



# **Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans:**

## **An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE**

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## Introduction and context

In recent years there has been an increasing concern about the potential for violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) in the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo<sup>1</sup>, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The region has been historically perceived as politically volatile with a history of violence that stems from right-wing (political) ideologies and actions.<sup>2</sup> Experts and officials from the Western Balkans raise concerns about the spread of right-wing extremism (RWE) in the context of political conflict. Thus, this paper focuses on both not-yet-violent and violent extremist movements and activities in the Western Balkans.<sup>3</sup>

Experts and practitioners have used various terms to frame VRWE. There is, however, lack of a universal definition. In 2021 a group of Member States of the European Union (EU) participating in a Project Based Collaboration<sup>4</sup> on Violent Right-Wing Extremism (Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Sweden) decided to adopt the following non-legally binding working definition:

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*“Violent right-wing extremism are acts of individuals or groups who use, incite, threaten with, legitimise or support violence and hatred to further their political or ideological goals, motivated by ideologies based on the rejection of democratic order and values as well as of fundamental rights, and centred on exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia and/or related intolerance.”*

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In this paper, RWE is defined as an ideology that “encompasses authoritarianism, anti-democracy and exclusionary and/or holistic nationalism”.<sup>5</sup> Accompanying characteristics of the concept are xenophobia, racism and populism.<sup>6</sup> Its violent manifestation (VRWE) is a form of political violence that has fluid boundaries between hate crime, terrorism<sup>7</sup> and atrocity (e.g., genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing).<sup>8</sup> An inseparable feature of VRWE in the Western Balkans is ethno nationalism. This concept is based on a large-group identity that forms around common points – such as the myth of common descent, language and religion – and has ideological roots in nativism, racism, chauvinism, traditionalism, xenophobia, homophobia and supremacism.<sup>9</sup>

The Western Balkans have numerous risk factors that can be related to RWE, such as unresolved identity-related issues, conflicting historical and governance issues, in some cases difficult transition to a fully accomplished democracy, frozen conflict and administrative dysfunctionality. Yet, knowledge about RWE in the Western Balkans has been scattered and unorganised. This paper aims to integrate and systematise knowledge on RWE in the Western Balkans; it frames the most important challenges for preventing and countering this form of violent extremism.

After a brief introduction, RWE and tendencies towards VRWE in the Western Balkans will be elaborated. The most important RWE actors and factors – from Albania, BiH, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

<sup>2</sup> Azinović, *Understanding violent extremism in the Western Balkans*, 3; Bećirević, Halilović and Azinović, *Radicalisation and violent extremism in the Western Balkans*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Azinović, *Understanding violent extremism in the Western Balkans*, 3 and 14; Schmid, *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> The Project Based Collaborations are projects led by EU countries, with the support of the European Commission, to foster exchange and cooperation on priority topics on prevention of radicalisation. Further information can be found here: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/prevention-radicalisation/project-based-collaborations\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/prevention-radicalisation/project-based-collaborations_en).

<sup>5</sup> Carter, *Right-wing extremism/radicalism: reconstructing the concept*, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Carter, *Right-wing extremism/radicalism: reconstructing the concept*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Buljubašić & Holá, *Historical Trauma and Radicalisation: How Can Intergenerational Transmission of Collective Traumas Contribute to (Group) Radicalisation?* 3.

<sup>9</sup> Halilović & Veljan, *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 11; Volkan, *Large-group identity, international relations and psychoanalysis*, 206-213; but see Malešević & Trošt-Pavasović, *Nation-States and Nationalism*.

and Serbia – that contribute to the sympathies for VRWE are systematically presented. The paper ends with the contextualisation of RWE radicalisation, a description of the main challenges for P/CVE in the Western Balkans and policy recommendations.

## Country-specific challenges regarding RWE in the Western Balkans

### a. Albania

Albania is a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member and a candidate for EU membership, nevertheless past experiences still play a role in its present.<sup>10</sup> The country still faces many challenges regarding economic and social development, the rule of law and corruption.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, however, Albania showed commitment to EU oriented reforms and delivered tangible and sustainable results.<sup>12</sup> In some cases Albania's difficulty to reconcile with the abuses of its former totalitarian regime has effect on today's society and political discourse. To criticise the government and show dissatisfaction, people risk to become more prone to supporting the RWE narrative. As Gjergji Vurmo, Director of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation in Tirana, in an interview for the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network said:

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*"This means there is a lot of potential for populist narratives and narratives against 'the establishment', including far-right ideologies and groups."*<sup>13</sup>

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Albanian RWE is present in political discourse. Some RWE political parties promote irredentism or autonomy of neighbouring territories inhabited by Albanians and have ties also with far-right parties in the EU<sup>14</sup> These political parties are non-mainstream and marginal in political decision-making.<sup>15</sup> They frequently use rhetoric fuelled with xenophobia and racism.<sup>16</sup> The only openly neo-fascist movement is the *Albanian Third Position*, which opposes communism, democracy and Abrahamic religions and promotes Albanian traditionalism, paganism and racism. It has been targeting Albanian Muslims under the discourse of fear of globalism, which is, according to them, promoted by George Soros and the left. Members of this VRWE movement are anonymous and small in number. Their online activities are published in English and Albanian. To attract youth, their posts are funny and attractive, and they use DIY style and fashwave.<sup>17</sup> There is a lack of knowledge about the current activities of the *Albanian National Army*, a VRWE organisation that operates in Albania, Greece, Kosovo\*, North Macedonia and Serbia with the aim of creating Greater Albania.<sup>18</sup>

Right-wing extremist ideas are present online, and the diaspora is an actor that plays a role as well in radicalisation. Generally, the RWE narrative builds on racism against the Roma and migrants. Similar to other WB countries their online content includes anti-communism, historical revisionism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, racism and conspiracy theories.<sup>19</sup> Also, football ultras in Albania tend to promote RWE. For example, *Tirana ultras* openly use fascist or Nazi symbols and messages in stadiums, such as usage of the banner of the SS Division Skanderbeg. They are also active on social media, where they promote Nazism and historical revisionism.<sup>20</sup> The scepticism about the EU and the dissatisfaction with government efforts to

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<sup>10</sup> Gjeta, *Albania Remains Hostage to its Communist Past*.

<sup>11</sup> Qirjazi & Shehu, *Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Albania*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Further information on Albania, including the country's engagement against violent extremism, can be found in the European Commission's following country report: *Albania 2021 Report. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. English language available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/albania-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/albania-report-2021_en).*

<sup>13</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>14</sup> Bego, *Albania*, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Serbs, Montenegrins and Greeks are portrayed as invaders, barbarous, a threat to the Albanian nation. Bego, *Albania*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Bego, *Albania*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Bego, *Albania*, 59-61.

<sup>20</sup> Bego, *Do Albanians like Fascism? An Iconographical Investigation on Social Media Material*.

build democratic institutions have been further exploited by right-wing extremists, by openly promoting anti-EU, anti-United States, pro-Trump and pro-Russian attitudes.

