

# THE DIVISION AMONG THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AND TURKEY'S ATTEMPT TO MEDIATE

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## Introduction

In the past decade, the division within the Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia has been frequently discussed by the state authorities of the Republic of Serbia (primarily the Ministry of Religious Affairs), the leadership of Islamic communities in Serbia and neighbouring countries, foreign diplomatic missions (Turkey and the United States in public, and the “two countries of Western Europe” far from the public eye) and the state and religious institutions of the Republic of Turkey. During the four-year engagement in the Ministry of the Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia (2008–2012), as a ministry official in charge of cooperation with the Islamic Community, I had the opportunity to witness this through both archival material and numerous meetings with religious officials of the Islamic communities and foreign diplomatic representatives in our country.<sup>[1]</sup>

In Serbian and foreign public, there was a lot of false information about the nature of the division within the Islamic community. To avoid further confusion, it was necessary to systematize knowledge and make it available to the state authorities and the media. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia has therefore compiled a document: “Information on the present situation in the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia, divisions, relations towards the state authorities of the Republic of Serbia and constant political attacks of the Islamic Community of the Riyaset [of the Islamic Community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the state authorities and national institutions of the Republic of Serbia.” In July 2009, this document was sent to the General Secretariat of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, the Offices of the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister, the ministries in the Government of the Republic of Serbia and later on to the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia (NUNS) in response to their request for clarification of the circumstances under which the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia stopped funding the *Glas islama (Voice of Islam)* – official newspaper of the Islamic Community in Novi Pazar, loyal to the Sarajevo Riyaset – because of hate speech.<sup>[2]</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Personal notes of the author (Aleksandar Raković).

<sup>2</sup> Archives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, „Informacija o aktuelnim prilikama u Islamskoj zajednici u Republici Srbiji, podelama, odnosu prema državnim organima Republike Srbije i neprestanim političkim napadima Islamske zajednice u Srbiji Rijasetu Bosne i Hercegovine na državne organe Republike Srbije i nacionalne institucije srpskog naroda“.

No issue regarding the division in the Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia can be understood without insight into this document, the sections of which are given below:

*The dissolution of the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia happened within a broader historical process of the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.*

*The Islamic Community of Yugoslavia was illegitimately abolished in 1993, and two out of four signatories were Mustafa Cerić and Muamer Zukorlić. The dissolution resulted in the creation of secessionist Islamic Communities of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sandžak, Croatia and Slovenia.*

*The newly founded Islamic Community of Sandžak was headed by Muamer Zukorlić and in 1995 placed under the jurisdiction of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. By the Constitution of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1997), the position of the Islamic Community of Sandžak as an integral part of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina was elevated to the highest legal level. In 1995, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Serbia rejected a request for the registration of the Islamic Community of Sandžak as a religious community. In 1998, Zukorlić tried to organize the Islamic community in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as an autonomous unit of the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but for the state authorities this form of registration was also unacceptable.*

*On the other hand, the Islamic Community of Serbia held an Assembly in Niš in 1994, to establish a legal continuity with the Islamic Community of Serbia in the Socialist Republic of Serbia. The Islamic Community of Serbia, under that name, seated in Belgrade and headed by Mufti Hamdija Jusufspahić, has been registered in the Register of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia since 2001. Until 2007, the Islamic Community of Serbia covered the territory of Central Serbia and Vojvodina, without six municipalities of the Raška region (Sandžak), where the Islamic Community of Sandžak was in charge. On February 19, 2007, the Assembly of the Islamic Community of Serbia adopted the Constitution of the Islamic Community of Serbia by which it was elevated to the rank of Riyaset for the territory of the Republic of Serbia and established continuity with the Islamic religious community in the Principality of Serbia. Hamdija Jusufspahić was appointed Reis-Ul-Ulema.*

*Chief Mufti and the President of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Sandžak, Muamer Zukorlić convened the Unifying Assembly of the Islamic Community in Serbia on March 27, 2007. The Islamic Community of Sandžak*

*was supposed to expand its field of operation in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, but at the same time to remain an integral part of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, for the sake of better understanding, this community should be described under the name that justifies its territorial pretensions and institutional connections - the Islamic Community in Serbia of the Riyaset [of the Islamic Community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

