



Online Radicalisation in the Western Balkans: Trends and Responses

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The development and proliferation of the internet and information and communications technology (ICT) have revolutionised communication and made it simple for people to connect and access information. However, while this technology has brought many improvements to people's quality of life, it has also opened channels for abuse from malign groups and individuals. These online harms range from organised crime in the form of drugs and arms trade and human trafficking to waging information warfare through disinformation and conspiracy narratives. An increasingly significant threat in this regard has been the use of the internet by terrorist and extremist groups. This threat is global in nature, with terrorists co-opting the internet in various ways and with distinct objectives, including as a tool for radicalising individuals and communities online. This paper will examine how this trend is manifesting in the Western Balkans by examining online extremist networks and identifying the scope and scale of crucial extremist and hateful narratives. It will also look at some of the responses that have been deployed to counter extremists online and provide recommendations for how practitioners in this region can help become part of the solution.

Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed society. While many of these changes have been positive, they have also offered terrorists and extremist groups new access points to amplify and spread their messages and solicit support for their political agenda. To better understand this threat, defining the two concepts is necessary. The **internet** is a global system of connected computers that allows users to share information and communicate with each other.¹ While the internet has different dimensions, this paper will focus on all communications, activity and content that take place and are stored on the world wide web and cloud structures, including social media networks.² **Information and communications technologies** refer to all devices, networking components and applications that allow people access to the digital world.³ Over time, ICTs have become more mobile and affordable, allowing easier access to the internet. According to Datareportal, at the start of 2022 the number of internet users reached 4.95 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 62.5 % globally.⁴

Not only have these advancements enabled terrorists and extremist groups to collaborate and communicate more easily among themselves, they have also given them a tool to reach large audiences to influence through propaganda in support of their goals. Researchers, policymakers and practitioners have raised alarms about this potential threat and the devastating impact it could have on peace and stability. Governments globally, including the EU and its Member States, have taken this perceived threat seriously and have made substantial efforts to prevent and counter terrorist misuse of the internet. However, this phenomenon is broad and complex, requiring holistic approaches. This paper hopes to help inform a response, by helping practitioners understand and address online radicalisation as a part of broader preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts.

Online radicalisation is a term commonly used by stakeholders in the P/CVE field to denote extremist risks and threats emanating from the internet, but it does not have a commonly agreed definition. The EU's 2020 Counter-Terrorism Agenda and its Regulation 2021/784 on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online recognise and emphasise the dangers of radicalisation on the internet, but they do not define the concept of online radicalisation.⁵ To fill this gap, this paper draws from definitions from non-EU policy and academia. A United States (US) Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services brief defines online extremism to violence as a process by which an individual is introduced to ideological messages and a belief system that encourages movement from mainstream beliefs toward extreme views, primarily through the use of online media, including social networks.⁶ Similarly, Adam Birmingham *et al.* define online radicalisation as a process whereby individuals through online interactions and exposure start to view

¹ See: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/internet>

² Ines von Behr *et al.* "Radicalisation in the digital era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism," 2-3.

³ Mary K. Pratt, ICT (information and communications technology, or technologies),

<https://www.techtarget.com/searchcio/definition/ICT-information-and-communications-technology-or-technologies>

⁴ Simon Kemp, Digital 2022 : Global Overview Report, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report#:~:text=Global%20internet%20users%3A%20Global%20internet,of%20the%20world's%20total%20population.>

⁵ See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0795&qid=1631885972581> and <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/784/oj>

⁶ IACP, Online Radicalization to Violent Extremism, <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/RadicalizationtoViolentExtremismAwarenessBrief.pdf>, 1-2.

violence as a legitimate method to achieve political goals and solve conflict.⁷ Although it may seem straightforward, this process is highly dynamic, complex, and difficult to monitor and measure. While separate, online radicalisation is also very closely connected with the processes of recruitment and mobilisation to hate and extremist-motivated violence, which further complicates our understanding of this issue and its consequences for peace and security. While it is generally agreed that the internet plays a role in the radicalisation of individuals, there is limited evidence to comprehensively assess its impact.⁸ Despite this, researchers have made headway by mapping online networks, identifying key narratives and assessing dissemination methods. Although most of this work is focused on the supply side of extremist content and actors online, there is enlightening research into demand-side dynamics that have helped stakeholders design and deliver evidence-based responses.

This paper will provide an overview of online radicalisation trends and responses in the Western Balkans, including key narratives, actors, networks and online dissemination strategies, as well as relevant practices to address vulnerabilities and recommendations for practitioners. Before delving into Western Balkans-specific trends, the paper will provide context on the influence of the online space on radicalisation by looking at the opportunities it offers and dispelling some common myths. Next it will contextualise the Western Balkans within the global landscape of online extremism and hate, pointing out global influences on online extremist activities and content in the Western Balkans, and vice versa to see how the Western Balkans has influenced global online discourses. The paper will then examine key trends, narratives and malign networks pertinent solely to the Western Balkans, paying particular attention to messaging of (violent) right-wing and Islamist extremist groups on the regional and country levels. In this regard, special attention will be put on gender-relevant extremist messaging. Finally, the paper will introduce prominent responses to this threat and provide recommendations for relevant stakeholders in the region and more broadly. To do this, the paper relies on examining primary sources of data including government-issued regulations and strategies, and secondary literature produced by researchers in the Western Balkans and more broadly across the world.

Online Radicalisation: Contextual Overview

Terrorist (mis)use of the internet dates to the technology's early years, and it has grown rapidly since. Using the U.S. Department of State terrorist designation, Weinman notes a dramatic expansion of terrorist websites in the early 21st century. In the late 1990s, a dozen terrorist sites existed and this number rose to over 5 800 by November 2007.⁹ Websites are only part of the picture. More recently, terrorist groups have also moved to social media and encrypted messaging platforms where their presence is harder to quantify.

A UNODC report states that terrorists employ the internet for six main purposes: "propaganda (including recruitment, radicalisation and incitement to terrorism); financing; training; planning (including through secret communication and open-source information); execution; and cyberattacks."¹⁰ While each of these uses presents a unique and sometimes interconnected set of challenges, the United Kingdom (UK) House of Commons Home Affairs Committee has labelled the utilisation of the internet for the promotion of radicalisation as one of the greatest threats facing states.¹¹

It is clear that the internet has enhanced extremists' capacity to spread propaganda because it has allowed them to share a wide range of content with limited moderation to a large and often vulnerable audience. This messaging can cover a multitude of topics and is usually tailored to an intended audience to maximise impact. Furthermore, traditional narratives by extremist groups are enhanced and intensified by topical reaction to specific crisis events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² This messaging often employs disinformation and

⁷ Adam Bermingham *et al.*, Combining Social Network Analysis and Sentiment Analysis to Explore the Potential for Online Radicalisation, https://doras.dcu.ie/4554/3/DCU_asonam09.pdf, 231-232.

⁸ Ines von Behr *et al.* "Radicalisation in the digital era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism," 8.

⁹ Gabriel Weimann, Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges, 3.

¹⁰ UNODC, The use of the Internet for terrorist purposes, https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf 3.

¹¹ UK House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, Radicalisation: the counternarrative and identifying the tipping point, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/home-affairs/Correspondence-17-19/Radicalisation-the-counter-narrative-and-identifying-the-tipping-point-government-response-Eighth-Report-26-17-Cm-9555.pdf> 2

¹² RAN, Capitalising on Crises How VRWEs Exploit the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lessons for P/CVE, 2022. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/ran_capitalising_crises_how_vrwe_exploit_covid-19_pandemic_082021_en.pdf

conspiracy narratives to create a common world view among its target audience.¹³ The actual role of the internet in radicalisation, however, is far more contested. Researchers disagree about its capacity to influence the beliefs and behaviour of individuals in the absence of personal contact. Some authors argue that the internet only plays a ‘facilitative’ or ‘reinforcing’ role, while others state that its role could be an ‘accelerant’ or even the ‘primary or sole driver’ of radicalisation.¹⁴ A 2013 RAND Europe study aimed to shed some light on this debate by assessing 15 terrorism and extremism cases and their internet engagement to ascertain its role in their radicalisation. It used these cases to test five primary hypotheses in the literature:

- the internet creates more opportunities to become radicalised;
- the internet acts as an ‘echo chamber’;
- the internet accelerates the process of radicalisation;
- the internet allows radicalisation to occur without physical contact; and
- the internet increases opportunities for self-radicalisation.¹⁵

It found that in all cases, the internet created more opportunities for radicalisation. It also found that the internet may act as an ‘echo chamber’ and in some cases provide more opportunities than offline engagement to support existing views. Interestingly, the study did not find evidence that the internet necessarily accelerates radicalisation, but that it facilitates it. Finally, the study did not support findings that the internet allows radicalisation to occur without physical contact, and that the internet contributes to self-radicalisation.¹⁶

In another study, Bakker examined the radicalisation pathways of 242 European Islamist extremists involved in terrorist activities between 2001 and 2006. While not dedicated to understanding the online implications of radicalisation to terrorism, the study also found a correlation between internet use and online propaganda to the rapidity of radicalisation among individuals.¹⁷

