TOPIC OF THE WEEK: In The Footsteps Of Sandzak Youths Who Fight In Syria

TRANSCRIPT IN ENGLISH

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Eldar Kundakovic, a 27-year-old from Novi Pazar, was killed on May 14 fighting against the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. According to available reports, he was killed less than a month and a half after leaving Serbia in a fight over a prison controlled by Syrian forces. Many online messages, as well as obituary that informed Novi Pazar residents about his death, read that “he died following Allah's path in Syria.”

As of now, we can only speculate about the channels that young men from Sandzak are using to get to a war zone where more than 80,000 people have been killed so far, according to the United Nations. And we can only speculate about who inspired them to take up arms and fight so far away from their homes. In Kundakovic’s case, we know his Islamic faith played a role in his decision – a thought that brings comfort to his father.

[MUSLIM BELIEVER PRAYING]

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] “God protect me from the devil,” Esad Kundakovic said when I met him two days after he’d been informed of his son’s death. He was reluctant to talk with a journalist but decided to do so to prevent others from following in Eldar’s footsteps.

[ESAD KUNDAKOVIC, FATHER OF YOUNG MAN ELDAR WHO DIED FIGHTING IN SYRIA] “(I am now talking) to the public, (I am doing this) for the youth that desires it (to go to Syria), so that they realize that it is not the path they should take”.

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] This doesn’t mean the Kundakovic family is not proud of their son and his sacrifice. He was raised in a religious environment and committed himself to Islam after graduating from high school.

[ESAD KUNDAKOVIC, FATHER OF YOUNG MAN ELDAR WHO DIED FIGHTING IN SYRIA] “He dedicated himself completely to studying the religion he belonged to”.

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] Simultaneously:

[ESAD KUNDAKOVIC, FATHER OF YOUNG MAN ELDAR WHO DIED FIGHTING IN SYRIA] “He also prepared physically. We have a gym across the street. He prayed regularly and even used to get up in the middle of the night to pray. He prayed to the Lord, and now I know why.”

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] The direction of Eldar’s prayers is clear, but the moment when his prayers intensified was crucial in his search for meaning. Before we followed his trail to Syria, we tried to identify the things that inspired Eldar.

[PEOPLE TALKING IN UNIVERSITY CAFE IN NOVI PAZAR]

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] We went to the International University café in Novi Pazar, where we talked to a group of students, many of whom knew Eldar.

[MINA JOVICIC, STUDENT AND ELDAR'S FRIEND] “When I hear he went there, I thought I expected it, but I hoped he would not end up the way he did.”
“He entered religion abruptly and then started attending lectures and hanging out with people who discussed it.”

To find out more about the lectures Eldar attended, we spoke with Resad Plojovic, vice president of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Serbia (one of the two Islamic communities in the country, headed by mufti Muamer Zukorlic).

“There are certain centers or individuals who probably have connections with other organizations and they are motivating people. They may also know ways to transport them to the war zone. To be honest, many of these youths do not even know where Syria is, and they cannot know how to go there and get involved in what is going on there.”

Kundakovic’s father, the self-proclaimed “father of a shahid,” provided more details about his son’s journey to Syria.

“He just decided to go. My wife and I went to the tailor shop where we work. When we came back for supper around 5:00, he was already gone. He called and told me he’d crossed the border. The next day, he called from Istanbul. He said he was visiting mosques and listening to prayers there. He was so happy. Two days later, he contacted me and told me he’d arrived and applied for college. I understood what that meant.”

Why did he speak in code?

“He probably didn’t want anyone to try to change his mind. I asked him if he’d arrived in Syria and he said, ‘yes.’ There was another kid from Novi Par and about 30 from Sandzak, he said. One young man died with him — he was from Rozaj and left five children behind.”

Do you know what was his name?

“His name was Almir Salihovic.”

Political and religious tensions in Sandzak were running high over the past year, but thankfully the peace in this ethnically diverse environment was never interrupted. Daily life in this municipality with Serbia’s highest birth rate is marked by unemployment, a low standard of living, and the insistent call to prayer.

But beneath this surface, some underground forces are moving. Media have speculated that an NGO called Srednji Put is behind the recruitment of youths to fight in Syria. The NGO has not responded to the charges.

