriented the movement towards the Roma (not only towards the Muslim ones but towards all), which helped him preserve the role of the party. MRF ranks the third political party and until 2009 played the role of a middleman, on whom the formation of the government depended. This position was lost under the governments headed by Boiko Borisov (2009-2013, 2014 – present



day), but the MRF continues to play an important role in politics as the party with most stable parliamentary presence due to the secure electoral support by the Bulgarian Turks and Muslims.

The party is linked with the bodies of the Muslim confession which is evidenced by the constant presence of religious representatives at celebrations, memorial meetings and other MRF events, as well as of representatives of the party at important Muslim fora. An example is the National Muslim Conference in January 2016 which approved Mustafa Hadji as Grand Mufti – at this event members of the MRF leadership were present – Mustafa Karadayi, Rushen Riza and Yunal Lyutfi.

Attempts at breaking up the monopoly of the MRF over the Muslim population have been made since the 1990's but they all have failed so far. In 1997-1999 Guner Tahir established National MRF but it quickly faded away. In January 2011 the former MRF deputy-chairman Kasim Dal left the party and on 1 December 2012 established People's party "Freedom and Dignity" (PPFD) together with the former leader of the youth MRF Korman Ismailov. The most successful attempt at splitting the MRF was made by the successor of Ahmed Dogan in the leadership Lyutfi Mestan (chairman from 2013 to 2015). At the end of 2015 after sharp criticism by the honorary chairman Ahmed Dogan he was removed from the leadership and on 10 April 2016 created his own party – "Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance" (DRFT). Mestan received the support of the Republic of Turkey and of the Turkish ambassador at the time Süleyman Gökçe, which caused a negative reaction in Bulgaria and even an unsuccessful attempt was made to prevent the registration of DRFT. The party created structures and participated in the 2017 parliamentary elections but with the just over 100 thousand votes cast for it and 2.86% of the vote failed to enter parliament.

### **Risks of Radicalisation among the Muslim Community**

The risk of radicalisation of the Muslims in Europe and in the Balkans was outlined after the start of the so-called war on terror in 2001. The process is global but also a regional one. The consequences of the wars after the collapse of Yugoslavia, which had also a religious colouring, contributed

to the penetration of radical Islam in the Balkans. They nurture a favourable environment for Islamisation of the regions populated by Muslims in the Balkans. The greatest concern is caused by the operation of the widespread in Saudi Arabia Wahhabi sect.

Bulgaria was neighbouring Yugoslavia, military action was taking place also on its border, although thankfully did not cross it, therefore the public environment remained unaffected by the religious conflicts. The so-called Bulgarian ethnic model also played a role, which in my view should not be credited to Ahmed Dogan and the MRF, as it is claimed, but to the historically established inter-ethnic and interreligious relations. But there is no way that the country may remain aside from the radicalisation of Islam.

The social consequences of the transition to a market economy resulting in deindustrialisation, high unemployment, constant or temporary labour emigration of a substantial number of Bulgarian citizens, a good portion of whom are Muslim, open a niche for the penetration of Islam that is not traditional for the Bulgarian lands. In the difficult situation of the 1990's Muslims in Bulgaria began to receive financial aid from Muslim organisations abroad, which were used to build 150 new mosques. What is more concerning is that with the absence of strict control from the state on the Islamic educational institutions such grants were used to establish also so-called educational centres, through which Wahhabism penetrates. In 2003 the authorities closed down several Islamic centres because of suspicions that Islamic groups financed by Saudis with probable links to radical Islamic organisations (Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) operated in them.

As can be seen, the main threat for the penetration of more conservative Islam in Bulgaria are the educational institutions. According to analysts like Dimiter Avramov, alongside the official Muslim schools, seven others have been opened, which are not registered and from which about 3 thousand young Muslims have graduated.

An indication for the penetration of radical Islam was the break up in 2010 of the organisation "Al Waqf-Al Islami", which operated in the municipalities Blagoevgrad, Rudozem, Smolyan, Plovdiv, Velingrad and Pazardzhik and which for eighteen months had received EUR 400 000

from Saudi Arabia. The action of the security services brought about the first in Bulgaria trial against 13 imams, who had studied Islam in Saudi Arabia. They were charged for distribution of *“anti-democratic ideology – objection to the principles of democracy, separation of powers, liberalism, statehood and the rule of law, basic human rights, such as gender equality and religious freedom, through preaching the ideology of the Salafist trend of Islam and imposing a Sharia state”*. The trial began in 2012 and ended in 2014 but with only one effective sentence for Ahmed Musa Ahmed, imam of the mosque “Abu Bekir” in the Roma neighbourhood of Pazardzhik. Two more suspended sentences were issued and the remaining defendants were fined.

The trial in Pazardzhik remains an isolated case, which indicates that there is no immediate threat of radical Islam penetrating among the majority of Muslims in Bulgaria. The failure of the attempts at their radicalisation indicates that they were objected by the traditional Muslims and that they have found fertile soil among the new converts to Islam in the Roma communities and among the Bulgarian Muslims.

### **Foreign Influence upon the Local Islamic Communities**

Since the main part of Muslims in Bulgaria are of Turkish origin, they feel related to neighbouring Turkey. This is evidenced by the numerous emigration waves towards Bulgaria’s southern neighbour and, for that matter, by the words of the MRF leader of late 1991: *“Bulgaria’s road to Europe passes through the Bosphorus”*. The historic link of the Muslims in Bulgaria with Turkey becomes a problem for the Bulgarian state lately, when the secular nature of Kemalist Turkey is questioned by the new leader of the country Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The influence of Turkey on the Muslims in Bulgaria aims at maintaining a channel of influence on Bulgaria’s policy. This is particularly evident after the launching of the strategy of neo-Ottomanism, reminiscent of the common past of the peninsula within the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish state relies mainly on the MRF – it maintains contacts with the MRF leadership and assists it in the voting of the thousands of Bulgarian citizens

living in Turkey, who invariably support the MRF. Gradually, however, the MRF is emancipating itself from Turkey and is asserting itself as a Bulgarian party, therefore Bulgaria's southern neighbour is focusing on the creation of alternative political formations. In this way the PPF of Kasim Dal was born, who in 2013 was present at Erdoğan's victory rally, and later DRFT of Lyutfi Mestan, who after his expulsion from the MRF sought protection in the Turkish Embassy in Sofia. Both political projects do not enjoy great success although Turkish support for them is ongoing.

The second channel for the influence of Turkey is through the Muslim religion. With the difficult financial situation of the Grand Mufti office, the shortage of imams and the lack of state control Turkey started to render financial and personnel support through the Turkish Directorate of Religious affairs (Diyanet). In this way already in the 1990's with the mediation of the Grand Mufti office the three Muslim secondary schools, the construction and maintenance of their buildings as well as the teachers and deputy-directors, sent by the ministry of education of Turkey were financed. There is Turkish presence also in the Higher Islamic Institute. According to information by Ahmed Ahmedov, secretary of the Grand Mufti office, annually 40% or BGN 3 million of the financing of the educational institutions comes from Turkey. In 2016 a list was published of 95 Turkish Islamic workers who are employed in the mufti offices and the big mosques in Bulgaria. Because of interference in the life of the Muslims in Bulgaria the chief coordinator of the Diyanet Adem Jerinde, who was also deputy-dean of the Higher Islamic Institute in Sofia, responsible for appointments and financing of the Muslim schools, was extradited from Bulgaria.

The Turkish influence over the religious life of the Muslims in Bulgaria materialises due to the ambiguities in the Confessions Act of 2003. This caused public debate in particular after the nationalists under the name "United Patriots" joined the third government of Boiko Borisov in 2017. Proposals for amending the law were made at that time that would restrict the possibilities of foreign influence and raise barriers before the penetration into Bulgaria of Islamic practices which are alien in Bulgaria.

## **Recruitment of Jihadist Fighters**

As opposed to other countries in the Balkans, there is no information about Bulgarian jihadist fighters in the conflicts in the Middle East. This does not mean that such a danger does not exist. On 18 July 2012 a bomb attack was carried out on a bus with Israeli tourists at Burgas airport in which seven persons died and 35 were injured. It remains the only terrorist act on Bulgarian territory so far, the perpetrator of which is a foreigner who had arrived in Bulgaria for this purpose.

Regardless of the fact that the Bulgarian security services have no information about Bulgarian jihadists, in 2014 in relation with the trial in Pazardzhik such suspicions were born. They provoked the Grand Mufti office, which in the middle of September of the same year condemned the "Islamic State" and called upon the Muslims in Bulgaria *"not to succumb to the provocations of these people and to dissociate themselves from their actions"*.

For the time being the only threat in Bulgaria from jihadist fighters comes from their transit through the country.

## **Risk Assessment of Islamist Terrorist Acts**

At least for the time being – August 2018 – the risk of terrorist acts on Bulgarian territory committed by radical Islamist groups is minimal. In Bulgaria there is no critical mass of people capable of creating a logistic infrastructure for such actions.

## **Measures against Islamic Radicalisation after 2000**

The developments in the last years in neighbouring countries as well as the series of terrorist acts in Europe urged the Bulgarian authorities to address the problem. Preparation began in 2017 of amendments to the Confessions Act and in early 2018 the main political parties submitted to the National Assembly a bill (a joint draft of the governing party GERB, the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party and the MRF, as well as an alternative one of the "United Patriots" who are part of the government). Their aim is to raise legal barriers to the penetration of radical Islam. The amendments envisage government subsidies for the main confessions in order to discontinue financing

from abroad; ban on the participation of political figures in the governing bodies of religious communities; ban on foreign citizens to execute religious rites in Bulgarian places of worship; control over the curricula and content of religious educational activities. The Grand Mufti office, however, disagreed with the restrictions on financing and involving foreigners in the service, with the attempt to present Muslims as *“a threat to national security of the country”*, and in general with the attempts to give a definition of the term “radical Islam” (on this topic the Supreme Muslim Council sent a letter to the state institutions, accompanied with the signatures of 46 thousand Muslims).

## Conclusions

The general conclusion with which I wish to end, is that the large Muslim community in Bulgaria cannot be perceived as a direct threat to the security of the country on account of the radicalisation of some Muslims in the Balkans, in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. The main mass of the Muslims in Bulgaria plays the role of a barrier before the radicalisation of Islam in Bulgaria.

My argument for this conclusion is that most of the Muslims in Bulgaria practice traditional Islam, which can be defined as moderate. The coexistence between Orthodox Christians and Muslims has a longstanding tradition, in which there was everything – annihilation, confrontation, conflicts but also – good neighbourliness and cooperation. The tendency for cooperation should continue with the efforts of both parties.

There are also worrisome tendencies among the Muslims in Bulgaria which cannot be overlooked. The issue refers to the penetration of the ideas of radical Islam primarily among the Roma and most of all the new converts. The second group susceptible to radicalisation is among part of the Bulgarian Muslims. In both cases this refers to young people (among the Turks the birth rate is lower than among the Roma and the Bulgarian Muslims), isolated from society and with serious economic and social problems.

It should not be forgotten that the threat of radicalisation of Muslims in Bulgaria may come as a result of negative changes in the international relations and in the environment outside Bulgaria.

## KOSOVO: A COLLISION BETWEEN TRADITIONAL TOLERANCE AND RADICALISM

***Bobi Bobev***

On one of the central boulevards in Pristina, immediately opposite the university campus, rises the imposing building of the newly built Catholic cathedral "Mother Theresa". If one visits the town of Peja (Peć) and heads towards the buildings of the local Serb Orthodox Patriarchate, just before reaching them one cannot help noticing the renovated Catholic church. From the hill of the Prizren fortress one can easily count more than 50 mosques and in close proximity to the one in the town centre is the Serb church "St. George" with the medieval temple "St. Nicholas" opposite it. Such a picture may be seen almost anywhere in Kosovo and it seems that it proves the unproblematic coexistence between the different religions – all the more so that the overwhelming majority of the population are Albanians, traditionally known for their tolerance in this sphere of public life. To that one could add the peaceful relations between the religions both during pre-war and socialist Yugoslavia taking into consideration the large Muslim population in the country.

This inherited tolerance, however, was put to a serious test in modern times and especially in the last two decades. The bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia awoke old contradictions and brought to the forefront both ethnic and religious confrontation. The consequences were catastrophic with more than 200 000 dead and the inherited risks of further similar developments. And the conflict in Kosovo was waiting in the wings. The threat of a new bloodbath in the Balkans was what urged the international community to adopt a tougher course and efforts to prevent it. NATO conducted the operation "Allied Force" against the regime of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević and the consequences are well-known – the Kumanovo Agreement, Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council and the establishment of an actual protectorate in the erstwhile Serbian autonomous region, unilateral declaration of independence on 17 February 2008 and the birth of a new sovereign political actor in the Balkans.

