



Briefing Paper VI:

EXTERNAL INFLUENCE IN EXTREMISM & RADICALISM

The sixth briefing paper covers Russian, Turkish and the Gulf States' influence in spreading extremism and radicalism. It mostly explores and analyses Russia's role in the spread of right-wing and nationalist extremism and the Gulf States' imprint in the support of the Islamist extremism. Turkey's role in spreading religious or nationalist radicalism has turned out to be very limited. Chinese involvement in this sphere has not been identified, so it is not discussed in the paper.

Preceding briefing papers:

- **The Briefing Paper I "East vs. West"** provides the historical and geo-strategic context of the project – [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).
- **The Briefing Paper II** focuses on Russian, Chinese, Turkish, the Gulf States' and Iranian influence and activities in the political arena of the Western Balkan countries – [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).
- **The Briefing Paper III** maps influence in the economic and financial sphere, especially the main dependencies and activities undermining rule-based market competition – [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).
- **The Briefing Paper IV** covers influence in the cultural, academic and religious spheres, areas most often associated with the notion of soft power in international relations - [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).
- **The Briefing Paper V** covers influence in media and elections aiming at shaping public opinion and creation of a more accommodating environment to achieve own goals - [full version](#) or [an executive summary](#).



WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS: ASSESSING NON-DEMOCRATIC EXTERNAL INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES

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Introduction

Analysing external actors' influences on supporting radicalism and extremism in the Western Balkans is a difficult task. Given the sensitivity of this issue and the difficulty in accessing credible information, it is very complicated to determine in which cases foreign governments, state institutions, or secret services are directly involved. In most of the cases, no direct links beyond suspicions can be established, sub-state or transnational groups with certain but unclear connections to the states are involved, or ideology of external actors serve only as an inspiration for local groups.

The issue is further complicated by divergent, and often conflicting, views as to what can be considered extremist or radical, both in the expert community and among lay citizens. This paper approaches the field taking into account the following methodological observations. First, a distinction should be made between radicalisation linked to violent extremism and terrorism, and radicalisation aimed at initiating social change through non-violent means.¹ It draws on the USAID definition of violent extremism, characterising it as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic and political objectives."² Second, radicalism and radicalisation should be viewed on a continuum and assessed individually for each context. Third, we should be aware that different forms of extremism feed one another in the process of reciprocal radicalisation.³ It is this dynamic of radicalisation which has been under-researched in the region since other than Islamist forms of extremism and their developments have been largely overlooked over the past several years.

Numerous analytical and media organizations have been researching the Islamist extremism threat among Muslim communities in the former Yugoslav states. The sheer abundance of these reports and the departure of several tens of people to Syrian or Iraqi battlefields have created a general perception of a great and imminent threat. However, the Islamist extremism still concerns only marginal groups of a radicalised population, and so far has not risen as expected.

In contrast, much less attention has been focused on the threat posed by right-wing radicalism and extreme nationalism, which is often challenging the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the post-Yugoslav countries, particularly Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paper, therefore, explores both these phenomena, the first being predominantly linked to Gulf States' activities, and the second to Russian.

¹ Edina Bećirević, "Extremism Research Forum: Bosnia and Herzegovina Report," *British Council*, April 2018.

² *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice*, USAID Policy, September 2011, p. 2.

³ Bećirević, "Extremism Research Forum: Bosnia and Herzegovina Report."



Russia

Russia has been linked with both violent and non-violent extremism across the Western Balkan countries. Besides the coup in Montenegro aiming to topple Djukanović's government before the parliamentary elections in 2016, in which the participation of two Russian intelligence officers has been confirmed by the court, direct involvement of Russian officials is difficult to prove and establish. The influence mostly takes the form of connections to Russian far-right organisations, such as Night Wolves or Cossacks, and individuals, who often have close links to the Kremlin, and the reception of financial donations from Russia. This is in line with a broader Russian foreign policy strategy of the past years which relies on the support of conservative and far-right political groups in Europe.⁴

Pro-Russian nationalist groups are most widespread and active in Serbia, but they often operate across borders or establish branches in the Serb-inhabited areas of neighbouring countries, particularly North Kosovo, Republika Srpska in BiH, or Montenegro. The form of extremism advocated by these groups primarily seeks to promote inter-ethnic hatred, spreads anti-Western narratives, challenges territorial integrity and legitimacy of the post-Yugoslav states and questions their capacity to protect their citizens.

A worrying development of the recent years has been the militarization of some of these extremist groups, with a few individuals undertaking training in Russia, and the indoctrination and radicalization of the youth. Pro-Russian extremist organisations have been able to prey not only on the persistent inter-ethnic tensions in the region, but also on the deteriorating economic situation and increasing political and social dissatisfaction among the citizens. Taking this into account, one of the main concerns related to Russian influence on the extremist scene in the Balkans is linked to citizens who have joined pro-Russian forces in the conflict in Ukraine.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

There is a major discrepancy in the views on the alleged Russian influence on extremist groups in BiH. While some experts and media accuse Russia of supporting Serb nationalist extremism, including the formation of Serb paramilitary troops in RS, others believe that Kremlin is mainly focused on using Dodik and RS in its ongoing global political chess match with the West.

Given the fact that Dodik himself is perceived as one of the most radical politicians in the region, and having in mind his full control over political and security system in RS, Russia has little interest in

⁴ Mariya Petkova, "The death of the Russian far right," *Al Jazeera*, December 16, 2017, accessed January 5, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/11/death-russian-171123102640298.html>.



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supporting the creation of any additional extremists in BiH. Instead, it can count on the RS authorities to destabilise BiH should this suit its interests. However, it must be noted that Russian influence in spreading extremism is often channelled through Serbian nationalist extremist organisations which are frequently closely connected to the extremist scene in RS and in some cases have own branches operating in the Serb dominated entity of BiH.

Serious concerns have been recently raised in relation to the speculations about the possible opening of a Russian "humanitarian centre" in RS, that is reportedly supposed to be similar to Russia's controversial humanitarian centre which is already operating in Serbia near Niš. Although occasional media claims that works aimed at the establishment of this centre are already ongoing⁵ and that the centre should have been already opened in 2018,⁶ so far there was no independent confirmation that any such project exists.

