

**CIG**

Council  
for Inclusive  
Governance

## **Challenges of Sandzak Non-Paper**

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## Introduction

In October 2011, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) visited Belgrade and each of the municipalities of the Serbian Sandzak:<sup>1</sup> Novi Pazar, Nova Varos, Priboj, Prijepolje, Sjenica, and Tutin. CIG met with several ministers and other officials in the Government of Serbia, with the office of the Serbian Ombudsman, members of the Serbian Parliament, mayors, political party officials, civil society activists, religious leaders, academic experts, and analysts. CIG interviewed almost four dozen individuals. These individuals spoke to CIG in their private capacities. CIG's objective was to examine the current situation in Sandzak, hear various views on possible ways of resolving existing problems and outline a future course of action for a new initiative in Sandzak. The goal of this CIG undertaking is to trigger innovative thinking and explore best ways to reach consensus on improving the political and economic situation of the area in general and of the Bosnjak community in particular.

CIG was encouraged that all of our interlocutors shared the view that any solutions to Sandzak's several problems must be found within the institutions of the system and according to the laws of Serbia. This commonality of views suggests that by searching for answers together, through shared dialogue, it may be possible to reach consensus on some key issues.

This paper outlines the opinions of the participants in our October discussions but does not offer their complete overview. It has not been reviewed by the participants and CIG is solely responsible for its content.

The municipalities of Sandzak are among the poorest in Serbia. They are economically underdeveloped, with insufficient infrastructure, low standards of living, and high levels of unemployment. The presence of a large proportion of a non-Serb minority population compounds these difficulties by creating an ethnic dimension to almost every problem. There is a widely shared perception among the local ethnic Bosnjak population that their problems are caused primarily by the government's purposeful neglect of this minority dominated area and even perceptions of discrimination.<sup>2</sup> A local official told CIG: "I have a country but I have no motherland." Such perceptions call for greater attention to Sandzak on the part of the Serbian government and for elaboration of more sensitive policies towards the area. Such policies are needed especially at the time of a volatile situation in the neighboring to Sandzak northern part of Kosovo.

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<sup>1</sup> CIG is aware of various preferences for naming this part of Serbia, the most common of which are Sandzak, Raska oblast, and Southwest Serbia. While keeping this in mind we have opted for using the term Sandzak, the most widespread in the English-language literature about the area. In this paper, Sandzak is used as a collective term for the six municipalities of the Serbian part of Sandzak. Montenegro's five Sandzak municipalities are outside of the scope of this CIG initiative.

<sup>2</sup> Bosnjaks constitute overwhelming majority in the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin, almost half of the population of Prijepolje, more than 15% of the population in Priboj and a smaller but significant percentage of population of the municipality of Nova Varos.

Even though the everyday political atmosphere in Sandzak is rather tense and the society is highly politicized, the overall situation remains peaceful. The interethnic relations are largely characterized by peaceful co-existence of the two largest ethnic communities, Serbs and Bosnjaks. No influential political party favors eruption of interethnic conflict. The main political rifts are rather within the Bosnjak community. These rifts are enhanced by divisions within the local Islamic community. As Serbia gears up for the new parliamentary and local elections in the spring of 2012, the tense political atmosphere in Sandzak will most likely deteriorate.

Even though Sandzak is losing its population as a result of declining birth rates and increased emigration, according to the preliminary and unofficial results of the 2010 Serbian national census, Novi Pazar is among the only three Serbian cities where the population has increased since 2002. The main reason for this growth is a rural-to-city migration within Sandzak bringing in less educated rural youth. Novi Pazar is a city with a very high proportion of youth who suffer even more from the economic problems affecting the area, especially from unemployment.

CIG asked its interlocutors to identify the most pressing problems. We also asked them to identify those problems that have a high probability of being resolved without major monetary investments or with just a decent amount of good will on the part of the government.

Following is the list of those issues. The economic issues received a much higher priority from the overwhelming majority of the participants. Economic problems and unemployment were cited as the main source of growing radicalism in Sandzak, for both Serbs and Bosnjaks.