The question naturally arises: what was at the root of the clash in 1998-1999 and to what extent religion was pertinent to it, considering the obvious fact that the Albanian majority practices Islam and the Serb minority – Eastern Orthodoxy? Let us give the floor to two people who are not only immediate witnesses of the events, but also spiritual leaders of the local population. In May 2013 a conference “Dialogue Between Religions” took place in the town of Peja under the auspices of the Kosovo President Atifete Jahjaga, which later on was transformed into traditional and is organised with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pristina. Among the keynote speakers at the first event of this nature were Naim Tërnavë, leader of the Muslim Community of Kosovo, and Bishop Theodosije, spiritual leader of the Eparchy of Raška-Prizren of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Their opinions to a large extent coincided and are very indicative. Tërnavë pointed out that the dialogue on all issues, including religious ones, was the only acceptable way. Even during the peak of the events of 1998-1999, in time of war, the religious communities were seeking contacts between them in the name of peace. And Theodosije seemed even more categorical. He underlined that this conflict was not religious but rather an ethnic one – a clash of two opposing national agendas. Kosovo is a colourful mosaic in ethnic and religious terms and because of this dialogue has no alternative, the guiding principle should be the maxim that religion should unite and not divide.

It is apparent that both opinions of exceptionally respected and highly placed persons coincide and the question logically arises why, less than two decades after the military operation, different expert assessments define Kosovo as a place of serious religious confrontation and a hotbed for jihadists for the wars in the Middle East. Enormous significance, undoubtedly, has the fact that it is religion that is the clear delineator between the Albanian majority in Kosovo and the unwanted Serbian authorities. And still, one has to look for the interference of another, imperatively foreign force that would transform confessional difference into ethnic intolerance. Because only under such influence the once tolerant society may be converted in a comparatively short time into a source of extremism and a channel for the export of jihadists – according to the assessment of the respected New York Times.



### **Current Confessional Picture, Role and Place of Islam in It**

The consideration of this issue requires also a glance towards the developments of the past even without going too deep in retrospect. The territory of Kosovo in the Middle Ages was consecutively within the borders of Byzantium, and of Bulgaria, and of Serbia – all this in the absence of an integral Albanian state in this period. Later these lands were part of the Ottoman Empire, where the Albanians enjoyed a privileged status and their elite was part of the elite of the enormous state. From the point of view of the ethnic picture the population was mixed but gradually the Albanian element became prevalent, particularly after the great Serb resettlement in 1767. Of course, there is no detailed information about these centuries and often there are speculations with this fact in order to advocate national agendas. In 1913 Kosovo became part of Serbia and later Yugoslavia, and the first census in modern times – in 1921, if one accepts its data as objective and not manipulated, showed already over 60% Albanian element. In the subsequent decades the overwhelming presence of the Albanians constantly grew – both due to the high population growth rate among them, and also to the slow but incessant process of mechanical decrease of the number of Serbs and to a lesser extent Montenegrins who were living in the area.

The shortest review of the confessional picture demonstrates that the Albanian population of Kosovo in the Middle Ages belonged to the Catholic denomination but in the period of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was voluntarily Islamised *en masse*, mainly due to financial and economic considerations. The picture changed neither during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, nor Socialist Yugoslavia. It could be concluded that the Albanian population belongs almost entirely to the Muslim Suni confession, the Serbs are entirely Eastern Orthodox, while among the existing Montenegrins there are also Catholics.

The last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a way changed the ethnic and respectively the religious picture of Kosovo society. The regime of Milošević practically annulled the autonomous status of the region and gradually deprived the Albanians of their rights and freedoms enshrined in the so-called Tito Constitution of 1974. This did not go by without pressure and resistance against the authorities and the serious ethnic domi-

nance of the Albanian element over the Serb and Montenegrone ones led to the gradual exodus of the latter. The situation in Kosovo became all the more complicated with the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990's. Towards its end the straightforward question arose about its status and affiliation with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as was the name of the residual format of the former federation.

At present the ethnic and confessional picture in Kosovo may be drawn only tentatively since the local Serbs boycotted the 2011 census of the population. It is clear, though, that on the territory of 10 800 square kilometres the Albanians are the dominant majority with about 1.8 million people or over 92% of the population. The Serbs living in the northern part of the country and in some southern enclaves are probably between 50 000 and 100 000 or about 5%. There are, of course, some other smaller minorities. The size of the existing denominations corresponds to this ethnic picture. So, the Albanians are almost 100% Muslim and minorities such as Turks, Roma, Gorani, etc. should be added to them. The Serbs are entirely Orthodox Christian, while Catholicism is represented by the small Montenegrin and Croatian population, as well as single cases among the Albanians. It may be stated that the ratio Muslims – Orthodox – Catholics varies within the approximate values of 91%-5%-3%. The overwhelming advantage of Islam as the main confession is more than apparent.

### **The Islamic Community – Legal Status, Activity, Relations with State Institutions, Existence of Trends**

The Constitution of Kosovo was drafted in 2008 under strict international control with the help of qualified legal experts and ultimate approval by the Venice Commission. Its main objective was to form a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society – the numeric prevalence of the Muslim confession does not lead to a privileged position in the Constitution and the legislation and the confessional groups are officially equal. The freedom of religion is categorically guaranteed. The definition of the state is secular.

The Kosovo Constitution is a modern basic law, which clearly outlines the separation of the state from the existing confessions. The central

government authorities do not interfere in any form whatsoever in the existence of the religious structures, their organisation and operation – by definition the state is neutral *vis a vis* them.

The main and officially adopted structural unit of the Muslims in the country is the so-called Islamic Community of Kosovo. It has a central office which is identical to a Grand Mufti office, and district entities, which correspond almost entirely to the administrative division. The president of the Islamic Community is the Grand Mufti and for a number of years this function has been performed by Naim Tërnavë. The supreme body of the community is the Meeting elected for a term of five years, chaired by a Chairman and Deputy-Chairmen. The members of the Meeting may be recalled in case of dissatisfaction with their activity.

The leadership of the Islamic Community of Kosovo is responsible also for religious education in the country. Under its control are the madrasa, of which most prominent and significant are the ones in Pristina and Prishtinë. On 15 August 1992 a Faculty of Islamic Studies was established as an educational and scientific centre with a decision of the Islamic Community Meeting. Under the conditions existing then its activity was semi-legal and subjected to serious difficulties but later, and in particular after the declaration of independence, it grew and on 6 July 2012 received accreditation as a higher educational establishment. The control by the Islamic Community over medium and higher religious education is of substantial importance especially in view of the foreign pressure exerted on the Kosovo Muslims in the last two decades.

This main structural unit of the Islamic confession in the country maintains correct relations with the central government institutions and the local authorities. The relations are active, well-intentioned and unity of action is a common occurrence, in particular under the complex situation of the last years, when the threat of radicalisation and respectively – destabilisation, became apparent and presented a real challenge to the country and to society.

There are no official trends among the Kosovo Muslims and the Islamic Community with its structures is their only legal representative. It is absolutely clear, however, that undercurrents exist based on foreign influence coming from the Arab world.

Objectively, political Islam has no roots in the country. An attempt was made to create a party on this basis but it was blatantly unsuccessful and did not bring about any presence in the realities of the country and in society. It is difficult also to speak of parties on an ethnic basis since the political actors are by definition purely ethnic – Albanian, Serb or of other minorities. However, one should probably mention the existence of an openly nationalistic formation – Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) which has a growing presence in the realities of Kosovo and wins positions at elections.

### **Processes and Tendencies among the Islamic Community. Foreign Influences Upon It**

What is characteristic of the confessional situation in Kosovo after the actual separation from Serbia in 1999, is undoubtedly the growing foreign religious influence and the unregulated advance of ideas that are incompatible with traditionally espoused Islam. This is a serious risk since the country's population is not only about and over 90% Muslim, but also because it is positioning itself as religious to a far greater degree than, for example, the Albanians in Albania. A Gallup poll in 2015 indicated that Kosovo was among the most religious countries in the world: 83% identified themselves as believers, 7% as non-believers, 1% as atheists and the remaining 9% could not answer. Such results, however distorted they may be, are influenced by two factors: the deep-seated religious dividing line with the Serbs, but also the already existing influence of more radical feelings. Another example: in 2016 32% of the Kosovo population identified themselves first as Muslim and after that as Albanian. I am convinced that the same poll 15 years earlier would have produced different results. This shows not only that the foreign radical influences have impacted to one or another degree society, but also that the Islamic Community of Kosovo and the state institutions and the international factors have underestimated the threat of fundamentalism and extremism and have failed to take the due countermeasures.

The advance of different religious structures and foundations, primarily from Saudi Arabia, began immediately after the war of 1999 in the conditions of a genuine humanitarian crisis. Because of this the start was with

humanitarian aid in the form of food and medicines and later a move was made also towards financial support under the condition that men should visit regularly the services in the mosques, and women should wear veils and the appropriate dress. The activity of literally dozens of such structures was constantly growing in scale and it is difficult to embrace it as a whole – they built mosques and schools for the study of the Quran at variance with regulations, secured scholarships for higher religious education abroad. The influence of Wahhabism in Kosovo – with the advocating of the sharia rule and the idea of “holy jihad”, reached its peak after the start of the armed conflict in Syria. Just a few examples will be given of this permanent and incessant advance. At present in Kosovo there are over 800 functioning mosques and approximately 240 of them were built after the war of 1999. According to available data more than 100 of these Islamic places of worship have been constructed at variance with the regulations, i.e. beyond the control of the official structure of the Islamic Community. All this activity required serious financing and apparently it was forthcoming. About EUR 10 million have passed only through the “Al Waqf - Al Islami” foundation operating on Kosovo territory. Another active structure is the “Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo and Chechnya”. According to probably incomplete information it has built several mosques as well as 98 schools for the study of the Quran and the pupils who excel are provided with scholarships to receive higher religious education in the Arab world, primarily in Saudi Arabia. A total of 200 citizens of Kosovo have graduated from such education in the years after the war and most of them have returned to the country.

All this creates risky conditions for preaching Wahhabism and radical Islam in general. The consequences are starting to be felt in the Islamic Community itself, where under the pressure of the generous Arab resources, representatives of this segment of preachers are also allowed. This inevitably has an impact on the tenets of traditional Islam – after 2004 there are already mullahs who have graduated abroad, who officially preach in Besiana (Podujevo) and (Gjilan) Gnjilane, and later also in the capital Pristina. And another risky element in the ranks of the Muslim mullahs – there is already clearly defined confrontation between the older and traditionally leaning mullahs and

the young radically inclined generation. There are many examples of threats and even physical violence. The clash on the religious front has become more than obvious and, in this sense, it could be asserted that after 2010 among the Muslims in Kosovo and in the ranks of the religious leaders there is, albeit small, but already formed wing of adherents to radical Islam. According to some expert assessments their number is up to 50 000 persons – under 3% of the Albanian population, but it is sufficient for the creation of serious problems. Developments during that time corroborate this assessment.

### **Participants from Kosovo in the Battles in the Middles East**

When the battle against terrorism and the ideologically justifying it Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism started in 2001, Kosovo was a UN protectorate, it did not pursue independent policy and remained aside from these developments. However, when in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Middle East was shaken by events and out of the chaos and the noise the silhouette of the “Islamic State” emerged, the country had declared its independence and had clearly defined foreign policy priorities. It is at that time that it became clear that Kosovo was threatened not only by the propaganda of radical Islam but also found its name interwoven in the recruitment of volunteers for the war in Syria and Iraq.

According to the official government institutions the first volunteers from Kosovo to the Middle East departed in 2012, but the probability should not be excluded that there were such cases before, albeit isolated. Initially they became mercenaries of Al-Nusra but subsequently the majority joined the “Islamic State”. The greatest number of Kosovo volunteers participated in the fighting in the period 2012-2014, after that there are probably isolated cases, and officially it is believed that as of 2016 the flow of Kosovo citizens to the “Islamic State” has stopped permanently.

The data about the number of the Kosovo mercenaries in this radical Islam army does not come from a single source and often diverge. So, according to the Ministry of Interior in Pristina, in August 2014 about 70 Kosovo citizens were fighting in the Middles East, while a report of the State Department two months earlier mentioned between 150 and 200 Kosovars.

