



## Article

Armina Galijaš\* and Ivan Ejub Kostić

# Being a Muslim in Belgrade. Ivan Ejub Kostić in Conversation with Armina Galijaš

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**Abstract:** Armina Galijaš interviewed Ivan Ejub Kostić on several occasions in Belgrade during 2019. The topic of the interviews was the contemporary sociopolitical position, the history, and the daily life of Muslims in Serbia and in Belgrade, a subject on which Ivan Ejub Kostić is an expert. He was born in Belgrade in 1979 and has lived there ever since. Islam is an integral part of his life, not only as a religion that he embraced over 15 years ago but also as a field of scholarly and sociopolitical interest. His elaborate answer to the question, ‘What is it like to be a Muslim in Belgrade?’ offers insights into both Ivan’s personal path and Muslim lives in Belgrade and in Serbia today.

**Keywords:** Islam, Belgrade, Serbia

## Introduction

The idea for an interview of this type—ranging from the personal to the academic and back—was born in 2018, after Armina Galijaš first met Ivan Ejub Kostić in Belgrade. Ivan Ejub’s life story and his knowledge of Islam led us to compose this (somewhat unconventional) text. Its aim is to bring the lives of Muslims in Belgrade and their current position closer to the interested public through an intimate but factually grounded narration.

What makes Ivan Ejub Kostić a good interviewee in this regard? He is an expert in Islamic studies; he graduated from the Faculty of Philology at the Department of Oriental Studies, Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Belgrade and obtained a master’s degree in Islamic civilization and culture at the same

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department. One of the founders of the Balkan Centre for the Middle East, he became its executive director in 2013. Ivan is co-author or sole author of several books on Islam.<sup>1</sup> He is also a member of the steering committee of the European Muslim Network based in Brussels<sup>2</sup> and of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religious Sciences Kom*,<sup>3</sup> as well as the editor-in-chief of *Algoritam*, an online platform for contemporary Islamic thought and culture.<sup>4</sup> He is a regular contributor on Serbia to the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*<sup>5</sup> and to the *European Islamophobia Report*.<sup>6</sup> In this interview, Ivan speaks both as an expert in Islamic studies and as someone who lives in Serbia and who has been a Muslim since his conversion to Islam more than 15 years ago. The conversation has been translated, with necessary adjustments in the conversion to written form, by Armina Galijaš.

Islam is a difficult and sensitive issue in Serbia, and the issues discussed in the conversation include the following questions: Does a Serb who converts to Islam become a Bosniak, a Serb Muslim, or something else? What about the aspirations of many believers to include Balkan Muslims in a global process that has Muslim unity as its aim? To what extent are Balkan Muslims 'split' between the global community of believers, the *Umma*, and the nation, and how should we regard an indigenous Balkan Islam? How do political issues influence the everyday lives of Muslims in Serbia, for example with regard to the institutionalized Islamic community being confronted with various Islamic teachings from outside the Balkans?<sup>7</sup>

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1 Among them, cf. Ivan Ejub Kostić, *Progonjeni Islam*, Belgrade 2013; Ivan Ejub Kostić, *Savremena islamska misao*, Belgrade 2019; and Ivan Ejub Kostić, *Religija verovanje i građanski identitet*, Belgrade 2019.

2 Cf. the European Muslim Network's website, <http://www.eumuslim.net>. All Internet references were accessed on 28 January 2021.

3 Cf. the website of *Časopis za religijske nauke Kom*, <http://www.centarkom.rs>.

4 Cf. *Algoritam. Savremena islamska misao i kultura*, <http://www.algoritam.net>.

5 Cf. the chapters on Serbia in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* 7 (2014), 503–514; 8 (2015), 598–619; 9 (2016), 588–599; 10 (2017), 581–594; and 12 (2019), 577–590.

6 Cf. the chapters on Serbia in the *European Islamophobia Report* (2017), 543–560; (2018), 715–734; and (2019), 679–702. The editors of the yearly report are the Austrian political scientists Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez; this project is supported by the SETA Foundation (*Siyaset, Ekonomi Ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*, Foundation for Political, Economic and, Social Research) in Ankara, cf. <https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com>.

7 Cf. Ina Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma. Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism*, Oxford 2013.

publications did not consent to publish this interview in its entirety; thus we decided to offer it to *Comparative Southeast European Studies*. The authors are grateful for its publication here.

*Galijaš: Ivan, you come from a reputable Belgrade family which cultivated a spirit of secularism and antinationalism. In 1992 your aunt Vesna Pešić co-founded the pro-European political party Civic Alliance of Serbia (Građanski savez Srbije) and was very active in the antiwar movement, as was your mother, the famous Yugoslav actress Stanislava Pešić. You converted to Islam more than fifteen years ago. How would you describe your identity? What role has religion, social class, language, geographical background, and family played in the shaping of yourself? Do these matters complement each other and merge together, or are they instead in conflict?*

Kostić: I think we all have multiple identities. However, in my case, there is one aspect of my identity that decisively influences other layers of my identity. This is, so to speak, a ‘vertical Islamic identity’ guided by the Qur’anic message and the Tawhidic principle, which represents the belief in the oneness of God. My vertical Islamic identity is in constant interaction with the manifold horizontal identities I also possess. Representing one of the most significant of my horizontal identities, certainly, is my possession of a passport of a particular country, Serbia, and also important is my native identity, that is the city I was born and raised in, where I still live today—Belgrade. Furthermore, the socioeconomic class I grew up in and my family’s values have also shaped my identity.

Unlike many people in the Balkans, I do not have a sense of ethnonational belonging. In fact, I am deeply averse to this type of identification. And yet I do have a positive attitude towards civic identity. I feel a great responsibility towards the society in which I live and a need to actively contribute to its well-being. That is why I consider myself a civil patriot but by no means a nationalist.

Islamic teachings contain no concept of ‘nation’ comparable to what has developed in the Western world. Islam absolutely rejects any extensive affiliation with or supreme affection towards an ethnicity or a tribe, and thus the Qur’an’s message is highly transnational. However, when I say that the Qur’an’s message is transnational, I do not mean that Islam rejects the pluriversality of the world. To the contrary: the Qur’an’s message takes a positive view of cultural and other particularities. The Qur’an calls for different religions, cultures, and beliefs to be nurtured and to be mutually acquainted with one another. Muslims who are guided by a vertical Tawhidic identity and are oriented towards the transnational unity of the *Umma* cannot cultivate a positive relationship to any exclusivist ethnonational worldview. However, they can certainly relate to the idea of a civil state in which all citizens are guaranteed equality and freedom of opinion and belief.

