

Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

Filip Ejdus and Predrag Jureković (Eds.)

Study Group Information



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Foreword

Filip Ejdus and Predrag Jureković

The 31st workshop of the Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe was convened in Belgrade, Serbia from 27 to 29 September 2015. Under the overarching title of “Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans” 30 experts from the South East European region, the international community and major stakeholder nations met under the umbrella of the PFP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes and the Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sports, represented through its National Defence Academy and Directorate General for Security Policy. The workshop was supported by the regional partner organization Belgrade Centre for Security Policy.

During the last two decades, the region of South East Europe has been on the agenda of Transatlantic, European and Austrian institutions with the goal of enhancing capabilities in the field of conflict management and peace support. Recent developments in the region have given rise to the main topic of the 31st workshop of the Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe.

For more than a decade, the Western Balkans was considered to be a region slowly recovering from the conflicts of the 1990s and on the way to consolidating peace and stability. In spite of occasional setbacks, democratic backslides and sluggish reforms there has been a dependable expectation that conflicts will be resolved or at least managed peacefully. The attack on a police station in the Bosnian town Zvornik (April 2015) and the killing of two soldiers of the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina near Sarajevo (November 2015) as well as the “weekend war” in Kumanovo, Macedonia (May 2015), put violence back on the agenda of the Western Balkans. Primarily the first two events shed new light on the problem of an increasing number of foreign fighters from the region who have joined the Islamic State or the Al Nusrah Front. In a video message from June 2015, the Islamic State invited Balkan Muslims to “either join, or kill over there”.

In particular during autumn and winter 2015, when also this part of South East Europe was heavily affected by the humanitarian challenges of the global refugee crisis, but with minor intensity as well after the closing of the so called “Balkan route” in March 2016 there have been fears that the refugee crisis could have negative security implications. On the other hand, these challenges, coupled with the never-ending economic crisis, EU enlargement fatigue, as well as the deterioration in West-Russia relationship further bolster extreme right wing mobilization across the region. A particularly strong catalyst for right wing mobilization has been the war in Ukraine attracting some dozens of foreign fighters and mercenaries from the Balkans who joined either Kiev or pro-Russian rebels. If continued, the current refugee crisis may also bolster the rise of right wing extremism thus returning ethnic security dilemma to the politics of South East Europe.

The following key questions constituted the framework of discussion and debate during the workshop and thus also structure the contributions from the four panels in the following pages:

- What is the potential for violent extremism in the Western Balkans?
- How can the region prevent radicalization?
- Is the Islamic State a threat to the Western Balkans?
- Should returning foreign fighters be reintegrated or sanctioned?
- Should the refugee problem be securitized or treated purely as a humanitarian issue?
- What is the role of media in the fight against violent extremism?
- Is “the Greater Albania” project a myth or reality?
- What are the links between right wing extremism and right wing political parties?
- How can the region cooperate in the prevention of radicalization?
- What is the role of the international community in the fight against violent extremism in the Western Balkans?
- In what way can the civil-society contribute to de-radicalization?

After Susan L. Woodward’s general reflections on the overall topic, part I of this book addresses the roots of violent extremism. The contributions in part II deal with the ties between Islamism and Salafi-Jihadist threats for

the Western Balkans. The various dimensions of nationalism are analyzed in part III. Finally, part IV focuses on the strategies for fighting violent extremism in the Western Balkans. The policy recommendations and findings of the expert group are summarized at the end of the publication in part V.

The editors would like to express their thanks to all authors who contributed papers to this volume of the Study Group Information. They are pleased to present the valued readers the analyses and recommendations of the Belgrade meeting and would appreciate if this Study Group Information could contribute to generate positive ideas for supporting the still challenging processes of consolidating peace in South East Europe.

Special thanks go to Ms. Adriana Dubo, who supported this publication as facilitating editor, and to Mr. Benedikt Hensellek for his stout support to the Study Group.

Abstract

For more than a decade, the Western Balkans was considered to be a region slowly recovering from the conflicts of the 1990s and on the way to consolidating peace and stability. The hope for peace was abruptly shaken by several violent incidents in 2015. The attack on a police station in the Bosnian town Zvornik and the killing of two soldiers of the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina near Sarajevo as well as the fights in Kumanovo, Macedonia, put violence back on the agenda of the Western Balkans. The fear of new violence and the problem of an increasing number of foreign fighters from the region who have joined the Islamic State or the Al Nusrah Front is a constantly present threat to the region. The Islamic State is encouraging Muslims in the region to start a fight against the “new world” and join their mission. These new developments are of concern to the international community who is afraid that old wounds could be reopened and instability and chaos would prevail.

Keynote Speech

Susan Woodward

When I accepted this invitation to speak today, I thought I was attending a conference on Regional Stability in South East Europe. Only later did I learn that the actual agenda for the meeting is on Confronting Violent Extremism. Are these related in any way? I will argue that they are not, but that we do need to ask this question – are they related and if so how – and to be quite open and explicit about our answers, whichever position each one of us takes. This would seem to apply to all of the sessions today and tomorrow.

Let me begin with this new policy agenda on violent extremism, originating in Washington, D.C., but gaining wholehearted support from the United Nations in UN SCR 2178, introduced by the U.S. under its Council Presidency on 24 September 2014, and already generating a large number of research institutes and policy platforms. Although some identify this concern with the war in Syria and the emergence of the radical Islamic extremism of the Islamic State, ISIS/ISL, we know that the leadership of the latter originates much earlier in Afghanistan and that the U.S. framing derives directly from 9/11 and the Bush Administration's global war on terror. "Violent extremist groups" are explicitly said to be the new nature of the terrorist threat, carried primarily by "foreign terrorist fighters," already with its own acronym, FTF. I propose, however, that the lineage of this policy agenda actually goes back to the early 1990s when the end of the Cold War, and particularly its enormous expenditures on armed forces and armaments, led to wide-ranging debates about a new definition of security, both national and international, appropriate to the new international conditions and the alternative uses for those mammoth defense budgets that such a new understanding of security would support. It was even called the peace dividend. In a book manuscript that I have just completed, I argue that the concept that emerged victorious at the time was that of the failed state and its security threat to international peace and stable countries (largely, the U.S. and Western Europe, that is, the transatlantic alliance). There was, therefore, no redefinition of security for the post-Cold War era, no restruc-

turing of the U.S.-designed international order in security and development, only a simple displacement of Western Cold-War threat analysis from the Communist world to poor countries mostly embroiled in civil war. The threat that these poor, conflict-affected countries were said to present came through refugees and asylum seekers, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, mass violations of human rights, pandemics of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, and even Ebola, and trafficking in illegal goods such as illicit drugs, looted natural resources like diamonds and coltan, unregistered small arms, or in human beings for prostitution or slavery. Although the original argument was that these were new asymmetric threats and actors such as what were called warlords at the time who did not obey the rules, both normative and practical, to which international actors such as national militaries, the U.N., or the World Bank and IMF were accustomed and for which the international system in 1992-4 and these actors were unprepared, the focus shifted quickly onto the so-called failed or fragile states as the threat. The original argument was based on actual events at the time, not only Somalia, Rwanda, and Haitian migrants, but also above all the Balkan wars – especially Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As we watch the EU countries quarrel over how to share the refugee and asylum-seeker burden currently, it is hard not to remember the very same fight in 1992 and 1993, including the development by then U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, of what she called “a right to stay,” that is to assist Bosnians of all nations and Serbs expelled from Croatia to become IDPs at home rather than refugees in places like Germany. The same argument has reappeared this month in regard to the Syrian civil war and the exodus from Africa.

For reasons I can explain but will only state here, the result of this particular framing of global security threats and particularly toward countries of the transatlantic alliance was, in a very short period of time, an increasing focus on military responses – the expansion of NATO, ever more forceful (“robust” is the euphemism) definitions of intervention, including by U.N. peace operations, humanitarian war (so-called because the term should be an oxymoron) in Kosovo and Libya, the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, increasingly military delivery of humanitarian aid – even now the primarily military responses by the EU to the migration crisis of this year and last. For me, it was a tragic missed opportunity in the early to mid-1990s to

reorganize the international system and the policies of the major powers in support of the alternative proposals – cooperative security, human security, and above all, economic development after the devastating consequences worldwide of structural adjustment policies in indebted countries – policies that might have prevented, or at least substantially reduced, the renewed cycle of civil war and migration that we have been seeing since 2000 after the much-celebrated decline in the number of conflict-affected countries in the second half of the 1990s.

Let me remind you of a significant article by Richard Ullman, the distinguished American scholar of security and international relations, in 1983, who argued already that the U.S. had an excessively narrow and excessively military definition of national security, and that the U.S. public thought about resource allocations for military and non-military dimensions of security in quite different ways – a single, authoritative determination on military security and none on non-military dimensions – and that this prevented thinking and deliberation on a wide range of non-military vulnerabilities such as environmental disaster, human rights, and other threats to the quality of their living conditions.¹ The article was aimed at the U.S. public, but it applies everywhere. It also correctly predicted the dilemma I believe we are now in, with ever more violent conflict – in 2010, there were 31 armed conflicts, in 2011, 37.² U.N. military and police deployments were at an all-time high by 2011-13 since their peak in 1992-1996.³ In early 2015, UNICEF recorded a milestone, of never before five simultaneous “level 3” humanitarian crises – Central African Republic, Iraq, Liberia, South Sudan, and Syria. I believe this is the consequence of this missed opportunity to develop robust non-military responses to conflict and genuine attention to prevention and the rapid resort instead to the military as a default toolkit, as if it were a solution, which it is not. The lesson of the past two decades also seems to be having effects in the discussions on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), for example, the CVE principles articulated at the February 2015 summit in Washington, in the 2014 language of the UN Security

¹ Richard Ullman, “Redefining Security,” *International Security*, 8: 1 (Summer 1983): 129-153.

² ECD 2012: 32, using data from the Uppsala armed conflict dataset; OECD DAC 2014: 5.

³ Perry and Smith 2013. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2358162.

Council, and by private NGOs such as the Global Center on Cooperative Security that emphasize prevention, respect for human rights, and encouragement of non-military tools and interstate cooperation; nonetheless, CVE remains a tool of counterterrorism so that it is difficult to imagine how these principles will win out against a military response.

Turning to Southeast Europe, however, why would the security threat, whether defined generally by the ideology of failed states or its current component, that of violent extremist groups and “foreign terrorist fighters,” apparently of concern to the United States, the UK, or France, for example, also apply to Southeast Europe? We know that most of the world, from China to India to South Africa to Brazil or Argentina, does not accept either version of this argument. The electoral logic of countries with minority Muslim populations and attacks in the last years, such as France, make their concern a bit understandable on popular, if not scholarly grounds. But how did Southeast Europe transition from a perceived source of threat in the early 1990s (I say perceived because I never accepted this argument), to being victim of this threat? Or is the region still considered a threat to the outside?

We can break this question into three parts. First, the primary assumption of the Countering Violent Extremism agenda is that the threat is Islamic extremism. But the populations in Southeast Europe are either majority Muslim or have large Muslim minorities. While it is true that conflict-provoking grievances by Muslim minorities against discrimination exists and is quite understandable in some cases, even these have not led to violence, nor, I predict, will they. This is not France, or even the U.K., in other words, where outsiders might find purchase in violent attacks by instructed individuals. Moreover, the enormous variation among Muslim populations in the region of Southeast Europe – linguistically, ethnically, religiously (e.g., doctrinally), organizationally – should even require those who speak of Muslims as a political actor to say what and who they mean.⁴ As Kerem Öktem writes, on the basis of extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Albania, Greece, Bosnia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey in 2010, the exaggerated

⁴ Kerem Öktem’s recent survey of this variation is very useful: “Between emigration, de-Islamization and the nation-state: Muslim communities in the Balkans today,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 11: 2 (June 2011): 155-171.

concern with Islamist terrorism in the region [such as the media industry's focus on the possibility of the Balkans becoming a hotbed of Islamic terrorism, *Salafism* and *Jihadi* terrorism] has obfuscated the facts on the ground, that is, the deep fragmentation of Muslim communities, the re-emergence of established Muslim administrations and communities [which emphasize the Europeanness of Balkan Muslims] after a period of relative weakness and the increasing impact of the Turkish state and religious institutions on how Islam is lived and practiced in the Balkans (Öktem 156).

Second and third, these facts lead to two related parts. The first is that violence-provoking grievances are always group-defined and organized, not individually instigated. The idea that there are “foreign trained fighters” returning home to a country in Southeast Europe who are a threat, without identifying a group whom these individuals would be representing or whose orders they would be implementing, makes no sense from anything we know about the causes of violence or this region. For example, Paul Staniland emphasizes on the basis of much empirical research the frequency of what he calls “fratricidal flipping,” that is, intrainsurgent conflict and the frequency of so-called “ethnic defection,” by rivals in such intragroup conflict seeking survival.⁵ Moreover, the studies beginning to emerge about those who left (from anywhere) to join the “Islamic state” suggest that the primary reason for return is disillusionment with intra-Muslim violence and atrocities and that, in response to the question posed to us by the organizers’ of this conference, the clear evidence supports reintegration, not sanctioning, even, as a new study from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence at King’s College, London, proposes, offering them “protection.”⁶ By recognizing that violence is a group-based activity, whether it is offensive (aggressive) or defensive, we then must ask what would be the interests or broader motivation of an external group in fomenting violence in Southeast Europe along Islamic grounds? I see none. (The most interesting foreign penetration of Southeast Europe by Islamic activists of some sort in the last 25 years was

⁵ Paul Staniland, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56:1 (February 2012): 16-40.

⁶ Shiv Malik, “Protect Isis defectors, western governments urged,” *The Guardian*, 21 September 2015, reporting the study, “Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: the Narrative of Islamic State Defectors.

on humanitarian grounds during the wars and now are on educational and cultural grounds – Turkish schools, Iranian and Saudi cultural institutions⁷ – to gain adherents in their competition among Islamic sects for dominance, but nothing that would provoke violence, either within the region or exportable⁸).

The second related part is that extensive scholarship on political violence shows that it is always primarily instigated by states, not individuals, the so-called “lone wolves”; states are responsible for the majority of deaths.⁹ In the Yugoslav case between 1991 and 99, these were politically organized groups using nationalism for political gain, that is, to create new states and borders. Currently, the primary incidences of violence are provoked by official actors using violence for political purposes, although these remain, thankfully, isolated cases, nothing threatening renewed civil war at all. For example, in Turkey, President Erdogan’s effort to win the parliamentary elections has included a major government assault on Kurds, on the assumption that Turks would turn against the new Kurdish political party that was so successful in the last elections as to prevent him from obtaining

⁷ A very useful recent survey based on the Bosnian case can be found in Eldar Sarajlić, “The return of the consuls: Islamic networks and foreign policy perspectives in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 11: 2 (June 2011): 173-190.

⁸ Gordon Bardos would not agree with this statement, and his analysis of Islamic radicalism in Southeast Europe currently is very carefully annotated and analyzed, in “From the Balkans to ISIS: Militant Islamism in Southeastern Europe,” SEERECON, Special Analytical Report, December 2013. The extensive research and rich detail in this excellent report does, however, largely focus on recruitment efforts in Southeast Europe for fighting in Syria and the neighborhood (e.g., the 500 “jihadis” in Syria that he counts), not activities within Southeastern Europe. The numbers who respond to the call, moreover, are still very small; the Bosnian Minister of Security, Dragan Mektić, reported in early September 2015 that 130 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina “have been or are currently in Syria,” of whom 43 were killed, another 50 returned home; 4 were in Ukraine; and 19 were being tried in Bosnia for fighting on foreign battlefields (Srećko Latal, “Bosnia Promises United Stance at Anti-ISIS Summit, *Balkan Insight*, 7 September 2015).

⁹ Stephen M. Saideman and Marie-Joelle Zahar, eds., *Intra-State Conflict, Governments and Security: Dilemmas of deterrence and assurance* (Routledge: 2008), see especially chapter 3 by Armstrong and Davenport for data; also chapter 2, Kalyvas: “violence is not typically launched by threatened minorities but confident and aggressive majorities.”

the majority he needed for constitutional change; then there were the violent incidents in Kumanovo in Macedonia, supposedly ethnically based but with great suspicion that the governing party instigated the violence to distract attention from the increasingly successful opposition campaign against its corruption and the wire-tapping scandal – Dane Taleski here can tell you much more than I; and then there is the violence during the Bosnian protests (“plenums”) in 2014 – this is a complicated story, but we do know that the violence in Sarajevo and Mostar, for example, was instigated by majority political party leaders aiming for political advantage. We might even add the appalling treatment by Hungarian police and border guards against migrants in mid-September, some of it very violent and certainly a willingness to use force, which Hungarians argue is actually a domestic, partisan fight on the right between the right-wing governing party of Prime Minister Orbán and the rising electoral popularity of the neofascist party to his right, Jobbik.

Perhaps the more important conclusion from these events, however, is how rare violence is these days in Southeast Europe and that these incidents conform very much to what we know about political violence from the literature on civil war. Public opinion polls, too, show that the vast majority of citizens in the region are not the least bit concerned about terrorism, in sharp contrast to the rhetoric of their politicians. I will be very interested in hearing what the panels discussing nationalist as opposed to Islamist extremism have to say, given that the goal of nationalist extremism in Southeast Europe, independent nationally defined states, has been, in my view, accomplished. The multinational states of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia are compromises with that goal, but the continuing contest over national self-determination in both cases manifests itself at the constitutional and party politics level, not with either violence or threats to regional stability.

Turning now to the second component of my talk, regional stability in Southeast Europe, it is very important for me to state up front my view of how truly impressive regional stability is in the region currently. Even the border conflict between Slovenia and Croatia has continued far longer than I would have expected, but it has not led to violence or even regional destabilization. Much of this stability is due to the active role of people aiming to restore good relations across the new state borders and to facilitate

regional stability. But as long as these good relations depend on personalities rather than institutions and on domestic politics over which they have some control but not developments beyond the region that nonetheless impinge on the region and require a domestic response, this will not be enough. The region's vulnerability to external actors and actions has been its defining characteristic for at least two millennia.

The migration crisis, the focus on Countering Violent Extremism by the PffP, U.S., and European officials, and the Ukrainian events are three such external elements. The most important, of course, is the migration crisis. The response of Macedonia reveals a weakness that we all knew was there, but was nonetheless shocking,¹⁰ while Slovenia's selfishness should have provoked more criticism, I believe. The way Serbia and Croatia have handled the crisis in the last months was very impressive, but it did not last. When Croatia closed the border to transport on September 17 and again 19-21, 2015, and Serbia responded critically, although this is in sharp contrast to Hungarian actions specifically and the reaction of east European members of the EU against any burden sharing, the rapid escalation of political rhetoric, just as within Bosnia after the Zvornik police station attack in April, revealed the need for more institutionalized mechanisms of regional conflict management. To the extent that the migration crisis is a result of the Syrian civil war, the Iraqi disaster, and the rise of the Islamic State, another element in active regional stabilization has also now been lost, the role of Turkey.

One of the main actors in improved regional cooperation and stability over the last few years has been Turkey. Beginning in 2009, with the assumption of the foreign ministry by Davutoglu (the current prime minister), Turkey embarked on a series of very high profile diplomatic initiatives aimed at mediating and normalizing relations among the countries of former Yugoslavia in the interest of regional peace and cooperation – particularly tripartite agreements among Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia, including the successful Srebrenica apology by the Serbian parliament and the Istanbul Declaration restoring Bosnian diplomatic relations with Serbia and a visa and travel

¹⁰ See the Human Rights Watch report, "As Though We Are Not Human Beings": Police Brutality against Migrants and Asylum Seekers in Macedonia," September 21, 2015. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/node/281211> (accessed September 22, 2015).

agreement, and regular consultations among Turkey, Serbia, and Croatia; successful intervention in the Sandžak internal dispute; and even the proposed “Balkan Bloc” at the United Nations.¹¹ This activity is clearly now interrupted by the Syrian and Islamic State crises.

The vulnerability of such initiatives to current events again demonstrates the need for more institutionalized means of regional cooperation and conflict management. The Balkan case is in sharp contrast to the development in the rest of the world, the increasing importance of regional security organizations worldwide since the end of the Cold War (even beginning with the Contadora group in the late 1980s for negotiating peace in Central America once the consequences of Gorbachev’s policies for peace were clear). The obstacle to creating such an organization, of course, is the local fear that this would condemn the region to peripheral status outside both the EU and NATO, and EU and NATO officials would surely send that signal as well. However, if we think about the very important role of ECOWAS and ECOMOG in West Africa, of IGAD in relation to South Sudan (less successful currently, but still very important), of ASEAN in Southeast Asia, even though in the shadow of China and Japan, and increasingly of multiple security forums in South America, we can see not only their very important role in conflict-mediation but also the lack of any conflict between these regional organizations and the wider economic and security organizations in which they are all embedded.

The absence of a regional approach within Southeast Europe to the migration flow, or even a mechanism for managing conflicts over it, brings us directly to the second external pressure, the EU policies and their influence on regional stability in Southeast Europe. The EU and UN response to this migration crisis has been to impose border controls and travel restrictions; just the opposite of what the countries of the region have been fighting against for more than 10 years and, more importantly, in the case of border controls, what could lead genuinely to regional instability. It is worth noting that European Union’s financial and policy support for security in Southeast Europe, especially in countries of the former Yugoslavia, has been focused almost entirely on security for the EU, not for countries in the

¹¹ For more details, see Susan L. Woodward, “Conference Memo on the Balkans,” for conference on “Turkey’s New Political/Global Activism,” Istanbul, 12-14 April 2012.

region.¹² This has meant their focus on border control, not on security within these countries. This, apparently, will only continue. The UN SCR 2178, written by the U.S. it is important to remember, has four components, two of which are border controls and travel restrictions. The consequence for security within the region, I posit, will be counterproductive – the more these new countries are isolated from each other in terms of economic relations, human movement, and simple communications of all kinds, the more small incidents can escalate. This effect is not only physical but also psychological. The more people feel constrained in a space, the more an “enclave” mentality can set in and provoke defensive and uninformed reactions. All of the work to improve regional cooperation will be under attack.

This leads me to why I am so concerned about this policy agenda called Countering Violent Extremism. Not only does it say, as the failed-states-as-security-threat ideology that enables it, that the stability concern is for the wealthy, developed countries of Europe and North America, not Southeast Europe, and in total ignorance of the lack of potential for an Islamic extremist threat from the Balkans, but it also directs resources away from what the main issues in the region and bases of stability are, namely, economic development. Thus far, the primary problem in all countries of the region, unemployment, has led not to local instability but to exodus, either as a goal or a reality. It is very interesting that 40% of the first time asylum seekers in EU countries in the first four months of 2015 (those are the most up-to-date reliable numbers), a total of 242,075, were from two countries, Syria and Kosovo. Syrian claims were up 80% over the previous year while those from Kosovo jumped an astonishing 17-fold over 2014.¹³ The original reason for the Hungarian fence along the Serbian border, moreover, was the Kosovo exodus last year. The protests in Bosnia in spring 2014 began with a fraudulent privatization deal and the huge dismissal of workers from their jobs in Tuzla. In the long run, if something is not done to improve economic development and job creation within the region, we

¹² I argued this in my article, “In Whose Interest Is Security Sector Reform? Lessons from the Balkans,” in Gavin Cawthra and Robin Luckham, eds., *Governing Insecurity: Democratic Control of Military and Security Establishments in Transitional Democracies* (London: ZED Books, 2003): 276-302.

¹³ Elaine Ayo, “Europe’s Migrant Crisis By the Numbers,” *Foreign Policy.com: Sightlines*, September 3, 2015; *Foreign Policy* September-October 2015: 26-27.

can predict troubles. Much of the protest in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia in the last years has been said to be against political corruption, but what this means to those protesting is the partisan influence on educational institutions and employment. Democracy should be about fairness, equal opportunity, and the enforcement of rights long before it is about elections.

Finally, the third external element is the Ukrainian events. The Countering Violent Extremism agenda focuses on the number of people from Southeast Europe who have gone as fighters to Ukraine. The prefatory note to our conference refers to 200 fighters from the region going to Ukraine, but it does not say from where. In 2015, for example, the Bosnian minister of interior said there were four from Bosnia in Ukraine! I find it difficult to consider this a security threat. What is worth considering, however, is the influence of the Ukrainian events on memories in the former Yugoslav space of Southeast Europe. For many people, and I have now in mind highly intellectual, professional people even, the events brought back stark remembrance of the events of the Yugoslav impending disintegration and then wars in the early 1990s, and with those memories, renewed fears. Psychological mechanisms and emotions are critical to political action; they are difficult to predict, but they are important to consider in creating antidotes. The same psychological effect could be said to be in response to the mangled EU response to the migration crisis and its disarray and disunity; given that eventual membership in the EU is intended to be the main stabilizer for the region, this has surely not been encouraging and has psychological consequences that I think it would be worth tracking.

Thus, I return to my argument at the very beginning of this talk – I believe we need a genuine discussion about the bases of security and stability in Southeast Europe. How do we define security? What are its organizational and policy implications? Where, in fact, should resources be allocated instead of this diversionary focus?

PART I:

THE ROOTS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Socio-Economic Roots of Extremism in the Region

Nemanja Džuverović

Introduction

Words ‘extremism’ and ‘extremist’ are most often used to depict actors and/or actions of those who are challenging state authority. This can be used for state opponents who are posing political demands (access to central government, increased political representation or territorial claims), demanding different resource management (from natural resources, exports or tax revenues) or claiming religion/identity freedoms. This is why groups such as Tamil Elam in Sri Lanka, Moro Front in Philippines, FARC in Colombia, ETA in Spain or SPLM in former Sudan are described as extremists who are, by actions they take, destabilizing countries and unjustifiably questioning decisions made by state officials.

At the same time, actions of countries *i.e.* state apparatuses are much less frequently described as having ‘extremist tendencies’. This applies very much for intra-state context, but also for global level where countries such as the U.S, Russian Federation, the U.K, France, etc. are not only intervening, very often on false claims as in Iraq and South Ossetia, but also, with their actions, endangering more civilians than authorities of countries where intervention is taking place (Iraq and Afghanistan are being two most drastic recent examples). But in these, and many other instances, state actions are usually described as ‘fight against terrorism/axis of evil’, ‘responsibility to protect’, ‘neutralizing the threat’ and not as extremism. The difference is even more pronounced if we look only at developed countries that seem, by mainstream media and academia, incapable of conductive excessive measures, on any level or at any moment. It seems that extremism is prohibited term in the vocabulary for ‘civilized’ countries. Now, or in the (colonial) past.

Therefore, the use of words ‘extremism’ and ‘extremist’ seems highly unnecessary. These terms are so contaminated that any description immediately creates false dyad good/bad which can be useful for depicting con-

flict, but certainly not for understating its root causes and possible solutions. The reality is that many insurgents have legitimate claims, and that violent actions are response to years (even decades) of state neglect in tackling problems and polarizing the society by creating ‘the others’ *i.e.* ‘extremists’. On the other hand, if the term ‘extremism’ is so deeply embedded in political discourse so that actions of different non-state actors cant be explained in any other way, than we have to consider using this term for describing state intentions as well.

State as an Extremist

The term ‘grievance’ seems more appropriate than ‘extremism’ for describing frustration building in individuals or groups in different societies, based on political, socio-economic or cultural deprivation. On the other hand, state behaviour, if directed towards denying rights or resources, based on selective (and unjustified) criteria could not be understood or described by nothing less than extreme.

As previously highlighted, grievances are often triggered by political motives such as unequal access to central authority or underrepresentation of different groups. Next to political, socio-economic demands prove to be as important, but also much more resilient. Stewart and Brown indicate that:

“People accept state authority as long as the state delivers services and provides reasonable economic conditions in terms of employment and incomes. With economic stagnation or decline, and worsening state services, the social contract brakes down[...].”¹

Furthermore, these authors state that economic variables such as poverty, horizontal and vertical inequality, decline in per capita income and reduced government social spending are the main contributors in fuelling grievances and subsequent violent behaviours. For each of these variables, state contributes mostly in deteriorating institutional or material conditions. Consequently, Taydas and Peksen, forecast that resources mismanagement could “provide groups with the motivation to use violent means against the state

¹ Stewart, Frances and Brown, Graham. 2007. “Motivations for Conflict: Groups and Individuals” In *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, ed. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall. Washington, D.S.: United States Institute of Peace Press, p. 226.

and, hence, carry a great deal of importance in explaining civil wars.”² A case can be made that this is the evidence of extremist behaviour.

Additionally, two factors contributing to grievance formation must be emphasized. Firstly, the end of the Cold War brought an end to Socialism, but very soon to Social Democracy as well, most notably in Northern Europe where its (positive) results were most visible during ‘70s and ‘80s. In both cases, ‘solidarity’ aspect was very pronounced, both in social and economic sphere, which proved to be important in buffering social discontent arising on various occasions. Subsequent collapse of Socialism in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, disappearance of social democracy from Western and Northern European agenda and prevalence of neoliberal model based on market-oriented policies,³ weakened the state, and its ability to control inequalities, social exclusion and poverty on socially acceptable levels.

Finally, for post-conflict societies (such as the Western Balkans) prevalent form of peacebuilding additionally enhance polarization and social cleavages. Since the beginning of the ‘90s peacebuilding efforts are, in contrast to traditional peacebuilding actions, correlated with statebuilding characterized by the influence of liberal institutionalism, top-down approach (also Northern approach), and implementation of comprehensive deregulating measures in post-war economies.⁴ Thus, Richmond notes that:

“the insertion of neoliberal norms and ideology into developmental, peacebuilding and statebuilding policy has underestimated the extent to which rights-based forms of equality can compensate for material inequalities in local and international contexts and has over-estimated the capacity of the market in conflict situations.”⁵

² Taydas, Zeynep and Peksen, Dursun. 2012. “Can States Buy Peace? Social Welfare Spending and Civil Conflicts.” *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (2), p. 273.

³ These policies introduced extensive cutbacks in government expenditures and comprehensive marketization of social services, including education, healthcare and welfare provisions.

⁴ For comprehensive overview of liberal peacebuilding efforts see: Paris, Roland. 2004. *At War’s End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Richmond, Oliver P. 2015. “The Impact of Socio-Economic Inequality on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding.” *Civil Wars* 16 (4), p. 456.

The result is ‘peacedelaying’ by dividing societies on peace transitions winners (mostly elites who are implementing these measures) and peace transition losers (including former middle class and/or former fighters). In this context, prior violent conflict continues to manifest in dissatisfaction of the majority who is escaping benefits of post war reconstruction, therefore prolonging frustration present before outburst of violence.

The Western Balkans Socio-Economic Context

If we look at the socio-economic categories underlined by Stewart and Brown as decisive for conflict formation, and apply on Western Balkans countries, situation is the following.

After initial period of positive economic performances starting from 2001, economic crisis in 2008 brought stagnation and decline of most important economic parameters, although with certain time delay (effects of the crisis in the region are mostly visible since 2011). Also, it should be noted that due to violent conflicts, high number of refugees and IPDs, international embargo and transition from command economy, starting position of Western Balkan countries were initially very low. This is important because in the situation where, after period of profound crisis, capabilities and expectations of majority population evenly and constantly grows, as it was in the Western Balkans since 2001, sudden drop in capabilities (in this case since 2011), may provoke strong frustrations (so called *progressive deprivation*⁶) which could potentially, yet again, destabilize post conflict region.

According to IMF’s report, poverty in the region, initially high, has additionally increased since 2008. This is especially important because research conducted so far has “postulated that the level or intensity of poverty may trigger civil strife when poverty among population groups intensifies social ties among groups to promote participation in collective violence or the support for armed groups.”⁷ The most dramatic increase is in Macedonia and Albania, although other countries, excluding Croatia, also have high

⁶ Gurr, Ted. 1970. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ.

⁷ Justino, Patricia. 2012. “War and Poverty” In *The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Peace and Conflict*, ed. Michelle R. Garfinkel and Stergios Skapedas. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 692.

rates of people living in poverty.⁸ The World Bank estimates that almost 35 per cent of people in Macedonia, and 47.5 per cent in Albania are living under poverty line (\$5 per day). In Serbia and Montenegro this range is between 15 and 20 per cent while Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are more positive examples where poverty is reaching less than one and four per cent respectively.⁹ The data clearly shows that significant share of population in the region still lives in poverty which presents immediate danger of large scale dissatisfaction. This could be channelled towards those who are seen as responsible (state authority, but also external actors who had important role during conflict formation/management/resolution) for the present situation, as it was during the protests in Sarajevo and across Bosnia and Herzegovina during 2014 as a consequence of factories closure in impoverished parts of the country.

When it comes to inequality, Gini coefficient in most countries of the region is around 30. This number cannot be described as dangerously high (especially comparing to some countries of Latin American and Africa where the coefficient is over 50), but three factors are contributing for this phenomenon to be increasingly important in the Western Balkans. Firstly, inequality is continuously growing since the beginning of the 2000s. Although, in general, people are better off comparing to the period before (during the '90s) this means that minority is doing much better comparing to the rest of population. Because of this, it could be said that inequality in the Western Balkans is not very high, but it is very 'visible' since polarization is occurring in a very short period of time. This fact certainly creates dissatisfaction that could be channelled in various ways. Second, unlike general beliefs that inequality is affecting only position on the income scale, it is now clear (especially after the crisis in the U.S. and European countries) that inequality is constraining human capital with devastating long-term consequences.

⁸ IMF Regional Economic Issue Special Report. 2015. The Western Balkans: 15 Years of Economic Transition. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, p. 20.

⁹ Poverty and Equity World Bank Data, The World Bank Website, Available from: <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/region/ECA> (Accessed 11 September 2015).

This concerns access to education (especially higher education), availability of different welfare programmes and the quality of health services.¹⁰ Accordingly, inequality today is much more a social than an economic issue.

Finally, the most worrisome issue with inequality is its group aspect, *i.e.* ‘horizontal inequalities’ which are, according to Stewart, “inequalities between culturally defined groups or groups with shared identities[...] These identities may be formed by religion, ethnic ties or racial affiliations, or other salient factors which bind groups of people together.”¹¹ In the Western Balkan countries, horizontal inequalities exist predominantly along ethnic lines. This is particularly worrisome for a region where ethnicity was the root cause of violent conflicts in the recent past. Discrimination of Roma population in every country of the region, unequal development of regions with population in majority comprised of Albanians and Muslims in Serbia, employment discrimination of Serbs in Kosovo and Croatia, are just few of examples where these kinds of inequalities are pronounced and growingly protracted.

Third factor, GDP per capita, has been somewhat more positive. Western Balkan countries have made significant progress in GDP growth, but as other indicators, this one has also stagnated in last five years. Countries of the region have reached only 30 per cent of the GDP per capita of the EU countries. Translated in real currency, GDP per capita in the region is between 5,000 and 8,000 US dollars, up to seven times lower comparing to 17 most developed countries of the EU (30-30,000 US dollars).¹² For the region where initial position is very low and poverty is growing, the growth of GDP in the last couple of years could be described as sluggish.

Finally, government spending has been constant in the region, ranging between 11 per cent in the case of Albania up to 20 per cent in Montenegro.

¹⁰ For the impact of inequality of constraining human capital see: Thorbecke, Erik and Charumilind, Chutatong. 2002. “Economic Inequality and its Socioeconomic Impact.” *World Development* 30(9): 477-1495.

¹¹ Stewart, Frances. 2008. “Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: An Introduction and Some Hypotheses.” In *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict. Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies*, ed. Francis Stewart. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 12-13.

¹² IMF Regional Economic Issue Special Report. 2015. *The Western Balkans: 15 Years of Economic Transition*. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, pp. 17-18.

Although these figures are not representing negative indicator, there is still possibility for improvement since average government spending in most developed EU countries is around 25 per cent.¹³ This point is especially important since, as Taydas and Peksen indicate,

“Public spending is an important tool that allows governments to peacefully redistribute and transfer some resources to the public. By investing in social safety nets, in-kind transfers, and valuable goods that are underprovided by the private sector and would not otherwise be available to certain segments of the society, government intervention can have a positive impact on citizens’ livelihoods and prove that the state cares about its citizens.”¹⁴

Of course, if spending is directed to something but increasing human capital even higher levels of state expenditure could prove to be futile in dealing with socioeconomic grievances of disenfranchised groups.

Policy Prescriptions

Following the findings of Stewart and Brown, the main assumption is for state to provide, not only equality of opportunities, but equality in access to resources and most importantly equality of outcomes.¹⁵ For this to happen, Western Balkan states need to have more comprehensive approach in dealing with poverty and rooted inequalities.

Firstly, countries should invest much more in increasing human capital. Western Balkan states are known for experiencing the so called ‘brain drain’ but also for investing very little in education and science. According to the UNICEF TransMonEE database countries of the region invest less than 5 per cent of total public expenditures for education, while in some cases such as Macedonia this number is less than 3 per cent.¹⁶ Without sub-

¹³ The World Bank General Government Final Consumption Expenditure, Available from:<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.CON.GOVT.ZS> (Accessed 11 September 2015).

¹⁴ Taydas, Zeynep and Peksen, Dursun. 2012. “Can States Buy Peace? Social Welfare Spending and Civil Conflicts.” *Journal of Peace Research* 49(2), p. 276.

¹⁵ Stewart, Frances and Brown, Graham. 2007. “Motivations for Conflict: Groups and Individuals” In *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, ed. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall. Washington, D.S.: United States Institute of Peace Press, pp. 232-3.

¹⁶ The UNICEF Transformative Monitoring for Enhanced Equity (TransMonEE)

stantial improvements in this field, any progress is temporary. Equipping people with knowledge and necessary skills allows them to position better in the labour market, to progress on income scale and to escape possibility of getting back to poverty, experience social exclusion and alienate from the system. Also, special attention needs to be aimed towards disenfranchised groups who should be privileged in accessing (higher) education by quotas, affirmative actions or other similar measures.¹⁷ Thus, instead of imposing financial restrictions, states need to invest more in boosting human capital thus creating strong long-term effect in poverty reduction and social exclusion. In this process, results may not be quickly visible, which is why policy makers tend to overlook the importance of education and increased human capital.

Targeted welfare provision, if possible as cash transfers should support this process.

“These programmes assume that money is transferred to households to help support them, providing they conform to certain expectations about school attendance and health-care check-ups of their youngest members. In other words, families get financial support for sending children to school (instead of working, often in dangerous environments), and taking care of their wellbeing.”¹⁸

In this way, duality is achieved by investing in human-capital development and poverty alleviation simultaneously.

Next to education, groups who are subjected to different forms of discrimination also need to experience positive change in their surrounding. Hence, governments should localize developmental efforts by involving “redirection of expenditures across regions or neighbourhoods, as well as groups within them.”¹⁹ This can be sensitive issue due to potential protests

Database, Available from: <http://www.transmonee.org/databases.php> (Accessed 13 September 2015).

¹⁷ This relates to employment policies where deprived groups should be recognized as priority.

¹⁸ Dzuverovic, Nemanja and Milosevic, Aleksandar. 2013. “In search for more: The importance of income inequality in conflict formation and its policy implications.” *Croatian Political Science Review*, 50 (5), pp. 181-2.

¹⁹ Stewart, Frances and Brown, Graham. 2007. “Motivations for Conflict: Groups and Individuals” In *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, ed. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall. Washington, D.S.: United

of those who are left out of this process, so it is essential for these decisions to be explained not as imposed (usually by international donors), but as required if the system is to stay unchallenged by 'have-nots'.²⁰ This is also the case with the EU where division between countries who are donors (such as Germany, France or the UK) and those who are mainly beneficiaries of development funds (Portugal, Greece) is clearly visible, and increasingly important in the context of economic crisis. In most of the Western Balkan countries underdevelopment overlaps with lower (or lowest) educational levels so the synergy of two factors could be decisive in prevalence of different grievances that still needs to be addressed.

Finally, the factor that affects not only Western Balkans, but also the rest of Europe, is the problem of unemployment. All countries of the region have very high levels of unemployment, reaching up to 28 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 31 per cent in Macedonia, with majority of unemployed being young people (in Kosovo more than 50 per cent).²¹ This situation is the result of many factors including violent conflicts and destruction of infrastructure, transition to market economies, large-scale privatizations, corruption and nepotism, global economic crisis, etc., Governments need to tackle this issue by using available resources and experience of other regions (such as micro-crediting in South East Asia), especially in developing local economy. Negative global trends present an obstacle, but it seems there is enough (misused) internal resources that can be utilized in alleviating or at least reducing this problem.