One should approach information, which is unspecified and is coming from different sources very carefully – without any specification in the information sometimes reference is made to actual number of mercenaries, in other cases – to a total number since the beginning of the conflict. In this sense more important are the end data, indicating total numbers.

So, I think, credit should be given to a report drawn up by the anti-terror group of the Kosovo police with the support of the UNDP and the partner services. As of May 2017, it mentions the figure 316 citizens of Kosovo, who have taken part in the war in Syria and Iraq. Among them there were two kamikazes, 44 women and 28 children. Again, according to data from the Kosovo police as of November 2017, there is information about 113 citizens of Kosovo, who have returned to the country and 74 who have been killed in battle.

Many news agencies and expert studies have accepted the number 316 as credible and have quoted it. If this is true, the country must rank first in Europe according to the number of jihadists per capita – 16 mercenaries per 100 thousand people, which is eight-fold more than France and even by 60% more than Libya.

If one should outline the reasons for this stream, which is serious for the country's scale, one should, first of all, mention two main ones. The first is the overall economic condition of society – low GDP levels and growth rates, which are combined with exceptionally high unemployment rates, in particular among the youngest age groups. To put it otherwise, part of these Kosovo jihadists are mercenaries seeking high pay. The second main reason should not be overlooked either – that the propaganda of radical Islam in Kosovo is gaining ground and succeeds in attracting to its side a number of young people. And the majority of volunteers from Kosovo are in the 21-25 age group.

And something very important in relation to the degree of risk of imposing radical ideas and carrying out terrorist activity. Already at the end of 2015 an expert study in the UK placed Kosovo in the second group of countries threatened by terrorist attacks, in line with Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc. The return of a number of jihadists will

heighten the degree of risk and this will require additional efforts both by the government institutions and the Islamic Community. The fact that so far there have been no serious incidents should not be comforting.

### **Actions, Directed Against Radicalisation in All its Forms**

The active work against the penetration of radical Islamic ideas and the consequences from them actually started in 2012 – this has been stated officially by the Kosovo authorities. It should be stressed expressly that this fact indicates a serious delay and lack of prevention before that. For the sake of objectivity, it should be noted that ideas in this direction existed before. So, in 2004 Prime Minister Bayram Recepi stated that a bill was under preparation then for the prohibition of sects operation on the country's territory but that it was abandoned due to recommendations "from Europe" that such an act would be interpreted as restriction of religious freedom. This is further proof of the short-sightedness and underestimation of the risks from the advent of radical Islam on a global scale, and more specifically in the Balkans and in Kosovo.

The government and its institutions develop their activities in several directions and it should be pointed out that the synergy, albeit very late, is beyond doubt. So, in the sphere of the legislation the government proposed and in 2015 parliament voted an act prohibiting the participation of citizens of Kosovo in armed conflicts abroad. Amendments were introduced also in the Penal Code allowing criminal prosecution for acts such as recruitment of volunteers, financing propaganda of radical Islam, creation of disruption and panic in society, etc. The law-enforcement and judicial authorities are actively engaged. It is reported that between 2013 and the beginning of 2017 over 217 persons have been arrested and investigated on charges of participation in the conflict in the Middle East, of terrorist activity, including recruitment of volunteers, of financing such activity, of threats to public order. Among the detained, investigated and convicted there were religious leaders. Dozens were convicted to different prison terms. The special services operate closely with the partner services of the Western countries, Turkey and Albania – according to government sources in this way over 50



attempts at departure to the Middle East were thwarted. A very important point is the fact that at least 19 Muslim foundations and organisations were prohibited from operating on the territory of Kosovo. All these are elements of the implementation of two national strategies: for combatting terrorism and for combatting radicalism and extremism.

The attitude of the Islamic Community – the official structure of the Kosovo Muslims is of particular importance. In the period before 2013-2014 its leadership made a number of mistakes, which allowed radical imams to infiltrate its ranks and practically to officialise their activity. This attitude has changed abruptly as of 2014 – the tenets of traditional Islam are preached actively, the tone against radicalism in general and specifically against the “Islamic State” has become harder, frequent appeals are addressed to the Kosovo citizens, fighting in the Middle East, to return home. In many respects the Islamic Community acts in parallel with the government structures and even jointly with them. Under an agreement with the Ministry of Justice, for example, a group of lecturers is prepared, who would engage in work in prisons advocating the canon norms of traditional Islam. It may be stated that all this activity makes sense and is useful but this does not alter the fact that it is late in time and the threat that is looming large over the faith and the country has been underestimated.

It is right to point out that the non-governmental sector and the media also delayed for years their response but later started to work in synergy and in a focused way against the threat from radicalisation.

As whole, it may be concluded that public attitudes in favour of traditional Islam and against radicalisation are apparent. However, this does not alter the fact that Kosovo is one of the main target points in the Balkans for outside pressure in a negative direction and a risk zone for dissemination of fundamentalism, extremism and radicalism.

## **Conclusions**

This short expose allows to reach some conclusions.

If one departs from the main topic – whether the country and society are a bridge for infusion of radicalism or a barrier before it, two stages

could be outlined. The fist was from 1989 to 2012 when radical ideas penetrated Kosovo freely and gradually found fertile soil for development and permeated even the system of the Islamic Community. Of course, the political upheavals and the lack of really operating power structures before 1999 also had their significance. What was dangerous was that after that both the UN administration and the representatives of the international factors and the existing Kosovo institutions in a certain sense were sitting on their hands and in such a way facilitated the process of radicalisation.

The situation changed after 2012 in the face of already real threats. Then both the government institutions of the already independent Kosovo and the structures of the Islamic Community and a number of public actors became active and began gradually to catch up with the delay with the support of the international factors which had become aware of the risk.

What is necessary from now on is to continue and deepen this line of behaviour. The government with its law-enforcement and judicial bodies should bring to the end its two strategies and focus on prevention – both through the system of education and through the necessary support for traditional Islam and its organisational structures. The improvement of the social and economic situation would be of particular importance and the creation of good prospects for young people, who are the overwhelming majority in the country. And again, it is the government institutions that are required to coordinate the cooperation with the international actors in this field.

The Islamic Community should be a genuine protector of the traditional Islamic denomination; it should obtain full control over religious education and the places of worship. It is necessary to discontinue any contacts with dubious religious organisations and foundations, particularly from the Arab world, regardless of how generous they might be. Active contacts with the entire public will be of particular importance, among which meaningful propaganda work should be carried out – in the best meaning of the word.

With such long-term attitude it could be expected that in the future Kosovo will cease to represent a preferred field for radicalisation in the region and will be transformed into a barrier before the negative foreign influence.

## **THERE IS NO INTERNAL ISLAMIC THREAT IN MACEDONIA, FOREIGN FORCES IMPORT RADICAL ISLAM**

***Lyubcho Neshkov***

The wars in Syria and Iraq revealed the existence of a well-built Islamic terrorist network in the Balkans. Hundreds of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and the Republic of Macedonia fought (are fighting) on the side of the “Islamic State” and in the different paramilitary formations in Syria and Iraq. Nobody knows the exact number of the participants in the fighting from the Balkan states controlled by the “Islamic State” but it is certainly known that the number of the dead is already several hundred. Only from the Republic of Macedonia their number is 33.

### **Religious Beliefs and the Place of Islam in the Republic of Macedonia**

Islam was brought to the Balkans by the Ottomans who ruled the region for five centuries. The subjugated or the “protected subjects” of non-Muslim origin were obliged to pay taxes to the Ottoman authorities. Many of them, in order to avoid paying taxes converted to Islam and were assimilated by the Ottoman system.

In the Republic of Macedonia, which has a population of 2.1 million people, there are two main religious groups: Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The majority of the Orthodox believers are Macedonians and the majority of the Muslims are Albanians. About 65% of the population are Orthodox Macedonians, 32% are Muslims, 1% are Roman Catholics and 2% practice other religions – different Protestant denominations. There is also a small Jewish community which resides in the capital Skopje.

The Islamic Religious Community is mentioned in Constitution of the country alongside with the Macedonian Orthodox Church – the Archbishopric of Ohrid, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church and the Jewish community as separate from the state and equal before the law. Until 1997 the Religious Communities Act was applicable. It was amended by the act of 2007 on the “legal status of the church, the religious communities and religious groups”.

The Islamic Religious Community is the only institution recognised by the Macedonian government, which represent the Muslims in the country by law. After the establishment of an independent Republic of Macedonia in 1991 the Islamic Religious Community was recognised by the state in 1994.

### **Islamic Communities – Legal Status, Relations with the State Institutions, Existence of Different Islamic Trends, Religious Organisations, Islamic Schools and Tendencies in the Islamic Community of the Country**

In Macedonia the denominations and the religions, together with their followers, typically are represented by specific government agencies. So, Islam has always been represented by a government body ever since the establishment of Ottoman rule in the region until the collapse of the totalitarian Yugoslav communist dictatorship of Josip Broz Tito in the 1990's.

The Islamic Religious Community deals mainly with education and cultivation of Islamic values, construction and maintenance of mosques, Islamic centres, tekke (Muslim ritual complexes of buildings) and mektebi (primary schools for Islamic studies), establishment and functioning of educational institutions, of social and cultural institutions, creation and maintenance of libraries, archives, museums, creation and maintenance of graveyards as well as establishment and functioning of charity institutions – establishment of waqf (charity grants) and protection of their rights. The official documents of the Islamic Religious Community state that it “advocates peace and wages war against evil and terrorism” and cooperates with “all institutions, associations and different organisations, which popularise Islamic Values”.

**Organisation of the Muslims During the Ottoman Empire.** The lands under the Ottoman rule in the Balkans were divided into administrative-territorial entities, the largest of which was the eyalet. The eyalets were divided into sanjaks. The ruler of the sanjak was the bey, who had military and administrative authority and the ruler of the kaza was the kadi, who had the judicial authority. Both were appointed by the central government, i.e. the so-called Porte. Although the sanjak bey was higher

in the hierarchy than the kadi, the latter was the most important figure in the region and enjoyed the greatest influence. The kadi had full authority in his region, both religious and secular.

**After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.** From 1918 to 1992 the functions and activities of the religious communities in the Balkans may be divided into two periods:

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, which in 1929 was re-named Yugoslavia. In the period between 1918 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia included the present-day territories of Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosna and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo.

The second period includes the years between 1945 and 1992 – the time of the communist totalitarian system created by the dictator Josip Broz Tito.

During the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the relations between the state and the different religious communities were based on the principle of recognition and acceptance of the practiced religion. In 1930 a new law was adopted in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which gave also the official name of the Islamic Religious Community. After the adoption of the new law the Muslim religious officials were under the jurisdiction of the state and the seat of Reis-ul-Ulema moved from Sarajevo to Belgrade. At the same time the members of the two Ulema Councils (Majlis) went to two places – to Sarajevo and to Skopje. The muftis were reduced to nine and were appointed with a decree by the King. Practically the Ministry of Justice of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia appointed their own people to leadership positions in the Islamic Religious Community.

**During the communist dictatorship between 1945 and 1992.** The Islamic Religious Community in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was established in 1947 during the Grand Sabor (meeting) of the waqfs in Sarajevo. It consisted of four councils: 1) Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia with a seat in Sarajevo; 2) Islamic Community of Serbia in Pristina; 3) Islamic Community of Macedonia in Skopje; 4) Islamic Community of Montenegro in its capital at the time – Titograd (present-day Podgorica).

A number of delegates for each council were elected in the Supreme Council of the Islamic Religious Community of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which on its part, elected the Reis-ul-Ulema. Interesting-

ly, all titleholders of Reis-ul-Ulema were from Bosnia with the exception of the Macedonian Jakub Selimoski, elected in 1989.

The Republic of Macedonia is the only former Yugoslav republic in which Muslim extremism has no local roots and its own radical leaders. If in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia (Sandžak, the Preševo Valley) there are many examples of the existence of local Muslim extremist organisations already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and during WWII in particular, in Macedonia, even among the Albanian population, the radical elements come predominantly from neighbouring Kosovo and Albania. In the Republic of Macedonia there are neither transnational, nor domestic terrorist organisations. However, taking stock of this, one should not overlook the causes and the consequences between the Islamist extremist ideologies and the Islamic terrorism.