In 2021, the UK’s Ministry of Justice commissioned one of the most comprehensive studies to establish the role of the internet in the radicalisation process of individuals convicted for extremist offences. The report found that the internet had an increasingly prominent role in the radicalisation of convicted extremists in England and Wales between 2005 and 2017. Over time, a more significant proportion of the sample size radicalised either primarily online or through a combination of online and offline interactions (83 % in 2015–2017, 64 % in 2010–2014, 35 % in 2005–2009), compared to those who radicalised primarily offline (17 % in 2015–2017, 36 % in 2010–2014, 65 % in 2005–2009).¹⁸ A comparative assessment of the data showed individuals who radicalised both through online and offline interactions tended to be younger, with a history of prior offending, and had higher overall engagement levels “to the extremist group/cause or ideology and motivation to offend).”¹⁹ On the other hand, those who primarily radicalised online without significant offline influence tended to have the lowest readiness to support/use illegal means to achieve the group’s goal, and exhibited the lowest ability to cause harm and perpetrate violence.²⁰ It is expected that the internet’s prominence in radicalisation will continue to grow, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on reducing face-to-face interactions.²¹ However, the results above show that despite the increasing importance of the internet in radicalisation, the online space is not replacing the important role of offline interactions and influences.²² Hence, when analysing radicalisation, it is important not to embrace a false dichotomy between online and offline radicalisation, because they more often than not work in tandem. With this in mind, this paper will refer to offline extremist influences and implications when exploring ‘online

¹³ Ruth Harris *et al.*, Misinformation, disinformation and hateful extremism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/hateful-extremism-misinformation-disinformation-covid19.html>

¹⁴ Ines von Behr *et al.*, Radicalisation in the digital era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism, 16-17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Edwin Bakker, Jihadi terrorists in Europe their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: an exploratory study. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20061200_cscp_csp_bakker.pdf

¹⁸ Dr Jonathan Kenyon *et al.*, Exploring the role of the Internet in radicalisation and offending of convicted extremists, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-14.

²¹ UN Security Council CTED, The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on terrorism, counterterrorism and countering violent extremism. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jun/cted-paper-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-counter-t_0.pdf, 1-2.

²² Dr Jonathan Kenyon *et al.*, Exploring the role of the Internet in radicalisation and offending of convicted extremists, 10.

radicalisation’ to provide a comprehensive picture of online trends affecting radicalisation in the Western Balkans.

Online Radicalisation in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans has consistently been perceived as politically volatile region with a history of violence and atrocities.²³ Following the wars that dissolved the former Yugoslav state and the end of the communist dictatorship in Albania, the countries of the Western Balkans entered a prolonged period of democratic transition characterised by socioeconomic poverty, distrust in government institutions and inter-ethnic tensions leaving people fearful for their well-being and future prospects.²⁴ Combined with the process of ‘state capture’ whereby political elites manipulate grievances and collective traumas to enrich themselves and promote ‘othering’, and the general sense of defeatism and victimisation among the population purported by endless social injustices, this creates an enabling environment for extremism and hate to take root and flourish.²⁵ Violent Islamist and right-wing extremists have been successful in capitalising and exploiting these ‘push and pull factors’ to gain support, radicalising, recruiting and mobilising individuals to their cause. For instance, more than 1 000 individuals from the Western Balkan region travelled to live in and fight for the Islamic caliphate as a part of Daesh. At the same time ultranationalist, racist and xenophobic ideologies are becoming increasingly mainstreamed in society,²⁶ creating a system of reciprocal radicalisation between these extreme ideologies.

While radicalisation and recruitment in the Western Balkans has traditionally been facilitated by face-to-face interactions, the internet is perceived to be playing a more significant role in this process.²⁷ For instance, in a public opinion survey conducted among youth in the Sandžak region of Serbia, 47 % of respondents believed that social networks are the most valuable tools for extremist propaganda, while 52.6 % believe that online platforms are crucial for the dissemination of extremist ideas.²⁸ Internet penetration rates in the Western Balkans (see Table 1) have increased in the past decade, so the perception that the internet is contributing to radicalisation is not unwarranted. The higher number of users makes it more enticing to extremists to make use of the online space, and more probable that individuals will be exposed to extremist content.

Table 1: Internet Penetration Rates for the Western Balkans

Country	Internet Penetration Rate ²⁹
Albania	76.3 %
Bosnia and Hercegovina	87.1 %
Kosovo* ³⁰	90.4 %
Montenegro	85.5 %

²³ Mirza Buljubašić, Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE, 4.

²⁴ Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities and Religion, 4

²⁵ RAN, Online radicalisation and P/CVE approaches in the Western Balkans.

²⁶ Vlado Azinović and Edina Bećirević, A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans. <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/54/a-waiting-game-assessing-andresponding-to-the-threat-from-returning-foreign-fighters-in-the-western-balkans>

See also Mirza Buljubašić, Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE, 4.

²⁷ Vlado Azinović, Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum: Regional Report Understanding Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans, 15.

²⁸ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum: Serbia Report, 15.

²⁹ Data for internet penetration rates is taken from Internet World Stats and reflect data from either December 2021 or January 2022: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm>

³⁰ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

North Macedonia	79.3 %
Serbia	73.8 %

With growing numbers of internet users, online radicalisation presents an ever-increasing and pertinent challenge in the Western Balkans. Local populations are particularly vulnerable to disinformation, which can contribute to radicalisation and create political and social disorder.³¹ This is due to many factors, including low media literacy rates, distrust in media and a lack of independent journalism.³² The Open Society Institute's 2021 Media Literacy Index placed the countries of the Western Balkans at the bottom of its rankings, indicating that the low capabilities to deal with disinformation are caused by underperformance in media freedoms and education.³³ Educational systems in the region are particularly outdated and cannot keep pace with technological developments. Instead of focusing on civic education and the development of critical thinking and analytical skills, teaching methods are based on memorising facts without broader engagement with the content.³⁴ These approaches are no longer relevant for the digital era and leave individuals ill equipped to navigate the online space.

Despite this understanding of population-level vulnerabilities, there is no thorough research in the Western Balkans that can demonstrate the effect of the internet on radicalisation. Unlike the EU and UK, which have studies on this relationship, Western Balkans literature focuses almost exclusively on understanding the supply-side dynamics of online extremist activity and mapping the most prominent extremist and hateful narratives, actors and networks, and their dissemination strategies. While there is a clear gap in our understanding of the relationship between the internet and radicalisation to extremism in the region, the existing supply side research gives us a starting point to understand the online threat landscape. Before focusing on the region-specific trends, the next section will contextualise the Western Balkans in the global online extremist environment.

The Western Balkans in the Global Online Extremist Landscape

The Western Balkans has a prominent space in global extreme Islamist and right-wing networks and discourses. Due to its unique and cultural diversity and complex history, the region is viewed as a frontline in a clash of civilisations between the Christian and Islamic worlds.³⁵ To make a geopolitical situation even more complicated and precarious, the region is also the playground of an influence war between the West and Russia for the hearts and minds of the local population.³⁶ A third and equally significant layer is the competition between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran over the Muslim population in the Western Balkans.³⁷ These power struggles and influence campaigns are extended to the online space, and have a direct and very complex impact on the region. While not all of them are malevolent in nature, malign actors at each extreme of the spectrum have purposefully and systematically targeted vulnerable communities and groups on the fringes of society to gain support for their political agenda.

The internet is outside the purview of any single government that has allowed extremist ideologies and hateful sentiment to roam freely across political borders. The main barrier to accessing openly available content is language. Hence, malign actors outside the region have made efforts to disseminate content in languages that local populations understand. Moreover, they have also made concerted efforts to adjust their messaging to exploit cross-cutting cleavages and the most sensitive political issues in the Western Balkans. The messaging is also adjusted to reflect ongoing prominent conversations and is placed in the most consumed channels. This approach has been largely successful as online right-wing extremist groups in the Western

³¹ Samuel Greene *et al.*, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 13-15.

³² Mirza Buljubašić, Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE, 15.

³³ RAN, Online radicalisation and P/CVE approaches in the Western Balkans.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Milo Comeford and Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans, 3.

³⁶ Rina Hajdari, Western Balkans as Russia's New Anti-Western Playground. <https://www.iir.cz/western-balkans-as-russia-s-new-anti-western-playground-2>

³⁷ Dimitar Bechev and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, Competing over Islam: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the Balkans. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/competing-over-islam-turkey-saudi-arabia-and-iran-balkans>

Balkans are utilising global themes to promote anti-globalisation and the strengthening of populism in the West.³⁸ Some topics that have featured prominently online are COVID-19-related conspiracy narratives, anti-immigration, anti-gender/feminism, support for Russian's invasion of Ukraine and the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy narrative.³⁹

Extreme Right-Wing (Online) Networks and Narratives

International violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) groups have been particularly invested in the Western Balkans. Recently, VRWE groups have been successful in developing and deploying new communication strategies to create a global network that allows cross-border exchanges, support and joint activities.⁴⁰ VRWE groups are united around the premise that they speak for the "silent majority" who are ignored by mainstream media and politics and have been pushed to the margins of society.⁴¹ The 'Serbian Far-Right,' which is rooted in Serbian nationalism, has been particularly successful in adopting ideas and symbols for the "Global Far-Right" and developing partnerships with groups outside the region.⁴² It has been successful in building relationships on both sides of the former Iron Curtain, with pan-national VRWE groups from the UK, US and other parts of Europe, and with Russian VRWE groups.⁴³ When it comes to the latter, Serbian VRWE groups have also contributed to Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass since 2015, and subsequently supported Putin's military intervention in Ukraine.⁴⁴ Not only have Serbian VRWE groups been able to work with counterparts in the West and Russia, Serbia has also been successful in bringing Russian and European VRWE groups together.⁴⁵ Most of this organisation was conducted online, creating a network of interconnected movements on social media.⁴⁶

