

How Extremists in Serbia Have Exploited the Pandemic -

Predrag Petrović, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)

In Serbia, the two major forms of extremism are Islamic extremism and right-wing extremism. Both groups have tried to exploit the coronavirus pandemic and the strict measures imposed by the government to abate the spread of the virus in order to further their agendas. Even before the coronavirus had spread to Europe significantly, Islamic extremist had resorted to a conspiracy theory claiming that the epidemic was being intentionally exaggerated by the Chinese authorities in order to silence critical voices opposing oppression of the Uyghur ethnic minority. Later, when a pandemic was officially declared, they reverted to spreading ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam by developing and sharing specially designed narratives about the coronavirus. The pandemic is seen as divine punishment for the sinful lives lead by humankind. The pandemic has also shown that the 'Muslim way of life' is not wrong. Life is indeed possible without nightclubs, pubs and casinos, as well as an economy without high-interest rates. The bottom line here is that one should adhere more closely to a strict interpretation of Islam.

The response by far-right groups has been more direct, political and even violent. In less than a month, a Facebook group called "STOP shipping in migrants" attracted more than 300 thousand followers. The group claims that the Serbian authorities have struck a secret deal with Western countries to settle huge numbers of migrants throughout Serbia. The curfew is seen as the perfect opportunity for implementing this plan. In the context of government-imposed isolation and high levels of uncertainty, this type of narrative spreads alarm among many citizens and potentially results in them being more susceptible to anti-migrant and anti-Muslim ideologies.

Two recent incidents involving right-wing extremists demonstrate a very dangerous trend of mainstreaming anti-migrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in Serbian politics. A member of the ruling party crashed his car into a migrant camp and live streamed the whole incident, quickly going viral. A protest organised by the opposition movement, including the right-wing People's Patrol, involved anti-Muslim sentiments. This trend will only further contribute to the radicalisation of Serbia's Muslim population raising the problem of reciprocal radicalisation and the labelling by Serbian authorities of Islamist extremists as 'terrorists' and the far-right as merely 'extremists'.

The long-term effects of the pandemic will provide opportunities for extremists. In [BCSP's most recent assessment of extremism in Serbia](#), a weak economy, widespread poverty, youth unemployment, (political) corruption and poor governance were identified as major push factors for (violent) extremism. Economists anticipate that the GDP of Serbia will drop by more than 4 per cent and that the economy will suffer the loss of 900 million euros. The aftermath of coronavirus could, therefore, easily strengthen the drivers of radicalisation and intensify grievances among people who are likely to become easy targets for extremist narratives.