Of course, to be successful, inclusive development must be followed by institutional and political changes, being restrictive (laws against discrimination) or affirmative (additional seats in parliament, quotas for public employment for certain groups) in its nature. In any case, suggested policies must recognize that not all groups are equally developed, integrated in society or freed from social exclusion. From this starting position, implementation of the above-mentioned and other measures could be more successful

States Institute of Peace Press, p. 233.

²⁰ Another point should elimination of 'clientelism development' where only regions with political support from central government are recognized as undeveloped thus receiving majority of allocated funds.

²¹ The World Bank Development indicators, Available from: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&Topic=4> (Accessed 12 September 2015).

in reaching solidarity consensus, and actually making the difference instead of having symbolic significance.

Conclusion

The paper offers different perspective on the question of extremism. It readdresses this issue along the reasons and motivations of those who rebel i.e. so-called extremist. Grievances due to ill economic situation, persistence of poverty and rising inequality are therefore seen as main triggers for contesting state authority by violent means. Thus, state responsibility for negative socio-economic prospects must be in focus when discussing possible prescriptions. Accordingly, paper advocates top-down approach where state authorities must bear responsibility in changing present context.

For the Western Balkans very negative starting position has been improved in the last 15 years, but it proves to be insufficient for overcoming present grievances. Therefore, increased human capital proves to be essential for transcending discussed obstacles since it improves positions of groups on the income scale and the level of their well being. This process needs to be supported by innovative welfare programs and more equal regional development, but also political change, which reaffirms this process. Only by investing in its citizens, instead of labelling them as extremists, states can lay foundation for long term and equal development. If not, possibility of channelling frustration by using violence will remain as imminent threat.

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PART II:

RADICAL ISLAM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Salafi – Jihadists: a Threat to the Western Balkans?

James Kenneth Wither

Introduction

The objectives of this paper are to analyze the origins, causes and impact of Salafi-jihadist inspired violent extremism and terrorism in the Western Balkans¹ and assess the threat that this poses to the overall security and stability of the region. The article addresses the growing body of literature, analysis and reporting on the topic, although commentators have often been influenced by the complex and bitter politics of the region. Partisan political agendas both within and outside the Balkans have tended to minimize or exaggerate the threat and truly dispassionate scholarship on the subject remains rare.

Before addressing the subject directly, some definitions are necessary. Salafi-jihadist is a term often used to refer to those individuals who believe in the use of terrorist violence to achieve a world-wide religious revival and the establishment of a true Islamic state based on a strict interpretation of the rules and guidance from the Koran and Sunna.² Of course, neither the terms Salafi nor jihadist are synonymous with terrorism. Most Salafis are “Islamists”, who believe that Islam is not only a religion but also a holistic system that provides the political, legal, economic, and social foundations for a just society. Most Islamists seek change through preaching, conversion and political activity, although movements such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the Moslem Brotherhood share essentially the same religious ideology as the violent jihadists and often hold views that are incompatible with the values of a liberal democracy. In the Balkan context, Salafism is normally referred to as Wahhabism, reflecting the influence of the puritanical interpretation of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia, which has had a growing

¹ Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro & Serbia.

² See for example: Christina Hellmich, “Creating the Ideology of Al Qaeda: From Hypocrites to Salafi-Jihadists”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31, (2) 2008, 111-124 & Haim Malka and William Lawrence “Jihadi - Salafism’s Next Generation”, *CSIS Middle East Program*, October 2013.

impact on the region since the 1990s. Given the doctrinal similarities, the terms Wahhabi and Salafi are used interchangeably in this paper, although many Salafists consider the term Wahhabi derogatory given its association with the “apostate” Saudi royal family.

There is no internationally accepted definition of terrorism or violent extremism. Although the phrase violent extremism is often used synonymously with the word terrorism, a distinction can and should be made between an extremist and a terrorist. Holding extreme views is not illegal in a liberal democracy and few people who express politically extreme views actually go on to commit politically motivated acts of violence against civilians, which is the core phrase in most definitions of terrorism.³ The term violent extremism arguably bridges the terms extremism and terrorism; a violent extremist being someone who supports or incites others to commit acts of terror. Violent extremism can be defined as the use of any means or medium to express views which foment, justify or glorify terrorist violence in furtherance of particular beliefs, behavior that seeks to provoke others to terrorist acts, foment other serious criminal activities, or fosters hatred which might lead to inter-community violence⁴

The focus of this paper is on the impact of Salafi extremism. But Salafi-jihadists are by no means the only current violent extremist threat to the Western Balkans. Right wing extremists and national separatists are also significant challenges. The former, for example, may be empowered by service as foreign fighters in Ukraine to commit acts of terror after their return. More alarming still is the risk of renewed ethnic conflict. Fighting in Kumanovo in Northern Macedonia in May 2015 involved Macedonian police and ethnic Albanian militants, not jihadists.⁵ The dead and injured far exceeded the total casualties caused by Islamist extremist violence in the Balkans in the last decade. The last US State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism, for example, recorded no Salafi-jihadist terrorist attacks at all

³ Reports and studies frequently refer to the process of becoming a violent extremist as “radicalization”. Therefore, the words “extreme” and “radical” are used interchangeably in this paper.

⁴ This definition is adapted from that of the UK’s Crown Prosecution Service.

⁵ Andrew Byrne, “Macedonian Violence Ignites Fears of Renewed Ethnic Conflict”, *Financial Times*, 11 May 2015 and “Macedonia: Defusing the Bombs” *International Crisis Group – Briefing No. 75*, (Skopje/Brussels, 9 July 2015) 9-12.

in the Western Balkans during 2014.⁶ However, at a meeting in July 2015, the interior ministers of Bosnia- Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro concluded that Islamic State (IS) inspired terrorist attacks constituted a real security threat to the region.⁷

The Origins of Salafi-Jihadist Extremism in the Western Balkans

Islam was introduced into the Balkans mainly as a result of the Ottoman conquest in the 15th Century. Under Ottoman rule, Sunni Islam was the dominant religion and culture in most of the region until the latter part of the 19th Century, although much of the population of the area remained Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Christians. Currently there are around 6.5 million nominal Muslims in the Western Balkans primarily resident in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia.⁸ The main form of traditional Islam in the Western Balkans, particularly in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo, is the relatively tolerant, mystical branch of Sunni Islam called Sufism. Reflecting the Ottoman influence, the main form of Islamic jurisprudence remains the Hanafi School, arguably the most open to reason and modern ideas. The process of secularization following the Ottoman era, reinforced under Communist rule, meant there was no popular Islamic fundamentalist movement in the Western Balkans prior to the 1990s. After the fall of communism and the collapse of Yugoslavia, there was a Muslim religious revival in the Western Balkans.⁹ This was most marked in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where religion has become a basic component of ethnic identity and is least evident in Albania, where the population has remained largely secular.¹⁰

⁶ US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*, Bureau of Counterterrorism, June 2015, 83-142.

⁷ Igor Jovanović, “ISIS Poses Threat to Balkans, Ministers Say”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 July 2015.

⁸ Stephen Schwartz, “The Heritage of Ottoman Islam in the Balkans”, *Center for Islamic Pluralism*, November 2010, 4.

⁹ Shpend Kursani, *Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens’ Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Kosovar Center for Security Studies, April 2015, 59 and Orhan Ceka, “Religion and Secularism in Post-Communist Transitions: A Comparative Analysis of BiH and Albania” Unpublished Master’s Degree Paper. Available from: https://www.academia.edu/627253/Religion_and_Secularism_in_Post-Communist_Transitions_A_Comparative_Analysis_of_BiH_and_Albania.

¹⁰ Ceka, *Ibid*, 9-14 and 15-20.

The extent of the penetration and influence of non-traditional forms of Islam in the region since the 1990s remains a matter for debate, although one influential study published in 2007, entitled *The Coming Balkan Caliphate* arguably overstated the Salafi impact.¹¹ Currently, there are three main groups of Islamists in the Western Balkans, all three of which wish to replace secular law with sharia. Firstly, there are those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, who are sometimes members of the political and religious elites and participate in democratic institutions, secondly there are the Wahhabis, who may or may not support violent extremism, but reject Western values and finally there is a small minority of active, violent jihadists. Some Wahhabis, such as prominent Bosnian cleric Nezim Halilović, have offered to work with local mainstream Muslim leaders for the sake of Islamic unity and have expressed opposition to the most extreme elements.¹² The Bosnian Salafi youth magazine SAFF has also advocated cooperation and dialogue with the wider Muslim community.¹³ However, Sufism in all its forms is abhorrent to Wahhabis and Sufi imams and shrines, regarded as idolatrous, have been singled out for attacks by extremists in the Balkans and elsewhere. The Shiite Bektashi Sufi order, headquartered in Tirana, is particularly despised for its liberal theology and religious practices.¹⁴

The origins of the current Salafi-jihadist presence in the Western Balkans are found in the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia in 1990s when foreign fighters embracing an extreme form of Islamist ideology entered the region. Foreign mujahidin were invited to Bosnia by the then president, Alija Izetbegovic. He remains a controversial figure as his political manifesto, the *Islamic Declaration*¹⁵ espoused an Islamist ideology and included the statement that: “There can be neither peace nor coexistence between the Islamic religion and non-Islamic social and political institutions”.¹⁶ However, given

¹¹ Christopher Delisio, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*, (Praeger Security: London, 2007).

¹² Juan Carlos Antunez, “Wahhabism in Bosnia – Herzegovina - Part One” *Bosnian Institute*, 16 September 2008, Section 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ World Almanac of Islamism, *Albania*, American Foreign Policy Council, 19 September 2013, 2.

¹⁵ This was originally produced in 1970, but was re-published in the 1990s.

¹⁶ Leslie S. Lebl, “Islamism and Security in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, *Strategic Studies Institute*,

the dire military situation facing Bosnia in 1992 Izetbegović's embrace of extremist Muslim volunteer fighters is perhaps understandable.¹⁷ Financial and military support from Saudi Arabia and Iran were also vital to the Bosnian war effort after 1992. Despite the rivalry between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, both states tacitly cooperated to support their co-religionists. Iran largely concentrated on military and intelligence assistance, while Saudi Arabia supplied finance and logistics.¹⁸ Monetary contributions were distributed through a network of Islamic charities, whose operations were never purely philanthropic and in many cases were alleged to have supported terrorist organizations.¹⁹

The formation of a Mujahideen Battalion (later Brigade) in Bosnia was a formative event for modern jihadists, who viewed its operations against Serbs and Croats as part of a wider war against unbelievers.²⁰ The Mujahideen fought with fanatical bravery and suffered high casualties, but were also guilty of horrific atrocities against prisoners and local Christians. However, there is no evidence that the majority of Bosnian Muslims supported their extremist beliefs or adopted their practices. Under the terms of the Dayton Peace Accords in December 1995, all foreign fighters were ordered out of Bosnia. But up to a thousand fighters managed to stay, some because of support from political or religious leaders, others by marrying local women and taking Bosnian citizenship.²¹ These fighters along with local extremists formed the nucleus of Salafi-jihadist groups in the Western Balkans by first wave of jihadists to depart Bosnia for Syria in 2012 included former members of the Mujahideen Brigade in their 40s, much older than the majority the late 1990s. Notably, the of foreign fighters attracted to the conflict.²²

May 2014, 21.

¹⁷ Aristotie Tziampiris, "Assessing Islamic Terrorism in the Western Balkans: the State of the Debate", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 11 (2) (2009) 209 – 219, 212.

¹⁸ Delisio, op cit, 8 and Gordon N. Bardos, "Iran in the Balkans: a History and a Forecast", *World Affairs Journal*, 31 August 2014, 3-4.

¹⁹ Tziampiris, op cit, 212.

²⁰ Mark Urban, "Bosnia: the Cradle of Modern Jihadism?" *BBC News*, 2 July 2015.

²¹ Ibid, Tziampiris, op cit, 214 and Gordon N. Bardos, "Jihad in the Balkans: the Next Generation", *World Affairs Journal*, 31 August 2014, 2.

²² Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*, The Atlantic Initiative, 2015, 35.

After the fall of communism, Islamic foundations also established a strong presence in Albania, financing mosques and awarding educational scholarships to hundreds of young Albanians. The impoverished Albanian government was naturally keen to attract investment and established links with Arab investors and charities such as the *Revival of Islamic Heritage Society* and *al Haramain*, some of which were associated with extremist and terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda.²³ The Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank, established in 1994, even paid poor Albanians on condition that their women wore the veil.²⁴ With changes of government and growing Western pressure from the late 1990s, Wahhabi activities in Albania declined. The main current foreign cultural and religious influences stem from Turkey, notably the Islamist *Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian and Humanitarian Relief*, known commonly as the IHH. Small numbers of mujahideen also joined the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in 1999, but their military role was not comparable with that in Bosnia. The KLA's ideology and goals were very different from those of the Salafi extremists.²⁵ However, following the war, Saudi based or backed charities financed educational institutions and mosques throughout Kosovo and offered educational and religious scholarships to young Muslims. The Saudi financed charities controversially advocated religious practices that contradicted local Hanafi-based Islamic norms.²⁶

Salafism as a Driver of Violent Extremism

After the end of the war in Bosnia in 1995, veterans of the conflict featured prominently in many terrorist plots and attacks around the world,²⁷ but there was little overt terrorist activity in the Western Balkans. However, Wahhabi groups became well established in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and in the mountainous area of the Sandžak region on the border between Montenegro and Serbia. In isolated communities, some Wahhabis created a

²³ Adrian Shtuni, "Ethnic Albanian Fighters in Iraq and Syria" *CTC Sentinel*, 8 (49), 30 April 2015 and *World Almanac of Islamism*, op cit, 9-10.

²⁴ *World Almanac of Islamism*, 9. There have been similar reports of such payments in other parts of the Western Balkans.

²⁵ See for example: Tziampiris, op cit, 216-218.

²⁶ Kursani, op cit, 2015, 36-37.

²⁷ John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qa'ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad*, (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007) 224-225.

network of sharia-run enclaves in villages such as Gornja Maoča and Ošve in Bosnia and Kačanik/Kaçanik in Kosovo. These communities did not accept the authority of the state or the official Islamic community and took advantage of the weak government presence in remote areas. Consequently, they became virtual safe havens and recruiting grounds for extremists. Nusret Imamović, Bosnia's main Wahhabi leader, was based in Gornja Maoča and lone actor terrorist, Mevlid Jašarević, who attacked the US embassy in Sarajevo in October 2011, was a resident. There are reported to be 10 of these communities in Bosnia alone²⁸ and around 60% of the foreign fighters from Bosnia in Syria are believed to have lived in or visited Wahhabi communities in Gornja Maoča and elsewhere.²⁹ The Bosnian authorities have had difficulties taking decisive legal action against those implicated in terrorist activity. After the police station bombing in Bugojno in 2010, for example, Nusret Imamović and his associates were arrested, but then released without trial. Imamović was re-arrested after Jašarević's attack in 2011, but again escaped prosecution.³⁰ He is now believed to be in Syria.

Wahhabis emerged in the Sandžak area, traditionally a conservative Muslim region, some years after their appearance in Bosnia. Although, Wahhabi communities became established in both the Montenegrin and Serbian areas of Sandžak, it was those around Novi Pazar that attracted the most controversy. Initially, Wahhabis in Novi Pazar launched civic initiatives, including assistance for local drug addicts, but eventually clashed with local Christians and those Muslims who followed traditional Balkan worship practices.³¹ In 2007, Serbian police uncovered a so called "youth camp" near Novi Pazar which they believed was providing military training for young Muslims.³² This discovery led to a major confrontation with the Serbian police that led to the death of Ismail Prentić, the Wahhabi leader, and the arrest of other leading extremists. The Wahhabis were accused of plot-

²⁸ Timothy Holman, "Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria", *CTC Sentinel*, 30 June 2014.

²⁹ Azinović and Jusić, op cit, 40.

³⁰ Stephen Schwartz, "Bosnia Re-Arrests Top Wahhabi Plotter After US Embassy Attacked", *The Weekly Standard*, 1 February 2012.

³¹ Kenneth Morrison, *Wahhabism in the Balkans*, ARAG, UK Defence Academy 08/06, February 2008, 7-8.

³² Nicholas Wood, "Discovery of Serbia Training Camp Draws Attention to Radical Islamists", *The New York Times*, 5 April 2007.

ting to assassinate leaders of the mainstream Islamic Community and Muslim politicians in Novi Pazar.³³ According to Serbian newspaper reports, Wahhabis are still very active in the Novi Pazar area recruiting jihadists for Syria, members of the Roma community being considered particularly vulnerable to “brainwashing” because of their lack of education and relative poverty.³⁴ Since the 1990s, some Serb protagonists have stressed the dangers to the whole of Europe of a “Balkan Caliphate”, warning of a *zeleno transverzala*, a green (Muslim) corridor that runs from Novi Pazar in Serbia to Sarajevo, down to Prishtina/Priština and all the way to Istanbul that could be used to bring Middle Eastern terrorists into the Balkans.³⁵

Saudi Arabia has financed a major mosque building program and established madrassas in the Western Balkans since the 1990s. The most prominent structure is the \$30 million-King Fahd Mosque and Cultural Center in Sarajevo, but around 550 other new mosques have also been built in the Wahhabi style in Bosnia.³⁶ In Kosovo, more than 100 unlicensed, Middle-Eastern funded mosques were also built in the ten years after the war in 1999.³⁷ In a number of mosques within the region, Wahhabi extremists have struggled for control with traditional Muslim leaders. In Skopje, for example, this has antagonized worshippers at the Yahya Pasha, Sultan Murat, Hudaverdi and Kjosekadi mosques and sometimes resulted in violent clashes.³⁸ The spread of extremist thinking has also been facilitated by a network of dubious humanitarian charities and educational NGOs, such as the *Saudi High Commission for Aid to Bosnia* (HSC) and the pro-Shia *Muslimanski Život* (Muslim Life).³⁹ A number of Islamist charities in the Balkans (and elsewhere in Europe) were shut down following US pressure after 9/11 because of suspected links with terrorist organizations. The HSC, for

³³ Morrison, op cit, 8.

³⁴ See for example: E.V.N, “Serbian Prosecution Indicts Five Men Accused of Recruiting Serbian Citizens to Fight Jihad in Syria”, *Vječernje Novosti*, 10 October 2014.

³⁵ See for example: R. Z. Marković, “Islamists to Attack Serbia in August”, *Naše Novine*, 9 July 2015.

³⁶ Morrison, op cit, 5.

³⁷ Kosovo Turns a Blind Eye to Illegal Mosques, *Balkan Insight*, 12 January 2012 and Miki Trajkovski, “The Balkans Confront Rogue Mosques”, *Southeast European Times*, 4 September 2014.

³⁸ Bardos, “Jihad in the Balkans”, op cit, 3.

³⁹ The Balkans has no tradition of Islamic sectarianism. However, a significant effort has been made by Sunni extremists to inject anti-Shia antagonism into the region.

example, was closed in 2001 after a raid by NATO peacekeepers that unearthed a cache of terrorist-related material.⁴⁰ More recently, charities and NGOs have been raising funds to help finance jihad in Syria. One example is the Tuzla-based *Invitation to Paradise*, which continues fund raising activities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, although its parent organization in Germany has been banned.⁴¹ Salafi influenced books, periodicals, social media sites and You Tube spots have also proliferated. These currently include the Facebook page *Krenaria Isalme* (Islamic Pride), which posts pictures and stories of ethnic Albanians fighting in Syria.⁴² IS's effective exploitation of social media remains largely unchallenged both in the Balkans and elsewhere.

A new generation of Muslim clerics has been educated in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. These clerics have brought a more extreme interpretation of Islam to challenge the traditional, moderate practices in the region. Consequently, some violent extremists have verbally and physically attacked imams who oppose jihadist recruitment. One prominent imam in Bosnia, Selvedin Beganović, was attacked seven times during a three-month period in 2014.⁴³ It is perhaps not surprising that eight of the 11 Kosovo imams arrested in August and September 2014 on charges of preaching extremism and jihadist recruitment were educated in the Middle East.⁴⁴ These imams were also associated with a chain of Islamic charities and cultural associations which were recently shut down by the authorities in Kosovo because of links with extremist organizations.⁴⁵

Despite the alarming developments outlined above, Wahhabism remains essentially unwelcome in the Western Balkans and most Muslims have not

⁴⁰ David Pallister, "Terrorist Material Found in Sarajevo Charity Raid", *The Guardian*, 23 February 2002.

⁴¹ Goran Maunaga, "B-H's Invitation to Paradise Association Continues to Finance Islamic State Jihadists in Syria, Iraq", *Glas Srpske*, 4 October 2014.

⁴² <https://www.facebook.com/krenariaislame>.

⁴³ Dražen Remiković, "BiH Imam Targeted by Radical Islamists", *Southeast EuropeanTimes*, 28 January 2015.

⁴⁴ Shtuni, op cit, 2.

⁴⁵ Fatos Baytyci, "Indebted to America, Kosovo Struggles to Curb Islamist Recruits", *Reuters*, 14 October 2014.

been persuaded to abandon their traditional religious practices.⁴⁶ Nor is there evidence of support for jihadists or recognition of IS's Caliphate among the majority of Muslims in the region.⁴⁷ It would also be wrong to assume that all Salafis represent a "threat" as many devout, conservative Muslims reject violent extremism as antithetical to their religious teachings and worship. The leader of the Muslim Community in Bosnia, Grand Mufti Husein Kavazović, has spoken out frequently against what he regards as the extremists' misrepresentation of Islam and he was quick to condemn the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015. His predecessor, Mustafa Cerić, even joined people outside the French embassy in Sarajevo to pay respects to the victims.⁴⁸ The Facebook photographs of Kosovar jihadist, Lavdrim Muhaxeri allegedly beheading a captive in Iraq, caused outrage in Kosovo being widely condemned by politicians and the public alike.⁴⁹ In the aftermath of this and other incidents involving Kosovars, the former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and now President of this country, Hashim Thaçi, unequivocally rejected claims that his country had become a safe haven for Islamists and affirmed that: "...Kosovars wholly reject the religious dogma proposed by radical strains of political Islam, and we shall not allow it to endanger our path towards eventual NATO and EU membership".⁵⁰ Thaçi's last phrase is telling as integration into Western economic and security institutions remains the ambition of the political elites of states in the Western Balkans. This provides a major incentive for them to clamp down on manifestations of Islamist extremism. It is also worth noting that Bosniaks and Albanians are arguably the most pro-American Muslims in the world following US support for ethnic Albanians during and after the war in 1999.⁵¹

⁴⁶ See for example: Lebl, "Islamism and Security in Bosnia-Herzegovina", 15, *World Almanac of Islamism*, 13 and Antunez, *op cit*, 7.

⁴⁷ See for example: Linda Karadaku, "Muslims in the Balkans Refute ISIL's So-Called Caliphate", *Southeast European Times*, 9 July 2014.

⁴⁸ Evisa M. Jukić, "Paris Attack Stirs Tensions in Divided Bosnia", *Balkan Insight*, 9 January 2015.

⁴⁹ Besar Likmeta and Nektar Zogjani, "Jihadist's Gruesome Beheading Photos Shock Kosovo", *Balkan Insight*, 31 July 2014.

⁵⁰ Hashim Thaçi, "Kosovo is Fully Behind America's Fight Against ISIS", *The Guardian*, 30 September 2014.

⁵¹ Tziampiris, *op cit*, 219.

Nevertheless, the Salafi-jihadists have been successful in attracting some young converts from the mainstream Muslim community. The Western Balkans has contributed a large number of foreign fighters to groups like IS and *Jabhat al Nusra* (JN) in Syria and Iraq and a major study examining Bosnia-Herzegovina's foreign fighters found that that: "...the largest number of BiH volunteers in Syria and Iraq have come from well known Salafi communities...".⁵² However, a recent analysis of the foreign fighters phenomenon in Kosovo found that while the growth of Wahhabi influence in the country had introduced more conservative Islamic ideas and practices, it did not appear to be the primary reason for the recruitment of foreign fighters. The report concluded that:

"...it is necessary to make a clear distinction between religionization (sic) efforts and the introduction of more conservative religious ideas and religious based ideologies in Islam on the one hand, and violent extremist ideas on the other."⁵³

High unemployment and growing inequality have added to the social pressures in the Balkans and arguably helped the extremists' "grievance narrative". For example, the unemployment rate among people under 25 in Kosovo in 2014 was 55%.⁵⁴ The situation has led one commentator to conclude that: "...the economic and social environment in Kosovo these days is ripe for extremism to spread its toxic teachings and indoctrinate ever larger numbers of young people."⁵⁵ The situation appears even worse in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the unofficial employment rate for those aged from 15-24 is as high as 63%.⁵⁶ The system of education in the region contributes to the poor prospects for young people. Studies have concluded that much of the education provided is ethnic-based, fails to meet the pedagogic and skills training needs of students or the broader economy and may actually help to promote extremist thinking.⁵⁷ The limited oppor-

⁵² Azinović and Jusić, op cit, 40.

⁵³ Kursani, op cit, 42.

⁵⁴ Kadri Arifi and Fatos Makoli, "Kosovo's Achievements in Fighting Transnational Terrorism", *Per Concordiam*, 5 (3), 2014, 51.

⁵⁵ Mikra Krasniqi, "Kosovo is Sleepwalking into the Islamists's Arms", *Prishtina Insight*, 29 August – 11 September 2014, 23.

⁵⁶ Azinović and Jusić, op cit, 42.

⁵⁷ See for example: Valery Perry, "Countering the Cultivation of Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case for Comprehensive Education Reform, Democratization Policy Council, Policy Note, New Series #10, September 2015 and European Commission, "Kosovo Progress Report" 2014. 38-39. Available from:

tunities for the young have resulted in a significant exodus from the Western Balkans, which is unrelated to religious extremism. Of the almost 200,000 requests for asylum in Germany in the first seven months of 2015, over 40% came from the region.⁵⁸

The Foreign Fighter Threat

The majority of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq originate from the Middle East and North Africa, Western Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The Western Balkans is thought to have contributed more than 700 out of the estimated 30,000 foreign recruits that have travelled to Syria.⁵⁹ Kosovo, with a population of just 1.8 million, is believed to have a larger proportion of its population serving as jihadists in Syria than any other European state. Kosovo's recruitment rate of 16 fighters per 100,000 inhabitants is eight times higher per capita than that of France, the largest supplier of foreign fighters from Europe.⁶⁰ Bosnia ranks 2nd and Albania is 4th on a per capita basis. However, these figures are deceptive. When foreign fighters are measured as a per capita of the Muslim population, Kosovo ranks 14th, Serbia and Bosnia rank 10th and 11th respectively, while Albania and Macedonia are way down the list at 20th and 21st.⁶¹

Prior to the war in Syria, only a small number of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans travelled to take part in jihadist campaigns.⁶² But since 2012, there has been an exodus of predominantly young Muslims to join JN or IS. Assessments of the number of foreign fighters from specific Western Balkan countries vary. For example, a number of Balkan Muslims have travelled to Syria from other parts of Europe where they were resident

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-kosovo-progress-report_en.pdf.

⁵⁸ Guy Delauney, "Migrant Crisis: Explaining the Exodus from the Balkans", BBC News, 8 September 2015.

⁵⁹ Azinović and Jusić, *op cit*, 30 and Eric Schnitt and Somini Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts", The New York Times, 26 September 2015. One recent source claims that there have been over 1,000 foreign fighters from the Western Balkans in the last two years. See Ebi Spahiu, "The Islamic State's Balkan Strongholds", *Terrorism Monitor*, 13, (20), 2 October 2015.

⁶⁰ Shtuni, *op cit*, 3.

⁶¹ Kursani, *op cit*, 25.

⁶² Holman, *op cit*, 2.

and some have dual- nationality. The following figures were obtained by the author from regional analysts in July 2015: Albania – 110, Bosnia – Herzegovina – 270, Kosovo – 232, Macedonia – 100, Montenegro – 20, Serbia – 25.⁶³ These numbers are broadly similar to those from other sources such as the UK’s International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation. Data on the number of returnees are scarce. But one source estimates that up to 30% of foreign fighters who traveled to Syria from Bosnia have already returned. Some were even able to make a number of trips earlier in the war and bring their wives and children to Syria.⁶⁴

The generic term foreign fighters is somewhat misleading. Not all Muslims, especially women, have travelled to Syria to take part in combat operations. Some believed it was their duty to offer humanitarian assistance to suffering co-religionists or to live in a society under sharia law. Often foreign fighters have found themselves in combat against fellow Sunni Muslims fighting on different sides in inter-group warfare. This appears to have disillusioned many foreign recruits.⁶⁵ Along with the release of gruesome IS execution videos, this may have reduced the flow of fighters from the Western Balkans during 2014.⁶⁶

In June 2015, the Al-Hayat Media Center of the IS released a video of fighters from the Balkans calling on fellow Muslims to travel to IS held territory or mount terrorist attacks at home. The video, entitled “Honor is in Jihad”, included a demand that believers

“...put explosives under their cars, in their houses, all over them. If you can, take poison and put it in their meal or in their drink. Make them die, make them die of poisoning. Kill them wherever you are. In Bosnia, in Serbia, in Sandžak, you can do it. Allah will help you.”⁶⁷

⁶³ Briefing by a Balkan Regional Intelligence Service attended by the author, 20 July 2015.

⁶⁴ Azinović and Jusić, op cit, 33.

⁶⁵ Peter R. Neumann, “Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors”, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, September 2015 and Griff White, “Westerners Fighting in Syria Disillusioned with Islamic State but Can’t Go Home”, Washington Post, 12 September 2014.

⁶⁶ Kujtim Bytyqi, “Kosovan Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”, Unpublished Bundeswehr University, Master in Security Studies essay, September 2015, 14.

⁶⁷ Al Hayat Media Center, 4 June 2015.

Another section of the video threatened the leaders of Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia accusing them of humiliating Muslims and of “hatred towards the religion of Allah”. With the possible exception of the Zvornik attack in April 2015, this threat does not yet appear to have mobilized lone actor terrorists in the Western Balkans including those fighters that have already returned. But it may indicate the intentions of at least some of those who come back to the region in future as a number of attacks over the last few years in Western Europe, Canada and Australia have involved foreign fighters linked to IS as planners or perpetrators. However, it is easy to overestimate the security threat from returning fighters, especially when exposed to propaganda statements such as that from IS above. Many fighters will never return as battlefield casualties among young, poorly trained jihadists tend to be high. Others will stay or move to new theatres of conflict, especially if they face interrogation and imprisonment on return to their home countries. Some IS recruits have already ritualistically burned their identity documents. Statistics from earlier conflicts also suggest that the vast majority of returning fighters will have no interest in getting involved in home grown terrorism.⁶⁸ Some former fighters will undoubtedly be disillusioned and maybe traumatized by their experiences in Iraq and Syria and may require psychological counseling and treatment rather than attention by law enforcement agencies.

UN Security Council Resolution 2178 stipulates that member states take measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, prevent their travel and logistic support and exchange information on their activities with other states.⁶⁹ In response, the authorities in the Western Balkans have acted vigorously to curtail foreign fighters. All states in the region have introduced legislation to criminalize recruitment, training and material support, as well as the participation by individuals in illegal military action in foreign countries. Those found guilty face jail terms of between 10 and 15 years. In Kosovo alone, 50 people were arrested because of this legislation in 2014.

⁶⁸ See for example: Daniel L. Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, “Homeward Bound? Don’t Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists”, Brookings Institution, 30 September 2014, 6.

⁶⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2178, August 2014. Available from: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11580.doc.htm>.

These arrests included notorious extremists such as Zeqirja Qazimi and Ilir Berisha, who had preached religious hatred and the importance of jihad both in person and on-line.⁷⁰

Bosnia-Herzegovina faces particular problems in responding to violent extremism and terrorism. When Mevlid Jašarević staged his lone attack with just an assault rifle on the US Embassy in Sarajevo in October 2011, it took 50 minutes for the security services to arrest him. This tardy response demonstrated how ill-prepared the Bosnian security services were to deal with such an attack as agencies with overlapping jurisdictions tried to determine which was responsible for dealing with the incident.⁷¹ Bosnia's unique constitutional structure has resulted in the establishment of no less than 22 separate police agencies, which creates particular difficulties with inter-agency cooperation and the exchange of information. Bosnia's challenges were once again exposed when another lone Islamist terrorist, Nerđin Ibrić, attacked a police station in Zvornik in April 2015. He shot dead one policeman and wounded two others before being killed by other police officers. This was the first terrorist attack in the Republika Srpska entity and it exacerbated tensions across the country. The President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, accused the state institutions of negligence, while Bosniak politicians were critical of a follow-up counter-terrorism operation in the entity that they believed unjustly targeted and intimidated ordinary Muslim residents.⁷²

Inadequate coordination between countries in the region and international partners has come in for significant criticism.⁷³ However, recently there have been encouraging signs of closer coordination and cooperation within the Western Balkans and with the European Union (EU). Since it has become difficult for Western European foreign fighters to travel to Turkey by plane from home, more are transiting through states in the Western Bal-

⁷⁰ Una Hajdari, "Kosovo Charges Seven With Islamist Terrorism", *Balkan Insight*, 3 March 2015.

⁷¹ Kemal Korjanić, "Responding to Transnational Threat Through Euro-Atlantic Integration", *Per Concordiam*, 5 (3), 2014, 44-47, 45.

⁷² Author's discussion with parliamentarians from Bosnia – Herzegovina at a George C. Marshall Center seminar on 1 September 2015. See also: Elvira M. Jukic, "Bosnian Serb Police Sweep Alleged Terrorist Cells", *Balkan Insight*, 7 May 2015.

⁷³ Holman, *op cit*, 5.

kans.⁷⁴ For example, British and Italian law enforcement agencies have received assistance from the Albanian authorities to stop their citizens flying to Turkey through Tirana International Airport.⁷⁵ All states in the region were represented at a major European Commission conference on foreign fighters in Brussels in November 2014. The objective of the conference was to identify and agree to operational and legal measures to address the threat.⁷⁶ The EU is working with Balkan states to tighten border controls, intercept terrorist suspects and encourage the exchange of information between agencies across national boundaries. Efforts are also being made to increase judicial cooperation between the Prosecutors' Network of the Western Balkans and the relevant European institutions such as Eurojust, the European Judicial Network and Europol. The aim is to bring regional prosecution offices closer to EU judicial standards as poorly functioning judicial systems have hampered regional counterterrorism efforts.⁷⁷

Western Balkan states have focused their counterterrorism efforts on law enforcement, but security measures alone cannot defeat violent extremism. As Kosovar analyst, Shpend Kursani, cautions: "Dealing only with the consequences (foreign fighters), by not alleviating the causes (conditions and factors), will by logic reproduce the consequences".⁷⁸ UN Security Council Resolution 2178 recognizes this fact by placing emphasis on the need to empower local actors for de-radicalization initiatives. Unlike Western states such as Germany, Belgium, Denmark and the UK, "soft power" measures to counter violent extremism (CVE) have been slow to develop in the Balkans. Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, still lacks a strategy for the prevention of radicalization. However, a number of schemes have been introduced recently elsewhere in the Western Balkans, not least to try to minimize the risk from returning fighters. In Albania, an interagency effort supports local social services and families to work with returnees to moni-

⁷⁴ Ivana Jovanović, "Balkans to Deal with Threat of Terrorists Travelling Across the Region, Southeast European Times, 12 January 2015.

⁷⁵ Mariglen Mullai, "Albania, UK Cooperate on British Jihadists Using Albania to Reach Syria", Tirana Shqip, 8 October 2014.

⁷⁶ Regional Conference on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, European Commission, 25-27 November 2014.

⁷⁷ See for example: Country Reports on Terrorism, op cit, 84 and footnote 30.

⁷⁸ Kursani, op cit, 93.

tor their reintegration into society and provide guidance and support.⁷⁹ The Islamic Community in Macedonia has launched an initiative called *Stop Radicalization and Terrorism* to help deter citizens from joining IS, promote Islam as a peaceful religion and help returning foreign fighters resettle.⁸⁰ The Kosovo Government released a CVE strategy in September 2015. This document was produced by the National Security Council, but representatives of all religious communities in Kosovo also worked on the strategy.⁸¹ It is, of course, too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of these CVE initiatives.

Conclusion

The Balkans has not suffered terrorist attacks on the scale of the Madrid and London bombings of a decade ago or the recent attacks in France. The editor of the newspaper *Balkan Insight* noted in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015 that:

“...people in the Balkans can be grateful for one thing. For now, in the war on, or with terror – which seems to be gripping more and more of the Western world – they look like remaining on the sidelines.”⁸²

This comment might seem like tempting fate, but to date it has proved true, despite the presence in the region of Islamist extremists, mass unemployment, deep poverty and the legacy of savage inter-ethnic/religious wars. Of course, there are no grounds for complacency. Salafi-jihadist thinking is likely to continue to attract a small minority of Muslims as long as the war in Syria and Iraq continues and on-line propaganda by jihadist groups remains largely unchallenged. Although it has limited appeal, Wahhabist ideology in the Western Balkans remains a challenge to democratic values and must continue to be contested by mainstream Muslim leaders. If Wahhabis cross the line between extremist views and violence, they must be coun-

⁷⁹ Country Reports on Terrorism, op cit, 93.

⁸⁰ Miki Trajkovski, “Islamic Community Acts to Stop ISIL Recruitment” Southeast European Times, 2 March 2015.

⁸¹ Besnik Krasniqi “Kosovo Government Document Identifies Main Causes of Extremism, Radicalism in Kosovar Society”, Koha Ditore, 19 September 2015 and Alban Selimi, “Kosovo’s National Council Adopts National Strategy to Prevent Violent Extremism, Radicalism”, Zeri (Daily Edition), 8 September 2015.

⁸² Marcus Tanner, “The Balkan Muslim ‘Threat’ has Never Materialised”, Balkan Insight, 9 January 2015.

tered by robust action by law enforcement agencies and an effectively functioning judicial system. However, care must be taken not to exacerbate tensions and potentially increase support for the radicals' narrative through arbitrary arrests and prosecutions. The struggle against religious extremism in the Western Balkans should remain primarily a battle of ideas. Just as effective law enforcement action against terrorists requires cooperation between agencies both within and outside state borders, countering violent extremism will require the sharing of ideas and policies across the region.

Statistically, the sheer number of returning foreign fighters suggests that at the very least Western Balkans states, like those elsewhere in Europe, are likely to suffer sporadic terrorist attacks. Certainly a range of measures both "hard" and "soft" will be required to minimize the potential threat from these returnees. A dangerous minority will have to be prosecuted and imprisoned if they return at all, but the blanket criminalization of all categories of former fighters only increases the danger of further radicalization in a hostile prison environment. The majority of returnees will likely require "softer" approaches in order to have a chance to reintegrate into mainstream society. Disillusioned foreign fighters may also serve as particularly potent tools against the influence of jihadist propaganda. However, deradicalization and reintegration efforts may fail unless the economic and social prospects for the region improve. The poverty of opportunity suffered by so many young people in the Western Balkans arguably remains the biggest long term threat to the region's stability and security as it provides fertile ground for extremism of all kinds.

Foreign Fighters, Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania and the Western Balkans

Ebi Spahiu

Introduction

The rise of the Islamic State and this group's ability to draw thousands of militant followers to a call for a global *jihad* is not singular to IS.¹ From its emergence, the group has effectively utilized religious doctrine and social media to evoke support among followers and attract thousands to line behind their military actions in Syria and Iraq. Similar strategies have historically comprised militant activities of Christian and Muslims groups alike, but the Western Balkans is currently a mere manifestation of this phenomenon, outgrowing from conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Being the blending indigenous home to Christian and Muslim communities in Europe (Muslim, Catholic and Christian Orthodox), the Western Balkans is presently experiencing a surge of foreign fighters that are participating in foreign wars, in both Ukraine and Middle East, affiliated based on religious identities and allegedly organized by radical religious recruiters throughout the region.²

According to several reports issued since the phenomenon first emerged, individuals that have joined Islamist groups from the Western Balkans, including IS, are larger in number, as well as ideologically mobilized by hardline religious interpretations that call for Muslims to volunteer in response to the hardships endured by other fellow Muslims due to the war in Syria. This paper argues that, among a set of conditions that respond to the root-causes of radicalization, religious indoctrination funneled by radicalization is a key conveyer belt to violent extremism; a process that has been perpetuated by external and internal conditions favoring the growth of radicalism in the Western Balkans.

¹ Throughout this study, IS will be the main acronym used to describe the Islamic State.

² Balkan Warriors Abroad: Fight the Good Fight. *The Economist*. April 18, 2015 <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21648697-western-balkans-peace-some-go-abroad-look-war-fight-good-fight>.

