

Preventing violent extremism, the Balkans

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Abstract

Based on extensive desk research and fieldwork, the present paper aims to analyze the various drivers of violent extremism (VE) in the contemporary Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia) and the elaboration of a refined, nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the concept of ‘enabling environment’, i.e., the cluster or combination of various factors in a given society that renders the emergence of violent extremism likely. When approaching the varying impact of ideological radicalization and hate speech, we seek to make a distinction between contexts, where radicalization morphs into violence (“occurrence”), and contexts, where it does not (“non-occurrence”). Thus, the paper seeks to provide an analytical explanation of the central question of why some communities tend to be more resilient to violent extremist ideologies than others, despite identical “enabling” conditions. Given the geopolitical significance of the Western Balkan region, an approach that prioritizes non-occurrence of violence may respond more adequately to the strategic need for strengthening resilience to radicalization, extremism and terrorism there.

1. Introduction

The post-1989 history of the Western Balkan (WB) countries has been marked by prolonged political crises, economic instability, social grievances, and precarious security for their citizens – features typically associated with “precarious states”. Characteristic of these societies is their ethnically and religiously mixed profile, with Muslims constituting the majority in Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as well as in some regions of Serbia (Sandžak/Novi Pazar) and the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM), two countries where Orthodox Christians are the majority. Although this mixed profile does not make communal tensions inevitable in these societies, the combination of young unstable democracies, prolonged economic and political crises, state dysfunctionality, and political classes prone to manipulate ethnic, religious and minority issues to narrow-minded ends, creates a fertile soil for different forms of radicalization and the proliferation of various extremist ideologies. On the whole, violent extremism (VE) in the WB should be understood in two different, and in some instances intertwined aspects: as *religiously driven*, above all Islamist extremism, which came to a head following the military clashes and the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq; and as *ethnonationalist* (far-right or politically motivated) extremism, which saw its peak during the Yugoslav wars of succession in the 1990s and whose influence remains strong or dominant.

2. Key concepts

Several key concepts have been instrumental for the following analysis. Although there have been various attempts to offer universally applicable definitions of these terms, the present essay tries to highlight their manifestations within the specific Western Balkan contexts.

➤ **Violent extremism (VE)**

Recent studies have used terms like “radicalism/radicalization” and “violent extremism”



interchangeably. Although there has been growing awareness that radicalization does not necessarily lead to violence, it is necessary, scholars (?) argue, to distinguish between radicalization linked to VE and terrorism, and radicalization aimed at initiating societal changes through non-violent means.¹ Under PREVEX, VE in the WB is seen as encompassing two sets of phenomena: (1) religiously driven, above all Islamist extremism dubbed also in the region “radical Islam”, “Islamic terrorism”, Salafism, Wahhabism, or jihadism, with its various doctrines, structures and networks, which came to a head following the military clashes and the rise of the Islamic State (IS, or ISIS) that gripped territories of Syria and Iraq; (2) ethnonationalist (far-right political) extremism, which saw its peak during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s and whose influence remains strong, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and the RNM.

➤ **Enabling environments**

Fundamental for our analytical framework is the concept of “enabling environment” understood as a specific situation in which the combination of various (objective and subjective) factors renders the expression of VE likely.² In these environments, disadvantaged communities or individuals may become alienated from state and society and could be vulnerable to supporting, joining or implementing organized violence inspired by political or religious extremist ideology.³ Characteristic of the approach employed in this paper is the context-sensitive understanding of the term, instead of a universally applicable definition, since seemingly identical situations of “enabling environments” may exhibit significant differences in terms of demographic profile, cultural factors, specific challenges, etc.

➤ **Drivers of violent extremism**

Within the rich corpus of literature on the P/CVE subject, there is a clear terminological distinction between the so-called “push” and “pull” factors. “Push” factors refer to the structural conditions and general context within a society, which could provoke radicalization and violent extremism. These are defined as “objective factors” and conditions, beyond the abilities of an individual – a prolonged political crisis, economic instability, inter-ethnic divisions, social marginalization, etc. “Pull” factors, on the other hand, connote the individual motivations and processes that contribute to the transformation of specific views, attitudes and grievances into violent actions. This group of drivers, therefore, refers to various “subjective factors” – the presence of an attractive alternative (to the “non-prestigious” mainstream) narrative, the influence of charismatic leaders, financial incentives, variety of personal/identity features (need for belonging, self-expression, ideology, etc.).⁴

¹ Torrekens, C. & Vingne, D. (eds.) (2021). *Perspectives on radicalization and violent extremism in MENA, the Balkans, and the European Union*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 47.

² Rupesinghe, Natasja & Bøås, Morten. (2019). Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali, Addis Ababa: UNDP, available at <https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/handle/11250/2630393> [accessed 14 September 2021].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vergani, Matteo, Ekin Ilbahar, Greg Barton, Muhammad Iqbal, “The 3 Ps of radicalisation: push, pull and personal. A systematic scoping review of the scientific evidence about radicalisation into violent extremism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43 (10), 2018, pp. 854–893; Besa Arifi, “Drivers to Violent Extremism in South Eastern Europe – the North Macedonian Context,” *Journal of Penal Law and Criminology* 7 (1), 2019, pp. 27–51.



➤ **Occurrence/non-occurrence**

Of central importance for our research are the cases of non-occurrence of VE despite the presence of ‘enabling’ conditions, asking why some communities tend to be more resilient to violent ideologies and acts than others. For strengthening resilience and designing preventive measures, an understanding of why violence does *not* occur is often more relevant than understanding *why* it occurs. Strengthening resilience, according to the OSCE definition, connotes a variety of programs, policies, platforms, etc., aimed at enhancing the ability of a community to withstand, respond to and recover from a wide range of harmful and adverse events.⁵ Yet, when addressing local resilience to VE, one should also consider some ‘objective’ factors, which are not an imminent result of specific policies, such as the existence of deeply-rooted and sustainable local traditions of inter-communal tolerance and stability. In some cases, such local cultural factors can be much more effective in preventing extremist narratives than some top-down enforced programs.

➤ **Reciprocal radicalization**

Whereas the term “radicalization” points to a turn towards a simplification of politics, one that is steeped in clear, emotive dichotomies that urge action and that can also be used to indicate a turn towards violence, “reciprocal” suggests this is a two-way process, as different groups feed from each other to construct radicalized worldviews.⁶

➤ **Resilience**

Following its use in the area of disaster preparedness, humanitarian aid and development work, in recent years the concept of resilience has gained ground within the PVE community, although it remains ill-defined. Its conceptual origin is located in the material sciences – as the capacity of a material to absorb large amounts of energy quickly and release them again without breaking.⁷ When applied to political science, it could be described as the ability of political systems and (in)formal governance arrangements to adjust to changing political and social conditions while keeping their structures intact.⁸

3. Methodology and research design

3.1 Methodology

The methodology utilized a qualitative data collection method. The first stage of the research involved a detailed desk review of statistical data, data from P/CVE programs, dossiers on cases of VE, and studies to identify the sampling. The major part of the study is based on extensive fieldwork, carried out between July and November 2021 respectively in Albania, Bosnia and

⁵ *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism a Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe*. Vienna: OSCE, August 2018, p. 7.

⁶ Knott, K., Lee, L., Copeland, S. (2018), Briefings: Reciprocal Radicalisation. Full Report. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST).

⁷ Morina, E. et al (2019). Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism: Lessons learned from the Western Balkans. Research Report. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.

⁸ Carpenter, A. C. (2006). Resilience to Violent Conflict: Adaptive Strategies in Fragile States. White Paper, Commissioned by University of Maryland and United States Agency for International Development.



Herzegovina, Kosovo, RNM, and the region of Sandžak in Serbia. The identification of these areas was made based on a set of variables that indicated support towards religious radicalization or the presence of religiously motivated violent extremism. The selected municipalities indicated the highest support towards socio-economic, political and cultural drivers related to religious violent extremism.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used as the main data collection tools. In each case between 30 and 45 interviews were conducted with public administration officials, civil society workers, religious leaders, civil society representatives, journalists, political parties' representatives, influential community members, academics, (in some cases) individuals who could be considered extremists. The research teams also conducted many informal conversations with interlocutors, including random respondents. Among respondents, men were more represented than women.

3.2 Key questions

Several key questions have served to frame the analytical basis for the research to be surveyed below:

- What are the main local understandings of various concepts such as violent extremism (VE), radicalization, radicalism (with a variety of possible designations – religious, Islamist, nationalistic, political), etc.?
- Which are the local manifestations of the main sub-categories subsumed to the umbrella term VE – Islamist, far-right/ethnonationalist/political extremism? How are they experienced? How are they countered?
- What is the present state of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in different regions of the country?
- Which are the main factors (*drivers*) that lead to radicalization and violent extremism? Where do such factors have a deeper impact and why?
- Why do some local communities/regions of the country tend to show greater resilience to the processes of radicalization and proliferation of extremist narratives (thus, can be seen as examples of “non-occurrence”) than others, despite sharing seemingly identical “enabling environments”?
- Which are the conditions for the eventual radicalization and proliferation of violent extremism in the short and the long term?
- How to promote local resilience in a situation that can be described as an “enabling environment”?
- How do locals (state and non-state actors) evaluate the P/CVE programs implemented by international stakeholders?

3.3 Selection of target areas

Fieldwork in the individual countries focused on the following localities:

Albania: Tirana, Elbasan, Kamza, and Maliq. Since violent extremism manifested in Albania upon the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the municipalities with most cases of foreign



terrorist fighters (FTFs) were Tirana and Elbasan.⁹ While Maliq has not experienced the manifestation of VE in any form, Kamza has experienced a sporadic manifestation of VE in 2020. The latest assessment of the VE situation in Albania indicates that Kamza and Maliq are among the least vulnerable municipalities to VE.¹⁰

Bosnia and Herzegovina: The research provides a snapshot of the drivers and dynamics of religious, far-right and ethnonationalist extremism in several communities in BiH. Researchers conducted interviews with 50 individuals in: *Bihać*, which has Bosniak majority; *Stolac*, with Croat majority; and *Trebinje* and *Bileća*, featuring Serb majorities. In each case, the demographics, war histories, and current political and social conditions of these locations serve to contextualize interview data and analysis. Trebinje and Bileća are discussed together, as they share many similarities, but are also distinguished by several key differences related to the ways each community interacts with and responds to extremist influences.

Kosovo: villages and neighborhoods in the municipalities of Gjilan, Skenderaj, and Mitrovica. The research sample was selected based on previous data that have shown that citizens from particular regions of Kosovo have higher tendencies to join radical as well as nationalistic groups/communities. Two neighboring villages from the Municipality of Gjilan were selected – *Capar* and *Bukovik* – due to previous recruitment of members who were promoted to high hierarchical positions of Albanian groups of ISIS. Part of the research was the village of *Polac* in the Municipality of Skenderaj, an isolated zone from which at least four people fled the country to join extremist and terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. The research also includes a sample of *Shipol neighborhood* of the Municipality of Mitrovica. Citizens from the municipality who participated in March 2004 riots as well as family members of the persons who fled the country to fight in Syria and Iraq were interviewed, too.

Republic of North Macedonia: Skopje, Struga, Debar and the nearby *St. George Orthodox Monastery* in Rajčica, the *St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery* in the Mavrovo and Rostuša Municipality, *Kičevo*, *Gostivar*, *Tetovo* and the nearby village of *Tearce*, and *Kumanovo*. These localities are situated in the northern and north-western parts of the country, which are characterized as ethnically and religiously mixed areas, mostly populated by Orthodox Christian Macedonians and Sunni Muslim Albanians in addition to some smaller communities of Macedonian-speaking Sunni Muslims (Torbeši), Bektashi Albanians, Roma, etc.¹¹ Previous research has shown that most of the FTFs from RNM originally come from these regions. The outskirts of Tetovo, Skopje and Kumanovo were also conflict zones during the 2001 insurgency in Macedonia, a conflict that greatly traumatized the relations between ethnic

⁹ CTC Sentinel, *Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*, April 2015, Vol 8. Issue 4, available at <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CTCSentinel-Vol8Issue49.pdf> [accessed 14 September 2021]. Jamestown Foundation, *Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters and the Islamic State*, 15 May 2015, Terrorism Monitor Volume: 13 Issue: 10, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/555d92834.html> [accessed 14 September 2021].

¹⁰ Institute for Democracy and Mediation, *The status of violent extremism in Albania: A national assessment of drivers, forms and threats*, March 2021, available at <https://idmalbania.org/the-status-of-violent-extremism-in-albania-2021/> [accessed 14 September 2021].

¹¹ According to the latest official national census (2002), ethnic Macedonians (who are predominantly Orthodox Christians) constitute 64.2% of the population, while Albanians (mostly Sunni Muslims) represent 25.2%.



Macedonians and Albanians. Other municipalities, such as Debar and Kičevo, were chosen as cases of non-occurrence of VE based on previous research and consultations with security studies experts from RNM.

In Serbia, Islamist radicalization in general is primarily tied to the south-western *region of Sandžak* with a predominantly Muslim population. Experts had gloomy projections for Sandžak and observed it as an extremists’ hotbed. However, this challenge has not materialized. Hence, Sandžak, and Novi Pazar, as a most salient example, are examined here as an enabling environment that has proven to have a significant level of resilience to extremism. Ethnonationalism and far-right extremism are considered as much as they serve as possible drivers of Islamist radicalization.

The findings of the fieldwork address several key points, which will be analyzed in detail in what follows: (1) local manifestations of ‘*enabling environments*’ and cases of ‘*occurrence*’ of VE; (2) factors (‘*drivers*’) stimulating radicalization and VE; (3) situational differences concerning ‘*occurrence*’ and ‘*non-occurrence*’ of VE; (4) factors influencing and/or shaping ‘*local resilience*’ to radicalization and extremism.

3.4 Ethical issues

Before conducting the interviews, the project teams obtained (written or verbal) permissions from informants to publish parts of their interview discussions. Respondents were explained in detail how their privacy will be protected during and after the study. With their explicit consent, the discussions were recorded and later transcribed; however, notes were taken for participants not willing to be recorded. As part of the ethics of this paper, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their role in it and were told the nature of their cooperation, including the issuing of a signed consent form and verbal affirmation to participate in the study.

4. The Western Balkan countries as enabling environments

The recent focus on Islamist extremism in the WB came with the spread of Salafism, Salafi ideology and groups throughout a region dominated by an ethno-religious form of nationalism, followed by the acknowledgment that almost 1000 citizens of the Western Balkans countries joined militant jihadi groups in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria.¹² In the WB,

¹² Vlado Azinović, *Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, (London: British Council, 2018), 3-4, https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf. The most widely accepted classification divides Salafis into three categories: “purists”, “politicos” and “jihadis”, shaped as a result of what Wiktorowicz calls their different contextual readings of a shared creed. Since all Salafis are “purists” in terms of seeking to purify Islam, scholars have tended to prefer the term “quietists”. Jihadis, for their part, are increasingly known as Jihadi-Salafis. Like Muslims from various other branches of Islam, all Salafis consider *jihad* legitimate as a basic religious duty. Jihadi-Salafis, however, distinguish themselves by privileging and strongly emphasizing the notion that religiously motivated war should not just be waged against invading or aggressive “infidel” enemies but should also be used in a revolutionary way against the “apostate” rulers in their own midst. Quietist, or “apolitical” Salafis are fundamentalists in many of their beliefs and practices, but they are not Islamists like the “politicos” or the Jihadi-Salafis. See Simeon Evstatiev, “[Salafism as a Contested Concept](#)”, in *Knowledge, Authority and Change in Islamic Societies: Studies in Honor of Dale F. Eickelman*, edited by Allen James Fromherz and Nadav Samin (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 182–3; Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29 (2006): 208; Joas Wagmakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.



where national and religious identities are deeply intertwined, radical ethnonationalism and Islamist extremism can feed on each other or evolve as separate, opposing forms of ideological and social radicalization depending on the specific context. The phenomenon of FTFs as a form of supra- and transnational Islamist extremism, appears as nurtured and conditioned – psychologically and socially – by often politically exploited ethno-religious grievances.¹³

Muslims in the Balkans have traditionally practiced Hanafi interpretation of Islam.¹⁴ After the Yugoslav war of succession in the 1990s, Islamist relief organizations and NGOs, coming from or supported by the Gulf states, most prominently Saudi Arabia, started spreading and setting up their branch offices across the region. They funded mosques and educational facilities disseminating the conservative, Salafi interpretation of Islam and granted scholarships for Muslims to study in the Middle East.¹⁵ Over the years, a number of para-jamaats¹⁶, or parallel “underground” mosque communities have been established in all these countries, attracting disillusioned youth in some areas. Out of the reach of official Islamic institutions recognized by the states, the spaces around the para-jamaats became meeting points for radical indoctrination and recruitment of potential foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). Notably, however, a majority of citizens in these countries, though they have religious affiliations, view themselves as part of secular societies.

The first occurrences of the FTF phenomenon were also the result of the Yugoslav war. FTFs from Middle Eastern countries supported the Muslims fighters in the region, particularly in BiH and Kosovo.¹⁷ The emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) once again spun the wheel of extremism in the region as ca. 1000 citizens rushed to battlefields in Syria. The return of some of them to their homelands was generally seen as posing a direct threat to national security, whereby by 2015 criminalization of foreign fighting was introduced in all these countries.¹⁸ The threat of violent Islamist extremism has been significantly reduced in the

¹³ “When asked about the reasons and goals for their departure, most [returnees FTFs to North Macedonia] answered that they did so in order to help Muslims in Syria, who were ‘tortured and suffered,’ ‘‘live in a country where faith is practiced’ and in order to ‘stop the persecution of Muslims’.” (Aleksandar Vanchoski, Natalija Shikova, Afrodita Musliu, *Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF): Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia*, Skopje: NEXUS Civil Concept, 2020, 34.

¹⁴ The Hanafis, or the Hanafi-Maturidis, follow the Hanafi legal school (*madhhab*) in combination with Maturidi theology (*kalam*). From Ottoman times, this is the prevalent religious orientation among the Sunni Muslims in the Balkans.

¹⁵ Jelena Bešlin and Marija Ignjatijević, “Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine”, European Institute for Security Studies, June 2017, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2020%20Balkan%20foreign%20fighters.pdf>.

¹⁶ The term *jamaat* (from Arabic *jama‘a* – assembly) denotes either the entire community of believers (*jama‘at al-mu‘minin*), or a certain community, local assembly shaped around a religious leaders or a mosque. *Para-jammaats* are groups of Salafi Muslims; they proliferated in BiH and the broader WB region following the Bosnian war (1992–1995), initially as a result of the interactions between the local Muslim population and the Salafi-Wahhabis, who came to the region to support Bosnian Muslims or fight on their side. In the Salafi sense, the people constituting the *jama‘a* are those Muslims, whose faith is guaranteed and who are in perfect line of continuity with the Ancients, the ‘Pious Ancesters’ (*salaf*).

¹⁷ Interview with an Anti-Terrorism Unit official in Kosovo.

¹⁸ Albert Shtuni, “Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications,” CTC Sentinel 12 (7), 2019, pp. 18–24; Vlado Azinović and Edina Bećirević, “A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans”, *Regional Cooperation*



last few years, primarily due to the weakening of pull factors. Developments in battlefields in the Middle East, the fall of the Islamic State and fading of its appeal has stopped the outflow of foreign fighters globally, but also in the region.

Whereas Saudi Arabia’s financially well-endowed indoctrination, typically under the banner of humanitarian aid, was a major drive propelling religious radicalization during and shortly after the Yugoslav wars of succession, during the last decades other foreign states are playing an increasingly destabilizing role in the WB. Russian support for far-right political forces and extremist groups in the region over the past fifteen years has been well documented, and encompasses comprehensive efforts in North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and BiH.¹⁹ While posing as a long-standing “trusted friend” of the Balkan Muslims, in recent times Turkey has been unabashedly exploiting or even fueling ethnic divisions in BiH, Kosovo and RNM, while China, who has only recently turned its attention to the region, often teams with Moscow in attempts at disrupting the fragile ethnic peace in these countries.

Enabling environments are usually associated with economic depression, rising unemployment, and low and declining levels of education. Evidence from the Western Balkans indicates, however, that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, the opposite appears to be true in the studied communities of Albania, for example, where the municipalities with better economies, higher population and better education (Tirana and Elbasan) are the ones which have been more conducive to VE. Also, the level of unemployment does not seem to affect the vulnerability, as Kamza with the highest unemployment rate is still less vulnerable to VE. On the contrary, the case studies with a larger Muslim population have been more resilient.

	Population	Muslims (% of population)	15-64 years old (% of population)	12+ years of education (% of population)	Unemployment (% of population)
<i>Tirana</i>	557,422	55.7	70.9	64.9	24.3
<i>Elbasan</i>	202,628	61.6	69.3	40.7	32.1
<i>Kamza</i>	124,612	73.5	66.1	33.5	57
<i>Maliq</i>	41,757	70.1	67.4	23.6	18.4

Source: Institute of Statistics, 2011 census

In other cases, such as Kosovo, as we will see further down, one witnesses higher correlation between the level of unemployment and education, on one hand, and penchant for VE, on the other.

The radicalization process, moreover, cannot be explained only by assessing the community-level factors as the radicalization process always takes place at the intersection of

Council, November 30, 2017, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/54/a-waiting-game-assessing-and-responding-to-the-threat-from-returning-foreign-fighters-in-the-western-balkans>

¹⁹ For example, see: Stronski and Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans”; Dorđević, “Just how much influence does Russia have in Bosnia and Herzegovina?”; and Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans,” *New Atlanticist* (blog), The Atlantic Council, 20 December 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-strategic-interests-and-tools-of-influence-in-the-western-balkans/> (accessed 12 November 2021).



an enabling environment and a personal trajectory.²⁰ Thus, only a few individuals who live in enabling environments turn to VE, because concrete personal experiences, kinship and friendship, group dynamics and socialization into the use of violence are needed to trigger the actual process.²¹ There is an interplay of various actors and factors that influence particular people at a specific time. Moreover, for the most part, people are subject to many factors such as the environment and society they belong to and even the international context of time and place imposed on them.²² Our research confirms that VE surfaces at the interplay of community factors, group dynamics, and individual drivers.

4.1 Albania

Albania ranks as the country with the third-highest number of FTFs of the general population in the Western Balkan (WB) countries, and as the lowest exporter of FTFs based on recruitment among the Muslim population.²³ The total number of Albanian citizens who joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq during 2011-14 is estimated at 144 citizens, of which 45 returned to Albania, 28 are believed to have died in the conflict zone,²⁴ and 24 (18 children and six women) have been repatriated by the Albanian state in 2020 and 2021.²⁵ The repatriation process of the remaining 56 people is ongoing. Although there is no deadline for the repatriation of all Albanian citizens remaining in these areas, the Government of Albania has taken a political decision to return the women and children.²⁶

Albania has never experienced a terrorist attack with religious motives. Nevertheless, there have been several grave incidents. The main attempt took place in 2016 when the ASP in coordination with their regional counterparts thwarted a potential terrorist attack on a football match between Albania and Israel. The police claimed that a cell of Muslim extremists from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia was planning the attack. The cell was hit a week before

²⁰ European Commission, Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism A concise Report prepared by the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, 15 May 2008, available at https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20080500_cscp_report_vries.pdf [accessed 17 September 2021].

²¹ Ibid.

²² Al Nuaimi, A. R. (2021) National State: Imagining a World without Narrow Nation States. Available at <https://www.amazon.com/National-State-Imagining-Without-Narrow-ebook/dp/B08W9MDPDV>. [accessed 17 September 2021].

²³ The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans: Regional Needs Assessment, available at <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf>. pp. 6.

²⁴ European Commission, Albania 2020 Report: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/albania_report_2020.pdf.

²⁵ For the first repatriation phase see: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Lebanon operation for repatriating four children and a woman from al-Howl camp: Minister Lleshaj “The second phase is the repatriation of the other group”, 26 October 2020, available at <https://mb.gov.al/2020/10/26/libani-operacioni-i-kthimit-ne-atdhe-te-kater-femijeve-shqiptare-nga-kampi-al-hawl-ministri-lleshaj-faza-e-dyte-eshte-riatdhesimi-i-grupit-tjeter/> [accessed 17 September 2021]. For the second repatriation phase see: Euronews Albania, 2021. “Five women and 14 children are repatriated from the Syrian camps, Rama: Dangerous operation”, available at <https://euronews.al/al/vendi/aktualitet/2021/08/01/pese-gra-dhe-14-femije-riatdhesohen-nga-kampi-al-hol-ne-siri-rama-operacioni-i-rrezikshem/> [accessed 16 September 2021].

²⁶ Decision of the Council of Ministers 826/2020. “On the provision of reception and accommodation services for unaccompanied children returning from Syria and Iraq.”



the match, and four people were arrested in Albania, seven in Kosovo, and some others in North Macedonia.²⁷ However, one year after their arrest, in November 2017, their security measure was changed to house arrest after the prosecution did not send any evidence to the First Instance Court for Serious Crimes, causing the legal deadlines for detention to end, thus, forcing the court to impose “house arrest” on all four.²⁸ Finally, in 2019, the Special Anti-Corruption Court has dismissed the case against the four accused citizens, thus leading to the accused being acquitted after more than three years.²⁹ It is not clear whether these individuals were really part of a terrorist cell, and whether they had planned an attack. Another event took place in one of the main mosques of Tirana. In April 2021, a person entered the mosque and stabbed five Muslim believers who were inside the mosque, thus marking the first violent incident that takes place within the premises of a religious site in Albania.³⁰ However, the local police and also the imam of the mosque ruled out terrorism as a motive,³¹ given that the perpetrator was suffering from mental health problems.

Although Albania has averted the acute threat of VE, the phenomenon remains present, especially in the online domain. The European Commission’s 2019 report noted a rise of the online radicalization content in the Albanian language.³² Similarly, the Public Report 2020 by SIS notes, *the Albanian language occupies an important place in cyberspace, in terms of propaganda materials ... certain individuals and groups continue to attend lectures with extremist content, distribute such literature to smaller groups and their social and friendly connections, within the country and in the region.*³³ A recently published report in Albania³⁴ not only confirmed the presence of VE content in Albania, but it went further by suggesting that ISIS-inspired VE groups in Albania have built their own “system of meaning.”³⁵ The same

²⁷ Deutsche Welle, *Anti-terror operation before the Albania-Israel match*, 12 November 2016, available at [accessed 15 September 2021]. <https://www.dw.com/sq/goditje-antiterror-para-ndeshjes-shqip%C3%ABri-izrael/a-36371735> [accessed 15 September 2021].

²⁸ Shqiptarja.com, *Albania-Israel, house arrest for two citizens that were accused of terrorist attack*, 7 November 2017, available at <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/shqiperi-izrael-arrest-shtepie-2-te-br-akuzuarve-per-sulm-terrorist-br> [accessed 15 September 2021].

²⁹ Panorama, *Planned an explosive attack at Loro Boriçi”? After three years of investigation, the Serious Crimes finds the accused citizens as innocent*, 19 December 2019, available at <http://www.panorama.com.al/fotoemri-planifikuan-sulm-me-eksploziv-ne-loro-borici-pas-3-vitesh-hetime-krimet-e-renda-zbulojne-se-te-akuzuarit-ishin-te-pafajshem/> [accessed 15 September 2021].

³⁰ A2CNN, *Knife attack on the mosque, 5 people were injured – the author had mental health problems*, 21 April 2021, <https://a2news.com/2021/04/19/sulm-me-thike-ne-xhami-plagosen-5-persona-autori-me-probleme-te-shendetit-mendor/> [accessed 15 September 2021].

³¹ Ibid.

³² European Commission (2019), Commission Staff Working Document

³³ State Intelligence Service, Public Report 2020, available at <https://www.shish.gov.al/files/Public%20Report%202020.pdf> [accessed 17 September 2021].

³⁴ Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, *Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach* (2021), available at <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Exploration-of-P-CVE-strategic-communication.pdf>. [accessed 14 September 2021].

³⁵ The “system of meaning” highlights the importance of a crisis of identity for an in-group, a crisis that is caused by an identified out-group and can only be solved by the in-group. The in-group is portrayed as morally superior, and a zero-sum game is propagated by three important types of violent extremist narratives: value, dichotomy, and crisis-reinforcing. For more see Haroro J. Ingram, “Deciphering Siren Call of Militant Islamic Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioral Change” International Center for Counter-Terrorism (2016).



report explains that this system of meaning calls for a struggle against the West, democracy, secularism, and the official religious communities. These groups portray themselves as the only true Muslims who are following the right path and one cannot be a true believer without supporting and participating in their cause. The solutions proposed by them include the violence against “enemies”, support towards violent extremists, establishing the sharia; and fighting for their cause.³⁶ Despite the non-occurrence of terror acts in Albania, the 2020 SIS report notes that *the objectives or plans to undertake terror acts in the country have been thwarted early on by the security authorities.*³⁷ It thus suggests that besides the VE presence online, there have also been attempts to plan terrorist acts in the country. The report concludes that *attacks by lone actors and smaller groups with no direct coordination with the terrorist organizations remain potentially possible.*³⁸

4.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Up to 190 men, 70 women, and 100 children with Bosnian citizenship travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016 (and an additional 120 children were born there) joining ISIS. It is noteworthy that 30% or more of this contingent were part of the Bosnian diaspora – typically, from German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) with long histories of immigration from the former Yugoslavia, dating back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today, part of the younger generation in this diaspora have responded to the global call of the transnational Jihadi movement going beyond ethnic lines with a subtle connection with local grievances. Some 140 Bosnian citizens are known to have been killed in Syria and Iraq or to have died of natural causes there (including 40 children), and a number of individuals remain unaccounted for; but from 2012 to 2019, 70 individuals are believed to have returned to BiH.³⁹ In most cases, male returnees were arrested upon return, and more than 30 were tried and sentenced for their involvement in foreign fighting and/or terrorism, with sentences averaging two years of imprisonment. A group of 11 women also returned to BiH and, promisingly, agreed to participate in rehabilitation programming.

In BiH today, however, there *is* also a risk of violent conflict as a result of the openly secessionist ambitions of Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, who has begun to create “Serb-only” parallel institutions in the Serb-dominated entity of *Republika Srpska* (RS), while threatening to de-Serbianize state level institutions – including the police and the military – in a series of actions reminiscent of those taken by Bosnian Serb leaders in the 1990s. As in the 1990s, Moscow is backing Serb ethno-nationalists in BiH through various political means, but it is also supporting the development of more extremist ethno-nationalist elements, including

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ State Intelligence Service, Public Report 2020, available at <https://www.shish.gov.al/files/Public%20Report%202020.pdf>. [accessed 15 September 2021].

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ This includes 20 children, some of whom have since been transferred to the Western diaspora communities from which they originated. For more details on statistics and recent issues related to the return of foreign fighters, see: GCERF, “Rehabilitation and Reintegration on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans: Regional Needs Assessment, 2020. (Available at: <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf>)



through military style training camps.⁴⁰ Russia has nurtured an alliance between Dodik and Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Čović as well, hoping to strengthen Croat calls for a “Croat entity” within BiH in the model of the “Serb entity”. A key difference between Dodik and Čović is that Dodik is not only the de facto leader of Bosnian Serbs, but is also a member of the tripartite Bosnian Presidency. In BiH, interviewees of all ethno-national identities have pointed to political radicalization as the enabling factor for any future violent extremist incidents in BiH.

For almost three decades running, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has been the subject of research and analysis that centers the topic of far-right extremism – from radical ethno-nationalism to religious fundamentalism.⁴¹ There is no doubt that the most harmful form of far-right extremism in BiH in that time has been the ethno-nationalism that inspired aspirations for a Greater Serbia and drove the genocidal operations of Bosnian Serb and Serbian political and military leaders in the 1990s, and which continues to shape the Bosnian political landscape today. Similar and parallel aspirations for a Greater Croatia among ethno-nationalist Bosnian Croat and Croatian leaders led to their commission of crimes against humanity in the 1990s, and in recent years, have also been increasingly re-activated for the political purposes of far right actors.

