



# Working paper 1: Cumulative Extremisms in the Balkans

PUBLICATIONS



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## 1 Introduction

This report aims to present PAVE's findings on cumulative extremism in the Western Balkans. The research focused on Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. The investigation of the cumulative extremism in the Balkan region is one of three clusters of the PAVE's general aim to explore the drivers of vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism. Besides cumulative extremism (WP3), the project investigates interactions between state and religious institutions (WP4) and online and offline deradicalisation (WP5).

This report addresses the interactive dynamics between different forms of extremist ideologies, often described by reciprocal radicalisation or cumulative extremism - an area that has remained underexplored so far. The relationship between ideology and behaviour (tactics) varies. While not all extreme groups are violent, and not all violent groups are extreme, studying the linkages between ideology and violence is still interesting. Considering the deep polarisation and war legacies in the region, our comparative analysis of WB countries detected some specific drivers of cumulative extremism, such as the political opportunities (in particular, alternative arenas to carry out the war-time battle). Furthermore, a key role in understanding the dynamics of cumulative extremism in the Western Balkans is how the states in the region manage and relate to extremist movements.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Serbia

Serbia can be described as a tale of two extremisms': far-right nationalism and Islamist extremism (Perry, 2019). Although the Islamist extremism has attracted more focus in the past several years, far-right nationalism and extremism remain more pervasive and are even normalised (Stakić, 2015; Perry, 2019).

*Far-right extremist* groups are not a new phenomenon in Serbia. They have been present in Serbia since the late 1980s. The wars that followed during the 1990s had a role of catalyst in shaping the Serbian far-right since they put (extreme) nationalism high on the political agenda, making it socially acceptable. During the 1990's wars, far-right extremists operated primarily as paramilitary formations, transforming themselves into various associations and movements after the beginning of the democratic transition in Serbia (2000). The ideology of these far-right movements could be summed up as ethno-nationalism, intolerance toward minorities (ethnic, religious, or sexual), anti-liberalism and anti-communism, hostility toward the West, militarism, glorification of war leaders (including war criminals), clericalism, and islamophobia (Stakić, 2015; Džombić, 2014; Biserko, 2014; Barišić, 2014). The primary division between them is based on their relation toward fascism and neo-Nazism, which divides them into two groups: **radical ethno-nationalists and far-right extremists** (clerical fascists, neo-Nazis). Serbian foreign fighters in Ukraine are a newer phenomenon among these groups (Petrović & Stakić, 2018). Notwithstanding Russia, Serbia is among the principal providers of foreign fighters in Ukraine, with approximately 100 to 300 men (Bešlin & Ignjatijević, 2017; Murauskaite, 2020).

Nevertheless, the internal action potential of far-right groups is relatively weak, mostly dependent on the support of the far-right in the EU and Russia and, more importantly, the Serbian government (Bakić, 2013). Although far-right actors do not often organise nor participate in violent activities, their narratives legitimise violence against minority groups, framing them as either a physical threat to the Serbian nation or a threat to social order. By spreading this far-right propaganda, they normalise extreme and violent attitudes. Benevolence of the state toward far-right actors and legitimisation of their narratives within the public discourse is also part of the problem (Stakić, 2015; Petrović & Stakić, 2018; Bakić, 2013).

Furthermore, there has been a mushrooming of radical right/far-right organisations since 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) came into power. Most of them have the financial and political support of the Serbian regime and are considered SPP's puppet organisations. For instance, during COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown-related protests in 2020, the SPP's government used far-right organisations to suppress demonstrations violently.

*Islamist extremism* in Serbia is mainly linked to the region of Sandžak with a dominant Muslim population. The ideology of **Islamist extremism** first came to Sandžak in 1997, although it remained marginal until the 2000s when the Salafis and Wahhabis became more visible and influential. Furthermore, the split in the Islamic Community in Serbia opened the space in Sandžak for external fundamentalist influences<sup>1</sup>.

Salafis in Sandžak became better organised and started gaining more financial support since 2010, coming into the spotlight with the beginning of the war in Syria and the foundation of ISIS (49 of them went to Syria) (Petrović & Stakić, 2018; Ćorović, 2017).

Sandžak is relatively susceptible to this phenomenon since it is one of the least economically developed regions in Serbia, with a noticeably young population (over 50% of them are under 30 years old) (Kisić, 2015; Ćorović, 2017). A study of youth population attitudes in Sandžak (mostly Muslims) in 2016 shows that the majority of them underline unemployment as the central problem of their community. They are also highly religious (87%) and recognise their religion and affiliation to the Islamic world as the essential elements of their identity (Ilić, 2016).

## 2.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) internal political and social dynamics are determined by the war legacy strongly reflected in the constitutional make-up of the country. It comprises two entities: Serb-dominated Republika Srpska and a Bosniak-Croat mixed Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the 1992-1995 war changed the ethnic structure of the population in most areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country remains a multiethnic and multireligious society. According to the census from 2013, 50,11 % of the population declared themselves Bosniaks, 30,78% Serbs, and 15,43 % Croats.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country where **various forms of extremism are present and manifested in different ways, both online and offline.**

The war in BiH damaged the quality of relations between the ethnic population groups, which resulted in many local communities that were ethnically heterogeneous before the war becoming homogeneous. The Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which addressed the issue of returnees, was never fully implemented.