The Context

Initial data analysis on the number of foreign fighters having responded to IS' call for a global *jihad*, suggests that as of the second half of 2014 there was an estimate of 20,000 foreign fighters that have traveled to Syria and Iraq in support of the group.³ As of the first half of 2015, the group has gathered over 30,000 fighters along its military factions. According to the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), this estimate exceeds the number of foreign fighters that have joined any other military group in the past, including the *mujahidins* in Afghanistan who similarly gathered thousands of fighters during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the '80s. Based on government data and other means of information-gathering by the international intelligence community, foreign fighters that have joined IS represent a wide geographical reach, with over 100 countries pinned, including Europe, South East Asia, former Soviet Union and even states from the Caribbean. Even though the largest majority of foreign fighters originate from countries in the Middle East, Europe and states of the former Soviet Union remain as two dominant sources of militant supporters to IS. Europe is estimated to have provided over 4,500 foreign fighters, with confirmed cases from Germany, the UK, France, Turkey, among others.⁴

In addition, recent media breaches throughout Europe reveal some of the challenges that state authorities have in providing an accurate assessment of the real number of fighters that have joined extremist groups in Syria and Iraq since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. A number of reports from media outlets across Europe question official data issued by government agencies and argue that the real situation is "severely underestimated" in comparison to analyses dedicated to periodic increases of the group's supporting base.⁵ The German, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for instance, recently disclosed in a report that the number of Germans that have joined extremist groups in Syria and Iraq is four times higher than initially de-

³ Foreign fighter in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000, January 2015 <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ How many Euro-Jihadists are Really in Syria? <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/how-many-euro-jihadists-are-really-in-syria/>.

clared. Although this claim was initially denied by state authorities, this allegation was later confirmed by the German intelligence which also emphasized that the accurate headcount of people joining these groups is limited because data analysis is overly focused on individuals known to authorities prior to traveling to these regions; thus leaving out a considerable number that were not under the authorities' radar.⁶

In addition, according to a recent UN report, IS is not the only extremist groups that has attracted followers in the region. In addition to IS, thousands more have joined extremist organizations in the Middle East, including Jabhat Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda.⁷ According to the report, citizens from over 100 states have defied security measures, seeing a 71% increase in the number of foreign fighters joining from mid-2014 until March 2015.⁸ Western Balkans states have been similarly affected by this growing phenomenon, particularly in countries and communities with existing indigenous Muslim populations, such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania; but also from Muslim dominated minority areas in Serbia and Montenegro. The majority of Muslim communities in the region have historically upheld a moderate vision of Islam and traditionally espoused religious harmony between Christians and Muslims.⁹

Although ethnic Bosnians are believed to comprise among the largest number of Balkan militants fighting in Syria and Iraq,¹⁰ ethnic Albanians from most notably, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro seem to have taken a lead in the number of foreign fighters provided from the region. Other ethnicities, however, are also marginally represented in the current regional demographics. According to official government accounts,

⁶ In Wirklichkeit sind 1800 Salafisten ausgereist <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/radikale-islamisten-zahl-der-ausgereisten-salafisten-in-wirklichkeit-bei-1800-13229426.html>.

⁷ UN: Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, receive more than 25,000 recruits: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/01/islamic-state-al-qaeda_n_6989422.html.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ardian Shtuni, CTC Sentinel, Westpoint, Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria, April 2015 <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria>.

¹⁰ Jihad in the Balkans: The Next Generation, World Affairs Journal, October 2014 <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/jihad-balkans-next-generation>.

the number of Albanian citizens that have joined is 90,¹¹ but additional research suggests that the number may be a lot higher, including the number of women and children that are also part of the demographics.

This issue initially attracted local media attention in March 2014 when state authorities led a series of security operations against an alleged network of recruiters based in two mosques Tirana at Unaza e Re and Mëzez¹² and arrested nine individuals, out of thirteen charged, on grounds of facilitating recruitment for terrorism, financing of terrorist activities and promoting religious divisions. Two of the arrested individuals were self-proclaimed imams, Bujar Hysa and Genci Balla, who, this study finds, were instrumental in promoting *jihad* among followers in designated towns and cities with a similar support base, as well as utilizing religious doctrine as means to radicalize Muslim practitioners in these areas. A few months later following these arrests, in July 2014 a series of photos posted to Lavdrim Muhaxheri's Facebook account showed the 25-year-old Kosovar-Albanian jihadi combatant beheading a young Iraqi teenager.¹³ The photos sparked outrage among government officials and the public in Kosovo as well as Albania, reflecting the strong security threat Kosovo and other states in the Balkans may now face due to increasing numbers of men and women traveling to Syria, in the name of *jihad*.

Since these media reports began emphasizing the rise of IS and the seriousness of religious militancy, state authorities in different countries have taken rigid measures to counter security challenges that have surfaced as a result of individuals traveling in support of the group. In Albania, the rigid security measures, investigations and arrests on alleged radical religious leaders and supporters, have posed several questions on the current religious order that dominates among Albanian Muslim practitioners and on the internal and external influences that have allowed radical ideologies to be grounded among practitioners. Even though most expertise in Albania attributes the rise of this phenomenon to poor education, higher levels of

¹¹ Merepeza, Genc, State Police, Border Control Department, Individual interview, March 2015.

¹² Both locations are based in the outskirts of Albania's capital, Tirana.

¹³ Lavdrim Muhaxheri pret koka njerezish ne Siri, July 29, 2014 <http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2014/07/29/fotot-tronditese-lavdrim-muhaxheri-pret-koka-njerezish-ne-siri/>.

poverty and growing government corruption, this paper attempts to go beyond this explanation and examine the ideological components and religious rhetoric that have long supported extremist groups, justifying violence in the name of Islam.

This paper finds that the current wave of Albanian foreign fighters supporting primarily IS in recent years, partially stems from the establishment of fundamentalist Islamic influences in the region which saw the Balkans as a safe haven for many Islamist escapees from the Middle East and their gateway to Western Europe throughout the '90s. These relationships were initially established due to presumed shared Islamic identities, but which similarly aimed at altering the way Islam and the Muslim identity is perceived in relation to the development of democracy and values of religious harmony between Christians and Muslims among Albanian followers. Subsequent to the collapse of the Communist regime in the early '90s, Albania provided that safe haven for radical Islamist militants from the Middle East who established several humanitarian organizations in the country. After the 9/11 attacks, several police operations encouraged by US security services, exposed these groups and individuals as fronts for Al-Qaeda affiliates in the region. Most of these groups and individuals were ultimately deported from Albania, but left behind a core supporting base in the country, as they had done throughout the region.

Methodology

The author of this report initially examined and categorized available information on foreign fighters, globally and regionally, based on media reports and official government data made available to the public. Regular media monitoring of local and international news reports was valuable in identifying key trends which guided the rest of the research strategy. Due to several restrictions encountered during the research period, the report provides a limited profiling of foreign fighters and fails to provide an accurate number of the Albanian citizens that have joined the ranks of ISIS or Al-Nusra in recent years. The majority of profiles are studied through media accounts, second-hand testimonies from site interviews, monitoring of social media and the author's observations of court proceedings of nine indicted men arrested in March 2013 on charges of recruiting over seventy Albanian foreign fighters and their families in the Middle East, propagating

religious hatred and supporting extremist organizations, among other charges.

On-site interviews

During a research period of over a year, the author was able to conduct extensive on-site interviews with security experts, local religious leaders from two affected regions in Albania, religious leaders from raided mosques in the outskirts of Tirana in Mëzez and Unaza e Re, leaders from the Muslim Community of Albania (KMSH), leaders from Islamic civil society organizations established in Albania, officials from relevant security and religious state institutions and journalists that have documented, reported and traced the emergence religious radicalism and the recruitment of foreign fighters since the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). Through many of the interviews, the author was able to develop a better understanding of the capacity religious and state structures hold in countering religious radicalism and violent extremism.

The author was also able to utilize several other research methods that offered a clearer overview of the current trends. Weekly observations of court proceedings of the nine indicted men arrested in March 2014 on charges of being involved in conflicts in Syria and Iraq, recruiting, propagating, facilitating and supporting extremist organizations, served in examining the alleged process of assisting violent extremism and the network involved, hear testimonies from alleged recruiters, analyze the current legal framework aiming at countering religious radicalism and violent extremism as well as have the possibility to speak with family members, supporters attending the trials and lawyers defending some of the individuals suspected of these charges. Some of these individuals were willing to speak publicly in response to this research. Moreover, informal interviews were also conducted with several female practitioners of Islam from mosques based in Tirana on their views of the issue at hand, as well as assisted the author with more specific questions on religious teachings.

Social media monitoring

Given the important role that social media has had in disseminating radical religious messaging, particularly in the case of IS, the research paid particu-

lar attention to study Youtube propaganda videos, religious sermons broadcasted online, follow individual accounts of IS supporters, individual imams, online forums, especially those among Albanian-speakers, and examine the propaganda strategies many followers and Muslim practitioners (male and female) are exposed to through social media. It is important to note that the author was careful in distinguishing religious sermons from religious propaganda, a distinction that is further analyzed in this report. The author was also able to directly contact a female IS supporter based in Tirana that openly disseminates propaganda videos and photos via her Twitter account. Due to agreed anonymity and strict research ethics, her identity will not be disclosed. Through her guidance, the author was also able to identify several Albanian-speaking (ethnic Albanian) public supporters of IS on Twitter and Facebook, purportedly currently residing in Syria and Iraq as well as others that also live in Albania and elsewhere in the region.

Literature review

A review of different literature was another key component of the research which largely guided the analysis and findings of this report. Even though this report essentially looks at the issue of religious radicalism in Islam and violent extremism through a sociological lens, the research also tries to examine the essence of these religious/extremist ideologies that are often the main channel between extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabbab in South Sudan and most recently, IS. This research recognizes the importance that religious ideology has had in both fostering the psychological pre-conditions among individuals that currently support and have supported extremist groups in the past, as well as the role it can also play in debunking radical religious messages if religious texts are interpreted properly.

Secondly, a review of scholarly pieces and relevant secondary research on the issue of religious radicalism in Islam and violent extremism was another centrepiece of the research strategy that helped understand the way scholarly literature has evolved in conceptualizing violent extremism and terrorism, as well as programs that aim at combating extremism and preventing violence.

Background information and religious composition in Albania

Albania consists of one of the largest indigenous Muslim populations in Europe with a concentration of almost 80% of the inhabitants,¹⁴ according to polls by PEW Research Center. PEW findings claim that Albania is home to over 2 million Muslims in the country. Other figures, however, suggest that the percentage of Muslims is lower, with about 60%, even though it still makes up the predominant religious group.¹⁵ Additional analysis also finds that six in ten Muslims do not distinguish their religious affiliation in a sectarian form, such as Shi'a or Sunni, rather simply identify as "just Muslim" with a median of 65%.¹⁶ The rest of the country's religious composition consists of Roman Catholic 10%, Orthodox 7%, Bektashi (a Sufi order) 2.1%, as well as other denominations.

Islam in Albania became the dominant religion during centuries of Ottoman occupation which ended in 1912. Despite the region's predominant Christian background, many Albanians converted to Islam in order to enjoy better career and education opportunities within the ranks of the empire. This partially explains the reasons why numerous ministers and state leaders within the Ottoman ranks were of Albanian origin, including twenty six Ottoman Grand Viziers (Prime Ministers) and other military leaders.¹⁷ However, Albanians have also practiced Islam in ways that are unique to the region and the rest of the Muslim world. Apart from inheriting the Ottoman-style Hanafi jurisprudence, Albania also homed various other Sufi traditions, such as the Bektashi Sufi order, popular throughout the time Albania was part of the Ottoman Empire. When the empire dissolved, then secular Turkish leader, Kemal Ataturk, expelled over 26,000 Bektashis from Turkey to Albania, "thus making Albania the Bektashi capital of the world".¹⁸

¹⁴ PEW Research Center, Mapping the Global Muslim Population, 2008: <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population14/>.

¹⁵ CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/al.html>.

¹⁶ PEW Research Center, The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity, 2008: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-1-religious-affiliation/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Christopher Delisso, The Coming of Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to

On the other hand, decades of secularism and imposed atheism in 1967, left Albania's religious communities isolated and struck until religion was reintroduced in the country's public life following the collapse of Enver Hoxha's regime in 1991. Until then, the majority of religious cults, including 1,200 mosques and over 400 Catholic and Orthodox churches were either destroyed or turned into warehouses, sport halls and cinemas.¹⁹ The crackdown on religion and severe persecution of hundreds of Christian and Muslim clergy was part of a cultural revolution campaign Hoxha undertook parallel to his only political ally at the time, China, who similarly led an aggressive campaign against religion. In 1967 Albania was officially declared as the "only atheist state" in the world by fully eliminating any form of religious practice.

But with the collapse of the communist regime in the early '90s, the country's highest religious orders reestablished their spiritual mandates and relationship with worldwide communities they had been long isolated from. The Islamic Jemiyeti of Albania or as it is known today, the Muslim Community of Albania (KMSH)²⁰ was similarly able to regain its institutional legitimacy established since 1923 to lead the spiritual life of Muslim believers in the country. Despite recognition, all of its legal and landowner privileges between 1923 and 1967 were only legally recognized in 2009, leaving a considerable institutional vacuum between the state and religious cults. Only in 2009 KMSH was officially established as the institutional representative of the Albanian Muslim order, based on "Muslim practices derived from Islamic law, following the Hanafi judicial Islamic school".²¹

Massive government campaigns against religion and a fusion of Christian and Muslim rituals affected generations of followers and clergy that were not able to freely practice their faith since the '60s. These historical and political elements highly influenced the way religion currently impacts public life and decision-making at political and social levels. Similarly, these

Europe and the West, pg. 29.

¹⁹ Miranda Vickers, Islam in Albania, Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008 file:///Users/ebispahiu/Downloads/2008_March_IslamAlb.pdf.

²⁰ For this report, the Albanian translated abbreviation will be used for Muslim Community of Albania (Albanian: KMSH).

²¹ Draft legal agreement between Muslim Community of Albania (KMSH) and the Republic of Albania, Nr. 10 056, January 22, 2009, Accessed January 2015.

historical elements have also impacted levels of religiosity among the country's Christian and Muslim populations who have also created a tradition of sharing religious celebrations. However, religious scholars and analysts have frequently observed that sectarian divisions have become subject to a newly-shaped religious narrative developed over the past two decades. A study conducted by the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development in 2005, analyses these trends as well as the complexities of religious practices of Islam developed among Albanian populations, and emphasizes the role that external influences had in introducing divides based on presumed "true" Islamic values "which require a sharp sectarian division between faiths"; a division that was not crucial to Albanian practitioners in the past.²²

Post-communism: The return to religious freedom and past ties to radicalism

Most current expertise in Albania attributes the number of Albanian citizens traveling for *jihad* to poor education, higher levels of poverty and growing government corruption. Others argue that the emergence of radical Islam and financing of extremist activities dates back since the fall of the Communist regime when the Muslim Albanian clergy of the time was receiving significant funding from Salafi and Wahabbi groups in the Middle East, including educational scholarships for a new generation of clergy and theologians attending schools in the Middle East.²³ In the early '90s KMSH was led by a number of imams that had been isolated from the rest of the Muslim world during five decades of Communist rule. As a consequence, a majority of clerics had not received any higher religious education other than local madrassas attended prior to isolation, creating a significant educational vacuum among the clergy.²⁴ To a certain degree there were some generational conflicts, in addition to ideological differences with incoming visions of Islam that were being introduced to the older Albanian clergy: "There was a new generation that was theologically better educated, but there was a sense of fear and lack of acceptance of religious waves that

²² Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, *Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans?*, Prishtina, June 2005, pg. 2.

²³ Aleksandra Bogdani, *Zanafilla e Islamit radikal ne Shqiperi*, Reporter.al <http://www.reporter.al/zanafilla-e-islamit-radikal-ne-shqiperi/>.

²⁴ Justinian Topulli (Union of Albanian Imams), Personal interview, February, 2015, Tirana, Albania.

were coming from the Gulf states and other Arab countries,” claims Justinian Topulli, head of the Union of Albanian Imams based in Tirana.

But too many Islamist groups in the Middle East, these differences were marginally considered and a shared religious identity with this Balkan nation was sought as an opportunity to sow the seeds for future religious establishments serving as a gateway to Western Europe for years to come. Even though a significant amount of investments and aid focused on religious establishments, the newly elected government of the time, led by Sali Berisha, equally took advantage of the Muslim identity for financial gains in the form of much-needed resources and economic investments.²⁵ In exchange, within a year of his administration, Berisha signed a military agreement with Turkey that enabled a military line stretching from Istanbul to Sarajevo that many Islamist groups are thought to have used during the Balkan wars of the ‘90s.²⁶

In addition, recent findings from US media accounts and government documents analyzed by Fred Abrahams in his book *Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy*, point to Albania’s membership at the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1992 as the cornerstone move that enabled Islamist fractions to access terrain during the Balkan wars. Albania was the first European country and post-Communist state to gain membership at the OIC, despite parliamentary opposition at home against Berisha’s decisions. This move not only institutionalized political influences and needed financial assistance from the Gulf states, but also established Albania’s role during the war in Bosnia “as a ‘gateway’ to the Bosnian Muslims for arms and foreign fighters, despite the UN arms embargo on Yugoslavia in place since September 1991”.²⁷ As several foreign fighters made their way to Bosnia, “after the war ended in 1995, some of these fighters came to Albania, hoping to make it a European base”.²⁸

²⁵ Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*, 2007, pg. 31.

²⁶ Hide, Enri, *Terrorism and State Responses in Post-Cold War Balkans*, Tirana, Albania, pg. 156.

²⁷ Fred Abrahams, *Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy*, From Albania to Bosnia: Brothers Need Arms, June, 2015 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/from-albania-to-bosnia-brothers-need-arms-1>.

²⁸ Ibid.

This created a leeway for established Islamist organizations who were taking advantage of Albania's favorable environment as a new and inexperienced democracy. According to Ahmed Kalaja, an imam near the Dine Hoxha mosque in Tirana, these political and economic moves had a strong religious dimension which was later exposed by state authorities in the country. He emphasizes that there was a proclamation of a religious school, the Hanbali jurisprudence, one of the most conservative interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, which was unfamiliar in Albania during this time: "Among these associations that operated, there were several individuals who had links to problematic organizations. These people were living in Albania," he claims.²⁹

These ties proved to be detrimental and conflicting with Albania's aspirations to join the European Union and maintain a strong relationship with the United States. Albania remains a highly pro-Western nation, widely supporting the United States' war on terrorism and integration in the European Union.³⁰ This trend is broadly reflected in national polls where the approval rate for the EU and Western influences has been above 50% throughout the past decade and even more so during the '90s.³¹ But despite the country's foreign policy direction, by 1994, the Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank was overseeing the construction of new mosques and granting scholarships to Albanian students to study in the Middle East, including in Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Turkey and Malaysia.

Even though these investments helped create a new elite of religious scholars and educated clergy that even today lead the spiritual life of Muslim communities throughout the country, it also made Albania a safe haven for individuals and organizations linked to extremist groups primarily from the Middle East. According to several accounts, Osama Bin Laden was "the majority stockholder" and founder of the Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank. He even reportedly visited Albania twice between 1994 and 1998 as a wealthy businessman wanting to help a fellow Muslim nation "through humanitar-

²⁹ Ahmed Kalaja, Individual interview, April 2015.

³⁰ Sidita Kushi, *Balkanizing the War on Terror*, E-International Relations, March 2015 <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/04/balkanizing-the-war-on-terror/>.

³¹ Megi Llubani, *The European Perspective of Albania: Perceptions and Realities 2014*. Albanian Institute of International Studies (AIIS). <http://aiis-albania.org/?q=node/85>.

ian support”.³² In Albania, he founded Al Haramain, a humanitarian organization who was later exposed as a front for money laundering and hosting “mujahidins and Arab extremists on the run from their governments”.³³ These activities were soon interrupted following the events of 9/11 in the United States when the Albanian authorities led a series of deportations and security raids against individuals and charity organizations that had long been operating in the country.

These operations addressed a series of other issues, including the finances and the support base these individuals and organizations had established with local communities and structures of KMSH which had been penetrated by external finances. Although KMSH and other organizations have since undergone several internal reforms and now distance themselves from Islamist and political interpretations of religious teachings, there are also numerous mosques that promote a radical *takfiri* vision of Islam³⁴ which are led by religious leaders and self-proclaimed imams that reject KMSH’s authority. Their ties to religious communities date back to the support groups many former Saudi organizations created in Albania by granting scholarships for new clergy.³⁵ Bujar Hysa and Genci Balla, two self-proclaimed imams currently under trial on charges of recruiting and financing terrorism, are believed to have attempted access to several religious communities in Tirana, Elbasan and nearby areas of Librazhd and Pogradec between 2001 and 2010, but were allegedly frequently forced out by local religious leaders that led sermons in these towns.³⁶ This series of events reflects the existence of sleeper-cells in Albania during a time when religious and security authorities took control of the internal functions of KMSH, but were not immune to external conflicts these cells later on created.

³² Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*, 2007, Praeger Security International, Conneticut, USA.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ A separate section is dedicated to explain these terms.

³⁵ These assertions are based on several informal conversations with former leaders at KMSH and current religious leaders in Tirana and Elbasan who have also received their religious education in countries in the Middle East. The author of this report is aware of several attempts Hysa has made to bribe KMSH officials, but has continuously failed to gain access.

³⁶ Ibid.

Foreign fighters from Albania

According to recent estimates, there are over 150 Albanian citizens and over 500 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia who have joined terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. In Albania, official police sources claim that 90 Albanian citizens have travelled between 2012-2014 to join groups in the region, initially Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's official franchise, and then later the Islamic State, its more hardline rival. However, religious leaders and journalists that have followed the issue believe the numbers are a lot higher. Many radicals are thought to have travelled with their families to Iraq and Syria, although there are several cases of children being taken away without their mothers' knowledge. Such was the case of Shkëlzen Dumani, a 40-year-old man from Laprakë, in the Albanian capital Tirana, who reportedly died in Syria in 2014; he allegedly tricked his wife into signing a legal agreement that gave him permission to travel abroad with his two children, who are six- and nine-years-old.

Most recruits to Syria and Iraqi radical groups seem to have come from central Albania, including rural areas near Tirana, Elbasan, Librazhd and Pogradec; however, even smaller numbers of individuals from other towns are also present in the demographics. Interestingly, a number of men that have joined the Islamic State were not uneducated youth; some were educated and had been exposed to Western lifestyles, but had few opportunities offered at home. Due to the EU economic crisis and Albania's long history of immigration, the country has experienced a surge of immigrants returning home, most notably from Italy and Greece, although there are few employment opportunities for those who return. For these individuals, radical ideologies can offer an apparent solution. Such was the case of Verdi Morava, a 48-year-old currently being tried in Albania for facilitating the travel of jihadists and for financing terrorism. Morava had, for many years, lived in Italy and had graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering. Similar examples are seen throughout the demographics of many young men, some of whom speak several languages, but joined due to ideological beliefs. However, many have since returned, regretful of having participated in a war that was not based on the religious principles that they have imagined. Some of them have even spoken against the war in their communities.

Analysis of the significant numbers of foreign fighters from Kosovo shows a generally similar picture. For instance, a recent publication by the Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS), based in Pristina, explored in detail lives and religious motivations of over 230 fighters from Kosovo, including veterans of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), assorted youths and also religious leaders who had promoted jihad in local mosques. Some of these volunteers, such as Hetem Dema, a former KLA soldier from Kacanik who was killed in Syria in January 2014, are known to have died in the conflict, while others have since returned. Indeed, the involvement of former KLA fighters is a persistent trend, dating to 2012 when, at the outset of the war in Syria, Kosovo government officials joined the international community in condemning Assad's atrocities and established "diplomatic contacts" with the rebel Free Syrian Army, with former KLA fighters, in particular, sharing their experiences in dealing with oppressive Serb rule.

Domestic arrests

Albania is a highly pro-Western nation, with aspirations to join the European Union. It also maintains a strong relationship with the United States, and it has supported the War on Terror since 2001. Partly as a result, it has cracked down strongly on foreign fighters and those believed to be encouraging them. For instance, in March 2014, 13 people were arrested at two mosques based in the outskirts of Albania's capital, for allegedly recruiting over 70 foreign fighters to join Jabhat al-Nusra, and later the Islamic State, and for having encouraged religious divisions. Nine of the arrested are currently being tried by Tirana's court over their links to organized crime. Almost unanimously, the indicted men did not deny their accusations, but publicly took pride in their activities. For instance, Bujar Hysa, one of the imams accused, formerly a preacher at the mosque of Unaza e Re, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, when questioned in court over his activities.

Similarly, in Kosovo, which also retains strong links with Western powers, since August 2014, more than 100 individuals have been arrested or questioned by the security services, including a number of leading religious and political figures tied to the Islamic Union of Kosovo, an officially recognized religious institution. However, even though these August operations

gained tremendous praise from Western leaders, many of those detained have since been released, including the imam of Prishtina's Grand Mosque, Shefqet Krasniqi, due to insufficient evidence of their direct involvement in terrorist activities.³⁷ However, in early March, seven of these suspects were indicted for "inciting others to commit or participate in terrorist activities, and for securing funds and other material resources," according to a statement by Kosovo's prosecutor's office.³⁸

Feminization of violent extremism: The presence of women and children

Since the emergence of IS based on a strict interpretation of a Salafist vision of Islam, among thousands of foreign fighters that have joined IS' call for a global jihad, women and children comprise some of the growing demographics. Violent extremism and radicalism are majorly considered as a male-dominated realm, with women often being perceived as less inclined to participate in violent extremism. In fact, the preconceived notion that women are less inclined to partake in violent extremist activities has been exploited by violent groups in the past. Boko Haram in Nigeria is a case where young girls as young as 9 years old have been forced into carrying suicide attacks later claimed by Boko Haram's leadership.³⁹ Differently from other extremist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and other similar groups, IS has encouraged the presence of women in governing and leading some of the most important military and ideological operations in the field. The discourse around women joining extremist organizations such as IS is relatively new and the majority of the discussion circles around the trends that characterize this aspect of the issue at hand, in addition to other factors that attract women to join an initiative that often openly subjugates them to violence.

According to initial findings, women make up about 10% of the recruits for the Islamic State. There are reportedly over 5,000 women engaged in

³⁷ Kerry: Shkaterruam celulat e ISIS'it ne Kosove, Gazeta Express, January 22, 2015, <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/kerry-shkaterruam-celulat-e-isisit-ne-kosove-75362/?archive=1>.

³⁸ Kosovo charges seven with Islamist terrorism, BalkanInsight, March 3, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-charges-seven-for-islamic-state-involvement>.

³⁹ Boko Haram formally pledged allegiance to IS in April 2015.

combat and logistical operations in the forms of female brigades created to

“...observe, search and arrest women. About 90% of the women in this brigade are immigrants, while only few are Syrians. In addition to their intelligence role to prevent women from smuggling weapons into the city, they are believed to arrange marriages for foreign fighters as well.”⁴⁰

This is still a low number compared to the presence of women in other extremist organizations in the past, such as the Tamil Tigers, Chechen fighters or the Irish Republican Army, which comprised about 25% of the forces. However, when looking at violent extremism in the Islamic world, this is an overwhelming number considering that radical Islamist groups have historically been dominated by men in leading their strategies. While distancing from Al-Qaeda’s short-term strategies, IS sees the presence of women as a crucial element in developing the *Caliphate’s* long-term sustainability, needing women to wed current fighters as well as mother an entire generation of fighters and political leaders loyal to the new “Islamic” system. Similarly, IS views children as the *Cubs of the Islamic State* and has initiated several programs to conduct training regimens which include religious indoctrination, radicalization and military exercises. The programs aim at ensuring the future expansion of the *caliphate* and continuation of a generation of fighters and leaders.⁴¹ Although the use of child soldiers is not unique to IS, the presence of children in numerous propaganda videos released by IS reflects that children as young as 2 years old are active participants in warfare trainings, while the older ones, in executions.⁴²

The presence of women and young girls is noticeable in different ways, from being subjugated to violence and sex slavery to suicide bombers, as well as leaders of female brigades at IS. On social media, young women describe their current lives in Syria and their paths into becoming jihadi brides so they can empower other young girls into taking that same passage.⁴³ Apart from reports of forced kidnappings that have pushed many

⁴⁰ Life in Raqqa Under IS, Al-Monitor, September 2014 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/raqqa-syria-islamic-state-activists-threatened.html#>.

⁴¹ Cole Pinheiro, The role of child soldiers in a multi-generational movement, CTC Sentinel, February 2015 <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-role-of-child-soldiers-in-a-multigenerational-movement>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Diary of a Muhajira tumblr blog, <http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/>, this is the

young girls and women to be the subject of strict rules set by IS or Boko Haram leaders – including specific pamphlets on how to conduct rape – there have been a large number of women that have voluntarily joined the ranks of IS. For law enforcement agencies this presents an additional challenge because the identification process by state authorities for women and children participating in Syria’s jihad is increasingly difficult when compared to the identification process for male fighters.⁴⁴ According to media reports in Albania, the most radical fighters have taken their families with them, including 13 women and 31 children that have followed their male family members to join IS or who were accompanied by just one of their parents.⁴⁵ Additional investigations confirm that 23 out of the 31 children that were accompanied to live in IS camps, are minors as young as two months old.⁴⁶ Thus far state authorities have not reported the death of Albanian children accompanied there by one or both parents.

Even though most cases have involved women from Albania voluntarily join the ranks of IS, at times a number of children were accompanied by only one of their parents, while taken away without their mothers’ or fathers’ consent or knowledge. Such was the case of Shkëlzen Dumani, a 40-year-old man from Peshkopi, but resident in Laprakë, who reportedly died in Syria in 2014. According to accounts his former wife, Mide Dumani, provided for several media outlets, he allegedly misled his wife into signing a legal agreement that gave him permission to travel abroad with his two children, who at the time were six- and nine-years-old. Ahmed Kalaja, a Tirana imam, also accounts the story of a man from Peshkopi who similarly convinced his wife into selling their home to “buy a bigger place” and signing a legal agreement so he could take their children “ice-skating to nearby Montenegro”. Later she discovered that her husband had abducted both of

tumblr blog of a young British girl who disappeared from her home in the UK in 2013 in order to become a *jihadi* bride. She now keeps a blog online, The *Diary of a Muhajira*, where she tries to contact and recruit new women to join IS and disseminate IS propaganda.

⁴⁴ Official near the office of the Prosecutor who did not wish to be identified.

⁴⁵ Aleksandra Bogdani, Individual interview, March 2015.

⁴⁶ Namik Mahmutllari, Individual interview, Pogradec, April 2015. Other media inquiries into classified information, claims that the youngest child, only 2 months old, accompanied to Syria by both parents was from Gurras in Librazhd <http://www.abcnews.al/lajme/aktualitet/2/40351>.

their children to Syria.⁴⁷ Genc Merepeza, Head of the Border Department at the State Police claims that the controlling process for children traveling outside the country has strengthened, requiring special paperwork for children accompanied outside borders, but child trafficking remains a security concern for law enforcement: “In addition to this issue, there is also a growing number of people who send their children to the West so they can be taken under custody from Western authorities.”⁴⁸

There are several factors that explain women’s involvement in these types of initiatives, but the discourses seem to be strikingly different when comparing the motivations between female foreign fighters coming from the West and Albanian females who seem to have mainly followed their male family members. According to several accounts acquired throughout the research period from media reports and personal testimonies, many women have claimed to have joined in defiance of Western political policies towards the Muslim world, but also due to their desire to live a pure “Muslim” life based on marriage promises from other jihadists.

The current narrative offers no explanation on to why women from the West – often guaranteed more rights and freedoms compared to oppressive rules in many Muslim countries – are equally inclined to join extremist groups that frequently bolster sexual violence, including sex slavery. Many Muslim women find that there is a sense of empowerment in practicing religion and defying misconceptions of Muslim women being forced to cover, by responding to the obligation of wearing the *hijab* as a sign of ownership over their intellectual capacities instead of physical looks.⁴⁹ This transformation, however, often makes female practitioners more aware of their religious identities in comparison to their male counterparts, and therefore more vulnerable to discrimination that can be seen as a source of resentment. A young woman from Tirana who offered to be interviewed for this study in exchange of anonymity, points to the “increasing sexual objectification of women in Western culture” as one of the primary reasons she supports IS’ ideologies. She suggests that many young girls and women

⁴⁷ Ahmet Kalaja, Individual interview, April 2015.

⁴⁸ Genc Merepeza, Individual interview, March 2015.

⁴⁹ Saadia Faruqi, Why do I wear the hijab?, Haaretz News, June 2015 <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.662729>.

seek validation in the teachings of Islam and feel the sense of empowerment among the ranks of an extremist group. Even though IS is ironically known to promote, legitimize and encourage sexual and gender-based violence, a large portion of propaganda disseminated on social media on women's participation in IS paints a picture of empowerment rather than subjugation of Muslim women. "There is no financial influence. I'm free and I follow whatever I deem just according to Shar'ia and Teuhid. Even though we don't live under Shar'ia in Albania, those brothers and sisters that travel there feel the need to do so. Nobody influences them," she says.

Iris Gjinishi, former head of Women's office at KMSH and a renown female theologian in Tirana, argues that radicalization among women occurs due to the continuation of a patriarchal culture in society which still orients the life of many women in Albania. Gjinishi believes that most women involved in violent extremism from Albania have followed their husbands or their male authorities, thus transforming this sense of empowerment. "I knew a woman from Vlora who joined with her two children because of her husband. We haven't seen women from Albania traveling on their own yet," she claims. She primarily blames KMSH authorities' slow response to lack of religious literature and the religious education crisis many young women receive in madrassas and Islamic communities throughout the country. Even though there is no consolidated network that recruits women and young girls from Albania, in comparison to other countries, women are similarly at risk to be lured into these ideologies based on a religious doctrine that is provided to them from various unauthorized sources. These sources are believed to move freely due to little oversight from relevant authorities over their content.

"Before we used to hold lectures with women once or twice a week. These initiatives have been minimized so we have a new set of problems rising. When you don't communicate with female practitioners, they will blindly follow their male counterparts and their ideological waves".⁵⁰

Life in Syria and those that have returned: are we threatened?

According to accounts available from state authorities, there are about 40 people that have returned to Albania from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq,

⁵⁰ Iris Gjinishi, Individual interview, April 2015.

leaving a remaining contingent of about 50-60 fighters believed to still fight alongside the ranks of IS.⁵¹ Recent figures claim that over 18 Albanian foreign fighters have been proclaimed dead by intelligence agencies.⁵² Little is known about their lives in Syria and the combat or operational roles that Albanian foreign fighters and their families have in IS, but a series of videos and media inquiries have provided a glimpse into the realities of the life under the Islamic State.

An investigative inquiry conducted by Reporter, a BIRN publishing, looks into the story of a 37-years old jihadist from northern Albania, Ebu Mejrem (not his real name), who had traveled to Istanbul in the Fall of 2012 with the intention to conduct jihad as a way to fulfill his “highest objective as a Muslim”.⁵³ Upon his easy cross to the border between Turkey and Syria, where tens of other European and Middle Eastern foreign fighters were undertaking the same journey, Ebu Mejrem was taken to numerous training camps before being established at a real camp controlled by the Al-Nusra Front in Tal Rifat. He describes his days spent learning the Qur’an and undergoing military trainings to use Kalashnikovs and snipers. But soon he grew frustrated and angry with Al-Nusra operatives because he could not participate in the battles due to shortage of arms. Similar sentiments he also recalls for other Albanian fighters that had joined the war via Murat Gezenler, a Turkish extremist organizations. Ebu Mejrem maintains that his decision to return to Albania was not related to his religious convictions, but rather with his disappointments that he could not immediately fight, in addition to his failure to request his mother’s blessing to conduct jihad.⁵⁴

The author of this report contacted two returned former fighters who did not wish to be interviewed for this study, but nonetheless provided some insight into their experiences fighting for IS in Syria. Although a full interview was not possible to be conducted, both of them stressed the delusion they had created in their minds before leaving their homes to join extremist

⁵¹ Available data from SHISH (Albanian Intelligence Services) as of March 2015.

⁵² Gazeta Dita <http://www.gazetadita.al/raporti-sekret-kush-jane-6-shqiptaret-e-vraren-siri-dhe-misteri-i-2-te-tjereve/>.

⁵³ Aleksandra Bogdani, Rruga e Myslimanve Shqiptare Drejt Xhihadit ne Siri, December 2014, <http://www.reporter.al/rruga-e-myslimaneve-shqiptare-drejt-xhihadit-ne-siri/>.

⁵⁴ In Quranic terms, jihad is only valuable if parental blessing is provided.

groups in Syria. They recall the horrific atrocities they witnessed during their time there, but most importantly the falsity of various interpretations of religious doctrine they were propagated prior to their journeys. This was also the case with Ervin Duka, for instance, who was injured during the war in Syria and was assisted by his brothers to return back to Albania, in addition to seeking medical care for his injuries in neighboring Greece.⁵⁵ Upon his return, his personal experiences played an incremental role to counter propagate the glory created behind the war in Syria, which discouraged a number of other followers who were thinking of assuming the same journey. “He spoke at our mosque for people not to go because it’s not a religious war. We’ve done a lot of work so people are not lied to,” claims imam Mahmutllari, currently the Mufti of Pogradec.⁵⁶

From several discussions and interviews conducted, a significant number of those that have returned are regretful of their actions, the journeys they undertook and the experiences they lived through. Although the current legal framework in place since the summer of 2014 punishes anyone that participates in a foreign conflict or promotes and recruits militants for foreign conflicts, most returned fighters cannot be prosecuted for an alleged crime committed prior to the passing of the law. Several restrictive measures have been undertaken in order to ensure their surveillance, but no rehabilitation and integration opportunities in religious communities as much as social settings were provided. Experts believe that these measures can only aggravate grievances among returned fighters due to social isolation and lack of opportunities for work and education.

“Their integration process should include different measures so they can be part of the community again. The state should not take repressive measures. I am aware of instances when they were under strict surveillance without any legal procedures when Pope Francis visited Albania,”

claims Justinian Topulli from the League of Albanian Imams, a Tirana-based NGO.⁵⁷

However, recent events and videos released by IS targeting audiences in the Balkans, including Albanian-speaking populations primarily in Albania,

⁵⁵ Namik Mahmutllari, Individual interview, April 2015.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Justinian Topulli, Individual interview, February 2015.

Kosovo, Macedonia, reflect a serious concern that may come from those that have returned and who still feel the pressures and prejudices of a society that is widely unaccepting of their choices. “Those who have returned may even be sleeper cells. This depends on the strategies that their former leaders used. A person who has sacrificed his life for a period of time, cannot easily detach from the ideology he believed in,” says Arben Ramkaj, currently an imam at the high-risk city of Elbasan.⁵⁸ Ramkaj calls for a series of conceded efforts from state authorities and religious institutions to rehabilitate those that have returned from the battlefields and who still support radical religious ideologies due to potential threats posed even under strict observations from local authorities. “The first step to de-radicalization should be theological rehabilitation,” claims Ermir Gjinishi, a Tirana-based religious scholar who has personally encountered radicalized youth and conducted one-on-one sessions on religious teachings among youth in Tirana.⁵⁹

Foreign Fighters and the Western Balkans

To the Islamic State militant group, foreign fighters from the Balkans have particular importance due to their historical ties to Islam, their homelands’ proximity to other Western Europe and because ethnic disputes in the region remain close to the surface. A video released in June 2015 by the organization’s al-Hayat media center, emphasizes the strategic importance that the Balkan Peninsula represents for the Islamic State in not only inspiring lone wolf attacks or fighters and their families to join the caliphate, but also lengthily analyzes the historical significance Balkan Muslims had in defying “European crusaders” during the Ottoman Empire. The video similarly analyzes the historical significance that communist regimes, including that of Enver Hoxha in Albania and Tito’s in Former Yugoslavia, had in shaping the life of Balkan Muslims.⁶⁰ In the last issue of Dabiq, a periodic magazine issued by IS media outreach efforts, IS continues to refer to the importance of the Balkans and calls for lone wolf attacks among

⁵⁸ Arben Ramkaj, Individual interview, March 2015.

⁵⁹ Ermir Gjinishi, Individual interview, August 2014.

