Responding to Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

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ABSTRACT

The Western Balkans has a long history of ethnic and ideological conflicts. The legacy of the recent Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s persists to this day and contributes to ongoing ethnic and political tensions. External actors including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are exploiting these tensions to service their own agendas of ethnic or political dominance. In addition, citizens in the Western Balkans are increasingly disillusioned with their local governments and the West (specifically, the US, EU, and NATO). Collectively, these tensions and disillusionment, intentionally aggravated by external actors, fuel Islamist and far-right radicalization and recruitment. Based upon a review of the secondary academic and policy literature as well as in-depth interviews with subject matter experts and on-the-ground practitioners, this report examines the drivers and mechanisms of Islamist and far-right radicalization and recruitment in the Western Balkans — specifically in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. After reviewing these drivers, we propose potential responses with an emphasis on strategic communications and local ownership. These include increasing media literacy, the development of local fact-checking institutions, the promotion of impartial journalism, fostering the development of counter-narrative and inoculation messages delivered through strategic cultural sectors, and support for local pro-democracy organizations and groups.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans has a long history of ethnic and ideological conflicts. The legacy of the most recent, the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, persists to this day. In addition, citizens are increasingly disillusioned with their local and national governments and the West (i.e. the United States (US), European Union (EU), and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Collectively, increasing tensions and disillusionment, intentionally aggravated by external actors, fuel Islamist and far-right radicalization and recruitment in the region. This report examines how external actors including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, exploit these tensions to service their own agendas of ethnic, religious, and/or political dominance. Saudi Arabia and Qatar utilize their wealth to build Salafi mosques, train local imams, and bribe the local population to conform to a strict interpretation of Islam. Russia, on the other hand, is trying to assert more political and economic influence in the region, with the goal to stop the further expansion of NATO and the EU by stoking existing ethnic, religious, and political divisions.

Based upon a review of the academic and policy literature, as well as in-depth interviews with subject matter experts and on-the-ground practitioners in the region, this report examines the drivers and mechanisms of Islamist and far-right radicalization and recruitment in the Western Balkans — specifically, we focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia), Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. After reviewing these drivers and mechanisms, we provide an overview of current local efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate this population. Finally, we propose potential interventions to counter radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism with an emphasis on strategic communications and local ownership. These include: i) improving media literacy through school and private sector programming, assisting in the development of local fact-checking institutions, and the promotion of standards of good journalism, ii) fostering the development and promotion of locally based online and offline counternarratives and inoculation messages, especially to youth, through strategic cultural sectors, and iii) leveraging local pro-democracy and pro-West movements.

2. THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM: FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND RETURNEES

a. Islamist Travelers and Returnees

Through the end of 2019, approximately 854 nationals from Bosnia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia have traveled to Iraq and/or Syria to join terrorist groups. According to the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, out of those who left the Western Balkans, more broadly, to conflict areas in Iraq and Syria, 66 percent were men, 15 percent were women, and 18

percent were minors (Shtuni, 2020). Albania, Bosnia, and Kosovo are the European countries which have produced the highest number of foreign fighters per capita who joined armed groups in Iraq and Syria (Edjus, 2017). Approximately 485 nationals successfully returned to the Western Balkans from the Middle East, while 500 or more are still presumed to be located in Syria and Iraq (Shtuni, 2019; 2020). Hence, it is possible that the number of returnees in the Western Balkans may double in size with time. The latest available census data show that Bosnia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia have a combined population of 14.2 million, and therefore approximately a collective rate of 34 returnees per million inhabitants. Based on the above figures, the number of travelers who have returned to these four Western Balkan states is approximately ten times the rate of returnees in the EU as a whole, which has a population of 500 million people and approximately 1,500 returnees for a returnee rate of 3 people per million inhabitants. Kosovo has the largest number of returnees per million inhabitants followed by Bosnia (Shtuni, 2019). The number of travelers per 100 thousand of Muslim population is the highest in Serbia, considering that the total number of Muslims in the country is less than two-hundred and thirty thousand in total.

Table 1, on the next page, provides details on the total number of travelers and returnees for each of the four researched countries in the Western Balkans. Since the number of *travelers* who left for Syria and Iraq and actually engaged in combat cannot be accurately established, the data below reflects the total number of individuals who went to conflict areas in Iraq and Syria between 2013 and 2016. The same rationale applies to those who returned. In the next few paragraphs, we review the data and context for each country listed, in turn.

i. Bosnia and Herzegovina

From 2012 to 2015, Bosnia - a country which is roughly half Muslim and half Christian - witnessed 323 of its citizens traveling to battlefields in Syria and Iraq (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Bosnia, 2019). These 323 individuals consisted of 181 men, 61 women, and 81 children. As of the end of 2018, 98 Bosnian men and women are still believed to be in Syria and Iraq. One area of major concern in Bosnia is the lack and length of prison sentences for returnees who may have been involved in combat. Of the 50 returned foreign fighters, only 25 were convicted of terrorist-related offenses (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Bosnia, 2019). Further, sentences were lenient with 12 of the 25 sentenced to only one year in prison, and with the option of potentially having their sentences converted into fines. The 13 other returnees received a three-year sentence. Another area of concern is that there are no comprehensive reintegration programs available for former combatants or for the families of the returning foreign fighters (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Bosnia, 2019).

ii. Kosovo

From 2012 to 2019, 355 citizens from Kosovo, a predominantly Muslim country, left for conflict zones in the Middle East (2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical

Report on Kosovo, 2019). The 355 included 256 men, 52 women, and 47 children and an additional 71 children were born within the conflict zone (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Kosovo, 2019). Two-hundred and forty-two citizens returned to Kosovo (124 men, 38 women, and 80 children), 96 died, and 97 (47 men, 8 women, 42 children) remain in the Middle East (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Kosovo, 2019).

Table 1: Islamist Travelers and Returnees

Country	Estimated Number of Travelers to the Middle East	Estimated Returnees	Estimated Travelers per 100K of Muslim Population	Estimated Travelers per Million Inhabitants	Key Recruitment Locations	Number of Returnees Sentenced*
Bosnia	323	50	18	98	Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, Travnik, and Bihac	25
Kosovo	355	242	19	170	Prizren, Pristina, Hani i Elezit, Kacanik, Mitrovice, Gjilan, Viti	12
North Macedonia	106	103	22	77	Skopje (Cair and Gazi Baba), Aracinovo, Saraj, Kumanovo, Gostivar	25
Serbia	60-70	9	28-32	8	Sandzak (Novi Pazar)	5

Sources: Data are based on the latest available information from the following sources for **estimated number of travelers to the Middle East, returnees, and returnees sentenced:** Bosnia (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Bosnia, 2019); Kosovo (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Kosovo, 2019); North Macedonia (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on North Macedonia, 2019; Serbia - travelers and returnees (Metodieva, 2018; Speckhard, 2018:9) and number of returnees indicted (Bogdani, 2016); **estimated travelers per million inhabitants and 100k Muslim population:** per 2019 population data from CIA's The World Factbook (CIA, 2020)**; key recruitment locations:** (Metodieva, 2018).
* For Serbia only indicted, rather than sentenced, data were available.

As Table 1 shows, Kosovo has repatriated a large percentage of travelers to conflicts in the Middle East and their response to returning foreign fighters and terrorism more broadly is increasing. In 2018, final verdicts on six terrorism-related cases resulted in four convictions (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Kosovo, 2019). Also in 2018, the Ministry of Internal Affairs established a Division for Prevention and Reintegration of

Radicalized Persons which is comprised of officials from the Ministry of Health and Education, social workers, and psychologists to aid in the successful reintegration of returning foreign fighters.

iii. North Macedonia

Since 2012, 106 citizens from North Macedonia, a country which is nearly two-thirds Orthodox Christian and one-third Muslim, have left to join conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. One hundred and three have returned home (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on North Macedonia, 2019). Since 2016, counterterrorism efforts in North Macedonia have been minimal (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on North Macedonia, 2019). However, a potential reason is that in 2018, there were no new recorded cases of foreign fighters leaving for the Middle East. In November 2016, 25 foreign fighters were convicted for their involvement in paramilitary formations in Syria and Iraq (Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 on the Accession of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2019). In 2018, six of the 25 individuals that were convicted were released from prison (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on North Macedonia, 2019). However, there is no systematic mechanism for monitoring whether or not their reintegration back into society was successful either upon their release or thereafter. There are also no specialized programs or regulations for terrorist offenders while in prison (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on North Macedonia, 2019).

iv. Serbia

Serbia is a predominantly Orthodox Christian nation and it has fewer Islamist foreign fighters than Bosnia and Kosovo, per million inhabitants (Table 1). However, the total number of known travelers to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq from Serbia per 100 thousand Muslim population is considerably higher than the rest of the Balkan states. Of the 60 to 70 foreign fighters who left Serbia for Syria and Iraq, most came from Sandzak region, Serbia's most prevalent recruitment location (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018). Five of the returnees were convicted for committing terrorist acts and recruiting individuals to fight in Syria (Bogdani, 2016). Over time, interaction and cooperation between the Police Service for Combating Terrorism and Extremism in Serbia and Europol has increased. Counterterrorism efforts have improved through strategic marketing including the creation of manuals and the involvement of religious leaders and local authorities (Communication on EU Enlargement Policy Analytical Report on Serbia, 2019). Although the number of Islamist travelers per Muslim population is high in Serbia, the larger threat in sheer numbers comes from far-right violent extremism.

b. Far-Right Travelers and Returnees

Data on far-right foreign fighters who have traveled from the Western Balkans is harder to obtain. With no visa restrictions between Serbia and Ukraine, most individuals make their way to eastern Ukraine legally; some pose as humanitarian workers along the way (Kelly, 2019). Though complete and accurate numbers are unavailable, it is estimated that at least three hundred Serbs have gone to fight in the war in Ukraine as part of the Serbian Chetnik Ravnogorski movement (Zivanovic, 2018). Most of the far-right violent extremists fight for the Russian side, although a number may have joined the Ukrainian volunteer battalions (Kelly, 2019).

Although Serbia passed a law in 2014 that prohibits its citizens from fighting in foreign conflicts, only 45 returned fighters from Ukraine had criminal proceedings initiated against them. Out of 28 convicted persons, 27 individuals pleaded guilty and negotiated with prosecution, and only four have been sentenced, serving between six and twelve months under house arrest (Zivanovic, 2018). Stevan Milosevic, one of the convicted Serbian fighters, received a 5-year suspended sentence in 2015, on the condition of not committing the same crime. Milosevic went back to Eastern Ukraine in 2018 to fight for the Prizrak, a known brigade of international fighters within the structures of self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. (Zivanovic, 2018).

Some Serb fighters have also joined pro-Russian paramilitary groups in Syria, fighting in the Serbian Hussar Regiment (Sukhankin, 2019). These fighters are treated leniently in comparison to Muslim fighters returning from Syria and Iraq. In Bosnia, it is estimated that seven citizens have traveled to fight in Ukraine, while others have also traveled to fight in the pro-Russian Serbian Hussar Regiment in Syria (Kelly, 2019). Only one person was prosecuted in Bosnia and later acquitted upon his return from fighting in Ukraine in 2014 (Mujkic, 2020). We were unable to locate any data on the number of far-right foreign fighters from North Macedonia or Kosovo. Five nationals of Montenegro are known to have fought for the Russian side in Ukraine and successfully returned home; four of them escaped prosecution entirely (Kelly, 2019).

3. THE IMPORTANCE AND INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE REGION

a. Saudi Arabia and Qatar

The Western Balkans, still recovering from the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, have fallen victim to various external actors. While Saudi Arabia is one of the main external actors in the Balkan region, Qatar also exerts influence, with both states looking to pursue their own interests

and promote their own variant of Islam (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017; Metodieva, 2018; Rrustemi et al., 2019).

The Western Balkans, historically, practice the most common and a moderate school of Islam, Hanafi Islam. However, the fall of communist regimes during the late 1980s and early 1990s created an opportunity for Saudi Arabia and Qatar to infiltrate the region with Salafist doctrines and practices (Spahiu, 2015). While these Gulf states seek to expand their influence beyond the Middle East, they are often in competition with Turkey and Iran, which also aim to spread their influence throughout the Balkans (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018). Although Iran has begun to pursue relationships with Balkan states, its involvement and impact has been minimal thus far due to Western sanctions and differences in religion as Iran practices Shia Islam while Sunni Islam is predominantly practiced in the Balkans (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Saudi Arabia's efforts to spread Salafism, a Sunni branch of Islam, serves as a part of the Gulf's longstanding effort to counter Shia Iran, resulting in a battle for the "leadership of Islam" (Shane, 2016). Turkey on the other hand has a strong influence and presence in the region due to its connections with "Islam, the kinship with many of the Muslim communities in these countries, as well as the neo-Ottoman narrative that combines Islamic narratives and narratives of kinship with historical and cultural ties in the region" (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Turkey utilizes its influence to pursue its political agenda. Moreover, Turkey primarily practices Hanafi Islam, which has been argued to "promote a more tolerant interpretation of Islam when compared to the Arab-led Wahhabism that has also penetrated Western Balkans"; Turkey has even been labeled as "an actor that could counter Wahabi influence in the region" (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Since the existing literature does not attest to further links between Turkey, Iran, and violent extremism in the region, the report does not focus on the influence of these external actors further and instead focuses on Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have been suspected of indirectly or directly contributing to violent extremism in the Western Balkans.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar's main intentions are to spread Salafism, but the Gulf states have taken advantage of their growing influence in the region to also exploit economic opportunities. The slowdown of the EU's expansion into the Balkans has emboldened the Gulf states to intensify their presence and diversify their oil-based economies (Ejdus, 2017). In addition, they exploit the Western Balkans' lax export controls, which allow wealthy Gulf states to purchase a large number of weapons, which are then re-exported to various armed groups in conflicts, including in Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Syria (Edjus, 2017). Saudi Arabia and Qatar have utilized their wealth and ideology to gain influence in the fragmented Balkan region in the pursuit of their own geo-strategic interests. Their influence has arguably contributed to Islamist radicalization and recruitment in the region, which we provide further detail on in later sections on drivers and mechanisms of radicalization and recruitment. First, however, we review the role of Russia in the region as it pertains to far-right radicalization and recruitment.

b. *Russia*

During the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, Russia supported Serbia and various paramilitary groups involved in fighting across the region. The 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia and the subsequent intervention in Kosovo marked a turning point for Russia in the Western Balkans. US support of Kosovo's 2008 Declaration of Independence diminished Russian influence in the region. After discussions regarding Kosovo's statehood were moved from the UN to the EU in 2011, Russia no longer had a say in the question of Kosovo's statehood (Deimel, 2019). However, when President Vladimir Putin returned to power in 2012 and invaded Crimea in 2014, Russia's efforts to refocus and expand political, economic, and military influence outside of the former Soviet sphere became clear (Deimel, 2019).