**Ethnically homogeneous environments formed through ethnic cleansing and persecution in the war became fertile ground for ethno-political narratives** that led to the exclusion of "others" in the post-war period. This reflected on the population and (in)directly contributed to the emergence of political extremism and extremism motivated by ethno-nationalist ideology and religion, where "others" are always labelled as "enemies."

In other words, in the post-war period, the state, with its constitutional structure that nurtures ethnic divisions, contributed to the conditions where social capital could not be utilised as an instrument to prevent radicalisation.

During the fieldwork period (June to November 2021), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) entered the most substantial political crisis in the post-Dayton period.

Namely, the peace in Bosnia was seriously threatened after former High Representative for BiH, Valentin Inzko, imposed a ban on genocide denial. This decision by the High Representative was seen by Bosnia and Herzegovina's Member of Presidency, Milorad Dodik, as an opportunity to introduce a blockade of the state-level institutions, cut any cooperation with the new High Representative, as well as to attempt to transfer state competencies to the entity level of the Republika Srpska (RS) (Balkan Insight, 2021). Therefore, the overall situation has resulted in the public manifestation of political grievances of various political actors, which in turn produced concerns over the stability within the country. Additionally, in September 2021, there were violent clashes between football fans in Mostar, as well as clashes with the police. In many media outlets, the participants in the conflict were marked as "young supporters of two football clubs in Mostar - HŠK Zrinjski Mostar and FK Velež Mostar." (Oslobođenje, 2021).

Media such as the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) have shed light on a presence of an organised humanitarian group in one of the selected communities (Brčko District) that serves as a helping hand for right-wing organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (Detektor.ba, 2021).

## 2.3 North Macedonia

North Macedonia emerged from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in September 1991 as a multi-ethnic state. As the Kosovo crisis spiralled into a war that ended by a NATO intervention in 1999, it also acted as a catalyst for developments in NMK.

In January 2001, the so-called *National Liberation Army* (NLA) – an armed group with ties to the *Kosovo Liberation Army* - appeared, declaring that it had been formed "following the failure of the Macedonian state to peacefully reform..." and setting several Constitutional-political demands (Χρηστίδης, 2021).

The background for this **dissatisfaction with the status of ethnic Albanians in the NMK** was the fact that they were recognised only as a *nationality* (as in the Yugoslav tradition of “national minorities”) while requesting to be equal with ethnic Macedonians (Χρησιδης, 2021).

NLA managed to spread its presence in areas of major Albanian settlements (like the municipalities of Tetovo and Kumanovo), underlying its appeal among ordinary, ethnic Albanians. But, most importantly, its success on the ground forced the international community and, reluctantly, ethnic Macedonian politicians to negotiate the demands it had set. As a result, a process of political dialogue was initiated that culminated with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (8 August 2001).

The **Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA)** was a milestone in the evolution of NMK. It was a political solution to a crisis that threatened to escalate into a full-blown ethnic conflict by providing the basis for major Constitutional reforms. In practice, OFA established the principle of civic equality among ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians without, at the same time, introducing any territorial or/and institutional arrangements that could have undermined NMK’s institutional cohesion and function (what the Dayton Agreement in effect did in Bosnia-Herzegovina).

However, for many ethnic Macedonians, OFA *had been imposed by the international community (the West), favouring the ethnic Albanians* (Χρησιδης, 2021), seeing it as “humiliating and the beginning of a feared binational or federal state” (Democratisation Policy Council & Eurothink, 2021).

It was during that period and more specifically after the 2006 elections that IMRO-DPMNU, under the new leadership of Nikola Gruevski, came to power. IMRO-DPMNU, as a party in power, extensively used nationalism-populism to “cement its hold on power”, negatively affecting inter-ethnic relations in the country. Thus, the party employed nationalistic slogans like “Macedonia for the Macedonians” (Николовски, 2021), that implicitly carried an anti-Albanian bias. Moreover, during the protracted political crisis of the 2015 – April 2017 period, it became directly involved in a security crisis with “ethnic connotations” - the Kumanovo crisis in May 2015 – and in the serious riots of April 2017 in NMK’s Parliament that could have also had serious consequences for inter-ethnic relations.

The formation of the new coalition government in May 2017 - by SDUM and with the participation of Albanian political parties like the *Democratic Union of Integration (DUI)*<sup>ii</sup>, and with Zoran Zaev as Prime Minister, signalled the opening of a new political chapter for the country. The reformist-led Prime Minister was dedicated to advancing NMK’s Euroatlantic integration process and working closely with its Albanian political partners. He adopted some bold political moves internally and in NMK’s foreign policy, which enjoyed high support among the ethnic Albanian electorate, contributing to improving inter-ethnic relations in NMK. Thus, his government signed the Prespes Agreement in June 2018, which fully normalised relations with Greece, opening the way for NMK’s accession into NATO. Furthermore, in January 2018, the Parliament adopted a new law by which the Albanian language became official throughout the country. In the previous law, the Albanian language was only official in localities where the ethnic Albanians constituted more than 20% of the total population. The coalition SDUM-DUI remained in power following the early parliamentary elections that were held on 15 July 2020.