The media have also reported on the connection between Milorad Dodik and Serbian right-wing extremist and pro-Russian oriented organisation Serbian Honour (see more in the Serbian chapter) which also has a RS branch. The authorities of BiH have accused members of the organisation of training at the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš, Serbia, in the purpose of the formation of a paramilitary unit in Republika Srpska.⁷ This information led some media and experts to claim that Russia is directly involved in the establishment of paramilitary troops in RS, aiming to destabilise BiH, yet they provided little evidence to corroborate these claims.⁸

Also, the presence of Russian extremist groups with apparent ties to the Kremlin such as Cossacks or Russian bikers' gang Night Wolves in Republika Srpska have stirred divergent reactions. While some experts, NGOs and media warned that their presence sparked fears⁹ as it was allegedly supposed to encourage or help build up RS extremists groups,¹⁰ others argue that these visits were mainly a part of

⁵ Mario Pušić, "Buduća ruska vojna baza gradi se na lokaciji 150 km od Zagreba," *Jutarnji List*, February 18, 2018, accessed January 5, 2019, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/buduca-ruska-vojna-baza-gradi-se-na-lokaciji-150-km-od-zagreba-republika-srpska-ulaze-3-milijuna-eura-u-uredenje-golemog-napustenog-vojnog-kompleksa/7043924/>.

⁶ Reuf Bajrović, Richard Kraemer and Emir Suljagić, "Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/UPDATED-Bosnia-2018.pdf>.

⁷ Advo Avdić, "Uz pomoc ruskih i srbijanskih specijalaca: Milorad Dodik formira paravojne jedinice u Republici Srpskoj!," *Zurnal info*, January 12, 2018, accessed January 4, 2019, <http://zurnal.info/novost/20914/milorad-dodik-formira-paravojne-jedinice-u-republici-srpskoj>.

⁸ "Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 2018.

⁹ Julian Borger, "Arrival of Russian Cossacks sparks fears in Bosnia," *The Guardian*, October 3, 2014, accessed January 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/03/arrival-russian-cossacks-fears-bosnia>.

¹⁰ "Inspirišu ekstremiste: Noćni Vukovi na turneji 'Ruski Balkan' dolaze u Srbiju i BiH," *Sarajevo daily Faktor*, March



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cultural or humanitarian aid projects.¹¹ The Night Wolves' visit to RS and Serbia in March 2018 was funded with a \$41,000 grant from the Kremlin.¹² According to the Atlantic, the visit had a clear geopolitical aim to provide visible support to the pro-Kremlin president of RS, Milorad Dodik.¹³ The Security Ministry in Sarajevo declared the bikers a security threat and banned the leader of the Night Wolves Alexander Zaldostanov and the leader of its Serbian chapter from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁴

Another concern related to Russian influence on extremist groups in BiH is linked to Bosnian citizens who have joined pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. There are reports that by the end of 2017, local law enforcement agencies and the Prosecutor's Office have been investigating 7 cases of BiH citizens who were suspected of fighting in Ukraine, one of whom has been thus far arrested.¹⁵

Kosovo

Russia is a contributing factor to the spreading of nationalist extremism in Northern Kosovo since it employs a variety of instruments aiming at the aggravation of tensions between the Albanian and Serb communities in the Northern municipalities. It challenges internal stability and further impedes Serb community's integration for example by inflicting fear among the Serb community in Kosovo through its fake news and propaganda apparatuses. The nationalist extremism primarily seeks to promote inter-ethnic hatred, consequently causing ethnic tensions and impairing the relations between the communities.

Russian involvement in Kosovo can also be linked to a few far-right radical organisations operating in the North, although direct links are often difficult to establish and prove. The lack of governmental control and persistent inter-ethnic tensions make this area a fertile ground for the development of extremist groups and individuals. Although Kosovo's "Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and

13, 2018, accessed January 4, 2019, <https://faktor.ba/vijest/inspiriu-ekstremiste-noni-vukovi-na-turneji-ruski-balkan-dolaze-u-srbiju-i-bih-287588>.

¹¹ "Putinovi Noćni vukovi: Za Obamu teroristi, za Dodika humanisti," *Zurnal*, January 17, 2018, accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.zurnal.info/novost/20922/za-obamu-teroristi-za-dodika-humanisti>.

¹² Andrew Higgins, "Russia's Feared 'Night Wolves' Bike Gang Came to Bosnia. Bosnia Giggled," *New York Times*, March 31, 2018, accessed January 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/31/world/europe/balkans-russia-night-wolves-republika-srpska-bosnia.html>.

¹³ Michael Carpenter, "Russia Is Co-opting Angry Young Men," *The Atlantic*, August 29, 2018, accessed January 5, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/russia-is-co-opting-angry-young-men/568741/>.

¹⁴ Higgins, "Russia's Feared 'Night Wolves' Bike Gang Came to Bosnia."

¹⁵ Vlado Azinović and Edina Bečirević, "A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans," *Regional Cooperation Council, RCC*, November 2017, <https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/2017-11-A-Waiting-Game-29112017.pdf/e31186dab7f32945592bcbe10bd9b180.pdf>.



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Radicalization” focuses primarily on Islamist extremism, it also mentions right-wing groups and ethnonationalism originating in the North and links these groups with “Serbian political parties of radical wing.”¹⁶

In an interview for Radio Television of Kosovo, Janusz Bugajski, a prominent American analyst, said that Russian services particularly flourish in these areas and operate via Russian criminal organizations present in the country.¹⁷ Formal sponsors of extremist groups in the North are believed to be “the far-right Serbian Radical Party; Srpski Obraz, a successor of ultranationalist movement Obraz, a movement banned in Serbia since 2012; and Nasi, a group of conservative citizens.”¹⁸ Interestingly, Obraz is regarded “as a primarily Russophile and anti-Western far-right organization that fosters relations with similar Russian organisations.”¹⁹ There is evidence that Russian organisations have provided financial assistance to such movements, but no significant amounts have been donated up to date.²⁰

Another case of a Kosovo-operating Serbian far-right organisation with certain links to Russia is the Order of the Dragon, which claims to have built relations with right-wing Russian intellectual Alexander Dugin, and that it can easily reach out to Kremlin in case of an attack on Kosovo Serbs.²¹ The organisation has been involved in equipping Northern Kosovo Serbs with weapons.²² There were also a few cases; some experts suggest that up to 27, of Serbian nationalists from Northern Kosovo joining pro-Russian forces in the conflict in Ukraine. Additional information on the circumstances and causes leading to this phenomenon are lacking.

The responsible Kosovo authorities generally remain uninvolved in the North as the focus has been towards the imminent threat posed by Islamist extremism in recent years. Kosovo has taken no concrete steps to circumvent the involvement and effect of far right and extremist organisations in the North, nor it has properly addressed Russia’s soft power mechanisms which are used to promote ethnonationalism. Several sources have argued that there are suspicions of Russia also financing and supporting Islamist extremism, but no known research reports have been made to date.

¹⁶ Qeveria e Kosovës, “Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism 2015–2020,” September, 2015, accessed January 5, 2019, http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf.