Currently, to Russia, at the international level, the Western Balkans is a small – but important – part of their broader geopolitical strategy (Deimel, 2019). As Russia is trying to assert more political influence in Europe, one of their objectives is to stop the further expansion of NATO and the EU. Both Albania and Serbia officially applied for EU membership in 2009, and Croatia successfully joined the EU in 2013. North Macedonia recently joined NATO in 2019, and in March 2020, North Macedonia and Albania were given the green light on opening EU accession talks (European Parliament, 2020; Ilieska 2018). To disrupt these alliances, Russia is potentially hoping to use countries like Serbia as a "'Trojan horse" to enter into the European market and promote its own political model which opposes the EU model of liberal democracy" (Deimel 2019, 51). Some EU officials, such as EU commissioner Johannes Hahn, policy experts, and scholars, such as Dimitar Bechev, a research fellow at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, maintain that any future EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is politically dangerous (Deimel, 2019). Nevertheless, in the absence of enlargement, the EU runs the risk of further isolating the Western Balkans and pushing the region further under Russia's influence (Deimel, 2019).

At the national level, Russia's role in the region continues to grow in prominence. Above all, Russia's main interests lie in distancing the region from the West, namely EU, NATO and the US, and to strengthen their own political, economic and military influence (Deimel, 2019; Bogzeanu, 2019; Santora & Barnes, 2018; Stronski & Himes, 2019; Metodieva, 2019; Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018). While Russia's visible presence is under the guise of helping Western Balkan locals, Russia's agenda has very little to do with their socio-economic wellbeing (Deimel, 2019). In fact, so far, Russia's actions in the region have only benefited the personal interests of local elites (Mujanovic, 2019).

One important geopolitical and economic relationship Russia seeks to strengthen is their energy relationship with the Western Balkans (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Russia's economy relies heavily on its energy exports, and the EU, after Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, is seeking energy independence from an increasingly anti-democratic Russia. Therefore, while Russia's

international energy market can no longer depend on Western Europe, the Western Balkans poses an opportunity for Russia (Deimel, 2019). First, energy consumption is increasing exponentially in the region (Deimel, 2019). For instance, Serbia's gas consumption is likely to double in the next five years (Deimel, 2019). Consequently, Russia is heavily investing in the Western Balkan energy market. While Russia's pursuit of energy dominance in the region is facing geopolitical setbacks, Serbia, in particular, is amenable to Russia's intent on expanding their energy infrastructure there (Stronski & Himes, 2019; Deimel, 2019). By continuing to invest in energy assets throughout the region such as gas stations, storage facilities, drilling and exploration rights, and representative offices, Russian entities have gained a visible presence (Stronski & Himes, 2019). This visibility of Russia's investments help to maintain Russian soft power, building goodwill toward Russia, even if their investments bring no other tangible economic benefit to local citizens (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Moreover, as we detail in our sections on the drivers and mechanisms of far-right radicalization and recruitment, Russian influence and actions in the region contribute to the phenomenon.

4. DRIVERS OF RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT

a. Islamist Violent Extremism

Although there is no single reason why any given individual supports or participates in violent extremism, common drivers of Islamist radicalization and recruitment in the Western Balkans include perceptions and resentments that stem from religious ideology, socio-economic conditions, and governance (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017; Metodieva, 2018). Poor socio-economic conditions and governance feed into the idea of victimhood, which is often exploited by recruiters, and used as a main narrative in jihadi recruitment campaigns (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). All together, these factors contribute to a subset of the Muslim population in the Balkans that are disillusioned and feel excluded by the local politics and mainstream society and are, consequently, unable believe a positive future for them in the Balkans is possible (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). The following paragraphs review each of these drivers in more detail.

With the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), many foreign terrorist fighters flocked to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans (Metodieva, 2018). Similar to how foreign mujahideen fighters felt when their fellow Muslims were being massacred in the Balkans during the 1990s, certain Muslims from the Western Balkans felt compelled to aid their fellow brethren in need abroad (Metodieva, 2018). Strong post-traumatic and "fictive kin" identifications with Sunni Muslims being under attack in Syria and Iraq led individuals to join Islamist organizations as many in the Balkans remember suffering the same. The call for jihad and end-of-times apocalyptic thinking, advanced by certain Salafi imams, further strengthened the goal to build and live inside an Islamic

"caliphate" under Sharia law (Olidort, 2016). ISIS narratives drive radicalization and recruitment, in part, through religious ideology. ISIS propaganda strongly promotes the individual responsibility of Muslims to participate in the "holy war" by citing Quranic verses and violent interpretations of religious text (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018; Çela, 2018). Additionally, ISIS narratives depict the caliphate as a utopian state, providing individuals the opportunity to practice what they claim is a true Islamist lifestyle under Sharia law (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018).

Saudi Arabia and Qatar's promotion and funding of conservative Islam, which aims to "purify" Sunni Islam, has arguably contributed to radicalization in the Balkans and facilitated the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria (Lilyanova, 2017; Gall, 2016; Rrustemi et al., 2019; Petrovic, 2016; Spahiu, 2015). Salafism promotes an intolerance of "unbelievers" and may legitimize radical views, creating an environment where radical ideas flourish (Lilyanova, 2017). While Saudi Arabian or Qatari organizations have not been found to have funded those who traveled to Syria or Iraq, these countries do financially support thinkers who promote violence and jihad in the name of Islam (Gall, 2016). Imams that studied and trained in Saudi Arabia have adopted a "rigid manner of prayer" and they often bombard new recruits with radical thoughts and ideas (Gall, 2016). Radical imams have also encouraged their followers to participate in jihad, insisting it is an obligation for every Muslim and the "blood of infidels is the best for Muslims to drink" (Gall, 2016). A local imam in Kosovo states, "The main goal of their activity is to create conflict between people. This creates division, and then hatred, and then it can come to...where war starts because of these conflicting ideas" (Gall, 2016).

As Muslim youth in the Western Balkans experience the continuous corruption of their political leaders, as we detail below, recognizing only the authority of Allah, through Salafism, may seem appealing. As more and more locals adopt Salafism, there has also been a rise in tensions as it continues to alter the religious landscape in the region (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Official leaders within Islamic communities have lost their legitimacy due to infighting, ultimately ceding some power and legitimacy to radical imams (Petrovic, 2016). The embrace by some of Salafist ideologies, has transformed the social fabric of various parts of the Balkans from moderate Islam into a visible, more hardline Islam. Such changes have created deeper divisions not only with Islam, but within society, and have led to an increase in hate crimes, which may further reinforce the appeal of radical, exclusionary, and/or violent ideologies (Rrustemi et al., 2019).

Socio-economic conditions have created feelings of economic deprivation, and corrupt and unaccountable governance, are also considered drivers behind Islamist radicalization and recruitment in the Western Balkans (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). The most prevalent socio-economic factor is a lack of economic opportunities leading to high unemployment, especially among the youth (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). The Western Balkans continue to experience high unemployment rates, twice as high as the EU average, standing at 30 percent in 2019 (World Bank, n.d.). Bosnia and Herzegovina has the

highest youth unemployment rate of any state globally (Vlk, 2020). With little hope of employment opportunities, some Western Balkan youth feel excluded from mainstream society and find themselves having difficulty picturing a positive future for themselves or their peers. Many of the foreign fighters who traveled from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq were in their youth. Three out of four Kosovan adults known to have traveled to Syria and Iraq since 2012 were between 17 and 30 years of age at the time of their departure (Shtuni, 2016). High levels of youth unemployment and poverty are cited as drivers of involvement in violent extremism for some Muslims from Bosnia and Kosovo as they seek a source of income within terrorist organizations that are known to pay their recruits a monthly stipend of at least 200 euro (Interview with Area Expert and Consultant, 2020). Thus, some turn to violent extremism to seek financial stability (Vlk, 2020). However, other researchers also indicated that the vast majority of the known foreign fighters from Kosovo have a moderate level of formal education and live in average or above-average economic circumstances (CVE Expert A, 2020). Therefore, in comparative terms, the economic circumstances of radical Islamists appear to be superior to the reported national rate (Shtuni, 2016). This phenomenon is attributed, at least in part, to the scale of financial support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, such as Qatar and Kuwait, in Kosovo (Gall, 2016).

Nevertheless, economic factors may still be an important driver for certain individuals who may be less well off than the average or feel that they lack the economic and employment opportunities they deserve. Unrealized expectations behind weak economic growth is especially important in Kosovo. Despite substantial improvements in the country's socio-political reality and living conditions since the 1998–1999 Kosovo War, chronic vulnerabilities have contributed to an environment conducive to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism. Foreign-led efforts to spread Salafi ideology were able to exploit some the Muslim community's resentment regarding perceived weak economic growth in Kosovo and North Macedonia. ISIS recruiters take advantage of these economic vulnerabilities to drive recruitment by promoting the promise of an utopian state (Knudsen, 2017; Speckhard et al. 2018).

b. *Far-Right Violent Extremism*

One driver of radicalization and recruitment into far-right violent extremism in the Western Balkans is widespread disappointment among the population with the EU, the US, and NATO - i.e. "the West" (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Another driver is resentment and disillusionment with local and regional political institutions as well as poor socio-economic conditions (Kelly, 2019). Russia, in particular, is exploiting these political realities to further societal polarization and in turn, far-right radicalization through local narrative proxies (Bogzeanu, 2019; Santora & Barnes, 2018; Stronski & Himes, 2019; Metodieva, 2019; Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018). A key component of these narratives is to expose, amplify and fuel the already existing general disappointment toward the West, whether it be the EU, NATO, or the US (Metodieva, 2019).

Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea resulted in a major downturn for East-West political relations. Since then, Russia further expanded its influence in the Balkans turning the geopolitics of the region into a zero-sum game (Stronski & Himes, 2019). A number of states are internally divided over whose side they are on: some, such as Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia generally align with the pro-democratic ideologies of the West and others, such as Serbia and Bosnia, specifically Republika Srpska, align with more conservative Russia-driven agendas (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Both Slovenia and Croatia have already been accepted into the EU. Russia is infiltrating the region both online and offline in order to distance individuals and their respective governments from pro-democratic ideologies and strengthen their ties to Eurasia. In doing so, Russia is fueling anger and resentments, which benefit far right extremist groups and may lead to violence (Bogzeanu, 2019; Santora & Barnes 2018; Stronski & Himes 2019; Metodieva 2019; Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018). By highlighting its economic, cultural and political support to the region, Russia is amplifying a perceived disregard of the region by the West (Bogzeanu, 2019; Santora & Barnes, 2018; Stronski & Himes, 2019; Metodieva, 2019; Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018). Russia furthers its cause by exaggerating local narratives of resentment toward Brussels, Washington, or Balkan politicians who appear "too Western" in their thinking and perceived values (Stronski & Himes, 2019). These narratives blame the West for the many struggles that institutions and individuals in the Western Balkans are facing, including relatively poor economic conditions and persistent ethnic divisions (Stronski & Himes, 2019).

Russian narratives further seek to demonstrate that although the West has left them behind, Russia supports the region. One such narrative they use to show their support through is the historical and cultural links between Serbian and Russian extremists. Russia further continually highlights and reinforces Slavic identity-based links and the so-called Eurasian values via offline mechanisms. By making its support visible through cultural identity, Russia is demonstrating they have not abandoned the Western Balkans (Stronski & Himes, 2019). This increases the likelihood that some individuals will support so-called Slavic Eurasian values and far right ideology (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Additionally, Russia invests in other aspects of culture to help foster their soft power (Stronski & Himes, 2019; Deimel, 2019). For instance, a number of Orthodox-style churches have sprung up in recent years across Serbia, which are conjoined by numerous "friendship associations" that otherwise underlie Russian efforts to influence the country (Velebit, 2017). Their goal is "creating Russian friendly local constituencies and levers of influence" (Stronski & Himes 2019, 1). Diplomacy is another way Russia attracts local constituencies. Russian government officials are constantly visiting the area making public promises of increased economic relations that will bring more wealth to the Western Balkans (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Ties between members of Serbian far-right groups and Russian politicians are well-known and recorded. For example, leaders of the Serbian group *Zavetnici* have been guests of the ruling United Russian party in the Kremlin on multiple occasions (Kelly, 2019). Certain politicians in the

Western Balkans are more amenable to Russian diplomacy than others. This includes Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian Serb politician, who is well known for aligning himself with Russian interests.