⁶⁰ <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/>.

followers in the region.⁶¹ With the emergence of IS and its ability to inspire thousands of foreign fighters, primarily based on an ideological appeal, over 1,000 foreign fighters from the Western Balkans have joined IS in Syria and Iraq.⁶² These recruits predominantly come from Muslim communities throughout the region, including Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other groups in Serbia and Montenegro.

These propaganda videos, among other forms of social media outreach IS has guaranteed since its inception, play an important role in creating a support base as well as inspire followers through aggressive messaging addressing their audiences. In one year of claiming the formation of IS, this organization has come to own a strong and modern media apparatus and thousands of social media accounts, including Facebook and Twitter. A large part of these videos and social media outreach aim at evoking the sense of victimhood targeted at Muslim followers; initially to feel genuinely disheartened by Assad's atrocities in Syria and then react to the urge to help fellow Muslims that are suffering in the hands of the dictatorship. It is important to note that since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, over 5 million people have been displaced and thousands more killed and massacred by the hands of the Assad regime. According to UN officials and other humanitarian agencies, victims of the war in Syria are a testimony of one of the largest humanitarian crises ever recorded. This humanitarian dimension is often exploited to extend calls on followers to join extremist groups, military warfare and the creation of a new system of governance based on Shari'a law that can replace oppressive regimes.

The region's Muslim communities in Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia still largely practice a moderate vision of Islam, based on Hanafi jurisprudence and Sufi traditions inherited from decades of Ottoman rule. However, Saudi-led efforts following the fall of the region's communist regimes have attempted to make the Balkans a bastion of Salafist and Wahhabist doctrines and practice. During the past year, the authorities in the region have conducted a series of arrests of groups and individual imams purportedly involved in inspiring and facilitating the flow of foreign fighters to the Islamic State. In addition to arrests conducted against a number of imams

⁶¹ Dabiq, An Opportunity for Noble Deeds, pg. 54.

⁶² <http://illyriapress.com/batalioni-i-ballkanit-me-1000-luftetare-ne-siri>.

and alleged recruiters in targeted mosques located in Albania, , authorities in Kosovo have similarly arrested and questioned over 100 individuals in a series of operations against recruiters and other religious leaders that openly called for young men and women to join the war in Syria.⁶³

Similar operations have been conducted in Macedonia, Bosnia and Serbia against individuals accused of involvement in militant recruitment on behalf of the Islamic State. Although most of these policing operations have proved successful in identifying and isolating the main lines of militant recruitment, questions remain over the continuity of hardline religious doctrine in these areas and ways it is being utilized to establish strongholds of support among smaller communities in the countries most affected. Even though most countries in the region remain keen to join the European Union (EU), high levels of corruption, organized crime and a weaker and less appealing EU have created an environment where hardline ideologies can spread, especially in countries with predominantly Muslim populations, such as Kosovo or Bosnia. The lack of preventative measures against this radical upswing may potentially make religious radicalism one of the region's greatest security threats, alongside organized crime.

Islamic State 'Strongholds'?

Weak governance and poor rule of law, and a corresponding limited government presence in remote areas, is a problem common to many Balkan countries. Communal anger over high levels of unemployment and extensive government corruption has been further stoked by a widespread dissatisfaction with a prolonged EU integration process. These elements have accordingly become the centerpiece of the grievance narrative that many Islamist leaders have promoted in order to gain local support and fuel anti-Western and anti-government sentiments among their followers. In addition, this dissatisfaction with the status quo also explains the gradual increase in people from Kosovo and Albania migrating to Western Europe in hopes of finding employment. For instance, Albanian migrants rank third after Syrians and Afghans seeking asylum in Germany.⁶⁴

⁶³ <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/kerry-shkaterruam-celulat-e-isisit-ne-kosove-75362/>?archive=1.

⁶⁴ <http://www.panorama.com.al/eurostat-shqiptaret-te-tretet-si-azilkerkues-pas-sirise-e>

As state institutions lack credibility, radical imams and similar groups are filling the vacuum, while additionally replacing moderate religious leaders and other societal actors in these communities. Several testimonies from local civil society groups based in northeastern Albania, for instance, describe the rapid transformation of local religious life and an increased commitment towards following imams among youths, whose lives are increasingly shaped by religious doctrine in the absence of a strong school system and meaningful employment opportunities. Similarly, a recent report found that youth in Kosovo are also becoming increasingly conservative, while their main reference points for spiritual and intellectual guidance are also imams.⁶⁵ While religiosity was already an integral component of a society that has historically promoted peaceful co-existence between religions, many in Kosovo have gradually embraced Salafist and Wahhabist ideologies, leading to a shift in their views and attitudes, while hundreds of religious hardliners from Kosovo have also joined the Islamic State in recent years. Kacanik, a small town in Kosovo near the border with Macedonia, is a particular example of where radical religious rhetoric has flourished and despite recent efforts to curb its influence; many radical imams in the area are still able to carry on giving sermons to radical youth despite being in hiding from the authorities.

In addition to Balkan youths' changing approach to religion, hardliners sympathetic to the Islamic State have apparently also established a physical presence in the region by purchasing vacant real estate along the former lines of contact between the local warring factions in the 1990s conflicts. This has been particularly visible in Bosnia, where these types of properties are often in badly damaged remote areas that have been abandoned by state authorities.⁶⁶ According to another report, this one on Bosnian fighters in Syria, these types of purchases are common among local Salafists, and many known Islamic State foreign fighters from Bosnia have visited these villages in the past.

afganistanit/.

⁶⁵ <http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2015/08/10/studimi-gjerman-te-rinjte-shqiptare-jane-teper-konservatore-u-besojne-imameve-nuk-duan-ti-kene-romet-fqinj-dhe-duante-martohen-vetem-me-partner-te-etnise-se-tyre/>.

⁶⁶ <http://www.avaz.ba/clanak/179549/kupuju-zemlju-u-maglaju-ratnici-islamske-drzave-dolaze-u-bih>.

Current communities inhabiting these villages do not shy from advertising their support for the Islamic State, either via flying the group's flags or through displaying other symbols of the group.

Organized Crime and Religious Radicalism

Although most regional security officials and security experts treat the threats posed by religious extremism and organized crime as separate concerns – growing out of separate networks – there are strong possibilities that these two elements may combine in future, as Islamist groups, such as IS, attempt to establish their presence in other parts of Europe. Throughout the past year, for instance, there have been several media reports and events that reflect that such combination is possible in a region marked by trafficking, prostitution and political links to organized crime.

This emerging nexus between criminals and religious radicals is particularly visible in Lazarat, a village in southern Albania infamous for its production and export of cannabis. There have been several instances of unrest in the area, with authorities issuing arrest warrants for five young men allegedly responsible for a series of explosions near Lazarat in March, which resulted in no reports of death or injuries.⁶⁷ Facebook profiles in the name of the five men showed that they were vocal supporters of the Islamic State, but also led glamorous lives, involving expensive cars and Mediterranean trips, despite outstanding domestic and international arrest warrants. Arbion Aliko, one of the main individuals involved, was apprehended in June, following a shootout between the young men and police, on charges of carrying out acts for terrorist purposes and over the killing of Ibrahim Basha, a special forces officer on duty in Lazarat. According to a Facebook profile in Aliko's name, which was later taken down, he expressed his admiration for Lavdrim Muhaxheri (an infamous Albanian-Kosovar jihadist with the Islamic State), and other known Albanian jihadists reportedly fighting for the jihadist organization. Aliko had also repeatedly called for action to take back Lazarat from state control.

⁶⁷ <http://www.balkanweb.com/site/kerkohen-nga-policia-per-shperthimet-me-tritol-ja-5-lazaratasit-qe-adhurojne-isis/>.

Although direct links between organized criminal groups and IS supporters in Albania were denied by the authorities, these events exposed the potential for organized crime to converge with religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania. The events in Lazarat shocked public opinion in Albania, but they also suggest the possible emergence of other nexuses between radicals and active criminal groups elsewhere in the country. Albania has a long history of being a transit and destination country for cannabis, heroin and cocaine, and also has long been considered a source country for cannabis going to EU countries. The Albanian government has sought to tackle this problem; for instance, in 2014, Albanian police undertook a massive raid on Lazarat that was intended to end the village's production and export of cannabis to Western Europe. However, although Albania's interior minister, Saimir Tahiri, has recently claimed that almost all marijuana plants in northern and southern parts of the country, which are particularly known for their high production of cannabis, were destroyed as a result of police operations, questions remain over who managed these areas and profited from their lucrative revenues. On the other hand, for hundreds of local residents, drug production is a valuable source of income in the absence of other employment opportunities, and the destruction of these plantations poses an economic threat to them due to the lack of alternatives. These areas are particularly vulnerable to the influence of radical religious leaders, as well as criminal groups that still maintain their own influence, in absence of police control and weak institutions. This situation illustrates that efforts to tackle the drugs trade also risk boosting radicalization.

Conclusion

Recent arrests and increased military capacity do not address the real concerns that have enabled violent extremism and religious radicalism to develop in the Balkans in the first place. These problems include corrupt officials who are involved in organized crime and the drugs trade. An additional problem is that moderate Islamic religious authorities that have been ousted by more radical preachers in recent years, leaving Islamic State supporters in the Balkan region, particularly those in Albania and Kosovo, with an open field. There are already indications that this toxic environment is starting to produce attackers; Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced its first violent assault by an alleged Islamist lone wolf, who killed two soldiers

and wounded several others in a shooting in the suburbs of Sarajevo on November 18, following Paris attacks just a few days prior. Despite the region's governments' efforts, however, it is becoming more clear that authorities are also aware of their own relatively limited capacities to carry investigations that involve acts of terrorism, and that the region's security continues to rely heavily on international intelligence. As threats levels remain high in the midst of the Islamic State's strong support-base in the Balkans, very few believe that the region's political elite has the will to confront violent extremism and organized crime.

In addition, convergences between organized crime groups and traditional terrorist organizations are nothing new. Frequent evidence of direct linkages is seen between terrorist organizations and criminal networks who seek to capitalize upon each others' skills and assets, despite divergences in ideologies and objectives. For instance, the U.S. National Security Council has said that today's criminal networks are fluid, striking new allegiances with other networks around the world and engaging in a wide range of illicit activities, including cybercrime and providing support for terrorism. Although details of direct links between the Islamic State and organized groups in Albania, especially since the recent events in Lazarat, are not confirmed, the rampant corruption in all sectors of society, including the judiciary, and allegations of prostitution and drug links to the political establishment mean that Albania and the rest of the Balkan region are particularly vulnerable to extremist groups looking to establish their presence in Europe. In addition, according to several unofficial sources, in Albania in particular, political polarization and electoral fraud have led religious leaders to support particular political agendas in exchange for delivering votes, thus leading to the willingness of authorities and politicians to overlook illicit activities that these individuals may be involved in. This underlines that high levels of corruption at administrative and political levels in affected Balkan countries can create additional vacuums in which religious radicalism can take hold, potentially increasing threats not only in the region itself but also further afield.

Islamic Radicalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Edina Bećirević

Introduction

Since September 11, 2001, Bosnia and Herzegovina has occasionally been portrayed in international media as a breeding ground for terrorism. In Bosnia and Herzegovina in fact there is no greater danger of terrorism than in other European countries, and overestimations of the Bosnian threat are built largely on stereotypes about countries with significant Muslim populations. Nonetheless, media have highlighted the presence and potential danger of foreign mujahideen who remained in Bosnia and Herzegovina after fighting in the 1992-1995 war.¹ Contributing further to this narrative has been the appearance of Salafism/Wahhabism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Extreme ideologies did arrive with the mujahideen, but their spread since the end of the war cannot be exclusively linked to these former foreign fighters, and thus must be understood in the context of more complex social transformations that have taken place over the last decades.

While the question of “homegrown terrorism” has become highly emotional and highly politicised in many countries, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it has become yet another instrument of ethnic politics. For years, Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) political and religious elites have denied that any threats of terrorism and radicalisation exist in the country, insisting that the practice and interpretation of Islam in Bosnia is moderate and tolerant. Indeed, the country’s history of religious and cultural pluralism – during which Muslims have lived together with Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish compatriots – supports this assertion.² Still, in their attempt to emphasise the tol-

¹ Azinović, Vlado: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Terrorism 1996-2011: Defining the Threat, Devising Counterterrorism Strategy. In: Le Beau, John J. (Ed.) : The Dangerous Landscape: International Perspectives on Twenty – First Century Terrorism; Transnational Challenge, International Responses. The Partnership for Peace Consortium's Combating Terrorism Working Group (CTWG). Procon Ltd. 2013. pp. 205-207.

² Malcolm, Noel: Bosnia: A Short History: New York 1994. See also: Hoare, Marko A. “The History of Bosnia”, London 2007.

erant nature of “Bosnian Islam,” many Bosniak leaders have intentionally minimised the danger posed by the proliferation of Salafist/Wahhabist ideologies. Alternatively, politicians from the Republika Srpska have intentionally blown this danger far out of proportion and have identified Serbs as particularly threatened by Islamic radicalisation.³

For different reasons, both Bosniak and Serb leaders have failed to make a distinction between traditional Bosnian Muslims and “new” Salafists/Wahhabists. The motivation for officials from the Republika Srpska is not so hard to understand – a “Salafist threat” that is not made distinct from Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina generally provides them a platform from which to present *all* Bosnian Muslims as potentially dangerous radicals. Thus, their argument goes, Serbs must protect themselves by seeking secession.⁴

The reasons that Bosniak political and religious elites have failed to make this distinction is more layered. For almost twenty years, mainstream Bosniak leaders have worked to maintain an inclusive discourse, claiming that it is wrong to underscore the differences between Salafists and traditional Bosnian Muslims.⁵ Yet, in 2012 – when Husein Kavazović replaced Mustafa Cerić as Grand Mufti – the official position toward Salafism began to shift, first among the ranks of Islamic Community officials behind closed doors, and then more publicly.

An Awakening

In 2015 alone, Bosnia saw two terrorist attacks.⁶ This was an awakening for the Islamic Community and Bosniak political elites and, combined with an

³ “Po Bosni vršlja 100.000 vehabija” (In Bosnia 100,000 hang around), Vesti Online, 3 April 2010. This article is the example of the Wahhabi threat exaggeration.

⁴ Špirić, Dodik: Vehabije i u institucijama BiH (Wahhabists inside the institutions of B-H). Vijesti.ba, 6 July 2015.

⁵ “Reis Cerić opravdava pristustvo vehabija“ (Reis Cerić defends the presence of Wahhabists), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 7 February 2009.

⁶ On 27 April 2015, Nerdin Ibrić attacked the police station in Zvornik. He killed one police officer and wounded two others. Ibrić was killed in the attack. On 18 November 2015, Enes Omeragić killed two Bosnian soldiers in Sarajevo suburb of Rajlovac. He wounded another soldier and a female employee of the betting shop where shooting took place. He also fired the gun on a bus, injuring the driver and two passengers. Both attacks were qualified as terrorist acts.

increasing number of Bosniaks departing to fight in the Syrian war on the side of ISIL,⁷ inspired a new narrative, which openly recognises Salafism as a radical interpretation of Islam that poses a potential security threat. In recent interviews, the Grand Mufti has called for the mobilisation of not only Muslims, but society as a whole, to develop programs that will prevent the spread of Salafism.⁸

On 4 December 2015, a meeting of 37 prominent Bosniaks resulted in a signed statement that not only condemned terrorism and violent extremism of any kind, but also warned of the dangers of Salafism by suggesting that this particular interpretation of Islam may provide an ideological justification to individuals inclined toward violence. The statement emphasised that radicalism threatens the values of traditional Bosnian Islam.⁹ It also demanded that

“authorities of Muslim countries respect our religious educational tradition, institutions and autonomy and cooperate with state institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and with the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina with regard to academic and religious education and student exchange.”¹⁰

To those familiar with the origins of Salafism/Wahabbism in Bosnia, this statement regarding educational exchange was rather transparently directed at Saudi Arabia, which has long financed madrasas in Bosnia. Wahabbism is, after all, a uniquely Saudi form of Salafism; and ten years ago, the respected Muslim scholar Rešid Hafizović warned in an article titled “They are coming to take our children” that Wahhabists would have a damaging long-term influence on Bosnian Muslim youth.¹¹ In a recent interview, Hafizović spoke of the death threats he received upon publication of the article and said that the former Saudi Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina had asked at the time that the Islamic Community should sanction him.¹² For-

⁷ Azinović, Vlado/Jusić, Muhamed: *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo 2015.

⁸ Reis Husein ef. Kavazović: *Ekstremni pokreti su ideologije, oni nisu vjera* (Extreme movements are ideologies, not faith). Interview on TV1 on 6 May 2015.

⁹ *Joint Statement on Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, Sarajevo, 4 December 2015. Preporod, No. 24/1058, December 2015.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hafizović, Rešid: *Oni dolaze po našu djecu* (They want to take our children). *Oslobođenje*, Sarajevo, 25 November 2006.

¹² Interview with Rešid Hafizović on television N1 on 23 September 2015.

mer Grand Mufti Cerić complied, and so it was a surprise to some that he was among the signatories of the 4 December statement.

Fertile Ground

The seeds of Islamic radicalisation in Bosnia were sowed during the 1992-1995 war and genocide. Extensive international media coverage meant that the victimisation of Bosnian Muslims was known and this, according to the most reliable estimates, attracted some 600-700 Islamic militants – mainly from the Middle East – to fight in the war on the side of Bosniaks. These mujahideen, along with newly-formed Islamic charities, began to spread Salafist/Wahhabist interpretations of Islam that were alien to traditionally moderate Bosnian Muslims.

In an interview I conducted with a former Wahhabist in 2007, I asked why reductionist interpretations of Islam were attractive to some Bosnians. He had joined the Wahhabi community during the war, as a youth, and explained:

“I was 12 years old when the war started. My intense interest in religion started in 1994, when I was 14. There was a war, and I had the feeling that the life of a Muslim was very cheap. I entered my teenage years with the sense that Europe had sacrificed us because we were Muslim. And also, I had a growing awareness that death was imminent and so close. The only hope and strength I could find was in Islam. I was especially interested in Sufism. And I read all the religious books I could get hold of. I really liked Sufi philosophy; it gave me serenity in those turbulent days. Yet, when Arab organizations that propagated Wahhabi philosophy came to Sarajevo...at the end of 1994, I readily joined a circle of ‘true believers.’ Sufism lacked a political dimension and activism. What I needed in those days was exactly that. And that is what Wahhabism gave me.”¹³

This importation of Wahhabism during the war years was very damaging to the international image of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but even worse, it compromised the just cause of the Bosnian-Herzegovine Army, which was fighting a defensive war. The mujahideen first arrived in central Bosnia in the summer of 1992, where they initially fought alongside soldiers in regular units of the Army. Then, despite the fact that rogue mujahideen were reportedly involved in committing a number of war crimes against Serb and

¹³ Interview with S.S., former follower of Wahhabism, conducted in Sarajevo on July 28, 2007.

Croat civilians and prisoners of war, they were integrated into the 3rd Corps as the el-Mujahid unit. The integration of these foreign fighters fed the myth of equal victimization in the war. Indeed, the presence of mujahideen on the battlefield was frequently cited as evidence that the country was involved in an uncontrolled civil war by those who denied that fighting had broken out as the result of a detailed plan to divide Bosnia.¹⁴

After the war's end, a few hundred mujahideen remained in Bosnia. They formed communities that represented a new fertile ground for radicalisation, which were joined in subsequent years by other extremists; and in 2007, the citizenship for more than 600 people believed to have been obtained unlawfully was revoked. Those initial foreign fighters had come with weapons, but Wahhabi preachers that followed came with books (printed with Saudi money), and their task was not to fight but to “educate.” These books promoted “pure Islam” and their propagation represented a new kind of war – one that the Islamic Community and its leader Cerić ignored, seduced by Saudi donations.

Most vulnerable to this form of “education” were young people. They had lived through a devastating war, and were unemployed, overwhelmed with frustration, and idle. Joining the circle of ‘true believers’ required their time and devotion; and if nothing else, they had plenty of time.¹⁵ Still, despite intense efforts financed by Saudi sources in the immediate post-war years, only a very small number of Bosnian Muslims accepted Salafism until more recently. Current estimates are that around 2% of the Bosniak population identifies as Salafist, and they tend to live in closed communities in which serious gender-based violence and the mistreatment of children has been reported.¹⁶ Many in these communities express animosity toward society at large and especially toward those they see as “impure” Muslims such as secular Bosniaks, traditional Bosnian Muslims, and the Islamic Community.

¹⁴ On this issue I elaborated more in the chapter “The Bosnian Approach to the Fight Against Terrorism”. In: Prezelj, Iztok (ed.): *The Fight Against Terrorism and Crisis Management in the Western Balkans*. NATO Science for Peace and Security Studies. IOS Press: Amsterdam, 2008.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Information based on interviews with intelligence sources.

‘True Believers’

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Salafists/Wahhabists are more aggressive in their public discourse toward Bosnian Muslims than toward members of Christian religions. Their mission is to convert Bosnian Muslims to Salafism; not to convert non-Muslims to Islam. They preach that the Bosnian Muslim interpretation of Islam is not the “right way” and encourage converts to Salafism/Wahhabism to cut ties with family members and friends who refuse to follow them. In this way, their worlds shrink to a small circle of ‘true believers.’

According to one former Wahhabist, “It is difficult to return to normal again. Only the understanding of family and former friends can help.” He feels that the Islamic Community should do more to support those who want to leave Salafist circles.

“My brain was washed, but not completely,” he explained. “I kept asking questions and was unhappy with the answers. That was the reason I left. But there are young people inside these circles who are not happy, but who are not brave enough to step away.”¹⁷

It is a hard to break free from these circles, even when someone desires to, as was true for one young woman, whose cousin recently spoke with me. The woman, a student, fell in love with a Salafi man in 2004, accepted his way of life – including the requirement that she has to wear the niqab – and got married. The marriage lasted two years, after which she returned to her parents’ home and re-started her studies.

“That is when her troubles started,” the cousin told me. “Salafi women from ‘the circle’ called her, and they kept threatening her. One day, as she was coming back from the University, they attacked her, pulling her hair and calling her names. Luckily, her parents...could afford to send her to study abroad. We all feared for her life.”¹⁸

Yet, not all Salafists are so hostile toward the outside world and traditional Bosnian Muslims. I have interviewed some who, while they claim to teach the “only true Islam,” also emphasise their respect for “others” as well as their desire for normal communication with their neighbours. And Salafists – who literally wear their religion in a way that traditional Bosnian Muslims

¹⁷ Interview with A.C. conducted in Sarajevo on 28 July 2007.

¹⁸ Interview with M.K. conducted in Sarajevo on 10 December 2007.

do not – stress the problems they encounter due to their different appearance. On a number of occasions, they told stories of women who have faced discrimination for wearing the niqab. Obviously shaken, one man told me:

“I never forced my wife to wear the niqab. When we accepted Salafism, she wore the hijab at first. One day, she decided that she would start wearing the niqab. I was surprised, and worried. I knew her parents, who are secular, would be against it, and I was right. They stopped communicating with her altogether. It was painful for her, but she did not want to give up. She wore it for two years and then she took it off. She said she loved it, despite condemnation from her relatives and friends. But she took it off because of the children. They kept putting pressure on her to take it off, because other kids in school were teasing them, calling their mother ‘ninja.’”¹⁹

This insight is valuable, because it reflects that, beyond the need to discern between Salafists/Wahabbists and traditional Bosnian Muslims, it is also important to recognise that adherents of these ideologies are not a monolithic group. Efforts to prevent radicalisation and violence should not be built on the assumption that all Salafist/Wahabbists are an inevitable threat to security. This does not only raise questions about religious freedom in Bosnia, but may result in vigilantism, which may threaten non-violent Salafists/Wahabbists.

Conclusion

Twenty years after the end of the war, Bosnia remains a fractured society with profound ethnic tensions and no unified narrative of the past. The secessionist discourse of Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik regularly awakens memories of plebiscites and referendums of the 1990s that evoke the threat of the war. And indeed, the general atmosphere in Bosnia today resembles that of the pre-war and wartime period. Only now, alongside ethnic radicalisation, the new threat of religious radicalisation additionally complicates and deepens divides.

Professor Esad Duraković recently warned that “If we do not eradicate Wahhabism, we can expect inter-Bosniak conflict.”²⁰ This is a frightening

¹⁹ Interview conducted with S.N. in one Bosnian town on 29 November 2015.

²⁰ «Ako se vehabizam ne iskorijeni, u BiH može doći do međubošnjačkog sukoba», Esad Duraković in interview for TV1 Sarajevo on 5 May 2015.

notion, and yet one that demands a thoughtful – not reactionary – response. Preventing the spread of Salafism/Wahabbism is a challenge that must be taken on by the Islamic Community, Bosniak political leadership, and Bosnian state as a whole, and which must balance freedom of religion, human rights, and the stability and security of Bosnian society. In the complicated Bosnian context, this will not be easy.

Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalism in Albania

Enri Hide

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze violent extremism and religious radicalism in Albania, through the combination of a quantitative data analysis and a qualitative, theoretical, approach. It maps this phenomenon, analyzes its development in Albania, the factors that have contributed to this process, as well as its ideological, economical and social roots. Its goal is to argue that religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania, with clear attitudes towards political Islam, with increasing numbers of Albanian citizens traveling to the war areas of Syria and Iraq to join terrorist organizations, like Al Nusra and Islamic State, constitute a potential threat to the country's national security. The increasing influence of jihadist groups bears the potential to harm the religious harmony, a widespread perception about Albania among domestic and international actors, with irremediable consequences for the country's future.

From a geographical viewpoint, this paper explores the most affected geographical areas of the country and the influence of external and internal actors, in order to better understand its implications for Albania's national security. The paper looks into the multiple causes of radicalization in Albania as well as into the state and society capacities to prevent or tackle it, vis-à-vis that of other countries of the region. Finally, this paper generates recommendations for state and non-state actors to deal with this phenomenon and to minimize its consequences that might pose a threat to national cohesion.

As virtually all countries of the Western Balkans region, Albania has been affected lately by a wave of violent extremism and religious radicalism. While still in an early stage, this phenomenon constitutes a potential threat for national security. This problem becomes even more pressing when seen in the wider context of terrorist attacks in Europe, like demonstrated by the last November attacks in Paris and Bosnia Herzegovina, and due to a large

number of Albanian citizens (compared to the general population) participating in the ranks of terrorist organizations (like Al Nusra and ISIL) in Syria and Iraq. The situation has precipitated especially after 2011, to reach its highest level during 2014.

The study of violent extremism and religious radicalism in Albania starts with exploring the contemporary literature from a security perspective, in order to clarify the basic concepts upon which our analysis on the structural and strategic features of extremism will be built. It will pay special attention to two theoretical aspects: i) the novelty brought into terrorism and extremism studies by the territorialization of terrorism; ii) and the securitization of religion, that has become a key feature of contemporary security studies.¹ The key argument is that Islam, as a religious doctrine, has been misinterpreted and misused, in order to use religion as a lure to attract individuals to participate in foreign wars in the Middle East (mainly Syria and Iraq). Empirically, it is based in cross-checking a vast number of official, semi-official and unofficial information sources, domestic and international, in order to come to the best possible conclusions.

Global, Regional and National Context

Violent extremism and religious radicalism, especially linked to Islamic roots, has been amongst the most important threats to international and domestic security after the Cold War. Although this dangerous phenomenon has intensified since the beginning of the '90s, it was only systematically studied after September 11, 2001 and the terrorist attacks on United States. Recently, terrorist attacks related to organizations such as Al Nusra and especially ISIL, has been frequent in Europe and other parts of the world – even in the Balkans, making, therefore, even more important and indispensable the study of religious extremism and terrorism. Their interpretation calls for a deep analysis of the relations between state and non-state use of violence. In order to legitimate their acts, extremists find shelter within ideologies, especially religious doctrines. During 2000, when the spread of violent extremism and Islamic radicalism had almost global dimensions, scholars' attention focused on terrorist organizations with reli-

¹ See, for example, Emmers, R. (2006). *Securitization*, in Collins, A. (ed.). *Contemporary Security Studies*. UK: Oxford University Press, Ch. 7.

gious affiliation, as non-state actors threatening not only state but also international security.

Initially, the Syrian conflict was the result of rebellion against the dictatorial regime of Assad. While starting as popular rebellion against a repressive regime, it became in the process, a clash between the regime and various rebel groups. This created the necessary circumstances for the involvement of an increasing number of foreign fighters (*jihadists*) and terrorist organizations that considered it an excellent opportunity to gain access to a vast geographical territory, of strategic importance for the Middle East.² The main terrorist organizations were the Al Nusra Front (an umbrella of a large number of minor organizations) and ISIL (*Islamic State of Iraq and Levant*) that managed to integrate other minor organizations with the final objective to establish an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The enlargement and consolidation of territory within Syria and Iraq, coupled with the constitution of some basic state structures, engendered the necessity for new volunteers and recruits. Besides, ISIL financial capacities increased considerably, exploiting especially oil production, but also robberies, hostages and other criminal activities.³ This oriented a part of ISIL strategy towards building regional and global recruitment networks, not only in Middle East. Thus, Western Balkans, where most of the countries have large Muslim populations, became a preferred ground of recruitment, making also use of geographical proximity and other historical events that followed the end of the Cold War, like ethnic conflicts with religious nuances.

The number of foreign fighters, engaged in the Syrian war has gradually increased during 2011-2015. Various sources put the number of ISIL foreign fighters between 12,000 and 54,000. London-based ICSR suggests this number is actually between 11,000-12,000 individuals, with some 3,000 coming from western countries, while the number of origin countries is about 80.⁴ Referring to Western official sources, the figures of foreign

² See Archick, K. & Belkin, P. (2015, April). *European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States*. US: Congressional Research Service, 7-5700, R44003.

³ See Shatz, H. (2014, Sept. 8). *How ISIS Funds its Reign of Terror*. US: Rand Corporation. <http://www.rand.org/blog/2014/09/how-isis-funds-its-reign-of-terror.html> (10/07/2015).

⁴ See Neuman, P. (2015) *Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000*. In

fighters are between 20,000-30,000 individuals.⁵ Although geographical allocation encompasses the whole European continent, countries like Germany, Britain, Belgium and France bear the highest numbers of their citizens, engaged in this war. Furthermore, a large number of Balkan foreign fighters are engaged in the ranks of ISIL and Al Nusra, mainly from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. Their number is between 700-1,000 individuals.⁶ This development has added a religious dimension to the ethnical issues of this troublesome region. On any case, according to a report by CIA (2014), the number of Albanian citizens in Syria and Iraq is about 140-150; the number of Kosovo's citizens is around 150, from Bosnia-Herzegovina stands to about 350, Macedonia 20, Montenegro 30 and Serbia 3 (for a total of about 690 people).⁷ On the other hand, according to a declaration by Kosovo's interior minister, the number of foreign fighters from this country amounts to about 300 individuals.⁸ According to Peter Newman, from ICSR, by January 2015, the number of Albanian citizens engaged in conflict was about 90 individuals.⁹ While according to the prestigious Rand Corporation, comes to the conclusion that for 2014 the number of foreign fighters from Alba-

<http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s> (02/07/2015). Also, SOUFAN Group, <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/> - 22/07/2015. According to official reports from the Syrian Army, the number is about 54.000 individuals from 87 different countries (as reported by BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29043331-09/07/2015>).

⁵ See Byman, D. & Shapiro, J. (2014, Nov.). *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Policy Paper No. 34, Foreign Policy Series, Washington D.C: Brookings Institution, Tab. 2, p. 11.

⁶ See Azinović, V. & Jusić, M. (2015). *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo, p. 30.

⁷ On any case, the study doesn't specify whether this number represents only fighters, or it includes their families as well. See Bardou, G. (2015). *ISIS Balkan Networks*, American Centre for Democracy, Working Paper. <http://acdemocracy.org/isis-balkan-networks> - 04/07/2015. The same number is also reported by Washington Post, referring to american intelligence sources. See "Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria," Washington Post, Oct. 11, 2014.

⁸ See VOA (2015, Febr. 20). Interview with Skënder Hysenin, Kosovo's Minister of Interior.

⁹ See Neuman, P. (2015) *Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20.000*, në <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s> (02/07/2015).

nia was between 140-150 individuals.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the official number of foreign fighters, according to Albanian Ministry of Interior (until July 2015), is 114 individuals.

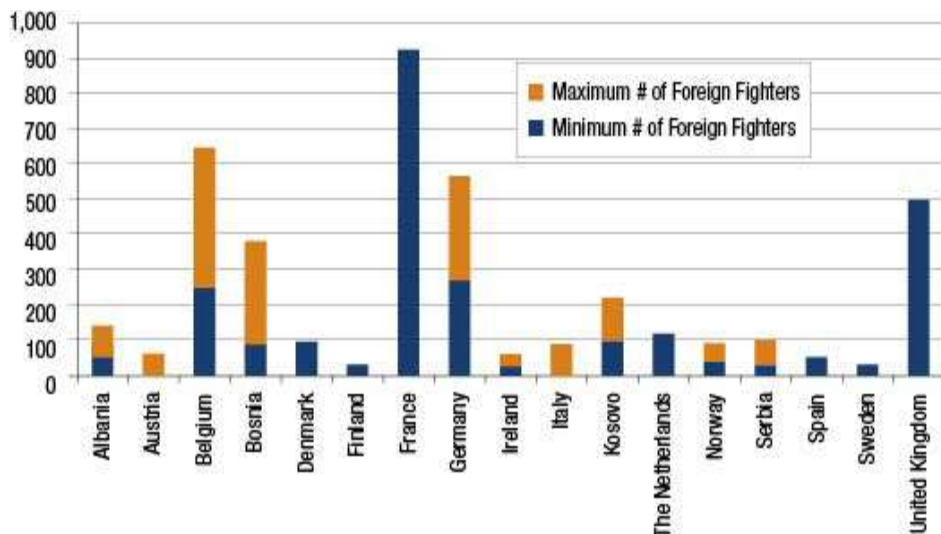


Table 1: The Number of Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq (2015); Source: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/01/western-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-byman-shapiro> (10/08/2015)

Because of the complexity and dynamic nature of this phenomenon, it is extremely difficult to identify the exact number of Albanian foreign fighters and to present accurate evidence. The fluctuation of these figures is mainly attributed to three factors: i) to the incorporation of the number of their family members; ii) to the dynamic movement back and forth to the front and/or the number of killed or wounded in battle; iii) as well as to the participation of a number of jihadists by the Albanian Diaspora in Western Europe and United States.¹¹ The main route to and back from Syria and Iraq is Turkey, which serves as main gateway for jihadists, especially from the Western Balkans, because of the lack of visa regime and generally lib-

¹⁰ See Jenkins, B. M. (2015). When Jihadis Come Marching Home. *The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerns Returning from Syria and Iraq*. Perspectives, 130-1-RC, p. 35.

¹¹ Sources from Albanian intelligent services, interviewed for the purposes of this research, confirm that it is extremely difficult to determine the exact number of individuals traveling to and from Syria and Iraq.

eral traveling conditions. The eastern cities of Antakya and Kilis act as traveling interconnection knot. Most extremists have entered the country by air, even though itineraries include also the route through Greece or other neighboring countries, like Bulgaria.¹²

Causes of extremism and radicalism in Albania

Although in an elementary stage, the appearance of this phenomenon in Albania requires the attention of all security actors. Their increasing influence, with the recruitment of Albanian citizens in the ranks of terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, has multiple roots and serious repercussions for the country. This is an imported phenomenon that has flourished especially after 2010, in a country with a centuries' long tradition of religious harmony.

While the numbers show a tendency, the mere fact that there is an increasingly number of family members (according to official sources: 31 children and 13 women) traveling to the conflict zones, shows the decisiveness to fight and never come back. The number of returnees is around 45 individuals, 20 others are reported killed in battle, while 15 more are under policy custody with charges of encouraging extremism and terrorism, 6 others being declared wanted by Albanian authorities. Furthermore, there is an increasing number of individuals whose entrance into Albanian territory has been denied for reasons related to violent extremism and religious radicalism. Among the arrested individuals are two imams, undergoing a trial under charges of terrorist and extremist activity. Geographically, the map of this phenomenon includes cities and rural areas of Pogradec, Elbasan, Librazhd, Bulqiza, Cërrik, Kukës and Dibra, as well as the outskirts of Tirana and Durrës.

In order to better understand the ongoing process of Islamic extremism and radicalization, it is important to start with a historical argument. Due to the multi-religional composition since the very birth of Albanian state, religious conflicts are substituted by harmony and coexistence, never becom-

¹² As reported by “*Today’s Zaman*” in an article of February 06, 2014. http://www.todayszaman.com/anasayfa_turkey-main-transit-route-for-balkan-fighters-to-syria-iraq_357854.html (10/05/2015).

ing a problem of national security. Religion has never been a component of national identity. It has never served as organizing ideology of state, nation or society.¹³ The communist regime saw religion not only as a threat to itself, but also to the nation as a whole. Thus, the forbiddance of religion went hand-to-hand with country's isolation, achieving the complete eradication of religion and its institutions, as a potential rival power pole. The actual process of securitization of religion in the public and political domain, transforming religion in a potential threat to national security, imposes the search for root causes back to the beginning of the '90s. The fall of communist regime unveiled this extreme heritage of religious freedom in Albania. Following two and a half decades, religious institutions have developed in a very dynamic transitional context of political, economic and social transformation.

The elevated costs of transition impacted religious institutions as well, exposing them to the influence of foreign actors for various reasons: i) due to financial inability of state institutions to support the re-organization of religious institutions; ii) due to the lack of political vision to understand the key importance of religious institutions during transition and democratization; iii) due to lack of institutional competence to build a full legal framework for the operation of these institutions. Throughout the following years, these foreign actors gained important footage within virtually all religious institutions. Intertwined with the security institutions' vacuum, they managed to infiltrate a whole new approach to religious doctrines (especially Islam) from international extremist movements, with strong ties to international terrorism.¹⁴

First, an important factor of the post-communist period has been the extreme poverty dominating Albania, where Muslim religious institutions couldn't count on state institutions for financial support. They were also physically destroyed, dismantled by all property rights. A number of Middle East and Gulf organizations came in to fill this vacuum, focusing their ef-

¹³ Rakipi, A. (2015, March 21). *Lindja e një ndikimi të ri radikal në Shqipëri*. (Birth of a New Radical Influence in Albania). Mapo Newspaper. <http://www.mapo.al/2015/03/lindja-e-nje-ndikimi-te-ri-radikal-fetar-ne-shqiperi> (22/06/2015).

¹⁴ See Woehrel, S. (2005). *Islamic Terrorism and the Balkans*. CRS Report for Congress, RL33012. <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL33012.pdf> (11/04/2015).

forts in offering material support for the reconstruction of Muslim institutions. This process had the cost of imposing a different Muslim culture from the prevailing traditional Hannifin doctrine of Albanian Muslims.¹⁵ Second, the revival of Muslim religion in Albania was confronting a very low education level of clerics, due to the incapacity of educative religious institutions to prepare the future generation of clerics. This created the premises for many Middle Eastern countries (including Turkey) to engage in educating the future generation of Muslim clerics, imposing ideological doctrines and other sects, far beyond Albanian traditional culture. Although debates in Albania have had more a theological moderated nature, Islamic radicalism has penetrated in this environment mainly through Islamic organizations, actually been fed by extremist cells, out of Albanian Muslim Community control.

Scholars have developed many approaches to the study of Islamic radicalism, referring to its direct, superficial, precipitating, deep or historical roots. For the aims of this study and for the purposes of a better understanding of this phenomenon in Albania, we will use the analytical model offered by Veldhuis & Staun (2009). They arranged the causes in two main groups: macro-level and micro-level causes of radicalization.¹⁶ Research and interviews for the purposes of this study, with various Albanian experts, Muslim Community leaders and key institutional actors, led us to the conclusion that the vast majority of Albanian citizens that joined ISIL and Al Nusra have in common the marginalization and isolation from the rest of society. These factors frequently make extremists individuals in search of a purpose and cause for their lives. Their refusal to develop or rebuild communication bridges with the rest of society might be interpreted in a number of ways. First, as result of the huge gaps, produced by the prolonged socio-economic Albanian transition. Second, as a problem of communication by state institutions, responsible to build bridges of cooperation and to convey peace messages by the state. Third, as failure of Albanian Muslim Community to control all worship places. Forth, as a problem of these Muslim communities to signal on time any attempt to create radical groups or cells.

¹⁵ See Bumçi, A. (2004). *Çështje të Sigurisë Kombëtare. Rasti i Shqipërisë. Kufiri, feja, korrupsioni*. (National Security Issues. The Case of Albania. Borders, religion and corruption). Tirana: AIIS Press.