¹⁷ “Rusia nuk e do pajtimin mes Kosovës dhe Serbisë,” *Zëri*, February 16, 2018, accessed January 5, 2019, <https://zeri.info/aktuale/186882/rusia-nuk-e-do-pajtimin-mes-kosoves-dhe-serbise/>.

¹⁸ “Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism 2015–2020.”

¹⁹ Jovo Bakić, “Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia,” *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, February, 2013, accessed January 5, 2019, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/09659.pdf>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Maja Zivanović et al., “Serbian Monarchists, British Right-Wingers Plot Kosovo ‘Resistance’,” *Balkan Insight*, November 03, 2017, accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbian-monarchists-british-right-wingers-plot-kosovo-resistance--11-02-2017>.



Macedonia

There are two most visible pro-Russian extremist groups in Macedonia. In one of the cases, there have been proven and materialised links to the Russian extremist scene, while in the other no direct links can be established and Russia probably serves as a mere inspiration. As in most other countries, there has been no evidence for direct involvement of the Russian state in spreading extremism in Macedonia so far.

The first link refers to the pro-Russian party in Macedonia, United Macedonia, whose name is a deliberate tribute to the name of President Vladimir Putin's party, United Russia. This party has been vigorously advocating a fundamental reconsideration of Macedonia's geostrategic priorities: an abandonment of the country's Euro-Atlantic course and its substitution with pursuing accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.²³ The leader of the party, Janko Bachev, has been at the forefront of the opposition camp over the name deal between Macedonia and Greece. This camp has been known for its harsh rhetoric and incitements to – even though as of now no exercising of – violence.²⁴

The same party, United Macedonia, underwent in May 2017 a comprehensive three-day training in Moscow aimed at helping them to “take over the government” in Macedonia.²⁵ While it is difficult to prove the Kremlin's knowledge of, let alone involvement in this training, the alleged conductor of the training, Leonid Savin is known as one of the biggest Eurasianist ideologues in Moscow,²⁶ with close links to Putin. Thus, United Macedonia's training in Moscow constitutes a form of Russian facilitation of non-violent extremism in Macedonia in and of itself, regardless of the lack of (provable) involvement by the Russian government. There is plenty of evidence for the non-violent extremism exhibited by Bachev, not least his recent inexplicable homophobic insults against Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, whom he referred to as “a bunch of faggots and dykes.”²⁷

²³ “Јанко Бачев: Влијанието на Русија на Балканот допрва доаѓа,” *Macedonia 365*, March 15, 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://macedonia365.com/7299/>.

²⁴ “Македонија“ и „Предавници“ ечеше пред Собрание - денеска ќе се протестира додека трае седницата,” *Sitel*, June 19 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://sitel.com.mk/makedonija-i-predavnici-echeshe-pred-sobranie-deneska-kje-se-protestira-dodeka-trae-sednicata>.

²⁵ “Партијата на Јанко Бачев: Успешно ја минавме руската обука и подготвени сме за преземање на власта,” *Fokus*, May 31 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://fokus.mk/partijata-na-janko-bachev-uspeshno-ja-minavme-ruskata-obuka-i-podgotveni-sme-za-prezemanie-na-vlasta/>.

²⁶ Leonid Savin, *Geopolitica*, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/person/leonid-savin>.

²⁷ “Канал 5: Бачев го злоупотреби просторот кој му го дадовме, во иднина нема да има место за него,” *Fokus*, October 25, 2018, accessed November 15, 2018,



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The second link between Russia and extremism in Macedonia refers to violent extremism, but Russia's role here is of symbolic nature, as Moscow has served as an inspiration rather than a facilitator of extremism. Hristijansko Bratstvo (Christian Brotherhood), a relatively low-profile yet vehemently nationalistic Macedonian movement, advocates for the abandonment of secular politics and closer alignment of Macedonia with Russia based on their shared Orthodox religion. The latter reached its culmination in March 2018, as the Hristijansko Bratstvo was the chief organiser of the relatively low-scale protests outside the Russian Embassy in Skopje. The protests opposed Macedonia's decision to expel one Russian diplomat in solidarity with the West over the poisoning of Sergei Skripal.²⁸ They were notable for offensive chants against Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev with the Russian Ambassador Oleg Scherbak being seemingly sympathetic to them.

Therefore, while it is probably fair to assume that Russia has no links to the Hristijansko Bratstvo beyond seeing them as a welcome source of opposition to the pro-Western geopolitical status quo in Macedonia, it is also fair to identify Russia's role as a major inspiration for this movement. The movement has been known not only for its non-violent extremism but recently also for some violent actions. During the name protests mentioned above, Hristijansko Bratstvo adopted a prominent role and engaged in inciting violence, as well as a series of passionate activities that incur criminal liability, such as climbing on other people's cars. Moreover, one of the members of the movement was arrested in September 2018 for illegal possession of massive artillery in his car, including various forms of cold and fire weapons, as well as riot gear.

Montenegro

Today, radical extremism and radicalism in the region are generally viewed through the prism of Islamist radicalisation and foreign fighters who left for Syria or Iraq. The general public and the region's governments often forget about other forms of extremism such as the right-wing nationalism, which is directly linked with Russia's imprint over the country.²⁹

Regardless of the fact it joined NATO in 2017, Montenegro partly remains in the Russian sphere of influence. Russia continues to affect Montenegro by boosting activities of the radical pro-Serbian, anti-

<https://fokus.mk/kanal-5-bachev-go-zloupotrebi-prostorot-koj-mu-go-dadovme-vo-idnina-nema-da-ima-mesto-za-nego/>.

²⁸ "Протест против протерувањето на рускиот дипломат во Скопје", A1 On Net, March 27, 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://a1on.mk/archives/872443>.

²⁹ Jelena Beslin and Marija Ignjatijević, "Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine," *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, June 2017, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2020%20Balkan%20foreign%20fighters.pdf>.