*The Assembly of the Islamic Community of Sandžak, or most of the members from the territory of the Republic of Serbia, thought that the creation of a parallel Islamic community in the territory of the Republic of Serbia was unnecessary. Therefore, on October 3, 2007, the Assembly of the Islamic Community of Sandžak, by the majority votes, decided to dismiss Muamer Zukorlić from all functions and to place the Meshihat of the Islamic Community of Sandžak under the jurisdiction of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia with the seat in Belgrade.*

*On October 4, 2007, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Community of Serbia unanimously verified the decisions of the Assembly of the Islamic Community of Sandžak. Adem Zilkić, the chief imam in Tutin was appointed new Reis-Ul-Ulema, and Hamdija Jusufspahić was appointed for life, honorary Reis-Ul-Ulema of the Islamic Community of Serbia. Thus, the Islamic Community of Serbia expanded its field of operation and organizational structure to the Raška region (Sandžak).*

*The Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia, led by Zilkić and Jusufspahić, claims that the unification with the Meshihat of the Islamic Community of Sandžak made a historical compromise among Muslims in Serbia, which established a unique religious organization among the Muslims in Serbia.*

*On the other hand, the Islamic Community in Serbia of the Riyaset [of the Islamic Community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina never accepted the decision on Muamer Zukorlić's dismissal, and held the view that the Islamic Community in Serbia was an organizational part of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

*A special brief review should be made regarding the Islamic Community of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, which comprises of ethnic Albanians. Interestingly, a part of this community accepts the leadership of the Islamic Community of Serbia, another part accepts the leadership of the Islamic community in Serbia of the Riyaset [of the Islamic community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while there are some who are oriented towards secessionist Islamic Community of Kosovo.*

[...]

*Therefore, in the Republic of Serbia, there is a factual and profound division among Muslim believers which is also reflected in their relation towards the Republic of Serbia. While the leaders and religious officials of the Islamic Community of Serbia support our country in international political, cultural and religious associations, the leader and religious officials of the Islamic Community in Serbia of the Riyaset [of the Islamic Community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina repeatedly threaten with internationalization and radicalization of the "Sandžak issue" and attack state authorities of the Republic of Serbia and its national institutions.*

[...]

*With the same dangerous and disrupting policy, Muamer Zukorlić constantly threatens to radicalize the situation in the Raška region (Sandžak) and often compares it to the scenario of solving ethnic and religious disagreements in Kosovo. Besides, Zukorlić has been working for years to destroy the correct interpersonal relations in the Republic of Serbia, because with his statements in public he tries to create an atmosphere of lynch and religious intolerance, negative emotions and contempt, feelings of insecurity and fear and creates an image that such behaviour is not subject to liability. This particularly refers to the official journal of the Islamic Community in Serbia of the Riyaset [of the Islamic Community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Voice of Islam.*

[...]

*Due to all this, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia noted with urgency that the editorial policy of the Voice of Islam is incompatible with the project of "improving religious culture, religious freedom and tolerance" because this paper promotes hate speech, xenophobia and intolerance. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia has therefore decided to suspend further funding of the Voice of Islam.*

[...]

*The Law on Churches and Religious Communities of the Republic of Serbia (Article 15) stipulates that only one Islamic Community can have the status of a traditional religious community.*

*The Constitution of the Islamic Community of Serbia underlines the continuity with Islam as a lawful religious community in the Principality of Serbia. The Islamic Community in Serbia of the Riyaset [of the Islamic Community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not mention this continuity in its Constitution. On May 15, 2006, the Islamic Community of Serbia (with the seat in Belgrade)*

*filed a request to the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia for registration in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities. On July 23, 2007, the Islamic Community in Serbia of the Riyaset [of the Islamic Community] of Bosnia and Herzegovina (based in Novi Pazar and Sarajevo) filed a request for registration in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities.*

*So far, neither of these Islamic communities has been entered in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities of the Republic of Serbia. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia is in the process of forming an expert commission that should determine historical and legal facts and present impartial and competent opinion on the historical and legal continuity of Islamic communities in the Republic of Serbia to the Minister of Religious Affairs. After considering the report of the commission, the Minister of Religious Affairs will decide on the adequate status of Islamic Communities in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities of the Republic of Serbia.*

Article 10 Paragraph 2 of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities stipulates that traditional religious communities are “those that have a multi-year historical continuity in Serbia and whose legal subjectivity is based on special laws”, and according to Article 15 of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities, the Islamic Community is recognized “the continuity with legal subjectivity acquired on the basis of the Law on the Islamic Religious Community of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia” from 1930.<sup>[3]</sup>