Moreover, Russia, along with far-right organizations, also make their presence visible by sponsoring football teams, charity events, schools, athletic associations and Russian language or cultural associations (Stronski & Himes, 2019). The other main area of culture they exploit is their shared connection through the Russian Orthodox and Serbian Orthodox faiths (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Commonly exhibited far-right and extreme nationalist narratives regarding culture in the region include anti-democratic views, anti-LGBT and gender equality views, and ethnic and religious hatred. In Serbia, these narratives are enabled by both mainstream politics and the Serbian Orthodox Church (Bakic, 2013). In addition, many of the groups and individuals involved in the wars of the 1990s are still active in both politics and public life. For example, Creators of Republika Srpska Association, an organization funded by the government in Bosnia's Serb-dominated region, is now led by a convicted war criminal Momcilo Krajisnik, who was released from prison in 2013 (Lakic, 2019b).

Many far right violent extremists are veterans of the Yugoslav Wars. After serving in Serbian-led paramilitary groups and law enforcement during the 1990s, some of these individuals forged lasting links with Russian units that fought in the Yugoslav Wars (Kelly, 2019). Similar to how the 1990s mujahideen connections encouraged participation of the Balkan-based Islamists in Syria and Iraq, active links between Serbian and Russian paramilitary units also provide opportunities for the volunteer fighters to participate in the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia (Beslin & Ignjatijevic, 2017). While far right groups in Serbia and Bosnia frequently use Orthodox imagery or have links with the Russian Orthodox Church, religion itself does not seem to represent a determining factor for far-right recruitment (Kelly, 2019). The stated ideological motives of some of the foreign fighters in Ukraine are instead based on a sense of Orthodox Christian brotherhood and so-called Slavic Eurasian values. Nevertheless, these foreign fighters are predominantly seen as mercenaries and therefore less dangerous than Islamist fighters (Kelly, 2019). One of the messages that local Russian narrative proxies highlight and distribute is that there is an alleged Western preference of defending Muslim groups over Orthodox Christians in the region (Stronski & Himes, 2018). This perception further entrenches the belief among some that the West does not care about them.

Finally, there is a continued desire to redraw nation-state boundaries based on ethnic lines. Since the 1990 Yugoslav Wars, ethnically charged far-right politics continue to be popular in Serbia and other parts of the Western Balkans where the Serbian population is significant. Glorification of war criminals from the 1990s is but one example of such tactics that are prevalent among the far-right groups in the region today (Kelly, 2019). Such glorification not only angers Muslims, but fuels Bosnian and Croatian Serb nationalist pride, with potential for further far-right radicalization among the general population.

c. *Reciprocal Radicalization*

Growing Islamist and far-right violent extremism are not isolated phenomena in the Western Balkans. The visible growth of one contributes to the other. The term *reciprocal radicalization* refers to the interplay of extremism as opposing groups make their views and actions more radical based on perceived threats from the other (Kelly, 2019). To drive recruitment, both Islamist and far right organizations capitalize on post-war resentments, trauma, and fear (Çela, 2018; Kelly, 2019).

i. The Yugoslav Wars

Historically, religion and nationality were inseparable in the Western Balkans. When the Yugoslav authorities designated national groups, or *narodi,* as a means of dividing territory and political control in the federation of communist republics, the five original *narodi* corresponded to specific ethno-national groups – Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Slovenes, and Macedonians (Schlesinger, 2011). The Bosnian Muslims, like the other ethno-national groups of Yugoslavia, were differentiated only by their religious confession. The other five *narodi* were all Christian, either Orthodox or Roman Catholic (CIA, 2019). This proved problematic for the Yugoslav authorities. In order to place well over a million of Muslims into a category comparable to the other *narodi,* Marshal Tito, the former president of Yugoslavia, granted Bosnian Muslims the legal status of *narod,* officially designating them a separate nation within Yugoslavia. This fact, combined with the repression of religious practice under communism, created an impression that the Bosnian Muslim population is an ethno-national group that did not fit in with the rest of the region. The term "Bosniak" is now used in reference to any ethnic Slav who is Muslim, significantly enhancing confusion over the term. This confusion adds to their isolation in the region as everyone refers to them differently, taking away from their efficacy of portraying themselves as a united religious community.

Suppression of religious identity and related practices were common in the Western Balkans both before and during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. The Yugoslav Wars were the most violent conflict in Europe since World War II (Barber, 1992). While ethnic tensions in the region far precede the 1990s, the origins of the Yugoslav Wars were, in part, a result of Marshal Josip Tito's success in uniting all Yugoslav republics under his communist leadership within a socialist federation of six separate republics (Barber, 1992). Ethnic tensions, having existed in the region for centuries, compromised the union between these six republics once Tito died. As a result, political, economic and social unrest ensued throughout the 1980s. In the early 1990s, the Serbian government in Belgrade reversed its position on Tito's previous recognition of Bosnian Muslims as a separate 'narod', or nation (Barber, 1992). When Bosnia first proclaimed independence in 1992, ethnic Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia demonstrated their refusal to separate from Belgrade by engaging in ethnic violence against the Muslim population, backed by the

Serbian-dominated Yugoslav army and Russian-sponsored paramilitary groups in the region (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017; Metodieva 2018).

Repression and marginalization of Bosnian Muslims by Serbs and Croats resulted in a religious mobilization and consolidation of Muslim identity between 1992 and 1995 (Schlesinger, 2011). This "evoked [a] transnational defensive mobilization" of Muslims from Afghanistan and other Arab countries, coming to the aid of their fellow Muslims in Bosnia and the other former Yugoslav states of the Western Balkans (Metodieva, 2018). To Muslim communities there and abroad, Bosnia, specifically, was understood as "a Muslim country, which must be defended by Muslims" (qtd. in Metodieva, 2018). The defense of Balkan Muslims not only became an opportunity for foreign radical Islamic ideologies to spread throughout the Balkans, but the legacy of these foreign ideologies help explain some of the Islamist radicalization and recruitment we see today.

A sense of duty to defend fellow Muslims abroad in Bosniaks is also attributed, in part, to the financial assistance foreign mujahideen fighters as well as Gulf states brought to the region in the 1990s (Donnelly et al, 2017). In addition to the desire of Balkan Muslims to return the favor for the help they received from foreign Muslims during the 1990s, it is important to understand how much Muslims lost during the Yugoslav Wars. All ethnic groups suffered casualties; however, Muslim communities suffered disproportionately in comparison. While it is estimated that over 100,000 Muslims and Serbs perished in the Balkans as a result of ethnic conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia, Republika Srpska, Serbia, and Kosovo between 1992 and 1995, over 65 percent of those who died were Bosniaks (Rohde, 2015; Canga, 2011). In total, Bosnian Muslims had the highest number of losses during the campaigns of ethnic cleansing (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). Subsequently, the extreme losses suffered by Muslims in the Western Balkans helped to feed anger and resentment during the post-war transition.

Currently, growing far-right extremism within the region helps drive Islamist radicalization. The discriminatory actions of non-Muslim communities toward Muslims across the region, following the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, continue to feed anger, fear, and resentment. Non-Muslim communities have a history of denying war crimes against Muslims and celebrating war criminals who killed Muslims during the 1990s (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). These attitudes stoke anger among the Muslim population and the fear that it is possible for a violent ethnic conflict to manifest itself once again (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). For instance, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik uses a nationalist discourse that reinforces these fears (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2017). Many Muslims are already victims of far-right extremism in the form of hate speech in their daily life (for example, at sports venues) (Bakic, 2013), and there is often no recourse when one is the victim of such speech. Even when more serious hate crimes are committed, local judges tend to spare young offenders from longer sentences.

In Serbia, hate crimes, offenses for which the perpetrator receives a higher maximum sentence because the act is motivated by ethnicity, religion, or race, were not included in the criminal law before 2012 (Ivanisevic, 2005). After hate crimes were defined by Serbia's Ministry of Justice in 2012, the newly modified legislation failed to modify the corresponding penalties for such crimes (Rudic, 2017). Similarly, there is no cohesive response from law enforcement to counter the threat of far right violent extremism in Bosnia and Kosovo (Kosovo Police Consultant, 2020). In Bosnia, researchers consistently identified the government sector, including the education system, as lacking the capacity to systematically address the growing problem of youth radicalization (Hasić, Mehmedović, and Sijamija, 2019). These same state and public institutions often fail to stop the spread of far-right groups. Moreover, in Serbia and Bosnia far-right organizations are sometimes linked to mainstream political parties via coalitions or enabled by lax prosecution and by right-wing discourse (Bakic, 2013; Kelly, 2019).

ii. Bosnian Migration Crisis

The increase in migrant flows through the Western Balkans, often referred to as the Bosnian migration crisis, also has the potential to contribute to reciprocal radicalization between the far-right and Islamists. In 2017, there were less than 1,000 migrants trekking on what has been deemed the "Balkan route", as these migrants, typically from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, are attempting to reach the EU (Zafonte, 2019). There has since been a sharp increase, with over 29,000 migrants settling in Bihac, Bosnia, which is close to the border with Croatia, in 2019 (Kingsley, 2020; Delauney, 2018). There are already perceived feelings from far-right groups that Muslims, who are viewed as foreigners, are taken care of by NGOs, the government, and the international community, while other communities are not granted the same treatment. These feelings may resurface as Bosnia has emerged as a host for a large number of migrants from predominantly Muslim countries.

Both the perceived threat of Islam and that of refugees entering Europe through the Balkans are popular themes in far-right extremist ideology (Kelly, 2019). These increasing tensions and divisions create the potential for further radicalization that could lead to violence as locals feel they are being pushed out of their own homes (CVE Practitioner B, 2020). The influx of migrants has put pressure on Bosnia's already struggling economy and high unemployment rate, which may cause further resentment towards migrant communities, as additional resources and funds are required to maintain refugee camps (Zafonte, 2019). With a large migrant population and the lack of a cohesive government response, economic and political tensions may add fuel to the fire for Islamist and far-right groups.

While some communities are anti-immigrant, others are sympathetic to the migrants due to personal experiences from the Yugoslav Wars, furthering tensions between local Bosnian communities who are either pro- or anti-immigrant (Radovanovic, 2019). The rise of the migrant population has resulted in higher crime rates in Bihac, Bosnia (CVE Practitioner B, 2020). The

Chief of Bosnia's border police, Zoran Galic, issued a warning that tensions could escalate between the different communities within Bosnia, creating instability within a fragile nation (Emric, 2019). Migrants who are not taken care of in an adequate capacity are vulnerable to violent extremism (CVE Practitioner D, 2020). Desperate for basic necessities, it is plausible that migrants would become recruits to organizations that can offer them a hot meal and other material means (CVE Practitioner D, 2020). Moreover, the treatment of these migrants may fuel grievances and contribute to Islamist radicalization and recruitment.

5. MECHANISMS OF RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT

a. *Islamist Violent Extremism*

Having identified the drivers of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism as well as the important role of reciprocal radicalization, we now discuss some of the common offline and online mechanisms by which Islamist and far-right radicalization and recruitment occurs.

i. Offline Mechanisms

Person-to-person contact is a primary mechanism of radicalization and recruitment in the Western Balkans and continues to thrive due to the influx of funding from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. To attract more Salafi followers, Saudi Arabia has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in post-conflict reconstruction, specifically the building and funding mosques, schools, hospitals, and charities in the hopes of establishing an "ultra-conservative strain of Islam" (Poggioli, 2010). Saudi Arabia has also built cultural centers, which offer language classes for free, allowing the Gulf state to expand its reach, and expose an increasing number of locals to its ideology, especially the unemployed (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Imams are often sent from the Balkans to Saudi Arabia to receive training, which includes learning certain strains of

, which are taught and spread when the imam returns home (Gall, 2016). Saudi Arabia allegedly deliberately targets poor communities, with a high unemployment rate, and offers a monthly stipend to those who attend sermons in a mosque and to women that wear the burqa (Poggioli, 2010). Visible changes can now be observed within communities that have adopted Salafism including dress, customs, and appearance aligned with conservative Islam (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Women are increasingly seen wearing burqas and hijabs, and an increasing number of Muslims now speak Arabic. Rrustemi (2020) maintains that Saudi Arabia's promotion of Salafism is a security threat for the region as it "represents the most radical branch of Islam" bringing people "closer to radical political Islam" which may contribute to their involvement in violent extremism.

Qatar, also taking advantage of the Balkans post-war reconstruction, has replicated Saudi Arabia's practices through mosque building, funding charities, and religious education (Rrustemi

et al., 2019). By financing various Islamic religious centers, schools, and charities, Qatar has established itself in all Western Balkan countries (Rakic & Jurisic, 2012). While Qatar has invested heavily in the Western Balkans, the country has little in common with the region culturally and linguistically (Entina, Pivoarenko, & Novakovic, 2018). To bridge this gap, Qatar has established various agreements with some Western Balkans states, specifically with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to boost cultural cooperation and further the funding of religious and cultural institutions such as sports fields, libraries, and museums (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018). Bosnia and Herzegovina has claimed Qatari influence and funding is facilitating radicalization in the country (Rrustemi et. al., 2019). With a donation from Qatar, Salafist imams purchased 20 acres of land in Bosnia, which is remote and unlikely to receive unwanted visitors. These remote locations are often utilized by fundamentalists to teach their conservative version of Islam (Rrustemi et al., 2019). In North Macedonia, Qatar established a collaboration between news agencies and a cultural center, while deepening cooperation within the tourism, culture, education, and health fields (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Qatar also expanded its influence through *Al Jazeera*, its domestic news organization which features stories that depict Qatar in a positive light, by establishing *Al Jazeera Balkans*, headquartered in Sarajevo (Rrustemi et al., 2019).

