



THE RISE OF THE RIGHT

THE CASE OF SERBIA

FOREIGN FIGHTERS, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

 Helsinki
Committee
for Human
Rights in
Serbia



Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

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Belgrade, 2022.

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Foreign Fighters, Extremism and Terrorism

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SONJA BISERKO

Edited by:

IZABELA KISIĆ

Reviewer:

SEŠKA STANOJLOVIĆ

Translated by:

SAVA MIHAILOVIĆ, SARA AMIGH, ANDREJA JANKOVIĆ, MILENA LAKIĆ,

MIRA GLIGORIJEVIĆ and VERA GLIGORIJEVIĆ

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IVAN HRAŠOVEC

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A Word from the Editors

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia has been researching the ideologies and manifestations of extremism in the concrete historical, political and social circumstances for more than two decades. On the basis of these experiences, we have determined the framework, topics and methodology of the research presented in this publication. We have brought together psychologists, lawyers, culturologists, political scientists, journalists and activists who have perceived the phenomenon of extremism from different perspectives.

The analyses are based on the information obtained from a large number of sources, including more than 60 interviews conducted by the Helsinki Committee team during 2021, judicial verdicts for terrorism and going to foreign battlefields, official data of the relevant Serbian institutions, media and academia. Multiperspectivity enables us to observe and explore a wide range of factors having an influence on the radicalization of both individuals and society.

We have analyzed Serbia's institutional framework for combating extremism as well as the possibilities and needs of local communities to help individuals in the processes of deradicalization and reintegration of returnees from foreign battlefields. The third part consists of a comparative analysis of the verdicts delivered between 2015 and 2018 against the Serbian citizens fighting on the Syrian and Ukrainian battlefields.

In order to get a wider picture, we have not confined our research on extremism to its manifestations, physical violence, illegal activities, or the phenomenon of foreign fighters. An important factor of radicalization is unconsolidated democracy and the very low potential of institutions to protect the basic democratic postulates. Extremism in Serbia also cannot be perceived without insight into the media, the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the division of the Islamic community, so that special chapters are dedicated just to these topics.

On the basis of insight in each research, we have formulated the recommendations for countering extremism and strengthening the performance of the community in the processes of deradicalization.

Summary and Recommendations

The extreme right in Serbia has already been on a significant rise for two years, which is evidenced by the growing number of violent, ideologically motivated acts. The main radicalization factor in Serbia and the generator of extremism is the dominant political narrative about the past, that is, the wars of the 1990s and actualization of the nationalist matrix, as well as the maintenance of Serbia's aspirations in the region. The official narrative about the wars of the 1990s is also the basis for a basis for bringing up the new generation of young right wingers either directly or indirectly. The research has shown that young people do not have a realistic idea of what was happening in the 1990s. Thus, in search of their identity, they spontaneously process the knowledge about the wars in a wrong way.

Among the participants in the wars of the 1990s there is also a belief that the sufferings of war are used for the radicalization of young people as well as broader society. The authorities use extremists as a convenient tool for quick interventions without high cost. Extremism in Serbia is controlled by political actors who thus constantly keep the society in a constant state of tension, profile the values of the young generation and keep it obedient. Extremists are useful to the authorities "because everyone is afraid of them, because they are ready for action". The right-wing narratives also rely on the power of national frustrations, which makes them acceptable in society.

Apart from the absence of legal punishability, the political and moral condemnation of crimes and criminals is also absent. As a rule, the perpetrators of the mass war crimes against the non-Serb population in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo during the 1990s now participate in public life, thus legitimizing right-wing organizations and their narratives. This not only encourages, popularizes and

legitimizes right-wing extremist movements and organizations, but also poses a threat of violence. Consequently, the responsibility for the rise of extremism lies not with young people who paint and guard the murals dedicated to war criminal Ratko Mladić throughout Serbia, but with Serbian nationalist politicians who institutionally protect and cherish the legacy of the crimes and wars of the 1990s.

The radicalization potential for strengthening the Serbian right-wing should be perceived in the context of the events in the Western Balkans: the intensive destabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the extremist statements and behaviour of Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who openly speaks about the potential secession of the Republic of Srpska, as well as the promotion of the “Serbian World” idea, which was elaborated in several strategic documents of the Republic of Serbia and matches the idea of Greater Serbia during the 1990s war years.

The special focus of this research is on fighters going to foreign battlefields, particularly to Syria and Ukraine. The risk of their going to Ukraine still exists, while their going to fight on the Syrian battlefields has not been recorded for a longer period of time. Overall, Islamic extremism is on a significant decline and there is currently no real danger of violent extremist actions. Registration for going to fight in Syria has also been stopped.

The Helsinki Committee has also gained an insight into the situation of women and children, Serbian citizens, who are stranded in Syria. They live in a camp in appalling conditions and their return depends exclusively on the relevant Serbian institutions. They wish to return to Serbia. According to the estimates of the Helsinki Committee, their families can provide conditions for their life and children’s education. However, the Serbian institutions should step in and provide conditions for their safe return and assist them in registering themselves, particularly children. Without the consent of the Serbian institutions their return is impossible, which further prolongs the agony of women and children stranded in Syria.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGIC AND THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COUNTERING TERRORISM

The multidisciplinary team of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia has analyzed the institutional framework for preventing extremism and terrorism. The data on the implementation of the Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism have been requested from all leaders of the activities listed in the Strategy Action Plan as well as the National Coordination Body for Preventing and Combating Terrorism. A request for access to information of public importance war has been sent to everyone. With the exception of the Coordination Body, all other institutions submitted their answers by December 2020. Apart from the information provided by the relevant state institutions, the analysis has also been based on other publicly available data that could be obtained during 2021.

The next national Strategy should be more fully harmonized with all relevant international guidelines, including specifically the EU Internal Security Strategy (2010), EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism (2014) and European Agenda on Security (2015).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The next Strategy should be evidence-based, including empirical, reliable and representative data on the initial situation with regard to radicalization, extremism and terrorism in Serbia, as well as the approaches to their prevention that have proved to be successful. Also, the relevant research should be continuous.
- The Strategy is not sufficiently comprehensive in terms of its content and should be expanded so as to cover all forms of radicalization, based on different ideologies and political platforms, and violent extremism present in the country (such as fascism, Serb ultra-nationalism, neo-Nazism). First of all, the next Strategy should cover right-wing extremism by

addressing the problems in this area, about which civil society organizations and professional media report on a daily basis.

- The next Strategy should deal with more activities, in terms of diversity and scope, which would be sufficient for achieving the intended aims.
- The counter-terrorism strategy should include the gender dimension, based on the previously made gender analysis of the phenomena of radicalization, extremism and terrorism in Serbia.
- In the next Strategy, the area of deradicalization and reintegration of radicalized persons should cover a wider range of activities, thus including radicalized persons on probation as well as their families, communities and civil society in the rehabilitation and reintegration programme for radicalized persons.
- The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) can also be an important resource in the development and implementation of new programmes, knowledge acquisition and re-socialization of former terrorists, foreign fighters and nationalist extremists, so that significant cooperation with it should be planned in the next Strategy.
- The approach to the inclusion of civil society should be developed into full participation and partnership building with civil society organizations, academia, professional media and experts in the national response to terrorism in all of its phases and areas.
- The role of family should be fully recognized in the next Strategy and should include the full spectrum of activities in the areas of prevention, deradicalization and reintegration.
- The next Strategy should recognize the significance and role of local communities, understood in a modern sense, and include the necessary actors in the national response to the challenges of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND NEEDS FOR DERADICALIZATION AND REINTEGRATION PROCESSES IN SERBIA

The development of a comprehensive and efficient programme of deradicalization and resocialization is not possible without the relevant information and multidisciplinary analysis. For these reasons, the Helsinki Committee has collected the data that will provide insight into the relevant issues.

The research is based in an interdisciplinary approach, which implies a coordinated involvement of several society sectors and actors in interventions and disengagement, as well as programmes of integration and rehabilitation. This approach has proved¹ to be necessary for a successful programme of deradicalization and resocialization, because radicalized persons and their families have a wide range of both practical and psychosocial, ideological and other problems and needs, so that one actor or one institution cannot respond to all of them.

The analysis of radicalization and violent extremism phenomena is based on the information obtained in the period of June-December 2021 in individual or group interviews with the persons who had been on foreign battlefields, terrorism convicts, family members of foreign fighters, representatives of the relevant institutions, various professionals and activists from the local community. The special focus of this research has been on accessing the needs of individuals in the deradicalization and resocialization processes, and the needs of their families and community members for support and empowerment, as well as assistance in the rehabilitation and reintegration of former convicts. This information is crucial for the design and implementation of efficient measures for the potential new returnees, areas of prevention, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration, as

1 “Non-custodial Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism” A Guidebook for Policymakers and Practitioners in South-Eastern Europe <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/444838?download=true>.

well as support in monitoring terrorism convicts after their release from prison and those tried for their involvement in conflicts on foreign battlefields.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The dimensions, forms and other characteristics of radicalization and extremism must be thoroughly researched so as to get a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the state of these phenomena, while the collected data should be made available to all relevant actors and the general public.
- As it has been established that all researched forms of extremism have emerged in very specific local, historical, political and cultural contexts with specific dynamics, the usual uniform countermeasures are ineffective. Thus, it is necessary to take into account the established specifics and design the measures that will correspond to the real needs of various forms of extremism.
- The prevention of radicalization and extremism in communities should be conceived by taking into account the identified weaknesses of the needs and widely put it into practice as one of the key strategic activities in terrorism prevention.
- The topics of radicalization, extremism and terrorism should be introduced into public discourse, with a sensibility for the nondiscriminatory treatment of all social groups, especially minorities, but openly and with clear value messages about their danger, as part of wider preventive measures.
- Various activities aimed at preventing and combating radicalization, extremism and terrorism should be strategic, involve civil society organizations and have such a scope as to exert a noticeable influence.
- It is necessary to raise the awareness of local communities about the ways of solving the radicalization problem, as well as to develop the relevant capacity. There is also the need to conceive the programme of strengthening the resilience of

communities to radicalization and create the relevant action plans and mechanisms.

- For the families of radicalized persons, which are unable to deal with the problem, it is necessary to design accessible community support programmes aimed at resocialization and reintegration, as well as deradicalization.
- It is necessary to design the adjusted and accessible support programmes for various groups of extremists with widely varied, specific and frequently long-term needs for support in the process of deradicalization and reintegration in communities, both during and after their imprisonment.
- It is necessary to clearly and consistently condemn right-wing extremism and devise measures for its combating.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VERDICTS AGAINST SERBIAN CITIZENS WHO FOUGHT ON THE SYRIAN AND UKRAINIAN BATTLEFIELDS

The most striking conclusion that can be reached on the basis of a comparative analysis of the verdicts delivered between 2015 and 2018 against Serbian fighters in Syria and Ukraine is that there is no essential difference between their actions. The competent judicial bodies in Serbia have taken a far more retributive approach against Serbian citizens fighting in Syria than against those involved in an armed conflict in Ukraine on pro-Russian side. Such unequal treatment, which privileges Serbian fighters in Ukraine, is harmful for several reasons.

Unequal treatment in the identical situation creates a suitable ground for the emergence or deepening of the animosity felt by radicalized individuals against the Serbian organs and institutions. This is certainly the case with convicts and people who feel a connection and empathy with them. Also, returnees from Ukraine are free throughout the trial against them, while former fighters in Syria are in custody throughout this period and can be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment. There is no room for resocialization and rehabilitation in

the custody regime. Namely, terrorism suspects even have to wait several years before gaining the status of a convict in which case the prison sentence can be adjusted to the personality of the radicalized person. According to the international standards, such a life regime can have a countereffect on the change in the behaviour pattern based on violent extremism and can even deepen it due to the feeling of injustice.

A simple approach to severe illegal actions of the former fighters in Ukraine which, according to the judicial authorities, have the characteristics of the crime of terrorism, creates the risk that they perpetuate criminal acts or, more precisely, that they return to Ukraine, which is done by most former convicts, as evidenced from the analyzed judicial proceedings.

The evident differences in punishment are a clear example of unequal treatment, which is always “good stuff” for building the narratives about injustice, oppression and suffering, which can be used by charismatic leaders who promote radicalization. Therefore, a strict penal policy that does not provide much scope for the rehabilitation of extremists is never a good response to terrorism and violent extremism as well as the phenomenon of foreign fighters.

Different criteria, which are applied to identical or similar situations, deepen distrust in the judicial authorities by the members of the population whose individuals are more severely punished. This completes the vicious cycle of abuse of the really or allegedly ill-treated segments of society and creates a suitable ground for extremism. Conversely, a uniform penal policy sends a clear message that religious, national or other background and the political context in which an armed conflict occurs in a foreign country are not relevant to the judicial authorities and that there is zero tolerance for foreign fighters, regardless of the battlefield they came from.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is necessary to establish the uniform criteria in judicial practice with the aim to ensure that the actions of foreign fighters on different battlefields do not differ substantially. This refers specifically to the position taken in the verdict against Podbićanin and others in the part in which a special intention had to be proved.
- The actions of foreign fighters in Ukraine should also be viewed through the prism of terrorism in order to determine more efficiently whether there are the elements of organization, financing, training and public promotion in the back of this phenomenon.
- The measures of procedural coercion such as the custodial measure should not last as long as criminal proceedings, especially if one takes into account that no other measure of procedural coercion was applied to foreign fighters.
- When pronouncing and weighing criminal sanctions, the competent courts should also take into account the personality profile of the defendant, that is, determine whether there exist the elements of violent extremism.

Key Concepts

In this field, there is not much consensus regarding key concepts. Many expressions signify different things in different sources and are used synonymously or without clear definitions and delineations. Even leading international figures do not have official definitions of key concepts that are used consistently.

In order for readers to follow the text of this report with ease, we have provided a short glossary of the used terms. Having no desire to start an academic debate about the definitions and delineations of concepts, this glossary merely outlines the meaning of the concepts as used in the text.

For this reason, in addition to the glossary we have also provided a list of sources for further familiarization and studying of current dilemmas.

Extremism – ideologies which are contrary to the general fundamental values and principles of democracy, rule of law, universal human rights, personal liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of different beliefs and faiths, and which set their goals above or at the expense of other goals.

Violent extremism – ideologies which are contrary to general fundamental values and principles, which set their goals above or at the expense of other goals, and advocate the use of violence to achieve those goals, which are usually ideological, social, racial, religious and/or political in nature.

Radicalization – a process by which an individual, a group or mass of people are exposed to ideological extremist messages and systems of belief and/or pass through a transformation of their beliefs from relatively moderate and generally accepted to the adoption of extreme views, ideals, and aspirations.

Radicalizer – a person instigating others to develop or adopt extremist beliefs and views.

Terrorist radicalization – a process by which an individual, a group or a mass of people are exposed to ideological terrorist messages and belief systems and/or go through a transformation of their beliefs from relatively moderate and generally accepted to the adoption of terrorist views, ideals, and aspirations, which may lead to the commitment of terrorist acts.

Self-directed and self-initiated terrorist radicalization – cases where people have become radicalized to terrorism with a minimum degree of interaction with radicalizers. These terms are associated with the phenomenon of “lone-wolf terrorists” or “self-starters”, who act on their own without outside direction, support or affiliation to any terrorist organization.

Counter-radicalization – activities, policies, and programs directed at a group of people with the aim of preventing radicalization by decreasing vulnerability and increasing resilience. A package of social, political, legal, educational, and economic programs whose aim is to change the conditions which may entice individuals to radicalization. They are especially designed to prevent dissatisfied (or, potentially, already radicalized) individuals from heading down the path of radicalization or to deter them from staying on that path.

Deradicalization – programs directed at working with individuals who became radical with the aim of reintegrating them into society or, at least, deterring them from violence. They strive to invert the process of radicalization of those who are either fully or partially radicalized or to help them detach themselves from extremist groups, regardless of whether they will change their ideas or not. Deradicalization has two elements: disengagement (rejection of a violent extremist group or their violent methods) and deradicalization itself (complete rejection of the ideological cause that the violent extremist group pursues).

Resilience to radicalization – Capability of an individual, a group or community to react, refute, and reject proponents of extremism and the ideologies they promote.

Vulnerability to radicalization – Susceptibility to radicalization, increased sensitivity and a lack of protection from moral or ideological attacks of radicalizers. A combination of factors and characteristics making a person, group, community or society particularly susceptible to radicalization.

Terrorism – The intentional and systemic use of violent actions devised to provoke terror in the public or to influence the government as a means to a political, religious or ideological end. Terrorism is a type of violent extremism.

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EXTREMISM CANNOT BE TACKLED WITHOUT A GOVERNMENT STRATEGY

Although violent extremism is not a recent phenomenon, it is increasingly being recognized as the main challenge in the modern world. The rise of right-wing extremists has been neglected in the global fight against terrorism (mostly Islamic terrorism), up until the recent terrorist acts within every society, such as the ones in the US during the reign of Donald Trump, who through his speeches and actions supported white right-wing groups. This has led to the radicalization and the polarization of the country's entire society, which is why the current administration announced the fight against domestic terrorism.

In order to adequately approach this problem, it is necessary to see the real causes of radicalization, especially that of young people. The International Center for Counter-Terrorism (the Hague) divides the causes of radicalism into three levels:

1. Micro-level, i.e. the individual level, which includes, for example, identity problems, failed integration, feelings of alienation, marginalization, discrimination, relative deprivation, humiliation (directly or by proxy), stigmatization and rejection, often combined with moral disapproval and feelings;
2. Meso-level, i.e. the wider radical milieu, gathering a broader audience which can be radicalized and brought to the formation of terrorist organizations;
3. Macro-level, i.e. the role of the government in the country and abroad, radicalization of public opinion and party politics, tense relations between the majority and minorities, socio-economic status of entire groups leading to the

mobilization and radicalization of the dissatisfied, some of which could take the form of terrorism.²

Historically, the far-right, as well as the generally right-wing ideology in Serbia, is the consequence of the structural changes in the country after the dissolution of the socialist state. The wars fought in the 1990s with the idea of the reconfiguration of the Balkans, or the idea of Greater Serbia, which is documented in the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art (1986), are just some of the ideological foundations upon which the right-wing thought still resides. Its main characteristics (taking into account the historical framework of the post-socialist period and anticommunism, which was on the rise in Europe, as well as the chaotic changes that Serbian society has been going through during a failed period of transition) are: the idea of ethnic homogenization (Milosavljević: 2001), a tendency toward the fusion of state and ethnic borders (Gellner: 1987), anticommunism and the denial of anti-fascism, the strengthening of traditionalism and authoritarianism, Orthodox Christianity treated as the superior religion as opposed to other ethnic and religious groups (especially Croats, Muslims, and Albanians), resistance to the ideas of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism seen as the mixing of different religions and nations, and a pronounced chauvinism and intolerance toward “the new” (LGBT population) and traditional minorities (Roma people).

What all these right-wing movements calling upon the extreme Serbian nationalism and fundamentalist interpretations of Orthodox Christianity, or Saintsavaism have in common is the pronounced Islamophobia and hostile attitude toward everything coming from Islam.

There are many types of radical right options and organizations in Serbia. Their activities are often qualified as “hooliganism” or “extremism”, although those terms tend to mask the real state of affairs

2 http://icct.nl/app/uploads/2013/03/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013_2.pdf –

— ideologically underpinned violence. The connection between the far-right oriented right-wing political parties with these organizations is reflected in the support they receive from them, as well as the ideological closeness (stance regarding Kosovo, support to the secession of the Republika Srpska, as well as the closeness to the Serbian Orthodox Church). Examples of these political parties include the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka) or the former Radicals — the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka), New Serbia (Nova Srbija), and the Serbian Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka). Ideological similarities exist due to the left-over structures from the 1990s – which function either as a part of the system or as the opposition, as well as due to the emergence of new layers of the right-wing politics among them, which is managing to couple the logic of market capital and nationalistic interests.

Serbia is failing to distance itself from its nationalistic past. Even though nationalism is less violent, it is present in all social spheres — from foreign policy, the media, education, to culture. All key social institutions are still promoting nationalism as the only ideology. This socio-political climate has birthed far-right organizations, which are part of an international network. Prior to and after the wars, Serbian propaganda was directed against the so-called Islamic fundamentalism, blaming it for the breakup of Yugoslavia and using it as an excuse for its own actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The war in Kosovo was defined as a war against terrorists.

When it comes to “right-wing terrorism”, it should be noted that Serbia is unprepared to focus on the violence coming from this side of the political spectrum. The unpreparedness of countries to face right-wing violence hinders, to the same extent as the Jihadist terrorism, the development of a comprehensive strategy which would significantly prevent the prolongation of violence. A distinction should be made between different kinds of political extremism in order to form more concrete counter-terrorism strategies. Right-wing ideologies and propaganda — as most forms of extremism — feed off of some concept of supremacy. Diversity in a society, especially in

societies with a substantial number of migrants, is feeding right-wing organizations which consider it their “natural prerogative” to dominate society.

This matrix remained more or less the same, but under significantly different circumstances. It was resurrected after the USA declared war on terror in 2001, especially when it comes to Kosovo. After the emergence of ISIL and their brutal executions of “infidels”, Serbia took part in the international counter-terrorism campaign. Young people from Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia who joined ISIL, were the cause for the campaign against fundamentalists, and some of them were put on trial. Serbia passed a law to punish volunteers and mercenaries who went to wars abroad. In practice, however, that law was used selectively and it was to a much greater extent applied to those going to war in Syria than to those going to Ukraine.

The biggest problem for government institutions is how to identify channels taking Serbian citizens to the wars around the world, as well as the people organizing that. Besides undoubtedly personal contacts, social media has been extensively used for that purpose, and there are profiles which directly and indirectly recruit participants for the conflicts in Iraq and Syria as much as in Ukraine, and they are appearing as quickly as they are disappearing.

Some instances of terrorist activities have shown what kind of mobilizing effect one attack can have at an international level and the significant effect of social media platforms on the radicalization of individuals. The Internet is creating vast possibilities for the development of relations with like-minded people around the world and the creation of an environment that instigates violence. For example, Anders Behring Breivik (Norway) became not only a mass murderer, but one of the most obvious examples of the influence of the chauvinist ideology of the regime of Slobodan Milošević. He claimed that he committed the murders against those he called “traitors to the state” because of the “opening” of Norway, multiculturalism and “the Muslim invasion of Europe”. This mass murderer said that his ideology was “partly imported from Serbia”. Brenton Tarant, an Australian,

murdered 51 people in a mosque in New Zealand. On the weapon he used he wrote names of Miloš Obilić, Baja Pivljanin, Novak Vujošević, Marko Miljanov, and in the car he drove to the scene he played the song “Od Bihaća do Petrova Sela” (From Bihać to Petrovo Selo) which mentions Radovan Karadžić.

Due to its complexity, strong coordination and cooperation within the national governments and between countries and organizations on a regional and international level is essential for the efficient fight against extremism, exchange of best practices and lessons learned, and assistance in investigating and criminally prosecuting terrorist cases.

As a response to this threat, gradually, during five decades of activities, the international community developed a common universal legal framework against terrorism. This framework consists of 19 universal legal instruments against terrorism, together with the relevant resolutions of the Security Council of the United Nations (UN). The guidelines provided by the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy together with the resolutions of the General Assembly of the United Nations give information about the application of these conventions, protocols, and resolutions.

The OSCE, the EU, and the majority of countries have strategies for the prevention of extremism. Serbia has officially opted for the EU membership, and through the new Action Plan for Chapter 24, it has made a commitment to adopt and implement a new strategy for the prevention and countering of terrorism in accordance with the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

The aim of this report is the analysis of the Strategy for Countering Terrorism, Extremism, and Radicalism in Serbia, and especially for the prevention of right-wing motivated attacks. Bearing in mind years of insight into the work of government bodies when it comes to right-wing violence, it can be concluded that there is no political will in Serbia to focus on this spectrum of political violence. The report includes all mechanisms, the Action plan, and the principal bodies in charge of its implementation.

Current radicalization is identical to the one from the time when Slobodan Milošević appeared on the Serbian political landscape. All negative stereotypes against neighbors have been revamped, contributing to a highly toxic atmosphere in the region. The relations between Serbia and its neighbors have never been at such a low level, except during the war. Hate speech dominates not only when discussing neighbors, but also when discussing those Serbian citizens who are critical and state their opinion about the situation in Serbia.

It should be noted that right-wingers are profiteering from the global disorder caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, by promoting conspiracy theories, racism, and planning large-scale violence in order to start a civil war or “race war”, as could be seen in the protests around the world. Extreme right-wingers have created an efficient strategy by using social media to recruit new members and carry out their operations.

Young generations with no perspective are susceptible to the influence of extremist groups. Political extremism of the right-wing orientation negates the fundamental values of the democratic constitutional state.

Extremists start with absolute truths, their doctrines reside on axiomatic foundations, they are ideologically rigid and have a tendency toward finding “a scapegoat” for the current situation. They do not acknowledge the ethos of fundamental human equality.

Subtle variants of right-wing extremism can undermine and jeopardize democracy. Due to the very deft “political mimicry, verbal camouflage, and game of confusion” and hiding behind “patriotism”, they are even more dangerous, because it is harder to recognize them as a social threat, especially in countries facing difficult transitional problems.

The problem of right-wing extremism cannot be solved without comprehensive state policy, primarily with regard to education, the media, and state institutions – above all the judiciary.

INSTITUTIONAL AND STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO RADICALIZATION, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM IN SERBIA

This analysis of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism 2017–2021 was conducted to determine whether it adequately addresses the issues of extremism and radicalization, as well as whether the mandates and activities of all actors respond to existing needs and lead to desired effects, in order to identify possible shortcomings and formulate recommendations for improving the national response to the challenges posed by radicalization and extremism.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of strategy evaluation, which was to be carried out by the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism, was postponed for 2022. Accordingly, the process of drafting a new strategy and national action plan will not begin before 2022.

The analysis of the institutional framework for the prevention of extremism and terrorism, outlined below, was conducted by the multidisciplinary team of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. All actors in Serbia – those with mandates or those working on prevention, research, documentation, treatment, deradicalization, opposition to radicalization, or any kind of intervention related to radicalization and extremism – have been mapped. Their mandates, objectives, activities and results were identified and analyzed. The analysis was conducted from the perspective of a comprehensive strategic national response, with a special focus on different target

groups, existing needs, different approaches and interventions used. The (un)equal attention and treatment of various forms of radicalization and how it affects radicalization at different levels have been analyzed in particular. Successes and shortcomings have been identified, and recommendations for improving the national response to the challenges posed by radicalization and extremism have been formulated.

Data on the implementation of the Strategy were requested from all responsible actors listed in the Action Plan and from the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism through requests for accessing information of public importance. All institutions, apart from the Coordination Body, submitted their responses by December 2020. In addition to the information received from state institutions, other publicly available data were used in the analysis, which were available during 2021.

Towards the end of this analysis, recommendations are made for the development of a new strategy for preventing and combating extremism and terrorism.

NATIONAL STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO RADICALIZATION, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM IN SERBIA

The field of prevention and suppression of extremism and terrorism in Serbia is covered by the following strategic documents:

- National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2019),
- National Strategy Against Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing (2020–2024),
- National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism (2017–2021),
- National Strategy for Combating Violence and Indecent Behavior at Sporting Events (2013–2018).

The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia³ is an umbrella strategic document that provides an overview of the security environment, outlines the main challenges, risks and threats, identifies the highest national interests and determines how they will be achieved and be protected in an changed security environment. Thus, this strategy represents a starting point for the development of other, hierarchically lower strategies, laws and public policies, including the Strategy for the Countering of Terrorism.

The first National Security Strategy from 2009 recognized terrorism and violent extremism for the first time as one of the biggest threats to security. One decade later, in 2019, Serbia adopted a new National Security Strategy, which also recognizes radicalization, extremism and terrorism as dangers. Regardless of the fact that the new National Security Strategy emerged after the Strategy for Combating Terrorism, the essential concepts of security and major threats are equally present in both strategies, so it can be expected that the authors of the next strategy for combating terrorism will base it on the same concept outlined in the National Security Strategy, since it is the more significant document in terms of hierarchy.

Therefore, in order to understand the Strategy for the Countering of Terrorism, it is necessary to point out some basic elements from the main political document concerning the defense and security of Serbia. In fact, the Strategy of Defense and National Security is one of the Serbian Government's most important strategic documents that indicates the realization of the idea of a "Serbian World", which is the core ideology of Serbian extremist groups and which represents a danger to the Western Balkans. The document outlines that the priority of foreign policy is "care for all Serbs, regardless of where they live", and that "preserving the Republika Srpska as an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina" is of special importance for the security and defense of Serbia.

3 From 2019: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/strategija/2019/94/2>; From 2009: <http://www.voa.mod.gov.rs/dokumenti/strategija-nacionalne-bezbednosti.pdf>.

The National Defense Strategy and its radicalizing potential should be seen primarily in the context of events in the Western Balkans: the intensive destabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the extremist statements and behavior of Serbian BiH Presidency member Milorad Dodik, who speaks openly about the possibility of secession of the Republika Srpska; the growing rapprochement between Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who share the same ideas of a Greater Albania and Greater Serbia, respectively, and advocating the idea of a “Serbian world” which, in addition to the above document, has been elaborated in several strategic documents of the Republic of Serbia and represents a counterpart to the idea of a Greater Serbia that came to the fore during the war-torn 1990s.

The Defense Strategy treats as a security threat the aspirations and attempts “in some countries of the region” to achieve “the highest possible degree of national unification of ethnic space and implement irredentist projects, especially when it comes to creating a ‘Greater Albania’, which would include revision of and changes to internationally determined state borders and jurisdictions”, which “poses a threat to peace and security at the regional level, as well as beyond”. Many international experts on the Balkans point out that this would be reflected primarily in changes to Kosovo’s borders, which could lead to a further disintegration of the Balkans. However, many of them, including Edward Joseph, lecturer at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, have warned that “a Greater Serbia will lead to the creation of a Greater Albania, and vice versa”.⁴

This is supported by the fact that the idea of ethnic territorial unity is advocated precisely by Serbia in numerous strategic documents. Primarily, these are the Strategy on Relations of the Motherland with Serbs in the Diaspora (2011), the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space signed by the Ministers of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the Republika Srpska (2019), as well as the Law on Cyrillic

4 “Slobodna Evropa”, 4 January 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/edward-joseph-intervju/31632463.html>.

alphabet, and the Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2021 to 2029 (2020).

Serbian defense strategists rightly note that “phenomena and manifestations of the strengthening of extreme nationalist groups, as well as the disruption of political relations and the deepening of political divisions” negatively impact the situation in the region. However, in the continuation of the very same paragraph, it is clear that the attitude towards that type of danger is selective and refers to “religious extremism which, above all, results in the strengthening of radical Islamic movements, whose activities could destabilize the region”.

The key risks and threats to the security of the Republic of Serbia are separatist aspirations, ethnic and religious extremism, covert foreign factor actions, organized crime and illegal migration. Special emphasis is placed on “Kosovo’s illegal and unilateral declaration of independence”. The activities of criminal groups are treated as dangerous, but it is Albanians in particular who are targeted in this regard, since the strategy states that “the activities of criminal groups in the south of the Republic of Serbia pose a particular security threat, primarily because of their links with terrorist, extremist and separatist activities.”⁵

*The Strategy Against Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing for the period 2020–2024*⁶ builds on the two previous strategies in this field (2008–2013 and 2014–2019) and is aimed at developing and strengthening the system for combating money laundering and terrorism financing in the Republic of Serbia, in order to successfully deal with the risks identified in the national risk assessment from 2018, as well as to adopt measures that will be in line with the standards of the Financial Action Task Force in the fight against money laundering and terrorism financing⁷ and will successfully contribute to achieving the

5 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/strategija/2019/94/2>.

6 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/14/1/reg>.

7 FATF-Financial Action Task Force, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/>.

strategic objectives set. In June 2019, Serbia was removed from the list of the Financial Action Task Force in the fight against money laundering in countries with strategic shortcomings in the prevention of money laundering and terrorism financing. On the other hand, civil society organizations have been investigated by the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing in 2020 without a clear legal basis,⁸ which is an abuse of the legislative and strategic national framework for limiting the activities of legitimate civil society.

*The National Strategy for Combating Violence and Indecent Behavior at Sporting Events 2013–2018*⁹ has expired, and a new one has not been adopted. This was the only strategy in Serbia that tackled the issues of extremist fan groups, hooliganism, violence and crime in sports. Both the document and its implementation have numerous shortcomings:¹⁰ no measures were aimed at banning or disbanding fan groups that have a history of “severe” violence; there was no sincere intention to investigate the criminal responsibility of hooligans linked to crime by the media; the racist and nationalist narrative at sports matches was not brought into question, but has even sometimes been supported; during the implementation period of this strategy, eight people lost their lives in 182 violent incidents caused by extremist hooligan groups; in 60 percent of the violent incidents in Belgrade, it was not possible to prove a connection with sports, because they took place outside sports facilities; the penalties imposed for such incidents were mild (mostly suspended sentences or small fines);¹¹ no system was established to monitor, evaluate and report on the implementation of this strategy; already in the first half of 2018, no activity from the Action Plan was undertaken.

8 <http://preugovor.org/Tekstovi/1608/Novi-izvestaj-Evropske-komisije-jos-kriticniji-o.shtml>.

9 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/reg/viewAct/c3be2176-76ee-4cea-9d9b-1656b412d159>.

10 <https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/nasilje-i-sport-nekad-i-sad-2/>, http://preugovor.org/upload/document/alarm_izvetaj.pdf.

11 https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/v1_-_nasilje_i_sport_-_bcbp.pdf.

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE PREVENTION AND COUNTERING OF TERRORISM

With the Action Plan for Chapter 24 within the negotiations with the European Union, Serbia has committed itself to implementing measures in the areas covered by this chapter,¹² in order to adjust the national strategic, legal and institutional framework in accordance with European standards. The development and implementation of the Strategy for the Countering of Terrorism are part of Serbia's commitments under the Action Plan for Chapter 24 and were due to be adopted in the second quarter of 2016.

The National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism for the period 2017–2021¹³ (hereinafter: the Strategy) and the Action Plan of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism (hereinafter: the Action Plan) were adopted at the Government session on 12 October, 2017. This was the first time that Serbia created a strategic national framework in this field, necessary for an adequate, i.e. comprehensive and coherent national response to the threats of radicalization, extremism and terrorism.

The National Strategy defines the basic and permanent commitments, values, objectives and activities of Serbia's policy in the field of prevention and countering of terrorism and establishes a strategic framework for responding to this threat.

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- 12 Chapter 24 – Justice, Freedom and Security, aims to enable the free movement of people, while guaranteeing their security. This chapter is divided into 12 sub-areas: asylum, migration, visa policy, external borders and Schengen, fight against organized crime, combating drug abuse, fight against trafficking in human beings, fight against terrorism, judicial cooperation in civil and criminal matters, judicial cooperation in criminal matters, police cooperation and customs cooperation.
- 13 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2017/94/1/reg>
<http://www.mup.gov.rs/wps/wcm/connect/6aff4ba-fa59-4d8a-99e4-729c0eb2ba54/AP+terorizam-1.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=mfqh4iX>.

INTERNATIONAL GUIDELINES AS A STARTING POINT FOR DRAFTING THE STRATEGY

Numerous international documents, standards and international legal obligations were used as a starting point for drafting this Strategy, primarily the Charter of the United Nations, the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism, the European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Directive 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe of 15 March 2017, as well as other international instruments for combating terrorism.

In many basic settings, principles and approaches, the Strategy follows international guidelines. However, the Strategy does not take into account important European Union strategic documents on terrorism, such as the 2010 EU Internal Security Strategy, the 2014 EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism and the 2015 EU Agenda on Security. Deviation from international guidelines is particularly noticeable: in relation to the need for public policies to be based on evidence, i.e. based on up-to-date, comprehensive and continuous research of the phenomenon; that the implementation of strategies must involve a broad range of relevant actors such as civil society, the private sector, the media and others; that the messages coming from governing structures must be clear, unambiguous and strong in condemning all forms of radicalization and extremism; that the response to radicalization and extremism must ensure the inclusion and provision of equal opportunities for all social groups, including marginalized, excluded and minority communities; and that the implementation of the strategy should be transparent, flexible and effective. This will be discussed in more detail below.

ANALYSIS OF SITUATION AND CHALLENGE

The Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism does not contain an adequate and valid description of the situation in Serbia, which should be the basic starting point of that document and the Action Plan. Instead of providing detailed and precise data on the situation, general statements are given from unquoted, mostly theoretical sources.

The chapter *Analysis of Situation and Challenges* briefly states that the threat of terrorism to the Republic of Serbia is real, that there has been a strengthening of violent extremism and an increase in the radicalization of certain individuals and groups. The Strategy also identifies the main forms of manifestation of the threat of terrorism specific to Serbia:

- ethnically motivated extremism and separatist tendencies in some parts of the territory, with the possibility to grow into terrorism, particularly in relation to the unilaterally proclaimed independence of Kosovo and Metohija;
- activity of members and supporters of radical Islamic movements and organizations, which are organizationally and functionally linked with similar movements in the region and beyond;
- continuous propaganda activity of radical religious preachers, individuals or groups who with the tendentious interpretation of religious teaching consciously spread the ideology of violent extremism, and the radicalization of the youth and religious converts;
- return of terrorist fighters from conflict areas to Serbia or countries of the region, whereby they become further radicalized and capable of executing terrorist attacks, thus possibly serving as negative role models;
- danger of the infiltration of terrorists during a mass influx of migrants and refugees, exceeding the Republic of Serbia's receipt capacity.