¹⁶ Veldhuis, T. & Staun, J. (2009). *Islamist Radicalization: A Root Cause Model*. Netherland Institute for International Relations, p. 21.

Another cause of radicalism is the *lack of faith in state of law and other institutions*. This differentiates the radicalization process from similar tendencies in Western Europe, where democracy is rather consolidated, and forces a radical discourse to compare democracy with another political system based on Islamic law. The slow and difficult process of Albania towards democracy, the state weaknesses to distribute justice and impose laws, the extremely high level of corruption and criminality, have been all used by extremists to radicalize a small segment of Albanian Muslims, with the argument that Islam is the only choice. According to Ermir Gjinishi, former Deputy Chairman of the Albanian Muslim Community, this constitutes a misinterpretation of the religious doctrine, serving mere political objectives.¹⁷ Islamic extremists exploit state weaknesses, refusing its existence as a whole, with the argument that this state of law vacuum should be filled up by the Islamic law, or *sharia*. This is connected with the effort of certain segments using this situation politically, making their way through the standard Albanian political system. During 2007 there were attempts to establish an Islamic political party, but such a move didn't get support by the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC).¹⁸ This is the first attempt to give political tincture to a religious doctrine in Albania.

Even though this effort of radical Islamists to give birth to a political party was unsuccessful, there remains another issue related to the more long-term dynamic of the process. It is connected to the *increased interest of political parties during electoral campaigns to directly accumulate votes from the Muslim community*. Such a problematic has been repeatedly raised every time the country is headed towards local or national elections, while civil society lacks its reaction. Sharp accusations were articulated by some moderated imams for the AMC involvement in support of specific political parties.¹⁹

¹⁷ Interview with Ermir Gjinishi, former Deputy Chairman of Albanian Muslim Community with the autor, July 10, 2015.

¹⁸ AMC refused categorically to support this political movement. According to a declaration of Mr. Gjinishi: "Muslim community doesn't resolve its difficulties by establishing political parties, because Islam belongs to people's heart". Op. Cit. Vickers, M. (2008). *Islam in Albania*. UK, London: Defense Academy of the United Kingdom. p. 6.

¹⁹ In an interview to "Agon Channel" television, imam Neki Kaloshi declared that public appearances of some religious representatives with specific political candidates indicate the crisis of Muslim Community of Albania, with hidden political agendas. See:

Another cause of Islamic radicalism in Albania is connected to *religious discrimination*. Although it can't be considered a widespread phenomenon, religious discrimination has been broadly used by the radicals to indoctrinate believers. But religious discrimination should not be mistaken for islamophobia, a phenomenon never encountered in Albania. A useful differentiation between these two concepts is offered by a Berkeley University study, where: "islamofobia is the fear induced by the modern Western structures of global power. It refers to a perceived Muslim threat, widening existing economic, political, social and cultural relations". This is a widely used concept in the West to explain the alienation of Muslims, especially after the 2000s. It is useful to clarify that in Albania such an issue was never raised because of religious harmony.

Islamic radicalism in Albania has also penetrated because the main responsible institutions, such as Intelligence Services, law-enforcing agencies and the prosecution office haven't taken the required preventive measures. Islamic radicalism is a process that needs a relatively long time of cultivation, in order to manifest its impact on national security. Except for the use of law-enforcement instruments, security institutions have shown remarkable deficiencies in understanding the issue at hand, as well as its impact and consequences. This can be noticed by the lack of institutional reaction in previous years to acts that induce religious hate through online predications, which have increased and have made extremely difficult their identification and prevention.

But Islamic radicalism in Albania has also deeper socio-economic causes. As a matter of fact, scholars are divided in two large groups: those believing that the deep roots of Islamic radicalism are closely connected to economic difficulties, poverty, unemployment and educational and cultural level within the Muslim world.²⁰ On the other side are those who believe that the causes are not economical, but more ideological and doctrinaire.²¹ Despite this theo-

<http://agonchanneltv.com/category/video/page/13/lajme/lajme/page/3/>
(16/06/2015).

²⁰ See Taspinar O. (2009). Fighting Radicalism, not 'Terrorism': Roots Causes of an International Actor Redefined. SAIS Review, Vol. XIX, No. 2, pp. 75-76.

²¹ Empirical studies have revealed that a considerable part of extremists and terrorists are neither poor nor poorly educated, but have embraced extremist ideologies for pure religious reasons. See, for example, Barro, R. (June, 2002). *The Myth That Poverty Breeds*

retical tension, one needs to assert some characteristics of the Albanian case. Available data analysis about Albanian foreign fighters shows that most of them come from rural, poor or extremely poor areas. Extreme poverty, coupled with the lack of institutional presence in these regions has created a developmental vacuum, filled up gradually by Islamic associations. According to official data, unemployment for the period 2010-2015 fluctuated between 18-21 % of the total labor force, which raises further for specific geographical areas, such as Pogradec, Elbasan, Librazhd, Bulqizë, Burrel, Dibër, etc.²² On the other hand, according to HDI (Human Development Index), Albania is ranked in the 39th position in Europe. The unemployment rate for the young working force (17-35 years old), which is the most exposed group to radical religious ideology, is extremely high, and in some districts exceeds 40-45%.²³ Radical ideology has also gained ground due to *extremely low education level* in these isolated areas of the country. The lack of education can be considered the most appropriate catalyst, mitigating the process of Islamic radicalization.

Another reason for the growth of Islamic extremism in Albania can be found at the actions and passivity of the AMC, as the institution in charge of all Muslim religious activity in the country. Despite the fact that the mosques and other worship places where radical indoctrination takes place are not objects under the direct responsibility of AMC, it can be noticed that it didn't prevent the trend when it first appeared. According to data accumulated for the purpose of this paper, cross-checked with those emanating from official sources, a small number of mosques (7-10 of them) are still not under the direct authority of AMC, from a total of 727 worship objects. This is a small number of mosques, actually under a process of dialogue with AMC with the purpose of putting them fully under the control of AMC.

Finally, even though social media and internet has not generally played the same part as in the process of radicalization in Western countries, these new tools of extremist ideas are being used more aggressively to reach

Terrorism. US: Business Week.

²² See official data from INSTAT: <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/themes/tregu-i-punës.aspx?tab=tabs-5> (30/06/2015).

²³ See INSTAT data. Ibid.

wider audiences of believers. Even in the Albanian case, these new forms of socialization are becoming crucial, especially among young generation, marginalized and isolated by other social processes, finding an easy shelter to extremist ideas, and even participating, some of them, in conflicts such as Syria and Iraq. Albanian internet and social media forums have been successful as radical catalysts.

One of the most pressing issues concerns the social integration of returnees and the establishment of de-radicalization tools. The psychological impact of war has been tremendous to most of them. According to previous studies in this regard, most of them suffer from psychic disorders and symptoms of post-traumatic stress.²⁴ This dimension should be seriously taken into consideration given the high number of Albanians returned from fighting in Syria and Iraq, not only for the clinical treatment, but also for their possible re-integration into the Albanian society.

Conclusions

Despite the wave of Albanian Islamic extremists departing to Syria and Iraq is diminishing, we cannot make the same assumption about the ideological trend of Islamic extremism, as evidenced by the recent trial of imams and other individuals accused of terrorist activities.²⁵ Although Albania is a country with a very moderate religious tradition and of well-cultivated religious harmony, the penetration of radical Islamic ideas during the first post-communist period through various Middle Eastern actors, seems to be paying off.

Amidst the lack of clear de-radicalization instruments, that combines the strategic and institutional, law-enforcement and socio-economic approaches, there are reasonable expectations that Islamic radicalism will be part of public space. This process will be stronger among the most vulnerable groups of Muslim community, with main instruments social networks

²⁴ See, Byman, D. & Shapiro J. (2014, Nov.-Dec.). *Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists*. Foreign Affairs.

²⁵ <http://www.panorama.com.al/rekrutimi-i-shqiptareve-per-ne-siri-imami-ne-gjyq-sjemi-terroriste-njerezit-po-vrasin-e-po-lirohen-mos-kujtoni-se-nuk-i-shohim-lajmet/> (19/07/2015).

and internet. These instruments will most likely be preferred in the future due to the incapacity of state actors to control or prohibit them.

Muslim religion in Albania has become part of the public debate, raising concern about its misuse and instrumentalization for non-religious purposes, in order to get support for conflicts geographically and religiously far away. This is how it has shown a tendency to enter the national security domain, especially since the country has witnessed an elevated number of foreign fighters participating in the Syria and Iraq conflicts among the ranks of IS.

As specified in the National Security Strategy (2014), the prevention, control and neutralization of the Islamic extremist threat is of paramount importance for Albania's national security. Second, violent extremism, religious mercenaries, Islamic radicalism and the presence of jihadist in Albanian territory, transforms the country in a territory of religious extremism and potential target of terrorist activity. Third, this phenomenon threatens to undermine the international image of Albania as a NATO member, an EU candidate and an active contributor to the international coalition to fight terror.

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PART III:

NATIONALISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The Roots of Success of Far Right Parties in Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria¹

Věra Stojarová and Richard Stojar

Abstract

This text examines the political, social, economic, ethnocultural and international variables potentially impacting the success of far right political parties in Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. The author concludes that the chief external factors influencing the success of formations on the far right are: the position, tactics and strategy of mainstream political parties, electoral design, a strong national minority situated outside the mother state or a national minority inside the state with strong political representation, along with a particular country's feelings of humiliation and a complicated EU integration process as international variables. The set of variables differs from country to country.

The Balkan region is one where the performance of far right parties² deserves close monitoring. This is true not only because of the intense nationalism which engulfed the region in the 1990s but also because of EU enlargement and the changes which that might bring to the far right party family in the region in the form of altered positions, new strategies and tactics, and the rise of new party formations. The text will take as its focus the politics of the far right in Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania, these being the countries of the Western and Eastern Balkan region where far right parties have been among the most successful in the political spectrum in terms of votes won in parliamentary elections. Political parties selected for further analysis have been chosen based upon two criteria, the first being that they have been represented in the lower chamber of parliament (if applicable) during the post-2000 period, and the second, that they have been described

¹ This article has been written as part of the specific research project: 'Current Issues in Political Science' (MUNI/A/1342/2014), undertaken at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University.

² The term "far right" will be used from this point on to encompass both right extremist and radical right parties.

as parties of the far right by scholars. Under these criteria, the focus will therefore be upon the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), Greater Romania Party (PRM), Ataka and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO).

Answers to the following questions, among others, are sought: What are the principal factors behind far right party successes in the countries in question? How is the rightmost end of the political spectrum in the Balkans structured and how does this impact on the success of the far right party family in these countries? Is there only a single party, or are several such parties present? Does the existence of a strong right-wing party marginalize parties of the far right? The explanatory models include several variables and external variables may be divided into five categories: political, ethnocultural, social, economic and international context,³ so these will be thoroughly examined throughout the text.

Political and ethno-cultural context of Serbia

Nationalist parties had a fair amount of popularity in Serbia at the beginning of the 1990s. The nationalist card was played by the Socialist Party of Serbia during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Milošević found favour with many voters. The SRS rose to power in the 1997 elections. The overwhelming victory of democratic parties in 2000 meant total loss for the SRS. Events after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić⁴ helped the SRS to consolidate and become the de facto victor (on the level of political parties, not coalitions) in subsequent elections (2003, 2007, 2008), although remaining isolated in opposition. In 2008, a new player made its presence felt in Serbian politics, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), created by former SRS Deputy President

³ Christopher WILLIAMS, Problems of transition and the rise of radical right, in: Sabrina RAMET (ed.), *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe Since 1989*. Pennsylvania 1999, 29-48, 37. Hans-Georg BETZ / Stefan IMMERSALL, *The New Politics of the Right. Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*. New York 1998. Michael, MINKENBERG, *The radical right in Europe*. Gütersloh 2008.

⁴ Zoran Đinđić was a founder and chief of the Democratic Party and became Prime Minister of Serbia in 2001. He was assassinated in 2003 by people related to the Serbian organized crime scene.

Tomislav Nikolić and his supporters, because of internal disagreements over party direction with the party's leader, Vojislav Šešelj. Probably the chief difference is that the party promotes the accession of Serbia to the EU and its nationalism has been softened. The SNS became very popular with the Serbian public while SRS lost its support and in the period 2012-2016 had no representation in the parliament. The 2016 elections brought SRS back to the parliament with 8,09% of the votes and also a new far right formation – Dveri movement – allied with DSS and so succeeded to surpass the electoral threshold.

It is not really possible to distinguish left from right in the Serbian political environment. The Serbian political configuration has been quite stable – four areas of conflict have evolved around the main poles. At one directional extreme, we have an authoritarian nationalist pole represented by the SRS; at another, a party with a communist past – the nationalist SPS and maybe supplemented with national conservative SNS. The nationalist Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and also the new formation Dveri might play a certain role for the voters of the SRS and SNS; the fourth pole is then occupied by Democratic Party (DS)⁵ being pro-European, modern, democratic player. The SRS seems to have replaced the SPS in the key position in the first decade in the new millennium while SPS re-joined the three main political players in 2012. The SRS replaced the SPS in order to be replaced then with SNS in dominant position with a charismatic leader and a focus on the same values – national conservatism.

With respect to the ethnocultural context, there is an extensive Serbian diaspora living outside of Serbia; the last pre-war Yugoslavian census counted 581,663 (12.2%) Serbs in Croatia, 1,365,093 Serbs (31.2%) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 57,453 Serbs (9.34%) in Montenegro⁶ and 209,498 (13.2%) of Serbs in Kosovo.⁷ There is also a tiny group of Serbs living in

⁵ Until 2013 together with G17plus.

⁶ STATISTICAL AGENCY BIH, Census 1991. Available at <<http://www.bhas.ba/arhiva/census1991/Etnickapercent20obiljezjapercent20stanovnistvapercent20biltenpercent20233.pdf>> 25.10.2011. Aleksandar RAKOVIC, Montenegrin censuses from 1909-2003. Available at <<http://www.njegos.org/census/index.htm>>, 25.10.11.

⁷ Data from 1981. All data from this period remains questionable due to a boycott by ethnic Albanians. Ruza PETROVIC / Marina BLAGOJEVIC, The Migration of Serbs and the Montenegrins from Kosovo and Metohija. Results of the Survey Conducted in

Albania and Macedonia. The censuses which took place after the war show quite different numbers – a significant drop in the ethnic Serbian population in Croatia and a slight increase in Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2004, 198,414 (32%) declared Serbian ethnic affiliation in Montenegro.⁸ The enormous increase in number of Serbs in Montenegro may be explained by the fluid notion of the national concept and the processes of nation and state building which culminated during the declaration of independent Montenegro in 2006.⁹ As regards Kosovo, the conflict came to a head in 1999 after the conference in Rambouillet in which Milošević refused to accept the presence of foreign military forces in Kosovo. Kosovo was provisionally put under an international protectorate and declared then unilateral independence in February 2008.

Political and ethno-cultural context of Romania

The Greater Romania Party (*Partidul România Mare*, PRM), set up at the beginning of 1990s by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, became the most successful party on the far right. The PRM reached its heyday in the 2000 elections, when it won 84 (out of 345) seats in parliament; its voting share decreased in the subsequent 2004 election and the party won only 48 (out of 338) seats, while in 2008 the PRM failed to gain a single seat.

The Romanian party system consisted of two main poles and two to three complementary ones in the 1990s. After the upheaval, the chief pole was occupied by FDSN (the successor to FSN), the party which would occupy the second main pole, the Christian-Democratic National Peasants' Party (PNȚ-CD), was confirmed by the elections in 1996. Supplementary poles were occupied by PD, the nationalist PRM, PUNR and the UDMR, as the party representing the Hungarian ethnic minority.¹⁰

1985-1986. Beograd 1992, available at: http://www.rastko.rs/kosovo/istorija/kosovo_migrations/index.html, 26.2.2012.

⁸ CROATIAN STATISTICAL AGENCY, *Census in Croatia. 2001*, available at www.dzs.hr/Eng/censuses/Census2001/Popis/E01_02_02/E01_02_02.html. MONTENEGRIN STATISTICAL OFFICE, *Census in Montenegro*, available at <http://www.monstat.org/EngPrva.htm>, 26.2.2012.

⁹ Previously quite a lot of them declared themselves as Yugoslavs.

¹⁰ Maxmilián STRMISKA, *Utváření rumunského multipartismu (1990-1999). Pluralita a polarita rumunského systému politických stran. Středoevropské politické studie 2*

PRM voters came partially from supporters of the Romanian National Unity Party, which was part of the National Celebration Front. But it was only with the collapse of the fledgling Romanian centre-right at the end of the 1990s that the PRM got its chance to seek power. The rise of PRM took place because parties of the right had become discredited in the eyes of their voters. Voters saw no difference between the clientelist right and left; PRM was to become the alternative for voters on the right end of the continuum and voters whose standard of living had fallen after 1990, i.e., the *losers* in the economic and political transformation. Opinion polls in 2000 showed great voter dissatisfaction with politics, accompanied by authoritarian sentiments: only 34% of the respondents had faith in political parties, 50% preferred equality to liberty and 57% believed that people behaved as they should if governed by an iron hand.¹¹ The Romanian case shows certain similarities with the Serbian case in the cooperation of the political parties operating at the end of the political continuum – a government composed of former communists was supported after the 1992 elections by the PRM and PUNR – the xenophobic discourse and rigidly centralized unitarian concept of the state hindered the emergence of democratic pluralism and of a Western Europe-oriented foreign policy.¹²

Data released by the World Bank in 2000 showed that in 1999, 41.2% of Romanians lived at or below the poverty line, compared with 25.3% in 1995. Meanwhile, Romanians living in extreme poverty comprised 16.6% of the population in 1999 compared with less than half that (8%) in 1995. Overall poverty, then, contrasted with the fact that the parliament approved salary increases for MPs of 16%,¹³ leading to a further lack of public confidence in political institutions and a deepening of the gap between politicians and their voters.¹⁴ The missing political culture and the swapping

(2000), n. 1, 10-21, available at <<http://www.cepsr.com/clanek.php?ID=130>>, 6.2.2012.

¹¹ Tom GALLAGHER, Romania's Greater Romania Party. Defying Political Categorisation? Marburg 2003, 32, available at <<http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/generalconference/marburg/papers/10/2/gallagher.pdf>>, 12.1.2011.

¹² IDEA, Democracy in Romania. Stockholm 2002, available at <<http://www.idea.int/publications/country/romania.cfm>>, 19.7.2011.

¹³ GALLAGHER, Romania's Greater Romania Party, 14, 22.

¹⁴ The lack of public confidence in the parties registered at 77% and 74% for the parliament in 1999 according to a poll carried out by the Metro Media Institute.

of ideology for personal ambition and public benefit for private benefit contributed to the overall dissatisfaction of the populace with politics. Statistics show that the number of people claiming their standard of living compared to that of 1989 was much worse rose sharply from 20% in 1997 to 35% in 1999 and the number of respondents who assessed the post-communist change as definitely negative rose from 7% in 1997 to 17% in 1999.¹⁵

The PRM was also able to draw votes from that portion of the population which was better off during the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, who was glorified by the party. One in thirty members of the population was an informer to the state secret police, Securitate.¹⁶ The party was able to draw upon a large number of people who were not satisfied with the new situation after 1989. The public was quite aware of the fact that former Securitate collaborators operated within PRM. The party refused to hand over the candidate list for verification by the National Commission for the Securitate Archives (CNSAS), whose task was to uncover collaborators with the former regime before they were allowed to run for office. However, there were no consequences. The commission published an incomplete list of candidates with compromising links to the former regime and PRM candidates went on to run in the elections.¹⁷

The process of Romanian accession to the EU had a great impact on the strategy and tactics of PRM. The continued popularity of the EU with the public forced PRM to recognize that there was no alternative to EU accession and the party moved to a more positive line on European integration. But even this pro-integration move did not add votes. PRM never repeated its success in the 2000 elections, when it had won 84/345 seats – 19.5% of the vote. Instead, the party experienced a steady decline, winning 48 seats (13% of the vote) in 2004 and failed to gain a single seat in the 2008 and 2012 national elections. In 2009, three MPs were elected on PRM's list to the EP, while the subsequent European elections in 2014 resulted in no seat for the party.

GALLAGHER, Romania's Greater Romania Party, 22.

¹⁵ Ioan MARGINEAN, *Quality of Life in Romania*. Bucharest 2004, 195-196, available at <<http://www.iccv.ro/oldiccv/romana/articole/quality.pdf>>, 6.2.2012.

¹⁶ GALLAGHER, Romania's Greater Romania Party, 20.

¹⁷ GALLAGHER, Romania's Greater Romania Party, 29.

One additional phenomenon must be mentioned in relation to PRM, as well – the existence of the other far right party within the system, the New Generation Party – Christian Democratic (*Partidul Noua Generație – Creștin Democrat*, PNG-CD; formerly *Partidul Noua Generație*, PNG) or, more precisely, its leader, Gigi Becali, who is very popular (*inter alia* Becali placed 13th in the 2006 TV show 100 Greatest Romanians). Becali joined the PRM and was elected an MP to the European Parliament as an independent on the PRM list. This was seen by many as the reason the PRM gained popularity and was viewed as very significant within the political context. The chief difference between the two parties is that the PRM retains its leftist orientation as regards the state's role in the economy. PNG-CD, by contrast, accords the major role to the market. The PRM also leans more to the Social Democrats, while PNG-CD leans in the direction of the Liberal Democrats and employs more nationalist, racist and xenophobic rhetoric. The existence of the second party on the far right must not be overlooked when speaking of elections. In the 2007 elections to the European Parliament, the PRM received 4.2% of the vote, while PNG-CD received 4.8%, with neither surpassing the electoral threshold. PNG-CD might also be seen as a potential new rival to the PRM which is taking its voters away and contributing to the party's decline. This may prove true even bearing in mind that each party has a radically different perspective on the economy since, as Mudde has noted, the economy is not a particularly salient issue for far right parties (Mudde 2007).

Romania is a special case in which the public acquires dual identities based on pro-Europeanism and nationalism.¹⁸ Despite being described as a party of the far right, the PRM glorifies the previous communist regime. This is made possible by the fact that the Ceaușescu regime in Romania was special in promoting nationalism rather than internationalism, unlike most other communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which were complete vassals to the Moscow leadership. Ceaușescu was (next to Enver Hoxha) the only leader in the Warsaw Pact able to stand against the USSR – in particular during the Prague Spring.

¹⁸ Tom GALLAGHER, Nationalism and Romanian political culture in the 1990s, in: Duncan LIGHT / David PHINEMORE (eds.), *Post-Communist Romania. Coming to Terms with Transition*. Houndmills 2001, 104-126, 114.

Romania also was the only country in the Soviet Bloc which did not boycott the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles and so became beloved by West.

The communist regime was the regime which began to romanise the Hungarian minority in Romania (Hungarians make up 6.6% of the total population according to the 2002 census; in Transylvania, Hungarians make up almost 20% of the population).¹⁹ Many Hungarian schools merged with Romanian schools and the teachers were romanised. The relationships between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians remain problematic and are full of stereotypes and prejudices on both sides.

The Moldovan card might have played quite an important role in the case of the PRM. Even though PRM's founding statute speaks of the "realization of Greater Romania in its historical boundaries",²⁰ the party only actively promoted the issue during the first half of the 1990s. Since then, it hasn't emphasized the issue but focuses instead on socioeconomic tasks and the Hungarian question. The PRM did not even take advantage of the opportunity to demonize the bilateral treaty with Russia in July 2002, which does not renounce the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 which prompted the loss of the province of Bessarabia to the Soviets.²¹

Political and ethno-cultural context of Bulgaria

Bulgaria's politics is extraordinary in that no government was able to achieve re-election until 2005. In addition, despite a large Turkish minority and difficult and long transformation, the nationalist parties remained at

¹⁹ FUNDAȚIA JAKABFFY ELEMÉR, Census in Romania 2002. Available at <<http://recensamant.referinte.transindex.ro/?pg=8>>, 15.2.2012. Romanian Statistical Office, Population by Ethnic. Available at <<http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/RPL2002INS/vol5/tables/t16.pdf>>, 15.2.2012.

²⁰ PRM, Statutul partidului România Mare. Partidul Romania Mare, available at <<http://www.prm.org.ro/node/2>>, 9.12.2010.

²¹ Previously, the nullification of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was seen as critical to the re-establishment of historical truth. GALLAGHER, Romania's Greater Romania Party, 3. WEINER, Romanian bilateral relations with Russia and Hungary:1989:2002. In: CAREY, H.F.: Romania since 1989. Politics, Economics and Society. Oxford: Lexington books, 2004.

the edge of the political spectrum until 2005, when Ataka won 21 seats out of 240. The fragmentation and fluidity of the party system led to an increased number of parties represented in the parliament and party switching. The elections to the European parliament in 2007 meant success for Ataka, the party received 14.2% of the votes (three seats). The mobilization of anti-European and anti-Turkish voters, along with the low turnout in the European elections, was behind the gain of Ataka as the party de facto placed fourth in the race. Dissatisfaction among voters on both sides of the political spectrum led to the fact that the elections of 2009 were won by the populist formation GERB, while Ataka confirmed its position by gaining the same number of mandates as in previous elections. The main competitor to Ataka since 2007 seems to have been GERB, due to the similarities in their campaigns and the same target group of voters. Both parties use anti-Turkish and euro-sceptical sentiments in their campaign and aim at voters dissatisfied with the current state of politics in Bulgaria on both sides of the political spectrum. In 2013 elections, Ataka won 7.3% of the votes, while a year later 2014 the number dropped to 4.52% of the votes.

Bulgaria used to have a highly stable multipolar system which was mostly classified as a limited multipartism or as a “two-and-a-half” party system at the start of the transition.²² Two main political players emerged over time, the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) on one side and the Bulgarian Socialist Party on the other. The 2001 elections brought a new player to the scene, the National Movement of Simeon II (NDSV)²³ which noticeably upset the existing electoral competition and destabilized the party system. The permeable nature of the electoral system and voters’ lack of patience with the governments in power allowed the system to be disrupted based upon a division between the *postcommunist left* and the *anticommunist right*. However, the success of NDSV was only temporary and was not repeated, in spite of the party being accepted into the coalition government with the Socialists and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) in 2005. The new government led by Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was instead composed

²² Maxmilián STRMISKA, Major Poles, “Third Parties” And Bulgarian Multipartism, *Středoevropské politické studie* 3 (2001), n. 1, 3-15, available at <<http://www.cepsr.com/clanek.php?ID=92>>, 6.2.2012.

²³ Known since 2007 as the National Movement for Stability and Progress.

of technocrats without any political experience, sometimes described as a government of lawyers and yuppies.²⁴

Similarly to Romania and Serbia, there is another far right party within the system and it represents the only group with relevance before 2005 – the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) – a nationalist political party whose political goal is the total and final resolution of the Macedonian question. However, the party remains marginal on the state level, in 2005 VMRO gained 5 seats out of the 13 won by the coalition Bulgarian National Union and in the 2009 elections, the party failed to win a single seat. Its failure in the 2009 elections was motivated by a shift of voters to both Ataka and the populist GERB.

The Bulgarian ethnocultural context resembles that in Romania. The biggest national minority consists of Turks, who constitute 9.4% of the total population, followed by the 4.7% who are Roma inhabitants.²⁵ Turks have always been seen as former occupiers and Turko-Bulgarian relations have been rather hostile. The Todor Zhivkov regime pressured for Bulgarization of Turks, forced many to accept the Slavic ending (-ov, -ova, -ev, -eva), closed Turkish schools or merged them with Bulgarian schools, banned use of the Turkish language both in public and at home and renounced Turkish customs. It is estimated that around 310,000 Turks left the country in 1989 and 500-1,500 people were killed when they resisted assimilation measures; others were forcibly resettled.²⁶

After the fall of the Zhivkov regime, the parliament restored the cultural rights of the Turks, they were able to begin using their original names once again, speak their mother tongue and some Turkish-speaking schools were reopened. The new regime also restored property rights and citizenship rights. The latter brought about heated discussions as some Turks had already acquired Turkish citizenship and settled down in Turkey. The new

²⁴ Georgi FILIPOV, *The Government of Lawyers and YUPPIES. Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha Relying on the Youth*. 2001, available at <<http://www.aimpress.ch/dyn/trae/archive/data/200108/10810-004-trae-sof.htm>>, 16.2.2012.

²⁵ NACIONALEN STATISTICESKI INSTITUTE, *Census 2001*, available at <<http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Ethnos.htm>>, 14.2.2012.

²⁶ Glenn CURTIS (ed.), *Bulgaria: A Country Study*. Washington 1992, available at <<http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/25.htm>>, 15.2.2012.

provisions led to many Turks living permanently in Turkey resolving to ask for Bulgarian citizenship. Turkish migrants with dual Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship form a community of around 380,000 people. Under the 1998 citizenship law, these migrants have the right to retain their Bulgarian citizenship while keeping their Turkish citizenship. As dual citizens, they develop and share dual loyalty, rights and obligations. The main disputes centred around a law which enables Turks to vote in elections in Bulgaria at all levels – local, parliamentary and presidential, as well as for the European Parliament. Opponents of these extensive rights were successful in the 2007 election, after a new law had been introduced requiring residency to be indicated on ID cards. But the Turkish minority living abroad possessed ID cards and the electoral tourism allowed this to continue,²⁷ although according to some sources 85,000 ethnic Turks were still denied the right to vote.²⁸ Despite the fact that the Bulgarian law does not recognize reserved seats for national minorities, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms scores well in every election and so took part in governance led by NDSV in 2001 and Socialists in 2005.

Ataka does not play the Macedonian card²⁹ much but chooses to pick on the Turkish minority instead. The Turks and Romas are accused of being responsible for the poor economic situation of the Bulgarian inhabitants. The party advocates the expulsion of Turks or at least their Bulgarization as already carried out under the Zhivkov regime. Similarly as with the PRM, many Ataka deputies are former members of the security forces and win votes from former members of the security apparatus during the communist regime.

²⁷ Daniel SMILOV / Elena JILEVA, *The Politics of Bulgarian Citizenship. National Identity, Democracy and Other Uses*, 228-229, available at <<http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/citmodes/files/bulgaria.pdf>>, 6.2.2012.

²⁸ SAVKOVA, *European Parliament Election Briefing no.23.*, 4.

²⁹ Its claim was based on the commonality of the Bulgarian and Macedonian languages and identities. Mobilization against the ethnic Macedonians was then used in Bulgaria chiefly by the populist VMRO and only rarely by Ataka. SMILOV / JILEVA, *The Politics of Bulgarian Citizenship*, 231-232.

Other common political variables

The regional trend toward transition from a mixed electoral system to a proportional system was maintained until 2008, when Romania and, in 2009, Bulgaria, decided to revert back to include a majoritarian component in their electoral systems. In all cases, there are barriers in the form of an electoral threshold for smaller parties to enter parliament, though these are not extraordinarily high; the Bulgarian case is most open towards new smaller political entities. The distribution of mandates on the national level, accompanied by the d'Hondt formula in the Serbian (and Bulgarian case until 2009) then favours bigger parties, while Romania and Serbia (since 2007) have promoted better conditions for the parties of national minorities (reserved seats for national minorities in the Romanian case and the abolition of the threshold for these parties in the Serbian case). Despite the fact that Bulgaria has been most receptive towards new political parties, the only gain of mandates before 2000 was that of VMRO in 1997 (2 mandates as part of the coalition United Democratic Forces), whereas in the more restrictive rule environment in Serbia and Romania, far right parties scored much better and SRS, together with PRM and the Party of Romanian National Unity, were parties with government representation.

The 2008 elections in Romania under new predominantly majoritarian rules (not strictly first-past-the-post) were the first elections in which the PRM failed to gain seats to either the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies. Some analysts assign the new electoral system a large role in hindering the PRM's access to parliamentary representation, since only one year later, in the 2009 EP elections, during which the proportional system was used, the PRM did quite well, coming in fourth with 3 seats (out of 33 MEP seats). The 2009 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria also resulted in no mandates in single-member districts for Ataka (9.36% of the votes in the proportional section of the system), whereas under the fully proportional system, 12% of votes were cast in the EP elections for the party (i.e., 2 mandates). The electoral system made a difference in both cases, the majoritarian component was a hindrance to far right parties in these two countries and the electoral rules in the two countries played a certain role in creating the party systems.

Social, economic and international context of Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania

The level of unemployment does not seem to have great impact on the gains of the far right parties in any of the cases. In Romania, PRM's biggest success came only when the unemployment rate began to drop.³⁰ At first glance, the level of unemployment does not seem to matter in Serbia, SRS seems to have had a stable voter basis and the numbers don't differ much with the decreasing unemployment rate, though they might have affected voter behaviour in the 2003 elections where the unemployment rate slightly rose. 2009 shows a slight increase in unemployment in Bulgaria and a slight increase in the support for Ataka, though in the previous elections this relationship was not visible. Unemployment expectations in Bulgaria prior to the 2005 elections were also optimistic, the number of people who thought unemployment would rise fell (from 29% in January 2009 to 15% in June 2005) while the number of people thinking unemployment would drop increased (from 15% in January 2005 to 20% in June 2005).³¹ The numbers given for unemployment rates are nevertheless inaccurate because of the existence of the grey economy. The unemployment rate does not seem to be the main factor in explaining the increase of support for far right parties, though in some cases other factors might play a certain role. This would be especially true for Serbia, where the economic situation had been bad for an extremely long period of time.

The international context of the three cases differs markedly. In Serbia's case, the international context was rather favourable for the rise of an extremist party, something which was made use of in the 1990s by the SPS and, after 2000, by the SRS, which was the most successful party in several elections. Serbia played the role of the black sheep until the fall of Milošević and remained in disfavour with the international community until the end of his regime. The presence of the international community (i.e., the USA and EU) was used by the far right, which demonized it and pre-

³⁰ The highest rates were in 1993-94 and then again in 1998-1999. For the rate of unemployment in Romania in the 1990s, see Alina BĂDULESCU, *Șomajul în România. O analiză retrospectivă (1991-2005)*. 2006, available at <<http://www.ectap.ro/articole/40.pdf>>, 6.4.2010.

³¹ Gallup Institute, *Unemployment expectations*. 2005, available at <<http://www.gallup-bbss.com/images/freeindex/free4.gif>>, 2. 2.2012.

sented its members as the Serbia's greatest enemies. In spite of this, support is quite high for integration of the country into the EU.

Unlike Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria were candidate countries for the EU membership which they finally joined in 2007. In Bulgaria as well as Romania, public opinion on EU membership was very favourable and the European card was not used by the far right parties until accession. The slow accession process and tough EU requirements had a bit of a negative impact on public opinion and the 2007 EU elections saw the issue of the European Constitution in the pre-electoral campaign. The governing parties saw the European Constitution as a mechanism for strengthening the position of European institutions, which was beneficial to the country. Ataka, on the other hand, perceived the Constitution as a document that facilitated the transfer of power from the national to the supranational level and was in conflict with Bulgaria's national interests.³² The restrictions on the right of Bulgarian citizens to work freely in some EU states (e.g. UK, Ireland), the right for EU citizens to buy land in Bulgaria and the closure of two reactors in a nuclear power plant in Kozloduy were interpreted by many Bulgarians as losses for Bulgaria and many felt themselves to be second class citizens in the EU. The expected increase in standard of living did not materialize immediately after accession and many Bulgarians felt betrayed. Ataka and GERB made use of Eurosceptic feelings and nourished them further in the pre-election campaign in 2009, by promoting the Bulgarian national interest, fear of losing national sovereignty and promoting *Bulgarianship*, similarly to the Hungarian Jobbik, which profited from Hungary's accession to the EU and the rise of euroscepticism.

The far right in Bulgaria saw success only in the 2005 elections, while its Romanian counterpart, the PRM, won almost 20% in the 2000 elections and the party's steady decline was visible. Both countries joined NATO and Romania has aligned itself extensively with the USA in its war on terrorism. This was not the case for Serbia, which was de facto at war with NATO in 1999 and never really had any intent of joining the organization. The international context was not really used by the PRM. It employed neither Romania's engagement in the war on terror in the Middle East nor the inclusion of the Hungarian UDMR in governing arrangements as a precondition

³² SAVKOVA, European Parliament Election Briefing no.23., 4.

for application to the EU. The PRM considers NATO to be the only tool capable of protecting and safeguarding the country and its strategic interest, unlike Ataka, which calls for revision of the accession treaty, non-participation in military operations, neutrality and no military bases in Bulgaria.

Ataka uses the anti-Turkish card in its programme towards the EU, advocating standing in the way of Turkey in its accession to the European Union. All the chief political parties in Bulgaria support the accession of Turkey into the EU (GERB, Bulgarian Socialist Party, National Movement Simeon II, Union of Democratic Forces, Movement for Rights and Freedoms), which enables Volen Siderov to make use of anti-Turkish sentiments. In the electoral campaign before the elections to the European Parliament the party stressed the threat from immigration and the tide of cheap labour from Turkey, unlike the governing parties, which saw Turkish membership in the EU as a chance to assert Bulgaria's regional role.³³

Conclusion

What is it, then, that made the far right successful in Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria in the last two decades? Our analysis has shown that one of the most important political variables is the position, tactics and strategy of mainstream parties – in Serbia's case, the SPS and then SNS played the dominant role in success and decline of SRS, since the parties share to some extent similar values and, to a certain extent, share a voting base. In the case of Romania, it was the right pole of the spectrum which lost credibility for the voters and created the space for a new far right formation. In Bulgaria, voters were also tempted to vote for a change from the established but discredited political parties. A proximate party may play a role only in certain cases as it plays a certain role in the case of PRM and voters for PUNR and PNG-CD. Another important political variable is electoral systems, as can be observed; the inclusion of majoritarian components in the Bulgarian and Romanian systems meant no gain for far right parties in single member districts. Significant voting for new politics might play a certain role in the case of Bulgaria, with the low level of political culture then being supportive in all three cases. In all three cases, the party system

³³ SAVKOVA, European Parliament Election Briefing no.23, 4.

was highly inclusive, a proportional electoral system was used and the right of the party system was either fragmented or vacant, the voters for far right parties in the case of Bulgaria and Romania were voters for the former right party, which had discredited itself before the voters rather than refusing to address the emotional topics preferred by the voters.

Ethno-cultural variables seem to be very important in the context of successful far right parties, in the case of Serbia and seen from the particular ethno-centred perspective of Romania and Bulgaria, ethnic borders are not aligned with national borders. In the Serbian context, the SRS plays the Greater Serbia card; the PRM (despite its name and the inclusion of Greater Romania in its party statute) and Ataka do not primarily focus on issues to do with ethnic borders. The case of a strong ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria, the Albanian ethnicity in Kosovo and the Hungarian minority in Romania, with its capable and qualified political representation, seems to be of great importance to the success of the far right parties. The issue of the Roma population is used only by the PRM and Ataka but not by SRS. The international dimension played a great role in the success of the SRS and in the case of Ataka and the EU integration process but could reduce gains by the PRM in Euro-optimist Romania. The Bulgarian context is multidimensional, as the topic of Turkey's accession to the EU could also increase the electoral basis of far right formations. Unemployment and economic expectations might be also supportive, though they do not seem to be the main motives for the far right voters. As may be seen, the post-material dimension plays no role, as it is still non-existent.

Cases from the Balkans have shown that every political space is unique and some factors which might play a significant role in one case need not have importance for another. This is probably the most important point; it is evident that the variables differ from case to case, as follows:³⁴

- Serbia: political (strategy of mainstream party), international (state humiliation) and ethno-cultural (ethnic kin abroad, national minority with strong representation);
- Bulgaria: political (strategy of mainstream player and electoral system), ethno-cultural (strong national minority) and international

³⁴ For further see STOJAROVÁ, *The Far Right in the Balkans*. Manchester University Press 2013.

(EU accession);

- Romania: political (strategy of mainstream player and electoral system), ethno-cultural (strong national minority).

In this text, the external variables behind the success of far right parties in Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania have been sought. The research has shown that these variables differ from case to case, rather than allowing for a single set of variables which would be applicable to all cases. It is also worth noting that a combination of external and internal factors is usually important. The existence of a strong charismatic leader, party structure and the internal decision making process³⁵ also contribute to party success. The research has also revealed a trend which has seen voters distance themselves from extremist parties and instead favour radical or purely populist parties not focused on nationalism and external exclusivity (i.e., bringing all members of the nation inside state borders via territorial expansion by, e.g., population transfer). Serbian voters currently prefer SNS. Those in Bulgaria are attracted by Ataka and GERB and recently Patriotic Front (electoral alliance for 2014 elections around political parties VMRO and National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria), and the PRM itself no longer highlights notions of a Greater Romania but instead concentrates on euroscepticism and populist hate speeches, shifting in the direction of the ideological centre. The research shows that the far right party family is a broad group with great inclusiveness and many differences. Further investigation is needed to understand the mechanism and strategies of the far right. It is the authors' hope that this text will serve as a basic resource for further research into the far right parties in the region.

