CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN in the Western Balkans – Regional small-scale meeting
16 June 2022, Online

Online radicalisation and P/CVE approaches in the Western Balkans

Key outcomes

Technological advancements have opened new channels for extremist organisations to spread their messages and win support for their political goals. This tendency is also seen in the Western Balkans (WB). In addition to making it simpler for individuals to communicate with one another, social media platforms have also made it easier for hateful voices to disseminate extremist views. Extremist organisations have mastered the use of the internet to spread their radical ideologies and find supporters for their cause ([1]).

This small-scale expert workshop of RAN in the WB brought together prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) experts and practitioners from the WB and the EU, including civil society organisations (CSOs), youth and social workers, teachers and educational professionals, police officers, and media and communication experts, who discussed challenges and lessons learned concerning understanding and addressing online radicalisation. The focus of the meeting was on understanding online extremist narratives, actors, channels of dissemination and vulnerable groups, and on how practitioners can address online radicalisation via both digital and offline P/CVE work. Some of the key findings of the meeting are listed below.

- **Extremist ideologies are not constrained to country-level influence.** Rather, online extremist propaganda in the WB draws on regional and (sometimes) international narratives. Further, they exploit regional connections based on a certain hate, conspiracy or extreme, language or ethnic identity that spread across the region. In addition, online P/CVE approaches are still nascent in the region and mainly focus on alternative narrative campaigns.

- **The WB is highly vulnerable to the proliferation of conspiracy narratives**, **disinformation and fake news**, related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine. There is a growing fear that online far-right extremist recruitment can result in foreign fighters joining Russia in the invasion of Ukraine.

- **The WB region is still affected by the consequences of recent conflicts.** Online hate narratives spread by extremist groups are reinforcing ethnic differences and adding to interethnic polarisation. They have been strengthening societal divisions along economic and political lines. Further, political instabilities and ongoing polarisation are partly a legacy of previous conflicts. As a result of insufficient means to deal with the past and achieve reconciliation, the online space became a theatre for these ongoing conflicts.

([1]) Dukić, S. (2021). *Online extremism in North Macedonia – Politics, ethnicities and religion.* Strong Cities Network, Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

- **There is a growing security threat on the rise of ethnonational and far-right extremism**, as well as reciprocal radicalisation caused by polarisation, historical revisionism and political narratives. The extremist environment is evolving, and increased attention must be paid to identifying the many extremist narratives that foster interethnic hostility, hate and violence.

- With a profusion of **foreign websites** spreading information in local languages and significantly increasing their online presence in the WB, **international extremist influencers** — both Islamist and far-right — from outside the region utilise the internet to reach audiences there. Regionally unique extremist narratives that exploit historical grievances are also being presented on a global scale through the online environment.

- **Gender** is an important part of extremist narratives. Extremists misuse "traditionalism" and "family" in the online space not only for — more or less — hateful stigmatisation and oppression, but also for the recruitment of men and women.

This paper presents the main highlights of the discussion held online during the meeting and relevant recommendations for successful online P/CVE initiatives.

Highlights of the discussion

The objective of the workshop was to contribute to a better understanding amongst practitioners of the key developments and trends in online radicalisation and its implications for P/CVE work. The workshop was focused on narratives, recruitment strategies and differences within the radicalisation process regarding different ideologies (violent right-wing extremism and violent Islamist extremism) and target groups.

Role of history and geopolitical context of online extremism in the Western Balkans

Online extremism in the WB is very much related to the region's particular demographics and history. Extremist ideologies are not constrained to country-level influence. Instead, WB's extremists' messaging on the internet depends on and exploits regional ethnonationalist historical myths and demography. Extremist ideologies prevalent in the WB have considerable online followers who are limited to the political, linguistical and ethnic boundaries. Such regionalised extremist narratives are inextricably linked to the region's history of violence and persistent interethnic strife. Furthermore, these narratives are being exploited internationally, and one of those examples was the case of Brenton Tarrant who carried out a terrorist attack on Muslim places of worship in Christchurch, New Zealand. While live-streaming his attack, a Serb nationalist song with roots in the Yugoslav wars and referring and responding to historical colonialism of the Balkans was playing in the background. The song, originally titled "[Radovan] Karadžić [convicted atrocity perpetrator], Lead Your Serbs", alternatively titled as "Serbia Strong" or "Remove Kebab", is now an anthem amongst international right-wing extremist groups. Right-wing extremists have been latched in the online space to the idea that the Balkans are the space of *Antemurale Christianitatis* (the region that defends the Christian frontiers). Internationalisation of right-wing extremism is not primarily a matter of physical interaction, rather it occurs online and the WB are an inspiration for many extremists.