4.3 Kosovo

In Kosovo, religious extremism stands out in an enabling environment context that also involves violence along ethnic and political lines. Together with BiH and North Macedonia, Kosovo is the country with the highest number of foreign fighters and jihadi mobilization in Europe.⁴² As

⁴⁰ See: Semir Mujkić, “How Russian Fighters Train Serb Teens at ‘Military-Patriotic’ Camps,” *Detektor*, 19 July 2019, <https://detektor.ba/2019/07/19/how-russian-fighters-train-serb-teens-at-military-patriotic-camps/?lang=en>; Sergey Sukhankin, “Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and ‘Volunteers’: Non-Russians in Russia’s Wars,” *War by Other Means* (blog), The Jamestown Foundation, 9 October 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/foreign-mercenaries-irregulars-and-volunteers-non-russians-in-russias-wars/>; and Sead Turcalo, “Bosnia Must Counter Russia’s Cultivation of Far-Right Extremists,” *Balkan Insight*, 26 August 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/26/bosnia-must-counter-russias-cultivation-of-far-right-extremists/> (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁴¹ The literature is extensive, as these topics have been explored by analysts and scholars both inside and outside of BiH, and from the perspective of almost every academic discipline. Some authors have focused exclusively on the question of extremism per se, while many have discussed it in the context of the war (an extensive topic in itself), the postwar transition, transitional justice mechanisms, reconciliation and trust building, democratic consolidation, domestic and regional politics and policy, and in more recent years, gender and women’s studies. Just a sampling of titles includes: Robert J. Donia, *Bosnia and Hercegovina: A Tradition Betrayed* (Columbia University Press, 1995); Vesna Pestic, “Serbian Nationalism and the Origins of the Yugoslav Crisis,” *Peaceworks*, No. 8, United States Institute of Peace, April 1996; Bodo Weber, “Rethinking Modern Ethnic Nationalism: Paramilitary Groups, Collective Violence and the Ethnicisation of the Balkan societies in the 1990s,” *L’Europe en Formation* 3, no. 357 (2010): 75–90; Valery Perry, “Countering the Cultivation of Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case for Comprehensive Education Reform,” DPC Policy Note, New Series #10, Democratization Policy Council, September 2015; Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashamova, eds., *Beyond Mosque, Church, and State: Alternative Narratives of Nation in the Balkans* (Central European University Press, 2016); Adis Maksić, *Ethnic Mobilization, Violence, and the Politics of Affect: The Serb Democratic Party and the Bosnian War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Marie E. Berry, *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Jessie Barton-Hronešová and Sanela Hodžić, “Portrayals of Women on Ethno-Nationalist and Radical Islamic Websites in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 27, no. 2 (2021): 176–192.

⁴² Azinović, V. (2018). Regional Report: Understanding violent extremism in the Western Balkans. In British Council-Extremism Research Forum.



in Bosnia, the FTF phenomenon in Kosovo can be traced back to the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, when jihadi foreign fighters from Middle Eastern countries supported the Muslims fighters in the region and a number of Islamic relief organizations and NGOs set up their branch offices in Kosovo.⁴³ The jihadi groups were not welcomed by the political and military structures of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which followed national ideologies seeking to avoid the influence of religion. The generations that were educated in a nationalist spirit was impenetrable by radical Islamic movements. However, the educational system, ruined by the war of 1998-99, opened the door to infiltration of radical Islamic ideology.

The process of religious revival in Kosovo was accelerated after the 1998-99 war; societal disorientation, high poverty, a weak economy and political vacuum made Kosovo fertile ground for the resurgence of religion.⁴⁴ As in BiH and the Sandžak, it was engineered by institutions and groups financed by Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East, whose teachings contravene the Hanafi's legal school that had existed for centuries in Kosovo and is known for its tolerance and entwinement with national identity, tradition and the culture of the population. The extremists spread their influence through social and humanitarian engagement, focusing their efforts mainly on rural areas and impoverished Muslim communities.⁴⁵ According to some estimates, faith-based aid agencies from Middle East and Gulf countries have invested around \$800 million in Kosovo, mainly in rural areas.⁴⁶

Approximately 356 Kosovars have travelled to Syria and Iraq (among them 256 male adults, 51 females, and 49 children; also, it is estimated that around 80 children have been born in these areas of conflict, from at least one Kosovar parent), making it the country with the highest per capita share of FTFs in Syria.⁴⁷ Most of these fighters are males between the age of 21 and 25, while more than a third of the overall FTF contingent originate from five municipalities – Hani i Elezit, Kaçanik, Mitrovice, Gjilan, and Viti – which account for only 14 percent of the country's population.⁴⁸ A finding that remains to be explained, is that 30 percent of the people who went to Syria and Iraq were from the diaspora, yet the process of their radicalization has not been analyzed thus far.

After 2014, an estimated number of 135 Kosovars found their way back to the country⁴⁹. Subsequently, Kosovo stepped up its activities to counter violent extremism with arrests and investigations of persons suspected of being involved in recruitment activities for terrorist

⁴³ Interview with Anti-Terrorism Unit official. November 2021.

⁴⁴ Demjaha, A., and Peci, L. (2016). What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period. Policy Paper, (1/16). Available at: http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What_happened_to_Kosovo_Albanians_740443.pdf

⁴⁵ Interview with BIK representative, Mulla Osmani, 2 November 2021

⁴⁶ Azinović, V. (2018). Regional Report: Understanding violent extremism in the Western Balkans. In British Council-Extremism Research Forum.

⁴⁷ GazetaExpress.com, 97 Kosovars are still in Syria, why Kosovo can't get them to come back?, 21/01/2020, Available at: <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/97-kosovare-kane-mbetur-ne-siri-pse-kosova-spo-mundet-ti-kthejta/>

⁴⁸ Demjaha, A., & Peci, L. (2016). What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period. Policy Paper, (1/16).

⁴⁹ Perspective of Law and Public Administration, 2020. The Latent Dangers of Islamist Extremism in Western Balkans.

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organizations such as ISIS and the Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front. Other individuals were arrested on suspicions of planning terrorist acts or as being part of terrorist organizations. Several terrorist attacks were planned and attempted after 2014, both inside Kosovo and abroad, but were eventually prevented by police and intelligence agencies.⁵⁰ A second wave of repatriations followed in April 2019, when Kosovo brought home from Syria another 110 of its citizens, including 74 children, 32 women and four men. The total number of adult returnees has reportedly reached about 250, with 98 killed in Syria and dozens of others remaining unaccounted for. Most recently, in July 2021, another 11 returnees were repatriated from Syria and Iraq, including a woman and a child.⁵¹ Kosovo has been praised for its ability to de-radicalize and re-integrate returnees.⁵² But if for the time being the immediate threat from FTFs and returnees is eliminated, there is still a latent threat from Islamist fundamentalism.⁵³ Two forms of future threats have been highlighted: that from imprisoned foreign fighters and religious preachers serving sentences on terrorism charges, and the potential threat from future returnees from Syria and Iraq.⁵⁴

Shaping the enabling environment in Kosovo is yet another type of extremism, the ethnonational, in its two forms – (predominantly Muslim) Albanian and (predominantly Orthodox) Serbian. While it began accumulating as early as the 1980s, the tension between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs culminated during the war of 1998-99, fueling a large number of crimes. As much as 13,553 Kosovo citizens were killed or went missing during this war. The vast majority of victims and those missing -10,812 - were of Albanian nationality, followed by 2,197 Serbs and 526 Roma, Bosniaks, Montenegrins and other nationalities.⁵⁵ Over 800, 000 Albanians and approx. 150,000 Serbs were forcibly evicted from their homes and properties after the war.⁵⁶ These war crimes remain uninvestigated and justice has not been served for the

⁵⁰ Kallxo.com. *Slobodan Gavric convicted*. 29 June 2016. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/shkurt/denohet-slobodan-gavriq/>; Kallxo.com. *They were planning terrorist attacks against KFOR, clubs in Gracanica and the Orthodox Church, they were convicted with 25 years imprisonment*. 4 September 2021. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/ligji/planifikonin-sulme-terroriste-ndaj-kfor-it-diskotekave-ne-gracanice-dhe-kishes-ortodokse-denohen-me-25-vite-burgim/>

⁵¹ Kallxo.com. *Kosovo returns 11 citizens from conflict zones in Syria*. 17 July 2021. <https://kallxo.com/lajm/kosova-kthen-11-shtetas-nga-zonat-e-konfliktit-ne-siri/>

⁵² infomigrants.net. 'Islamic State' returnees in Kosovo guided back into society. 03.10.2019. Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/19936/islamic-state-returnees-in-kosovo-guided-back-into-society>

⁵³ Kursani, S. (2018b). Reintegration of returnees: the challenge of state and community response in Kosovo. British Council.

⁵⁴ Kursani, S. (2018b). Reintegration of returnees: the challenge of state and community response in Kosovo. British Council.

⁵⁵ Deutsche Welle. *Crime and Punishment: Fractography of the war in Kosovo*. 26 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/sq/krimi-dhe-d%C3%ABnimi-faktografia-e-luft%C3%ABs-s%C3%AB-kosov%C3%ABs/a-56062226>; Humanitarian Law Center. *31,600 documents undoubtedly confirm death or disappearance of 13,535 individuals during war in Kosovo*. Available at: <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=28185&lang=zh>

⁵⁶ Deutsche Welle. *Crime and Punishment: Fractography of the war in Kosovo*. 26 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/sq/krimi-dhe-d%C3%ABnimi-faktografia-e-luft%C3%ABs-s%C3%AB-kosov%C3%ABs/a-56062226>; Balkan Insight. *Displaced Kosovo Serbs Join Parliamentary Race*. 7 March 2016. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/03/07/serb%C3%ABt-e-zhvendosur-t%C3%AB-kosov%C3%ABs-i-bashkohen-gar%C3%ABs-parlamentare-03-04-2016/?lang=sqhttps://www.evropaelire.org/a/pronat-e-uzurpuara-serbet-kosova/29255288.html>



victims, and this constitutes one of the main drivers of revengeful sentiments in both communities.⁵⁷ Until now, the conflict has failed to heal and the two nations have not reconciled.

Kosovo declared independence in 2008 and, according to the Ahtisaari plan, the Serbs govern 10 municipalities (out of 38) and certain government ministries. Kosovo's *Strategy for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020* puts the threat of "national radical extremist groups of Albanian and Serbian origin" at par with that posed by Islamic extremism.⁵⁸ The four municipalities in the northern part of the country bordering Serbia (Leposavic, Zubin Potok, North Mitrovica and Zvecan) lack effective control by the central government and extremist and organized crime groups continue to obstruct basic rule of law in this area. Attempts to establish some control and counter organized crime met with violent protests instigated by radical nationalist elements, purportedly supported by Russian citizens.⁵⁹ The city of Mitrovica, divided since 1999 between an Albanian south and a Serbian north, and especially the Ibar bridge connecting the two areas, has become a focal point of numerous protests since 1999.⁶⁰ The one of March 2004 was the most massive and violent, as it escalated into inter-ethnic clashes in most of Kosovo's cities. An Italian EULEX prosecutor describes the event as being organized by a group led by a KLA leader, who aimed to gain political advantage from the open conflict.⁶¹ Following the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, acts of violence by local Serbs against government officials trying to establish customs control on, and prevent smuggling across, the border with Serbia have occurred, occasionally with Russian involvement, in 2008, 2011, 2017, 2019, and 2021.⁶²

Behind such acts lurk the bigger stakes on both sides: general recognition of Kosovo's independence and closer links with ethnic Albanians in Albania, Serbia, and Macedonia, on the Albanian side, and secession of northern Kosovo and unification with Serbia, on the Serbian side. The Kosovo government has underlined the risk of violent extremism in northern Kosovo

⁵⁷Kosovo Coalition for Reconciliation. *War Crimes Trials: Slow Progress*. 2020. Available at: <https://www.hlc-kosovo.org/storage/app/media/Gjykimet%20per%20krimet%20e%20luftes%20Perparim%20i%20Ngadalte/Kosovo%20report%202020%20ALB%20SRB%20ENG%20web.pdf>

⁵⁸ Republic of Kosovo, *Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015–2020*, Pristina, September 2015, p.5.

⁵⁹Radio Free Europe. *North: Police Actions Against Smuggling*. 13 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/veri-aksion-kunder-kontrabandes-/31506642.html>; Facebook Page of Albin Kurti, Prime Minister of Kosovo. Posted on 25 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/page/220997878400104/search/?q=Vladislav%20Dajkovi%C3%A7>

⁶⁰ The interviewed Nexhmedin Spahiu, a university professor from Mitrovica, and Nerimane Ferizin, a civil society activist in Mitrovica, hold that the impossibility for Albanians to return to their homes in the northern part of the city is the main reason for the recurrent protests.

⁶¹Kallxo.com. Indicted against suspects for March turmoil's filed. 21 July 2017. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/shkurt/dorezohet-aktakuza-per-te-pandehurit-e-trazirave-te-marsit/>

⁶² Radio Free Europe. Border point in Jarinje burnt. 27 July 2011. Available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/24278949.html>; Bota Sot. *Last farewell given to murdered police officer, Enver Zymberi*. 26 July 2011. Available at: <https://www.botasot.info/aktuale-lajme/129722/iu-dha-lamtumira-e-fundit-policit-enver-zymberi/>; Zeri.com. *Russian train makes its way to Kosovo*. 14 January 2017. Available at: <https://zeri.info/aktuale/125976/treni-rus-niset-per-ne-kosove/>; Kallxo.com. *Kosovo Police operation in the North. One police officer wounded with firearms*. 28 May 2019. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/shkurt/aksioni-i-policise-ne-veri-nje-polic-i-plagosur-me-arme-zjarri-foto/>



among ethnic Serb Kosovars, stating that these Serbian extremist groups might engage in “various acts of violence against Kosovar citizens of Albanian ethnicity, institutions as well as local and international presence in [the north] of the country”.⁶³ A recent study published by the Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS) suggests that it is in fact the politically motivated threats that had dominated the share of all violent extremist threats in Kosovo during the past decade. The report maintains that close to 80 percent of violent extremist threats that were executed were political in nature, while close to 70 per cent of unexecuted threats were religious in nature.⁶⁴ Approximately a dozen protests that have been organized in Kosovo in the past several years have turned violent. Even so, domestic right-wing extremism is still seen as a secondary concern.

The foreign fighter phenomenon, furthermore, is not only manifested as Islamist fundamentalism, but has also been encountered among Serbs in the northern parts of Kosovo. Some media outlets have reported that around 300 Serbian foreign fighters, funded by the Russian organization “The Kosovo front”, joined the fighting in the Ukrainian separatist territories⁶⁵. It is, however, hard to determine their exact number and place of origin since they usually feature as “Serb nationals”.⁶⁶ The phenomenon did not, however, receive sufficient attention from either state institutions or researchers.⁶⁷ On the Albanian side, on the other hand, one witnesses the participation of ethnic Albanians in suspected violent acts in the Republic of North Macedonia. During operations carried out by the North Macedonian police in March 2015 in the city Kumanovo, eight policemen were killed as well as ten members of armed groups, whereas 37 people were indicted, the majority of whom came from Kosovo.⁶⁸ In another operation of the Macedonian police, carried out in 2010 in the city of Tetovo, six people were killed, including some from Kosovo.⁶⁹

All in all, a recently published report found that nationalist-motivated riots and social-based violent protests have been on the rise in Kosovo, while those believed to be at the highest risks of engaging in violence are found to be educated individuals who, however, fail to achieve an occupational position conforming with their levels of education.⁷⁰ Politically or ethnically

⁶³ Goshi, A. and van Leuven, D. (2017) Kosovo-wide Assessment of Perceptions of Radicalization at the Community Level. Prishtina: UNDP and Government of Kosovo. Available at: <https://www.prevox-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/D5.1-Policy-brief-the-Balkans-1.pdf>

⁶⁴ Kursani, S. (2018a). Extremism Research Forum, Kosovo Report . British Council. Available at: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf

⁶⁵ Stelmakh, A. and Kholodov, P. (2017). How Russia recruits Serbian mercenaries into the ranks of its fighters in Donbas. Euromaidanpress, 30 October. Available at: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/10/30/howrussia-recruits-serbian-mercenaries-into-the-ranks-of-its-fighters-in-donbas/>

⁶⁶ Velebit, V. (2017) Serb fighters in Ukraine continue to worry the West. European Western Balkans, 29 December. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/12/29/serb-fightersukraine-contineworry-west/>

⁶⁷ Peci, L.& Demjaha, A. (2020). National Approaches to Extremism: Kosovo. European Institute of the Mediterranean. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/kosovo-country-report-on-national-approaches-to-extremism/>

⁶⁸ Radio Free Europe. *Convictions for the Kumanova Group rendered*. 2 November 2017. Available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/denimet-per-grupin-e-komunoves-28831384.html>

⁶⁹ Voice of America. *Tetovo: Six killed during a Police Operation against armed groups*. 27 February 2010. Available at: <https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/a-30-2007-11-07-voa6-85721717/439773.html>

⁷⁰ British Council. Shpend Kursani and Krzysztof Krakowski. May 2021. *An Experimental Survey Study of Types*



motivated violence, therefore, is currently considered to be a more significant threat for security in Kosovo than foreign fighters.

4.4 North Macedonia

With its more than 150 FTFs, who left for Syria and Iraq, the RNM ranks highest per capita of Muslim population in this kind of “export” among the Western Balkan countries. As in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ethno-political and the religious are strongly intertwined with the forms of extremism present in the country. Since the Yugoslav war of the 1990s, the country has witnessed a growing division between the two major communities in the country – the (mostly Greek Orthodox) Macedonians and the (mostly Sunni Muslim) Albanians. During and after the Kosovo war (1998–9) many Kosovar migrants fled to Macedonia. In early 2001, Albanian insurgents, closely related to the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK), started military actions with demands for equal civil and political rights for the Albanians in the country.⁷¹ In August 2001, the so-called Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed between the Macedonian authorities and representatives of the Albanian community, declaring Macedonia as a ‘multi-ethnic state’ and providing enhanced collective rights for the Albanians, (e.g., stronger administrative representation, education in the mother tongue, establishment of an official Albanian-language university). The brief armed conflict in 2001 left a major traumatic imprint on both groups’ identities, which is still noticeable today.⁷² The insurgency witnessed the climax of decades-long inter-communal animosity, distrust, and lack of mutual understanding. In its aftermath, ethnic Macedonians keep massively reproducing the narrative that they are gradually “losing” their state, whereas local Albanians tend to view what they had achieved as a result of the riot as a façade, i.e. far removed from the political and cultural rights they deserved. Several serious incidents on an ethno-religious basis followed, notably the 2012 Smilkovci lake killings, the 2014 Macedonian government building attack, the 2015 Kumanovo clashes, and the 2017 storming of the Macedonian Parliament. Yet, according to analysts, ‘the dominant opinion in North Macedonia is that there exists political and ethno-nationalist extremism, but that highly extreme groups in the country are marginal.’⁷³ At the same time, when asked about the probability of future occurrence of violent extremism in North Macedonia, some interlocutors suggested that nationalist radicalism seems much more likely than ‘Islamist extremism’.

and Expectations of Violence in Kosovo: Engagement in Foreign Wars, Nationalist Riots and Violent Protests, p.5. Available at: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/study_of_types_and_expectations_of_violence_in_kosovo_may_2021.pdf

⁷¹ John Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels in the Balkans*, London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2004, p. 90.

⁷² Although the Ohrid Framework Agreement managed to restore peace in the country, it also led to the ‘politicization of ethnicity’. See Katerina Mojanchevska, Elena Jovanchikj, and Afrodita Musliu, *Ethnic and Political Extremism in the Republic of North Macedonia. Mapping the Main Action Frameworks in the Extremist Scenes*, Skopje: NEXUS – Civil Concept, 2020, p. 16.

⁷³ See Katerina Mojanchevska, Elena Jovanchikj, and Afrodita Musliu, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.



4.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

In the Sandžak region, several incidents took place during the 2000s, involving radical Wahhabi individuals or groups, who have advocated the restoration of Islam in its pure and original form. These groups had on several occasions intruded mosques and attacked believers during the service due to differences in rituals or habits or attacked those who do not show faith through adequate clothes or appropriate public behavior. In 2006, a group of Wahhabis interrupted a concert by the Belgrade-based band Balkanika.⁷⁴ Later the same year, shooting took place between a local mufti supporter and a Wahhabi movement representative in the ‘Arap Mosque’ (*Arap dzamija*) in Novi Pazar.⁷⁵ Finally, in 2007, a group of Wahhabis was arrested in a village near Novi Pazar under suspicion of planning terrorist activities. Few weeks before that, police discovered a sort of a Wahhabi training facility in a mountain cave near Novi Pazar, full of weapons, ammunition, explosives, propaganda materials etc.⁷⁶ The group was tried and sentenced to a total of 60 years in prison.⁷⁷

Among the 49 Serbian citizens who left for Syria, around nine have returned to Europe, but only four to Serbia. 12 are considered killed in the conflict zone, whereas the rest are still in Syria or on the run. Among them, around 20 are women, while the number of children is unknown.⁷⁸ The four returnees and three persons tried *in absentia* were convicted of various terrorism-related crimes in 2018.⁷⁹ They were found guilty of participating in the battlefield in Syria, financing terrorism, recruiting new warriors, and public incitement – all acts related to terrorism, according to the Criminal Code. Each of them will be included in a central terrorism database, planned to be launched soon.⁸⁰

In recent years, upon marginalization and condemnation from the rest of the community and harsh response by the state, extremist groups in the Sandžak have kept a low profile. The latest case of occurrence recorded in Serbia was the arrest of Armin Alibašić, member of Salafi organization Da’va team⁸¹, under the accusation of plotting a terrorist attack. However, since his co-fellows in the organization appear to have reported him, he could rather be considered a lone wolf actor.⁸²

⁷⁴ B92, “Novi Pazar: Vehabije i huligani”, June 5, 2006, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2006&mm=06&dd=05&nav_category=12&nav_id=199956

⁷⁵ Kenneth Morrison, “Wahhabism in the Balkans”, *Defence Academy of the United Kingdom*, February 2008, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/50179/2008_March_Wahabism.pdf.

⁷⁶ Police discovered a sort of a Wahhabi training facility in a mountain cave near Novi Pazar, full of weapons, ammunition, explosives, propaganda materials etc. See Amela Bajrović and Jelena Grujić, “Alahova kletva”, *Vreme*, March 22, 2007, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=492179>

⁷⁷ RTS, “Osudene vehabije iz Novog Pazara”, July 03, 2009, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/135/hronika/71693/osudjene-vehabije-iz-novog-pazara.html>.

⁷⁸ Svetlana Božić Krainčanić, “Srbija čuti na poziv da vrati svoje državljane iz sirijskih kampova”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, February 09, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-sirija-kampovi-zene-i-djeca-repatrijacija/31094193.html>.

⁷⁹ Milan Nešić and Ognjen Zorić, “Višegodišnje kazne građanima Srbije zbog ratovanja u Siriji”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, April 04, 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-sirija-presuda/29142854.html>

⁸⁰ Predrag Urošević, “Srpska baza podataka za borbu protiv terorizma bez boraca u Ukrajini”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31282690.html>.

⁸¹ For more details see Da’va team Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/DavaTim>.

⁸² Ivana Mastilović Jasnić, “Ovo je uhapšeni vehabija - Kod njega pronađen priručnik za bombe, testirao ih i spremao se za teroristički napad u Srbiji”, *Blic*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/ovo-je->



5. Competing authorities

As many people in the Balkans live in a state of precarity, with governments lacking the capacity to protect their citizens, many view the state not as benevolent, but dysfunctional and corrupt. This leads to grievances against the state that are instrumentalized by “violent entrepreneurs,” making use of extremist ideologies and discourses. Nor have the official religious institutions, recognized by the WB states, always proved capable to cope with the challenge of radicalization and VE in terms of offering appealing counter-narratives. Initially, the spread of Salafi ideology with its global appeal, delivered by groups like ISIS, found both national governments and the formal religious institutions insufficiently equipped to counteract and neutralize the extreme narratives.

5.1 Albania

The state institutions in Albania had not paid attention to the “machinery” (radicalization) of the phenomenon, but simply the “output” (FTFs),⁸³ nor was there an apparent interest on the part of state institutions to react to the FTF phenomenon when it first appeared.⁸⁴ This state “apathy” allowed a violent extremist cell to become very active at that time,⁸⁵ and create not only a system of meaning in Albania,⁸⁶ but also to promote and facilitate the travel for aspiring FTFs.

Facing the widespread radical narratives, the religious authorities responded with their counter-narratives, but due to their “last-gasp” (reactive) response and their limited institutional capacities, they focused mostly on main cities, thus, failing to reach the remote areas and vulnerable individuals. This may explain why the majority of Albanian FTFs were from remote areas and suburbs rather than from main cities.⁸⁷ As the mufti of Elbasan recalled the escalation of the FTF phenomenon, he explained that “*our focus [of religious authorities] on the city of Elbasan and our absence from the surrounding areas has influenced different individuals and people to fall prey to these things [violent extremist propaganda]. Our absence was exploited by other actors. The dissemination of counter-narratives and theological clarification should have been done earlier and in a more active way.*”⁸⁸ Another focus-group participant from

uhapseni-vehabija-kod-njega-pronaden-prirucnik-za-bombe-testirao-ih-i-spremao/sb7g6y3.

⁸³ Vurmo, Gj. et al. (2015). *Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania*. Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation. <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Qirjazi R. & Shehu, R. (2018). *Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania*. Country Case Study 4. Berlin/Tirana: Berghof Foundation and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM). <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/community-perspectives-on-preventing-violent-extremism-in-albania>

⁸⁵ The First Instance Court for Serious Crimes (2014) Court Proceedings on 9 individuals who were found guilty for recruiting Albanian citizens to take part in the Syrian war. [Confidential document].

⁸⁶ Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, *Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach* (2021), available at <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Exploration-of-P-CVE-strategic-communication.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Spahiu, E. (2017). *Albanian Migrants and Risks of Radicalization*. In V. Azinović, *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans* (31-42). Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative.

⁸⁸ Interview with Muslim official in Elbasan, 24 August 2021.



Elbasan added that “*the information was missing and that leads to misunderstandings ... a bridge of communication between institutions, associations and ordinary people is needed so that the idea of Islam is not created based on some problematic cases and individuals.*”⁸⁹

5.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The scope of the crimes against humanity committed against Bosniaks put the Bosnian war on the radar of foreign mujahedeen, and hundreds came to defend their fellow Muslims.⁹⁰ These fighters imported the radical Islamic doctrine of Salafism to BiH, and actively spread it during the war. Those who remained in the country after the fighting ended established several Salafi communities, along with alternative Muslim congregations popularly referred to as *para-jamaats*.⁹¹ They actively engaged in proselytizing, trying to impose their ideology on surrounding communities as well. Nearly two decades later, 200 Bosnian Muslims were recruited from Salafi para-jamaats to fight in Syria and Iraq for ISIS, and the issue of Salafism in BiH became a primary focus of international researchers studying extremism.

The fact that Bihac is predominantly Bosniak, and a small percentage of its citizens were under the influence of Bilal Bosnić, the informal leader of the Bosnian Salafi community, led our researchers to delve more deeply into the views of interviewees there about Salafism. Echoing others, a professor at the Islamic Faculty in Bihac voiced frustration that the town was viewed mostly as “troubled” by the international community and the state, particularly due to an association with Salafi extremism, which this professor characterized as a competing external force “planted” in the country: “*Salafi activities run counter to our culture and the Bosnian Muslim interpretation of Islam. Even these people who went to Syria, it is known exactly what kind of congregations they attended and who led them, and none of those congregations actually belong to the... [official] Islamic Community.*”⁹²

According to this professor, as well as several other interviewees linked to the Islamic Community of BiH, the curricula in religious colleges and madrassas have been amended to include modules on preventing radicalization. Interviewees also emphasized that the Islamic Community organizes conferences on co-existence and tolerance and has cooperated with various international organizations to host seminars aimed at raising awareness about the dangers of radicalization and violent extremism. At the height of international attention on Salafism, when FTFs’ departures to Syria and Iraq from BiH peaked in 2014, the Islamic Community established an office to coordinate its cooperation with NGOs, which helped it

⁸⁹ Focus group with religious practitioners in Elbasan, 24 August 2021.

⁹⁰ See Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, “Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015),” ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, October 2015. Interestingly, the phenomenon of foreign fighting during the Bosnian war tends to be associated only with Muslim mujahedeen, but as Milos Popovic has noted, there were also Russian fighters in the country supporting Serb forces and European fighters supporting Croat forces; see: “Pathways of Foreign Fighters,” *Leiden Security and Global Affairs* (blog), 29 March 2021, <https://www.leidensecurityandglobalaffairs.nl/articles/pathways-of-foreign-fighters> (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁹¹ The official Islamic Community of BiH has a jamaat in each mosque, and this represents the smallest organizational unit of the Community. Because Salafis were not part of the Islamic Community of BiH, their jamaats were extra-institutional.

⁹² Interview with Islamic Community official in Bihac, 25 July, 2021



better monitor the NGOs with a Salafi orientation.

Recognizing that Salafism was being spread in part through a network of Salafi NGOs, providing a channel by which donors in the Gulf could transferred money to Bosnian Salafi leaders, Islamic Community officials in Sarajevo decided that they would have better results at countering and preventing extremism if they had more control over this network of Salafi organizations. As one interviewee from the Islamic Community in Bihać explained: *“Now, we have a person within each municipality, who supervises their activities and talks with those engaged in the work of these NGOs; and very importantly, we request that they submit an annual report... This way we know who donates money to them. Here in Una Sana Canton,⁹³ we have identified only two organizations that caused concern. One is a masjid on the outskirts of Bihać, and the other is a para-jamaat in the village of Stijena. And of course, there was a third, the famous masjid of Bilal Bosnić, but it was abandoned when he was arrested.”⁹⁴*

Several foreign countries’ interventions have had a markedly disruptive effect on the situation in BiH. In the post-war years, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, often in tandem with diasporic Bosnian communities in the West, sought to mainstream the fundamentalist ideology of Salafi Wahhabism in BiH, typically under the guise of humanitarian aid. For the most part, these Gulf channels of influence are no longer operational after intervention by the state, but they inspired Salafi congregations and communities across the country, where some of the foreign fighters, who had travelled from BiH to Syria and Iraq, were radicalized. They continue to promote a hyper-conservative and intolerant form of Islam, which is at odds with the teachings of the official Islamic Community of BiH, yet it offers validation to the narratives of other groups that Islam itself is a dangerous ideology, thereby contributing directly to reciprocal radicalization in the country. The phenomenon of FTF departures has also become supporting evidence for these narratives. It put the spotlight on BiH for several years as a potential “hotbed” of Muslim extremism in Europe, a “threat” that was played up in the political rhetoric of ethno-national parties and was latched on to by media. Until now, however, the return of dozens of former fighters and their radicalized family members has not led to any incidence of violence.⁹⁵

Topics of CT, CVE, and PVE are frequently connected to the “Islamist” threat. However, the influence of Russia is associated with the threat of ethnic radicalization and obstruction of Euro-Atlantic integrations, of the Western Balkans countries, and lately of Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. The concept of reciprocal radicalization actually links the two threats

⁹³ There are two political entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Federation Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (BiH), and one self-governing administrative unit, Brčko District. FBiH consists of ten cantons, which are subdivided into municipalities. Each canton has its government, and the seat of the cantonal government of Una-Sana Canton is in Bihać.

⁹⁴ Interview with Islamic Community employee in Bihać, 27 July, 2021. A masjid is essentially a mosque without the minaret, but it can be more informal, whereas mosques are only part of the official Islamic Community network.

⁹⁵ See: Institute for Economics & Peace, *The Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (2020). Notably, some analysts contend that foreign fighters deployed to Ukraine may pose a threat when and if they return to BiH, yet these fighters have largely been ignored by researchers and policymakers. For example, see: Hikmet Karcic, “The Balkan Connection: Foreign Fighters and the Far Right in Ukraine,” *Newlines*, 1 May 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/eurasia/the-balkan-connection-foreign-fighters-and-the-far-right-in-ukraine/> (accessed 12 November 2021).



and can be an appropriate theoretical framework for studying but also preventing both treats simultaneously.

Of all these threats, Russian political influence is strongest in their openness in preventing BiH from joining NATO. Russia has become even more confrontational over the past couple of months. Recently, Moscow's overt attempts at destabilizing the country has been joined by China.⁹⁶ Turkey's deteriorating relationship with the West and its closeness with Russia has also affected its attitude towards Bosnian statehood. While it officially seeks to play the role of regional mediator, posing as the equitable and rational friend of all parties, Ankara simultaneously harnesses the "geopolitics of emotion", playing on Bosnian historical victimhood, which is ultimately destabilizing. In the past years Ankara, too, has started viewing BiH through an ethnic lens, and has exploited divisions.⁹⁷

5.3 Kosovo

As elsewhere in the WB, the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam is believed to have been imported into Kosovo,⁹⁸ and disputes between the local traditional interpretation of Islam among the heavily secularized majority of the population and the newly "imported" radical interpretations, came to the fore.⁹⁹ Accompanied by the creation of parallel religious bodies in the country,¹⁰⁰ similar to the para-jamaats in BiH, such clashes antagonized the country's practicing Muslim community, formally known as the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK).