In addition to Islamic teachings, as I’ve said, my upbringing and family life have played a significant role in my understanding of the world. I come from a

very politically and socially engaged family. During the 1990s war my mother, Stanislava Pešić, a well-known actress in the former Yugoslavia, was very active in the antiwar movement and the Civic Alliance of Serbia, which succeeded the Association for a Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (*Udruženje za jugoslovensku demokratsku inicijativu*, UJDI), the only truly antinationalist parties in Serbia at that time. The president of the Civic Alliance of Serbia was my aunt Vesna Pešić, my mother's sister. Furthermore, my mother was one of the first public figures to publicly support the Democratic Movement of Serbia (*Demokratski pokret Srbije*, DEPOS), which fought against the regime of Slobodan Milošević. She wrote, not least, a very valuable book published in 1997 entitled *Devetnaest društvenih igara* (19 board games), which was about the prevalent atmosphere in Serbia during the 1990s, especially among intellectuals and artists in Belgrade.<sup>8</sup>

In light of my family's political and social engagement, I would also point out that Islamic teaching nurtures a concept of the 'active citizen'. A significant number of Qur'anic verses and narrations of the Prophet (*hadiths*) imply the obligation to actively participate in society with the aims of promoting good and preventing evil in order to achieve prosperity and well-being in the social sphere. Islam also teaches that the members of the Muslim community should rebel against political, economic, or any other social injustice and stand up for the oppressed and disenfranchised. Likewise, in situations where a ruler usurps the authority that has been granted by the people, Muslims are obliged, according to the message of the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition, to strive to remove this ruler from power. For example, the 113th verse of the Surah 'Hud' in the Qur'an reads: 'And do not incline toward those who do wrong, lest you be touched by the Fire.' Besides what one finds in the Qur'an, there are numerous narrations of the Prophet Muhammad which express the necessity of fighting against unjust and authoritarian rule, such as: 'Whosoever of you sees an evil, let them change it with their hand; and if they are not able to do so, then [let them change it] with their tongue; and if they are not able to do so, then with their heart—this is the weakest form of faith';<sup>9</sup> or 'One of the best forms of Jihad is to speak a word of truth in the face of an unjust ruler'.<sup>10</sup> Thus I see my upbringing and Islamic teachings as highly compatible, and their joint influence led me to fight for justice and for freedom of thought and expression concerning sociopolitical issues.

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<sup>8</sup> Stanislava Pešić, *Devetnaest društvenih igara*, Belgrade 1997.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the relationship between Islamic Law and the right to rebel against an unjust ruler, cf. Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law*, New York 2001.

<sup>10</sup> *Hadith* in Sunan Abu Dawood. Sunan Abu Dawood is one of the Kutub al-Sittah (six major *hadith* books containing collections of *hadith*, sayings or acts of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, compiled by six Sunni Muslim scholars), collected by Abu Dawood, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud>.

*G: What is it like to be a Muslim in Serbia? Do prejudices nurtured by certain historical narratives in Serbia, as well as by the oral tradition of storytelling, continue to influence the image of Muslims? To what extent are Muslims a part of Serbian society today?*

K: To understand the position of Muslims in Serbia today, it is indispensable to consider the lengthy historical process whereby Muslims were stigmatized as an essentialized ‘Other’, and to identify which figures have promoted such a narrative. The latter is important because stigmatized individuals and groups cannot exist without stigmatizers. Since Islam came to the Balkans together with the ‘occupier’, i.e. the Ottoman Empire, it was regarded highly negatively from the end of the seventeenth century onwards, and this hostile perception was heightened especially with the rise of the national movements at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Specifically for Serbia, the Battle of Kosovo, fought in 1389 between an army led by the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović and invading troops of the Ottoman Empire, became crucial for the perception of Islam. The ‘Turk’—a synonym for Muslims—was identified as the archetypal enemy, the ultimate ‘Other’. The ‘Turk’ was responsible for the assassination of Prince Lazar, who over time took on a ‘Christ-like character’ and became identified with the whole Serbian nation.<sup>11</sup> Prince Vuk Branković, a brother-in-law to Prince Lazar, acquired a similarly important role in the process of stigmatization directed towards Slavic Muslims. The epic literature dedicated to the Battle of Kosovo has portrayed him as the negative anti-hero, a traitor to his people, a man who aligned himself with ‘the Turks’. He became the ‘symbol of the ancestral curse of all Slavic Muslims’.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the myths perpetuated about the Battle of Kosovo, several other topics in (folk) epic literature have significantly contributed to the stigmatization of Turks and Slavic Muslims as the antagonists to (Serbian) Orthodox identity. An important example is the reflexive-heroic poem ‘The Mountain Wreath’ by Petar II Petrović Njegoš, which in some segments reflects the striking hatred directed against Muslims.<sup>13</sup> Njegoš’s famous work was complemented by collections of epic poems published by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, a philologist and linguist who was the most important reformer of the Serbian language. In particular his work of 1836, *Srbi svi i svuda* (Serbs all and everywhere), significantly helped erect the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Michael A. Sells, *Islam in Serbian Religious Mythology*, in: Maya Shatzmiller, ed, *Islam and Bosnia. Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*, Montreal 2002, 56–85, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Christ Killer, Kremlin, Contagion*, in: Emran Qureshi / Michael A. Sells, eds, *The New Crusades. Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, New York 2003, 352–388, 356.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop Petar II Petrović Njegoš, *The Mountain Wreath*, Irving/CA 1986. This edition contains the Serbian original and an English translation of the work.

foundations for the assimilatory and expansionist idea of ‘Greater Serbia’ that would be developed later.<sup>14</sup> Karadžić’s ideas were based on Johann Gottfried Herder’s concept of ‘culture and language’, which he used to affirm the Serbian people as the only ‘true nation’ in the territories of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and parts of Croatia. The time of national awakening when Karadžić composed his works was often marked by various forms of Islamophobic representations of Balkan Muslims used to support the idea of the unification of ‘Serbian lands and people’.<sup>15</sup> In their writings, Serbian intellectuals such as Ilija Garašanin, Jovan Cvijić, and especially Vaso Čubrilović drew on the work of the Serbian linguistic reformers, including the nineteenth-century folk epics which stigmatized Muslims.<sup>16</sup> These scholars did not explicitly stigmatize Muslims on religious grounds; however, their constant negation of the existence of any other ethnic groups beyond the Serbs, and, in the case of Čubrilović, a pathological intolerance towards the Albanian population granted legitimacy to the expansionist ideas of Serbian nationalism, then experiencing a strong upsurge. Their idea that it was crucial for Serbia to conquer the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo—lands which they believed Serbia had an exclusive right to—were later developed into a quest for ethnic cleansing by the Chetnik ideologist Stevan Moljević and by Dragoljub ‘Draža’ Mihailović, the leader of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland (known as ‘Chetniks’) during World War II. Their ideas resulted in numerous atrocities committed against Muslims within the territory of Yugoslavia, especially in eastern Bosnia and Sandžak from 1941 to 1943.<sup>17</sup>

*G: What changed in this regard in socialist Yugoslavia?*

K: During the time of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Serbian nationalism and its expansionist pretensions and antagonism towards Slavic and Albanian Muslims were curtailed but never eliminated. Soon after the death of the Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito in 1980, there began an open reaffirmation of

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<sup>14</sup> Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srbi svi i svuda*, in: Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Kovčežić za istoriju, jezik i običaje Srba sva tri zakona*, Vienna 1849.

<sup>15</sup> Details in Ivan Ejub Kostić, *Islamsko razumevanje manjinskog statusa muslimana u nemuslimanskim društvima i aktivnog građanskog identiteta. Slučaj Srbija*, in: Kostić, ed, *Religija, verovanje i građanski identitet*, 137–149, 139.

<sup>16</sup> Significant in the context of the position of Muslims is, for example, Ilija Garašanin, *Načertanije, Delo* 38 (1906), 321–336; Jovan Cvijić, *O iseljavanju bosanskih muhamedanaca*, *Književni glasnik*, 16 June 1910; Vaso Čubrilović, *Isterivanje Amauta*, Belgrade 1937. Čubrilović wrote this memorandum as a proposal for a solution to the ‘Albanian issue’ to the Yugoslav government.

<sup>17</sup> On the Chetnik movement’s crimes against Muslims during World War II cf. Vladimir Dedijer / Antun Miletić, *Genocid nad muslimanima 1941–1945. Zbornik dokumenata i svjedočenja*, Sarajevo 1990; and Milan Radanović, *Kazna i zločin. Snage kolaboracije u Srbiji: odgovornost za ratne zločine (1941–1944) i vojni gubici (1944–1945)*, Belgrade 2015.