Certain religious leaders are also an important offline mechanism in the radicalization and recruitment process. Due to the fragmented politics of the Balkans, imams, in some communities, are perceived to have more credibility than government institutions (Petrovic, 2016). Radical imams contribute to the spread of religious extremist ideology within the region by continuously preaching radical extremist teachings offline, in addition to online. Some imams act as 'life coaches' and provide dormitories for poor students, offering an opportunity to spread Salafist and takfirist ideas to their followers (Petrovic, 2016). In Kosovo, radical religious activities take place in private spaces outside of official mosques, which the Islamic Community of Kosovo has no authority over. This leaves unauthorized mosques isolated from the mainstream religious communities increasing the likelihood they will become "hotbeds" of Islamist extremism (Vlk, 2020). Local authorities have difficulty in detecting and identifying these invite-only exclusive mosques because they are less likely to be open to the public (Interview with Area Expert and Consultant, 2020; Vlk, 2020). Potential recruits are invited via multiple channels: based on their active participation in other mosques or through person-to-person invitations in universities, social groups, and youth camps (Interview with Area Expert and Consultant, 2020, 2020; Vlk, 2020). The recruiter usually first monitors the interest of potential recruits, then approaches them socially (Interview with Area Expert and Consultant, 2020). Although not all unauthorized mosques have radical imams preaching violent ideologies, left unmonitored by the authorities, the content within these mosques could easily become a potential driver of violent extremism (Interview with Area Expert and Consultant, 2020; Vlk, 2020). Besides radical preaching, certain imams in Kosovo and Bosnia were highly involved in the process of recruiting and influencing prospective foreign fighters by providing them encouragement, guidance, and the relevant information needed to depart for the battlefield (Vlk, 2020).

Finally, some of those returning from Iraq or Syria may remain committed to a radical, violent ideology and are in a position to spread such teachings throughout their communities. Prisons also play a role in the radicalization and recruitment process within the Western Balkans, especially as the number of convictions for terrorism-related offenses and ideologically radicalized individuals has increased (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Prison staff typically refrain from infringing in the spiritual matters and religious activities of inmates, including returnees (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Overcrowding combined with a lack of resources and specialized knowledge of how to handle radicalized individuals within prisons allows the radicalization and recruitment process to thrive (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). There have been numerous instances of radicalized inmates influencing prisoners, including those convicted of crimes unrelated to terrorism or violent extremism within Balkan prisons, This has been identified as a major problem especially within North Macedonia prisons (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017; Arifi, 2019).

Some convicted returnees from Iraq and Syria may be perceived as heroes and leaders and individuals may be more susceptible to narratives promoted by these individuals, which creates a platform for ideological recruitment and radicalization (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Further, a place for prayer is given, but there is no oversight into the services that take place, the competence of those leading services, or the religious material, which can create the potential for radicalization and recruitment (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Moreover, prisoners are granted communication devices, such as telephones, which may allow violent extremist individuals to further spread their ideology (Arifi, 2019). Extremist literature was discovered in Kosovo's prisons in addition to radical imams that preach radically charged content (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). It has been acknowledged that, "Prison is not a universal solution to the problem and in some instances it may prove counterproductive," as some individuals were radicalized in prison in the first place (Qafmolla, 2016). Saudi Arabia has even extended its influence by installing mosques and imams within prisons (Rrustemi et al., 2019). Vulnerable populations, such as prisoners, creates a ripe recruiting base for violent extremists.

ii. Online Mechanisms

More than half of the population in the Western Balkans has access to the internet and is active on social media. Research shows that, as of 2018, the internet penetration rate[1] in the region is 68.1% and there are 12.5 million internet users and over 8.5 million Facebook users (Živković, 2018). The percentage of the population with internet access in the Western Balkans varies slightly across countries: 72% in Albania, 70% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 73% in Serbia. Kosovo has the highest internet penetration rate at 89% (Vlk, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Though offline engagement plays an important role in the process of radicalization and recruitment in the Western Balkans, the influence of the online space should not be underestimated (Interview with local CVE Practitioner E, 2020; Vlk, 2020).

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[1] The internet penetration rate corresponds to the percentage of the total population of a state or region that has access to the internet (Internet World Stats, n.d.).

Several studies demonstrate that ISIS recruiters actively use the internet and notably encrypted and non-encrypted social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Viber to spread propaganda (Steurenthaler, 2017; Vlk, 2020; Çela, 2018; Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018). Social media is an effective platform for terrorist recruiters to attract and target individuals who share similar interests or ideologies (Çela, 2018; Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2017; Bertram, 2016). Social media sites are highly popular among mainstream audiences and most widely used among the younger generations (Van Eerten & Doosje, 2019). Not only are social media sites free and easy to use, but their ability to rapidly disseminate messages to reach a wider audience make these online platforms a convenient gateway for recruiters to easily reach and engage with young people – their primary target audience (Van Eerten & Doosje, 2019). The instant feedback mechanisms of social media allow ISIS recruiters to immediately connect with users who interacted with their materials by liking, retweeting, sharing, or endorsing the content posted (Knudsen, 2017; Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018). ISIS is also able to connect via social media with vulnerable individuals and persuade them into traveling to the battlefield. Moreover, not only is social media an effective platform to easily reach a large audience, recruiters can also tailor their messages to narrow audience niches (Çela, 2018). Radicalized individuals, or 'social media jihadis' publicly embrace and disseminate the ideology and propaganda of terrorist organizations on various social media platforms by creating group forums, coordinating events, and distributing materials with the intent to recruit and incite violence (Bertnam, 2016; Shtuni, 2019).

Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the Western Balkans, along with Viber. Similar to WhatsApp, Viber is an app with calling and messaging features available on both mobile and desktop devices. Group chats on Telegram, an encrypted messaging app are also gaining popularity among Muslim communities in the region (CVE Practitioner E, 2020). Since Facebook has been proactively removing accounts disseminating jihadi content, consumers of such content also partially migrated to other, often encrypted, social media platforms to minimize the chances of having their content removed by web administrators. Telegram thus has become a safe haven for ISIS followers due to its less aggressive content removal policy, end-to-end encrypted messaging protocol, and privacy protection where private group chats are only accessible through a specific URL link (Shtuni, 2019; Clifford & Powell, 2019). More public-facing platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are still utilized by jihadis to reach a wider audience as a part of their recruitment effort to attract new members into the private network on encrypted platforms (Clifford & Powell, 2019).

ISIS's media team use Telegram as a coordination center where they disseminate official videos, photosets, magazines and news announcements of ISIS within the channel, and encourage their channel subscribers to spread this content online on different platforms (Clifford & Powell, 2019). Some content is uploaded onto file-sharing sites whereas others are shared on public-facing social media platforms with a link attached. ISIS's media team also organize online raids through

Telegram channels by asking their supporters to create new public-facing social media accounts or upload specific propaganda videos on the Internet in an effort to counter account suspensions or content removal and maintain their online presence (Clifford & Powell, 2019).

A study conducted in March 2019 identified 27 active Telegram channels disseminating jihadist ideologies in the Albanian language with 6,352 subscribers following their content (Shtuni, 2019). Out of the 27 channels, 13 were operated by ISIS militants, 6 were operated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and another 8 channels were operated by generic jihadi supporters (Shtuni, 2019). The content posted within these channels include the promotion of jihad, distributing news announcements from official media channels of jihadi groups operating in different conflict zones, propaganda videos and infographics, Salafi literature, sermons of local and foreign Salafi imams who were imprisoned for their involvement in terrorist activities, and religious chants containing jihadist ideology known as nasheeds (Shtuni, 2019). While Telegram has made efforts to suspend these channels, channel operators are able to quickly reactivate them using names that bear a resemblance to the previously suspended channels (Shtuni, 2019).

One of ISIS's recruitment strategies in the Balkans includes having Balkan nationals who joined the group speak in their propaganda videos, which are exclusively designed to attract individuals from the region (Interview with Area Expert and Consultant, 2020). ISIS recruiters take advantage of vulnerabilities such as the desire for personal significance and lack of economic prospects to lure individuals into joining them by depicting ISIS as a utopian state filled with guns, sex and paradise (Interview with local CVE Practitioner A, 2020; Knudsen, 2017; Speckhard et al. 2018). Similarly, Xhemati Alban, a jihadi militant group composed of ethnic Albanians also released a 33-minute high quality propaganda video targeted at Balkan audiences via their social media platforms. The propaganda video is narrated in Albanian with English subtitles and includes scenes of the militant units undergoing stages of training, planning and fighting (Shtuni, 2019).

The internet and social media channels also contain radical religious teachings including the proclamation of the "call to jihad". Use of religious content to justify violence is often an indirect motivation for participation in foreign conflicts in Syria and Iraq (Çela, 2018; Vlk, 2020). ISIS's narratives, spread through social media platforms in native languages, are therefore, for some, an effective catalyst to action (Çela, 2018). Moreover, radicalized religious leaders are utilizing their personal social media accounts to promote violent extremist content (Mietz, 2016). For instance, Bilal Bosnic, a Bosnian Wahhabi leader has uploaded countless videos on YouTube via different accounts preaching violent extremism in the Balkans (Mejdini et al., 2017). In one of his many videos, Bosnic sings to glorify violence and support the concept of suicide terrorism (Bardos, 2014). Even at times when radical imams are serving time behind bars, their social media profiles remain highly active with content related to the imams updated regularly, which suggests that someone is maintaining their accounts (Marusic et al., 2017). Rexhep Memishi, an imam convicted of terrorism-related offenses was sentenced to serve seven years in prison, but his

Facebook profile continues to show new updates with his sermons and other content (Mejdini et al., 2017).

Public and English-language content are more likely to detected quickly and removed from the online space. Individuals in the Balkans, however, are disseminating radical content via private Facebook profiles in local languages, meaning it is sometimes left undetected for a longer period of time, increasing the risk and likelihood of individual exposure (Interview with local CVE Practitioner E, 2020). Individual profiles of violent extremists were reported sharing content that expressively supported imams convicted of terrorist offenses including recruitment in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017). These individual Facebook profiles interact with one another and share the belief that imprisoned imams are the "real imams" while disagreeing with imams officially associated with the Islamic Communities in Kosovo and North Macedonia as well as authorized imams from the Albanian Muslim Community (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017).

Other than ISIS and Al Qaeda propaganda (Dizdarevic, 2019; Marusic et al., 2017), the extreme content available online mainly comes from the Balkan diaspora communities in other parts of Europe, including the Albanian, Serbian, and Croatian communities (Spahiu, 2015). The diaspora mainly shares violent extremist content via social media platforms among their own language communities. The online space in general allows the diaspora community to have continuous engagement with locals by sharing and commenting on each other's online content (Interview with local CVE Practitioner E, 2020).

b. Far-Right Violent Extremism

i. Offline Mechanisms

Similar to Islamist extremism, person-to-person contact is a primary mechanism of far-right radicalization and recruitment in the Western Balkans. The problem of violent far right ideology in the region is tightly associated with an unresolved culture of extremism based on anti-West, anti-liberal, and anti-Islamist values that have reemerged in conjunction with post-war dynamics (Perry, 2019). Both newly reorganized and already existing political institutions in Serbia and Bosnia have failed to provide for the socioeconomic wellbeing of all of their citizens in the post-conflict environment of their respective countries (Kelly, 2019). As a result, the main focus in the region continues to revolve around nationalist and ethnic-driven agendas, either connected with questions of Kosovo's independence and the roles of Belgrade, Brussels, Moscow, and Washington, or the role of Islam in their respective countries. The most direct form of far right ideological radicalization and subsequent recruitment into groups and organizations that promote fear-based, violent ethnic propaganda continues through traditional media-based propaganda (CVE Practitioner C, 2020). Traditional media sources in the Western Balkans are represented by

public television broadcast, radio, and satellite TV known to be highly dependent on funding from foreign foundations and or oligarchs, who frequently sponsor the types of agendas in line with their own interests (Marusic, 2018).

Russian influence within the Western Balkans exploits local fault lines and societal disconnects via traditional media channels as part of its strategy to distance the region from the West (Metodieva, 2019). Because of Russia's growing economic involvement in the region, they have been able to build media partnerships with local actors, both mainstream and radical; these proxies are both state and non-state sponsored, and they all willingly align their nationalist propaganda messages with Russian interests (Metodieva, 2019). Through mediums like *Sputnik News,* Russia preys on local regional issues and spreads adversarial disinformation about regional ethnicities in both Kosovo and Serbia (Cvjetićanin, et al. 2019; Karović, 2019). In Bosnia, thanks to the strengthening of the economic ties between Republika Srpska and Russia, the mainstream media acts as the main local narrative proxy for Russia, as it is politically controlled (Metodieva, 2019).