Bearing this in mind, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Prof. Dr. Bogoljub Šijaković, has organized a Special Working Group to determine the facts about the historical continuity and legal legitimacy of the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia.<sup>[4]</sup>

According to the decision of the Minister of Religious Affairs dated November 10, 2009, the following members were appointed to a Special Working Group: Dr Dragan Novaković, sociologist, Chairman of the Special Working Group (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia), Prof. Dr. Darko Tanasković, Islamologue (Faculty of Philology in Belgrade), Adem Zilkić, Reis-Ul-Ulema (Islamic Community of Serbia), Aleksandar Raković, historian (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia), whereas the Islamic Community in Serbia led by Muamer Zukorlić refused to appoint a representative in the Special Working Group.<sup>[5]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije* 36/2006.

<sup>4</sup> Archives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia,, „Nalaz Posebne radne grupe za konstatovanje činjenica o istorijskom kontinuitetu i pravnom legitimitetu Islamske zajednice u Republici Srbiji”, 23 July 2010, No. 119-01-17/09-03.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

After considering the given facts, on July 23, 2010, the Special Working Group decided that “only the Islamic Community of Serbia had i.e. could have the historical continuity and legal legitimacy of the traditional Islamic religious community in the Republic of Serbia.”<sup>6</sup>

Then, the Islamic Community of Serbia (unlike the other Islamic community) was integrated into several councils, commissions, special working groups and other bodies of the Republic of Serbia: the National Educational Council of the Republic of Serbia, the Commission of the Serbian Government for Religious Education in Primary and Secondary Schools, Religious Service in the Serbian Armed Forces, Inter-Religious Council of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, and others.

The Islamic Community in Serbia of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter referred to as the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia, which is the latest name of this religious community) did not receive representatives in the bodies of the Republic of Serbia because it explicitly rejected or ignored proposals for cooperation with the relevant ministries: primarily with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia.

Thus, the Islamic Community of Serbia *de facto* inherited, i.e. acquired the status of a traditional Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia, and it is only necessary, in accordance with the legal procedure, to confirm *de jure* the status of the Islamic Community of Serbia, as a traditional religious community, by its entry into the Register of Churches and Religious Communities in the Republic of Serbia.

Turkish diplomatic initiative from 2011 – named as a mediation – was actually supposed to prevent the registration of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia as a traditional religious community in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities in the Republic of Serbia and impose its abolishment.

#### **Turkish Mediation and Initiative for the Unification of the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia (October – November 2011)**

Even before Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs (May 1, 2009), the Turkish diplomacy was making efforts to reconcile conflicting leadership structures of the Islamic Communities in Serbia, whose religious supporters physically confronted in a similar way as political supporters of Sulejman Ugljanin (Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak) and Rasim Ljajić (Sandžak Democratic Party).

Turkish Ambassador to Belgrade Süha Umar has twice played a mediating role between

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

the Islamic Community of Serbia and the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia, with the aim not to impose the solutions but to gather communities within a dialogue. In autumn 2008, no agreement was reached because Zukorlić refused to meet Umar. Ambassador Umar had no intention of giving up; so, on April 14, 2009 he gave a statement for official Serbian press agency *Tanjug* that the Reis-Ul-Ulema Adem Zilkić and Chief Mufti Muamer Zukorlić failed to agree on a code of conduct which would help avoiding incidents between the followers of conflicting Islamic communities. Umar stressed that “no state should ever allow any [religious] community to fall under the institutions of another state.” Thus, he made it clear that the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia should not be part of the organizational structure of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, Zukorlić stated for Bosniak newspaper *Dnevni Avaz* that Umar did not get the support of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül.<sup>[7]</sup> Umar’s initiative failed and the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs Prof. Dr. Ahmet Davutoğlu came to the scene.