NATO/EU groups and by enhancing ethno-nationalist political forces. The most particular instance of Russia-linked violent right-wing extremism was the attempted coup in Podgorica on 16 October 2016, on the day of the parliamentary elections. It involved leaders of the Serbian extremists, Montenegrin pro-Russian opposition and two Russian intelligence officers.³⁰ The High Court in Podgorica has so far confirmed the indictment of 14 people for being directly involved with two Russian citizens and two Montenegrin pro-Russian opposition leaders belonging to the Democratic Front Party, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, among them.³¹ The event was also controversial as it engaged the returnees fighting with pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, including Aleksandar Sinđelić, an Austria-born Serbian citizen who was in charge of giving orders during the coup.³² Despite the established evidence of Russian intelligence officers participation, the Russian government up to date denies any involvement in the event.³³

Another case of nationalistic pan-Slavic extremism is a contentious pro-Russian paramilitary group known as the Balkan Cossack Army that is operational in Montenegro, Serbia and Republika Srpska. The group was founded in Kotor, Montenegro, in 2016 and is twinned with the Russian pro-Kremlin Night Wolves biker group. Its mission remains unclear, apart from endorsing pan-Orthodoxy for the Slavic people. The opening ceremony was led by the Serbian Orthodox priest Momčilo Krivokapić thus becoming one of the examples of direct involvement of the Serbian Orthodox Church, with close links to the Russian Orthodox Church, in Montenegro's extremist activities.³⁴ The group is led by Cossack General Viktor Zaplatin, a Russian veteran who fought in Bosnia in 1992–1993.³⁵ Interestingly enough, Aleksandar Sinđelić, the leading figure of the coup, is also a member of the Cossacks.³⁶

Montenegro also did not stay immune to foreign fighters who left the country to fight alongside pro-Russian forces in the Ukrainian conflict in Donbass. As mentioned above, some of them were directly involved in the coup organisation. Official data on the exact number of foreign fighters who went to

³⁰ Those are Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov.

³¹ "Montenegrin Court Confirms Charges against Alleged Coup Plotters," *Radio Free Europe*, June 8, 2017, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-coup-charges-confirmed/28535744.html>.

³² Beslin and Ignjatijević, "Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine."

³³ "Russia plotted to overthrow Montenegro's government by assassinating Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic last year, according to senior Whitehall sources," *The Telegraph*, February 19, 2017, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/18/russias-deadly-plot-overthrow-montenegros-government-assassinating/>.

³⁴ "Balkanska kozačka 'vojska'," *Radio Free Europe*, September 12, 2016, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.in4s.net/u-kotoru-formirana-balkanska-kozacka-vojska-video/>. ; "Hanging by a thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro," *Russia Foreign Policy Papers*, June 2018, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/kraemer-rfp5.pdf>.

³⁵ And also in as well as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transdniester.

³⁶ Russia's Friends Form New 'Cossack Army' In Balkans," *Radio Free Europe*, October 18, 2016, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/balkans-russias-friends-form-new-cossack-army/28061110.html>.



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Ukraine significantly vary. Yet, the authorities say that at least five Montenegrins returned from fighting alongside pro-Russian forces in Ukraine.³⁷ As other Western Balkan countries, Montenegro has changed its criminal legislation in order to outlaw foreign fighting. There are two ongoing proceedings against Marko Barović, who fought in the battles in Ukraine and against Hamid Beharović, who fought in Syria.³⁸ Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that some research suggests that fighters returning from Ukraine usually remain exempt from prosecution and severe sanctions, unlike those coming back from the Middle East.³⁹

Serbia

When analysing Russian support for far-right groups in Serbia, it should be stressed that not all pro-Russian organisations are involved in extremism spreading nor that all far-right movements have direct links to Russian state or its intelligence services.

The activities of the radical right-wing organisations in Serbia has been recently mapped by the Women Support Center in partnership with the Vojvodina Anti-Fascist Coalition.⁴⁰ One of the right-wing extremist organisations with strong ties to Russia is Serbian Honour. The organisation exists and operates under the guise of humanitarian work and activism, but in reality, it promotes militarism, glorifies war and war criminals. Its members publicly advocate Russophilia, Chetniks, homophobia, intolerance towards Europe, America and everything that is “not Serbian.”⁴¹

In 2007, the leader of Serbian Honour Bojan Stojković was on training in the military base Ševatske livade in Preševo, Serbia, which was later extended to Moscow thanks to the cooperation with the association of Russian war veterans Successors of the Victory.⁴² Members of the Serbian Honour have

³⁷ Azinović and Bečirević, “A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans.”

³⁸ “Na ratištima u Siriji i Ukrajini 20 Crnogoraca,” *CDM*, November 5, 2017, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/na-ratista-u-siriju-ukrajinu-otislo-20-crnogoraca/>.

³⁹ Beslin and Ignjatijević, “Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine.”

⁴⁰ Map of extremist organisations in Serbia – Gde zivi ekstremizam?, https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/052a67a1f32f0485ca11202764d2ae60/gde-spavaju-ekstremisti/index.html?fbclid=IwAR3hvv1xBKms_1Zlf4ARsINxdGDFPU9hWGYN4AjbzJQw8uNdmXna_1TPJpo The map and investigative articles are created in the framework of the project “Combating Extremism and Civil Resistance - Serbia 2018”.

⁴¹ They also show hatred towards Croats, Albanians, feminists, migrants, Muslims and other groups. Vuk Stanojević, “ŠIRENJE MRŽNJE I MILITARIZAM U SRBIJI PROLAZI KAO HUMANITARNI RAD”, *Autonomija info*, December 5, 2018, <http://www.autonomija.info/sirenje-mrznje-i-militarizam-u-srbiji-prolazi-kao-humanitarni-rad.html>

⁴² According to the Sarajevo-based “Žurnal” portal.



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also been practising firing at the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš, which, in diplomatic circles of the Western countries, is considered a Russian intelligence centre.⁴³

The Serbian Honour is also affiliated with the Russian motorcycle club Night Wolves, famous for its close ties to President Putin, while also being on the United States blacklist for terrorist actions in Ukraine. Serbia has its own branch of the Night Wolves whose leader is Saša Savić.⁴⁴ The Night Wolves are famous in Serbia for supporting Kosovo Serbs, for organising various humanitarian actions and for their close ties to their “Orthodox brothers.”⁴⁵ Western media claim that the Serbian branch “is part of an extremist ecosystem” nurtured by Russia through its ties to the Serbian Orthodox Church and radical Serb nationalists who still dream of a Greater Serbia.⁴⁶

Another notable phenomenon is the indoctrination and radicalisation of youth from Serbia by both Serbian and Russian extreme-right organisations but also academic institutions. Russian Institute for Strategic Research organised scientific conferences, symposiums of young politicians in Russia, children’s camp Lemnos in Greece visited by children from Serbia, as well as the international children’s camps Serbian Code⁴⁷ and Our Serbia, which include children from Russia, Crimea, Transnistria and Donbas. In early 2018, 30 teenagers from Serbia travelled to Russia to attend an International Military Patriotic Youth Camp ran by an ultranationalist group called E.N.O.T. Corp, whose military trainers teach kids how to find their way in the woods, handle weapons, and prepare for the possibility of war.⁴⁸ In August 2018, “Serbian and Russian veterans and patriotic groups” with the support of Serbian local authorities and Russian far-right groups, organised the first “patriotic youth camp” in Serbia where children and young adults learned military skills. Following public complaints, the government closed the camp.⁴⁹

Foreign fighters who support pro-Russian forces in Ukraine is a relatively new trend in Serbia. Around 70 individuals fought on the pro-Russian side in the Ukrainian conflict.⁵⁰ Serbian citizens travelled to Ukraine under the guise of delivering humanitarian aid or by going to work in Russia. The majority of

⁴³ This center was also linked to the Russian-sponsored coup attempted in Montenegro in 2017.

