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CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN in the Western Balkans – Cross-cutting Event on Violent Right-Wing Extremism (VRWE)
28-29 June 2022, Skopje, North Macedonia*

Preventing and countering VRWE in the Western Balkans

Key outcomes

In recent years, attention in the realm of P/CVE activities in the Western Balkans (WBs) focused almost exclusively on Islamist Extremism (IE). The number of citizens from the region who travelled to Syria and Iraq and, more recently, the foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who returned alone or with their families remain a challenge both for practitioners and policy makers. However, like in the rest of Europe, other forms of extremism are on the rise in the region, with (Violent) Right Wing Extremism (VRWE) becoming the predominant concern¹. Linked to a long history of violence rooted in ethno-nationalist conflicts, RWE can present itself in various ways, including polarisation and hate crimes. Ethno-nationalism as well as discrimination, including segregation in social and educational settings, continue to fuel patterns of social exclusion and radicalisation, manifesting in different ways across the region. Not least in response to the ongoing societal debates linked to migration that have been affecting the region just like the rest of Europe². Additionally, the numbers of WB citizens, in particular from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia and Montenegro, who travelled to Ukraine in 2014 have also risen³ and represent a growing concern.

VRWE has gradually come onto the agenda of WB P/CVE efforts, particularly with regards to the renewal of national P/CVE strategies. Under that framework, RAN WBs Cross-cutting event on VRWE brought together policy makers, representatives of EU law-enforcement agencies, representatives of WB Civil Society and local authorities, researchers as well as practitioners with the aim to provide an overview of the VRWE scene in the Western Balkans from a research, a practitioner, and a policy perspective while also, familiarize practitioners with existing P/CVE structures/know-how in the field of VRWE. Main key points raised include the following:

- VRWE responses need to be approached for each WB context individually, as a regional perspective is not taking into account specifics in terms of local manifestations, scope, and nature of the threat. VRWE shows less similarities than IE across the Western Balkans. The 'us-them' groups can differ due to nationalist frames, feelings of superiority towards other ethnical or religious groups in the region.
- In polarized societies, VRWE groups meet a fertile breeding ground. At the same time, it is more complicated to recognise/ distinguish them in an environment where the debate is polarized, which is a legitimate part of a democratic political system.
- A common understanding on terminology and definitions and the adoption of a holistic approach by looking towards adjacent societal phenomena is crucial for tackling VRWE phenomenon. There is a lack of

¹ See: <https://icct.nl/publication/zeitgeist-future-of-terrorism/>

² See: Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević's [Migrants are leaving, but hatred remains – the anti-migrant extreme right in Serbia](#)

³ See: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/eurasia/the-balkan-connection-foreign-fighters-and-the-far-right-in-ukraine/>
<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/09/montenegro-reveals-31-citizens-have-fought-in-foreign-wars/>
<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/study-international-right-wing-extremist-terrorist-networks/2419576>

recognition of VRWE in the policies and actions of the WB governments. As VRWE is not referred in in all WB' National strategies to prevent and counter radicalisation and terrorism, the consensus on a common language should be promoted. Tackling VRWE is generally not part of the mandate nor scope of practitioners.

- The lines between religiously inspired and national radicalisation are not always clear. E.g., in one WB country, a foreign national church is promoting a mixture of pan Islamism and national pride.
- There is the need to better understand VRWE among stakeholders, its manifestations, the actors involved, the narratives and the ideological underpinnings. There is a lack of such common understanding and the classification of actors and groups in the region. Using examples/cases from the EU during trainings is not perceived as suitable for the regional or national setting in the WBs.
- Current trends such as anti-LGBTQI, anti-gender, anti-immigrant sentiments on social media, disinformation and conspiracy thinking, are visible across the region, but how they interlink with VRWE remains unclear to practitioners and policymakers and to what extent they should be tackled through existing P/CVE infrastructures and mechanisms. These existing working mechanisms should be improved and adapted to address VRWE trends and threats, instead of introducing new ones.
- Practitioners expressed the need for a risk assessment tool that can be used by different actors to identify and assess VRWE trends and signs. The need for trainings on VRWE was also mentioned, including through case studies from real life. Trainings need to be adapted to the local context and realities, and stakeholders should be enabled (including through financial support) to adjust their own methods and practices to tackle VRWE (instead of importing tools from abroad).
- Women voices are at the margins within VRWE milieu. The instrumentalization and violence against women is at the essence of VRWE ideas.
- Linkages between far-right and far-left wing extremism are to be found in terms of discourse and perceived "enemies".
- Use of online gaming for spreading messages, recruitment and mobilization has emerged in VRWE groups' modus operandi.