After the Kosovo war, much effort was invested by powerful states in spreading a radical fundamentalist version of Islam promoting a political Islamist agenda in the Balkans through Middle Eastern charities, which sometimes were infiltrated by violent extremist organizations.¹⁰¹ Under the guise of humanitarian aid, they propagated Wahhabi and Salafi religious interpretations that were formerly unknown to the local population.¹⁰² In the light of

⁹⁶ Michelle Nichols, "Russia, China fail at U.N. in bid to shut down Bosnia peace envoy," *Reuters*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-china-fail-un-bid-shut-down-bosnia-peace-envoy-2021-07-22/> (accessed 12 November 2021).

⁹⁷ For more on the recent history of Turkish relations with BiH, see: Ešref Kenan Rašidagić and Zora Hesova, "Development of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Western Balkans with Focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Croatian International Relations Review* 26, no. 86 (2020): 96–129.

⁹⁸ International Republican Institute. *Kosovars Cite Corruption and Unemployment as Drivers of Violent Extremism*. 2017. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resource/new-research-kosovars-cite-corruption-and-unemployment-drivers-violent-extremism>

⁹⁹ Stojarová, V. (2020). Quo Vadis, Kosovo? Security Challenges for a Small State. *Obrana A Strategie*, pp. 5-24. Available at: <https://www.obranastrategie.cz/en/archive/volume-2020/1-2020/articles/quo-vadis-kosovo.html>

¹⁰⁰ Perteshi, S. (2020). *Kosova Resilience Index. Violent extremism in Kosova: what community resilience can teach us?* Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/44199576/KOSOVA_RESILIENCE_INDEX_VIOLENT_EXTREMISM_IN_KOSOVA_WHAT_COMMUNITY_RESILIENCE_CAN_TEACH_US

¹⁰¹ Shtuni, A. (2016). *Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo*. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

¹⁰² Demjaha, A., & Peci, L. (2021). *Kosovo – Macro-drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism*. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/mapping-the-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-the-light-of-state-dynamics-in-kosovo/>



the above analysis, it seems that radical (mis)interpretations of Islam are the major source of VE. Furthermore, these interpretations that call for a transnational Islamic state with Sharia at its epicenter and Jihad as its appeal are in inherent contradiction with Albanian ethno-national identity, disturb interreligious traditional harmony among Albanians and are in sharp collision with the official theological interpretations of BIK, which are based on tolerant traditions of the Hanafi school inherited from the religious tradition of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰³ These external influences have stirred a conflict with the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK), since religious radicals expressed discontent with the BIK, claiming that it does not represent Islam.¹⁰⁴ The BIK, on the other hand, partly blamed the Kosovo government for having failed to act against these external influences in the critical period after the war. The state, however, does not technically concern itself with religious associations, professing separation between state and religion.¹⁰⁵

Apart from these processes, far-right politically radicalized forces play an increasingly important role. Driven by nationalistic motives, the Serbian ethnic group is firmly backing up parties like the Serbian Radical party led by Vojislav Šešelj. Although in a more moderate manner, nationalistic elements are present amongst the Albanians as well. Radical groups on both sides endeavor to create the impression that they are armed and ready to fight for their cause.

Public threats that were broadcasted on a public television,¹⁰⁶ from the group called the Albanian National Army, created after the war between Kosovo and Serbia, announcing that they will defend national interest through arms and weapons, forced The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) to designate it as a terrorist group. Even though the leadership of this group remains unknown, over the years, at least one person belonging to the group has been sentenced.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, a planned terrorist attack organized on Kosovar soil by a Serb, Slobodan Gavrić, was prevented.¹⁰⁸ He was eventually arrested for the possession of several kilograms of explosives and charged with terrorism.

In addition to nationally-motivated extremism, groups promoting political and radical Islam began to emerge. The first groups started operations in 2000 in the form of humanitarian organizations, which promoted Islam in the name of reviving it, however, they promoted

¹⁰³ Demjaha, A., & Peci, L. (2016). What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period. Policy Paper, (1/16). Available at: http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What_happened_to_Kosovo_Albanians_740443.pdf

¹⁰⁴ Demjaha, A., & Peci, L. (2021). Kosovo – Macro-drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/mapping-the-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-the-light-of-state-dynamics-in-kosovo/>

¹⁰⁵ Jakupi, R. and Kraja, G. (2018) Accounting for the Difference: Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kosovo. Country Case Study 3. Berlin/Pristina: Berghof Foundation and Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/accounting-for-the-difference-vulnerability-and-resilience-to-violent-extremism-in-kosovo>

¹⁰⁶ Radio Free Europe. *UNMIK and KFOR investigate the presence of AKSH*. 13 April 2004. Available: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/1016184.html>

¹⁰⁷ Kosovo Supreme Court. *Verdict* dated 4 December 2012 on terrorism charges. Available at: https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/eul/repository/docs/72462-Ap_Kz_166_2012_Alb.pdf

¹⁰⁸ BalkanInsight.com. “Mystery Surrounds Serbian Terrorist Vet Case in Kosovo”. 12.07.2016. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/07/12/mystery-surrounds-serbian-terrorist-vet-case-in-kosovo-07-11-2016/>



political Islam in the form of Wahhabism and Salafism. Then, after 2006 Islamic political representation began its transformation into a political cause. According to an analysis conducted by the Anti-Terror Unit, a radical Islamic group had drafted a plan for seizing political power in Kosovo.¹⁰⁹ The group aimed at changing the state's constitution and transforming Kosovo into a religious state. Their activities were halted in 2014 after Kosovo police detected the plans and their source of financing. The FJALA political party, based on religious Islamic identity, was represented by two party members in the government in 2014.¹¹⁰ In the first years, the promotion of radical Islam was done through victimization as a tool of increasing grievances of the community, and building the narrative that Muslims were a marginalized community and their rights were continuously oppressed. Two key narratives were primarily used in order to intensify grievances. The first one concerned the covering of young Muslim girls in secondary school, and the second drew on debates about the location of mosques in the capital city of Prishtina.

Another problem encountered was the opening of mosques and masjids that operated outside the jurisdiction of the Islamic Community organization, where imams identified as extremist lectured.¹¹¹ One such mosque was that near Termokos in Prishtina, where imam Bedri Robaj lectured and which was financed by Fatos Rizvanolli, who was charged and sentenced for having financed terrorism as well as foreign fighters.¹¹² The imam of another mosque with unclear jurisdiction, Zeqirja Qasimi, was charged with terrorism and sentenced to prison for ten years. Clearly, ICK was unable to withhold control over the religious content and literature taught in at least some mosques. Moreover in many cases Islamic teaching was being offered outside public mosques, in private houses without any supervision by authorities e BIK. It has been found out that some of the FTFs attended lectures in such mosques.¹¹³

5.4 Republic of North Macedonia

Although all Muslims in RNM fall under the jurisdiction of the official Islamic Religious Community (hereafter the IRC), the organization is characterized by a growing lack of trust among believers.¹¹⁴ Some respondents with a Muslim background even stated that they do not consider this institution to be a legitimate representative of the community of believers.¹¹⁵ This is generally a result of the plethora of long-lasting scandals, cases of corruption and the lack of administrative capacity within the IRC.¹¹⁶ In this regard, the provocative and even inflammatory

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Luan Keka, Anti-Terror Unit, Kosovo Police. Oct 2, 2021

¹¹⁰ Political Party Fjala website. Available at: <http://www.partiafjala.com/kryetari-2/>

¹¹¹ Telegrafi.com. *BIK: We asked from the MiA to close the mosque close to Termokos two years ago.* 12 August 2014. Available at: <https://telegrafi.com/bik-para-dy-vitesh-kemi-kerkuar-nga-mpb-qe-te-mbyllet-xhamia-te-termokosi/>

¹¹² Klan Kosova. *Fatos Rizvanolli convicted with seven years imprisonment.* 2016. Available at: <https://klankosova.tv/fatos-rizvanolli-denohet-me-shtate-vjet-burg/>

¹¹³ Kallxo.com. *The transcript of declarations of Imam Zeqirja Qasimi at the court.* 14 March 2016. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/uncategorized/transkripti-i-deklaratave-te-imamit-zeqirja-qazimi-ne-gjykate/>

¹¹⁴ Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Op. cit.*, p. 13–14.

¹¹⁵ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Struga, 18 August 2021.

¹¹⁶ Interview with an Albanian journalist and political analyst – Gostivar, 22 August 2021. See also Florian Qehaja and Skënder Perteshi, *Op. cit.*, pp. 8–9, 14–16.



personality of the former *reis-ul-ulema* Sulejman Rexhepi (in office: 1991–2020) had a particularly negative impact on the popular image of the Community. Moreover, the IRC faced difficulties with the control of some of its temples. In previous years, several cases of mosques in Skopje being “occupied” by radical preachers gained considerable prominence.¹¹⁷ The IRC was fully aware of the situation, but instead of finding practical solutions, its leadership asked the imams not to speak publicly about it.¹¹⁸

5.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

In Sandžak, besides the vacuum left by low trust in both central and local authorities, divisions among three main local political parties also contribute to maintain an enabling environment in Sandžak. In the cracks of different political commotions, fierce struggles over scarce resources in an impoverished and marginalized region, leave a lot of space for political extremism.

Since 2007, furthermore, there is the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) based in Novi Pazar and more inclined towards Sarajevo, on the one hand, and the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) based in Belgrade, on the other. The parallel existence and action of two different official religious institutions make it difficult to reunite the Islamic public, while also hampering efforts to tackle radicalization.¹¹⁹ All interlocutors agreed that the absence of a united Islamic community corrodes trust in both, and creates a vacuum suitable for exploitation by alternative religious groups.

6. Drivers of violent extremism

Several groups of factors, or drivers of VE, have been identified, based on our fieldwork, that may have contributed to reaching the decisive moments in the “enabling environments” in the five Western Balkan countries under examination. However, this means neither that all these factors have influenced each FTF, nor that there is a single factor leading to extremism. Similar to previous research, this study has delineated the radicalization process as a multi-layered combination of factors, where different drivers may have influenced different people. This study has found the following to be the main factors.

6.1 Social and economic conditions. Poverty.

For a long time, there has been a common narrative to portray the lack of economic opportunities or the search for financial gains, as a main driver of radicalization. This narrative to perceive economic hardships as a crucial element of radicalization had also influenced popular perceptions.¹²⁰ This aspect is dismissed today as the main driver of recruitment. There is no simple correlation between the socio-economic status and demography of young adults

¹¹⁷ Among the most popular cases were Skopje’s Yahya Pasha Mosque (located in Čair) and Tutunsuz Mosque (located in Gazi Baba).

¹¹⁸ Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Macedonia Report*, Policy Report, Extremism Research Forum. London, UK: British Council, April 2018, p. 14.

¹¹⁹ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, “Western Balkans Extremisms Forum – Serbia Report”, British Council, April 2018, https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf.

¹²⁰ See, for instance, Vurmo Gj. & Sulstarova E. (2018) “Violent Extremism in Albania. Research, Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation



and their likelihood of becoming radicalized.¹²¹ However, even though economic hardships are not a direct driver of radicalization, they can have an indirect influence on the radicalization process. The economic deprivation makes it difficult for individuals to stay connected with their society or to provide for their livelihood, and those aspects contribute to grievances and a loss of hope. Hence, the economic hardships might be a contributing factor, but not necessarily the key single factor in pushing an individual toward VE.¹²²

6.1.1 Albania

A journalist on VE issues interviewed for this study, argued that although the socio-economic situation in Albania is not the main element of radicalization, in the areas with high unemployment and lack of prospects, there is certainly a greater vulnerability to radicalization.¹²³ Similar opinion was shared by an imam in Tirana, who explained that “*the economic aspect is very important, in the sense that if someone has a job, that person has a normal system of living that does not allow room for radicalization.*”¹²⁴ The imam argued that it is illogical to believe that people went to Syria for financial gains because people cannot put themselves and their families in a dangerous warzone for the sake of financial gains. That is why, for the imam, the economic welfare was not a driver for Albanian FTFs.¹²⁵ The imam added that he knew personally some of those who left for Syria, and according to him, they did not have economic problems. Indeed, they had a comfortable life and no reason to join the Syrian conflict other than ‘emotional reasons’.¹²⁶

Other key sources and focus group discussions revealed that economic and material gains were the main motivator for FTFs. The VE groups had created a narrative that the war in Syria would not last for long, and that they would build the Islamic Caliphate where they would own properties. A focus-group participant in Tirana regarded this as a strong narrative as many FTFs were Muslim believers, which is why they took their families with them.¹²⁷ Another focus-group participant claimed that Albanian FTFs “*were promised a better future for them and their families, and considering that they had no prospects in Albania, they had nothing to lose.*”¹²⁸ The economic hardships were perceived as key radicalization factors even by some representatives of state institutions¹²⁹ and civil society representatives. As an interviewee from Kamza argued, “*the lack of socio-economic policies or support in the area, and the lack of hope*

¹²¹ Richardson et al. (2017) Radicalization of Young Adults in the Balkan States. Dundee: JD Journal for Deradicalization, pp. 88-89. See also: <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/61467> and <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0090718>.

¹²² Qirjazi R. & Shehu, R. (2018). Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania. Country Case Study 4. Berlin/Tirana: Berghof Foundation and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM). <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/community-perspectives-on-preventing-violent-extremism-in-albania>

¹²³ Interview with a journalist in Albania, 27 July 2021.

¹²⁴ Interview with an imam in Mëzez, Tirana, 16 August 2021.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Focus group with religious practitioners in Tirana, 18 August 2021.

¹²⁸ Focus group with mixed group of people in Maliq, 31 August 2021.

¹²⁹ Interview with representative of Administrative Unit of Kashar in Tirana, 16 August 2021.



and prospects for a future, all help in the radicalization process.”¹³⁰ An imam explained that recruiters take advantage of financial hardships, claiming that, “I know cases when recruiters have provided financial support to very poor people, which has prompted their radicalization.”¹³¹

6.1.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

While the same common socio-economic, psychological, and ideological drivers are observed in BiH, the present research highlights that, with some exceptions, a greater sympathy for VE, or outright radicalization to violence, has been observed in individuals who face higher levels of socio-economic marginalization, report higher levels of dissatisfaction with their jobs or personal lives, have lower levels of trust in government, and perceive that a significant risk is posed to “their” group from others in society.¹³² Indeed, the Bosnian context is specific, especially compared to countries in Western Europe, as it is impossible to analyze the dynamics of radicalization in BiH without accounting for the continued impact of the wars of the 1990s; and in some places, the legacy or revision of World War II-era history as well.¹³³

One of the questions PREVEX researchers explored with interviewees in Trebinje and Bileća was why the two towns appear to have very different realities on the ground when it comes to radicalization and extremism, even though they are so close geographically and share similar wartime experiences. The simple answer, in this case, appears to be *economics*. Trebinje is economically developed and takes in considerable income from tourism, while Bileća is underdeveloped and impoverished. These conditions extend from the post-World War II period, when weak industrial and cultural development in Bileća not only set the stage for its current socio-economic problems, but also encouraged the preservation within families of victimization narratives and sentimentality towards the Chetniks¹³⁴, whereas in Trebinje, economic growth encouraged cultural and community development. Interviewees told the research team that the leadership of Bileća has not changed since the war; meaning, the local extremists who oversaw its brutal wartime policies still hold power today. This has made membership in a Chetnik group a natural choice in Bileća, especially when socio-economic factors have begun to chip away at people’s non-ethnic identities (as breadwinners, innovators, patriarchs, etc.). As one interviewee framed it, “Bileća is such a failure [economically and socially] that all its people have been left with is to celebrate Chetniks and being like the Chetniks.” A monument has been

¹³⁰ Interview with civil society representative in Kamza, 26 July 2021.

¹³¹ Interview with an imam in Kamza, 25 August 2021.

¹³² For example, see: Majda Halilović and Nejra Veljan, *Exploring Ethno-Nationalist Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Atlantic Initiative, 2021); Edina Bećirević, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum: Bosnia and Herzegovina Report* (British Council, 2018); Sead Turčalo and Nejra Veljan, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Country Case Study 2* (Berlin/Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative and the Berghof Foundation, 2018); and Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters’ Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016).

¹³³ Turcalo and Karcic (2021): https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Far-Right-in-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina_preview_without-IRI-logo.pdf

¹³⁴ Chetniks were a Serb nationalist and monarchist paramilitary organization, set up in the first half of the 20th century, which participated in the two Balkan wars and the two world wars. During World War II, they collaborated with the Axis powers and are notorious for having committed war crimes against non-Serb civilians.



built in the town to Draža Mihailović, the World War II-era Chetnik commander, who was sentenced to death for war crimes and treason by communist authorities in Yugoslavia. He was posthumously rehabilitated by Serbian authorities in 2015.

Since 2018, the socio-economic situation in Bihać – with its location some 460 km northwest of Sarajevo in northwestern BiH near the border with Croatia – has borne the brunt of the country’s migrant crisis. Since the beginning of 2018, travel on the “Balkan Route” has intensified, and Bihać has become the last stop for people attempting a clandestine border crossing into the EU. Migrants are not the only ones frustrated by this situation, as the citizens of Bihać face a humanitarian crisis of overwhelming proportions and feel they have been abandoned to confront it without support from the central government in Sarajevo. Bihać, and the Bosanska Krajina region, is known for the hospitality of its people and the beauty of its nature, but also for systemic poverty – which extends from this same neglect by the state. Many local citizens in this Bosniak-majority town have been challenged by competing desires, to provide help to migrants (some of whom they relate to as survivors of war) while also ensuring their own economic and physical security. The municipality lacks funds to provide proper shelter for migrants; and on top of this, human trafficking and organized crime have emerged as by-products of the crisis, the burden of which has fallen on the shoulders of local police. The only link between Bihać and VE was Bilal Bosnić (to be discussed further down) and his parajamaat, which served as a recruiting center for ISIL.¹³⁵

6.1.3 Kosovo

In Kosovo, socio-economic conditions, including poverty, are widely perceived as a driver of VE, particularly on the individual level. Earlier studies, on the other hand, have indicated a complex and equivocal relationship between poverty and VE, suggesting that poverty may be a side-effect of some other cause¹³⁶. Our study seems to confirm that poverty is a factor explaining, to some extent, why some individuals are more vulnerable and prone to extremism. Poverty in the country was aggravated during the 1990-s since, after the removal of autonomy by Serbia, the majority of Albanian citizens found themselves jobless due to their refusal to be part of public institutions and enterprises of the Yugoslav Government. Kosovo is facing the highest unemployment rates in the WB, and significantly higher than the global average.¹³⁷ Although the official unemployment rates among ethnic Albanians have halved compared to 1997¹³⁸, one unemployed in four is still a high number, which leaves little room for development

¹³⁵ See: Asya Metodieva, “The Radical Milieu and Radical Influencers of Bosnian Foreign Fighters,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 1, no. 20 (Asya (2021) [DOI:10.1080/1057610X.2020.1868097]; and Nermina Kulogija, “Bilal Bosnić je na slobodi: u kakvo okruženje se vratio?” *Detektor*, 10 September 2021, <https://detektor.ba/2021/09/10/bilal-bosnic-je-na-slobodi-u-kakvo-okruzenje-se-vratio/>

¹³⁶ RUSI. October 2015. Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf

¹³⁷ Regional Cooperation Council (2021). Balkan Public Barometer. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

¹³⁸ Shtuni, A. (2016). Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>



and a lot of space for frustrations and grievances among the population.

Data for youth unemployment is even more alarming. Kosovo's youth unemployment rate is significantly higher than the average unemployment rate, with around half of youths between 15 and 29 being registered as unemployed in 2020, despite the fact that younger generations have higher levels of education. A recent survey indicates that a clear majority of the Kosovar population consider inadequate employment opportunities (e.g. lack of job offers, support mechanisms/programs to secure a job or open a business) to be the biggest problem that youths confront today.¹³⁹ These challenges, in combination with an insecure future because of few opportunities to exit poverty, creates an enabling environment among vulnerable youths.

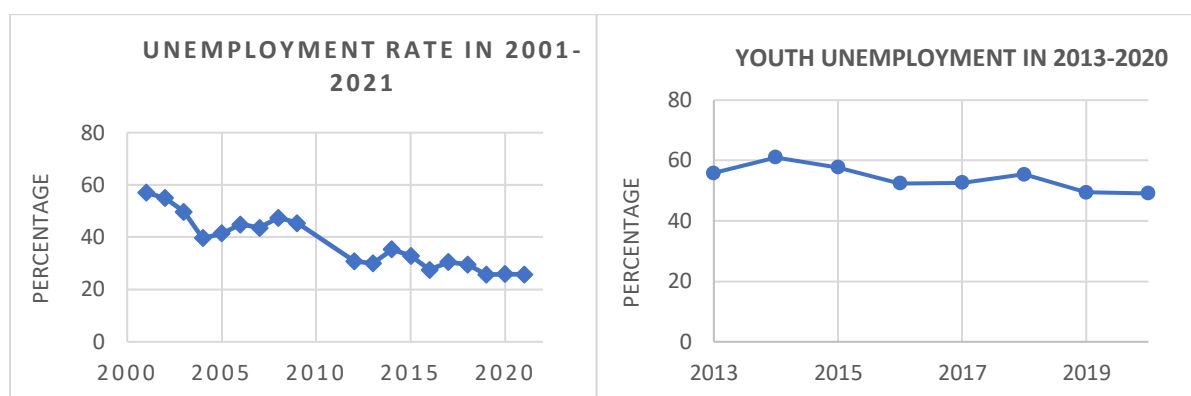


Figure 1 and 2: Unemployment rate and youth unemployment rate in Kosovo (ref).

Socio-economic conditions are thus an important factor driving individuals to leave Kosovo to join ISIS and other Islamist resurgent groups as FTFs.¹⁴⁰ FTFs subsist in average socio-economic conditions leaning towards being poor, with lesser chances of climbing towards higher socio-economic standards.¹⁴¹ Moreover, the unemployment rate among foreign fighters is significantly higher than the Kosovo average: while the average unemployment rate is 30 percent, the unemployment rate among FTFs is 76 percent. The majority of foreign fighters fall under the younger-age group, which suggests that, while the gap between the unemployment rate among the younger foreign fighters and the younger Kosovo average is smaller, the difference still appears to be double.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Regional Cooperation Council (2021). Balkan Public Barometer. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

¹⁴⁰ Kursani, S. (2018a). Extremism Research Forum, Kosovo Report . British Council. Available at: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.



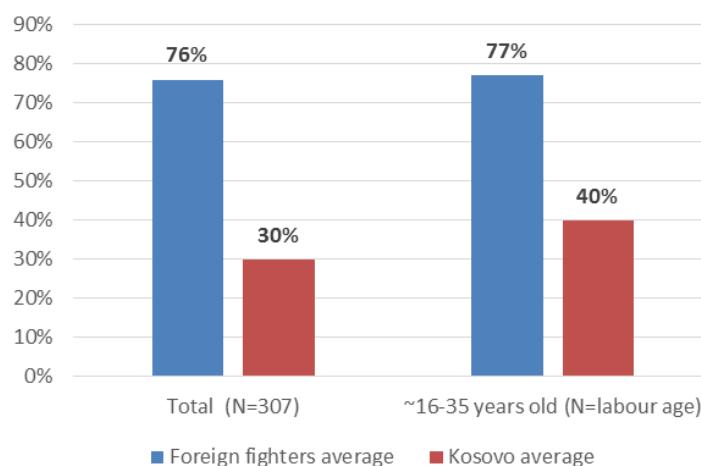


Figure 3: Unemployment rate, foreign fighters vs. Kosovo average, retrieved from: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf

That being said, as in the other WB countries, the relation between poverty and radicalization/VE is indirect and depends on a combination of various other factors. The majority of Kosovo's population living in poor socio-economic conditions never become radicalized or join militant Sunni groups in the Middle East. Thus, poor socio-economic living conditions are not a sufficient explanation for the country's high radicalization, recruitment, and FTFs mobilization rates.

Of 112 foreign fighters, about 64 percent enjoy average or above-average economic circumstances, and only about 36 percent live in poor conditions.¹⁴³ It is indicative that among the five most foreign fighter exporting/affected municipalities, none are among those with the lowest 2014 Human Development Index (HDI) in Kosovo.¹⁴⁴ However, based on available data, no correlation can be observed between income, educational levels and VE since extreme poverty and low levels of education in Kosovo are highest in other municipalities—such as Skenderaj, Kastriot, and Malisheve, which boast a smaller number of FTFs.¹⁴⁵

6.1.4 Republic of North Macedonia

The fact that regions or municipalities, usually defined as socially or economically vulnerable,

¹⁴³ Shtuni, A. (2016). Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

¹⁴⁴ Matthias Lücke et al., *Kosovo Human Development Report, 2014: Migration and a Force for Development* (Kosovo: United Nations Development Programme, 2014), <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/khdr2014english.pdf>. The Human Development Index is a summary measure of key dimensions of human development. It measures the average achievements in a country in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living.

¹⁴⁵ Shtuni, A. (2016). Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>



may react and adapt differently to their conditions, can be illustrated by two neighborhoods of Skopje with identical economic profiles – Šuto Orizari¹⁴⁶ and Čair.¹⁴⁷ Whereas poverty and bad living conditions have provoked extraordinary increase in crime rates in the former case, they have provided fertile soil for the spread of extremist ideologies in the latter. This indicates that the response to social and economic grievances depends on the interaction with other - demographic, political, ideological, or cultural- factors.

As in Albania and Kosovo, for instance, certain North Macedonian regions with lower economic development are characterized by significantly more resilient inter-communal tolerance than other parts of the country supposed to enjoy higher economic and living standards. A case in point is the city of Debar, which was often cited as a model of resilience to radicalism and extremist ideologies, despite the major economic and even humanitarian issues plaguing this municipality.¹⁴⁸ Notably, in a recent survey, North Macedonian citizens ranked corruption as the biggest problem in their country for the first time, whereas in previous years unemployment and/or poverty was identified as the most serious problems.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, recent data from the World Bank also show that during the last decade, poverty in North Macedonia has gradually decreased; over the 2009–2017 period, the number of people living below the poverty line in the country has halved (from 35.1 percent to 18.2 percent).¹⁵⁰

6.1.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

Similar observations can be made regarding the complexity of the economic conditions in the Sandžak region as indirectly related to VE. Overall, the economic situation in this region is poor, reflected in a lack of job opportunities, poverty, and brain drain. The unemployment rate is particularly high (Novi Pazar 54 percent, Tutin 58 percent), when compared to the average in Serbia (around 11 percent).¹⁵¹ Youth unemployment is even higher than general average in Serbia.¹⁵² In the center of the province, the city of Novi Pazar, these social challenges do not appear as depressive, since cafés and restaurants are full of young people. This, however, is due primarily to the help provided to the local population by the diaspora, which contributes in three ways: by directly helping family members or local humanitarian organizations; by starting small businesses, thus creating at least temporary job opportunities; and by investing in real estate

¹⁴⁶ Today, Šuto Orizari, a municipality located in the northern part of Skopje, which is considered the biggest ‘Roma neighborhood’ in the country is regarded as one of the poorest and economically backward municipalities in North Macedonia. The great majority of Macedonian Roma are Muslims.

¹⁴⁷ Čair is inhabited predominantly by Albanians, although there are also other Muslim communities – Turks, Bosnians, Roma, etc.

¹⁴⁸ A local respondent told PREVEX researchers with disappointment that Debar does not have a proper water supply for 6-7 hours every day.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Skopje, 21 August 2021.

¹⁵⁰ World Bank, Poverty & Equity Brief, North Macedonia, Europe & Central Asia. April 2020, https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Global_POVEQ_MKD.pdf, last accessed 12 October 2021.

¹⁵¹ Baza opština, Novi Pazar. Available at:

<http://crm.siepa.gov.rs/municipalities-srb/index.php?search=Naziv&place=novi-pazar&district=all®ion=all&pod=&pdo=&sod=&sdo=&zod=&zdo=&nod=&ndo=&order=rating>.

¹⁵² Anketa o radnoj snazi, I kvartal 2021. godine, Republički zavod za statistiku. Available at:

<https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/Pdf/G20211182.pdf>.



development and construction. Furthermore, Sandžak youths often go the EU countries for three months to work (a visa free period) and then return with enough resources for the next few months.

Young people also leave the Sandžak region in great numbers for good, in search for better living conditions and job opportunities, predominantly in Western European countries.¹⁵³ This outflow contributes to the spiral of frustrations and corruption, where the most educated and capable leave the country, whereas under skilled use political or personal connections to occupy available jobs.

6.2 Social exclusion and marginalization

Societal factors, other than poverty, play a key role in VE as they form a vicious cycle that makes it difficult for certain individuals to escape. Even if individuals do not identify with VE, the desire to escape from their reality may overcome the fear of the risks related to embracing VE.

6.2.1 Albania

Discussions in focus groups and interviews highlighted three main societal factors that may have influenced some of the Albanian FTFs. The first is *dysfunctional families*. Members from such families tend to have a much weaker sense of connection with their community and are prone to exploit others or become exploited themselves. The second factor is societal exclusion. This includes when the person fails to adapt to society, or because the society alienates the person. The third, and last factor, is the lack of representation in state institutions or formal religious authorities. This factor pushes individuals to seek support and rely on other actors who may have malign influences on them. Various key sources and focus group participants had the opinion that most of radicalized persons come from dysfunctional families. In Tirana, a participant knew a family that joined a radical group. “*The family had a lot of trauma, they were poor, and there were abusers and victims within the family.*”¹⁵⁴ The participant argued that individuals of that family were alienated and marginalized in the community, adding that the role of the community was very negative, by alienating the victims instead of the perpetrators.¹⁵⁵ In addition, the discussant added that some of the FTFs had a problematic background, such as divorced parents, depression, inability to socialize, and parental absence. These were the kind of people most vulnerable to recruitment.¹⁵⁶

In terms of family dysfunctionality, there are two conflicting views in the literature. One theory perceives it as a factor that can further encourage violent and extremist behavior of individuals.¹⁵⁷ This theory supports the idea that family dysfunction strongly predicts future

¹⁵³ Irfan Ličina, “Zašto mladi beže iz najmlađeg grada u Evropi”, *Nova.rs*, August 30, 2020, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/zasto-mladi-beze-iz-najmladeg-grada-u-evropi/>

¹⁵⁴ Interview with a civil society representative in Tirana, 3 August 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with an imam in Mëzez, Tirana, 16 August 2021.

¹⁵⁷ The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children (2020). A Child-Resilience Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism. Available at:



deviance, whereas strong and positive parental role modelling can play a protective role, cancelling out other drivers that exist in the community.¹⁵⁸ Some authors of this theory go even further, arguing that too many young men and women from dysfunctional families tend to have a much weaker sense of connection with their community and are prone to exploit its members to satisfy their unmet needs or desires.¹⁵⁹ In contrast, the other theory supports the idea that there are no family patterns that make children vulnerable to radicalization. They conclude that the focus on the individual or dysfunctional families is a blind alley in the PVE strategy.¹⁶⁰

Concerning social exclusion, the imam of Kamza believed that those who engage with VE groups need to belong somewhere and to be heard.¹⁶¹ The need to fill their sense of loneliness and inferiority is, thus, one of the reasons for why some people join VE groups. A key source in Tirana believed that the lack of identity and belonging is an influential element of radicalization.¹⁶²

6.2.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Societal exclusion and marginalization in BiH have been nurtured for decades by segregation along ethnic lines and socio-economic grievances. Any number of structural and cultural fissures are practically built into the country's post-war government and society. Ethnic segregation is common in towns across the country, and as it will be indicated below, schools remain divided along ethnic lines. As long as Bosnian politics remain in the ethno-nationalist stranglehold that Dayton has created and inspires, the rhetoric of these politics seems destined to grow increasingly radical. Youth across BiH largely reject these politics with its ethnic exclusivity and segregation. Young people demonstrate the greatest degree of inter-ethnic trust and the greatest desire for a truly multi-ethnic society and government, even in towns that are functionally divided along ethnic lines. This spirit is a rich resource for BiH, politically and otherwise if there were not the “brain drain” and the emigration of the young people who seek professional opportunities and a more secure future abroad.¹⁶³

Mass emigration, particularly of young people, has a number of effects that may increase the vulnerability of communities in BiH to extremist influences. By shrinking the labor force and the tax base, for example, the phenomenon has real economic impacts at the local social level, for the private and public sectors. According to Majda Ruge, the labour force in BiH has shrunk by over 10 percent since 2015, which “places additional strains on the public budget, as

https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/reports_extremism/un_hq_osrsg_a_child-resilience_approach_to_preventing_violent_extremism_20-01153_lo-res.pdf. (accessed 15 September 2021).

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. pp. 16.

¹⁵⁹ Kamaruddin, Z. 2011. “Dysfunctional Families and Crime: Righting Wrongs”. ICR Journal 3 (1):75-89. <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v3i1.581>.