Explicitly extremist and hateful Islamist content is also present and disseminated through various groups. Islamist extremist narratives are also targeted at WB populations. IslamHouse, a prominent Gulf-based website hosting content from a number of Islamist extremist clerics, hosts content in WB languages. On mainstream social media, most of the online content of the WB Islamist groups and influencers is non-violent, but even when extremist ideology does not directly promote terrorism and violence, it can create dangerous divisions in society that systematically undermine democratic values and institutions. This rhetoric poses a particular threat to decades of efforts to achieve stable peace and gender equality in the WB. Indeed, this subtler type of radicalisation is poised to produce significant long-term social, political and security challenges.

The exploitation of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine through right-wing extremist actors

Like other places in the world, terrorist and violent extremist groups have successfully exploited vulnerabilities in the social media in the WB to manipulate people and disseminate conspiracy theories. These trends have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Even before the pandemic, there had been a normalisation of extremist discourse in the WB and a proliferation of extremist narratives on mainstream social media (i.e. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok "trolling" in informative media content comments sections). While these narratives are more approachable to youth, they may have become

even more attractive when the COVID-19 pandemic kicked off. They are potentially more harmful since the "endless" internet space is an important source for information and cognitive formation of new generations. If nothing is done in terms of effective content control, building counter-narratives and preventing radicalisation, it may be a significant danger to the unstable peace architecture in the WB.

Online far-right extremist groups are using global themes and exploiting regional and local grievances to recruit more followers. Many of these global themes reflect the sentiments of the international right-wing groups and therefore promote narratives of anti-globalisation or celebrate the strengthening of "populism" in the West. For example, vaccine and pandemic-related conspiracy theories, anti-gender/anti-feminist discourse, anti-immigration rhetoric and support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have featured prominently in the online content of far-right groups in the WB ([2]). These themes are exploited to further anti-establishment sentiment, and in some cases to elevate the value followers place on the global versus the national "struggle". In short, democracy or striving for democratic values is seen under threat. The current invasion of Ukraine is being portrayed as the ultimate battle for ownership of the global order — democratic globalism versus totalitarian (clerical) nationalism. Online right-wing groups have developed widespread influence very quickly during the pandemic and the Ukrainian invasion. Some have even been crucial to setting the stage for a new generation of politicians in the WB to be moulded. Now there is the risk that a younger generation of conservative politicians in the WB follows the discourse of anti-globalism and ethnonationalism.

Mainstreaming extremist narratives through social media and humanitarian work

The "climate" that characterises the WB is widespread socioeconomic poverty, elite manipulation of collective traumas to promote "otherness" (i.e. dehumanisation/devaluation of other groups), and defeatism amongst citizens caused by a sense of eternal social injustice. Combined with a general distrust of institutions and the rule of law, this created a fertile ground for different extremist groups to flourish online. Taking advantage of the structural and financial weaknesses of the state and local communities, these groups are presenting themselves as "humanitarian". This agenda is being used to attract a larger number of members, especially young people, and to normalise their activities — outside of humanitarian work — in the local communities and beyond.

Right-wing groups build their appearance on toxic masculinity and the look of "dangerous guys" who see themselves as frontliners in times of individual or collective calamity, exploiting the vulnerabilities of people in need of help. On the other hand, online Islamist groups build their presence on micromanagement of everyday lives, including lifestyle, religion, work and marital relations — by always putting women in their traditional roles. Both are frequent providers of lunch packages and humanitarian aid to those in need. Thus, online actions of all extremist groups related to physical actions are best explained as: "from the 'people' for the 'people'". The empathy they display is driven by interest, but also exclusive to the in-group members. They have attempted to portray themselves as legitimate cultural or educational associations or community organisations and have used social media posts about their "humanitarian work" or clerical national activities (e.g. protecting group members, places of worship, etc.) to attract followers in online spaces.