Highlights of the discussion

VRWE in Western Balkans is a multidimensional phenomenon compiled by old and new trends

Ethno-nationalism, polarisation, discrimination, hate crime, hooliganism, hate speech, belief in conspiracy theories are all interrelated phenomena that fit in the broad puzzle of VRWE in the Western Balkans. Especially, hate speech, is used as a "fertile" ingredient for maintaining grievances in post-conflict societies and is a prominent radicalization factor that some mainstream politicians and regime media use (in particular, exacerbated during pre-election periods), to promote political goals. VRWE is in constant "communication" with hooliganism, where its instrumentalization and politicization are deepening more and more this relationship. Connections with organized crime are completing this scenery. Anti-government, anti-authority and anti-establishment feelings intensified by Covid-19 pandemic restrictions within VRWE scene, while belief in conspiracy theories about pandemic has been a new central trend/factor for further radicalisation. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is a factor that leads to further polarisation, with anti- and pro Russia sentiments provoking further divisions. Xenophobia and anti-immigrant ideas are a strong characteristic of VRWE groups in the region. In addition, apart from the outgroup hostility towards external perceived enemies, special attention should be given to in-community hostility that VRWE groups express towards perceived enemies/traitors who does not reflect the "proper way of living" according to the VRWE groups extreme narratives. This trend could lead to further grievances.

Top-down interventions and bottom-up initiatives need strategic re-orientation

There is a need for more attention on VRWE in the policies and actions of the WB governments. A weak state response to VRWE groups “allows” and might accelerate the radicalisation process. There is a need for more support for local, experienced CSOs in P/CVRWE. Some of the practitioners feel that they and the subject they work on are not sufficiently acknowledged by their governments.

Often practitioners still lack awareness when it comes to signaling VRWE. By consequence, they are not able to reflect on their own values and beliefs, which can then become part of the problem. Training is needed and requested, but its content needs to respond to the regional contextual realities.

Recommendations

- Critical thinking, empathy and tolerance needs to be further promoted in schools and should be reflected in the whole curriculum, as the educational system heavily suffers from discriminatory and exclusionary practices based on RWE discourse. In general, Critical thinking is a very important skill for practitioners dealing with VRWE.
- Training and guidance of teachers/school staff on violent extremism prevention in schools should be done on regular basis.
- Building trust among civil society organisations and the private sector for promoting multiagency work at local level.
- “Making the counter narratives mainstream” is an effective path from strategic communication to tackle and lessen extreme narratives, as mainstreaming and normalisation of parts of VRWE narratives are a challenge in the region.
- To build resilience, it is important to work with an information-based approach regarding the local presence of the VRWE phenomenon: which groups are present, how active are they, who do they recruit, and to whom is the hatred or violence addressed?
- Exchange and cooperation between policy makers and practitioners should be formalized as a working-group which will hold regular meetings. Policy makers and practitioners are sometimes considered as antithetical categories, while practitioners feel alienated from decision centers and seek to be integrated to policy-making process. Practitioners addressed that along with policy makers, they form two important supplementing categories of experts who needs a better collaboration. A “network between theory and praxis” should be promoted.
- Religion could play an important role on de-radicalisation process if utilized properly. Religion can be part of the solution instead of being, at times, part of the problem. Involvement of religious communities in the prevention of VRWE could be very fruitful on that direction.
- For promoting research, deepening our knowledge and better understanding VRWE phenomenon, the safety measures should be safeguarded for researchers when they come to direct contact with extremists.
- Emphasis should be given on local level looking forward to creating commonalities.

Relevant practices

1. Kumanovo Local Prevention Council - resilience and multi-agency cooperation (Strong Cities Network), North Macedonia. https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/04/SCN_Kumanovo-1.pdf
2. Local Public Safety Council⁴ Elbasan, Albania
3. Propulsion online campaign, Serbia

Follow up

- There is a strong interest from both practitioners and policymakers in the provision of trainings on VRWE: on understanding the phenomenon, signaling and how to act. Preferably with regional examples and perhaps on a national level given the different manifestations of VRWE. The outcomes of the meeting have been used as input for the Study Visit on VRWE to Sweden in Q4.

Further reading

- Mirza Buljubašić, [Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE](#) (2022). Also available in Albanian, BCMS and Macedonian.
- Claudia Wallner and Jessica White, [Global Violent Right-Wing Extremism: Mapping the Threat and Response in the Western Balkans](#), Turkey, and South Africa (2022).

⁴ <https://idmalbania.org/the-municipality-of-elbasan-approves-the-new-regulation-and-the-inter-institutional-plan-on-the-organization-and-functioning-of-the-local-council-for-public-safety/>