Serbian and European VRWE groups have been able to align on many topics, but anti-immigration is at the core of the cooperation. This partnership manifested through the successful localisation of two European online anti-immigration movements in Serbia: 'Generacija Identiteta [Generation Identity]' and Inicijativa Anti-Imigracija [Anti-Immigration Initiative]. Generation Identity is a global extreme right-wing youth movement born in France that is a part of the broader Identitarian movement that wants to preserve "ethno-cultural identity" globally.⁴⁷ The group is a leading proponent of the Great Replacement theory which argues that white European populations are being deliberately replaced at an ethnic and cultural level through migration and the growth of minority communities.⁴⁸ Even before the establishment of its official branch in Serbia, the movement had a special place for the country in its narratives as a historic defender of "white Christian Europe" and a victim of 'Islamic colonisation' with the loss of Kosovo.⁴⁹ Using the same branding and strategic communication plan as the global movement, the Serbian Generation Identity branch established an online presence to raise awareness of the detrimental consequences of migration and recruit like-minded individuals. Moreover, it used its online presence to promote a Serbian identity, which stretches beyond the borders of Serbia, purport victimisation of the Serbian people and apply a revisionist outlook on the region's recent history. Generation Identity has been officially dissolved and its online accounts largely removed following a ban from the French government in March 2021; however, this only forced its members and supporters to go underground and share content on less visible and encrypted platforms.⁵⁰ As for the Serbian branch, even though Generacija Identiteta's online profiles have currently either been removed or are

³⁸ RAN, Online radicalisation and P/CVE approaches in the Western Balkans.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Marina Lažetić, "Migration Crisis" and the Far Right Networks in Europe: A Case Study of Serbia, 139.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

⁴² Dr. Hikmet Karčić, Far-Right Movements and Symbolism in the Western Balkans: A Handbook, 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁴ For an overview of Serbian fighter's contribution to Russian-backed separatists see RFE/RL's Balkan Service, Serb Who Joined Russian-Backed Forces in Ukraine Has Jail Sentence Overturned. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-sentence-ukraine-separatists-overtuned/32243089.html>

For Serbian VRWE support of Putin military intervention, see Nermina Kuloglija and Azra Husaric Omerovic, Serb Volunteers Answer Call to Fight in Ukraine. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/08/serb-volunteers-answer-call-to-fight-in-ukraine/>

⁴⁵ Marina Lažetić, "Migration Crisis" and the Far Right Networks in Europe: A Case Study of Serbia, 149.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁷ Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, The 'Great Replacement': the violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism, 5.

https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/french-identitarians-are-mobilising-around-the-2022-presidential-elections/

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁹ Eleonora Vio, 'Young Patriots': Serbia's Role in the European Far-right. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/19/young-patriots-serbias-role-in-the-european-far-right/>

⁵⁰ ISD, French Identitarians are Mobilising around the 2022 Presidential Elections.

https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/french-identitarians-are-mobilising-around-the-2022-presidential-elections/

dormant, the group has had significant influence online where they disseminate content incorporating local issues and grievances in line with European VRWE narratives.

The Knights Templar International (KTI), a UK-based self-styled “Christian militant order” and a strong proponent of the Great Replacement theory, is another influential group that made its way to Serbia.⁵¹ Its leader, Jim Dowson, was described as one of the most influential extreme right-wing activists by UK anti-racism campaigners in 2018, managing a network with about 2.5 million followers on Facebook and YouTube.⁵² KTI secured this following by mixing “emotive memes” with “hard hitting right-wing and socially conservative material.”⁵³ Sharing its methods for success, the group trained Serbian VRWE members to enhance their capacities for an “online war.”⁵⁴ Additionally, KTI has also produced news videos and other online content in Serbo-Croatian to warn of an impending war between Muslims and Christians and denounce the “Islamification” of Europe through immigration.⁵⁵ Outside the online space, KTI has provided military equipment to Serb right-wing groups in Kosovo and Bulgarian militias on the border with Turkey to help them defend themselves and Europe from “Muslim invaders.”⁵⁶ Similarly to Generation Identity, the group has been successful in creating networks in the Balkans and using its influence to support and amplify voices of like-minded groups.

Serbia and the broader Western Balkans have also become a popular destination for individuals from VRWE groups from the US. Most notably, Robert Rundo, a co-founder of the Rise Above Movement (RAM), has found a safe haven in Belgrade and quickly made friends with the Serbian extreme right. RAM is a notorious white supremacist gang, which gained prominence after three of its members were arrested for violence at the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017.⁵⁷ At its start, RAM members were not as interested in online battles and strategic communication but focused their energy on mixed martial arts and training in order to be able to physically attack their ideological opponents.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, that changed as Rundo utilised the power of the internet to include athleticism as a core part of the image of identitarian nationalists. His presence in Serbia further strengthens international links of the growing number of VRWE groups in the region with racist movements from Europe and beyond.⁵⁹ He created a strong partnership with Junak [Hero] Foundation, a nationalist Serbian movement, and has participated in and contributed to a couple of their activities. Namely, he was a part of and fundraised for humanitarian initiatives of the group, including collecting aid for Serbs who still live in Kosovo.⁶⁰ As with Generation Identity and KTI, one can conclude that the situation and narratives connected to Kosovo are a popular tool for extreme right-wing organisations. This is equally worrying because many Serbian communities in Kosovo are a vulnerable group and through humanitarian support these groups fill a gap left by ineffective governance and a failure to provide services.

Rundo’s online presence has grown in significance in the past couple of years. For instance, he used his YouTube channel to post videos with advice on issues such as organisational planning, physical training and travel.⁶¹ Equally important, Rundo gained a significant following on Telegram, which serves as a hub for extreme right-wing organisations globally, including in the Western Balkans. To enhance his messaging and enterprise, Rundo registered a company in Serbia called Will2Rise used as a front to sell extreme right-wing inspired merchandise as a part of broader fundraising efforts. He also supported the operationalisation of other right-wing fashion brands in Serbia, most notably Serbon.⁶² Finally, he also controls another entity called

⁵¹ Milo Comeford, The Christchurch Attack and the Far Right’s Obsession With the Western Balkans.

<https://institute.global/policy/christchurch-attack-and-far-rights-obsession-western-balkans>

⁵² Simon Cox and Anna Meisel, Is this Britain’s most influential far-right activist? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43924702>

⁵³ Matthew Collins and Nick Lowles, Empire builders. <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/HnH-2017-01-02-no30.pdf>

⁵⁴ Jelena Cosic *et al.*, British Nationalist Trains Serb Far-Right for ‘Online War’. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/01/british-nationalist-trains-serb-far-right-for-online-war-04-30-2018/>

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Matthew Collins, Jim Dowson: the ‘invisible man’ of the far right and the Kosovo connection.

<https://hopenothate.org.uk/2018/05/01/jim-dowson-kosovo-connection/>

⁵⁷ Michael Colborne, An American White Supremacist’s New Home in Serbia. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/11/18/an-american-white-supremacists-new-home-in-serbia/>

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Nermina Kuloglija, The ‘Awakening’: American Right-Wing Extremist Finds Allies in the Balkans.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/13/the-awakening-american-right-wing-extremist-finds-allies-in-the-balkans/>

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Michael Colborne, An American White Supremacist’s New Home in Serbia. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/11/18/an-american-white-supremacists-new-home-in-serbia/>

⁶² *Ibid.*

Media2Rise, a media outlet that “counters the leftist-controlled media and the narrative that is used to degrade the efforts of nationalist movements.”⁶³ The production has developed a dozen short documentaries exploring various right-wing extremist narratives around Europe, including on the Western Balkans, and the US. Its accounts on YouTube and Twitter have been banned, so the organisation currently operates on Telegram, Odysee, BitChute and Gab, which have offered a safe haven for other right-wing organisations as well.⁶⁴

The examples above give a snapshot of how Serbian VRWE organisations are incorporated in the global extremist right-wing network, and how this is manifested in the online sphere. However, it should be noted that Croatian and some Bosniak, mostly ultranationalist and neo-Fascist organisations also take inspiration from and are connected to counterparts across the world. Croatia holds an important spot for the Ukrainian right-wing extremists and their goals. VRWE organisations from Croatia have provided support and travelled to aid the Azov movement in Ukraine.⁶⁵ Interestingly, Azov is also close with members of RAM, but Serbian and Croatian foreign terrorist fighters find themselves on different sides in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Extreme Islamist (Online) Networks and Narratives

Extreme right-wing groups are not the only ones that have incorporated Western Balkan organisations into their network. Islamist extremists have been equally successful in co-opting support from the region in advancement of their goal. Since the war in Bosnia, Salafi-jihadi terrorist organisations have established a strong foothold in the region. Islamist extremists have capitalised on the precarious situation in the Western Balkans described above and the lack of meaningful religious education and understanding stemming from former communist systems that restricted the role of religion in public life and secured support among Muslim communities across all parts of the Western Balkans. Their success is evidenced by the outflow of individuals who travelled to live in and fight for the Islamic caliphate. There are numerous reasons for this success, including humanitarian support, peer-to-peer religious indoctrination, financial incentives, relevant messaging and so on. Online radicalisation played an important part in this regard as well.