To tackle VRWE, the destructive fascist and communist history should be adequately disseminated, and its legacy detected and communicated to the public, including with the usage of online platforms and television. The public, especially diaspora and at-risk youth, should be informed about the potentials of neo-fascism, which include online recruitment and radicalisation strategies. Fragile issues of the Greek minority in Albania, as well as Kosovo\*-Serbia relations still have the potential to mobilise support for RWE.<sup>21</sup> Regional forms of collaborations for example through educational and economic cooperation, could mitigate distance from other Western Balkan partners based on historical and cultural differences. Dissatisfaction with government efforts to build democratic institutions and tackle the economy, health and migration issues as well as organised crime has VRWE potential. Rule of law and EU accession's prospects could play a key role in this regard.<sup>22</sup>

## **b. Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The war in BiH ended in November 1995, but its legacies still impact BiH citizens.<sup>23</sup> A lack of consensus about the narratives of the past, frequent political disagreements, significant economic problems and various foreign influences have intersected and further intensified interethnic and political tensions and polarisation.<sup>24</sup> This has made the BiH society especially vulnerable to ethno nationalism, political radicalisation and ideological extremism.<sup>25</sup> As noted in the European Commission's Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2021:

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*"The public political commitment of the authorities at all levels of government to the strategic goal of European integration has not been turned into concrete action, as political leaders continued to engage in divisive rhetoric and unconstructive political disputes."<sup>26</sup>*

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The BiH RWE ideological spectrum is mostly divided by ethnicity and includes ultranationalist, neo-fascist and neo-Nazi movements.<sup>27</sup> The most prevalent narratives of these groups are related to religious nationalism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and historical revisionism. Their activities are low-key. They are not politically active and their alleged connections to nationalist political parties have not been proven.<sup>28</sup> These groups are related to football hooligans and the most prominent examples are ethnic Croat ultras from Mostar and ethnic Serb ultras from Prijedor. In Mostar, *Zrinjski ultras* – some of whom are Skinheads Mostar members – openly endorse neo-Nazism and have connections with the Ukrainian VRWE organisation Azov.<sup>29</sup> In Prijedor, *Rudar ultras* have similar traits to counterparts from Mostar. They are linked to Serbian RWE organisations and have attended VRWE camps in Russia.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the *Bosnian Movement of National Pride* aims for a pure Bosniak state.<sup>31</sup> They promote homophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-

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<sup>22</sup> European Commission, *Albania 2021 Report*.

<sup>23</sup> Turčalo & Veljan, *Community Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2; Buljubašić, *Predetermined for war? A trace of intergenerational transmission of war legacies among ethnically divided postwar generation from Bosnian urban areas*, 77-94.

<sup>24</sup> Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina report*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Further information on Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the country's engagement against violent extremism, can be found in the European Commission's following country report: *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021 Report. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*. English language available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2021_en).

<sup>26</sup> European Commission *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021 Report*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Organisations that promote neo-Nazi ideology are the *Bosnian Movement of National Pride*, *Blood and Honour*, its affiliate *Combat 18* and *Skinheads Mostar*.

<sup>28</sup> Kuloglija, *Bosnia & Herzegovina*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Kuloglija, *In Bosnian River Town, Far-Right Symbols and a Link to Ukraine*.

<sup>30</sup> Kuloglija, *Ultra-Right Groups Show Their Face in Bosnian Town*.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 10.

Muslim and anti-communist ideas,<sup>32</sup> and have connections with similar movements in Ukraine and Scandinavia.<sup>33</sup>

Some RWE organisations operate as formally registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Republika Srpska, exhibiting anti-governmental tendencies while advocating for national unity and ethnic purity, such as the *Chetnik movement*. Their narrative is based on irredentism, historical revisionism, celebration of war criminals, and spreading of anti-Croat, anti-Muslim and anti-communist sentiments. All closely cooperate with their equivalents from Montenegro, Serbia and beyond, and they have close ties with the Serbian Orthodox Church, war veterans' organisations, and various other RWE organisations and individuals. Chetnik gatherings in Republika Srpska feature militaristic rituals, Srebrenica genocide denial, glorification of war criminals, and portraying of ethno nationalist and fascist iconography.<sup>34</sup> Their members have close links to VRWE included in the Ukrainian war. At least 11 BiH citizens fought in Ukraine before the 2022-armed conflict,<sup>35</sup> but procedural issues, such as obtaining evidence, are making it more difficult to conduct criminal proceedings.<sup>36</sup> Russian and Serbian right-wing extremists have formal and non-formal branches as well as members from the BiH entity Republika Srpska. Russian examples are the *Night Wolves* that have close ties to Putin<sup>37</sup> and the BiH Serb political scene.<sup>38</sup> Russian support for Serb RWE activists and organisations is multifaceted and spans from support to strengthen (online) activities to military training.<sup>39</sup> Russian fighters from Ukraine acted as instructors on youth training camps in Russia and Serbia, in which children from the BiH entity Republika Srpska participated.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, several Serbian VRWE organisations such as *Serbian Cossacks*<sup>41</sup> and RWE organisations such as *Serbian Honour* have membership and operations in BiH. RWE organisations that are established and operate in the entity Republika Srpska have a similar pattern: shady financing, Orthodox Christian nationalism, pro-Russian support, homophobia, militarism and historical revisionism. Some, like *Saint Gregory Loncari*, use humanitarianism as a cover.<sup>42</sup>

Most of the Croat RWE activities are mostly scattered amongst individual and informal groups, mainly online, through web portals and various social networks' outlets. Croat RWE spills over from neighbouring Croatia to ethnic Croats in BiH. It is grappling with historical revisionism, such as World War II or the 1990s wars,<sup>43</sup> is characterised by homophobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia and glorification of war crimes, and has a particularly pronounced hatred of feminism, gender equality and abortion, including due to the intersection with religion and religious institutions.<sup>44</sup> At least 20 individuals from BiH and Croatia joined the VRWE volunteer *Azov Battalion* in Ukraine before the 2022-armed conflict.<sup>45</sup>

Coordination and communication amongst security agencies in BiH should be improved, and stronger rule of law and an open political will to tackle RWE would be important achievements.<sup>46</sup> Policies dedicated to prevent and counter VRWE are needed, as well as effective control of online content.<sup>47</sup> Public officials should reach a better understanding about the need to tackle these phenomena, and specialised training measures for different branches, such as the judiciary, law enforcement and other security authorities, should be

<sup>32</sup> Kuloglija, *Bosnian Far-Right Movement Weds Bosniak Nationalism, Neo-Nazism*.

<sup>33</sup> Milekic et al., *Far-Right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net*.

<sup>34</sup> Veljan & Čehajić, *A Dangerous Nexus? History, Ideology and the Structure of the Contemporary Chetnik Movement*, 22-40.

<sup>35</sup> Obrenović, *Novi zov rata u Ukrajini za dobrovoljce iz BiH i Srbije*.

<sup>36</sup> Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina report*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Losh, *Putin's Angels: the bikers battling for Russia in Ukraine*.

<sup>38</sup> Mujkić, *Bosnian Branch of 'Putin's Angels' Enjoys Political Backing*.