Serbian nationalist ideas, represented most prominently by intellectuals affiliated with the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (*Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti*, SANU), the Association of Writers of Serbia (*Udruženje književnika Srbije*, UKS), and the Serbian Orthodox Church (*Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva*, SOC). In the 1980s and early 1990s, the SANU, the UKS, and the SOC developed an ideology that, based on Serbian nationalist manifestations and beliefs, emphasized the ‘undesirable’ characteristics of Slavic and Albanian Muslims and their perceived threat to the Serbian people. Among the intellectuals who played a significant role in the promotion of such ideas were Dobrica Ćosić, Matija Bećković, Gojko Ćogo, Radovan Samardžić, and Antonije Isaković, as well as bishops Atanasije Jevtić, Amfilohije Radović, and Irinej Bulović of the SOC. Such constant stigmatization corresponds to the observation of the American-Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman in explaining how an ideology can be employed to account for a person’s purported ‘inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on differences’.<sup>18</sup> Those who engaged in such stigmatization referred to the people they targeted as morally weak, as apostates and traitors to the ancestral religion, and as dangerous because they embodied the Ottoman ‘legacy’, a foreign element, linked to those who long ago had killed the ‘Serbian nation’ by murdering Prince Lazar.<sup>19</sup> The idea that Muslims are alien to Serbian society, a view that had been advocated by Serbian nationalists since the nineteenth century, was manifested in its most brutal form during the wars of the 1990s, culminating in the ethnic ‘cleansing’ of the Muslim population in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. In Srebrenica in July 1995 this attitude toward Muslims took the form of genocide. Up through today, not a single Serbian government has substantially dissociated itself from these deeds.

*G: In other words, you maintain that today’s anti-Muslim stance is directly related to the century-old idea of Greater Serbia. To what extent does that idea effectively live on in the political life of Serbia today? And what about ethnicity? What would you say are the differences distinguishing a Slavic Muslim from an Albanian Muslim or a Roma Muslim?*

*K: Exactly those individuals who during the 1990s were the most ardent supporters of the ultranationalist politics that paved the way for the genocide in Srebrenica—for the ethnic ‘cleansing’ of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo—are in charge today, too. Since the time of the socialist state’s end, there have hardly been any powerful political actors in Serbia who did not in some way advocate*

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<sup>18</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs/NJ 1963, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Sells, *Christ Killer, Kremlin, Contagion*, 364. Cf. also Ivan Čolović, *Smrt na Kosovu polju*, Belgrade 2016; Miodrag Popović, *Vidovdani krst časni*, Belgrade 2016.



some idea of a ‘Greater Serbia’. Take Ljubomir Tadić, who in 1990 was one of the ideologists and founders of the liberal, pro-European, centrist Democratic Party (*Demokratska Stranka*, DS). Tadić maintained that ‘all opposition parties in Serbia except the Association for Yugoslav Democratic Initiative share the opinion that the Serbian people should live in one country’ and that ‘we can never give up the fundamental goal of erasing 200 years of struggle of the Serbian people for liberation and unification and say—we renounce the Greater Serbia, no, that cannot happen’.<sup>20</sup>

So there is a clear continuity of nationalist politics that has more or less been going on since the nineteenth century, and the dominant line of political thinking in Serbia throughout history has mostly been nationalism. The essentialization of Muslims as the ultimate ‘Other’ has been one of this nationalism’s main pillars. On the one hand, Serb converts to Islam are in some way worse than ‘born’ Muslims for most Serbian nationalists. There is the popular saying ‘a *poturica* [convert] is worse than a Turk’, and the derogatory term *poturica* applies to all South Slavs who have accepted Islam—including Bosniaks and Serbian converts. On the other hand, being Roma, Ashkali, Balkan Egyptian, or Albanian also carries certain forms of stigma which further complicate the social status of members of each of these groups. In the case of Albanians, there is the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. As for Roma, Ashkali, and Balkan Egyptians, they are subject to double discrimination—on the grounds of both their skin colour and religious affiliation.

*G: You have spoken about the situation in Serbia in general. But more precisely: What is the position of Muslims and the Islamic community in Belgrade? Does Belgrade, as an urban space, deal with this minority in a more relaxed and inclusive way than the rest of Serbia?*

*K: The position of Muslims in Belgrade is difficult. On the one hand, the government has systematically denied the needs of the Muslim community in Serbia, and this neglect affects Belgrade too, of course. For five decades, the city’s Muslims have attempted to obtain a permit for the construction of a mosque. Not only are they denied permits for the construction of new mosques, but in 2017 the Serbian authorities and the police special forces demolished a prayer facility of Roma in Zemun Polje with the explanation that it had been built without permission. They did so on the first day of the holy month of Ramadan.<sup>21</sup> In addition, in the context of the riots that broke out in reaction to the anti-Serb pogroms in Kosovo in 2004, the*

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Olivera Milosavljević, *U tradiciji nacionalizma. Ili stereotipi sprskih intelektualaca XX veka o ‘nama’ i ‘drugima’*, Belgrade 2002, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Muslimani u Zemun Polju klanjali džumu pored srušene džamije, *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 2 June 2017, [http://balkans.aljazeera.net/video/muslimani-u-zemun-polju-klanjali-dzumu-pored-srusene-dzamiye?page=2&qt-video\\_wide\\_tabs=1&qt-video\\_side\\_tabs=0](http://balkans.aljazeera.net/video/muslimani-u-zemun-polju-klanjali-dzumu-pored-srusene-dzamiye?page=2&qt-video_wide_tabs=1&qt-video_side_tabs=0).



Bajrakli Mosque, the only mosque that still exists in Belgrade and also the city's oldest building, was attacked by anti-Albanian demonstrators.<sup>22</sup> It was set on fire, but fortunately it survived the blaze and was later renovated with the help of contributions from the government of Azerbaijan.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the Bajrakli Mosque, there are a dozen other *masjids* and prayer facilities in Belgrade. Some, however, are inadequate for their purpose: the Roma Muslims who frequent the facility in Karaburma must perform their prayers in a ten-square-metre room. During the Friday Prayer, due to the lack of space in the Bajrakli Mosque as well as in other *masjids* throughout the city, Muslims pray on the street, on concrete, in the dust.

However, it is not only the state that bears the blame for the current dire state of the Islamic community in Belgrade; members of the Jusufspahić family, who for the last five decades have possessed absolute power in the community, share responsibility for the situation. Today, *maktabs*, *madrasas*, or any other form of Islamic education is either non-existent or is offered only at the lowest possible level. Human resources are inadequate. The community has not adequately supported any of the younger imams so that they can complete their higher education, and its huge debt burden has ensured that there is neither heating in the prayer rooms nor hot water for ablutions, and the carpets on which prayers are performed are old and dirty. Imams receive their extremely low salaries irregularly. Most strikingly, even though the majority of the congregations (*džemati*) are unsatisfied with the Jusufspahić family's management of the Belgrade Muftiate, they can do nothing about it because the state, structurally, fully supports the Jusufspahić family.<sup>24</sup>

G: *But now there is the Mufti Abdullah Numan, no?*

K: Yes, Abdullah Numan took over the position of the Serbian Mufti in 2016, and this was a stroke of luck for the Muslims of Belgrade. He is driven by the desire to bring change. But will he succeed? For many reasons, I think it unlikely.

<sup>22</sup> Neredi u Beogradu, zapaljena Bajrakli džamija, *B92*, 18 March 2004, [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2004&mm=03&dd=18&nav\\_category=12&nav\\_id=135543](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2004&mm=03&dd=18&nav_category=12&nav_id=135543).