IMRO-DPMNU also sought to capitalise on the resentment accumulated among ethnic Macedonian against OFA. Following the December 2016 parliamentary elections, it sought to block the formation of a new government by openly inciting nationalist passions (Marusic 2017a; Marusic 2017b). It was a period of dangerous political polarisation that culminated in the events of 27 April 2017, when the Parliament of NMK was stormed by a mob of IMRO-DPMNU supporters following the election of Talat Xhaferi, an ethnic Albanian, as speaker of Parliament. *In the past two decades*, the country has seen



**different dimensions of extremism: religious, ethno-political, and even extremist behaviour with ethnic undertones by football fans.**

## 2.4 Kosovo

Kosovo is a multi-ethnic society with a total population of 1.8 million, of which over 90% belongs to Islam, while 2.2% to Catholicism and 1.5% to Orthodox Christianity. Albanian community is internally diverse when it comes to religion. Although the majority are Muslims, there are Albanian-Catholics and Albanian-Protestants, while the Serbian community is predominantly Orthodox Christians (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Following the 1990's wars as the consequence of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, Kosovo was placed under **international administration** in July of 1999. The Security Council established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) in its resolution 1244. Under Resolution 1244, which requires a "political process designed to determine Kosovo's future status", in November of 2005, the Secretary-General of the UN-appointed former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari as his Special Envoy for the future status process for Kosovo. Following two years of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia, President Ahtisaari presented to the UN Security Council the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement – commonly referred to as the Ahtisaari Plan – which recommended that Kosovo's status should be independence, supervised by the international community for a period of time (UN Security-Council, 2007). However, the proposal by President Ahtisaari was opposed by Serbia, Russia, and China, which prevented a vote in the UN Security Council.

To secure a compromise, three mediators from the International Contact Group, the U.S. envoy Frank Wisner, Russia's Aleksander Botsan-Kharchenko, and EU's representative Wolfgang Ischinger, travelled to Serbia and Kosovo but failed to negotiate a deal. In the words of Ischinger, they "did everything "humanly possible" (DW, 2007). Following the failure to reach a compromise agreement, on February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared its independence and committed itself to implementing the Ahtisaari Plan. Accordingly, the United States and almost all of the EU Member states recognised Kosovo's independence on the grounds that it would integrate the Ahtisaari Plan into its constitution. In 2010, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) also ruled that Kosovo's independence did not violate international law (ICJ, 2010). The General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution that acknowledged the opinion and asked the European Union (EU) to facilitate a dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia in order to normalise the relations between the two (UN General Assembly, 2010). The EU initiated the dialogue for the normalisation of the relations between Kosovo and Serbia in 2011. However, a decade after, the conclusion of the process with a comprehensive and legally binding agreement between the two countries remains an unlikely outcome (Stanicek, 2021). The **absence of normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is a significant source of instability and tension** in the Western Balkans.

Current research suggests that around 403 Kosovars travelled to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, and 250 are considered **foreign fighters that joined transnational terrorist groups**, including IS (Islamic State) (Jakupi & Kraja, 2018). However, as Jakupi and Kraja (2018) note, most of them left Kosovo between 2012 and 2014, before the Islamic State was established. Kosovo's government responded to



the phenomenon of foreign fighters and violent extremism in several ways. In 2015 the Kosovo Assembly adopted a Law prohibiting joining the armed conflicts outside state territory (No. 05/L-002) (Official Gazette, 2015). In addition, in 2014, the government implemented a large-scale operation against violent extremism, arresting around 60 individuals for promoting radicalisation and recruiting individuals to be foreign fighters. As a result of this, it is considered that recruitment of foreign fighters in Kosovo was "decreased by 50%." (USAID, 2015, p. 8). In 2014 the government also closed around 16 non-government organisations suspected of having connections with extremist networks and funding as well as supporting radicalisation and recruitment of foreign fighters under the disguise of humanitarian assistance.

Following the collapse of the IS, however, most of the Kosovars in Syrian camps have been repatriated by the Kosovo government with the support of the U.S. government. It is estimated that around 242 have been repatriated from the war zones of Syria and Iraq (Ilazi & Perteshi, 2020). The government of Kosovo established a special unit in the Ministry of Internal Affairs to lead and coordinate de-radicalisation efforts in the correctional service system as well as reintegration into the society of radicalised individuals. The Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalised Persons (DPRRI) focuses on the reintegration of radicalised individuals and foreign fighters into the society and making them a useful part of it (DPRRI, 2020). Civil society or non-government organisations are essential in de-radicalisation and reintegration efforts. In Kosovo, they also complement government services, such as providing support to returnees from Syria and Iraq to treat trauma.

### **3 Methodology**

All PAVE project partners involved in the WP3 used the same general structure for the initial questionnaire. However, questions had to be subsequently adapted to the particular context of each of the countries. Some of the central questions we attempted to answer in each country included: a) Do the respondents recognise cumulative extremism in the context of their respective community?; b) What are the pivotal factors of community resilience to extremism; c) What are the pivotal factors of community vulnerability to extremism?

To gather the data, all involved partners conducted interviews and, if deemed necessary, focus groups. Furthermore, we use supplementary bibliographical sources on radicalisation and violent extremism in respective countries.

#### **3.1 Serbia**

The fieldwork in Serbia explored ethno-nationalist and religiously-inspired extremism and their interconnections. Furthermore, it examined the legacies of the conflict and community polarisation. The

analysis particularly looked for narratives of ‘othering’ (the definition of out-groups), threat perceptions, self-victimisation, and legitimisation of violence.

Regarding the actors, research focused on the role of state and religious institutions in mainstreaming extremist narratives in the public discourse. In particular, the research addressed the political ties between state, local intuitions and radical right/far-right organisations, the different treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim extremists by the Serbian authorities, and the impact of the Islamic community divisions on the radicalisation of the Muslim population. It also included the inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue and the centre-periphery relations (Belgrade-Novı Pazar).