The Albanians are the main Muslim minority in the Republic of Macedonia. According to the last census of 2002 the ethnic Albanians comprise about 23% of the total population. It should be underlined that in the last two decades a permanent exodus from the country is observed not only by the Macedonian but also by the Albanian population. A growing number of Macedonian citizens (of all ethnoses) leave permanently their birthplaces, sell their property and have no intention to return. This is especially valid for the rural areas.

As opposed to the Albanians in Albania and Kosovo, where there are Christians among them – Orthodox and Catholic, the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are almost all Muslims. The Albanians in Macedonia are Ghegs, which includes the largest of the two sub-groups (the other consists of Tosks). The Ghegs are more conservative compared to the Albanians from Albania and Kosovo. The Albanians in Macedonia live predominantly in the north-western part of the republic, bordering on Albania, Kosovo and Serbia.

The Turks in the Republic of Macedonia are the third largest ethnic group in the country. According to the last census in 2002 the Turks comprise about 4% of the total population and about 12% of the Muslims living in Macedonia. For the Turks in Macedonia the relationship between Islam and national identity derives historically from the political and reli-

gious developments in Turkey. The majority of the Macedonian Turks are members of the Democratic Party of the Turks, which advocates the values of the secular state. In the last years the so-called "Gülen movement" is particularly active. A Turkish newspaper "Zaman" was launched in the 1990's and later it started publishing also in the Albanian language. In addition, the Gülenists support the private schools "Yahya Kemal" in Skopje, Gostivar and Struga. These schools are accessible also for children of Muslim elites from other nationalities. The largest number of Turks reside in the western part of Macedonia.

The "Torbeši" are a Macedonian Muslim minority living predominantly in the western part of the country. It is difficult to identify their exact number because in the past many of them identified themselves as Turks and some have been assimilated by the Albanians. In this way the "Torbeši" have always tried to avoid problems with their neighbours. In the last decades a large number of Macedonian Muslims - "Torbeši" emigrate to West Europe and North America. The "Torbeši" lead a conservative life. Even today they oppose the consumption of liquor, nightlife and photographs. In the last years, however, there is an increase of the "bearded Wahhabis" in their villages, who receive financial support mainly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

After the census of 2002 the Roma are about 2.6% of the total population of the Republic of Macedonia. Most of them are Muslims and a small number are Christians. The relations between these two religious groups are often hostile and distrustful. Most of the Roma in Macedonia speak their mother tongue, in the western part of the country they communicate in the Albanian and Turkish languages. In the eastern part of the country the Roma identify themselves as Turks.

### **Foreign Influence on the Local Islamic Communities, Jihadist Fighters and Measures Against Islamic Radicalisation after 2002**

According to information of the Macedonian special services and in particular of the agency combatting terrorist acts and paramilitary formations as of now it is known that a total of 150 Macedonian citizens have partic-

ipated in the wars of Syria and Iraq. They have fought on the side of paramilitary formations in the territories controlled by the so-called "Islamic State". 80 of them have already returned and at present (August 2018) are in the Republic of Macedonia.

The first public reports about the participation of Macedonian citizens appeared in 2010. A local newspaper reported in November 2010 that about 50 volunteers, who had been training to participate in the war in Afghanistan, had been followed by the security agencies of Macedonia.

According to information of the Macedonian security agencies by mid-2018 33 Macedonian citizens had been killed on the battlefields in the territories, controlled by the "Islamic State". The documents do not specify their ethnicity but, judging from the information on their identity, there is no doubt that they were ethnic Albanians. Judging from interrogations of Islamic extremists, who had returned home or had been arrested, all fighters from the Republic of Macedonia went to Syria and Iraq through the territory of Turkey. In most cases they travelled by land but some flew by air.

From the interrogations of the terrorists it becomes clear that before departing to the battlefield the persons attended religious sermons of radical imams. Part of them "became radicalised" through the social networks, others through personal contacts, from which they received logistical support for their travel and for joining the ranks of the paramilitary formations.

Seventeen Macedonian citizens, who had fought with the "Islamic State" and had returned home have already been convicted on charges of terrorism. From their testimony it becomes clear that foreign persons had participated in their organisation and training – part of them had been from the region – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo or Albania, but there had been also citizens of Arab states.

A National Committee for dealing with extremism and combatting terrorism was established recently in the Republic of Macedonia. At present strategies for the re-socialisation of such persons are being drawn up.

**The use of charity organisations for financing and establishment of terrorist groups.** The Islamic charity organisations dramatically



increased their activity in the Balkans during the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo. They were received comparatively well by the local population due to their "officially charitable causes". Very soon, though, it became clear that these charitable organisations financed and spread Wahhabist ideology and terrorism. The very same charity organisations use the Balkans as a logistic base and territory for recruiting members. Because of this activity of theirs they fell under the surveillance of the special services, which discovered that they are linked to Islamic extremism and money laundering. Enormous cash flows have been traced from Saudi Arabia to Macedonia for the construction of innumerable mosques. At these mosques volunteers are being recruited for jihad and for spreading Wahhabist ideology, resentment to the West, the European values and hatred of Christianity.

The authorities in the Republic of Macedonia started to investigate the Islamic charity organisations already in the 1990's at the very beginning of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The special services in Skopje discovered that many Islamic charity organisations from the Albanian capital Tirana were seeking permission in 1996 to open shops in Macedonia. However, the charity organisations International Islamic Relief Organization and the Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina were not admitted by the security and intelligence officers. These charity organisations were denied registration. After this denial they began to finance from Tirana the leaders of the Islamic Religious Community in Tetovo and the madrasa in the village of Kondovo. The Wahhabist International Islamic Relief Organization from Saudi Arabia, which was established in 1978 as a relief subsidiary of the Muslim Global League, already in 1979 started opening offices abroad and especially in the Balkans. In the period 1992-1995 the International Islamic Relief Organization and other Islamic NGO's provided US\$ 350 million for weapons and mercenaries. At the beginning of 1995 the authorities in the Republic of Macedonia closed the office and banned the activity in Skopje of the International Islamic Relief Organization. All members of the International Islamic Relief Organization were deported from the country. In 2003 it became clear that the International Islamic

Relief Organization actively supported the global activities of Al-Qaeda, but this did not prevent it to open its office in the town of Tetovo in the western part of the Republic of Macedonia. The Islamic foundation "Al Haramain", of which the US Department of the Treasury discovered that it, together with its international branches supported the terrorist network of Osama bin Laden and different extremist organisations, in the Republic of Macedonia raised funds through drug trafficking and prostitution. Another charity – "Bamiresia", which was headed by the imam Bekir Halimi, an ethnic Albanian, had operated in Skopje since 1997. Later it opened offices in all major towns of the country. On multiple occasions "Bamiresia" was investigated for relations with the terrorist organisations and money laundering. In one of his interviews Halimi officially stated that his organisation was entitled to receive funds from Saudi Arabia. The main source of finances for "Bamiresia" is a Saudi NGO and the Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage with a seat in Kuwait.

Local experts warn that "the number of the new non-governmental organisations dealing with religious activities under the cover of humanitarian aid has grown in the last several years".

The Active Islamic Youth, which was created after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina by local Muslims who had fought together with the foreign Islamist fighters from the mujahedin units and which popularises fundamentalist Islamic teachings, has its affiliates in Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, Struga and Kumanovo. The security services have detected that the members of the Active Islamic Youth in Macedonia coordinated the transfer of a substantial sum of money for Kosovo and that they have close links with the members of the Islamic Jihad Union. Other Islamic radical movements, groups and non-governmental organisations include The "Student Club", the president of which is Kurtishi Fatmir from the village of Aračinovo and "El-Mujahedeen", founded in 2002 by Šamilj Demirović in the village of Batinci.

It becomes clear from the revelations in 2017 of a participant in "Islamic events" on the territory of the town of Debar and the vicinity that "persons born in the town and living in the USA are financing religious schools, which preach radical Islam". The same persons finance different

associations supporting education of children, religious literature libraries, book shops, perfume and food shops specifically intended for Muslims. The source uncovered the “whole supply network for these facilities in the country”. They all are part of the “Selefi” group which had participated in support actions during the refugee (2001) and Kumanovo (2015) crises. The members of this group are divided into two groups – more radical and moderate. Among them there are members of the former National Liberation Army and different Islamic groups, which had fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. They operate in Gostivar, Tetovo, Debar, Ohrid, Kumanovo and Struga but have registration only in Skopje. The financing comes from different foreign countries – the USA, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Austria or Italy, the source reveals. They use mosques for propaganda and recruitment of persons for “departure for Syria in the name of Allah, to die for Allah and going to paradise and to the angels”, the source said. At the gatherings there are persons from abroad, including from Saudi Arabia. The source revealed the distinctiveness of the clothes of the extremists and their behaviour in the mosques – different hand gestures and touching in a particular way with the feet and the arms during prayer. He described in detail the type of dress, the length of the trousers and the form of the beard of the group’s members.

The Islamic extremists in Macedonia use the internet for dissemination of jihad and radical Islamist ideology. Already 15 years ago DVDs of Chechen jihadists were discovered in many mosques in the country, which showed how mujahedeen killed Americans. A musical video clip in Albanian was also distributed in 2010 dedicated to the leader of the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda Osama bin Laden. There is a great number of supporters of the Gülen movement in the Republic of Macedonia. It is known that in the Gülenist schools in Struga and Gostivar there are lessons outside the curriculum about radical Islam, during which fundamentalism is praised.

The problems with radical Islam in the Republic of Macedonia date back to the mid 1990’s when Saudi Arabia and other states used the domestic contradictions in the Islamic Religious Community. The radical elements availed themselves of this situation as well as of the weakness of

the young independent Macedonian state. In 2002 a group of local and Arab Wahhabis invaded with arms "Arabati Tekke" – the most renowned religious site in the town of Tetovo in the western part of the country. After taking over the building they quickly converted it to a mosque. The Centre for Islamic Pluralism in the Republic of Macedonia characterised their actions as "aggression of Wahhabist Islamists and a serious terrorist threat to the whole region and a violent act of cultural and religious vandalism". The Centre sent a letter to the American Embassy in Skopje and to the President of the Republic of Macedonia. "We strongly protest against the Wahhabist invasion of "Arabati Tekke" in the town of Tetovo and appeal to the diplomatic bodies in the USA and the authorities in Skopje, which monitor terrorist threats in the Balkans, to exert pressure on the Macedonian Government for the immediate eviction of the Wahhabists from "Arabati Tekke" pursuant to the law and, if necessary, for the protection of the Tekke from further encroachments", the letter of the Centre for Islamic Pluralism in the Republic of Macedonia stated.

During the conflict in 2001 in Macedonia the security services registered several groups of mujahedeen in different regions of the country. According to the Ministry of Interior in the period 2001-2012 about 500 mujahedeen, individually or within the terrorist group Albanian National Army, have taken part in different armed clashes. In the region of Kumanovo members of a mujahedeen unit of about 100 fighters acted on the territory of the villages Slupčane, Matejče, Vaksince, Otlja and Lipkovo. In the region of the capital Skopje mujahedeen participated in armed conflicts in the villages Tanuševci, Brest, Malino maalo and Aračinovo. In August 2001 there was also a group of mujahedeen in the Gazi Baba municipality in Skopje, where five members of the terrorist group were killed together with their leader "Teli", who was not a Macedonian citizen. Other five persons were arrested by the Macedonian police forces. In the region of Tetovo groups of mujahedeen were deployed in the villages Bozovce, Vejce, Gajre and Poroj.

From the reports of the special services dealing with combatting terrorist acts on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia it is clear that in

February 2001 two wings of the mujahedeen organisation were formed in the country. The military wing was under the command of Muhamed Hadafan Gamili and the political wing was led by sheikh Ahmed Ali Sedan.

Islamic extremists continue to operate on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia even after the end of the crisis of 13 August 2001, when the Ohrid peace agreement was signed. So, in 2004 French terrorist experts discovered that "up to 100 fundamentalists, related to terrorist organisations, operate on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia".

In 2006 street protests and demonstrations were organised in Tetovo and Skopje because of the cartoons of the prophet Mohamed. This was the first public appearance of the Wahhabis and the Wahhabi movement. The protest in Skopje started after the Friday prayer in front of the "Yahya Pasha" mosque. About 1000 persons took part in the protest. The crowd in the streets of the capital chanted "Allah is great". Many of the participants wore black scarfs and black and green flags with Arab inscriptions. At the same time in the town of Tetovo about 800 persons gathered in front of the Šarena Mosque. Most of the protesters were young people and students. The two main Albanian political parties – the Democratic Party of the Albanians and the Democratic Union for Integration distanced themselves from the protests but addressed mutual accusations for participation in the protests. Representatives of the Islamic Religious Community also denounced the publication of the cartoons but appealed to the Muslims not to succumb to provocations.

