

Preventing violent extremism in the Balkans

D5.3

Workshop: European Café Debate and presentation of initial findings from the Slavic speaking cases



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European Café Debate “External actors’ efforts in preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkans – lessons learned and a look ahead”

Date: Tuesday, 19 January 2021

Time: 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM

Zoom platform

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) and Atlantic Initiative (AI) from Sarajevo organized a virtual roundtable discussion to share the main conclusions presented in a policy brief summarizing EU and other stakeholder’s prevention strategies towards violent extremism in the Western Balkans. The policy brief outlines the dominant external approaches and narratives behind the prevention and countering of violent extremism.

Igor Bandović, BCSP Director, gave the opening remarks and reminded of the evolution and history of Islamic and far-right extremism in the Western Balkans. He emphasized that in the shadow of Islamic extremism, right-wing extremism started to grow, especially since 2017.

Marija Ignjatijević, BCSP Researcher and moderator, briefly presented the panellists: Edina Bećirević, Atlantic Initiative (Sarajevo, BiH), and Predrag Petrović, BCSP Program Director. Ignjatijević also gave an introduction to the main topics for discussion.

Both panellists acknowledged that violent extremism comes in all shapes and forms and cannot be reduced to Islamic extremism, nor should it be equalized with terrorism. They also agreed that there have been problems with the implementation of long-lasting soft policies and a lack of coordination among international stakeholders for implementing P/CVE measures.

Bećirević accentuated that there is no consensus about the past, which is reflecting in different views of the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which together with dysfunctional social, economic and political institutions, encouraged violent extremism. Nevertheless, a change has been noticed since the fall of the ISIS – a promotion of non-violent religious and ethnic extremism has become much more dominant. On that note, Petrović added that a similar situation is happening in Serbia – although violent Islamist extremism does not represent a great threat to Serbia, one might witness the rise of far-right groups in Serbia, but also in the region



and the EU. These groups are more political, more assertive, and they are becoming much more aggressive. Moreover, a very mild response of Serbian government towards the far-right groups is worrying. Some would argue that these groups are not really recognised as extremist groups in Serbia, while their connection with the authorities makes the implementation of measures even more difficult.

When it comes to the returnees, Bećirević spoke about the hitherto efforts to tackle the threat, as well as efforts regarding their rehabilitation and reintegration into the society. Returnees do not pose a significant challenge in Serbia, however, reciprocal radicalisation and *not-now-violent* extremists do, as Petrović highlighted. He illustrated thorough some examples how different forms of extremisms reinforce each other, which is even further fuelled by the unequal treatment by the government.

During the discussion, the participants discussed the EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda; the influence this research might make on EU policy; what recommendations should be presented; and the need for civil society to be involved in implementing counter-terrorism measures. Participants agreed that some of the repressive measures mentioned in the newly adopted EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda should be closely monitored in the context of Western Balkans countries, since they can and have already been used to silence critical voices and political opponents.

Participants also agreed that the right-wing extremist groups have become a great concern, especially since the beginning of the pandemic, which has provided fertile grounds for different conspiracy theories and extreme narratives.



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4	Constantin PREVELAKIS	Ambassade de France en Serbie
5	Alain Ancion	Embassy of the Netherlands in Sarajevo
6	Jadranka Pantelemonov Gajinov	OSCE Mission to Serbia
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18	Nermina Kuloglija	BIRN
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26	Milica Stojanovic	BIRN
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30	Predrag Petrovic	BCSP