Davutoğlu’s initiative to reconcile the Sandžak political leaders and religious leaders of the Islamic communities in the Republic of Serbia cannot be interpreted apart from his neo-Ottomanist concept “Strategic Depth”, according to which regional and global power of Turkey should be based on the spiritual, cultural and political basis of historical Ottomanism. In the region, this would be about the “reconstruction of the Ottoman Balkans”, with the support of Bosniaks and Albanians – the inheritors of “Ottoman heritage.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Minister Davutoğlu and then deputy of Turkish Reis-Ul-Ulema Prof. Dr. Mehmet Görmez arrived in Novi Pazar in July 2009 with a double peace mission: Davutoğlu to reconcile Ugljanin and Ljajić, and Görmez to reconcile Zilkić and Zukorlić. The talks between Görmez and religious leaders on July 23, 2009 did not bridge the gap between the leaders of the Islamic communities. On the other hand, on July 24, 2009, Davutoğlu successfully reconciled Ugljanin and Ljajić. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Vuk Jeremić also attended Davutoğlu’s meeting with Ugljanin and Ljajić.<sup>[9]</sup> In the months to come, Ugljanin slowly, but decidedly, began to leave his position that “Meshihat [of the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia] no longer existed.”<sup>[10]</sup> It seems that Davutoğlu emerged as a key figure who later in an informal conversation was asked to mediate the dispute between the Islamic religious communities in Serbia and find a solution to their

<sup>7</sup> Umar: Muslim leaders agree on code of behavior, *Mfa.gov.rs*, 14 April 2009; Pomirenje između Zilkića i Zukorlića, *Sandzaknews.com*, 15 April 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Darko Tanasković, *Neosmanizam: povratak Turske na Balkan*, Beograd: Official Gazette – Službeni glasnik, 2010, 39, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Ko je pomirio Ugljanina i Ljajića?, *Radio-televizija Vojvodine*, 24 July 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Interview of Sulejman Ugljanin to the Radio-Television of Novi Pazar, „Mešihat više ne postoji”, published on Youtube.com, 3 October 2007.

unification. This Turkish initiative should have waited for a new radicalization of the “Sandžak issue” that was triggered by Zukorlić’s supporters in 2010.

Faced with the fact that the state authorities of the Republic of Serbia did not accept threats and blackmails, the supporters of Muamer Zukorlić got more and more offensive. During the visit of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Novi Pazar on July 12, 2010, the supporters of the Chief Mufti physically attacked the religious officials of the Islamic Community of Serbia and other citizens of Novi Pazar who did not share their opinion.<sup>[11]</sup> Then, on September 4, 2010, “about 1,000 belligerent supporters of Mufti Zukorlić” attacked the gendarmerie and police of the Republic of Serbia in Novi Pazar with stones, bricks and bottles. At the same time, the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia, headed by Muamer Zukorlić, underlined that their political goal was to establish the autonomy of Sandžak as soon as possible.<sup>[12]</sup>

An unnamed Turkish high-ranking diplomat gave a statement to *Hürriyet* that “Serbia asked for Turkey’s help in resolving this problem” and that “the whole process is led by two foreign ministers,” Jeremić and Davutoğlu.<sup>[13]</sup> The information given by the Turkish diplomat was correct because, during an informal conversation, “one of us” asked a Turkish colleague to help us overcome the divisions within the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia.<sup>[14]</sup> In that sense, there was no official request of the Republic of Serbia to the Republic of Turkey, which was confirmed by Minister Jeremić for Serbian Television B92.<sup>[15]</sup> However, Davutoğlu accepted an informal suggestion and developed it into a Turkish diplomatic initiative and proposed “Basic Principles” for the unification of the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia.

According to the press, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Bakir Izetbegović, and Minister of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Serbia Rasim Ljajić, Minister without Portfolio of the Republic of Serbia Sulejman Ugljanin, Reis-Ul-Ulema of the Islamic Community of Turkey (Diyanet) Mehmed Görmez and Reis-Ul-Ulema of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina Mustafa Cerić were involved in the creation of this text (which had several versions and revisions). While the interests of the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia with Muamer Zukorlić were led by the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, representatives of the Islamic Community of Serbia led by Reis-Ul-Ulema Adem Zilkić were not invited to participate

<sup>11</sup> *Tanjug* video clip, 12 July 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Muftijini blokirali Pazar, *Večernje novosti*, 4 September 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Davutoğlu danas u Beogradu, *Danas*, 11 November 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Personal notes of the author.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremić: Davutoğlua zvali verski lideri, a ne država, *Radio-televizija Vojvodine*, 26 October 2011.

either in talks or in the drafting of the text. The Islamic Community of Serbia was to be fully confronted with the “take it or leave it” principle.<sup>[16]</sup> The Bosniak parties supported the unification of the Islamic communities under Turkish initiative in the Republic of Serbia.<sup>[17]</sup> The issue of the Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia was therefore dealt as a “Bosniak religious issue”, although Muslim believers in the Republic of Serbia are not only the Bosniaks, but also the Albanians, Roma, Muslims, Yugoslavs and others, especially the Gorani in Serbian southern province of Kosovo and Metohija.