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³⁵ Centralized organizational structures and efficient mechanism for enforcing party discipline are typical for far right formations. As for a charismatic leader, one of the latest examples is Vojislav Šešelj being back in Serbia and getting back SRS into the parliament.

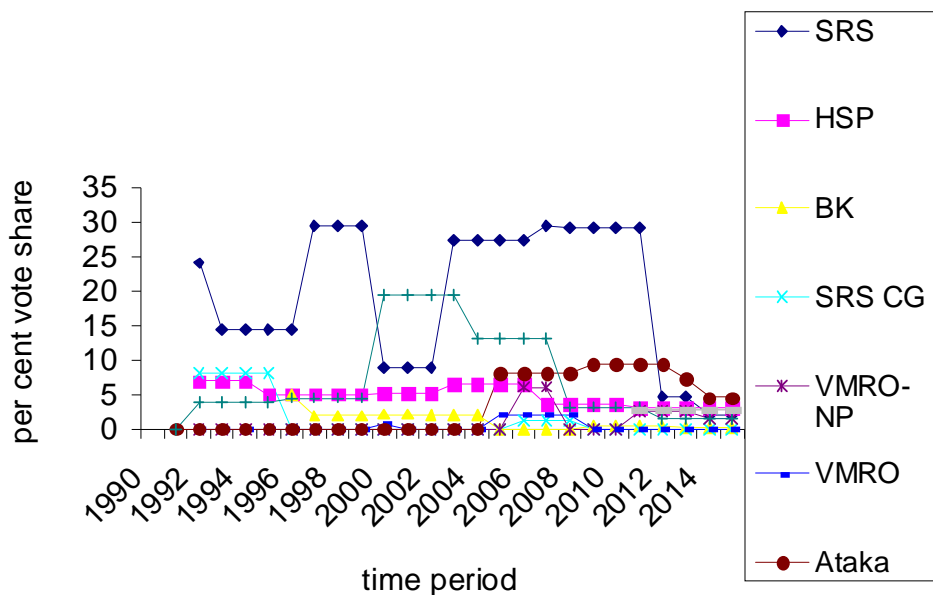
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Annex

Percentage Vote Share of Far Right Parliamentary Political Parties in the Balkans since 2000



Data retrieved from the Adam Carr Archive and Šedo 2007 and rounded up. Data for 1992 Croatia related to the proportional portion of the votes won, data for the 1997 elections in Albania to the total percent proportion (both the proportional and majority components) of seats for the party.

Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism

Isidora Stakić

Introduction

The rise of nationalism in Serbia started in the late 1980s as a response of the political elites to the growing pressure for democratization and liberalization of the economic and political system of the former Yugoslavia, more specifically, as the attempt of the elites to preserve their power positions. This re-emergence of nationalism enabled the appearance and later facilitated the legitimization of the Serbian right-wing extremism. During the wars in the former Yugoslavia radical nationalist groups were operating primarily as paramilitary formations, some of which were connected to the major political parties such as the Serbian Radical Party. Since the democratic transition started in 2000 extreme-right in Serbia have been consolidating. In changed circumstances comparing to the 1990s, but with the unchanged ideologies, the Serbian right-wing extremists are today involved in incidents and crimes motivated by hatred, as well as in spreading far-right propaganda.¹ This paper provides an overview of the extreme-right organizations in Serbia, but also a brief analysis of the socio-political context in which they operate, characterized by the hegemony of nationalism. The paper also seeks to pin point the main factors affecting the position of far-right groups in Serbia. In particular, two factors – the increased tolerance of the Serbian state institutions towards the extreme-right actors and the normalization of nationalism within the Serbian public discourse – contribute most to the establishment of the extremist organizations as legitimate political actors.

Serbian Nationalism

Re-emergence of the Serbian nationalism started in the mid-1980s, with Serbian conservative intellectuals – primarily the members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) – as its main proponents. The new

¹ Although the difference between the terms ‘extreme-right’ and ‘far-right’ could be established, in this paper these terms will be used as synonyms.

nationalist narrative, laid out in the infamous SANU's 'Memorandum', was fueled and informed by the Serbian 'resentment', the perception of ethnic Serbs being hated, threatened and exploited by other Yugoslav nations throughout socialist Yugoslavia.² The dominant critique of the Yugoslav socialism by the Serbian nationalist intellectuals was not as much focused on its economic inefficiency or the authoritarian tendencies, as on the responsibility of socialism for 'destroying' the Serbian nation.³ Thus, in the new official narrative, social class as the unification principle was replaced by nation, understood not as a political but rather as a biological entity.⁴

With Slobodan Milošević's rise to power, nationalist agenda became enshrined as state policy which led to the violent breakup of Yugoslavia and a series of ethnic conflicts during 1990s, followed by numerous atrocities, including ethnic cleansing and genocide. Throughout the 1990s, Serbian nationalism was successfully imposed by Milošević's regime as the official ideology and hegemonic discourse, while the opposition to his regime was only partially anti-nationalist.⁵ After the downfall of Milošević, Serbia started transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime through a series of reforms. In the course of democratic transition, new discourses emerged – Europeanization discourse, human rights discourse, transitional justice discourse, neo-liberal discourse, and a number of others, competing over the creation of meaning. Although the hegemonic position of nationalist discourse was challenged, new elites – political and intellectual – never made a radical break with nationalism. Therefore, it managed not only to survive but to remain dominant and, in some sense, the official discourse.

² Pešić, V. (1996) *Serbian Nationalism and the Origins of the Yugoslav Crisis*, Peaceworks No. 8, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, p. 5-7; available at: <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/pwks8.pdf>.

³ Kuljić, T. (2002) *Prevladavanje prošlosti: Uzroci i pravci promene slike istorije krajem XX veka* (Overcoming the Past: Causes and Directions of the Change in the Image of History at the End of the Twentieth Century), Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, p. 475.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Serbian Renewal movement (SPO), one of the main opposition parties during the Milošević's rule, was also promoting nationalist ideology, while the Democratic Party (DS) was at the time anti-nationalist and established as social-democrat party.

In the views of the new nationalist elites that came to power after 2000, Milošević's regime compromised nationalism by leading the wars that Serbia eventually lost and, therefore, the new elites strove to 'rehabilitate' nationalism – to present it in positive lights, as the very essence of Serbian identity.⁶ However, this new post-Milošević Serbian nationalism retained the classical nationalist assumption that state boundaries should coincide with ethnic boundaries.⁷ Although less aggressive than the nationalism during 1990s, the new Serbian nationalism put 'ethnic' above 'political', which became legally sanctioned in the Serbian Constitution of 2006 that defines the Republic of Serbia as 'a state of Serbian people and all citizens who live in it, [...]',⁸ therefore establishing a hierarchy between ethnic Serbs and the Others.

The contemporary Serbian nationalism has several features that are distinctive of the Serbian context, as well as of the specific historical circumstances. First, it is characterized by the rejection of dealing with the past, meaning the rejection of responsibility for the war crimes committed by the Serbian military and paramilitary forces during the Yugoslav wars. This lack of will to scrutinize the role of nationalist policies in the mass crimes of the 1990s is followed by the victimization narrative in which Serbs are presented as the greatest victims of the Yugoslav wars. Second, Serbian nationalism is grounded in a thorough revision of historical memory of the WWII-WWII veterans of the ultra-nationalist Chetniks and antifascist Partisan movement were legally declared equal in rights; Chetnik leader Dragoljub Mihajlović was rehabilitated before the court; history textbooks were changed; a number of streets named after Partisan heroes got new names. The third characteristic of the Serbian nationalism is the symbolic power of Kosovo myth that occupies the central place in the national imaginary. This symbolic capital of Kosovo has been hindering the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia since the end of the Kosovo war, as well as reconciliation between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. The fourth feature is the close alignment of Serbian nationalists

⁶ Milosavljević, O. (2007) "'Dobri" Nacionalizam' ("The Good" Nationalism), *Peščanik*; available at: <http://pescanik.net/dobri-nacionalizam/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia (2006) *The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia*, Official Gazette of the republic of Serbia No. 98/2006.

with Russia and the Russian political regime, based on the historical and cultural ties, as well as on the shared religion. Fifth, Serbian nationalism is strongly promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church that, since the beginning of the 1990s, has significantly increased its power and managed to influence political processes. Finally, contemporary Serbian nationalism has shown great tolerance towards right-wing extremism, while strongly antagonizing the left, as well as other anti-nationalist actors.

Extreme-Right Groups in Serbia

The rise of nationalism in the late 1980s and during the 1990s enabled the emergence of right-wing extremism in Serbia. During the decade of Yugoslav wars, the extreme-right groups acted as paramilitary formations and collaborated with the Serbian regime of the time. After the democratic changes in 2000, the extremist groups continued to exist, in the changed circumstances, but relying on the same ideological propositions and promoting similar agendas. Right-wing extremists will here be considered as all actors that promote radical ethnic-nationalism (including xenophobia and racism), militarism, intolerance towards minorities, anti-egalitarianism, regardless of whether they openly support the use of violence as a means of achieving political goals, or implicitly legitimize and incite violence against certain social groups. While Milošević's regime used right-wing extremists as an instrument of its aggressive nationalism, the post-Milošević Serbian governments have shown considerable tolerance towards the extreme-right actors. Until the Parliamentary elections held on 24 April 2016, virtually all the Serbian far-right organizations were extra-parliamentary actors. However, many of them managed to get their voices heard, due to the increased tolerance of the state institutions towards them, and the compatibility of their agendas with the mainstream discourses, which will be discussed in more details in the next section.

According to the assessment of the Serbian Police from 2011, there are around thirty active extremists groups in Serbia that, all together, count approximately five thousands members.⁹ It should be noted that this as-

⁹ Račić, Lj. (2011) 'Šta čeka Ustavni sud: Srbiji preti 5.000 ekstremista' ('What the Constitutional Court Can Expect: Serbia Is Threatened by 5.000 Extremists'), *PressOnline*, 03. 10. 2011. Available at: <http://www.pressonline.rs/>

assessment did not include one of the most prominent extreme-right actors in Serbia – the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) – which itself has more than five thousands members. During the 1990s, the SRS supported Milošević’s war politics, advocating for the Greater Serbia. Its leader Vojislav Šešelj was indicted before the Hague Tribunal (ICTY) in 2003 for war crimes and crimes against humanity, however, in March 2016 he was acquitted on all charges. Throughout 1990s and 2000s SRS was not only a member of the Serbian Parliament, but from 2003 until 2008 it was the strongest parliamentary party, with the voters’ support above 27 per cent. The split within SRS in 2008 was a major blow to the party after which it did not manage to regain its previous strength, as the newly formed Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won over the great majority of the supporters. At the elections in 2012, SRS for the first time in its history remained below 5 per cent of voters’ support which left them outside the National Parliament. However, at the Serbian Parliamentary elections held on 24 April 2016 the SRS had its major comeback to the parliamentary politics by winning more than 8% of votes.

Legal Status of the Extreme-right Groups

SRS is currently the only extreme-right organization that is formally registered as political party. However, another far-right organization *Dveri Srpske* (hereinafter: Dveri; English: *Serbian Gates*) in 2015 announced its transformation from ‘political movement’ registered as civil society organization (CSO) into political party. *Dveri* participated as a CSO in two parliamentary elections, in 2012 and 2014, but both times remained below the threshold. At the recent Serbian Parliamentary elections held on 24 April 2016 *Dveri* ran in the coalition with the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), a right-wing conservative party, and won around 5% of votes which might get them the seats in the Parliament.¹⁰ With SRS and potentially DSS-Dveri as the new parliamentary actors, it is reasonable to expect the extreme-right will be further mainstreamed in Serbian politics.

info/politika/179192/sta-ceka-ustavni-sud-srbiji-preti-5000-ekstremista.html.

¹⁰ At the moment of finalizing this text (28 April 2016), it is still unclear whether the coalition DSS-Dveri passed the threshold of 5%, as the Republic Electoral Commission (RIK) decided to order elections repeated in 15 polling stations where 18,000 citizens of Serbia are eligible to vote. (Source: B92) http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=04&dd=28&nav_id=97839.

Other far-right organizations in Serbia are either registered as CSOs – such as *SNP Naši* (Serbian National Movement ‘Ours’) and *SNP 1389*¹¹ (Serbian National Movement 1389) – or they are not registered at all – such as numerous football hooligans’ groups¹² and neo-Nazi organizations *Nacionalni stroj* (National Alignment), *Srbska akcija* (Serbian Action) and *Krv i Čast* (Blood and Honor Serbia). The Serbian Constitutional Court banned *Nacionalni stroj* in 2011 despite the fact that it was not formally registered. A year later, the Constitutional Court banned the registered clerical-fascist organization *Obraz* (Honour). However, *Obraz* continued to exist with a slightly changed name – *Srbski Obraz* – and the unchanged ideology, programme, leadership and even iconography. This clearly shows that the Constitutional Court’s decisions critically lack enforcement mechanisms, as well as that there is no political will to address this issue. The public Prosecutor’s Office also requested Constitutional Court to ban two other organizations, *SNP 1389* and *SNP Naši*, substantiating its request with the same arguments as in the case of *Obraz*: it was seen as a threat to the constitutional order and violating human and minority rights by inciting racial, national and religious intolerance. However, the Court rejected this request. At the parliamentary elections in March 2014, *SNP Naši* participated in a coalition with *Obraz* and the SRS, but this coalition remained below the parliamentary threshold.

Ideology of the Extreme-Right Groups

In regards to the ideologies and political programmes, there are some variations among the extreme right organizations in Serbia. Nevertheless, there are also certain ‘core’ premises and ideas that are common for them all. This ‘core’ of the Serbian far-right could be summed up as: radical ethno-

¹¹ 1389 is the year of the Battle of Kosovo between Serbian and Ottoman armies which is considered by Serbian nationalist to be a formative event for the Serbian nation and national identity.

¹² Some of the football hooligans’ groups are: Ultra Boys, Belgrade Boys, Ultras, Brigade, Alkatraz, Ludaci – Padinska Skela, Anti – Romi, South Family, Head Hunters, Irriducibili – Nbg, Shadows, Extreme Boys, Čuvari Časti, Brain Damage i United Force 1987. Source: Stjelja, I. (2014) ‘Zločin iz mržnje i incidenti motivisani mržnjom u kontekstu delovanja ekstremističkih organizacija u Srbiji’ (‘Hate Crime and Incidents Motivated by Hate in the Context of Activities of the Extremist Organizations in Serbia’), in Biserko, S. (ed.) *Ekstremizam: Kako prepoznati društveno zlo* (Extremism: How to Recognize the Social Evil), Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, p. 108.

nationalism, intolerance towards minorities (national and religious minorities, Roma, LGBTIQ, since recently the refugees from the Middle East), anti-communism and anti-liberalism, hostility towards ‘the West’, militarism and the cult of the glorious national past including the celebration of Serbian war criminals as national heroes. The major ideological dividing line among the Serbian extreme-right organizations places those who are openly neo-Nazi on one side, and those who declaratively reject Nazism and fascism (although their political programmes contain a number of elements characteristic of fascism) on the other. The former group includes the above mentioned neo-Nazi organizations, *Nacionalni Stroj*, *Srbska akcija*, *Krv i čast*, as well as parts of football supporters groups. These organizations openly promote racial superiority of the white race and believe in Aryan roots of Serbian nation; they advocate for ethnically and racially ‘pure’ Serbia in which racial inequality would be proscribed by law. The Serbian neo-Nazi organizations co-opted the white supremacists’ iconography, such as swastika (used only by *Krv i čast/Combat 18*), Celtic cross, symbols of SS divisions, as well as the Nazi salute.

The organizations that belong to the second category accept the idea of parliamentarism and seek to participate in the mainstream political processes (e.g. elections). The most prominent among them are the SRS, *Dveri*, *SNP Naši* and *SNP 1389*. Besides the above mentioned ideological core that all far-right groups in Serbia share, some of the major reference points on the political agendas of these organizations are: strong opposition to Kosovo independence, the idea of unification of all Serbs in one state, advocating for stronger political, cultural and economic ties with the Russian Federation, anti-LGBTIQ sentiment and the promotion of patriarchal family, as well as the promotion of Orthodox Christianity as an indispensable part of Serbian identity. Somewhere in between those two categories of the far-right organizations in Serbia is the above mentioned *Obraz* (currently registered as *Srbski Obraz*). *Obraz* has been classified by the Serbian police as clerical-fascist organization. However, the organization does not openly embrace fascism, although it derives its agenda from the political programme of the Serbian fascists movement *Zbor* from the 1930s and 1940s. *Obraz* is pronouncedly clerical, even in comparison to other Serbian far-right organizations. They advocate for the establishment of Serbia as an Orthodox theocracy, and promote the ideology of ‘St. Sava nationalism’ – the mix of Serbian nationalism and Orthodox clericalism, formulated by

the Serbian Orthodox Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and endorsed by the leader of *Zbor* Dimitrije Ljotić.

Violent Potential of the Extreme-right Groups

While during the 1990s the extremist groups acted primarily as paramilitary formations in the Yugoslav wars, from the beginning of 2000s far-right extremists have shifted their focus from the external to the internal ‘enemy’ – i.e. to the minorities and vulnerable groups within Serbia. LGBTIQ persons, national and religious minorities (especially Roma and Albanians), as well as human rights defenders, are the most common targets of the right-wing extremists in Serbia.¹³ A number of right-wing extremists participated in violent riots in Serbia since 2000, such as: the anti-Albanian riots in 2004 (incited by the violence against Serbs in Kosovo) in which two mosques were set on fire; clashes between neo-Nazis and ANTIFA activists in Novi Sad in 2007; the riots after the declaration of Kosovo independence in 2008 in which a number of foreign diplomatic missions and businesses were attacked by the Serbian protesters; riots during the Pride Parade in 2010; attacks on Roma settlements in village Jabuka in 2010, Resnik in 2012, and anti-Roma riots in Zemun Polje in 2013; attacks on shops and bakeries owned by ethnic Albanians in Vojvodina, after the incident with the flag of the ‘Greater Albania’ at the football match between Serbia and Albania in 2014; and many others. The increase in violence based on hatred and intolerance, and the frequency of attacks on vulnerable social groups in Serbia, resulted in the initiative for codification of hate crime.¹⁴ Hate crime was introduced into the Serbian legal system in 2013, by the amendments to the Criminal Code, namely the Article 54a which reads: ‘If a criminal offence is committed from hate based on race or religion, national or ethnic affiliation, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity of another, the court shall consider such circumstance as aggravating except when it is not stipulated as a feature of the criminal offence.’¹⁵ Almost three years after the introduction of hate crime in Serbia, this legal institute has not been

¹³ Since recently, the refugees from the Middle East, as a particularly vulnerable group, are also targeted by the extremists.

¹⁴ Stjelja, I. and Viguier, C. (2014) *Civilno društvo protiv zločina iz mržnje* (Civil Society against Hate Crime), Belgrade: YUCOM, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

implemented in practice – there hasn't been any verdicts in which the motive of hatred was taken as an aggravating circumstance.¹⁶

It is important to note that not all the far-right organizations in Serbia are directly engaged in physical violence. Some of them, such as *Dveri*, seek to present their strategies as entirely non-violent.¹⁷ However, even in cases when they refrain from direct involvement in violence, far-right actors actively contribute to the incitement and/or legitimization of violence, by being engaged in securitization of minorities. Securitization is a discursive process in which a securitizing actor depicts something as a security threat to a valued referent object, thus urging for exceptional measures through which the threat would be removed.¹⁸ For instance, in the narratives of far-right extremists in Serbia, Roma people are represented as thieves, i.e. a threat to property of Serbian people, as well as filthy and primitive; LGBTIQ persons are presented as immoral and ill, threatening to destroy Serbian family and patriarchal order; refugees from the Middle East are depicted as a threat to physical security, especially the safety of women; etc. Generally, in the narratives of the Serbian right-wing extremists, all minority groups are described as a threat to the Serbian nation, either a direct, physical threat, or as a threat to certain societal order that is considered to be crucial for the survival of the nation. By discursively constructing a group as a threat, far-right actors implicitly legitimize violence against those groups. In other words, if something is declared a security threat, violence against it becomes self-defense.

¹⁶ Stjelja, I. (2014) 'Zločin iz mržnje i incidenti motivisani mržnjom u kontekstu delovanja ekstremističkih organizacija u Srbiji' ('Hate Crime and Incidents Motivated by Hate in the Context of Activities of the Extremist Organizations in Serbia'), in Biserko, S. (ed.) *Ekstremizam: Kako prepoznati društveno zlo* (Extremism: How to Recognize the Social Evil), Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, p. 101. The data are updated in the interview with a YUCOM lawyer.

¹⁷ For example, as a response to the announced Pride Parades, *Dveri* has been organizing the so called 'Family Walks' – the counter-parades promoting traditional values and patriarchal morals.

¹⁸ See, for example: Buzan, B., O. Wæver and J. de Wilde (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, p. 35-36; Buzan, B. and O. Wæver (2003) *Regions and Powers: the Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p. 491.

Legitimization of the Extreme-Right in Serbia

In regards to the far-right groups that openly promote fascism and racism, resistance to them is still the prevailing sentiment in the Serbian public discourse. Strong negative emotions linked with the fascist and Nazi iconography that these groups display prevent them from entering political and social mainstream. However, when it comes to the extreme-right groups that declaratively reject fascism, their position within the Serbian society is different. Groups and organizations such as *Dveri*, *SRS*, *Obraz*, *SNP Naši* and *SNP 1389* are considered by the official institutions and the mainstream media as legitimate actors at the political scene – they are given significant media space, some of them participate at the elections, some participated in local governments in coalitions with other political parties.¹⁹ I argue here that the ‘mainstreaming’ of the extreme-right in Serbia could be pinned down to two major contributing factors: the benevolence of the judiciary towards the far-right actors, and the normalization of nationalism within the Serbian public discourse.

The Judiciary and the Extreme-right

As previously mentioned, the Constitutional Court banned the neo-Nazi organization *Nacionalni stroj* in 2011. This court decision represents an important precedent, since before the decision the Constitutional Court proclaimed that it had no jurisdiction over the organizations that were not formally registered (such as *Nacionalni stroj*) and rejected the Public Prosecutor’s request for banning 15 unregistered extremist organizations, mostly football hooligans’ groups.²⁰ In 2012 the Constitutional Court banned the clerical-fascist organization *Obraz*. On that occasion, the Court pointed out that *Obraz* was advocating for a model of society based on discrimination of certain minority groups, using hate speech, intimidation and degrading treatment, and accepting violence as the legitimate means of political struggle.²¹ However, the same year, the Court rejected the Public Prosecutor’s request for banning organizations *SNP Naši* and *SNP 1389*.

¹⁹ For example, *SNP Naši* participated in the local government of the city of Aranđelovac, Serbia, in the coalition with the Serbian Progressive Party.

²⁰ See above, footnote 16, p. 108.

²¹ Ibid, p. 107.

The practice of the Constitutional Court in regards to the far-right organizations is problematic in two ways. First, the Court's practice is not harmonized, in that it acted differently in similar cases – it accepted jurisdiction in the case of unregistered *Nacionalni stroj*, while declining jurisdiction in the cases of other unregistered far-right groups; further, it banned *Obraz*, but decided not to ban *SNP 1389* and *SNP Naši*, although these organizations not only share the ideological framework of *Obraz*, but also frequently act in coalition with *Obraz*. By refusing to ban *SNP Naši* and *SNP 1389*, the Constitutional Court indirectly confirmed the legitimacy of their political programmes and activities. Secondly, there are no mechanisms in place that would ensure the enforcement of the Constitutional Court's decisions. Both *Obraz* and *Nacionalni stroj* *de facto* continue to exist, and *Obraz* even participated at the 2014 parliamentary elections, in coalition with the *SRS* and *SNP Naši*.

Leaders of *Obraz* and *SNP 1389*, Mladen Obradović and Miša Vacić respectively, were tried for inciting discrimination and hatred against sexual minorities before the banned Pride in 2009. Obradović was also tried for organizing riots during the 2010 Pride, in which several thousand of right-wing extremists clashed with the police in the streets of Belgrade. Vacić was tried for illegal arm possession and obstruction of law enforcement officer. Criminal proceedings against the leaders of *Obraz* and *SNP 1389* lasted much longer than foreseen by the standards of fair trial, due to numerous postponements. In all the proceedings against those two far-right leaders, the Court of Appeal overturned the primary courts' rulings and ordered new trials after which the sentences were significantly reduced, so both Obradović and Vacić got only probation. These decisions of the Court of Appeal were explained by the violations of procedural rules, which might indicate that the primary courts do not dedicate sufficient attention to the cases of violent extremism. In the repeated trials, mitigating circumstances – such as young age, student status, family circumstances, etc. – were taken into account by the courts. Similar tendencies could be observed in the criminal proceedings against other extremists.²²

²² For example, trial for the murder of Brice Taton by the Serbian football hooligans, the trial of Uroš Mišić for attempted murder etc.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, nationalism in Serbia has been imposed as dominant discourse by the power holders, and consequently accepted as 'common sense' by a significant segment of the society. This normalization of nationalism started in the late 1980s, but continued even after the democratic changes in 2000, when Serbia, instead of making a radical break with the ethnic-nationalist past of the 1990s, provided a legitimization framework for nationalist ideology – through legal norms, historical revisionism and the promotion of the so-called 'democratic nationalism'.²³ The normalization affirmed the extreme nationalists as legitimate political actors by bringing them closer to mainstream politics or, perhaps more accurately, by moving the political mainstream closer to the radical right. Scrutinization of the extremists' agendas shows that they share major reference points with the mainstream nationalism – war crimes denial, glorification of Russia, historical revisionism, the Kosovo myth, clericalism – it is just that these commonplaces are more explicitly and more aggressively promoted by the far-right groups than by the major political parties and the mainstream media. In other words, the normalization of nationalism made possible the emergence and the 'mainstreaming' of the right-wing extremists, by installing the reference points of their narratives in the mainstream rhetorical field.²⁴ Once the nationalist ideas are normalized through the official narratives and accepted by a significant part of the population, the agendas of the far-right groups cease to be perceived as extreme and become more acceptable.

²³ See, for example: Kuljić, T. (2002) *Prevladavanje prošlosti: Uzroci i pravci promene slike istorije krajem XX veka* (Overcoming the Past: Causes and Directions of the Change in the Image of History at the End of the Twentieth Century), Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia; Milosavljević, O. (2007) "Dobri" Nacionalizam' ("The Good" Nationalism'), Peščanik.

²⁴ Krebs and Jackson (2007) argue: 'Arguments can prove powerful only when the commonplaces on which they draw are already present in the rhetorical field, which is shaped both by the unintended consequences of prior episodes of (rhetorical) contestation and/or by campaigns undertaken in advance with the express purpose of reconfiguring the rhetorical terrain.' In Krebs, R.R. and P.T. Jackson (2007) 'Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13(1), p. 35-66.

Therefore, the normalization of nationalism and certain compatibility of the extremists' and the mainstream discourses contribute significantly to the legitimization and even strengthening of the right-wing extremists in Serbia.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the legal status, ideological premises and violent potential of the Serbian extreme-right groups within a socio-political environment dominated by nationalism. It started with a brief overview of the rise of Serbian nationalism from the late 1980s until today, in order to determine the context in which the extremists groups exist and operate. While all the Serbian extreme-right organizations share certain ideological assumptions – radical nationalism, intolerance towards minorities, anti-communism and anti-liberalism, anti-Western sentiment and the cult of the glorious warrior past – the major division among them is to those who openly embrace neo-Nazism and those who declaratively reject it. The former are currently pushed to the political margins, whereas the latter are seeking to participate in the institutional processes such as elections and trying to present themselves as non-violent Serbian patriots. Albeit the resistance to neo-Nazi organizations is still prevailing, the latter group of the Serbian right-wing extremists has entered the political mainstream. These organizations, although sharing a number of characteristics with fascism, are not officially recognized as such, which significantly contributes to their legitimization. In this paper it was argued that the establishment of the Serbian far-right organizations as legitimate actors within the Serbian society is the consequence of two major factors: the benevolence of the judiciary towards the extreme-right actors, and the fact that nationalism in Serbia has gradually become normalized, i.e. imposed as the hegemonic worldview. The practice of the Serbian courts in the cases related to the far-right groups and their members shows that the Serbian institutions do not have a clear position towards the right-wing extremism – unharmonized judicial practice, violations of procedural rules, and a lack of enforcement mechanisms for the courts' decisions implicitly legitimize far-right extremism in Serbia. Normalized nationalism, as the second factor, contributes mostly to the general public perception of the extreme-right organizations as acceptable. The increased tolerance of the state institutions towards the far-right extremists, as well as the public discourse that fails to recognize them as

politically dangerous, create a fertile ground for consolidation and further rise of the extreme-right in Serbia.

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PART IV:

**STRATEGIES FOR THE FIGHT AGAINST
VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS**

Policing, Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

Gordana Jankuloska

Overview of the Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters

The number of foreign fighters with a jihadist political agenda participating in the Syrian civil war has recently increased exponentially, becoming a growing concern for security experts and policymakers. Following the adoption of the UN Resolution 2178 (2014)¹ and the subsequent White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism from the beginning of 2015, the Member States have proved their commitment to fight violent extremism, not only as a declarative, but also as a true allegiance against terrorism throughout the world. This certainly includes the Western Balkans region.

Armed conflicts throughout the world, especially the Syrian and the Iraqi conflicts, created, and are still creating, generation of young people who, instigated by events in the conflict areas, started to personally, materially and logistically support the jihadi movements. They are also inspired by the militant Salafist ideology, which leads towards recruitment, and thus presents the foundation for action of radicalized individuals. Furthermore, the current trend of involvement of volunteers towards “the Islamic State”, Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations and groups, considering as well the intentions of spreading jihadism internationally, indicates growing threats against national, regional and global security.

Current events in Syria and Iraq, along with the attacks committed by “suicide bombers”, encourage terrorist actions committed by so-called “lone wolfs”, i.e. people who are not directly connected to the jihadists, but are inspired by them. Risks increase with the continuous increase in the number of refugees from crises regions and possible use of illegal migration channels for transfer of potential terrorists and their stationing on European soil.

¹ Resolution 2178 (2014), Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272nd meeting, on 24 September 2014.

Moreover, security risks can also be seen in the involvement of returnees in the recruitment and/or logistic support for sending new fighters, aided by local Islamic networks and in coordination with extreme terrorist structures from Syria and Iraq. The fast unimpeded internet communication facilitates the process of increasing mass support of jihadism.

The number of recruits-jihadists is continuously rising and it is directly related with the involvement of returnees and of the plan of indoctrination and radicalization of ideological followers. Additional inciting factor is the so-called “e-propaganda” where posting texts and video clips of highly extreme and radical contents are of key importance.

The presence of foreign jihadi fighters in the Syrian war in general has raised concerns in many European Union member states as well as the countries from the region of Western Balkans. It is not only the families and communities that worry about losing their youth to Syria’s war. Governments and security agencies are particularly concerned about the potential threat the returning fighters could pose. The estimates and numbers are not yet precise, but it is confirmed that in some cases “returnees” from foreign battlefields were involved in terrorist plots and successful attacks back home. More precisely, of all those who have been convicted of jihadi terrorism related activities in Europe between 2001 and 2009, about 12% had been abroad prior to their attack, either for ideological training, military training or participation in foreign conflicts.² The data is often not very specific but it is sufficient to show that those who have visited foreign ideological schools, training camps and battlefields outside Europe compose a remarkable part of the total number of jihadi terrorists in Europe.³

Having said this, there is no doubt that the greatest security threat some of the returnees pose, beside being a key recruitment factor for new jihadists and potential terrorists, is exactly the high level of religious fanaticism, gen-

² CTC/ICCT Database on Jihadi Terrorists in Europe; E. Bakker, “Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe (2001-2009)”, in Rik Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011).

³ T. Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting”, *American Political Science Review* (February 2013).

erated military experience and established connections with international radical structures and terrorist cells.

Violent Extremism in the Western Balkan Countries

The Balkan countries, as many other countries in the world, face an increased risk from violent extremism and terrorism, especially due to the actualization of the phenomenon of “foreign fighters”. In the spectrum of modern security risks, the radicalization phenomenon becomes increasingly present in any society where parts of population accept extreme positions and ideas, which leads to change of their behavior, going from political activism to use of violent means and methods. In parallel with the danger from violating social cohesion, deepening polarization as per ethnic/religious line and the occurrence of inter-religious/inter-cultural tensions, the main threat as well as top security priority for all countries, is the possibility of violent extremism and terrorist actions. The complexity and the specificity of this phenomenon, instigating people from the region to join terrorist and extreme paramilitary formations, impose the need of detection, preventive actions and timely interception of threats from terrorism.

Looking at the example of the countries from the Western Balkans, the participation of their nationals in military regions in Syria and Iraq, mainly as activists in “the Islamic state”, supplemented with the already established presence of extreme individuals and groups, as well as the spreading of radical positions, ideas and principles, especially in terms of global communication, indicate potential danger from possible acts of violence with elements of terrorism. For example, operational information from the Macedonian Security Agencies as of September 2015 shows that since the summer 2012, they have registered the participation of more than 130 Macedonian nationals at the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, and 16 of them have already been killed.

The numbers of foreign fighters from Western Balkan countries (around 1000) in the spectrum of military operations in Iraq and Syria are variable and growing. Some of them come from the diaspora, some are from the countries from the region. According to the information available to the Security Agencies, some are ready to stay there in the promise land, the

Caliphate, without considering to come back in their countries of origin. But, at the same time, there are others that are not ideologically motivated but their main incentive to join the jihadists is of financial nature. No matter what is the motivation behind their decision to join the military operations in Syria and Iraq, their interaction with other jihadi foreign fighters builds strong core with multinational structure and creates further risk and potential danger of certain problems. Many of them have their external network and supporters in the Western European countries, have the capability to plan, support, and conduct attacks threatening the values of the freedom and democracy. Thus, the foreign fighters can easily export the conflict and commit terrorist attacks internationally, using as a hub Syria and Iraq, or other crisis areas under jihadi influence.

Parallel with the danger from violating social cohesion, deepening polarization as per ethnic/religious line and the occurrence of inter-religious or inter-cultural tensions, the main threat, but also top security priority for the countries, is the possibility of terrorist actions.

In that respect, the Balkan region does not represent an operational base for international terrorist networks. Its position is mostly one for logistics and recruitment of members and their motivation and radicalization for “global jihad”. Still, based on some comments in the public coming from the returning Foreign Fighters, the Security agencies consider scenarios and analyse indicators for the possibility of promotion of the Balkan Caliphate in future.

Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization

Participation of nationals from the countries of Western Balkans in military regions in Syria and Iraq, mainly as activists in “the Islamic state”, supplemented with the presence of extreme individuals and groups, as well as the spreading of radical positions, ideas and principles, especially in terms of global communication, indicate potential danger from possible acts of violence with elements of terrorism. Facing the new challenges, the countries from the region constantly upgrade their normative and institutional capacities, setting up their own security strategy, harmonized not only with the national requirements, but also with the efforts of the international community for a joint fight against terrorism. Parallel with the respect of

basic human rights and freedoms, the prevention from extreme and radical action, preparatory activities that may lead to terrorism, as well as the recruitment of potential terrorists is one of the basic issues in the fight against these security phenomena. In that line interventions in the legislature became inevitable. For instance this is the line following the amendments of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Macedonia (September, 2014) sanctioning the participation and any type of logistic and other support in sending volunteers in foreign armies or paramilitary formations. They correspond with the recommendations of the adopted UN Resolution 2178/2014, with the focus of security measures and activities being the prevention of terrorist activities financing, tracing suspicious transactions, prevention of money laundering and possible recruitment of potential terrorists committing terrorist activities in the country and abroad.

Thus, one of the first problems for governments and security agencies is to assess who has traveled to Syria. The ease with which European jihadi fighters can travel from the countries from the region or through the Schengen area to Turkey and slip across the border into Syria makes it difficult for intelligence agencies to establish exact numbers and identities of those who have joined the military operations. Sometimes it is immediate family members or friends who alert authorities of the absence of a foreign fighter.

The analysis of the situation in the region shows that it is necessary for the Police as well as other respective security agencies to constantly upgrade their professional structure and foster their capacities, raising the level of operational capacity for the purpose of appropriate and timely addressing potential threats from any form of violent extremism. In view of this combined action of operational and reactive component in fighting violent extremism and terrorism, i.e. the use of operational capacities of security-intelligence services, the special task units in coordinated action with all security institutions and bodies, is what makes the countries more prepared to respond to possible attacks and become an active factor in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism within a wider framework.

It is important to keep in mind that the complex and dynamic nature of the situation requires constant engagement of the police forces, monitoring from an intelligence perspective as well as from a governance and legal

perspective. However, starting from the position that extremism and radicalism, along with the security one, have a wider social component, it is important to underline that the prevention of such security phenomena necessarily impose the need of widespread activities undertaken not only by the police but also by official religious communities, educational institutions, local communities, medias and the civil or non-governmental sector.

Community Policing responding to Violent Extremism

Considering the need of protection from radicalization of vulnerable categories of persons, but also the need of changes in beliefs and behavior of potential jihadists, their actions are focused on activities from the domain of counter-propaganda as a form of “war of ideas”, as well as activities for de-radicalization of returnees and finding mechanisms for their reintegration in the society. However, the weaknesses that we face today, primarily in the area of determining the exact number of volunteers-jihadists, necessarily indicate a need for finding and promoting mechanisms for more precise identification of these persons, preventing flow of fighters, and termination of financing jihadi aims. Therefore, on national level regular and rapid exchange of information among experts, undertaking joint actions, as well as finding effective means and methods for prevention of all extremisms leading towards terrorism will increase the capacities for timely and efficient opposing to eventual threats. The engagement of all resources of the police plays a key role in achieving these goals.

Along with the traditional police methods of work, the community policing programs become a valuable tool. The community policing, as a relatively new concept of work for the police, is undoubtedly an asset in fighting violent extremism and terrorism. Originally, it is introduced as a concept of police work that actively involves the community in order to reduce, prevent, and detect all types of crime. Since it is a partnership between the police and the community, it aims to ensure that the police continually provides quality services to the public. However, this works differently in different countries. Nevertheless, applying the same community policing principles that have helped to reduce general crime, violence, and social disorder to terrorism and violent extremism they can also contribute towards preventing future incidents.

At the core of this new understanding is the deep appreciation of the importance of non-police resources in fighting crime, and especially an appreciation of the role of the community as a partner of the police in fostering public safety. To use community policing to prevent terrorism means to adapt to the political, social and geographical context where the approach is to be implemented. We are all very much aware that community support cannot be assumed or taken for granted; it must be won and deserved. As much as it is hard to win public trust, it is even easier to lose it. This is especially true with view of preventing and countering terrorism, which is an issue that may seem remote or too sensitive to members of the public, and even provoke hostility and resistance towards the police. The level to which community policing may contribute in countering terrorism depends on the level of trust and co-operation that already exists between the police and the public.

There is no universal formula for policing in a community, because all programs for community policing must be formulated and implemented in consideration of local political and cultural environment. An established model of policing in multi-ethnic and multi religious community should help police officers to build relationships of cooperation, especially with the citizens who are of minority ethnic or religious origin and to gain their confidence. The achievement of these goals requires police officers to have the appropriate skills and capabilities. As a consequence these police officers will become important contact persons of the citizens who will indicate the problems in the environment in which they live. In a society with different ethnic groups, the role of the police is determined precisely by its multi-ethnicity. The heterogeneous composition of the population is a source of diversity that can be the cause of some security problems, but it can also bring some country specific benefits. Building partnerships with public and private community stakeholders, interacting with residents and community leaders, sharing information, and investigating reports of suspicious or unusual behavior are all components of community policing that are easily transferable to terrorism prevention and countering violent extremism. Building reliable relationships based on interaction and collaboration may also lead to increased reporting of suspicious activity as well as sharing of information, target hardening, and improved coordination. Community members are an important force multiplier.

They can help identify, prevent, and eliminate terrorist ideologies and behaviors before violence occurs.

