

PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism
through Community Resilience

Policy Brief for Serbia



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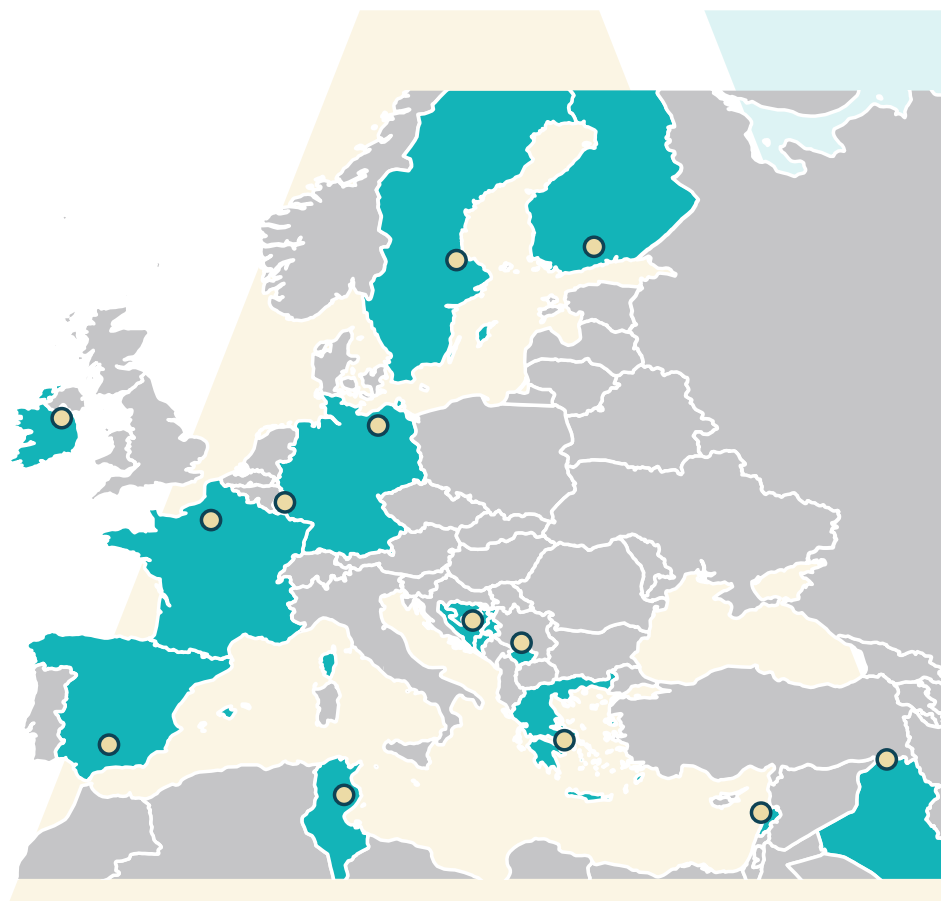


Introduction to the PAVE project

The PAVE research project (2020-23) collects evidence-based knowledge on trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Western Balkans. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and community leaders for the development of an effective prevention strategy between the European Union and its neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, innovative training tools for stakeholders are developed based on the project's findings.

The PAVE consortium consists of 13 partner organisations based in 12 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development. In all countries, community leaders such as local state representatives, religious leaders, educators, youth organisations and women's organisations were consulted to validate first the research plans and later the research findings.

Empirical data was gathered in seven case study countries through a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches and compared across selected communities (e.g. municipalities) which are unevenly affected by violent extremism. Factors of vulnerability and resilience were identified at the meso level of community dynamics and actors, based on three thematic clusters: the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms; the interaction between religious and public institutions; and the interplay between online and offline narratives on (de)radicalisation.





Introduction to PAVE research in Serbia

The fieldwork in Serbia explored ethno-nationalistic and religiously inspired forms of 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. Fieldwork in Serbia was based on the methods of semi-structured interviews, archival research, and discourse analysis. It 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.

Previous research on extremism (and radicalisation) in Serbia identified Islamist extremism and far-right extremism as its two most common forms. Our findings show that besides these two forms of extremism, there is also a new form of 'not-yet-extremism', i.e. radical ethno-nationalism, which permeates the whole of Serbian society. Furthermore, the reciprocal relationship between Islamist extremism and far-right extremism is weak or almost non-existent. At the same time, the ethno-nationalisms of Serbs and Bosniaks produce a substantial cumulative effect.