The fieldwork included 34 interviews with relevant political and religious leaders, state and local government officials, social movement activists, and CSO representatives in Belgrade and Novi Pazar. The interviews were conducted in both ethnic/religious communities. Archival research included official documents, political speeches and interviews, media and CSO reports, and other relevant publications. Two focus groups (one per field site) were planned but had to be cancelled because of the COVID-19-related restrictions and substituted with additional interviews.

The fieldwork research showed that besides the concepts of Islamist and far-right extremism, it is necessary to introduce a third category of “not-yet-extremism”, i.e. radical ethnonationalism (or just radicalism). While the far-right groups in Serbia are mainly related to fascism, neo-Nazism, racism and/or white nationalism, and violent political means, radical ethnonationalists are anti-fascists and dismiss the use of violence, at least declaratively. Their ideologies are primarily based on ideas of superiority (cultural and/or moral) of own identity group over the Other, relativisation/denial of identity of the Other, and the victimisation of the collective Self. Also, it is important to stress that Islamist extremism should not be equalised with Salafism or Wahabism. Islamist extremism in Serbia is primarily related to takfirism and justification/use of violence against “non-believers”.

### **3.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina explored causal links between war legacy, ethnic relations, ethno-political narratives, and the constitutional structure of the state, as well as the permeation of all these categories with the religious matrix, that led to a specific type of extremism in post-Dayton BiH - cumulative extremism. The fieldwork for Work Package 3 (WP3) was conducted from June to November 2021 in four selected communities/cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo, Mostar, Prijedor, and Brčko. These communities were chosen based on their specificities and relevance to the topic (see: Background) and for the necessary contextualisation of the phenomenon of extremism in the diverse BiH society. Selected respondents are affiliated with various state institutions, religious institutions, civil society organisations, and international organisations. The respondents were selected following their professional engagement in the prevention and repression of violent extremism, as well as broader (general) countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) actions within programmes and initiatives of various organisations and institutions. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 39 interviewees in the above-mentioned period – 13 in Sarajevo, 10 in Mostar, 8 in Prijedor, and 8 in Brčko.

Following the national laws of Bosnia and Herzegovina, general ethical guidelines for writing scientific work of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Political Science, the methodological framework of the PAVE project, as well as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the identity of respondents is anonymised, kept private, and as such will not be mentioned in this research. The only categorisation made by the project team was related to the type of institutions from which the respondents come – in order to attain a broader view of institutional perceptions depending on the sector to which the respondent belongs.

Given that the fieldwork was conducted in a time of uncertainty posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were also several methodological challenges that the University of Sarajevo project team faced. A total of 12 interviews had to be conducted online (via Zoom) due to the changing circumstances "on the ground", quarantine isolation of respondents, as well as occasional pandemic restrictions in some communities – two of these cases, were with interviewees from Mostar, two from Brčko, and eight from Prijedor. The remaining 27 interviews were conducted in a "face-to-face" format at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, and in the communities/cities selected for research. The challenges mentioned above sometimes led to the postponement of previously scheduled interviews, as well as the postponement of the deadlines and work plan of the University of Sarajevo research team. Another significant challenge was that a significant number of respondents, although closely related to the topic through their daily work, did not have broader views on the issue. Several respondents noted that this was their first time thinking about ideas such as "cumulative extremism." Furthermore, during the selection of respondents, the research team concluded that there is a small circle of people who deal with these topics, meaning that it is difficult to find an interlocutor who has not previously participated in research within the general sphere of radicalisation and violent extremism.

### 3.3 North Macedonia

The research field sites in North Macedonia were the cities of Tetovo, Kumanovo – the two 'prime objects' of research - as well as in Skopje, that was added given that many stakeholders who have worked on radicalisation/extremism in NMK live in that city.

Although planned to be conducted earlier the fieldwork took place from 3-11 July and 20-29 July 2021. A two-month delay to the field work research caused by COVID-19 circumstances did not allow any preparatory work in the field to occur. The delay caused also meant that it became more difficult to arrange interviews due to the "summer month period". In addition, it should be mentioned that several stakeholders refused to be included in the research particularly in the case of Kumanovo. The above-mentioned difficulties also "complicated" the comparative aspect of the analysis. The field work involved semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with a variety of stakeholders – from government, municipalities, civil society organisations (SCOs), the religious communities, education, the police, international organisations and media. Some of the interviews conducted were online. In Kumanovo 6 interviews were conducted, while 11 were conducted in Tetovo and Skopje, respectively. Four focus groups were organised, 2 in Tetovo and 2 in Kumanovo.

COVID-19 has been a major difficulty in designing and operating the research. First, due to travel restrictions, the interviews and focus groups had to be re-scheduled for July, instead of May-June, as it

was initially planned (and hoped for). The delay was not helpful, as for many people July is a vacation month, and thus were not available for interviews. Another significant difficulty encountered was the reluctance of several stakeholders to be interviewed, particularly in the municipality of Kumanovo.

