

ON THE CROSSROAD BETWEEN THE ORTHODOX AND THE MUSLIM WORLD

by Roland Brunner, Novi Pazar, november 3rd, 1993

Thursday, november 2nd, 1993. I leave Podgorica for Novi Pazar. There is no direct bus, but one at 8.10am for Pristina will bring me close to it. At 8.40 the bus really comes and we drive a beautiful vally and canon of river Moraca long through the mountains and forest in all autumn colors of bright sunlight, up the mountains till the Crkvina pass at 1060m. Passing the tourist place Kolasin on the Highlands and the National Park of Biogradska Gora we enter Sandzak, a region today split in a part of northern Montenegro and a part in southern Serbia, on the border to Kosova.

From Montenegro to Sandzak

Some few kilometers before Bijelo Polje we leave the main road to Beograd, turning towards Ivangrad, a industrial city, looking ugly as the name suggests. Passing hilly highlands with lot of agriculture lands, we reach the Lovka tunnel at 1336m and drive down to Rozaje. Along canons, over bridges and through tunnels we leave Montenegro and enter South Serbia.

In Ribarice, I have to leave the bus and looking for some bus driving to Novi Pazar I sit in a nice coffee shop where Marshall Tito is still hanging on the wall in all his pride. There is no bus around at all, but after two hours, I see some nice red brandnew sportscar stopping at the bus station. I see some swiss number plates and ask the guy, where he is from. I an almost perfect swiss dialect, he tells me half his life and offers me to drive me up to Novi Pazar. The liter gasoline costs some 3 German Marks, but that does not any matter for him. Just some 15 minutes later, after a real race, we arrive in Novi Pazar, the capital of Sandzak region, looking at the first view rather like one big market place than like a modern european town.

Novi Pazar: Multicultural since centuries

Novi Pazar was founded in 1460 and became very early a important trading place. 1580 the Sandzak became a administrative unit of the Bosnian pashadom with Novi Pazar as capital. During the 16th and 17th century, it was one of the most prosperous and prominent cities in the Balkans. Still today, Novi Pazar is a very mixed place. Some 60'000 people live here, majority muslim, but also orthodox, catholic and jewish; Serbs, Montenegrins, Romas and Jews and what ever more. Also here the war has spoilt part of this multicultural tradition. Sefko Alomerovic, an independant intellectual, business man and writer, a humanist as he calles himself, characterizes the situation like that: "The city is quiet. There are no open clashes. The regime controlles the situation. If they want peace, there is peace. If they want war, they can provoke it." The civil

society in Novi Pazar is rather week: "People want to make their business. They are not interested in war or in politics."

Every ethnic or religious side today runs its own political party. Sefko Alomerovic is critical about all of them. "Every party uses its own nationalism to mobilize its members or just common people. There is nationalism on both sides."

Nothing to do with Kosova

Unlike Kosova, where the albanian population not only gets a vast majority of people but also a tradition of its own borders (Kosovo was a autonomos region in the 1974 constitution of Yugoslavia), the Sandzak area is fully integrated in the serbian state and many of the oldest proofs of serbian history - the oldest monasteries for example - are standing in this region. No easy situation for the muslim majority in the town.

But the ties with the muslims in Kosova are almost non existing. The muslims in Sandzak are Bosniaks, while the muslims in Kosova are Albanians. Their problems are completely different. While Kosova tends to have its own state or to link up with Albania, people here in Sandzak are Yugoslavs by language and big part of their cultural identity. Novi Pazar today is Serbias biggest marking place. Everything is produced here, falsed Lewis Jeans, Lacoste shirts and whatever more. Hundreds of buses are coming here on weekends for shoping tours from all over Serbia. The problem of Sandzak is rather similar to the problems in Vojvodina. But as Sefko Alomerovic states: "In Vojvodina, the hungarians have Hungary, the slovakes have Slovakia. And the muslims in Sandzak?"

They call it "incidents"

During 1992, the situation in the area was very tense. Muslim houses were blown up, muslims beaten up in the street or even killed. Two particular cases got some public: - October 22, 1992, in the early morning, a bus with workers

and school children was stopped between Sjeverin and Priboj. The soldiers in camouflage uniforms took 17 muslim people out of the bus. These 17 persons disappeared and have never been seen again. They were taken to Visegrad and after the "Bosnian-Herzegovinian Army" refused to exchange them for 28 "Serbian Fighters" they were killed. - The train from Belgrade to the Montenegrin harbour Bar was stopped at Srpci, a small station on the Bosnian territory controlled today by the army of Republic Srpska. 19 muslim men were kidnapped by soldiers in camouflage uniforms with chetnik insignia. They were taken in an military truck and left in unknown direction.

Roland Brunner / Gruppe fuer eine Schweiz ohne Arme
GSoA Pf. 103, CH 8031 Zuerich, Schweiz Tel. +41 1 273
01 00, Fax. +41 1 273 02 12

Serbia, 01.11.93

Dear Friends

on the weekend october 30/31, something or somebody cut off the power supply in the Center for Antiwar Action in Belgrade. When you get this message, the power came back again. Still, who knows for how long...

Sorry for all our friends, who waited for information. Sorry for everybody who waited for my mail too long. Somebody knows, information is dangerous. To cut the power supply is almost the only possibility to stop us working. It could happen again.

Love, Peace and Power from Serbia
Roland Brunner

Hundreds of muslim people left there villages after these "incidents" towards the main cities. There were never any investigations on these cases, not even the testimonies from other passengers were asked by the police. Also the media covering in Serbia was more camouflage than information. Beside big promises and warm words from President Milosevic, the relatives of the kidnapped people never got any support. Additionally, some 5000 muslim refugees from Bosnia, from Visegrad, Foca, Gorazde or Srebrenica live today in Novi Pazar.

The regime is the problem

Sefko Alomerovic insists, that the problem between serbian and muslim population is not caused by the serbs in general. But the regime tries to provoke incidents when needed and where possible. They built up special police units, consisting only of serbian men and activ mainly in propaganda. Provoking incidents, they say that all happens because of "ethnic conflicts". They try to push national feelings and hatred among the people.

Muslim people in Novi Pazar suffers lots of burocratic problems: They will not find a good job as manager of any enterprise unless they are proserbian and loyal to the regime; they will have almost no possibilities to find a place in any university to study; sometimes even number plates of cars from Novi Pazar have to pay ten times higher polls on the highway. But Sefko Alomerovic insists, that it was not the people starting these problems. "All began with Milosevics dream of great Serbia. This made every possible solution for the existing problems between the former republics and nations unfeasible."

No future in Sandzak?

There is no easy way out for the muslim population in Sandzak. Asked about his perspectives, Sefko Alomerovic insists in the results of the sanctions against Yugoslavia. "Sanctions should be imposed on all totalitarian regimes, also on Croatia seen its politics in Bosnia." He does not see any way out of Yugoslavia to solve the muslims repression. "We are not seperatists. What we need is a democratic Yugoslavia, integrated in Europe." Again he is more business man than politician.

The new symbol of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at least does not give many hopes: The double headed eagle wears a shield with the signs of Serbia and Montenegro. While the montenegrin lion at least is someway neutral, the serbian orthodox cross with the four C does exclude the muslim population of Serbia. How could they identify with the orthodox cross as symbol of their state?

Asked about the scheduled elections for december this year, Sefko Alomerovic is not only pessimistic, but even willing to give a promise: "After every elections, when Milosevic strenghened his power, he started a new war. War in Slovenia and Croatia after elections, war in Bosnia after the next elections, and the elections this december will bring the war to Kosovo, Sandzak and Vojvodina."