<sup>23</sup> Shahin Abbasov, Azerbaijan. What's with Baku's Serbia Connection?, *Eurasianet*, 31 May 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-whats-with-bakus-serbia-connection>.

<sup>24</sup> During a one-year field research project from August 2018 to August 2019, which encompassed among others the Belgrade Muftiate, Marija Đorić and Ivan Ejub Kostić conducted focus group and deep interviews. The absolute majority of respondents stated that they were strongly dissatisfied with the situation of Muslims in Belgrade and the community's management by the Jusufspahić family. The research was carried out for the internal use of the OSCE Mission in Serbia, cf. Marija Đorić / Ivan Ejub Kostić, *Serbia Roma Population. Towards a Better Understanding of Potential Vulnerabilities to Exploitation including Radicalization*, Belgrade 2019.

*G: There are some similarities between Abdullah Numan and you. Both you and he were born in Belgrade and later embraced Islam. You were both named Ivan at birth, and his aunt, like your mother, was a prominent Yugoslav actress—Ružica Sokić. In fact, she was your mother's friend. In Abdullah's words, it was primarily she who gave him understanding and support when he converted to Islam.*

K: Well, there is certainly some similarity between us, but I would stress more the fact that we are both Belgrade-born citizens who have a strong love for their city. Abdullah Numan, born Ivan Trifunović, has been living with his family in Melbourne, Australia, since the mid-1970s. However, lately, because of his position in the Islamic community, he has spent at least six months every year in Belgrade. Every time he comes to his hometown it is evident that he feels happy and at peace in the city. He likes to take endless walks along Belgrade's streets, probably to delve into the memories of his youth.

In that regard, I strongly identify with him. Like him, I went through a period when I was more in the 'Belgrade streets' than at home, school, or anywhere else. The phenomenon of the 'Belgrade street', or what is often called the 'Belgrade asphalt' (*beogradski asfalt*), is something that marks you for life. That life in the 'Belgrade streets' entails something that Numan and I have in common—namely, we both tasted the 'urban', 'subcultural', 'underground' Belgrade life in our respective periods. In Numan's time, this was the hippie movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In my time, it was the punk music scene, followed by the beginnings of underground techno music in the early 1990s.

Both the hippie movement and punk and techno were subcultural expressions that sought to go against dominant social patterns and established conventions. Essentially, each represented the pursuit of spiritual freedom and a search for the authenticity of one's being. I think that both Numan and I, later in our lives, found our defining moment of liberation and authenticity in Islam and the message of the Qur'an. But it is important to emphasize that after the spiritual recognition that all creation has one common source, neither he nor I ended up in a state of mind that often happens to converts, which is the abolition of and escape from one's past and culture, resulting in some kind of 'Arabization', 'Turkification', 'Iranization', or 'Bosniakization'. I have remained faithful to the urban Belgrade culture I come from and, above all, to my friends whom I invariably love and appreciate, even though we often have different worldviews and lifestyles.

*G: Since the breakup of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s, there have been two competing Islamic communities within the territory of Serbia. You mentioned already the Jusufspahić family and the Islamic Community of Serbia (Islamska zajednica Srbije, IZS) seated in Belgrade. The close relationship between Mufti Jusufspahić and Milošević's regime allowed the former, during the 1990s, to usurp*

*the Serbian Muftiate, which had been a part of the Islamic Community seated in Sarajevo (IZBiH). The other is the Islamic Community in Serbia (Islamska zajednica u Srbiji, IZuS) seated in Novi Pazar. IZuS is still a 'branch office' of the Sarajevo Islamic Community. I would like to ask you: How do you see the relationship of the two Islamic Communities?*

K: The first thing to point out with regard to Serbia's institutionalized Islamic communities is that they should exist for the sake of the believers, and not, vice versa, that the believers should exist for the sake of the communities. You might think that this is something to take for granted. However, in our region, the communities have distanced themselves from the believers and listen poorly to them; they fail to understand the needs, dilemmas, and problems that believers face in their daily lives. Also, the communities are very often socially anachronistic and have not adjusted to the extremely dynamic trends of today's world. In their work, opportunistic attitudes have allowed them to obtain a comfortable position so that the employees, especially the leading figures, are freed from taking any substantial responsibility. The question really is how much the communities have been guided by their basic mission, which is to spread the word of God and to connect believers through religious precepts and teachings.

Let me explain. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s, the two opposed Islamic communities have largely been dealing with (daily) politics and the promotion of national identities. This orientation is in direct conflict with Islamic teachings, which are by no means apolitical but are opposed to any narrow ethnonational, tribal, particularistic understanding of the world or party politics. But at the same time any comparison between the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (IZBiH) and the Islamic Community in Serbia (IZuS) on the one side, and the Islamic Community of Serbia (IZS) on the other, is inappropriate. The IZBiH is an institution with a significant infrastructure and educational capacity, an heir to a tradition that reaches back to the era of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, whose representatives established the institution of the *Reis-ul-ulema* in 1882. The IZS, for its part, is a clumsy, wasteful project of the Serbian (deep) state. Unlike the IZBiH, this community has never had the capacity, neither the infrastructural nor the human resources, to be a serious religious institution.

*G: Obviously, the Islamic communities are deeply politicized and subject to personal interests and feuds. Are the ordinary believers aware of all these divisions?*

K: For many decades, Islamic community officials have aligned their activities more with their own interests and the demands of the political leadership than with the needs of believers. The former president of Bosnia and Herzegovina Alija Izetbegović noted how religious personnel

'lived from Islam; it is a profession to the clerics. Throughout history, they have been tied to power everywhere, and this had devastating consequences, because *ilmija* [Muslim clerics] should, instead of being controlled, control the power. However, the *ulema* [Muslim scholars or men of authority in religion and law] and people in power have always been like finger and thumb.'<sup>25</sup>

I assume that believers in Serbia and the wider region find it very difficult to feel 'represented' by the official Islamic communities, if they strive to be socially engaged on the basis of Islamic values of social justice, antinationalism, anti-communitarianism, economic equality, political pluralism, the affirmation of the will of 'ordinary' people, and the preservation of personal integrity.

*G: Does the conflict between the two Islamic communities in Serbia have implications for ordinary believers in their everyday lives?*

K: The present division of the communities has nothing to do with the differences concerning Islamic teachings. It is solely the result of a faulty relation with the state and of narrow political interests. Both the IZS and the IZuS have been strongly influenced by political parties that are driven by exclusivist ethnonational ideas and that seek, through the Islamic communities, to establish their political dominance among the Muslims of Serbia. So Islamic communities in the service of a particular party cannot guarantee stability and unity; rather, they serve as generators in an ongoing conflict.

The division has negative repercussions on believers who are manipulated into being the blind followers of opposing 'pharaohs', to the point that they are ready to tear down even their closest family ties. But this has nothing to do with following the spirit of the Qur'anic message of Islamic unity and Sharia. Importantly, however, the younger generation of believers has become more aware of how blasphemous this division is and how much it benefits individuals who abuse their political and religious positions for their own pursuits, and do so at the expense of Muslim believers.

Inappropriate behaviour of religious persons in responsible positions has systematically destroyed the authority and reputation of the institution of the Islamic Community. Therefore, members of the younger generations need to think of alternative forms of engagement so that the Islamic message can be sustained and the believers provided with what they are looking for. Under the current circumstances in Serbia this is only possible through non-institutional action, that is through the establishment of independent organizations and associations by Muslim women and men who are ready to commit to affirming Islamic values

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. the interview with Alija Izetbegović in: Sead Trhulj, *Mladi muslimani*, Zagreb 1992, 57–70, 68.

without asking for anything in return, or in other words to live for Islam, not to make Islam your living.