In 2007 the special police forces discovered in the area of Brodec in the north-western part of the country an armed group of local Albanians. According to the police report the group prepared for prolonged armed struggle. An enormous cache of ammunition and arms was apprehended – mortars, machine guns, rifles and sniper rifles, but the law-enforcement forces discovered also brochures, documents and other mujahedeen propaganda materials. Less than a year later in January 2008 a policeman was killed and two others were wounded in an armed attack from a car driving next to the police car. The attack was carried out by three persons, who had been members of the National Liberation Army in 2001. A similar incident occurred in November 2008, when another policeman was killed and two were wounded.

## **Islam in Macedonia – A Bridge or A Barrier for Radicalisation**

As in most Balkan countries also on the territory of present-day Republic of Macedonia Islam was brought by the Ottomans who ruled the region for five centuries. Macedonia is the only country, which in spite of the enormous threats during the Serb aggression in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo managed to neutralise any serious incidents of religious and ethnic extremism in the country. The young state did not allow on its territory the operation of different Islamic organisations which were deeply rooted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania. If one were to compare Macedonia with another Balkan country in terms of peaceful coexistence and high degree of religious tolerance, one would be fully justified to claim that it is closest to Bulgaria. These are the two countries, which were bordering a country at war (Serbia) in the 1990's, but allowed no bursts of extremism, including religious. The small Balkan state managed to overcome and control the brutal aggression of Slobodan Milošević, who in the course of just a few weeks deported 300 000 Kosovo Albanians in the spring of 1999. Besides common citizens, including children and old people, among the deportees were a number of former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army as well as fighters of most diverse armed groups. Among them there were Kosovo Albanian activists of radical Islamic organisations, linked to Saudi Arabia, Turkey or coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Macedonia, which was flooded by hundreds of thousands of deported Albanians, had to deal also with the threat of infiltration of these radical elements in the territory of the republic with resident Muslim population.

The absence of "intensive hatred" between the Macedonian and Albanian population (Christian and Muslim) was best demonstrated during the three-year deep political crisis that beset the Republic of Macedonia in the 2015-2017 period. The then governing party of Premier Nikola Gruevski, in order to cling to power, used aggressive nationalistic and anti-Albanian propaganda. Gruevski, who governed for ten years thanks to the party Democratic Union for Integration, created by the former leader of the National Liberation Army Ali Ahmeti, organised for several months mass

protests in the central streets of the capital against the so-called “Tirana Platform”. The participants and primarily the leaders of the protests used rude and vulgar language against the Albanian minority. The rhetoric reminded very much the one of the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević from the end of his political career. The 2015-2017 political crisis which ended with the pogrom on the Macedonian Parliament on 27 April 2017 proved two things. In the Republic of Macedonia the “Albanian threat” was used by the erstwhile rulers to preserve the links with the authorities in Belgrade with the ultimate objective that Macedonia would not be a fully independent and sovereign state. At the same time, it became apparent that in the Republic of Macedonia the local Albanians, including the political leaders, do not have the necessary support and strength to trigger ethnic collisions if they do not receive support from the neighbouring Kosovo and Albania. Perhaps, it should be noted here, that during the great migrant wave in 2015-2016 the territory of the Republic of Macedonia was crossed, mainly from Greece, by over 600 000 migrants. Among them were fighters of the “Islamic State”. The country managed to deal quite successfully with this challenge. The greatest risk for the stability of the Republic of Macedonia, including the emergence of radical Islamic organisations, comes from the outside. The Skopje authorities are facing a single threat – to prevent the infiltration of their territory by jihadist elements from neighbouring Albania, Kosovo and the slightly further away Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this respect the Republic of Macedonia should receive also international support in the fight against terrorism. The last official information shows that at least 4 800 former jihadists have found refuge on the territory of present-day Albania. All of them are a potential threat not only for the Republic of Macedonia but also for the other countries in the region.

## THE MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN SERBIA: BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND RADICALISATION

*Biser Banchev, PhD*

### **Role and Place of Islam in Serbia**

The Republic of Serbia is a predominantly Christian country, but it has inherited also a part of the religious diversity of the former Yugoslav federation. According to the census of 2011 almost 85% of the population belongs to the Eastern Orthodox Church, 5% to the Catholic Church, and the Muslims slightly exceed 3% (222 828 persons). Both the official statistical documents and the prominent researcher of the Muslim communities on the territory of former Yugoslavia Ahmet Alibašić point out the persistent boycott of the censuses by Southern Serbia communities populated by Albanians, which justifies the claims that the actual number of Muslims in Serbia should be increased by about 60 thousand people and their actual percentage should be assessed at approximately 4% of the total population.

An important characteristic of the Serbian citizens of Muslim faith is their ethnic and territorial religious concentration. The historic region of Sandžak with its main town of Novi Pazar is usually defined as multi-ethnic, but almost two-thirds of the Muslims in the country live there. Traditionally they feel attached to their fellow Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and until the breakup of the religious unity in the former Yugoslav space in the 1990's they were subjects of the supreme head (Reis-ul-Ulema) of the Yugoslav Muslims residing in Sarajevo. The residents of Sandžak are no strangers to the identity transformation processes that are taking place in Bosnia. The change of the nationality identification from Muslims with a capital letter to Bosnians after 1993 was adopted also in Sandžak (Boshtak/Boshtjak is regarded a national category as opposed to Bosnian which denotes geographical and state affiliation). The last census in Serbia in 2011 recorded 145 278 Bosniaks and 98% of them were registered in Sandžak. Another 22 301 residents of the six Sandžak municipalities in Serbia identify themselves as Muslims by confession. The Albanians in the municipalities Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac are also Muslims. Outside these regions the religion is represented in all major cities in Serbia, where



part of the Roma community and other smaller groups may be added to the Bosniaks and Albanians.

### **Legal Status of the Islamic Community, Relations with the Institutions of the State, Existence of Different Islamic Trends, Religious Organisations, Islamic Schools**

In the 1990's the "Islamic Community *in* Serbia" was taking care of the Muslims' spiritual salvation, which regarded itself as part/subsidiary of the larger Muslim family in former Yugoslavia and was subjected religion-wise to the Grand Mufti (Reis-ul-Ulema) of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At local level the spiritual leader is the mufti of Novi Pazar Muamer Zukorlić, who since 1993 has been controlling waqf properties, publishing houses, media and educational establishments and also aspires to be the main mediator for the grants coming from Turkey and the countries of the Middle East. The first democratic government in Belgrade after the fall of Milošević tolerated the mufti and in 2002 allowed him to open the so-called International University in Novi Pazar, which is registered as a religious foundation (waqf) and to conduct education in Islamic theology without having obtained the required accreditation. Zukorlić monopolised also the issuing of "halal" certificates which are required for the export of foods to the Muslim countries.

The intensifying international contacts of the mufti and his association with influential factors in Bosnia and Herzegovina are regarded with suspicion by the authorities. An alternative religious structure was established in 2007 - the "Islamic Community *of* Serbia". It is headed by an old hand from the times of Tito – the Belgrade mufti Hamdija Jusufspahić and his family. Formally the management of the structure is granted to the mufti of the Sandžak Tutin municipality Adem Zilkić and the position of his deputy is occupied by Mohamed Jusufspahić – son of Hamdija. The local imams respectively, depending on their views and often by virtue of family commitment, divide their loyalty between the groups of Zukorlić and Jusufspahić. Adem Zilkić was proclaimed Reis-ul-Ulema, which underlines the complete independence of Serbian Muslims. Hamdija Jusufspahić received the title of an honorary Grand Mufti.

The existence of two Islamic communities prevented the believers from availing themselves of the restitution legislation. The social functions

of the religious charity, respectively, were made more difficult. The mufti Zukorlić resolved the problem through enforced occupation of former waqf properties and their management without ownership documents.

Muamer Zukorlić remained at the head of the “Islamic Community **in** Serbia” for 22 years – until January 2014, when he resigned and Prof. Mevlud Dudić – a former associate of his and dean of the International University in Novi Pazar - was elected mufti to replace him. Zukorlić. remained mufti of Sandžak. The Reis-ul-Ulema of Sarajevo – Husein Kavazović, was in personal attendance at Dudić’s inauguration.

In 2016 the leadership of the “Islamic Community **of** Serbia” was replaced. It was headed by Sead Jusufović of Bijelo Pole in Sandžak – up until then the president of the community’s religious court.

Both competing organisations have their supporters among the Albanians in the Preševo valley, where more than 60 mosques are in operation but the larger part of them are managed by a third institution – the local structure of the Islamic community of Kosovo.

The “Islamic Community **in** Serbia” is more active in the field of education. It controls several primary Muslim schools in different towns and in Novi Pazar – one high school and a faculty for Islamic studies. The latter trains also teachers for the Serbian state schools on the subject “Confessions – Islamic Religion”. There are also students from other countries – mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The faculty is part of the International University of Novi Pazar.

### **Political Parties Connected with the Muslim Community**

Two parties dominate the political life of the Serbian Muslims. They group around themselves a plethora of smaller parties, the majority of which exist only on paper. The strongest political figure is the dentist Sulejman Ugljanin, who in 1991 organised an unrecognised by the authorities referendum on the autonomy of Sandžak. In this period he established the Party of Democratic Action. It emerged as an affiliate of the great Bosnian party with the same name but already in the 1990’s the links between the two parties were discontinued under pressure from Belgrade. The authorities raised additional obstructions to the local political leaders by dividing the six municipalities of the historic Sandžak region among two different administrative regions. Ugl-

janin's biography features a short political exile in Turkey, following which he returned to Serbia where he was elected on multiple occasions as Member of Parliament and from 2004 to 2008 he was mayor of Novi Pazar. Sometimes Ugljanin is nicknamed "the Milošević of Sandžak" and foreign diplomats define the region as his "feudal fief". Ugljanin is a member of the government where he is responsible for the underdeveloped regions.

Ugljanin's political role is contested only by his former deputy in the party Rasim Ljajić, who established an autonomous party as far back as in the 1990's. He pursues a softer policy towards the authorities in official Belgrade and for this reason he is subscribed for a ministerial position in every government since the democratic changes after the year 2000. Ljajić is a doctor and was born in Novi Pazar. This allows him to counterbalance Ugljanin's influence, who lacks strong family base in the town and the municipality. The two leaders are vigorously contesting control over the region and in certain cases this has provoked physical clashes between their supporters.

The competition is reaching particular heights during elections for the National Council of the Bosniak Minority. The powers of the National Council lie in the fields of education, culture, language and the media. A characteristic of the Bosniaks is that they are almost entirely concentrated in the Sandžak municipalities which practically transforms their National Council into a regional parliament. During the 2010 elections Zukorlić opposed the traditional parties and registered a ballot list of his own supporters. The matter resulted in a prolonged deadlock. The government did not condone the mufti's attempts to unite religion and politics. The Ministry of Human Rights and Minorities extended *ex-officio* the mandate of the old National Council headed by the Member of Parliament from Ugljanin's party Esad Džudžević. In response Zukorlić initiated the establishment of a new party – the Bosniak Democratic Community, led by his brother-in-law Emir Elfić. The party was registered as a minority party. In this way the mufti walked the full path to the inclusion of religion in politics. In the 1990's he was close to Ugljanin, in the next decade he enjoyed the support of Ljajić and in the end rejected everyone and became an independent political factor.

The actual balance of forces was tested in 2012 when elections were held on all possible levels – presidential, parliamentary and local. Zukorlić

ostentatiously distanced himself from direct participation in politics stating that he only supported the Bosniak Democratic Community but in the end succumbed to the temptation and ran for president. At the first round of the presidential elections he ranked last-but-one of a total of twelve candidates. It should be taken into account that the mufti managed to attract to his side the votes of the Albanians of the Preševo valley who usually boycott the election of Serbia's head of state.

The parliamentary race preserved the balance among the regional parties. Ljajić was elected on the ballot of the Democratic Party which had governed until then while Ugljanin won two seats independently. The coalition of small minority parties organised by Zukorlić won one seat, which to no one's surprise was occupied by the mufti's brother-in-law.