Additionally, Russian media outlets are frequently able to thrive and publish in the local language with minimal scrutiny (European Parliament, 2016). In 2019, local fact-checking organization *Raskrinkavanje* discovered that the Serbian language outlet of *Sputnik* has infiltrated a disinformation hub in Bosnia prior to local elections (Presic, 2020). North Macedonia also suffers broad challenges that allow it to become a target of influence campaigns. It possesses the lowest score among Balkan countries when it comes to media press freedom (Jankuloska, 2018). Furthermore, its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and general socioeconomic development have become a target of Russian propaganda (Stojanovic, 2018). While the main scope of this report focuses on Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, it is important to note that since 2014, Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns have been on the rise in other Balkan countries, mainly Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania (Marusic, 2018).

Although the difference between mainstream and far-right extremist parties in the Western Balkans can sometimes be difficult to determine, our research is focused on those political establishments and individuals that promote extreme nationalism and ethnic hatred through violence. The majority of the far-right individuals in Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo share a Serbian ethnic background and have been actively connected through the Yugoslav Wars (Kelly, 2019). In North Macedonia, the far right includes two types of political parties: Albanian and Macedonian (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012). In Bosnia, Russia inflames ethnic divisions by emboldening nationalist sentiment within Republika Srpska (Russell, 2017; Mujanovic, 2017). There have been multiple reports of pro-Russian far-right politicians from Serbia visiting Crimea, after Russia annexed it from Ukraine in 2014. Similarly, a delegation from the nationalist Serbian Radical Party and the Serbian People's Party visited Crimea in 2017, marking the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution (Zivanovic, 2017). Various Russian Yugoslav War veteran NGOs with active links to

pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine are reportedly connected to the Bosnian Serb ruling party of Republika Srpska. Together, they facilitate and visit annual commemoration services connected to the ethnic cleansing of Muslim Bosniaks and Croats. One example of such combined activities took place in 2019 at the cemetery of the town Visegrad, located on the border between Bosnia and Serbia (Mujkic, 2019). The relations run through two NGOs – Zavet, or 'Oath' and the Union of Donbass Volunteers, which reportedly has 10,000 members and actively works to promote the image of volunteer fighters in eastern Ukraine (Mujkic, 2019).

Specific political elites in the Western Balkans also serve as a mechanism for radicalization to far-right violent extremism (Rrustemi, 2020). Milroad Dodik is one popular example (Rrustemi, 2020). Dodik is more or less Russia's and Putin's hype man in Bosnia; he is well known as one of the biggest proponents of Russia (Rrustemi, 2020). Throughout state visits from Russian officials, he highlights the Russo-Serbian relationship (Rrustemi, 2020). Currently, Dodik is stalling the Bosnian NATO membership process with probable financial support from Russia in return (Rrustemi, 2020). Dodik also regularly uses hate speech against Bosnian Muslims (Rrustemi, 2020). This creates challenges from his extremist supporters that are dangerous and violent (Rrustemi, 2020). Russia uses political elites in Serbia as well to help foster even more anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiment (Rrustemi, 2020).

While Russia and Serbia are historically connected through Slavic ethnic ties and a common allegiance to the Orthodox Christian faith, there are also reports that the Balkan nationals recruited to fight in the east of Ukraine are well paid (Zivanovic, 2017). In fact, far-right extremists from the Western Balkans who are willing to test their battle readiness on the front lines are recruited into Russian mercenary and fake humanitarian organizations located in Moscow and Rostov-on-the-Don (Zivanovic, 2017). The recruitment process itself begins with local far-right groups that organize the travel portion for those willing to fight in Eastern Ukraine. According to Bratislav Živković, Commander of the Chetnik Movement, his unit of 15 volunteers from Serbia arrived to Eastern Ukraine via Russia with only tourist visas (Kelly, 2019). Out of the total number of estimated foreign fighters, at least two hundred fighters from Serbia were allegedly recruited and paid by the Wagner Group, a private Russian paramilitary organization with mercenaries participating in various conflicts around the world (Zivanovic, 2017).

In addition, far-right groups are frequently linked to soccer fan clubs in Serbia. Nacionalni Stroj and Srbska Akcija have been identified as neo-Nazi organizations, with a hierarchical military structure, that facilitate gatherings of skinheads who are often members of local Serbian soccer clubs, such as FC Rad, FC Crvena Zvezda 'Red Star', and FC Partizan (Bakic, 2013). The recruiting base for these sports organizations, which serve as a front for far-right violent activities, are youth from working class neighborhoods, usually unemployed and generally not well-educated (Bakic, 2013). The activities of radical far right soccer fans frequently take place in stadiums and streets, where they insult Roma people, rival fans, and minority soccer players and incite violent

conflicts with fans of opposing teams and the police (Bakic, 2013). Hate speech directed at ethnic, religious, and sexual minority groups is embedded into stadium culture across the country (Djordjevic & Pekic, 2018). Other far-right ideological offline radicalization mechanisms include academic and para-academic connections linked to the *Eurasianist* philosopher Alexander Dugin (Kelly, 2019).

ii. Online Mechanisms

When it comes to online mechanisms for radicalization and recruitment for far-right violent extremism, Russia is doing very little of the work directly. Instead, Russia employs local proxies who facilitate online radicalization and recruitment (Metodieva, 2019). These local proxies exploit existing narratives and frame them in a way that serves Russia's interests on social media (Metodieva, 2019). For instance, Russian media proxies in the Western Balkans are highlighting and advocating Russia's cultural, political and economic support of the region, while framing the West as uncaring and neglectful (Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018; Stronski & Himes, 2019). The narrative varies according to local context in each country. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia inflames ethnic divisions by emboldening nationalist sentiment within Republika Srpska (Russell, 2017; Mujanovic, 2017). Through mediums like *Sputnik News*, Russia preys on local issues like Bosnia's three-way ethnic divide, or spreads adversarial disinformation about regional ethnicities in both Kosovo and Serbia. (Cvjetićanin et al., 2019; Karović, 2019). In North Macedonia, most of the local disinformation actors are bots and automation tools (Metodieva, 2019). Russia's ability to locally outsource their influence campaigns is made possible by the region's weak information environment (Metodieva, 2019).

Taking the case of the referendum in North Macedonia to change the country's name in 2018, there is substantial evidence of Russia's local social media proxies (Santora & Barnes, 2018; Metodieva, 2019). Before the vote for the referendum took place, Russian-backed social media groups proliferated false and misleading articles on Facebook to heighten social divisions and amplify public anger (Santora & Barnes, 2018). In the Spring of 2018, soccer fans opposed to Macedonia's name change, violently clashed with police officers, thanks to online content Russian social media proxies helped to spread (Santora & Barnes, 2018). Russian-backed groups then took this story and spun it into one of police brutality (Santora & Barnes, 2018). Russia's primary goal in spreading such content was to depress voter turnout for the referendum (Santora & Barnes, 2018). Leading up to the day of the referendum, up to 40 new groups or pages, that fit Russia's history and style of electoral disruption, were being created each day to convince people to boycott the vote (Santora & Barnes, 2018). On Twitter, the hashtag "#Boycott" was trending and quickly acquired more than 24,000 mention and 20,000 retweets (Metodieva, 2019). These efforts not only helped to increase the already volatile ethnic tensions in the country against the Albanian minority, but also contributed to the spread and resonance of far-right and nationalist ideology in the country (Metodieva, 2019). The aggressive anti-West and anti-Albanian speech and narratives used

through the boycott campaign provided far right-groups with a way to engage in political actions and, in turn, recruit more people for violent measures (Metodieva, 2019).

Moreover, there are far-right groups in the Western Balkans that work independently of Russia. There are numerous websites in the region promoting ideas of ethnically pure nation states, neo-Nazism and violent homophobia (Milekic et al., 2017). Such sites are now becoming more mainstream in the region (Milekic et al., 2017). In Serbia, more than 30 websites in Serbian advocate extremist far-right values and viewpoints (Milekic et al., 2017). Such viewpoints typically denounce Kosovo as an independent state, denounce the EU, and promote a Christian Orthodox Russia (Milekic et al., 2017). A majority of these websites strongly support Russia's agenda, and more specifically their war in Ukraine and their 2014 invasion of Crimea (Milekic et al., 2017). For instance, one website, *Srpska.tv*, uploaded a video about a commander killed by Russian fighters in eastern Ukraine (Milekic et al., 2017). The fighters in the video were idolized as patriots (Milekic et al., 2017). In relation to such content, Serbian citizens have gone to Ukraine to fight on the Russian side of the conflict (Milekic et al., 2017).

Jim Dowson, a British-born anti-immigration campaigner and his organization, the Knights Templar International (KTI), are known to be behind a widespread network of websites and social media pages that specialize in the spread of far right memes, 'patriotic' videos, and other racist materials across Europe (Cosic, Marzouk & Angelovski, 2018). As of 2018, KTI's content was spread across 14 Facebook pages, generating millions of 'likes' from viewers (Cosic, Marzouk & Angelovski, 2018). Dowson has been banned from Hungary, where his network was centered previously, making Belgrade, Serbia, his new far-right hub. In addition to Facebook and YouTube-based entertainment, KTI provides media training in preparation for an "all-out war between Christians and Muslims" (Cosic, Marzouk & Angelovski, 2018). Serbia continues to be hospitable towards KTI with dozens of news reports and 'educational' videos filmed across Serbia and its borders, based on the so-called "Great Replacement" and other similar theories about white Europeans being replaced by Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and Africa (Mujanovic, 2019). Dowson has successfully partnered with Misa Vacic, a prominent far right leader of a Serbian group by the name of "1389", a symbolic number representing the year when Kosovo was won by Serbia from the Ottoman Empire. In 2013, Vacic received a suspended jail sentence for attacking a local LGBT community; this did not prevent him from serving as an advisor to Marko Djuric, the head of the Serbia's Office for Kosovo, in 2017 (Cosic, Marzouk & Angelovski, 2018). In the same year, Vacic established a new far-right organization, Serbian Right; a senior member of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party was also involved. Once Vacic invited KTI into Serbia, their content and news production embraced Serbian language; the average viewership of the KTI produced YouTube-hosted videos ranges from low hundreds to thousands of views (Cosic, Marzouk & Angelovski, 2018).

Aleksandar Djurdjev, the head of another far right group, Serbian League, and a private company, Feedback Consulting and New Media Production, claims that the traditional media provides too much focus on issues like the EU, and that Serbia gives no space to other views (Milekic et al., 2017). Djurdjev registered both Srpska.tv and poredak.rs., known far-right portals. In addition, many Serbian-speaking immigrants are active at promoting far-right content among the Balkan diaspora on various social media outlets, including but not limited to Facebook, Viber, and Telegram. Some of these individuals are even wanted by Serbian authorities. For example, Goran Davidovic, a leader of the far-right organization, National Machine, has been tried in absentia in Serbia, for initiating national, racial, and religious hate; although Davidovic lives in Italy, he is very active and popular in Serbia via multiple websites and social media profiles (Milekic et al., 2017).

The effects of all of these influence campaigns are exacerbated by the fact that the Balkans, at large, are particularly vulnerable to disinformation. Aside from Croatia and Slovenia, the entirety of the Balkan peninsula has consistently reported the lowest media literacy scores on the continent for over the past three years (Lessenski, 2019). Another issue contributing to low media literacy scores is the low regard for journalism as a profession. On the one hand, there is little interest from the youth in careers in journalism, and on the other, a narrow execution of the journalist profession as a whole. As a result, trust in media across the Balkans is low, with print media particularly singled out in Serbia and North Macedonia — as opposed to the social media distrust that dominates much of the remainder of Europe (European Broadcasting Union, 2018).

6. REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISTS

Rehabilitation and reintegration programs for terrorists can be separated into two broad categories: those within prisons where terrorist offenders are serving sentences, and those in a non-custodial setting which target former offenders and individuals who have been associated with violent extremism, but have not been convicted (OSCE, 2020). Reintegration and rehabilitation programs, because they serve those already involved in violent extremism, require "more specialized training and engagement on psychological, ideological, and theological issues than prevention-focused programs" (OSCE, 2020). Throughout the region, there have been few rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for returning foreign fighters and associated women and children, often due to the lack of funding, political will, and/or the capacity to handle such an issue. Some of the Balkan states, such as Kosovo and Albania, have adopted softer CVE strategies while Bosnia, Serbia, and Macedonia have adopted more hard-line CT strategies, but these plans appear to be only on paper with little implementation thus far. Within the Balkan states there is a lack of a multi-actor collaboration within the rehabilitation and reintegration realm, which is key to developing a successful approach (OSCE, 2020).

In Bosnia, Dzidic and Jahic (2016) argue that the state needs to address issues of poverty, corruption, organized crime, and poor levels of education before rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives are established. There is also the concern that simply criminalizing returning foreign fighters may be counterproductive as radicalization has been known to take place within prisons (Dzidic & Jahic, 2016). Meanwhile, the state has established a Strategy for Preventing and Combating Terrorism, which addresses extremism that can lead to terrorism (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). In addition, Action Plans have set in place measures aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating returned foreign fighters, which include "the promotion of tolerance and dialogue as well as by strengthening and supporting the capacities of local communities" (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Unfortunately, these specific mechanisms have yet to be operationalized throughout Bosnia.