Islamist extremists have historically shown an understanding of the importance of strategic communication and information warfare. This is evidenced in a statement made by the al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, killed in 2022: “I tell you we are in a battle, and more than half of it is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah⁶⁶.”⁶⁷ Daesh is considered to have developed the most influential strategic communications outreach among all Islamist terrorist organisations. They produced a wide range of content from audio statements, magazines, memes, videos and *nasheeds* (Muslim hymns) to news reports, and disseminated them through the standard social media networks, fringe platforms and encrypted messaging applications.⁶⁸ Although most of this content was in Arabic, their products were shared in 28 other languages,⁶⁹ including those spoken in the Western Balkans.

‘Honour is in Jihad’, a 20-minute video produced by Daesh’s al-Hayat Media Centre, gained the greatest prominence in the Western Balkans. Featuring ethnic Albanian and Bosniak fighters, the video calls Muslims from the region to move to the Islamic caliphate and join in holy war, while also threatening the region’s apostate governments and non-believers.⁷⁰ The video is contextualised based on the local grievances and perceived injustices of Muslims in the region. Its narrative amplifies the subjugation of Muslims by the “atheist” Albanian and Yugoslav states and the atrocities committed by Christians against Muslims during the wars that dissolved Yugoslavia.⁷¹ Moreover, the video labels the region as the next frontier for global jihad. Daesh doubled down on these threats in many subsequent publications, including a video titled ‘Put Halifa [Way of the caliphate]’ that calls for the conquest of Serbia, the creation of an Islamic caliphate in the

⁶³ See <https://media2rise.com/about-us/>

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Michael Colborne, Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far-Right’s International Ambitions.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/18/croatia-key-to-ukrainian-far-rights-international-ambitions/>

⁶⁶ Ummah is an Arabic word that means “community.” It refers to the global community of Muslims who are bound together by their belief in the same religion.

⁶⁷ Eleni Kapsokoli, Cyber-Jihad in the Western Balkans, 41.

⁶⁸ Moran Yarchi, ISIS’s media strategy as image warfare: Strategic messaging over time and across platforms, 64.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁰ James Gordon Meek, ISIS Aims New Recruitment Video at Balkan Muslims. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/isis-aims-recruitment-video-balkan-muslims/story?id=31554167>

⁷¹ Milo Comeford and Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans, 1-3.

Western Balkans and the destruction of democracy.⁷² Following the territorial collapse of the so-called Islamic State, much of Daesh's propaganda apparatus and online radicalisation efforts targeting the Western Balkans went underground away from the public eye. This will be further unpacked later in this paper.

Daesh is not the only Islamist terrorist organisation with an online footprint in the Western Balkans. al-Qaeda and its affiliates have also targeted Muslim communities in the Western Balkans for its global operations. Although less successful than Daesh in attracting people to its ranks, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra), an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, has been successful in radicalising and recruiting a small but powerful force into its military hierarchy. Referred to as Xhemati Alban, the combat unit is composed of ethnic Albanian snipers who are active in the Idlib province in Syria. The group continued to be active after Daesh's political demise and produced online audiovisual content in Albanian, which was disseminated online. A 33-minute video titled 'Albanian Snipers in al-Sham' presenting the lives of the group's members, including insights from their military operations, gained prominence among Albanian audiences.⁷³

There are other online sources, outside the direct control of Daesh and al-Qaeda, that also host content easily accessible to Western Balkan audiences. Namely, IslamHouse, a prominent Gulf-based website that hosts content from a number of Islamic extremist clerics, has over 9 000 pieces of content in Western Balkan languages, compared to only 7 000 items in English.⁷⁴ This is another indicator of the relative importance of the Western Balkan audiences in the global Islamist extremist landscape. Moreover, a report by the Strong Cities Network found an online archive page maintained by the ethnic Albanian Islamist extremist group called Bejtul Muhaxhirin. The page consists of 46 uploads: 32 documents, 13 videos and one audio in the Albanian language, including biographies, texts and sermons from known violent Islamist extremists, such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Nasir al-Fahd, Ahmad Musa Jibril, Faris al-Zahrani and Turki al-Binali.⁷⁵

This international right-wing and Islamist extremist context, and the Western Balkans' place in it, is very important for understanding how networks influence the creation, amplification and dissemination of regional narratives. It is impossible to fully understand Western Balkan (online) radicalisation patterns without understanding how global grievances and international influences and partnerships function in the region.

Western Balkans Impact on Global Online Extremist Communities

While the global extremist landscape is influencing Western Balkans extremist organisations, Western Balkans narratives are also successfully impacting global (online) extremist movements, and have inspired individuals to commit terrorist attacks. Just as the Great Replacement conspiracy narrative offered a linking point for the international right-wing extremist organisations to access the Western Balkans, so too have distinct Western Balkans narratives provided inspiration for the development of the online extreme right-wing community. What seems like inconsequential internet content involving Western Balkans references in right-wing chatrooms was found in the manifestos and internet interactions of right-wing terrorists.

Namely, one of the most notorious right-wing extremists, Anders Breivik, who was responsible for the 2011 Norway attacks that resulted in 77 casualties — a majority of them children — made nearly 1 000 mentions of the Yugoslav Wars in his manifesto.⁷⁶ Another right-wing terrorist, Eric Frein, who orchestrated the 2014 attack on the Pennsylvania State Police, was known to frequently wear Serbian nationalist uniforms.⁷⁷ However, the role of the Western Balkans narratives in international right-wing terrorism was most visible during the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand, terrorist attack. Brenton Tarrant, a white supremacist, live-streamed his attack on Muslim places of worship on Facebook, which resulted in 51 murders and 40 injuries. There were two notable references to the Western Balkans during the live stream. First, his guns and magazines were covered with, among other things, the names of prominent figures who fought the Ottoman Empire, including historical figures from the Western Balkans such as Miloš Obilić, Marko Miljanov Popović,

⁷² Igor Jovanovic, Pro-ISIS Video Calls for Balkan Caliphate. <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/07/15/new-isis-threats-to-balkan-countries/>

⁷³ Aaron Y. Zelin, New video message from Hayy'at Tahrir al-Sham: "Albanian snipers in al-Sham". <https://jihadology.net/2018/08/04/new-video-message-from-hayyat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-albanian-snipers-in-al-sham/>

⁷⁴ Milo Comeford and Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans, 1-3.

⁷⁵ Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities and Religion, 24.

⁷⁶ Jasmin Mujanović, The Balkan Roots of the Far Right's "Great Replacement" Theory. <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-balkan-roots-of-the-far-rights-great-replacement-theory/>

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Lazar of Serbia, Gjergj Arianiti, Novak Vujošević and Bajo Pivljanin.⁷⁸ Secondly, on his way to the first mosque, Tarrant played several right-wing anthems, including a song released during the Bosnian War titled 'Karadžiću, vodi Srbe svoje [Karadzic, lead your Serbs]', also known as 'Bog je Srbin i on će nas čuvati [God is a Serb and he will protect us].' The song and its video recording were created by three Bosnian Serbs to lift the morale of fellow soldiers in 1993. The song's lyrics celebrate the former Bosnian Serb President, now-convicted war criminal, Radovan Karadžić, and make genocidal threats to Bosniaks and Croats in their way.⁷⁹ Over the years the song came to be known in extreme right-wing circles as 'Serbia Strong' or 'Remove Kebab Song', with 'kebab' being used as a derogatory term for Muslims.⁸⁰ The song was co-opted by the global far-right as it gained international prominence and became more famous in international circles than in the Western Balkans. This is illustrated by the fact that YouTube videos of the song received thousands of comments mostly in English.⁸¹ Equally important, there have also been reports of incidents of the song being sung in China, Poland and Slovakia.⁸² Tarrant was also a fan of the song and the extremist ideology that it symbolises, as he referred to himself as a "kebab removalist" in his manifesto.

To understand how the song rose to prominence one needs to understand the online extreme right-wing meme culture. The quality of the song and its lyrics are not necessarily what spurred its fame, but the memes that were inspired by it. Richard Dawkins first coined the term meme to mean "a unit of cultural transmission" that conveys an idea designed to change a person's world view and can spread "virally" from one person to another.⁸³ In the context of the internet, a meme is defined as "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media."⁸⁴ Memes have become a dominant form of messaging and expression in the digital age as they are easy and free to make.⁸⁵ Similarly as with other tools, malign actors have used memes to sow discord and blur the lines between fact and fiction.⁸⁶ The 'Remove Kebab', also known as 'Serbia Strong', meme became popular among right-wing circles not only because of its origin, which reinforces an obvious anti-Muslim subtext, but also because of its humorously odd phrasing, and was used by parts of the online community to refer to ethnic cleansing in a satirical way.⁸⁷ Memes like this are created based on edgy humour to attract a young audience that is receptive to a less serious way of communication. Some argue that memes have done more to radicalise individuals than any manifesto.⁸⁸ The use of memes among VRWE groups is also becoming more common in the Western Balkans as well.