Ethnic and Religious Identity in the Republic of Serbia According to the 2002 Census Results*							
	Orthodox	Roman Catholics	Protestants	Muslims	Jews	Atheists	Total
Serbs	97,42%	0,07%	0,08%	0,01%		0,34%	6.212.838
Hungarians	0,80%	89,35%	6,21%			0,33%	293.299
Bosniaks	0,17%	0,05%		99,35%		0,13%	136.087
Roma	54,38%	2,71%	3,09%	16,72%		0,21%	108.193
Yugoslavs	37,59%	20,90%	1,72%	2,18%		8,83%	80.721
Croats	2,65%	87,48%	0,42%			2,28%	70.602
Montenegrins	89,05%	0,29%		0,26%		3,14%	69.049
Albanians	0,28%	1,30%		95,72%		0,11%	61.647
Slovaks	1,57%	6,65%	83,27%			0,37%	59.021
Vlachs	98,66%		0,11%			0,06%	40.054
Romanians	81,91%	7,75%	2,15%			0,20%	34.576
Macedonians	92,17%	0,27%	0,37%	1,05%		1,12%	25.847
Bulgarians	90,78%	4,26%	0,17%			0,27%	20.497
Bunjevci	1,26%	92,15%	0,30%			1,48%	20.012
Muslims (ethnic)	2,38%	0,26%	0,07%	86,13%		1,38%	19.503
<b>Total</b>	<b>84,98%</b>	<b>5,48%</b>	<b>1,08</b>	<b>3,20%</b>	<b>0,01%</b>	<b>0,53%</b>	<b>7.498.001</b>

<sup>16</sup> Potpis na jedinstvo u sredu, *Danas*, 16. October 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Ostaju muftije Jusufspahić i Zukorlić, Zilkić ide u penziju, *Danas*, 14 October 2011.

\* Table drafted according to the data of the Republic Statistical Office of Serbia published in: Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u 2002: osnovni skupovi stanovništva, vol. 16, Beograd, 2005.

THE DIVISION AMONG THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AND TURKEY'S ATTEMPT TO MEDIATE

Geographical Distribution of Muslim Believers in the Republic of Serbia According to the 2002 Census Results. The Republic of Serbia: 239.658 Muslims (3.20%)*		
Geographical distribution	Percent of total Muslim population	Percent of total population of the Republic of Serbia
The Raška region (Sandžak) Novi Pazar: 67.366 Tutin: 28.558 Sjenica: 21.149 Prijeopolje: 16.968 Priboj: 6.997 Nova Varoš: 1.647 Total: 142.685	59,55%	1,9%
Southern Serbia Preševo: 30.507 Bujanovac: 25.595 Medvedja: 2.801 Total: 58.903	24,57%	0,79%
Belgrade: 20.366	8,50%	0,27%
Central Serbia without Belgrade, the Raška region and southern Serbia: 9.631	4,02%	0,13%
Northern Province of Vojvodina: 8.073	3,37%	0,11%

Different versions of the “Basic Principles” and information were spread in public with an explicit goal to abolish the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia, eliminate the Islamic Community of Serbia as a traditional religious community in the Republic of Serbia, dismiss Reis-Ul-Ulema Adem Zilkić, and place him to some other position outside Islamic Community, at the same time leaving the possibility to Muamer Zukorlić to run for the position of Reis-Ul-Ulema of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (thus wanting to show that united Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia should be part of the organizational structure of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina), or become Chief Mufti of Sandžak when the opportunity arises if he avoids political activity.<sup>[18]</sup>

In the second week of October 2011, it was certain that the “Basic Principles” should soon be handed over to official Belgrade. On October 10, 2011, Ministers Ugljanin and Ljajić met with Prime Minister Erdoğan and Reis-Ul-Ulema Görmez in Ankara “behind the