It remains undefined from which research or source the data on which the strategic plan should be based come from, nor what specific data this involves. Modern international principles of strategic management¹⁴ stand in contrast to this approach. They call for national strategies to be an expression of *evidence-based policy*. This, among other things, implies the need for empirical, reliable and representative data on the initial situation in the field of radicalization, extremism and terrorism in Serbia, as well as on the approaches to their prevention that have been proven as successful. This data should be used as a starting point for creating a strategy and an action plan.

In addition, not only in the Strategy, but more broadly, in Serbia, there is a lack of research on the radicalization, extremism and terrorism, as a basis and starting point for strategic management in this field. Research in this field is scarce and insufficient, rare and fragmentary, so there is a need to collect and analyze baseline data in this regard. Research is needed on the extent, causes, factors, mechanisms, and types of radicalization and extremism, as well as research on existing responses to them.

This weakness is not even recognized in the description of the situation or in the objectives of the Strategy, and is only partially mentioned in the Action Plan. Only activity I.2.6. refers to encouraging scientific research on the causes and manifestations of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, and the improvement and exchange of research results and opinions among researchers and policy makers. However, this activity is limited only to causes and manifestations and limited to the academic sector (this activity falls solely under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development). A complete overview of the situation is possible only with much broader research frameworks. Research activity conceived in this way suggests that the exchange of information is also limited to researchers and policy makers, which is

14 The 2010 EU Internal Security Strategy, the 2014 EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism and the 2015 EU Agenda on Security.

insufficient and contrary to numerous international principles in this field involving the wider community, the civil and the private sector.

For example, the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism from 2014 emphasizes on multiple points the need for continuous research into radicalization and terrorism as ever-changing phenomena to achieve an effective response, as well as the need to continuously adapt approaches based on new facts. Encouraging research into the trends and challenges of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism, existing needs and responses to them, is one of the ten priorities under this European Union strategy's response to radicalization and terrorism. Discussions with academia, government, first-line practitioners from various fields, vulnerable individuals, former terrorists, victims of terrorism, as well as with civil society organizations are also recommended to better understand these phenomena at the local, national, regional and international levels.

The lack of adequate research and understanding of the initial situation was reflected in the incomplete plan of strategic action, in the content of which certain highly important courses of action are missing. Primarily, and as mentioned above, this Strategy will not enable sufficient research on the state of radicalization, extremism and terrorism in Serbia, because it did not recognize their lack as a weakness. Other content-related shortcomings will be discussed below.

The lack of precise, concrete and comprehensive data on the initial situation will have a negative impact on monitoring the effects of the implementation of the Strategy, and especially on the impact assessment, i.e. the assessment of the effectiveness of the overall strategy at the end of implementation.

STRATEGY PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES

The purpose of the Strategy is defined as protecting the Republic of Serbia from the terrorist threat to its citizens, values and interests, while at the same time supporting international efforts to counter terrorism.

Four priority areas of the Strategy fully follow the four pillars of the European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy¹⁵ and include:

1. Prevention of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism;
2. Protection by detection and elimination of terrorism threats and system weaknesses;
3. Criminal prosecution of terrorists, while respecting human rights, the rule of law and democracy; and
4. System response in case of a terrorist attack.

In this part of the priority areas, the Strategy is in line with the EU Strategy and the areas of necessary work on radicalization and extremism are mapped out well. However, the objectives and activities that fall under strategic areas are questionable in almost all segments. At least in some parts, it was necessary to plan several different activities in order to achieve the planned impacts in each of the priority areas. For example, in the chapter on prevention (strategic objective 1.5), “skill of strategic communication” is explained as “confronting malicious interpretation of religious teaching and extremist messages in the public media and on the internet”, which should enable “consistent policy of communication with the public” and ensure “the promotion of alternative, positive messages, and improve the approach to revealing illegal contents on the internet which publicly justify terrorism”. In the following paragraph, this objective is explained somewhat differently: “This objective will be achieved through the efforts to recognize the importance and advantage of the skill of strategic communication at the level of preventing violent

15 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%2014469%202005%20REV%204/EN/pdf>.

extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, and to build the necessary capacities for its implementation.” Apart from this unclear and incomplete formulation of strategic objectives being a methodological shortcoming, it prevents further elaboration of the necessary activities and subsequent monitoring and evaluation of the extent to which an objective has been achieved. Methodologically speaking, a better option would be for each objective to clearly express in one sentence the change that is being sought. For example, “strengthening strategic communication”, or “developing strategic communication skills”.

To achieve the objective planned in this way, two activities are projected:

- 1.5.1: “Strengthen the skill of strategic communication with the public, by sending positive messages targeting vulnerable groups in society, through regional coordination and cooperation and other EU and UN mechanisms.” This mainly involves strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Culture and Information.
- 1.5.2: “Provide the public with real information through the media about the situation and fate of persons who have joined terrorist organizations, which, with the help of relatives and victims, reduces further radicalization and the departure of new persons to crisis areas.” This activity implies the strengthening of strategic communication towards the public, and the Ministry of Culture and Information is also in charge of it, and the only indicator is the number of public messages.

Contrary to the proclaimed objectives and planned activities in the field of information, leading media outlets in Serbia further radicalize the public, stigmatizing not only vulnerable groups, but entire national and religious communities.

It is unlikely that the realization of only these two activities will achieve the set objective. In addition, the logic of activity 1.5.2, according to which public information through the media “with the

help of relatives and victims” is expected to reduce further radicalization and the departure of new people to crisis areas, is unlikely to yield the desired result. A better and methodologically more justified approach would be to plan for activities that have been shown to achieve the desired effects to be implemented as interventions under the Strategy: for example, media campaigns aimed at the general public to raise awareness of radicalization and extremism and of how to prevent them, education of vulnerable groups about these phenomena – also in order to prevent radicalizing action, work directed at and tailored to vulnerable communities, etc.

MAIN THREATS

The biggest shortcoming in terms of the identified main types of terrorism in Serbia is ignoring the dangers of right-wing extremism in the Strategy and the Action Plan. Thus, in its chapter *Analysis of Situation and Challenges*, the Strategy outlines the following as main manifestations of terrorist threats specific to the Republic of Serbia:

- ethnically motivated extremism and separatist tendencies in some parts of the territory,
- activity of members and supporters of radical Islamic movements and organizations,
- continuous propaganda activity of radical religious preachers
- return of terrorist fighters from conflict areas to Serbia, thus possibly serving as negative role models, and
- danger of the infiltration of terrorists during a mass influx of migrants and refugees.

The threats defined in this way confirm that the notion of extremism is being reduced to Islamic radicalism and groups related to ISIL and other Middle Eastern terrorist groups. The way in which the threats are defined opens the door for abuse of the Strategy that may result in greater discrimination of minorities, stigmatization and placing them under unnecessary security control. Based on an analysis of the public speech of politicians and the media, we point out that the strategists, in defining the threats as “ethnically motivated

extremism and separatist tendencies in some parts of the territory”, exclusively meant minorities living in Serbia’s border areas.

The strategy is not comprehensive enough and should be expanded to include all forms of radicalization and violent extremism in the country (such as fascism, extreme nationalism, neo-Nazism) in line with the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Moreover, this was also a remark made by civil society organizations during the public debate on the draft Strategy, but their remarks were not taken into account.

Right-wing extremism has been present in Serbia since the 1990s and was fueled by the political mainstream during Slobodan Milošević’s rule, when its legitimacy was made possible. During the wars of the 1990s, extremists were mostly part of various paramilitary formations and cooperated with the Serbian regime at the time. After 2000, they transformed into associations, movements and numerous groups of hooligans at football matches that spread hate speech and participate in violent incidents. Authorities did not respond to these incidents adequately, but only in an *ad hoc* or repressive manner. Two right-wing extremist organizations, “Obraz” and “SNP Naši 1389”, were also banned, but their offshoots were not.

In addition to causing many violent incidents in the country, right-wing and ethno-political extremism groups were also a breeding ground for pro-Russian fighters in the conflict in Ukraine, and have been active in intimidating human rights organizations. There are also links between right-wing extremism, football hooliganism, and hate speech, which should be further investigated.

The influence of right-wing extremists on the public is much greater than the influence of other extremists, due to the tolerance of state institutions towards them and, in some cases, due to the compatibility of their programs with mainstream discourse.

As a consequence of the omission of right-wing extremism from the Strategy, not only was no action taken to reduce it, but it was also strengthened. In Serbia, during the implementation of the Strategy, there was a rise of the far right – it was normalized and made progress towards being legitimized, because state institutions and

pro-regime media increasingly support, tolerate or ignore it.¹⁶ Take, for example, the political party *Serbian Right*, established in 2018 – led by well-known extreme nationalist Miša Vacić, who has been convicted of inciting violence against the LGBT population and of illegal possession of firearms, and who has also threatened the citizens of Bujanovac and Šabac Mayor Nebojsa Zelenović – is given space in pro-regime newspapers, is opening offices throughout Serbia, and has significant financial support, which is not common for such small political parties.¹⁷ Vacić is also a presidential candidate in the 2022 elections. “Leviathan”, an organization that presents itself as an animal protection group, and which often engages in far-right rhetoric and activities against migrants and refugees, Roma people, etc., has also announced its participation in the parliamentary elections. Well-known right-winger Goran Davidović aka Führer, leader of the banned neo-Nazi organization “National Alignment”, returned to Serbia after 11 years in exile in Italy and announced the possible participation of his new organization “National Serbian Front” in the local elections. The far-right opposition party Dveri is also very active in spreading hatred and fear of migrants and refugees. By entering into a coalition with parties closer to the center, as well as legitimately criticizing corruption and the authoritarian tendencies of the ruling party, Dveri managed to gain legitimacy in the general public.

It is noticeable that the tolerance of the ruling regime to right-wing extremism is strengthening. For example, in 2019, a group of hooligans attacked the premises of the “Pride Info Center” in Belgrade before the start of a football match. According to the Center, the police officers who were at the scene did not react, while the officers who arrived by police car – only after someone called in this incident

16 http://preugovor.org/upload/document/alarm_izvetaj.pdf.

17 Hajrić, Dario. “Miša Vacić’s Serbian Right – SNS’s extended arm”. *DW*, 14 November, 2019. <<https://www.dw.com/sr/srpska-desnica-mi%C5%A1e-vaci%C4%87a-produ%C5%BEena-ruka-sns/a-51236352>> 7 April, 2020.

– refused to conduct an investigation.¹⁸ In addition, in broader society, the Council of Europe’s report on the use of hate speech in Serbia¹⁹ shows that continuous reporting spreads intolerance and raises tensions, that hate speech in the media in Serbia is tolerated, and that regulatory bodies and prosecutors have not adequately dealt with this issue.

GENDER ASPECT

A serious shortcoming of the Strategy is the complete omission of the issue of gender and the gender aspect of the phenomena of radicalization, extremism and terrorism. Both the Strategy and the Action Plan are *gender blind* and do not address the specific needs of women and men in any of the strategic areas. In this sense, the Strategy is inconsistent with a number of relevant international documents.

In 2013, in Resolution 68/178²⁰ on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, the United Nations Assembly called on states to shape, review and implement all counter-terrorism measures in accordance with the principles of gender equality. The following year, 2014, the UN Assembly in Resolution 68/276²¹ on the Review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy encouraged states and organizations to consider the participation of women in efforts to prevent and combat terrorism. In 2016, the UN Assembly adopted Resolution 70/291²², which called on states to integrate a gender analysis of the drivers of radicalization for women into terrorism and to consider the impact of strategies on wom-

18 “Pride Info Center: Police did not protect us from hooligans; Ministry of Interior: Incorrect and tendentious accusations”. *Insajder*, 2 October, 2019. <<https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/15699/>> 7 April, 2020.

19 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/izvestaj-saveta-evrope-govora-mrznje-nema-u-svim-tekstovima-ali-se-siri-netolerancija/>.

20 <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/document/ares68178-protection-of-human-rights-and-fundamental-freedoms-while-countering-terrorism/>.

21 <https://undocs.org/A/RES/68/276>.

22 <https://www.undocs.org/A/RES/70/291>.

en's human rights and women's organizations. The OSCE's Ministerial Declaration on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to Terrorism²³ (adopted in Belgrade in 2015) points to the need to empower women and engage them in preventing and combating radicalization, extremism and terrorism.

All these documents were available when the Strategy of the Republic of Serbia was being written, and it is therefore inexplicable that their guidelines were not applied in such an important case. The next national counter-terrorism strategy should address this shortcoming. But, above all, during the remaining time of the implementation of the current Strategy, it is necessary to carry out gender analyses in this field, which would serve as a basis for the development of a new strategy, and the new strategy should provide adequate activities to collect and monitor data on the various experiences, needs and roles of men and women in relation to the prevention and suppression of extremism and terrorism and to deradicalization in Serbia.

International research and principles related to the introduction of the gender aspect in preventing and combating radicalization, extremism and terrorism emphasize a number of aspects: the different roles of women and girls involved in terrorist activities and in the prevention of radicalization, extremism and terrorism; various ways in which policies and practices in this field potentially influence women and men; the influence of gender factors on radicalization; ways in which extremist organizations use their propaganda to manipulate and exploit gender stereotypes and discontent in order to improve recruitment; manifestations of toxic masculinity that contribute to the appeal of radical narratives; direct attacks and the broader influence of extremists and terrorists on women's human rights; various patterns of involvement of women and girls in radicalization, extremism and terrorism; characteristics and experiences of women going to foreign battlefields; characteristics and experiences of women returnees from foreign battlefields and those who remain there, as well as many others.

23 <https://www.osce.org/cio/208216>.

REINTEGRATION, REHABILITATION AND RESOCIALIZATION

Within Priority Area 2 (Protection by detection and elimination of terrorism threats and system weaknesses), one of the objectives of the Strategy is the deradicalization and reintegration of radicalized persons (Objective 2.5). This is a very important objective of the Strategy and it is important that it was set. In this way, the Strategy is in line with the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism from 2013, which emphasizes that countries should design and develop interventions for deradicalization and rehabilitation, adapted to the culture and specific context. The strategic plan envisages two activities for the realization of this objective:

- Development of programs for effective deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration with developed institutions based on best practices. The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs are responsible for these programs, and the indicator of the realization of this activity are the programs adopted.
- Suppression of radicalization at penitentiary institutions, through adopted programs of deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for this activity, and the indicators of the realization of this activity are the programs adopted.

Strategic activities set up in this way are not sufficient to achieve the planned objective, because these are only introductory activities for which the programs are still being developed, while the objective is considered achieved if deradicalization and reintegration have been implemented. During more than four years of implementation of the Strategy, it was possible to set more ambitious activities which, in addition to the introductory development of the programs, would have also begun their implementation.

Work on reintegration and rehabilitation with this concept of strategic activities is limited only to persons sentenced to prison.

In Serbia, 11 persons have been convicted of terrorism since 2013²⁴, while a significantly larger number of men (31) have been sentenced to suspended sentences for the criminal offence of going to foreign battlefields, and according to this Action Plan, they would not be eligible for any program aimed at rehabilitation, reintegration and deradicalization.

The Strategy overlooks the role of family, community and civil society in rehabilitation and reintegration, which is crucial according to international guidelines. Family and community members can provide support, but also represent obstacles in the process of resocialization of convicted persons, and they themselves need support and capacity building, in order to successfully cope with the challenges faced following the release of convicts from prison. Therefore, programs for effective deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration should also include them.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the changing nature of radicalization, it is highly important for programs of this type to be particularly carefully monitored and regularly evaluated, as recommended by the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism. The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN)²⁵ can also be an important resource in the development and implementation of new programs, the gaining of knowledge and the reintegration of former terrorists. This network has a permanent working group dedicated to rehabilitation.

CIVIL SOCIETY

The strategy recognizes on several occasions civil society in the sense of civil society organizations – as collaborators, and to some extent partners. However, the real attitude of government bodies towards civil society organizations (CSOs) during the implementation

24 According to data of the Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia

25 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/topics-and-working-groups_en.

of the Strategy regressed further, so much so that the cooperating role of CSOs was not represented, while government bodies have been increasingly open in showing their distrust and hostility towards the entire civil sector.

Thus, in the chapter *Methodology*, it is stated that the Strategy is based on the concept of comprehensive cooperation among all actors that can contribute to the achievement of strategic objectives, and that this approach implies close cooperation among government and non-government actors, including representatives of civil society, the academic and scientific community, and partners at the national level.

Priority Area 1 – Prevention of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism recognizes in its description the importance of establishing intensive and close cooperation and coordination between representatives of government authorities, civil society, the private sector and families, in order to provide support in case that radicalization is detected.

Strategic objective 1.3 – Environment discouraging the recruitment of youth for participation in terrorist activities states in its description that this objective “will be achieved through the efforts to raise awareness among the youth about the bases and advantages of democracy and the rule of law, improve their integration and their social position, and ensure the support of the civil sector and family in such efforts, particularly in the case of recognizing radicalization among individuals”.

Strategic objective 4.2 – Mitigating the consequences of a terrorist attack also states in its description that this objective will be achieved, among other things, through the efforts to “motivate the participation of citizens, civil society and the private sector in diminishing the consequences of a terrorist attack”.

Annex 2 – Partners in strategy implementation lists as one of the partners “the civilian sector and other entities of society with an impact on the creation of security policy, among other things through the public oversight of the security sector”.

It seems that this inclusion of civil society organizations in the Strategy is more declarative than real, because there are no developed mechanisms for its implementation. In other words, what will be realized from the Strategy, i.e. the Action Plan, limits the involvement of CSOs to three activities in the field of prevention:

- Activity 1.1.1 – Improve the general level of information of the entire public about terrorism, through media campaigns, round tables and public debates and other activities, including cooperation with civil society. Within this strategic activity, during the implementation of the Strategy, a total of three CSO projects were supported, small in scope and aimed at preventing violent extremism and radicalization, within competitions of the Ministry of Culture and Information for co-financing media content production projects.
- Activity 1.3.2 – Strengthen communication and cooperation between the state and civil sectors in the field of preventing the spread of extremism and radicalization, through the organization of round tables, consultations and other activities with civil society organizations. As the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society, which was closed down in 2020, was responsible for this activity in the Strategy, data on the implementation of these activities were not available. According to the Action Plan, the activities were to be implemented in 2018 and 2019. Representatives of the Helsinki Committee and other organizations were invited to two round tables on the implementation of the Strategy. However, government representatives did not provide any feedback regarding the recommendations made by civil society organizations.
- 1.3.3 – Establish intensive cooperation between government, civil society and family representatives in order to support young people in recognizing the dangers of radicalization and be protected against it, through the preparation of programs and projects under this strategic activity. The Ministry of Youth and Sports adopted the planned programs and in

2018 financed a small-scale project, which dealt with the topic of radicalization, among other things.

The role of civil society organizations in the Strategy is seen in various types of consultations and funding of their projects that meet the objectives of the Strategy, which does not involve CSOs having a partnership role, but only an executive and consultative one. The true partnership role of CSOs would be reflected in the full participation of organizations in all phases of strategic management in the field of preventing and combating radicalization, extremism and terrorism – with full involvement in data collection and assessment of the situation in the sector, through participation in the development of the Strategy, as well as participation in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the level of the Strategy's successful implementation. In addition, the annual budgets for these activities are extremely low – from 100,000 to about 250,000 dinars (between 850 and 2100 euros) in total per activity, of which not all funds are intended for CSOs, indicating that cooperation with organizations is at a very low level.

Involvement of CSOs through occasional consultations, limited only to the strategic area of Prevention, represents neither essential nor significant involvement of broader civil society in the national response to the challenges of terrorism, extremism and radicalization. Instead, a more adequate approach would be the participation of a wide range of representatives in all phases of strategic management in this area, from initial situation assessment, through strategy planning and implementation, but also in monitoring, evaluation and identification of lessons learned. Therefore, the entire approach to the involvement of civil society only through consultations, which is a low-effective way of participation, should be promoted to full participation and building partnerships with CSOs within the national response to terrorism, in all its phases and areas.

In this aspect, the Strategy is not in line with the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism from 2013, which emphasizes that governments need the active participation

of partners – including civil society – in the fight against radicalization and recruitment to terrorism, as this provides a series of methods, resources and insights, which are not otherwise available. Partnership work with civil society is also in many ways useful for prevention, since it increases the trust and transparency of the public sector, which leads to increased resilience of individuals and communities to terrorist ideology and lowers susceptibility to radicalization and recruitment to terrorism. Also emphasized is the need for the civil sector itself to work on capacity building in order to be able to fulfil this role.

The Radicalization Awareness Network can be a particularly useful forum for using all recommended methods in order to involve civil society in responding to threats of radicalization, extremism and terrorism.

CSOs are also recognized in the Strategy as a threat, where within *Priority Area 2 – Protection by detection and elimination of terrorism threats and system weaknesses*, the entire strategic objective 2.4 – *Improved system for combating the financing of terrorism* is almost completely focused on, as it is called here, the non-profit sector. Consideration of this threat within the framework of national protection against terrorism is quite legitimate. Planned activities also included the development of cooperation with CSOs, although only through the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society, which has since been closed down. It is also worrying that the number of strategic activities in which CSOs are seen as a threat is higher than the number of those in which they are treated as partners.

FAMILY

Family is mentioned in only one strategic activity: 1.3.3 – *“Establish intensive cooperation between government, civil society and family representatives in order to support young people in recognizing the dangers of radicalization and be protected against it, through the preparation of programs and projects”, within strategic objective 1.3 – Environment discouraging the recruitment of youth for participation*

in terrorist activities. The role of the family is reduced only to providing support in protection against radicalization, and exclusively to young people. At the same time, this type of activity would receive project financing through programs of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, which in reality, as a rule, means a very small scope and short duration of activities. The description of objective 1.3 also emphasizes the role of family “particularly in the case of recognizing radicalization among individuals”, but this aspect is not outlined in strategic activities. By omitting the important role of family in other prevention activities, in the lives of other members, not only young people, especially in the deradicalization and reintegration of radicalized persons, the opportunity to use this important resource was missed. Furthermore, in dealing with the challenges of radicalization and deradicalization, families need support and capacity building, and by omitting such activities from the Strategy, the opportunity to develop and strengthen this important resource was also missed.

In this aspect, the Strategy is not in line with the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism from 2013, which, in addition to what has already been mentioned, emphasizes the important role of families, particularly those that have experience with radicalization and deradicalization, in creating influential and credible alternative narratives, with which it is possible to influence those already radicalized to gradually deradicalize, as well as those interested to lose motivation for radicalizing messages.

LOCAL COMMUNITY

Although the importance of acting at the local level is mentioned on two occasions, local communities are not viewed in accordance with modern understanding. Thus, activity 1.2.4 – “*Promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue through media support*”, only through its second indicator, “*increase in the number of citizens, especially at the local level, who are involved in intercultural and interreligious dialogue*” to some extent indicates the intention to act in the local community. Annual budgets for activities of this type are

extremely low – about 250,000 dinars (about 2000 euros) per year in total, which cannot yield significant results, even if only one local community were funded each year. A study by the Helsinki Committee has shown that there no such activities have been carried out, because there is no political will to do so.

Activity 1.2.5 – *“Create conditions for social groups and individuals potentially at risk of radicalization to be represented in institutions, through the preparation of programs, especially at the local level”*, also indicates the intention to act in the local community, with an emphasis on impacting locally identified and particularly vulnerable groups. Such activities, with quality implementation, could be important for reducing the risk of radicalization.

The role of the local community envisaged in this way in the Strategy is not in line with modern viewpoints. For example, the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism emphasizes as a basic principle that the challenges of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism cannot be addressed without government cooperation with local communities, among other things, and that joint efforts are needed at local, regional, national and international level in order to yield a successful response.

In addition, another strategic activity, 1.2.7 – *“Strengthen the role and engagement of local self-government units in the prevention of violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism”*, refers to action at the local level through the introduction of preventive measures in “local action plans of municipal security councils in certain municipalities” and mechanisms for coordination of relevant actors in local self-government units. This is a well-chosen approach, as it involves adaptation and specification of interventions related to violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism specific to local contexts, and cooperation of local actors. What remains is the question of how this local action is connected to the national response, because the manner of connection, cooperation and coordination is not mentioned in the Strategy, but is necessary for the implementation of an effective response.

In addition to all of the above regarding the role of the local community, it is important to keep in mind the attitude of the state towards municipalities where minorities live, primarily Bosniaks and Albanians, who have been labeled as communities prone to radicalization and terrorism since the Yugoslav conflict. In fact, the issue at hand is that the state does not want to integrate minorities.

A Helsinki Committee research on the position of minorities in Sandžak and the Preševo Valley, carried out in 2021, showed that the state has marginalized the municipalities where Bosniaks and Albanians live²⁶. Both national communities are discriminated against, which is primarily reflected in their underrepresentation in institutions at the national level, low economic investments in the municipalities where they live, denial of national identity in textbooks, education, and public life. Both communities are exposed to the brutal campaign of Serbian nationalism, as well as to situations involving incidents. The unrest among Bosniaks and Albanians, especially during the last year, has been caused by the escalation of Serbian nationalism, which finds ground in numerous official Government documents²⁷. Manifestations of that are the murals of war criminal Ratko Mladic, which have been popping up across Serbia.

When it comes to the Albanian community, its position and real status are closely linked to the status of Kosovo and the Serb community in North Kosovo. Belgrade's policy towards Sandžak is based on continuous divisions among Bosniak leaders, as well as on control, because Sandžak is an area of controlled tensions. Due to all of the above, citizens are highly distrustful of politicians, which causes members of minority communities to distance and organize themselves.

26 "MINORITIES: PERMANENT OBSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INTEGRATION", Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade, 2021.

27 Primarily, these are the Strategy on Relations of the Motherland with Serbs in the Diaspora (2011), the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space signed by the Ministers of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the Republika Srpska (2019), as well as the Law on Cyrillic alphabet, and the Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2021 to 2029 (2020).

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING, MONITORING AND COORDINATING THE STRATEGY

As part of the Strategy document, in the chapter *Implementation, Monitoring and Coordination*, a plan for the execution of these three functions of strategic management is given, which is methodologically highly important for successful realization and in line with international standards for implementing national strategies.

This part of the document states that the Strategy, together with the Action Plan, which is its integral part, is a public document which is necessary for transparent management. It is also important that the Action Plan, without which implementation would not be possible, is an integral part of the Strategy and this is in line with international standards and obligations that Serbia has undertaken in this field.

Also, it is determined that all state bodies and organizations that are the responsible actors for the implementation of activities according to the Action Plan are obliged to develop detailed internal action plans within six months, which, according to the submitted answers, they did not do. These plans should be in accordance with the general Action Plan, contain the necessary funds for the implementation of planned activities, and determine the partners needed for the implementation of the defined activities. The strategy also allows internal action plans to be fully or partly designated as confidential, depending on the nature of data they contain. The strategy also states that the level of confidentiality of the internal action plan is determined on the basis of applicable laws and bylaws. What is missing in this part of the plan for implementation, monitoring and coordination of the Strategy is an emphasis on the fact that all internal action plans of responsible actors are public documents, available on their websites (except, of course, those parts that are justifiably excluded in accordance with data confidentiality regulations).

The strategy also plans to establish a national coordination body in order to coordinate activities, ensure efficient implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting on implementation.

The Strategy recognizes the importance of monitoring for the full implementation and improvement of work, and plans to establish mechanisms for continuous monitoring, which include:

- Monitoring based on the Action Plan, which includes:
 - Detailed analysis of problems and obstacles which arose in the process of implementation of the Strategy
 - Identifying improvements in institutions
 - Taking corrective measures as needed
- Assessing the effects and degree of efficiency of implemented activities once a year
- Revision of the Action Plan as needed
- Reporting on the implementation of objectives and activities (which will be public)
- Setting up a Government Working Group for the implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

The first thing that is missing from the Strategy's monitoring plan is a clear decision that *all* these documents should be public and available on relevant websites, which would be in line with international standards of transparent and open work of governments.

In addition, there are methodological shortcomings in this part of the monitoring plan, as well as in the Strategy and the Action Plan itself, which may affect the success of the implementation of the Strategy.

- Thus, the wording of some strategic objectives and activities are not precise and clear enough, or they lack the key elements needed to monitor and evaluate the success of implementation. Some of these examples have been mentioned and analyzed in earlier parts of this text, but adequate monitoring of implementation through necessary revisions should have eliminated all these shortcomings.

- Also, there are weaknesses in the selection and wording of some indicators, so in some places the indicators that were collected were not valid or sufficient for the activities listed.
- No indicator or strategic activity points to targets to be achieved (for example, if the indicator is the number of participants or the number of programs, the required number is not specified). In this way, activities of extremely small scale can be considered as sufficient indicators of an achievement of strategic activities, despite the fact that their extent and, in turn, their potential effect at the national level, are negligible.
- There are no set indicators other than those for activities. This means that it is questionable on the basis of which data, i.e. indicators, the success in achieving the objectives of the Strategy will be assessed. The monitoring plan of the Strategy states that the implementation of *objectives* and activities will be reported on, but if indicators are not defined and the data not collected on time, this will not be possible.
- Evaluating the success of achieving strategic objectives is necessary and crucial. First of all, the purpose of strategic management of the national response is not to implement activities, but to achieve objectives, and activities are only a means to achieve targeted change. In addition, the analysis of the achievement of objectives provides information on how justified the selection and planning of strategic activities was and what needs to be improved. As stated earlier in the text, very scarce activities are planned for some strategic objectives, which, logically, cannot lead to the achievement of the objective. A full evaluation of the success of achieving strategic objectives would reveal and correct all such shortcomings and thus make the implementation of the Strategy more successful.
- Although not explicitly stated, it is clear from the plan itself that monitoring of implementation will not be participatory, but will only involve responsible actors and the formed

Working Group, which is contrary to all modern viewpoints and positive practices in strategic management of national policies.

- The implementation, monitoring and coordination plan does not mention evaluation, i.e. assessment of the success of the implementation of the Strategy, which is a key and necessary part of strategic management. Moreover, given the length of the implementation period and the fact that this is the first national strategy in this field for the Republic of Serbia, it was necessary to plan for an midterm evaluation, as well as a final evaluation. In addition, positive practice in this field also implies carrying out an independent evaluation.
- Finally, one of the key roles of monitoring and evaluation is to identify lessons learned, learning and empowerment of all relevant actors. The Strategy does not mention this, nor does it mention how the results of monitoring and assessment of effects will be shared, discussed and promoted at the national level.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The area of prevention and combating terrorism in Serbia is multi-departmental. The institutional framework consists of all institutions relevant to this field.

The main responsible actor for the implementation of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism is the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia.

According to the Action Plan, other responsible actors of individual strategic activities include:

1. Security Information Agency
2. State Prosecutorial Council
3. Office for Cooperation with Civil Society²⁸

28 The Office for Cooperation with Civil Society of the Government of the Republic of Serbia was closed down in 2020, with the adoption of the Law on Ministries and the establishment of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue. Part of the competences of the Office has been transferred to this Ministry.

4. Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government
5. Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure
6. Ministry of Culture and Informations
7. Ministry of Youth and Sports
8. Ministry of Justice
9. Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
10. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
11. Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications
12. Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
13. Ministry of Health
14. Republic Public Prosecutor's Office
15. Customs Administration (Ministry of Finance)
16. Administration for the Execution of Penitentiary Sanctions (Ministry of Justice)

The following have also been identified as partners for the implementation of the Strategy:

- bodies in charge of managing, harmonization and directing, supervision and control of the security sector – the Parliament, President, Government, judicial system, independent government authorities and supervision bodies and bodies in charge of directing and harmonization in the field of security, particularly the National Security Council and the Bureau for Coordination of Security Services;
- prosecutor's offices;
- stakeholders from the private security sector (private security enterprises and private detective agencies);
- stakeholders in the information field;
- Government's service in charge of cooperation with civil society organizations;

- the civilian sector and other entities of society with an impact on the creation of security policy, among other things through the public oversight of the security sector;
- the academic and university community;
- existing authorities and coordination bodies: Standing inter-institutional working group for the fight against terrorism – as the umbrella working body; Standing coordination group for supervision of implementation of the National Strategy Against Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing; National (inter-institutional) team for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear material.

According to the Strategy, certain local self-government units should establish a functional mechanism for coordination of relevant actors in this area, and also have measures to prevent violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism included in local action plans of municipal security councils.

A significant quality of the Strategy is the multi-sectoral response to the challenges of terrorism and the involvement of representatives of various institutions. However, what the Strategy does not sufficiently recognize, emphasize or plan for is a meaningful multi-sectoral approach and planned involvement of various sectors of society in all phases of strategic management in the field of preventing and combating terrorism. From the overall analysis of the Strategy, its elaboration and implementation, we can conclude that the focus is on security services, police and judiciary, and that vulnerable communities are approached exclusively from a security point of view, while all other aspects of the process of radicalization and departure to foreign battlefields, such as social or economic aspects, are completely neglected. We looked into these issues further in the part of the publication that deals with the analysis of focus groups.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGY ACTIVITIES

The assessment of the implementation of the Strategy was carried out on the basis of data collected through requests for information of public importance, which were sent to the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism and all designated relevant actors within the Action Plan, except the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society, which has been closed down in the meantime.

The institutions to which a request for information of public importance has been sent are:

1. Ministry of Interior
2. Security Information Agency
3. State Prosecutorial Council
4. Ministry of Justice
5. Ministry of Justice – Administration for the Execution of Penitentiary Sanctions
6. Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
7. Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
8. Ministry of Youth and Sports
9. Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government
10. Ministry of Health
11. Ministry of Culture and Information
12. Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications
13. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
14. Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure
15. Ministry of Finance – Customs Administration
16. Republic Public Prosecutor's Office
17. National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism

All contacted institutions submitted their responses during December 2020. Only the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism did not respond at all, while the Ministry of the Interior did not provide data on the implementation of the activities it is responsible for. Instead, the Ministry stated in its response that it was awaiting the report of the Multi-Department Working Group for drafting reports and analytical materials related to the National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism and the accompanying Action Plan which “will serve as a basis for drafting all subsequent reports”, which is not an acceptable explanation for not providing data on the implementation of activities under the Ministry’s jurisdiction, because the reports of each relevant actor represent the input data on the basis of which the summary report is prepared – not the other way around. It is especially problematic that these two bodies did not provide data, given that the Ministry of Interior is the main relevant actor for the implementation of the Strategy, and the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism is tasked with coordinating activities, ensuring effective implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting in relation to the implementation of the Strategy. At the same time, in the chapter “Implementation, Monitoring and Coordination”, the Strategy itself obliges all institutions involved that “the report on the implementation of the Strategy will be public”. In addition, such conduct is not in line with the principle of transparency in work and other internationally accepted principles of national strategy management.

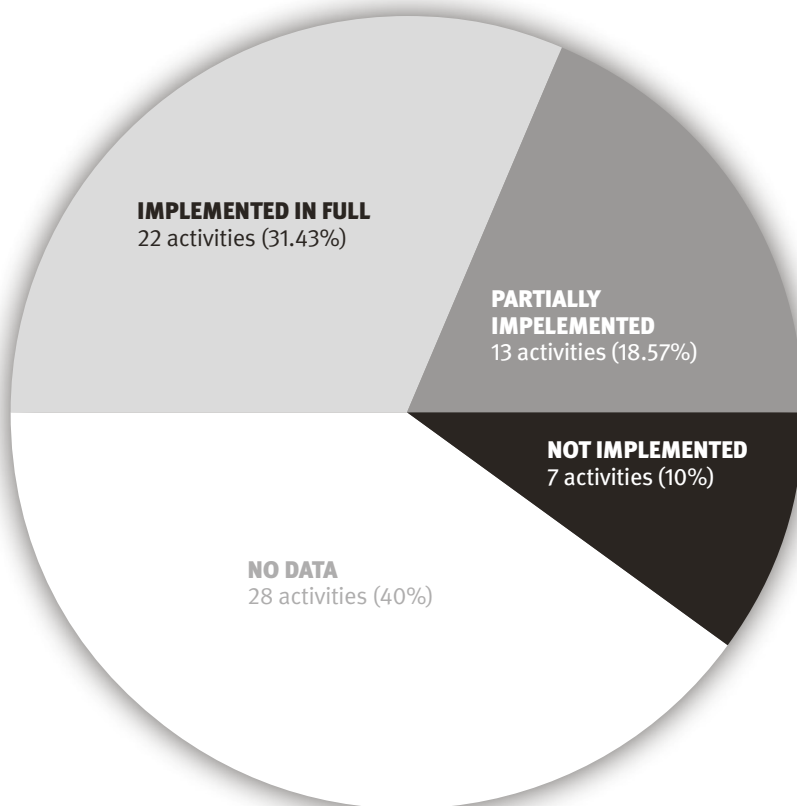
According to the submitted data, 31.43% of strategic activities were fully implemented. Another 18.57% were partially implemented, while 10% were not implemented. No data were obtained for as much as 40% of activities. These are data for two strategic activities²⁹,

29 Activity 1.3.2 – Strengthen communication and cooperation between the state and civil sectors in the field of preventing the spread of extremism and radicalization, through the organization of round tables, consultations and other activities with civil society organizations, and Activity 2.4.5. – Establish appropriate institutional and operational mechanisms for cooperation with the non-profit sector.

which were carried out by the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society and 26 activities carried out by the Ministry of the Interior. (An overview of the realization of activities is given in the following table and graph.)