<sup>39</sup> Mujkić, *Ukraine War Veterans Bind Russia and Bosnian Serbs*.

<sup>40</sup> Mujkić, *How Russian Fighters Train Serb Teens at 'Military-Patriotic' Camps*.

<sup>41</sup> Obrenovic, *Under Cossack Banner, Russian Ties with Balkan Fighters Strengthened*.

<sup>42</sup> Pekmez, *Black-Clad 'Humanitarians' Promote Pro-Russian Agenda in Bosnia*.

<sup>43</sup> Colborne, *Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far-Right's International Ambitions*.

<sup>44</sup> Veljan & Čehajić-Campara, *Gender Ideologies: How Extremists Exploit Battles over Women's Rights and Drive Reciprocal Radicalisation*.

<sup>45</sup> Colborne, *Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far-Right's International Ambitions*.

<sup>46</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>47</sup> Kuloglija, *In Bosnian River Town, Far-Right Symbols and a Link to Ukraine*.



implemented. In BiH, the engine for potential VRWE lies deep in a complex political context that includes the intersection of politics, religious nationalism,<sup>48</sup> interethnic polarisation and unresolved issues of the past.<sup>49</sup>

By empowering women, especially in the decision-making process, and supporting independent media, RWE sympathies could be mitigated.<sup>50</sup> Transitional justice efforts, including peacebuilding and reconciliation activities, should be reinvented and adapted to P/CVE. Instead of engagement of the general population, youth at risk of VRWE need to be carefully selected and included in activities, such as educational visits to areas in which other ethnic groups predominantly live.

### **c. Kosovo\***

After the war in the late 1990s, Kosovo's socio-political reality and living conditions have improved. Progress to the EU path has continued to advance.<sup>51</sup> However, the country still faces perceptions of failed leadership efforts, unemployment and corruption.<sup>52</sup> According to the National Democratic Institute's Kosovo focus group, from 2016, Adrian Shtuni, foreign policy and security specialist for the Balkans, noted that:

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*"Participants expressed little trust in most government institutions, and perceived them as largely corrupt, self-interested and incapable of addressing important issues for ordinary citizens."*<sup>53</sup>

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Issues of organised crime, unemployment and the spread of fear that the EU is failing to defend the interests of Albanians can lead to the rise of RWE. However, studies that analysed risk factors that enable extremism have found that a combination of external and internal factors<sup>54</sup> and frustrated expectations are a far more common supporting factor of extremism than simply economic deprivation.<sup>55</sup> The aggressive nationalism that ultimately led to armed conflict continues to burden Kosovo's post-war society.<sup>56</sup> The RWE narratives intersected with religion still play an important role in shaping Serbia's policies towards Kosovo. It is important to emphasise that RWE in Kosovo is divided amongst ethnic lines and is mostly based on identity-related and ultra-ethnonationalism politics. Although EU-facilitated Kosovo-Serbia normalisation of relations dialogue,<sup>57</sup> in a similar pattern as in other Western Balkan countries, the RWE radicalisation is mainly top-down and reciprocal; a sense of threat, fear and mistrust between ethnic groups has the potential to feed RWE radicalisation.

Albanian RWE is characterised by Kosovo independence sentiments and is regionally connected with ethnic Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. While the idea of uniting "Albanian territories" has emotional appeal, it is fringe and does not enjoy a wide popular support. The RWE organisations that advocate for Greater Albania are marginal. This, however, does not mean that such a right-wing extremist idea should not be considered a possible threat.<sup>58</sup> V/RWE Serb movements see Kosovo as a small enclave within Serbia; a so-called historical heartland. Most of the right-wing extremist Serbs have internalised the stance that Albanians are "dangerous subversives" seeking to create Greater Albania and consider Albanians intruders. They have close relations with international RWE organisations and activists.<sup>59</sup>

Kosovo's National Strategy Against Terrorism and Action Plan recognises RWE as a form of extremism with nationalist and political motives and mechanisms for P/CVE such as institutional coordination and control of individuals and groups that pose a potential terrorism threat. However, institutional and non-governmental

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<sup>48</sup> Bećirević, *Bosnia and Herzegovina report*, 44-45.

<sup>49</sup> Hone, *How Ethnic and Religious Nationalism Threaten the Bosnian State*, 58-77.

<sup>50</sup> Atlantic Initiative, *Countering Violent Extremism Baseline Program*.

<sup>51</sup> Further information on Kosovo\*, including their engagement against violent extremism, can be found in the European Commission's following report: *Kosovo\* 2021 Report. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. English language available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/kosovo-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/kosovo-report-2021_en).*

<sup>52</sup> Beha & Selaci, *Statebuilding without Exit Strategy in Kosovo*, 97-124.

<sup>53</sup> Shtuni, *Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo*.

<sup>54</sup> Kraja, *Cultural Drivers of Radicalisation*.

<sup>55</sup> Denoeux & Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*.

<sup>56</sup> Biserko, *Yugoslavia's Implosion: The Fatal Attraction of Serbian Nationalism*.

<sup>57</sup> European Commission Staff, *Kosovo\* 2021 Report*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Janjevic, *Greater Albania - bogeyman or a pipe dream?*



approaches to P/CVE are more dedicated to Islamist extremism.<sup>60</sup> Kosovo uses a cooperative and coordinative approach with NGOs and religious institutions to prevent VRWE.<sup>61</sup> Although interethnic relations have advanced in recent years, they continue to be a challenge. Rhetoric and activities shape complex interethnic local dynamics and fuel sympathies for VRWE. Ethnic-based attacks and incidents, and the lack of a proper institutional response, are contributing radicalisation factors.<sup>62</sup> Thus, any peacebuilding, reconciliation and similar efforts need to be reinvented and consonant with local RWE challenges. Practitioners – including public officials and security services – would benefit of trainings aimed to improve the capacity to recognise early signs of radicalisation and VRWE in local communities, and could be trained for a bias-free approach in the treatment of citizens, regardless of their ethnicity. Negotiations and improvements of relations between Kosovo and Serbia could mitigate RWE in Kosovo.<sup>63</sup> The unresolved Kosovo–Serbia dispute remains amongst the main threats to the stability of the Western Balkans.<sup>64</sup>

#### d. Montenegro

In the last two decades, Montenegro made overall progress to EU accession,<sup>65</sup> but the political landscape in Montenegro slowly became deeply fragmented and ethno nationalism has been on the rise. Just before Montenegro gained independence from the Federation of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, Serb and Montenegrin ethnic polarisation and radicalisation slowly started emerging on the surface. Serbian RWE in Montenegro is characterised by historical revisionism, political polarisation, role played by religious institutions in public life and expansion of violent rhetoric in public spaces. Online space, especially social networks, has an immense role in RWE radicalisation in Montenegro.<sup>66</sup> On social networks, especially Facebook, supporters of RWE ideologies gather in dozens of connected groups and pages. These online activities have consequences in real life. It should be noted that numerous citizens approve of violence as a response to injustice or as a measure to protect their religion.<sup>67</sup>