The most common factors of community vulnerability in Serbia are competitive self-victimisation (between Serbian and Bosniak communities), malfunctioning of the state, lack of national and local strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), regional crises (with Kosovo and Bosnia), religious and ethnic segregation, criminal political networks, and lack of cooperation between the religious communities. Factors specific to far-right extremism are the benevolence of the state toward far-right organisations and the reluctance of the Serbian Orthodox Church to distance itself from the clerical far-right/radical organisations. Islamist extremism is mainly driven by the political and economic isolation of Sandžak and divisions in the Islamic community in Serbia.

On the other hand, P/CVE-related activities of the CSO sector, a tradition of religious tolerance, rejection of violence by the community leaders, and programmes for the deradicalisation of returnees from Syria or Ukraine are the common factors of community resilience in Serbia. Specific factors of resilience in the case of far-right extremism are central government control of far-right violence, integration of radical and extremist groups into informal political clientelistic networks, and feminisation of radical and far-right politics. For Islamist extremism, the main drivers of resilience are the social bonding of the communities, social bridging between them, and the prevalence of the moderate Hanafi interpretation of Islam in Serbia.

The P/CVE domain in Serbia is largely underdeveloped. Notwithstanding stereotypical framings of Islam and terrorism, the government and religious communities do not recognise radicalisation and extremism as issues or engage in prevention and countering. Therefore, the crucial recommendation for Serbia that all stakeholders should address is to include the government and religious communities (particularly the Serbian Orthodox Church) in the process. This would include raising awareness among the representatives of state and religious communities, influencing them to participate in the dialogue on P/CVE, and providing them with all the necessary assistance for that purpose. It also means changing international donors' and CSOs' attitudes toward the government and religious institutions, no matter how authoritarian or illiberal they might be. Only in this manner will P/CVE gain importance and rise from the bottom of the political agenda. Otherwise, it will remain on the margins of society as one of many issues acknowledged only by CSOs and their donors.

The second crucial recommendation, stemming from the previous one, is to reframe the P/CVE approach to avoid stigmatising the target groups. In post-war societies, there is a high level of trauma, competitive self-victimisation, and mutual stigmatisation, and P/CVE should not exacerbate the situation. A more sensible, contextually based approach would reduce the possibility of alienating the stakeholders and open a space for more meaningful and effective dialogue.



1. Recommendations for the government

The state in Serbia is largely neglecting the whole field of P/CVE, leaving it almost entirely to civil society and international donors. P/CVE still needs to be institutionalised in Serbia. Therefore, the government needs to take an active role in this domain and to develop national and local P/CVE strategies that include all relevant actors, the state, religious communities, local institutions, CSOs, and the education system.

- The government needs to **develop programmes and mechanisms for preventing radicalisation and supporting deradicalisation** on both national and local levels, including:
 - Raising awareness of the threats and risks of **youth** radicalisation;
 - Increasing institutions' **accountability** for the overall security of the community;
 - Raising awareness of the harmful effect of **hate speech and antagonistic discourses** among community representatives;
 - Implementing a **referral mechanism** for protecting vulnerable youths from radicalisation and providing support for those already affected;
 - Institutionalising **support for women** to increase their knowledge about early signs of radicalisation and their critical skills to serve as agents of prevention;
 - Developing **protocols for institutional responses** to extremism and radicalism.
- Since education can play an essential role in both radicalisation and deradicalisation, further **education sector reforms** are necessary. Education in Serbia is still burdened by national myths, ethnic stereotypes, and antagonistic narratives, which are more or less a characteristic of any post-war society. As a result, Serbia needs a reform of primary and secondary education that would encourage young people to develop skills in civic engagement, critical thinking, and media literacy – all necessary prerequisites to develop multi-perspective perceptions of the past and tolerant, open-minded worldviews.
- An essential segment of this reform should be **religious education**. Currently, religious education is identified as a vulnerability factor for radicalisation since it segregates pupils based on their religion (Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim) and is entirely controlled by the religious communities (curricula, textbooks, teachers). Therefore, there is no interreligious communication or interreligious education programme in the Serbian education system. Reform of this education segment should include introducing the history of religion as a mandatory course and religious courses as elective, as well as interreligious and civil control of religious education programmes and curricula.