TABLE 1. **IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES**

Implementation of activities	Number of activities	% of activities
Implemented in full	22	31.43
Partially Implemented	13	18.57
Not implemented	7	10
No data	28	40
TOTAL	70	100



A more detailed review of strategic activities that were implemented in full shows that the assessment of the success of the implementation of strategic activities is complex for several reasons.

For some strategic activities, unreliable indicators have been set for evaluating whether an activity has been achieved. For example, for objective 2.5 – *Deradicalization and reintegration of radicalized persons*, for activity 2.5.2 – *“Effective suppression of radicalization in penitentiaries, through adopted programs of deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration”*, the sole indicator evaluating whether this activity has been achieved is *“Adopted programs of this kind”*. If the realization of this activity is assessed only according to the indicator, then it would be considered successfully completed only with the adopted programs, although the existence of the programs (documents) themselves is not a sufficient indicator or proof that radicalization has been effectively suppressed in penitentiaries.

As mentioned previously, strategic activities and indicators both lack the target (numerical) values that need to be achieved in order for the indicator to be considered realized. In this way, activities of extremely small scale can be considered as sufficient indicators of the realization of strategic activities, although their extent, and in turn their potential effect at the national level, is negligible. For example, for strategic activity 3.2.1 – *Strengthen the personnel, material-technical and expert capacities of the public prosecution in charge of prosecuting the perpetrators of the criminal act of terrorism and related criminal acts*, the indicator is very imprecise: *“Strengthen the personnel, material-technical and expert capacities of the public prosecution in charge of prosecuting the perpetrators of the criminal act of terrorism and related criminal acts”* and it does not contain any set numerical value. With regard to this matter, information was obtained that the Republic Public Prosecutor’s Office received two laptops and one printer, which according to the indicator formulated in this way should be proof that the material-technical and expert capacities of the Prosecutor’s Office have been strengthened. However, the question is whether this represents significant enough capacity

building for a period of more than three years of implementation of the Strategy.

In addition, the activities that are carried out and reported as realized activities from this Action Plan often have insufficient strategic focus, i.e. they are not sufficiently directly aimed at achieving the effects from the framework of this Strategy, but are part of broader program activities of the implementers, which only partially affect this Strategy. For example, for strategic activity *1.1.2 – Improve educational processes, especially in terms of timely detection and recognition of radicalization, methods to counter violent extremism and respond in cases of terrorist attacks, through the preparation of content proposals supporting tolerance, inclusive society and adequate response*, the of Ministry Education, Science and Technological Development reports that it develops and implements many projects and activities related to tolerance and inclusion, with significant coverage of both users and territory. However, most of them will not improve educational processes “in terms of timely detection and recognition of radicalization, methods to counter violent extremism and respond in cases of terrorist attacks”. For this reason, it would be important when evaluating this and planning the next strategy to enhance the strategic focus of activities so that they lead to the realization of strategic objectives planned by this Strategy.

A more detailed review of strategic activities that were partially implemented shows that often only preparatory or introductory activities were carried out, such as capacity building, development of plans and regulations, holding meetings, etc., while essential activities that contribute to realizing strategic objectives were left for later. Of course, such activities logically and practically must be carried out first, in order to be able to carry out key activities based on them, but if most of the implementation period of the Action Plan is spent on preparatory activities, then there is little chance that strategic objectives will be sufficiently realized in a short period of time.

A more detailed review of strategic activities that were not implemented shows that the most common reason is that the relevant

actor appointed to implement the activity does not have the authority or the right to carry out such an activity. For instance, the Ministry of Culture and Information points out about strategic activity *1.5.2 – Provide the public with real information through the media about the situation and fate of persons who have joined terrorist organizations, which, with the help of relatives and victims, reduces further radicalization and the departure of new persons to crisis areas* that it has no right to influence media content in this way. Another example is the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, which believes that for activities *1.2.5 – Create conditions for social groups and individuals potentially at risk of radicalization to be represented in institutions, through the preparation of programs, especially at the local level* and *1.2.7 – Strengthen the role and engagement of local self-government units in the prevention of violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism*, it cannot be the relevant actor for their implementation and that the Ministry of the Interior, as the main actor responsible of the entire Strategy, can directly address local self-government units. Given that some appointed relevant actors pointed this out in the phase of providing an opinion on the draft Strategy, ambiguities of this type should have been resolved at that time, or at the latest in the phase of monitoring the realization of the Strategy, and the Action Plan should have been revised in a timely manner so as to enable the implementation of all planned activities.

REALIZATION OF THE PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND COORDINATION OF THE STRATEGY

No state bodies or organizations listed in the Action Plan as responsible actors for the implementation of activities have developed detailed internal action plans, although they were obliged to do so within six months from the beginning of the implementation of the Strategy. This development and specification of the Action Plan is necessary for more successful implementation of the Strategy and its lack has contributed to the mentioned shortcomings in

implementation. In addition, if these plans had been developed in time and discussed at the sessions of the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism, many ambiguities and difficulties in implementation would have been removed in time.

Mechanisms for continuous monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy were not established in time and did not fully perform their functions even when they were established.

Thus, it was only on 18 April, 2019, that the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism was formed and the National Coordinator for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism appointed, by the Decision of the Government of the Republic of Serbia³⁰. Among other things, the tasks of the National Coordination Body are to ensure efficient implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting on the implementation of the Strategy and to submit to the Government a joint annual report on the implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan, starting in 2019. Firstly, the body whose function is to monitor the implementation had to be formed at the beginning of the implementation of the Strategy, because, according to all recommendations of good practice, monitoring is carried out in parallel with the implementation of the Strategy throughout the implementation period. With this delay of almost two years, both the Strategy and relevant actors were left without coordination and monitoring throughout that period, and important strategic management functions envisaged by the Strategy's Implementation, Monitoring and Coordination plan were not implemented during almost half of the implementation period. Thus, no one reacted when the responsible actors did not develop internal action plans; there were no analyses of problems and obstacles during implementation; necessary corrective measures were not carried out; no planned annual assessments of the effects of strategic activities and no revisions of the Action Plan were carried out.

30 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/odluka/2019/29/6/re>

In addition, even after the beginning of its work, the National Coordination Body stopped holding sessions from March 2020 due to epidemiological measures. This not only delayed the ongoing activities of coordination and monitoring of the Strategy, but also delayed the formation of a working group for reporting.

As a result, it was only more than a year later, in September 2020, that the National Coordination Body formed a Multi-sectoral Working Group to draft proposals for reports and analytical materials related to the Strategy and Action Plan. The tasks of this group include: regular reporting on the implementation of activities from the Action Plan, compiling other supporting analytical materials, reviewing the current situation, monitoring, evaluating and analyzing the achievement of strategic objectives. Since its formation, this group has been working on the preparation of reports on the implementation of the Strategy, and only afterwards and on the basis of this will it work on analytical materials. Due to the late start of work, the Multi-sectoral Working Group will not be able to fulfil its tasks related to monitoring, regular reporting and review of the current situation relevant to this Strategy. In this regard, it has already been announced that the reports and the development of the next strategy will be postponed to 2022. What can be achieved during this extended period is a report on the overall implementation of the strategy and its evaluation (although it is not listed among the tasks of the Multi-sectoral Working Group), as well as an overview of the current situation, all of which represents important data for the next strategy. As already mentioned, the National Coordination Body is obliged to make the report on the implementation of the Strategy public, and it would be important and in accordance with international standards and requirements for all other reports to also be made public.

With the new Action Plan for Chapter 24³¹, the Republic of Serbia has committed itself to the adoption and implementation of a

31 <http://www.mup.gov.rs/wps/wcm/connect/a7fbd693-caec-4f3e-b471-187a2be8bcf0/lat-Akcioni+plan+za+P24+--+revidirana+verzija+23+07+2020.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=ng1k6t5>.

new strategy for the prevention and countering of terrorism in accordance with the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy. As the previous Strategy expired at the end of 2021, and the new one was not adopted on time, there is a gap in strategic action in this field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The next national strategy needs to be more fully harmonized with all relevant international guidelines, especially the 2010 EU Internal Security Strategy, the 2014 EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism and the 2015 EU Agenda on Security.
- The next Strategy should be based on evidence, i.e. empirical, reliable and representative data on the initial situation in the field of radicalization, extremism and terrorism in Serbia, as well as on approaches in their prevention that have proven to be successful. In addition, research in this area should be continuous.
- The next strategy needs to include more activities, both in terms of their diversity and their scope, which would be sufficient to achieve the planned objectives.
- The strategy is not comprehensive enough and should be expanded to include all forms of radicalization and violent extremism present in the country (e.g. fascism, extreme Serbian nationalism, neo-Nazism). Primarily, the next strategy should include right-wing extremism, starting from the existing relevant problems in this field, which are reported on daily by civil society organizations and professional media.
- The next national strategy for the fight against terrorism should introduce a gender dimension, based on a previously conducted gender analysis of the phenomena of radicalization, extremism and terrorism in Serbia.
- The area of deradicalization and reintegration of radicalized persons in the next strategy should be improved with a wider range and scope of activities, inclusion of radicalized persons

who received suspended sentences, as well as involvement of families, communities and civil society in the rehabilitation and reintegration of radicalized persons.

- The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) can be an important resource in the development and implementation of new programs, gaining knowledge and resocialization of former terrorists, foreign fighters and nationalist extremists, and the next strategy should plan for significant cooperation with it.
- The approach to involving civil society should be promoted to full participation and building partnerships with civil society organizations, the academic community, professional media, and experts, as part of the national response to terrorism in all its phases and areas.
- The role of family should be fully recognized in the next strategy, including a full range of activities in the field of prevention, but also deradicalization and reintegration.
- The next strategy should include recognizing the importance and role of local communities, understood in contemporary terms, as necessary actors in the national response to the challenges of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism.
- All strategic management functions should be significantly improved in the next strategy: successful and complete implementation, monitoring and coordination, as well as evaluation and reporting.
- The transparency of the entire process of drafting and implementing the next strategy – including monitoring, evaluation and reporting – also needs to be improved.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND NEEDS FOR DERADICALIZATION AND REINTEGRATION PROCESSES IN SERBIA

All the countries of the Western Balkans, including Serbia, face numerous challenges regarding the return of their nationals who are known or presumed to have fought on foreign battlefields in Syria or Ukraine.

Improving the mechanisms that strengthen a community's resilience to radicalization processes should be one of the priorities of Serbia's new national strategy for the prevention and countering of terrorism. The Strategy for the period 2017–2021 emphasizes that effective protection against terrorism includes a well-established system of deradicalization and the resocialization of deradicalized persons, but the institutions have not dealt with these issues so far.

Creating and developing a comprehensive and effective strategy for deradicalization and resocialization is not possible without relevant information and multidisciplinary analysis. Serbian institutions have no answers to questions such as how families and communities react to returnees, what support there is for returnees and their families, what the needs of families are, or whether the lack of support affects the success and dynamics of the process of deradicalization and resocialization.

For these reasons, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights has collected data that will provide insight into these and other issues. Based on the empirical data we collected in the period between June and December 2021, we also made recommendations in regards to strengthening the resilience of communities to radicalization. The

recommendations include strengthening the capacity of communities to help individuals who want to abandon the beliefs or groups that may lead to violent extremism.

The research paper is based on an interdisciplinary approach, which implies the coordinated engagement of several sectors and actors within society in interventions and disengagement, as well as rehabilitation and reintegration programs. This approach was proved³² as necessary for the successful process of deradicalization and resocialization, because radicalized people and their families have a whole range of problems and needs, both practical and psychosocial and/or ideological etc., so it is not possible for only one actor or institution to respond to all of them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the phenomenon of radicalization and violent extremism was made on the basis of information obtained in individual or group conversations with people who were on foreign battlefields, convicted of terrorism, family members of foreign fighters, representatives of institutions, various professionals and activists from local communities.

A series of interviews in different parts of Serbia made it possible to identify subgroups that are presumed to be particularly vulnerable to radicalization based on previous research available to the public. Special emphasis was placed on assessing the needs of individuals in the processes of deradicalization and resocialization, and the needs of their families and community members for support and empowerment, as well as assistance in the rehabilitation and reintegration of former convicts. This information is crucial for the design and implementation of effective measures related to possible new returnees, in the field of prevention, disengagement, rehabilitation,

32 “Non-custodial Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism” A Guidebook for Policymakers and Practitioners in South-Eastern Europe <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/444838?download=true>.

reintegration, as well as support in monitoring people convicted of terrorism and released from prison and those who attempted to participate in conflicts on foreign battlefields.

A total of 7 series of interviews were held with different groups exposed to the risks of radicalization: in Novi Pazar; in the south of Serbia (Preševo, Bujanovac); focus groups in Roma settlements; the Pančevo Penitentiary-Correctional Facility and a focus group with veterans from the war of the 1990s. The study included a total of 65 people. The research shows why and how each of these groups is at risk of radicalization.

Each focus group was designed to meet the specific needs of the subpopulation, and in the case of less accessible groups, in-depth interviews were used to gather the necessary information. The information that follows, obtained in these conversations, is transmitted without the intervention of researchers. Conclusions and recommendations were derived from the gathered information.

NOVI PAZAR

A series of interviews in Novi Pazar was conducted in December 2021 and January 2022, and it included 10 representatives of the local community – convicted terrorists who served their sentences, family members of people who went to Syria, religious teachers, representatives of local civil society organizations, community activists and imams.

There were not a lot of people from Novi Pazar and the surrounding area who went to the battlefield in Syria. According to the local community, no more than 40 people left, including women and children. It is emphasized, however, that there is no public, precise and complete data on this, and that only the security services know the actual number of those who left. In 2018, a group of seven people was convicted of terrorist acts, and these were all people that had

been to Syria. In addition, two groups (of 12 and 4 men) were convicted of terrorism-related offenses in 2009.³³

In addition, occasional activities of radicalization, without elements of violence, are present in the community, and include advocating conservative puritanical views, which are mostly related to the Salafi movement. There is a perception in the community that all the fighters who went to the Syrian battlefield came from groups that practiced non-traditional Islam, belonging to the Salafi movement that came to the Balkans from Saudi Arabia. In the past, religious teachers from the Balkans studied mostly in Syria, whose school of thought was the most moderate, or in Turkey.

There is also a belief in the community that there is a center for “the radicalization of the Balkans” in Vienna. It is assumed that people from these areas are being further radicalized and trained there, some of whom have already been arrested for various acts related to recruiting for Syria and terrorism. Also, there is a belief among the residents that “world powers are consciously producing extremists”, and that they are only declaratively fighting against extremism, as well as that the goal is to “present Muslims in a different light”. Media campaigns are used to present extremists as numerous and organized, and not as outliers, even though more than 95% of Muslims in the world practice traditional Islam. This distorted image of Muslims is “a mask, a justification for the radical actions of governments against Muslims (for example, in France)”. Without the altered image of Muslims, democratic nations would not approve of many government actions. The governments of the world powers are “responsible for the politicization of Islamic communities and the abuse of religion and the religious feelings of people for the purpose of dividing the Islamic community, crushing religious authorities, which consequently opens space for radical groups”.

33 “Osudene vebabije iz Novog Pazara”, *Politika*, 8. Septembar 2009, [https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/103093/Hronika/Osudene-vehabije-iz-Novog-Pazara](https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/103093/Hronika/Osudene-vehabije-iz-Novog-Pazara;); “Vehabijama 60 godina zatvora” *Politika*, 3. Jul 2009, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/94006/Vehabijama-60-godina-zatvora>.

It is recognized that in order to prevent radicalization, it is necessary to achieve the unity of the Islamic community, as well as its depoliticization. This would be the most important, fundamental counter-radicalizing measure, but there is currently insufficient capacity for it in the conflicts and tensions of a divided and weakened community. It is believed that allowing pluralism within the Islamic community in Serbia and, consequently, the creation of different communities of this type has led to the absence of a strong Islamic institution that would have authority in the community.

People accept Salafism and turn to Saudi Arabia and go there to study for several reasons. Some have a “desire to make up for lost time”. All that they lacked while they were not practicing religion and that they lack in life, they want to make up for by going to Saudi Arabia and dedicating themselves to the school of Islam there. They are perceived in the community as uninformed, naive, and as “those who face religious teachings for the first time”. They are recruited by those who are more knowledgeable or those who pretend to be more knowledgeable. There are also those who are attracted to Salafist teachings for psychological reasons, because of the need to feed their ego. This is often the case, because Salafist teachings offer the narrative of: “You are the only one that is right, you can do no wrong”, so they find personal pleasure and satisfaction in the belief that they are superior. Some young people join these studies allured by high scholarships, extraordinary living conditions and the comfort they are provided with, and they accept non-traditional Islam, because they are not empowered enough to resist it. The common thread with all these groups that are subject to radicalization is that they were not highly religious, nor did they fully practice Islam in their families. This makes them vulnerable to new interpretations of the religion, because they did not know enough about it, nor did they have enough experience in practicing traditional Islam. The phenomenon of leaving to study in Saudi Arabia began after the breakup of Yugoslavia, that is after the war in Bosnia. Recruiters and missionaries who then came to the local community launched a wave of new teachings of Islam, which

in various forms continues to this day. The recruiters are said to have been from Bosnia, to have been convicted of various acts related to recruiting in Syria and terrorism, and to have often travelled to Bosnia as recruits.

It is believed that the recruiters were paid well for this job, and that the narratives they used to recruit young people to go to Syria were untrue and tailored to be alluring. The main and most influential narrative known to have been used for recruitment was that they were not going to Syria to defend the Islamic State, to fight for their goals, but for the goals and defense of all Muslims. All Muslims were presented as victims of discrimination and oppression and young people were called upon to defend them. The Internet was the main tool and platform for recruiting and brainwashing young people. They were shown footage of discrimination against Muslims and violence against them, propaganda and appeals for help. This narrative was especially successful because, according to Islamic belief, Syria is a promised land, a place where the “battle between truth and lies” will begin.

In Novi Pazar, the tolerant understanding of Islam, which implies “the existence of different schools of thought within Islam, with the understanding that the basic tenets of religion are common to all”, is the most accepted. Radicalism occurs when all other opinions are excluded and only one is imposed. Exclusivity leads only to extremism. Extremism is understood as any religious attitude that is exclusive, because from the aspect of religion, it does not make sense, since one of the basic messages of Muhammad’s teachings is that one should not be exclusive or extreme. There is also a story about two students from Novi Pazar in Saudi Arabia who came to such a level of exclusivity that they considered all Muslims in the world to be infidels. They would say: “Only you and I are faithful.” One day they got into an argument and then each considered himself the only remaining true Muslim in the world. This story illustrates the extent to which those who have been radicalized in this way are exclusive and do not accept authority. In their experience, all extremists, when they reach

these stages, no longer have the group they belong to, they do not accept authority. And even a small disagreement will make them turn against others.

Islamophobic incidents occur in the community and they leave a sense of discrimination, oppression and continuous threat among residents. For example, the handball match in Novi Pazar is mentioned, where people chanted extremely nationalistic and Islamophobic slogans. Those hooligans (who came to Novi Pazar from other places) walked around the city with full police escorts, that is, with the full support of the state. For the local population, it was a demonstration of force, provocation and injustice “that is hard to bear”. The people of Novi Pazar know that the state will not react, that no one will be punished for threatening Muslims.

In general, there have been no departures to the battlefield in Syria for several years, and the degree of risk pertaining to the radicalization of individuals and extremist behavior in Sandžak is decreasing significantly. Proponents of rigid Islamist views no longer have the support they had a decade ago. There used to be a belief that extremists would come (to power) and the community was in fear, but now no one believes in that anymore. There is a perception in the community that there is no real danger of terrorist activities. Recruitment to go to the battlefield has been almost completely shut down. Until a few years ago, sporadic but ultimately rare recruitment attempts were noted but they all failed. These activities are supervised and controlled by the security services.

On the other hand, advocacy of certain extremely conservative Islamist attitudes, radicalization in a milder sense, without elements of violence, is present. Sporadic cases have been reported where famous figures, for example, try to persuade very young people to go to study in Saudi Arabia, or to accept such teachings from teachers in the community. In such cases, the family usually reacts by preventing further contact between the young person and those people and distancing itself completely from them. There is an increase in the creation of new religious currents. New modes of prayer, typical of

Saudi Arabia, are being observed in mosques. To the local population, this disrupts the traditional way of practicing the faith and brings fear about the unknown. New and atypical behaviors are also appearing among young people, including weddings without music, but how much of a threat these changes are to the stability of the community, or whether anyone is managing them, is not known.

It is recognized that any extremist and exclusive interpretation endangers the community, and that those who are closest to such persons suffer the most, which is damaging for both individuals and the community. The issue of extremism is considered very sensitive for the community; extremism prevention programs are often perceived as putting pressure on the entire community and as something that creates polarization within the community. It is pointed out that Novi Pazar is mostly a religious community and that extremism is rarely accepted. Nuances and small differences in perceptions in relation to “the traditional faith” are most often present. Only some interpretations are different, and those wrong interpretations can be radicalized later.

Of the several civil society organizations present in the community, several occasionally dealt with issues of radicalization and extremism, mostly within small-scale informational and educational projects. There are local associations that deal with projects for the prevention of extremism among young people, although not continuously or to a sufficient extent. Many associations consider these topics very sensitive and fear that addressing them could cause them problems with the security services, as well as that they would seem particularly suspicious, because they are a national minority dealing with such topics.

On the other hand, there are associations that advocate conservative puritanical albeit nonviolent views. They use passiveness in the community and financial ties with Islamic states to achieve a wide range of influence in the local community. It is enough for the association to find one individual, a donor in Saudi Arabia, for them to not need other sources of funds, because these are extremely rich

individuals. With the use of social networks, they manage to connect with a large number of followers, and that seems like a powerful thing. Because of their popularity, others are happy to follow them.

The importance of religious instruction in schools for the prevention of radicalization has been recognized, although it should be pointed out that it is not used for that purpose. There are no religious education teachers with exclusive extremist views, Islamic communities have ensured that much, but the problem is that those who have a peaceful and tolerant understanding of religion in the community are passive and do not spread their beliefs, unlike those who advocate exclusivist interpretations of Islam. The topics of radicalization and extremism are not in the religious education program, nor is there a pedagogical stance on how to answer students' spontaneous questions regarding issues they encounter in the media and their everyday lives. Questions that arise include those such as what is ISIS, what is happening to Muslims in Syria, who is killing them, is it an Islamic state, and the like. In religious education, the only related topic covered is that of the "jihad", which is explained to students as a fight, not simply a fight with weapons, but above all a struggle to become better, to respect the principles of life and not to endanger or hate anyone. It is also noted that the interpretation of the religion that only views jihad as an armed struggle is a distorted interpretation, but that is as far as the prevention of violent extremism goes.

No Islamic community in Sandžak deals with issues of radicalization and extremism. This topic is not focused on, although it could have a large impact. In addition, there is the perception among citizens that the Islamic community tolerates and includes in its institutions persons of clear and openly radical views and thus sends the wrong message to the public. The problem in regards to the engagement of Islamic communities is also the fact that even though state institutions together with the said communities should be the most relevant social actors working systematically, strategically and comprehensively on the prevention of radicalization and extremism, cooperation between them in this field does not exist, even on a

declarative level. Instead, the two Islamic communities and the state are shifting the responsibility from one side to the other and blaming each other. Public discussions (panels, lectures, etc.) on the topic of extremism in the local community are avoided, because there is a fear of extremist incursions and the violent disruption of gatherings. That is why such events do not end up seeing the light of day, “for fear that they could cause an even bigger problem”.

In the local community in general, there is no developed awareness of the ways to solve the problems related to radicalization and extremism, nor the capacity for it. The topic is avoided as a sensitive issue, both among imams and the local community. By avoiding to raise the issue and develop prevention and deradicalization programs, the community remains vulnerable. Young people, as the social group most vulnerable to radicalization, do not have enough information about radicalization, and no one deals with their empowerment in this regard. Activists of certain civil society organizations (CSOs) and religious leaders have knowledge about these phenomena, but there are still no programs that would be directly aimed at radicalized people. It is also emphasized that the organization that would deal with the prevention of radicalization and deradicalization should have credibility in the community, especially religious credibility, in order for its activities to be accepted.

There is no deradicalization in the community and no one deals with providing support in the processes of resocializing individuals who have been radicalized. Some imams stated that there has been a handful of attempts to work with returnees from the battlefield, through CSOs or directly, but only in cases when their families turned to them and appealed for help. However, there was no organized work, with plans and programs. These attempts at deradicalization, although with the best intentions and with the support of the family, were not successful either. Those who decide to go to the battlefield, for example, are difficult to approach, and it is almost impossible to influence their perceptions, especially in the last stages before they actually leave. Currently, there is no organized work with

returnees from the battlefield in the community. On rare occasions, the families of religiously radicalized people have no objections and allow some family members to change their opinions and interpretation of religion, even in the direction of exclusivist interpretations and going to the battlefield in Syria. In most cases, families are desperate, scared and helpless. They see first-hand that they cannot dissuade their family members, and they do not know who to turn to for help. On the other hand, there are rare examples where deradicalization and deterrence from going to the battlefield succeeded with certain individuals, most of whom were in the earlier stages, in cases where their family learned what they were planning before it was too late and managed to find someone they would accept as a convincing figure to speak to. As a rule, these figures were neither family members nor religious leaders, but acquaintances from the community whose authority and authentic and sincere intentions the radicalized persons found believable. It is mentioned that what was particularly convincing in deterring recruits was when they were asked “why don’t the recruits go to the battlefield if they advocate it so adamantly”, “why don’t they fight themselves if it’s so good to fight”. For those who were deterred from leaving, that was a turning point in their thinking.

In the initial stages of radicalization, families usually do not accept new radical attitudes, but they often fight against them in the wrong way. Not wanting to reveal their problems and not asking for help, they themselves try to put pressure on the radicalized person to accept the authority of their parents or someone else and give up non-traditional Islam or the intention to go to the battlefield. This fails, and instead a more useful approach would be to consult authority figures in the community who could help.

The Islamic community does not have a deradicalization program, because this is also considered a sensitive issue, especially since there are two Islamic communities, so raising the issue could cause tensions between them. On the other hand, when one of the Islamic communities is approached by interested persons, for example, the families of radicals or activists, and they ask for these issues to be

addressed, and it rejects them, they move to the other Islamic community out of dissatisfaction.

A father whose son died on the battlefield in Syria has an important personal contribution to the community and is support in it. As an activist, he speaks publicly and talks about the dangers of going to the battlefield. He is active, participates in panels, visits mosques on his own initiative and discusses this topic with the youth. As a person who has suffered a great loss, he wholeheartedly works with young people and has a positive impact on them.

A small number of people who were on the battlefield returned to their community, but no one has information about the real number, except for the security services. Most of those who returned were criminally sanctioned. However, there is also data from personal contacts of family members that some others want to return to Serbia, but cannot find a way to do so. There is no reliable data on how many people like that are left on the battlefield in Syria.

The group convicted of terrorism in 2009 served its prison sentence and the community is well aware of that. Namely, in 2009, the Judicial Council of the Special Department of the District Court in Belgrade sentenced 12 Novi Pazar residents to prison terms for associating for unconstitutional activities, terrorism and the illegal possession of weapons and explosives. The group was also accused of forming a camp for military and terrorist training on the Ninaja mountain near Novi Pazar, and they were also accused of contacting like-minded people and mentors from BiH, Saudi Arabia, Austria and other countries. In addition to the leader of the group, Senad Ramović, who received the maximum sentence of 13 and a half years, eleven defendants who were found guilty of participating in the organization of actions were sentenced to between six months and eight years in prison.

Prior to their arrest, the group members were known in the community as being problematic and involved in numerous incidents. They were involved in petty crime; they broke into mosques, took books and prayer beads during prayers and threw them into

the river; they would harass women on the streets and shout at them that they should be covered; they broke the sound system at a concert, which they thought was against their religious beliefs, etc. The police did not intervene enough in such incidents. There were dozens of charges against them, but they were detained only when they broke the sound system at a concert. They were not physically violent, but they acted that way and people were wary of them. They never had much support in the community, it was a group of about 20 people all the time. But those 20 people thought they were “the chosen ones” and were planning to establish a caliphate in Novi Pazar.

In their early youth, they lived dynamically and without religion. They felt that there was something missing and began to seek salvation from “women and the nightlife” in Islam. They learned everything they know about Islam in mosques and from the books they read there, but they believe that others do not really adhere to what Islam requires and that they are the only true believers. When they realized that, they wanted to introduce new things to the mosques in Novi Pazar, a more correct way of praying and the like, but the imams told them that “it is not time yet”.

While serving their prison sentences, the convicts describe that the food and accommodation were excellent, but that contact was extremely limited, i.e. only behind a glass panel and only with immediate family, and that phone calls were also limited. They were also bothered by 24-hour video surveillance and rigorous security protocols while walking in the yard and moving inside the prison, with repeated searches and armed guards.

The convicts spent most of their time in solitary confinement: 6 out of 7 years and 12 and a half out of 13 and a half years spent in prison, although this is not in accordance with the law. The reasons for the permanent placement in solitary confinement were that these convicts enjoyed a great reputation among others, and that they influenced other convicts to convert to Islam in the way they interpret it. An additional problem that occurred during their time in prison was the fact that according to the house rules, prisoners have to shave.

Because they refused to do so for religious reasons, the guards tied them up and shaved them every few weeks. After one of the convicts went on a hunger strike because of that, the guards stopped shaving them.

During their time in prison, no one worked with them on deradicalization programs. There was also no preparation for their release from prison.

Members of their families took care of their children and wives while they were serving prison sentences, none of the family members had problems in the community because they were convicted, on the contrary, “they were helped by both Bosniaks and Serbs”.

Upon their release from prison, they are considered not to be a danger to the community. They are under the supervision of the security services. They build their own religious facilities where they teach Islam. They do not have many new followers, and they are mostly joined only by members of their families. After their release from prison, some of them were given space in the media to “present their side of the story”.

Soon after being released, everyone started working, earning money, mostly privately, and taking care of their families. They did not receive any help or support from the institutions after their release. Those who do not work say that they are “managing”.

After their release, the convicts themselves say that they have not changed, but that they have only been empowered. Especially in their beliefs. And now they would introduce Sharia without hesitation, if it were possible, but they are aware that it is not. They believe that Sharia is still not implemented anywhere in the world, and that its establishment would mean the final rule of justice and morality. Nationality represents nothing to them. Only faith is important and the strict observance of religious principles. Regarding their beliefs, they emphasize that their worst enemies are “those who think they are Muslims”, while others do not interest them. They emphasize their hypocrisy and obvious disrespect for the basic religious postulates, their false faith.

All the convicts know that the security services are constantly monitoring and checking in on them, and they have accepted that and they don't mind it. The only thing that bothers them is that they always experience problems at the border when they try to leave the country. For the most part, they can't even leave Serbia.

The environment is distant and reluctant in its attitude towards the convicts and their families. The label that they went to Syria or prison for terrorist activities constantly follows them. People do not want to get too close to them for fear of causing a problem with the security services or with the convicts themselves. They believe that this could endanger them and their families. Even before the arrests, those monitored by the police, which the community could notice, were usually avoided or even asked not to come to certain places so as not to endanger others. There is also the belief, at least in some parts of the community, that someone who has experienced things like being on the battlefield, in prison, and the like "cannot be normal", which further leads to their isolation.

CONCLUSIONS

- There were no large numbers of people from Novi Pazar and the surrounding area going to the battlefield in Syria – there were up to around 40 people, including women and children.
- Serbian citizens who went to the Syrian battlefield rarely return to their community, and their families stay with them in Syria. There is currently a group of people who would like to return, but they cannot do so without support.
- Families do not have the sufficient capacity to deradicalize their relatives, they do not know how to deal with the issue, and there is no institutional support program for them in the community. Only their relatives, immediate family and their inner circle help them.
- It is recognized that in order to suppress the phenomena of radicalization, it is desirable to achieve the unity of the Islamic community, as well as its depoliticization. That would be

one of the most important, fundamental counter-radicalizing measures. However, the conflicts and tensions of the divided and weakened community do not provide sufficient capacity for this to be done.

- A tolerant and traditional interpretation of Islam is most common in the community in Sandžak and it accepts the existence of different schools of thought within Islam, with the understanding that the basic tenets of religion are common to all.
- Islamophobic incidents in the community occur and leave Muslims feeling discriminated against, oppressed and threatened.
- Overall, radicalization and extremism in Novi Pazar are declining significantly. There is currently no real danger of terrorist activities in the community. And recruitment to go to the battlefield has stopped. On the other hand, the advocacy of certain extremely conservative Islamist puritanical attitudes, radicalization in a milder sense, without elements of violence, is present.
- There is an acute problem with families – women and children, citizens of Serbia who have gone to Syria, who wish to return to their community, and the necessary conditions for this must be created.
- There are no institutional programs to prevent radicalization and extremism in the community.
- There are no programs of deradicalization in the community or programs for the resocialization of deradicalized persons.
- For people convicted of terrorism, during their imprisonment as well as after their release, there are no institutional programs of deradicalization, not even attempts of that of any kind.
- There is no developed awareness in the community about ways to solve problems related to radicalization and extremism, nor the capacity for it. The topic is avoided as a sensitive

issue. There is no strengthening of the community's resilience and it remains vulnerable.

SOUTH OF SERBIA / PREŠEVO VALLEY

A series of interviews was held in Preševo and Bujanovac in the period between 24 and 26 July 2021 and it included 10 representatives of the local community – family members of persons who went to Syria, representatives of local institutions and civil society organizations, community activists and imams.

There were no significant departures from the Preševo Valley to the battlefield in Syria. According to the estimates of the representatives of the local community, no more than fifteen people left, although it should be pointed out that there is no public, precise and complete data, and that only the security services know the actual number.

Departures to the battlefield in Syria took place in a very specific local social, political and cultural context. Namely, the national identity of Albanians is not built on belonging to a religious community. Older generations of Albanians were influenced by the Yugoslav ideology, which was atheist, and during socialism, religion was not significantly present in the public space. These communities have neither a tradition nor established mechanisms for cooperation between the religious community and society. Since 1990, changes have taken place: religion started entering the public and political sphere. Only then did Albanians in Southern Serbia begin to declare themselves as Albanian nationals and identify themselves religiously as Muslims.

In addition, until 1989, Islamic religious organization was run from Sarajevo. Those who wanted to study Islam went to Sarajevo, Priština, Skopje or Syria. One of the imams from Preševo represents the 69th generation of imams in the family in which they have traditionally been imams for 150 years. They follow the traditional Islam inherited in the community, Hanafi, as it was practiced 150 years ago.

After 1989, the borders opened and some young people from Preševo and other places went to study in Arab countries. Many who

went to the East to study were offered great financial and material benefits. These organizations have great material resources at their disposal, especially uncontrolled cash, and they use it to act and spread influence. Upon returning to their community, these students from Arab countries would bring “Arab Islam”. Then pluralism arose within Islam. The new current of “Arab Islam”, when it came to Serbia with party pluralism, was in conflict with the majority Ottoman Islamic tradition. Because of that, it functioned non-institutionally, religion was practiced in informal spaces, or through its organizations, and they were not integrated into the community. Some of them managed to put some mosques under their control. So, for example, now in Preševo, two mosques are traditional, or as they call them – Ottoman, and the third is more under Arab influence. Out of a total of 56 mosques in the Preševo Valley, only two or three are under Salafist influence, but not publicly. All Islamic communities have the same constitution, and those who do not respect it do not have the right to work.

Dervishes are also present in the Preševo Valley (there is a smaller number of them in some other parts of Serbia). Only in Albania are dervishes recognized as a religion, and their center is in Tirana. Until the time of pluralism came around in the south of Serbia, the Hanafi school of Islam dominated, and there were few dervishes. They could not empower themselves in the society of that time due to the dominance of traditional Islam. Dervishes also had a great influence on the creation of Albanian independence in the Balkans. Most of those who led the “Albanian Renaissance” were dervishes.

In Serbia, the law makes it easy for an Islamic organization to be established, so some organizations made connections with Novi Pazar, and some with Belgrade or Pristina, and formed independent organizations. Different Islamic communities are fighting for supremacy, but they do not differ in their practice of Islam.

One of the problems caused by the lack of unity of the Islamic community is the emergence of new interpretations of Islam. The first Wahhabis appeared in the south of Serbia in the 1990s. In the beginning, they acted as informal groups and the local community did not

understand them, nor did they recognize what was happening. They managed to gather a small number of followers, mostly young people, and win them over. Some of the groups even recruited people to go to the battlefield in Syria. At the beginning of the war in Syria, people thought that the “Arab Spring” was happening there, because that is how recruiters lured them, but later they realized that was not the case. They left out of ignorance and only there did they realize that they were fighting against each other: Albanians against Albanians, in different units.

During that period, financial aid began to arrive through humanitarian organizations from Saudi Arabia. It was difficult to distinguish what the real purpose of such organizations was and which ones are actually humanitarian, and which only use such activities for indoctrination.