¹⁶⁰ Davies, L. “Wicked Problems: How Complexity Science Helps Direct Education Responses to Preventing Violent Extremism.” Journal of Strategic Security 9, no. 4 (2016): 32-52. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.4.1551>. Available at <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol9/iss4/4>. [accessed 17 September 2021].

¹⁶¹ Interview with an imam in Kamza, 25 August 2021.

¹⁶² Interview with a representative of Ardhmëria Cultural Association in Tirana, 18 August 2021.

¹⁶³ See: Turčalo and Veljan, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 23.



pressure on pension payments in the next 10-15 years increases, foreign loans come due, and the private sector stagnates.”¹⁶⁴ This is a formula for even wider socio-economic marginalization, greater levels of dissatisfaction among the population, and even lower levels of trust in government – all of which are known drivers of violent extremism.

6.2.3 Kosovo

Like BiH, Kosovo pursues a trajectory of societal marginalization intertwined with socio-economic grievances. Kosovars were the most socially marginalized and discriminated people in Yugoslavia.¹⁶⁵ yet this did not push them towards VE more than other peoples in Yugoslavia. The Kosovar leadership, led by President Ibrahim Rugova, emphatically chose non-violent resistance to address oppression under Milosevic’s regime.¹⁶⁶ It was only at the end of the 1990s and with the Kosovo war in 1998-99 that Kosovars resorted to violence for political ends, opting to wage guerrilla warfare against the Yugoslav government forces.¹⁶⁷ This, in combination with other socioeconomic factors, have impacted the levels of violence and the number of Kosovars adhering to extreme ideologies.

The current situation in Kosovo shows that economic drivers fuse with social marginalization to render disturbing tendencies among youth. Every year, thousands of young people leave the country in pursuit of better living conditions. The level of unemployment among the young population (aged 15–24) is almost 50 percent, while the employment rate of women during the last five years is only around 12 percent.¹⁶⁸ Thus socio-economic marginalization and a culture of emigration create high potential for engaging marginalized youth and women in politicized or radical Islamic circles.

6.2.4 Republic of North Macedonia

Respondents in RNM placed varying significance on the importance of social marginalization and its consequences in the process of radicalization and the spread of extremist ideologies. Interlocutors, who defined social exclusion as *the* main motivation for individuals to join foreign military formations, were in the minority. At the same time, an informed respondent noted the long-year ghettoization and overpopulation of Skopje’s Čair municipality as a factor with significant potential for radicalization.¹⁶⁹ One should also stress the effect of the collective stigmatization in everyday talk, a result of the long-lasting reproduction of pejorative stereotypes against the ethnic and religious “other” within the North Macedonian society. Thus

¹⁶⁴ Ruge, “Hostage state: How to free Bosnia from Dayton’s paralysing grip.”

¹⁶⁵ Amnesty International. 2012. IKosovo: Time for EULEX To prioritize war crimes. Available at: https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/260412_EULEX_Report.pdf

¹⁶⁶ Shtuni, A. (2016). Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Institute for Development Research, Riinvest. *Employment and Labour Market Analysis: MUNICIPAL COMPETITIVENESS INDEX 2019*. October 2021. Available at: <https://www.riinvestinstitute.org/uploads/files/2021/October/05/Employment-and-Labour-Market-Analysis-ENG1633434888.pdf>

¹⁶⁹ Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 27 August 2021.



Macedonians would use the slur *Šiptar* (instead of “Shqiptare,” as Albanians call themselves) and the Albanians would brand Orthodox Slavs as *shka* (in its contemporary usage translated as “man without honor”).¹⁷⁰

While social exclusion of Albanians is not observable, ethnic separation is deeply rooted within Macedonian society and is visible in everyday life. The symbolic manifestations of this division are conspicuous. “Delineation” of territories and sense of cultural domination is mostly achieved through the construction of religious objects and temples, usually extravagant in terms of size and number, but highly visible. Muslim areas are dominated by large mosques with unusually high minarets even in sparsely populated areas. Orthodox Christians, on their part, place huge illuminated crosses, with the Millennium Cross situated on the top of Vodno Mountain next to Skopje and the cross in Skopje’s Aerodrom municipality being the most popular examples. This symbolic competition is especially visible in mixed areas, demonstrating visually one’s ethno-religious domination, i.e. to whom “belongs” that particular region, and demarcating cultural boundaries.

6.2.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

Widespread in Serbia’s region of Sandžak is the perception of intentional neglect by the central government in Belgrade directed against Bosniaks in the region, even though the socio-economic conditions in many regions and cities in Serbia are similar. This perception is tightly connected with the legacy of the crimes the community suffered during the 1990s – a decade marked by violence, police repression, intimidation and an intensive anti-Bosniak media campaign by the state authorities in Sandžak.¹⁷¹ Many well-documented incidents and crimes were never investigated or prosecuted, and Serbian authorities continue to ignore them.¹⁷² Furthermore, the very same people who are responsible for crimes and wrongdoings to Bosniaks still work in the Sandžak state institutions.

Interlocutors used very illustrative and emotionally charged expressions to explain their perception of the neglect by the state, such as ghettoization or latent segregation. Hence, part of the local population still perceive current events involving state security institutions, such as the presence of a gendarmerie unit in response to violent criminal incidents in Novi Pazar or military exercises by the Serbian Armed Forces near that city, as menacing and intimidating.

The state’s response to the issue of foreign fighters and different treatment of those who went to Syria and to Ukraine, further boosted the perception of discrimination and the feeling of injustice: while the “Syrian” fighters were tried as terrorists, the “Ukrainian” were regarded

¹⁷⁰ On the ethnic stereotypes between Macedonians and Albanians based on the particular case of language usage, see Vasiliki P. Neofotistos, “Beyond Stereotypes: Violence and the Porousness of Ethnic Boundaries in the Republic of Macedonia,” *History and Anthropology* 15 (1), 2004, pp. 47–67.

¹⁷¹ Kenenth Morrison, “Political and Religious Conflict in Sandžak”, April 2008, *Defence Academy of the United Kingdom* https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/92367/2008_Aug_Political_Relig.pdf. Fond za humanitarno pravo, “Pod lupom: praksa kršenja ljudskih prava u vreme oružanog sukoba - Sandžak”, March 1994, <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Pod-lupom-Sand%C5%BEak-mart-1994.pdf>.

¹⁷² <https://www.dw.com/bs/srbija-uporno-%C4%87uti-o-zlo%C4%8Dinima-u-sand%C5%BEaku/a-44275004>.



as regular foreign fighters and all got away with mild, mostly parole sentences.¹⁷³ Another phenomenon that contributes to this self-perception is the disproportionate representation in state institutions, especially in law enforcement institutions. While Bosniaks represent the majority of the local population in Sandžak, they are scarcely represented in these institutions. Politicization and centralization of employment, resulting in inequitable representation in judiciary and police, with which citizens are in the most frequent contact, undermine their trust.

6.3 Political malperformance and polarization

In most of the WB, the state's political malperformance, in terms of corruption and political polarization, seems a common ground instrumental for grasping the drivers of VE throughout the region. Some of the reasons for this are rooted in the widespread corruption practices of governments and administrations, while others lie in a historically continuous line of inter-ethnic and ethno-religious relations, upon which the contemporary nation-states build when devising their policies, some of which deepen the existing inter-communal tensions. As a result of the unfinished process of state-building, WB countries remain precarious, with conflict-affected societies that have lost the ability to manage governance and provide key services for all citizens.¹⁷⁴ In addition, the legacy of wars and armed conflict in the region has made most of the WB countries vulnerable to ethnonationalism, political radicalism and ideological extremism.

6.3.1 Albania

In this respect Albania is an exception, as it was not part of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and was not directly affected by the wars of its dissolution. Nonetheless, although not directly affected by an armed conflict in the recent past, Albania is still a country in transition (after becoming pluralist and democratic in 1992) and suffering from political and socio-economic challenges, including radicalism and ideological extremism. Deep-rooted systemic inadequacies and inequalities are contributing factors to the recent trends of departures of fighters to foreign wars.¹⁷⁵ In a context where perception of inadequate political rights and civil liberties and unresponsive political systems is widespread, the belief that violence is the only means for political change can prevail. Civil liberties and political rights may also represent a critical (although not representative) link between economic development and vulnerability to violent extremism.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, even though political malperformance is

¹⁷³ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, “Western Balkans Extremisms Forum – Serbia Report”, British Council, April 2018, https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf.

¹⁷⁴ Morina E., Austin B., Roetman T.J., & Dudouet V. (2019). Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism: Lessons learned from the Western Balkans. Research Report. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. Available at <http://image.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/>.

¹⁷⁵ Morina E., Austin B., Roetman T.J., & Dudouet V. (2019). Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism: Lessons learned from the Western Balkans. Research Report. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. Available at <http://image.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/>.

¹⁷⁶ Vrugtman L., Kelmendi S., Shehu R., and Angjeli D. The status of Violent Extremism in Albania 2021: A national assessment of drivers, forms and threats. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Available at https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Violent-Extremism_EN-2021-online.pdf.



not an exclusive factor of violent extremism, it makes communities more vulnerable and conducive to malign actors and phenomena.

6.3.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Political polarization and malperformance in BiH today are rooted in, and date back to, the territorial objectives of ethno-nationalists in the 1990s to expand Serbia and Croatia following the process of Yugoslav dissolution that would result in the creation of two nationally homogenous states, achieved by dividing BiH and wiping it off the map. The war resulted from attempts to realize these enlarged Serb and Croat states, and it was clear from the start that Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) would be its primary victims – unlike Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats, they had no “backup state”. The war in BiH was tragic for all Bosnians, and war crimes were committed not only against Bosniaks, but also against ethnic Croats and Serbs as well, though the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has characterized only the mass killing of Bosniaks in Srebrenica in 1995 a genocide. And, while the Army of the Republic of BiH (ARBiH) did commit war crimes, it did not do so as methodically as Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat forces. Among the fundamental mistakes of the Dayton Agreement (1995) summarized by Alexander Clapp, is that the system it created “punishes electoral moderation, erodes political accountability and all but rewards extremism,” and the fact that “both entities essentially operate as their own states... doesn’t so much quench the desire for autonomy as dangle it before them.”¹⁷⁷ In other words, Dayton itself has empowered the ethno-nationalist political structures that have prevented its implementation, and this has paralyzed democratic processes and frozen the conflict.

Recent research in the region on how corruption affects vulnerability to radicalization, which also involved interviews with foreign fighters from Kosovo, confirms that corruption increases this vulnerability “by affecting the quality of education, employment and economic opportunities and social trust.”¹⁷⁸ Over a decade ago, Jessica Teets and Erica Chenoweth found similarly that “corruption... produces more favorable conditions under which terrorists conduct attacks;” but they noted, too, that it “produces externalities that the international community must address through targeted policy programs.”¹⁷⁹ Their research determined that “corruption decreases growth, investment, and entrepreneurship, and weakens the legal capacity of the state,”¹⁸⁰ – impacts that are magnified in a paralyzed BiH and exploited by the ethno-nationalist political powers, who have prevented Dayton’s implementation. In fact, both Dragan Čović and Milorad Dodik have faced corruption charges themselves but have been cleared of wrongdoing in initial verdicts or later court decisions. Majda Ruge has detailed how these, and other ethno-nationalist elites, have used the failings of Dayton to achieve state capture, explaining that: “the

¹⁷⁷ Alexander Clapp, “Bosnia’s Sordid Independence,” *The National Interest*, 16 August 2017. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/bosnias-sordid-independence-21930>

¹⁷⁸ Tord Skovly Freberg, “How Corruption Affects Vulnerability to Radicalization into Violent Extremism: Examining the Case of Kosovo’s Foreign Fighters,” Master’s thesis (The Arctic University of Norway, 2018).

¹⁷⁹ Jessica C. Teets and Erica Chenoweth, “To Bribe or to Bomb: Do Corruption and Terrorism Go Together?” in *Corruption, Global Security, and World Order*, edited by Robert I. Rotberg (World Peace Foundation and American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2009), 169.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.



problem of Dayton... stems from the fact that nationalist parties are primarily interested in consolidating their political grip over institutions and undermining the system's capacity for checks and balances rather than creating structures that can work through compromise. State capture lies at the heart of this problem.”¹⁸¹

6.3.3 Kosovo

As recorded by a 2017 survey, Kosovo, too, is dominated by a widespread perception of pervasive corruption. The survey indicates that Kosovo citizens, albeit supporting democracy, do not trust the country's democratic institutions in preventing and combating violent extremism.¹⁸² It can be argued that this perception, compounded with continuous political instability, has shaped the image of Kosovo and its institutions as corrupt and dysfunctional. The Transparency International report ranks Kosovo amongst the most corrupt countries in the world,¹⁸³ while the PISA report ranks it amongst the countries with the least qualitative educational system.¹⁸⁴ Interlocutors associated the problem of widespread corruption with the government's inability to effectively combat radicalization, and thus indirectly saw it as a driver of violent extremism. Moreover, as indicated in an analysis conducted by the Kosovar civil society organization “LENS”, the common perception that prevails in Kosovo is that “the practices of employment in Kosovo are not based upon a fair competition between the abilities and qualifications of individuals, but on corruption and nepotism”.¹⁸⁵ Added to it is the delayed process of transitional justice. Thus, narratives of historical injustice and the corrupt state helped forge, on one hand, groups and political parties that used nationalist slogans to strengthen their power and, on the other hand, groups that strove to achieve a religion-based political representation in the state institutions.

6.3.4 Republic of North Macedonia

Many respondents in North Macedonia singled out political malperformance manifested in high rates of corruption, clientelism, politically motivated manipulations, and institutional malfunctioning as an immanent characteristic of present-day RNM and a major precondition for social tensions that can lead to conflict.¹⁸⁶ This perception is most widely shared by inhabitants of regions considered to be socially marginalized and backward (Čair being an illustrative example¹⁸⁷). A recent study by a local NGO claims that extremism in RNM is mostly

¹⁸¹ Majda Ruge, “Hostage state: How to free Bosnia from Dayton’s paralyzing grip,” European Council on Foreign Relations, policy brief, 18 November 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/how-europe-and-the-us-can-take-bosnia-beyond-dayton-25-years-later/> (accessed 4 November 2021).

¹⁸² International Republican Institute. Kosovars Cite Corruption and Unemployment as Drivers of Violent Extremism. 2017. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resource/new-research-kosovars-cite-corruption-and-unemployment-drivers-violent-extremism>

¹⁸³ Transparency International. Corruption Perception Index 2020. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/ksv>

¹⁸⁴ Prishtina Insight. PISA results paint dispiriting picture.2019. Available at: <https://prishtinainsight.com/pisa-results-paint-dispiriting-picture/>

¹⁸⁵ LENS. 2018. KOSOVO RURAL YOUTH Employment Opportunities, Barriers, and Needs. <https://www.ngolens.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/RYEO-English-PRINT.pdf>

¹⁸⁶ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Skopje, 21 August 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Informal conversations with respondents in the municipality of Čair, Skopje, 21 August 2021.



due to “malgovernance” and a “captured state”, entailing high rates of corruption and lack of justice. The same paper suggests that these characteristics deprive Macedonian citizens of a sense of dignity, purpose and meaning.¹⁸⁸

6.3.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

All interlocutors in the region of Sandžak highlighted that corruption corroded all institutions, which contributes to a great extent to citizens’ grievances and, consequently, makes them more susceptible to extreme ideas. For instance, and similar to the situation in Kosovo, a job is impossible to get without connections or party membership, which makes people go abroad in search of a better life or makes them slip in a wrong direction, which can include radical ideas and extreme behavior. As interlocutors highlighted, another trend arousing concern is that politicians lean towards conservative interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism, in order to enforce discipline, enhance easier mobilization and obedient voting.

It should also be noted that political divisions and party affiliations have immense influence on all spheres of citizens’ lives in Sandžak. Political splits are reflected in business and economy, media, religion, even everyday life, and political disputes are increasingly being resolved in street clashes, thus bringing out the risk of political extremism. Physical confrontations, even murders, on a political basis are not a new or uncommon phenomenon in Sandžak. The local elections in 2006 ended with a murder and several injured, and in August 2021 another political murder took place in Sjenica.¹⁸⁹ In the cracks of political upheavals, fierce struggles over scarce resources in an impoverished and marginalized region, coupled with individual and community grievances, opens up a lot of space for political extremism. This may also fuel religious extremism, as its proponents have good arguments for delegitimizing both political and official religious institutions and offering alternative and “pure” views, practices, and institutions.

6.4 Religious/ideological indoctrination

The revival of Islam and Islamism (political Islam), with the whole range of phenomena related to their spread in the WB during the last three decades (such as radical Islamic fundamentalism, jihadism, Salafism and its Wahhabi form), has been associated by most of PREVEX’s respondents with a process of transnational mobilization, penetration and adaptation of “alien” Islamic doctrines. “Imported” mainly from the Arab Middle East, these religious teachings propagate a stricter observance of the Islamic tenets rejecting local Muslim tradition as “deviant” due to the folk elements added in the course of time to its original, “pristine” normative core. In a context, such as the Balkans, with a widely spread religious syncretism, this “Arab” Islam is perceived as having arrived via Saudi and other Middle Eastern, including Turkish, channels, beginning in the 1990s, and often through local preachers and religious

¹⁸⁸ *Sell out, Tune out*, p. 5.

¹⁸⁹ Ljubica Gojčić, “Opasno po život”, *Vreme*, September 1, 2006, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=464948>; S. Novosel, “Troдневna žalost u Sjenici zbog ubistva Edina Hamidovića”, *Danas*, August 14, 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/trodnevna-zalost-u-sjenici-zbog-ubistva-edina-hamidovica/>.



scholars who studied overseas. “Arab” Islam, as labeled by its detractors, claims to lead a return to Islam’s doctrinal roots and strengthen a sense of belonging to the global *umma* – the “imagined community” of Sunni Islam.¹⁹⁰ By contrast, many local Muslims as well as some secular political analysts tend to perceive these Middle Eastern influences as “alien” – a “distortion” of the Islam they used to practice in the Balkan contexts before these recent developments. Apart from this largely transnational process of Islamic revival, in which Balkan Muslims have been involved, religions in the region, including Christianity, have been instrumentalized, and often manipulated, for local ethnonationalist political ends.

6.4.1 Albania

When discussing VE, Albanian respondents tend to emphasize their perception of “distortion of Islam” due to the lack of proper religious understanding as a factor influencing Albanian FTFs. This tendency has already been registered by early research in this field,¹⁹¹ and it is primarily religious practitioners, who describe the lack of a proper understanding of Islam as one of the main factors influencing the Albanian FTFs. Although by claiming this, the religious practitioners may have felt the need to distance their religion from the actions of certain individuals, this “distorted” understanding of Islam may be a valid argument for several reasons. In Albania there have been only mere manifestations of VE before the FTF flow. Albania had not witnessed evident and threatening forms of religious violent extremism before the flow of Albanian FTFs towards Syria and Iraq in the early 2010s. Although violent extremist discourse was present earlier, it did not gain much attention and support, therefore, the state and religious authorities had in some way neglected the fight against religious radicalization, especially the uncontrolled religious practices outside of mainstream Islam.¹⁹² Therefore, the state and religious authorities had in some way neglected the fight against religious radicalization, especially the uncontrolled religious practices outside of mainstream Islam.¹⁹³ As a result, the religious authorities were caught unprepared to deal with the widespread violent extremist propaganda at that time.

There was wide presence of radical narratives by violent extremists and absence of religious counter-narratives by mainstream religious authorities at the beginning of the Syrian conflict. As a focus group participant articulated in Tirana, “*there was a lot of news and a lot*

¹⁹⁰ On the ubiquitous Balkan perceptions of a “traditional” as opposed to “non-traditional” Islam ranging from “Arab”, through Wahhabi or Salafi, to “radical” forms of Islamic experience inspired mostly by the Middle East, see Simeon Evstatiev, “Salafism is Coming: ‘Balkan’ versus ‘Arab’ Islam in Bulgaria under Milletic Secularism”, in Simeon Evstatiev and Dale F. Eickelman (eds.), *Islam, Christianity, and Secularism in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe: The Last Half Century*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022, pp. 74–111.

¹⁹¹ Qirjazi, R & Shehu, R. (2018). *Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania*. Country Case Study 4. Berlin/Tirana: Berghof Foundation and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM). <<http://image.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/>. First launch : 17/10/2018

¹⁹² Vurmo, Gj. et al. (2015). *Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania*. Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation. <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>.

¹⁹³ Vurmo, Gj. et al. (2015). *Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania*. Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation. <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>.



of unclarity at that time about this (Syrian war) issue. Some even claim the (then) Prime Minister of Albania and well-known imams called for the war in Syria."¹⁹⁴

The community discussions have found that the interplay of religious affection, religious ignorance and lack of common sense has been the necessary combination for some FTFs to join the Syrian conflict. An imam in Tirana argued that "*individuals who are at the same time closely related to religion, and also ignorant of religion, are an easy target because they are sincere and believe everything that is said to them. They do not even have a critical approach to question what is said to them.*"¹⁹⁵ A person who is unable to understand religion properly, and at the same time is very emotionally related to their religion, is an easy target for violent extremist recruiters. This aspect was acknowledged widely during the fieldwork, as explained by a key source in Tirana, "*when ignorance is combined with religion, it drives recruits towards undertaking extreme actions.*"¹⁹⁶ The same key source argued that, "*the Muslim individuals who went to Syria for jihad had a very narrow understanding of jihad. Although jihad is highly regarded in Islam, the conditions for organizing jihad have not been met in the case of the Syrian war. Also, jihad is organized by certain institutions and should not be left in the hands of ordinary believers, in complete anarchy. Thus, through religious indoctrination, the religious concept of jihad has been instilled into an empty mind (a Muslim who does not understand Islam properly and lacks common sense).*"¹⁹⁷

The present study has found that emotionally driven radicalization has been an important factor for Albanian FTFs to join the Syrian conflict. Fieldwork findings in the selected areas in Albania suggest that emotional religious appeal and the quest for identity are key drivers of VE. This factor is composed of three different discourses; the first one is linked to the humanitarian appeal of helping the less fortunate. This was achieved by persuading people into empathizing with the suffering of the Syrian people from their brutal dictatorship. Further reinforcing this narrative, the second type of discourse appeals to the religious side of every targeted Muslim believer – reminding Muslims of both their collective obligation (Fard al-Kifayah) as well as their individual duty (Fard al-Ayn) to protect the *umma*. The third type of discourse appealed in particular to those who lacked a sense of belonging, to whom jihadism provided an "in-group" identity. ISIS had constructed its propaganda in a way that offers the group's potential recruits many attractive self-images, which the recruits could use to construct an identity as a better version of themselves. The feeling of excitement caused by the newly acquired identities made the recruits fully adhere to the group's ideology and eventually join it.¹⁹⁸ This aspect was reflected during the fieldwork of this study. An imam explained that the "*character of a person is one of the factors that leads to radicalization. Someone may feel inferior, he may perceive a lack of belonging to a certain group of society. There may be some kind of resentment towards*

¹⁹⁴ Focus group with religious practitioners in Tirana, 18 August, 2021.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with an imam in Tirana, 2 September 2021.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with a representative of Ardhmëria Cultural Association in Tirana, 6 September 2021.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Kruglova, A. (2020). Selling terror: Excitement, emotion-driven choice and ISIS's recruitment in Britain. Available at <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.820554>.



society.”¹⁹⁹ The sense of belonging is a significant part of radicalization, as it is linked to individual perceptions of grievances that contribute to later acts of violence. And, as explained below, this provides a whole range of local-global connections in terms of ideological radicalization and extremist narratives and motivations.

The propaganda of VE is designed to provide its audiences with the competitive system of meaning, which acts as the lens through which their supporters are bound to perceive and judge the world.²⁰⁰ At the core of this system of meaning is typically a single overarching idea, that “we are the champions and protectors of (appropriately-aligned) Muslims (the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow in-group identity are enemies (out-group identities or others) who are responsible for the *umma*’s crises, so support us and our solutions (the militant’s agenda).”²⁰¹ If this system of meaning is successful at captivating their followers, the latter are more vulnerable towards manipulation and prone to abide their charismatic leaders devotedly, regardless of their discourse. Being in close contact with the radical recruiter creates a personal bond for the FTFs, who feel inferior to recruiters, given their lack of religious knowledge and education. The followers regard the radical recruiter as a champion of true Islam not influenced by other actors, unlike mainstream imams, and as such his judgment is only to be obeyed, not questioned. In this sense, Albanian FTFs were not following the radical ideas *per se*, they were only following the imam (recruiter). A focus group participant in Tirana, who used to be in close contact and a supporter of the main violent extremist recruiter in Albania, claimed: “*To be honest, it is easy for a well-spoken imam to deceive me. When the imam [referring to the imprisoned imam] talked, whatever he said was an unquestionable order for us.*”²⁰² The vulnerability to be easily deceived was also confirmed by the other participants during the fieldwork, who stressed that extremist propaganda targeted naive believers.²⁰³

Another aspect highlighted during the fieldwork was the fanaticism among Muslim believers. As a respondent explained, “*when you are fanatic about an imam, you like his opinions, although they do not correspond with the mainstream ideas.*” He then told the story of a close friend who joined a radical group in Tirana. “*I used to be very close to some [Muslim] brothers. After changing the jamaat, they changed their opinions about other imams and acquired the opinions of their new imam. They followed strictly whatever the new imam said.*”²⁰⁴ A similar case was told in Elbasan, when a person radically transformed his look and behaviour after becoming part of a radical group. The participant added, “*the radicalized person then started to not only be part of the group, but also to recruit others, until he was arrested by the police, and is still serving his sentence.*”²⁰⁵ Even in Kamza, there were cases when people changed radically after they started to associate with the main VE group based in Tirana. However, in contrast to the other cities, the community in Kamza reacted to this situation. “*He*

¹⁹⁹ Focus group with mixed group of people in Elbasan, 24 August 2021.

²⁰⁰ Ingram, H. J. (2016) Deciphering Siren Call of Militant Islamic Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioral Change. International Center for Counter-Terrorism, pp. 8-19.

²⁰¹ Ibid. pp. 8-19.

²⁰² Focus group with religious practitioners in Tirana, 18 August 2021.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Focus group with mixed group of people in Elbasan, 24 August 2021.



*did not find support in our mosque. We exposed him within our congregation, to limit his bad influence on others, and we informed the state security institutions.”*²⁰⁶ An imam of one of the main radicalization hotspots in Tirana argued that the previous (imprisoned) imam was highly respected in the community and people did not question his opinions or authority. He said that *“the ruling of the previous Imam was perceived as a law for the community because they perceived him as well-educated and highly knowledgeable. The followers of the imam began to discredit other mainstream imams and exalt their imam. According to them, other imams were not following the truth because they were afraid of the state.”*²⁰⁷

6.4.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

In BiH, the drivers of the war and genocide in the 1990s were explicitly ethno-nationalist, both in the sense that Serbian and Bosnian Serb leaders sought to realize the centuries-long Serb nationalist dream of a Greater Serbia, but also in terms of *how* they prepared and mobilized Serbs across former Yugoslavia for war. This entailed years of indoctrination by political and religious figures and the media, which portrayed the Serbs as existentially threatened by other groups in former Yugoslavia and proposed an ethnically homogenous Serb state as the solution. In essence, a threat against the Serbs was invented, and then was instrumentalized to justify aggression against non-Serbs. Key to this effort were several historical narratives that emphasize Serb valor and victimization through degrees of revisionism, including the “Kosovo Myth”, which reframes the death of Serbian Prince Lazar in a battle against Ottoman forces as sacrificial,²⁰⁸ and the role of the Serb Chetnik forces in World War II. To this day, these narratives retain their power in mobilizing Serb ethno-nationalists and are celebrated by the far-right neo-Chetnik movement, whose rhetoric denies the genocide committed against Bosniaks in the 1990s while highlighting genocidal acts committed against Serbs in World War II.²⁰⁹

The rhetoric and narratives that mobilize various groups in BiH also appear to have a reciprocal effect. In other words, the World War II revisionism and other rhetorical arsenals that inspire Serb ethno-nationalists motivate non-Serb extremists in a way that mutually reinforces the prevailing ideologies of all groups. Similar rhetoric by Bosnian Croat and Bosniak far-right groups (both of which engage, though arguably less systematically, in some World War II revivalism and revisionism) likewise motivates Serb ethno-nationalists. As Tahir Abbas has observed, variations of far-right extremism – whether radical ethno-nationalism or radical clerico-fascism (which are, in many instances, interwoven in BiH) – actually echo each other in many ways and make similar “claims to notions of purity, exclusivity, and omnipotence.”²¹⁰ This has been noted by researchers in BiH and the region, some of whom

²⁰⁶ Interview with an imam in Kamza, 25 August 2021.

²⁰⁷ Interview with an imam in Mëzez, Tirana, 16 August 2021.

²⁰⁸ For more on this, see: Florian Bieber, “Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering: The Kosovo myth from 600th anniversary to the present,” *Rethinking History* 6, no. 1 (2002): 95–110.

²⁰⁹ See: Sead Turčalo and Hikmet Karčić, *The Far Right in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Historical Revisionism and Genocide Denial* (Balkan Insight, 2021).

²¹⁰ Tahir Abbas, “Far Right and Islamist Radicalisation in an Age of Austerity: A Review of Sociological Trends and Implications for Policy,” ICCT Policy Brief, January 2020, 3. Clerico-fascism is a term used to describe organizations and movements that combine religious elements with fascism.



have found that this ideological intersectionality can sometimes make unexpected bedfellows of extremist actors, who should presumably be at odds. During research in Montenegro in 2017, for example, several Salafi extremists expressed their admiration for a local radical Orthodox figure, including one who said he would rather live in an Orthodox theocracy than a liberal democracy; and an Orthodox extremist told researchers he sympathized with Muslim FTFs and had a poster of Osama Bin Laden on his wall.²¹¹ Nonetheless, the many ideological similarities among far-right groups and actors, in BiH and elsewhere, rarely supersede other divisive influences, and as Abbas writes, these groups “engage in configurations of reciprocal hate, demonization, and violence due to the structural dynamics of economic, political, and social division, where notions of collective intra-ethnic identities are undermined by widening structural and cultural fissures across society.”²¹²

In 2020, protests were organized in both Trebinje and Bileća in support of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which clashed with the former Montenegrin government over a contested law on religious rights. Protests in Montenegro had been taking place for more than a year when local leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Trebinje and Bileća joined in, along with branches of the Church in other parts of BiH. A journalist from Trebinje stated that Church leaders there were concerned about the way protests were organized, as well as the idea that their destiny be linked with that of the Church in Montenegro: they had to show solidarity with their fellow Orthodox in Montenegro, and yet they did not want to disturb the image of Trebinje as the tourist town where people of all nationalities feel welcome. “However, they had no choice but to call on their followers to support their ‘Serb brethren’ in Montenegro. The pressure from the headquarters of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade was so strong, they could not resist it.”²¹³ In Bileća, though, an interviewee said these protests “were to be expected” and, in general, interviewees felt the Orthodox Church there is far more radical, reflecting the character of the local community. Still, they noted that the power and position of the Church in Serb majority towns – whether in Bileća or in more moderate Trebinje – means that Church leaders always have the capacity to mobilize citizens if they choose to do so.

The Bihać area, on the other hand, is the home to Bilal Bosnić, who was responsible for inciting and recruiting followers to fight in Syria and Iraq. He was arrested and charged in BiH for these activities in 2014 and served a seven-year prison sentence, but after his release in early September 2021 from detention in Sarajevo, he returned to Bihać. Even before his release, over the last couple of years, security officials voiced concerns that the migrant crisis in Bihać might contribute to enabling radicalization and violent extremism; and although this has not happened, the media spent a short time in September, after his release, focusing its attention on the town and enquiring whether Bosnić was likely to reactivate his Salafist network and local para-jamaat. And then the story died out: it came about just as our interviewees from Bihać said it would: “Sarajevo is interested in us only when they see a problem.”²¹⁴

²¹¹ From notes made by Atlantic Initiative researchers, 2017.

²¹² Abbas, “Far Right and Islamist Radicalisation in an Age of Austerity,” 3.