⁴⁴ Michael Carpenter, “Russia Is Co-opting Angry Young Men,” *The Atlantic*, August 29, 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/russia-is-co-opting-angry-young-men/568741/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Higgins, “Russia’s Feared ‘Night Wolves’ Bike Gang Came to Bosnia.”

⁴⁷ Organisation “Serbian Code”, <http://nasasrbija.rs/index.php/srp/srpski-kod-srb>

⁴⁸ “Serbian Teens Play War Games At Russian Paramilitary Camp,” *Radio Free Europe*, April 6, 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-serbia-paramilitary-camp/29149543.html>.

⁴⁹ “What are armed children doing on Mt. Zlatibor?/VIDEO,” *B92*, August 16, 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2018&mm=08&dd=16&nav_id=104874.

⁵⁰ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report*. Belgrade, British Council, 2018, pp. 6.



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Serbian foreign fighters in Ukraine are organised in a unit called the Serbian Chetnik Movement.⁵¹ Inspired by the ideology of ultra-nationalism, Serbian Chetniks in Ukraine consider it to be their patriotic duty to support Russia, although the financial gains can also be a motivator.⁵²

Some of the foreign fighters in Ukraine have also been accused of planning terrorist attacks in the Western Balkans, such as Aleksandar Sindjelić who allegedly was one of the organisers of the attempted coup d'état in Montenegro in October 2016.⁵³ Sindjelić, who is a member of the Serbian branch of the Night Wolves, identified two Russians as Russian intelligence officers, saying that they organised and financed the plot.⁵⁴

Furthermore, news about the death of Serbian citizen fighting in Syria revealed the fact that many Serbian right-wing extremists active in the Ukrainian battlefields are now fighting for Assad's forces through engagement of Russian private military company called Wagner.⁵⁵ Since the Serbian government criminalised foreign fighters by making the amendments to the Criminal Code in October 2014, the foreign fighters who came back to Serbia from Ukraine were prosecuted.

Turkey

Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership is mainly trying to influence Muslims of the Western Balkans in ways that enhance its political and business interests. Turkish influence in the region has never been associated with the support of violent extremism or radicalism. Moreover, Turkish support and cooperation with local Islamic Communities, and official Muslim religious institutions, have a counterbalancing effect on the spread of Salafism⁵⁶ and other radical interpretations of Islam. The only exception to this is in Serbia, in which Turkish influence has helped to divide the official Islamic Community which facilitated the spread of radical interpretations of Islam not backed by official Muslim institutions.

⁵¹ According to the Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum.

⁵² Petrović and Stakić, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report*, pp. 10.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 12.

⁵⁴ Michael Carpenter, "Russia Is Co-opting Angry Young Men", *The Atlantic*, August 29, 2018.

⁵⁵ Petrović and Stakić, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report*, pp. 33.

⁵⁶ For the purposes of this briefing paper, we use the term Salafism as an umbrella term for a fundamental and purist interpretations of Islam, even though it is not a unified movement. Salafism is largely influenced by the teachings and practices of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his followers who established it as an official religious practice in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century. For this reason terms Salafism and Wahhabism are often interchangeably used, however, we use the term Wahhabism only when quoting external sources.



Bosnia and Herzegovina

There are no indications that Turkey has been in any way involved in supporting extremist elements in BiH. However, no one could rule out a possibility of different future developments given Turkish ever-growing political engagement and physical presence in BiH and with regards to Turkish government's radical positions towards Gülenist presence in BiH and the rest of the region. Having in mind that the anti-Gülenist campaign has already led to secret, illegal arrests and deportations of alleged Gülenists in several countries in the region,⁵⁷ one cannot exclude the possibility of similar or some other radical situations in BiH occurring in the near future.

Besides political links with Bosniak politicians, Turkey has also been steadily building its power base through other means. Practices it uses range from the establishment of a local branch of its ruling AKP⁵⁸ party to establishing groups of its supporters made of both local residents and Turkish nationals many of whom attended some of the numerous Turkish academic institutions in the country and abroad. These groups have already been used in BiH in previous years for the staging of demonstrations in support of the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as well as protests against Turkish self-exiled preacher and political figure Muhammed Fethullah Gülen and his Bosnian supporters. Furthermore, according to different Turkish sources, Turkey has in recent years also built up the presence of its secret police all over the region.⁵⁹

Kosovo

Turkey's purpose has never been to promote violent extremism and support more Kosovar citizens to join the wars in Syria. Instead, Turkey appears to be more concentrated in the economic and cultural realm in Kosovo. While the Gulf States have to some extent imposed "an alien Islam to the Balkans," Turkish organisations support the existing Islamic communities and strengthen their activities through different investments aimed at increasing peoples' religiosity.⁶⁰ However, it is worth noting that Turkey's Islamist agenda under Erdoğan is more pronounced. It seeks to expand the role of religion into people's lives and encourage them to adopt it as a way of living, rather than a mere religious and cultural practice.

⁵⁷ Madalin Necsutu, "Turkish Secret Services Nab Six 'Gülenists' in Moldova," *Balkan Insight*, September 6, 2018, accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/six-turkish-professors-detained-by-moldovan-secret-services-09-06-2018>.

⁵⁸ S. Kurt, "Erdoan širi AKP, otvara predstavništvo u BiH?!", *Avaz*, January 5, 2018, accessed January 7, 2019, <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/337868/erdoan-siri-akp-otvara-predstavnistvo-u-bih>.

⁵⁹ Interview with a Turkish official, October 2018.

⁶⁰ Ibid.



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Macedonia

As mentioned in the previous reports (see links above), the first private high school in Macedonia, Yahya Kemal College, is a Turkish school associated with Gülen's Hizmet movement. The college has six branches in four cities in Macedonia and is widely considered as one of the most prestigious high school institutions in the country. The Turkish government has tried to put pressure on Macedonia to shut down these schools, but the Macedonian government has refused to fulfil this request. As part of this effort, the Turkish ambassador to Macedonia went as far as claiming that parents who don't want their children to become "terrorists" should not send their children to Yahya Kemal.⁶¹ Yet despite the harsh rhetoric emanating from Ankara, there has been no evidence of any extremist inclinations among the Yahya Kemal schools, be it towards Turkey or Macedonia.