Western Balkans-Specific Trends

Despite being connected and influenced by the global online extremist landscape, there are Western Balkans-specific online extremist trends unique to the region. As described above, these trends have developed based on the same unique demographics and history of the region, but they have no broader relevance outside the Western Balkans. They show that the challenge of online radicalisation is fundamentally regional, not constrained by country-level influences, apart from exceptional circumstances. There are a couple of reasons for this: (1) the legacies of the (unresolved) conflicts in the 1990s and longstanding inter-ethnic tensions continuously fuel cross-border hate and extremism; (2) the spread and similarity of languages across the region allows for the smooth sharing of (extremist) ideologies and narratives; and (3) the multicultural characteristics of each state, dynamics of identity and broader cross-cutting cleavages create vulnerabilities and potential barriers among the population. For example, ethnic Albanian Salafi-jihadi imams from Kosovo can influence Albanian language communities all over the Western Balkans, but most notably in Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. On the other hand, extreme right-

⁷⁸ Daily Sabah, New Zealand mosque shooter names his 'idols' on weapons he used in massacre.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/asia/2019/03/15/new-zealand-mosque-shooter-names-his-idols-on-weapons-he-used-in-massacre>

⁷⁹ Dr. Hikmet Karčić, *Far-Right Movements and Symbolism in the Western Balkans: A Handbook*, 13.

⁸⁰ Jasmin Mujanović, *The Balkan Roots of the Far Right's "Great Replacement" Theory*.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Dr. Hikmet Karčić, *Far-Right Movements and Symbolism in the Western Balkans: A Handbook*, 13.

⁸³ Maxime Dafaure, *Memes and the metapolitics of the alt-right*, 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁵ Taraneh Azar, *Propaganda of the digital age: How memes are weaponized to spread disinformation*.

<https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2022/09/20/memes-disinformation-trump-maralago-jan-6-hearings-covid/7832934001/>

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Maxime Dafaure, *Memes and the metapolitics of the alt-right*, 5.

⁸⁸ Taraneh Azar, *Propaganda of the digital age: How memes are weaponized to spread disinformation*.

wing Serbian nationalist narratives can influence Serb populations across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.⁸⁹ This section is composed of three parts looking at key online trends among extreme right-wing groups, extreme Islamists and gender-based extremist dynamics.

The Western Balkans Online Extreme Right-Wing Community

There are different terms used, often interchangeably, when discussing the extreme right wing in the Western Balkans, including “including radical right, extreme rights, right-wing extremist, neo-fascist, neo-Nazi, neo-populist, anti-immigrant, ultra-right or far right, new right and right populist.”⁹⁰ A 2019 ‘Helpdesk Report’ Commissioned by the UK government, supplement by Dr Karčić’s handbook on right-wing symbolism, characterises these movements as:

- Advocating ethnically based politics.
- Continual reference to the 1990s wars.
- Glorification of war criminals and ethnic cleansing [and genocide] from the 1990s.
- A belief in victimisation.
- A desire to redraw state borders on ethnic lines.
- Hatred or ‘securitisation’ of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups.
- The use of violence.
- Anti-NATO and anti-EU politics.
- Pro-Russian attitudes and links.
- Links with organised crime.
- Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim sentiment.
- Genocide denial.⁹¹

In addition to this list, the paper considers these groups as being populist and having: anti-immigrant, anti-Roma, anti-minority, anti-gender/feminist and anti-authority sentiment, the last one particularly evidenced through the spread of COVID-19 conspiracy narratives.

Technological advances and the recent political, economic and health crisis have not only made right-wing extremist narratives internationalised, but also mainstreamed and normalised into Western Balkans societies.⁹² This is particularly problematic where there is an alignment of right-wing extremist narratives and mainstream politics in purporting irredentist goals because of their potential to enhance reciprocal radicalisation and fracture already fragile relationships between Western Balkans states, as well as different communities within the borders of one country.⁹³ Online activity in this regard is particularly dangerous and poses a serious security challenge for governments in the region because right-wing extremists have become increasingly confident and willing to openly share extremist narratives and symbolism to denote their ideological belonging.⁹⁴ This significantly impacts the scale of online radicalisation since an individual’s journey generally starts by being exposed to extremist material on mainstream social media platforms and moves to more closed and encrypted applications.⁹⁵ The lack of government-led responses to online activities by right-wing extremist groups and communities resembles the time when Islamist extremists openly used mainstream social media platforms as Daesh was growing in power and significance. There are multiple reasons for this outcome, including lack of understanding of the online extremist landscape coupled with an

⁸⁹ Milo Comeford and Simeon Dukić, *Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans*, 1-2.

⁹⁰ Dr. Hikmet Karčić, *Far-Right Movements and Symbolism in the Western Balkans: A Handbook*, 6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹² Mirza Buljubašić, *Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE*, 14.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁴ Dr. Hikmet Karčić, *Far-Right Movements and Symbolism in the Western Balkans: A Handbook*.

⁹⁵ Nermina Kuloglija, *Bosnian Far-Right Movement Weds Bosniak Nationalism, Neo-Nazism*.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/06/02/bosnian-far-right-movement-weds-bosniak-nationalism-neo-nazism/>

absence of political will. For instance, while across the Western Balkans authorities and groups are monitoring online hate speech and hate crime, cases are often not reported and perpetrators rarely prosecuted. In Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2010 and 2019, the courts issued only 24 final judgements for provoking hatred despite the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina logging 33 cases in the first three months of 2019.⁹⁶

To properly portray the VRWE online radicalisation threat in the region, it is important to understand some of the most prominent extremist narratives and actors. As indicated above, many VRWE groups in the Western Balkans are ultranationalist with irredentist ideologies and visions of redrawing already existing political borders. For example, the Albanian National Army, a VRWE group that operates in the Balkans more broadly where there is a significant Albanian population, works towards creating a Greater Albania.⁹⁷ While this organisation has limited influence, maps of Greater Albania have often appeared offline and online. Namely, during an UEFA European Championship 2016 qualification game between Serbia and Albania in Belgrade, a drone propelling the Greater Albanian flag approached the football pitch causing a serious incident.⁹⁸ Online, the Greater Albanian map found its place in a tweet posted by British pop star Dua Lipa receiving more than 28.7 thousand likes and over 14.2 thousand retweets.⁹⁹ The ethnic Albanian artist with roots from Kosovo published the controversial image in support of an initiative calling for Apple Maps to show Kosovo as an independent nation. Elsewhere in the Western Balkans, Serbian VRWE groups are committed to the creation of a “Greater Serbia”. Tracing its roots back to World War II and the Chetnik movement, the idea for a Greater Serbian state rose to prominence during the Yugoslav wars. Many of the current Serbian VRWE organisations are using names and symbolism inspired by the Chetnik movement, adopting its ideology and goals. Similarly as in the Albanian case, the idea of a Greater Serbia can be found not only on the fringes but also in mainstream online messaging. For instance, a high-ranking politician referred to a creation of a new “Serbian World”, an idea that all Serbs in the Western Balkans should be a part of the same political sphere, which many see as a substitute for a Greater Serbia.¹⁰⁰ In addition to the concepts of a Greater Albania and Greater Serbia, there are two more irredentist ideologies in the Western Balkans calling for a Greater Bosnia and United (Greater) Macedonia. Moreover, irredentist ideologies from Bulgaria, Croatia and Hungary have claims on territories in the Western Balkans and are perceived as threats to the region. These ultranationalist ideologies have been perceived as a threat and co-opted by VRWE groups for reciprocal radicalisation. For instances, right-wing extremists in North Macedonia use the perceived threat of a Greater Albania as an excuse to incite hateful sentiment towards Albanians. A study on online radicalisation in North Macedonia found that Greater Albania is frequently brought up in Macedonian language hateful online discourses to demonise and ‘other’ an entire group, and justify hateful sentiment, and even violence.¹⁰¹ In this regard it is important to highlight online discourses in the country emphasising the dichotomy of “patriots and traitors” and calling for appropriate means to deal with treason and the individuals who “sell” the Macedonian identity and state.¹⁰²

In addition to irredentist ultranationalist ideologies, the Western Balkans has also seen a (re-)emergence of neo-Nazi ideology and groups. The Albanian Third Position is an openly neo-Nazi group that promotes Albanian traditionalism and racism and opposes communism and democratic governance.¹⁰³ The group uses the internet to post satirical content in Albanian and English to attract youth to its cause. Moreover, football ultras in Albania are also promoting neo-Nazism. The most notable group in this regard are FC Tirona’s ultras supporters ‘Tirona Fanatics’ and affiliated subgroups, who are openly anti-communist and use neo-Nazi

⁹⁶ Mladen Lakić, Hate Crimes in Bosnia: Under-Reported and Rarely Prosecuted. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/26/hate-crimes-in-bosnia-under-reported-and-rarely-prosecuted/>

⁹⁷ Mirza Buljubašić, Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE, 5.

⁹⁸ Guardian Sports, Albania awarded 3-0 win after Serbia match abandoned over drone stunt. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/jul/10/albania-serbia-match-abandoned-drone>

⁹⁹ BBC News, Dua Lipa sparks controversy with ‘Greater Albania’ map tweet. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53483451>

¹⁰⁰ Nikola Đorđević, Serbian World — a dangerous idea? <https://emerging-europe.com/news/serbian-world-a-dangerous-idea/>
See the statement here: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/6/25/vulin-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-proces-koji-se-ne-moze-zaustaviti>

¹⁰¹ Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities and Religion, 16-17.