In the south of Serbia, there was no major influence of recruiters, as there was, for example, in Kosovo or Macedonia, for several reasons. First of all, such interpretations were not acceptable to a wider circle of people due to the predominantly liberal approach to Islam in the community. For example, Trnovac has three mosques and next to each mosque – several taverns. When “conspicuous people with beards” came to such a community, there was great resistance to them being recognized as part of traditional teachings. In addition, the congregations offered great resistance to recruiters. Some imams have publicly called them criminal organizations, written articles for newspapers about Albanians killed in Syria, and demanded that the war in Syria be treated as a civil war in which people fight against the dictatorship, and not as a call for jihad. Spokespersons against recruitment received threats through social networks, but they did not consider them to be serious, because they came from young people who were more driven by emotions. In addition, the influence of recruiters was not great, because there were no intellectuals among them, renowned public figures who propagated radical ideas. Radicalization took place mostly in secret, in small groups or individually.

Those who succumbed to the influence of the radicalizers were mostly young people, of a lower economic status, from dysfunctional families, from rural families, some also engaged in crime or were alcoholics and caused incidents in the community. They all suddenly and very quickly became distinctly religious. It was also recognized that they were mostly, though not always, from atheist families and did not know what the idea of Islam was. These people went from an extremely atheist point of view to an extremely religious one.

No one had the support of their family to leave, and the departures were organized secretly. Recruits often told their families that they were going on vacation or abroad, and their families would only find out what had happened after they left, some from the police. The processes of radicalization were also hidden from families, so their relatives would notice what was happening only when indoctrinated people began to visibly change their appearance and dress. And then the families tried to dissuade them and deradicalize them themselves, because they had no one to turn to for professional help.

The belief that all those who were radicalized had become police informants soon spread in the community, which further increased the distance towards them and the community excluded them.

Some who went to Syria were found to be dead. In rare cases, if the family found out in time, they would manage to stop their relative from going to the battlefield. For example, a father managed to bring his child back from Istanbul and thus prevent him from going to Syria. Family has the greatest influence when it comes to preventing someone from leaving and making them come back. One returnee, for example, is very educated, and now teaches at a university in the region, and what influenced his return the most was his family.

Most of those who went to Syria, however, do not return to their community for fear of legal penalties and negative reactions from their environment. Serbia has no plan for their potential integration.

In addition, there are certain challenges in the community regarding former members of the Liberation Army of Preševo,

Bujanovac and Medveđa (abbreviation in Albanian: UCPBM). None of the leaders live in the community anymore due to constant pressures. Former soldiers also have a feeling that the police are hounding them due to constant surveillance and harassment. It still happens that, as soon as a weapon is found in someone's possession, that person is arrested. Although the law on their amnesty is respected, the situation in their environment is not acceptable for them. No civil society organization has worked with them. Their children also feel disheartened, because their fathers did not provide anything for them, so they go to Albania or Kosovo. Although this situation is not related to the fighters in Syria, it still contributes to the expectation of similar treatment for them and their families and influences their decision not to return to Serbia.

With the change in the attitude of the community towards the Wahhabis, some of them have changed their appearance, shortened their beards and lengthened their trousers, and no longer express radical attitudes in the community. It is not known whether they essentially abandoned their previous ideology, but they visibly changed their behavior.

Rejection, avoidance and fear of radicalizers and radicalized people prevailed in the community. For example, when Muhaz Ahmeti was killed in Syria, the first of the fighters from the south to die, people from the community did not even express their condolences to the family out of fear due to pressure from the media and social networks.

There are no isolated families in the community, because even if some people went to the battlefield, their families were against it, and that is why the families were not isolated after their relatives left. Families are against radicalization and recruitment, and extended families and communities help them.

Recruitment to go to the war in Syria is mostly related to the period 2012/13. After that period, it begins to subside, especially in the last few years under the influence of several factors. First of all, the security services quickly solved the acute problems and stopped

further recruitment and the sending of local residents to Syria. Many imams have been under surveillance since then, as have the families of those who went to Syria. Informative talks are held with them on a regular basis, and they also have problems at border crossings. The decrease in the number of radicalized persons and radicalizers was also due to the fact that they themselves realized that such an ideology does not suit the local community and is difficult to accept.

Following the global trends related to the fight against terrorism and departures to foreign battlefields, the mobilization for the fight against terrorism in Kosovo and Albania began in 2012/2013, and this was reflected in the events in the south of Serbia. Hodjas and the media were especially involved in the public struggle to stop the recruitment process, and the wider society then began to view Salafism as a suitable environment for recruitment.

It is now recognized in the community that the presence of radical groups isolates the whole community from the rest of society, that it is undesirable, and that radical ideologies, especially ISIS itself, do the most damage to Islam.

The Selafis now have no significant influence in southern Serbia. Also, Salafi communities no longer call for going to the battlefield. There is a registered association of Salafis called "Tiria". They practice Salafism, but have never called for people to go to Syria. Other young people who practice Salafism do not want to go to the battlefield either. Nevertheless, society does not view them favorably.

Now the Salafis are a very small group that has no outside support. There is often a rift between them, because some have gained more money. They clash over interests, especially material ones. Now they accuse each other, and in the beginning they were a group of idealists gathered around a religious utopia. Those who identify as Wahhabis form small closed groups and are difficult to approach. They are not ready to communicate with their environment. Wahhabis are not organized into groups. They are no longer as intrusive as they used to be and they are no longer as isolated as they used to be, they are now talking to those who practice Islam in the traditional way. Some

community activists recognize the importance of open communication with local Wahhabis, as well as the importance of their integration into the community, although such activities are not enough.

Young people now have the most contact with Salafism online and through one local hodja. It is understandable that they are going through an identity crisis and changing their minds, which makes them open and susceptible to various forms of influence. On the other hand, their ideologues themselves realized that they could no longer function as before due to great pressure from society and the state, as well as decreasing financial resources, so they adjusted their approach and focused on new media.

In the local community, traditional Islamic communities organize activities – various forms of training (English language courses, etc.), publish books, hold lectures, which do not speak directly against Salafi influence, but emphasize the practice and teachings of traditional Islam. Some imams of traditional Islam approach young people, teaching their religious tradition, introducing them to religion and registered mosques through group work and social networks, thus working indirectly to prevent radicalization. The association “Ditroia” (knowledge) organized training for the prevention of extremism.

Sometimes local activists, or interested citizens, affected parents, react independently when they notice some phenomena that they perceive as extreme. For example, a local activist accidentally saw on social media a picture of a woman with a burqa teaching six – to seven-year-old girls at a local organization. The parents of those children did not know what was happening and thought they were sending their children to foreign language courses. The activist wrote that it was not their culture, and because of that, the lecturer’s husband threatened him. He was supported by many people from Kosovo and Albania, so they closed the school because the local association was considered radical. In some cases, parents also protested because some of the teachers who taught religious education in schools were members of Salafist Islam. They demanded that they be replaced by

someone who had a degree in theology and who had views that are more adapted to the local community.

The OSCE, as well as local civil society organizations, worked on these topics in the Preševo Valley, but these activities are small in scope and impact, occasional and of a project-based nature, while systemic, comprehensive and strategic activities are lacking. In this regard, there is a lack of local research on the state of radicalization, the factors that contribute to its occurrence and the potential for resilience to radicalization.

In addition, religious instruction could play/plays a very important role in preventing radicalization, but this potential has generally not been sufficiently exploited. Namely, religious teachers are not ready enough to work for that goal. In the methodological sense, they work more as hodjas than as pedagogues, so they need training in teaching methodology.

There is no institutional and local self-government response to radicalization. Municipal authorities and local politicians avoid the topic, fearing that it will jeopardize their political rating and lead to a loss of votes. Neither the school nor the social protection system address these issues, and there are no programs that would include them. Rare seminars of an informative nature in the social protection sector on the topic of radicalization were organized, but there were no professional trainings that would point to work on radicalization. Even the local Security Council did not consider radicalization, nor did it include it in its work plans. The institutional position is that radicalization is a “sensitive” topic and that it is best to leave it to the security services and not explore it further.

The media are also afraid of negative reactions and a loss of support, so they do not work sufficiently on these issues.

Among the representatives of the local community, there is a strong belief that the security services exaggerated the issue of radicalization in southern Serbia, because it suits this government to have such an enemy to use the issue of extremism as needed and keep the local community, especially Albanians, under surveillance. It is also

believed that the former radicals are now cooperating with the security services. The unrealistic presentation of the problems of radicalization and violent extremism contributes to continuing tensions in the community, mistrust and suspicion and the consequent avoidance of the “sensitive” topic of radicalization and non-integration of all who are perceived as radical or suspected to be radicals.

CONCLUSIONS

- The number of radicalized people who went from the south of Serbia to the battlefield in Syria is small, from 5 to a maximum of fifteen people.
- Fighters from the Syrian battlefield do not return to their community, and their families remain in it.
- Families of fighters do not know how to deal with the problem, and there is no support program for them in the community. Only their extended family helps them.
- Recruitment has been completely stopped in the last few years, so in that sense there is no current security problem in the south of Serbia.
- The dimensions and characteristics of radicalization, extremism and departures to the battlefield in Syria from southern Serbia have not been sufficiently researched, and the existing rare data (security services) on these phenomena are not available or even known in the community.
- There is no prevention of radicalization and extremism in the community. No institution of the system is working on these issues.
- Almost no one speaks publicly about radicalization, so such a situation leaves the door open for radicalizers to act freely.
- Religious leaders themselves recognize this problem, but they see it in a narrower context, stating that the lack of (adequate) religious instruction allows radicalizers to act, as well as self-radicalize.

- In events of radicalization when it took hold and led to recruitment and deployment to foreign battlefields, the security services responded successfully to the point that recruitment was no longer available and identified actors were monitored and contacted regularly.
- Salafists have established their associations where religious institutions could not and this creates a bad image of NGOs in the community.
- There is a belief in the community that the Government of Serbia keeps the problem of extremism in the south burning, because it suits it to exploit it as needed.
- Religious leaders are aware of the possible presence and occasional appearance of radicalizers in the community. Community activists, too. When the phenomenon is noticed, they seek help from the community.
- Civil society organizations have small and occasional projects that address this topic.
- There is no developed awareness in the community about ways to solve problems.
- The topic is avoided as being sensitive.
- The community remains vulnerable.

ROMA SETTLEMENTS

Three focus groups were organized in the period from September to November 2021 in three Roma settlements in Vojvodina and around Belgrade. They included residents of these settlements, their leaders (formal and informal), religious leaders and activists of Roma civil society organizations. To investigate the phenomenon of violent extremism, we chose Roma settlements because their residents are exposed to attacks by right-wing extremists almost daily. Since they are directly exposed to violence, we started from the assumption that they can provide some insight into the activities of the organizations to which they are exposed. On the other hand, we examined the

resilience of Roma communities to radicalization coming from conservative, puritanical religious missionaries.

The level of negative social stereotypes, marginalization and discrimination of Roma is high, it is maintained at that level and exists in various areas. From when they start their formal education, Roma children experience numerous incidents with other children and with teaching staff in schools. Their parents as well. Schools do not resolve such problems nor do they deal with them. Healthcare service providers treat them differently, reject them and deny them services. The Roma perceive this situation as if they have no human rights anywhere, and as if all doors are closed to them. Roma are exposed to prejudice on multiple fronts – both as Roma and as Muslims, as poor people, etc., emphasizing that the attitude is much more negative towards Muslims than towards Roma. Men with beards and covered women are especially exposed to this multifaceted and more pronounced discrimination. The police stop them and interrogate them because of that. They regularly face threats and insults that they are terrorists, mujahideen, Shiptars, and the like. Graffiti with hate speech appears near the settlements, and the police do not react even when they are called. Covered women constantly experience unpleasant incidents and discrimination outside the community to such an extent that they generally avoid leaving their neighborhoods. Prejudice and the consequent marginalization and discrimination begin in the settlements themselves with non-Muslim residents, and outside the settlement they are even more pronounced. Non-Muslims from the settlements are more distant and they do not interfere. Incidents are rare. Repulsion, disapproval, insults and provocation are more common outside the settlements.

Part of the marginalization and discrimination of Roma is structural/systemic discrimination in all areas of life. It is noticeable in areas from housing, healthcare, education, economic status, to employment and their integration into society. Thus, in all settlements, although they have existed for decades, a significant part of residential buildings is neither legal nor livable. Basic infrastructure is

also missing, such as roads, water, sewage, electricity, etc. A small part of the population of the settlements is sufficiently educated, and an even smaller part is employed. And, if they are employed, they usually have the lowest paid jobs and work under bad conditions, i.e. without a permanent employment contract, without the right to sick leave, vacation, among other things. They mostly work on the black market, while as day laborers they work occasionally. Among those who are not employed, a significant number still regularly looks for food in bins, because there is no other way to survive. A part of the marginalization and discrimination they face is the lack of assistance/intervention from various services, from social to healthcare services. General support for the development and inclusion of Roma communities is insufficient. In all settlements, the residents receive some forms of institutional assistance, either financial or in the form of various goods, but they point out that the assistance is insufficient in relation to their needs. Due to all of the above, it can be assumed that even if the radicalization of individuals took place, the community would not have any support from institutions in terms of implementing deradicalization measures.

The population in the settlements is predominantly Muslim and, in part, Orthodox. There are also residents who are not members of any religious community. It is noticeable that the presence of Muslim religious communities has been expanding and gaining strength over the last decade. Imams and hodjas come to the settlements, open places of prayer, and the residents of the settlements become more actively involved, or join Muslim communities. The “new wave” of Islamism in the settlements is more pronounced and of a different content in relation to the Islamic interpretation and religious practices of previous generations. Imams are very engaged in communities on both religious and social issues, and community residents believe that the Islamic community contributes to the fight against alcoholism, drug use, gambling, prostitution, work with youth and adults, improving community relations, helping the poor, etc. It is pointed out that Islam has a very positive effect on the moral values of the

community and individuals: “Faith helped him grow into a man.” “Faith saved us.” “When we entered the faith, we understood what life meant.” It saved us from other things and helped us to organize our lives, taught us how to treat our children, family, hygiene...” Although most of the surveyed Roma communities were previously of Islamic faith, now they believe that their parents “were not in the faith”, because they also celebrated St. George’s Day, and now only Ramadan and Eid al-Adha are celebrated.

In all settlements there are various Roma associations and occasional projects of other non-governmental organizations, which are mostly of humanitarian and educational character. However, as their funding has been significantly reduced in previous years by the departure of foreign donors, and as it continues to decline, their activities are rare and very small in scale. Currently, these settlements receive important help only in the form of humanitarian aid, from local Islamic communities and from the diaspora, from relatives. In some Roma settlements, the humanitarian aid of local Islamic communities is significant and includes everything from financial aid to children’s packages, firewood, household appliances, etc. Also, these communities collect donations from the residents of the settlements and from the diaspora.

Registered Islamic communities have been stepping up their activities in Roma settlements in recent years. However, the arrival of Salafist/Wahhabi hodjas and recruiters was also noticed. In Serbia, only one Roma went to the battlefield in Syria, and that person returned from the battlefield and served his prison sentence and now lives in one of the Roma settlements. However, traditional Islam is present on a larger scale, and the Salafis, who are presumed to be most often recruited as foreign fighters, are under the constant control of the security services, so recruitment for Syria has not taken off. Communities react differently to Salafis/Wahhabis, but most often marginalize or isolate them themselves. However, no one deals with them. There is a belief in the communities that the security services are following the followers of non-traditional Islam, sending a message that

they will act against them and that everyone who is in contact with them will have big problems because of that. There is also the belief that the security services continuously monitor the activities of all Salafist congregations and that this supervision will remain continuous, regardless of the fact that most of them are peaceful and reject violent extremism. Therefore, the inhabitants of the settlements are very cautious and take care not to be associated with them. Everyone publicly condemns extremists, denies their existence in their settlements, and even avoids talking about these topics.

On the other hand, Roma are exposed to constant incidents by violent right-wing groups, which invade Roma settlements, intimidate and physically attack residents, or do so on the outskirts and outside settlements. For example, Roma who received social housing were targeted by the right, and the police did not want to protect them. They stated that they were attacked by hooligans in front of the police, so they had to leave these apartments and return to the Roma settlements. Another resident of the settlements was photographed in a bus with a woman who was covered, and it was announced on the social media group “Moj Beograd” (My Belgrade) that he was a Syrian terrorist. Police were looking for refugees from Syria in the settlements at the time, so they questioned him, but other residents recognized him and said he was a native. Some covered women were also physically assaulted outside the settlements. Even when there were recordings of the attacks, the police claimed that they did not happen and did not take any action, and the Roma believe that all this is due to corruption, institutional discrimination and the support of institutions, racists.

Also, there are unidentified right-wing groups, which particularly target migrants, i.e. they look for “Syrians”, thus intimidating the entire settlement. This group broke into houses in search for refugees from Syria, allegedly helping the police find them. They act like a people’s patrol that establishes order on its own. They beat the residents of the settlements, telling them that they are terrorists and Syrians.

In the Roma settlements where the people displaced from Kosovo are located, and who have been coming in waves since 2000, it has been noticed that hooligan attacks are escalating with each wave. Hooligans from other cities gathered around the settlements and came in, attacked residents, broke things, damaged houses, beat residents...the police intervened and protected residents in incidents as violent as these. Even after the arrival of displaced persons from Kosovo stopped, right-wingers have continued to visit these settlements and intimidate and attack the surrounding residents, every time a problem occurs in Kosovo.

There is also the sentiment among the non-Muslim part of the community in the settlements that migrants should be expelled from the settlements as soon as possible, partly due to the fear of right-wingers and security services, and in some cases as an expression of Islamophobic views. They report to the police if someone lives illegally in the settlements, if they suspect that there are migrants, or that Muslims from the settlements are hiding them. And in some settlements, the non-Muslim population shows intolerance towards Muslims and irrespective of migrants, keeps itself distant and isolated, with violent incidents also occurring.

Roma people are also attacked outside Roma settlements, only because they are Roma. Cursing, insults and provocations are most often experienced by children at school. Roma outside the settlements often experience verbal attacks, sometimes accompanied by physical violence. All focus group participants report that they do not feel safe when they go out of the settlements. They are afraid and expect insults, threats and attacks, because that happens very often. Residents of Roma settlements primarily need the protection of security services from violent right-wing extremists, which is not always provided.

The rarest, but still present in some places, type of extremism is right-wing extremism within Roma communities. It is mostly observed among young people who are not of the Islamic faith, and join right-wing fan groups. Violent extremism is manifested mainly

in violent incidents with other hooligan groups outside Roma settlements. The police were regularly called when such incidents occurred and they responded. Then both hooligan groups would usually leave. Young people from Roma settlements who were members of violent hooligan groups usually left them spontaneously when they started their own families and started looking for work. These are rare occurrences, and with the strengthening of the work of the Islamic community, they have become even rarer and have practically disappeared.

The Islamic community in Roma settlements sets a condition for all believers that they must comply with and respect the rules that apply to everyone. Worship in a different way and similar variations in religious practices are allowed and acceptable, but drastic deviations and radical attitudes that disrupt the community are neither accepted nor tolerated. Those who deviate from the required, are asked not to appear at joint gatherings. It is believed that it is their responsibility and decision how they will think and how they will behave and that no one should interfere with that. An important part of the motivation to distance themselves from the Salafis is the firm belief that the security services monitor all developments in Roma communities and that the presence of extremists would cause problems for the whole community, police reactions, media reports, and all communities try to avoid that.

The main counter-radicalizing “barrier” is actually the peaceful interpretation of religion and the rejection of all forms of violence, which is currently the content of the dominant Islamist currents in the settlements. However, religious leaders often insist that they deal with religious life and humanitarian work above all, and that everything they do is related to religious life. They do not deal with politics, they do not deal with other problems, but leave them to others, who are responsible for those issues. Thus, there is no real strengthening of the resilience of Roma communities to radicalization, but the resilience is an unintended consequence of the strengthening of the Islamic community. They believe that in cases when someone is attacked because they are a Muslim, the mufti, non-governmental

organizations, human rights offices, etc., should address it. Because they are not strong enough to start something or to change anything.

CONCLUSIONS

- The level of negative social stereotypes, marginalization and discrimination of Roma is high, it is maintained at that level and it exists in various areas. First of all, they are multiply, intersectionally exposed to prejudice – both as Roma and as Muslims, as poor people, etc. Prejudice and consequent marginalization and discrimination begin in the settlements themselves with non-Muslim residents, and outside the settlements they are even more pronounced.
- Part of the marginalization and discrimination is structural/systemic discrimination in all areas of Roma life. It is noticeable in various areas, from housing, healthcare, education, economic status, to employment and integration into society. A part of the marginalization and discrimination is visible in the lack of assistance/intervention from various services from social to healthcare services. General support for the development and inclusion of Roma communities is insufficient. The conclusion is that there are no measures that would reduce the risk of radicalization in Roma settlements.
- Security services control all non-traditional Islamic communities.
- There are no measures to strengthen the resilience of Roma communities to radicalization.
- “The main counter-radicalizing barrier” is actually the peaceful interpretation of religion and the rejection of all forms of violence as the content of currently dominant Islamic currents in settlements.

PANČEVO PENITENTIARY-CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

A series of interviews was organized in July 2021 and it included representatives of the management of the Pančevo Penitentiary-Correctional Facility (KPZ), treatment services and convicts. All interviewed convicts were active members of various hooligan groups and they had been previously convicted of various crimes – attempted murder, grievous bodily harm, threatening journalists, sale of drugs and weapons, violence at sporting events, participation in the war in Ukraine fighting on pro-Russian side, robbery, etc. And they have all served prison sentences before.

The Pančevo Penitentiary-Correctional Facility was opened two years ago and it has around 150 employees and 300 convicts.

Various treatment programs are implemented in the penitentiary, which include economic, cultural, educational and sports activities. The “Block without drugs” functions as a regular program, which lasts for six months and is on a voluntary basis. Participants attend different courses, they are helped to work on themselves, they are treated, there is a methadone program run by a psychiatrist, and frequent drug testing is organized. A good part of the applicants quickly give up, but there are also many who successfully complete it, even if data on their numbers has not been collected. The penitentiary also provides a psychologist who has one-on-one conversations with the convicts. After a certain period, convicts who use treatment programs can progress, and everyone is taken care of and has a personal treatment file.

Convicts have the opportunity to work in agriculture, animal husbandry, in the window assembly plant, or in the assembly of clips within the penitentiary. They also have the opportunity to work in the kitchen. There is also a dryer for medicinal herbs, and for this seasonal job KPZ provides training to interested persons. Only those who want to work are hired; they work seven hours a day and get paid for it.

The penitentiary also provides educational programs for convicts. There is a large number of adults without primary education in

the penitentiary. There were as many as 80 people interested in the primary education program, but it was temporarily canceled due to the pandemic. The program will be provided for them as soon as the epidemiological conditions are met. One convict submitted a request for higher education, which will also be realized.

Various workshop programs are also organized – assertiveness workshops, workshops for reducing aggressive behavior, oratory workshops (with participants even going to competitions), art workshops, woodcarving, painting, drawing workshops etc. Sports activities and tournaments are most popular with convicts. Convicts can also use the library every day.

There is also a religious room within the Pančevo Penitentiary-Correctional Facility. Every week someone new reads a prayer, and about 26 people come regularly.

There is also a release preparation program for all convicts. It includes instructions on how to get an ID card (since most IDs are passivized for all convicts); how to secure one-time financial assistance from the Center for Social Work; they get a list of organizations they can turn to for help and support, etc. However, upon leaving, there is no organized support and no system to monitor them after their release. In addition, the material assistance that convicts can receive from the centers for social work depends on the resources of the municipality, so it can be only a few thousand dinars, with which they can only afford to pay the fees for personal documents.

Right-wingers within hooligan groups do not see themselves as right-wingers or extremists, but as patriots. They believe that their activities contribute to the improvement of the situation in the country.

It has been noticed that convicts who are hooligans, and right-wingers, mostly have similar narratives: they do good things, the system is to blame for everything that is not good, they want the system to be good, to change it and so on. Their values are with the family, church and nation, and they are against the Pride Parade, LGBT rights, blacks, “Gypsies”, migrants, and the like. They do not hide their

anti-Semitic and racist views either. Some even say: "Hitler did the right thing to cleanse the Jews and the Roma." Extremists who are free and violent are very disciplined in prison, they are the most active in sports, they often impose themselves as leaders, they advocate discipline; they are always neat, and the like. They can follow the rules as much as they want. However, their beliefs remain the same. For example, every other day, a right-wing convict put a swastika on the canteen tray of a Roma convict.

Young people are recruited and join hooligan groups very early, even in their teens. That age is the target of recruiters, and young people are pliable at that age, they are trying to find their identity and the group to which they will belong, it is easy to manipulate them. Some of them are attracted to hooligan groups primarily because of identity and ideological issues, while others join because of existential and social reasons.

The young people who join hooligan groups, primarily due to existential and social problems, come from extremely dysfunctional families, often living in violence for many years, with a history of abuse and neglect. As a rule, they live in very bad socio-economic conditions, on the edge of misery and homelessness, in families that did not want them. They themselves displayed some form of problematic, aggressive or antisocial behavior at a very early age. They join hooligan groups and accept violence and crime with ease, because it is not foreign to them, and for many it is their only source of income, which they can earn relatively easily. In addition, they recognize that from their family life they carry a large amount of accumulated dissatisfaction, frustration, revolt and anger due to various deprivations in life, which they could only express through hooligan groups. They describe that only fights could calm them down. They were not interested in the matches, the result, or who they were going to fight. Sometimes they would fight with the police, sometimes with a rival group, and sometimes with each other within the group, it was just important for them to fight. They say: "When I get beaten, it gets easier for me, it calms me down." In the past, the police would call them as

hooligans to fight, for example, to beat up someone because they were selling gasoline. They stated that they were not involved with crime because of the money, but because it made them feel like they belong to a group and because they felt better that way.

Young people who sought a sense of identity and an ideology in the hooligan groups passionately accept right-wing ideas and tend to deal with these issues much more and on a much deeper level. They join various right-wing organizations and groups, study literature of this type, connect with the international right-wing movement, establish their own organizations, and the like.

The values around which they gather are Serbdom, tradition, the preservation of faith and tradition, “correct” moral principles, patriotic spirit. They believe that today’s society has become immoral, only the individual is important, not the collective, and “everything revolves around money”, solidarity is lost. Immorality is propagated through music and the media. They are fighting against everything that is not useful for the nation, for the “moral structure”.

The literature they study includes primarily theology, history and literature. From theology, they state that they read Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović. Literary figures of authority include: Jovan Dučić, Milan Rakić, Miloš Crnjanski, Petar Petrović Njegoš, Aleksandar Tešić, Dejan Stojiljković, Slavomir Nastasijević. Among the foreign writers mentioned are: Yesenin, Dostoevsky, Terry Prachet, Stephen King. The official accounts of history that are taught in schools are considered to be bad learning material and misunderstood and misrepresented accounts of Serbian history. The idea that Serbs came “from somewhere” and created the Serbian empire “and everything in it in just 200 years” is not acceptable to them. They believe that this is impossible and that Serbs must be much older. They like the idea that Serbs are the oldest people in the world and that they are the cradle of humanity on these lands. As they say, they read “our great historians”: Jovan Deretić, Goran Šarić, Dobroslav Jevđević, Olga Luković Pjanović (Serbs are the oldest people), Miloš Ković, Predrag Marković, Čedomir Antić, Radovan Damjanović.

The “National Alignment” (“Nacionalni stroj”), “Blood and Honor”, “Obraz”, “National Serbian Front” are among the organizations they gladly join for ideological reasons. They believe that the humanitarian work of the right is also important, that Serbs should help Serbs, if they are real Serbs. “Serbs for Serbs” stands out as an example as the most professional and transparent organization which operates successfully and which truly helps Serbs the most when they need help. A lot of people help individually. “Leviathan” is not taken seriously, because it is thought that they pay unjustifiably much attention to animals, while there are “disturbing things”, for example, children who “have nothing to eat”, the Serbian people in Kosovo, and the like.

They are often not completely satisfied with the work of existing organizations and try to form new organizations or organize independent humanitarian initiatives. They also say that they have realized that they will not be able to change the system the way they want, acting even through organizations that suit them. That is not the way to change the system. Then they usually leave those organizations and attempts to act, as being futile.

As far as politics and social organization are concerned, they are in favor of a (parliamentary) monarchy, and they do not trust or value the current figures on the political scene or their work.

A Russophile sentiment is also common. They believe that Serbs are strongly connected to the Russians, through Orthodoxy, the army, historical and ruling ties. Those who went to fight in Ukraine on the side of Russia point out that the Russians were volunteers in Bosnia in the recent wars, as well as that they felt obliged to go to Ukraine and contribute to the “fraternal fight against the common enemy”. They believe that a great injustice happened in Ukraine, because “the people allowed for themselves to be turned against each other, just like we did”. That our two peoples are one and the same, but that they fell under the influence of the Vatican against them, just like its influence against Serbs.

Among other influential ideas nurtured by these groups, we will mention: that the laboratory from which the coronavirus escaped

is co-owned by Soros and Bill Gates; that Dr Nestorović reveals many hidden truths and should be listened to; that there was no genocide in Srebrenica; that everything that Naser Orić did is accepted as correct and that he will go unpunished, which is an incomprehensible injustice; that NGOs organize a “Shiptar festival” in the heart of Belgrade and that it is a shame that the state allows it; that there is a significant “infiltration” of security services into right-wing organizations; that many such organizations are mere puppets of power; that nepotism and corruption have ruled for 50 years, which is a systemic problem that needs to be eradicated, etc.

Right-wingers tend to make connections with international right-wing groups and organizations and develop in the direction of international action. This aspiration for international connection is realized through nationalist ideology. Although they are often xenophobic, they still point out that nationalists from Western Europe are closer to them than their non-nationalist peers. Arnaud Gouillon³⁴ is highly esteemed, they believe that he should be an example to them and that what Gouillon is doing is great and the right way to express nationalism. They also point out that Serbian nationalism was misrepresented to European nationalists before, but that now Serbia is a “bastion of nationalism” for them, they come to Serbia to learn from local nationalists.

Usually, the family and the immediate environment in the community, except for the hooligan groups themselves, do not share the very extreme attitudes and beliefs that right-wingers have, nor do they approve of their membership and activities in these groups. However, they emphasize that this does not affect them. They are deeply unwavering in their attitudes and believe that their surroundings do not understand how wrong they are. They usually hide their criminal and violent acts from their families and their environment, knowing that that would scare them the most and that they would be

34 Arnaud Gouillon has gone from being an activist of the French extreme right-wing Identitarians movement to acting director of the Directorate for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region in the Government of Serbia..

against it the most, and for that reason they cannot influence their deradicalization. They do not establish friendly ties with people who are not like-minded, which further closes them within the framework of right-wing groups and enables their stronger influence.

On the other hand, a wide range of right-wing attitudes is very accepted and present in the public, and even right-wingers rightly believe that they are accepted in society along with their beliefs. The community does not react to most right-wing narratives, on the contrary, it often reproduces them itself. That is why both these and later more extreme radicalizing influences are normalized and continuous in the environment of young people, who later join right-wing and hooligan groups.

The right-wingers themselves believe that their views are accepted in the environment, except for extremely violent and criminal acts. They openly say that the laws under which they are being tried are not intended for them, but for the prosecution of Islamist extremists and fighters on foreign battlefields. Even when convicted, they believe that this is only collateral damage, and not the real purpose of the law. They also know that for the same act – participation in foreign battlefields – they were punished much more leniently than Islamist fighters who went to Syria. They believe that the state does not have to be afraid of them, but that there are bigger and more threatening dangers that it should deal with, and that the state knows that.

There is no deradicalization program during the time sentences are served, and the need for it has not even been recognized. The penitentiary does not have more precise data on whether radicalization happens during the course of a prison sentence, because it does not have insight into what exactly goes on among convicts. Only the manifested respect for house rules is monitored. What is known is that some convicts are right-wingers, hooligans, participants in the war in Eastern Ukraine on pro – Russian side. It is also known that they openly express racist, fascist, anti-Semitic and other extremist views, i.e. that they are clearly radical, but the employees of the prison, despite that, do not recognize the need to work on

deradicalization with them. There is no program related to ideological topics, and the KPZ staff believes that such programs, especially those aimed at deradicalization, would be needed only in larger institutions, where convicts serve longer sentences for serious crimes.

The staff at the penitentiary have the opportunity and interest to attend various professional training programs, but there have been no training programs for the treatment work on deradicalization. No one from the penitentiary participated in the activities related to the implementation of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism, because they were not invited to such activities, nor were they aware of there being any.

There is a high percentage of repeat offenders among the convicts. In some cases, this is related to social factors, when, for example, persons who are released have nowhere to go, so for that reason they commit a crime and return to the penitentiary. It is “harder for such people to be free than to be in prison”. They are worried about what will happen outside, what they will eat, where they will live, what they will do. And in prison, anyone who wants to work can work. Those who do not have a family or anyone to accept and support them when they are released do not have any good options available. For multiple returnees and those with longer prison sentences, the individual capacity for resocialization declines rapidly. Many completely lose all social ties because of prison. They get so used to life in prison that they can no longer get used to a life with freedom, which scares them. They want to stay in the penitentiary and are ready to commit a crime, in order to be returned as soon as possible.

All convicts face the problem of employment and, in connection with that, finding accommodation immediately after their release. No one will hire them when they find out that they were in prison, so they can't even rent accommodation. The next problem is that most of them are used to getting large sums of money easily and quickly, so they are not ready to work for 30,000–40,000 dinars, when they can earn that much through crime, in two days. The problem is that they don't care that they will return to prison. Most think:

“So what if I go to prison again, I’ll get out.” During the treatment and preparation for release, these beliefs and attitudes are especially worked on through individual conversations. That is a part of resocialization, with the intention of discouraging convicts from engaging in crime any further by making them aware of what they will lose if they do something illegal again, that that will not change what they are dissatisfied with in their lives and that they have to find a better way. However, councilors also note that convicts often come to them so “damaged and neglected” that it is often impossible to change them. During the preparation for release, the convicts make resocialization plans with their councilors, which include future accommodation, employment or other sources of income, and a support network. For those who have a (functional and supportive) family, this part of the preparation for release is much easier and increases the chances of their successful resocialization. They make a plan with their family that they will live together, that the family will help them financially and in finding a job, and in some cases the family will arrange employment for them when the time comes for their release. However, in the absence of institutional support, all the options that convicts have are limited to relying on family resources, and there are no mechanisms of assistance and professional support for families. In such a situation, even those families that have sufficient resources to financially support and assist convicts after their release, do not have the psychosocial competencies to ensure their resocialization and prevent their return to criminal and hooligan groups.

Unfortunately, belonging to hooligan groups makes it even more difficult to resocialize such people after they are released from prison. Hooligan groups constantly demand loyalty, proving oneself, attending games, which further entails other acts – violence, crime. It is difficult for convicts to avoid that and to resist such pressures. For those who do not have a family that would accept them after their release, or someone who would support them and help them cope, returning to hooligan groups is the only option for both existential and social reasons. In addition, their perceptions are such that they blame

the system for everything. The system is always to blame as far as they are concerned, because there is no understanding for them, and that prevents them from realizing their mistakes and changing. During the preparations for release, special attention is paid to working on these views, but this is not successful in all cases. What can help resocialize hooligans is if they get disappointed by their group while serving their sentences, because, for example, they did not visit, contact or support them, because they expect loyalty from their group, considering them friends, just as the group expects from them. If that happens, they may be more willing to distance themselves from the hooligan group, or even leave it and look for another group to dedicate themselves to. Another factor that encourages distancing from right-wing and violent hooligan groups is the belief of convicts that the security services are closely monitoring them after their release and that they will surely be suspected of and arrested for a crime. Therefore, some of them reduce or avoid contact with their group after being released, at least at the beginning.

CONCLUSIONS

- Right-wingers within hooligan groups do not see themselves as extremists and right-wingers, but as patriots.
- Young people are recruited and join hooligan groups very early, in their teens. That age is the target age for recruiters.
- Some of them are attracted to hooligan groups primarily due to identity and ideological issues, while others join for existential and social reasons.
- The dimensions and specifics of this type of extremism have not been systematically investigated. Hooligan groups are often associated with crime, so access to these groups for research is difficult for that reason.
- Young people who turned to these groups to find their identity and ideology passionately accept right-wing ideas and tend to deal with these issues much more and on a much deeper level. They join various right-wing organizations and groups, study

literature, connect with the international right-wing movements, establish their own organizations, and the like.

- Usually, the family and the immediate environment in the community, except for the hooligan groups themselves, do not share the extreme attitudes and beliefs that right-wingers have, nor do they approve of their membership and activities in these groups. However, they emphasize that this does not affect them.
- A wide range of right-wing attitudes is very accepted and present in the public, and even right-wingers rightly believe that they are accepted in society with their beliefs. The community does not react to most extreme right-wing narratives, on the contrary, it often reproduces them itself. That is why both these and later more extreme radicalizing influences are normalized and continuous in the environment of young people, who later join right-wing and hooligan groups.
- They believe that the laws under which they are tried are not intended for them, but for prosecuting Islamist extremists and fighters on foreign battlefields. Even when convicted, they believe that this is only collateral damage, and not the real purpose of the law.
- There is no deradicalization program implemented during the prison sentence or after the release from prison.
- Families do not know what to do with them. They occasionally help them resocialize and reintegrate after their release from prison, but they do not have the capacity to cope with deradicalization.
- Compared to Islamist, right-wing extremists are much less recognized by various actors as extremists, which makes them much more dangerous.
- Right-wing extremism is tolerated, supported and often used.
- No one works with right-wing extremists in terms of deradicalization, and this further generates extremism.
- There is no strengthening of community resilience.