Montenegro is an exemplary case of how RWE radicalisation in the Western Balkans can be understood through regional and wider geopolitical dynamics and shifts.<sup>68</sup> During the years preceding Montenegro's membership in NATO, the increased Russian influence in the country was evident. As years passed, very good relations with Russia soured, as Montenegro had an inexorable trajectory towards NATO membership and the government supported the EU sanctions against Russia in 2014. As Montenegro's NATO accession became evident in 2015,<sup>69</sup> RWE began to increase immensely amongst ethnic Serbs.<sup>70</sup>

In 2015, a branch of the Russian motorcycle club *Night Wolves* was founded in Montenegro. In 2016, *Balkan Cossack Army* was formed in Kotor. These groups have similar narratives that celebrate war criminals and revisions of history and share strong Orthodox sentiments. As is the case in BiH and Serbia, Montenegro also has the *Chetnik movement*, which is interconnected regionally.<sup>71</sup> As Montenegro's NATO membership commenced in 2017, the internal political crisis further poisoned the political landscape and fuelled RWE. RWE activities backed and stirred by the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian adversaries intensified after an attempted coup in 2016. The coup involved 2 Russian and 20 Serbian nationals, respectively, some related to the Ukrainian war<sup>72</sup> and foreign security services.<sup>73</sup> Their aim was allegedly to assassinate the ethnic Montenegrin president and take over political power.<sup>74</sup> In 2020, after the pro-Serbian government in

<sup>60</sup> European Commission Staff, *Kosovo\* 2021 Report*, 44-45.

<sup>61</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs, *National Strategy against Terrorism and Action Plan 2018–2023*.

<sup>62</sup> PAVE, *Focus-group in North Mitrovica with the Serbian community to examine the issue of online and offline (de) radicalization*.

<sup>63</sup> Office of the Prime Minister, *Strategy for the prevention of violent extremism and radicalism that leads to terrorism 2015–2020*.

<sup>64</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Kosovo: Background and U.S. Policy*.

<sup>65</sup> Further information on Montenegro, including the country's engagement against violent extremism, can be found in the European Commission's following country report: *Montenegro 2021 Report. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. English language available here* : [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021_en).

<sup>66</sup> Jovanovic, *Call to Lynch: The War of Words Threatening Montenegro's Delicate Balance*.

<sup>67</sup> Papović & Kovačević, *Rast desničarskog ekstremizma u Crnoj Gori: Građanska država na ispitu*, 14, 26-27.

<sup>68</sup> Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*.

<sup>69</sup> Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*.

<sup>70</sup> BIRN, *Montenegro: Key Political Parties*.

<sup>71</sup> Papović & Kovačević, *Rast desničarskog ekstremizma u Crnoj Gori: Građanska država na ispitu*, 26-27.

<sup>72</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Radio slobodna Evropa, *Ukinuta presuda za 'državni udar' u Crnoj Gori, DPS tvrdi rezultat pritiska na sud*.

<sup>74</sup> Tomovic, *Key Witness in Montenegro 'Coup' Trial to Testify*.

Montenegro was formed, the Supreme Court released all accused in 2021 due to violations of criminal procedure.<sup>75</sup>

Montenegro's government in 2018 started a process to adopt the law on religion aiming to register all religious property and sites that belonged to the Kingdom of Montenegro before it forcibly became part of the Serb-dominated Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918. This decision strengthened the interethnic divisions. The Serbian Church reacted by mobilising Serbs in Montenegro and neighbouring countries – Serbia, BiH and Kosovo\* – including the most prominent politicians for a cause that would cement interethnic relations. Under the guise of "Save Serbian Shrines", the Serbian Orthodox Church exploited vulnerabilities of Montenegrin society that fuelled RWE. Domestic and regional groups, including support from foreigner RWE organisations such as Russian Night Wolves and Cossacks, openly supported tens of thousands of protesters of Serbian Church believers.<sup>76</sup> Numerous informal RWE groups grew out of the protest, such as the *Orthodox Brotherhood Pillars* that describe their mission as patriotic and humanitarian while operating with iconography characteristic for RWE groups; also, some RWE activists even turned to political activity.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the Serbian Church does not hide its links with RWE activists and groups.<sup>78</sup> When it comes to the Ukrainian war, five ethnic Serbs were accused of foreign fighting on the pro-Russian side before the 2022 armed conflict, but only one was convicted, while the others escaped, most probably to neighbouring Serbia.<sup>79</sup>

Online RWE activities continue to grow throughout various social media outlets. Meme pages, together with other RWE social media accounts, formed a communication network in the election campaign during the 2020 elections. These networks promote the importance of religion, Serbian national symbols, Church and values, irredentism, toxic masculinity and animosities towards other ethnic groups.<sup>80</sup> The consequences provoked by the right-wing extremists span beyond the mere ideological interethnic conflict between Montenegrins and Serbs. For example, after the 2020 elections, there was a rise in Islamophobia and incidents against Muslims throughout the country.<sup>81</sup>

Following the loss of political power and with alleged indignation moves of Serbian nationalists and clergy, the right-wing extremist pro-Montenegrin political party – *Patriotic Komitas Union of Montenegro* (Komitas) – was established. In early 2021, Komitas took responsibility for the attacks on the new Montenegrin cabinet.<sup>82</sup> The recent enthronement of Serbian Church priests in Montenegro's old royal capital – Cetinje – became a new lure for the continuation of RWE amongst ethnic groups.<sup>83</sup> Amongst both sides, individuals who are leaning towards VRWE on the field are ultras from Montenegro and Serbia.<sup>84</sup>

There are no P/CVE policies and activities that address RWE, and risks related to such forms of extremism are not properly addressed.<sup>85</sup> Incidents motivated by ethnic or religious hate are treated as a misdemeanour. The Montenegrin interior ministry banned the Chetnik movement as they pose a security threat, but prohibition did not eradicate the network of activities of the movement; they have just gone underground.<sup>86</sup> Online RWE radicalisation is a major issue,<sup>87</sup> but a weak legal framework on control of online information prevents official authorities from acting.<sup>88</sup> If supported and trained, NGOs and independent media can be a valuable tool to tackle widespread latent online narratives that can lead to RWE radicalisation. While security

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<sup>75</sup> Apelacioni sud Crne Gore, *Saopštenje za javnost povodom predmeta "Državni udar"*; European Commission Staff, *Montenegro 2021 Report*, 46.

<sup>76</sup> Zivanovic, *Russian 'Night Wolves' Bikers Support Montenegro Church Protests*.

<sup>77</sup> Papović & Kovačević, *Rast desničarskog ekstremizma u Crnoj Gori: Građanska država na ispitu*, 26-27.

<sup>78</sup> Rudic, *Montenegro Detains Pro-Putin Bikers Escorting Serbian Patriarch*.

<sup>79</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Vujanović, *Mim stranice kao lideri javnog mnjenja u izbornoj kampanji za parlamentarne izbore u Crnoj Gori 2020. godine*. Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro*.