### 3.4 Kosovo

The Kosovar Centre selected two municipalities for Security Studies (KCSS) as field sites for the research. The selection was based on the criteria established by the PAVE project, "which share common socio-economic features (e.g., divided/polarised social space, high social cleavages, or high level of economic deprivation) but are affected differently by the phenomenon of violent extremism." (PAVE project, 2020, p. 44). The selected field sites for Kosovo include two municipalities: Mitrovica (North and South) and the municipality of Podujeva<sup>iii</sup>. Mitrovica's municipality is divided into two municipalities: the Mitrovica-South<sup>iv</sup> and Mitrovica-North<sup>v</sup>. The respective field sites (municipalities) that have been selected are generally similar in terms of the social-economic situation. However, they differ concerning the extent of manifestation of radicalisation and violent extremism. For instance, Mitrovica has witnessed, over the years, ethno-political tensions, as well as religious radicalisation.

## 4 Drivers of cumulative extremism

Research across the WB countries involved in PAVE project shows that factors at all levels play a role in radicalisation and are interconnected. Findings suggest that factors at the macro and community level in the Western Balkans cultivate an environment that facilitates the rise of cumulative radicalisation in the region. This is primarily due to regional **socio-political instability**, particularly concentrated in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Kosovo. This vulnerability stems largely from the legacy of the 1990s wars in both of these countries.

The war destroyed systems, structures, and social unity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. **Moreover, the conflict**, fuelled by radical ethno-nationalism and far-right extremist notions of expansionist entitlement, also **facilitated the emergence of another form of extremism** – Salafism – directly, through the migration of mujahideen fighters to BiH beginning in 1993 and indirectly, through the post-war fragility. A fragile state and polarised society became fertile ground for a **reductionist ideology** that offered rigid clarity in a time of social distrust and political uncertainty.

The wars in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Kosovo impacted countries throughout the region, which faced disorganisation as the new century began. Most respondents pointed to the **fragility of internal state structures, massive levels of corruption, and a lack of political accountability** as macro-level risk factors for cumulative radicalisation in the researched countries.

War-related conditions have uniquely complicated the situation in the region, particularly in BiH, where persistent politically-manipulated and ethnically-linked grievances have played a role in motivating radicalisation.

According to many of those interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the markers of vulnerability is the community's political division. **Populism is the dominant political discourse**, frequently characterised as fertile ground for extreme manipulation of religious and ethno-political identities and divisions. Moreover, the collected data suggest that political narratives are generally extreme, meaning that categories like "we" and "they" are emphasised even more in these tales.

Corruption, a clientelist economy, and state institutions that are in service of party politics instead of citizens are also seen as a factor of vulnerability in Serbia and North Macedonia. As observed in the field research in Serbia, the **lack of legitimacy** and the **state's inability to provide services** to its citizens, especially minorities, allows dissatisfied individuals and groups to meet their needs through informal, often clientelist networks. This lack of legitimacy and inability of the state to provide services can lead to them engaging in criminal activities and eventually accepting violence as a normal pattern of behavior. Many far-right groups in Serbia, for example (such as Levijatan, Narodne patrol, Srpska desnica, and others) are part of major political and criminal networks controlled by the regime. The situation with Islamist groups in Sandžak is no different, with them being controlled by local political parties and religious leaders.

Similar conclusions were reinforced during focus group discussions in North Macedonia. Participants agreed that "party politics, particularly corruption and nepotism, demoralise people, providing fertile ground for the spread of extremism" (Kumanovo) and that "party political corruption and nepotism are present at every level of government in NMK Central and municipal." As a result, people are becoming more demoralised due to political corruption, providing fertile ground for radicalisation" (Tetovo).

**Economic conditions** have also increased the risk of radicalisation among Western Balkan youth, regardless of context or ideology. War destroys not only state and social structures but also industry, and the entire region has faced economic challenges and relatively high unemployment rates in recent decades. However, these indicators have been particularly dire in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, economic deprivation and a lack of employment opportunities are major drivers of cumulative extremism. In the case of Kosovo, the majority of the Serbian community is financially dependent on the Serbian government, as **most Serbian-majority municipalities in Kosovo continue to operate Serbian government institutions**, particularly in the north of Kosovo. As a result, the Albanian community in Kosovo has a negative perception of Kosovo Serbs as not being productive members of society due to this situation. On the other hand, both the Albanian and Serbian communities see a lack of employment opportunities, particularly for youth, as a powerful factor in radicalisation, as illustrated by the following quote:

*"Well, in general, I think that in Kosovo, the material situation is quite critical in terms of susceptibility to radicalisation. I don't think I will generally use that famous sentence of Rambo Amadeus, who says that extremism and nationalism are for those who have a salary of up to 300 euros, when the salary goes to 500 euros, there is already talk about boutiques and healthy food and the like. Out of 1000, there is talk of love, and over 2000, all flaming stops there. In general, the poorer the communities, not only the material situation, not only the more difficult the material situation, the more susceptible they are, especially in this case, I mean religious fanaticism, any but also religious and national extremism, so it would be one of the main factors." (Public-Official, 2021)*

Nearly every person interviewed in North Macedonia brought up economic factors such as poverty and unemployment, in particular, the **high rate of youth unemployment** as a significant problem in

the country. Unfortunately, these factors socially marginalise whole sections of the population, making people more susceptible to radical or extremist ideas.

A certain combination of socioeconomic conditions and external factors – in this case, imported ideologies and propaganda as well as other malign influences – played a role in expanding the impact of radicalisation. This echoes findings in BiH that the burden of internal **state fragilities**, combined with structural factors such as the presence of radical ideologies and persistent socioeconomic problems, feeds cumulative radicalisation.