Extremist groups have the potential to adapt to various situations to attract more followers and promote an agenda that can lead to radicalisation in the online space. Also, Islamist groups have started using language that does not call for violence — so their content most often is not being seen as a security threat. However, they still pose a risk because they comment on prevalent social and political issues through a rigid conservative lens and this requires additional trainings of stakeholders to recognise the changing face of non-violent extremist narratives. Ethnic and gender minorities are very often under attack and extremist online influence through dehumanisation — "Othering" — is creating an environment where the use of violence is becoming acceptable. Counter-narratives are non-existent or marginal and usually have poor outreach that does not specifically target individuals at risk of radicalisation but mainly the general public.

The importance of education and media literacy for the creation of resilience

The WB is highly vulnerable to disinformation, which influences radicalisation, due to low rates of media literacy. The Open Society Institute – Sofia's Media Literacy Index 2021 placed WB countries at the bottom of its rankings and stated that low capacities to deal with disinformation are caused by "underperformance in media freedom and

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([2]) Veljan, N., & Ćehajić Čampara, M. (2021). *Gender ideologies: How extremists exploit battles over women's rights and drive reciprocal radicalization*. Atlantic Initiative. https://atlanticinitiative.org/gender-ideologies-how-extremists-exploit-battles-over-womens-rights-and-drive-reciprocal-radicalization/

education" (³). One part of the problem is the substantial number of media channels that lack transparency with respect to ownership information. Most false or misleading media content is political in nature and serves to enable radicalisation. Disinformation campaigns often run regionally and reciprocally, fuelling nationalism and polarisation amongst neighbouring countries. Media literacy is at a critically low level for all generations across the WB. Lack of critical assessment of online content and impossibility of critical thinking about identity, religion, gender, history and politics in the online space have been at the core of vulnerability in online radicalisation (⁴). Parents and school curricula cannot keep up with internet trends or their influence on the cognitive, emotional and behavioural development of youth. Transgenerational effects have been underestimated in general and especially when considering the online developmental influence on youth (⁵).

One of the most devastating outcomes of the recent conflicts in the WB is the institutionalisation of ethnic divisions in the education system. The post-conflict and post-totalitarian environment of younger generations in the WB means they are growing up in ethnic isolation, collective traumas are prevalent, and they experience the state of "extremism as normal" in everyday life, especially in the online space. As such, these generations are more vulnerable to radicalisation. Educational systems across the WB continue to be marked by outdated teaching methods and techniques based on instructor-centric *ex cathedra* lectures favouring memorisation of facts, which leads to a lack of critical and analytical skills. Several authors have pointed to these deficiencies of the educational system as contributing to the alienation and radicalisation of young people, making them more receptive and vulnerable to harmful (online) messages (⁶). Given the growth of online time for youth during the COVID-19 lockdowns, it is not surprising that misinformation, conspiracy theories and disinformation on social media have been amplified during this period.

Recommendations

This workshop identified some gaps in the practice of WB practitioners when it comes to the prevention of online radicalisation. Firstly, the focus on prevention is very low and most activities are reduced to the reactions of institutions (chasing after events), while practitioners' awareness of (violent) right-wing extremism is also very low. Below, some recommendations, discussed during the meeting, are offered.

1) Regional and international cooperation and communication

Online radicalisation is not a threat that can be addressed by states merely on a national level — its transnational nature highlights the need for a wider strategy that will include both the EU and the WB. There is a need to create regional and international frameworks and strengthen cooperation between practitioners, experts, institutions and policymakers so that gaps between EU and WB P/CVE online activities can decrease.

2) "Whole of society approach" and national cooperation between government institutions and CSOs

P/CVE/counterterrorism strategies need to recognise and include the threat of online radicalisation. Specific approaches, if possible, regionally coordinated, have to deal with not only hate speech but also atrocity denial, historic revisionism, extremism, disinformation and fake news.

The online world is constantly evolving, and there should be a specialised workshop targeting stakeholders to stimulate the adoption of appropriate and timely measures and set strategic goals related to online radicalisation. This also includes the need for policymakers, experts and practitioners to cooperate and find a space for open

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(³) The Media Literacy Index is produced by the European Policies Initiative of the Open Society Institute – Sofia. See: https://osis.bg/?p=3750&lang=en

(⁴) See, for example: Halilović, M., Zuković, A., & Veljan, N. (2019). *Mapping online extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings and reflections*. Atlantic Initiative.

