A Balkan Perspective: Violent Extremism and Its Prevention in the Light of

the COVID-19 Pandemic –

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The COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented global-scale threat to national and collective security systems. Apart from dangers such as collapsing healthcare and ruined economy, the coronavirus is also challenging the effective struggle against violent extremism. Thus, it is crucial to understand how violent extremist groups perceive the new situation and how they try to use it as an advantage in their propaganda and acts of violence.

Although violent extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the IS warn their followers about the dangers of the coronavirus, they have not stopped inciting them to commit acts of terror in the lands of the 'infidels.' They use the pandemic to promote their ideology considering, it a sign of divine retaliation, which nurtures an apocalyptic predisposition, an ethos successfully exploited so far by the IS. Indeed, there is a real danger of the IS re-emerging in Iraq along with the already intensified terror attacks in the Sahel region.

The pandemic could eventually lead to deep economic and socio-political crisis resulting in weakened governments and domestic security efforts, creating an enabling environment for violent extremism. However, groups such as al-Shabab that control certain territories face the same difficulties as the state governments in controlling the pandemic and, similarly, may face a surge of public discontent. Public health and order may also be jeopardised by even reasonable precarious measures if seen as 'anti-Islamic'. Experts also warn about the possibility of coronavirus-inspired chaos in prisons and detention camps that may set many extremists free.

The coronavirus frustrations represent a fertile ground for the dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories, sometimes legitimising attitudes of discrimination, marginalisation, and xenophobia. Human rights organisations suggest that governments, far-right, and other groups may abuse this situation to discriminate against minorities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the government has used the opportunity to postpone indefinitely the repatriation of Bosnian IS fighters residing in Syria.

The coronavirus crisis gives rise to the 'diplomacy' of humanitarian aid, which is also an opportunity to reaffirm well-established religious, cultural, and political ties between some Western Balkan regions and external geopolitical powers like the Republic of Turkey. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to slow down the integration of the Western Balkan in the EU, which would certainly contribute substantially to the prevention of radical extremism in the long term.