However, a unique combination of factors and pressures is likely to push any single individual over the edge of radicalisation. Thus, a single all-encompassing profile of a "likely" extremist remains elusive. The areas most vulnerable to violent extremism are those with low state penetration, low investment in education, high youth unemployment, and widespread corruption. The **Centre – Periphery relations** that highlight most of the factors mentioned above are visible in Serbia. Sandžak, which experienced the foreign fighters phenomenon, is one of the regions in Serbia with the lowest economic development level. It has a remarkably high unemployment rate (around 50 percent) and very high poverty rates, despite having a very young population (over 50 percent of its residents are younger than 30 years old). The region's **lack of investments and infrastructure** is the most pressing issue. An examination of the perspectives held by the younger generation in Sandžak, which is composed primarily of Muslims, reveals that thirty percent view unemployment as the primary issue facing their community. Almost sixty percent have the impression that they are powerless to affect any sort of the change in their community. In comparison, 41% of those who participated in the survey believe that the state of Serbia bears the primary responsibility for finding solutions to regional issues (9 percent of them opted for local government). The Bosniak population in Sandžak has little or no sense of identification with the state of Serbia, and they report being subjected to discrimination.

Although structural factors might play a role, it should be noted that general structural explanations cannot directly explain cumulative extremism because of the extremely low number of violent extremists that have emerged from a total population suffering from marginalisation.

The **legacy of war** is still a factor in cumulative radicalisation. The legacy of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been frequently invoked by political actors but also radical preachers in order to mobilise followers. Competing and conflicting war narratives are a fundamental driver of cumulative extremism, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. In Serbia, these drivers based on conflicting war narratives, competitive victimisation, and collective grievances are emphasised between Serbian and Bosniak communities, while in Kosovo, between Albanians and Serbs.

This is exemplified by the following quote from a high school professor in Kosovo when asked if the 1990s war and unresolved political issues still have an impact on the community today: "It affected the growth of nationalism, religious intolerance, linguistic intolerance, it affects everything." (Professor, 2021). **Victimisation** of Self is a core component of ethnic identities, perpetuating political culturalisation/ethnification (the naturalisation of economic and political inequalities as identitarian/cultural differences) and social fragmentation along ethnic lines. Competitive victimisation between these groups leads to cumulative radicalisation that is more ethno-political than religious. Nonetheless, religious identity plays a crucial role in this "culture of extremism," as it was frequently the main diacritic between the warring parties of the 1990s as a constituent element of nationhood.

Similarly, many interviewees emphasised the **politicisation of religion** and **instrumentalisation of religious institutions** as important drivers of vulnerability. Various anniversaries and commemorations



(especially those related to past war events in BiH), as well as elections, are occasions in which the politicisation of religion mostly occurs. Political and religious extremism largely encourages homogeneity within communities during these manifestations, emphasising the importance of preserving unity and identity as a guarantee of survival in relation to "others."

Individuals susceptible to radicalisation often **view their identity as threatened by other groups** in society and develop a behaviour that can push them toward extremism. And identity is a highly complicated issue in the region; the wars of the 1990s cemented identity-based socio-political narratives that leave much youth with the impression that they must fit into one of the ethnic identities that emerged from conflict.

Furthermore, it was mentioned in a series of conversations that the **current political elites support extremist groups**, keep them under control, and use them in situations where they need to maintain or initiate circumstances that will allow them to remain in power. For example, in North Macedonia, two political parties, IMRO-DPMNU and DUI, were singled out for their overall attitude towards extremism and radicalisation that at times involves actual encouragement and cooperation with extremist groups and figures:

*"VMRO (i.e., IMRO-DPMNU) needed to develop this kind of political extremism among Macedonians, they invested a lot of energy into it... VMRO at the time (i.e., in 2015) tried to use narratives more or less of internal threats which were ethnic or religious in order to mobilise support..."* (Skopje interview)<sup>2</sup>. *"VMRO continues to put fuel on the fire and creates ethnic problems and radicalisation"* (Skopje interview).

Radicalisation and extremism are not confined to a single country in the region. **Regional dynamics** cannot be neglected as a factor contributing to cumulative extremism. Many issues related to extremism are both regional and transnational. For instance, in Serbia, almost all radical ethno-nationalist/far-right activities revolve around Kosovo's status. As a result, any concessions to the Kosovo government or recognition of Kosovo's independence by the Serbian government would only exacerbate the radicalisation of these movements. Simultaneously, the permanent political instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina impacts the radicalisation of both Serbs and Bosniaks in Serbia. The categorisation of Srebrenica as genocide in July 1995 and its denial provided a powerful impetus for radical/extremist attitudes in Serbia. It is the cornerstone of reciprocal radicalisation, along with the relativisation or denial of the Bosnian state, language, and Bosniak identity (or Republika Srpska and Serbian identity in BiH). Reactions to the High Representative for BiH's recent decision to impose amendments to Bosnian criminal law to criminalise genocide denial are an excellent example of this radicalisation. This decision galvanised radical nationalists, reinforcing mutual polarisation and dehumanisation and reintroducing a "war framework."

## 5 Drivers of community resilience

Addressing the issue of resilience PAVE project attempts to draw important lessons from the field and reflect on the data and values observed among respondents in order to think innovatively about cultivating resilience in communities across the region. Further, **understanding the context-specificity of communities is critical**. The PAVE project defines *resilience* as: "...the ability of political systems and



**(in)formal governance arrangements at the community level** to adjust to changing political and social conditions" in order to provide clarity and in recognition of critiques regarding the potential delegitimation and disempowerment of equal politically inclusive society when (mis)understood as an effort to maintain stability" (PAVE, 2020). Because the PAVE project focuses on community dynamics, the concept of resilience in this context emphasises a community's structural and agency-based capacity to respond to the threat of violent extremism, with a particular emphasis on the roles of social connections, social bridging, and belonging (Carpenter, 2006; Ellis & Abdi, 2017).