- The percentage of returnees among convicts is high.
- Belonging to hooligan groups further complicates the resocialization of these individuals upon their release from prison.
- Hooligans, like right-wing extremists, have largely remained inaccessible to this research. The reasons are different, but the repulsed, exclusivist and extremely negative attitude of such groups and organizations towards civil society organizations is among the main ones. Also, many groups of this type are directly involved in crime, corruption and organized crime, and therefore refuse any kind of communication.

WAR VETERANS AND PSYCHOTHERAPISTS WHO WORK WITH THEM

The series of interviews was conducted in July 2021 and included war veterans and representatives of psychotherapists, activists, consultants who have been providing psychosocial support since 1998 to war veterans and related groups, who participated in the wars of the 1990s. We opted for this group of interviews in order to indirectly obtain information on the capacities for working with returnees from foreign battlefields who need psychosocial support for their resocialization into the local community, after the battlefield or after their release from prison. The talks also gave us insight into extreme right-wing groups that are otherwise difficult to reach and interview.

The group gathered around the War Trauma Center in Novi Sad (hereinafter: the Center) has worked from the beginning with war veterans, direct victims of war and refugees, with a primary focus on war veterans.

The number and other characteristics of the group of war veterans have been insufficiently researched. The state, primarily the security services, actively prevented such research. According to official reports, which were accepted and confirmed by representatives of institutions in Serbia and abroad, but not publicly, there are around

700,000 to 800,000 war veterans,³⁵ i.e. people who participated in armed conflicts and now live in Serbia, which is almost 10% of the population of the country at this time. This group of veterans includes: units of the Ministry of the Interior (MUP) that were engaged in hostilities in Yugoslavia, the MUP reserve, the regular army, the army reserve and all refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo and persons displaced to central Serbia, who formed the armed defense on their territories. These are the people who took part in the wars, from Slovenia to the last campaigns in Kosovo. The Center has repeatedly tried to organize a systematic and comprehensive survey of war veterans, but they have been thwarted in every attempt. In addition to the lack of financial resources, both representatives of the Center and engaged researchers were banned by the security services from collecting data and, in particular, extrapolating information on the dimensions of this phenomenon from samples.

Participants in the wars of the 1990s often do not consider themselves right-wingers, and certainly not extremists. They are not a homogeneous group, but in the socio-political situation at the time, different subgroups of them participated in the war for different reasons.

A significant number of veterans were mobilized and they believe that “the state sent them there”. Their war experiences are so strong that, if the circumstances coincided with the nationalist narrative, they adopted those views. The second group are those who grew up before the war on nationalist narratives in the family, with the narrative that their family lost family members in World War II, so the need to compensate motivated them to go to war. They left as nationalists, and when they returned, they realized that the state did not need them, that it did not even recognize them. That is why they thought that they were damaged twice, so from that disappointment they became even bigger nationalists and developed some idiosyncratic radical ideas, for example, that a monarchy should be introduced, that

35 Data from the War Trauma Center.

(some) politicians should be assassinated, ethnic cleansing should be carried out in war-torn territories, etc. People from both groups often returned to the battlefield later, as volunteers. Another category of those who fought in the war were officers of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), who went to advance from a lower officer rank to a high rank more quickly, because ranks were very easy to acquire in the war. Their motivation was purely pragmatic.

Among the volunteers from Serbia, there were also convicts from penitentiaries, their motivation was that one day on the battlefield replaced three days of serving a prison sentence. There were also adventurers and criminals among them, each looking for a way to pursue their interests on the battlefield. There were also people from the margins who were looking for a way to improve their reputation upon their return by joining a well-known unit, for example, that of Captain Dragan or Arkan. Also, there were young volunteers who, growing up in families, had conflicts with strict parents, who were more or less nationally inclined, so they went to the battlefield out of rebellion. A significantly different group was the subgroup of antisocial personalities, for whom there were no moral scruples, who were able to kill everyone in a house if they saw that there was food in it. They did very well in the war, some of them received decorations as heroes, sometimes they made significant progress in their careers and positioning, and became local leaders and the like. Both their opponents and comrades-in-arms were afraid of them and "everyone got out of their way".

Most of the participants in the war, after their first experiences in battle, decided that they would never return. They returned only if their unit returned, to protect those who protected them, but even that was very rare. A small part of the veterans are more prone to violence, and they continued to fight even later. After the 1990s, they moved on to Africa, Central Asia, Afghanistan, working in security for private American companies, among other things. They liked being in that kind of position of power and earning easy money. They feel powerful when they can kill. They also have an addiction and a constant motivation to take part in wars. For the most part, they are not

ideologues, nor are they tied to anyone's ideology, but they are willing to use violence as a tool for profit. It is not known how many veterans fall into any of these categories, as there has been no research into this.

Members of paramilitary units – the more notorious groups – are also among the veterans. There are two categories among their members: those who joined in full awareness and voluntarily and those who applied at a very young age, because they heard in their village that that is what they were supposed to do. Paramilitary units were often combined and merged, but there were very few real volunteers. The paramilitary units “offered organization, and in such circumstances it was extremely important for the people to feel the strong system to which they belong”. They also had better weapons and attire, as well as officers who acted as if they knew what they were doing. This attracted a large number of more brazen people, who transferred to these groups. There were a lot of transitions from one unit to another. Paramilitary units were considered elite units.

Veterans bare huge, extremely specific psychological problems and the consequences of participating in the war. They have the most intense life experiences of war that form a new personality. It is not a matter of predominantly and primarily ideological indoctrination, but extremely difficult experiences from the battlefield, which, depending on the circumstances, lead them in different directions. Most often, the stress trigger is not something that happened to them personally, but to others. For example, finding gravely injured children, losing a comrade-in-arms in battle, witnessing pillaging and the sacrifices of soldiers, etc. These are indelible experiences that are also physiologically manifested. These triggers are so strong that they move them to question the deepest basic postulates they have been taught and often destroy their previous value system. In those situations, how they conceive and interpret the situation and how they proceed depends on their environment – their unit or their superior, their fellow soldiers. Some of them, for example, realized that it was easier for them to join paramilitary units, which were much more

organized, because they would have perished in the JNA. If in those units they were surrounded by people who were already nationalists, they accepted those beliefs, because that group of people protected them, and that's who they depended on. It becomes impossible for them that Croats or Bosniaks can be good people, they begin to believe that violence is the best solution, because of all the terrible things they have experienced and because they identify with their environment.

A number of veterans somehow managed to suppress their war experience and move on. Huge amounts of alcohol and sedatives are the standard in their lives as the way they manage to control themselves. However, after returning from the battlefield, most of them retreat into themselves, sit in their homes with "turmoil" inside, they are unhappy and dissatisfied. They returned from the war as patriots, because they had to go for some reason, that is, to have some justification. They saw it as logical protection. They do not like the current politicians and they can only love the state. Factors that further worsen their situation after returning from the battlefield are the fact that they believe that the society and all the actors in it betrayed them and remained indebted to them, that they were completely excluded from society and left without the necessary support. They don't feel like they belong anywhere. Everyone is dissatisfied, unhappy and that is a great basis for extremism. Many of them spontaneously and independently become even more radical on the Internet, and their online activities motivate new young people to develop their own extreme ideas.

Many participants returned from the war severely traumatized, with severe post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS). According to estimates by the War Trauma Center, about 10% of veterans have PTSS. Thus, in our country, out of 700,000 participants in the wars of the 1990s, about 70,000 of them potentially have PTSS, and at least 20% of them are in active service in the Ministry of the Interior and in

the army³⁶. War trauma in practice is the essence of frightening experiences and emotions, memories that veterans cannot fit into their lives after the war. They return from the context of war with that burden, to where the rules are clear in an environment that is completely different and they need to fit into something that has become too demanding for them. Returning with such difficult experiences, some of them no longer have the emotional capacity to function in their family, in society, at work, on the street. Therefore, they get involved in various incidents in their environment. Without specific support, most of them have no chance of solving problems positively.

Their families and environment do not know how to support them. There is no strengthening of community resilience, i.e. since this issue has never been addressed or treated in Serbia. Local communities do not have any plans or mechanisms for action in this field. So the whole environment does not know what to do with the returnees from the war. Often their wives or mothers seek help in the community for them, but also for themselves. They suffer, if not violence, then from severe depression at home and “a huge amount of negative energy”. In addition, many of them do not have a job or have lost it, and often cause violent incidents in their environment. They also often lacked the support of their families, but were expected to start working and earning money as soon as possible.

Serbia does not provide any institutional support or financial support to veterans. Many of them are struggling to be recognized for having participated in wars at all. Only a small number of civil society organizations had programs, but they were of short duration and project-based.

Successful work with veterans is extremely expensive and time consuming. There were several programs for working with veterans within the War Trauma Center. For a start, the veterans applied to the counseling center and went through individual therapy sessions. Those who wanted to be more actively involved were referred

36 Conversation at the War Trauma Center.

to a support group, where the veterans themselves gathered without the participation of experts, except when a group meeting with supervising therapists was organized. There were several such groups that met regularly every two weeks, or once a month. This model was later transferred to the Republika Srpska and several places in other parts of Bosnia. These were support groups for the development of self-help, where veterans gathered, many of whom faced existential problems, and helped each other find employment, apply for disability pension, among other things and, if at all possible, reduce the pressure on their families. Within the Center, there was also a counseling center dealing with individual development.

For a short period of time, there was a group in the Center to support women participants in the war, which proved to be very necessary, but it did not last due to lack of funding.

The other direction of the Center's work was the work on the constructive use of veterans' experiences, where training for veterans and hosts for conducting interviews with young people were organized. The whole project was aimed at enabling veterans to resocialize, to function on a daily basis, and the step forward for them was that they worked on their trauma, so that they could speak publicly about it and help young people transform their attitudes. Dialogues with young people were conducted in such a way that young people could gain a realistic picture of what war is, and that a few months or years in war can affect the rest of a person's life. The dialogues involved young people who did not receive an answer from their fathers and carried trauma in the family, as well as young delinquents. These are potential participants in a new war, and they said that this was the only activity that really piqued their interest. Dialogue groups of this type were also established in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it turned out that there were difficulties, because the narratives and extremism were very deep. The Center sees the special value of this program in the fact that it built a bridge between the so-called civil and veteran-right of Serbia. This is a topic that no one discussed and it did not receive serious institutional support, or the support of the non-governmental

sector, and there is a gap between “civil Serbia” and the one responsible for the wars, sanctions, which supported Slobodan Milošević. A series of dialogues was organized with various representatives of non-governmental organizations and veterans’ organizations throughout Serbia, which showed how divided society in Serbia is, and no work is being done to establish ties.

Work on the constructive use of veteran experiences has been expanded by launching mixed groups of veterans, for example, discussion groups of veterans from the Bujanovac area (members of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa) with veterans from various Serb battlefields, or mixed groups of Serbs, Albanians and Bosniaks, in the Netherlands. These meetings were followed by numerous incidents, but they stayed to talk after everything. The experiences of all veterans are the same. Veterans think that they understand each other very well, and that psychologists say empty words. Those who have not been on the battlefield for veterans represent nothing. They do not understand them. It is a question of the simplicity of belief. Veterans have rigid attitudes and consider rigidity a good trait, they see it as consistency. Some of the veterans were ready to join programs on the transformation of experiences from armed conflicts.

Within these forms of work, great changes are possible, but with a lot of time and effort. Some veterans, for example, after several years of individual therapy and participation in groups, were so empowered that they moved on to lead independent discussion and transformation groups, speak in public and advocate for peace solutions and go to international meetings.

Apart from the War Trauma Center, no other actor has been involved in the development and implementation of such programs in Serbia. Knowing how many veterans would need some form of support and how sporadic and small-scale the project work was, the Center repeatedly tried to initiate cooperation with state institutions, work on laws, and even establish cooperation with the church, but no one was interested in working on these issues.

The long-term integration of veterans is also possible, it should be the goal, but it is absolutely not being worked on in Serbia. In order for long-term integration to take place, the United Nations model called Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration should be applied. Even disarmament was not carried out in Serbia. It is not known how many weapons were brought back from the battlefield, and they are often hidden by veterans, because a real program for their removal has not been implemented. Demobilization was not carried out with a number of units, especially paramilitaries. Demobilization requires a procedure, an official return of uniform and army membership booklet, as well as deregistration from the draft list. In Serbia, about 15 percent of war participants did not go through such a procedure. One of the important elements of the long-term integration of veterans is memorialization, and it requires an adequately defined history. The surrounding countries have exact victory dates, while in Serbia such dates do not exist. There is no reintegration in Serbia either, because there are no recognized veterans because, officially, Serbia did not even take part in the wars. Croats, Bosnians and Albanians reintegrated as great winners. Croatia gave all possible privileges to its liberators. Kosovo has put its veterans on a pedestal. In the Republika Srpska, veterans were given the status of first fighters.

There is no political will for Serbia to deal with war veterans, or a law on war veterans, or any form of support for them. There was a total of 40 beds for veterans in psychiatry wards on the territory of Serbia. Two parliamentary hearings were organized and two draft laws related to veterans were prepared and annulled. Despite numerous attempts by the Center and other groups and associations, no state activities were initiated, not even the recognition of participation in the war for veterans. This is one of the most important causes of their dissatisfaction, and one of the basic preconditions for their reintegration. In Serbia, veterans do not have a recognized or defined position and status, which is why their reintegration cannot take place. They are suing the state because officially they did not take part in wars, but were deployed in military exercises or were on leave. Society cannot

accept veterans either, if they are not defined in society, who they are is not known. As a result of their unresolved status, the veterans were not provided with specific institutional support and assistance.

There are several different radicalizing factors related to the participants in the wars of the 1990s and this requires further research. Moreover, at least some of them are in a dynamic relationship.

- For some veterans, extremist attitudes and narratives in families related to World War II led to their participation in the wars of the 1990s. These experiences and attitudes became stronger and developed new extremist attitudes, especially after the war and in their inability to reintegrate into life in peacetime. Very few of them, however, still accept violent action. And, if they join hooligan groups, they do not engage in violent activities, and an even smaller number of them went to Ukraine to fight.
- The second group consists of participants in the war who went to the battlefield without extreme attitudes, but under the influence of the war experience and the passionate environment there, they accepted such attitudes. Upon their return, remaining in touch with their comrades-in-arms and burdened by war experiences, many of them retained extreme nationalist views.
- There is also a transgenerational transmission of attitudes. Some veterans, but also war victims and witnesses, pass on their radical views to future generations, to their families and their wider environment. A smaller number of them does this consciously, by advocating violence against other nations, and more often their environment spontaneously becomes radicalized, interpreting veteran suffering as injustice.
- A new generation of young right-wingers is being raised on the narrative of the wars of the 1990s, and they are directly and indirectly being radicalized. The participants in the wars believe that they have no realistic idea of what was actually happening, that they spontaneously process the knowledge

about the wars in the wrong way in search of their identity. This further intensifies the dissatisfaction of veterans with society's attitude towards them.

- There is the belief among veterans that veteran suffering is used to further radicalize young people, but also society. Authorities are using extremists as a good way to intervene quickly, at no great cost. Extremism in Serbia is produced by those actors who want to control events, and to rule society. Extremists are useful to the government "because everyone is afraid of them, because they are ready for action". There is also an increased affinity and receptivity in society for right-wing attitudes, as well as the view that the right is honest and that the left is corrupt. Right-wing narratives continue to rely on the strength of national frustrations and are therefore acceptable in society.

Clearly and consistently, the veterans blame the NGOs for the unconstructive attitude, which contributed to the strengthening of extremism. They believe that after the wars of the 1990s, the whole society should have dealt with it, and in Serbia, no one did it in the right way. NGOs are criticized for blaming veterans for the wars, for not considering all aspects of the situation and for not involving all actors in the dialogue, which is necessary to produce positive social changes and positive changes among veterans. Veterans believe that NGOs perceived them as criminals and did not realize that they were also victims of the war. In this way, they contributed to the strengthening of the dissatisfaction and resentment of veterans, the deterioration of social relations, with their pretentious uncritical attitude and by addressing only one segment of the population. That created a bigger gap between people. Instead, what should have been done was including everyone and working with everyone. Some projects in the region had a better approach – they looked for the smallest common denominator, which turned out to be that both sides that participated in the wars were victims of the transition. The winners of the

transition are tycoons, politicians, criminals and powerful people who came out of the wars with power which increased even more after that. They are the winners of the war, while everyone else is the loser. This approach could have succeeded because it integrated everything, but the project did not last. The predominantly unconstructive attitude, on the other hand, with the existing frustrations and not dealing with the wars, leads to the strengthening of extremism as a consequence both for veterans and in society.

The War Trauma Center also dealt with hooligans, while not working directly with them, but to that end, this group which is difficult to reach and not open to cooperation, was mapped to some extent. It was found that among the hooligans there are subgroups of different characteristics and with different attitudes towards right-wing ideology and extremism.

One group of hooligans consists of people who are extremely passionate, but consider themselves “real” fans, non-violent and people who live for the club. They can, but they don’t have to be right-wingers. The only two violent elements with them are strong verbal quarrels and severing ties with people who speak ill of the club. These are people in their 50s and 60s, some of them are company directors and people in important government positions, artists, etc. It is an older group, connected as brothers and ready to support other fans at any time. Their network of loyalty and support is extremely strong. Right-wing views are not politically linked to this group, but violence among them still exists to a greater extent than they are willing to admit. For example, they treat forms of violence (such as a slap) as a joke and do not see it as a violent act. Or, at the end of each message, a group of Partizan fans sign: let everyone who doesn’t like Partizan die.

The second group consists of criminals, people who use cheering for a club as a mask for various criminal acts: extortion of small debts, narcotics, theft, etc. These fan groups finance themselves through criminal activities. As far as recruitment is concerned, it usually includes young people from poor families who want to earn more than their parents; “They do not want to be unsuccessful and

incompetent as their parents” and therefore seek membership in such groups. Depending on the group and more so the territories where they are recruited, they have two possible courses of action. The first is to climb only on the ladder of hooligans, with possibly petty criminal acts without excessive threats to themselves. The second is that, if they prove themselves in smaller criminal endeavors, they will be involved in larger criminal acts, get weapons, etc. progress is made in a way that's similar to the mafia. The group of criminals is completely closed to outsiders and cannot be approached for research purposes.

The third group consists of classic “soldiers” who do what their bosses tell them. They seek identity and belonging to a group and therefore fully adapt to the group. They are most often introduced to right-wing ideology, which they also readily accept as an important part of the group they want to belong to. “Soldiers” are most often high school students aged 15–17. Groups of “soldiers” organized in this way began to form in 1993. The older generation had a different king of young, they protected them. In the fights, the young members were behind the older members. Young people are now more involved in criminal activities, as the last link in the distribution of narcotics – the sale of narcotics around schools. New groups, such as “Alkatraz”, are lined up even when chanting at the stadium. This subgroup of hooligans could probably teach us the most about the causes of radicalization, and serious interventions could probably deradicalize them and point them towards a more constructive path.

All hooligan groups are extremely controlled and very closed groups, like the mafia, especially the latter two categories. Trying to communicate with those two groups is difficult and can result in problems, threats and rejection.

Hooligan groups were recruited for the wars of the 1990s, but after 2000, they were disbanded. Rad used to have a very strong right-wing and nationalist ideology, Zvezda promoted a Chetnik ideology, while Partizan had divided groups and allegedly followed a left-wing ideology. Now all the hooligan groups foster a type of right-wing ideology, and they are going in the nationalist direction. Currently, they are

mostly used to perform illegal tasks for the needs of political parties in power. The greatest potential for violent action, compared to some other ideological groups, is in hooligan groups.

It is difficult to get out of hooligan groups. It used to be the rule that fans, as they get older, participate less in going to the stadium, only the craziest ones stay, and the rest cheer in their cafes. The elders retire, meet on the side and rarely go to matches, but they never give up on cheering for their club. In order for individuals to reach a higher level in hooligan groups, they must seriously injure someone or take part in an armed conflict. If they stay in the group long enough, the risk increases that they will be killed in a incident, and as in the mafia, “pensions” are very expensive.

CONCLUSIONS

- The number and other characteristics of war veterans have been insufficiently researched because such research has been actively prevented and banned.
- Participants in the wars of the 1990s are not a homogeneous group, and have participated in wars for a variety of reasons.
- Serbia has not addressed the issue of veterans, nor has it acknowledged that they took part in the wars at all. There is no institutional support for them, they are not provided with financial support. Only a small number of civil society organizations have had occasional projects that have addressed the problems of combatants.
- Veterans believe that society and all the actors in it betrayed them and remained indebted to them. They are marginalized in society and remain left without the necessary support. They don't feel like they belong anywhere.
- Families and communities do not know how to support them, because this issue has never been addressed in Serbia. Local communities do not have any plans or mechanisms for action in this field.

- There is no political will for Serbia to deal with war veterans, and that is one of the most significant causes of their dissatisfaction.
- They bare huge, extremely specific problems and consequences of participating in the war, with no prospect of a positive solution.
- There are known ways to help affected veterans, but almost no one is involved in this anymore and no one is interested in funding such programs.
- The long-term integration of veterans is possible and it should be a goal, but nothing is being done about it in Serbia. In order for long-term integration to take place, the United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration model should be applied first.
- There are several different radicalizing factors related to participants in the wars of the 1990s and this requires further research.
- Hooligans as right-wing extremists have remained largely inaccessible to this research paper and data on them can only be inferred indirectly. Many hooligan groups are directly linked to crime, corruption and organized crime, so they refuse to communicate with researchers.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VERDICTS AGAINST SERBIAN CITIZENS WHO FOUGHT ON THE SYRIAN AND UKRAINIAN BATTLEFIELDS

1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND INCRIMINATION OF TERRORISM IN SERBIA

Foreign fighters or persons associated with them are prosecuted around the world for various acts of execution, such as: calling for support for terrorist organizations,³⁷ sharing materials that incite terrorism, terrorist training, assisting foreign fighters in travel, financing foreign fighters, recruiting, attempting to travel or traveling for the purpose of joining terrorist organizations,³⁸ preparing to commit murder and other common criminal acts such as arson, preparing to commit terrorist acts, membership or participation in the activities of terrorist organizations, etc.³⁹

Individuals who undertook preparatory actions were also prosecuted, and accusations of membership in a terrorist organization were also frequent,⁴⁰ all with the aim of putting pressure on

37 *Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries on the Visit to Austria*, para. 18.

38 *Ibid.*, para. 16.

39 *Paulussen, C. and Pitcher, K.*, p. 15–16.

40 *Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries on the Visit to Austria*, para. 18.

the judicial system to prevent terrorist activities through criminal prosecution. Of particular interest are cases in which individuals – who committed murders, terrorist acts or war crimes in the war zones of Syria and Iraq – were prosecuted and against whom a wide variety of evidence was collected, the most interesting being digital evidence (from social networks), as well as testimonies of returnees.⁴¹

Since the amendments to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia⁴² from 2012, the Serbian legal framework provides for 8 criminal offenses incriminating various types of terrorist acts: terrorism,⁴³ public incitement to commit terrorist acts,⁴⁴ recruitment and training for committing terrorist acts,⁴⁵ use of a deadly device,⁴⁶ destruction and damage to a nuclear facility,⁴⁷ endangering persons under international protection,⁴⁸ terrorism financing⁴⁹ and terrorist association.⁵⁰

In addition, the Criminal Code (CC) specifically incriminates the activities of foreign fighters through the criminal offenses of participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign state⁵¹ and organizing participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign state.⁵² All these changes came as a result of the impact of a series of universal and regional conventions (for example, the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism) that Serbia has ratified or that bind Serbia due to its legal nature (such as UNSC resolutions).

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 85/2005, 88/2005 – rev., 107/2005 – rev., 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016 and 35/2019, available at: <http://bit.ly/2DMH7Lm>, hereinafter: CC.

43 Article 391 of the CC.

44 Article 391a of the CC.

45 Article 391b of the CC.

46 Article 391v of the CC

47 Article 391g of the CC.

48 Article 392 of the CC.

49 Article 393 of the CC.

50 Article 393a of the CC.

51 Article 386a of the CC.

52 Article 386b of the CC.

2. CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS AGAINST FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Through new, but also existing provisions, prosecutors around the world have been provided with a wide range of criminal offences for prosecuting foreign fighters, and are without any doubt under great pressure to detect and prevent terrorist attacks in a timely manner.⁵³ As they are bound by law (enacted by the bodies of the legislative and executive branches), prosecution that is fair and in line with the principle of the exercise and protection of human rights can only be ensured through careful discretionary action by the prosecutor within the existing legal framework.⁵⁴

When it comes to Serbia, the only procedure conducted so far against foreign fighters from Serbia, and defined as terrorist activity, refers to the seven Serbian citizens of Muslim faith. They were charged with terrorist association under Article 393a of the CC, terrorism financing under Article 393 of the CC, recruitment and training for committing terrorist acts under Article 393b and public incitement to commit terrorist acts under Article 391a of the CC.⁵⁵

This procedure refers to foreign fighters who went to the battlefield in Syria, and who in the period between 2012 and 2014 stayed on the territory of the city of Azaz, close to the front that existed near the Syrian city of Aleppo. As this is a procedure that was open to the public, and taking into account the fact that media coverage of the procedure was intense and that the identities of both defendants and key witnesses were revealed,⁵⁶ the analysis of this case will not be anonymized in relation to key participants in the process. This will

53 Paulussen, C. and Pitcher, K., p. 24.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

55 Higher Court in Belgrade, Special Department for Organized Crime, K 88/2014, 4 April, 2018.

56 Most prosecution witnesses made appearances in the media: BalkanInsight, *Jihadists "target young, marginalized Muslims in Serbia"*, 28 March, 2016, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Ro8826>; Blic, *First witness examination in terrorism trial completed*, 29 April, 2015, available at: <https://bit.ly/3uTKR6t>; B92, *Witness: From BG via Istanbul to ID*, 7 May, 2015, available at: <https://bit.ly/3eXxayd>.

enable readers to have a clearer view of the extremely complex factual structure of this procedure, which lasted nearly 7 years (from 2012 to 2019) and in which dozens of different pieces of evidence were presented.

When it comes to the proceedings against foreign fighters who fought for the pro-Russian side in Ukraine, it will not be possible to reveal their identity and thus it will not be possible to make a clearer connection between dozens of cases, given that the High Court in Belgrade anonymized all personal data of the persons convicted. However, certain media articles will be useful to more clearly define the actions of foreign fighters in Ukraine, as well as to compare their actions with the actions of those convicted of participating in the war in Syria.⁵⁷ The comparison is necessary in order to question the classification of Ukrainian fighters under criminal offenses of participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign country under Article 386a of the CC, as opposed to the classification under terrorism that was made in relation to the fighters in Syria.

2.1. VERDICT OF THE HIGH COURT IN BELGRADE – SPECIAL DEPARTMENT FOR ORGANIZED CRIME⁵⁸ K 88/2014, 4 APRIL, 2018 – PODBIĆANIN, ET AL.

The HC SDOC, and in accordance with the Law on Organization and Competence of State Authorities in Suppression of Organized Crime, Terrorism and Corruption,⁵⁹ passed a verdict on 6 March, 2018 (publicly announced on 4 April, 2018) which sentences Abid Podbićanin, Sead Plojović, Tefik Mujović, Izudin Crnovršanin, Ferat Kasumović, Goran Pavlović and Rejhan Plojović to multiple years in prison, and according to the indictments of the Prosecutor's Office

57 BalkanInsight, *Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine*, 13 December, 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/3ydCDs6>.

58 Hereinafter: HC SDOC.

59 *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 94/2016 i 87/2018 – state law, available at: <https://bit.ly/2S1aDYc>, Article 2, paragraph 1, item 5 and Articles 3–8.

for Organized Crime KTO 33/14 dated 11 September 2014, KTO 13/16 dated 23 February, 2016, which were amended on 20 November, 2017.

All seven defendants were convicted of the criminal offense of terrorist association under Article 393a of the CC in connection with the criminal offense of terrorism under Article 391, paragraph 1 of the CC.

Sead Plojović, Rejhan Plojović, Tefik Mujović and Izudin Crnovršanin were also convicted of the criminal offense of terrorism financing under Article 393, Paragraph 1 of the CC.

Abid Podbićanin, Sead Plojović, Goran Pavlović, Rejhan Plojović, Izudin Crnovršanin and Ferat Kasumović were convicted of the criminal offense of recruitment and training for committing terrorist acts under Article 391b, paragraph 1 of the CC.

Tefik Mujović was also convicted of the criminal offense of public incitement to commit terrorist acts under Article 391a of the CC.

The accused were sentenced to 11 years in prison (Abid Podbićanin, Sead Plojović and Tefik Mujović), 10 years (Goran Pavlović), 9 years and 6 months (Rejhan Plojović and Izudin Crnovršanin) and 7 years and 6 months (Ferat Kasumović). The first-instance decision was confirmed by the verdict of the Court of Appeal in Belgrade in March 2019.

2.1.1. Pre-investigation, investigation and indictment

The pre-investigation procedure against the accused began in April 2012, when a pre-trial judge of the HC SDOC issued an order in relation to Abid Podbićanin and Sead Plojović to conduct a special evidentiary action of secret surveillance and recording of communication.⁶⁰ Secret surveillance and recording of communication was subsequently extended to Tefik Mujović, Izudin Crnovršanin, Goran

⁶⁰ Criminal Procedure Code, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 72/2011, 101/2011, 121/2012, 32/2013, 45/2013, 55/2014, 35/2019 and 27/2021 – decision of the Constitutional Court, available at: <http://bit.ly/2CVXF2W>, Articles 166–170, hereinafter CPC.

Pavlović, Ferat Kasumović and Rejhan Plojović. This special evidentiary action was applied until the last quarter of 2013.⁶¹

In this way, the collection of data on the activities of the group gathered around the non-governmental organization Islamic Youth of Sandzak “Furkan”⁶², which was headquartered in Novi Pazar and located in a house that turned out to have served as a religious building – a masjid, where, according to most of the convicted persons and witnesses, “fundamentalist Islam” was practiced.

On 17 December, 2013, the Ministry of the Interior – General Police Directorate – Criminal Police Directorate – Department for Monitoring and Investigation of Terrorism⁶³ filed a criminal complaint with the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime against an N.N. perpetrator for the above offenses.⁶⁴ The criminal charges were filed a day after the Department for Terrorism collected information from, as it turns out, a key witness in this procedure, Agnes Čeković, who gave up on going to Syria at the border crossing, at the urging of his father. Upon his return to Serbia, Agnes Čeković, with the support of his family, contacted the Department for Terrorism.⁶⁵

Based on the filed criminal charges, on 17 December, 2013, the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime issued an order to conduct an investigation against N.N. perpetrators of the crime of terrorist association under Article 393a, paragraph 1 in connection with the criminal offense of terrorism under Article 391, paragraph 1 of the CC. The next day, pursuant to Article 300, paragraph 6 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime requested from the pre-trial judge of the HC SDOC approval for the examination of witnesses due to the fact that an investigation was being conducted against unknown perpetrators. The request was approved by the

61 From the case files available until October 2013.

62 Established in 2010.

63 Hereinafter: Department for Terrorism.

64 Department for Terrorism, Criminal report no. KU 180/13, 17 December, 2013.

65 Department for Terrorism, Official record of a notice received from a citizen, KU no. 655/13, 16 December, 2013.

decision of the pre-trial judge.⁶⁶ On the same day, Agnes Čeković was examined as a witness.⁶⁷

After the testimony of Agnes Čeković, the Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime issued a new order to conduct an investigation, which this time included 5, and later 7 convicted persons,⁶⁸ based on the amended criminal report KU 180/13 submitted by the Department for Terrorism. The investigation, and later the indictments that were filed and changed, covered all seven convicted persons until mid-2016.

2.1.2. Verdict K 88/2014

2.1.2.1. Terrorist association – Article 393a of the Criminal Code

The verdict established the criminal responsibility of all 7 accused⁶⁹ for the criminal offense of terrorist association under Article 393a of the Criminal Code. The HC SDOC found that Podbićanin, et al., in a state of sanity and aware of the illegality of their acts committed the crime by associating, for a long time, to commit criminal offences of terrorism, and took action to achieve a plan consisting of:

- 1) continuous collection of financial resources with the aim of using them for the purpose of committing the criminal offense of terrorism;⁷⁰
- 2) continuously committing the act of recruiting the citizens of Serbia to commit or participate in the act of committing the criminal offense of terrorism, i.e. to join ISIL by

66 Pre-trial judge of the HC SDOC, Decision no. KPP 109/13, 18 December, 2013.

67 Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime, Witness examination record KTN 1/13, 18 December, 2013.

68 Rejhan Plojović and Goran Pavlović were not covered by the first order to conduct an investigation.

69 Although Ferat Kasumović is also mentioned in this part of the disposition of the verdict, he was not credited with any of the acts of execution from this part of the disposition, which was also pointed out by the defense attorneys in the appeals.

70 Explained in more detail in the part of the disposition related to the criminal offense of terrorism financing under Article 393, paragraph 1 of the CC.

organizing their own departure and the departure of other Serbian citizens for Syria;⁷¹

- 3) organizing their own departure and the departure of other people for Syria to join ISIL.

Regarding organizing their own departure and the departure of other people for Syria to join ISIL:

1. Podbićanin and Mujović were found to have established links in 2013 with organizations declared as terrorist organizations by the UN, namely ISIL and al-Nusra Front, which are involved in the armed conflict against, as the High Court states, regular Syrian forces and that all defendants acted with the aim of using weapons and other violent methods to attack the lives, bodies and freedoms of others, activating explosive devices in order to cause explosions and fires, destroying state and public facilities and infrastructure, and undertaking other dangerous actions which may endanger human life, with the intent (*animus terrorandi*) of seriously intimidating the population and endangering the basic constitutional, political, economic and social structures of Syria in order to carry out a violent change of a legally elected government, and to direct their actions to Iraq and other African and Asian countries, but also countries from Southern and Central Europe, including the Republic of Serbia, with the ultimate goal of creating a global Islamic state – caliphate;
2. For Sead Plojović, Rejhan Plojović and Crnovršanin, it was established that in the premises of the Furkan masjid in Novi Pazar, they organized the accommodation of foreign fighters from Serbia and other countries in order for them to rest, be equipped and provided with necessary information before continuing their travel, while Rejhan Plojović

71 Explained in more detail in the part of the disposition related to the criminal offense of recruitment and training for committing criminal offenses under Article 391b, paragraph 1 of the CC.

- accommodated a certain Senad from Sarajevo both in Furkan and in his house in Novi Pazar;
3. Rejhan Plojović and Iznudin Crnovršanin agreed on the accommodation on the Syria-Turkey border, provided telephone and personal contacts, organized the time and place of the meeting in relation to Asmir Avdulović, Albin Curić and Agnes Čeković, while Sead Plojović agreed with Abid Podbićanin that these persons would join Podbićanin's unit in Syria;
 4. Izudin Crnovršanin advised Asmir Avdulović and Agnes Čeković what clothes, shoes and equipment to buy for fighting, which they ended up buying together;
 5. Tefik Mujović welcomed and accommodated foreign fighters for Syria in Istanbul, in order for them to join the above-mentioned terrorist organizations, and transferred them to Syria to training camps, and he also accommodated Irfan Ličina in his apartment for a few days, until he transferred him to Syria;
 6. Goran Pavlović kept track of the departure of Ferat Kasumović from the Zemun masjid to Syria, where through his contacts in ISIL he tracked his behavior (public appearances on social networks), fearing that his activities related to the recruitment and organization of the departure of fighters to the battlefield would be revealed;
 7. Abid Podbićanin organized the accommodation, military training and inclusion of newcomers in the Syrian city of Azaz;

The persons in relation to whom the departure was organized are: Senad from Sarajevo, two N.N. persons, A.Č., E.L., M.J., S.Š., S.Š., Agnes Čeković, Albin Curić and Asmir Avdulović.

The members of the group themselves went to Syria in an organized manner, namely Gorana Pavlović with her husband, Rejhan Plojović with his wife and children, Izudin Crnovršanin with his wife

and two children, and Ferat Kasumović with his child [Podbićanin and Mujović were already in Syria].

The accused Podbićanin, Pavlović, Rejhan Plojović, Mujović, Crnovršanin and Kasumović joined the armed part of ISIL in Syria, while Podbićanin, Mujović and Kasumović took part in armed actions, while Podbićanin commanded the “Devla Islamia” unit.