In North Macedonia, a National Strategy for Countering Terrorism was adopted in 2017, but it has been criticized by the US and the EU as the strategy failed to adequately address radicalization and violent extremism (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). A revised version of this strategy is in the works and will focus on "radicalization, violent extremism, and reintegration, and will emphasize the need for bilateral agreement with neighboring countries and joint operations" (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). The renewed strategy will also include measures on returnee foreign fighters, educating and training civil servants in the education and security sectors, and will invite civil society organizations and religious institutions to partner with state agencies in order to effectively address rehabilitation and reintegration issues (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). An accomplishment in North Macedonia was the criminalization of "participation in foreign armies in order to prevent and punish the citizens" who joined ISIS (Arifi, 2019). Yet, as of 2017, there have been no de-radicalization, rehabilitation, or reintegration programs within prisons, where the population is vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment (Azinović and Bećirević, 2017). The government has failed to develop counter-messages, leaving religious authorities to tackle the issue through regular preaching against extremism (Azinović and Bećirević, 2017). For deradicalization and reintegration to be effective, the state "will have to shift away from a relative lack of public acknowledgement of the problem of extremism, so that root causes can be openly addressed, and community awareness raised" (Azinović and Bećirević, 2017).

Kosovo, in 2015, adopted a National Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization leading to Terrorism, as well as an Action Plan for implementation (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). This strategy focuses on four themes: early detection, prevention, intervention, and de-radicalization and reintegration (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). The weakness of the strategy is that it did not include local levels of government or local level input (Perry, 2016). The Kosovan government also prepared for its citizens to return home by providing medical help, psychiatric treatment and counseling, housing, social services, special education, and reintegration support. Mental health services are offered under the government's rehabilitation and reintegration

program for women and children who have returned home from Syria (Plesch & Haxhiaj, 2019). The Islamic Community of Kosovo have also prepared to assist returning foreign fighters with imams and female preachers who have been tasked with traveling across the country to work with families within the home (Plesch & Haxhiaj, 2019). Various efforts are utilized throughout the state, but it remains unclear as to what mechanisms are most successful and whether the services are effective in countering violent extremism.

Serbia was the last country in the region to adopt its National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism and an Action Plan to implement it in 2017 (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). The focus is mainly de-radicalization and reintegration programs, with an emphasis on prison programs (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). The Strategy also includes various mechanisms to increase employment rates, as well as promote dialogue between differing cultures and religions (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). The Serbian government has passed laws criminalizing joining a foreign militia, but rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives outlined in the state's strategy have yet to be implemented (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). While establishing a strategy is an important step as it demonstrates an increased awareness and acknowledgement by officials, the state has received criticism for failing to address far-right violent extremism (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017).

Throughout the Balkans, prison sentences for returning foreign fighters have been relatively short and are some of the shortest terrorism-related sentences within Europe (OSCE, 2020). There is a common "lack of resources and the specialized knowledge necessary for correctional officials, psychologists, social workers, and other stakeholders to successfully engage in de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs" (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017) within Balkan states. Overcrowding is also an issue and there is an overall lack of disengagement, rehabilitation, and social reintegration programs offered to radicalized offenders, which is concerning due to the possible radicalization that occurs in prisons (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Rehabilitation and reintegration programs within prisons need to prioritize training prison staff so they are able to identify and assess the risks of extremist offenders, providing offenders with one-on-one counseling on religious or ideological issues, allowing offenders to engage with family and community leaders, and establishing links with community organizations to ensure the offender continues the program after their release (OSCE, 2020).

While the region strives to shift from a security and law enforcement response towards a prevention-centered approach to fight violent extremism, there are still many obstacles that stand in the way (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). The radicalization and rehabilitation of returning foreign fighters are often politicized and securitized and there is also a lack of regional awareness, understanding, and capabilities (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Projects and activities lack strategic coordination (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). Moreover, there is little coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of ongoing projects in the region (Azinović and Bećirević, 2017), making it difficult to assess which projects are successful and worth funding. The rise and involvement of various

international organizations also contributes to present issues as these entities typically fail to understand the region's context and dynamics, and may undermine efforts on the ground (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017). The Balkans have taken the first few steps to establish a clear approach to rehabilitation and reintegration programs, but still have much room for improvement.

7. INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

a. Media Literacy, Fact-Checking Platforms, and the Promotion of Impartial Journalism

The Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable to disinformation and adversarial propaganda as these countries, with the exception of Croatia and Slovenia, possess the lowest media literacy rates across the continent over the past three years (see Figure 1) (Lessenski, 2019). Interventions could therefore aim to bridge media literacy gaps – specifically, media freedom, trust, and education. Fact-checking online platforms and media literacy campaigns are the current primary responses in the fight against disinformation and propaganda within the Western Balkans (see Table 2) (Petković, 2019). Once vetted, such platforms and campaigns could be emboldened or partnered with. However, significant work and resources are needed to improve knowledge and awareness to counter propaganda and disinformation. The exposure of Russian, Saudi, and Qatari influence and their motives may serve as a motivating factor behind increasing citizens' desire to improve media literacy in the region. In the absence of stakeholder, policy-maker, and tech-platform interest in remediating the issue, empowering information literacy initiatives at a grassroots level may improve resilience against violent extremism (Brkan, 2019).
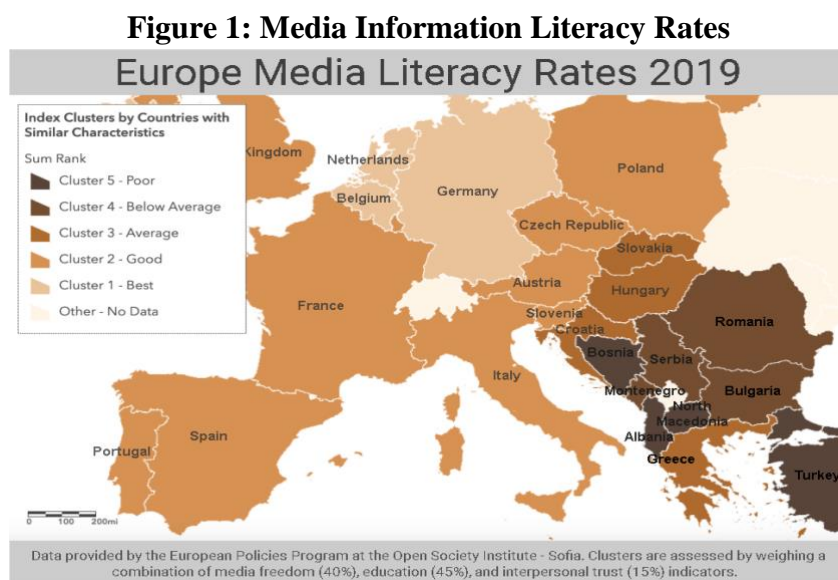
Figure 1: Media Information Literacy Rates

Table 2: Select Media Information Literacy Initiatives and Fact-Checking Platforms

	Initiatives	Platforms
Serbia	• Creative Drive Project organized by Novi Sad School of Journalism — aims to develop and professionalize the media sphere in Serbia and the region by advocating, educating, monitoring, and analyzing media content.	• Medijametar.rs — by Public Policy Institute Belgrade aimed at establishing professional and ethical standards in Serbia and the region. • Istinomer.rs — Local fact-checker • Raskrikavanje.rs — Local fact-checker • Vistinomer.mk — Local fact-checker
Bosnia & Herzegovina	• Strengthening Media Literacy in Republika Srpska (RS) — initiative by the RS Ministry of Transport and Communications and its staff members to raise awareness of the importance of media literacy and its advancement.	• Istinomjer.ba — Local fact-checker • Raskrinkavanje.ba — promotes the responsibility of political parties and holders of public functions. • ZastoNe.ba — serves as a broad platform that promotes political accountability, while strengthening civic activism and responsible use of new media and technologies.
North Macedonia	• Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services — which has since 2013 promoted programs aimed at improving media literacy. • Makedox — initiative that promotes skills in documentary filmmaking and overall analysis through handbooks for school teachers.	• Factchecking.mk by NGO Metamorphosis Foundation — Local fact-checker devoted to improving journalistic standards within the country.
International	• UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) — attempts to develop resilience within local youth in vulnerable communities. • USAID's Independent Media Empowerment Project — promotes citizen-journalism through grants and workshops.	• South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM) — network devoted to building and improving the capacity of local civil society organizations.

Other potential online initiatives to improve media literacy could involve the microtargeting of vulnerable groups and communities and the promotion of content filtering and selection, also called strategic silence (Donovan & Boyd, 2018). A fragmented media landscape with weak institutions, allows for the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers that allow for harmful messages and narratives to thrive. Collaborating with local and international media outlets and platforms could strategically minimize coverage of harmful material (Wardle, 2017).

The promotion of high-quality and impartial journalism could also have an important and positive effect. Much of the disinformation in the Western Balkans is exacerbated by non-existing

standards in journalism and is driven by political agendas, advertisement revenue, and external financing. A number of protests have taken place throughout the Western Balkans as a result of public mistrust of the media, disrespect and intimidation of journalists, and an overwhelming lack of press freedom. An alarming number of attacks on journalists have yet to be investigated or solved. For example, journalists in Serbia gathered together in front of the Department of High-tech Crime at the High Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade. This was in protest of a video that was distributed via Twitter that targeted an editor of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), Slobodan Georgiev, calling him a "traitor" (Balkan Insight, 2019). The video was a montage of Georgiev's "statements [being] taken out of context to suggest that he publishes lies" with the comments on social media containing a continuous stream of insults and threats (Rudic, 2019). Alongside Georgiev, the video displayed tabloid articles discrediting BIRN and the Center for Investigative Journalism in Serbia. The video was not only condemned by the Serbian journalists' associations, but also by the media freedom representative from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) stating that "portraying journalists as traitors in Serbia can seriously endanger their safety" (Balkan Insight, 2019).

Similarly, in 2018, journalists gathered in three towns in Bosnia: Sarajevo, Mostar, and Zenica, to protest an end to violence against reporters. The protests were a result of an attack that took place two days prior when a journalist at BN TV was attacked outside of his home. The police investigated the attack as a potential attempted murder (Lakic, 2018). Some of the protestors gathered in front of the National Theatre, holding signs that stated "journalism is not a crime" (Lakic, 2018). Similarly, on September 30, 2019, journalists gathered at the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, to protest violence against media workers while urging the authorities to better protect the rights of journalists to practice their duties in a safe environment. A local radio station, Radiosarajevo.ba, published a fact-checked article regarding a fan of a local soccer club who was sent to jail for possessing drugs. Two days prior to the protests, a group of individuals who were associated with the football club, stormed into the radio station's office and threatened the journalists to retract the article (Lakic, 2019a). The Bosnian Association of Journalists noted six cases of journalists who reported receiving physical threats as well as death threats in 2019 and around 40 threats total in 2018 which included 14 physical assaults and five death threats (Lakic, 2019a).

In 2015, the main right-wing political party in North Macedonia published recordings of illegally taped conversations with political figures, journalists, and non-government organizations as the targets (Vračić, 2019). The political party claimed that the conversations were recorded by the Secret Police, who immediately denied any government involvement (Vračić, 2019). This incident further demonstrates the imbalance of power and abuse that is inflicted on the media. Nevertheless, mass protests broke out which eventually led to the necessary downfall of the ruling party after 10 years. If more citizens throughout the Western Balkans felt encouraged to stand up for their democratic right of freedom of press, then positive change is possible. The response of

the West in supporting these movements towards greater press freedom is weak and could be improved. Safe conditions for impartial journalism should be encouraged and democratic efforts at reform, such as protests, should be supported.

b. Counter Narratives and Inoculation Messages

While not an empirically proven method (Reed et al., 2017), the continued leveraging of social media and other offline strategic cultural sectors to spread counter-narrative messages could be helpful when carefully designed to match the target audience (Silverman et al., 2016; Digby, 2018; Hakim et al., 2019). On a local scale, the onboarding of moderate imams to assist with online and offline counter-narrative initiatives would be worthwhile (Ruge, 2017). Similarly, one might engage with soccer fan clubs to help develop counter-narratives to combat far-right violent extremism. More research, however, is needed into how different actors are perceived by different audiences in order to pinpoint the openings that allow for the deconstruction of narratives and the types of counter-narratives and messengers that would be most beneficial (similar to how narratives communicated via WhatsApp helped push Islamist foreign fighters from the Balkans to feel disillusionment with what was happening on the ground in Syria and Iraq (Metodieva, 2018), and how weak local media environments were exploited by internal and external disinformation actors to produce dissatisfaction with the West and the embracing of pro-Russian narratives (Metodieva, 2019)). Tapping into local issues and local messengers is critical in the development of effective counter-narratives (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Braddock & Morrison, 2020; Ragnet et al., 2019).

The use of attitudinal inoculation has also yet to be officially tested as a means to prevent the adoption of violent extremist ideologies. Several studies, however, find that individual exposure to inoculation messages reduces the persuasiveness of extremist propaganda (Braddock, 2019; van Eerten et al. 2017; Vacca, 2019). In other words, individuals exposed to inoculation messages seemed to be *immune* against materials promoting terrorism or violent extremism as compared to those who are not exposed to it (Braddock, 2019; van Eerten et al. 2017; Vacca, 2019). The inoculation theory was developed by an American psychologist, William McGuire, in 1964. The theory proposes that individuals can be made more resistant to persuasion in the event that they "(a) perceive threat from an impending attempt to change their beliefs or attitudes and (b) receive information to refute such an attempt" (Braddock, 2019). McGuire argued that individuals exposed to persuasive messages with weakened arguments included against an established attitude could help individuals to build resistance against more impactful persuasive attacks in the future (Compton et al., 2016). The theory was devised to help people build resistance against persuasion and to establish the ability to maintain their long-held beliefs (Vacca, 2019). There are two key requirements to develop effective inoculation and indeed counter-narrative strategic communications: 1) the ability to propose strategy backed with data-based empirical evidence and 2) the ability to implement the proposed strategy without disproportionally targeting

and criminalizing specific groups of the population (Braddock, 2019). In addition, inoculation messages must be simple and straightforward with careful consideration of cultural differences and the targeted audience must be able to access these messages easily (Vacca, 2019).