*G: The IZBiH, which is present in Sandžak through the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia (IZuS), closely links its activities to 'Bosniakism'. How do you perceive this?*

*K:* The relationship between IZBiH and Bosniakism is complicated for several reasons. First, the two 'neighbouring' Christian communities in Bosnia, the Catholic and the Orthodox, have subordinated themselves to Croatian and Serbian nationalist ideologies. Even though Bosniak Muslims have been critical of the overlap of religious and national identity among Serbs and Croats, and have been aware of all the negative consequences ensuing from the nationalization of religious identity, it was necessary during the military aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s to mobilize and homogenize the Bosniak people as greatly as possible in order to repel the attacks by Serb and Croat forces. Hence, for pragmatic and utilitarian reasons many Bosniak intellectuals and Islamic scholars (sub)consciously accepted the same ideological/conceptual overlapping of religion and nation as the Serbs and Croats had embraced. But in addition, the Islamic Community, in the absence of other Bosniak (ethno)national institutions and because of its recognized authority among the people, became an ideal platform for achieving national homogenization in the wake of the wars of the 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

Today, however, when we say that IZBiH is a largely nationalized institution, another extremely important fact must not be forgotten: after the Dayton Peace Agreement of November 1995, and increasingly over the last decade, Bosniaks have experienced continual pressure due to both Serb and Croat nationalist politics. Such circumstances, marked by steadily high nationalist tension, has led to a stronger expression of the Bosniak ethnonational sentiment at all social levels as a response to the brutal aggression inflicted upon them by neighbouring states during the 1990s and its protracted aftermath in an ethnicized, largely dysfunctional state.

It is also true, however, that during the 1990s some leading figures and employees of the IZBiH 'wisely' anticipated that after the end of the war they could secure important sociopolitical capital for themselves through the nationalization of the Islamic Community. Thus there has never been a 'denationalization' of the IZBiH. Quite the opposite: nationalization has prevailed, which is why it is primarily today an ethnonational community of Bosniak Muslims. The Sandžak

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<sup>26</sup> Atif Purivatra, *Nacionalni i politički razvoj Muslimana. Rasprave i članci*, Sarajevo 1970; Robert J. Donia / John V. A. Fine, *Bosnia and Herzegovina. A Tradition Betrayed*, New York 1994; Xavier Bougarel, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Surviving Empires*, London et al. 2018.

Mashihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia (IZuS) is just one example of how this national exclusivism of the IZBiH works. Since its establishment in 1993 the IZuS, as a part of the IZBiH organizational entity, has made minimal efforts to integrate Islamic believers of ethnonational groups beyond Bosniaks.

*G: Yes, I agree. The Riyasat of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina is an example of how an ‘official dogma’ can be imposed through institutionalization. It is based solely on one of the main schools of Sunni Islamic theology, the Maturidi kalam, and a particular religious law school, the Hanafi madhab. In addition, Article 3 of the Constitution of the IZBiH states that their work is based, apart from the Qur’an and the Sunnah, specifically on the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks. When constitutional guidelines are put this way, an important question arises: What about all those believers who, for various reasons, follow a different kalam (for example, Ashari) or adhere to law schools (Shafi, Hanbali, Maliki) other than those prescribed by the IZBiH?*<sup>27</sup>

*K: You are right. Precisely through the imposition of a single interpretation of Islamic teachings was it possible, in 2016, for the IZBiH to declare war on what they called *parajamaats*: irregular congregations who follow other law schools and *Aqidah*. The confrontation went so far that the *Riyasat* issued a statement declaring that*

‘unless one of the representatives of these *parajamaats* accepts the request for shutting down and closing their illegal facilities, they will remain outside the legal framework of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina and face the consequences of non-institutional action at their own risk’.<sup>28</sup>

Such behaviour corresponds to the structure of the IZBiH, which today functions in a highly exclusivist manner where there is only one ‘official dogma’.

*G: Insisting on having only one address that will represent all Muslims can be a double-edged sword, can it not?*

*K: Absolutely. But when we talk about the relationship between the state and Islamic communities, it is important to point to another phenomenon, which applies not only to the Balkans but to the whole of Europe. European states often insist that only one address represent all Muslims in their relations with state structures. From the perspective of Muslims in Europe, the ‘war on terror’ has*

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<sup>27</sup> More about *kalam, madhab, aqidah* in Sabine Schmidtke, ed, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, Oxford, New York 2016; and Tim Winter, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, Cambridge et al. 2008.

<sup>28</sup> U BiH 22 paradžemata ne žele biti dio Islamske zajednice, *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 29 October 2016, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/u-bih-22-paradzemata-ne-zele-biti-dio-islamske-zajednice>; Islamska zajednica BiH protiv ‘paradžemata’, *Deutsche Welle*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.dw.com/bs/islamska-zajednica-bih-protiv-paradzemata/a-18980961>.

only reinforced this stance. I find this demand problematic for two reasons. First, it opens up a space for the imposition of a single dogma on believers as the only correct one, which is strongly opposed to the Islamic principle of *ikhtilāf*, that is differing opinions and interpretations of the Islamic message. Second, states are here significantly interfering with matters concerning the religious life of believers, but this sort of intervention should be avoided, because experience teaches all too well that such interference can manifest itself via state surveillance, disciplinary action, and sometimes even the imprisonment of those marked as ‘inadequate’.

*G: What do the terms ‘Bosnian Islam’ and ‘Balkan Muslims’ represent to you?*

*K:* With reference to Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism*, Mahmood Mamdani identifies four dogmas that guide the juxtaposition of the ‘West’ with the ‘Orient’. The first dogma contrasts the ‘rational, developed, humane and superior’ West with the ‘unreasonable, backward and inferior’ Orient. The second dogma is that the Orient lives in accordance with established rules based on sacred texts rather than in response to the changing demands of life. The third dogma says that the Orient is ‘eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself’, which ensures that the West inevitably assumes ‘a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient’. And finally, the fourth dogma posits ‘that the Orient at the bottom is something either to be feared (the Yellow peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible)’.<sup>29</sup>

Such orientalist logic has become more and more predominant in the discussions in Europe and North America on the compatibility of what is regarded as normative Islam with (Western) values of individualism, secularism, liberalism, contemporary gender theory, and gay rights. All Muslims who adopt a normative understanding of Islam and are not ready to unconditionally follow Eurocentric thoughts are ostracized and socially stigmatized as ‘backward, ignorant, narrow-minded’, then securitized and declared to be security threats for the sociopolitical order of the West through various national security programmes. In the process, all Muslims who choose to publicly affirm their identity and piety represent a potential target, and especially ‘bad’ are those Muslims who are ready for open political and social participation in the societies of the ‘Global North’ based on Islamic values and teachings. That is why in the West today we have a situation that every practising Muslim is ‘bad’ until proven otherwise.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim. America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, New York 2005, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 15.



We must understand the notions of ‘Bosnian Islam’ and ‘Balkan Muslims’ within the aforementioned context of orientalism and the securitization of Muslims more broadly. Because, as their countries strive to enter the European Union and NATO, Balkan Muslims have developed a kind of ‘auto-Orientalism’, a devaluation of their cultural-historical heritage and their Islamic values and identity. In addition, riding the wave of ‘anti-terrorism’ launched in 2003, programmes funded by Western governments and security services aimed at preventing terrorism and combating violent extremism and radicalization began to flourish in the Western Balkans. Such activities, however, have exceeded their original goal and have spread to the extent that they have become a kind of industry. It is frightening that not even the official Islamic communities in the region are immune to them, as these communities have increasingly been subjugating normative Islamic thought (whose heirs they should be) to what is being imposed on them by the creators of securitization programmes and schemes.