²¹³ Interview with local journalist in Trebinje, 22 August, 2021

²¹⁴ Interview with local journalist from Bihać, 16 July, 2021



6.4.3 Kosovo

Kosovo's "Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020" (SPVERLT) refers to the Islamist extremism as an underlying driver of VE. Similar to other post-communist countries, Kosovo witnessed a resurgence of religiosity after the fall of communism.²¹⁵ Societal disorientation, high poverty, weak economy, and political void made Kosovo a fertile ground for the resurgence of religion, most conspicuously Islam.²¹⁶

Religious extremism in Kosovo was non-existent during the period between the establishment of Tito's Yugoslavia in 1945 and the rise of Serbia's leader Slobodan Milosevic in the late 1980s. In the next period, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) joined and served in a large measure the nationalistic euphoria led by Milošević, and only few Serbian Orthodox clergymen, including some of those serving in Kosovo, opposed Serbia's nationalistic discourse.²¹⁷ According to Luan Keka, head of the Anti-Terrorism Unit at Kosovo Police, today the SOC continues to be a major factor supporting ethnonationalism, especially in North Mitrovica, where inter-ethnic tensions are recurrent.²¹⁸

Religious indoctrination as a driver of VE in Kosovo demonstrates generational and identity-related aspects. Considerable generational differences have been found in Kosovo, where younger generations are more open to radical and extreme interpretations of Islam than older generations. The resultant feeling of alienation and identity crisis of individuals, who do not rely on either their families or the broader society, is exploited by religious leaders, who promote radical religious ideas.²¹⁹ An earlier study has found that a common denominator between FTFs traveling to Syria was their detachment from society and the quest for group self-identification prior to the decision to join radical groups, either at home or abroad.²²⁰ Put differently, religious ideas have been found to be less important than belonging to a group, which is also reflected in the low levels of religious knowledge among Kosovan FTFs²²¹.

Several lawsuits were filed against imams in Kosovo, the biggest case being that of Zeqirja Qazimi, an imam who lectured at the El Kudus mosque in Gjilan and was sentenced to ten years in prison on charges of indoctrination and recruitment of FTFs.²²² The decisive role of imams is also highlighted by most respondents in three localities, where some of those

²¹⁵ Peci, L. & Demjaha, A. (2020). National Approaches to Extremism: Kosovo. European Institute of the Mediterranean. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/kosovo-country-report-on-national-approaches-to-extremism/>

²¹⁶ Demjaha, A., and Peci, L. (2016). What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period. Policy Paper, (1/16). Available at: http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What_happened_to_Kosovo_Albanians_740443.pdf

²¹⁷ Peci, L. & Demjaha, A. (2020). National Approaches to Extremism: Kosovo. European Institute of the Mediterranean. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/kosovo-country-report-on-national-approaches-to-extremism/>

²¹⁸ Interview with Luan Keka, 2 November 2021

²¹⁹ Kursani, S. (2018a). Extremism Research Forum, Kosovo Report . British Council. Available at: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Kallxo.com. *Zeqirja Qazimi convicted. 20 May 2016*. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/shkurt/denohet-zeqirja-qazimi/>



involved in the war in Syria and Iraq originated from. *“They brainwashed them with lectures, I have no other reasonable explanation”* said a FTF relative.²²³ At the same time, the interviewees are divided regarding the role of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK). Some believe that it had performed its deterring role by identifying and counteracting extreme interpretations of Islam. *“If it was not for our Imam, who protected the village from outside influences, the number of those who would have left for Syria and Iraq and potentially been killed would have been much higher”*, said one of the interviewees.²²⁴ Others claim that the BIK had shown reluctant to face these new currents in the earliest stages, perhaps because it feared them.²²⁵

An issue of particular relevance to Kosovo, as well as other WB countries, is the use of communication platforms for online radicalization.²²⁶ In 2020, Kosovo Police arrested a person who promoted participation in foreign wars through social media. The country has often witnessed cases where extremist individuals used the internet to spread extremist ideologies and recruit adherents.²²⁷ Luan Keka from Kosovo Anti-Terror unit said: *“At the beginning, the dominant forms of spreading radicalization were through direct contact and written literature. In recent years, however, there is a higher concentration of radicalization primarily through the internet, while written literature has been replaced by digital literature”*. The majority of the radicalized individuals in Kosovo have been indoctrinated online through lectures on YouTube and other online portals and social media platforms. Certain websites/networks still transmit lectures with extremist content by the same imams, who were imprisoned for extremist activities. Information technologies are increasingly being used for propaganda, which has clearly served to amplify the dissemination of radical extremist messages.²²⁸

Digital communication systems have also been vital in recruiting Kosovo’s diaspora. Forty-eight of the 255 Kosovar FTFs, or nearly 20 percent, who joined different terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq came from the diaspora.²²⁹ The Kosovar imams, who were propagating political Islam in Kosovo, were also very active in addressing the Albanian-speaking diaspora, exploiting the feelings of isolation and stigmatization among them, whereby some of them ended up in the areas of conflict. The Albanian diaspora was also indoctrinated by propaganda videos widely spread in the Internet addressing the Albanian-speaking audiences. These videos were produced by groups within Kosovo while others were produced by Kosovar ISIS members from Syria or other radical groups.

²²³ Interviews with relatives of and people involved in the wars in Syria and Iraq, November 3-9, 2021

²²⁴ Interview with a citizen in Polac, 3 November 2021.

²²⁵ Interviews held with citizens and relatives in villages Bukovik, Capar, Polac and in Shipol in Mitrovica, 5-9 November 2021.

²²⁶ https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Kosovo_CONNEKT_Macro_Drivers.pdf

²²⁷ Shtuni, A. (2016). Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Perteshi, S. (2020). Kosova Resilience Index. Violent extremism in Kosova: what community resilience can teach us? Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/44199576/KOSOVA_RESILIENCE_INDEX_VIOLENT_EXTREMISM_IN_KOSOVA_WHAT_COMMUNITY_RESILIENCE_CAN_TEACH_US



6.4.4 Republic of North Macedonia

Interviewees in North Macedonia confirmed the observation made by informed observers that most of Macedonia's FTFs did not come from poor families and that their main source of motivation for departing was not financial, but mostly ideological: "*a sense of solidarity with their Muslim co-religionists*"²³⁰ and/or readiness to die as a "*martyr*".²³¹ Others departed for Syria before the proclamation of the Caliphate by ISIS, in order to help the anti-Assad Islamic opposition, and were as such supported by some Macedonian Muslim leaders.²³² But even at this early stage of the Syrian conflict, as a representative of the Macedonian security services observed, some of the foreign fighters were already "*religiously radicalized*".²³³

Some of these individuals appear to still be active in ISIS-affiliated branches. The perpetrator of the November 2020 Vienna attack was an Albanian dual citizen of Austria and North Macedonia.²³⁴ However, Albanian respondents from Tetovo stressed that this individual should not be regarded as an indicative example of the Macedonian context since he grew up and became radicalized abroad.²³⁵

But while during the last few years the danger of Islamist extremism has significantly decreased, due to the defeat of the ISIS and the counter-terrorism legislation and operations conducted by the Macedonian security services,²³⁶ nationalistic discourses, according to some NGO activists and experts in the P/CVE field, is currently gaining momentum and represent a graver danger to the security of RNM.²³⁷ A politician and member of the North Macedonian government at the time of the fieldwork, claimed that radical and, thus, non-mass structures such as the Jihadi-Salafi ones in RNM could be more easily controlled and isolated via various mechanisms. This is not the case, however, with what he called "*mainstream nationalism*", which expands its influence on a larger scale in society.²³⁸ Many of our respondents highlighted the date 27 April 2017,²³⁹ defining the incident as an emblematic example of "*right-wing*

²³⁰ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Skopje, 23 August 2021, Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 26 August 2021. See "Dzhihadisti od Makedonija raskazhuvat: ISIS e lazno islamsko dvizhenje, vidov masakri na ulicite i lugye kakov gorat vo kafezi", 09.08.2018, <https://fokus.mk/djihadisti-od-makedonija-raskazhuvaat-isis-e-lazno-islamsko-dvizhene-vidov-masakri-na-ulicite-i-luge-kakov-gorat-vo-kafezi>, last accessed 12 October 2021.

²³¹ Vasko Šutarov, "The Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Republic of Macedonia and the Western Balkans." – In: *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, ed. Vlado Azinović. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2017, pp. 103–124 (121).

²³² Shpend Kursani and Arbër Fetiu, "The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Kosovo: Covering a Blind Spot." – In: *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, ed. V. Azinović, pp. 83–102 (90–91). Sarajevo: The Atlantic Initiative, 2017; Florian Qehaja and Skënder Perteshi, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

²³³ Interview with a representative of the intelligence agency – Skopje, 26 August 2021.

²³⁴ Aaron Boxerman, "Islamic State claims responsibility for Vienna terror attack". *The Times of Israel*. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-for-vienna-terror-attack/>, last accessed 10 October 2021.

²³⁵ Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Tetovo, 25 August 2021.

²³⁶ Kaltrina Selimi and Filip Stojkovski, *Assessment of North Macedonia's efforts in countering violent extremism, view from civil society*, Skopje: Analytica, 2016, pp. 21–22.

²³⁷ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Struga, 18 August 2021, Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 27 August 2021.

²³⁸ Interview with a politician, member of the current parliament of North Macedonia – Skopje, 20 August 2021.

²³⁹ On 27 April 2017, a huge crowd entered the building of the Macedonian parliament, following the appointment



extremism”, “*extreme [Macedonian] nationalism*”, etc.²⁴⁰ Similarly, in several interviews, it was claimed that the extremism among the Albanians is predominantly nationalistic, not religious. As one of the respondents put it, “*An Islamist won’t die for the Albanian cause*”.²⁴¹ The bitterness that the 2001 armed conflict and subsequent agreement left on both sides feeds into emotive narratives about “historical injustices” and provide a resource for nationalistic mobilization. To this must be added the more recent historical disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, which, as most respondents pointed out, keep high the temperature of the nationalist attitudes in the country.

6.4.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

Serbia’s region of Sandžak, on the other hand, presents itself as an interesting case probing the connection between Islamist and political (far-right, nationalist) extremism. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the presence of the extreme right in Serbia has been strong, often operating like parapolice.²⁴² At the same time, far-right extremism is not perceived by the government in Belgrade as a security concern and has been predominantly tolerated or supported by the current government. Since the region of Sandžak has a Muslim majority, exploring how the rising far-right trend influences Muslims and contributes to Islamist radicalization was important. Therefore, each interview conducted within the research has a featured section addressing this issue.

To the researchers’ surprise, respondents from Sandžak showed indifferent to the rise of the far-right, even though they are well aware of this trend. Even interviewees that could be labelled as Islamist extremists, both violent and nonviolent, are not concerned with a more active Serbian extreme-right. They do not perceive that their life could be endangered in any way. This could be explained by the greater autonomy of the region since 2000. Rather than rendering better integration, this process has resulted in greater isolation of the Sandžak. In this respect, the local population perceives events and processes happening in other parts of Serbia as distant. Interlocutors stressed that it was very important that there was no Serbian far-right group operating in Sandžak or in neighboring towns, so there are no regular incidents that might endanger solid ethnic and religious relationship between Bosniaks and Serbs. Furthermore, in a situation where far-right politics have become an integral part of Serbian mainstream nationalist politics, Muslims become accustomed to anti-Islamic rhetoric and activities and react to right-wing outbursts mainly when they occur directly in the community they live in. By contrast, Muslims living in Belgrade are very concerned with the rise of the far-right and their

of Talat Xhaferi (an ethnic Albanian) as a Chairman of the Assembly. During the incident, there were serious clashes, resulting in dozens of injured. According to local media, the mob consisted primarily of supporters of VMRO-DPMNE, representing radical Macedonian nationalists, and even ‘neo-fascists’.

²⁴⁰ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Skopje, 23 August 2021, Interview with a representative of the intelligence agency – Skopje, 26 August 2021, Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 27 August 2021, Interview with an official from the Municipality of Kumanovo – Kumanovo, 30 August 2021.

²⁴¹ Interview with a politician, member of the current parliament of North Macedonia – Skopje, 20 August 2021, Interview with an Albanian journalist and political analyst – Gostivar, 22 August 2021.

²⁴² Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed. *Preugovor Alarm – Report on the Progress of Serbia in Chapters 23 and 24* (Belgrade: Preugovor, 2021), 107.



activities in Serbia. This is especially true for the Arab population in Belgrade, who fear being confused with the migrants and refugees, thus becoming victims of anti-migrant far-righters.

6.5 Manipulation of ethnic and social grievances for religious and political ends

Political instrumentalization and other types of manipulating various social tensions can be regarded as a factor propelling radicalization and acts of violence. Evidence from the WB contexts indicate that this factor encompasses two types of manipulation in heavy-handed states – religiously-oriented manipulations of social grievances and political instrumentalization of (primarily ethnic) grievances.

6.5.1 Albania

In Albania, the lack of representation was also emphasized during the fieldwork. The majority of key sources and focus group participants argued that violent extremists had instilled in their followers the belief that the mainstream Muslim leaders in Albania distorted Islam, were insincere in their work, and controlled by the government. The government was described as corrupt, unfair and an enemy of Islam and Muslims in Albania. This narrative, as well as the lack of services by the local institutions in their areas, induced many among the FTFs to lose faith in such institutions. A key speaker explained that to make believers more attached to their group, *“recruiters try to delegitimize mainstream Muslim institutions by describing them as being affiliated with the state, and the state as an entity that seeks the destruction of Islam.”*²⁴³ This narrative was also helped by the poor state presence in those areas, as an imam argued, *“state services were non-existent at the time, and the community did not feel represented.”*²⁴⁴

6.5.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Divisive and disruptive political rhetoric has become normalized across BiH over decades. For the most part, citizens are aware that political actors use this rhetoric to distract from their failures to address the many economic, political, and developmental shortcomings of the state; but this does not mean that people are immune to the influence of such rhetoric. And in BiH, where the “peace” declared in 1995 led to something much more like a frozen conflict than anything resembling restorative reconciliation, the political instrumentalization of extremist ethno-nationalist narratives carries especially heightened risks.²⁴⁵

This commitment by Serbs in BiH to the rhetoric of denial has fueled yet another crisis of the state, and this time, it appears more serious than any other similar crisis since the war’s end (and there have been many). The key figure behind this obstructionist boycott of state institutions, but also behind the normalization of radical political rhetoric, is long-time Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik. His popularity among Bosnian Serbs has helped position him as a

²⁴³ Interview with Muslim official in Maliq, 31 August 2021

²⁴⁴ Interview with an imam in Mëzez, Tirana, 16 August 2021

²⁴⁵ Even UN officials have referred to conditions in BiH as a “de facto frozen conflict.” See: United Nations, “Bosnia and Herzegovina Remains in Effect ‘a Frozen Conflict’ as Political Leaders Push Nationalistic Agendas, High Representative Tells Security Council,” press release, 4 May 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14511.doc.htm> (accessed 12 November 2021).



member of the tripartite Bosnian Presidency, which affords him considerable international legitimacy even though he has effectively ruled the RS as an autocrat for the last several years and has repeatedly called for its secession from BiH. And while Dodik’s previous secessionist rhetoric has been alarming, his latest provocations in 2021 may be his most dangerous yet, as he has threatened to order all Serbs to depart from all state institutions, including from the Armed Forces of BiH.²⁴⁶ The degree to which people across BiH support the political desires of ethno-nationalist political forces or view them as a potential reality varies widely, sometimes from one local community to another despite their similar ethnic majorities. And in a country where so many citizens have strong memories of the mass violence they suffered or witnessed due to their identities, it is especially challenging to battle extremism driven by grievance and threat narratives meant to play on perceived risks to national or cultural identity.

Far-right extremists across the region view the multicultural and multi-denominational tradition of BiH as a dangerous aberrance. They seek state borders drawn exclusively along ethnic-religious lines and fear that EU membership of Western Balkan countries will undermine national identities. These ethnic politics are intertwined with religion in such a way that extremist groups with an Orthodox Christian or Catholic identity promote narratives claiming that Christianity and Christians (i.e., Serbs and Croats) are under threat, and Salafi groups claim that Islam and Muslims (i.e., Bosniaks) are under threat; but in each case, this rhetoric has leaked beyond the edges of the most radical fringe and has increasingly become normalized even among many of the political forces that call themselves “moderate”.

Foreign influencers are playing an increasingly prominent role within BiH by manipulating the many weaknesses of the state to support the anti-democratic activities of ethno-nationalist actors. What this amounts to, as Clapp puts it, is “the most salient, and dangerous, example of ongoing elite collusion,” within the country and across borders. “What the armies could not thrash out twenty years ago,” he writes, “is now being steadily carried out by bureaucratic machination.” Still, Clapp observes a crucial reality on the ground in BiH, which is reflected regularly in the statements of participants in our research but seems to be misunderstood or overlooked by most outside analysts: many citizens in BiH view elites from all groups as equally corrupt and untrustworthy, and do not believe these actors are concerned with the best interests of “their” group or the country. After the election of a Serb mayor in Srebrenica, which drew international outrage, Clapp noted that local Bosniaks directed their ire not at Serbs, but at “their own political elites, who, they believed, had deliberately ceded Srebrenica to the Serbs in order to consolidate their administrative control of the Federation further west.”²⁴⁷

The Bosnian case of Bihac demonstrates the use of religious belonging for manipulating people. While it would be irresponsible and naïve to dismiss the possibility that Bosniac could

²⁴⁶ See: Mersiha Gadzo, “Bosnians worried push to create Serb army may prompt violence,” *Al Jazeera*, 5 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/5/bosnians-worried-push-to-create-serb-army-may-spark-violence>; Marko Prelec and Ashish Pradhan, “Grappling with Bosnia’s Dual Crises,” International Crisis Group Q & A, 9 November 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/bosnia-and-herzegovina/grappling-bosnias-dual-crises> (accessed 12 November 2021).

²⁴⁷ Clapp, “Bosnia’s Sordid Independence.”



reassert his influence over local Salafists, or target youth for indoctrination, a majority of the officials, civil society representatives, and imams we spoke with, believe his influence has waned considerably. Still, a police officer in Bihać noted that it was only after Bosnić was arrested that significant issues with the local Salafi community ceased to occur, suggesting the centrality of Bosnić himself to the extremism previously displayed by that community. Prior to his arrest, this officer explained, “*para-jamaats formed around [Bosnić]. Basically... the Salafi community comprised people from Bilal’s circle. These were mostly people from the lower strata of society. He is a rather charismatic person, and he knew how to attract followers and to manipulate them.*”²⁴⁸ Indeed, Bosnić has “made something of an industry out of providing *ruqya* [faith healing], opening up his home... as a spiritual rejuvenation center” thus building intimate relationships with people who were often highly susceptible to the influence of a spiritual “authority”.²⁴⁹

6.5.3 Kosovo

In Kosovo, according to Luan Keka, there is close correlation between the rise of political tensions and the arousal of ethnonationalism.²⁵⁰ In an interview, titled “North Mitrovica – a safe haven for extremist and organized crime”, Fatos Makolli, a former national PVE coordinator, explains that there are three different structures in North Mitrovica: the Serbian parallel structures, organized crime groups, and extremist groups or organizations. The latter two work freely and hand in hand with Serbian parallel structures, whose main goal is to keep the population in the north isolated and undermine the legitimacy of Kosovo authorities in the north. The cooperation amongst these three groups became obvious by several violent acts. In 2008, a border point in Kosovo was burnt down,²⁵¹ and in 2011 a Kosovo Police officer was killed,²⁵² while for about two years, streets in the northern part remained blocked by barricades put up by radical Serbs.²⁵³

Another mobilizing factor that turned up from the interviews were the parallels drawn between the situation in Kosovo until 1999, when the majority of the population was subject to repression by the Milosević’s regime, and the policies pursued by the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Although the great majority of respondents exclude the impact of family tragedies and war traumas as drivers for the involvement of Kosovar youth in the wars in Syria and Iraq, due to the young age of those involved during the war in Kosovo in 1998–99, there was at least one case where a family had lost members both in the Kosovo war and the war in Syria. Several other interviewees, on the other hand, claimed that the entire operation of involving Kosovar youth in the wars in Syria and Iraq was aimed at politically destabilizing Kosovo – a threat posed by states hostile to Kosovo’s statehood – starting from the

²⁴⁸ Interview with police officer in Bihać, 17 July, 2021

²⁴⁹ Azinović and Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War*, 63.

²⁵⁰ Interview with Luan Keka, head of the Anti-Terror Unit of Kosovo Police. November 2, 2021.

²⁵¹ Radio Free Europe. April 2014. North Kosovo Serbs Halt Cooperation With EU Mission. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/north-kosovo-serbs-halt-cooperation-with-eu-mission/25352966.html>

²⁵² Radio Free Europe. July 2011. Available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/24277801.html>

²⁵³ Balkan Insight. June 2014. Kosovo removes symbol of division in the north. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/06/18/kosovo-removes-symbol-of-division-in-the-north/>



indoctrination of young people by “imams sold abroad” to recruiting and financing participation in the wars in Syria and Iraq.

6.5.4 Republic of North Macedonia

Almost all interviewees in RNM agreed that, in many cases, the processes of rival radicalization in the country had been deliberately instigated by leading politicians and their parties.²⁵⁴ Ideological radicalism, they intimated, is often strongly influenced by local political parties. For instance, the active reproduction of radical ethno-nationalist and xenophobic narratives by specific groups of people (e.g., supporters of leading football clubs in the country),²⁵⁵ in almost all cases was deliberately instigated or sanctioned by politicians.²⁵⁶ Some respondents claimed that, in order to earn political benefits, some of the major parties often deliberately provoke inter-communal conflicts and even armed clashes: e.g., the 2002 Rashtanski Lozja action, the 2012 Smilkovci lake killings, the 2015 Kumanovo clashes, as well as the 2017 storming of Macedonian Parliament.²⁵⁷ Besides such major outbursts of violence, there are frequent cases of inter-communal clashes on a smaller scale, e.g., school fights between Macedonian and Albanian students.²⁵⁸ Another immanent feature of Macedonian political life is the chronic exploitation of nationalist tensions in order to attract voters, especially at times of parliamentary elections.²⁵⁹

6.6 Low trust in institutions

Lack of trust in government institutions which do not provide basic services for all its citizens,

²⁵⁴ Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest – Skopje, 20 August 2021, Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Skopje, 23 August 2021, Interview with an Albanian journalist – Skopje, 23 August 2021.

²⁵⁵ Previous reports concerning P/CVE in North Macedonia emphasized that among the militants who traveled to fight abroad (in Syria and Ukraine), there were men who had previously participated in football-related subcultures. See Florian Qehaja and Skënder Perteshi, *The Unexplored Nexus: Issues of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Macedonia*, Prishtinë: KCSS, 2018, pp. 34-35; Alush Doda and Marina Mclellan, *Promoting a Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: Summary report of roundtable discussions on the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism in the Republic of North Macedonia*, Skopje: OSCE, 2020, p. 32.

²⁵⁶ Some of the leaders of football fan clubs are members of political parties (Interview with an Albanian journalist – Skopje, 23 August 2021, Interview with a representative of the NGO sector and anthropologist – Skopje, 24 August 2021). Studies also highlight the links between sport fan clubs and political parties in RNM. See Alush Doda and Marina Mclellan, *Op. cit.*, pp. 23, 32.

²⁵⁷ Both the 2015 Kumanovo clashes and the 2017 storming of Macedonian Parliament were represented in the media mainly as orchestrated by ex-prime minister Nikola Gruevski. The first incident was thought to change the focus of public attention from the diminishing popularity of VMRO-DPMNE, while the second allegedly aimed to prevent the peaceful transition of political authority towards the new SDSM-led coalition. See *Sell out, Tune out, Get out, or Freak out? Understanding Corruption, State Capture, Radicalization, Pacification, Resilience, and Emigration in Bosna and Herzegovina and North Macedonia*. Skopje: EUROTHINK – Center for European Strategies, 2021, pp. 76–77; Susan Woodward, “Keynote Speech.” – In: *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 31st Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe,” eds. Filip Ejduš, Predrag Jureković, pp. 11–21, p. 17. Vienna: Study Group Information, 2016.

²⁵⁸ Filip Stojkovski, *Perceptions of front-line school workers and community officials from Skopje, Kumanovo, Tetovo and Gostivar on radicalization leading to violent extremism*, Skopje: Centre for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) and Centre for Education Development (CED), 2019, p. 20.

²⁵⁹ Interview with an Albanian journalist – Skopje, 23 August 2021. See also Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Op. cit.*, p. 3.



certainly contributes to increased religiosity and might serve as a driver of radicalization. When citizens are disappointed with everyday life within a community and sense that institutions do not provide for their existential needs, they are more likely to search for a purpose and identity in religion.²⁶⁰

A 2020 survey carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that only one-third of WB citizens on average have confidence in national governments, considerably lower compared to the OECD member countries and the EU. Since 2007, trust levels dropped in BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia, and improved in Albania and Serbia. On average 67 percent of WB citizens do not trust the judiciary and the courts and only 57 percent are satisfied with the education system and schools. Another worrying trend is that younger people in the WB trust their governments less on average compared to their OECD and EU counterparts.²⁶¹

6.6.1 Albania

The failure of state institutions in Albania to provide basic services such as security, healthcare, rule of law and education is a major cause of discontent, leading to exacerbated grievances and a further detachment of individuals from the state.²⁶² The lack of consolidation of state presence, inefficient institutions, and widespread corruption and impunity, have influenced the rise of violent extremism in Albania.²⁶³ Public trust in domestic institutions in Albania is low, as the majority of the citizens perceive the government as not transparent or accountable. They perceive corruption as a widespread phenomenon, and most Albanians think that they do not have sufficient opportunities to participate in the decision-making of public institutions.²⁶⁴

6.6.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The power structures and the post-Dayton political paralysis in BiH both play a role in the administrative dysfunction that plagues BiH – which is directly linked to problems of social and economic development, corruption (and thus, distrust in institutions), and the sense among citizens that they have very limited prospects in BiH – and both feed narratives of in-group risk. As Turčalo and Veljan put it, Dayton has “created a constitutional reality that perpetuates the political extremism of the war.”²⁶⁵ In their research, respondents across BiH cited “corruption generally and corrupt politicians specifically, [and] unreliable institutions” as the biggest challenges facing their communities.²⁶⁶ This is important because even the most cautious

²⁶⁰ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, “Western Balkans Extremisms Forum – Serbia Report”, British Council, April 2018, https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf.

²⁶¹ OECD (2020), *Government at a Glance: Western Balkans*, Paris: OECD Publishing, esp. pp.29-40.

²⁶² Qirjazi R. & Shehu, R. (2018). *Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania*. Country Case Study 4. Berlin/Tirana: Berghof Foundation and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM). <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/community-perspectives-on-preventing-violent-extremism-in-albania>.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Vrugtman, L. and Dauti, M. (2021). *Trust in Governance 2020 Opinion Poll*. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Available via: <https://idmalbania.org/trust-in-governance/>.

²⁶⁵ Turčalo and Veljan, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 22.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 23.



analyses of links between corruption and violent extremism argue that “corruption is both a cause and consequence of governance deficits, and may create or sustain conditions that could fuel violent extremism.”²⁶⁷

In BiH, the Dayton system itself is an “umbrella” driver of extremism. The BiH case study under PREVEX highlights a number of other drivers – from economic development to lack of trust in government – as stemming from several legacies of the 1990s. The comparative analysis of Trebinje and Bileća, for example, demonstrates how the wartime experiences of people in both towns continue to echo in social relations today. In Stolac, the extent to which people feel they have truly democratic representation, and what this means in a “Dayton democracy”, is clearly a factor that inhibits greater inter-ethnic cooperation and encourages continued ethnic segregation.²⁶⁸ And in the case of Bihac, state neglect for decades, but especially in the face of the migrant crisis, is a factor driving potential political conflict.

6.6.3 Kosovo

The case of Kosovo exemplifies low trust in institutions on account of both socio-economic and political reasons. According to data from the Balkan Barometer, 43 percent of Kosovars feel to be losers because they cannot find a job.²⁶⁹ Frustrations are particularly strong in cases where individuals who have received higher education are confronted with no job opportunities, or available jobs do not correspond to the level of education achieved.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, there exists a general perception that to gain employment in the public sector, family connections, party allegiance, and bribes, are more important than education and professional experience.²⁷¹

Another survey conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council asked the Kosovar public which factors they think contribute most to radicalization and VE in Kosovo. The answers indicate that in 2021, the majority of people consider unemployment as the main driver, followed by the weakness of state and the propaganda/fake news and social media (see Figure 5). The existence of social cohesion within communities with different religious and ethnic belongings notwithstanding, there is a lack of cooperation and interaction between the

²⁶⁷ Anga Timilsina and Jide Okeke, “Reducing corruption could help prevent violent extremism,” *UNDP* (blog), 4 May 2018, <https://www.undp.org/blog/reducing-corruption-could-help-prevent-violent-extremism> (accessed 4 November 2021).

²⁶⁸ Essentially, Bosniaks and Croats in Stolac both reported feeling a lack of representation and/or access to power, but for different reasons and at different levels. While Bosnians of all ethnicities are generally distrustful of politicians, who they view as mostly (or wholly) corrupt, many will fall in line at election time and vote with their co-ethnics to support ethnically-aligned and ethno-nationalist parties, the goal of which is to maintain divides, not foster cooperation.

²⁶⁹ Regional Cooperation Council (2021). *Balkan Public Barometer*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

²⁷⁰ British Council. Shpend Kursani and Krzysztof Krakowski. May 2021. *An Experimental Survey Study of Types and Expectations of Violence in Kosovo: Engagement in Foreign Wars, Nationalist Riots and Violent Protests*, p.5. Available at: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/study_of_types_and_expectations_of_violence_in_kosovo_may_2021.pdf

²⁷¹ United Nations Development Programme and U.S. Agency for International Development (2020). *Public Pulse XVIII*. Retrieved from: https://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/public-pulse-xviii.html



communities and the state level, and citizens in general have low levels of trust towards the municipal and central state institutions.²⁷²

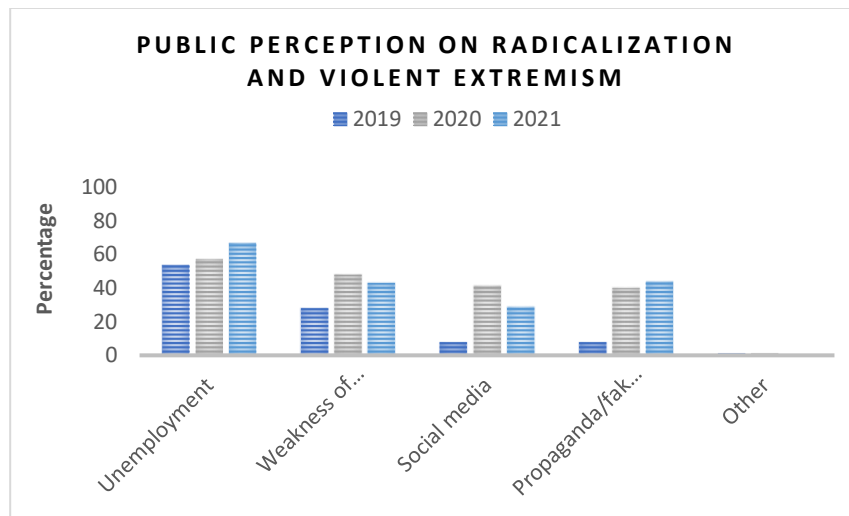


Figure 5: DK/Refuse was removed because it had very few to none answers to it. Data source: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public>

The perception of injustice and inequality was present in official statements made by FTFs to Kosovo Police, recalls Fatos Makolli, a previous head of counter-terrorism in Kosovo Police.²⁷³ The perception of injustice and stigmatization due to their religious identity was a reason for many FTFs to feel frustrated and look for alternatives promising a more just society and system. Narratives used by ISIS, that in Syria they were creating a just system under the law of God, was appealing for many of these frustrated Kosovar FTFs. Among those interviewed, there were at least two cases (one involving a fighter in the war in Syria and Iraq), where dissatisfaction with the way the country is governed, corruption, but also the breach of fundamental rights and freedoms of members of the Muslim community – such as denial of education for veiled girls, labelling, or unequal treatment – were mentioned as causes for involvement in the wars in Syria and Iraq. The latter were seen as an opportunity to join a state that functions in accordance with Islamic principles.²⁷⁴

6.6.4 Republic of North Macedonia

In RNM, the poor functioning of official institutions – combined with the widespread corruption and clientelism – is among the main reasons for the high levels of mistrust of Macedonian citizens towards their state.²⁷⁵ While such attitudes can be observed within both major ethnic

²⁷² Perteshi, S. (2020). Kosova Resilience Index. Violent extremism in Kosova: what community resilience can teach us? Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/44199576/KOSOVA_RESILIENCE_INDEX_VIOLENT_EXTREMISM_IN_KOSOVA_WHAT_COMMUNITY_RESILIENCE_CAN_TEACH_US

²⁷³ Interview with Fatos Makolli, head of the Anti-Terror Unit at Kosovo Police. 2 November 2021

²⁷⁴ Interview with a returnee, Skenderaj. November 6, 2021.