The big political change after the elections reflected on Ugljanin and Ljajić who were included in the new government. In this way the practical message of the government on continuity of the policy of ethnic peace overwhelmed the populist statements that are mandatory for modern politics and in particular in the Balkans. One of the responsibilities that Ugljanin obtained in the government was co-chair of the mixed intergovernmental committee with Turkey for bilateral economic cooperation, and also with Iraq, Algeria, Morocco, etc.

In March 2013 Zukorlić managed to quarrel with his brother-in-law Emir Elfić. The mufti was forced to establish a new party under the name of Bosniak Democratic Community of Sandžak. For the early elections in 2014 the mufti's party joined a coalition led by the Liberal-Democratic Party of Čedomir Jovanović. The liberal-democrats undertook this step after their coalition negotiations with Ugljanin failed. The joint ballot failed to cross the election threshold and remained outside parliament. Ugljanin won the usual two seats while Ljajić this time was part of the victorious election coalition of the Progressive Party, led by Aleksandar Vučić.

In the autumn of 2014 the mandate of the minority national councils also ran out. This time Ugljanin won and he was elected chairman of the Bosniak Council.

The frequent parliamentary elections played a certain role for the shifting of the political layers among the Serbian Muslims. Nationwide this

diminished Ugljanin's role, and after the early elections of 2016 Zukorlić was elected Member of Parliament. At the presidential elections in 2017 both Zukorlić and Ljajić supported the victorious ballot of the incumbent premier Aleksandar Vučić.

During the entire period after 2000 the political formations of the Albanian minority managed to send one or two Members of Parliament to the different compositions of the Serbian Parliament and to hold control over local power in the Preševo valley.

### **Foreign Influence Over the Local Muslim Communities**

The Serbian Muslims often seek the support of their fellow believers abroad. Quite often their sights are set on Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The inter-confessional conflict among the Muslims in Sandžak creates difficulties for the Turkish government, which at present demonstrates a growing ambition to play a leading and uniting role for the Balkan Muslims. The Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu appealed officially for the unification of the two Islamic communities during his visit to Serbia on 25 October 2011. The visit was preceded by shuttles of the Turkish ambassador and a dispatch of senior Islamic imams from Turkey to Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in an attempt to prepare an agreement. The mediation failed. The mufti Jusufspahić, who was backed continuously by the Serbian government, played a prominent role for the failure. To the Belgrade authorities the envisaged mechanism, whereby the Grand Mufti from Sarajevo would approve the head of the Serbian Muslims, was unacceptable. There was also a problem with Zukorlić who did not agree to leave the stage and to accept a voluntary exile in Turkey that was offered.

The Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) organised new attempts at uniting the two Serbian Islamic communities, which envisaged that Zukorlić and Zilkić would rescind their leading positions, while continuing to work as imams in the new structure at a lower level. The involvement of the Diyanet was interpreted by Zukorlić as a threat and in August 2013 he accused Turkey that it was financing his opponents. Such reactions restrict Turkish activity among Serbian Muslims.

The "Islamic Community *in* Serbia" looked for support in Bosnia and Herzegovina and initially found it with the member of the collective pres-

idency Bakir Izetbegović but the latter withdrew it under the influence of Ugljanin. Allies are being sought in Bosnia and Herzegovina also through joining in the hot topics of public debates as the one about the genocide in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica in 1995. The mufti Zukorlić obtained address registration in the town and later even voted at the municipal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Zukorlić continues to count on the Reis-ul-Ulem in Sarajevo. In June 2012 Zukorlić and the Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina Mustafa Cerić participated in Mecca in the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (the former Islamic Conference). A paragraph was included in the official declaration urging Serbia to stop the isolation of the Bosnians from Sandžak and of Bosnia and Herzegovina, not to undermine the unity of the Muslim community, not to imperil the waqf properties and to start supporting the educational and training institutions. Cerić and Zukorlić were included in the organisation's Supreme Council.

Mustafa Cerić at the end of his mandate pronounced a religious sentence "fatwa" against the rival Serbian mufti Adem Zilkić. This position was continued also by the new Grand Mufti of the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina Husein Kavazović, who visited Novi Pazar and participated in various events, organised by Zukorlić.

### **Processes and Tendencies Among the Islamic Community in the Country – Risks of Radicalisation and Influence of the Islamic State Ideology**

The predisposition to use forceful arguments for the resolution of political disputes among the Serbian Muslims does not allow to consider in pure form the topic of the risks of the Islamic community's radicalisation. For example, the mufti Zukorlić declared 4 September as a day of the martyrs for the freedom of Sandžak. On this day in 1944 the execution took place of the leaders of the local Muslim self-defence forces during WWII, who were accused of collaboration with the German occupiers. Subsequently, the initiative was taken over by Ugljanin. He led the commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the execution of the Sandžak political and military leaders by the communist partisans. In the great commemoration march the young people wore uniforms of the

Muslim self- defence forces during the war. The incident caused serious concern throughout the entire country. In the following years the young people were taking part in the demonstration without uniforms.

After Ugljanin was not included in the new government following the 2014 elections, he for the first time for many years reminded of the demand for autonomy of Sandžak. Literally some months earlier Ugljanin had criticised Zukorlić for a similar demand with the argument that economy was more important than autonomy.

The topic of the study of the mother tongue is also a sensitive one. The division of the Yugoslav federation was followed also by the division of the uniform until then Serbo-Croat language. The Bosniak nation and its minorities in the former Yugoslav republics defended their right to their own language. An official start took place in February 2013 in Sandžak of the teaching of Bosniak language and classes were opened on Bosnian history and culture. At various instances before that rival Muslim leaders had accused the government of obstructing the process.

In the course of the 2014 election campaign for national councils new claims were addressed to the authorities that the rights of Muslims were not observed. The president of the official Bosniak National Council Esad Džudžević, who was a leading activist of Ugljanin's party, organised a campaign to remove the Serb endings "ić" and "vić" from the names of Bosniaks and he himself changed his name to Džudžo.

### **Recruitment of Jihadi Fighters**

Much more serious alarm is causing the accumulation of information about Muslims from the region of the former Yugoslav space who die as volunteer jihadists in Syria. Observers and officials express concern with the spread of Wahhabism in the region during the entire first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in 2011 an extremist originating from Sandžak fired at the American embassy in Sarajevo. Other Sandžak-born persons. investigated as his accomplices. were discovered in the following years in Syria. At the beginning of 2014 the names of the first victims from Sjenica and Novi Pazar were made public. One more resident of Novi Pazar was added to the list by the end of the year. The following spring the Ministry of Interior in Belgrade made public information

on more than 30 Serbian citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq. In 2015 the chairman of the parliamentary committee for oversight of the security services Momir Stojanović, who is a former director of military intelligence, announced that 37 persons had gone to fight in Syria and seven of them had died.

A nineteen-year-old woman, who had returned from the battlefields in the Middle East, was arrested in Bosnia and Herzegovina and handed over to the Serbian authorities. She was born in the town of Smederevo on the river Danube but her patronym was Albanian and her husband was a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The borders in the Western Balkans are dangerously permeable for the activists of radical Islam. In 2015 the Serbian security services found out that a theologian from the Kosovo town of Prizren, who had the symbolic nickname "the Sheikh", with the help of a Bosniak – citizen of Serbia, used the mosque in Novi Pazar to urge the worshippers to join the "jihad" in Syria. The mosque is not a recruitment centre for volunteers but there a connection may be established with people fighting on behalf of the "Islamic State".

In 2017 the Serbian Minister of Interior Nebojša Stefanović announced that 49 persons from Serbia had left to fight on behalf of the "Islamic State" and that some of them had died while others were still there. Before that Momir Stojanović spoke of 70 Serbian citizens in the "Islamic State". An explanation of the differing numbers gave the mufti Zukorlić in March 2018 when he raised the alarm that eleven Serbian citizens – women and children - had been detained in a Kurdish camp near the borders of Syria, Iraq and Turkey and called for their release and return home. There is no doubt that part of the Serbian jihadists had been accompanied by their families.

### **Risk of Terrorist Acts, Related to Radical Islamist Groups**

According to the researcher of Islamic radicalism in the Balkans Christopher Delizo at the early stages of his establishment as a leader Zukorlić had received financial and moral support from Wahhabi circles both directly from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran and through the mediation of structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Controlled by Zukorlić young Muslim Activists in Sandžak are being radicalised. They provoked several incidents in 2006-2007, during which they attacked and threatened moderate local imams, women in fashionable attire and participants in music concerts. A secret



weapons cache was uncovered in 2007 in the vicinity of Novi Pazar containing explosives, uniforms and propaganda literature. The equipment was received through the existing Wahhabi connections. The participants in the shooting incident at the American embassy in Sarajevo in 2011 and the Serbian jihadists in the Middle East originate precisely from these circles.

In the subsequent years the most radical elements were located outside Serbian territory but with the shift in the course of the military activities in the Middle East the attention was focused on their homeland again. On 10 July 2015 a threatening video of the "Islamic State" was published on YouTube in which, against the background of a religious song, a threat is pronounced that Serbia would be the first target of the jihadists, who after that planned "to bring back sharia law" also in the other countries of the Western Balkans. The message was published on the day before the Serbian prime-minister Aleksandar Vučić visited Srebrenica to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims during the war for the Yugoslav succession. During the visit Vučić was the victim of organised stone-throwing attack. The situation was exacerbated significantly by the manifold increase of the refugee streams from the Middle East to Western Europe. It turned out that some of the participants in the Paris incidents in November 2015 had crossed Serbian territory. Experts warn that terrorism may escalate into armed clashes in the Balkans.

In March 2016 three "Islamic State" loyalists, who had returned, were arrested in Kosovo for planning attacks in Serbia. In the summer of the same year a clip was published in the social media in which armed men were burning the Serbian flag dressed in uniforms of the Bosnian Muslim army from the time of the wars in the 1990's.

In 2016 the mufti Zukorlić was awarded special attention by the "Islamic State" in the form of a video, calling for his assassination and identifying him as a traitor who had brought disgrace to his position of imam for having been elected a member of parliament in a Christian state.

A special poll was conducted at the same time which showed that in Sandžak almost one fifth of young Muslims between the age of 16 and 27 justified violence in the name of faith. Almost a quarter refused to reply to the question whether they knew what the "Islamic State" was. About 10% replied positively to the question whether it was justifiable to go to

another country to fight if in this way the faith was defended. According to sociologists young Muslims in Sandžak are socially isolated and “atomised”. They do not believe the imams, political parties, non-governmental organisations, neighbours but believe only in their families and partners. This is loneliness which, coupled with danger on a collective level, easily generates opening towards radical political opinions.

Such people are susceptible to radical propaganda disseminated through the social networks. Yet another threatening message from the “Islamic State” was issued in the summer of 2017 in the specialised on-line magazine “Rumiyah” (Rumelia). In it threats of terrorist attacks were addressed against the Serbs for the “killings of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo”.

### **Measures Against the Threat of Radicalisation**

The Serbian government pays special attention and undertakes a series of measures against Islamic radicalisation in the field of legislation, judicial prosecution and the operation of the special services. This is coupled with a sustained policy of integrating the Muslim community and its leaders.

It is an indicative example that none other than minister Rasim Ljajić is raising the alarm and members of parliament from his party are proposing legislative amendments directed against participants in armed conflicts abroad. At the start of its 2014 autumn session the parliament adopted a law, providing for imprisonment of Serbian citizens who participate, support or recruit participants in armed conflicts abroad. Implementing exactly these texts in April 2018 the Specialised Court in Belgrade convicted to a total of 67 years imprisonment seven persons, accused of terrorism and cooperation with the “Islamic State”. Three of them were tried *in absentia*. There are assessments that the group had sent at least 24 people to the battlefield in Syria.

This case is an example of successful international cooperation. One of the defendants was deported to Serbia from Turkey. Because of the links of the Serbian Muslims with their fellow countrymen in Bosnia and Herzegovina (as far as Bosniaks are concerned) and in Albania, Kosovo and Western Macedonia (in cases when Albanians are concerned) the Serbian special bodies are collecting targeted information about the processes in the respective countries and the possible sources of threats.

The policy of integrating the Muslim community is of equal importance. When forming the local authorities, the big national parties always try to conclude the necessary coalitions with the local political leaders and the prominent representatives of the Muslim confession in the respective municipality. The latter, on their hand, successfully incorporate themselves in the local and national power structures. The central authorities also seek a balance and try to have more than one ally in Sandžak. Rasim Ljajić passed flawlessly from government to government where he was complemented by Sulejman Ugljanin. After 2014 only Ljajić remained minister but the departure of Ugljanin from the capital enhanced the possibilities of the mufti Zukorlić for cooperation with the government to such an extent that after the 2016 elections he received the chairmanship of the Parliamentary Committee for education, science, technological development and information society. Neither were other prominent representatives of the Muslim community forgotten. Vučić's government sent Mohamed Jusufspahić as ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Emir Elfić – to the Lebanon.