In this context, via a shift in meaning the notion of a ‘Bosnian Islam’ is now akin to the term ‘moderate Muslim’ heard often in the contemporary West. By affirming the term ‘Bosnian Islam’, one wants to prove that there is also a ‘European’, ‘liberal’ version of Islam that is in line with modernity as understood and lived in the West, and that will pose no challenge to the political orders of Western states at any level, whether in politics, epistemology, or values.<sup>31</sup> In this way the Balkan Muslims, while trampling on normative Islamic values, should pass the ‘Europeanism’ test in order potentially to be admitted to the club of ‘advanced’ nations. But even if Balkan Muslims abolish their religious identity by their own hands, it is by no means certain that they would be accepted into the community of ‘European’ peoples, and even if they were, there remains the question of how a voluntary renunciation of one’s spiritual being may affect one’s inner being and psyche. It is not easy to live with the burden of self-negation and the betrayal of your deepest beliefs.

However, it should also be said that the term ‘Balkan Muslims’ has a slightly different connotative meaning than ‘Bosnian Islam’. For although the former term is as geographically determined as the latter, ‘Balkan Muslims’ is different because it lacks the ideologized component contained in ‘Bosnian Islam’. Therefore, ‘Balkan Muslims’ is still primarily a term linked to a particular region, in this case the Balkans, and entails particularities on the level of the social, cultural,

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**31** One of the more illustrative examples of this phenomenon is an interview with Enes Karić, professor of Qur’anic studies at the Faculty of Islamic Studies at the University of Sarajevo, one of the most vocal advocates of ‘Bosnian Islam’. In the interview, Karić went so far as to ‘criminalize’ even the academic debate about the secular order, saying that ‘writing against secular societies is equal to an intellectual crime’. Cf. Intervju: Akademik Enes Karić: Kur’an treba čitati zarad dobra, *Preporod.info*, 11 December 2019, <https://www.preporod.info/bs/article/13721/akademik-enes-karic-kuran-treba-citati-zarad-dobra>.

historical, and political realities that determine the circumstances under which Muslims live Islam and practice Sharia regulations.

To my mind, the underlying question here is whether a reconciliation of the circumstances in line with Islamic principles is being sought, or whether the Islamic principles are to be modified to meet the circumstances. As I said above, there is no 'national' Islam(s). In the affirmation of a 'Bosnian', or 'Albanian' Islam the Islamic message is gradually and delicately moulded and is ultimately subordinated to frames which have no source in Islamic teaching. The transnational, pluriversal Qur'anic message can never be defined through or be subordinated to ethnic or national labels.

*G: Many European societies face serious challenges in facilitating the co-existence of Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The teachings and practices that some Muslims follow are indeed retrograde, regressive, and dangerous.*

K: I completely agree: Not only do they run counter to the democratic and liberal spirit of most European societies; they also fundamentally contradict the Qur'anic message and Islamic teachings.

*G: Let us return to Belgrade. How does it feel to be a Muslim in Belgrade? How has your life changed since you converted to Islam?*

K: I love Belgrade and am very attached to it. As I elaborated above, the city represents my native identity, which has had a powerful influence on me. During the demonstrations in the 1990s against the regime of Slobodan Milošević, one of the most famous banners read 'Belgrade is the World'. Indeed, Belgrade has always nurtured a broad array of diametrically diverse people and opinions. It is an open city in a specific way. But at the same time, it is a proud city that is eager to keep its peculiarities alive. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the wars of the 1990s, Belgrade has acquired a negative image in some circles in the region, which I find very sad. I think many people know very well that it is impossible to essentialize Belgrade. Yes, it is the capital of a country that committed numerous atrocities during the wars of the 1990s, that is responsible for the genocide in Srebrenica and because of that it certainly bears significant responsibility. The citizens of Belgrade will have to come to terms with this at some point in the future. I honestly think they will succeed; they have the capacity to do so.

My everyday life hardly differs from that of any other Belgrade citizen. I will not go into practical issues, such as praying, fasting, and halal food, because they are easily resolved with goodwill. As for the part of the question that relates to my conversion to Islam, I think that the aspect of social class is crucial. I am definitely not the right person to talk about experiences of converts more generally; I absolutely do not do that, ever. I was very protected by belonging to a social class that provided me with economic and every other type of security. Most converts in Serbia

do not have this type of security. To me these people are true *mujahideen*; they face a much greater struggle than I do when they seek to live their religion freely.

However, I would like to point out one other thing. I have received, many times, death threats from far-right-wing fanatics, however not primarily because of my religious affiliation but because of my sociopolitical views and my public opposition to Serbian exclusivist nationalism. In some instances the insult did refer to my religious affiliation, as for example when these individuals curse my ‘Turkish mother’ or call me *balijo*, a derogative term for ‘Turk’. In most intellectual circles, however, I am very often labelled as ‘traitor’ or a ‘foreign element’ and I am unwelcome because of both my religious and my political views. Unfortunately, in Serbian society and the media, ethnic hatred and Islamophobic discourses have developed into the dominant tropes.

*G: So from what you said earlier it is obvious that nationally oriented intellectuals are still present and influential in the academic and public spheres. Can you tell me to what degree? I am especially interested in those who played an active role during the 1990s in promoting anti-Muslim hatred.*

K: To answer this question, I will once more refer to the work of Erving Goffman, who pointed out the particular importance of those ‘outsiders’ who got to know the world of those who are stigmatized in a certain way, which is why he calls them the ‘wise’. On the basis of their knowledge of stigma, the ‘wise’ may play a positive role as some kind of a ‘bridge’ between the stigmatized and the rest of society. In the case of Muslims in Serbia, who are an unambiguously stigmatized group, we have the perverse phenomenon that those who have worked to approach and get acquainted with the beliefs of Muslims and their culture, customs, and traditions are actually the same people who did everything they could to make them even more strongly stigmatized and grotesquely represented. Intellectuals such as Darko Tanasković, Miroljub Jevtić and Srđa Trifković: all were ardent proponents of Serbian expansionism and espoused anti-Muslim sentiment during the 1990s. At that time, numerous articles and interviews by and with nationally oriented Serbian intellectuals, political scientists, writers, and cultural workers were published under bombastic titles, which from today’s perspective can be said to have served to some extent as an overture for Serbian aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. To illustrate the nature of these articles, some of the more ‘intriguing’ titles can be useful: ‘Jihad and Yugoslavia’<sup>32</sup>, ‘Islam and Kosovo: Radicals against Yugoslavia’<sup>33</sup>, ‘Modern Jihad as war’<sup>34</sup>, ‘From the Islamic

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32 Miroljub Jevtić, *Džihad i Jugoslavija*, *NIN*, 10 July 1989, 65–67.

33 Darko Tanasković, *Islam i Kosovo. Radikali protiv Jugoslavije*, *NIN*, 8 April 1990, 10–14.

34 Miroljub Jevtić, *Savremeni džihad kao rat*, Belgrade 1989.

Declaration to the religious war in BiH<sup>35</sup>, 'Islamization, it is Serbia's turn'<sup>36</sup>, 'Is the Islamic republic born in the old Ras: The nucleus of the crescent state'<sup>37</sup>, 'Allah invokes Sandžak'<sup>38</sup>, 'In the name of Allah—Islam, a holy war'<sup>39</sup>, 'The second Islamization of the Balkans'<sup>40</sup>, 'The Turks defend Sarajevo'<sup>41</sup>.