(⁵) Buljubašić, M., & Holá, B. (2021). Historical trauma and radicalisation: How can intergenerational transmission of collective traumas contribute to (group) radicalisation? Atlantic Initiative. See: https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Policy-Paper-Br.-2-ENG.pdf

(⁶) Perry, V. (2015). *Countering the cultivation of extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The case for comprehensive education reform*. Democratization Policy Council (DPC). See: https://www.academia.edu/15969761/Countering_the_Cultivation_of_Extremism_in_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina_The_Case_for_Comprehensive_Education_Reform

discussion and to design various approaches, based on previous practices beyond the WB, and invent new practices adaptable to the WB context.

3) Transfer and expansion of interfaith dialogue and cooperation into the online sphere

P/CVE activities should include or be related to interfaith dialogue. Trust-building between religious communities has to be approachable for different societal categories across the WB. Moderate religious voices should be enhanced and easily accessible for young people on different social media outlets. Organise lectures and give participants the opportunity to ask questions during these lectures to encourage discussion and reflection.

4) Gender mainstreaming of online and offline P/CVE activities

The online extremist digital presence is highly gendered, with men and women participating in different ways. It is important to gain a deeper understanding of the notions of gender, masculinity and femininity and how these are used and instrumentalised in calls for terrorist violence.

There is a need for cooperation between CSOs and government institutions to develop guidelines on gender and violent extremism for a range of stakeholders. Guidelines could address violence against women, anti-gender equality movements, and online radicalisation where misogyny and violent extremism overlap.

5) Capacity building of practitioners

There is a lack of expertise, lack of strategic approaches in tackling online radicalisation, and lack of coordination and insufficient cooperation amongst stakeholders. Providing capacity-building for practitioners on extremist online threats is needed. Social workers, educators, security staff, etc., preferably the ones working with vulnerable communities, should be able to recognise and deal with indicators of extremism and train co-workers.

Teachers and youth workers should have at least basic knowledge of the relevant platforms and narratives and how social media and fake news are influencing online radicalisation. A workshop could be run by social media and violent extremism experts to provide information on key aspects.

Relevant practices

1. The Why not organisation (BiH) is an excellent example of how to tackle extremist, ethnonationalist narratives through fact-checking. Through fact-checking they dismantle conspiracy theories, historical revisionism, disinformation and fake news, thus promoting accountability across the WB.

2. The Citizens Against Terrorism Bosnia and Herzegovina (CAT BiH) initiative is the first youth group that embraced popular internet forms such as memes, vlogs and podcasts in BiH and used them for P/CVE initiatives. In addition to education and programmes for young people, most of their online engagement is focused on reactions to extremist acts and narratives. This project is implemented by Youth Resource Centre Tuzla.

3. #ItsNotLikeitSeems (#NijetoBasTako) is a campaign by the Resonant Voices Initiative (SR). In this campaign, personal migrant experiences of WB diaspora and how they can be connected to the experiences of those who have just arrived in Europe have been shared. The initiative has been: (1) developing and engaging users online; (2) providing alternative narratives; and (3) addressing a defined target group deemed susceptible to online radicalisation.

4. The Europol Internet Referral Unit (IRU) works on different activities to tackle the spread of online terrorist content. The IRU works on: (1) strategic analyses; (2) monitoring of online terrorist propaganda; (3) preparation of reports for Member States and third parties; (4) situation reports (e.g. on the exploitation of women and children); and (5) the EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report. Further, they have developed a referral mechanism with the aim to remove online content related to violent extremism and terrorism.

Follow-up

Concerning the recommendations above, further meetings should be organised to discuss the online P/CVE mechanisms for regional collaboration of experts, practitioners and policymakers in the WB. Any future meeting should incorporate a focus on non-violent online extremism and right-wing online influences.

Further reading

Azinović, V. (2018). *Regional report: Understanding violent extremism in the Western Balkans.* British Council Extremism Research Forum. https://www.britishcouncil.me/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf

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Scheuble, S., & Oezmen, F. (2022). *Extremists' targeting of young women on social media and lessons for P/CVE*. Radicalisation Awareness Network. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/extremists-targeting-young-women-social-media-and-lessons-pcve-february-2022_en