In all countries, respondents in multiple communities cited the quality of **education, (state and religious) institutional cooperation, social ties, and engagement** as essential factors of resilience.

*"Education makes people more with standards and values, and that's why people understand each other. When they have values when they can talk with each other, they start to care... about the environment... school... municipality, everything that relates to the quality of life and they start thinking..." (Tetovo interview)² "... during the last years, working especially with young people, we see more and more that they do not have these radical ideas. They are more liberal in their mindset... through the help of the civilian organisations and the educational sector... the youth have become aware that there are many things that unite us" (Tetovo interview).*

For example, the focus groups and the interviews in Kosovo (Podujeva, North and South of Mitrovica) resulted in identifying three factors: Education, social ties, and the role of CSOs, that contribute to building strong community resilience against violent extremism. In addition, strong social connections, or social linking, which provides **a sense of belonging** and association to individuals and groups, were also found to be essential to resilience.

In Serbia, especially in Sandžak, **social bonding within communities and social bridging between communities** is critical to community resilience. Individuals' lives are enriched by the community, which provides them with a moral sense of right and wrong. Both the Bosniak and Serbian communities in Sandžak strongly oppose extremism, and despite being mostly segregated, they are highly tolerant of one another. These communities have a long history of coexistence, while inter-ethnic conflicts mainly were imported from elsewhere.

Findings in BiH contend that Bosnians' wartime and post-war experiences have significantly undermined their resilience, even compared to citizens in other regional countries. Still, the factors most clearly linked to resilience in BiH include **education, the role of religious institutions, and the role of political/state institutions**. Education, according to respondents, should be one of the main drivers of societal resilience in general, but the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is unique. Specifically, BiH's education system is ethnically fragmented rather than unified, resulting in the permeation of curricula with various ethno-political narratives. These narratives are frequently at odds with one another, resulting in disparities in educational values across Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the respondents, the values obtained from education in Bosnia and Herzegovina have a limited range of resilience and cannot fully realise their potential in strengthening resilience.

Respondents, on the other hand, see **religious institutions as drivers of resilience** and believe that they could make an even more significant contribution to resilience in various ways, significantly increasing our society's resilience potential. To put it another way, they need to play a more constructive role in some social issues related to cumulative extremism in order to mitigate its negative consequences. An individual or a group can fill this position. The Interreligious Council's activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina were highlighted as a positive example.

The influence of **social networks on the community level** is a significant factor not only in radicalisation but also in building resilience. Moreover, these networks have the potential to play a critical role in preventing radicalisation, particularly when it comes to rejecting the narratives and narrators that fuel radicalisation, regardless of ideology.

**The role of civil society organisations (CSOs)** has been identified as a potential factor of resilience, particularly those NGOs and grassroots organisations that engage in the themes of violent extremism and radicalisation. Civil society organisations in most countries have been recognised as actors able to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation processes between different ethnic groups but also play an essential role in preventing violent extremism through community resilience. According to the respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, training projects, seminars, and other forms of Education carried out by international and domestic civil society organisations (CSOs) represent an important segment of resilience in a broader or narrower sense.

## 6 A gender perspective on cumulative extremism and resilience

Most previous studies examined the issue of violent extremism without accounting for possible differences in how the radicalisation process affects men and women, or how it may be impacted by gender concepts more broadly, so research on how gender intersects with radicalisation (or deradicalisation) is limited.

The collected data in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that women are thought to be more vulnerable to general forms of violence (such as domestic violence), while men are thought to be more vulnerable to extremist ideas, susceptibility to various contents, and the ultimate expression of violent extremism. According to one respondent, "men are more likely to be perpetrators of any kind of violence," while another believes that "a woman will sometimes support all of his ideas without any criticism because of her support for her partner and loyalty." As a result, we can deduce that: a) women are more often victims than we realise; and b) in some cases, women only follow men (often due to economic dependence or "absolute control of men", i.e., strongly patriarchal social structures), which can be described as a form of invisible radicalisation. Some of the respondents attribute it to the (still prevalent) patriarchal society ideas that exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, based on the foregoing, it is possible to **distinguish between women who are vulnerable and women who are radicalised victims**.

On the other hand, respondents from all investigated communities in Kosovo appear to believe that **male and female extremists are equally susceptible and vulnerable**. Despite the fact that female recruitment in ethno-political extremism is frequently marked by forced recruitment, in which violence is used to entice women, the majority of recruitment takes place on a voluntary basis. The fact that they are participating voluntarily can be attributed to factors such as poverty, inequality, and a lack of economic opportunity, which force them to choose a life in these extremist groups (PAVE, 2020). Similar perception of gender role in extremism prevails in North Macedonia. During the interviews and focus group discussions there, it was noted that "both men and women are susceptible to radicalisation/extremism, though more men are radicalised." Projects like the "Motherschool" have recognised the **important role that women can play in community resilience**. More research on women and their role in community resilience, according to some interviewees, is needed (Kumanovo interview).