## **Issues**

### ***Economic Infrastructure***

If there is an issue that everyone in Sandzak agrees on it is the dismal state of the region's roads, especially in the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin. CIG's interlocutors singled out the miserable condition of the roads linking Novi Pazar with Sjenica and Tutin and absence of a road connecting Sjenica and Tutin directly.

Another urgent problem frequently mentioned is insufficient water supply, poor water quality, water shortages, and lack of proper water management in Novi Pazar.

### ***Economic Development***

Even though the overwhelming number of participants spoke about the low level of economic development in Sandzak, it is not the underdevelopment that was the main point of their dissatisfaction but the perceived lack of fairness in Belgrade's attention to the economic development of this area compared to other poor parts of Serbia and lack of equitable distribution of resources.

According to the interviewees, differences are notable not only between Sandzak and other parts of Serbia but also within Sandzak itself, namely between the municipalities with the majority Serb and with the majority Bosnjak population. For example, in 2010 investments per capita in Nova Varos, a majority ethnic Serb municipality, were more than six times of those in Novi Pazar and Sjenica and four times higher than those in Tutin, majority Bosnjak municipalities. Investments in Priboj were also higher. Average level of investment in Serbia is five times higher than that in Novi Pazar.<sup>3</sup>

Unemployment is another painful issue. There are over 20,000 unemployed in Novi Pazar alone.<sup>4</sup> Many of the participants believe that the most efficient way of increasing employment is for the state to support small and medium size enterprises in Sandzak.

Sandzak's economy also suffers from the unresolved issue of Kosovo since for over a decade it provided the main transport connections for export of goods from Serbia to Kosovo. Over 3,000 trucks are registered in Novi Pazar, most of them transport goods to Kosovo. Recent instability on the administrative crossings to Kosovo took most of these drivers out of business for quite some time. So far prospects for their full employment remain uncertain. Direct links between Sandzak and Kosovo are unavailable because of the road barricades in north Kosovo. Alternatively, a much longer route via Montenegro takes three times as much time.

### ***Local Government***

Many of CIG's interlocutors understand that not all of the problems in Sandzak require attention of the central government. They suggest many of the problems can and should be resolved by local institutions. But, while recognizing the positive results reached by the local municipal administrations, many also cited dysfunctional local governance, frequently found lack of professionalism among municipal employees, and little connection with the local population as important problems. Many, however, agreed that party nepotism is a much bigger problem. They say that nepotism is still the rule in filling the limited but secure municipal jobs. As one observer said "the change of government did not change the system."

### ***Interethnic Relations***

Interethnic relations in Sandzak remain peaceful but tense. Posters of extremist Serb organizations such as Dveri were present in Sjenica and some other towns. On the other hand, posters of the Bosnjak Democratic Community calling for the boycott of the Serbian state census were widely evident in most Sandzak municipalities. In October portraits of the Serbian Orthodox patriarch were posted on the back of almost every single road sign in Priboj, Nova Varos, and Prijepolje. In Priboj emigration of the most educated young people who do not see any future prospects at home is perceived to be the main reason for the growth of extremism and support for extremist politics by the remaining youth.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.fiskalnimonitor.rs](http://www.fiskalnimonitor.rs)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.b92.net/video/video.php?nav\\_category=905&nav\\_id=403268](http://www.b92.net/video/video.php?nav_category=905&nav_id=403268). Some of the speakers mentioned an unofficial figure of 50% of the working age population of Novi Pazar being unemployed.

Some of CIG's interlocutors believe that the Serbs and Bosnjaks in Sandzak are living in increasingly parallel rather than integrated societies. This is a serious cause for concern especially among the civil society activists. They warn that this increased parallelism has to be prevented and more programs encouraging integration must be developed.

One manifestation of this parallelism is that Sandzak, a multiethnic area, does not have any multiethnic political parties. All parties are based on ethnic principle.