2.1.2.2. Terrorism financing – Article 393 of the Criminal Code

In relation to Sead Plojović, Tefik Mujović, Izudin Crnovršanin and Rejhan Plojović, the High Court in Belgrade found that they committed the criminal offense of terrorism financing under Article 393, Paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code by collecting funds from believers from Serbia and other European countries for the financing of the criminal offence of terrorism (Article 391 of the CC) and the recruitment and training for committing terrorist acts (Article 391b of the CC). The defendants took advantage of the difficult financial situation of potential foreign fighters to recruit them, and then send them to the battlefield in Syria, but they also used those funds to finance the activities of people who were already on the battlefield in Syria. The total amount proven to have been used to finance terrorism is a minimum of 3700 euros.

2.1.2.3. Recruitment and training for committing terrorist acts – Article 391b of the Criminal Code

All those accused of terrorist association, except Tefik Mujović, were also convicted of the criminal offense of recruitment and training for committing terrorist acts (Article 391b of the CC). The High Court in Belgrade determined that they continuously recruited multiple, mostly younger believers, to join ISIL, for the sake of committing the criminal offence of terrorism.

They committed this crime by gathering believers and “carrying out their radicalization” during religious ceremonies in masjids in Zemun, Novi Pazar (Furkan), Raška, Sremčica, Smederevo, Novi Sad and other places, where they organized seminars, lectures and panels,

with the aim of creating and maintaining a misconception about the circumstances concerning the position of their allies in Syria and beyond (including Serbia). They connected them to members of the Salafi community in Gornja Maoča in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their leader, Nusret Imamović,⁷² who also went to Syria as a foreign fighter. They used the authority of Podbićanin, who carries the title of sheikh, Sead Plojović, who has the status of emir, and Goran Pavlović, who carries the title of imam. The recruitment was carried out in relation to Agnes Čeković, Albin Curić, Asmir Avdulović and Fahrudin Šaćiri [who was later killed].

2.1.2.4. Public incitement to commit terrorist acts
– Article 391a of the Criminal Code

Of the seven accused of terrorist association, only Tefik Mujović was convicted of the criminal offense of public incitement to commit terrorist acts due to posts on his *Facebook* profile, which he opened under the pseudonym “Abdullah Abdullah Abdullah”. With these posts, Tefik Mujović praised ISIL, called for attacks (including Serbia), reported on the dead, etc.

2.1.3. Evidentiary proceedings

The main trial was attended by Sead Plojović, Izudin Crnovršanin, Tefik Mujović and Ferat Kasumović. Abid Podbićanin, Rejhan Plojović and Goran Pavlović were tried in absentia. During the main trial, the defendants and witnesses pointed out on several occasions that Abid Podbićanin died in Syria, which has never been confirmed. The facts which have undoubtedly been established, in the sense that neither the prosecution nor the defense have challenged them, are as follows:

- Abid Podbićanin, Tefik Mujović, Rejhan Plojović, Izudin Crnovršanin, Goran Pavlović and Ferat Kasumović resided or continue to reside in Syria, in the city of Azaz near Aleppo;

72 Who also took part in the armed conflicts in Syria.

- Witnesses Agnes Čeković and Albin Ćurić withdrew at the border from crossing into Syria, while Asmir Avdulović went to Syria where he was allegedly killed;
- Various people spent the night in “Furkan”, many of whom were traveling to Syria;
- Makfirete Šaćiri and Fahrudin Šaćiri went to Syria where Fahrudin was killed, while Makfirete Šaćiri (Ferat Kasumovic’s ex-wife) managed to return and become one of the prosecution’s key witnesses;
- Eldar Kundaković was killed in Syria [it has not been proven that they went to Syria with the help of the accused];
- Mirza Ganić was killed in Syria [it has not been proven that they went to Syria with the help of the accused];
- There was a clear connection between Furkan, the masjid in Zemun headed by Goran Pavlović and other masjids in Serbia, but also a connection with Nusret Imamović from Gornja Maoča, Idriz Bilibani from Kosovo, Mirsad Omerović from Tutin, Mevlid Jašarević and his family and other supporters of so-called “fundamentalist Islam”.

All the defendants denied their guilt, and one of the impressions gained while reading the verdict is that there is a whole series of inconsistencies in several different statements that the defendants gave both during the investigation and during the main trial. However, allegations of mutual knowledge of convicted persons and continuous communication (in Serbia, but also in Syria) were undoubtedly established through special evidence of secret surveillance and recording of communication, but also through conflicting testimonies of the people convicted, some of whom spoke more openly about their mutual acquaintance, while others denied such a thing, or described the relationship as superficial.

Evidentiary actions taken:

1. Interrogation of the accused;
2. Examination of witnesses who were recruited and whose trip was organized to Syria, primarily Agnes Čeković, Albin Curić and Irfan Ličina;
3. Reading transcripts of conversations between defendants collected through a special evidentiary operation of secret surveillance and recording of communication;
4. Interrogation of family members, primarily the Šaćiri family and their connections with Ferat Kasumovic;
5. Reading various UNSC resolutions relating to ISIL, al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda as terrorist organizations on the United Nations list;
6. A *YouTube* video of the sermon of Abid Podbićanin, aka Abu Safi, which according to Sead Plojović originated in Syria and in which Podbićanin preaches about jihad and glorifies ISIL, mentions events in Syria, the conquest of Vienna, Iraq, Mecca and Medina, glorifies al-Qaeda, etc. In another video, he mentions Baghdadi (the leader of ISIL at the time), the Islamic State as the only entity created by the law of Allah, which has its own territory where Sharia is practiced, that its spread has been accelerated and should be recognized.⁷³
7. Use of excerpts from the “Borders” system, from which all entries and exits of the people convicted who are from Serbia were clearly seen;

73 Excerpt from the verdict: He also pointed out that Sead Plojović helped him and Asmir Avdulović make contact with Podbićanin in order to go to Syria – “These allegations were accepted by the court and assessed as true, considering that in relation to the stated facts, the witness made identical statements on all occasions, and these allegations from the testimony of witness Agnes Čekovec are mutually consistent with other pieces of evidence presented” and “Due to the above, the Court points out that it has been reliably established that the defendant Abid Podbićanin first went to Egypt at the end of October 2012 to join the armed forces in Syria after making contact with members of the terrorist organization ISIS, where he participated in armed actions and was the commander of the ISIS unit Devla Islamia.”

8. Analysis of Tefik Mujović's *Facebook* profile and making a connection with the "Abdullah Abdullah Abdullah" profile;
9. Examination of the witness who is the owner of the "Ekspres turizam" agency who transported Irfan Ličina to Istanbul;
10. Search of the place of residence of the defendants and the Furkan masjid;
11. Examination of the witness, Slovenian citizen Roko Žavabi, in the procedure of providing international assistance in criminal matters, who confirmed that he was staying in Furkan;
12. Accessing of technical devices and analysis of their contents (laptops, telephones, USB devices, etc.);⁷⁴
13. *YouTube* video from Syria showing Tefik Mujović;
14. Deciphering the communication between the accused in which their stay in Syria and participation in armed activities was described as "studying" and "learning";
15. Form of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria – General Directorate of the Border, submitted by the Federal Attorney General at the Federal Supreme Court of the Federal Republic of Germany in which the name Tefik Mujović is written down as a fighter of the Free Syrian Army, then Muhammad's Army, then the Islamic State, which was obtained in the process of providing international legal assistance in criminal matters;
16. Reports on financial transactions made through "WesternUnion".

74 A variety of content was found in Sead Plojović's laptop: "Collective work for Islam", which mentions Azaz, ISIL – the path of the faithful, "Battle for Aleppo", glorification of ISIL, a map of the distribution of forces in Syria, a photo of Bin Laden, photos of Islamic fighters in action, a photo of a certain Bajro Ikanović armed in Syria (he came to Furkan) and with whom Irfan Ličina was in Syria and was returning with him to Turkey when he was wounded, information about the deaths of Almir Salihović from Rožaje and Eldar Kundaković, etc. The book "Jihad – Fight in the Way of Allah" was also found.

Defense motions rejected by the HC SDOC:

1. Expert evaluation of religious material from Furkan by theologians;
2. Extraction from the case file of the *YouTube* recording of Abid Podbićanin's sermon;
3. Extraction from the list of transcripts of conversations that took place before 2013, and through special evidence, secret surveillance and recording of communication;
4. Examination of several witnesses, mostly family members of the accused;
5. Expert evaluation of *Facebook* profile;
6. Expert evaluation of Sead Plojović's laptop on the manner of removing incriminating content from the Internet;
7. testimony of persons who are not available to the competent authorities of Serbia;
8. Testimony of the protected witness "0307" who was neither examined in this case nor mentioned anywhere in the case file.

2.1.4. Measures of procedural coercion

All four defendants who were present during the trial were in custody from 7 or 8 March, 2014. They spent 5 years in custody, except for Tefik Mujović, who was in custody since 28 April, 2016, when he was arrested in Turkey and extradited to Serbia.

2.1.5. Connections of the people convicted to other persons suspected or convicted of terrorism abroad or persons who were (allegedly) killed in Syria

During the criminal proceedings, an undoubted connection was established with the following persons who are suspected of or who have been convicted of terrorist acts abroad:

1. Nusret Imamović from Gornja Maoča, who participated in the radicalization of several witnesses in the criminal

proceedings against Podbićanin, et al., and who is on UNSC's list as a terrorist linked to al-Qaeda;⁷⁵

2. Mirsad Omerović, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison in Austria for the recruitment of foreign fighters, and who held lectures for believers from Furkan;
3. Mevldi Jašarević, who was convicted of attacking the American Embassy in Sarajevo;
4. Eldar Kundaković from Novi Pazar, who was killed in Aleppo;⁷⁶
5. Almir Salihović from Rožaje, who was killed in Aleppo;⁷⁷
6. Mujo Hamidović from Sjenica, who was killed in Syria;⁷⁸
7. Mirza Ganić from Novi Pazar, who was killed in Syria.⁷⁹

2.1.6. Key qualifications and findings from Judgment K 88/2014 relevant to terrorism and violent extremism

The HC SDOC has established that al-Nusra Front and ISIL fought against “regular Syrian forces and that all defendants acted with the aim of using weapons and other violent methods to attack the lives, bodies and freedoms of others, activating explosive devices in order to cause explosions and fires, destroying state and public facilities and infrastructure, and undertaking other dangerous actions which may endanger human life, with the intent (*animus terrorandi*) of seriously intimidating the population and endangering the basic constitutional, political, economic and social structures of Syria in order to carry out a violent change of a legally elected government, and to direct their actions to Iraq and other African and Asian countries, but also countries from Southern and Central Europe, including

75 Security Council, *Nusret Imamovic*, available at: <https://bit.ly/3oqDlxJ>.

76 Insajder, *Insajder bez ograničenja: Episode 25*, available at: <https://bit.ly/3tS95gd>.

77 *Ibid.*

78 SandžakPress, *Mujo Hamidović from Sjenice killed in Syria*, 22 January, 2014, available at: <https://bit.ly/3bwwwqxy>.

79 SandžakPress, *Mirza Ganic killed in Syria during recent clashes within opposition (Photo)*, 8 January, 2014, available at: <https://bit.ly/3hyNKpQ>.

the Republic of Serbia, with the ultimate goal of creating a global Islamic state – caliphate.”

Thus, the fact that the defendants were part of armed units that fought against “a legally elected government” was taken as proof of the existence of special intent (*animus terrorandi*). In other words, it can be clearly concluded from the verdict that by being part of armed units that carry out some of the alternative acts of execution (which is not difficult to prove for ISIL and al-Nusra Front) and which fight against official forces manifests as special intent to seriously intimidate the population and endanger the basic constitutional, political, economic and social structures of a given country, or to force that country to do or not do something.

None of the defendants was found to have committed the criminal offense of terrorism, pursuant to Article 391, paragraph 1 of the CC, although the court found that Abid Podbićanin, Rejhan Plojović, Ferat Kasumović, Tefik Mujović, Izudin Crnovršanin and Goran Pavlović participated in armed actions. The question that remains open is whether the absence of this qualification is conditioned by a lack of sufficient evidence that the mentioned persons really undertook some of the alternative acts of terrorism.

In the disposition of the verdict, one can see a whole range of actions of the convicted persons that were qualified as acts of association, financing, recruitment and training and public incitement to commit terrorist acts.

2.2. CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS CONDUCTED AGAINST SERBIAN CITIZENS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE ARMED CONFLICT IN UKRAINE⁸⁰

In response to the request for access to information of public importance, the High Court in Belgrade⁸¹ submitted 31 decisions in which the criminal responsibility of the citizens of Serbia who took part in the Ukrainian conflict was established.

80 See detailed list of cases in Annex 1 to this Analysis.

81 Hereinafter: HCB.

In the mentioned proceedings, it was established that the defendants committed the criminal offense of participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign state under Article 386a, paragraph 2 in conjunction with paragraph 1 because:

“as citizens of the Republic of Serbia, as part of a group, they participated in the armed conflict in the Republic of Ukraine, as members of paramilitary formations of pro-Russian forces in the conflict, and are not citizens of the Republic of Ukraine, nor members of the official mission of the international organization of which the Republic of Serbia is a member, wherein they were able to understand the significance of their actions and were in charge of their actions, and whereby they were aware of their actions and wanted to carry them out, and whereby they were aware that their actions were prohibited, in a way that included:

- joining the pro-Russian forces as a volunteer in the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation “International Brigades”, where the accused, in relation to whom proceedings were carried out separately, conducted military training in the form of physical training, tactical actions in combat and handling of firearms, and as the commander of the paramilitary formation “International Brigades” issued orders in the form of schedules for duty, security of facilities and unloading of humanitarian aid;⁸²

In the mentioned proceedings, it was established that the defendants committed the criminal offense of participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign state under Article 386a, paragraph 1 because:

82 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. K 189/15 – SPK 104/15, 21 May, 2015 (suspended sentence); K 103/15 – SPK 103/15, 21 May, 2015 (sentence of 6 months imprisonment to be served in the premises where the convicted person resides); K 189/15 – 102/15, 21 May, 2015 (suspended sentence); K 189/15-SPK 101/15, 21 May, 2015 (suspended sentence); K 189/15-SPK 100/15, 21 May, 2015 (suspended sentence); K 189/15-SPK 99/15, 21 May, 2015 (suspended sentence); K 189/15-SPK 98/15, 21 May, 2015 (suspended sentence); K 189/15 – SPK 105/15, 21 May, 2015 (suspended sentence);

“as citizens of the Republic of Serbia, as part of a group, they participated in the armed conflict in the Republic of Ukraine, as members of paramilitary formations of pro-Russian forces in the conflict, and are not citizens of the Republic of Ukraine, nor members of the official mission of the international organization of which the Republic of Serbia is a member, wherein they were able to understand the significance of their actions and were in charge of their actions, and whereby they were aware of their actions and wanted to carry them out, and whereby they were aware that their actions were prohibited, in a way that included:

- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the formation “Serbian-Hussar Regiment” of the Donetsk People’s Republic where he:
 - was provided with an AK-74 automatic rifle with 2 to 5 rounds of ammunition with which he carried out tasks of securing the facility-command of the “Oplot” Brigade, which was under the command of New Russia.⁸³
 - was provided with an AK-74 automatic rifle with 2 rounds of ammunition, and on 18 January, 2015 he took part in combat operations in the Donetsk city region, together with units of the “Vostok” and “Oplot” battalions, and then joined the “7th Brigade” where within the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Company, 2nd Platoon, he participated in armed conflicts until 9 June, 2015, when he left the Republic of Ukraine;⁸⁴
 - was provided with a firearm – a 5.45-caliber automatic rifle AKM, with 4 rounds of ammunition, and he carried out the task of securing several watchtowers near Dmitrovka and Kumshatskiy and participated in combat operations in the

83 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. K 444/15 – SPK 209/15, 5 August, 2015 (suspended sentence).

84 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SOK 255/15, 26 October, 2015 (suspended sentence).

territory of Debal'tseve, Kumshatskiy, Dmitrovka and the Pisky airport, and then in March he joined the "7th Brigade" where within the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Company, 2nd Platoon, he participated in armed conflicts until 1 June, 2015, when he moved to the 1st Slavyansk Battalion, where he remained until 16 December, 2015;⁸⁵

- and then joined Igor Strelkov's paramilitary formation of the 7th Brigade, 2nd Battalion, 6th Company, 2nd Platoon, where he was provided with a firearm – a 7.62mm-caliber automatic rifle with 2 rounds of ammunition and a uniform, and he carried out duties on checkpoints where he controlled vehicles and persons, loaded and unloaded cargo from military warehouses, guarded the headquarters and went to the range to practice shooting and military tactics with combat vehicles, so he indirectly participated in military conflicts until 15 November, 2015, when he left Ukraine;⁸⁶
- and after the disbandment of the "Serbian Hussar Regiment" he was assigned to the 7th Brigade, 2nd Battalion, 6th Company, "Biker", where he was provided with a firearm – an automatic rifle 5.45mm-caliber AK 74 with 2 rounds of ammunition, and carried out the control of passengers and vehicles at checkpoints near Debal'tseve, where he remained until 4 June, 2015;⁸⁷
- joining as a volunteer the "7th Brigade" of the Donetsk People's Republic in the territory of eastern Ukraine, where he was provided with a firearm – an automatic rifle AK-74 with 2

85 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 7/16, 11 March, 2016 (suspended sentence).

86 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 56/16, 27 April, 2016 (suspended sentence).

87 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 23/17, 10 March, 2017 (suspended sentence).

rounds of ammunition with which he carried out security of facilities⁸⁸ or simply left the Republic of Ukraine;⁸⁹

- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of eastern Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation “7th Brigade”, and took part in armed conflicts in the territory of Donetsk;⁹⁰
- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation “International Brigade” in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine, and then as part of the paramilitary formation “Ural”, unit “Thunder”, where he was provided with a firearm – an automatic 7.62mm rifle with 3 rounds of live ammunition and 2 bombs, and thus indirectly participated in armed conflicts until 28 February, 2015, when he left the Republic of Ukraine;⁹¹
- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation “Rezan” of the Donetsk People’s Republic in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine where he was provided with a uniform and a firearm – a 5.45mm-caliber automatic rifle AK with 4 rounds of ammunition, and carried out the duties of transporting the deputy commander whose nickname was “McKay”, after which on 27 December, 2014 he transferred to the “Security Service” within the Ministry of Defense of the DPR (Donetsk People’s Republic) where he carried out counterintelligence protection duties, and then in late January 2015 served as commander of

88 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. K 470/15 – SPK 213/15, 23 September, 2015 (suspended sentence).

89 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. K 476/15 – SPK 218/15, 8 October, 2015 (suspended sentence).

90 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. K 476/15 – SPK 218/15, 8 October, 2015 (suspended sentence).

91 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 320/15, 18 January, 2016 (suspended sentence).

the “GBR” (Rapid Reaction Group) until March-April 2015, when he became Head of the Security Service within the Ministry of Defense of the DPR, where he remained until the end of November 2015;⁹²

- joining as a volunteer the paramilitary formation “Ural” where he carried out basic military training and training of tactical special operations, and as a member of the group “Thunder” within the Ural unit he supervised, observed, scouted and collected data at “block posts” – checkpoints, and participated in the arrest of persons collecting data for the military security service of Ukraine;⁹³
- joining as a volunteer the paramilitary formation “First Slavyansk Brigade” of the DPR (Donetsk People’s Republic) in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine, when he was provided with a firearm – a 5.45mm-caliber automatic rifle AKM with 4 rounds of ammunition, and was positioned at the location Novoazovs’k, where he remained until the end of August 2015;⁹⁴
- joining as a volunteer the paramilitary formation “International Brigade” within the Prizrak Brigade, which was commanded by defendant X who was replaced by Z, where he was in charge of the so-called Serbian Group, after which he left the territory of the Republic of Ukraine in mid-November, and then returned on 7 December, 2014 and joined the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the Oplot paramilitary formation, 3rd Battalion, which later changed its name to “Serbian Hussar Regiment”, and in the territory of Donetsk he took part in fighting that took place

92 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 22/16, 15 March, 2016 (suspended sentence).

93 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 22/16, 10 May, 2016 (sentence of 6 months imprisonment to be served in the premises where the convicted person resides).

94 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 78/16, 13 October, 2016 (suspended sentence).

in the settlement of Pisky somewhere in early 2015, where he remained until 15 March, 2015;⁹⁵

- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation of the Seventh Brigade, the First Slavyansk Battalion in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine where he was provided with a firearm – a 5.45mm-caliber automatic rifle AK 47 with 3 rounds of ammunition, and he was on guard duty within the “Komisarovka” prison and participated in training, so he indirectly participated in armed conflicts until 15 November, 2015, when he left the Republic of Ukraine;⁹⁶
- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the eastern part of Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation of the 2nd Company of the 1st Slavyansk Battalion, he carried out physical work, assigned duties in the facility where he was staying, and thus indirectly participated in armed conflicts in the territory of Donetsk;⁹⁷
- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation of the Seventh Brigade, the First Slavyansk Battalion in the Republic of Ukraine, where he was provided with a firearm – a machine gun with 3000 rounds of live ammunition, one offensive grenade, one defensive grenade and TNT, and he carried out control of vehicles and persons on the Debal'tseve – Grigorovka road, and then stayed on the line of separation between pro-Russian and Ukrainian forces, and he thus indirectly participated in armed conflicts until 15

95 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 80/16, 24 May, 2016 (suspended sentence).

96 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 116/16, 4 October, 2016 (suspended sentence).

97 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 123/16, 4 October, 2016 (suspended sentence).

November, 2015, when he gave back his weapons and ammunition, and then left the Republic of Ukraine on 19 November 2015;⁹⁸

- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine as part of the paramilitary formation of the Hussar Regiment, where he remained until 17 March, 2015, after which he joined the Seventh Brigade, First Slavyansk Battalion in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine, where he was provided with a firearm – a 7.62mm-caliber AK 47 automatic rifle with two rounds of ammunition, when he carried out the duties of driver of the caterpillar-track T64 and the BMP1 (combat armored vehicle) while also securing the facility in which he was staying, and he thus indirectly participated in armed conflicts until 15 November, 2015, when he gave back his weapons and ammunition, and then left the Republic of Ukraine on 19 November, 2015;⁹⁹
- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine, as part of the anti-terrorist battalion “Wagner” of the Donetsk People’s Republic, in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine, where he was provided with a firearm – a 5.45mm-caliber automatic rifle with two rounds of ammunition, and he thus carried out the tasks of security – shift duty at the facilities within the Faculty of Agronomy, where the entire battalion was staying, where he remained until 16 September, 2015;¹⁰⁰
- joining as a volunteer the paramilitary formation “Batman”, where he was provided with a uniform and firearms – a 9mm

98 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 154/16, 29 July, 2016 (suspended sentence).

99 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 155/16, 11 August, 2016 (suspended sentence).

100 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 24/17, 10 March, 2017 (suspended sentence).

Makarov pistol, a 5.45mm-caliber AK 47 automatic rifle, together with 10 rounds of ammunition, a 64mm-caliber hand-held rocket launcher, and in the meantime was also provided with a 7.9mm-calibre PKT machine gun together with ammunition, 800 rounds, and he thus took part in armed conflicts in the territory of the airport in Donetsk, the city of Debal'tseve, Dokuchajevs'k and Yelenovsk near Mariupol;¹⁰¹

- joining as a volunteer the paramilitary formation “GBR” (Rapid Reaction Group) of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People’s Republic in the territory of the eastern part of the Republic of Ukraine, where he was provided with a uniform, a 5.45mm-caliber AK 47 automatic rifle and 5 rounds with ammunition, and on 18 October 2014, he carried out the duty of border protection, controlled persons and vehicles crossing the border crossing “Severna”, and was then assigned to the Second Brigade of the Third Motorized Battalion of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People’s Republic, where until 13 September, 2015, he held combat positions on the front line in the territory of the village of Smelovo and the towns of Chernukhin and Pervomaisk;¹⁰²
- joining as a volunteer the pro-Russian forces originally in the Seventh Brigade, Second Corps, within which he was provided with a 5.45mm-caliber AK-47 Kalashnikov model automatic rifle, uniform and combat kit, during which time he carried out the duties of securing armored vehicles and patrolling, after which in June 2015, he joined the company called “Desantnici” where he was in military infantry training, and then in October 2015 he joined the armed formation “Legion”, i.e. the special operations unit within which he participated in combat operations against the Ukrainian armed forces and

101 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 72/17, 25 October, 2017 (suspended sentence).

102 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 86/17, 31 August, 2017 (suspended sentence).

mercenaries, after which in the fall of 2016 he joined the Fifth Brigade within the group of diversion and reconnaissance units within which he was in military training until September 2016, after which he returned to the Seventh Brigade in the reconnaissance company where he carried out the duty of instructor until 19 May, 2018, after which he left the territory of the Republic of Ukraine;¹⁰³

- in the village of Komesarovka, in the building of the former prison, performing the duty of guard in and around the building where he was staying and carrying a 5.56mm-caliber AK 74 weapon, the so-called “Kalashnikov”; together with one live round of 30 bullets of ammunition;¹⁰⁴
- residing in the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic as a member of the security service of the Ministry of Defense of the DPR intervention platoon with the task of securing facilities and persons from the Ministry of Defense, where he was provided with a uniform and a 5.45mm-caliber automatic rifle AKN 74 with 8–9 rounds of ammunition, after which he joined the unit “Fifth Brigade” corps of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic, which was in charge of securing the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic in the border zone on the Yelenovka – Dokuchajevs’k – Styla line, where he carried out security duties in the border area, security work at traffic control points and inspected vehicles and persons who were traveling and moving within the territory of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic.¹⁰⁵

103 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 111/18, 25 September, 2018 (suspended sentence).

104 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 150/18, 18 December, 2018 (suspended sentence).

105 HCB, Plea agreement acceptance verdict no. SPK 188/18, 18 December, 2018 (suspended sentence).

Thus, the subject of this Analysis included 31 verdicts of the High Court in Belgrade which confirmed the agreement on the recognition of a criminal offence in relation to 31 foreign warriors in Ukraine. Of the 31 verdicts, 8 were in relation to Article 386a, paragraph 2 in conjunction with paragraph 1, while 23 verdicts were in relation to Article 386a, paragraph 1. In the period since the incrimination of taking part in war or armed conflict in a foreign country, there have been no recorded cases of criminal prosecution of persons suspected of organizing participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign country under Article 386b of the Criminal Code.

When it comes to penal policy, the verdicts of the High Court in Belgrade clearly show that it is extremely mild, because in 29 of the 31 verdicts, a suspended sentence was imposed. In addition, 2 persons were sentenced to 6 months in prison, which they served in the premises where the convicted persons reside.

2.2.1. Evidentiary actions, measures of procedural coercion and connections with other Serbian citizens who are widely known to have taken part in the armed conflict in Ukraine

From the submitted decisions, no conclusion can be drawn regarding the evidentiary actions taken, except for the fact that all defendants pleaded guilty and clearly undertook the act of committing the criminal offense of participation in war and armed conflict in a foreign country under Article 386a of the Criminal Code.

There is also no information on the type of measures of procedural coercion that were applied, although it is reasonable to assume that no measure of custody was imposed.

From the case file itself, it cannot be seen that the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade made an effort to establish a pattern of recruiting Serbian fighters for the Ukrainian battlefield, organizing their departure or financing their travel, although it is clear that hundreds of Serbian citizens stayed in Luhansk, Donetsk and Donbass,

and that a large number of them are still there.¹⁰⁶ However, Internet sources show that the persons convicted were in contact with Dejan Berić, the most well-known Serbian fighter in Ukraine,¹⁰⁷ but also with other Serbian citizens who have openly spoken in public about their experience in Ukraine and the way they and other fighters went to join pro-Russian forces.

2.2.2. Key qualifications and findings from the verdict of the High Court in Belgrade relevant to terrorism and violent extremism

All convicted persons participated as citizens of the Republic of Serbia and as members of a group in the armed conflict in the Republic of Ukraine, as members of paramilitary formations of the pro-Russian force in the conflict, and are not citizens of the Republic of Ukraine, nor members of the official mission of an international organization of which the Republic of Serbia is a member, wherein they were able to understand the significance of their actions and were in charge of their actions, and whereby they were aware of their actions and wanted to carry them out, and whereby they were aware that their actions were prohibited.

The High Court in Belgrade did not engage in establishing special intention to force Ukraine to do or not do something, nor was such an effort made by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office. Thus, facts of interest to the judicial authorities in the proceedings of foreign fighters in Ukraine referred exclusively to proving their stay in Ukraine and determining the act of participating, either directly or indirectly, in armed conflict.

106 BalkanInsight, *Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine*, Maja Živanović, 13 December, 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/3ydCDs6>.

107 BalkanInfo, *INTERVIEW: Dejan Berić – Kosovo is ours in our hearts, and we will get it back when the time comes! (16 February, 2017)*, YouTube, available at: <https://bit.ly/3ouUW7w>.

3. CONCLUSION

In considering comprehensively all criminal proceedings that have so far been finalized against Serbian citizens who took part in combat in Ukraine and Syria, and taking into account diametrically opposite qualifications of similar or identical actions of these persons, different penal policies and different intensity of efforts to prosecute Serbian warriors, we will present in the conclusion a comparative analysis of: 1) qualifications of illegal actions of Serbian fighters in Ukraine and Syria; 2) the manner of criminal prosecution; and 3) penal policy from the aspect of the purpose of sanction.

3.1. DIFFERENT CRIMINAL QUALIFICATIONS OF SERBIAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA AND UKRAINE

The first and most striking conclusion is that there is no essential difference in the actions of fighters in Syria and fighters in Ukraine, especially if we take into account the qualification from the HC SDOC verdict, which found that Podbićanin, et al., fought against “regular Syrian forces and that they [...] acted with the aim of using weapons and other violent methods to attack the lives, bodies and freedoms of others, activating explosive devices in order to cause explosions and fires, destroying state and public facilities and infrastructure, and undertaking other dangerous actions which may endanger human life, with the intent of seriously intimidating the population and endangering the basic constitutional, political, economic and social structures of Syria in order to carry out a violent change of a legally elected government, and to direct their actions to Iraq and other African and Asian countries, but also countries from Southern and Central Europe, including the Republic of Serbia, with the ultimate goal of creating a global Islamic state – caliphate.”

It is a well-known fact that tens of thousands of fighters and civilians were killed in the armed conflict in Ukraine, and that the regions in the east were destroyed in terms of public and private facilities, road infrastructure, airports and other facilities housing public institutions, and that Ukraine lost control of its legitimate and

internationally recognized territory, which includes Crimea, Luhansk, Donetsk and Donbass. An indisputable fact established in all verdicts is that the convicted persons at least voluntarily joined pro-Russian paramilitary formations such as the International Brigade, Serbian-Hussar Regiment, Oplot, Vostok, Seventh Brigade, First Slavyansk Battalion, Biker, Ural, Thunder, Rezanj, Security Service, the First Slavyansk Brigade, the GBR, Wagner, Batman, Desantnici, and Legion, and that they participated directly or indirectly in armed conflicts there by:

- being provided with weapons (rifles, pistols, rocket launchers, caterpillar-track vehicles, Kalashnikovs and other dangerous things), military uniforms and other combat equipment;
- performing loading and unloading from military warehouses and carried out physical work;
- going to the training ground to practice shooting and military tactics with combat vehicles and undergoing military infantry training;
- providing security for military facilities, military headquarters, watchtowers near Dmitrovka and Kumshatskiy, Komisarovka Prison, and the former prison building. At the Faculty of Agronomy, where the entire battalion was also located, they secured armored vehicles and patrolled the grounds;
- carrying out control of vehicles and persons at checkpoints near Debal'tseve, but also on the Debal'tseve – Grigorovka road, and monitoring, observing, scouting and collecting data at that location;
- carrying out the duties of transporting the Deputy Commander with the nickname “McKay”;
- issuing orders in the form of shift duty schedules, security of facilities where they were located, and other facilities, as well as unloading humanitarian aid;
- conducting as instructors basic military training in the form of physical training, tactical actions in combat, but also training

in handling firearms, automatic rifles, as well as training in tactical special operations;

- engaging in counter-intelligence protection duties;
- participating in the arrest of persons collecting data for the military security service of Ukraine;
- operating within a diversion and reconnaissance unit;
- serving as commanders of the Rapid Reaction Group (GBR);
- performing the function of the Head of the Security Service within the Ministry of Defense of the DPR;
- leading a company called “Desantnici”
- staying on the line of separation between pro-Russian and Ukrainian forces and protecting the border and border areas, controlling persons and vehicles crossing the border at the Severna border crossing;
- being provided with the caterpillar-track T64 and BMP1 (combat armored vehicles);
- participating in combat operations in the region, i.e. in the territory of the city of Donetsk and Donetsk airport, in the territory of Debal'tseve, Kumshatsky, Dmitrovka, Dokuchajevs'k, Yelenovsk near Mariupol airport and the settlement Pisky and holding combat positions on the front line in the territory of the Smelovo village and Chernukhin and Pervomais'k, as well as acting within special action units, and all that against the official and legal Ukrainian armed forces.

All the above-mentioned acts were determined in plea agreement acceptance verdicts, and were determined on the basis of direct confessions of Serbian fighters in Ukraine.

On the other hand, in the proceedings against Podbićanin, et al., the HC SDOC took the position that the statements of witnesses and some defendants were sufficient to establish that Podbićanin, Rejhan Plojović, Crnovršanin, Pavlović, Mujović and Kasumović took part in armed conflicts in Syria, that they acted with automatic weapons and in military uniforms, and that Podbićanin led the

Devla Islamia unit. However, none of the people convicted admitted the stated actions on the basis of which their criminal responsibility was determined. Thus, a far lower degree of evidence has been presented in relation to the warriors in Syria. This does not mean that, in combination with other presented evidence, the HC SDOC did not have enough to convict, but that a far greater degree of evidence was achieved in the proceedings against the Ukrainian warriors.

In addition, the acts of execution that have been proven in Ukrainian cases are far more flagrant than the acts of execution that have been proven in the verdict passed against Podbićanin, et. al. More specifically, both of them undertook dangerous actions, but the actions of Ukrainian fighters were much more precisely determined and established on the basis of confessions, and not indirect knowledge of witnesses. Also, many Ukrainian fighters admitted in their public appearances that they took part in conflicts in which people were killed, but also that they killed members of the rival side themselves.¹⁰⁸

When it comes to the nature of these actions, each of them can only be considered dangerous, and given that they were directed against the official forces of Ukraine, which were under the command of the legally elected authorities of the country, and undertaken with the aim of, at the very least, forcing Ukraine to withdraw its military forces from parts of its internationally recognized territories of Donbass, Luhansk, Donetsk and Crimea, several very logical questions arise:

1. What is the difference between the actions of Podbićanin, et. al., in Syria, against, as the HC SDOC established in its verdict, the legally elected authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic, and the actions of Serbian fighters in Ukraine who took the same, but far more precise action against the legal and legitimate armed forces of Ukraine and on internationally

108 BalkanInfo, *INTERVIEW: Dejan Berić – Kosovo is ours in our hearts, and we will get it back when the time comes!* (16 February, 2017), YouTube, available at: <https://bit.ly/3ouUW7w>.

recognized Ukrainian territory where this country enjoys full sovereignty?

2. What is the difference between the control that ISIL, within which Podbićanin, et. al., were proven to have acted, had over almost 2/3 of the Syrian territory, and especially the region around the city of Azaz and Aleppo, compared to the control of pro-Russian forces, within which Serbian fighters acted, over the territories around Donetsk, Donbass, Luhansk and Crimea?
3. Are the actions of Podbićanin, et. al., within the ISIL units different from the actions of Serbian fighters in Ukraine, from the aspect of endangering the basic constitutional, political, economic or social structures of Syria, i.e. Ukraine?
4. If the credibility of the evidence presented against Podbićanin, et. al., was sufficient for the HC SDOC to establish that the persons convicted attacked the lives, bodies and freedoms of others in Syria, as well as activated explosive devices and caused explosions and fires, destroyed state and public facilities and infrastructure and undertook other dangerous actions which may endanger human life, the question arises as to how the same conclusion was not drawn in relation to Serbian fighters in Ukraine, and taking into account the plethora of dangerous acts that the persons convicted admitted to? In fact, the persons convicted of participating in the war in Ukraine admitted to a far greater number of alternatively committed acts of committing the criminal offence of terrorism because they participated in combat operations in which the traffic system and infrastructure (airport) were destroyed, to possessing, procuring and using explosives and other weapons, and causing explosions and destroying other public facilities.

Therefore, the acts of execution undertaken by Serbian citizens who fought in Syria and Ukraine, and which correspond to the

acts of committing the criminal offence of terrorism, coincide completely, i.e. they are identical.

When it comes to subjective characteristics, it is clear that the existence of direct intent is indisputable, but also that the special intent established in relation to Podbićanin, et. al., is identical to the special intent of Ukrainian fighters, and that is that Ukraine/Syria be forced to withdraw from parts of their internationally recognized territories and stop exercising de facto power over them, but also to intimidate the population that does not agree with the aspirations of ISIL/pro-Russian forces and make it obey paramilitary units. When it comes to motives that are not relevant to the realization of the legal nature of the crime of terrorism, they are almost identical, with Podbićanin, et. al., justifying their terrorist activities by fighting for Islam and Muslims who are oppressed by Bashar al-Assad, while Serbian fighters in Ukraine described their terrorist activities as aiding “our Russian brothers”.

