

COVID-19 and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans – Evlogi Stanchev, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

The current COVID-19 pandemic highlights a deepening crisis, which will possibly have serious long-term political, social, and economic consequences on a global scale. In this extraordinary situation, various analysts warn about the possibility of some extremist groups from across the ideological spectrum to use the COVID-19 crisis [for their benefit](#).

Islamist extremism

Analysts are particularly concerned with some of the Salafi-jihadi organizations, widely recognized as a source of international terrorist actions. Many experts warn against the possible [reactivation of their activities](#) following the partial withdrawal of international peacekeeping missions and the subsequent limitation of counter-terrorist operations due to the pandemic. In this context, groups like [ISIS and Al-Qaeda](#) already declared openly their intentions to benefit from the crisis, although the different Islamist organizations react and adapt differently to the current situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has multifaceted perceptions among the leading Islamist organizations, provoking the need for a number of actions to be taken. Some of these are:

- The new coronavirus is perceived as [“Divine” retribution](#).
- Calls for Muslims to repent because of their depravity and calls for “infidels” to convert to Islam amidst the pandemic.
 - Perceiving the COVID-19 crisis in the West as a result of the sinful, [“materialistic way of life”](#) of Western societies.
 - Following the strict example of the Prophet Muhammad for the prohibition of [“entering the land of the epidemic”](#).
 - Spread of fake news and conspiracy theories mainly against the West.
 - Calls for using the current situation of “infidels” political and economic weakness for planning future terrorist acts (ISIS).

Far-right extremism

With the deepening of the COVID-19 crisis in the last months, various far-right organizations and ideologues (among them radical nationalists, racists, neo-Nazis, white-supremacists, proponents of anti-Semitism, etc.) took advantage of the situation to spread their messages and gain new followers. The coronavirus itself is often perceived by them as a [“hoax”](#), behind which stand major economic, corporative and/or geopolitical interests (mostly referred to as “Jewish”). Various analyses warn that the current state of mass lockdown makes many people significantly vulnerable to different types of hate speech (incl. far-right) because they are isolated in their homes and draw mostly on [unfiltered and unmonitored information](#) from the Internet and social networks. Such a situation poses particular risk for multiethnic societies, characterized by fragile ethnic balance and/or by recent inter-ethnic conflicts.

Major trends among far-right extremists related to the COVID-19 pandemic can be summarized as follows:

- Posting and spreading [fake news](#) and conspiracy theories related to the coronavirus pandemic.
- Use of publicly visible hate speech. Online calls for physical provocations and confrontations.
- Intensification of xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Accusations of ethnic minorities and immigrant/refugee communities for [spreading the disease](#).
- [Islamophobia](#).
- Anti-government calls and criticism against the politics of liberal democracy.

Some of the above trends among various extremist groups can be observed in several countries and regions in the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sandžak, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia), although strongly influenced by the regional context.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In addition to the unprecedented political and economic challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights already existing destabilizing trends in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the two ethnically dominated entities: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. In many cases, they function completely independent and isolated from each other which is illustrated by the [different anti-epidemic measures](#) taken by the two entities against the coronavirus.

Some Salafist communities are in sharp conflict with the official Islamic Community (*Islamska Zajednica*) in the country and do not recognize its authority and supremacy, therefore existing parallelly and independently. Proponents of Salafi ideology in Bosnia might call on the broad Muslim population for actions other than those propagated by the state-sanctioned Islamic Community. As noted by many observers, some Salafi messages implicitly preach [intolerance towards non-Muslims](#) (in the sense of non-Salafis), which may potentially intensify the spread of COVID-19-related hate speech. Such cases have already been observed among some international Islamist organizations. Furthermore, currently local media in Bosnia has intensified the rhetoric around the [possible repatriation of Bosnian fighters](#) involved in the Syrian civil war. The latter are seen by the general Bosnian public as an additional source of tensions and radicalization. These trends can lead to an increase in the intra-Muslim tensions, as well as to further intensification of Islamophobic narratives among the other religious communities in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already pushed to the fore political strife and ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to acting on its own regarding the COVID-19-related issues, Republika Srpska sees the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen its political independence and even further its [separatist aspirations](#), visible in the past months in the [nationalist rhetoric](#) of its official statements. As pointed by experts, any action to redefine the sovereignty and political framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its constituent entities, especially in the context of a multidimensional crisis, contains the explicit danger of escalation of nationalist and ethnic tensions on a wider scale.

Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic is influencing the already existing [refugee crisis](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the current situation, wide segments of Bosnian society view immigrant communities and refugee camps as a potential source of the disease, although this is by no means a trend specific to Bosnia only. This further stimulates anti-immigrant sentiments. For example, concerning the anti-epidemic restrictions, the authorities in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina decided to [transfer thousands of immigrants](#) to a remote newly-built camp, near the Croatian border. As a result, the local population which consists mainly of Serbian repatriates protested against the decision, stating that Muslim immigrants pose an immediate “[threat to their livelihoods and way of life](#)”.

Serbia and Montenegro (Sandžak)

It is worth noting that although characterized by a common social, cultural, and economic situation, the historical region of Sandžak is divided between Serbia and Montenegro. From this perspective, the Serbian and Montenegrin parts of the region are sometimes subjects to different state policies by Belgrade and Podgorica, respectively. This is something that should be kept in mind when approaching the current situation with the coronavirus pandemic.

In mid-April 2020 Sandžak (and specifically Novi Pazar, the center of the Serbian part of the region) received some [medical assistance from Turkey](#) via the diplomatic group “Friends of Sandžak” (*Prijatelji Sandžaka*). This clearly demonstrated the desire of the Turkish state to maintain its positive image among local Muslims, mostly Bosniaks. However, there is the question of how this assistance will be distributed – among the entire population, regardless of ethnic or religious background, or exclusively among Bosniaks? The second option carries the risk of activating considerable anti-Muslim/anti-Bosniak sentiment among both local Serbs and Serbian society in general.

The region of Sandžak is also characterized by the [visible distribution of Salafis](#). In the past, there have been cases of Salafist confrontations with local “moderate” Muslims. Although their impact is considered limited today, Salafis could benefit from a possible exacerbation of the coronavirus pandemic. In times of humanitarian crises, there is a common practice of intensification of charities, financial incentives, and other kinds of assistance from various Middle Eastern, mainly Saudi, donors in regions with considerable Muslim populations. However, this assistance usually goes with the desire to spread and adapt Salafist influence in the respective region. In this context, Novi Pazar gave an illustrative example in the last two decades with the [assistance provided by Salafis](#) to some of the local drug addicts, many of whom have taken a fundamentalist religious orientation since their rehabilitation. Such a charitable “reactivation” of local Salafist and foreign Muslim activity in the region can trigger another prospect of exacerbation of Islamophobic content in the respective dominant societies. It can also lead to the spread of hate and violence-related speech, and even to physical confrontations on a mass scale.

Kosovo

In a state of a weak economy and a fragile inter-ethnic balance, a global crisis like COVID-19 could have serious consequences for Kosovo. The current crisis raises the

fundamental question of whether anti-epidemic measures and operations for economic recovery will be implemented ethnically neutral or if the Serbian minority will be isolated by Pristina. Thus, a further escalation of the pandemic could result in the radicalization of the major local communities (Albanians and Serbs), which are practically segregated but share a common trauma of the recent war (1998 – 1999) and ethnic cleansings. In this regard, it should be noted that the coronavirus pandemic has already hampered the important [commemorations](#) of the massacres of Kosovo Albanians during the war.