Montenegro

There is traditionally good cooperation among the Islamic Community of Montenegro (ICM), which is moderate and pro-active, and their Turkish counterparts and officials, including Erdoğan. Fears of the potential spread of Islamic radicalism are not related to Turkish activities but to the forms of Islamic teachings and support coming from the Gulf States.

Serbia

One of the biggest results of Turkey's influence in religious affairs in Serbia is the creation of a breakup within the Islamic Community. In 2007, the Islamic Community split into two official structures – Islamic Community in Serbia with headquarters in Novi Pazar headed by former Mufti Muamer Zukorlić⁶² and operating under the auspices of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Islamic Community of Serbia based in Belgrade, headed by Adem Zilkić and supported by Turkey. Both Islamic communities are fighting for the hearts and minds of Muslim believers.

The divided Islamic community in Serbia is an additional factor that opens a space for harmful influences, i.e. problematic interpretations of Islam that might lead to violent extremism.⁶³ According to the Western Balkans Research Extremism Forum, this competition only damages the legitimacy of both communities leaving the space for extremists to attract dissatisfied believers.⁶⁴ The attempt of

⁶¹ "Turkish ambassador implies Gülen schools in Macedonia raise terrorists," *Turkish Minute*, September 5, 2018, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2018/05/09/turkish-ambassador-implies-gulen-schools-in-macedonia-raise-terrorists>.

⁶² Baza imovine politicara, Muamer Zukorlić," *Krik*, January 11, 2018, accessed January 6, 2019, https://imovinapoliticara.krik.rs/display/disp6/profil.php?disp_id=67.

⁶³ Petrović and Stakić, *Western Balkans Research Forum – Serbian Report*, pp. 23.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 4.



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Ankara to mediate in the reconciliation between religious leaders Zilkić and Zukorlić had failed, primarily because Ankara supported Zilkić, with the intention to place the Islamic Community of Serbia under control of the Islamic Community of Turkey.⁶⁵

On the other hand, Zukorlić, a former religious and party leader of the Justice and Reconciliation Party, is seen as a promoter of a more fundamental version of Islam promoted by Saudi Arabia. In mid-2016, after renouncing the functions of a religious leader, he was elected as a member of Serbian Parliament. Some experts believe that President Vučić tried to pacify Zukorlić by including him in the formal government structures as a member of Parliament and the Chairman of the Committee on Education, Science, Technological Development and Information Society.⁶⁶

The Gulf States

The wars of the 1990s opened doors for the Gulf States' imprint over the former Yugoslav countries which brought to the region new ultraconservative and intolerant forms of Islam, particularly Salafism. As in Russia's case, however, direct involvement of the Gulf States' governments and authorities remains obscure in most cases. Frequently, radicalisation begins with education at the Gulf States' religious institutions, or has been spread through various charities and NGO's, with certain but unclear links to the state institutions and political elites, assisting in the post-war reconstruction.

Teachings of radical Islam were introduced to the moderate Balkan forms of Islam with the arrival of the Islamic fighters, Mujahideen, who came to fight alongside their Muslim counterparts in the Bosnian war. After the war, some Mujahideen stayed in BiH and established closed communities in which they educated their local supporters on Salafism. A similar trend was to be seen during the war in Kosovo.

Activities of Islamic charities and NGO's decreased after the 2001 terrorist attack in the US and the following war on terror, which led to the exposure of their suspicious activities, including the support of terrorism or illegal arms trade. Despite that, the Gulf States had, throughout the years, financed the reconstruction of many mosques and construction of new ones and invested into other cultural and commercial projects. Salafi communities living in remote areas remained, and Salafi influences have also penetrated Muslim communities in other countries of the region, especially in the Serbian and Montenegrin Sandžak region. Their overall numbers, however, remain very low and estimated numbers of Salafists with the potential for violent extremism are marginal.

⁶⁵ Forum for Ethnic Relations, Mapping of Sandžak, Forum for Ethnic Relations, Belgrade, June 2017, pp.41

⁶⁶ Dušan Komarčević, "Smenu traže, Zukorlić ostaje," *Slobodna Evropa*, October 16, 2017, accessed January 5, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zukorlic-odbor-obrazovanje-/28797233.html>.



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The main concerns related to Islamist extremism in the region have been recently related to the departure of tens of radicalised Balkan Muslims, many of whom are known to have spent some time in closed Salafi communities, to Syrian or Iraqi battlefields. As a response to this worrying phenomenon, the Western Balkan countries have passed new legislation outlawing such practice, and several foreign fighters have already been prosecuted.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Islamic radicalisation in BiH has been encouraged by certain Islamic countries and groups over the past three decades. The beginning of this phenomenon is closely connected to the war in Bosnia during which several thousand Islamic fighters, so-called Mujahideen, came to fight alongside their Muslim brethren. Their religious and political views atypical for Bosnian Muslims' traditionally very moderate way of practising Islam as well as some of the war atrocities, which they committed against non-Muslim fighters and civilians, triggered controversy within the country.

The presence of Mujahideen significantly decreased at the end of the war as most left seeking other wars to join, but few thousand of them remained in the country, established families and received BiH citizenship. Some of these Mujahideen appeared to be fed up with war rather seeking solace and peace in BiH, while others gathered local supporters and established closed communities in which they educated people to Salafism. These groups were also supported by different NGOs from Islamic, mainly Gulf, countries which provided them with money, food and clothes. At the difficult times immediately after the end of the war, such assistance was enough to draw the attention of larger numbers from the local population.

BiH has seen a number of terrorist attacks carried out by local Islamic extremists. A major, and last up to date, the incident took place on October 28, 2011, in Sarajevo when Mevlid Jašarević fired at the U.S. Embassy with an AK-47 rifle for over 40 minutes, wounding a policeman. It came to light that Jašarević had spent some time in a Salafi community in Gornja Maoča village. In recent years, despite the fact that terrorist activities increased significantly across Europe, BiH was mostly spared.

Throughout this period, various Gulf countries and their NGOs financed construction of new or reconstruction of war-damaged mosques. Some mosques operated as these countries' consulate offices and were outside of the control of local authorities and without supervision from the BiH Islamic Community. The involvement of Islamic countries decreased significantly following September 11, 2001, and the subsequent global (US-led) 'war on terrorism' which resulted into many Islamic NGOs being shut down or forced to reduce their activities in BiH. Presence of Islamic countries started increasing again in recent years, as a result of the weakening of EU and US presence in BiH.



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Several local religious communities have emerged in remote areas around radical Islamic preachers. These communities have been fertile ground for the recruitment of fighters for battlefields in Syria and elsewhere. According to the RCC report,⁶⁷ some 240 adults from BiH are believed to have departed to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and the end of 2017. According to the same report, 112 citizens, both men (62) and women (50), remain there. At one point, some 50 BiH children were also believed to be in ISIL/Daesh-held territory, but it is not known how many remain. So far, 53 BiH citizens, three women and four children – have returned from Syria and Iraq, ten to countries other than BiH.