Economic and ethnic issues appear to be interwoven in Sandzak. There is a widespread sense of inequality among the Bosnjaks. Even some of high level officials, speaking in their personal capacity, expressed this feeling. They suggest the main tool that would repair this perceived sense of inequality is most certainly the improvement of the economic situation in Sandzak and especially in the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin. These municipalities are most ethnically mixed in Sandzak, most tense, and most underdeveloped. In addition, Novi Pazar is the largest municipality and the economic and cultural center of the area. However, some of our interlocutors suggested a lot can be done by demonstrating good will on the part of the political parties and government in Belgrade towards Sandzak and the Bosnjaks in particular. One said: "We are Serbia's loyal citizens but what do we get in return?" Regardless of whether such perceptions are valid or not, they are dangerous if not dealt with.

Another participant suggested that one of the most important signs of such good will could perhaps be examination of and acknowledgment for crimes and injustices done against Bosnjaks during the 1990s. Recognizing these crimes, according to most interviewees, will return a great deal of trust into the system and its institutions.

A civil society activist told us that Bosnjaks, as other minorities, are the most natural allies of the democratic and pro-European political forces in Serbia. Some participants expressed their belief that attention to the Bosnjaks and other minorities by parties in Belgrade is paid only during elections when their votes are needed. They said the interethnic coalition of democrats needs to be strengthened through daily work for the benefit of the minorities.

Some of our interlocutors report that lack of equitable representation by Bosnjaks in the local bodies of the state administration, especially in the police and courts, is perceived as another sign of inequality. Some of the participants mentioned introduction of a program of affirmative action for acceptance of Bosnjaks into the State Police School as a way to resolve at least a part of the problem.

Resolution of these issues, according to the majority of interviewees, will help further the integration of Bosnjaks into the political and social life of Serbia.

### ***Education***

Education has been cited as the major policy that can improve or worsen the integration.

Some of our interlocutors suggested too many of the current school programs do not encourage the Bosnjak students' belonging to Serbia, that textbooks and programs, participants said, are dominated by the Serbian history and the Orthodox Church while ignoring the history of the Bosnjaks and of Islam, that literature programs ignore non-Serb and particularly Bosnjak writers. Serbs do not learn about Bosnjaks and their culture and history even though at the same time they live side by side. Many of the participants consider that the textbooks need to be analyzed, modified, and improved.

Some people are especially concerned about teaching of religion in schools. Teaching religion, according to many, deepens the divisions and should be replaced by teaching of history of religion where both Serb and Bosnjak children could study together and learn more about each other.

### ***Language***

Regarding language two main problems were brought up by the participants.

One concerns the teaching of the Bosnian language and its usage as an official language in local governance. The case of the municipality of Priboj was cited frequently where according to the existing Serbian laws language of a minority constituting more than 15% of the population should be recognized as an official language of the municipality. So far Priboj has refused to implement this national legal provision.

On the other hand, many said that while recognizing the Bosnian language, the Serbs and Bosnjaks do not need interpreters when speaking to each other and the linguistic divisions are largely artificial and are instrumentalized politically. According to these interlocutors such policies create additional artificial divisions between Serbs and Bosnjaks. These participants feel that wider introduction of the Latin alphabet in the official usage in Sandzak, greater attention to teaching Bosnjak literature, and differences in Bosnian vocabulary in schools could be a good step forward.

### ***Bosnjak National Minority Council***

In June 2010 Bosnjaks, like other minorities in Serbia, held an election to form their national minority council. However, the results of that election and its results have not been recognized by the Serbian government for more than a year and a half. As a result two minority councils claim to represent the Bosnjak minority, one formed by the majority of those elected in June 2010 and one elected in the previous elections, the technical mandate of which has been extended by law.

While agreeing that the current situation is not sustainable and needs to be resolved as soon as possible the participants differed over the way to resolve the issue. While some said that the council elected in June should be recognized as the only legitimate minority council of the Bosnjaks, others said that a new election needs to be held. Many think that a compromise solution is possible and needs to be defined. Many also agree that the

responsibilities and functions of the council need to be better explained to a wider Bosnjak audience. Their understanding of the right place of the council in the system of governance, its powers, and prerogatives is important for its successful establishment.