²⁷⁵ See Marta Szpala, Macedonia: a superficial democracy in the shadow of crises, *OSW Commentary*, No. 206, 31 March 2016. https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_206.pdf, last accessed 14 October 2021..



communities,²⁷⁶ Albanians tend to be much more skeptical towards the central government than towards their local municipal authorities. According to some local analysts, this is indicative of the fact that many Albanians do not consider the state as their own.²⁷⁷ Furthermore, previous fieldwork had indicated that many of the Macedonian citizens who joined foreign militant groups were motivated by their “disenchantment with the political system in the country.”²⁷⁸

6.6.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

Trust in institutions is very low in the Sandžak region. Confidence in the armed forces, police and intelligence service is significantly lower among minorities than among the Serbian population.²⁷⁹ Previous research has demonstrated that ethnic Bosniaks and Albanians tend to have lower than average confidence in institutions, both central and local.²⁸⁰ These percentages are particularly low for youth in Sandžak, according to a public opinion poll conducted back in 2016.²⁸¹ Only 5 percent of the Sandžak youth trust the police, whereas only 2 percent trust the judiciary. According to a public opinion survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in September 2020, more than a third of citizens of Serbia see organized crime (25 percent) and corruption (15 percent) as the main internal security threats, while many perceive institutions to be highly corrupt, especially the judiciary and the police, serving only the interest of politicians, business magnates, and criminals.²⁸² Previous research has shown that almost nine out of 10 Bosniaks (87 percent) think that the risk of corruption is high, which is a larger percentage than within other ethnic groups in Sandžak. These findings suggest that the population of Sandžak experience even more problems with corrupted politicians, civil servants, law enforcement officers, and so on, than the rest of the population of Serbia.

The Covid-19 pandemic not only further jolted already fragile trust in state institutions, as the overburdened health system in Sandžak completely broke down in the summer of 2020,²⁸³ but also demonstrated how organized and agile are some of the Salafi organizations in the region. They have been among the most successful during the pandemic in coordinating and distributing help to those in need. The Covid-19 crisis has shown that they are very well

²⁷⁶ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector and anthropologist – Skopje, 24 August 2021. Such a notion was suggested by some previous policy papers as well. See. Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁷⁸ Florian Qehaja and Skënder Perteshi, *Op. cit.*, pp. 27–28.

²⁷⁹ BCBP, “Bezbednosni Barometar Zapadnog Balkana - Poverenje građana Srbije u bezbednosne i pravosudne institucije”, *Kosovski centar za bezbednosne studije i Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku*, November 2020, https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WBSB_SerbiaReport_Serb.pdf.

²⁸⁰ Bojan Klačar, Ivo Čolović, Aleksandra Marković and Emilija Orestijević, “Assessment of Violent Extremism in Serbia”, CESID, December 2019, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TH7V.pdf.

²⁸¹ Vladimir Ilić, *Stavovi mladih u Sandžaku: Koliko su mladi otvoreni prema islamskom ekstremizmu*, (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2016), <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/sveske35.pdf>.

²⁸² Marija Ignjatijević, Bojan Elek and Marija Pavlović, *Boosting Armament to Fight Demographic Decline, Crime and Corruption – Public Opinion on Security* (Belgrade, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2020), <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/boosting-armament-to-fight-demographic-decline-crime-and-corruption-public-opinion-on-security/>.

²⁸³ Sandra Maksimović, “Novi Pazar is the biggest hotspot of COVID-19 in Serbia”, *EWB*, July 07, 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/07/novi-pazar-is-the-biggest-hotspot-of-covid-19-in-serbia/>.



connected and can quickly mobilize volunteers and react in solidarity with citizens. Interlocutors have drawn attention to the fact that Salafi organizations tend to spread ultra-conservative views (although not violent), alongside many positive actions and initiatives they do for the community. For instance, it was highlighted that the humanitarian organization *Put Sredine* (Middle Way),²⁸⁴ while distributing help, persuaded women to cover themselves.

6.7 Inadequate educational system

Some aspects of the educational systems in the Western Balkan countries are problematic in that they nurture ethno-religious segregation which creates two “parallel worlds” among the younger generations. Kosovo Serbs and Albanians attend separate classes “in their own languages” as do the Albanians and Macedonians in the RNM. The solution of the “two schools under one roof” system adopted by some WB governments is a delay-action bomb with unforeseen consequences in the near future for social peace and social cohesion. In addition, there is evidence that the insufficient control on the curriculum and the educational process in religious subjects may result in the infiltration of radical preachers, turning religious classes into a hotbed of extremist ideologies.

6.7.1 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The “two schools under one roof” system has been condemned in BiH for years, by a chorus of Bosnian voices as well as international observers, and has been characterized by the OSCE as a form of discrimination that violates the right to education.²⁸⁵ In a 2018 report, the OSCE tied this system to the tendency of political leaders in BiH to “leverage identity politics for their own political gains” and described its continuation so long after the war’s end as “more a reflection of the success of [that] political strategy” than of any value to students.²⁸⁶ The report also emphasized that the commonality among these schools is that “they segregate children, and through this segregation teach them that there are inherent differences between them. In post-conflict BiH, this increases mistrust among members of different national groups, impedes reconciliation and is a long-term threat to stability, security, and economic prosperity.”²⁸⁷ Conducting the present research across BiH, we have often heard very similar views expressed by parents, teachers, and activists. During a focus group conducted in 2019, for instance, women educators in the city of Zenica called the system “a vehicle for both ethnonational and religious radicalization.”²⁸⁸ And in a survey conducted by the Atlantic Initiative team in 2020, 57% of respondents identified the “two schools” system as a security threat.²⁸⁹

Still, in many ways, segregated schools in BiH are merely a localized reflection of formal and informal structures that administer social life across the country, at all levels. The “two

²⁸⁴ For more details see Put Sredine Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/putsredine/>.

²⁸⁵ OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, ““Two Schools Under One Roof”: The Most Visible Example of Discrimination in Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” November 2018.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸⁸ Mirza Buljubašić, “Women’s Empowerment and Resilience to Violent Extremism in Bosnia & Herzegovina: A Subnational Qualitative Assessment,” *Democracy and Security in Southeastern Europe* VII, no. 1 (2020):

²⁸⁹ Halilović and Veljan, *Exploring Ethno-Nationalist Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 25.



schools under one roof” system was supposed to be a temporary solution for the immediate post-war years, as parents feared their children could face hostility in the classroom; that it has endured in some parts of the country is one of many indications that the Dayton Peace Agreement has done more to freeze aspects of the conflict in place than to facilitate movement past it. Many have pointed to the Agreement as flawed, and there is much to critique – from its role in legitimizing the wartime Serb para-state by establishing the Republika Srpska within roughly the same borders, to its “ethnicizing” effect on the country by designating governing roles for “constituent peoples”, but not for Bosnians who do not identify as Bosniak, Croat, or Serb.²⁹⁰

This more integrated and less conservative social environment in the case of Trebinje foregrounded within the present study was also reflected in the opinions of interviewees, most of whom were Serb, that the education system in BiH must change. They expressed the view that children are being indoctrinated to be disloyal to the state of BiH, and to treat the RS as independent and sovereign. Interviewees highlighted this as one of the ways younger generations are being ideologically prepared to accept the secession of the RS, and they asserted that teaching children to be nationalists is “a road to disaster”. Some made suggestions to researchers about how to improve the Bosnian education system, while others simply expressed exasperation about the system as it is: “*Children must be taught that the RS is an entity and a part of the state of BiH*”²⁹¹; “*It would be useful to have regular excursions so that children could learn about other places and peoples,*”²⁹²; “*The policies of the past must change because they maintain extremist narratives.*”²⁹³

Extremist religious training and propaganda was significantly weakened, according to officials, after the arrest of Bilal Bosnić in 2014, which was a key factor that put under control the influence of Salafism in Una Sana Canton. Most of the Salafi groups that remained outside the Islamic Community after its 2016 integration of some para-*jamaats* have ceased to exist and even the one para-*jamaat* in Stijene that is considered operational has no significant activities and has not engaged in any proselytizing since the arrest of Bosnić. Albeit there is an insignificant “homegrown” threat of extremism in Bihać today, the problem now are the “guest lecturers” who travel from Sarajevo to speak at locations across Una Sana Canton. This includes highly popular figures in the Bosnian Salafi movement, such as Safet Kuduzović and Elvedin Pezić, both of whom have formally accepted the authority of the Islamic Community and are therefore viewed by security officials as non-violent, but whose rhetoric continues to reflect

²⁹⁰ For example, see: US House of Representatives, 115th Congress, Hearing of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, “The Dayton Legacy and the Future of Bosnia and the Western Balkans,” 18 April 2018. Just a handful of the analyses that have linked the Dayton Agreement to ethno-national hegemony and radicalization in BiH include: Amra Sabic-El-Rayess, “How do people radicalize?” *International Journal of Educational Development* 87 (2021); Janusz Bugajski, “Bosnia’s Volatility: Bosnia-Herzegovina Is a Politically Frozen State Veering Toward Further Ethnic Division,” 10 October 2018, Center for European Policy Analysis, <https://cepa.org/bosnias-volatility/> (accessed 4 November 2021); and Alexander Clapp, “Bosnia’s Sordid Independence,” *The National Interest*, 16 August 2017.

²⁹¹ Interview with writer from Trebinje, 20 August, 2021

²⁹² Interview with local citizen/parent in Trebinje, 21 August, 2021

²⁹³ Interview with local citizen in Trebinje, 21 August, 2021



Salafi ideals and not those of moderate Bosnian Islam. To counter these influences, the Islamic Community has implemented activities in Bihać through its Youth Network and Department of Marriage and Family. These educational and assimilation activities are designed to promote the Hanafi school of Islamic thought and the customs of Bosnian Islam to local youth and families who have adopted Salafism or are influenced by it.

6.7.2 Kosovo

Whereas the national system of public education in Albania draws on a relatively homogeneous and secularized dominant ethnic group, some radicalized citizens of Kosovo have been introduced to radical Islamist and extremist ideologies in public schools in some EU countries. An indicative example of radicalization in school is the case of Bujar Behrami – a Kosovar born in Belgium, coming from a secularized modern family with no links to radical Islam. At his school in Belgium he attended Islamic religious classes led by a teacher, who came from Chechnya and who subsequently evolved into a well-known extremist imam. As a result, Behrami became radicalized and involved heavily in spreading Islamist extremist propaganda. While on vacation in Kosovo, Behrami was arrested and detained for a while by Kosovo Police for his propagandistic activities. After this event, his family decided to leave Belgium and moved to Germany, hoping that the milieu in a new country would disengage him from the extremist ideology and extremists networks. However, Behrami continued his activity mainly through internet by spreading Islamist extremism, recruiting people to commit terrorist acts in Kosovo, financing terrorism, etc. He was investigated by Kosovo authorities for involvement in planning and financing terrorist acts in cooperation with other extremists based in Syria and Kosovo. In 2018, at the request of Kosovo judiciary Behrami was arrested by the German authorities and extradited to Kosovo, where he was sentenced for planning terrorist acts. A PISA report²⁹⁴ showed that Kosovo pupils are not educated to read and think critically, whereas data from the Ministry of Education showed that less than 10 percent of school teachers are trained in media literacy and coping with cases indicating signs of extremisms amongst younger generations.²⁹⁵

Already between 1990 and 1999, when Kosovo had a parallel government in exile operating from Germany, the quality of education fell sharply due to harsh conditions and the devastating economic situation. Besides major inter-ethnic tensions, by the beginning of the 21st century Kosovo found itself almost ruined by war – its society was left traumatized and hopeless, and a large segment of the population lived in extreme poverty. On the list of PISA, measuring the level of education among youths, Kosovo ranks at the very bottom.²⁹⁶ At the same time, it is notable – also in view of evaluating the proper role of educational level – that Kosovar FTFs have moderate rather than poor formal education levels, thus suggesting that it

²⁹⁴OECD's Programme on International Student Assessment (PISA). 2018. Student performance and equity in education. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/7a4a5fdf-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/7a4a5fdf-en>

²⁹⁵ Kallxo.com. Thousands of teachers in Kosovo, yet, only 3 thousand trained to work with returned children. 20 October 2021. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/gjate/mijera-mesues-ne-kosove-vetem-rreth-3-mije-moren-trajtime-per-trajtim-te-femijeve-te-rikthyer/>

²⁹⁶ Kallxo.com. *PISA Results for Kosovo are shocking but surprising*. 7 December 2016. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/gjate/analize/rezultatet-e-pisa-s-per-kosoven-tronditin-por-nuk-cuditin/>



is not necessarily the less educated segments of society who are recruited.²⁹⁷

In addition, the educational system in Kosovo does not guarantee that all Kosovo youth learn the same lessons. Schools where the subjects are taught in Serbian language do not follow the Kosovo official curricula as presented and approved by the Ministry of Education. Thus, Kosovo Albanian youth learn a different version of history, geography, civil education, etc. compared to Serbian students. As a consequence, the two communities acquire their knowledge about the country's past via two different "regimes of truth", which constantly breeds conflict between ethnic Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo.

6.7.3 Republic of North Macedonia

In RNM, the inadequate educational system, especially religious education, is highlighted by some recent publications as a driver of extremist narratives.²⁹⁸ Muslims who had received high-quality religious education in prestigious Middle Eastern universities, upon returning home, often became proponents of more radical interpretations of Islam, and are often believed to be potential preachers of extremist ideologies. Local Muslims, especially in rural areas, on the other hand, lack in-depth knowledge about the doctrines of their religion and adhere to a predominantly syncretic folk version of Islam, which stands in stark contrast to – and even conflict with – some purist religious interpretations, such as Salafism. Representatives of the Islamic Religious Community in RNM (IRC) thus consider religious education abroad as an issue with negative implications. Officials of a regional branch of the authorized IRC strongly emphasized the urgent need for legalizing Islamic secondary schools in the country, which should prevent young people from going abroad in order to receive their religious education and, thus, be potentially exposed to various extremist networks.²⁹⁹

The Ohrid Agreement of 2001 significantly enhanced cultural rights for local Albanians, including the right to instruction in the mother tongue. The result, however, was enhancing "ethnicization" in schools. Currently, the educational system in North Macedonia, similar to the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, functions as an ethnically segregated one. It is common in mixed regions that pupils from different ethnicities attend school in shifts, i.e. at different times of the day. This situation reduces the contact among students of different ethnic backgrounds to a minimum.³⁰⁰ Where schools are mixed, classes are formed on an ethnic basis; mixed classes are said to result in frequent fights (*tepački*).³⁰¹ Instruction takes place almost exclusively in the mother tongue of each community.³⁰² Thus, the educational system in both

²⁹⁷ Shtuni, A. (2016). Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

²⁹⁸ See Filip Stojkovski and Natasia Kalajdziovski, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Macedonia: Country Case Study 1*, Research Article, Berlin/Skopje: Berghof Foundation and Democracy Lab, 2018, pp. 15–17, 24–25.

²⁹⁹ Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Tetovo, 25 August 2021.

³⁰⁰ [Usaid.gov/results-data/success-stories/young-people-set-example-ethnic-integration-macedonia](https://www.usaid.gov/results-data/success-stories/young-people-set-example-ethnic-integration-macedonia).

³⁰¹ Interview with a former Macedonian politician – Skopje, 20 August 2021.

³⁰² Gëzim Xhaferri, "Language policy and language learning in Macedonia. Which lessons may be adopted from the Swiss model?" *Linguistik Online* vol. 64, 2/2014, pp. 29–33; (<https://bop.unibe.ch/linguistik-online/article/view/1374/2320>); Sara Barbieri, Roska Vrgova, Jovan Bliznakovski, *Overcoming Ethnic-Based*



the RNM and BiH, instead of promoting inter-ethnic socialization, keeps reinforcing ethnic divides. Young respondents with Albanian background said that socialization with ethnic Macedonians is practically impossible.³⁰³

6.7.4 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

In the Serbian region of Sandžak, where language and education in the mother tongue is not an issue, Bosniak and Serbian children are organized separately in terms of religious education. Several interlocutors working in educational institutions, highlighted that this had contributed to deepening the gap between the two communities and that learning about different religions at a young age would be very important in preventing later religious radicalization. The majority of interviewees from Novi Pazar agree that persons who turn to religion “overnight” are at greater risk of becoming violent extremists than those who practice religion over a longer period and has solid religious education. Many young people from Sandžak go to study abroad in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and upon return, become more religious, with greater potential for radicalization, as agreed by a majority of interlocutors.

Similar to North Macedonia, although incidents along ethnic or religious lines practically do not exist, there is no communal life and essential mixing of the two communities. For instance, inter-religious marriages are still a taboo and some neighborhoods are ethnically homogenous. This type of living in parallel worlds next to each other is also one of the drivers of radicalization.

7. Local-global connections

Islamist extremists in the Western Balkans are not acting in isolation; instead, they are well connected in the region and with like-minded groups from Gulf countries. Radical fundamentalist and extremist interpretations of Islam first came to Bosnia-Herzegovina with the mujahedeen – veteran fighters, mainly from MENA, who stayed in the country after the armed conflict had ended in 1995 with a mission of spreading ‘true Islam’, which according to their interpretation, will protect repetition of genocide against the Muslims. Soon, numerous Islamic humanitarian organizations from Arab countries, mainly from Saudi Arabia, had come to Bosnia, many of which served as a tool for financing extremists. Salafi and Takfiri beliefs spread to neighboring Serbia and Montenegro, with a large Muslim Bosniak minority. Bosnia was regarded at one point as the center of *takfiri* ideology for Western Balkan Muslims. Since the fall of ISIL, the influence of that ideology has diminished.

Many individuals who joined militants in Syria and Iraq had previously stayed in Bosnian villages (e.g., Gornja Maoča, Ovše, Bočinja) where strict Salafis live, wherefore these villages have been dubbed “Jihadis’ hotbeds.”³⁰⁴ It is reported that leaders and individuals from these settlements were well connected with several groups of extremists operating in masjids in Vienna. The Austrian capital had become a center for indoctrination and recruitment

Segregation: How to Integrate Public Schools in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 2013, Skopje and Sarajevo, p. 2–3.

³⁰³ Focus group with representatives of the NGO sector – Tearce, 25 August 2021.

³⁰⁴ Florian Qehaja, "Beyond Gornje Maoče and Ošve: Radicalization in the Western Balkans," in *Jihadist Hotbeds-Understanding Local Radicalization Processes*, ed. Arturo Varvelli (Milano: ISPI, 2016).



of FTFs, as well as for collecting money from the diaspora and funneling Saudi funds to the Western Balkans. Austrian authorities had conducted several law enforcement operations, including arrests of the preachers and members of these masjids until many of the groups had been crack-downed. Among the most prominent and radical groups' leaders were individuals from Sandžak – Mirsad Omerovic, Adem Demirovic, and Nedžad Balkan. All of them were arrested and prosecuted for recruiting and organizing departures of people to Syria, as well as for financing violent extremism and terrorism.³⁰⁵ They had direct ties with ISIS and Al-Nusra, as well as with extremists in Bosnia and Serbia. According to Austrian authorities, Omerovic maintained a direct line of communication with ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.³⁰⁶

A very important tool for spreading radical and extremist interpretations of Islam in the Balkans have been Islamic universities in Arab countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, where many new imams and preachers from Sandžak have completed their studies. The attractiveness of these universities to young people lies mainly in the fact that education there is entirely free – tuition, accommodation, and meals are fully covered. Studies in Western Balkans countries tend to be expensive relative to the standard of living, which is even more pronounced in the regions where poverty and economic deprivation are above average, as in the Sandžak.³⁰⁷ Overall, the evidence in the present study shows that Islamic radicalization and VE tend to “globalize” in that they are linked to a transregional process involving radicalized Muslims from the Middle East, Western Europe and elsewhere. Ethnonationalist extremism, in turn, relies mostly, though not exclusively, on intra-regional interactions between the same ethno-religious groups no matter to which current nation state they belong as citizens. In certain cases, diaspora plays a crucial role in spreading violent narratives serving as an intermediary in the local-global connections.

7.1 Albania

In Albania, the local-global connections channeled VE along the lines of an intensified and emotionally appealing sense of belonging to the global Islamic community (*umma*), triggering the rise of FTFs who made their ways to the Middle East to join ISIS and other militant Sunni groups. Violent extremists are known to be especially adept at scouring the social landscape for examples of victimization and at using these to evoke emotive responses that not only bind the terrorist group more tightly but also reinforce their self-belief that they are fighting on behalf of a wider oppressed community.³⁰⁸ Tallying with this tactic, attempts were made at the time in Albania to portray the war in Syria as the alike of the Civil War in Spain, thus drawing a parallel between Bashar al-Assad and Francisco Franco and convincing the people that by

³⁰⁵ Meliha Kešmer, "'Radikalne Veze' Osoba Iz Zapadnog Balkana S Austrijom," *RSE*, 4. novembar 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/radikalne-veze-osoba-iz-zapadnog-balkana-s-austrijom/30930268.html>.

³⁰⁶ "Mirsad Omerovic," in *Terrorist and Extremists Database* (Brussels: Counter Extremism Project, 2019), <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/mirsad-omerovic>.

³⁰⁷ Predrag Petrovic and Isidora Stakic, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report* (Belgrade: British Council, 2018), 23.

³⁰⁸ Wright-Neville, D. & Smith, D. (2009) Political rage: terrorism and the politics of emotion, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 21:1, 85-98.



going to Syria, they would be doing what the Albanian volunteers did in the 1930s in Spain.³⁰⁹ As a focus group participant argued in Tirana, “*those who went to Syria had sincere intentions, they were emotionally charged with the dire situation in Syria, they had religious emotions, and that resulted in joining the war in Syria.*”³¹⁰ An imam, who was appointed to take over one of the two main mosques that were used for FTFs recruitment in Albania, highlighted the emotional appeal of believers to join the conflict. According to him, “*recruiters have tapped into the humane part of people and that was the key to that (recruitment). When a ruler commits genocide, be it in Syria or else, people are emotionally affected by that and can be easily manipulated. They (Albanian FTFs) said that they were going to help the Syrian people to get over this conflict and maybe come back later to Albania.*”³¹¹ The imam concluded that the profile of those who were recruited was diverse, “*but they had a common denominator that unites all of them, and that is the emotional appeal. The pity they felt for the Syrian people, and the intention to help them.*”³¹²

The emotional appeal of Albanian FTFs was also influenced by the idea of the *umma*, which was used by VE recruiters to tap into the emotional anxieties of Muslims. The discourse of ISIS tried to avail the emotional appeal of Western Muslims particularly to join ISIS by trying to connect the need for immediate sacrifice for the sake of the suffering Muslims in Syria with the long-awaited millenarian hope of building the Caliphate.³¹³ Driven by the need to blend in with a wider Western audience, Western Muslims became vessels of “home-grown” plots of religious radicalization, effectively spreading ISIS propaganda in their respective countries. Both these aspects were the elements that portrayed the Syrian conflict as *jihad*. A focus group participant in Tirana explained that “*most of them [Albanian FTFs] have repented [for joining the Syrian conflict], as their main goal was jihad, as instigated by their imam. When they left [Albania], they thought it [Syrian war] was something else, but when they went there, they faced a reality that was not what they expected.*”³¹⁴ Similarly, another focus group participant in Maliq argued that the people who joined the Syrian conflict “*thought that this war was the holy war (jihad) that will send them to Paradise. Although jihad has another meaning, they took it literally as if the holy war was taking place in Syria.*”³¹⁵

7.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the context of BiH, the local-global connections are mainly maintained through the links with some extremist circles in diaspora. For example, Salafi leader Bilal Bosnić received

³⁰⁹ Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, *Exploring the development of a strategic communication on P/CVE in Albania: A Research Based Approach (2021)*, available at <http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Exploration-of-P-CVE-strategic-communication.pdf>. pp. 30-31

³¹⁰ Focus group with religious practitioners in Tirana, 18 August 2021.

³¹¹ Interview with an imam in Mëzez, Tirana, 16 August 2021.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Fernandez, A. M. (2015). Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks. The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers. Available at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IS-Propaganda_Web_English.pdf.

³¹⁴ Focus group with religious practitioners in Tirana, 18 August 2021.

³¹⁵ Focus group with mixed group of people in Maliq, 31 August 2021.



considerable funding from abroad (mostly from Austria and Germany) for his activities in BiH, and many of the Salafis who supported him continue to donate towards efforts to promote Salafism in the country. What is more, some 30 percent of the Bosnian FTFs contingent in Syria and Iraq was made up of citizens who reside outside BiH. As Vlado Azinović has highlighted, the Bosnian diaspora is among the largest in the world, relative to the country's population, and the overwhelming majority of Bosnians abroad are incredibly well integrated and assimilated; yet people in diasporas "in general, are more susceptible to radicalization into violent extremism."³¹⁶

Francesco Ragazzi makes an important point about diasporas: "far from representing an immediate, objective reality... the diaspora [is] a social and political phenomenon." This means that "diasporas" per se are not agents of politics, rather the "organizations and institutions representing, or claiming to represent a diaspora" are, which can make these organizations and institutions attractive to politicians who seek to "advance policies that have little to do with the dispersed populations themselves, but which justify transnational policies that would otherwise be considered illegitimate."³¹⁷ He notes that a very large percentage of the people considered by the Croatian government to be part of its diaspora are actually Bosnian Croats, linking this to what he calls Croatia's "deterritorialized annexation" of Herzegovina³¹⁸ and arguing that the HDZ – the ethno-nationalist party of Croats in both Croatia and BiH – has never really given up on its territorial aspirations in BiH.³¹⁹ According to Ragazzi, Croatia's diaspora policies and discourse proved "an efficient way of enacting a de facto annexation" of parts of the country. He warns of the rebranding of transnational identity formations as "diasporas," where identity claims may be manipulated for political purposes. This is a warning that should be heeded across former Yugoslav states; Věra Stojarová has found that "a national minority or diaspora abroad" is a key factor in the success of far-right parties.³²⁰

7.3 Kosovo

Local-global connections and transnational dynamics feature as a crucial driver of radicalization and VE in Kosovo.³²¹ Transnational Islamic movements, migration dynamics and diaspora networks, pilgrimage, as well as cultural and educational links, have catalyzed such trends. The local-global connections of VE in Kosovo must be seen through two different lenses: transnational cooperation in the diffusion of extremist interpretations of Islam, on one hand, and the proselytization of more conservative or radical religious interpretations, on the

³¹⁶ Azinović and Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War*, 57–58.

³¹⁷ Francesco Ragazzi, "The Invention of the Croatian Diaspora: Unpacking the Politics of "Diaspora" During the War in Yugoslavia," Center for Global Studies Project on Global Migration and Transnational Politics, working paper no. 10, November 2009, 2.

³¹⁸

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²⁰ Věra Stojarová, *The far right in the Balkans* (Manchester University Press, 2013).

³²¹ Demjaha, A., and Peci, L. (2016). What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period. Policy Paper, (1/16). Available at: http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What_happened_to_Kosovo_Albanians_740443.pdf



other.³²² A further distinction is made between international and regional connections with regard to their ideological goals.³²³ The transnational cooperation in the diffusion of violent extremist interpretation involve non-state actors – predominantly a handful of Albanian speaking individuals from North Macedonia (and some from Kosovo), who spent some time in the MENA region during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and whose ideological motives were driven by the call to *jihad* in conflicts abroad. Such individuals often explicitly called for the use of violence and participation in foreign conflicts.³²⁴

The Kosovo Islamic Council (BIK) follows the Hanafi Judicial school of Islam, and position themselves as the only Islamic Authority in Kosovo. However, there exists radical religious figures in Kosovo who do not accept the legitimacy of the BIK, and try to undermine them and rather respect and support the Radical Political Imams and ideology represented by ISIS.

Furthermore, these interpretations that call for a transnational Islamic state with Islamic law (*shari'a*) at its heart and *jihad* as its appeal, are in inherent contradiction with Albanian ethno-national identity. This type of loyalty to the global *umma* disturb traditional interreligious harmony among Albanians and are in conflict with the official BIK, based on tolerant religious customs.³²⁵

Demographic data show that Kosovan recruits originate predominantly from the country's two most populous municipalities – Pristina (35) and Prizren (26).³²⁶ But the rate of mobilization per capita is highest in five other municipalities: Hani i Elezit, Kacanik, Mitrovice, Gjilan, and Viti, which together account for only 14 percent of the country's total population.³²⁷ Research indicates³²⁸ that the high rates are a result of targeted and effective radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization efforts by extremist networks that have operated in that particular geographic space across borders for over a decade. After 2014, ISIS changed its strategy from concentrating on a single area to instead organizing attacks in countries where adherents to their ideology are located. With increased communication via the internet and a changed ISIS strategy, there is a high risk of potential attacks in Kosovo or the region. During 2021, five people, primarily radicalized online, were arrested for planning attacks in Kosovo.³²⁹

³²² Kursani, S. (2018a). Extremism Research Forum, Kosovo Report . British Council. Available at: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf

³²³ Kursani, S. (2018a). Extremism Research Forum, Kosovo Report . British Council. Available at: https://kosovo.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/erf_report_kosovo_2018.pdf

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Peci and Demjaha, 2021, Kosovo – Macro-drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/mapping-the-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-the-light-of-state-dynamics-in-kosovo/>

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Shtuni, A. (2016). Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

³²⁸ Interview with Luan Keka, head of anti-terror unit of Kosovo Police. 2 November 2021.

³²⁹ KALLXO.COM. October 2021. Dosja e Prokurise: Grupi terrorist qe planifikonte sulme ne Kosove me ISIS. Available at: <https://kallxo.com/lajm/dosja-e-prokurise-grupi-terrorist-qe-planifikonte-sulme-ne-kosove-i-lidhur-me-isis/>



7.4 Republic of North Macedonia

The local-global connections in RNM are primarily financial. While links to Middle Eastern donor organizations and foundations associated with radical Islam has tended to diminish in recent years, financial aid is provided by other sources, such as, for example, certain “jamaats” in Western Europe.³³⁰ Moreover, the (seasonal) migration to European countries makes it possible for Macedonian Muslims to contact other Muslim communities there and, thus, adopt and “import” extremist narratives in North Macedonia.³³¹ (Does “make it possible” is enough, are there such attested cases?)

In addition to Salafi influence, there is a network of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the country. Among the structures of the Brotherhood is *Forumi Rinor Islam* (Islamic Youth Forum, hereafter FRI), headquartered in Tetovo. In 2011, FRI hosted a conference titled “Islam in Europe (Danger or Salvation),” in which Hani Ramadan (brother of Tariq Ramadan and grandchild of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Brotherhood) participated. The leadership of the local official IRC reacted sharply, stating that the activities of foreign Islamic NGOs in the country represent interference in the affairs of local Muslims.³³²

Despite the decreasing influence of international extremist organizations and, subsequently, the almost full cessation of the process of recruiting local Macedonian individuals, experts on P/CVE and counter-terrorism said that groups such as ISIS still have “sleeping cells” in the country. Moreover, these external organizations continue to exert influence over the believers attending the mosques believed to be “reclaimed” by the IRC.³³³ In this context, a relatively recent event that needs to be paid attention to, is the official registration of the so-called “Islamic Salafi Community Dar al-Hadith” by the Macedonian court on 31 December 2020.³³⁴ Representatives of the official IRC expressed their concern over the registration of this group.³³⁵ However, an expert in the P/CVE field noted that, so far, there was no activity of the part of this Community.³³⁶

7.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

The most important imams and preachers (*da'ias*) in Sandžak, from quietist Salafis to violent Takfiris, have studied on Islamic universities, mainly in Saudi Arabia. There is no official publicly available data on the number of graduates and students from Sandžak in Saudi Arabia. Still, it can be assumed that figures are not low, as there is an association of Bosniak students

³³⁰ Interview with a representative of the intelligence agency – Skopje, 26 August 2021.

³³¹ Interview with an Albanian journalist and political analyst – Gostivar, 22 August 2021.

³³² Andrea Marinković, Viktor Szucs and Martina Valušiaková, *CEE activities of the Muslim Brotherhood – Final Report: North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina & Region’s Conclusions*, Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2020, pp. 5–6.

³³³ Focus group with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Kičevo, 22 August 2021, Interview with a representative of the intelligence agency – Skopje, 26 August 2021, Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 26 August 2021, Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 27 August 2021.

³³⁴ Radmila Zarevska, “Селефистите регистрирани како нова верска заедница во земјава, ИВЗ реагира” [The Salafists registered as a new religious community in the country, the IRC reacts]. <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/politika/селефистите-регистраани-како-нова-в/>, last accessed 10 October 2021.

³³⁵ Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Tetovo, 25 August 2021.