Srednji Put publishes videos on its Facebook page showing the fighting in Syria with commentary by Sead effendi Islamovic, who the Islamic Community in Serbia accuses of recruiting youths.
[RESAD PLOJOVIC, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE MESHIHAT OF THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN SERBIA] “We concluded there are certainly some organizations and individuals in contact with youths who are willing to abuse the most precious thing a youth has -- their life”.

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] Plojovic indirectly mentioned concrete people.

[RESAD PLOJOVIC, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE MESHIHAT OF THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN SERBIA] “If you look back at who was promoting his lectures, you can pinpoint one television station. That television station broadcasts his lectures every Sunday.”

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] And what is his name?

[RESAD PLOJOVIC, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE MESHIHAT OF THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN SERBIA] “Well, the person is mentioned in that question.”

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] Why do you have a problem with mentioning Islamovic’s name?

[RESAD PLOJOVIC, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE MESHIHAT OF THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN SERBIA] “I do not. It is Islamovic, a member of a working group on the initiative of so-called unity.”

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] The issues has caused a new disputes between Serbia’s two Islamic communities. The second one – headed by Adem Zilkic – declined to speak to us for this story.

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] Alen Grbovic, a journalist and a high-school classmate of Eldar’s, says the Islamic communities might not be involved at all.

[ALEN GRBOVIC, JOURNALIST AND EL DAR’S FORMER CLASSMATE] “The fact is that there are illegal organizations that recruit people here. The fact is there are houses where they meet. The fact is there are facilities where they conduct their religious rituals, which means they isolate themselves from the mosque. That means they isolate themselves from the system of the Islamic community and they are more easily influenced by other people and organizations.”

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] Eldar had been in Syria less than two months when the telephone rang at his parents’ house.

[ESAD KUNDAKOVIC, FATHER OF YOUNG MAN ELDAR WHO DIED FIGHTING IN SYRIA] “A young man was speaking through his tears. I told him not to cry because they went there to fight, not to cry. I told him they did not go there to attend school, but to fight, and I urged him to tell me what had happened. He told me they were part of an operation to break into a prison. His friend from Rozaj was their leader, but he was wounded by a sniper. Eldar tried to rescue him, but he was hit too. Probably by snipers. After that, they faced heavy fire – tanks and shooting. They said they were hit by a grenade and both of them were killed. I know it is a war zone and they were fighting for the rebels. I know it is impossible to recover their bodies now. I asked that their graves be marked, and that was done. They promised me they would record everything and send me the footage, it doesn’t matter.”

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] After that call, Kundakovic found a letter on Eldar’s computer.

[ESAD KUNDAKOVIC, FATHER OF YOUNG MAN ELDAR WHO DIED FIGHTING IN SYRIA, TALKS ABOUT THE LETTER HE FOUND IN HIS SON’S COMPUTER]

[MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] It was filled with quotations from the Koran and ends with the words:
ESAD KUNDAKOVIC, FATHER OF YOUNG MAN ELDAR WHO DIED FIGHTING IN SYRIA, READS THE LETTER] “I hope Allah will gather us all in heaven with our Prophet.”

MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] Eldar knowingly sacrificed his life, certain that his choice would pave the way to heaven for him. He did not find a path to heaven by working with charitable organizations, but by taking up a gun to take revenge on Assad’s regime. Eldina Murati, a psychology student from Novi Pazar, wonders about this.

ELDINA MURATI, PSYCHOLOGY STUDENT FROM NOVI PAZAR] “If they wanted to do something, they could have chosen a better way to do it - such as humanitarian work and organizations.”

MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] Eldar’s father has similar advice for those thinking of following after his son.

ESAD KUNDAKOVIC, FATHER OF YOUNG MAN ELDAR WHO DIED FIGHTING IN SYRIA] “As the parent of a shahid, I say we have much work to do right here,” he said. “We need hard-working, honest men. We need brotherly relations, learning, and books. We do not need another jihad.”

MILOS TEODOROVIC’S OFF] From Novi Pazar for the Topic of the week of RFE/RL, Milos Teodorovic.