Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

Policy Recommendations [1]
Study Group Regional Stability in
South East Europe

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- Focus public policies on prevention rather than sanction.
- Work on eradicating the root causes of violent extremism.
- Strengthen moderate voices among religious communities as a preventive measure to counter extremism.
- Differentiate between different categories of returnees among foreign fighters.
- Foster education as a tool for reconciliation and social progress.
- Promote critical thinking, civic engagement and media literacy.
- Encourage the media to improve understanding and raise awareness instead of fostering prejudices.
- Adopt stricter regulations regarding transparency of foreign charities.
- Enhance countering of extremist messages in social media.

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

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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.

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 Mujahede- ens came to fight in the Bosnian war in the early 1990s. Ignored or in some cases even permitted by local Isla- mic authorities, fundamentalist teachings of Islam gra- dually spread across the region. According to recent estimates, there are approximately 3,000 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 rela- tionship and an unprecedented influx of refugees are all further bolstering extreme right-wing mobilization across the region.

A particularly strong catalyst for right wing mobiliza- tion 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 par- ties advocating territorial expansion, national homoge- nization 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 ext- reme. 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 do not 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 radicalization. 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 straightfor-

ward 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 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 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 did not 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 par-

ticipated 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 the 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 well 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.