¹⁰² Ramadan Ilazi *et al.*, Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the Balkans. https://www.pave-project.eu/publications/PAVE_870769_D5.1_publication_layout.pdf, 22.

¹⁰³ Mirza Buljubašić, Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE, 5.

symbolism.¹⁰⁴ Namely, the group has adopted a flag that is very similar to the one used by the SS Division Skanderbeg, an ethnic Albanian unit that collaborated with the Nazis and operated in Kosovo.¹⁰⁵ The group is active online and promotes hate and historical revisionism and builds networks with like-minded groups from the region.¹⁰⁶

Ultras groups in other parts of the region are also increasingly adopting neo-Nazi ideologies. This is true in the case of Bosnian Croatian ultras. Skripari, supporters of FC Široki Brijeg, have openly posted pictures on Facebook with Nazi salutes and even displayed the Nazi flag at a football game in 2010, a couple of rows above the Vatican flag.¹⁰⁷ The Croatian far-right is inspired by and based on the a clero-fascist and ultranationalist Ustaša movement that led the Nazi puppet Independent State of Croatia and was responsible for some of the worst atrocities during World War II. Ustaša symbolism is present throughout parts of Bosnia where mostly ethnic Croats live. For instance, neo-Nazi extremists have regularly target Partisan memorials, including the one in Mostar that is desecrated with Ustaša and Nazi symbols and threats against Bosniaks.¹⁰⁸ Croatian neo-Nazis are also active in Croatia, the diaspora and online. On the internet, neo-Nazi groups are involved in spreading anti-Semitic, anti-Roma and anti-Serbian sentiment based on historic revisionism. Namely, these VRWE groups have edited Wikipedia articles in Croatian to deny the Ustaša legacy.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, another study by the Resonant Voices Initiative found more than 10 000 users in Croatia who posted Ustaša-relevant content on Facebook.¹¹⁰

The Serbian VRWE ecosystem is also becoming increasingly prominent and overt in their following and using of neo-Nazi symbolism and narratives. These organisations include Stormfront Serbia, Obraz (Honour), National Serbian Front, Blood and Honour, and Serbian Action.¹¹¹ The increase in appeal of neo-Nazi sentiment among the Serbian far right is also evident online. At one point, the neo-Nazi white supremacist forum Stormfront boasted around 180 000 posts on its south-eastern European-focused forum, mostly covering the Western Balkans. At the same time, according to Google Trends, Serbia and Croatia showed some of the highest proportional search interest in Stormfront globally.¹¹² Leaders of the above-mentioned organisations are also very active and influential on social media.

Bosnia also has a small but emerging neo-Nazi Bosniak movement. The Bosnian Movement of National Pride is the most prominent group in this space, operating under the slogan “Bog, Bosna, Bošnjaci [God, Bosnia, Bosniaks]”.¹¹³ Despite being a relatively small movement, the organisation has been successful in raising its profile through its online activity, particularly via Facebook.¹¹⁴

The Western Balkans Online Extreme Islamist Community

Violent Islamist extremist content flourishes online across the Western Balkans and its effect has had some influence on individuals and communities. A report examining radicalisation pathways for foreign terrorist fighters from North Macedonia found that video content with radical themes and violence on social media attracted them to extremist ideology.¹¹⁵ Family members of the incarcerated terrorist offenders confirmed that they spent significant time on the internet watching videos of fighters and narratives of Muslims being mistreated.¹¹⁶ Research respondents in a Berghof Foundation study have also seen a similar uncontrolled spread of extremist content, which is believed to have an effect on radicalisation and recruitment to

¹⁰⁴ Fabio Bego, Do Albanians like Fascism? An Iconographical Investigation on Social Media Material. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/01/03/do-albanians-like-fascism-an-iconographical-investigation-on-social-media-material/>

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ See: <https://www.24sata.hr/sport/skripari-197989/galerija-160884>

¹⁰⁸ Dr. Hikmet Karčić, Far-Right Movements and Symbolism in the Western Balkans: A Handbook, 25.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁰ Marija Ristic *et al.*, Far-Right Balkan Groups Flourish on the Net. <https://resonantvoices.info/far-right-balkan-groups-flourish-on-the-net/>

¹¹¹ Mirza Buljubašić, Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE, 12-13.

¹¹² Milo Comeford and Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans, 1-3.

¹¹³ Dr. Hikmet Karčić, Far-Right Movements and Symbolism in the Western Balkans: A Handbook, 7.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Aleksandar Vanchoski *et al.*, Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF): Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia. https://kbb9z40cmb2apwafcho9v3j-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/nexus_ftf_rrr_eng.pdf, 8.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

violence.¹¹⁷ Local imams have stressed that this content is not only shared by radical preachers but it is magnified by individuals who are misled by rampant disinformation online. However, it is difficult to ascertain how much impact this online content had on the radicalisation process, and whether it had more influence on specific demographic groups.

In addition to the extremist Islamist material mentioned above that was translated and disseminated in local languages, extremist imams from the region and their online footprints play an important role in online radicalisation as well. These imams found safe havens online where they were vocal and overt with their extremist messaging and successful in recruiting support, particularly at the time when Daesh was making territorial gains in the Middle East. For instance, one of the most notorious radical clerics in Bosnia, Bilal Bosnic, who was jailed for 7 years for the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters to the ranks of Daesh, had a vast online presence. He was openly calling for violence against non-believers, urging individuals to sacrifice themselves for a greater cause in a sermon published on YouTube that gained over 21 000 views.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Rexhep Memishi, an extreme Islamist imam from North Macedonia, who was also jailed for recruitment of foreign terrorists, created his own online presence through his 'Minber Media' YouTube channel and Facebook page, which are still active despite his imprisonment because they are designed in a way that do not violate the platforms' community guidelines.¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, recently extremist preachers have changed their tone and means of communication. Due to increased efforts by authorities and social media platforms to monitor and distort extremist messaging, Islamist extremists have significantly sophisticated their language to avoid censorship and moved to encrypted messaging applications to disseminate their ideologies and mobilise individuals.¹²⁰ For example, one can find extremist material on platforms such as Telegram and TamTam in channels associated with the group Bejtul Muhaxhirin and other affiliates.¹²¹ This change presents a different challenge for practitioners as the radicalisation pathway of some individuals moves from public platforms into encrypted groups where access is limited, and hence designing interventions to respond is harder. Also, even if the new style of extremist messaging does not directly support terrorism or the commission of violent acts, it generates serious polarisation among different communities contributing to radicalisation and thus undermining democratic norms.

Gender-Specific Online Extremist Landscape

Despite being at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, extreme Islamists and right-wing groups share similar views and narratives when it comes to women and girls. These are centred on a common vision based on 'traditional' gender roles at home and in the public sphere while at the same time condemning feminist movements.¹²² Social media platforms have been instrumental in spreading anti-feminism messages and seeking support for their ideologies by individuals with a genuine sense of grievance. For instance, Elvedin Pezić, a Bosnian Salafi preacher with more than 325 000 followers on Facebook, posted online that Western society morally collapsed when women stopped being mothers.¹²³ Additionally, on microblogging platforms such as Reddit, 4chan and 8chan where anonymity is protected, newly formed 'incel' communities are openly expressing hostile misogynistic narratives denying women's rights, and inciting violence against women who are drifting from traditional roles.¹²⁴ Incels are defined as individuals who regard themselves as involuntarily celibate and express resentment against those who are sexually active. These communities,

¹¹⁷ Engjellushe Morina *et al.*, Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism Lessons learned from the Western Balkans, 28.

¹¹⁸ Fatjona Mejdini *et al.*, Balkan Jihadi Warriors Remain Safe on the Net. <https://resonantvoices.info/balkan-jihadi-warriors-remain-safe-on-the-net/>

¹¹⁹ Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities and Religion, 20-21.

¹²⁰ RAN, Online radicalisation and P/CVE approaches in the Western Balkans, 2-4.

¹²¹ Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities and Religion, 25.

¹²² Jessie Barton Hronesova and Sanela Hodžić, Portrayals of Women on Ethno-Nationalist and Radical Islamic Websites in Bosnia And Herzegovina, 176-180.

¹²³ Nejra Veljan, Extreme Entitlement: Misogyny, Anti-Feminism in Far-Right Recruitment. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/10/extreme-entitlement-misogyny-anti-feminism-in-far-right-recruitment/>

¹²⁴ Boris Milanović, "To Conclude, Women Are a Mistake"¹—A Study of Serbian User Discourse on 4Chan's /Pol/ Board on Women within Political Ideology, 195-205.

mostly composed of young men, frequently target women online because they perceived themselves as sexually rejected victims.¹²⁵

Extreme right-wing groups also instrumentalise women in broader anti-immigrant and Islamophobic narratives. Namely, members of Leviathan, a Serbian political movement with a significant public profile and almost 300 000 followers on Facebook, use social media to express its rage against migrants, feeding into narratives that they are rapists while assuming the role of protectors of women from an alien Islamic rape culture.¹²⁶ Even more important, social media users are praising the group for its stance on “traditional family values” while supporting hierarchical gender norms and opposing women empowerment.¹²⁷ Some narratives online go a step further to justify violence and rape of women. For instance, former Croatian MP Ivan Pernar stated on Telegram that women are more welcoming of migrants because “2/3 of [them] had a fantasy about being raped [...]”.¹²⁸ It is important to note that while women-centred narratives are very important for mobilising men, there are also distinct narratives designed to radicalise and recruit women to malign groups and causes. For instance, Daesh continuously used online platforms, namely Telegram, to disseminate narratives around women empowerment and agency, encouraging them to make a willing decision to travel to the Middle East.¹²⁹ All of these narratives, whether inspired by violent or non-violent extreme right-wing or Islamist groups, are exploiting anti-feminist and misogynist sentiments and are used as a recruitment tool. Countering these narratives online should be prioritised because evidence suggests that supporting women empowerment is associated with resilience to violent extremism.¹³⁰

Western Balkans Responses to Online Radicalisation

Despite a lack of robust research to understand the effect of online supply of extremist narratives on internet consumers, Western Balkans governments stress the perceived threat of online radicalisation. Many of them have listed this challenge in the National Strategies to Counter Violent Extremism, and some have even developed dedicated structures to respond to this issue - for example the Montenegrin government has created an Internet Referral Unit - while others are leveraging existing departments and/or structures to monitor extremist content.¹³¹ However, despite this prioritisation, there is little data on government-led initiatives to counter online radicalisation. Wherever these initiatives exist, there is no publicly available evaluation that gives insight on their impact.

