

Sandzak's Black-Market Bugle Boys

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Muslims who fled Yugoslavia's Sandzak region are not returning, and little else is functioning except for factories starting once again to make 'Original' Levi's 501 jeans and other bogus brand names.

While Serbia's periphery has witnessed a wave of protests against the rule of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic since the end of the war in Kosovo, one outlying region has bucked this trend - the Sandzak.

This predominantly Muslim, mountainous territory, which straddles Serbia and Montenegro and borders Bosnia on one side and Kosovo on the other, is often cited as one of the future flash points in the Balkans. Yet it has remained silent, both during and since the war.

That said, a large proportion of the Sandzak's Muslim population left Serbia during the war fearing that they may be the next to be ethnically cleansed. The UNHCR registered 27,000 refugees from the Sandzak in Bosnia, and many thousands more have fled to third countries, in particular to Turkey.

Unlike the Kosovo Albanians who sought refuge during the war and have since made their way home, the Sandzak's Muslims are not returning. Instead, like an estimated 50,000 of their ethnic kin who fled the Sandzak during the Bosnian war, they appear to be hoping to make new lives for themselves outside Yugoslavia.

Driving this exodus is a fear of what may be lurking around the corner, not what is actually taking place. During the NATO bombing, the Yugoslav Army increased its presence in the Sandzak but avoided confrontation with the local population. Indeed, the commander of its Uzice corps, Colonel Gruica Davidovic, appealed publicly to Muslims to remain and personally guaranteed their security.

Having been spared during the first 10 days of NATO's bombing campaign, the Sandzak was targeted almost every subsequent night to the end of the war. In the process the Yugoslav Army's barracks and one administrative building in Novi Pazar, the main town, were destroyed and another 50 buildings damaged. In an attack on 31 May, 12 civilians--all Serbs--died, among them a four-year-old child.

Many Yugoslav Army soldiers deployed in the Sandzak were billeted with Muslim families without incident. Moreover, some 350 Muslim businessmen raised 2.5 million Yugoslav dinars (220,000 German Marks) in cash, food and fuel for the Yugoslav Army to help cover its operating costs during this period.

The Muslim businessmen were clearly contributing to the Serbian war effort for selfish reasons, hoping that the fund-raising drive would both protect them personally and their business interests. Many had grown wealthy in the 1990s by manufacturing bogus jeans, including Levi's, Versace and Bugle Boy, as well as shoes which mimic famous Italian designs but sell for a fraction of the price.

For most of the past decade, the Sandzak's entrepreneurs benefited from Serbia's pariah status, since this enabled them to avoid law suits brought by the owners of the trademarks of the products they copy. They used to boast that as a result of their industry, the Sandzak paid more tax to Belgrade than any other comparable region of Yugoslavia.

Today, however, the boom time is over. The state-run factories are shut and the private industry for which the Sandzak was famed is struggling to get back on its feet.

Some 10,000 people who used to work in four state-owned factories in Novi Pazar are now effectively unemployed. In Priboj, some 2,500 employees of the FAP car factory are no longer working. In Sjenica, some 800 workers with the Vesna textile factory are idle.

Entrepreneurs attempting to revive their businesses find their efforts stymied by poor communications, following destruction to bridges during the bombing, a lack of buying power in Serbia, and no export route via Kosovo. Nevertheless, both jeans and shoes are again being manufactured.

The economic slowdown has meant severe hardship for many. In Novi Pazar alone, some 3,000 households now rely on a soup kitchen for their meals. Meanwhile, the town itself appears increasingly dirty as fuel shortages have meant that refuse is no longer collected on a regular basis.

The Sandzak Coalition, a group of ethnic Muslim political parties, attempted to imitate opposition activists elsewhere in Serbia by organising a petition against Milosevic. However, police banned the signature drive and the action was halted.

On 27 and 28 August, a group of people from Damad, a news agency and cultural association, are planning a public meeting on the theme of tolerance and co-existence, to which they have invited intellectuals from Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro.

According to the 1991 census, 420,000 people lived in the Sandzak--278,000 in Serbia and 162,000 in Montenegro--of whom 54 per cent were Muslims.

The Sandzak, which takes its name from the Turkish word for military district, was administratively part of Bosnia within the Ottoman Empire until 1878. At the Congress of Berlin of that year, the Great Powers decided to leave the Sandzak within the Ottoman Empire, but allowed Austria-Hungary to deploy troops in part of the region. It was seized by Serbia and Montenegro in the first Balkan war of 1912.

Six municipalities of the Sandzak are in Serbia and five in Montenegro, all of which are ethnically mixed. At the time of the 1991 census, Muslims formed 2.7 per cent of the population in Serbia, 14.6 per cent in Montenegro, and 3.2 per cent overall in rump Yugoslavia.

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