Bosnia and Herzegovina: Effects of COVID-19 crisis on radicalization processes – Edina Bećirević, Atlantic Initiative (AI)

Salafi groups working in BiH have remained rather silent as though subdued by the strict quarantine and safety measures. Besides intensively calling for their followers to turn to God for answers to the crisis, there has been nothing that can been interpreted as an incitement to violence or even hatred toward others. This is especially true of Salafi influencers. In the past, most have looked for every crisis opportunity to start a verbal conflict with the official Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBiH). The ICBiH had followed the governments advice and closed all mosques at the very start. Yet, Salafi groups did not protest this decision and instead silently accepted it.

For the Serbian Orthodox and the Catholic Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina, disobedience came from within. This is especially the case with the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose priests maintained their practice of using a shared spoon to distribute sacramental bread and wine to churchgoers. The Catholic Church in BiH has made a turn toward far-right politics made obvious by announcing the holding of a mass on May 16, to commemorate Croatian Nazi collaborator troops and civilians captured at the end of WWII. It is difficult to determine what factors contributed to this radical move of the Catholic Church because this mass might be a high-level security risk event. Last year the Austrian diocese banned the event, saying it was being used for nationalist purposes. Symbols of WWII fascist Ustasha's movement have been regularly seen at events like this, and far-right groups have used it for annual gatherings.

Previous research has shown that the push factors for radicalization, and radicalization to violent extremism, could be linked to common systemic factors in the Western Balkan region, such as: economic deprivation, corruption, and political and institutional dysfunctionality. Similarities were also exhibited in the identification of pull factors. A primary variable involved personal and community level crises of identity and this was emphasized among younger generations, which are most affected by unemployment crises. The economic crisis caused by COVID-19, in combination with religious communities turning toward far right, can only make Bosnia and Herzegovina a more "enabling environment" for radicalisation and violent extremism. Following these process in the future will be crucial for understanding the "enabling environment" in Bosnia and Herzegovina.