It is also important to note that the UNSC Resolutions placing certain groups and individuals on the United Nations list as terrorist associations or groups are not relevant for qualifying certain behavior as terrorist behavior. In fact, whether a certain group is recognized as such at the UN level or not is not determined as a feature of the legal nature of the criminal offence of terrorism under Article 391 of the CC, nor is it a condition set in mandatory elements of the definition of terrorism of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism.

Therefore, taking into account the identity of the illegal actions of Serbian foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine, the positions taken by the HC SDOC in the case of Podbićanin, et al., as well as the substantive criminal law solutions in the Criminal Code in relation to the act of execution and special intent within the criminal offence of in accordance with the obligatory elements of the definition, Serbian citizens who fought in Ukraine had to be prosecuted as terrorists.

3.2. DIFFERENT APPROACHES OF JUDICIAL BODIES IN CRIMINAL PROSECUTION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS, CITIZENS OF SERBIA, IN UKRAINE AND SYRIA

Although the author of this analysis had at their disposal far more material for the analysis of the criminal proceedings against Podbićanin, et al., it can be concluded with certainty that the efforts of the competent judicial authorities to detect, prosecute and sanction Serbian foreign fighters in Syria were far greater than the efforts invested in relation to Serbian foreign fighters in Ukraine.

From the judgments on the acceptance of the agreement on the recognition of criminal acts submitted by the High Court in Belgrade for the purposes of compiling this Analysis, it is not possible to determine the content of the pre-investigation procedure. However, it is reasonable to assume that no special evidentiary actions were taken against the convicted Serbian fighters from Ukraine. One of the indicators for this conclusion is the fact that the criminal offense of participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign country is not recognized as an offense in relation to which special evidentiary actions can be taken.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, Podbićanin, et al., were the subject of a special evidentiary action of secret surveillance and recording of communication, which brings with it a high level of invasiveness in relation to the right to privacy.

In addition, it is not known whether the most severe measure of procedural coercion – custody – was applied to the persons convicted. And if so, it could not last unreasonably long, as was the case with three of the four convicted persons in the proceedings before the HC SDOC. In other words, Sead Plojović, Izudin Crnovršanin and Ferat Kasumović spent 5 years in custody before serving their prison sentences, and the period of almost three years that Tefik Mujović spent in custody is not negligible either. If we take into account the living circumstances, which the CPT calls a “relic of the past”, which includes a minimum of 22 hours spent in the bedroom, a lack of meaningful

¹⁰⁹ Article 162, CPC.

activities, inability to work and separation from family and the outside world, it is clear that in the proceedings against Podbićanin, et al., the position of the accused was far more unfavorable and stricter than was the case with the fighters from Ukraine.

What is common to both categories of proceedings is that the competent judicial authorities did not deal at all with the causes of the crime, in terms of expert evaluation of the persons convicted whose behavior is without a doubt a typical example of violent extremism. Addressing the causes of these types of crime, which must also be taken into account during sentencing, is a key aspect of the fight against violent extremism.

Finally, due to the very fact that the actions of the convicted Podbićanin, et al., were marked by at least three, and in relation to Tefik Mujović, 4 criminal offences related to the criminal offence under Article 391 of the CC, and that they were the subject of extensive investigations, which included international co-operation in criminal matters, the question that remains open is why Serbian fighters in Ukraine did not deserve the same treatment. This is important to point out due to the fact that hundreds of Serbian citizens went to Ukraine, that is, far more than is the case with Syria. It is hard to imagine that hundreds of people spontaneously and on an individual basis decided to get involved in armed conflicts on the side of pro-Russian units in eastern Ukraine. In other words, it is difficult to imagine that there was not a certain level of organization, that no funds were collected, but also that in relation to, mostly young fighters, recruitment activities were not carried out for the purpose of going to Ukraine. Social networks,¹¹⁰ Internet portals,¹¹¹ *YouTube* channels,¹¹² but also televi-

110 BalkanInfo, *BALKAN INFO IN DONETSK: Teša Tešanović's impressions and observations from Donetsk! (04 April, 2017)*, 4 April, 2017, YouTube, available at: <https://bit.ly/3f0z94z>.

111 Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Verdict in Serbia because of war in Ukraine, then back to the front*, 19 October, 2018, Gordana Ćosić, available at: <https://bit.ly/33Y6gQo>.

112 BalkanInfo, *INTERVIEW: Dejan Berić – Kosovo is ours in our hearts, and we will get it back when the time comes! (16 February, 2017)*, YouTube, available at: <https://bit.ly/3ouUW7w> and *INTERVIEW: Dejan Vujić – Serbian volunteers were on the*

sion shows that are broadcast on televisions with national frequency are flooded with appearances, testimonies and a certain kind of promotion of returnees from the Ukrainian battlefields.¹¹³ Public appearances of individuals who participated in the conflicts in Ukraine, and who were convicted on their return to Serbia for the crime of participation in war or armed conflict in a foreign country, contain a large amount of data indicating recruitment, organized departures and funding, both of travel and participation in the Ukrainian conflict. Special evidentiary actions in relation to the entire network of individuals connected with the departure of Serbian volunteers to the east of Ukraine could shed light on a series of circumstances and facts that could indicate qualified forms of terrorism.

Due to all the above, it is not easy to remove the impression that the competent judicial authorities of Serbia have taken a far more retributive approach towards Serbian citizens who went to the battlefield in Syria than towards warriors who went to Ukraine. This kind of unequal treatment, which undoubtedly privileges Serbian fighters in Ukraine, is harmful for several reasons.

The first reason is certainly that unequal treatment in identical situations creates a suitable ground for the emergence or deepening of animosity that radicalized individuals may have towards the bodies and institutions of Serbia. This is certainly the case with the persons convicted, but also with people who feel a connection and empathy with Podbićanin, et al.

In addition, while on the one hand, the fighters from Ukraine were free during the proceedings, the fighters from Syria were in custody throughout the proceedings, with living circumstances bordering inhuman and degrading treatment. There is no space for re-socialization and rehabilitation in the living circumstances within custody, i.e. those accused of terrorism wait for several years until they receive

front lines in Donetsk! (02 August, 2017), YouTube, available at: <https://bit.ly/3fwC6jc>.

113 Ćirilica, *ĆIRILICA: Ristic, Vujic, Prorokovic, Jevtic* (TV Happy 06 February, 2017), YouTube, available at: <https://bit.ly/343TEXH>.

the status of a convicted person in which there exists a possibility for the prison sentence to be adjusted to the individual personality of the radicalized individual. Thus, international standards say that such living circumstances can have a counter-effect in terms of changing patterns of behavior based on violent extremism and can deepen it due to feelings of injustice.

On the other hand, a simple approach to severe forms of illegal actions of individuals who decided to fight in Ukraine, and which, according to the HC SDOC, legally meets the characteristics of the criminal offence of terrorism, creates a risk of continuing to commit criminal offences, i.e. going to Ukraine again, which is the case with most convicted persons from the analyzed proceedings.¹¹⁴

3.3. DIFFERENT APPROACHES OF JUDICIAL BODIES IN SANCTIONING FOREIGN FIGHTERS, CITIZENS OF SERBIA, IN UKRAINE AND SYRIA

Podbićanin, et al., were sentenced to multiple years in prison, while Serbian fighters in Ukraine were given far shorter sentences, which were also suspended. Only two fighters from Ukraine were sentenced to six months in prison, which they served in the premises where they reside.

The prison sentences handed down to Podbićanin, et al., are closer to the legal maximum of 15 years.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, fighters from Ukraine received suspended sentences or sentences that were below the legal minimum. Taking into account the practice in other countries, the sentences imposed on fighters from Syria fall into the category of moderately severe. However, as criminal responsibility was established in relation to 3 or 4 concurrent criminal offences of terrorism, the sentences imposed can be assessed as proportional to the gravity of the offences committed by Podbićanin, et al.

114 Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Verdict in Serbia because of war in Ukraine, then back to the front*, 19 October, 2018, Gordana Ćosić, available at: <https://bit.ly/33Y6gQo>.

115 This was the maximum according to the CC valid at the time of the criminal offence.

On the other hand, suspended sentences and 2 six-month prison sentences served by the convicted persons in the premises where they reside, can in no way be considered proportional to the gravity of the offences committed by Serbian fighters while fighting for pro-Russian paramilitary units in Ukraine. In addition to the wrong qualification, which had to be identical to the qualification of the actions of Podbićanin, et al., or vice versa, mild sanctions led to the meaninglessness of the very purpose of sanction. According to media reports, a significant number of convicted Ukrainian fighters returned to the east of the country, where they once again took part in combat.

In addition, it is important to point out that a suspended sentence could have been a solution for some of the completed proceedings, but provided that the convicted persons had been imposed with an obligation aimed at treating the causes of violent extremism, which would have been possible through the legal regulation of protective supervision.¹¹⁶

The obvious difference in sanction is a clear example of unequal treatment, which is always “good material” for creating narratives of injustice, oppression and suffering that a charismatic leader carrying out radicalization could take advantage of. Therefore, a strict penal policy in which there is not much room for the rehabilitation of extremists is never a good response to terrorism, violent extremism, or the phenomenon of foreign fighters. In addition, varying standards applied to identical or similar situations deepen distrust in the judiciary among members of the population whose individuals are more severely sanctioned. This completes the vicious circle of abuse of reality or allegedly disenfranchised segments of society and creates suitable ground for violent extremism. Conversely, a uniform penal policy sends a clear message that the religious, national, political, or any other context in which a war in a foreign country is taking place, makes no difference to the judiciary and that there is zero tolerance for foreign fighters, regardless of the battlefield they choose.

116 Articles 71–76 of the CC.

DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF INSTITUTIONS FOR PREVENTING AND COMBATING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISM LEADING TO TERRORISM

The Ministry of Interior of Serbia is the principal body for the implementation of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Terrorism, but also stands out as an actor of exceptional importance in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism. The General Police Directorate is located in Belgrade and consists of 15 organizational units, almost each of which has numerous units, operational centers, centers for analysis and/or risk assessment, various specialized centers, etc. In addition, the Police Directorate has 27 regional organizational units outside its headquarters, which, to a much lesser extent, also have an extensive network of departments. The Criminal Police Directorate has a particularly important role in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism, and it includes the Department for the Fight against Corruption, the Service for the Fight against Organized Crime (SBPOK) and the Service for the Fight against Drugs, as well as the Service for the Fight against Terrorism and Extremism, whose work is organized in two special departments – for the fight against terrorism and for the fight against extremism, as well as four field departments (in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Novi Pazar). Within this directorate, there are two units that are separated from SBPOK

into special organizational units: the Service for Special Investigative Methods, which deals with conducting special evidentiary actions, special investigative techniques, and the Service for Criminal Intelligence and Undercover Investigators. The National Forensic Center is also a special part of the Criminal Police Directorate; the Uniformed Police Directorate, which is in charge of police organization, prevention and community policing, and security at sports events; The Border Police Directorate, which, among other things, has a special Department for Cross-Border Cooperation and Operational Affairs, as well as a Department for the Suppression of Cross-Border Crime; the Directorate for International Operational Police Cooperation (UMOPS), which cooperates with Interpol and Europol; the Unit for the Protection of Participants in Criminal Proceedings (witnesses and persons close to them); the Gendarmerie, which has significant responsibilities in combating terrorism and depriving members of organized crime groups of their liberty; the same role is played by two other special units of the Police Directorate – the Helicopter Unit and the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SAJ).

Despite the fact that laws, internal laws and bylaws established a clear structure of competencies of the Ministry of Interior and organizational units of the Police Directorate, strong political influence threatens the professionalism of the institution in all areas of work, and thus the security of society as a whole. Numerous scandals in recent years are related not only to former Minister of Interior Nebojša Stefanović, but also to the current Minister, Aleksandar Vulin. The arrest of Dijana Hrkalović, a former state secretary of the Ministry of Interior and a close associate of the former Minister, has attracted a lot of attention and most free media interpret it as a political showdown within the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), with Hrkalović's detention being interpreted as a message – for her to think carefully about whom she will side with.

Hrkalović was arrested on 15 October, 2021 and questioned the same evening by the Deputy Prosecutor for Organized Crime. Although she had previously been linked to Veljko Belivuk's clan,

suspected of removing evidence following the 2017 assassination of Vlastimir Milošević (known as the “rail murder”), being involved in the wiretapping of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and having alleged criminal ties to Slaviša Kokeza (the former president of the Football Association of Serbia) and the Kavač criminal clan in Serbia, after her arrest, Hrkalović was charged with committing the prolonged criminal offense of trading in influence. Several lawyers corroborated the allegations of independent media, emphasizing that this is a difficult-to-prove criminal act that the prosecution applies when it does not have enough evidence for a secure verdict; in fact, this leaves room for her release if she agrees to cooperate and meets certain expectations of the party that enabled her stellar career, first in the Security Information Agency (BIA), and then in the Ministry of Interior. On the other hand, the pro-regime media continues to feed the frenzy around Hrkalović, calling her the “queen of the mafia”. The fact is, however, that only one case has been filed against her and several other Ministry of Interior employees so far, according to the criminal charges of former members of the MUP Secret Surveillance Department Milan Dumanović and Mladen Trbović, who accused Hrkalović of using information gathered through secret surveillance and recording for private purposes. This case ended not only with the rejection of the criminal charges filed by Dumanović and Trbović, but also with an indictment against the two operatives for revealing official secrets. Their trial is ongoing.

The sudden departure of Police Director Vladimir Rebić also has political connotations. Rebić was questioned on 15 July at the Belgrade Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office as part of an investigation against former Deputy Head of the Service for the Fight against Organized Crime (SBPOK) Goran Papić, charged with committing the crime of abuse of office because in April 2020, he went against protocol and ordered the return of an armored car to Marko Miljković, a member of Veljko Belivuk’s organized crime group. Journalists from the KRIK portal, who have been focusing on Belivuk’s group for a long time, believe that the Police Director was not involved in that case in any way, and

that it is unclear whether he even knew what was happening, despite his position. Unlike Rebić, two police officers were arrested on suspicion of helping the Belivuk group by superficially searching the apartment of one of the arrested members, while SBPOK inspector Božidar Stolić was suspected of leaking information to the Belivuk group from the police. Numerous investigative reports by the KRIK portal point out that some high-ranking officials are no longer mentioned in connection with Belivuk, such as gendarme Nenad Vučković Vučko and Secretary General of the Government of Serbia Novak Nedić.

In October 2021, the Police Director was questioned in the Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of Interior, due to the “Jovanjica” case. Questioning was refused by the head of the Department for the Fight against Drugs of the Belgrade Police, Slobodan Milenković, and head of operations, Dušan Mitić, both of whom had previously passed a polygraph examination twice, where it was determined that they were telling the truth. Rebić went in to do the polygraph after Predrag Koluvića, owner of the largest marijuana plantation in Europe, in an interview with his lawyer and SNS member Vladimir Đukanović, accused members of the police of pressuring him to blame the whole case on the brother of the President, Andrej Vučić, and Kosovo businessman Zvonko Veselinović. However, Rebić said during the polygraph, but also publicly, that he trusts his police officers, which is why many predicted that he would soon be removed from his position as the Police Director. After this hearing, Rebić went on a sudden vacation, after he had previously gathered his coordinators, told them that he would not return, and handed over his stamp and facsimile to Deputy Dragan Vasiljević. The fate of the Police Director is identical to the case from 2014, when five heads of police organizational units were practically replaced. Even then, tabloids under the influence of the SNS, accused the police officers of cooperating with the mafia and put them in a situation where they feared for their own lives and the lives of their families, which Rebić also stated. Unfortunately, like his predecessors, he did not have the courage to speak publicly about what he knows, analysts claim.

The National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism consists of 30 members, representatives of the Ministry of Interior, Security Information Agency, Military Security Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance, Republic Public Prosecutor's Office and the Office of the National Security Council and Secret Information Protection. The national coordinator of this body is the Police Director, Vladimir Rebić, whose departure will certainly affect the work of the Coordination Body until the election of a new head.

The Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing was established within the Ministry of Finance. The system for combating money laundering and terrorist financing in Serbia is organized in accordance with international standards which are an integral part of the "Forty Recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force" (FATF). The Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering is a member of the Egmont Group, which brings together financial intelligence units¹¹⁷ from 164 countries. The administration actively participates in the work of the Moneyval Committee, the expert committee of the Council of Europe. Another highly important aspect of international cooperation of the administration is the possibility of concluding cooperation agreements with foreign partners. The administration has so far signed co-operation agreements with 46 countries.

The Administration plays a key role in developing a list of indicators for identifying transactions and persons suspected of money laundering or terrorist financing. In addition to the functions of the FIU, the Administration has a number of other key powers, which are not common to all FIUs. In particular, the Administration may issue an order suspending the execution of a transaction for 72 plus 48 hours (if the 72 hours end during the weekend) and an order for monitoring the client's financial operations for up to six months. It may also use these powers at the justified request of a foreign FIU.

117 FIU (Financial Intelligence Unit).

The Administration plays an important role in drafting a list of indicators for identifying transactions or persons suspected of money laundering or terrorist financing, and an important regulation applied by the Administration is the Law on the Freezing of Assets with the Aim of Preventing Terrorism and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. This law prescribes actions and measures to limit the disposal of assets of designated persons, the competence of state bodies to apply these measures, as well as the rights and obligations of natural and legal persons in the application of the provisions of this law. The Administration plays an important role in the process of implementing the list of designated persons of the United Nations Security Council and the adoption of the so-called domestic lists of terrorists, as well as in the procedure of temporary restriction (freezing) of assets of identified terrorists and the supervision over the application of this law.

The administration has a special organizational unit dealing with the prevention of terrorist financing (Group for the Prevention of Terrorist Financing), it participates in the work of the working group for controlling non-profit organizations in terms of their misuse for terrorist financing, and the Director is a permanent member of the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism.

Although the work of this administration is not linked to scandals and criminal groups, as is the case with the Ministry of Interior, political influence on the work of the administration became apparent in the “List” case, when in June 2020 a list of people working in the media, non-governmental organizations and citizens’ associations for whom the administration requested access from banks to all transactions from 1 January, 2019, was leaked to the public. The list contained the names, surnames and unique master citizen numbers of 20 persons and the names of 37 non-governmental organizations or media associations. The Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism of the Council of Europe (MONEYVAL) was the first to react and warned

that “the legal framework for combating legitimate civil society activities without the suspicion of money laundering, terrorist financing and other related acts must not be abused”. The EU, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the US Embassy in Serbia, the FATF, as well as international organizations working to protect human rights and media freedom have criticized the financial check. Although more than 140 organizations and individuals jointly asked the administration and the Ministry of Finance to “without delay present the grounds for suspicion due to which they ordered the extraordinary collection of information about organizations, media and individuals from commercial banks”, a year and a half since the administration started this check, there has been no information on what the investigation revealed. Since the list includes the names of individuals and organizations that openly criticize the government, it clearly pointed out the abuse of institutions for the sake of confrontation with critics of the government.

In 2018, the Government of the Republic of Serbia established the Coordination Body for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing, which was meant to deal with the analysis of the most important issues for the functioning of the system, coordinating and proposing measures to improve that system. This body includes 30 members representing state institutions and bodies from the professional level and the level of policy making in this area. The President of the Coordination Body is the Minister of Finance. As in the case of the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism, there are no representatives of civil society in this Coordination Body.

The Security Information Agency (BIA) is a civil national security service and it is part of the unified security intelligence system of the Republic of Serbia. The Agency’s website states that the basic tasks of the Agency are to protect the security of the Republic of Serbia, to detect and prevent activities aimed at undermining or destroying the constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia, to investigate, collect, process and assess security intelligence and information of

importance to the security of the Republic of Serbia and to inform the competent state bodies about this data, as well as to perform other tasks determined by the Law on Security Information Agency. The Director of the Agency is Bratislav Gašić, a senior Serbian Progressive Party official and one of the closest associates of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

The activities of BIA are extremely non-transparent and no data can be obtained on its work. Investigative media, which have repeatedly asked questions about the Agency and/or its staff in relation to specific cases, continue to encounter a wall of silence.

The Military Security Agency (VBA) is also a security service and part of the unified security and intelligence system of the Republic of Serbia. It is organizationally part of the Ministry of Defense with the status of a legal entity, and it is responsible for security and counter-intelligence protection of the Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Army.

The Military Intelligence Agency (VOA) has the same status as the VBA. It is responsible for conducting intelligence activities important for security related to the collection, analysis, assessment, protection and transmission of data and information on potential and real dangers, activities, plans or intentions of foreign states and their armed forces, international organizations, groups and individuals. In addition to the abovementioned, it is also responsible for the diplomatic function in the field of defense and the Serbian Army.

As of 29 October, 2020, the Minister of Defense has been Nebojša Stefanović, who was appointed to that position after having been the Minister of Interior and after having been continuously connected with numerous scandals. He is still considered a close associate of Aleksandar Vučić, although the media continues to speculate about their falling out, which they have both denied. The regime-controlled and tabloid media have been “targeting” Stefanović for a long time. The latest story was opened by the head of the Special Investigation Methods Unit of the Criminal Police Directorate (UKP), Tomislav Radovanović, who said on TV Prva on 8 October, 2021 that he was

“convinced” that there was a parallel structure in the Ministry of Interior “with precisely selected people”, whose goal was to collect data on Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his family. Radovanović said that the group, formed at the time when Nebojša Stefanović was the relevant minister, had the logistical and any other kind of support of “a Western intelligence service”, as well as that it established an intelligence network with “tycoons” and organized criminal groups. The next day, the Minister of Defense convened a press conference at which he threatened Radovanović with a lawsuit and stated that “he never has and never will work against the president of the state”. For the time being, it is not clear whether the Serbian public is attending another “show from the imperial court”, or whether Stefanović will be politically eliminated. Independent analysts doubt such an outcome, because the former Minister of Interior might have brought along with him a whole group of “players with serious interests”.

Considering all the above, the question is what tasks Stefanović is supposed to be performing as the Minister of Defense. The delicate and important function he currently holds, and taking into account fully politicized institutions subordinated to only one center of power, can easily enable the further strengthening of private companies that trade in weapons at the expense of Serbian factories, and even undertaking other illegal acts. As the Act on Internal Organization and Systematization of both agencies of the Ministry of Defense and the manner of their functioning represent a state secret, while at the same time there is no civilian control of security actors, the possibility of new scandals arising is not excluded. Free and investigative media have repeatedly written about suspicious transfers of weapons produced in Serbian special-purpose factories to foreign battlefields, despite a UN ban, so weapons produced at the “Sloboda” factory were used to quell protests in Baghdad, “Krušik” mines were recorded in Tripoli, and sold to Saudi Arabia, etc. The “Krušik” affair had a serious echo outside the borders of Serbia, but no follow-up in court. The then director Mladen Petković was transferred to the head of the

company “Zastava Oružje” from Kragujevac, but many claim that he still controls the Valjevo-based weapons factory.

BIRN Serbia, which uncovered the Krušik affair and has been following it for a long time, reminds that the key participant in the affair was Nebojša Stefanović’s father with his company GIM, and that another member of Mladen Petković’s family is in a powerful and lucrative position in the military industry thanks to their closeness to the top of the SNS. Jugoslav Petković is the director of Jugoimport SDPR, the largest state-owned arms trade company.

Apart from the fact that such activities endanger Serbia’s credibility by exposing it to potential UN sanctions, they pose a serious security risk for both Serbia and other countries.

THE ROLE AND POSITION OF THE JUDICIARY

The state bodies responsible for dealing with organized crime and terrorism are the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime, the Special Department of the Belgrade High Court for Organized Crime, the Special Department of the Belgrade Court of Appeal for Organized Crime, and the Special Detention Unit of the Belgrade District Prison. In addition, criminal offenses related to the departure of volunteers to foreign battlefields, violent extremism, money laundering, corruption and other types of crime are dealt with by courts of general jurisdiction and the public prosecutor’s office.

The strengthening of the judiciary and the rule of law have a special place in the EU Reports every year. The latest report estimates that Serbia’s judicial system remains “at a certain level of preparedness” and that progress was limited. After a long stalemate, constitutional reform in the area of justice was re-launched in December 2020, and was scheduled to be completed by the end of 2021. The system for selecting judicial office holders and evaluating the performance of judges and prosecutors needs to be thoroughly revised after the adoption of amendments to the constitution to enable the selection and careers of judicial office holders to be competence-based, given that the current legal framework does not provide sufficient

guarantees against potential political influence on the judiciary, the report said¹¹⁸.

Thus, in the fight against organized crime, no results have been achieved in terms of effective investigations, prosecutions and final verdicts in cases of serious organized crime, including financial investigations. The number of verdicts for organized crime cases was reduced in 2020 compared to the previous year, the Prosecutor's Office does not have enough capacity, and court proceedings are inefficient and take a long time. Prosecutors face the refusal of state institutions to provide the requested information, and together with judges they are often exposed to media lynching in pro-government tabloids. The EU report emphasizes that Serbia should focus, instead of cases of low or medium importance, on cases with a high level of importance in order to break up large and internationally active organizations and seize and confiscate the proceeds of crime.

The situation is much more complex in practice. The entire judiciary suffers under constant and even overt political pressures. Representatives of the ruling coalition often use the National Assembly to attack certain judges and prosecutors, sending a clear message

118 A referendum on changing the Serbian Constitution in regards to the judiciary was held on 16 January, 2022. Thanks to changes in the Law on Referendum and People's Initiative adopted at the end of 2021, the census was abolished, so that the referendum result is now measured by a majority vote. The Republic Election Commission (REC) announced the final results on 4 February, after processing the repeated votes at nine polling stations on 23 January and at one polling station on 2 February. According to the overall results, only 30.65 percent of citizens registered to vote went to the referendum, while the number of valid ballots was 30.23 percent. 59.62 percent of voters voted for the change of the Constitution, while 39.35 percent voted "no". The referendum was marked by the conspicuous absence of any campaign, both by the government and the opposition, professional associations and the non-governmental sector. The majority of opposition parties pointed out that the National Assembly that called the referendum had no legitimacy, and that there was no public debate. Judges, prosecutors and the professional public also did not take a clear position – some believed that changes to the Constitution would lead to the greater independence of the judiciary, while others believed that political influence would continue to be present through members of the High Court Council and the State Prosecutorial Council.

to everyone in the judiciary not to criticize the government and to act in cases as the government expects them to. The few judges who dare to speak publicly about the situation in the judiciary, such as the judge of the Court of Appeals Miodrag Majić, point out that the judiciary in Serbia operates in an atmosphere of survival and fear and that in such conditions it is impossible to perform the function entrusted to the judiciary in a democratic society.

DIRECTORATE FOR EXECUTION OF CRIMINAL SANCTIONS AND PROBATION SERVICES

The Administration for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions (UIKS) and the Office for Alternative Sanctions, is the official name of the body that should, among other things, deal with the protective supervision of persons released from prison, and have an important role in preventing the radicalization of convicts and their deradicalization, which are very important tasks in preventing and combating violent extremism and radicalism leading to terrorism. The problem of overcrowding and the overall conditions in which convicts serve their sentences has been improved by building new facilities and/or refurbishing existing ones. However, what is still a big problem is the small number of employees in the treatment services, and they are the bearers of tasks related to the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism and deradicalization.

On the other hand, the offices for alternative sanctions do not have enough employees and they are very poorly equipped. The development of these offices came to a halt after they opened in all 25 cities, as had been planned. Although they should be equivalent to probation systems and services as they exist in developed democratic societies, in reality they are not even close to achieving their purpose.

A small number of employees in treatment services and commissioners for alternative sanctions are also not sufficiently educated about the P/CVERLT field.

COMMUNITY PREVENTION AND DERADICALIZATION PROGRAMS

Many P/CVERLT experts and security analysts working in the Western Balkans, including Serbia, point out that the practice of sentencing in cases involving violent extremism and terrorism may need to be reconsidered and aligned with those imposed in the states of the European Union, the United States and other countries. However, longer prison sentences are not a solution in themselves, but should be aligned with meaningful rehabilitation, supervision and reintegration programs.

Currently, Serbia lacks the capacity and specialized expertise to rehabilitate and reintegrate people convicted of terrorism or violent extremism, or foreign battlefield fighters. Local communities do not have developed support systems and any attempt at reintegration depends on the former prisoners themselves, people close to them and possibly local NGOs, if there are any.

Local governments have done almost nothing on a practical level, they have only included the prevention of violent extremism in local security plans. The situation is somewhat better in larger cities where non-governmental organizations are active and the problem is recognized, as well as in the area of Sandžak, whose population faces serious risks and the loss of life of young people dying on foreign battlefields.

It is superfluous to mention in such a situation that the support in the local community must be carefully designed and nuanced, because the same approach cannot be applied to victims, fighters, recruiters and families. There is a lack of coordination between all participants, from institutions dealing with this problem, courts and prosecutors' offices as well as NGOs, all the way to religious elders and the community.

CONCLUSION

- NGOs have been paying more attention to the prevention of extremism in recent years. Their projects are mainly aimed at young people, who are often marginalized because of poverty, unemployment and a lack of opportunities due to the current socio-economic circumstances. Therefore, they are a highly vulnerable category of society that is easy to influence with rhetoric that feeds hatred, frustration and sometimes incites violence. There are organizations that are serious about extremism prevention programs and that, with the support of the state, could make a significant contribution to capacity building in local communities.
- However, a key change must take place at the political level, in order to begin building truly democratic institutions that serve the citizens, not individuals, parties or interest groups and criminals.

THE STATE, THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY, AND MUSLIMS IN SERBIA

Since the Law on Churches and Religious Communities was passed in 2006, the legal status of the Islamic Community has still not been resolved. This is due to the fact that two parallel organizations¹¹⁹ claim to meet the conditions to be legally recognized as the official Islamic community, thus restitution regarding the property confiscated from this community after 1945 has still not been enforced. Also, because of this unregulated legal status, issues regarding the appointment of religious education teachers in schools are present. However, what is interesting is that the state, despite not recognizing either of the two organizations as the one meeting legal requirements to be recognized as the official Islamic community, accepted both organizations' registrations, and in that sense took upon itself the obligation to aid them financially, to pay health insurance for the employees and pensions to former employees. But what is perhaps most important is that the state thus guarantees them both a status that exempts them from paying taxes to the government.¹²⁰

This last piece of information is particularly significant because the way the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) and the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) do business is highly problematic, especially if we take into account the fact that the former has been led by the Jusufspahić family ever since 1967. Since the dissolution of

119 This refers to the Islamic Community of Serbia (Islamska zajednica Srbije) based in Belgrade, and the Islamic Community in Serbia (Islamska zajednica u Srbiji) based in Novi Pazar.

120 The State Department's 2020 Annual Report on Religious Freedoms in Serbia is available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/serbia/>.

the former Yugoslavia, the Jusufspahić family has been treating the ICoS as a family business, and not as a common good for all Muslims in Serbia.¹²¹ The situation with ICiS is very similar. From 1993 to 2016, it was led by Muamer Zukorlić, who was on several occasions accused of embezzling vast amounts of money as the Chief Mufti.¹²²

Furthermore, both organizations are closely tied to certain (ethnonational) political parties which use the infrastructural capacities and social capital of these religious organizations to further their party's exclusive goals. That is especially the case with the ICiS which often acts as a branch of the Justice and Reconciliation Party (*Stranka pravde i pomirenja*) led until recently by Muamer Zukorlić. On the other hand, the Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije*) has a strong influence on individuals within the ICoS, while Mustafa and Muhamed Jusufspahić on several occasions pointed out how close (and friendly) they are to individuals in power, who were also in power during the 1990s war years, such as Ivica Dačić, the of the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička stranka Srbije*) and Aleksandar Vučić, of both the country and the ruling Serbian Progressive

121 During the past decade and a half, brothers Muhamed and Mustafa Jusufspahić held practically all the most relevant positions in ICoS. From 2007 to 2016, Muhamed Jusufspahić was the deputy of Reis-ul-Ulema of ICoS and Mufti of Serbia at the same time. Afterward, he was elected president of the Supreme Council of ICoS in 2017, and he still holds that position despite the fact that since 2018 he has been the ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Mustafa Jusufspahić became in 2008 the director of the newly formed Halal Agency Serbia for Examination and Certification of Halal Quality which operates within ICoS. Besides that, Mustafa Jusufspahić has been the Military Imam in the Serbian Army since 2013 and holds the rank of major. Also, Mustafa Jusufspahić holds the position of the Mufti of Belgrade.

122 "Evidence of the embezzlement of 200,000 euros in the Islamic Community", available at: <https://rtvnp.rs/2016/12/26/dokaz-o-proneveri-200-hiljada-eura-u-islamskoj-zajednici/12990>. About how the private businesses of Muamer Zukorlić and certain members of his immediate family are run through ICiS, see: https://imovinapoliticara.krik.rs/display/disp6/profil.php?disp_id=67. About the illegal "restoration" of mosques from the 16th and 17th centuries which are considered cultural goods and are under state protection, see: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/30/in-muslim-region-of-serbia-ottoman-era-mosques-perish/>.

Party (Srpska napredna stranka).¹²³ In the context of close ties to the structures of power, the Jusufspahić family, through the years, has decisively contributed to the tearing asunder of Muslims in Serbia. The most recent example being the autocratic and nepotistic behavior of Muhamed Jusufspahić who violated the Constitution of the ICoS and tried to reappoint Sead Nasufović as the Reis-ul-Ulema of this organization, which is why representatives of the Sandžak Mashihat led by Effendi Senad Halitović and Effendi Muhamed Demirović decided to boycott this decision and withdraw themselves from the Supreme Council's further operations.¹²⁴

In line with the aforementioned circumstances, it can be concluded that the *status quo* suits the state,¹²⁵ as well as the representatives of both of these organizations and that no one involved has a true motive or desire to effectively settle the legal status of the Islamic community, which permanently leaves it in a “gray” area, and therefore why its infrastructural capacities could potentially represent

123 On one occasion, Muhamed Jusufspahić also pointed out his closeness to and affinity for Vojislav Šešelji who was convicted of war crimes in the Hague Tribunal and who is known for negating the genocide and death of Muslim Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians in a most vulgar manner. About the friendly sentiments of Muhamed Jusufspahić toward Šešelji, see: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/muftija-jusufspahic-bio-sam-prijatelj-milosevicu-seselju-nikolicu/p94rc48>.

124 The assembly of the Supreme Council was held on 12 December 2021. The Sandžak Mashihat's press release regarding the violation of the Constitution of ICoS and the violation of the legal acts by Muhamed Jusufspahić is available at: <https://www.mesihatsanzaka.rs/aktivnosti/371-saopstenje-za-javnost.html>

125 In addition to restitution being a reason for not solving the question of the Islamic community, Sonja Biserko has also pointed to the interest of Serbian government structures in the destabilization and undermining of the Islamic community due to its significance to the identity of Bosniaks: “The Islamic community is the key identity matrix for the Bosniak community in the absence of other institutions. That is why the government in Belgrade and its security agencies made it a target, with the aim of fundamentally destabilizing it. That led to a rift in the Islamic community and the increase in tensions within the Bosniak community, which can be, if necessary, quickly turned into a crisis point.” For more, see: Biserko, Sonja (2010), “Sandžak: Radicalization or cooperation”, in *Sandžak and the European perspective*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade, *Helsinki files* 29.

security risks due to its institutional porousness.¹²⁶ Additional evidence of this institutional crisis is the insufficient trust of young Muslims in the religious authority of representatives of the ICoS and the ICiS.¹²⁷ When we also add that young Muslims, due to structural discrimination, have a very low level of trust in government institutions such as the army, police, and judiciary, but also in the minority political parties claiming to represent them in the political sphere,¹²⁸ we can conclude that there is a space for different types of extremist organizations and individuals to act successfully.

Still, in the above-mentioned context, it is important to emphasize that currently in Serbia there are no organizations that are founded in Islamic teachings and which propagate extremist viewpoints, especially not ones calling for violence.¹²⁹ However, there is a noticeable increase in the popularity of conservative and puritanical da'is (missionaries) who are active in the region, such as Elvedin

126 Muamer Zukorlić himself has stated multiple times that the unresolved issue of the Islamic community is crucial for the security and the control of what happens in the mosques. However, in spite of that, nothing definitive has been done to resolve that issue. Also, it is important to emphasize that from the moment Zukorlić entered politics, he has made very little substantial effort to bring this question to the fore and reach its final epilogue. As a rule, everything simply ended in declarative statements.

127 The research of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia carried out in 2016 indicated that only 11% of young Muslims in Sandžak trust religious figures. For more, see: Ilić, Vladimir (2016), *Views of Young People in Sandžak: How Much are Young People Open to Extremism*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade, p. 13.

128 According to the same research, their trust in the army is 8%, in the police 5%, and in the judiciary and minority political parties only 2%.