\* Table drafted according to the data of the Republic Statistical Office of Serbia published in: Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u 2002: verispovest, maternji jezik i nacionalna ili etnička pripadnost prema starosti i polu, vol. 3, Beograd, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> The talks of Aleksandar Raković with Reis-Ul-Ulema Adem Zilkić and Mufti Muhamed Jusufspahić in autumn 2011; Ostaju muftije Jusufspahić i Zukorlić, Zilkić ide u penziju, *Danas*, 14 October 2011; Ujedinjenje Islamske zajednice glavna tema, *Danas*, 24 October 2011.

closed door.”<sup>[19]</sup> According to the report of the Turkish news agency *Anadolu (AA)*, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Mehmed Görmez, Mustafa Cerić, Muamer Zukorlić, Sulejman Ugljanin and Rasim Ljajić also attended the meeting. On October 17, 2011, *Today's Zaman*, a Turkish daily in English, reported that “last week” the differences between “two religious institutions” were overcome at that meeting in the “old Ottoman military base” Sandžak. After the meeting, Ugljanin said that the differences were “finally overcome under the leadership of Turkish authorities,” Ljajić added that after “the real problem of Sandžak, the economy can finally be discussed and resolved,” and Zukorlić stressed: “I surrender myself to the will of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan “ and “I admire the efforts of Davutoğlu and Görmez to find a solution to the problem in Sandžak.” Zukorlić also said that he accepted every solution supported by Turkey and Mustafa Cerić.<sup>[20]</sup>

Mufti of the Islamic Community of Serbia Muhamed Jusufspahić stressed that “Serbia was not adequately represented” at these meetings because “Serbia had its own Islamic community” independent of Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>[21]</sup>

The Islamic Community of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja comprised of the Albanians also reacted. On October 18, 2011, Mufti Džemaljedin Hasani on behalf of his religious community told the Beta agency that Albanians were not involved in the negotiations on the unification of Islamic communities in the Republic of Serbia and that they would not accept any agreement.<sup>[22]</sup>

Regarding the “economic problems” that Ljajić spoke of, Turkey allegedly promised that, if it comes to reconciliation and the unification of Islamic communities, 200.000.000 to 300.000.000 Euros would be invested in highway Belgrade-South Adriatic and “not only in Sandžak but also in the rest of the country.”<sup>[23]</sup>

Although the Islamic Community of Serbia headed by Adem Zilkić was not invited nor asked about the unification of Islamic communities, Bosniak ministers in the Government of the Republic of Serbia strongly wished the public to get the impression that signing was only a formality. After returning to Serbia, Ugljanin said that all parties gave their consent to the unification of Islamic communities,<sup>[24]</sup> while Ljajić underlined that the process of unifying Islamic communities was unstoppable and that a party refusing to sign the agreement will be excluded from further negotiations.<sup>[25]</sup> There was false information

<sup>19</sup> Başbakan Erdoğan Ugljanin ile Ljajić'i kabul etti, *Hürriyet*, 10. October 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Ankara settles dispute between religious institutions of Sandzak, *Today's Zaman*, 17 October 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Zukorlić je muftija političar, običan kriminalac i nasilnik, *Blic*, 21 October 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Albanci ne prihvataju pomirenje islamskih zajednica, *Frankfurtske vesti*, 18 October 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Ujedinjenje Islamske zajednice glavna tema, *Danas*, 24 October 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Na pomolu pomirenje islamskih zajednica?, *Radio-televizija Srbije*, 17 October 2011.

that the agreement on the unification of Islamic communities should be signed by the President of the Republic of Serbia Boris Tadić, which was later denied from his cabinet.<sup>[26]</sup>

Thus, the untruths and semi-truths flooded the media, and the pressure was growing as Davutoğlu's visit to Belgrade approached. The Islamic Community of Serbia was not a party to the negotiations and therefore could not be excluded. It was only expected to agree to surrender and abandon the concept of independent Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia without a fight. This provoked the suspicion regarding the intentions publicly expressed by the proponents of the agreement on the unification of Islamic communities.