<sup>81</sup> The Atlantic Initiative Team, *Muslims in Montenegro after the Elections, and Fear of the Future*; Karcic, *Separatism reloaded: How did Montenegro end up in limbo?*

<sup>82</sup> Jovanovic, *Call to Lynch: The War of Words Threatening Montenegro's Delicate Balance*.

<sup>83</sup> Kajosevic, *Serbian Church Leader's Enthronement Raises Tensions in Montenegro*.

<sup>84</sup> Voice of America, *Montenegro Denounces Protest Attack on Embassy in Serbia*.

<sup>85</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>86</sup> Papović & Kovačević, *Rast desničarskog ekstremizma u Crnoj Gori: Građanska država na ispitu*, 26.

<sup>87</sup> European Commission Staff, *Montenegro 2021 Report*, 45.

<sup>88</sup> Jovanovic, *Call to Lynch: The War of Words Threatening Montenegro's Delicate Balance*.

services established a unit for radicalisation and a team to flag internet content related to terrorism and violent extremism, VRWE has been on political and media margins.<sup>89</sup>

#### e. North Macedonia

In last two decades, North Macedonia has implemented a significant number of reforms, including measures to prevent and counter violent extremism. However, VRWE seems to be neglected. Prioritisation of risks and resilience for countering and/or preventing RWE should be recognized and improved.<sup>90</sup> After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Macedonian–Albanian relations were fuelled with a widespread sense of threat and grievances that eventually lead to radicalisation and violent episodes. In 2001, the short-lived armed conflict in the country's north-western region ended with the Ohrid Agreement that guaranteed political and cultural rights to Albanians. North Macedonian society, however, remained polarised while local incidents and sequences of violence continued. Additional political polarisation occurred after the 2014 elections, and led to a series of protests against the anti-democratic rule and alleged corruption. In 2017, North Macedonian RWE activists, stormed the parliament in reaction to the election of an ethnic Albanian as Assembly Speaker. As in other cases, radicalisation in North Macedonia can be understood only if we investigate regional and wider geopolitical dynamics.

Several events influenced Macedonian right-wing extremists' radicalisation and their more pro-Russian, anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiments. Difficult relations with Greece (affecting NATO membership) lasted until 2018, and relations with Bulgaria affected the EU accession process in 2020. Ethnic Macedonian RWE has strong anti-Albanian, anti-Greek, anti-Bulgarian and occasionally anti-Serb sentiments, while ethnic Albanian RWE has strong anti-Macedonian and anti-Serb sentiments. Only neo-Nazi groups nurture anti-Semitism.<sup>91</sup> Macedonian RWE tends to intersect with religion.<sup>92</sup> Several fringe organisations, such as the *Macedonian Christian Brotherhood*, promote violence through symbols and use militant rhetoric and hate speech.<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, the *Fatherland Macedonian Organisation for Radical Reconstruction - Vardar, Aegean, Pirin* uses the historical liberational movement as a credential and advocates for an ethnically pure Macedonia.<sup>94</sup> Macedonian RWE has positive attitudes towards Israel since they see its perceived treatment of Palestinians as the desired model for the treatment of Albanians in North Macedonia.<sup>95</sup> The *People's Movement of Macedonia* follows a similar pattern; it is against the Ohrid Agreement and has a territorial expansionist agenda that dates back to the pre-1913 period. They also promote conspiracy theories and target and even report criminal complaints against individuals who are perceived as enemies of the state. The *World Macedonian Congress* promotes identity politics that raises Macedonian historical importance such as the idea that North Macedonia is the historical cradle of European civilisation. These organisations have marginal influence, but they share some similar interests and enjoy support from far-right activists.<sup>96</sup> These groups use social media outlets for propaganda, which often tends to evoke emotional reactions, such as sense of threat or hate towards other ethnic groups, that lead to sympathies for violence.<sup>97</sup>

Neo-Nazism is detected amongst ethnic North Macedonians with several active groups being interconnected. Their activities are obscure and hidden from the public eye, predominantly present in Bitolja and Skopje, but have some influence amongst football ultras,<sup>98</sup> such as football club Vardar's *ultras Komiti*. Their activities include symbolising presence in public space, and they tend to push discourse of a pure Macedonia and display extreme hate towards Albanians, Greeks and Roma.<sup>99</sup> There is an indication that neo-Nazis are present in the *Macedonian Radical Front Sarisa* that promotes the idea of ancient roots and historical continuity of Macedonian people, which intersects with the ideology of other Macedonian RWE

<sup>89</sup> Bećirević et al., *Radicalisation and violent extremism in the Western Balkans*, 17-18.

<sup>90</sup> Further information on North Macedonia, including the country's engagement against violent extremism, can be found in the European Commission's following country report: *North Macedonia 2021 Report. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. English language available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021_en).*

<sup>91</sup> Zdravkovski, *North Macedonia*, 100-101.

<sup>92</sup> Zdravkovski & Morrison, *The Orthodox Churches of Macedonia and Montenegro: The Quest for Autocephaly*.

<sup>93</sup> Kambovski et al., *National Approaches to Extremism. North Macedonia*, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 12.

<sup>95</sup> Zdravkovski, *North Macedonia*, 101.

<sup>96</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 12-13.

<sup>97</sup> Milekic et al., *Far-Right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net*.

<sup>98</sup> Zdravkovski, *North Macedonia*, 100-101.

<sup>99</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 12-13.

organisations.<sup>100</sup> Although neo-Nazis are marginal, racism and hate speech have become widespread on the internet.<sup>101</sup> Albanian RWE advocates more autonomy for ethnic Albanians or Greater Albania.<sup>102</sup> Strong rhetoric against the Ohrid Agreement and promotion of territorial nationalist aspirations are present both online and in the public space for example through graffiti. In Tetovo, football club Shkendija's *ultras Ballistet* display anti-Slav, most notably anti-Macedonian and anti-Serb, sentiments.<sup>103</sup>

Social media are heavily used by activists to gain support and promote right-wing extremist ideas.<sup>104</sup> As in other Western Balkan countries, RWE has become more present online and influential under the COVID-19 pandemic and conspiracy theories.<sup>105</sup> Macedonian RWE has regional connections. While some have close ties with Serbian and Russian right-wing extremists, others are closer to the European RWE organisations. For example, the attempted coup in 2017 involved a Serbian who participated in the Ukrainian war. On the other hand, Albanian right-wing extremists are close with their counterparts in Albania and Kosovo.<sup>106</sup> Understanding the influence of regional political and extremist groups, such as Serb and Albanian, on RWE is essential for preventing radicalisation and implementing P/CVE policies.