In order to discourage and halt these departures, BiH was among the first countries in 2014 to adopt legislation that criminalises the establishment of or association with foreign fighting forces.⁶⁸ So far, 22 former fighters have been convicted upon return. This law, the hardening of security forces' positions towards people leaving for foreign battlefields and also the gradual weakening of ISIS positions in Syria have significantly reduced this trend. Furthermore, the greatest obstacle for further expansion of Islamic radicalism in BiH is the moderate version of local Islam, which finds Salafism and other radical versions of Islam as strange and hostile to Bosniaks.⁶⁹

There is ample evidence of Gulf and other Islamic countries' support aimed at establishing a religious and cultural foothold in BiH. Yet there is little evidence that these countries and their regimes were behind terrorist or any other radical activities which were mostly promoted and/or carried out by extremist groups such as Al-Qaida or ISIS.

Kosovo

The aftermath of the Kosovo War in 1999 saw an inflow of religious charities from the Gulf States under the guise of humanitarian aid. It is estimated these organizations, frequently infiltrated by Islamist extremists, have invested around \$800 million in building mosques, provided educational scholarships to study in religious institutions across the Middle East, and sponsored Koranic schools in rural areas, often led by local fundamentalist alumni of Middle Eastern religious institutions.⁷⁰ Kosovars

⁶⁷ Azinović and Bečirević, "A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans."

⁶⁸ The law, which was adopted in 2014, allows for imprisonment of a minimum of 5 years for participation in foreign armed formations and between 3 months and 10 years for other activities related to foreign fighting, such as incitement and recruitment; as well as at least 3 years for recruiting, financing, training, or organizing for a terrorist group

⁶⁹ A term used for Bosnian Muslims.

⁷⁰ Adrian Shtuni, "Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo," *United States Institute of Peace*, December, 2016, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>.



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have traditionally adhered to practising Islam based on Hanafi school, a more liberal and tolerant version of Islam.⁷¹ However, these charities deliberately spread an ultraconservative form of Islam infused with a political agenda, mainly Salafism.⁷²

In Kosovo, there is a strong perception that non-domestic organizations and foreign money are among the key factors and preconditions for violent extremism and radicalism. Many imams and theologians who completed their studies in the Middle East are believed to have contributed to spreading extremism. A professor at the Faculty of Islamic Science at the University of Priština, who himself completed his studies in Medina before the 1990s, supports such view by claiming that many scholarship providers belong to extremist ideologies and oblige the students to follow similar paths.⁷³ At the same time, an imam from Peja argues that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Bahrain are pouring money to support Salafism through a blizzard of publications, videos and other materials aimed at indoctrinating younger generations.⁷⁴ He, in cooperation with other moderate imams, launched a website called *foltrash.com* (Speak Now) to counter the Salafi interpretations of Islam but as a result, received countless death threats from extremists.

Violent extremism, therefore, seems to be an externally driven phenomenon in Kosovo. Saudi Arabian organisations have operated under the umbrella of the Saudi Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosovo (SJCRK).⁷⁵ The Committee and the organisations operating under it built 38 mosques, 12 schools, supported more than 30 Koranic schools in rural areas and sponsored doctors' specialisation studies in the Middle East.⁷⁶ SJCRK was later shut down under accusations that it operated as a front for Al Qaeda.⁷⁷ Another such organisation was Al Waqf, which worked closely with BIK's (Islamic Community

⁷¹ Arben Qirezi, "Public pulse analysis on prevention of violent extremism in Kosovo," *UNDP Kosovo*, June, 2017, accessed January 2, 2019, http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/democratic_governance/public-pulse-analysis-on-prevention-of-violent-extremism-in-koso.html

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "Radikalizmi fetar në Kosovë ka ardhur nga shkollimi i imamëve në vendet arabe," *Telegrafi*, August 04, 2018, accessed January 2, 2019 <https://telegrafi.com/radikalizmi-fetar-ne-kosove-ka-ardhur-nga-shkollimi-imameve-ne-vendet-arabe/>

⁷⁴ Carlotta Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS," *New York Times*, May 21, 2016, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>.

⁷⁵ Shpend Kursani, "Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Kosovar Centre for Security Studies*, April, 2015, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens'_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS."



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of Kosovo) Mufti Naim Ternava and often received requests to refurbish mosques. Eventually, it was closed by the Government due to their suspected funding of terrorist activities.⁷⁸

Kosovo authorities claim to have successfully mapped the real sources of radicalism but do not directly point the finger at Gulf States' governments, as there is lack of evidence. Kosovo's Ambassador to the United States, Vlora Çitaku, acknowledge that Gulf-based money advocating Wahhabism permeated Kosovo, but she rejects that Gulf governments per se were responsible for such activity.⁷⁹ A former Board Member of the Central Bank of Kosovo spoke about having encountered a few suspicious microfinance institutions whose capital originated in the Gulf States.⁸⁰ According to NY Times, "investigators from Kosovo's Financial Intelligence Unit found that Al Waqf al Islami ran through €10 million from 2000 through 2012. Yet little paperwork was found to explain much of the spending."⁸¹

Macedonia

Since the beginning of the Syrian War in 2011, and especially since the emergence of ISIS in 2014, Macedonia has seen a number of its citizens, usually of Albanian ethnicity, join the battlefield in Iraq or Syria. This represents a peculiar form of foreign influence on violent extremism in Macedonia as the countries in question are both victims of extremist fighters and indirect exporters of these groups back to Macedonia, especially in recent years with the gradual downfall of ISIS.

As of June 2016, the Macedonian intelligence services had counted 110 fighters that fled to Syria.⁸² Twenty-five had been killed in Syria, and 86 fighters had returned to Macedonia.⁸³ There has been no religiously inspired terrorist attack on Macedonian soil as a result of these returns, which might be due to the fact that most of these fighters are believed to have joined the Syrian war on the side of a more moderate (albeit Islamist) group, the Free Syrian Army, with the purpose of toppling President Assad rather than pursuing jihad.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ "OJQ-ve që promovuan ekstremizmin, nuk u lejohet veprimtaria", *Telegrafi*, February 13, 2016, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://telegrafi.com/ojq-ve-qe-promovuan-ekstremizmin-nuk-u-lejohet-veprimtaria/>.

⁷⁹ Hiam Nawas, "Kosovo: The Collateral Damage of Saudi's Funding Extremist Ideology", *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2016, accessed January 2, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/hiam-nawas-/kosovo-the-collateral-dam_b_10156972.html.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS."