Responses to counter this online radicalisation vary. They are generally categorised as supply and demand side responses depending on their approach. On the supply side, different stakeholders work to disrupt the use of the internet for terrorist purposes and extremist messaging. Governments, practitioners and civil society work closely with technology companies to moderate and filter problematic content, and collect data for law enforcement investigations. Additionally, they've relied on launching strategic communications campaigns to counter and provide alternatives to extremist narratives, and operationalised 'fact-checking' platforms to dispel mis-/disinformation. On the demand side, practitioners are working to strengthen capacities of internet users, regardless of age, to better navigate the online space and appropriately engage with problematic content. The next two sections will provide an overview of some of these supply and demand side responses that have been deployed in the region, and draw from European practice that could be beneficial for Western Balkans stakeholders.

¹²⁵ Ben Zimmer, How 'Incel' Got Hijacked. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/05/08/intel-involuntary-celibate-movement-218324/>

¹²⁶ Nejra Veljan, Extreme Entitlement: Misogyny, Anti-Feminism in Far-Right Recruitment.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Vesë Kelmendi and Rudinë Jakupi, Countering the myths of IS: How to counter the IS narrative online? The case of Albanian speaking countries, 30-33.

¹³⁰ Countering Violent Extremism Baseline Program: Research Findings – Bosnia & Herzegovina. <https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/BiH-CVE-Survey-December-2018-Final-X-1.pdf>

¹³¹ Milo Comeford and Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans, 2-3.

Supply Side Responses

Disrupting extremist and hateful messaging online has been a key segment of counter-extremism initiatives. It is based on a simple premise that if extremist content is removed from the internet, then it will not be able to impact users and hence the broader society. Law enforcement agencies are working closely with online service providers to ensure community standards are on par with national regulations aimed at safeguarding individuals from hate speech and extremist narratives. This includes supporting them through referrals and requests for removal of content, and sharing data to facilitate law enforcement investigations. While each Western Balkans country is doing this independently, Europol's Internet Referral Unit is providing support through capacity building, awareness raising, information sharing, and access to its referral mechanism that aims to remove extremist and terrorist content.¹³² While disruption of extremist activity and messaging online through censorship and content removal is an important tool within broader counter-extremism responses in the short term, it is not a solution to online radicalisation, and at points can even have counterproductive results. Practitioners have warned against censorship, insisting that it can be misused by governments to eliminate critical voices using counterterrorism excuses, thereby violating fundamental human rights and freedoms. Also, the effect of online censorship is questionable because extremist voices can re-establish themselves under different names or on less accessible platforms. Equally important, censorship can have detrimental effects by reinforcing beliefs that regulators are corrupt and aiming to hide the truth, and in turn strengthening extremist voices.¹³³ Hence, it is important to utilise, and even prioritise, other supply side responses to extremist messaging.

Fact-checking

As mentioned above, extremist groups use disinformation and conspiracy narratives to polarise communities, radicalise individuals and mobilise support. To test the validity of these narratives, fact-checkers have emerged to raise awareness of and counter disinformation. Fact-checking media organisations have sprouted across the region and are becoming increasingly prominent and have formed alliances to consolidate resources and jointly counter the cross-border effects of disinformation. For example, SEE Check is a network of six organisations from south-eastern Europe that hosts fact-checking platforms: Fake News Tragač, Faktograf.hr, Raskrikavanje.rs, Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me and Razkrinkavanje.si.¹³⁴ It focuses on deconstructing fake news in the Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Montenegrin and Slovenian. Since these languages are similar, the six organisations are able to amplify each other's research and effectively allocate resources to tackle the most prominent conspiracy narratives, disinformation and historical revisionism disseminated online. There are other fact-checking organisations within the region that operate outside this network as well. For instance, in North Macedonia the platforms Vistinomer and F2N2 produce daily pieces debunking fake news, while in Albania and Kosovo the fact-checking services Faktoje and Hibrid.info, respectively, are leading the charge. These platforms function based on basic investigative journalism principles to seek, collate, corroborate and verify information.

Practitioner takeaways: Debunking online extremist messaging can be an effective way to address online radicalisation. Practitioners can use the above-mentioned platforms to check whether a piece of information is true, or use their resources to perform fact-checking themselves. However, it is important for practitioners to understand the extent to which debunking should be used when engaging polarised communities or individuals vulnerable to extremist messaging because it could have a counter-effect, particularly when discussing sensitive issues, and entrench conspiracy narratives.

Counter/alternative narrative online campaigns

Counter-narrative initiatives address supply-side extremist content by offering target audiences a rebuttal to extremist claims. There is limited empirical evaluation on the impact of counter-narratives in responding to extremist content because the literature does not provide a broader understanding of the causal relationship

¹³² EUROPOL, Targeted: propaganda material disseminated in the languages of the Western Balkan countries. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/targeted-propaganda-material-disseminated-in-languages-of-western-balkan-countries>

¹³³ RAN, Far-Right Extremism: A Practical Introduction. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-12/ran_fre_factbook_20191205_en.pdf, 24.

¹³⁴ For more information about SEE Check visit: <https://seecheck.org/index.php/members/#rskba>

between consumption of extremist material and engagement in violent extremism.¹³⁵ Despite this significant limitation, strategic communication campaigns based on counter-narratives, which counter extremist messaging, and alternative narratives, which provide pluralist values and the respect of human rights, have been launched globally, including in the Western Balkans. A prominent region-wide programme includes the Resonant Voices Initiative, which aims to challenge polarising, inflammatory and radicalising narratives. Facilitated by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, Propulsion and Groundscout, the initiative has launched several campaigns targeting not just residents in Western Balkan countries but also diaspora communities that are vulnerable to extremist communities. Their campaign #NijeToBašTako [#ItsNotLikeItSeems] aimed to show personal migrant experiences of Western Balkans citizens and their integration pathways in Europe.¹³⁶ Another regional campaign led by The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies called 'Life Stories' features personal experiences of returned foreign terrorist fighters in an effort to dissuade support for Daesh and other extreme Islamist groups.¹³⁷ Among the 32 videos produced for this initiative, there is a story of a former extremist from North Macedonia who desired to travel to Syria to protect innocent people from the atrocities of the Assad regime, strongly affected by shocking images and videos accessed online. However, the disillusionment experienced by friends and acquaintances returned from the war, as well as the influence of his family, prevented him to travel to Syria. This individual reflects that they are happy with their decision not to go, which is considered a strong message to individuals at risk of adopting extremist ideas, coming from a former extremist.¹³⁸

Country-specific counter-narrative campaigns are also present in the region. For instance, a Bosnian youth-led initiative, Citizens Against Terrorism, aims to provide a safe space online by countering hate speech and extremist ideologies through informative audiovisual content including memes, vlogs and podcasts.¹³⁹ Additionally, imams across the region have taken it upon themselves to counter extremist messaging online. For example, Mustafa Jusufspahić, an imam from Belgrade, regularly uses his Facebook and Twitter accounts to promote religious tolerance and social cohesion by communicating with his followers.¹⁴⁰ Similarly in Kosovo, a group of Islamic theologians launched the counter-narrative portal Fol Tash [Speak Now], to counter prominent extreme Islamist narratives.¹⁴¹ In addition to these grassroot civil society-led campaigns, government authorities have also engaged in alternative messaging. For instance, the government of North Macedonia launched the campaign 'One Society for All' to celebrate the country's multi-cultural composition and traditions by promoting diversity and pluralism.¹⁴²

Practitioner takeaways: It is challenging to effectively evaluate the impact of these initiatives on dynamics of online radicalisation with the existing data. Despite this drawback, counter-narratives continue to be an important tool in online counter-extremism responses to win the hearts and minds of individuals and communities. However, there is greater chance for the campaigns to be more successful if they follow key instructions. In accordance with the KISMI approach, the narratives need to be dominated by PS-PS (Persuasive, Simple, Positive, Short) messages augmented by TANDEM (Thematically Accumulated, Narrative-Drive, Emotion Motivators) messaging.¹⁴³ This approach is particularly relevant for vulnerable communities experiencing a crisis. Additionally, the RAN Communications and Narratives Working Group has developed guidance to support practitioners to develop effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns. Referred to as GAMMMA+ (Goal, Audience, Message, Messenger, Media and Action), the model provides clear, practical and concise guidelines for anyone planning an (online) campaign.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁵ Alastair G. Reed and Haroro J. Ingram, A practical guide to the first rule of CTCVE messaging: Do violent extremists no favours. https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/reed_ingram-a_practical_guide_to_the_first_rule_of_ctcve.pdf, 6.