The efforts were worthwhile. When on June 11, 2015 the Serbian prime-minister Vučić was attacked with stones in an assault, prepared in advance during his visit to pay respect to the victims of Srebrenica, which in itself was a serious challenge for the security of the region, the mufti Zukorlić made a statement to the news agencies that he supported the policy of reconciliation pursued by Vučić and wished the prime-minister to remain committed to the selected course. His statement was followed by a statement of the Bosniak National Council in the same vein. The appeals for peace came at the right moment.

A similar coincidental position can be observed with regard to religious extremism. It is denounced both by Ljajić, who was the sponsor of the bill, criminalising the participation in foreign military structures, and by the Bosniak National Council, presided by Ugljanin.

## **Conclusions**

The observation of the processes within the Muslim community in Serbia creates the impression of a seemingly paradoxical situation. On the face of it stand out periodic sharp extreme statements of the leaders about violations

of the Muslim's rights, which often are accepted quite seriously by their supporters. In comparison with the leading figures of the big national parties, as a matter of fact, this looks like an expression of a "macho" style in the politicians' rhetoric, who in this way legitimise their leadership presence. A similar behaviour is part of the Serbian political tradition but it does not always take account of the voters' emotions, which are additionally heightened by unemployment, economic backwardness and the growing number of young people seeking their realisation in life. The nepotism and political patronage are an integral part of local politics in a backwater region such as Sandžak. A daily fight is being waged for control and distribution of the local resources, which are an extremely important source of influence, livelihood and in certain cases – even of survival. Local leaders are often inclined to legitimise their public role with the threat of "external enemies" and by their own declared readiness to respond in force. This is not always comprehended by their followers, who often resort even to physical clashes. The party bosses have difficulties in controlling their supporters among the region's growing unemployment and are inclined to resort to the dangerous mix of religion and politics and of social and ethnic problems. Not all members of the community succeed in finding their own place in this complicated balance. Their feelings are exploited ruthlessly and they stand on the verge of emotional stress, which is seeking a vent to go out. Some find this vent in the temptation of Islamic radicalisation.

Such preconditions may put the relations between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Serbia and, for that matter, in the entire former Yugoslav space, to the test. In addition, the Albanian problem should also be taken into consideration, which undoubtedly is a national one, but which under certain circumstances and the right conditions for radicalisation may acquire religious dimensions.

Compared to its neighbours, Serbia sends fewer jihadists to the Middle East. This may be due both to the relatively smaller share of Bosniaks and Albanians as compared to the rest of the population and to the Yugoslav legacy, which tolerated secular Islam. In this sense the Serbian Muslims may become an effective barrier against radicalisation. On the other hand, underestimating the problem may bring about a development of hazardous tendencies, of which there are hints in the developments of the past years.

# ISLAM IN TURKEY

*Peter Vodenski*

## **Religious Beliefs – Role and Place of Islam**

The predominant religion in Turkey is Islam; about 99.8% of the population identify themselves as Muslims. According to generally accepted studies about 80% of modern Turkey's population are Sunni, and 20% Shia-Alevis. Islam spread in the lands of present-day Turkey in about the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century when the Seljuk Turks expanded in Eastern Anatolia. Since 1517 the Sultan became the only Caliph (from Arabic – “successor”, “steward”) of the prophet Mohammad, supreme head of the Islamic Community, performing spiritual and secular leadership of the Islamic world.

After WWI a group of patriotic nationalistic officers and intellectuals, headed by Mustafa Kemal, refused to accept the peace treaty of Sevre and started armed action that grew into a war of national liberation. The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 (the peace treaty of Lausanne). The republic was built by Mustafa Kemal, who was named Atatürk (father of the Turks), on an ideology, resting on six principles: *populism, republicanism, nationalism, laicism, statism* (state control of the economy) all this requiring *reformism*.

Atatürk's reforms encompassed practically all spheres of Turkish society, including the role of religion. The Sultanate was annulled on 1 November 1922, and the Caliphate on 3 March 1924 (the position of Sheikh-ul-Islam was also annulled and all religious questions were handed over to a Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*)). In subsequent years women were granted equal rights with men (1926-34), wearing the fez and hijab was banned (25 November 1925), a Civil Code was adopted (in March 1925 the sharia courts were disbanded and civil judicial procedures were introduced), and on 30 November 1925 the religious sects and orders were closed down. These reforms, in particular in the religious sphere, were met by strong resistance by the clergy and on certain occasions caused revolts which Atatürk suppressed radically.

Atatürk and his followers regarded organised religion as anachronism, opposing “civilisation”, which according to them was rational secular cul-

ture. When in the 1920's (and later for that matter) reforms were carried out in the direction of a secular society, the reformists strived to exclude religion from the sphere of public policy and to restrict it to personal morality, behaviour and faith. The aim of these changes was to place Islam under the control of the state.

### **Political Parties and their Relations with Islam**

In any event, during Atatürk's time Islam incessantly played inalienable role in citizens private life. This role grew after the relaxation of political control in 1946. The newly-established Democratic Party (DP) lead by Adnan Menderes included in its programme some policies aimed at satisfying the aspirations of the religious circles, which brought it votes at elections.

After the DP came to office, it started gradually to meet the need for restoring religious education in state schools. In the 1950's religious education became obligatory in schools unless parents expressly objected. In 1949 a Faculty for Religious Education at the University of Ankara was established for training teachers in Islam and imams. In 1951 the DP government opened a special secondary school (Imam Hatip) for the education of imams and preachers. In 1982 religious education became obligatory for the pupils in primary and secondary schools.

In the 1960's the successor party to the DP was the Justice Party (JP) headed by Süleyman Demirel, which gradually withdrew from the rural areas, and the space freed by it was occupied by newly created small parties with religious orientation. The deep changes in society brought to the forefront the respective politicians who had the skills to exploit voters' religious feelings. Such a politician was Necmettin Erbakan. On the basis of the "National Outlook" (*Millî Görüş*) ideology he created one after the other several pro-religious parties (at the first congress in 1970 of the National Salvation Party, created by Erbakan, it embraced an Islamist political philosophy and for the first time the chant "Allah-u-Akbar" was heard at a party forum).

Speaking about such politicians, one should point out also the role of the current President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan. He was a member of Erbakan's Welfare Party, in 1994 he was elected mayor of Istanbul; after the party

relinquished power (under the pressure of the military) and its ban he was sentenced to four months imprisonment. In 2001 he established the Justice and Development Party (JDP) which won the parliamentary elections in November 2002. The court record of Erdoğan, burdened by imprisonment, prevented him initially from becoming prime-minister but later the law was amended. In 2014 he was elected President and after the win at the 2017 referendum on amending the Constitution and the transformation of the republic's form of government from parliamentary to presidential, in 2018 he was elected President and headed the executive. In parallel, Erdoğan preserved his position of party leader.

One of the reasons that in the 1970's and 1980's Islam underwent political renaissance was that the leaders right of centre regarded religion as a lever in the fight against left and leftist ideas, which were becoming socially popular. A very powerful and influential group of intellectuals, organised in the so-called "Intellectual Hearth" (*Aydınlar Ocağı*), emerged, which preaches that the true Turkish culture is a synthesis of the Turkish traditions before the adoption of Islam and the tenets of Islam itself.

### **Attitude of the State Institutions Towards the Islamic Communities, Existence of Islamic Trends and Religious Organisations**

The tolerant attitude of the state towards Islam leads to the development of private initiatives, including construction of new mosques and religious educational establishments in the cities, establishment of Islamic centres for research and holding conferences dedicated to Islam, development of Islamic newspapers and magazines, opening of Islamic health centres and orphanages, as well as financial institutions and cooperatives. In 1994 the first Islamic TV channel (Channel 7) began broadcasting first in Istanbul and later also in Ankara.

Turkey was the first Muslim country which in 1925 officially banned women from wearing hijab. For the first time in 1984 the then prime-minister Turgut Özal, following the policy of "synthesis with Islam", rescinded this ban, but under public pressure from secular circles in society he restored the ban in 1987. In 2008 Erdoğan's government made a new attempt to remove this ban in the universities, but the Constitutional Court left it in place. In 2010 the

ban was lifted and in 2013 the wearing of hijab was allowed in government offices. In 2014 the ban to wear hijab was lifted for the upper classes in the state schools. In 2015 the Supreme Military Court of Turkey annulled the ban on wearing hijab by relatives of servicemen when visiting barracks.

Islamic sects, movements and organisations like Nakşibendi, Bektashi, Nurcu, etc. developed too. They also have their own media. It is believed that their membership includes a substantial part of the Turkish political, economic and cultural elite (it is a well-known fact that the former prime-minister Turgut Özal was a member of Nakşibendi and it is thought of Erdoğan as being “very close” to Nakşibendi). The members of Süleymanlılar (Sülaymanites) – more than 100 000 persons – do not consider themselves an Islamic order but “followers”. In their ranks there are ministers, members of parliament, founders of political parties (after the formation of the JDP the Sülaymanites divided politically between the Motherland Party and the JDP). They carry out humanitarian, educational work in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, France, Sweden and Switzerland – a total of 1 700 associations. Before the June 2018 elections support for Erdoğan and JDP was expressed also by 14 organisations of the Salafites (there are claims that Turkish Salafites have taken part in the fighting in Syria on the side of the radical groups).

The religious charity foundation Maarif (there are rumours that it is under the control of President Erdoğan) not without help from Diyanet and TİKA (Development agency), as well as from other humanitarian organisations serving as cover for the intelligence service MIT (*Milli istihbarat teşkilatı*), is currently implanting itself in the place of FETO (Gülen movement), and not only in Turkey itself but also in the Balkan countries and among the Turkish communities in Western Europe, which FETO had penetrated through educational establishments, libraries and foundations.

In the last years the influence of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), established by Atatürk, is growing. The budget of this Directorate, subordinated directly to the President, amounts to billions of dollars. In 2002 its budget was USD 325 million and in 2016 – in excess of USD 2 billion, which is by 40% more than the budget of the ministry of interior and equals the budgets of the ministries of foreign affairs, energy and culture together.



The Directorate takes care of the construction and maintenance of mosques (almost 100 thousand in Turkey), of the wages of the imams, etc. It allocates resources also to the Islamic communities abroad – in the Balkans, in the Western countries with Turkish communities, etc., where it tries to send its imams and preachers, and to carry out work among them, including intelligence work. After the coup attempt in 2016 the Diyanet ordered its employees abroad to monitor and report on activities of Gülenists and hundreds of intelligence reports from dozens of countries were sent to Ankara. The Diyanet has 150 thousand employees which practically means an entire army of Islamism. The Diyanet has licence to create its own media – TV and radio stations, newspapers, magazines.

After 2011 the Diyanet started to issue fatwas on request and their number is growing steadily. At the end of 2015, for example, the fatwas explained that “one should not keep dogs at home, should not celebrate the Christian New Year, should not play lottery, neither have tattoos”. The establishment newspaper “Yeni Şafak” (advocates the policy of the JDP) publishes these fatwas periodically. However, although the Diyanet is a government body the fatwas issued by it do not have (at least so far) the obligatory character of a law in Turkey.

During the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, the opposition defined as a sort of interference in the election struggle in Turkey the support for the JDP by the Muslim clergy and in particular their active campaign in favour of Erdoğan. For this purpose religious evenings (iftar) and the Muslim places of worship were used (during the prayers appeals were made for support of the JDP and Erdoğan’s portrait was placed in every mosque or in front of its entrance).

It should be pointed out that the Diyanet takes care only of the Sunnis and the Alevis are deprived of such care. This creates a certain inequality since all Turkish citizens pay taxes (from which the budget is formed) regardless of the practiced religion (the Alevis visit their own places of worship – cemevi and their preachers are called “dede”).

It should be taken into account that a main pillar of secularism in the Republic of Turkey were the military, they were considered the staunchest supporters of Atatürk’s legacy. After WWII the Turkish military made

four coup-d'états, one attempt at a coup and were charged once of an attempted coup (the charge was dropped later) – all this to prevent (in their judgment) the deviation of certain politicians from the principles of Atatürkism, the Islamisation of society and the threats to national security. It should be definitely underlined that the gradual erosion of the role of the military in Turkish politics, their expulsion to the sidelines led – in addition to other consequences – to the undermining of the secular tenets of Atatürk's legacy. This expulsion happened not without help from Europe.