Regional and international cooperation as a tool in countering violent extremism

The capacity for Counter Violent Extremism can be strengthened by building partnerships in the society between the police and other security agencies on one side and the local communities on the other. There is a clear recognition of the importance of the relationship between the police and the community, but at the same time there is a clear indication that all the stakeholders have to remain to the commitment of further active participation in the regional and international fight against violent extremism and terrorism. In view of the above-said, aiming for more efficient and joint action of security agencies, it is necessary to act on national, regional and international level.

On national level, all the countries have to strengthen the institutions by funding programs for de-radicalization and counter-radicalization in order to ensure early prevention. At the same time they have to develop counter measures through programs and action plans focusing on denying extremist groups their most precious resource – new recruits, by reducing sympathy and support for violent extremism.

On a regional level, being aware that so far there is no regional security assessment for threats related to violent extremism and terrorism thus there is no regionally coordinated respond to the challenges the countries are facing, better coordination is inevitably needed. A regional security strategy and a platform for exchange of information and implementation of joint actions can certainly strengthen the capacity of the security agencies.

Having in mind the differences between the countries in the region while participating in broader regional security forums and initiatives, the idea that is already circulating in some policy making forums for setting up a “Regional Counterterrorism Center,” would certainly contribute to improve the situation in this field. Such center with competences narrowed to countering violent extremism and terrorism will enable the rapid exchange of intelligence, developing security analysis and evaluations, as well as op-

erational coordination of competent authorities. This center, tasked with management and synchronization of activities of the overall security community, will have great input in reducing terrorism threats, thus strengthening security and stability in the region. With the establishment of a Regional Counterterrorism Center in the countries of Western Balkans the police services and other security agencies will benefit from improving the quality of identification of threats, assessment of terrorism threats, operational coordination regarding intelligence information on terrorist groups (their networks, locations, capacities and intentions), early warning, prevention and coordination of activities between law enforcement agencies and intelligence responding to threats. Having in mind the linguistic diversity in the region of the Western Balkans, the Counterterrorism Center should cover the two linguistic groups: the Albanian language and Slavic group of languages.

Still, it remains important to collaborate with international governments, law enforcement and non-governmental organizations in order to gain greater insights, to understand the violent extremism from a global perspective and to use the most efficient techniques to counter it. In line with that, as stated in the Vienna Declaration,⁴ the cooperation between the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Europol, Interpol, Frontex and other institutions should be intensified. Europol is the EU's central body for the prevention of and fight against radicalisation, extremism and terrorism, and all authorised bodies have to pay particular emphasis on forwarding any relevant information to Europol's "Focal Point Travellers" and to the "Network of Contact Points" entrusted with the task of collecting and exchanging operational information on foreign fighters. The existing operational and strategic agreements that the countries from the region have with Europol are an important prerequisite to make this possible. Further agreements should also be concluded in line with identified needs. Furthermore, operational cooperation should be enhanced through further implementation of the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe.

⁴ Vienna Declaration on Tackling Violent Extremism and Terrorism (adopted on 20 March 2015), <http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/cs03documentsbmi/1657.PDF>.

At the end, it is important to underline that the need for policing to be responsive, adaptive and proactive in relation to the new challenges of the society has never been greater. Recognition of the importance of diversity issues and the implementation of appropriate strategies would assist policing in international and regional cooperation, connecting with the community and meeting the challenges of the future. As the Interior and Foreign Ministers from the region agreed with the Vienna Declaration, the immediate threat posed by “foreign terrorist fighters,” including the radicalized single perpetrators, calls for swift and efficient action by the law enforcement authorities. In this context, it is necessary to exploit all existing operational and legal instruments at the national and international level.⁵

Conclusions and recommendations

The number of foreign fighters with a jihadist political agenda participating in the Syrian civil war is constantly increasing and has become a growing concern for security experts and policymakers. Thus, the Balkan countries, as many other countries in the world, face an increased risk from terrorism, especially due to the actualization of the phenomenon of “foreign fighters” and, therefore, further participation of these countries in the global war against violent extremism is of crucial importance. Along with the police and other security agencies, community leaders and local law enforcement agencies share responsibility for addressing the prevention of violent extremism and terrorism within their communities. Thus, it is essential to focus on developing trust between police and other law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve in order to address the challenges of crime, violent extremism and terrorism prevention.

The relevant institutions as a part of their competencies and tasks attempt to have preventive impact over young people at risk, by averting them from departure into crises region. In the same time it is important to implement other operational measures and activities, where along with the role played by their families, the prevention of radicalization of young people will include educational institutions and religious communities with programs for respect of individualism, collectivism and basic moral values.

⁵ Ibid.

Stability and security of each state is an important link in the region. Therefore, it is essential to highlight domestic, regional and international efforts to prevent violent extremists and their supporters from radicalizing, recruiting, or inspiring individuals or groups from the Balkan countries or abroad to commit acts of violence. Facing all these new challenges, the authorities from the region must enhance their political and economic cooperation, as well as the mutual collaboration when it comes to security and development policies, all in the common interest of security. In all of this, they should also have, in mind the possible connections between illegal migration, violent extremism and terrorism. But, from a security point of view, only full integration of the Balkan countries in the EU would substantially improve the security in the region and would enable adequate mutual coordination and cooperation in responding the regional and global threats from violent extremism and terrorism and, generally, in addressing most of their national security issues.

The Role of the Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism

Izabela Kisić

Introduction

The contribution of civil society organizations is recognized in all international strategies on countering violent extremism. About 120 NGO representatives attended the Washington Countering Violent Extremism Summit (February, 2015),¹ which is one of the key events that define the international CVE agenda and strategy.

Conclusions of many international workshops/conferences (including those organized by UN, EU, OSCE) illustrate the multidimensional approach and relate to the civil society actors as essential partners in addressing violent extremism.² The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy highlights the role of non-governmental organizations and civil society in implementing this strategy.³ Another general conclusion implies that without adequate respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, counterterrorism measures are counterproductive and provoke further radicalization.

¹ Ministers from more than 60 countries, the High Representative and Vice President of the EU, the UN Secretary-General, the Secretaries General of the Council of Europe, the League of Arab States, the Organization of American States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the African Union's Peace and Security Commissioner, representatives from civil society and the private sector met in Washington to develop a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder action agenda against violent extremism. <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/cvesummit/releases/237673.htm>.

² See the documents: OSCE Fact Sheet on OSCE Activities to Counter Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism. <http://www.osce.org/secretariat/144741?download=true>; First Report of the WG on Radicalization and Extremists that lead to Terrorism. <http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/pdfs/radicalization.pdf>.

³ UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. <http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/strategy-counter-terrorism.shtml#poa4>.

This article highlights the role of the civil society in countering violent extremism in the context of the Western Balkans and its political, economic, social, historical and cultural context. The case study presented in this article tackles the situation in Serbia with a focus on the Sandžak region. It is worth mentioning that there are almost no comprehensive studies about the Western Balkans and the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in countering violent extremism that give examples of good practices or challenges, unlike the research on the USA, the EU or the Middle East countries.

The article points out the specific role of the civil society organizations and their contribution to the CVE programs and de-radicalization of the society. The intention is to analyze the local context from an international perspective. Further, the article also examines to what extent the conclusions about the role of civil society organizations in countering violent extremism are relevant to the local context.

Countries of the Western Balkans are EU candidates; however, this fact does not ensure their participation in direct EU programs for countering violent extremism. For instance, they cannot become members of the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN).⁴

Analysis framework

Contemporary societies including the Western Balkans are characterized by the plurality of extremism. These various types of extremism nurture one another and recruit young people. Extremist groups are interlinked and have global partners. Therefore, local initiatives cannot be perceived outside the global context.

⁴ The Radicalisation Awareness Network, launched in September 2011, is an umbrella network connecting people involved in preventing radicalization and violent extremism throughout Europe. First liner practitioners from different member states and Norway, such as social workers, religious leaders, youth leaders, policemen, researchers and others who work on the ground in vulnerable communities can meet, each in their area of expertise, in order to exchange ideas, knowledge and experiences. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/index_en.htm.

It should be emphasized that not every type of ideological radicalism is necessarily connected with terrorism or leads to it.

“All terrorists are by definition extremists. But not all extremists are terrorists. Extremists express significant dissent without necessarily being violent. Being extreme is perfectly legitimate, and sometimes even positive. In an open society, holding extreme views is recognized as a human right and protected in law, under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and under Article 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (...) However, terrorists often draw on extremist ideology, and there is some movement of people between the categories. The relationship between these groups is one of the most complex questions in counterterrorism. The difficulty for government is to recognize which types of extremism are merely uncomfortable, and what types are more dangerous”.⁵

One of the most complex tasks is to understand whether a certain organization endorsing radical ideas is becoming violent or could potentially become violent and pose a threat to the security and lives of citizens, or cause regression of human rights and freedoms in the society.

This article uses a definition, according to which de-radicalization “means rejecting the ideological basis of terrorism”.⁶ In most EU programs and projects de-radicalization implies providing support to those individuals who have abandoned violent radical organizations. The Western Balkans countries mainly place the focus on the youth prone to different risk factors, such as unemployment, instability, nationalism etc. which make them susceptible to recruitment of violent radical groups or to fleeing to foreign battlefields.

Formulating a successful strategy for countering violent extremism requires a deep insight into the civil society profile. Non-governmental organizations’ capacities depend on their relations, with the institutions and the local community, access to funds, favorable working environment, conditions for maintaining sustainable independence, cooperation with international organizations, relations between local NGOs and the potential for establishing local networks.⁷ Of course this list is far from being complete.

⁵ Bartlett, Jamie and Bridwell, Jonathan: “From suspects to Citizens: Preventing Violent Extremism in a Big Society”, UK , 2010. http://www.demos.co.uk/files/From_Suspects_to_Citizens_-_web.pdf?1279732377.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See more: “Study on the best practices in cooperation between authorities and civil

The role of the civil society is also defined by the level of its involvement in the de-radicalization process. It may be involved in the early stages of the process, or in developing the CVE strategy, or it may be limited to the implementation of a program. Bearing in mind that the civil society organizations are very close to the community, have constant communication, are able to get information directly from the citizens and are highly sensitive to the issue, their full potential should be used in the early stages of the strategy development.

The legitimacy of CSOs, especially in transition societies and in underdeveloped democratic institutions, depends on their independence from the government, political parties and other important factors with institutional influence such as religious communities. If they are perceived as close to the state or a political faction, they lose their legitimacy.

On the other hand, a civil society organization's efficiency can be measured in terms of its ability to open new communication channels at as many levels as possible. International communication at the level "community – civil society organization – institutions/state" provides information about problems, needs and possible solutions from different actors. This contributes to creating such strategies that are based on sophisticated information from all sectors. Moreover, it is also necessary to establish strategic partnerships between the representatives of different sectors and spheres of the society. The greatest advantage of the CSOs is that their approach to the community is based on trust, while institutions have the necessary capacities to implement relevant measures.

The engagement of civil society organizations influences not only the representatives of the target group, but also those who develop and implement the project – CSO employees and other participants such as lecturers. It is always a two-sided process with a continuous information exchange in both directions.

society with a view to the prevention and response to violent radicalization: A Report by the Change Institute", A study commissioned by DG JLS of the European Commission, London, July 2008. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/doc_centre/terrorism/docs/ecvr_best_practice_core_report_en.pdf.

Civil society organizations have the capacity for a wide range of activities, such as trainings for the civil servants (especially those known to the public, such as spokespersons), establishing political and inter-religious dialogue, developing and implementing programs for countering discrimination, integration and cohesion programs, trainings for the media professionals, working with artists, organizing educational programs about identity, culture, religion and human rights that promote critical thinking. The other area of activity includes the promotion of public policies through advocacy (which implies identifying the problem and producing a set of recommendations to the regions exposed to radicalization). The third type of activity includes issuing “early warnings” about problems that may trigger violence. CSOs can also be useful in the evaluation of governmental strategies and programs.

Case study – Sandžak

Wide context: The Dayton Agreement (1995) that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina left the Bosnian question in the Western Balkans unsolved. The consequence of politics during the ‘90s and not dealing with the past is the increased number of Serbian nationalist right-wing organizations, which is the dominant type of extremism in Serbia.

Violence erupted after the football match between Serbia and Albania in October 2014 – many shops and stores owned by the Muslim population in Serbia were attacked and demolished and a Molotov cocktail was thrown at a mosque. Researcher and journalist Boris Varga wrote in his study about extremism in Serbia that ethnic extremism operates on the principle of action-reaction: “Therefore, violence in South Serbia, Sandžak and the entire Western Balkans region can easily provoke extreme ethnic activities in Vojvodina, and vice versa”.⁸

The number of extreme right-wing organizations has been on the rise since 2000. Their sources of financing are nontransparent and their activities increasingly organized. Reports of nongovernmental organizations point to a high level of impunity for the violence of members of right-wing organi-

⁸ Varga, Boris: “Od nacionalizma do ekstremizma – samo nekoliko sati”. In: Helsinška povelja: Ekstremizam. Belgrade, December 2014, pp. 13-18.

zations. They are closely connected to academic and political circles which indicates their potential influence in the society.⁹ Sociologists and lecturers at the youth seminars, which have been organized by the civil society organizations in Serbia as part of the CVE program, said that the ideological framework and values promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church can also be identified in the rhetoric of the right-wing organizations in Serbia. “(...) they do not differ from similar organizations in Europe, but interestingly they emphasize religious (clerical) elements in their identity.”¹⁰

The Republic of Serbia has no national strategy for the inclusion of the civil society and its initiatives in the programs for countering extremist ideologies of violent groups.¹¹ Cooperation of CSOs and institutions in this area was based on ad-hoc initiatives so far.

Experiences in the different parts of the world have taught us that knowing and understanding the local context is the starting point of the development of successful CVE strategies and their implementation.

Narrow context: The focus of this case study is on the adequate measures for deterring the youth from going to the Middle Eastern battlefields and joining terrorist organizations in that region. The public is not informed about the influence of terrorist groups in Serbia and the recruitment for foreign battlefields. The public opinion is largely formed on the basis of information from the media – particularly tabloids – which rely on anonymous and untrusted sources. Due to the lack of information, the process of writing a good de-radicalization strategy is hindered.

⁹ Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia: “Extremism – Recognizing a Social Evil”, , Belgrade, 2014.

¹⁰ Barišić, Srdjan: “Duhovna legitimizacija ekstremne desnice”. In: “Ekstremizam kako prepoznati društveno zlo”. Belgrade, 2014, pp. 38-70; Digest in English is available in: Helsinki Committee: Legitimization of the Extreme Right-wing”, In: “Extremism – Recognizing a Social Evil”. Belgrade, 2014.

¹¹ The Government of the Republic of Serbia is writing the Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism with the support of the OSCE Mission. See: TV N1, September 21, 2015. <http://rs.n1info.com/a94175/Vesti/OEBS-Pomoc-Srbiji-uborbi-protiv-terorizma.html>.

Working with the young Muslims who the extremists see as a target group or “new soldiers” requires a subtle approach as they are also members of an ethnic minority group in Serbia. On the other hand, the methodology implemented for a long time by the local NGOs in countering extremist ideologies based on Serbian nationalism, can also be implemented for other forms of extremist ideologies.

Sandžak is a region located on the territory of two countries: Serbia and Montenegro. The Serbian part of Sandžak borders Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Muslims make up a majority in the Sandžak region, but they are a minority in Serbia. Sandžak is one of the least economically developed regions in Serbia: 50 percent of the population is unemployed. Sandžak lacks economic investments as it is not close to the highway. Fifty percent of the population is younger than 30.

The local community is politically, religiously, inter and intra-ethnically polarized. Conflicts between the political parties sometimes result in violence of their activists. Verbal radicalism, particularly online, is even more intense than before. Radicalization of the society is greatly influenced by the negative political climate and absence of political authorities.

The Islamic community is divided since 2007 into the “Islamic Community of Serbia” and the “Islamic Community in Serbia”. Tensions between the two communities are strong and given that the law recognizes only one Islamic community, the relationship between the believers is worsening. The two communities only have political differences, not religious. The “third option” also appeared recently. In addition to the groups that follow traditional Islamic practice, the number of independent Jama’at is also increasing their followers (Salafists) bow differently from the followers of traditional Islam.

In the societies with a divided or plural Muslim community, support to only one group can be counterproductive. A limited approach to the Islamic communities and cooperation with only one of them should be avoided, particularly when the collaboration is limited to the Islamic community supported by the state or to the community perceived as moderate by the local community and the state. Significant changes will not occur unless radical and conservative communities are included. A similar di-

lemma appears in the peace talks when debating whether to include radical groups. “Civil society should also reach out to dialogue and work with violent, hard-line groups, as that is where the biggest impact on preventing violence can be achieved. Governments should support civil society organizations in reaching out to the most difficult groups”.¹²

The relationship between secularism and religion in the forming of the Bosniak identity is still one of the burning issues in Serbia and the Western Balkans. The fallout of Yugoslavia during the war and nationalist policies combined with crimes, further contributed to the radicalization of groups in the process of forming of new identities that is based on religious conservatism. The community consequently rejected moderate approaches that promote a different and multilayered identity of the community along with a more moderate narrative.

The negative stereotype of a “dangerous Turk” that is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the non-Muslim part of the Slavs in the Balkans dates back to the times of the Ottoman Empire. With its dissolution, violence against the Muslims began. They had accepted Islam as autochthonous people. The goal of these violent acts was to banish Muslims from the Balkans (see the First and the Second Balkan War, the Second World War, the wars during the ‘90s...)

Muslims’ mistrust in the state institutions is very high at the national level, and the integration of Bosniaks (Muslims) after the ‘90s wars is very slow. The crimes against Bosniaks during the ‘90s, including crimes and torture of the people in Sandžak and impunity of the perpetrators, contribute to the frustration and mistrust of the Muslim population.

The information provided by the police in Novi Pazar indicates that the police are in control of the situation in Sandžak regarding a potential danger that comes from extremism and thus serious threats to security do not

¹² Report Global Event, Addressing Violent Extremism Side Event of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy Review , 26. June 2012. <http://www.humansecuritynetwork.net/documents/125374024/0/Report+of+the+June+26+Global+Conference+Addressing+Violent+Extremism>.

exist.¹³ The increasing number of followers of Wahhabism in Sandžak is a subject of securitization.¹⁴ However, for permanent stability it is necessary to have other institutions functional as well. So for example the independent civil society is faced with a series of challenges caused by tensions in the society.

Civil Society: Local civil society actors hold unique knowledge by maintaining the trust of the local community and understanding the roots of conflict that drive extremism.¹⁵ The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia implements activities in Sandžak since 2012 as a part of the CVE Program.¹⁶ This was the first project whose goal was to support de-radicalization in the Sandžak region. The Committee has a vast experience in working with the youth, particularly in deterring the youth from nationalist right-wing ideologies and groups through the development of critical thinking and promotion of human rights values and fundamental freedoms.

The Committee, whose head office is in the capital of Serbia, also cooperates with the local nongovernmental organizations in Sandžak in the implementation of project activities. The legitimacy of the organization would be questionable if it did not have the capacity for such cooperation. On the other hand, local NGOs are often targets of the attacks of radical groups, thus making it difficult for them to be in the forefront.

The goals: Empowering the youth to prevent radicalization; building trust between the police and the youth by “breaking” the stereotypes about the police, Islam and youth culture.

¹³ Interviews of the project staff with the representatives of the police and other stakeholders, Novi Pazar, September 2015.

¹⁴ Fahrudin Kladničanin, “Wahhabis in the Cyberspace of Serbia”. In: “Political Extremism in Cyberspace of Serbia” Zrenjanin 2013, pp. 127-134.

¹⁵ Report Global Event, Addressing Violent Extremism Side Event of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy Review, 26 June 2012. <http://www.humansecuritynetwork.net/documents/125374024/0/Report+of+the+June+26+Global+Conference+Addressing+Violent+Extremism>.

¹⁶ This project has been realized since 2012 with the support of the US State Department through the Countering Violent Extremism Program.

Target group: The youth is the most vulnerable group susceptible to radicalization. Therefore the project focuses on the youth in the age group 17-28, on secondary school and university students as well as young professionals.

It seems that family connections are getting weaker and that the family as a role model does not have much influence on the youth anymore. The only institution that gathers the youth are Youth Offices, which are often influenced by the political parties. They usually gather the youth of one political party and for that reason they are not very inclusive.

The research of NGO Damad from Novi Pazar¹⁷ identified several risk factors in the community, which are important for understanding possible reasons for extremism and radicalism: economic insecurity (unemployment and poverty), institutional insecurity (lack of the rule of law and corruption), constant feeling of deprivation and injustice, long-running and unresolved conflicts, divisions into “us” and “them” along political, religious and ethnic lines that affect numerous spheres of public and private life, antagonism and hate speech, increased intolerance towards diversity inside the groups, with no room for the development of common interests and symbolic space for dialogue and exchange of opinions, normalization and legitimization of violence, lack of institutional mechanisms for the prevention of violence and its sanctioning, overall increase and acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of communication among the youth, social exclusion and isolation from the political, economic, social and religious life and an overall apathy.

Activities include **youth seminars**¹⁸ whose goal is education and opening space for critical thinking and dialogue between the peers and lecturers. One of the goals of these activities is to empower the youth to create an authentic counter narrative.

¹⁷ “Grad i dalje podeljen po mnogo osnova” (The town continues to be divided along many fundamentals), In: Danas, 11 June 2015. http://www.danas.rs/dodaci/sandzak/grad_je_i_dalje_podeljen_po_mnogo_osnova.42.html?news_id=303135.

¹⁸ Seminar topics: identity, causes of radicalization, war past in the region and war crimes, deconstruction of myths and stereotypes, youth, family and sports violence, etc.

Building, conveying and publishing comprehensive counter narratives to violent extremism is a crucial, maybe the most challenging task. Creating a narrative requires comprehensiveness, credibility, and wide accessibility:

“A comprehensive counter narrative should be able to cover major dimensions of the violent extremist ontology in question, namely the political, historical, socio-psychological, theological, and instrumental dimensions. It also has to be conveyed, promoted and supported by credible messengers. Since 1960s, empirical data have constantly shown that sophisticated counterarguments to the ideologies to the violent extremists without conveyance by credible messengers can have only limited success”.¹⁹

Those messengers could be: scholars, respectable and independent religious clerics, CSO activists. It is very important who conveys the message, it makes a difference.

For example, one seminar participant said that he would not try to dissuade a friend or a cousin who decided to be a foreign fighter. He would not try to convince him to stay because it is his decision and God’s way. Our experience shows that credible persons who are very familiar with religion, politics and psychology should talk to such individuals. It is also important to tailor those messages to different audiences, especially young people. These should not be banal propaganda messages.

On the other side, one of the youth group members transformed from a football fan who used to participate in sports related incidents into one of the young leaders in his local community and now inspires other young people and brings about changes.

The second type of activity is **open discussions of the representatives of the police and the youth**. Civil society advocates a human security approach vs. state security, focusing on the protection of citizens rather than on number of caught terrorists. Related to that, it is necessary to set up the open dialogue between civil society and police and authorities on the analyses of the problem of spreading violent ideologies and to take measures which are necessary to counter it. All levels of the police are included in

¹⁹ Ashour, Omar: “Online De-Radicalization? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy”, 2010. <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/128/html>.

this project, from the higher to the lower officials, which gives credibility to the project.

The third part of the program are **outreach events** organized by the youth (funds for these activities are available). Through peer to peer work, CSOs provide the space for dialogue and opportunities for bridge-building among polarized groups. The Helsinki Committee gathers young people from various Islamic communities, recognized and unrecognized by the state, students of the public and the private university, which are also in a clash, youth wings of political parties, etc.

“By raising awareness of nonviolent conflict resolution skills and developing opportunities for diverse youth to work together for common purposes, civil society programs help lay the groundwork for more tolerant societies and future leaders. CSOs also create media programming that introduces youth role models and promotes coexistence between ethnic groups to thousands of viewers”.²⁰

A supporting activity of the youth is **online activism**. The general opinion is that the Internet is an instrument for recruitment of young people and a powerful mechanism with a significant role in the process of radicalization. The Internet is not only used for propaganda, it is also means of communication and coordination of activities in the offline sphere. It is used more often to facilitate the communication of like-minded people than as a platform for discussions. What are the effects of online activism in the process of de-radicalization?

Many websites and social networks are used in Sandžak for brutal attacks on political opponents. One of the challenges is how to motivate young people who oppose extremism to get involved online to create the counter narrative. Moderate young people evidently lack the motivation to get involved in such way. We concluded that it is not possible to have serious content and texts on the Facebook page without the “mother site”. Another challenge in small towns is that hate speech and negative messages put a much bigger pressure on individuals to give up on doing the activities that provoked negative reactions in the first place.

²⁰ Report Global Event: Addressing Violent Extremism, 26 June 2012. <http://www.humansecuritynetwork.net/documents/125374024/0/Report+of+the+J+une+26+Global+Conference+Addressing+Violent+Extremism>.

In the virtual world the content should only be observed in connection with concrete events. Therefore, online contents of the young activists in Sandžak are related to the events that they organize, and Internet (mostly Facebook) is used largely as a notice board with invitations to events that they organize and for short reports of activities they implemented.

Achievements: A youth group was formed whose members are young people from opposing sides, capable to work “on the field” and motivate their peers for grass roots activism.

Challenges: direct vs. indirect approach

Civil society organizations rather choose the indirect than direct approach. They emphasize human rights, fundamental freedoms, integration and cohesion of the society and are thus a control mechanism. CSOs fill out the space that the state officials either neglect or have limited effect on. Indirect approach of the civil society complements other activities of the institutions in the democratic societies. Pressure on the civil society to directly address radicalism can be counterproductive and negatively affect the trust built in the community and put CSOs at a risk.

The De-radicalization of a society is a complex process that requires a holistic approach and a wide spectrum of activities. If the CSOs take this approach and address multiple important issues in the community, the assumption is that the community will trust the organization more, and be more willing to get involved.

However, in some situations CSOs are also likely to approach the problem directly. For example, the attack on Charlie Hebdo and murder of 12 journalists on January 7, 2015 requested an adequate reaction of the youth in Sandžak. It was decided that the debate “Religion Instigates Dialogue” will be organized in Novi Pazar. Questions were asked: What is radical Islam? Who is being attacked, Europe or Muslims? Who does Charlie Hebdo enter into dialogue with? What freedoms caricatures conquer? What are the reasons behind religious radicalism and battling for it?

Citizens from various social groups attended the debate: the youth, representatives of various Islamic communities (traditional and non-traditional),

police representatives, local self-government including the Mayor, opposed political parties, etc.

In order for the debate to be as open and focused as possible, we waited for the first wave of reactions to end, and the debate was organized at the end of February 2015. This public debate was the first occasion since the beginning of the project, when the topic of extremism was discussed in such a direct manner. The organizers (youth group) were faced with certain resistance to the very idea of organizing a public debate about this topic. We were told that this is a very sensitive topic and that we can expect negative reactions. One must not forget that after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, a protest because of islamophobia was organized in Novi Pazar (23 January).

During the heated debate, a part of the audience entered into discussion about the topics of the debate with a number of panelists. Representatives of one of the local political parties left the event as a sign of protest. Their official explanation was that they are leaving because they do not agree with the statement of one of the panelists, who said that everyone has the right to criticize religion and clerics. However, the analysis of the event and talks in the community after the debate showed that the actual reason for their leaving was that political opponents from the local community were also present at the event.

The incident and polemical tones during the debate also raised concerns among the youths who were the local organizers of the event. They were concerned about how they will be perceived in the local community and whether they will be safe in the future. This could have jeopardized the implementation of the project. In order to manage the risk we have talked extensively with the youth organizers of the debate when it was finished. They showed the readiness to overcome their own fears and prejudice.

The youth also talked to the police representatives about Charlie Hebdo. They wanted to know whether the terrorist attacks in Europe could be reflected also in Novi Pazar and whether this could worsen their safety and security. The trust between the youth and the police is growing stronger with each open discussion and possibility for speculation that provokes additional tensions decreases.

The indirect approach is also important in the context of plurality of extremisms in a society. Therefore, speaking about the consequences of various extremist ideologies instead of focusing on only one of them has a greater influence.

Applying the direct approach requires systematic preparation and several steps of project planning in order to build community trust. De-radicalization in the communities in which the majority group is stereotyping the minority and is having extremist attitudes towards the minority group, which is being radicalized, should include the deconstruction of stereotypes and extremist messages. Deconstruction of an ideological extremism is easier to approach if the extremist matrix of another ideology is analyzed.

The choice between direct and indirect approach remains one of the biggest challenges. When making the choice, several factors already mentioned in the text should be taken into consideration: the context, legitimacy of the CSO in the community, risk to the activists ... It can be assumed that the direct approach is a good option in cases of mapping and countering violent extremism of the majority communities in a society, as is the case of extremist right-wing groups in Europe. Undoubtedly, future researches and case studies should additionally focus on this topic.

Conclusion

Innovativeness and success of civil society organizations is measured by the efficient opening of various communication channels in the relations “community – civil society organizations – institutions” and in relations between various actors in a radicalized society, as well as by gaining legitimacy within the community. This is a starting point for change.

There is a wide and internationally recognized range of activities and tools for de-radicalization, but the content of these activities remains crucial. The content of activities should be based on the local context and the sources of radicalization. Although nowadays countering violent extremism is a global problem, it is of utmost importance to consider the local context when developing de-radicalization programs.

Engaging a greater number of actors from various society sectors (representatives of the community, institutions, police, religious communities etc.) requires time, but also produces long-term effects.

The range of civil society organizations' activities also has certain limitations. When their role is only advocacy, the implementation of recommendations depends primarily on the state's capacities and the political will. Funding civil society organizations in the Western Balkans is irregular and unstable which often results in the lack of continuity and long-term effect.

Recommendations

The more numerous and long-term the initiatives are, the more various actors they embrace, the more considerable the CVE effects become. One of the greatest challenges is to conceptualize the counter narrative. Therefore, information exchange on the international level including civil society representatives and experts in the different sectors is necessary. Moreover, a roster of experts from the Western Balkans with a different profile should be formed.

Pressuring the civil society to directly mark radicalism can be counterproductive, reduce the level of the community trust and put civil society organizations at risk.

Securing stable support for long-term projects (lasting 3-5 years) is also important, for CVE initiatives require longer periods of time and a long-term approach. NGOs in the Western Balkans should not be expected to become financially sustainable within a short period of time. It should not be assumed either that the countries in the region will support NGOs financially.

Civil society should reach out to dialogue and work with the most conservative groups which are most difficult to engage, in order to have the biggest possible effect on the prevention of violence.

Countering Violent Extremism – The Role of the European Union

Marianne Wade

Introduction

Discussion on countering violent extremism at the European Union level is currently, and has been for the past two years or so, dominated by the notions of “returning jihadis” and “foreign fighters” more broadly. The (potentially counterfeit) Syrian passport found next to the body of an assailant during the recent attacks in Paris reinforced fears of the immediate danger posed to Europeans by fighters, who have gained experience in that desperate conflict.¹ Within the context of the massive people flows of the ongoing refugee crisis a sense of dread as to who might be taking advantage of Europe’s inability to control its borders became seemingly pervasive.² Given that external relations, immigration and terrorism are all policy areas in which the EU plays a (central) role, it seems superfluous to note that the EU has a key role to play in this arena, potentially also for the countries of the Western Balkans.

Even prior to the Paris attacks, this was a policy area marked by unprecedented activity within the international arena. Thus for example, Interpol created a Foreign Terrorist Fighters programme in April 2013 due to concerns over the number of fighters flocking to Syria and Iraq. When the UN Security Council hosted a briefing on this issue, Interpol was present to provide expert advice “as Ministers of Interior gather before this body for the first time in history.”³ Clearly this is a very specific context in which nation states will happily make use of international structures and international entities, even in unprecedented manners. As a security actor coming

¹ Ishaan Tharoor „Were Syrian refugees involved in the Paris attacks? What we know and don’t know.“ Washington Post, 17th November 2015.

² Patrick Kingsley “Why Syrian refugee passport found at Paris attack scene must be treated with caution” The Guardian, 15th November 2015.

³ Jürgen Stock „Statement“ to United Nations Security Council Ministerial Briefing on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, New York, 29th May 2015.

into its own, it is unimaginable that the EU will not follow the calls of its member states, accession states and those negotiating such status to undertake activity in this area. Indeed, it is a mark of the EU as a security actor, that no specific call to action has been needed.

Discussion on the Western Balkans is somewhat unusual in that it relates not only to foreign fighters in Syria (and perhaps Iraq) but also to the Serbian and Croatian nationalists who are fighting in Ukraine. Nevertheless, as shall become apparent, the mechanisms the EU can offer for dealing with the “foreign fighters” phenomenon, applies to both constellations, provided, of course, they are both politically defined as falling within the remit of EU work in this area.

The Problem as Defined at the EU Level

Countering violent extremism can naturally apply to fighting anything encompassed by the term terrorism. The latter is notoriously not defined under international law and therefore, presumably avoided in the current discussion. A search for exploration of the term “violent extremism” within the EU context yields results relating in the first instance to foreign fighters per se. More precisely these refer to concerns about the numbers of individuals leaving EU member states to join forces fighting in Syria. When specified attention is detailed, this is focused almost exclusively on “jihadis” and those emigrating to join Daesh.⁴

Ever more strongly, the EU’s role countering violent extremism is concerned with the return of the latter individuals to Europe and their potential as a security threat. There is, however, also a longer-standing and still present – though currently overshadowed – discussion of violence linked to causes more broadly. Given particularly the work undertaken by Euro-pol in the context of its annual Terrorism Threat Assessment (TE-SAT) it would be worrying not to see any trace of this amassing knowledge expertise in EU policy discussion. This serves as a fitting reminder that the EU is not an ad hoc actor in this arena but houses expert capacities to the benefit of member, accession and associated states.

⁴ See Zeba Kahn “Words matter in ‘ISIL’ war so use ‘Daesh’” *The Boston Globe*, 9th October 2014.

Undeniably, however, the more recent flood of documents is more strongly focused. Discussion concentrates on events in Syria and European nationals involvement in them or attempts by the latter to reach them. This is not surprising given the attention member state criminal justice systems are for example, devoting to such individuals. Thus reports of high prison sentences handed to those returning from or attempting to reach Syria are becoming more frequent.⁵ EU discussion of these issues centre strongly around input by the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator whose work maps gaps and progress in the nitty gritty of law enforcement activity. In October 2014 the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator issued a paper following up the August Council Conclusions on foreign fighters made against the background of Daesh's increasing power and aggression.⁶ Detailed analysis of the need for legal change at EU and national levels, improved co-operation and use of agencies such as Interpol, Europol, Eurojust and other relevant EU agencies was provided.⁷ These developments will be analysed further in what follows.

Alongside this discussion at the EU level, it is important to recognise the more subtle reminders of the complexities involved. One can worry about community relations and the flow of information to law enforcement, e.g. when one reads of West Midlands police being accused of betrayal by families who asked for assistance in getting their sons (who left in 2013 to fight the Assad regime) out of Syria. Families are horrified that their pleas resulted in court cases and 12 year prison sentences for the returnees.⁸ Other

⁵ See e.g. „Islamistischer Terror: Syrien-Rückkehrer zu elf Jahren Haft verurteilt“ Der Spiegel, 15.07.2015 and UK cases cited in following footnotes.

⁶ EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator “Effective criminal justice response to the phenomenon of foreign fighters.” 10th October 2014, Council Doc. 14188/14.

⁷ Ibid and EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator “Foreign fighters and returnees: discussion paper” 2 December 2014, Council Document 15715/2/14.

⁸ Tracey McVeigh “‘Police betrayed me,’ says mother of imprisoned British jihadi” The Observer, 6th December 2014. It must be noted that the UK Supreme Court has expressed concern over the very broad definition of terrorism in British law citing the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislations opinion that “the current law allows members of any nationalist or separatist group to be turned into terrorists by virtue of their participation in a lawful armed conflict, however great the provocation and however odious the regime which they have attacked”.” see R v Gul [2013] UKSC 64, para. 61.

media reports found beyond the headlines, detail other fates of those who chose to go to Syria. Thus e.g. reports of a teenager from Vienna, beaten to death for trying to leave Raqqa after two years there.⁹ Amongst the flurry of EU activity, it is easy to forget that some member states focus on other aspects of these disturbing phenomena. Thus e.g. Denmark runs, above all, rehabilitative programmes for returnees from Syria.¹⁰ Whilst it would be unfair to claim EU documents never make reference to the broader social contexts of the problems relating to violent extremism, it would be wrong to regard the EU as, matters currently stand, as anything but a (more narrowly focused) security actor in this realm.

EU Council documents more generally touch upon a number of neuralgic, security-related points: securing the external borders of the Schengen area, the need for a PNR data agreement, internet content, which encourages violent extremism, illegal trafficking of firearms and co-operation amongst member states.¹¹ The Statement of the 12th of February 2015, which serves as an orientation point for Council work includes a section on “preventing radicalisation and safeguarding values.” This highlights a need for tolerant dialogue and communication to “counter terrorist ideologies” as well as educational and rehabilitative measures. However, far more specific goals are named in relation to securing citizens (those named above, operational law enforcement information sharing, anti-financing and money laundering activities and a Directive to step up cyber-security). The cooperation with international partners section includes reference to e.g. capacity building projects relating to border controls with the Western Balkans.¹²

⁹ Stern “Junge Wienerin Samra K. flüchtete aus IS-Hochburg - ist sie nun tot?” Stern 25th November 2015.

¹⁰ e.g. European Parliamentary Research Service “Foreign Fighters” Briefing, February 2015, PE 548.980, p. 8. Lorenzo Vidino, “Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Responses in Eleven Countries” CSS Study, March 2014, Zürich:ETH. p. 9 et seq.

¹¹ See e.g. Conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council, 12th and 13th of March 2015, Council Doc. 7178/15, p. 4.

¹² Detailed follow up on the implementation of these measures can be found in reports provided by the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator “Follow-up to the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12th February 2015 on counter-terrorism: Report on implementation of measures” of 10th June 2015, Council Doc. 9422/1/15 and “Follow-up to the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12th February 2015 on counter-terrorism: State of play on implementation of measures” of

Whilst there is discussion of the necessity of legal reform, legislation is not the main focus of EU activity in this area. Often legislation has proved the focal point of EU activity in relation to trans-national crime. Centrally in relation to terrorism, the EU seems already to have undertaken the necessary work when updating the Framework Decision on Terrorism 2002 in 2008. Since then namely, article 3 (2) provides for criminalisation of a number of preparatory acts; including “public provocation” to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment or training for terrorism.

Clearly the EU has already been activated as a security governance level to ensure its member states feature legislation criminalising a broad range of terrorism-related behaviour. In so doing much has been undertaken in the past to ensure behaviour associated with the foreign fighters phenomenon should already be criminally culpable. EU activity in this policy-area can thus fall-back on previous work. Indeed, this prior activity gains greater legitimacy given today’s discussions. It is important, however, to note that this older legislation was and remains controversial. It required major departures from traditional principles of criminal law in a number of member states.¹³ Terrorism as a legal concept is an incendiary topic and the criminalising of associated activities of this nature: ones associated with phenomena regarded as dangerous rather than directly and immediately linked to the culpable activities feared (namely murders and bodily injury in the member states) themselves, are developments associated with the controversially titled and debated “enemy criminal law” phenomenon.¹⁴

Defining the Issues and Identifying Responses

At the EU level at the moment, the foreign fighters phenomenon, usually dealt with under the cloak of violent extremism, appears superficially to fit into the broader terrorism debate and the mainly criminal justice focused response chosen for that threat thus far. It would, however, be foolish to

5th October 2015, Council Doc. 12318/15.

¹³ See e.g. Korošec, D. & Zgaga, S. (2009) *Anti-terrorism Related Criminal Law Reforms and Human Rights in Slovenia*; and Derenčinović, D. (2009) *The Evolution of the Anti-terror Legal and Institutional Framework in Croatia*. Both in Wade, M. and Maljević, A. (2009) *A War on Terror?* (pp305-320) New York: Springer.

¹⁴ Jacobs, G. (2004) *Bürgerstrafrecht und Feindstrafrecht*. In: *HRRS 3/2004*, S. 88-95.

lose sight of the far broader problem we Europeans are faced with in this context.