- Another education-related recommendation is to **bring together academic institutions from different ethnic and religious contexts** (for instance, the universities of Belgrade and Novi Pazar) to develop joint research projects, courses and syllabi that deal with violence and radicalism in a more academic manner.
- Furthermore, Serbia lacks any form of **institutionalised religious dialogue**. Relevant government departments should initiate and engage in dialogue with the Serbian Orthodox Church and the two Islamic communities in Serbia since they are crucial for successful P/CVE activities. This dialogue should be institutionalised on the national level (the Bosnian Interreligious Council could serve as a role model) but also on the level of local communities, particularly those that are religiously and ethnically mixed.
- Lastly, the government should introduce stricter **fiscal control of financial contributions from the diaspora and foreign foundations** since, as our findings show, they played a role in radicalising the vulnerable population in Serbia.



2. Recommendations for the international community

- International donors should consider the possibility of **reframing their P/CVE approaches**. The conventional approach lacks contextual sensibility as the concepts of radicalisation and extremism are value-laden and could lead to the stigmatisation of vulnerable groups (for instance, the Muslim minority in Serbia). From our research experience, **focusing on community resilience** seems to be a more adequate approach because it identifies the positive characteristics of a local community. In this manner, community resilience gains epistemic priority, while radicalisation and extremism are equated with a lack or absence of resilience.
- In general, the P/CVE agenda could benefit greatly from **adopting a peacebuilding perspective** with a particular focus on depolarisation and rehumanisation of the Other in post-war societies.
- In the P/CVE approach, there is an evident lack of conceptualisation of the **role of women** in these situations. International P/CVE programmes should focus more on empirical research on women's motivation to join violent extremism or serve as extremism prevention agents.
- Furthermore, the international community should address **institutional capacity-building as a part of their P/CVE programmes**. These programmes should include representatives of the state, religious communities and local institutions as the most influential political actors, rather than focusing only on CSOs. This means that the international community has to prioritise state-centred programmes that would lead the Serbian government to recognise P/CVE as an important political issue and incorporate it into national strategies and other official documents. In particular, these programmes could be in the form of assisting state and local institutions to develop P/CVE mechanisms or provide training for government employees (police, judiciary, education system) in P/CVE.
- The international community can also raise awareness of the importance of developing **regional approaches to P/CVE and regional P/CVE mechanisms**. Radicalisation and extremism do not stop at national borders and should be approached as regional phenomena. The international donors should focus on regional P/CVE education programmes that would include academic institutions from various Western Balkan countries.



3. Recommendations for civil society

Willingly or not, civil society has monopolised the domain of P/CVE in Serbia. Consequently, P/CVE has shared the dominant reputation of the CSO sector as ‘an externally imposed hoax’. This has led to the marginalisation of P/CVE activities and their denunciation as ‘a CSO bubble’ and a tool of foreign political influence.

- To counter this negative reputation of P/CVE in Serbia, CSOs should develop a more sensitive approach toward the state and religious communities and recognise them as **partners, not rivals**. The **ideological exclusivity of CSOs** and the lack of willingness to engage in dialogue with those labelled as too conservative, radical or extreme, although often justified, threatens to permanently alienate the Serbian government or the Serbian Orthodox Church from the P/CVE domain.
- Another group that should be included to a greater extent in this domain is the **academic community**, which has served chiefly as service providers for CSOs in previous years. The academic community can share necessary expertise on P/CVE and could serve as a **bridge between CSOs and the government**, given that most of the academic institutions in Serbia are state-based. In this manner, civil society could create a space for a wider dialogue about critical P/CVE issues (schools, universities, and public discussions).
- Similarly to the international community, CSOs in Serbia could also contribute to **reframing the P/CVE approach by utilising peacebuilding tools**. Specifically, they should focus more on promoting local examples and mechanisms of tolerance, intercultural dialogue and cooperation, with a particular emphasis on the depolarisation and rehumanisation of former warring parties (i.e. Bosniak and Serbian communities). For instance, the region of Sandžak is a positive example of intercommunal tolerance and coexistence between Bosniaks and Serbs, despite the wars and political instability, and many lessons can be learned about mechanisms of community resilience from its local context.
- Finally, although there are many female activists in this sector, the gender issues in P/CVE have not been dealt with. There is a noticeable gap for CSOs to address by **challenging traditional gender roles** that suppress the participation of women in private and public life (while avoiding causing a backlash from conservative communities), their financial dependence, poverty, and illiteracy (especially among women living in rural areas).



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