Inoculation and counter-narrative messages could be disseminated on social media platforms, government sites, and by partnering with different strategic cultural sectors both offline and online especially universities and educational institutions, local authorities, religious communities and imams. Below we review each of these strategic cultural sectors and the ways in which they could be leveraged. We also review the advantages and disadvantages to using "former" violent extremists (i.e. "formers") in the development and delivery of counter-narrative and inoculation messages.

i. Educational Initiatives

Research shows that the application of inoculation theory may be most effective on children and young adults (Compton et al., 2016). Given that education plays an important role in shaping the ideologies of an individual, we contend that it is important to have these narratives delivered in one's early learning years. Inoculation messages for young children are found to be most effective if presented in a video format (Braddock, 2020). In addition, schools should educate children on different cultures and religions and actively promote ethnic and religious tolerance.

Preventing violent extremism efforts should also focus on targeting adolescents and young adults as people in this age group are more vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment as a result of peer influence (van Eerten et al., 2017). Indeed, most individuals involved in violent extremism are young males and our review of mechanisms and drivers highlights universities as a potential locale for radicalization and recruitment (Brown & Saeed, 2015; Centre for Social Cohesion, 2010; Neumann & Rogers, 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2019). We therefore suggest that partnerships with universities or university student groups might be an especially effective way to deliver credible inoculation and counter-narrative messages that will reach a particularly vulnerable population. Realizing the age at which individuals enter university, we would further suggest the delivery of such messages to younger individuals with local partners through earlier schooling, government programming, sports groups, online or offline media, or other civil society based organizations.

Research shows that inoculation messages targeted at teenagers or adults are most effective when presented through text or video-based format (Braddock, 2020). The messages should be specifically tailored to reach the target audience. Inoculation messages intended to prevent or counter violent extremism that are targeted at university students are more likely to be effective if designed to include emotional or logical content. This is because adolescents and young adults possess the cognitive capacity to process deductive logic, statistics, and empirical data as compared to young children, who are more likely to be responsive towards messages embedded in emotional testimony (Braddock, 2020).

Besides encouraging partnerships with universities to launch awareness campaigns, similar to "Dare to Be Grey" that was co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and Facebook (Utrecht University, 2016), university students and university student organizations should be encouraged to develop their own inoculation and counter messages from a peer-to-peer perspective, which could be delivered online across different social media platforms (van Eerten et al., 2017) or offline. Young people are more likely to develop relevant counter-narrative content that resonates with their peers as they share a similar living experience; this enables them to better design positive messages to prevent and counter violent extremism (van Eerten et al., 2017). We suggest local schools and universities partner with student organizations to adopt similar programs that help students build resilience against violent extremism, while also empowering them to actively participate in pro-social activities in school.

Offline inoculation messages and counternarratives can be strategically introduced into classrooms. For example, Extreme Dialogue, a program launched in Canada designed to prevent young people from being drawn toward violent extremist ideologies, shows a series of short documentaries sharing different stories: the impact of violent extremism on Canadians, a former member of the extreme far right, and a mother who lost her son who fought for ISIS in Syria (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015). These videos come with a set of educational resources that can be used to engage and facilitate discussions with young people to enhance their critical thinking skills and ultimately build their resilience towards violent extremism (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015). Similar programs can be implemented in early childhood education to reduce the appeal of violent extremism via formal education.

ii. Local Authorities

Since there is a certain level of mistrust among the public towards the governing institutions in the Western Balkans, including law enforcement agencies, we suggest police departments switch from a securitized approach to a humanitarian approach that encourages interactive partnerships and builds trust between law enforcement agencies and the community. For instance, a Counter-Terrorism Unit in Kosovo that deals with foreign terrorist fighters establishes a local connection with communities and works directly with families by helping returnees find employment and engage in community activities and ensuring children of returnees make it to school (Kosovo Police Consultant, 2020). Rather than securitizing the issues surrounding foreign fighters, Kosovo, in this example, has taken a community-based approach. When preventing and countering violent extremism, policing programs require an understanding "between the community and the police as to what constitutes violent extremism and what is an effective response" so both parties can collectively develop solutions to mitigate the threat effectively (Holmer & van Deventer, 2014). Further, developing partnerships with youth centers, schools, and universities offers local authorities the opportunity to engage with marginalized communities, as well as detect and prevent radicalization (Gerspacher et al., 2019). An officer's

communication skills which includes "strategic listening, verbal and nonverbal communication, and critical thinking can be used to diffuse potentially explosive situations and lower levels of violent extremism" (Gerspacher et al., 2019).

As communities' willingness to cooperate or listen to the police depends on the level of trust they have for the law enforcement authorities, police agencies should implement programs and initiatives under the framework of community policing to build trust between police officers and community members (US Department of Justice, n.d.; Jackson & Bradford, 2010). For instance, police involvement in school activities or police participation in community events provide officers an opportunity to improve police-community relations and deliver counter-narrative or inoculation messages in person. Therefore, we suggest law enforcement authorities in the Western Balkans adopt community-oriented approaches as a way to foster good relations with the community, re-establish themselves as an institution that citizens can rely on, and improve their capacity to prevent and respond to violent extremism.

Widely used by police forces around the world, social media is also an effective communication tool to inform, educate and engage with the public (Živković, 2018). Many cases historically have demonstrated that information sharing via social media platforms assisted police in gathering the information used to resolve cases (Živković, 2018). Moreover, such platforms are especially crucial in times of crisis when the public needs to obtain the most up-to-date information and reliable advice from credible sources. Police services can also improve their public image by engaging with the public informally through social media.

The Western Balkans' high internet penetration rate sends a signal that local law enforcement agencies have great potential to take advantage of social media sites to gather useful information and to deliver inoculation messages. An analysis of social media and police services in the region conducted by Živković (2018), a writer for PointPulse, a Western Balkan civil society organization committed to ensuring police integrity, revealed the police forces in Kosovo, Bosnia, Serbia, and North Macedonia have a social media presence. Each state has at least two accounts out of the four most popular open social media platforms which are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (Živković, 2018). The police in Kosovo is present on three out of the four social media platforms and is most active on Facebook, but there is no sign of community engagement and most of the content posted are links that direct users to service information (Živković, 2018). The content on Twitter is not original and YouTube activity is relatively low (Živković, 2018). In Bosnia, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) does not have active social media presence while the MoI of the Republic of Srpska have YouTube and Facebook accounts. The official Facebook page of the Republic of Srpska has over 18,000 likes and is primarily used to share service information through graphic materials. The community engagement level is still low, but much better as compared to Kosovo (Živković, 2018). The MoI of North Macedonia has Facebook, Instagram and YouTube accounts and is primarily active on YouTube with over 5,000 subscribers and holds

a personal record of 9.5 million views. The police in Serbia have an active social media presence on both Instagram and YouTube while Instagram is primarily used to promote recent activities of the police force and the Minister. On YouTube, the Serbian MoI has the highest number of views and most subscribers in the region at over 9 million YouTube views with close to 6,500 subscribers (Živković, 2018). The police services in the Western Balkans should better leverage their social media platforms to build a following and post inoculation and perhaps, counter-narrative, messages as a tool for building community resilience to and countering violent extremism.

iii. Religious Leaders

The use of religious leaders to prevent and counter both Islamist and far-right violent extremism presents a variety of opportunities as they possess a unique position of authority and play an important role in their communities. While religion may not necessarily be the primary driver behind an individual's radicalization and recruitment, it often plays some role. As outlined earlier, those who are exposed to Salafi Islam are arguably more likely to become radical and engage in violence. For the far right, Russia utilizes the solidarity of Orthodox Christians to ignite ethnic tensions within the Balkans, which has led to an increase in violence and foreign fighters traveling especially to Ukraine, but also Syria. Far-right extremists have been identified as exploiters "of Christianity and the Bible" in order to "radicalize and mobilize" individuals into crime and terrorism (Johnson, 2018). Similar to how some Muslims feel a sense of duty to other Muslims, certain Serbian foreign fighters felt a sense of duty to join Russian Orthodox Christians in the Ukrainian conflict (Rrustemi, 2020).

Religious leaders can play an important role in countering violent extremism because they typically better understand who to engage with and how (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017). We recommend local partners work closely together with official Islamic communities and Orthodox churches in each state in the Western Balkans, as well as individual religious leaders, to develop inoculation and counter-narrative messages. However, much like former violent extremists, which will be discussed in a subsequent section, the effectiveness and use of religious leaders is heavily debated as there are a multitude of pros and cons that must be weighed before involving such actors in countering violent extremism.

Initiatives to counter violent extremism often seek to engage and partner with credible voices, but the term 'credible' is often linked to religious leaders who are aligned with government policies, receive government funding, and refrain from criticizing political leaders, which may discredit the leader from the beginning. As such, it is important to include religious leaders that critique a violent extremist group's religious justification, as well as injustices associated with government policies (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017). Further, religious leaders should absolutely not be tasked with surveilling their communities as this may lead the community to believe the

individual is working for the government and result in the loss of the leader's authority and credibility (Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, 2016).

It can be difficult to select credible, moderate leaders that can offer counter-narratives to violent interpretations of religious scripture, particularly for Islamists (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017). Moreover, it is assumed that formal, publicly visible religious leaders with credentials or backed by institutions, who are mostly older men, are the most useful and credible, but many often do not have the greatest following or connection within communities (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017). Instead, the focus should be on local religious leaders, including women, who play a large role in shaping understandings and interpretations of religion within families, as well as younger leaders, who are deemed more credible and effective communicators, particularly with their peers in local communities (Hayward & Marshall, 2015; Mandaville & Nozell, 2017). Finally, local religious leaders should be regularly consulted by the government in the formulation of policies regarding violent extremism, in order to obtain insight on the needs and issues of particular communities and create a coordinated response between these leaders and the government (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017).

While moderate religious leaders may be useful in countering violent extremism, promoting a moderate version of a religion may be perceived by some with more radical views as offensive and disempowering; therefore, it is also important to promote the desire for social change in a positive and productive, non-violent way (Wilton Park, 2016; Mandaville & Nozell, 2017). Local religious leaders within Islam and Orthodox Christianity can challenge misconceptions and bias by offering religious education, identifying the parallels between both religions, and creating safe spaces for inter-faith dialogue (Bakali, 2019). Additionally, these leaders can expose foreign influence (i.e. Russian, Saudi, and Qatari) including their promotion of certain variants of religion. In addition to the use of religious leaders in person, there is an opportunity for these leaders to build an online presence in order to promote inoculation messages and counter-narratives. Both moderate Islamic and Orthodox Christian religious leaders lack a strong online presence because their platforms are either under-utilized or poorly maintained (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017). The lack of traditional online religious education puts internet users in the region interested in the faith at a higher risk of exposure to violent extremist content as those groups are actively posting propaganda materials online. Proper online platforms that provide religious education should be established to connect with the population via Facebook, Twitter, Telegram and YouTube (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017). Moreover, through firmly established online platforms, inoculation messages and counter-narratives can be strategically or organically deployed (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017). Some imams who are associated with official, state-approved Islamic communities realized the importance of online communication and established personal social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, to be shared with a wider audience. However, as noted above, the more *recognized* religious leaders are typically not as trusted within communities (Mejdini et al., 2017). There is little to no information on priests from Orthodox churches utilizing

online platforms to engage with followers, spread counter-narratives, and denounce hate, but there is an opportunity to do so, particularly in the Balkans where Orthodox solidarity is strong. Since government officials cannot be trusted to denounce the actions of the far right, Orthodox leaders should denounce the misinformation spread online through their own online platforms.

Finally, collaboration between state institutions and religious communities is strongly encouraged. For example, the creation of an online platform for individuals to come forward to address any issues or to report user profiles with violent extremist content or propaganda could prove effective (Kelmendi & Balaj, 2017).

iv. Sport and Cultural Activities

As previously established, far right violent extremism in the Western Balkans is frequently associated with soccer fan clubs in the region. Although the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) has repeatedly imposed various sanctions on local soccer clubs since the end of the Yugoslav Wars, further interventions in this particular area may be helpful. UEFA swiftly reacts to fans' racist conduct inside stadiums by closing off the sections designated for home fans, cancelling future games, and even disqualifying entire soccer teams from the Champions League and the Europa League, such was the case with Serbia's Partizan Belgrade FK (UEFA, 2007, 2014; Associated Press, 2019).

While certain soccer fan clubs are indeed structured according to military-style chain of command and do frequently engage in racist acts and hate speech, they do not represent the actions of most young individuals involved in local soccer clubs. If attending soccer games is prohibited due to UEFA sanctions, these young individuals are in need of alternative venues that can provide a safe space for non-violent, pro-social sports related activities. We propose the establishment and/or support for such venues in strategic urban centers and locations where the local soccer fan base is active. For example, building and sponsoring youth clubs and recreational centers can serve this objective. In addition, facilitation and support for cultural initiatives can also be achieved through soccer clubs themselves. In one example from North Macedonia, Russian oligarchs Sergei Samsonenko and Ivan Savidis, provided financial support to soccer and handball teams, such as FK Vardar in Skopje; Vardar later mobilized their young fans to participate in violent protests related to North Macedonia's name change (Rrustemi, 2020). With this dynamic in mind, it is clear that countering violent extremism initiatives across the Western Balkans could include more opportunities for athletes to engage with the youth in order to promote ethnic and religious tolerance and leverage a shared interest in sport, especially soccer.