If the pandemic continues to escalate, an eventual withdrawal of some of the international peacekeeping forces (KFOR), could lead to an escalation of inter-ethnic tensions and violent extremism. This may strengthen local Salafi communities, which have been steadily present since the war. Observers believe that Salafis have a [serious influence](#) on the local Islamic Community of Kosova and also maintain close ties with some of the Albanian paramilitary structures in the region (the so-called Albanian National Army). Furthermore, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the influence of the Salafis can be further enhanced through various financial, humanitarian, educational, and other types of assistance by foreign donors and funds.

Albania

Like other countries in the region, the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania has a destabilizing effect on both the weak local economy and healthcare system, and broad segments of society. As the pandemic in Muslim-dominated Albania coincided with the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, measures against the spread of the virus (which included a ban on visiting mosques) can be interpreted as a kind of “attack on Islam” by some believers. Possible measures against religion by the authorities, regardless of their relevance and necessity, may [revive old memories](#) of the state-imposed atheism in pre-1991 Albania.

Given this situation, the dissatisfaction of believers who are unable to fulfill some of their religious commitments during Ramadan can be instrumentalized by local Salafi preachers. In the context of the religious revival in post-communist Albania Salafi interpretations of Islam have been propagated through various foreign-sponsored organizations and NGOs, which exist independently from the official “moderate” Muslim Community of Albania. Such strengthening of extremist voices can threaten the religious balance in multiconfessional Albania (56,7 % Sunni Muslims, 10 % Catholics, 6,75 % Eastern Orthodox, 2 % Bektashi, according to the [2011 official census](#)).

North Macedonia

North Macedonia is a country with a fragile economy, long-lasting political instability, severe levels of corruption, inefficient institutions, and an underdeveloped public sector. Observers warn that poor crisis management, combined with the deepening corruption, and the growing lack of media freedom and [public transparency](#), could lead to new waves of protests and further political tensions in the near future. Moreover, North Macedonia has also been an arena of several violent ethnic and religious clashes. With their peak reached in 2001 when a *de facto* open military conflict took place, there have also been several recent clashes since then, with the latest in [Kumanovo](#) in the spring of 2015. Given this snapshot, North Macedonia can be considered a country with some probability of violent extremism during the pandemic.

For states with strained inter-ethnic relations like North Macedonia itself, whether the virus spreads evenly or unevenly among specific ethnic groups is of crucial importance. The uneven spread of the virus could easily exacerbate xenophobic attitudes. For example, the Roma community in neighboring Bulgaria has been the [subject of racist narratives](#) incl. at the political level and their ghettos were claimed to be a source of the disease. In North Macedonia, a mass spread of such nationalist and ethnocentric narratives during the pandemic may have dramatic consequences for the country.

In North Macedonia there are some clear opportunities for local “radical” Muslims to “use” the pandemic for their benefit. A particular concern lies in the possible reactivation of some foreign-sponsored Salafist organizations, which are directly linked to Albanian secessionism and its paramilitary structures. Additionally, Salafis in the country are in deep conflict with the official Islamic Community in Macedonia (*Islamska Verska Zaednica*) which contains the risk of an increase in intra-Muslim friction in the current crisis. The Muslim community in North Macedonia itself is composed of different ethnic groups (Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks, Roma, Torbeši, or Macedonian Muslims) that often follow different agendas. Moreover, an increase in visible activities by Salafi preachers and their organizations would lead to a counter-reaction by nationalist and anti-Islamic voices.

Concluding remarks

Based on the proposed comments, it can be argued with relative confidence that in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic the risk of future violent extremism in the Western Balkans mainly depends on several general factors, including the implementation of effective preventive measures by local policy-makers; in-depth monitoring of some of the trends described above; an emphasis on security measures as a top state priority; as well as the general response to the current crisis by the countries under discussion.

Although the present situation has already outlined some clear trends in the region (and on a wider scale), it is probably too early to make more specific predictions about the long-term effects of the crisis. The political, economic, and social consequences depend above all on the duration and scope of the pandemic and on the further measures against it. Given this inevitable conditionality, this analysis offers assumptions that are subject to further modifications and redefinitions due to the dynamic of current events.

Further reading:

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