## 7 Conclusion

The issue of violent extremism in the Western Balkans is not an isolated problem, as evidenced by the findings presented in this report. Instead, their mutual experiences are closely related and inextricably linked. The drivers of vulnerability to cumulative extremism across the Western Balkan countries show that they still suffer from the effects of post-war and post-socialist transitions. As the collected data showed, the **Western Balkans' cumulative radicalisation is deeply rooted in the wars of the 1990s and their legacies**, as well as protracted social transition and democratisation so that the region continues to grapple with various manifestations of the **socially embedded culture of extremism**.

**Political parties** mainly promote an (ethno)nationalist agenda, which is critical to their survival, and they feed extremist narratives daily. Moreover, the presence of historical revisionism and war crimes denial, which has been acknowledged as a factor of cumulative radicalisation thus far, reinforces extremist groups and their discourses.

In this study, it was not easy to identify community resilience factors to cumulative extremism. However, most respondents identified **religious communities' work** as a critical potential indicator of community resilience. Their more proactive and "visible" work **promoting reconciliation, forgiveness, and coexistence in the community** has been identified as one of their most important contributions to building resilience. In addition, interviewees praised the role of **civil society** in promoting and strengthening community resilience. However, while this contribution to society's resilience is exceptionally beneficial, given the **lack of a systematic approach to strengthening resilience** that would overcome vulnerability factors, it is unclear what its true impact is. Such a systematic approach, which is currently lacking, should be implemented, and coordinated through the roles of education, religious institutions, and political/state institutions, with the CSO sector and international organisations completing the picture. Because this approach does not exist, there are **untapped potentials – typically drivers of resilience – to eventually become drivers of community vulnerability**. Furthermore, without this approach, the role and importance of initiatives undertaken by the CSO sector and international organisations are diminished because these initiatives lack a broad reach in the absence of material and financial

resources and state support. As a result of the content analysis, it is clear that public dialogue on these issues is required in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which should contribute to a critical examination of the overall potential for community resilience and the role of key actors in this process.

As it was significantly more difficult for all interlocutors to identify resilience factors, we can assume that **on the vulnerability-resilience continuum, all indicators presented as vulnerability indicators can also be viewed as potential resilience indicators**. In a society in which vulnerability is heavily emphasised, likely only vulnerabilities are perceived and there is difficulty recognising the potential for growth and healing – even though both are reflected in resilience. Resilience factors both mitigate or slow down the effects of exposure to risk factors and reduce the incidence of problems – and thus significantly contribute to the community's "recovery and healing."

## 8 Recommendations

### State/local institutions

- Development of individual national strategies that include all relevant macro-level actors such as the state institutions, religious institutions, international organisations, and civil society organisations while paying particular attention to developing a system of early detection and recognition of forms of extremism that have a reciprocal effect.
- Development of specific, state, and local community tailored security, social and educational programmes for vulnerable local communities, emphasising increased participation of local religious communities, youth, and women.
- Development of mechanisms for adequate institutional responses while considering the specificity of threats and risks for particular youth groups and women.
- Expansion of cooperation between academic institutions in the individual states as well as the Western Balkans region and the European Union, and design of joint outputs, digital education platforms, and courses dealing with intercultural communication, critical thinking, media, and religious literacy, cumulative extremism, and extremism in general.
- Introduction of special programmes or workshops in the education system, to develop preventive activities for students such as civic engagement and media literacy.
- Establishment of prevention programmes in cooperation with religious institutions (and between them), to teach about other religions or religious groups within the state or local community.
- Encouragement of stronger support for local social and mental health centres to contribute to building stronger social ties and family-oriented resilience.

### International organisations

- Establishment of a national prevention programme, and support for regional prevention programmes, with the participation of domestic and international expert groups.
- Development of various additional education programmes for civil servants (police, judiciary, education system), with the participation of academia, religious institutions, and CSOs.
- Development of a regional (academic) educational programme for students in the realm of violent extremism to enhance regional academic cooperation.
- Support for the regional cooperation between state institutions and regular exchange of experiences in preventing and countering cumulative extremism.
- Development and support for peacebuilding projects and the state-centred programmes to lead states in the Western Balkans to recognise prevention as an important political issue.
- Support for further empirical research regarding the role of women in the processes of radicalisation.

### **Civil society**

- Establishment of a platform for cooperation between state institutions and CSOs for C/PVE-related issues while considering the more prominent and leading role of state and religious institutions to avoid the occurrence of “a CSO bubble.”
- Development of thematic workshops (e.g., the culture of tolerance) and encouragement of dialogue in local communities (public discussions, educational institutions), with the participation of all relevant macro-level actors.
- Organisation of activities (particularly in more rural areas) that aim to empower women and promote their inclusion while challenging traditional gender roles that suppress the participation of women in private and public life.
- Encouragement of other CSOs that deal with the topics of critical thinking and media training.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> There are two Islamic communities in Serbia: The Islamic Community of Serbia (Belgrade) and The Islamic Community in Serbia (Novi Pazar). The latter operates under the auspices of The Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>ii</sup> *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*. DUI has been the most important and successful ethnic Albanian political party since 2002. It was established by the ex-leadership of the *National Liberation Army*.

<sup>iii</sup> Read more about Podujeva from the OSCE profile of the municipality, available at: [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/4/13126\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/4/13126_0.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Read more about Mitrovica South from the OSCE profile of the municipality, available at: [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/3/122118\\_1.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/3/122118_1.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Read more about Mitrovica North from the OSCE profile of the municipality, available at: [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/9/122119\\_1.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/9/122119_1.pdf)