North Macedonia has a legal framework to ban RWE organisations and their activities, but it seems it was never used. Government decisions for the prohibition of potential VRWE organisations are needed. As Oliver Spasovski, North Macedonia's Interior Minister, noted, extremism is "a real danger".<sup>107</sup> Monitoring and control of RWE activists is one of the relevant operative security issues. Thus, training of practitioners (including security actors and judiciary) can be an important step for P/CVE. The P/CVE local actors and NGOs should be involved in training, research, design and implement policies to prevent RWE, conduct P/CVE activities focusing on RWE. This should include the tackling of RWE online activities, identity-related and political issues, but also the overall bad economic situation of youths, which is affecting the political situation in the country negatively.<sup>108</sup>

#### f. Serbia

During 1988/89, Serbia's intelligentsia, elites and politicians joined forces to encourage a national revolution to create a "unified Serbia" by appealing to socio-economical and national dissatisfactions of Serbs in the ex-Yugoslav republic. In the years that followed Serbia made significant EU accession reforms in the scope of the EU accession process,<sup>109</sup> but the violent fall of Yugoslavia and its aftermath haunts Serbia to this day. This difficulty to reconcile with the past combined with vulnerabilities, such as deep economic instability and uncritical media outlets, are exploited by right-wing extremists for radicalisation.<sup>110</sup> Wars during the 1990s were a catalyst in shaping Serbian RWE by setting extreme nationalism high on the political agenda.<sup>111</sup> The main narrative of Serbian RWE is that Serb territories have been unjustly detached from the country during the 1990s wars and their primary goal is the unification of "Serbian lands and people" (BiH, Croatia, Kosovo\*, Montenegro and North Macedonia).

At least 23 V/RWE groups are active in Serbia.<sup>112</sup> V/RWE ideologies are both mainstream and underground; they include identity-related, ultranationalist, neo-Nazi, Orthodox Christian extremist movements. Reports stress that violence and threats against migrants as well as attacks based on hatred and ethnic identity is part of their activity.<sup>113</sup> Organisations such as the *1389*, *Serbian Party Oathkeepers*, and *Serbian People's Movement Nashi* declaratively reject fascism, while *Stormfront Serbia*, *Obraz (Honour)*, *National Serbian*

<sup>100</sup> Neofotistos, *Sport and nationalism in the Republic of North Macedonia*, 110-122.

<sup>101</sup> Zdravkovski, *North Macedonia*, 100-101.

<sup>102</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 11, 13-14.

<sup>103</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 13; Saveski & Sadiku, *The Radical Right in Macedonia*, 5-6.

<sup>104</sup> Zdravkovski, *North Macedonia*, 100.

<sup>105</sup> Huszka & Lessenska, *Viral vulnerability: How the pandemic is making democracy sick in the Western Balkans*.

<sup>106</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 11-13.

<sup>107</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>108</sup> Kambovski et al., *National Approaches to Extremism*. North Macedonia, 10-17.

<sup>109</sup> Further information on Serbia, including the country's engagement against violent extremism, can be found in the European Commission's following country report: *Serbia 2021 Report*. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. English language available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/serbia-report-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/serbia-report-2021_en).

<sup>110</sup> Klacar, *Serbia's Right-Wing Shift Risks Fuelling Extremism*.

<sup>111</sup> Halilovic Pastuovic et al., *Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Framework*, 19.

<sup>112</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>113</sup> European Commission Staff, *Serbia 2021 Report*, 37. Petrović & Ignjatijević. *Migranti odlaze, mržnja ostaje antimigrantska ekstremna desnica u Srbiji*. Prevex and BCBP.



*Front, Blood and Honour* and *Serbian Action* are either clerical-fascist or neo-Nazi. *Blood and Honour Serbia* and *National Serbian Front* openly advocate for white supremacy and national socialism.<sup>114</sup> Leaders of RWE organisations are very influential on social networks. For example, the leader of the *National Serbian Front* – referred to as Führer – shares anti-Semitic and racist posts, which are often reshared by other right-wing extremist leaders and organisations.<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, *Serbian Action* is affiliated with *National Serbian Front* and has a hierarchical military structure, which facilitates skinheads' gatherings.<sup>116</sup> The *Serbian Party Oathkeepers*, *Dveri* and *People's Freedom Movement* are anti-establishment and base their narrative around religious conservatism. The *Dveri* openly promotes anti-LGBTQ+ narratives, while *Serbian People's Movement Nashi* advocates Orthodox religious education to "protect" children from LGBTQ+ and gender equality. Orthodoxy is at the core of Serbian V/RWE. They all rely on religion<sup>117</sup> and emphasise religious elements of the Serbian identity promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The official narrative provided by the Serbian Orthodox Church in some cases offers the "master framework" in which these organisations operate, including pro-Russian, anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, the Kosovo status issues, unification of the "Serbian lands and people", and reification of war crime perpetrators.<sup>118</sup> Some RWE organisations are spreading conspiracy theories related to the pandemic, such as *Living for Serbia* that heavily spreads misinformation and uses pandemics as an opportunity to gain public attention. They are connected to *Leviathan Movement*, the VRWE organisation that presents itself in public as an animal rights protection organisation. Their violent activities are directed against the Roma, migrants and LGBTQ+. Leader of the *Leviathan Movement Pavle Bihali* is connected with the members of neo-Nazi biker gang *MC Srbi*.<sup>119</sup> Various V/RWE individuals and groups are more or less interconnected. For example, *Damnjan Knezevic* helped to found *Oathkeepers* and is currently an important figure in *People's Patrols*, predominantly an anti-governmental, anti-migrant, anti-LGBTQ+ and conspiracy theorist VRWE organisation. *People's Patrols* overlaps with (in)formal RWE groups, such as the Facebook group *Stop censorship*, and mostly utilises online space for recruitment.<sup>120</sup> Some Serbian RWE groups, such as *Serbian Honour*, operate as a humanitarian organisation and have open ties with Russia.

Although RWE political organisations are marginal in the political decision-making process, they have a relevant impact on public opinion and some are closely connected or indirectly cooperate with political organisations that hold political power. *Members of punk, metal and electric musical scenes* are only a few examples of subcultural varieties that show support for RWE in Serbia.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, ultras are known for their open support to RWE that include Belgrade's football clubs' ultras – *Red Star's Delije*, *Partisan's Grobari* and *Rad's United Force*. They use historical imagery of Serb nationalism and Orthodox Christianity and are prone to violence, but they also practice charity works. One of the main reasons for the lack of effective measures to counter RWE<sup>122</sup> amongst ultras is important positions and relations to football clubs by prominent politicians who control them.<sup>123</sup> As Marija Srdic of the Anti-Fascist Coalition of Serbia noted in an interview for the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network:

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*"So those organisations are legitimate and often supported by various funds and domestic and foreign institutions. They get so-called legitimate support for their activities."*<sup>124</sup>

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Serbia is attractive for some of the western right-wing extremists. They have become latched to the narrative and collective imagination that Serbia was a defender of Europe from Islamic invasion.<sup>125</sup> Almost all RWE organisations have connections or tend to connect with other RWE organisations in Europe. For example,

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<sup>114</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 6.

<sup>115</sup> Bego, *Serbia*, 107.

<sup>116</sup> Vio, *Young Patriots': Serbia's Role in the European Far-right*.

<sup>117</sup> Bego, *Serbia*, 107-108.

<sup>118</sup> Halilovic Pastuovic et al., *Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Framework*, 19.

<sup>119</sup> Colborne, *Leviatan: Serbian Animal Rights Vigilantes Go to The Polls*.