The history of Daesh alone should be suitable to convince us of the dangers posed by significant numbers of militarily trained and experienced persons left idle with grim prospects.¹⁵ Such concerns led e.g. the allied forces at the end of WW II to negotiate the tricky process of de-nazification rather than to attempt any other, broad-scale response to the shock of discovering the true nature of what the war had masked. Hind-sight cannot but leave on asking where this historical knowledge resided as coalition forces decided to disband Saddam's forces in Iraq. The problems currently forcing their way into the minds of European citizens are reminders that conflicts pose difficulties for us all, long after military solutions may appear to be found. The EU has acknowledged the challenges faced in Iraq and Syria as going well beyond the security realm and into that of foreign policy.¹⁶ The purpose of this paper is to highlight the need for more a more comprehensive, holistic approach in this policy area as it relates to EU citizens in criminal justice and related social matters. It is vital to remember that the central problem remains the situation in Syria, not "just" the immediate security concerns, which hit us so disconcertingly close to home. A paper of this nature cannot, of course, deal with the multitude of issues as a whole but it would be remiss to ignore the wider and powerful push and pull factors which surround the central issues addressed here.

The identification of an appropriate response, of course, presupposes a clear understanding of what precisely is at stake. For the purposes of this paper, the response to violent extremism in the narrower sense identified within EU discussion is focused upon. Our concerns relating to violent extremists as currently being discussed in this more restricted EU policy area are nevertheless manifold. Europeans have rightly been shocked by

¹⁵ See e.g. Ruth Sherlock „Inside the leadership of Islamic State: how the new 'caliphate' is run“ The Telegraph, 9th July 2014.

¹⁶ Thus Council Documents often acknowledge the need to rethink EU strategy towards Syria and Iraq and indeed a strategy exists specifically relating this to the foreign fighters phenomenon. Council of the European Union “ Outline of the counter-terrorism strategy for Syria and Iraq, with particular focus on foreign fighters” 16th January 2015, Council Doc. 5369/15.

images of citizens committing atrocities as foreign fighters.¹⁷ Deep discomfort is undeniably felt at the idea of young men, and perhaps particularly bright young women, leaving western societies in order to join radical Islamist fighting groups, particularly Daesh and the society it is attempting to build. Increasingly concern focuses upon the potential threat posed by such individuals should they choose to return to their EU countries of origin as experienced, radicalised fighters. Finally, the propaganda skills of Daesh have lent the fears of home-grown terrorists inspired by radical Islamist groups new vigour. So how can we respond to these concerns and what constitutes an appropriate EU role in doing so?

A Legislative Response

Unsurprisingly calls can be heard for legislation to protect us against these phenomenon. With e.g. British politicians keen to prevent citizens leaving for or returning from Syria legislation is now in place to allow law enforcement agencies to pursue this policy.¹⁸ The UK Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 provides for the seizure of passports and other travel documents from persons suspected of involvement in terrorism¹⁹ and for the imposition of temporary exclusion orders which prevent the return of individuals to the UK unless this return complies with a pre-issued permit issued by the relevant Government Minister (or deportation proceedings to the UK).²⁰

¹⁷ A propaganda stream exploited by Daesh leading to notoriety for Mohammed Emwazi, the British citizen beheading a number of US American and British prisoners on camera during the course of 2014. See e.g. Dominic Casciani “Profile of Mohammed Emwazi a.k.a. ‘Jihadi John’” BBC News, 13th November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-31641569>.

¹⁸ Nigel Morris “New laws to stop jihadists and ‘jihadi brides’ leaving UK rushed through House” The Independent, 10th March 2015. Home Office “Counter-Terrorism and Security Act” Gov.uk, 12th February 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/counter-terrorism-and-security-bill>.

¹⁹ Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, section 1 “(1) Schedule 1 makes provision for the seizure and temporary retention of travel documents where a person is suspected of intending to leave Great Britain or the United Kingdom in connection with terrorism-related activity....”

²⁰ Section 2 of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 explains when such an order can be made: “(2) The Secretary of State may impose a temporary exclusion order on an individual if conditions A to E are met.

This norm, like the canon of counter-terrorism legislation in the UK is lent particularly wide reach by the UK's broad definition of terrorism not long ago subjected to strong criticism by the UK Supreme Court because it renders many forms of resistance to even the most oppressive regimes terrorism.²¹

As should become clear from these norms, the strategy adopted by the UK Government – which declares itself as actively seeking to ensure EU activity in this area – is an extremely far-reaching legal approach. This will come as no surprise to those familiar with UK counter terrorism law. The central definition of terrorism reveals that narrowing precision is not the main concern.²² Thus any government can be the target of activity deemed to be

(3) Condition A is that the Secretary of State reasonably suspects that the individual is, or has been, involved in terrorism-related activity outside the United Kingdom.

(4) Condition B is that the Secretary of State reasonably considers that it is necessary, for purposes connected with protecting members of the public in the United Kingdom from a risk of terrorism, for a temporary exclusion order to be imposed on the individual.

(5) Condition C is that the Secretary of State reasonably considers that the individual is outside the United Kingdom.

(6) Condition D is that the individual has the right of abode in the United Kingdom.

(7) Condition E is that:

(a) the court gives the Secretary of State permission under section 3, or

(b) the Secretary of State reasonably considers that the urgency of the case requires a temporary exclusion order to be imposed without obtaining such permission.

(8) During the period that a temporary exclusion order is in force, the Secretary of State must keep under review whether condition B is met.“

²¹ R v Gul [2013] UKSC 64.

²² Terrorism is defined in the UK by the Terrorism Act 2000 as follows:

“1 Terrorism: interpretation.

(1) In this Act “terrorism” means the use or threat of action where:

(a) the action falls within subsection (2),

(b) the use or threat is designed to influence the government [F1or an international governmental organisation] or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and

(c) the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious [F2, racial] or ideological cause.

(2) Action falls within this subsection if it:

(a) involves serious violence against a person,

(b) involves serious damage to property,

(c) endangers a person's life, other than that of the person committing the action,

(d) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public,

or

terrorist. The Supreme Court has acknowledged this definition to cover all activity directed at foreign governments as noted above (see footnote 9). Thus, although new norms have been created with the current concerns relating to the foreign fighters phenomenon in mind, legally they are drawn far more widely than applying merely to this group. Whilst it would be surprising to find these norms being utilised against individuals other than Muslims thought to potentially be seeking a role particularly in the conflict in Syria in practice, legally in fact, far more individuals have been captured.

This UK legislative activity was undertaken in response to the foreign fighters phenomenon. As we have seen the call at the EU level is for tailored legislation. The UK's choice to recourse to such general norms, however, highlights that this approach is narrow and difficult to pour into legislative form without being discriminatory. After all, the foreign fighters problem has really become prominent in our minds since US American and British prisoners have been murdered on camera. Furthermore the most prominent "securing citizens" strand of EU policy clearly highlights that our concern is, above all what foreign fighters mean for us directly. It is less about ensuring accountability for acts undertaken by citizens abroad. There is apparent concern to prevent individuals leaving and motivation does go beyond the merely security focused.²³ Once individuals have left, however, the concern is clearly that any threat they pose be identified and controlled. Given the discussion of Syrian returnees, this cannot but appear logical; radicalised, hateful, battle-hardened individuals returning to the countries of origin they willingly turned their backs on cannot be treated otherwise

Do we know what foreign fighters are?

Except of course, that returnees are broadly acknowledged as not only fitting this profile. As has been noted for some time, foreign fighters are not a

(e) is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system.

(3) The use or threat of action falling within subsection (2) which involves the use of firearms or explosives is terrorism whether or not subsection (1) (b) is satisfied. It is important to note that the British definition of terrorism features no geographic limitation to its applicability. Such action undertaken against any government therefore constitutes terrorism.

²³ Thus discussion is of young people lured by Daesh propaganda for instance: Vikram Dodd and Nadia Khomami "Two Bethnal Green schoolgirls 'now married to Isis men' in Syria" *The Guardian*, 4th July 2015.

new phenomenon. Great literary figures record their time as such from Byron to Hemmingway. Indeed, without the willingness of many to fight abroad for the rights of others,²⁴ Europe would be a very different place today. From a less idealistic viewpoint one may even speculate that the UK and other European neighbours may find paying attention to the movements of citizens moving towards conflict zones reveals a far broader picture of citizens engaged in foreign conflicts. Tying the legal response to terrorism perhaps captures what it is which has concerned the general public about the foreign fighters phenomenon currently dominating our headlines. More impartial reflection might lead us to question why, however, we are only concerned with those who try to topple regimes for religious or ideological purposes. What of those citizens who, acting in a private capacity abroad, kill and aim for financial gain?²⁵ The UK two-tier motive definition of terrorism ensures mercenaries will often not fall under the definitions set out above; although as soon as their motivation is anything beyond financial, this may not be the case. An even-handed prosecution policy should therefore potentially uncover some uncomfortable truths about what a legally impartial view identifies as a foreign fighters phenomenon. Unless of course the aim of national and EU policy is only to cover those who commit such acts in the name of radical Islam. EU association with actively discriminatory policy can barely be advocated, however.

When policy-making occurs in such high-profile areas, the temptation to portray problems as novel and unprecedented is great. It should be noted, however, that the individuals who are at the heart of fears we legitimately hold, bear great resemblance to criminals of greater familiarity. Those who

²⁴ Indeed the involvement of foreign fighters in armed conflicts in the Muslim world has attracted thousands since the 1980's. Nevertheless the phenomenon is regarded as recently having taken on new dimensions. See e.g. European Parliamentary Research Service "Foreign Fighters" Briefing, February 2015, PE 548.980, p. 2 et seq.

²⁵ See Jeremy Scahill "A very private war" *The Guardian*, 1st August 2007; Raymond Bonner "U.S. reportedly Backed British Mercenary Group in Africa" *The New York Times*, 13th May 1998; Mail on Sunday Reporter "The British have good snipers: UK mercenaries are battling pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, claims PM of self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic" *The Mail on Sunday*, 31st May 2014; Mark Townsend "Revealed: UK 'mercenaries' fighting Islamic State terrorist forces in Syria" *The Guardian*, 22nd November 2014; Matthew Holehouse "British mercenaries fighting Isil 'open to murder charges'" *The Telegraph*, 24th November 2014.

kill and maim and enter EU territory aiming to do so are combatable under more traditional criminal law norms and all the more so under prevailing counter-terrorism norms. Those who commit atrocities abroad such as Mohammed Emwazi are culpable as criminals under international law. It is worth recalling Article 7 of the Rome Statute governing the International Criminal Court, which reads as follows:

“Crimes against humanity 1. For the purpose of this Statute, ‘crime against humanity’ means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack:

- (a) Murder;
- (b) Extermination;
- (c) Enslavement;
- (d) Deportation or forcible transfer of population;
- (e) Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law;
- (f) Torture;
- (g) Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity;
- (h) Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court;
- (i) Enforced disappearance of persons;
- (j) The crime of apartheid;
- (k) Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.

2. For the purpose of paragraph 1:

- (a) ‘Attack directed against any civilian population’ means a course of conduct involving the multiple commission of acts referred to in paragraph 1 against any civilian population, pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy to commit such attack; ...”

Whilst crimes against humanity would appear suited to cover many of the actions undertaken abroad by foreign fighters gaining them so much attention in the past 18 months, Daesh attacks on the Yezidi people would appear a clear case of genocide.²⁶ The power of this legal label to condemn and mobilise is as great as any we have.²⁷ The question then, is why we are

²⁶ See the declarations now passed by the European Parliament (4th February 2016) and the UK House of Commons (20th April 2016).

²⁷ See Marianne Wade “Genocide: The Criminal Law between Truth and Justice” in

not satisfied to ensure EU activity is undertaken in order to call to justice those EU citizens who commit crimes against humanity and other better established crimes? In the call to action over foreign fighters, it seems important to recognise that many of them will already be subject to criminal sanction under existing law. These are not individuals who cannot be called to account.

The EU's Capacities to React

Leaving such broader issues aside for a moment, if one acknowledges that there is a security threat posed by returning foreign fighters to EU member, accession and associated states (and it would be negligent to fail to do so), there can be little doubt that the EU has much to offer to its member, accession and associated states. Indeed the EU is uniquely well placed to respond to many of the issues involved and would appear an appropriate framework to house a common reaction of its member and accession states.

The returning foreign fighters phenomenon is fundamentally cross-border in nature. This fact alone means that the EU – as a supra-national governance level having amassed great expertise in relation to a number of serious, transnational criminal activities, including terrorism²⁸ – is a natural actor. Quite apart from anything else, its structures regularly host meetings of ministers representing all EU member states, can easily be utilised to facilitate emergency meetings and features an Internal Security Fund, which can be accessed for urgent, common action.²⁹ The Council of the EU is a structure within which the governments of the member states are accustomed to acting together.³⁰ Structurally alone, the EU presents a potent

International Criminal Justice Review, 2009, 19, p. 150-174.

²⁸ See Marianne Wade “The EU as a Counter-Terrorism Actor: Right Path, Wrong Direction” *Crime, Law and Social Change*, October 2014, Volume 62, Issue 3, pp 355-383.

²⁹ See e.g. Council of the EU “Conclusions of the Council of the EU and of the Member States meeting within the Council on Counter-Terrorism” Press Release 848/15 of the 20th November 2015.

³⁰ Thus see e.g. the swift declarations made at the highest level about action to be undertaken against Daesh and foreign fighters in August 2014 – Council of the European Union “Special Meeting of the European Council (30th August 2014):

political forum to support its member states and accession and associated states such as those of the Western Balkans.

In terms of trans-national crime and counter-terrorism-related security structures, however, the EU has grown well beyond a political forum. In dealing with the foreign fighters issue the member states make frequent reference to use of existing structures. This apparatus is, of course, potentially also available to non-member states. Given that the Western Balkans have been highlighted as security partners for close cooperation and indeed explicitly mentioned for such cooperation within the documents reviewed above, these resources are ones from which states there can also be expected to profit.

The past decade has seen the EU as a security actor grow fundamentally in terms of knowledge expertise. In supra-national, terrorism-related matters, Europol (the European Union's Policing Agency) can increasingly be seen as the "go to" organisation of the member states. Europol's annual review of the terrorist threat to the EU, which includes assessments of violent extremism of all kinds, is a regular source of information, which reveals a substantial knowledge base within the organisation.³¹ Thus, for instance, one of the initial acts of the Council was to provide for an internet referral unit to combat terrorist and violent extremist propaganda to be established within Europol.³²

The Council documents concerned with countering violent extremism and foreign fighters of the past two years make copious reference to the need to fully utilise and, if necessary augment existing resources and structures. Highest priority is currently assigned to the potential of the EU criminal

Conclusions" EUCO 163/14, p. 5 et seq.

³¹ See e.g. the latest version: Europol "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (Te-Sat) 2015" 6th July 2015, available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/latest_publications/37. Note that such reports are not without their critics: see e.g. P. C. van Duyne and T. Vander Beken "The incantations of the EU organised crime policy making" *Crime, Law and Social Change*, Volume 51, Number 2, 261-281.

³² Launched on the 1st July 2015, see <https://www.europoleuropa.eu/content/europol%E2%80%99s-internet-referral-unit-combat-terrorist-and-violent-extremist-propaganda>.

record information system (ECRIS)³³ to ensure law enforcement agencies can access relevant information about prior convictions when surveilling individuals identified as potentially dangerous individuals. The most recent EU Council press release announces an expected Commission proposal to expand ECRIS to cover third country nationals.³⁴ The conclusion of an EU agreement to ensure comprehensive collection of passenger name record (PNR) data for internal flights and long, broad data retention powers has consistently been treated as having the outmost urgency.³⁵

In terms of tracking potentially dangerous individuals reference is also made to the considerable resources provided by the Schengen Information System (SIS)³⁶ and the Europol Analytical Work File “TRAVELLERS.”³⁷ With these, the EU houses powerful mechanisms for the information exchange acknowledged as crucial for member (and other) states’ law enforcement agencies to be able to effectively track suspected foreign fighters and particularly the “returning jihadis” viewed as a most urgent security threat. The latest EU Council and member state declaration on the subject details specific improvements to be undertaken by member states (e.g. ensuring data is comprehensively entered into SIS) and the Commission (to ensure interoperability of EU and Interpol databases), demonstrating clearly the powerful resources available within the EU context and the expertise amassed and being further augmented.

³³ EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator “EU CTC input for the preparation of the informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers in Riga on 29 January 2015.” 17th January 2015, Council Doc. DS 1035/15. ECRIS p. 9.

³⁴ Council of the EU “Conclusions of the Council of the EU and of the Member States meeting within the Council on enhancing the criminal justice response to radicalisation leading to terrorism and violent extremism.” Press Release 845/15 of the 20th November 2015.

³⁵ See e.g. Conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council, 12th and 13th of March 2015, Council Doc. 7178/15 and Council of the EU “Conclusions of the Council of the EU and of the Member States meeting within the Council on Counter-Terrorism” Press Release 848/15 of the 20th November 2015.

³⁶ EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator “Report on the implementation of the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy.” 24th November 2014, Council Doc. 15799/14, p. 8.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 9.

More broadly the institutional structures already established within the EU are instructed to play crucial roles. Thus Europol functions not only as a source of knowledge or an information-exchange post but is also the host to crucial, operational capacities. Alongside the internet referral unit, the Agency is not set to launch the European Counter Terrorism Centre in January 2016.³⁸ This centre is to feature experts seconded from the member states “to form an enhanced cross-border investigation support unit, capable of providing quick and comprehensive support to the investigation of major terrorist incidents in the EU.” In other words, the operational response to terrorist incidents is also becoming a matter for supra-nationalised law enforcement.

Knowledge and information flow improvement alongside the creation of operational capacities can also be tracked in relation to border control of the Schengen area as well as the EU’s border Agency: Frontex. Both Europol and Frontex are assigned roles in relation to the tracking of firearms, whilst the Financial Intelligence Units of the member states and the Financial Action Task Force are called upon in relation to combat terrorist financing.

Whilst these more operationally oriented law enforcement agencies are the focus of most attention in Council documents, other EU structures are of particular importance. Eurojust, the EU’s judicial cooperation agency has held tactical meetings for some time³⁹ and is an important resource for transnational prosecutions. The role of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)⁴⁰ is frequently referred to when discussion turns to countering extremism. In the most recent Council of the EU statement it is called upon specifically to assist with the development of deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes in prisons.⁴¹

³⁸ Council of the EU “Conclusions of the Council of the EU and of the Member States meeting within the Council on Counter-Terrorism” Press Release 848/15 of the 20th November 2015.

³⁹ EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator “Report on the implementation of the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy.” 24th November 2014, Council Doc. 15799/14, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁴¹ Council of the EU “Conclusions of the Council of the EU and of the Member States meeting within the Council on enhancing the criminal justice response to radicalisation

Beyond the more obvious supra-national agencies with direct input into law enforcement and prosecution activity, it is important to note that the Council also hosts further resources. Housed in this way, they remain more of an inter-governmental resource (if one is concerned with their legal character) but they doubtlessly enhance EU capacities. Thus the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator is a prominent actor in the current debate.⁴² Furthermore, the Situation Centre provides further capacities. This less well-known entity referred to as SitCen is an informal organisation of multinational character situated within the Council.⁴³ SitCen is concerned with intelligence and is a contact centre for the member states' and third states' intelligence services. SitCen is located within the Council Secretariat and composed of analysts from member states' external and internal security services. Their task is to assess any terrorist threat developing within the European Union or externally.⁴⁴

leading to terrorism and violent extremism.” Press Release 845/15 of the 20th November 2015.

⁴² Article 14 of the Council Declaration on Combating Terrorism of the 25th March 2004 following a special meeting in the wake of the Madrid bombings provided for a Counter-Terrorism Co-ordinator to work within the Council (upon appointment by the High Representative) to “co-ordinate the work of the Council in combating terrorism and... maintain an overview of all the instruments at the Union’s disposal” as well as to “closely monitor the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Combating Terrorism and to secure the visibility of the Union’s policies in the fight against terrorism.” Council document 9809/1/05, EU Plan of Action on Combating Terrorism – Update and http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/fsj/terrorism/institutions/wai/fsj_terrorism_institutions_counter_terrorism_coordinator_en.htm.

⁴³ The ‘new’ SitCen (which became operational in 2005), was distinct from its predecessor because its activities were no longer limited to the material falling within the ambit of the former “2nd pillar” (common foreign affairs and the European defence area). This expansion related directly to areas belonging to the former 3rd pillar.

⁴⁴ Cf. Interview with G. de Vries, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, *Terrorism, Islam and democracy*, 4.3.2005, retrieved 27.3.2007 from www.EurActiv.com; G. de Vries, “The European Union’s role in the fight against terrorism”, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 16 (2005), pp. 3-9; cf. also Council Conclusions, *Terrorism – Follow-up to the European Council Declaration*, 8.6.2004, point 1, Council of the European Union, Press Release 2588th Council meeting, Justice and Home Affairs, Luxembourg 8 June 2004, Council doc. 9782/04 (Presse 173), p. 9. See also Statewatch, EU: “Anti-terrorism” legitimizes sweeping new “internal security” complex, *Statewatch bulletin*, Vol. 14, No. 5, August-October 2004, retrieved 27.3.2007 from www.statewatch.org.

This brief overview should demonstrate the EU as a powerful governance level in this area featuring capacities accessing a uniquely strong knowledge base, setting its agencies and entities up as a vital source of expertise and support. The mechanisms in place facilitating information exchange form a vital part of member states' ability to react to urgent concerns such as the one at hand. This policy-area shows the ease with which member states will merge their capacities with supra-nationalised structures, which they constantly augment, where a strong, supra-national challenge is recognised.

Nevertheless, it is important to note also that the EU houses far more than just these law enforcement related capacities. Reference is made to these in documents produced by the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator in particular and they bear, at least, important potential to be kept in mind. The EU is a governance level now designed to serve its citizens more broadly. This paper lends clear testimony to it doing so as a security actor. Nevertheless, broader aspects of the phenomena with which we are concerned remain relevant and EU capacities to serve them deserve mention, even if they are not currently at the foreground of EU action.

The RAN network mentioned above features expertise far beyond that relating to deradicalisation and rehabilitation in prisons and is a vital resource to be relied upon if the more aspirational goals relating to preventing radicalisation, mentioned in the Council declarations of February 2015, for example, are to be achieved. Alongside the capacities Europol, Eurojust, CEPOL (the Union's police training college) and the Directorate-Generals Home and Justice have in training criminal justice and law enforcement professionals, this is a source of knowledge, best-practice exchange and training capacities vital to this policy area if the manifold problems identified are to be tackled. Of course, these cannot be matters only for the EU governance level. Nevertheless, much speaks for the EU as a central actor and resource in these respects too. The latest Council press release acknowledges this vital part of any durable strategy, also as extending well beyond the law enforcement sphere⁴⁵

The Fundamental Rights Agency is a further resource likely to play an important role in what will hopefully become more balanced debate in the

⁴⁵ Press release 845/15 op cit.

future.⁴⁶ It has, for example, undertaken work which also highlights the damaging side-effects counter-terrorism policies can have on minority and marginalised communities.⁴⁷ In its latest press release, the EU Council highlighted “Member States to lead efforts to address the underlying factors of radicalisation leading to terrorism and violent extremism through targeted preventive measures, by developing cohesion-inductive actions and programmes, including in the education field, that promote Fundamental Rights, the Rule of Law and democracy and encourage inclusive, tolerant and pluralistic societies.” The EU Fundamental Rights Agency is a resource member states should take advantage of in doing so.

Unfortunately, the European Parliament notes significant concern that in the urgency of action being undertaken in this policy area, fundamental rights and data protection issues are being swept aside.⁴⁸ If the EU is to serve its citizens well, such – not unfamiliar – issues of imbalanced policy must be addressed and corrected.

Concluding Reflections

There can be no doubt that criminal justice responses are appropriate for a number of persons currently targeted by the strategy focused on foreign fighters and violent extremists, also at the EU level. The nature of that criminal justice response is one that should, however, remain open to debate. The counter-terrorism coordinator has called for “Harmonized criminalization of foreign fighter related offenses across the EU” which he states

“would provide a common legal framework, which would be an important reference point for the EU agencies and facilitate cross-border cooperation. Differences in criminalization without common minimum standards risk prosecution gaps. It would send a strong political message and would be an inspiration for third countries.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) was established by Council Regulation No 168/ 2007 of 15 February 2007, OJ L 53 of 22 February 2007, p. 1.

⁴⁷ <http://fra.europa.eu/en/project/2011/racism-and-social-marginalisation>:

⁴⁸ e.g. European Parliamentary Research Service “Foreign Fighters” Briefing, February 2015, PE 548.980, p. 6.

⁴⁹ EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator “Foreign fighters and returnees: discussion paper” 2 December 2014, Council Document 15715/2/14, p. 2.

Any such legislative activity would represent classic EU action – also of symbolic law-making – in this policy area. Nevertheless, it would also represent the EU further driving the notion of the need for specialist, counter-terrorism legislation providing for criminal culpability in fields ever less associated with any manifestly harmful conduct. That the EU as a governance level wishes to express its horror at the acts that have brought this policy area into such sharp focus is understandable. The question is whether new legislation is the appropriate vehicle for doing so.

Counter-terrorism legislation is marked by a seemingly insatiable desire to provide this particular label to a group of offenders. In many cases this is justified by the desire to trigger special preventative powers enabling early intervention in this area. Whilst this is understandable, from a legal point of view, activity in this particular context must lead to the question why crimes against humanity and indeed even genocide are not considered appropriate labels. For acts planned within the EU, it would seem current legislation is already sufficient. Considering the controversial nature of the terrorist label, its utility and necessity should be analysed. In how far do law enforcement authorities in fact rely upon such precursor offences?

The need for analysis does not, of course, end with legislation. The practice of this EU-led policy area must also be evaluated. If one accepts the necessity of a particularly threat-based response to the problems identified above and the resulting existence of ever more unspecific criminalising norms, one can surely argue for these being directed only against the “right” individuals. UK law seeks to ensure this, for example, by subjecting terrorism prosecutions to a broad discretion to prosecute (or not) held by the Attorney-General.⁵⁰ A brief look at headlines gives rise to concern that use of such norms is, however, not being restricted appropriately. The recent conviction of a teenage girl as a terrorist because she informed her family she would be joining the PKK to fight Daesh, even though she never got further or attempted to travel further than Brussels (where she resided with a man, who she claimed at trial to be the real reason she left the UK) sits uneasily with an image of good prosecutorial judgement. The EU’s association with such policies and its obligation to serve all its citizens, might be

⁵⁰ Again something the Supreme Court demonstrated very significant unease with in the Gul judgement, *op cit*.

taken as a basis for keeping an eye on and facilitating dialogue in relation to such developments and practices too.

Unquestionably criminal law is a society's moral compass. That it is engaged when society is revolted by atrocities or feels strongly threatened, is natural enough. Nevertheless criminal justice must be achieved for an individual in each case. More modern terrorist offences⁵¹ allow swift conviction – also of course even in relation to the current situation in Syria. In this case, such offence definitions are plausibly a relief as the situation in Syria cannot be conducive to a careful amassing of evidence – but therewith also, of course, a finding of guilt as soon as the slightest flirtation with phenomena regarded as threatening can be established. The defendant of this particular case had spoken of wishing to fight Daesh not to join the organisation spreading such fear. Nevertheless she has been convicted of very serious, broadly defined terrorist offence.

There is no denying that European societies should be concerned by young people willing to sacrifice everything to fight a brutal war abroad. Where this stems from extremist views, concerns rightly become manifold and a concern for our own safety legitimate. Nevertheless, another historical lesson etched into European history is that crime is normal amongst young people, that criminal justice is associated with mercy when crime is committed in the course of youthful exuberance and folly. Above all the wisdom of sending naïve, young persons to prisons a.k.a. the “high schools of crime”⁵² has long been questioned. Stronger reflection along the lines of more traditional criminal law offences might assist in the determination of which individuals embroiled in the foreign fighters phenomenon are indeed worthy of incarceration.

Unquestionably there are also young people, who have overstepped any boundary at which mercy can be shown. Dangerous, violent extremists must, of course, be combatted. Criminal justice demands it. A quick look at cases currently busying courts across the EU, however, allows one to legitimately question whether the line is being drawn correctly. Criminal con-

⁵¹ Such as membership of a proscribed organisation or preparation of a terrorist offence as defined by section 5 of the UK Terrorism Act post 2006.

⁵² See e.g. Samuel Day „Juvenile Crime“ Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2009.

victions (not merely investigations or surveillance measures) as terrorists for young people based on statements and broad actions which bring them within the realm of association with worrying phenomena are surely a step to far? Individual case hearings should surely also allow an exploration of all aspects of a case? In some cases an admission that our moral compass is far from clear in relation to Syria is surely appropriate and possible? In 2013 Western leaders were adamant that the Assad regime was an evil not to be tolerated. If individuals have acted to that effect must they necessarily be morally blameworthy? Broad definitions of terrorism and norms criminalising foreign fighters – no matter which of the four aspects identified above as constituting these – will ensure they are all criminally culpable as particularly heinous convicts. Sentences should vary but their convictions will be the same. Might it not be wiser to allow more traditional understandings of wrong-doings in militarised settings – such as crimes against humanity – to guide our understanding of criminal culpability?

Countering violent extremism always bears with it the danger that law will be used to counter behaviour sanctioned by international law. Currently the concern and fear caused by phenomena ranging from youths leaving behind lives in the West, to atrocities committed abroad by EU citizens to a foreign-inspired, merciless home-grown terrorist threat, are causing national leaders to push further at boundaries of the law and international cooperation. The European Union is a key player in such activity.

Whilst we can doubtlessly be glad to have the resources of the EU to harness as member, accession, associated and third states cooperate to ensure potential dangers are guarded against, the wish for an EU working more holistically, also perhaps to serve as a steadying hand when defensive decisions are made in fear, becomes more attractive. This is doubtlessly an appropriate area for multi-level governance. This should then be sophisticated enough to encompass all aspects; also the rights of individuals who become the focus of public fear and criminal justice responses. The even-handedness of criminal justice policy directed not only at EU citizens of a certain faith but tied to the blameworthiness of their conduct, is surely also a European tradition worth discussing and preserving? Broader discussion of best practices and experiences relating also to these aspects are policy aspects EU citizens should demand the EU provide as a resource.

Here we can immediately enter a complex, legal discussion about the nature and competences of the EU. The fundamental question, however, remains why, if we have a multi-level governance system, it cannot be utilised to its full potential. Also to allow for discussion of threat discourse being taken too far. The European Union is at its most fundamental level, associated with legal developments to ensure non-discrimination, peace and an equal enjoyment of rights for marginalised groups. It draws a great deal of legitimacy from those achievements. This paper alone should have demonstrated its might as a security actor. This aspect of its work should, however, not be allowed to eclipse its *raison d'être*. That checks and balances to ensure fairness and a holistic approach should accompany the advantages this security actor brings to EU citizens and beyond, should not be a matter of controversy.

PART V:

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Recommendations from the Regional Stability in the South East Europe¹

Filip Ejdus

Situation Analysis

For more than a decade, the Western Balkans was considered to be a region slowly recovering from the conflicts of the 1990s and on the way of consolidating peace and stability. In spite of occasional setbacks, democratic backslides and sluggish reforms there has been a dependable expectation that conflicts will be resolved or at least managed peacefully. Nonetheless, recent events demonstrated that the region is still vulnerable. A recent chain of serious security incidents casted a dark shadow over such an image of the region. On 27 April 2015, a radical Islamist attacked a police station in Zvornik, Bosnia and Herzegovina, killing one policeman and wounding two others. Two weeks later, the town of Kumanovo in northern Macedonia was hit by a “weekend war” leaving eight policemen and fourteen terrorists dead. Finally, in June 2015, the Islamic State invited Balkan Muslims in a video message to “either join, or kill over there”. The video had a very powerful resonance across the region and most mainstream media reported about it in a dramatic fashion. Many downplayed the importance of the video as an attempt of recruitment propaganda and dismissed the capacity of the Islamic State to gain significant support in the region, let alone organize serious attacks there. Nevertheless, only few weeks after the video was released, Albanian security forces lost one man in clashes with criminals in the village of Lazarat, infamous for gigantic marijuana production. This incident – although deadly – would not be a particular cause for concern here hadn’t the criminals involved in the shootout with the police openly expressed their support to the Islamic State.

¹ These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 31st RSSEE workshop on “Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans” convened by the PfPC Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe” from 27 to 29 September in Belgrade/Serbia. They were prepared by Filip Ejdus, University of Belgrade.

All these developments casted a shadow over regional stability and put violence back on the agenda of the Western Balkans. They also threw a new light onto the problem of foreign fighters, approximately 700 from the region, who have joined different warring factions in Syria and Iraq. Some of these foreign fighters will return home and can potentially be a security threat. In response to the decisions of the UNSC, most countries in the region amended their criminal codes and made the participation in foreign wars illegal. Some experts believe that this only aggravated the problem, as it led to discriminatory preventive arrests, especially in Kosovo, propelling victimization discourses that only fuel radicalism. Moreover, recent security incidents have also raised fears that the ongoing refugee crisis, so far framed by and large in humanitarian terms, could also potentially have negative security ramification. Although most experts disregard the popularly shared belief that terrorists might infiltrate among the refugees in order to reach the West, some of them fear that returnees could make use of the situation to return to their home countries unnoticed by security agencies thus avoiding interrogation or imprisonment.

In spite of the above-depicted security incidents, violent extremism in the Western Balkans should not be exaggerated as an actual problem but rather treated as a deeply concerning potentiality. To begin with, Islamic fundamentalism should not be over-estimated as a security challenge and blown out of realistic proportions. The vast majority of Muslims in the region are either secularized or practice a moderate version of Islam and are culturally accustomed to religious co-existence. However, the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism should not be dismissed either. It has had a small but growing presence in the region ever since Mujahedeen's came to fight in the Bosnian war in the early 1990s. Ignored or in some cases even permitted by local Islamic authorities, fundamentalist teachings of Islam gradually spread across the region. According to recent estimates, there are approximately 3000 Wahhabis and 10 Wahhabi enclaves in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone. Advocated by radical preachers and fuelled by images of war and persecution in the Middle East, Islamic fundamentalism has been financially backed by foreign Islamic charities. According to some estimates, Saudi Arabia alone funded around 500 mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 100 in Kosovo.

The spectre of Islamic extremism could easily play into the hands of far-right extremism in the Western Balkans. Permanent economic crisis, EU and NATO enlargement fatigue, deterioration in West-Russia relationship and an unprecedented influx of refugees are all further bolstering extreme right-wing mobilization across the region. A particularly strong catalyst for right wing mobilization has been the war in Ukraine attracting up to 150 foreign fighters from the Western Balkans who joined either Kiev or pro-Russian rebels. Most countries of the region traditionally have significant far-right parties advocating territorial expansion, national-homogenization and welfare chauvinism. However, in contrast to Western Europe where the far right is on the rise, these parties haven't shared the same electoral success in Eastern Europe in general or Western Balkans in particular. Nevertheless, their gradual moderation (e.g. HDZ in Croatia) or marginalization (e.g. SRS in Serbia) have created an opportunity for the emergence of "the new right", often less formal and potentially more extreme. A number of these organizations such as Obraz or 1389 in Serbia are suspected to have opaque links with established political parties or even deep state structures.

For sure, the Western Balkans currently has greater challenges than terrorism or violent extremism, to use the term championed by the Obama administration. These problems are first and foremost economic stagnation, endemic corruption, permanent political instability, unresolved territorial disputes, poor governance and weak states. However, all the above-mentioned intra-regional challenges, especially in a combustible fusion with trans-regional spill overs from an imploding Middle East, act as force multipliers of violent extremism in the Western Balkans, be it Islamic or nationalist. States of the region currently don't possess sufficient capacities to successfully manage popular grievances and deliver public goods to all of its citizens. In the absence of these capacities, a favourable environment is being created for future radicalization. Finally, although the overall economic situation in the region improved since the end of the armed conflicts, initial high expectations were not fully met leading to disappointments and disillusionments with current political and economic order. Unemployment rates, especially amongst the young, are among the highest in Europe reaching almost 50% in certain countries. Although not higher than in the rest of Europe, inequality in the region has a group character which is fuelling ethno-nationalist grievances and create potential for radicaliza-

tion. Any meaningful course of action to prevent and combat violent extremism in the Western Balkans should have these fundamental considerations as the starting point.

Summary of Recommendations

The issue of violent extremism in the Western Balkans should be tackled from the perspective of its specific historic, cultural and political context. Uncritical adoption of foreign policies on countering violent extremism, designed with different set of domestic and international challenges in mind, and its straightforward translation into national security priorities in the region should be avoided. It is not only diversionary in that it may channel scarce resources to wrong or inexistent challenges but also dangerous as it can exacerbate or even create new problems.

In order to prevent radicalization, all relevant stakeholders interested in regional stability in the South East Europe should work on eradicating the root causes of violent extremism. This means that the focus of public policies should be on prevention rather than sanction. This necessitates, first and the foremost, economic development, infrastructure improvement and governance enhancement in the areas mostly affected with radicalization.

Another way of eradicating root causes of violent extremism is to focus on education. Compulsory education remains the most significant opportunity to encourage young people to develop skills in critical thinking, civic engagement and media literacy – all competencies necessary to promote thoughtful, tolerant and open-minded worldviews. Curricula that emphasize rote-memorization or simplistic historical perspectives impede the development of minds prepared to effectively counter extremist messages.

While non-formal initiatives can complement broader educational policies, they cannot replace the influence of formal and compulsory in-school learning. Good practices in modern curricular development, multi-perspective history, student-centered teacher training and critical thinking should be re-emphasized to initiate a new era of reforms in schools throughout the region. All donor initiatives should be targeted towards such systemic reform rather than short-lived, stand-alone projects.

States should refrain from interfering with religious groups on the ground of fight against violent extremism. However, they should adopt stricter regulation regarding transparency when foreign charities are concerned. Political leaders should show restraint when making public comments about the issue. Inflammatory rhetoric can easily trigger chain reaction, ignite old inter-ethnic animosities and provide fuel for violent extremism.

The refugee crisis is a challenge difficult enough in terms of its humanitarian, social and even political ramifications but should not be securitized. It is rather unlikely that terrorists will choose slow, long and dangerous refugee routes along which they will be monitored and registered by law enforcement agencies of several states, to reach Western Europe. However, what remains a realistic concern is that foreign fighters from the Western Balkan region may use the refugee routes to return home unnoticed by their home countries' security agencies.

The issue of foreign fighters should not be over exaggerated but should not be underestimated either. Some foreign fighters will return but not all of them will be a threat. Indiscriminate imprisoning of all the returnees can only lead to further radicalization via victimization. Flat out amnesty along with guaranteed program for social reintegration is also not the right approach as it removes the deterrence of individuals to join foreign wars in the first place.

State authorities should therefore differentiate between different categories of returnees in order to encourage rehabilitation of those who deserve it. Those who went to conflict zones to join warring parties but didn't participate directly in armed conflicts or human right abuses should be reintegrated into society. In contrast to them, returnees who personally took part in armed conflict and war crimes should not be pardoned. In cases when lower ranked fighters return home, states should exploit the information they provide and offer them smaller sentences in return. Children who participated in foreign wars should always be treated as victims and not perpetrators, and special care should be taken for their proper reintegration into society upon return.

Civil society and local community should be the first line of defence against violent extremism. Together with state, it should build counter-narratives

that will appeal not only to elites and to winners of transition but also to those who are less better off. Civil society organizations should build knowledge about the issue and a capacity to deal with both prevention and rehabilitation. Moderate voices among religious communities should be strengthened. They should be included in policy discussions and decision making at all levels, from the local community through state institutions to regional and European or global fora. Finally, in order to be effective counter-extremist policies should take media seriously. When reporting about violent extremism, traditional media should avoid being a tool in the hands of extremist propaganda.

Their coverage of topics such as Islamic or far right extremism should avoid demonization, high-pitched tones or sensationalism. Instead of panic media should improve understanding and raise awareness about the complexity of the subject. In addition to the traditional media, special attention should be paid on countering extremist messages in social media, so far largely neglected and underestimated by counter extremist policies.

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What is the potential for violent extremism in the Western Balkans? This question has been the main topic of discussion of the 31st workshop of the Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe that took place in Belgrade, Serbia, from 27 to 29 September 2015. The term “radicalism” witnessed many different interpretations in the past, especially among the political elites across the Balkans. With the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011 and the emergence of IS, the term “radicalisation” received a different meaning in the context of the Western Balkans. “Radicalisation” is increasingly being used as proxy for Balkan-born fighters going to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq. This increasing on-site potential of violence affects the international political community which is making efforts to put a halt to this phenomenon.

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