Davutoğlu's visit to Belgrade, arranged for October 19, 2011, was postponed because all diplomatic visits of Turkish officials were cancelled due to Turkish military actions against Kurdish rebels in the southern Anatolia and northern Iraq.<sup>[27]</sup> He arrived in Belgrade on October 24, 2011 with the text of "Basic Principles," confirming rumours that Turkey wanted the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia to be under the auspices of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina and that the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia should be abolished.<sup>[28]</sup>

In this regard, the Reis-Ul-Ulema of the Islamic Community of Serbia Adem Zilkić, spoke at the press conference held on October 28, 2011, at the Belgrade Airport "Nikola Tesla" before leaving for the Hajj. Zilkić said it was unacceptable that the politicians should create an agreement and that the Islamic Community of Serbia should hear about it from the media. Zilkić explained that he was open for negotiations, but could not accept the abolition of Riyaset with the seat in Belgrade.<sup>[29]</sup> The Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Prof. Dr. Dragoljub Mićunović, who was at that time in an official visit to the Turkish Parliament, told *Tanjug* that the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia must be based in Belgrade. He added that it was not desirable for Turkish officials to interfere with the relations between religious communities in the Republic of Serbia.<sup>[30]</sup> Aleksandar Raković, advisor for cooperation with churches and religious communities, spoke on behalf of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia. In his statement to Republika Srpska Television, Raković said that the state authorities of the Republic of Serbia would support reconciliation within the Islamic community only when all interested parties came to agreement, including the Islamic Community of Serbia, which required a much longer negotiating process. Raković also clarified that the division within the Islamic community

<sup>26</sup> Kabinet: Neistiniti navodi da će Tadić potpisati sporazum o jedinstvenoj islamskoj zajednici u Srbiji, *Blic*, 17 October 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Davutoglu odložio dolazak u Srbiju, *Mondo.rs*, 19 October 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Ujedinjenje Islamske zajednice glavna tema, *Danas*, 24 October 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Zilkić ne prihvata ukidanje Rijaseta IZS, *Politika*, 29 October 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Mićunović: Sedište Islamske zajednice mora biti u Beogradu, *Politika*, 29 October 2011.

was not religious, but political, because the Islamic Community of Serbia was loyal to the Republic of Serbia, and the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia acted as a “political opposition to our country.”<sup>[31]</sup> Confronted with such disapproval, Sulejman Ugljanin invited representatives of the Islamic Community of Serbia and the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia to “sit down, dismiss vanity and agree on unification.”<sup>[32]</sup>

Towards the end of October 2011, it became evident that the Republic of Serbia could accept the unification of Islamic communities only if the Islamic Community of Serbia agreed with it. It was also clear that for the Republic of Serbia it was acceptable that the Islamic Community of Serbia should be seated in Belgrade, and headed by the Reis-Ul-Ulema. These were the messages that Minister Jeremić was supposed to convey to Davutoğlu when he visited Turkey on November 3, 2011.<sup>[33]</sup>

The talks of Reis-Ul-Ulema Zilkić and Reis-Ul-Ulema Görmez on the unification of the Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia were held on November 8, 2011 at the Hajj office of the Islamic Community of Turkey in Mecca (Saudi Arabia). Zilkić told Görmez that he supports the unification of the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia, but that all parties should be equally involved in negotiations.<sup>[34]</sup> On the other hand, Görmez told Zilkić that Turkey did not accept the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia. Zilkić was advised by the Turkish Ambassador Ali Rıza Çolak, Chief of Staff of the Reis-Ul-Ulema of Bosnia and Herzegovina Muharem Hasanbegović, Minister Ugljanin, people close to Minister Ljajić and local Sandžak officials to agree with the Turkish initiative. Ljajić advised the Mufti Muhamed Jusufspahić the same thing.<sup>[35]</sup>

Davutoğlu came to Serbia again on November 12 and 13, 2011.<sup>[36]</sup> The new draft agreement still provided for the abolition of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia asked for the opinion of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia on the latest text of the “Basic Principles”. The Ministry of Religious Affairs underlined that the Republic of Serbia must adhere to the position that the Riyaset of the Islamic Community seated in Belgrade and headed by Reis-Ul-Ulema should be a unique and indivisible religious community of Muslims in the Republic of Serbia.<sup>[37]</sup> Therefore, the text of the “Basic Principles” that would bring the Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia to the so-called reconciliation and unification was not harmonized, mainly because the Turkish initiative ignored the

<sup>31</sup> Ministarstvo vera nije upoznato sa turskom inicijativom, *Politika*, 29 October 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Pomirenje u Islamskoj zajednici daleko, *Novimagazin.rs*, 29 October 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Jeremić u Turskoj, *Radio-televizija Vojvodine*, 3 November 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Mekka: Susret reisa Srbije i reisa Turske, *Mesihatsandzaka.rs*, 9 November 2011.