Today, after more than two decades, these intellectuals continue to promote the idea of a (pan-)Islamic, Serbo-phobic fundamentalism, especially through media such as newspapers and *YouTube*.<sup>42</sup> Apart from this 'old guard', in the past 20 years a new generation of academics and public figures has successfully continued to reaffirm the extremist Serbian nationalist project, among them intellectuals such as Miloš Ković,<sup>43</sup> Čedomir Antić,<sup>44</sup> Bojan Dimitrijević,<sup>45</sup> and many others. This younger generation of intellectuals, apart from actively glorifying the war criminals Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, is devoted to the revisionist rehabilitation of the World War II Chetnik movement, which was responsible for massive war crimes and ethnic cleansing against the Muslim population of Eastern Bosnia and Sandžak.

Unfortunately, this discourse has not only survived but continues to be the dominant narrative in Serbian society and media about the Balkan Muslims. In my

35 Mirosljub Jevtić, *Od Islamske deklaracije do verskog rata u BiH*, Prnjavor 1995.

36 Mirosljub Jevtić, *Islamizacija*. Na redu je Srbija, *Politikin svet* 12, no. 238 (29 May – 12 June 1991), 8–9.

37 Mirosljub Jevtić, *Rada li se islamska republika u starom Rasu*. Nukleus države polumeseca, *Politikin svet* 12, no. 245 (4–17 September 1991), 16–17.

38 Mirosljub Jevtić, *Alah priziva Sandžak*, *Politikin svet* 12, no. 248 (9 September – 23 November 1991), 8–9.

39 Mirosljub Jevtić, *U ime Alaha*. Islam, sveti rat, *Duga*, 3 May, 38–40.

40 Darko Tanasković, *Druga islamizacija Balkana*, *Duga*, 15 March 1992, reprinted in: Darko Tanasković, *U dijalogu sa islamom*, Gornji Milanovac 1992, 155–160.

41 Darko Tanasković, *Turci brane Sarajevo*, *Epoha*, 7 January 1992, reprinted in: Tanasković, *U dijalogu sa islamom*, 145–150.

42 Srdja Trifković, *Islam nije religija mira*, *YouTube*, 7 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCJYMU3S-60>; Darko Tanasković, *Zapad je pravio savez sa đavolom i radikalizovao muslimane!*, *YouTube*, 8 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kojui1WLvk>; Mirosljub Jevtić, *Muslimani su spremni da urade sve da bi pokorili svet!*, *YouTube*, 30 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohFBdqC438A>; Darko Tanasković, *Erdogan neće odustati od sna o Osmanskom carstvu*, *YouTube*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUIIjwW7jdE>; Mirosljub Jevtić, *Kosovo je par ekselans islamsko pitanje*. Evropa mora da se opameti, *YouTube*, 31 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1bSwvUgWrU>.

43 Miloš Ković / Draga Mastilović, *Pravo na istoriju*. Svedočenje u procesu Haškog tribunala protiv generala Ratka Mladića, Belgrade 2018; Miloš Ković, *Zašto Sam branio Mladića u Hagu*, *Nedeljnik*, 14 February 2017, <http://admin.nedeljnik.rs/nedeljnik/portalnews/milos-kovic-zasto-sam-branio-mladica-u-hagu/>.

44 Čedomir Antić / Nenad Kecmanović, *Istorija Republike Srpske*, Belgrade 2016.

45 Bojan Dimitrijević, *Golgota četnika*, Belgrade 2019; Bojan Dimitrijević, *Komandant*. Knjiga o Mladiću, Belgrade 2018; Bojan Dimitrijević, *General Mladić i Vojska Republike Srpske*, Belgrade 2019; Bojan Dimitrijević / Dušan M. Babac, *Đeneral Mihailović*. Završna reč, Belgrade 2019.

latest report on Islamophobia in Serbia, published in 2019 in the annual European Islamophobia Report, I cited dozens of newspaper articles, *YouTube* lectures, and interviews that spread the most vulgar forms of Islamophobia.<sup>46</sup>

*G: What about liberal, left-oriented intellectuals? Are they free from these stereotypes of the ‘Orient’?*

K: Unfortunately not. Liberal, left-oriented intellectuals in Serbia have spread Orientalist stereotypes connecting the Ottoman Empire to antimodernist notions. Again, the story starts in the nineteenth century. Svetozar Marković, a foundational socialist and populist thinker, wrote: ‘Everyone realizes that there is no other solution for the Eastern question but the struggle for life and death between Christians and Muslims’.<sup>47</sup> In recent times, some of the most eminent pro-European Serbian intellectuals, activists, and politicians employed orientalist images to invoke a certain kind of backwardness, among them former prime minister Zoran Đinđić, who was assassinated in 2003. Đinđić said in one of his speeches:

‘And then you say—what is life to me—now I’m going to take drugs, now I’m going to get drunk! But stand up man, your responsibility is huge, towards God and towards yourself. You won the most important game of all. You’re alive. You were born. Do something positive with your life. Only this, in our people, needs to come to the surface. That is a remnant of that empty Turkish way to say that we will easily accomplish, tomorrow we will, but it can’t be done, they are against us, it’s a world conspiracy... but that is all nonsense. Of course, the world is a harsh market. And no one loves anyone. Everyone only loves themselves. But let us love ourselves as much as Americans love themselves, then let’s see who is more successful.’<sup>48</sup>

The orientalist twist in this quote shifts the responsibility for Serbia’s lagging behind, their often fatalistic, nihilistic attitude to life, their lack of civic engagement, and their understanding of time to their being tied to the Ottoman past. It is that past which allegedly keeps Serbs from striving to achieve the individualist, competitive American way of life.

A similar example comes from Srđa Popović, one of the most famous lawyers and intellectuals originating in Serbia (Yugoslavia). In his book *Put u varvarstvo* (Road to barbarism) he described the impression Belgrade made on him when he returned there in 2000 from his exile in the United States (he had left in June 1990).

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**46** Ivan Ejub Kostić, Serbia, in: Enes Bayraktı / Farid Hafez, eds, *European Islamophobia Report 2019*, Ankara 2020, 679–702, [https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EIR\\_2019.pdf](https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EIR_2019.pdf).

**47** Svetozar Marković, *Celokupna dela*, vol. 1, Belgrade 1987, 31.

**48** Poruke dr Zorana Đinđića, *Blic*, 12 March 2011, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/poruke-dr-zorana-djindica/pljft3b>. *Blic* published Đinđić’s speech on the eighth anniversary of his assassination.