³³⁶ Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 27 August 2021.



in Saudi Islamic universities.³³⁷ Upon their return to Sandžak, they maintain contacts with Saudi clerics, who visit Sandžak and hold lectures. Maintaining connections enables them to raise humanitarian aid from Saudi Arabia and support the building of new, and renovating old, mosques. The influence of the Saudis on Islamic communities in Serbia is such that experts in Islamic culture claim that, through renovating mosques, for example by changing local specifics such as colorful and picturesque mosque interiors under Saudi principles of simpleness, the Saudis are erasing the traditional Islamic culture of Sandžak, a legacy of the Ottoman times. As the chief of office for strategic planning of the Islamic Community of Bosnia explained, Salafi imams in Sandžak do not care about art, culture, and history. They only want to have the simplest place for prayer, and in that way, they destroy Bosniaks' Islamic cultural heritage.³³⁸

Integration of Salafi imams and believers in the Islamic community contributed to their pacification and moderation. It could also be assumed that ongoing comprehensive modernizing reforms in Saudi Arabia have been beneficial for this process.³³⁹ According to estimates of one radical Salafi, only 100 families in Sandžak practice true Islam outside official Islamic communities' structures, and there are around four masjids where the violent extremists gather. Even though peaceful Salafi believers are integrated and dominant over violent ones, Salafi influence could represent a big challenge for the Muslims in Serbia. It could further divide the Islamic community and encourage power struggle, resulting in violence.

8. 'Occurrence' and 'non-occurrence' of VE. Factors of resilience

Most research on VE focuses on why people turn to violence. This research tried to partially turn this around by answering the reverse question, why people living in enabling environments often choose not to get involved in political violence. This is important, as often cited factors of VE, should have led to a much greater proportion of the various populations joining violent groups, but this is not the case.³⁴⁰ Thus, this chapter explores why some communities display much greater resilience to violent extremist ideologies than others; what prevents decisive moments from tipping into violence; and what prevents radicalization in the first place. Some explanations have been put forth, including the diversity of the religious sphere³⁴¹; logistical and financial barriers to violence; strong ideas against the use of violence; family influence; as well as the efficiency argument that the benefits do not justify the costs.³⁴² As Cragin argues, it

³³⁷ SABA, "Predsjednik SABA-e u posjeti sandžačkim studentima u Saudijskoj Arabiji," *Sandžak Press*, April 13, 2015, <https://sandzakpress.net/predsjednik-saba-e-u-posjeti-sandzackim-studentima-u-saudijskoj-arabiji/>.

³³⁸ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, "Džamije iz osmanskog doba propadaju u Sandžaku," *Balkan Insight*, December, 30, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/30/dzamiye-iz-osmanskog-doba-propadaju-u-sandzaku/?lang=sr>

³³⁹ More on pacification of Salafis in Sandžak, and the possible role of Saudi Arabia see further down under "Resilience to extremism."

³⁴⁰ Cragin, R. (2014) 'Resisting Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Model for Non-radicalization,' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26(2): 337-353.

³⁴¹ Kurzman, C. (2011) *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁴² Fahmi, G. (2017) 'Why Aren't More Muslim Brothers Turning to Violence?' *Expert Comment* 27/04/2017, London: Chatham House. Available from: www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/why-aren-t-more-muslim-



is impossible to understand pathways to radicalization, or design policies to pre-empt them, without a complementary knowledge of why individuals resist the influence of VE.³⁴³ Policies designed to prevent VE need to work on both levels: weakening the factors pushing for violence, while strengthening the factors resisting such a path.

Findings from this study indicate that there are two types of factors that have strengthened communities' resilience against VE; (i) resilience factors during the radicalization wave (2011–2014), and (ii) resilience factors after the radicalization wave (2015-onwards). The first category includes religious counter-narratives, social cohesion and civic values as the main factors that have helped communities resisting radicalization during the peak propaganda wave. The second category includes the hard approach by state institutions and the soft response by international donors and civil society organizations.

8.1 The role of local communities: social cohesion and civic values

Muslim communities in the Balkans are traditionally oriented towards the Hanafi school of thought of Sunni Islam, meaning that radical interpretations of Islam are somewhat alien to them. Furthermore, fifty years of communist rule in the region instilled a sense of secularism in Balkan Muslim communities and gave rise to an Islamic tradition that is evidently different in its interpretations and practices to its more conservative counterparts on the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, many refer to Muslims in the Balkans as “Progressive Muslims” and “Cultural Muslims.”³⁴⁴

8.1.1 Albania

Apart from the crucial work of the imams (to be discussed below), an important factor of resilience that was registered in Albania was that staying close to mainstream Muslim communities kept most *jamaats* safe from VE indoctrination. As a focus group participant in Tirana argued: *“it is only about good luck or more precisely God's plan that I learnt about Islam through brothers in this mosque and the well-known mainstream imams who teach us values, and the true understanding of Islam based on logic rather than emotions. If I were to come across radical groups during my early days in Islam, I could have been one of them now.”*³⁴⁵

In addition to the religious aspect, social cohesion has also contributed to the non-occurrence of VE. In the context of the studied communities, social cohesion refers to the extent of connectedness between individuals and institutions, as well as the homogeneity in society. As one participant argued in Maliq, *“we are a very small community where most people know each other. This is probably why we did not have cases of VE.”*³⁴⁶ In similar terms, another participant in Elbasan, while referring to their community argued, *“there are neither cases of*

[brothers-turning-violence](#). [accessed 14 September 2021].

³⁴³ Cragin, R. (2014) ‘Resisting Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Model for Non-radicalization,’ *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26(2): 337-353.

³⁴⁴ Riada Asimovic Akyol, “Want to Cultivate a Liberal European Islam? Look to Bosnia,” *The Atlantic*, January 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/bosnia-offers-model-liberal-european-islam/579529/>.

³⁴⁵ Focus group with religious practitioners in Tirana, 18 August 2021.

³⁴⁶ Focus group with mixed group of people in Maliq, 31 August 2021.



*people who have been engaged in VE, nor people who have been interested in VE discourse in my community. This is partly a result of the homogeneity and coexistence in our community.*³⁴⁷

Communities with stronger social cohesion are less conducive to the occurrence of VE because social connections within, and between, communities help mitigate the risk factors associated with VE.³⁴⁸

Another strong theme noticed during the field research was the idea that civic values, especially the tradition of religious tolerance, had served as a crucial mechanism for preventing VE. Key sources and focus group participants argued that religious harmony is strong in the city of Maliq, where religious officials of different faiths often join forces to contribute to their community.³⁴⁹

8.1.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Researchers in BiH spoke with an Orthodox priest in Trebinje who appeared interested only in mobilizing his congregation to greater tolerance. This is not typical within the Serbian Orthodox Church, but this illustrates how religious leaders can serve as key figures in developing community resilience against extremism. He spoke of the need to learn to tolerate the various narratives that exist in a society, and used the example of Vienna, home to 150,000 Serbs, noting that *“the vast majority of Serbs who live in Vienna believe that Gavrilo Princip (who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand) was a hero. Other people in Vienna believe that he was a murderer, but Serbs and Austrians do not clash over that.”*³⁵⁰ He said this should be the case when it comes to interpretations of the war in BiH as well. Interviewees told researchers that relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community in Trebinje are generally good. Occasionally, joint humanitarian actions are undertaken, such as distributing aid to vulnerable citizens. However, several attempts to hold joint religious education classes have not materialized.

An imam who was interviewed by researchers in Trebinje reported that there were tensions between religious groups in the town in the past, as well as attacks on Bosniak returnees. It has been years since these incidents took place, though, and while this imam could not rule out the possibility of future tensions, he noted that this *“wouldn’t favor the authorities in Trebinje, because Trebinje is a tourist town very close to... Montenegro and Croatia. The town lives off tourism, and attacks on the local Bosniak population would certainly affect tourism.”*³⁵¹ This underscores that the economy is a factor of resilience in Trebinje in a variety of ways – not only by providing jobs and greater security, and exposing locals to tourists from other places, but by discouraging political conflict that would make the town less attractive as a tourist destination. According to this imam, there are no Salafists in Trebinje because *“the conditions for Salafis to proselytize”* do not exist. *“Our mosque is the only religious place for*

³⁴⁷ Focus group with religious practitioners in Elbasan, 24 August 2021.

³⁴⁸ Ellis, B.H. & S. Abdi (2017). Building Community Resilience to Violent Extremism through Genuine Partnerships. *American Psychologist*, 72 (3), 289-300.

³⁴⁹ Focus group with mixed group of people in Maliq, 31 August 2021.

³⁵⁰ Interview with an orthodox priest in Trebinje, 23 August, 2021

³⁵¹ Interview with local imam in Trebinje, 26 August 2021.



Muslims to come and pray,” he noted. He also rejected the idea that the presence of the neo-Chetnik movement in Trebinje represents a real threat, explaining that they only appear when a reunion takes place and do not cause problems. Still, he did mention the presence of their trolls in online spaces and told researchers that police attend events organized by the Islamic Community not out of concerns of Muslim extremism, but to discourage Serb extremists from intimidating Bosniaks.³⁵²

Members of the NGO *Druga priča*, an organization of independent journalists from Trebinje and the wider East Herzegovina region, also emphasized that there was a very high level of inter-ethnic communication and cooperation in Trebinje. Because these journalists expose crime and corruption, they work in extremely difficult circumstances and regularly receive online threats, many of which use extremist and ethnically loaded language. But they credit the Interreligious Council of BiH for organizing trainings among religious officials in the region to expand their knowledge about other faith communities, and to normalize communication and strengthen relations among ethnic groups. This has translated on the ground in Trebinje, where there was hardly any reaction to the recently imposed law sanctioning genocide denial, which has radicalized the political context in other parts of the RS.³⁵³ While SNSD officials in the town follow Dodik’s party line, his announcement that RS citizens would have the opportunity to sign a petition condemning the law, generated only a very small turnout in Trebinje.

8.1.3 Kosovo

An important factor of resilience on the community level in Kosovo is the inherited prevailing religious tolerance, embracing also the inter-ethnic communication. The exception are the relations between Albanians and Serbs, damaged due to the systematic persecution and discrimination towards Albanians by the Milosevic regime. In the aftermath of the Kosovo war, people went out in the streets requesting return to their homes in the north, which then escalated into protests.³⁵⁴ Gradually tensions have been calmed down in an environment where imams and priests demonstrate respect to each other using the communal religious celebrations to build religious harmony.³⁵⁵ The Islamic Community as the leading religious institution of Muslims has played an awareness-raising and preventive role.³⁵⁶ It sends out imams to provide lectures in state correction institutions, which contribute to the process of rehabilitation and resocialization of convicts and helping to prevent the radicalization of other prisoners.³⁵⁷

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ “Dodik launches petition rejecting High Rep’s ban on genocide denial in BiH” <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/dodik-launches-petition-expressing-opposition-to-ban-on-genocide-denial-in-bih/>

³⁵⁴ Interview with Professor Nexhmedin Spahiu, Mitrovica. November 2021.

³⁵⁵ Koha.net. Korrik 2021. Available at: <https://www.koha.net/arberi/231568/ipeshkvi-dode-gjergji-i-uron-myftiut-ternava-dhe-besimtareve-myslimane-bajramin/https://www.facebook.com/birk2015/posts/2867396693297015/>

³⁵⁶ Islamic Community of Kosovo. Available at: <https://bislame.net/intvstvoa/>

³⁵⁷ Indeksonline.net. May 2018. Imam lectures will have a positive impact. Available at: <https://indeksonline.net/ligjeratat-e-imameve-ne-burgje-do-te-ndikojne-pozitivisht/>



8.1.4 Republic of North Macedonia

In RNM, too, the existence of stable traditions of tolerance appears as a fundamental factor for resilience. Telling in this respect is the comparison - in terms of attitudes towards religion and traditional social institutions - between the Albanians in the municipality of Debar, and the Albanian population in the regions bordering with Kosovo. One of the most prominent cases of non-occurrence of VE in the town of Debar, in RNM, boasts a rich local tradition of mutual understanding and co-existence between Muslim Albanians and Christian Macedonians. The city was many times evoked in conversations as an ideal example of tolerance between the ethno-religious communities and resistance to the spread of extremist ideologies.³⁵⁸

Several respondents explained that the local Albanian population consisted of *starosedeltsi* (lit. “natives” or “long-time residents”), who form an old, traditional community in the region.³⁵⁹ Respondents often contrasted the “natives” of Debar with the “Kosovo migrants” in Kumanovo and Skopje as a clear example of significant cultural and social differences within the Albanian group itself.³⁶⁰ Furthermore, Debar, in contrast to the capital Skopje where minority isolation (bordering ghettoization) and anonymity prevail, represents a relatively small community, where most people know each other. This makes it possible for the inhabitants to reproduce certain patterns of social cohesion and neighborliness as well as traditional forms of Islam.³⁶¹

The situation is quite different in the Torbeši settlements located only a few kilometers away from Debar. The population in these villages is significantly more conservative and culturally isolated and, accordingly, deliberately distances itself from possible contacts with other communities.³⁶² Therefore, adherence to the so-called “traditional Islam” which is visible, for instance, among Albanians in Debar and Tetovo, serves as a factor for resilience against the penetration of external, and more radical, interpretations of the Islamic religion.

8.1.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

The region of Sandžak was the center for spreading radical Salafism and its militant jihadi

³⁵⁸ During our fieldwork in Debar, local officials of the Islamic Religious Community and the Macedonian Orthodox Church both put special emphasis on the long-lasting practice of local communities attending the religious feasts of their neighbors as a sign of mutual respect – e.g., Muslims often visited Christmas and Easter, while Christians were invited to attend Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr. In the past, there was even the common tradition of *kumstvo* (the relation of a godfather and a godchild) between members of both groups, but it was eventually abandoned. Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Debar, 18 August 2021; Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest – Debar, 17 August 2021, Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Debar, 18 August 2021

³⁵⁹ Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest – Debar, 17 August 2021; Interview with a monk from the St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery, 18 August 2021. Similarly, an interlocutor coming from the city of Kičevo, another case of non-occurrence of VE, noted that there were no intercommunal tensions in this city even during the 2001 insurgency in Macedonia and attributed it to the character of the local Muslim communities there, namely ‘old Turks’, interview with an NGO activist – Skopje, 24 August 2021.

³⁶⁰ Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest – Debar, 17 August 2021, Interview with a politician, member of the current parliament of North Macedonia – Skopje, 20 August 2021, Interview with a former Macedonian politician – Skopje, 20 August 2021.

³⁶¹ Interview with an Orthodox Christian priest – Debar, 17 August 2021.

³⁶² Interview with a nun from the female St. Georgi Orthodox monastery in Rajčica, 17 August 2021, Interview with a monk from the St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery, 18 August 2021.



branch, takfirism, in Serbia, which caused many conflicts within the local community, including armed skirmishes and planning of terrorist attacks. It also contributed to foreign fighters' mobilization and departures to battlefields in Syria and Iraq. Many experts have had dark predictions for the region of Sandžak, however, these did not materialize: this region and Serbia have not witnessed any terrorist attack, and only a small number of people, when compared to other Western Balkans countries, joined militants in Syria and Iraq. Hence, Sandžak represents an excellent case featuring both an enabling environment and a region where the community showcased high levels of resilience, and even resistance, to violent extremism.

As elsewhere in the WB, Salafism was alien to the Muslims in Serbia's religious practices. At first, the local community reacted with curiosity to new religious practice, which soon became rejection and even resistance. The first generation of Salafis, or Wahhabis as they are being called in Serbia, superficially knew Islam, but that did not prevent them from imposing their understanding and religious practices to other believers and even imams, often in a very aggressive way. They also insisted on the lifestyle characteristic of Gulf states, although it was inappropriate to local conditions (wearing sandals and short pants is suitable for the hot climate of the Arab Peninsula, but is not appropriate for winters in Sandžak). The intrusiveness of the first generation of Salafis even resulted in physical violence between them and traditional Muslims. One group of militant Salafis was sentenced for terrorism-related offenses, including planning the assassination of the then-Mufti Muamer Zukorlić.³⁶³

According to an interlocutor, an Islamic scholar, the local population isolated the aggressive and most obtrusive Salafis. They boycotted their shops and products and refused to socialize and even talk with them. Salafis reacted by withdrawing into their own circle, which further distanced them from the local community. However, this might have contributed to the accumulation of frustration among Salafis, now isolated from the local community, who looked to another community that was emerging in war-torn Syria. According to Nusret Imamović, a prominent Salafi leader in Bosnia, he left for Syria when he could not withstand constant pressure and accusations that he was a terrorist.

It seems that the departures of young men from Sandžak to Syria and their deaths were one of the important turning points that brought about a kind of "reconciliation" between Salafis and traditional believers. Since then, Salafis, and especially their leaders, have been trying to moderate their views and practices so that Salafism can co-exist with the traditional interpretation of Islam. The focus now is on solving issues in the local community together with others and not allowing Salafi followers to be involved in distant conflicts. Interviewees claim that the change is visible as Salafis now accept, for instance, to speak or shake hands with uncovered women who enter their shops. Moderation of Salafis has contributed to their (re)integration into the local community and the official structures of the Islamic Community in Serbia. Today they are entirely accepted, and there are no conflicts with adherents of traditional Islam. The downside of Salafi integration, as it will be explained further down, is that now they have official channels for spreading their interpretation of Islam, and they are

³⁶³ "Osuđene vebabije iz Novog Pazara," *RTS*, 3. jul 2009, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/135/hronika/71693/osudjene-vehabije-iz-novog-pazara.html>.



known to have good leaders and dedicated followers who are committed to humanitarian work.

That being said, there is still a group of Salafis, or adherents of authentic Islam as they like to refer to themselves, who are not fully integrated into the official Islamic Community in Serbia as they do not recognize it. The group uses private places for practicing religious duties. It is estimated that there are around 100 families that form this group. There are also several small masjids, where the most problematic Salafis, who still cause some troubles in the local community and even occasionally send threats to other Salafis, gather. The local community is well aware of them.

8.2 The role of imams and individuals of authority

Key sources and participants in focus groups were asked to offer their perspectives about how they perceived the *modus operandi* of violent extremists in their communities. Their responses can be summed up as follows. In terms of target communities, violent extremists first study the communities where they plan to spread their agenda. If they notice that certain mosques or communities have addressed the issue of VE for years, they do not enter those settings at all. Regarding individuals, violent extremists target two kinds of individuals: 1. those who have little religious knowledge and are willing to join their group blindly, but also 2. those who have religious knowledge but share the same propagandistic interpretation of Islam. Members of radical groups believe they are doing the right thing by becoming part of these groups. They describe society as unfair and believe they have a mission to solve this problem.³⁶⁴ Their channels of communication are mostly based on physical contact, in private congregation houses, talking to people on the streets, or providing economic assistance to those in need. Social media is also utilized for such purposes. They visit different mosques to assess the potential support they may have among believers. Their ultimate aim is to take over the mosque and preach freely their religious interpretation. One of the strategies that is being used to form radical religious groups, is through polarizing believers through their discourse. As explained by a Muslim official covering the Maliq area in Albania, there are certain sensitive topics that radicals exploit, and through these forms of “scouting,” they manage to polarize people.³⁶⁵ These topics are mostly religious, but sometimes also social issues.

8.2.1 Albania

As VE individuals or groups visit different mosques to assess the potential support, they may attract certain individuals. Many of the imams who were interviewed during this study, explained that although their mosque was not influenced by radical narratives, they were not immune to radicalization attempts. In a response to that, imams provided counter-narratives, while the social cohesion among the *jamaat* rendered the radicals’ attempt a failure. Although the VE propaganda is not eradicated and their activities are still present, radical groups maintain a low profile and are highly unlikely to attract followers. As a focus group participant in Tirana argues, “*there was a tight-knit group of five to six people in our mosque who preached a non-*

³⁶⁴ Focus group of mixed composition in Elbasan, 24 August 2021.

³⁶⁵ Interview with Muslim official in Maliq, 31 August 2021.



traditional Islamic practice, calling others kafirs [infidels]. When they saw that the congregation here did not listen to them, they left.”³⁶⁶

Another key source from Kamza explained that during 2012-2013, there were cases when radical individuals from other mosques would go to the main mosque of the city to propagate their extreme interpretation of Islam to the *jamaat*. Moreover, there were also incentives to send people to Syria. The imam of Kamza addressed this issue by adjusting his religious lectures to focus on these issues, hence, displaying people the reality in Syria and exposing radical discourses.³⁶⁷

In a similar response, a Muslim official in Maliq said that most of the imams in Maliq and surrounding areas did a good job by not allowing people from outside the community to indoctrinate their followers. He added that *“there were incentives for radicalized individuals to approach mosques, but since they weren’t allowed in the religious space, recruiters found it difficult to connect with believers in another way.”³⁶⁸* Another key source in Tirana argued that the main tactic to counter Islamic extremist discourse is the good communication between the imam and the *jamaat* and the willingness of the imam to invest in this process.³⁶⁹

The small number of those affected by manifestations of VE in Albania also demonstrated the overall resilience that existed in the communities. Moreover, the occurrence of VE resulted in several positive side effects, which further strengthened community resilience. The state institutions are now more aware of their role in the prevention of VE; the religious and civil society actors are more active and strategic in their interventions against VE, and the society is better informed about the VE phenomenon. The imams of all the areas that were studied on behalf of this research, said that they are organizing more frequent informative sessions in mosques. In the mosque of Kamza, there are even daily informative sessions. A focus group participant in Kamza stated *“these sessions increase our knowledge to figure out what is right and what is wrong. We also have the opportunity to interact with the imams and ask them about things we do not understand.”³⁷⁰*

8.2.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Most interviewees in Bihać, the locality where Bilal Bosnić once had a strong Salafi influence, made a distinction between radicalism that presents a security challenge by threatening to develop into VE, and attitudes that are relatively radical but non-violent. Many were sceptical about the real extent of the influence of some popular Salafi figures in BiH, yet some acknowledged that the presence of these non-violent but radical figures in online spaces and on social media could nonetheless represent a risk to youth, including by dominating internet platforms.³⁷¹ An NGO-activist stressed: *“Since [Salafis] are more active and agile on social networks, their youth outreach is much better than that of the Islamic Community. The Islamic*

³⁶⁶ Focus group with religious practitioners in Tirana, 18 August 2021.

³⁶⁷ Interview with an imam in Kamza, 25 August 2021.

³⁶⁸ Interview with a Muslim official in Maliq, 31 August 2021.

³⁶⁹ Interview with a representative of Ardhmëria Cultural Association in Tirana, 6 September 2021.

³⁷⁰ Focus group with religious practitioners in Kamza, 3 September 2021.

³⁷¹ Interview with official from the police in Bihać, 25 July, 2021.



Community in Una Sana Canton, but also in other parts in Bosnia, is aware of this and has activated new media platforms.”³⁷² The role of the mainstream imams and religious instructors from the official Islamic Community is therefore increasingly significant for achieving community resilience.

A professor from the Islamic Faculty in Bihać, who attended a meeting with the Islamic Community’s newly established media department, advised them that *“to reach the hearts and minds of young people, you have to offer better performances than Pezić or Kuduzović. However, if you continue to promote Islam in the old way, you will be reaching only the generation of 50+. Young people want social networks, they want something that is fast, flexible, alive, they want real, live authorities who are ready for discussion and willing to stay up all night in [online] conversations with them.*”³⁷³ This professor told researchers that, so far, the Islamic Community has only a handful of young representatives who are active on social media. Recently, though, several graduates of the Islamic Faculty in Bihać have started contributing in progressive media platform where imams from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina collaborate in producing modern and dynamic religious content with the aim to help counter the Salafist influence that is so present online and so accessible to Muslim youth in BiH.³⁷⁴ There are also plans to begin social media training for young imams in the Islamic Community, so that they can engage online to counter extremist narratives.

Some imams have expressed concerns that Salafists in BiH, both violent and non-violent, are strongly influenced by “foreign actors”, and several in Bihać highlighted unsuccessful attempts by the Islamic Community to take down the web portal *vijestiummeta.net*. At one time, the website – the daily operations of which are run out of an office in Austria – promoted news from the so-called Islamic State and celebrated crimes committed by ISIL members. The Islamic Community requested that Bosnian security services deactivate the portal due to its violent content, and it was taken down in 2016; but only for a short period.³⁷⁵ Interviewees could not understand how such a portal could be a legal platform in Austria, but it appears the website has become much more moderate, promoting the Islamic cause but not the Islamic State. The news posted on the site now mostly discusses the waning influence of Islam, or features Turkish president Erdoğan.

Most of the Bosniaks researchers spoke with in Bihać, view Salafists as a danger to their cultural and social identity and feel threatened by Salafist dogma. But one high school teacher admitted that he had been infatuated with Salafism in his youth and had spent two years (in the late 1990s) attending the lectures of Salafist preachers. While he never radicalized to the point of altering his dress or physical appearance, he was very much a part of the Salafist social network during this period and told researchers that he was tempted, and encouraged by friends, to join the Salafist community. He decided against it but acknowledged to researchers that he was attracted not only to social dimensions of the movement, but to some of the ideological

³⁷² Interview with NGO activist in Bihać, 5 August, 2021.

³⁷³ Interview with Islamic scholar in Bihać, July 25, 2021.

³⁷⁴ See <https://islamedu.ba>

³⁷⁵ See “Portal Vijesti Ummeta ponovo počeo sa radom,” *NI*, 9 August 2016, <https://ba.n1info.com/vijesti/a108466-vijesti-ummata-ponovo-u-funkciji/> (accessed 2 November 2021).



teachings of Salafism and to the charity work of Salafists. For him, the main obstacle to conversion was his traditional Bosnian Muslim identity, which he described as “*very closely connected with the identity of my ancestors.*” Still, this experience left him with a relatively open mind when it comes to the ideology of Salafists.

The sentiment of another interviewee, that “*your freedom ends where you start threatening another,*” was more reflective of the majority of the individuals interviewed in Bihać. And when the subject of children and schools was raised, interviewees expressed that Salafist parents must adapt to community norms. They felt it was inappropriate that parents would not allow their children to participate in physical education or music classes. “*You come to school, where the rules and expectations are clear, and you must be ready to make an effort,*” one argued, adding that “*it is to the detriment of the child*” to deprive them of the opportunity to “*participate in all educational activities.*” This topic generated a great deal of discussion about the extent to which parents can dictate how their child is educated, and whether a “responsible parent” would deny their child something that educators believe is valuable. One interviewee underscored that the mission of the educational system is the welfare and proper development of children, but that the parents of a minor child must also be respected. Yet, the scenario was put forth that a parent could similarly keep their child from attending a math class; a ridiculous proposition, as the curriculum is clear. Ultimately, there was some agreement among interviewees that forcing parents in Salafist communities to allow their children to participate in certain activities was not likely to be the path of least resistance, or the best way to resolve these community-level tensions.

8.2.3 Kosovo

In Kosovo, our research shows that work with imams and community representatives should be a priority. Data from the Kosovo Police’s Anti-terror unit and research conducted for the purposes of this report, indicate that major radicalization drivers were neutralized in areas such as Podujeva and Prizren, because imams refused to accept groups that promoted such ideas. Yet, regardless of this assessment, the process of resocialization and reintegration needs a longer period of time to prove completely successful. The majority of terrorists who were arrested for planning terrorist attacks or those charged with radicalizing others, are still serving time in high security prisons. Recent data raises the concern that individuals involved in these processes still have a great radicalization potential. A person involved in a judicial procedure before, was arrested in October 2021 as part of a five-member group of suspects believed to have been planning a terrorist attack in the country. Local Kosovo imams belonging to the official Islamic Community and lecturers in its educational bodies are among the ones who strongly oppose these radical narratives and activities – even while risking to be verbally or physically attacked.

Two opponents of the radical movements, an imam and a lecturer at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, were physically attacked between 2008 and 2010, while they publicly accused radical groups for orchestrating these attacks.³⁷⁶ According to the Imam Osman Musliu, who since the

³⁷⁶ Interview with Imam Osman Musliu, an imam in Drenas who opposed radical movements and was attacked.



beginning had opposed radical movements, a fear of publicly opposing radical movements still exists, and is sustained through social networks. In the period of 2012–14, several imams were arrested on charges of spreading violent Islamic ideologies, but were acquitted due to lack of evidence. However, data shows that since then, these imams have increased their audience and become trendy in social media, including in areas such as Podujeva and Prizren, where there was no spread of radical political Islam.³⁷⁷ Indeed, the Islamic Community of Kosovo is entitled to control preaching in the mosques under its jurisdiction, however, it cannot control lectures and materials broadcasted on the internet by imams who were expelled by BIK, or imams who are active in other countries in the region.

8.2.4 Republic of North Macedonia

The role of the local religious leaders in RNM and their personal examples in shaping relations of mutual respect between the two major ethno-religious communities appears indispensable. The excellent relations of Debar’s Muslim Albanians with the monastic fraternity of the St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery are a case in point.³⁷⁸ A Muslim religious leader from Debar emphasized that painting eggs as a tradition to celebrate the Orthodox Easter was a cherished memory from his childhood. He identified himself with the Republic of North Macedonia, its society and institutions (“*I love Macedonia*”) and underlined that he wanted his children, as citizens of the state, to learn the Macedonian language. He attributed the Islamist radicalization not so much to poverty as to distorted interpretation of Islam (“literalist Islam”) by “ignorant” people, underscoring that IRC strongly condemned and opposed radical Islam.³⁷⁹

IRC representatives in the city of Tetovo also stressed the efforts of their institution at combating religious radicalism. Although the IRC did not pre-define the texts of the sermons in the mosques, it closely monitored their content. These religious leaders criticized the radical ethos of “*those who had returned from studies in the Middle East and with whom one cannot talk in a normal way.*”³⁸⁰ Some Christian religious leaders also acknowledged that “*IRC is indeed fighting against radical Islam, although this is a very difficult task.*”³⁸¹

8.2.5 Region of Sandžak (Serbia)

From the beginning of the expansion of ultra-conservative Salafism in Sandžak, imams that belonged to these groups and actively contributed to the spread of Salafism, have also played an important role in their pacification. This was the case with longtime Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, who had come into conflict with a group of militant Salafis in 2006, which involved armed confrontation. Later, 15 Salafis from Novi Pazar were arrested, and in 2009, 12 of them were convicted for planning terrorist acts in Serbia, including an attempt at assassinating Mufti Zukorlić. Since then, Zukorlić has been teaching that there is a big difference between Takfiris

October 2021.

³⁷⁷ Interview with Luan Keka, head of anti-terror unit of Kosovo Police. 2 November 2021.

³⁷⁸ Interview with a monk from the St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery, 18 August 2021, Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Debar, 18 August 2021.

³⁷⁹ Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Debar, 18 August 2021.

³⁸⁰ Interview with local representatives of the Islamic Religious Community – Tetovo, 25 August 2021.

³⁸¹ Interview with a monk from the St. Jovan Bigorski Orthodox Monastery, 18 August 2021.



and Salafis, as the latter group has been doing many positive activities for the local community, whereas the former is preoccupied with hatred, mainly toward other Muslims.³⁸²

When the civil war in Syria broke out, some imams in Novi Pazar were very active and vocal in presenting atrocities committed by Assad forces to believers in Sandžak. Since most of these forces were under the control of Shiites, hated among Salafis, the conflict had a strong religious dimension and strong emotional charge.³⁸³ In this context, presenting horrible atrocities was actually a call to action, as one interviewee pointed out. One of the involved imams was Sead Islamović, a graduate of the Islamic faculty in Medina, Saudi Arabia, who was spreading content related to the Syrian conflict through his personal Facebook account. Islamović was allegedly connected to “Put sredine” (The Middle Way), a non-governmental organization from Novi Pazar, suspected of recruiting foreign fighters by social media. Even high-ranking clerics from the Islamic Community in Serbia had singled out Islamović as one of the most responsible for Serbian Muslims’ departures for Syria.³⁸⁴

Today it is impossible to find such content on Islamović’s Facebook page.³⁸⁵ His sermons are non-political, wholly dedicated to faith. Islamović explains Hadis to help his congregation become better believers, and avoid different and problematic interpretations of Islam. Speeches are also aimed at assisting believers in solving real-life problems by using religion. According to our interlocutor, Islamović insists on recording his addresses and later sharing them on social networks in order to avoid speculations that they contain a political, militant, or wrong interpretation of Islamic writings. His apparent U-turn is significant, as Islamović is very influential in the Salafi community that gathers in the Hadzi-Meho Mosque, one of the biggest in Sandžak, where he is imam.³⁸⁶

According to our interviewees, “Put sredine” has also changed. The local community now recognizes it as a purely humanitarian organization that helps people in need, whoever they are, Muslims and Christians. During the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sandžak, it worked closely with other, very diverse Sandžak NGOs (religious but close to Turkey, civic, sport, etc.) and with local municipal institutions.