<sup>35</sup> The talks of Aleksandar Raković with Reis-Ul-Ulema Adem Zilkić.

<sup>36</sup> FM Davutoglu to Visit Serbia on Saturday, *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 12 November 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Personal notes of the author.

Islamic Community of Serbia as an equal negotiator, and wanted to impose a solution that would satisfy the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its religious leaders Mustafa Cerić and Muamer Zukorlić.

On November 22, 2011, *Dnevni avaz* wrote that the Turkish initiative to unite the Islamic communities was “about to crash” because the Serbian authorities demanded Zukorlić to “leave Sandžak and continue his life in Istanbul.” This was complete nonsense, as was the nonsense the quote in *Dnevni avaz* that the Serbian authorities accepted the seat of the Islamic Community of the Republic of Serbia to be in Novi Pazar and under the head of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>[38]</sup>

At the very end, the question of possible signatories of the unification of Islamic communities in the Republic of Serbia was raised. The speculations ranged from a rather wide to a very narrow circle. According to Zukorlić's words, the unification agreement would be valid even if signed only by Cerić and Görmez.<sup>[39]</sup> In absence of other signatories, this was a forced solution, unacceptable even for the negotiators themselves. *Dnevni avaz* reported that the signing of the Agreement on the Unification of Islamic communities in the Republic of Serbia, that was supposed to be signed on November 25, 2011 by Görmez and Cerić, was cancelled.<sup>[40]</sup> Zukorlić concluded that “it was not pleasant at all for Turkey to be defeated in this initiative”.<sup>[41]</sup>

The fourth meeting of Jeremić and Davutoğlu was to be held at the end of November or early December 2011, but it was postponed and never realized. Although there were some indications in 2012, a new Turkish mediation or initiative to unite Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia officially never happened again.

## Conclusion

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia took a stand in 2010 that the Islamic Community of Serbia, seated in Belgrade and headed by Reis-Ul-Ulema, has a status of a traditional religious community in the Republic of Serbia.

The Islamic Community of Serbia *de facto* inherited, or acquired the status of a traditional Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia, and it was only necessary, in accordance with the legal procedure, to confirm *de jure* the status of the Islamic Community of Serbia, as traditional religious community by its entry in the Registry of Churches and Religious Communities in the Republic of Serbia.

<sup>38</sup> Beograd blokira sporazum o objedinjavanju IZ u Srbiji: Inicijativa Turske pred krahom?, *Dnevni avaz*, 22 November 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Davutoglu danas u Beogradu, *Danas*, 11 November 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Beograd blokira sporazum o objedinjavanju IZ u Srbiji: Inicijativa Turske pred krahom?, *Dnevni avaz*, 22 November 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Vrijeme je da se kriminalci istjeraju iz političkog i javnog života Sandžaka, *Meshihat.org*, 17 December 2011.

Other state authorities of the Republic of Serbia, through direct cooperation, accepted in 2010 that the Islamic Community of Serbia is *de facto* a traditional religious community in the Republic of Serbia.

The Turkish initiative “Basic Principles” for the unification of the Islamic Community in the Republic of Serbia from 2011 intended to prevent granting the status of a traditional religious community to the Islamic Community of Serbia, seated in Belgrade and headed by Reis-UI-Ulema, and demanded the abolition of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Serbia.

The Turkish initiative “Basic Principles” intended to place the Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia under the “spiritual arch” of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina seated in Sarajevo and headed by Reis-UI-Ulema, according to the same or similar model of the Islamic Community in Sandžak–Serbia based in Novi Pazar towards the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Turkish initiative “Basic Principles”, treated the conflict of Islamic communities in the Republic of Serbia as a “Bosniak religious issue”, which should be resolved in the triangle Istanbul–Sarajevo–Novi Pazar in the future.

The Turkish initiative “Basic Principles” completely ignored the fact that Muslim believers in the Republic of Serbia were Bosniaks, Albanians, Roma, Gorani, Muslims, Yugoslavs and others, which is advocated by the Islamic Community of Serbia seated in Belgrade and headed by Reis-UI-Ulema.

Due to the above-mentioned facts (under 4, 5, 6 and 7) the Turkish initiative “Basic Principles” for the unification of the Islamic community in the Republic of Serbia was not accepted.

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