¹³⁶ Find more information about the campaign here: <https://resonantvoices.info/nije-to-bas-tako/>

¹³⁷ Ramadan Ilazi *et al.*, Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the Balkans, 34.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹³⁹ RAN, Online radicalisation and P/CVE approaches in the Western Balkans, 5.

¹⁴⁰ Fatjona Mejdini *et al.*, Balkan Imams Take Counter-Extremism Struggle Online. <https://resonantvoices.info/balkan-imams-take-counter-extremism-struggle-online/>

¹⁴¹ Milo Comeford and Simeon Dukić, Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans, 4.

¹⁴² Ramadan Ilazi *et al.*, Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the Balkans, 32-33.

¹⁴³ Alastair G. Reed and Haroro J. Ingram, A practical guide to the first rule of CTCVE messaging: Do violent extremists no favours, 9.

¹⁴⁴ RAN, Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-12/ran_cn_academy_creating_implementing_effective_campaigns_brussels_14-15112019_en.pdf

Demand Side Responses

Consumer-focused programmes are equally important as dealing with supply-side extremist content online. If individuals are not susceptible to messaging aimed to radicalise and recruit to extremism, then malign actors will be unable to push their political agenda. Demand side responses vary in their approach, but are ultimately designed to address vulnerabilities and even some of the push and pull factors that drive individuals to extremism. These will be further explored in this section.

Redirecting

To circumvent internet users from accessing extremist material, technology companies have partnered with counter-extremism organisations to redirect individuals to counter-narrative content. Piloted by Jigsaw, a unit within Google that explores and counters online harms, The Redirect Method automatically advertises curated YouTube content with constructive alternative and counter-narratives whenever individuals search for extremist material. This approach avoids many ethical dilemmas of censorship because no material is removed and users are given a choice whether they would like to access the counter-narrative content being advertised in their browser.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, this method amplifies already existing campaign initiatives in relevant languages without necessarily needing to rely on the development of new in-house material. There is no publicly available data on whether any technology companies have tailored their redirect method to support any of the Western Balkans languages. While this approach seems promising and there is existing data about reach, it is difficult to assess its effectiveness because there is no information on impactful engagement with target audiences.

Practitioner takeaways: The Redirect Method is in essence an automated and target messaging campaign using key terms and platform algorithms to reach particular groups. It is important for practitioners from the region to work with technology companies and other relevant stakeholders to sensitise a redirect initiative to local languages, jargon and cultural specificities. In the meantime, practitioners should also look at opportunities to intensify online presence on social media platforms and applications that host problematic content in order to directly engage target audiences. A RAN LOCAL online meeting on 27-28 May 2021 captured not only key challenges but also practical tips and tricks practitioners can use to strengthen their online engagement with vulnerable individuals and groups.¹⁴⁶

Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy

Education is at the forefront of demand side responses to extremism. When it comes to countering online radicalisation specifically, digital citizenship, media literacy and critical thinking educational programmes are most relevant. Digital citizenship education is key because it allows internet users to navigate the internet better by addressing harmful content and creating online safe spaces. Media literacy is equally important because it provides individuals with the skills to better understand, assess and engage with online content, including skills to identify disinformation through corroboration and verification. Finally, critical thinking skills are at the core of an individual's ability to independently and confidently form opinions and assess information. This paper already outlined regional issues connected to media (il)literacy and an educational system that is not fit for purpose. There are multiple initiatives across the region to address this issue. Some of them aim to make structural long-term changes while others are tailored to achieve priority short- and medium-term goals. A 5-year programme led by IREX in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science of North Macedonia aims to integrate critical information engagement skills and awareness into existing coursework and teacher training programmes across all levels of education.¹⁴⁷ The programme also provides non-formal education opportunities and amplifies youth voices by providing them an opportunity to produce media content. IREX has implemented similar media literacy capacity building programmes in other Western Balkan countries, and has most recently launched a Balkans Regional Media Literacy Network to

¹⁴⁵ Alastair G. Reed and Haroro J. Ingram, A practical guide to the first rule of CTCVE messaging: Do violent extremists no favours, 5-6.

¹⁴⁶ RAN, An online P/CVE approach for local authorities: challenges, tips & tricks. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/ran-local-online-pcve-approach-local-authorities-challenges-tips-tricks-online-meeting-27-28-may_en

¹⁴⁷ Learn more here: <https://www.irex.org/project/youthink-media-literacy-north-macedonia>

serve as a hub for experts, organisations and programmes to collaborate on this topic.¹⁴⁸ There are similar educational programmes aimed to improve critical thinking and media literacy capacities. For example, the Council of Europe (CoE) has an expansive media and information literacy programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina targeting government stakeholders mandated to create, implement and evaluate strategic state-wide media literacy frameworks. Additionally, as a part of this programme, the CoE has developed and disseminated useful resources for practitioners to implement good practices relevant to media literacy.¹⁴⁹ The OSCE is another major regional security organisation that delivers similar media literacy trainings through its country offices. Some of them are tailored for government representatives while others are designed for youth. There are also smaller-scale programmes on media literacy and critical thinking education led by grassroots organisations. For instance, Ponder is a programme in Kosovo supported by UNICEF and the OSCE that aims to foster critical approaches to information through a 3-day workshop followed by a month-long internship in (online) media companies for the most successful participant.¹⁵⁰ Finally, Young Cities, the youth pillar of the Strong Cities Network, joined forces with the Municipality of Čair (Skopje) to deliver a critical thinking-focused digital citizenship educational programme inspired by the 'Be Internet Citizens' module.¹⁵¹ The programme built the capacities of middle and high school teachers not only regarding media literacy and critical thinking, but also raised their awareness of alternative messaging and responding to online harms such as bullying and polarising content. Once they went through the training, they engaged students and parents on digital citizenship.

Practitioner takeaways: The various educational programmes show the importance of working with various target audiences, including government representatives, educators, youth and adults. It is important to tailor these programmes based on relevant country-wide or localised priorities. While 'deep-dive' programmes that aim to make systemic and sustainable changes such as IREX's initiative are important, smaller programmes that can be easily deployed to address immediate needs among vulnerable groups can be also valuable. When delivering educational programmes, they should be focused on one-off trainings, but should also allow opportunities for employing the newly developed skills, whether through the development of campaigns or other media materials.

Recommendations for Local Practitioners

1. Prioritise research that aims to provide insights on the causal relationship between online supply-side extremist content and radicalisation pathways. Some of the research focused on analysing these dynamics mentioned in this paper can serve as an inspiration for Western Balkans stakeholders. Any evidence in this regard can support practitioners to develop a set of responses that are most relevant to the actual risk factors.
2. Commission and carry out further research to build understanding of the online dynamic threat landscape. There is a growing literature on extremist narratives in the Western Balkans that is encouraging; however, practitioners would benefit from more analysis utilising software to collect and process big data to get a better understanding of the scale and scope of extremist content, and more easily map networks of malign actors. It is important to note that this research needs to be conducted on an ongoing basis because of the continuously changing online landscape and evolving organisational dynamics of extremist groups.
3. Provide capacity building for practitioners across the Western Balkans to better understand how to navigate the internet, and have adequate skills to launch impactful online campaigns and design online interventions targeting vulnerable groups to online extremist content.

¹⁴⁸ Jenna Presta, IREX Launches Balkans Regional Media Literacy Network. <https://www.irex.org/news/irex-launches-balkans-regional-media-literacy-network>

¹⁴⁹ Resources can be found here: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/bosnia-and-herzegovina-media-and-information-literacy-for-human-rights-and-more-democracy>

¹⁵⁰ Learn more here: <http://www.ponder-ks.org/about/what-is-ponder/>

¹⁵¹ More about the programme can be found here: <https://youngcities.com/city-grants/critical-thinking-cair/>; Be Internet Citizens modules can be found here: <https://internetcitizens.withyoutube.com/>

4. Collaborate with social media tech platforms to inform and deploy localised approaches that are sensitised to local languages, jargon and the cultural context. This needs to include adequate investment in regional capacities to effectively moderate extremist content by tackling language blind spots on the social media platform.
5. Social media tech platforms need to do more than just moderate content. A significant part of the solution is improving algorithms that will prevent individuals from entering extremist rabbit holes.
6. While censorship/content moderation is an important part of supply side responses, it is essential to note that by itself it will not solve online radicalisation, and if used inappropriately can contribute to the problem.
7. Partner with broader civil society and local communities in order to effectively mount a ‘whole of society’ approach in responding to (online) radicalisation. Civil society and community-based organisations as well as local governments have untapped potential that can inform and contribute to the meaningful delivery of supply side and demand side responses.
8. Promote digital citizenship, critical thinking and media literacy programmes. Functional illiteracy on the internet is a major challenge in the region, hence these educational initiatives need to be a priority for the region.
9. Mainstream gender in online and offline counter-extremism activities due to findings that individuals who are in favour of women empowerment are associated with higher levels of resilience to violent extremism.

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Radicalisation Awareness Network

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Practitioners