### **Islam and the Foreign Policy of Turkey**

During the different periods of its development the Republic of Turkey has used Turkish/Turkic nationalism and the Muslim religion for the purposes of its foreign policy in the countries where the Ottoman Empire once ruled. Depending on the circumstances and the historic period this was based on the ideology of "pan-Turkism", and later "pan-Islamism", "Turkic-Islamic synthesis", "strategic depth" but the purpose had always been the same – strengthening the position of Turkey among these countries.

Presently Turkey is a regional factor with ambitions to become a global one. In order to gain advantages for its policy, in the course of its conduct Turkey uses all available hybrid means – political, military, "soft power" for establishing influence over Turkic and Muslim groups in the neighbouring countries. This is done through various tools: intelligence service (MIT), the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the "Yunus Emre" Institute, the Agency of the Turks Abroad, NGO's, political and party engineering in the countries where conditions allow, etc. The *modus operandi* is "what is possible is enough".

Erdoğan's first visits after he was elected President in 2018 were in Azerbaijan and in the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. At both places Erdoğan used the phrase "... we are the same people divided in two states".

Relations with the states of the Western Balkans traditionally have priority significance for Turkish foreign policy and Turkey often regards them through the prism of the Ottoman historic legacy, which at times brings about contradictory results and leads to exacerbating the existing historic burdens and prejudices. The Western Balkans are for Turkey the territory

on which it has to exert influence through the Turkic-Muslim element, starting from Albania, through Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sandžak, Kosovo and Macedonia, through Thrace (Bulgaria and Greece). But Turkey's aspirations do not end here. What follows is the Black Sea (Crimea – the cause of the Crimean Tartars and the Gagauz in Bessarabia, particularly in Moldova where in less than 30 years the local Gagauz population – Orthodox but speaking a Turkic language – were subjected to intensive “soft” cultivation that they are Turks), and further East – the Caucasus (with the Turkic-Muslim element among the local population), Central Asia up to the Uygur region in China.

The basic parameters of Turkish foreign policy *vis a vis* the Republic of Macedonia are to build an image of “protector” and closest ally of Skopje, always underlining the role of the Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia. Turkey officially defines the Bosnian Muslims as a “brother nation” and Sarajevo, together with Skopje, is one of the Balkan capitals mentioned most often in President Erdoğan's speeches in the context of the promoted vision of the existence of a group of states upon which Turkish power is projected in the form of influence, protection and solidarity. For many years now the JDP has supported the Bosnian leader Bakir Izetbegović through nurturing among the Muslims the cult of his father – Alija Izetbegović. According to the TV series “Alija” of the Turkish state TV (filmed in Sarajevo and Mostar) on his deathbed Alija “had bequeathed Bosnia to Erdoğan and had asked him to take care of the country”. The Turkish state leadership prioritises relations with Kosovo, which is justified with argument that the residents there are Turkish citizens of Albanian origin. Albania is perceived as “friendly and brotherly” (as opposed to the other countries in the region – with Serbia the Turkish side develops relations and increases its influence mainly on the basis of economic cooperation using TIKA).

Also interesting is the question of the so-called FETO (Gülen movement – some characterise it also as a Muslim sect), accused as the organiser of the unsuccessful coup attempt in 2016. Alongside the hundreds of thousands of supporters of the preacher, subjected to subsequent persecution, the Turkish side undertook the persecution of such persons abroad too through a different set of tools. For example, in

Kosovo. Azerbaijan and the Ukraine MIT conducted operations for the “extraction” to Turkey of so-called Gülenists (as a matter of fact Kosovo politicians expressed public disagreement with the operation, which was carried out without their knowledge). There was an attempt of such an operation also in Mongolia.

The existence of Turkish and Muslim communities in West European countries is used by Ankara in the election struggle – there were such cases both before the referendum for the amendment of the Constitution (April 2017) and before the elections for President and Majlis in 2018. Apparently, this was characterised as a problem for some of the countries like the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, which did not permit such election propaganda on their territory (this caused deterioration of their relations with Turkey).

The activity of the preachers sent by the Diyanet to other countries also causes problems in some countries. An indication of this is the case of Austria, where in the period of the election campaign for President and Majlis in Turkey among the Turkish citizens abroad the government decided to close down seven mosques (six related to the Arab community and one to the Turkish) and extradited six imams (all related to the Turkish community). This decision was the result of established violations of the Law on Islam and the Law on the Non-Profit Legal Persons related to the licencing regime, the form of financing and the advocating of extreme Islam. A similar incident happened also before the Bulgarian parliamentary election in 2017 – the caretaker government applied a so-called “compulsory administrative measure” in relation of six Turkish citizens (two of them were imams sent by the Diyanet with diplomatic passports), who were obliged to leave the country. As a matter of fact, a similar measure was applied by the Bulgarian Government also in 2006 in relation to a diplomat (attaché) from the Turkish Consulate General in Burgas (he had also been sent by the Diyanet).

At present there are eleven political parties in the European countries founded by “Muslims or with predominantly Muslim membership”. In France there are three such parties, in Spain – two, in Bulgaria – three, in Austria, the Netherlands and Greece – one. According to publications in the Turkish media, these parties are financed by official Ankara through different

instruments. It is interesting that with the exception of Bulgaria in all other countries these are marginal organisations with “insignificant influence” on the policies of the respective country. In the period of the caretaker government in Bulgaria prior to the early parliamentary elections in the spring of 2017 the Turkish ambassador in Sofia was invited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and his attention was drawn to the inadmissibility of interference in the country’s internal affairs in the form of party-political engineering.

An interesting aspect of Turkish foreign policy is also its policy toward Islamic countries. As opposed to the times of Atatürk, at present Turkey emphasises by all possible means the common Muslim base for the relations with these countries. Ankara proclaimed itself as the most ardent defender of the Palestinian cause, which on the other hand caused problems with Israel.

Ankara used to maintain discreet relations with military and political groups opposing Bashar Assad in Syria, traded with energy resources with the “Islamic State” (when a journalist published a story that the lorries, transporting the fuel, were with registration plates of Turkish intelligence, he, together with the newspaper’s editor, was confined to prison for “disseminating classified information”). With its military operations in Afrin and Manbidj, as well as in Iraq, Turkey demonstrated that it is an unsurmountable factor in the region.

In spite of the confrontation along the Sunni-Shia line, there are many delicate links between Turkey and Iran, related mainly to the sects Nakşibendi and Süleymancılar (Sūlaymanites). There are “reasonable assumptions” that these links are supervised and maintained by MIT. The intelligence service is using the Islamic banks in Iran in which there are assets of present-day Turkish leaders.

### **Processes and Tendencies in the Islamic Community – Risks of Radicalisation, Influence of the “Islamic State” Ideology, Recruitment of Jihadist Fighters**

The existence in Turkey of jihadists (including Turkish citizens) – fighters of ISIL cannot be excluded, but what is more important is that Turkey tries to monitor and neutralise such fighters and strives to be recognised as “the staunchest opponent of jihadism, a barrier before the jihadists trying to go to Europe, protector of the European countries from terrorism”. Officially Erdoğan denies any involvement with ISIL.

At the same time, persons in opposition to Erdoğan who have found refuge in Western Europe claim that there were links between Erdoğan and members of Al-Qaeda, especially during the “Arab Spring” and subsequently, when he tried to take part in the installation of proxy regimes from Tunisia and Libya to Egypt and Syria. According to these persons Erdoğan interfered in the judiciary in the Van vilayet, preventing the conviction of a local resident (Osman Nuri Gülaçar – an imam on the payroll of the Diyanet) for links with Al Qaeda, and in his capacity of prime-minister refused to answer a parliamentary enquiry in relation to this incident. Moreover, the same Gülaçar appeared on top of the ballot papers for the June 2018 elections.

The question “Does Turkey look like a secular state today?” is being asked not infrequently and moreover not just in philosophic terms. Under the Constitution the country observes secular laws and not the Sharia. But if one compares present-day Turkey with what the country used to be, for example, 40 years ago or to the situation prior to 2002 (Erdoğan’s coming to office), one would notice inevitably exceptional changes in the religious field. Tens of thousands of new mosques have been built on the country’s territory (just in the period 2002-2013 17 000 new mosques were built, and a significant part of the ones, remaining from Ottoman times, were renovated). The existing ban on wearing hijab by the public employees – teachers, lawyers, parliamentarians, etc. was lifted by the JDP. In November 2015 a female judge became the first judge to preside in court wearing a hijab. And in August of the same year Ms Ayşen Gürcan became the first Turkish government minister wearing a hijab. The Imam Hatip schools train students to become imams. In 2002 there were 65 000 students in such schools, in 2013 their number was already 658 000, and in 2016 they reached one million. Compulsory religious courses were introduced in schools. Initially, when organising courses on the Quran, the children who had expressed a wish, had to be at least twelve years of age. This was abolished by the JDP government, and in 2013 such pilot courses were introduced also for children of pre-school age. In 2013 the JDP adopted a law, prohibiting advertising and sale of alcohol drinks within a radius of 100 metres of mosques and schools. The TV broadcasters were obliged to dim or cut out from their broadcasts scenes, showing alcohol drinks.

Opinion polls indicate that 56.3% of the Turkish population consider Turkey not a secular but an Islamic country (in 2015 this figure was 5%, in 2016 – 37.5%, and in 2017 – 39.9%). Almost 50:50 were the responses to the question whether the country was with “western” or “eastern” orientation, and on the assessment whether Turkey had the characteristics of a European or Middle Eastern country the latter prevailed by 54.4%.

In modern Turkish society voices are also heard that lately among the youngest part of the population a withdrawal from Islam and a sort of turn to deism (belief in God but without a religion) and even atheism can be observed. This was recognised even in a report, discussed in April 2018 in Konya (a conservative town in Anatolia). Right-wing pundits attribute this fact to the penetrating from the West “hedonist, materialistic and decadent” influence, while others attribute it to the raging corruption, arrogance, narrow-mindedness and spitefulness, which can be observed among the elite otherwise loyal to Islam. As a reason the latter point to the excessive referral to Islam by JDP activists (e.g. a party functionary declared at a rally in an Istanbul district that “if we lose the elections, we shall lose Jerusalem and Mecca”, as if Islam could not exist if JDP was not in office). Turkish students studying in Western European universities often think that Erdoğan is not a true Muslim, believing unreservedly in Islam, but rather is exploiting religion to attain his political objectives.

## **Conclusions**

Obviously, Islam has very deep roots in Turkey. During the Ottoman Empire the country observed Sharia law and the Sultan was Caliph (representative of Mohamad on Earth). The reforms of Atatürk in this field displaced Islam from the centre of public life but it continued to govern people’s personal morality, behaviour and faith. After Atatürk’s death and particularly in the period of the emergence of a real multi-party system (1946-1950) Islam gradually started to play a more prominent role, and not just as a private faith but also in the political system where it is “creeping” to occupy an ever more serious place. For Turkey this is, obviously, a constant process, although the country is still secular in terms of political system.

At present Erdoğan is inclined to use Islam in politics for his own purposes but the process of strengthening the religious Islamic factor in do-

mestic and in foreign policy is acquiring natural momentum, it cannot be stopped by force of will and it is unforeseeable when it will cross the limit, set for it by Erdoğan

In its foreign policy under Atatürk Turkey used actively the Turkic factor in neighbouring and more distant countries (pan-Turkism), while the Islamic factor was placed on the back-burner in view of the principle of the secular state in the ideology of reformism. After the beginning of the return of Islam to the domestic policy, pan-Turkism is complemented by pan-Islamism (influence through the Islamic factor in neighbouring and more distant countries) additionally developed into “Turkic-Islamic synthesis” and “strategic depth” – neo-Ottomanism. Turkey establishes links with different Islamist groups in the Balkans, the Middle East, as far away as the Uygur region, provides refuge to compromised members of these groups. The instruments of this policy are the intelligence service (MIT), the Development Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). MIT, for example, carries out secret/dark operations for kidnapping Gülenists from other countries, for the time being just from Kosovo, the Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Mongolia.

There are grounds to expect that this policy will continue even after the actual transformation of Turkey from a parliamentary into a presidential republic with an extreme concentration of power in the hands of President Erdoğan.



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