<sup>120</sup> Vucic, *Hate, Lies and Vigilantes: Serbian 'Anti-Vaxxer' Brigade Plays With Fire*.

<sup>121</sup> Bego, *Serbia*, 109-111.

<sup>122</sup> European Commission Staff, *Serbia 2021 Report*, 48.

<sup>123</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 6-7.

<sup>124</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>125</sup> Mujanovic, *Why Serb Nationalism Still Inspires Europe's Far Right*.

*Serbian Right* joined the European political organisation *Alliance for Peace and Freedom*,<sup>126</sup> 1389 that has open cooperation with right-wing extremists from Poland, Russia and South America,<sup>127</sup> while *the Alternative for Germany*, of which the youth organisation and the so-called *Flügel* suborganisation have officially been declared “suspected cases” as potentially extremist endeavours by the German national domestic intelligence agency,<sup>128</sup> backed the leader of *Dveri – Bosko Obradovic* – in elections.<sup>129</sup> The *Knights Templar International* are known for online radicalisation, with specialisation in the spread of memes, videos and various materials across Europe, and have a direct presence in Serbia. They spread anti-Muslim, anti-migrant and racist propaganda and in general theories that Muslim immigrants will replace white Europeans.<sup>130</sup> Some RWE organisations have local branches in neighbouring countries, such as *Blood and Honour* in BiH, others are registered as NGOs, such as the *Chetniks movement*, but the only political organisation that has political activities in BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia is the *Serbian Radical Party*.<sup>131</sup> Serbia had a security issue related to departures of pro-Russian foreign fighters in the Ukraine war.<sup>132</sup> Foreign fighters from Ukraine, however, are seen as mercenaries and are usually not prosecuted or have lenient treatment.<sup>133</sup> The day before Russia began the attack against Ukraine in 2022, Serbian Chetnik war lord Bratislav Živković said that “many Serb volunteers are ready to go to Donetsk”. After the armed conflict began Živković confirmed that Serbian foreign fighters arrived to fight on the Russian side.<sup>134</sup>

Serbian RWE activities have reciprocal effects on the radicalisation of Hungarian, Bosniak and Albanian minorities. Some Bosniak and Albanian political organisations take separatist drifts and lean towards RWE. For example, Albanian RWE political organisations and activists in Presevo Valley, southern Serbia, glorify the local branch of the former Kosovo Army.<sup>135</sup>

Some Serbian policymakers do not recognise a need for P/CVE in relation to RWE. However, the Serbian Counterterrorism Strategy includes addressing RWE through motivations and separatist tendencies that can develop in terrorism.<sup>136</sup> There is often a perception of lack of political will to map V/RWE as a security threat. RWE activists and organisations are aware of the weak rule of law and lenient response to their activities.<sup>137</sup> Legal, strategic and institutional reforms are needed to tackle V/RWE, for example for control of internet content from most influential activists and prohibition of numerous organisations that pose a threat to democracy and security, not only in Serbia but in the region as well.<sup>138</sup> NGOs should be strengthened for the effective dissemination of counter-narratives on social media.<sup>139</sup>

## Contextualising RWE radicalisation and challenges for P/CVE in the Western Balkans

RWE and radicalisation in the Western Balkans did not occur in a vacuum. First marginal appearances of RWE in politics and amongst groups have been accelerated by technological advances and political, economic and health crises (COVID-19 pandemic). Today, RWE narratives are a highly internationalised, mainstreamed phenomenon that does not take place only on fringe platforms.<sup>140</sup> In the Western Balkans, ideological divisions, vulnerabilities and grievances are further exploited by foreign powers, such as Russia. Their actions speed up the decline of trust in international alliances, public institutions and the media, while narratives make use of unresolved conflicts from the past, to instigate regional or interethnic tensions. By creating alliances based on Orthodox brotherhood and financing V/RWE in the Western Balkans, foreign

<sup>126</sup> Bego, *Serbia*, 110.

<sup>127</sup> Milekic et al., *Far-Right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net*.

<sup>128</sup> Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, *Fachinformation: Teilorganisationen der Partei "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD)*.

<sup>129</sup> Radicevic, “We Are Their Voice”: German Far-Right Builds Balkan Alliances.

<sup>130</sup> Chua et al., *Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 27.

<sup>131</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 10.

<sup>132</sup> Petrović, *The Problem of Islamist Extremism in Serbia: What are the drivers and how to Address Them*, 2.

<sup>133</sup> Kelly, *Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkans*, 9.

<sup>134</sup> Kuloglija & Husarić, *Serb Volunteers Answer Call to Fight in Ukraine*.

<sup>135</sup> Bego, *Serbia*, 107, 110.

<sup>136</sup> European Commission Staff, *Serbia 2021 Report*, 47.

<sup>137</sup> Bego, *Serbia*, 111.

<sup>138</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>139</sup> Bego, *Serbia*, 111.

<sup>140</sup> Pauwels, *Contemporary manifestations of violent right-wing extremism in the EU: An overview of P/CVE practices*.



fighters were successfully recruited.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, with new escalations of conflict in Ukraine and beyond, a threat exists that V/RWE activists will continue to depart to participate in the foreign war<sup>142</sup> and remain a significant threat to the security in the Western Balkans.<sup>143</sup> Thus, RWE radicalisation in the Western Balkans can be understood through regional and wider geopolitical dynamics and shifts.

In the Western Balkans, RWE radicalisation is mainly top-down and reciprocal. It is a result of a complex nexus that connects mainstream politics, religious institutions and movements that ride on the wave of RWE that tends to become violent,<sup>144</sup> driven by past wars resentments, trauma and fear.<sup>145</sup> Considering the rise of violent attacks in the West that are attributed to right-wing extremists – some inspired by the Serb nationalism – similar dynamics pose a threat to the Western Balkans that should not be easily overlooked.<sup>146</sup>

Low trust in media, even the lowest media literacy scores in Europe, and lack of critical and independent journalism makes the Western Balkans vulnerable to disinformation. Although some research indicates that in-person interaction is still a primary mechanism of RWE recruitment,<sup>147</sup> the online omnipresence of the RWE narratives made it easier. But also, normalisation of RWE in physical spaces with graffiti, monuments and parades symbolically displaying (religious) ethno-nationalism has been a concern in BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia. As one of the most vulnerable states to VRWE, there is a concerning alignment of Serbian right-wing extremists with mainstream politics, media and religious institutions in advocacy for irredentist goals through soft politics.<sup>148</sup> Almost all Serbian RWE organisations are regionally connected and act as an exporter of VRWE narratives throughout the Balkans. Some of their activities are being mainstreamed and their online actions pose security challenges for BiH, Kosovo\* and Montenegro. Furthermore, BiH is also prone to VRWE, given the political and socio-economic challenges it faces. In the context of BiH, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, reciprocal radicalisation drives RWE and inflames already fragile relations. Everyday political discourses create a conducive atmosphere for radicalisation, by creating a sense of threat, which can circulate between the parties creating a vicious circle of RWE that can lead to VRWE.