⁸² Andreja Stojkovski and Kaltrina Selimi "Assessment of Macedonia's efforts in countering violent extremism – View from civil society", December 2016, p.10.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 11.



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The efforts of Macedonian security services are another factor that has accounted for no terrorist attacks. In two separate operations conducted in August 2015 and July 2016, a total of 11 individuals were arrested under the suspicion of participating in foreign paramilitary organisations and conducting recruitment for those organisations in Macedonia.⁸⁵ While all of the people arrested ended up receiving prison sentences in a trial held the following year,⁸⁶ the numbers mentioned above clearly indicate the likelihood that dozens of former foreign fighters are still in Macedonia.

Fortunately, Macedonia has mostly been omitted of allegations of foreign financing of Wahhabist mosques in the Balkan region having only a few minor instances of this practice. The Islamic Religious Community, which is the highest representative body of Muslim citizens in Macedonia, has identified the presence of four Wahhabist mosques in 2010.⁸⁷ One mosque in the municipality of Gazi Baba has also been identified as a hotbed of *takfiri* practitioners of Islam, or Muslims who tend to be intolerant of other branches of Islam, as well as other faiths.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, any foreign funding for these mosques from Saudi Arabia or other usual suspects when it comes to the support of Wahhabism has been difficult to prove. Moreover, due to the lack of observed violence, this threat tends to receive scarce attention in Macedonian media.

Montenegro

Out of the five analysed countries, Montenegro has been the least affected by the spread of Salafism during and after the 1990s wars. There has been, for example, no attacks in the country inspired by Salafi teachings. Nonetheless, Salafism and Salafi-oriented NGOs with their ultraconservative teachings is considered as a potential threat by many researchers and officials. The National Security Agency in 2007 estimated there were around 100 Salafis in Montenegro.

Salafi centres can mostly be found in areas bordering Kosovo and Serbia. One of them operates in Plav and is led by Sead Jašavić who studied at universities in Saudi Arabia and started recruiting upon return. As in most of the other cases, economic marginalisation and social exclusion are some of the main drivers of radicalisation in Montenegro.⁸⁹ There are, however, signs that non-violent Salafism in Montenegro is less conservative than in Bosnia for instance. The popularity of Sufi preacher Hafiz

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.23

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.24

⁸⁷ Srdjan Stojanov, "Во Македонија има вахабисти," *Slobodna Evropa*, July 7, 2010, accessed January 2, 2019 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/2093516.html>.

⁸⁸ Edina Bećirević, Majda Halilović and Vlado Azinović, "Literature Review: Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," *British Council*, March 2017.

⁸⁹ Ibid.



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Sulejman Bugari, who now lives in Montenegro and is accepted by Salafists there, signals that Montenegrin Salafists may be ideologically flexible and more tolerant.⁹⁰

However, Salafi activities are monitored by Montenegrin authorities, who work closely with the Islamic Community of Montenegro and its leader Rifat Fejzić. He has quite a bit of influence in politics with Montenegrin Muslims being more involved in the decision-making process and feeling more integrated into the Montenegrin society than the Serbian Sandžak Muslims. The majority of them also voted in favour of Montenegro's independence in 2006.

When it comes to foreign fighters from Montenegro in militant Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq, the exact numbers differ. But according to a report presented to the parliament in October 2015 by the Montenegrin National Security Agency, around 13 Montenegrins have fought with the ISIS and Al Qaeda-affiliate Al Nusra in Syria and Iraq. Six are believed to be still fighting there, and four are known to have been killed. Some research suggests that there is also a big difference in how people perceive extremists from the Orthodox communities who went to fight in Ukraine and Islamist extremists who went to Syria or Iraq and calls for equal treatment of such individuals.

Serbia

Over the last decade, people in the Sandžak region, particularly young people, have turned to religion in large numbers. According to a survey conducted by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia in May 2016, religious identification among Sandžak young people is extremely high. Almost two-thirds of the respondents claim that they are strict believers who do not question any religious teaching, half of them say that religious community has a strong influence over them, while every fifth respondent justifies violence as a means to defend their faith.⁹¹ One of the explanations why young Bosniaks from Sandžak have become more religious is that a large number of young people go to study abroad, at the Islamic universities in Turkey and Saudi Arabia.⁹² The Islamic universities offer studies free of charge, while in Serbia just a small number of students receives a scholarship and the rest has to pay high tuition fees including costs for accommodation and meals. The increased religiosity of people from Sandžak is not per se a driver of Islamist extremism, yet, it could be considered as a greater potential for radicalisation of the youth.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Petrović and Stakić, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report*, pp. 22.

⁹² Ibid.



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Apart from the Schism within the Islamic community (described in the Turkish section), the spread of Salafism and Shia Islam raises concerns among the Serbian Muslim community. There are no more than 2,000 Shia Muslims in Serbia, but given the fact that there were only a few hundred of them a couple of years ago, these numbers show that Shia Islam is taking root in Serbia.⁹³ The findings of the Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum indicate that the division among Muslims is intentionally maintained and exacerbated.⁹⁴

Another phenomenon that can be traced in Serbia in recent years is Roma radicalisation, who follow a radical Salafi interpretation of Islam. This is especially evident among the Ashkali Roma community that immigrated from Kosovo after the 1999 Kosovo War. Even though most of the Salafi Roma are peaceful, according to media reports, 11 Roma have travelled to Syria and Iraq, some of them even taking their families with them.⁹⁵ Last but not least, similarly to neighbouring states, the influence and spread of Salafism, especially in Sandžak, is on the rise. The Bosniak diaspora from Sandžak as well as diaspora from some Western European countries (Sweden, Austria, and Switzerland) heavily financially support this movement.⁹⁶

According to the estimates of the Serbian authorities, 49 Serbian citizens (37 men and 12 women) from the Sandžak region have left Serbia to join the conflict in Iraq or Syria. So far, seven people have been indicted for terrorism-related offences, including radicalisation and recruitment and financing terrorism. Some foreign fighters who have joined anti-Assad forces had records of petty crime and were linked with football hooliganism. However, further research on links between organised crime and extremism is still required. Also, the research shows that the Islamist extremists from Sandžak promote Salafi and Shia ideology, as well as Takfiri ideology and incite discrimination and hatred towards many groups, including Muslims who belong to the traditional, Hanafi school of Islam, through several websites and social networks (Facebook, Twitter).⁹⁷

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 31

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 31

⁹⁵ Ibid., 2018, pp. 31-33.

⁹⁶ Forum for Ethnic Relations, 2017, pp. 30.

⁹⁷ Petrović and Stakić, *Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum - Serbia Report*, pp. 14-15.