As did Đinđić, Popović included the adjective ‘oriental’ in his description of a Belgrade that seemed to have regressed into barbarism:

‘This Belgrade exists only as a carcass of the former city, upon which some other parasitic life develops, much smaller, oriental, provincial, poor. That life does not need the old sceneries, large restaurants, hotels, ministries, assemblies, the magnificent architecture of the pre-barbarian era. The latter has been replaced by kiosks, boutiques, concession stands, coffee houses, hot dog stands, bakeries, flea markets. The people who are now inhabiting it do not know that they abuse of the city; packs of abandoned dogs are wandering in the streets [...]. The trees have also grown, and overgrown grass is breaking through cracks in the asphalt. The consequences of industrial counter-revolution.’<sup>49</sup>

Also, the present camp of the antinationalist elite shows another extremely interesting, often overlooked phenomenon, namely the ‘ideological and value-related’ conversion of certain intellectuals who were the most passionate cultural-racists during the 1990s. The most illustrative example here is Nikola Samardžić, now a full professor at the Department of History at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and the founder of the pro-European Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). During the 1990s war Samardžić published a series of texts in the ultranationalist magazines *Pogledi* and *Književne novine* not only exuding inconceivable hatred against Muslims, whom he called a ‘Muhammadan precipitate’, but also promoting the most radical forms of Serbian nationalist ideology.<sup>50</sup> As the daily *Politika* pointed out in March 2008, *Pogledi* also gathered other authors whom one would rather not count among the ‘usual suspects’, such as dramatist Biljana Srbljanović and Veran Matić, who in 1989 founded the famous anti-Milošević radio station *B92* and until 2019 was CEO of both the radio and later also the *B92* television station, founded in 2000. According to *Politika*, in 1990 he conducted ‘interviews with prominent emigrant Chetnik commanders for *Pogledi*. He did them live for *B92*, and after typing the texts, he would give them to the magazine.’<sup>51</sup>

The non-governmental sector did not bypass the orientalist narrative, either. In 2004, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia published a collection of texts by Sonja Biserko, its founder and head. One is entitled ‘Srbija na Orijentu’

<sup>49</sup> Srđa Popović, *Put u varvarstvo*, Belgrade 2000, 258.

<sup>50</sup> For the quote cf. Nebojša Simeunović, LDP I nacionalizam: Otkrivanje skrivenog, *Nova srpska politička misao*, 13 December 2007, [http://starisajt.nspm.rs/koment\\_2007/2007\\_ldp\\_2.htm](http://starisajt.nspm.rs/koment_2007/2007_ldp_2.htm). Cf. Nikola Samardžić, *Pogledi*, 30 October 1992, 9–11; Nikola Samardžić, *Pogledi*, 13 November 1992, 8–11; Nikola Samardžić, *Pogledi*, 27 November 1992, 9–11; Nikola Samardžić, *Pogledi*, 11 December 1992, 35–37; Nikola Samardžić, *Pogledi*, 25 December 1992, 39–41; Nikola Samardžić, *Pogledi*, 9 July 1993, 28–30; Nikola Samardžić, *Pogledi*, 6 August 1993, 29–31; and Nikola Samardžić, *Književne novine* 844, 15 June 1992, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Stara ljubav zaborava nema, *Politika*, 25 March 2008, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/37348/STARA-LJUBAV-ZABORAVA-NEMA>.

(Serbia in the Orient), the title chosen for the entire book. Biserko's goal was 'to penetrate into the core of the Balkan, that is primarily Serbian moral and political disasters at the end of the twentieth century'.<sup>52</sup> 'Srbija na Orientu' was written in January 2000, assessing Serbia as the new millennium got underway. After laying out how Serbian society was permeated by anti-Western hatred coupled with global conspiracy theories, in which the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague was the most prominent agent, a 'form of legalization and institutionalization of retaliation for resistance to colonization at the end of the twentieth century and the humiliation of modern man',<sup>53</sup> she points to how this approach shifts responsibility for Serbian failures on the presumed 'neo-imperialist and hegemonic policies of the United States and their European satellites' and how there is 'a fundamental misunderstanding and non-comprehension of western values' in Serbia. Serbia, she writes, nurtures essentially the same attitude towards the West as Russia does, but features

'another component in its identity, which is not so transparent, and therefore eludes all analysts. I am talking about the oriental one. It is noticeable in everyday life, through the "folklore orgy" (folk music, kiosks, flea markets) which is increasingly dominating our public life. However, through the deep animosity towards Muslims as the century-old rulers of the region as well as Serbia, it is consciously suppressed. These two components of Serbian identity, the orthodox one as a figment of imagination and the anachronistic oriental one as reality, permanently distract Serbia from the West, because they are both essentially anti-Western.'<sup>54</sup>

As we can see, Biserko defines the Orient as 'anachronistic' and presents the orientalizing 'folklore orgy' visible in the Belgrade of these days as a symptomatic expression of Serbian society consciously suppressing its Ottoman past, which is coupled with the unreal boosting of Orthodoxy into an unfortunate and untimely exclusion from the Western world.

*G: Yes, both Srđa Popović and Sonja Biserko refer in an orientalizing way to 'kiosks' and 'newsstands' that appeared all over the streets of Belgrade during the wars in the 1990s. The anthropologist Stef Jansen, in his book Anti-Nationalism, also mentions the city's kioskozacija and links this to the expression 'Istanbulization of Belgrade', which came up in conversations during his fieldwork.*<sup>55</sup>

*K: Yes, the ways that even the most antinationalist pro-European intellectuals in Serbia link the most negative phenomena existing in Serbian society with 'the*

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<sup>52</sup> Sonja Biserko, *Srbija na Orijentu*, Belgrade 2004, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Biserko, *Srbija na Orijentu*, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Biserko, *Srbija na Orijentu*, 74.

<sup>55</sup> Stef Jansen, *Anti-Nationalism. Post-Yugoslav Resistance and Narratives of Self and Society*, PhD thesis, University of Hull, October 2000, 143–144.



orient' is addressed well in Stef Jansen's book. He makes it very clear that the articulation of negative stereotypes has little to do with actual knowledge. His analysis shows how even the most open-minded representatives of Serbian society are not exempt from orientalism, misrepresenting the Islamic cultural and spiritual heritage. Jansen convincingly illustrates how the stereotyping works—it is omnipresent, it is manipulative, it is rather unreflective, being ingrained in one's sociocultural upbringing, and in the last 30 years it has been consciously activated and amplified by certain sociopolitical actors.

*G: To conclude on a personal note: Tell me, please, are you raising your daughter in the Islamic tradition?*

K: It is very important to me to raise my daughter in accordance with Islamic principles and the higher goals of Sharia. I try to convey to her what the message of the Qur'an teaches me, which is a sense of justice as well as the need to always and in every situation fight for the rights of the disenfranchised and to help those in need. Importantly, I encourage her to be herself, never to be ashamed or hesitate to go against popular opinions or the attitudes of the majority when she feels that they are unjust. Likewise, in the spirit of Islamic teachings, it is important to me to encourage her freedom of thought and spirit as well as for her to strongly believe in what she considers the truth to be. One of the first thoughts I shared with her when she was a young child was the famous sentence of one of the most prominent African-American Islamic activists, Malcolm X, valid for every person: 'A man who stands for nothing will fall for anything.'

*G: All these principles are to me universal values, rather than specifically Muslim ones. What about the religious worshipping and rituals (Ibadah)?*

K: I have a problem with the term 'universal values'. I would rather speak of 'pluriversal values', a term affirmed in the works of the brilliant decolonial thinkers Enrique Dussel and Walter Dignolo.<sup>56</sup> I perceive the notion that values are 'universal' as one of the pillars of the hegemonic, ultimately colonial, project of Western societies. I believe that the values I convey to my daughter are rooted in the Islamic tradition. As for following religious regulations and, on the whole, as to whether she makes Islam a part of her identity, she will decide for herself. My family gave me absolute freedom in this regard when I was a child, and also later, and this is what I wish to give to my daughter, too: that she masters fully autonomous thinking and making decisions about her own life.

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Dignolo, On Pluriversality and Multipolar World Order. Decoloniality after Decolonization, Dewesternization after the Cold War, in: Bernd Reiter, ed, Constructing the Pluriverse. The Geopolitics of Knowing, Durham, London 2018, 90–116; Enrique Dussel, Ethics of Liberation. In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion, Durham 2013.

## Bionotes

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