So far, as this paper has shown, none of the Western Balkan countries have institutionalised activities directed towards prevention and/or countering V/RWE. External actors play a pivotal role in fostering P/CVE measures in the Western Balkans and most of their efforts are intended to combat Islamist extremism. In some countries such as BiH, Montenegro and Serbia there is a need for broadening the analysis of radicalisation that includes V/RWE and ethno nationalism. Nevertheless, when it comes to BiH and Serbia, some Western governments have begun investing in projects intended to combat V/RWE inspired by ethno nationalism, but the international focus on the Western Balkans remains Islamist extremism.<sup>149</sup>

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*“A failure to recognize emerging threats that emanate from the changing extremist landscape, combined with a narrow focus on long-standing perils, could damn the region to a futile routine of applying old or partial solutions to current problems.”<sup>150</sup>*

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Furthermore, there is lack of a cohesive approach to the Western Balkan countries regarding V/RWE and a lack of communication about the current programmes being developed between the local NGOs in the

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<sup>141</sup> Eisentraut & de Leon, *Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: How the EU Can Counter Russia's Information War*, 3-4; Chua et al., *Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 7, 9-10, 14; Rustemi, *Far-Right Trends in Southeastern Europe: The Influences of Russia, Croatia, Serbia and Albania*.

<sup>142</sup> Obrenović, *Novi zov rata u Ukrajini za dobrovoljce iz BiH i Srbije*.

<sup>143</sup> Rovčanin, *Šta trebate znati o posljednjem izvještaju o stanju sigurnosti u BiH*.

<sup>144</sup> Bego, *Spotlight on the Western Balkans: far-right trends in the region*, 46-51.

<sup>145</sup> Chua et al., *Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 15; Buljubašić & Holá, *Historical Trauma and Radicalisation: How Can Intergenerational Transmission of Collective Traumas Contribute to (Group) Radicalisation?*, 13-16.

<sup>146</sup> Kuloglija et al., *Balkan States Failing to Address Threat from Far-Right Extremism*.

<sup>147</sup> Chua et al., *Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, 18, 28.

<sup>148</sup> Bego, *Spotlight on the Western Balkans: far-right trends in the region*, 46-51.

<sup>149</sup> Fetiu et al., *Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the Mena: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environment*, 17.

<sup>150</sup> GCERF & Atlantic Initiative, *Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans Regional Needs Assessment*, 2-3.

respective countries.<sup>151</sup> There is a need to address country-specific and region-specific approaches to prevent and/or counter V/RWE in the Western Balkans since most of the RWE groups operate regionally and their narrative spans further than the country of origin. P/CVE activities should take bottom-up and top-down approaches and be based on inclusivity and belonging. This paper offers overall regional and country-specific P/CVE recommendations.

## Recommendations

1. In the Western Balkans, VRWE is the spirit of the past that haunts the future. **Transitional justice and peacebuilding projects** should be adapted to prevent and counter VRWE. A Western Balkans network of NGOs with extensive expertise – to name a few: the Atlantic Initiative in BiH, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, Institute for Democracy and Mediation in Albania, and Nexus in North Macedonia – should be established. A network should develop P/CVE baseline programmes, research designs and advocacy initiatives. Moreover, organisations with experience in P/CVE should empower youth activists and local NGOs and enhance facilitation of information sharing amongst key state and P/CVE actors.
2. More in-depth **empirical research on V/RWE** in the Western Balkans and their local specific, regional and international connections are needed. The aim of such research is threefold: to get a better understanding of actors and factors that contribute to radicalisation that can lead to VRWE, to sensitise the public/civil society in the Balkans, and for signalling to potential security threats. Any research should be conducted and monitored by independent organisations with extensive experience in violent extremism research. Results and recommendations should be delivered to local, regional and international stakeholders – such as the security ministry, intelligence service and diplomats.
3. Through **regional cooperation**, local actors such as NGOs, scholars and journalists must strongly advocate for legal and institutional reforms to be able to tackle VRWE. Advocating for rule of law enforcement should be a priority, such as advocacy for severe punishment of online or in-person violence and incidents by RWE activists, incrimination of the activities and banning of RWE organisations that have the potential for violence. Smaller community-based organisations should be empowered for operational and advocacy activities.
4. Besides structural factors, the biggest focus should be given to **education**. Developing skills in critical thinking, civic engagement and media literacy can encourage developing thoughtful, tolerant and open-minded world views. Non-formal initiatives, such as education of state personnel, are preferred and can complement compulsory education, but cannot replace it. Thus, curricula that have developed a multi-perspective history, student-centred teacher training and critical thinking should be a part of reforms in the Western Balkans. Media literacy initiatives should include a wider target audience, enable detection of fake news and teach critical thinking skills.
5. Raising awareness of online risks for VRWE is important. Development of **online preventive measures** by local stakeholders for countering toxic but “borderline” RWE expressions, and more effective countering of fake news and conspiracy theories with straightforward messages and answers, suitable to young and old, are needed.
6. Media outlets with high readership bear a great responsibility for the uncritical transmission of information. **Independent investigative and broadcast journalism** should be enhanced through RWE-related training for journalists, especially young, prospective journalists, but also for journalists from public service media. These activities should be led by journalist organisations that have experience in violent extremism, such as the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, and individuals with notable experience in the field of V/RWE, for example, freelance journalists.
7. The non-violent activity of RWE results in seeking “grey” zones to operate, especially in Albania, BiH, Montenegro and Serbia. These activities should be carefully monitored and navigated by the authorities. International networking and activities of RWE organisations and individuals that lean towards violence must be recognised by security services in the Western Balkans through information sharing and preventive policing. Thus, investments in understanding, identifying and managing

<sup>151</sup> Fetiu et al., *Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the Mena: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environment*, 21.

potential VRWE threats should be made in the criminal justice system – security service, judiciary and prisons. To achieve this, extensive trainings by V/RWE experts should be implemented. Training can encompass knowledge sharing on phenomena and ways to tackle VRWE. Criminal justice professionals need a better understanding of their responsibilities and guidance on how to utilise the current legal framework for interventions, especially related to non-violent RWE activities.

8. In the cases of BiH, Montenegro and Serbia, the reconciliatory voices amongst religious communities (Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church and Islamic community) need to be strengthened and included in programmes to prevent and counter VRWE. In the case of BiH, the Interreligious Council needs to be strengthened and included in P/CVE projects.
9. P/CVE activities should consider the development of tactics to detect youth at risk and communities at risk; attract them to participate in carefully designed interventions. By understanding and responding to underlying contextual factors and capturing early signs of radicalisation, practitioners could reach out to youngsters. Individual interventions, such as psychological treatments, should impact underlying causes of radicalisation. Community interventions should build interethnic dialogue and be involved with non-violent RWE behaviour to ensure societal cohesion and mitigation of marginalisation, societal fractions and divisions. If not able to enrol targeted at-risk individuals and communities, those linked to them should be engaged, for example, through sport, religion or alike community-related institutions. Moreover, it is of utmost importance to facilitate encounters, build ties and invest in youth travel within and between the Western Balkan countries for intercultural and interethnic experience and learning.

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