In addition, international festivals and student exchange programs can further be used to amplify democratic values and Western initiatives in the Western Balkans. For example, the World Festival of Youth and Students (WFYS), a week-long international event organized by the World Federation of Democratic Youth and known to be sponsored by the Russian government, is a cultural initiative tailored specifically to promote an anti-Western agenda among young

individuals between 18 and 35 years old (Neal, 2017). The 19th WFYS took place in Sochi, Russia, and hosted over 20 thousand youth from 177 countries in 2017. The agenda of the festival included propaganda in opposition to 'American imperialism' and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Translated: Russkaya Gazeta, 2017). Similar to how Russia sponsors European youth to participate in such events, the EU, US, and their allies could sponsor and support youth events of similar size and caliber. For example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel launched the Western Balkans Initiative which includes regional youth engagement as part of its agenda (German Marshall Fund of the US, 2015). A Joint Declaration on the Establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans has been signed by the Serbian and Albanian leaders during a 2015 summit in Vienna, Austria. The governments of Bosnia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have joined the initiative, with Slovenia and Croatia acting as observers. This specific initiative brought together civil society and government representatives of the above Balkan countries, laying the groundwork for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office. Nevertheless, existing regional structures lack sustainable Western Balkan exchange programs and common projects that will empower young citizens.

v. Formers

The use of "formers" to assist in countering violent extremism and with the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremists has long been debated within academic circles. Former violent extremists are defined as "individuals who have disengaged from a path of violent extremism and radicalization…who can play a useful role in raising awareness and communicating credible counter-narratives" (OSCE, 2020). A common debate is whether the former needs to be deradicalized themselves, meaning they have abandoned a group's ideology or if the individual can be a former combatant who has given up terrorist or violent behavior, but whose ideology has not changed (Tapley & Clubb, 2019). The effectiveness of a former differs depending on what the individual is leaving behind and what they are retaining from their extremist past (Tapley & Clubb, 2019). Those who have been fully deradicalized can have a "limited but more immediately impactful role in CVE activities" (Tapley & Clubb, 2019). In addition to whether the former has been deradicalized or not, an individual's skills and qualifications apart from their identity as a former extremist is important to consider before employing that individual as an employee (OSCE, 2020). While formers may serve as a credible voice within this realm, there is often more work to be done than just counter-narratives, especially when a "client" or the target of an intervention is ideologically motivated (OSCE, 2020). Such qualifications often leave a limited number of formers who are capable and willing to provide assistance to deradicalization programs (RAN, 2017).

There are various opportunities formers present within the deradicalization process. Formers may fulfill various roles such as intelligence assets or promoting counter-narratives, conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and restorative justice. Those who have been deradicalized may possess a unique perspective as a mentor and serve as evidence of the benefits of

deradicalizing. Formers can also be role models and set an example for those going through the deradicalization process by showing it is possible to live a different life; they can also and connect with a potentially isolated individual on a personal level (RAN, 2017). As a former, being able to "speak the same language" to an extremist individual is an asset and can help build trust within the process (RAN, 2017). Because formers have been through the radicalization and deradicalization process themselves, they may be able to identify and assess indicators of risk and the specific needs of an individual (OSCE, 2020). Formers may be the most credible as messengers as they are well placed to "discredit extremist propaganda, prevent radicalization, contribute to disengagement and deradicalization, and…support those who chose to leave a violent extremist movement" (RAN, 2017).

Although formers have been shown to offer a unique perspective and experience that may be helpful in countering violent extremism and the deradicalization process, there are also challenges with using formers in such a personal, sensitive process. First and foremost, it is challenging to determine whether an individual is in fact, a former. It often takes time to assess and determine if an individual has truly moved on from their extremist identity (RAN, 2017). After determining a former is credible, there is also the challenge of getting radicalized individuals to accept a former, as the radicalized individual may regard the former as a traitor and working for the enemy (RAN, 2017). Exposing oneself as a former may also impact the individual's future and career (RAN, 2017). If in a messenger role, it must be determined if relaying such messages and past experiences is helpful by de-glamorizing extremist ideology or if it simply boosts the self-importance of the former (RAN, 2017). While working with violent extremists, relapse is a constant risk as formers are now back in an extremist environment (RAN, 2017). Those who have not distanced themselves from an extremist group or fully deradicalized may continue to support extremist ideologies, essentially undermining rehabilitation efforts. It has been noted that those who have been separated from an extremist environment for a long period of time, as well as, have re-socialized and reattached to society serve as important factors in lowering the chance of relapse (RAN, 2017). As such, it is crucial to have allowed an allotted time to pass before involving a former in deradicalization work. While the role of former has been explored within academic research, it is shown there are clear pros and cons to this strategy.

Within the context of the Western Balkans, the use of formers may be challenging due to the fragmentation and ethnic tensions within civil society. If the Balkans were to employ formers, especially with its returning foreign fighters, it must strongly consider the opportunities and the risks of doing so. If formers were to be used, one must ensure there are both Islamist and far-right formers employed and that such efforts do not target one specific group, which could further exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions. One of the ways in which we envision formers could be utilized that would mitigate most of the risks discussed above are their stories, which could be shared by credible messengers, such as journalists, to protect the returnees' identity and distance the individual from the deradicalization process. Returnees' stories of disillusionment from their

experience in Syria and/or Iraq, offers a unique perspective and has the potential to be an effective preventative measure to stem radicalization and recruitment in the Balkans.

c. Support for Pro-Democracy and Pro-West Movements

Democracy in the Western Balkans is deteriorating (Ivković, 2019). In 2019, the Freedom House Report named Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia, and Kosovo as "partially free" (Kadovic, 2019). The report cites widespread criticisms of political leaders in the area and their efforts to consolidate state power around themselves, while exceeding their assigned constitutional roles (Kadovic, 2019). Furthermore, many civil society and international organizations as well as independent experts have been exposing unfair election practices, rising corruption, lack of accountability, and the infringement of media freedoms (Ivković, 2019). The growing number of anti-democratic practices led to mass protests throughout the region in 2019, especially in Serbia (Democracy Digest, 2019). According to Open Society European Policy Institute, the protests were mainly motivated by deteriorating political and media freedoms (Ivković, 2019). In Serbia specifically, protesters were advocating for the resignation of President Vučić, as they feel he has overseen "an unprecedented erosion of democracy, media freedoms, and institutional independence" (MacDowall, 2019). In other words, these protesters are fighting for values that the US, EU and NATO officially support. In Serbia, these protests lasted for more than three months, and brought tens of thousands of people into the streets (MacDowall, 2019). The sheer number of protestors resulted in many media and political commentators questioning whether the movement would become a "Balkan Spring" (MacDowall, 2019). However, neither the EU nor the US vocally supported the movement at the time (Vračić, 2019; Kadovic, 2019).

Having the entire Western Balkans as part of the EU would help both Brussels and Washington in their efforts to limit Russia's pursuit of geopolitical power in Europe. North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia have all indicated their desire to become official EU members in the past. Therefore, European allies could have played an important role in the development of the situation (Kadovic, 2019). Moreover, during the 2020 Zagreb Summit, European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, stated that Western Balkan countries "belong in the EU" (Tidey, 2020). Officially, the EU "aims to promote peace, stability and economic development in the Western Balkans and open up the prospect of EU integration" (European Parliament, 2020). While the EU could have validated and supported the concerns of protestors, instead they remained relatively quiet (Kadovic, 2019). From one perspective, the EU does not want to jeopardize the Western Balkans' accession process by supporting political instability in the region (Kadovic, 2019; MacDowall, 2019). As a result, the EU continues to support current leaders despite the fact that they are not upholding the democratic values the EU touts (Kadovic, 2019; MacDowall, 2019). However, by not supporting pro-West and pro-democratic protests, Brussels may have jeopardized the timely accession of the Western Balkans

states into the Union nonetheless (MacDowall, 2019). The sentiment has been such that "the EU has failed to throw its weight behind the protesters, and indeed seems to be giving them the cold shoulder" (MacDowall, 2019).

Even though the EU, US, and NATO are known to traditionally support democratic protests against anti-democratic regimes, this was not the case in 2019 in Serbia (MacDowall, 2019; Ivković, 2019). By not visibly supporting democratic protests of ordinary citizens, the EU and its Western allies are risking further alienating the Balkan population; this in turn might incite more instability and even violent extremism (Kadovic, 2019; Ivković, 2019). In Serbia specifically, support for EU membership has been waning following the protests of 2019 (MacDowall, 2019). In other words, if the EU and other Western allies want to promote democratic values in the Western Balkans, these institutions must verbally and visibly re-affirm their support when ordinary citizens are advocating for pro-democracy and pro-Western values. The West must show that they are willing to listen and hear their grievances (Kadovic, 2019).

Ultimately, these mass protests did little to stop the deterioration of democracy in the Western Balkans (Large, 2020). They proved that a desire for better governance is widespread, but still failed to yield any of the changes that were advocated for (Large, 2020). Moving forward, by supporting such movements, the US and its Western allies can at least show that the people fighting for democracy in the Western Balkans are not isolated in their concern and are being listened to and understood by powerful allies. This will likely help to curb the growing disillusionment with the West, and maybe even garner additional support for the West and pro-democracy voices. Moreover, such protests are not always at such a large scale; many smaller pro-democracy and pro-West protests happen throughout the region and could similarly be supported.

8. CONCLUSION

With a combination of remaining strife as a result of the 1990's Yugoslav Wars, disillusionment with Western institutions, and a significant lack of democratic freedoms, the Western Balkans has fallen victim to both internal and external ethnic, religious, and political tensions. By the end of 2019, approximately 854 nationals from the four countries we focused on in our report: Bosnia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, had traveled to the conflict in Iraq and Syria. In addition, since 2014, at least 300 individuals from the above countries went to fight in the East of Ukraine, primarily on the Russian side. It is estimated that the number of returnees to these four countries is approximately ten times the rate of returnees in the EU as a whole. Our report found drivers of Islamist radicalization and recruitment in the region include a perceived duty to help Muslims abroad, prompting local Muslims to leave to Syria or Iraq. There is also a sense of needing to repay the mujahedeen who sacrificed themselves in the Yugoslav Wars as well as fight against the perceived discrimination against Salafism or Islam, more broadly. The drivers

of far-right radicalization and recruitment in the region include disappointment with Western institutions, a strong sense to uphold Slavic identity, and the fear of the spread of Islam throughout Europe. Common drivers of both Islamist and far-right violent extremism include post-war resentments and trauma, disillusionment with local governance, discontent with poor socioeconomic conditions, and the ongoing fears associated with the migrant refugee crisis.

A series of offline and online mechanisms have contributed to the spread of violent Islamist and far-right ideologies and recruitment within the Western Balkans. While online mechanisms certainly play an important role and over half of the population has access to the internet and social media platforms, we found substantial evidence that the spread of violent extremist ideology byword-of-mouth and through offline forums remains prevalent. Media literacy rates and poor quality journalism exacerbate the spread of disinformation in the region.

At present, rehabilitation and reintegration programs in the Western Balkans are both insufficient and inefficient due to the lack of funding, political will, and/or the capacity to address the issue of violent extremism. Failure to involve local government and grassroot practitioners undermines the success of these programs throughout the region. As the radicalization and rehabilitation of returning foreign fighters are often politicized and securitized, international organizations who initially entered the region with the motive to help, often end up creating additional issues due to a lack of regional awareness, including the cultural and historical context.

Our proposed interventions to help prevent and counter violent extremism in the Western Balkans include:

1. Improve media literacy, fact-checking, and the exposure of foreign influence through engaging with local youth and universities and local civil society organizations.
2. Promote higher ethics and standards in journalism while ensuring the security of journalists; consider intervening when journalists' rights and freedoms are violated.
3. Support the development of inoculation messages and counter-narratives that micro-target vulnerable groups and communities without stigmatizing them, while establishing content filtering of harmful material.
4. Integrate initiatives into educational institutions, such as exposure to inoculation messages and the promotion of religious and ethnic tolerance in grade school, and partner with universities and/or university student groups to develop and deploy counter-narratives and inoculation messages.
5. Entrust local authorities to play a larger role in countering violent extremism by: i) emphasizing a focus on community-oriented, humanitarian-based initiatives, and ii) embracing social media as a tool to engage with constituents.
6. Utilize religious leaders from both Islam and Orthodox Christian communities in efforts to spread counter-narratives and promote productive ways to create social change.

7. Encourage religious leaders to build or strengthen their online presence to offer alternative narratives against violent extremist propaganda.
8. Commend and facilitate opportunities for youth engagement that promotes ethnic and religious tolerance through sport or other strategic cultural sectors, and as part of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office initiative.
9. Consider the effectiveness of formers and their stories as a mechanism to counter violent extremism; credible messengers of such stories might include investigative journalists.
10. Verbally and visibly support and promote pro-West and/or pro-democracy movements in a way that shows empathy towards individuals grievances and that the West is an ally.

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