Another influential imam in the Sandžak Salafi community, and part of the Sandžak diaspora, is Bekir Makić. Makić was vocally advocating that Muslims first must solve their personal, family, and community problems and issues. People in Sandžak, he taught, should not worry too much about global issues and world politics, as there are more urgent issues in the region that their involvement can solve, whereas the conflict in Syria is too complex as it

³⁸² Muamer Zukorlić, "Vehabije, selefije, tekfirdžije, neoselefije (detaljno objašnjeno)," *SAHVA*, 2020, https://youtu.be/59D_ng73D6U.

³⁸³ See, among others, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/02/salafist-sunnis-shiites-enemy-jews.html>

³⁸⁴ Miloš Teodorović, "Sandžački dobrovoljci na sirijskom ratištu," *RSE*, June, 1, 2013. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sandzacki-dobrovoljci-na-sirijskom-ratistu/25003927.html>

³⁸⁵ Sead Islamović’s Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/Sead-ef-Islamovi%C4%87-173817383126024/?ref=page_internal

³⁸⁶ Glas Islama, "Hadži-Mehova Džamija," *Islamska zajednica u Srbiji*, <https://mesihat.org/2017/12/30/hadzi-mehova-dzamiya-2/>. <https://mesihat.org/2017/12/30/hadzi-mehova-dzamiya-2/> and SANA, "Džemat Hadži Mehove džamije primjer dobro organiziranog džemata u Sandžaku," *Sandžak Press*, april 22, 2017, <https://sandzakpress.net/dzemat-hadzi-mehove-dzamije-primjer-dobro-organiziranog-dzemata-u-sandzaku/>.



features a struggle among global and local powers, and one cannot be sure whose interests ISIS serves in the end. Actually, he claimed, the greatest evil that happened to Muslims in Syria and Iraq, as well as globally, is ISIS.³⁸⁷

Makić stressed that radicalism and extremism were brought to Sandžak by nescients. Prophet Muhammed was saying, God save me from a pious man who is ignorant, because the ignorant talk the most about faith. Muhammed has forbidden to exaggerate in obedience to Allah because any exaggeration in Islam is not allowed.³⁸⁸ Most of Makić's messages have been mirrored by other very active individuals in the Sandžak public space.

Interlocutors interpreted differently why Salafi imams had started to send these messages. One group stressed the importance of external factors, such as political and religious reforms in Saudi Arabia, or pressure from the USA and other powerful countries that prioritized the fight against terrorism and (violent) extremism. There is also an interpretation that when imams became influential and radical, they were targeted and pressurized by security services in and outside of Serbia. Finally, a group of interviewees thought that these imams realized at some point that they had to change their approach, as otherwise they would do more harm than good to Muslims.

Certain individuals, like Esad Kundaković, had played a decisive role in preventing more people from joining militants in Syria and Iraq, interlocutors pointed out. Kundaković is the father of Eldar Kundaković, who was killed in Aleppo in May 2013 trying to storm a prison, where enemies of Bashar Assad's regime had been kept. Following the death of his son, Esad embarked on a personal mission to save other people from making the same mistake and perish, and their parents from feeling the pain he has been suffering.³⁸⁹ According to interviewees close to the Salafi community, Kundaković had prevented dozens of young persons from going to Syria.

Kundaković primarily blames himself, and parents generally, for not talking with their children and understanding why they were feeling intensely for civilians being killed by Assad forces. Second to blame are Islamic communities and their imams, as they are not dedicated enough to young people. They transformed mosques into museums where imams just read Hadis without any desire to explain their meaning.³⁹⁰ According to Kundaković, people of authority need to be summoned to sincerely discuss important issues with youth so that young people see that they understand their needs. Esad himself is frequently participating at public and closed events and gatherings, and has never rejected anybody to have a conversation with him; young men would come to his tailor shop asking for advice, which would turn into a lengthy discussion. As Kundaković explains, to make the fight against radical and violent

³⁸⁷ Amela Bajrović, "Sandžak: Ekstremizma ima, a uzrok su i verske i političke podele," *RSE*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/debata-ekstremisti-novi-pazar/28310916.html>, and

Milan Kurucić, "Debata: Radikalizam i ekstremizam – izazovi, uzroci i posledice," *Forum 10*, February 14, 2017, <http://www.forum10.org.rs/aktivnost12.html>.

³⁸⁸ Kurucić, "Debata: radikalizam i ekstremizam – izazovi, uzroci i posledice".

³⁸⁹ Portal Analitika, "Svi smo zakazali," *Portal Analitika*, February 18, 2018, <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/294169--svi-smo-zakazali>.

³⁹⁰ Amela Bajrović, "Novi Pazar: 'izgubio sam sina u siriji zato što ga nisam saslušao'," *RSE*, January 18, 2017. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/novi-pazar-sirija-islam/28239600.html>.



extremism successful, you have to include extremist groups in discussions to tell their stories.³⁹¹ Interlocutors also stressed that a very important factor contributing to Kundaković's success in preventing youth radicalization, was that the local community recognized his family as respectable.

8.3 Preventive measures

While the above factors are mainly those who prevented the spread of VE in the communities during the radicalization wave of 2011-2014, two other factors have also contributed to the prevention of VE after 2014. First, the hard approach of state institutions after the manifestation of VE. Such measures have limited violent extremists' activity only to propaganda, as violent extremists are now more easily spotted and risk facing criminal proceedings for recruitment activities. This has influenced their *modus operandi* by making it harder for them to be organized in groups. As a key source in Kamza (Albania) stated: “*We have certain radical individuals, but they are detached from each other, consequently, they do not have any major influence. They try to build physical contact with others but are very careful because the police authorities can track them.*”³⁹²

This brings out the issue about the effectiveness of the national security institutions, such as state intelligence agencies and national committees for countering violent extremism and terrorism. Although their activities have been subject to some criticisms,³⁹³ their deterring role cannot be doubted. In Albania, RNM, and Kosovo, the hard approaches to P/CVE receive, and are often dependent on, the strong support from the US government. Interviewees in RNM, for example, suggested that since local Muslim communities did not want to lose the support of Western partners, they try to demonstrate their aversion to religious fanaticism.³⁹⁴

In Kosovo, the VE preventive measures are two-dimensional. The first dimension is a security-centered approach and includes measures to counter VE through conventional law mechanisms, while the second is related to countering radical religious preaching on doctrinal grounds. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) plays a crucial role in the former, while the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) is instrumental in formulating and spreading counter-narratives.³⁹⁵

Secondly, the soft response is mainly supported by foreign actors and implemented by civil society organizations. Besides state measures, non-state actors, such as international and civil society organizations have also been engaged in the P/CVE by setting up referral mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, awareness-raising campaigns, and grassroots-level projects that aim to build more community resilience. In addition, a collaboration of various actors and institutions has become more noticeable in P/CVE in some countries, such as

³⁹¹ Ibid.; see also Portal Analitika, “Svi Smo Zakazali.”

³⁹² Interview with a civil society representative in Kamza

³⁹³ See, for example, Kaltrina Selimi and Filip Stojkovski, *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁹⁴ Interview with an Albanian journalist and political analyst – Gostivar, 22 August 2021.

³⁹⁵ Peci and Demjaha, 2021, Kosovo – Macro-drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/mapping-the-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-the-light-of-state-dynamics-in-kosovo/>



Albania, especially through the Local Public Safety Councils, which enables a better inter-institutional coordination to address local concerns.

In other WB countries, like BiH and Kosovo, training programs are still in great demand. Thus in BiH, Bilal Bosnić whose home is in Bužim located 50 km north-northwest of Bihać, managed to form a small Salafi community which continued to live after his arrest and trial. There is almost no social interaction between this community and the mainstream population in Bužim, and local police and individuals close to the Islamic Community told researchers they have no particular strategy for dealing with these local Salafis, who keep to themselves and communicate among themselves almost exclusively. One interviewee admitted, *“our strategy is to react on the spot when a problem with them arises.”*³⁹⁶ In situations when social workers or school teachers have needed to communicate with Salafis in Bužim, they have simply relied on “intuition” to guide them as a social worker explains: *“We have no protocol, no established procedures. We react on intuition and the experience we have with the general population. But often, that experience is not relevant to communicating with Salafis. Dealing with a woman who has experienced domestic violence is not necessarily the same as dealing with a woman who has experienced domestic violence at the hands of her Salafi husband.”*³⁹⁷

It is at the same time significant that no one stepped into the leadership role of Bosnić while he was in prison, and that his community shrank in his absence. Some members moved away, and others joined the local official Islamic Community after de-radicalizing and reasserting their identity as “normal Bosnian Muslims”. Over time, the Salafi community in and around Bihać has diminished so significantly that a police officer acknowledged to researchers, *“Nobody even really pays attention to the Salafis anymore. Migrants, and the departure of young people from the area, are much bigger problems.”*³⁹⁸ Indeed, upon his imprisonment, many of Bosnić’s followers seem to have completely discarded radical Salafism, and a majority of interviewees said they view the potential for these individuals to be mobilized to violence as almost non-existent. Interviewees noted that some followers of Bosnić came to realize that their continued association with him after his arrest would have harmful, long-term social consequences for themselves and their families. This realization, along with repressive measures by authorities, the loss of contact with their charismatic leader, and the changing international context (the defeat of the Islamic State), were all factors in the subsequent de-radicalization of many of these individuals as they decided it was safer to moderate their views and join the Islamic Community.

As an important PVE factor, a representative of the security services in North Macedonia singled out the successful cooperation with colleagues from other countries in the region, especially Turkey which was used by Balkan FTFs as a corridor to enter Syria and Iraq.³⁹⁹ Similarly, the adoption in 2014 of legislation incriminating the FTF phenomenon is seen as having contributed to attenuating radicalization and propensity to VE.⁴⁰⁰ In this respect, the

³⁹⁶ Interview with local citizen of Bužim, 13 July, 2021

³⁹⁷ Interview with social worker in Bužim, 13 July, 2021

³⁹⁸ Interview with police officer in Bihać, 15 July, 2021

³⁹⁹ Interview with a representative of the intelligence agency – Skopje, 26 August 2021.

⁴⁰⁰ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Skopje, 23 August 2021.



American influence is considered to be of utmost importance. Local politicians acknowledge the leading role of the USA in managing the P/CVE field in the country, especially through “hard measures.”⁴⁰¹ The recent accession of RNM into NATO and the process of EU integration is also seen as a uniting factor in the Macedonian society.⁴⁰²

Experts in the P/CVE field in North Macedonia, on the other hand, expressed skepticism regarding the effects of the ongoing programs for de-radicalization, re-socialization and rehabilitation of returnee FTFs and their families.⁴⁰³ Conditions in local prisons are described as inimical to the process of de-radicalization of interned individuals.⁴⁰⁴ Thus, in September and December 2020, two radical groups consisting of returnees who have already served their sentences, were re-arrested and imprisoned.⁴⁰⁵ In this context, one of our respondents and an expert in counter-terrorism, noted the ever latent possibility for those who had returned and went through rehabilitation programs, to be radicalized again.⁴⁰⁶

9. Resilient local communities: lessons learned

Summing up this part of the research, it must have become clear that, due to the plethora of possibilities in which factors and actors interconnect in a given community, resilience to VE is not necessarily deliberate, but often it can occur by chance.⁴⁰⁷ In that sense, resilience is systemic for it does not depend on one single factor of resilience, but rather on the overall interconnection of factors and the way in which actors play a role in shaping those factors. On the whole, local resilience to VE is determined by the social cohesion and civic values of the community; the efficiency of preventive measures and interventions undertaken by state institutions, religious authorities and community actors; and the community’s attitude towards the measures. To understand which practices of local resilience-building are the most efficient, one must look into the drivers of VE and the specific grievances identified in each community. Alternatively, mapping out lessons learned from previous proven practices can also help stakeholders identify replicable approaches or potential areas for intervention.

The *prevalence of what has been often designated as “moderate Islam”* among Muslims in the WB, makes the local population reject intrusive and violent interpretations of Islam, such as the ones brought in the region by Jihadi-Salafis. On the whole, attempts of religious extremist groups to infiltrate mosques had ended in the *jamaats* ousting them as soon as they learned such groups were attempting to indoctrinate people. Our fieldwork across the WB suggests that the existence of sufficiently stable local traditions of tolerance and their reproduction in the cultural memory can have a great preventive effect on the processes of radicalization in a society. It will not be an exaggeration to state that, in the specific Western Balkan context, traditional Muslim

⁴⁰¹ Interview with a politician, presently member of the parliament of North Macedonia – Skopje, 20 August 2021.

⁴⁰² Interview with an Albanian journalist – Skopje, 23 August 2021.

⁴⁰³ Interview with a representative of the intelligence agency – Skopje, 26 August 2021.

⁴⁰⁴ Besa Arifi, *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰⁵ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Skopje, 23 August 2021.

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with a representative of the intelligence agency – Skopje, 26 August 2021.

⁴⁰⁷ Qirjazi R. & Shehu, R. (2018) Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania. Country Case Study 4. Berlin/Tirana: Berghof Foundation and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM). <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/community-perspectives-on-preventing-violent-extremism-in-albania>



identity acts as the main “brake” to the adoption of radical versions of Islam. An illuminating case is the town of Debar, and to a large extent the towns of Tetovo or Kichevo in North Macedonia, where one observes long-standing continuity of traditional religiosity and mutual respect between Muslims and Christians. Such relations, nurtured by close neighborly or even kin connections and transmitted from one generation to the next, are much more likely to prevail in small towns. The situation is quite different in cities like Skopje in RNM, Tirana and Elbasan in Albania, or Priština and Prizren in Kosovo, where local or migrant Muslims experience the anonymity and alienation of the big city, hence the absence of mechanisms that transmit and reproduce the traditional type of religiosity. It is no accident that the abovementioned municipalities exhibit the highest levels of radicalization, detected by both interlocutors and experts, as well as the highest number of FTFs.

The differences between the new migrant groups in the big cities and the indigenous Muslims living in the Western Balkan counties for centuries underscore the two-fold decisive role that local communities have in building a strong resilience to radicalization and VE. First, Salafism is intimately context-specific, having different appeal in the Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East, where Islamic identity is already established and is mainly about theology, and in Europe where it has to do mostly with identity.⁴⁰⁸ In the WB contexts, Jihadi-Salafism spread due to a combination of factors, where the quest of a revived Islamic identity blended with local social disruptions such as the Bosnian and Kosovo wars. Second, despite its global appeal and transnational channels of spreading, Jihadi-Salafism in the WB becomes increasingly localized – meaning that some radicalized individuals become theologically and institutionally re-accommodated into local “traditional Islam” and its official institutional representation. It could be anticipated that the immigrants to the bigger cities, who have no previous connection to the local WB context, will be also involved in a process of localization. In turn, local Muslims who had previously “globalized” through Salafism and its jihadi branch, undergo a process of “re-localization” by finding a *modus vivendi* with the “traditional” Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.⁴⁰⁹ For this (re)-localization, the official Muslim institutions in the WB countries have an important role to play.

Religious officials, such as muftis or imams, have an indispensable role in both creating close-knit communities, where radical elements are easily identified, and preventing, countering, and awareness-raising efforts. As a rule, imams in Albania, Sandžak, North Macedonia, Kosovo and BiH, who espouse the Hanafi strain of Sunni Islam, refuse to allow radical recruiters in their mosques, therefore recruiters find it difficult to connect with believers in other ways. Other imams, in order to counter the effects of the radicalization efforts, resort to holding speeches and counter-narratives focused on the topic of religious VE. As one interviewee put it, “*a qualified imam of a small community knows each member of his jamaat*

⁴⁰⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, “Radicalization, Salafism, and the Crisis of Jihadism”, in *Salafism: Challenged by Radicalization? Violence Politics, and the Advent of Post-Salafism*, edited by Théo Blanc and Olivier Roy, European University Institute: Florence, 2021, p. 26.

⁴⁰⁹ For a similar process of ‘re-localization’ in the Middle East, see Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, *How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria*, EUI Working Papers, RSC 08/2021, p. 27.



and is capable of recognizing who has more impulsive tendencies. Imams often work on an individual basis to persuade them to not fall prey to radical religious preaching”.⁴¹⁰ On the other hand, as the case of Sandžak indicates, imams and individuals of authority and influence over Salafi groups have played an essential role in their (re)-localization and integration into the moderate local community. Another example is the re-integration of some former followers of Bilal Bosnić into the *jamaats* belonging to the official Islamic Community in BiH.

Hard *preventive measures* have had tangible deterring effects in post-radicalization situations and, in combination with the changes in the international environment, are in great measure responsible for reducing the threat from Islamist VE. Soft measures, on the other hand, have proved particularly important in fostering youth resilience, which is crucial since the data suggests that the age group most susceptible to recruitment for violent jihad is 21–25. In this respect, the School as Community Centre model that was launched in Albania in 2014 has proved quite effective.⁴¹¹ In the opinion of interlocutors, many localities that had previously registered higher levels of radicalization and “VE occurrence” have benefited from multiple initiatives carried out by civil society organizations and state authorities, concerning awareness-raising and the threat of VE. However, concentrating efforts in areas where there has been an occurrence of VE threatens to oversaturate certain communities, while ignoring the needs of communities that are commonly acknowledged as “resilient” based on non-occurrence.

In the framework of PREVEX, we provided an overview of domestic and external actors’ approaches towards P/CVE in “The EU and other stakeholders’ prevention strategies towards VE in the Western Balkans”. The paper outlines a set of recommendations for stakeholders, urging, among others, the development of monitoring and evaluation tools, as well as risk management strategy, and the need to enhance local ownership in P/CVE programs implemented in the area.⁴¹²

In BiH, amid a crisis of multiplying Salafist para-*jamaats* in Bihać, many international and local organizations, as well as the media, were focused on the issue of Salafi radicalization. Yet, the only organization engaged in local projects in 2021 was the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which implemented these through an initiative of USAID and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Resilience Initiative (BHRI), to empower parents and youth to resist radical influences. Both efforts are extremely well conceived and make use of local entities; however, activities are directed mostly at users who are not at a direct risk of radicalization. In fact, there are no projects currently working directly with radicalized families and children in Bihać. The hope is that projects like the one implemented by IOM/USAID/BHRI will have broader impacts

⁴¹⁰ Interview with an imam in Mëzez, Tirana, 16 August 2021.

⁴¹¹ The primary goal of this model is the strengthening of sustainability and the prevention of radicalization that leads to violent extremism through multi-sectoral preventive measures, with special emphasis on educational institutions and lifelong learning competencies. The model aims to transform the school to (i) a place where local partnerships are built between school actors, local institutions and organizations, religious communities, and other community representatives; (ii) an environment that is in the service and interaction with the community. For more on the School as Community Centre model, see <https://shkollaim.org/>

⁴¹² Vrugtman, L. (2020) *The EU and other stakeholders’ prevention strategies towards VE in Albania*. Institute for Democracy and Mediation. Policy Paper available at: <https://www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/the-status-of-preventing-and-counteracting-violent-extremism-in-albania/> (accessed 22 December 2021).



when participant parents and youth influence other people in their community, including people at risk of radicalization or in families with radicalized members, by sharing what they have learned through community-level interactions. This kind of “social contagion” is often linked to radicalization and other negative social phenomena, and rightly so; but increasingly, it is also viewed as a means by which targeted community projects can foster broader positive social transformations.⁴¹³

The VE dynamics in BiH is inextricably linked to the wars of the 1990s, and to the competing, ethnicized narratives that had emerged in their aftermath. Indeed, the ethno-nationalist and religious extremism that fuelled the war in BiH has only been consolidated in the decades since, especially among older generations of politicians, who have effectively mainstreamed some forms of radicalization. Still, for the most part, our researchers find that youth in BiH reject ethnic segregation and the prevailing politics of division. The consistency of this finding indicates that younger Bosnians represent a real opportunity for the country to begin seeing through a new frame and moving away from the ubiquitous “ethnic lens”; but this opportunity is available only if young citizens of BiH remain in the country. Instead, many are emigrating, chasing the potential of a more prosperous and stable future elsewhere. As long as ethno-nationalist leaders like Milorad Dodik are actively pursuing anti-democratic objectives and ethnic exclusivity, it is hard to imagine that many young Bosnians are likely to return.

In Kosovo, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is a key institution in the multi-agency efforts to counter VE, and positive developments notwithstanding, deficiencies and failures in the work have been revealed.⁴¹⁴ Two important issues have been highlighted in this respect: (1) the permanent coordinating mechanism for implementation of *Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020* (SPVERLT) has ceased to exist since 2020, and; (2) the abolition of the position of National Coordinator for counterterrorism. Although Kosovo is among the Balkan countries with the highest number of sentences on foreign fighters, the country’s average prison sentences has decreased. Moreover, Kosovo’s law, that outlaws joining foreign armed conflicts, does not deal with probation after imprisonment.⁴¹⁵ Kosovo lacks a national reintegration plan that would help the resocialization of vulnerable individuals.⁴¹⁶ Local civil society and the Islamic Community have proved to be important in this regard, having been involved in both major national inter-agency activities to

⁴¹³ One very interesting project in The Netherlands, for example, has sought to “activate residents towards the [country’s upcoming] energy transition using... social influence and social contagion.” See: Jesal Shah, “Social Contagion as a Means to Transitions,” Master’s thesis (Delft University of Technology, 2020). Also see: Mehdi Moussaïd, et al., “Reach and speed of judgment propagation in the laboratory,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017).

⁴¹⁴ Peci and Demjaha, 2021, Kosovo – Macro-drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/mapping-the-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-the-light-of-state-dynamics-in-kosovo/>

⁴¹⁵ Law No. 05/L-002 on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=10763>

⁴¹⁶ Hedayah countering violent extremism, BIRN. May 2020. Evidence in terrorism cases is proving difficult to find, while experts warn that the reintegration and rehabilitation of foreign fighters is an even greater challenge. Available at: <https://detektor.ba/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Balkan-States-Find-Prosecuting-Terrorism-a-Challenge.pdf>



counter VE, and tailor-made initiatives and projects in local communities.⁴¹⁷ Factors, such as the inter-ethnic tensions between South and North Mitrovica as well as the failure of the authorities to ensure the safe return of families back to their homes continues to engender potential for further spreading of ethno-nationalism. Whereas the focus on Islamist FTFs has shaped the prevailing optics through which state institutions view threats stemming from VE, in recent years such threats stem not from religious, but rather from political and ethnonationalist extremism.

Experts in the P/CVE field in North Macedonia, on their part, hold that the psychological element is often neglected when it comes to programs treating VE,⁴¹⁸ even if it is recognized that “wounded dignity” stimulates the politicization of ethnic identities and mutual antagonism. For some observers, the Albanian aspirations are less a struggle for rights than a “struggle for recognition.” Their armed resistance failed to bring the respect they strived for, even though it brought them the political rights they desired. In this sense, they remained with a “maligned identity, as the violent birth of their collective freedoms functioned to reinforce the negative images Macedonians already harbored of Albanians.”⁴¹⁹ It was also noted that, induced by the multiple crises and potential threats in the post-Yugoslav space, the NGO sector in RNM had become overblown and “inflated” by external donors. A director of a prominent NGO admitted that “we are a bit of a parasitic society.” Many NGOs without the necessary capacities, resources, and experience obtain grants in the P/CVE sector turning this funding into “profitable business.”⁴²⁰

10. Concluding remarks

Drawing primarily on fieldwork in the five Western Balkan countries, the findings from this research can be summed up as follows.

The radicalization and VE upswing in the region took place during the Syrian civil war, which brought along intensified radical propaganda, a higher number of supporters of radical Islamic ideology, and a considerable number of FTFs. Several violent, occasionally bloody, incidents and terrorist attempts also took place during that period. Since 2014, due to the disintegration of ISIS, the institutional and legal counter-measures undertaken by local governments, and the work of (local and international) non-state actors in P/CVE, the threat from Islamic extremism has been drastically reduced and its discourse largely isolated. Yet, there is good reason to believe that there still exist “pockets” of religious extremism that can be (re-)activated under certain conditions, and the VE phenomenon is still present, especially online. The latter thus requires constant attention by all stakeholders to debunk VE propaganda,

⁴¹⁷ Peci and Demjaha, 2021, Kosovo – Macro-drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. Available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/mapping-the-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-the-light-of-state-dynamics-in-kosovo/>

⁴¹⁸ Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 27 August 2021.

⁴¹⁹ George Vasilev, “Multiculturalism in post-Ohrid Macedonia,” *East European Politics and Societies* 27 (4), 2013, pp. 685–708.

⁴²⁰ Interview with a representative of the NGO sector – Struga, 18 August 2021, Interview with an expert in the P/CVE field – Skopje, 26 August 2021, Focus group with representatives of the NGO sector – Skopje, 26 August 2021.



undermine VE groups and address the drivers of violent extremism.

At the same time, respondents across the region acknowledge the rising influence of extreme ethnic nationalism and far-right populism. Many interviewees pointed to the prevalence of “political extremism” and to the role of political parties in polarizing and exacerbating inter-communal relations. Global-local connections, including diaspora, function differently relative to types of radicalization. When it comes to Islamic VE, Bosnian, North Macedonian or Albanian diasporas take part in a largely global process of transnational Islamic mobilization, whereas ethnonationalist radicalization entails predominantly intra-regional allegiances and networks.

The declining trend of Islamist VE in terms of “occurrence” noticed in some WB cases, such as BiH and Kosovo, is a result of a two-fold process, encompassing: (1) the outcome of hard and soft measures undertaken by governments and civil society sectors; (2) a process of (re)-localization of Muslim identities previously radicalized and globalized due to key decisive moments such as the outbreak of the Syrian war and the spread of the IS Jihadi-Salafi propaganda throughout the WB. Ethno-nationalist radicalization, in turn, is increasing in some WB localities, e.g. in Kosovo and BiH, which – unlike Islamist VE – is largely linked to local political developments and tensions as well as to the legacies of the Bosnian and Kosovo wars.

In the Western Balkan contexts, VE has been motivated, driven and shaped by a combination of factors:

- The emotional appeal of the FTF phenomenon was nurtured by three different discourses: the humanitarian idea to help the suffering people in Syria against a brutal dictatorship; the responsibility towards the *umma* and the call for *jihad*, and; the opportunity to provide an “in group” to those who lacked a sense of belonging.
- Social exclusion and marginalization are major factors of radicalization that may result in adopting an extremist agenda. These are not necessarily based on socio-economic condition, but can stem from other societal factors. One such factor are dysfunctional families: members of such families tend to have a much weaker sense of connection with their community and are prone to exploit others or become exploited themselves. Social exclusion may also result from failure of a person to adopt to society, or when the society alienates the person. Bases for such alienation maybe prejudices against one’s ethnic or religious background, resp. lack of representation in state institutions or formal religious authorities. Fieldwork has confirmed that in some localities, ethno-religious segregation that push individuals to seek support and rely on other actors, is a strong VE driver.
- The economic hardships may have indirectly contributed to the radicalization process as a push-factor. The economic gains may have been a major pull-factor for some FTFs, as the VE discourse had created an attractive idea that the war in Syria would end soon, and FTFs would gain enormous properties in the newly established caliphate. All in all, however, poverty and economic grievances can be regarded as neither a leading, nor a standing alone driver of VE.



- Deficient state and political institutions, marked by corruption and clientelism and prone to politicizing grievances, creates distrust in the political system and alienation from the state.
- During the radicalization upswing following the eruption of the conflict in Syria, the reactions from the state, and the resources of the established religious authorities in all five countries, proved inadequate to effectively counteract – through institutional, financial and rhetorical means – radical narratives. The financial vulnerability of the religious authorities perceived as a “barrier” against Islamist radicalization and VE, in particular, leaves space for other actors to challenge these societies’ mainstream religious practices.
- Most of the FTFs were recruited/indoctrinated by radical imams. The FTFs, who often lack religious knowledge and education, regard the radical recruiter as a champion of true Islam who is not influenced by other actors (unlike mainstream imams) and whose actions and words are only to be obeyed, and not questioned. In this sense, FTFs often don’t follow the radical ideas per se, they are following the imam (recruiter). Despite the successes of reintegrating returning FTFs, recent arrests (such as in Kosovo) of persons who were previously involved in trials, indicate that there is a risk of re-radicalization.
- Lack of quality education (both secular and religious), particularly segregation in schools along ethnic and religious lines, leads to greater propensity for inter-communal hostility and can serve as a fertile soil for the penetration of extremist ideologies.
- In terms of radicalization and VE, local-global connections in the WB are two-directional, whereby the “globalization” of individuals and groups through ideologies, such as Jihadi-Salafism, can under certain conditions be followed by their (re)-localization – a process that entails their harmonization with mainstream Muslim tradition in the region.

The main factors of resilience our fieldwork had identified can be subsumed under two major groups:

- Local communities and the culture of “traditional Islam” that prevails among the Muslim communities in the WB stand out as leading resilient “agencies” in this region. Although their influence embraces mostly local Muslims, it can be anticipated that it has the potential to eventually involve the immigrant individuals and groups living in the bigger cities throughout the region.
- Religious leaders prove to play an indispensable role both in terms of building social cohesion and in preventing and countering extremist ideologies, which underscores the need to identify and work actively with local stakeholders.

10.1 How to strengthen local resilience

Strategic recommendations:

- Adopting a multi-agency and holistic approach for countering VE: The factors that lead to radicalization are diverse, context-bound and include a range of issues. As a result, the



response to it should also cover a range of actors that target these issues. Security-based and “whole-of-society” approaches should at that proceed simultaneously.

- Preventive measures combining hard and soft policies, state- and civil society-driven programs should be further sustained by upgrading the national strategies, working on the ground with local authorities and civil society, strengthening existing capacities and coordinating such efforts with central governments.
- Aligning prevention and reintegration programs with community needs: P/CVE stakeholders must design their interventions based on community-specific needs in order to adequately address any enabling factors. Community assessments must be carried out periodically to assess the priorities of the citizens and identify potential push and pull factors towards VE.
- Among the long-term generic measures, reducing unemployment, especially among youth, and political corruption – two factors that in many contexts are closely linked – stand out as crucial as they can substantially alleviate the social frustrations, which constitute a fertile soil for radicalization and VE.
- Authorized religious institutions, which espouse and cultivate “traditional Islam,” should be provided with the resources and state support needed to exert effective jurisdiction and control on their communities and counteract extremist ideologies. Such institutions should, (i) increase their visibility online and utilize the possibilities offered by social media to engage more effectively with young people and, (ii) cooperate more closely with the NGO sector and be engaged more actively in the P/CVE field.

Medium-term

- Empowering local community leaders by vesting them an important role in social bridging and opening more space for their activities. It proved that individuals with actual authority in the local community have been important in building resistance and resilience to (violent) extremism and improving community cohesion. Specifically this applies to local religious leaders since findings revealed that qualified imams that reinforced counter-narratives among their jamaat, enabled the community to identify, expose and mitigate the risks of potential radicalized individuals efficiently.
- Fostering youth resilience against violence extremism: In order to shrink the enabling space for social exclusion and marginalization, stakeholders should continue strengthening digital and civic literacy skills that target youth in marginalized communities or rural areas and equip them with the tools to actively engage in the community. Related to that is the improvement of religious and civic education, training of educators, and updating the curricula they teach. The curricula should include learning about other religions (in a historical and sociological context) and improved critical thinking skills to enable students to better assess problematic content they encounter, especially via social media.
- In societies as divided along ethno-religious, and often also political, lines such as Kosovo, North Macedonia and Sandžak, communal isolation can be countered by programs aimed at creating “inclusive environments” and social bonding through continuous dialogue,



inter-communal socialization and achieving common goals. As pointed out by some respondents, “to know each other” is extremely important in such societies. This means promoting interculturalism instead of multiculturalism and designing modules for building bridges among communities in all aspects – from education to employment in the public or private sector.

Short-term

- State institutions, the international community, and civil society should pay more attention to right-wing politically motivated extremism, especially in BiH, Kosovo and Serbia. Authorities should respond more resolutely by both prosecuting far-righters hate crime activities and publicly condemning their actions.
- Civil society should establish better communication with citizens and engage in as much as possible local initiatives and direct contacts and communication with citizens, so as to perform more effectively its mediating role in social bonding.
- There is an urgent necessity to adopt legislation that sanctions extremist content and propaganda online.
- The EU and other external stakeholders and donor organizations should closely monitor how local beneficiaries operate with their funds. As critically remarked by some respondents, the admittedly easier access to these financial resources in recent years led to dubious final products.
- Confront malign foreign influences in countries where they are harmful, such as BiH, and have a devastating effect on inter-ethnic relations exercised by both global/transregional actors (e.g., China, Russia, Saudi Arabia) and neighboring states (Serbia and Croatia in the case of BiH).
- Set up youth organizations cultivating intercultural socialization, with a focus on public schools, in view of overcoming the segregation at schools along religious and ethnic lines in the form of “two schools under one roof”.



Appendix A: Map of the Balkans