129 Certain da'is, who in previous years spread radical and extreme ideas, have to a significant extent made a U-turn toward apoliticism and quietism, emphasizing individual piety and calling for the following of Islamic laws in the (private) lives of believers. The most vivid example of this is the organization The Middle Road (*Put Sredine*) from Novi Pazar, which was accused of inviting young people to go to war in Syria. Today, this organization predominantly bases its work on humanitarian campaigns and the fight against addiction. Also, this organization has directed a significant number of its activities toward collecting funds and medical equipment, in order to provide aid in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pezić, Safet Kuduzović, Sead Islamović, Dževad Gološ, and many others. The mentioned da'is are most present in the online space, that is on Facebook and YouTube, which enables them to spread their message to a significantly larger number of people, especially the younger population which is most present on social media. The work of all previously mentioned individuals is inspired by puritanical pro-Salafi ideas and world view, which means that they are affirming a very literalistic understanding of the Qur'an's message. Apart from a literal approach to the Qur'an, one of their main characteristics is the rejection of a spatial and temporal context when interpreting the holy Text, thus resulting in a paralyzing and inadaptible view of reality. Also, this kind of understanding of reality entails strong anti-modernist sentiments, which are most often presented in an utterly dogmatic manner. Thus, the image these da'is offer is apocalyptic, occasionally nihilistic, and opposes the dominant values of Western thought. The conflict of these two worldviews is especially present in the questions concerning individualism, gender roles, and the rights of sexual minorities. However, at the same time, these da'is have a constructive social role, such as the positive contribution to the fight against addiction – be it drug addiction, gambling, or alcoholism, as well as prostitution. The positive influence of these figures in the abovementioned field is especially visible within the most vulnerable Muslim communities, such as Roma.¹³⁰

In the end, it should be concluded that although puritanical da'is are still very popular in the region, the multitude of research conducted so far concerning extremism and violent extremism in Serbia

130 The author of this text has on multiple occasions during his field research in Roma communities had the chance to hear claims from the respondents that puritanical pro-Salafi da'is had a very strong influence on them. According to the respondents, the result of these teachings has been, among other things, that many individuals who used to have problems with different types of addiction successfully overcame these diseases. A similar thing has been revealed in the focus group created for this project in the suburban settlement Sremčica in Belgrade. Roma people from this settlement came into contact with puritanical pro-Salafi teachings via the Internet, which shows the vast increase of the significance of social media in the dissemination of religious messages.

and Islamic teaching/activism did not make an adequate distinction between the representation and the work on the affirmation of legally allowed conservative views and ideas and (violent) extremist ideas and activities. The most vivid testament to that is the fact that the previously mentioned Sead Islamović, who works as an imam in Hadži-Mehova mosque within the legally recognized ICiS, was in one research paper comparatively problematized with Goran Davidović, the leader of the legally banned neo-Nazi organization National Alignment (Nacionalni stroj) known for its racist ideology and violent action and activities.¹³¹ This profoundly problematic action is by no means an isolated example of excessive securitization of Muslims in Serbia through focusing on conservative Islamic organizations and individuals who act in the public sphere.¹³² Securitization of Muslims is especially problematic if we view the action of pro-Salafi da'is comparatively, i.e. if we take into consideration the increasing presence of ethnonationalistic, chauvinistic, and racist organizations in Serbia. During the last few years, the violent actions of these organizations have greatly intensified, and, what is particularly concerning, they are tolerated (and indirectly supported) by the structures in power. This has become blatantly obvious because, despite their open propagation of national, religious, and racial hatred and violent actions

131 For more see: Marko, Davor (2019), "(Non)violent Extremism Online: How Opinion Leaders Use Online Channels to Disseminate Radical Messages and Intolerance", in Valery Perry (Ed.), *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, ibidem Verlag, Stuttgart, p. 139–183.

132 Since the outbreak of conflicts in Syria and the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, the international organizations in the region funded various projects with the aim of "fighting against Islamic (non)violent extremism". Insistence on financing projects whose aim is dealing with "the Islamic extremism" often results in the securitization of Muslims and viewing practicing Muslims as (potential) security threats to society. This outcome contributes to the worsening of the already poor condition of Muslims in the region, who are often perceived as the "ultimate others". In other words, insisting on "Islamic extremism" additionally spurs the present ultra-nationalistic ideologies, which for many decades in the past have been trying to justify and rationalize the persecution and physical elimination of Balkan Muslims by depicting Muslims as "fundamentalists" who are endangering social harmony and order.

directed against vulnerable groups, these organizations have not been legally prosecuted.

Due to the increase and strengthening of (ultra) right-wing organizations, it would be vital if more attention were devoted to the position and rights of Muslims in Serbia and all other vulnerable groups in the future, instead of predominantly seeing Muslims as a potential security threat.¹³³ This is of special importance if we are to take into consideration that the mentioned (ultra) right-wing organizations are revitalizing the nationalistic and exclusivist ideology, which in the recent past resulted in crimes against humanity and genocide against the Balkan Muslims.

133 More about the rise of Islamophobia in Serbia see: Kostić, Ivan Ejub (2021), "Islamophobia in Serbia: National Report 2020", in Enes Bayraklı & Farid Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report 2020*, Vienna, Leopold Weiss Institute, pp. 693–721.

IDEOLOGICAL MATRICES, RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM, AND SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

“Faith is What Makes Us a Nation”

*All significant concepts of the modern theory of state
are actually secularized theological concepts.*

—CARL SCHMITT, *Political Theology*

If we were to make a certain summary of ideological influences on the development and possibility of establishing a civic and plural society, even at the beginning of 2022, we could rightfully see Serbia as a hotbed of ideological warfare still raging almost with equal fervor as towards the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, with far-right organizations carrying out their operations almost unsanctioned and, when the need arises, collaborating with the current regime to promote the idea of the “Serbian world”. The fact is that it is precisely because of the expansion of nationalistic and right-wing ideological matrices, which have flooded the public space and which are being nurtured by cultural institutions and state-owned media, that Serbia is very far away from the secular and emancipated state model.

The fact is that even after the democratic turn in 2000, dominant stereotypes of the 1990s haven’t been deconstructed. On the contrary, during the last ten years, they have actually made a big comeback to the political and cultural space. It should be noted that that the cultural system in Serbia in the 1990s (together with the media

and educational system) was created in a closed society as a dominant ideological state apparatus, ideologized in all its segments by and large through continuous and consistent creation, cultivation, and distribution of stereotypical representations, formations, and ideological matrices as nuclei of manipulative strategies. Dominant stereotypical representations in Serbian culture at the end of the 20th century, most frequently portrayed in the form of collective myths and narratives, were differentiated and grouped around semantic themes: unity, particularity of the Serbian nation and it being the chosen one, its messianic and ancient qualities rooted in its heroic and calamitous past (hence the specific standstill and ahistoricism), being based on traditionalism, having a tendency toward mysticism and myth creation, motifs of (internal) treason and (external) hostility as the insignia of continually being endangered, the cult of language and the cult of undisputed supremacy of the collectivity/nation.

Stereotypical formations, comprised of joint stereotypical representations, by way of semantic and functional proximity, have been grouped into three dominant and thematically different but mutually ideologically compliant and compatible groups of ideological matrices: matrices with an ideological construct formulated around the core theme of the nation – being endangered, unity and uniqueness, matrices with the ideological construct formulated around the core theme of the cult of the Nation as a public will and legislative and superordinate collectivity (its themes are “deified lineage” and “the nation is everything, the individual is only there to serve”), and matrices with the ideological construct formulated around the core theme of culture, literature and art, and science in the service of lineage, but also in the service of the formation of collectivity, that is to say, national (and state) identity and integrity.

Thus, the stereotypical representation of the continuous endangerment of the nation was joined by the semantically close stereotypical representation of the missing and, above all, necessary national unity, forming a stereotypical formation dedicated to the endangerment and unity of the nation which, coupled with the

stereotypical formation comprised of stereotypical representations dedicated to its messianic and ancient qualities and the uniqueness stemming from them, makes up the ideological matrix formed around the core theme of the nation which, in its simplified form, could sound like this: due to its thwarted, but immanent, historical, traditional, and cultural uniqueness and particularity, the nation has been continuously endangered from all directions, therefore, its unification is simultaneously both a way out and an imperative.

The possibilities of varying, combining, semantically and functionally harmonizing and refining ideologically created stereotypical representations and formations are practically endless. After a period of ideological preparation towards the end of the 1980s (which required engagement and participation of the elites, primarily academicians and writers), this collectivist and ethnocentric version of cultural production required an intervention in terms of form, but also in terms of artistic modeling: establishing the cult of the nation also meant a certain populist “adjustment” and correction of esthetic norms. That is why cultural production in the 1990s, along with the dominant stereotypes, was pervaded by reductions of artistic expression, the dominance of folk music and populist culture, as well as the dominance of realistic forms which have, as adequate “support beams” of patriotic and national themes, satisfied the normative poetic imperative: proximity, intelligibility, and “service to the nation”, as opposed to avant-garde, alternative or abstract art, which was hermetic and “not useful”, as well as difficult to understand and inaccessible to the people.

These two actions, the action of “the elites”, which with the help of media and institutions initiated and directed the masses, and actions of the creators and performers of populist culture in which the masses were actually the audience and the active protagonist, were expressed as compatible, complement, and synergistic in the Serbian culture of this period. In the beginning of the 1990s in Serbia, the program of both the culture of the elite and the culture of the masses focused on establishing and preserving cultural and national

identity and integrity, ambivalently perceived as endangered, but also as superior. Or as Ivan Čolović concludes, not without irony: “The demands for the recognition of cultural identity, for the preservation of the national being or national spirituality, ultimately boil down to the pretension to the preferential status of the chosen nation. Because cultural identity, defined as the being of the nation embodied in the culture of one ethnic community, apparently hasn’t been given to everyone. That is God’s exclusive gift, a quality reserved just for us. Others either don’t have a cultural identity at all, or it is in a very poor, run-down condition. Americans, for example, don’t have an identity because they are an artificial community, without true tradition, without collective memory, without soul. What’s left for the Western Europeans steeped in materialism, humanism, and cosmopolitanism, is a sort of sick, flaccid, run-down identity. Finally, for Serbian nationalists, Muslims and Croats represent examples of nations that betrayed their true (i.e. Serbian and Orthodox) identity and accepted Islam and Catholicism, respectively”. These deeply rooted, and as it turned out, permanent heterostereotypes in Serbian culture, are joined by autostereotypes, constructed on the principle of binary opposition, whose ultimate consequences were the initiation of the notion by which the cultural identity and national cultural action are the necessary precondition and a guarantee of the establishment of national identity, integrity, totality, and unity.

The ideological matrices that can be recognized in Serbia in this period, which even now have not been deconstructed, are close to the ideological program of the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to the historian Petar Atanacković, the essence of the its ideological program is contained in the thesis that a strong state in symbiosis with a strong Orthodox church should lead the completely homogenous Serbian society. “This ideology,” writes Atanacković, “is thereby relying on the old principles: Orthodoxy – autocracy – synodality, or God in Heaven – king on earth – man of the house at the head of the table”. During the wars of the 1990s, says Atanacković, some bishops and priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church openly preached

nationalism, thereby serving the regime of Slobodan Milošević and the army.

Even after the democratic changes of 5 October, 2000, Serbia witnessed the rise of clerical fascism, according to the insight of historians. And in November 2000 the Assembly of Archbishops demanded for religious education to be introduced to state schools as a compulsory subject, and representatives of the Religious Education Office at the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate made an announcement that “the state must declare Orthodoxy as a state religion,” meaning that Serbia should be verified as an Orthodox state. Towards the end of 2000, the presence of priests in the military institutions was approved, and in 2001, the Government of the Republic of Serbia passed a regulation introducing religious education to Serbian state schools as an elective subject.

Exactly at this time, right-wing groups inspired by Saintsavaism, a specific version of ethnophyletism, started rising to power. In 2001, Dignity Patriotic Movement (Otačastveni pokret Obraz) took part in the violent interruption of the Pride Parade, and in the following years, it used force to prevent political, cultural, artistic, and religious manifestations whose content it disagreed with. This organization publicly and vocally supports Saintsavaism-based nationalism, advocates the establishment “Christian values” and uses violence to achieve its goals. In a 2015 police report, their ideology was described as clerical fascism — the amalgam of Serbian clericalism and fascism.

Some critics believe that the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the rest of the Christian world has become more sectarian in the last few years and that this institution is leading a policy of isolationism. They consider the features of Saintsavaism to be: commitment to the restoration of medieval Serbian values (“love of god, chivalry, synodality”); proclamation of Saintsavaism as the Serbian version of Orthodoxy; nationalism and chauvinism against Albanians, Croats, and others; commitment to the restoration of monarchy, commitment to the theocratic state model (state led by a Christ-loving ruler and a religious educational system); commitment to Greater

Serbia as a unique Serbian state “from the Kupa River to the Vardar River and from the Danube River to the Adriatic Sea”; militarism as reliance on military power; clericalism as unquestionable influence of the Orthodox church clergy on social and political life; synodality; rejection of democracy and republican values; antiliberalism and the rejection of human rights and liberties, pluralism, and individuality; anti-Western sentiment; anticommunism, which implies the absolute rejection of the anti-fascist tradition and leftist and centrist political ideology; antisemitism and placing emphasis on the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy; victimization and denial of one’s own crimes while emphasizing crimes of others; xenophobia and homophobia.

In the 2007 report of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, it was assessed that the Serbian Orthodox Church neglects the universal message of the Gospel, that it is slipping into nationalism and that the two main features of its activity are anticommunism and ethnophyletism, by which it is trying to purify Serbian national identity. In the last ten years, ethnophyletism has is becoming an increasingly dominant narrative within the Serbian Orthodox Church, but it has also become the subject of criticism of the public and individual bishops who see this action as “creating the edifice of schismatic spirit”.

According to Milan Vukomanović, an evident pushback toward the pluralistic society model can be seen even now among younger generations in Serbia, and they are opting for a monistic, premodern, votive pattern of nation and state. And the result of the unfinished secularization in Serbia is the permanent tension between ideological guidelines and practices of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as the dominant religious institution, and the civic society and liberal intellectuals: “The Serbian Orthodox Church is perceived (and it perceives itself) as the bearer and guardian of symbolic resource which provide sanctuary for ‘the defense of culture, and everything national, local, particular’. In fact, this involves the protection of the religious interpretative heritage which, above all, affirms a religious institution, for example the Serbian Orthodox Church, as an ‘age-old guardian’

of Serbian culture, tradition, the Cyrillic alphabet, etc.” Vukomanović emphasizes that the revival of the “monocultural votive pattern in the 21st century, which is increasingly being supported by the majority of paraclerical, right-wing, and clerico-fascist organizations in Serbia, as well as the revival of the principle of synodality, are consequences of the abandonment of modern pluralistic model of society which represents the legacy of European Enlightenment”.

In 2014, a debate titled “Resistance to Extremism” was held in Belgrade, organized by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. The president of the Helsinki Committee, Sonja Biserko, then formulated the problem which has up to now remained unchanged: “The legal institutions of this state are still not functioning, and human rights have been rendered meaningless by unending campaigns against human rights organizations and their leaders. What contributes to the rise of far-right organizations is the political discourse of government representatives who persistently avoid to mark these organizations as a threat to the constitutional order and very often equate them with the organizations which are promoting and protecting human rights”. According to Sonja Biserko, one of the important aspects of the rise of right-wing extremism is the ideological proximity of a part of the Serbian Orthodox Church to extremist organizations, and right-wing extremism has been given huge public and media space in Serbia, as well as the support of the part of the academic community and the Serbian Orthodox Church. What these groups have in common is the rejection of the concept of human rights, marked anti-Western and anti-European sentiment, with a continual focus on conservative and nationalistic values akin to ethnophyletic and conservative ideological matrices promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Retrograde ideological matrices, which served to destroy Yugoslav social and cultural space in the 1990s, and which are becoming increasingly more dominant social and cultural pattern in Serbia, are manifested in national chauvinism, clericalism, imperative synodality, the idea of Greater Serbia (“the Serbian world”), a unique nation on a unique territory, stigmatization and persecution of all those who

are outside of this concept of state and nation. Obsession with unity and persecution of ideological detractors has also been present in the state-owned media, tabloid press, and on social media in the last few years. Society in Serbia has thus become the source of unresolved and increasingly intense conflicts which are spilling over onto the neighboring states of the projected “Serbian world” — Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

Finally, the sentence that Patriarch Irinej once said that “faith is what makes us a nation” perhaps most convincingly illustrates Schmidt’s definition from the beginning of this text and unambiguously confirms that Serbian society is indeed living a sort of secularized theological concept. And it is still very far from its proclaimed European orientation.

THE RIGHT AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN SERBIA 2020–2021

In 2021, Serbia, like other countries in Europe and around the world, continued to face the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, both the direct, health and social ones, as well as the consequences that the two-year fight against the infection has had on the economy, political relations and society as a whole.

Since the emergence of the virus, the public in Serbia has been receiving very contradictory information, primarily regarding the so-called patient zero and the beginning of the pandemic in Serbia, through arbitrary information about the severity of the virus to public health, all the way to information about the course and control of the epidemic, the number of patients, and then number of deceased, measures taken and the degree of rigidity of their application.

Authorities in the Republic of Serbia reported inconsistently to the public, often causing confusion and fear among citizens. The fact is that both much richer countries and those with more organized health systems have not found the best answers to the new global challenge. To a certain extent, this can be taken as an “extenuating circumstance”, but from the beginning of the pandemic in Serbia, through the introduction of a state of emergency, to the sudden suspension of measures, the way of informing citizens proved to be one of the weakest points in the epidemic control process.

The government and the institutions responsible for crisis management have not established an optimal strategy for monitoring and reporting on the course of the pandemic, all its aspects and numerous consequences. The information that is presented seems to be emotionally overemphasized, illogical, is often contradictory, or

burdened with everyday political issues. The Crisis Staff, which was established by the Government of Serbia¹³⁴, has been informing the public about the course of the pandemic since the declaration of the state of emergency – the number of infected, tested and deceased people, the opening and operation of COVID-19 clinics and COVID-19 hospitals, the number of vaccinated people and other activities undertaken by the state regarding the control of the epidemic, and is a key body in communication with citizens. At the beginning, it seemed that this team adhered primarily to professional criteria and standards, but as time went on, the influence of politicians in power became increasingly obvious. This seriously, and it seems irreversibly, undermined its credibility and provoked many reactions from the professional public and other actors in society, and deepened the distrust of citizens in institutions, which continues to this day.

In a report published at the end of 2020¹³⁵, Freedom House described Serbia, for the first time since 2003, as a *hybrid regime*¹³⁶, and not as a *semi-consolidated democracy*. Although the report echoed strongly, and the Government of Serbia sent an official response to the report¹³⁷ on that occasion, the situation in 2021 has not improved. Serbia is not a democracy, and this assessment is (understandably) lagging behind the reality that the citizens of Serbia have been feeling for several years.

134 Information on the state of emergency is reserved only for the Crisis Staff prescribed by the Government Conclusion, on the proposal of the General Secretariat of the Government and withdrawal of this measure, with the Government Conclusion on termination of its validity, also on the proposal of the General Secretariat of the Government; things are similar with the decision to hold press conferences, which are held during one period without the presence of journalists, and questions are asked by e-mail.

135 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

136 Hybrid or mixed regimes are a type of regime that combines democratic and authoritarian elements – meaning that they cannot be grouped either to one or the other group, rather that they exist as a separate type of regime that manages to survive in the “interspace”.

137 <https://pescanik.net/vazno-je-zvati-se-haus/>.

Recently, the Varieties of Democracy institute (V-Dem) from the University of Gothenburg classified Serbia in 2019 as an *electoral autocracy*. That was a significant change compared to 2009, when their report characterized Serbia as a *liberal democracy*¹³⁸.

Equally negative in its assessment is the latest shadow report “State of Democracy in Serbia 2021”¹³⁹ by the Center for Contemporary Politics/EWB¹⁴⁰, which covers the period from October 2020 to September 2021. Relying on the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership, as well as the European Commission’s reports on candidate countries, this report testifies to the situation in five important areas: elections, parliamentary work, governance, civil society and freedom of expression. Already in the introduction, the following is stated: “Since 2017, when the first shadow report of the Center for Contemporary Politics on the state of democracy in Serbia came out, there has been a clear and convincing weakening of democratic institutions, as assessed by both foreign and domestic organizations and experts.”

COOPERATION BETWEEN THE PARTIES OF THE EXTREME RIGHT AND THE GOVERNMENT

According to an earlier analysis by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, “Serbian nationalism, with almost four decades of continuity and a history of violence (wars in the former Yugoslavia), in which several new generations grew up, is an obstacle to creating the resistance to the ultraconservative vision of society”.¹⁴¹

When it comes to the local “pro-European” set of politicians in power, from the moment Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić

138 In this report, Serbia ranked fourth in terms of the degree of autocratization over the past decade, out of over 200 observed countries. The six countries in which V-Dem recorded the highest degree of autocratization are Hungary, Turkey, Poland, Serbia, Brazil and India.

139 <https://centarsavremenepolitike.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Stanje-demokratije-u-Srbiji-2021.pdf>

140 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/>.

141 <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj2016.pdf> pages 26–27.

left the extreme right-wing Serbian Radical Party and the formation of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) until now, the “European path” has been and remains a pragmatic step, not an essential, value-based change in their political action. It can be said that following unscrupulous political pragmatism brought them to power and has kept them there for a whole decade.

There is plenty of evidence for the claim that the Serbian Progressive Party and its exponents have never embraced the values of freedom, justice and equality. This is especially evident when they are under pressure. Let us see how the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Aleksandar Vučić himself received negative reports from the European Commission on Serbia’s progress in European integration in the last two years. At a time when reports (after a long time) pointed to painful issues of Serbian society: the state of parliamentary life, freedom of the media, and the rule of law, there was no well-established “scheme” by which the government submits a checklist of its “achievements” and the EU, turning a blind eye, approves the opening of chapters. The inability of that and such nomenclature to accept assessments with seriousness, without being insulted and without affect displays, and to immediately start working on improving the situation, reflects the true nature of the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader.

Another example is the attitude towards the past, war crimes, genocide committed against Bosniaks in Srebrenica. This attitude is not only “non-European”, but it is an example of the old *dishonesty of the Radicals* that was built into the foundations of this party.

The governing structures, fully conditioned by the activities of the Serbian Progressive Party, have an ambivalent attitude towards key political and development issues. Thus, they declaratively advocate Serbia’s accession to the EU, and yet they make moves contrary to European integration, they use aggressive rhetoric in communication with neighboring countries, revitalizing topics from the wars of the 1990s, do not engage in resolving open issues (such as Belgrade-Priština relations), do not strengthen institutions and do not

encourage professionals in the system to combat anomalies such as corruption, organized crime, growing extremism and violence in society. Moreover, the governing structures are part of each of the listed problems.

Thus, the list of previously recognized factors that affect the strengthening and spread of the extreme right (high levels of corruption, inefficient judiciary, poverty, narrowing of the space for civil society organizations, endangerment of human rights and freedoms) should now also include: loss of lives during the pandemic,¹⁴² an atmosphere of fear and prolonged uncertainties, but also the way in which the governing structures manage the current crisis and its consequences.

Although the analysis titled “Right-wing on the offensive” within the publication of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia “Real limitations of Serbia in choosing its own future”¹⁴³ states that *the extreme right is a kind of pillar that holds the neo-conservative government with the principle of it being the lesser evil*, and also assesses at the same time that Aleksandar Vučić did not establish control over “...the intellectual, authentic nationalist and uncompromising right that does not deviate from anti-European views”.¹⁴⁴ If this assessment could stand in 2016, and a little later, after the Serbian Radical Party and the Democratic Party of Serbia returned to the Parliament, and Dveri became a parliamentary party, that assessment would have to be reconsidered, both in the context of the election process and its 2020 results, as well as other circumstances that occurred in the post-election period. All three right-wing parties have since been without members of the Serbian Parliament (SRS and DSS

142 According to official statistical data from the portal <https://covid19.rs/> at the time of writing of this report (December 2021) the number of deaths from the infection has approached 12,700, while alternative sources, such as BIRN or United Against COVID, have reported that the number of deceased persons in Serbia are two or three times higher.

143 “Desnica u ofanzivi” in “Realna ograničenja Srbije u izboru sopstvene budućnosti” <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj2016.pdf>.

144 Ibid., pages 30–31.

have fallen below the electoral threshold, while Dveri boycotted the elections), making their work more difficult and political influence even weaker.

These parties, pressed by the difficulties posed by their extra-parliamentary status, became more cooperative in 2021, which is reflected, among other things, in continuous participation in inter-party dialogue to improve electoral conditions without foreign mediators, as well as in establishing bodies and mechanisms provided for in the agreement they signed (seats on the Republic Election Commission, the temporary supervisory body for the media, etc.). Although organizations specializing in election control, such as CRTA, emphasize that this is a “limited response to burning issues noted by domestic and foreign observers”¹⁴⁵ and that the envisaged measures coincide with 8 of the 29 recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission, enacted after the 2020 parliamentary elections, right-wing parties continue to take part in the implementation of such measures. In addition, the leaders of the aforementioned parties take part in events in which the government demonstrates “national unity”, especially with regard to policies regarding the Republika Srpska and Kosovo. Furthermore, the increasingly frequent appearances in the government-controlled national media are an indicator, if not of the new/old ideological rapprochement between the Serbian right and the Serbian Progressive Party, then at least of short-term “deals” made ahead of the parliamentary elections set for April 2022. In that way, the SNS presents itself as “flexible” and open to improving the conditions that should lead to a severely disrupted multiparty system in the Parliament, and the right is maintained in the political space and occupies starting positions before the 2021 elections. Although this relationship can be considered a *win-win combination* for the SNS and the right, in the medium and long term it represents a threat to the emancipation and Europeanization of Serbian society.

145 <https://crt.rs/analiza-predlozi-medjustranackog-dijaloga-uz-posredstvo-ep-nece-obebediti-uslove-za-postene-i-slobodne-izbore/>.

In that manner, the long-standing constant is the “promotion” of the Serbian Radical Party and its leader Vojislav Šešelj as a “greater evil” that could happen if SNS policy is not supported. The space that the SRS leader and person convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia gets in the regime-controlled media (almost daily appearances on TV Pink and TV Happy) is disproportionate to his party’s position in politics.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, it stands in stark contrast to the standards that the state should apply in order to prevent his public action, which has not happened since the pronouncement of the final verdict of the Hague Tribunal until now (which is the subject of constant debate and condemnation in the democratic part of the public)¹⁴⁷. Namely, Šešelj’s public and media appearances are still characterized by: presenting untruths and slander, threats, belittlement based on national, ethnic and religious grounds, as well as hate speech, and misogyny. As a rule, all this is addressed to political opponents, both from the ranks of European-oriented opposition parties and people from academic community, media representatives, activists of NGOs, and even representatives of public and political life of neighboring countries. In the last in a series of media appearances, on the morning program of TV Happy, he made highly insulting comments aimed at the Montenegrin people and the member of the Parliament of Montenegro, Draginja Vuksanović Stanković¹⁴⁸.

NEW WAYS OF OPERATION OF EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS

If we can talk with certain barriers about the establishment of control over right-wing parties, when it comes to the influence of the ruling structures on the largest part of the extreme right-wing scene

146 In the elections held in June 2020, the Serbian Radical Party did not pass the 3% threshold and today has no representatives in the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia.

147 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-haski-tribunal-vojislav-seselj/29161258.html>.

148 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Qtb7nSPMiE&t=151s>.

in Serbia, there is no room for dilemma. Although the promotion and use of extreme right-wing violence is declaratively condemned, on a practical level it is justified, tolerated, and increasingly supported. With the tacit consent of the state and its institutions, the potential for violence has been maintained on the right since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, as a way of “resolving” social crises and settling scores with political opponents and “disobedient citizens”.

In the last decade, the activities of the far right have moved to the *online* space where they freely spread their ideas, recruit sympathizers and members, while their practical activities are realized through newly registered citizens’ associations, as well as newly established political parties and movements. In that way, their activities are legalized and “normalized”. Examples are especially noteworthy since 2019 in the activities of the Serbian Right and its leader and candidate for President of Serbia 2022, Miša Vacić, who emerged from the banned organization Serbian People’s Movement 1389, Serbian Party Oathkeepers, formed from the Serbian Movement Oathkeepers, the Leviathan Movement, whose leaders and members presented themselves as animal protectors “gentle towards the helpless, rough towards those who abuse the weak”, and then appeared as participants in attacks on migrants, refugees, Roma, peace activists, but also ran in the June 2020 elections.

Also, from the parts of the mentioned ones, but also from new right-wing organizations, the so-called People’s Patrols were formed and they became known during 2020 and 2021 for spreading anti-immigrant sentiment and attacks, both against migrants and against the people who help them, but also against civic and peace activists.

In the digital space, they spread their ideas through the Facebook group “Stop cenzuri” (“Stop Censorship”)¹⁴⁹, which, according to BIRN research¹⁵⁰, gathers more than 320,000 members. The group was launched in March 2020 under the name “Pokret STOP naselja-

149 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/512775282720731>.

150 <https://birn.rs/mrznja-lazi-i-patrole-srpska-antimigrantska-brigada-se-igravatom/>.

vanju migranata” (“STOP Migration Settlement Movement”), as a forum for commenting on texts on *how migrants and refugees rape, kill and rob*, and with the message “If you do not want migrants in Serbia, invite your friends to the group”. During the coronavirus pandemic, the group changed its name and switched to an “anti-vaccine” narrative, with continuous spread of dissatisfaction with isolation measures, the obligation to wear protective masks, and vaccinations. The content they publish is presented as *what the governments and the media have decided to hide*, and in fact these are fake news that can be exposed by the simplest checks. Although BIRN’s research primarily reveals what is happening behind the scenes of the Facebook group that is testing the limits of free expression on that platform, it also provides a lot of data on the impact that such and similar groups have on taking dangerous actions in the *offline* environment.

A new phenomenon in the activities of the extreme right is the inclusion of members of the growing anti-vaccination movement and conspiracy theorists in political life. For now, the most famous movement is I Live for Serbia,¹⁵¹ led by Dr. Jovana Stojković. According to its Program, the movement *brings together those citizens of Serbia who accept, respect and honor the experiences of our ancestors, believing at the same time that patriotism, commitment and love for the country we live in are the basis for moral, economic, health, educational, cultural and security renewal of Serbia.*¹⁵² The movement participated in the elections on the list “Leviathan Movement – I live for Serbia”. During the election campaign, the movement’s leader Jovana Stojković appeared in public with members of Leviathan, but also with Goran Davidović Führer, leader of the banned neo-Nazi organization National Alignment, who became visible in public life again, following his acquittal by the Court of Appeal for the attack on the participants of the anti-fascist walk “Stop Fascism” (from 2007)¹⁵³. Although the list “Leviathan Movement – I live for Serbia” remained far below the

151 <https://zivimzasrbiju.com/>.

152 <https://zivimzasrbiju.com/program-pokreta/>.

153 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29870458.html>.

threshold in the parliamentary elections, winning 0.7% of votes (just over 22,000),¹⁵⁴ the movement continued to operate, and in 2021 it joined the *Declaration of Sovereignists*,¹⁵⁵ together with the Enough is Enough Movement, Healthy Serbia and Progressive Club.

A new phenomenon is also the network of parapolice organizations, among which the DBA¹⁵⁶ and the Orthodox Knights Templar¹⁵⁷ are the most visible to the public. A mapping conducted by BIRN in 2021¹⁵⁸ found that all organizations of this type were named in order to sound like influential supranational institutions: International Police Organization – IPO, World Police Counter-Terrorism Organization – CTO, European Police Organization – EPO, Global Police Association – GPA, while the badges that they put in the foreground are reminiscent of those used by police and security agencies. The research showed that the DBA is a pioneer, but just one in a network of interconnected organizations in the civil security sector, affiliated with the Serbian Progressive Party.

Experts who spoke to BIRN believe that these organizations are a simulation of civil society in the security sector and serve as an example of “constructive opposition”. At the same time, they are places for recruiting young people who want to belong to the “brotherhood”, and who are fascinated by badges and nationalist ideas. Predrag Petrović, program director of the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, said: “They are definitely dangerous and were formed with intent. It is clear that they were created from one center. The fact that they resemble official security institutions with their badges, whether the BIA or the police, is tolerated by the state. They have created that

154 <https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/tekst/sr/9386/ukupni-rezultati-izbora-zanarodne-poslanike-narodne-skupstine-2020-godine.php>.

155 <https://dostajebilo.rs/blog/2020/06/14/deklaracija-suverenista/>.

156 <https://www.centarzabezbednost.org/>.

157 <https://www.vitezovitemplari.com/>.

158 <https://birn.rs/mreza-parapolicijskih-organizacija-pravoslavni-templari-i-veze-sa-sns-om/?fbclid=IwAR1hMFF8P3e8YdBjsCgiRlzlzGBXsRnhkCwoNBqOvyb18eGs5rnUVHMgYSY>.

parallel world of civil society and parapolice organizations – and they are operating in both fields.”¹⁵⁹

In reality, these organizations operate against the background of extreme right-wing ideologies, expressing anti-immigrant, xenophobic and racist views, and their members are also among the People’s Patrols and extreme right-wing organizations and groups known for anti-immigrant actions.

ATTACKS BY EXTREME RIGHT-WING ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS ON MIGRANTS

A car incursion into the Center for the Accommodation of Migrants in the barracks in Obrenovac was recorded on 6 May, 2020. Filip Radovanović, a 20-year-old member of the “Leviathan” movement, was behind the wheel of the car, shouting “I don’t want my girlfriend to be attacked by migrants” and “I don’t want a Muslim state”. He broadcast all this on his profile on the social network Facebook. Fortunately, no one was injured during the intrusion, and the young man was quickly stopped. After the arrest, the president of the Leviathan movement, Pavle Bihali, issued a statement confirming that the attacker was a member of the Leviathan and accepted responsibility for this event, saying: “Although he did not wear the movement’s colors and did this as a lone wolf, I will not distance myself, that is how my boys are, temperamental and upstanding.”¹⁶⁰

Radovanović was detained for 30 days for this crime, after which he admitted guilt and made a settlement with the Prosecutor’s Office. He was sentenced to eight months in prison.¹⁶¹ The Commissariat for Refugees reacted to the incident, saying that it was a consequence of a negative campaign against migrants on social networks: “This incident warns that it is high time to stop verbal and now phys-

159 Ibid.

160 <https://www.masina.rs/clan-levijatana-automobilom-upao-u-migrantski-prihvatni-centar-u-obrenovcu/>.

161 [https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/hronika/3198199-osudjen-filip-koji-je-autom-upao-u-prihvatni-centar-za-migrante-poznato-koliko-ce-bitu-zatvoru](https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/hronika/3198199-osudjen-filip-koji-je-autom-upao-u-prihvatni-centar-za-migrante-poznato-koliko-ce-biti-u-zatvoru).

ical attacks on migrants, as well as to stop the hysterical campaign against them on social networks that led to this incident.”¹⁶²

This event provoked a reaction. Organized by Leviathan, a protest “Stop illegal migrations” was held on 13 May, in support of Filip Radovanović. The event was broadcast on social networks, and among the protesters was the leader of the Leviathan movement Pavle Bihali and the leader of the anti-vaccination movement in Serbia, Jovana Stojković, who addressed the gathered with the words “Xenophobia means nothing and it is a parapsychiatric term to explain the fear of the unknown”.¹⁶³

In October 2021, migrants were again attacked by extremist groups. One of them, the People’s Patrol¹⁶⁴, which operates under the slogan “Stop settling migrants!”, as an unregistered ultra-right group and which has more than 67,000 followers on Facebook, put up posters in Sombor with photographs and names of citizens who rent accommodation to migrants. Those photos were accompanied by the message: “Sombor citizens, these are your neighbors who are illegally renting accommodation to migrants. For their own profit, they participate in accumulating them in your city”; they were then also shared on social networks.¹⁶⁵ Citizens, whose faces and names ended up on posters, are called domestic traitors and “migrants with non-Serbian surnames”.

The Sombor police reacted after five citizens whose photos were on the posters of the People’s Patrol filed a report. The public was informed about the undertaken activities and the report that the police submitted to the Public Prosecutor’s Office.¹⁶⁶

162 <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/18330/>.

163 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/sramni-protest-u-obnovcu-ultradesnicari-daju-podrsku-clanu-levijatana-koji-je-upao/pzq881t>

164 <https://www.facebook.com/narodnapatrola>

165 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2021/10/17/ekstremisti-i-antimigranti-u-sluzbi-vlasti-srbije>

166 <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/20587/mup-reagovao-na-protest-narodne-patrole-u-somboru-prijavu-podnelo-pet-osoba-pomenutih-na-plakatima/vest>

Somewhat earlier, at the end of September 2021, the People's Patrol shared a video on social networks showing a citizen expelling a group of migrants from an intercity bus, with threats and insults: "Out, out, out. Come on, *raus*, get out! Outside, you scum!" The migrants were confused, they did not understand what was happening to them and why, and he then continued with the threats: "M70 and a bullet to the head. You all need to be killed. You will only learn Serbian when I shoot you in that black head of yours". The migrants left the bus, and for this "action", the perpetrator received the support of the bus driver.

An overview of the activities of the People's Patrol on social networks shows that they continuously publish where migrants are accommodated in other cities, and their activists in those places intercept smaller groups of migrants and brag with that on social networks. As the "actions" of the Patrol are organized away from the public eye, and the police usually do not react, one can only guess how many migrants have been victims of their violence. In addition, the People's Patrol permanently spreads misinformation about migrants and organizes anti-migrant rallies in cities where migrants are staying.

It was also noted that members of the Leviathan conduct patrols around Belgrade equipped with batons and Staffordshire terriers and intercept migrants. The police did not react even when the recordings of such "actions" were published on social networks (and then in the media), with the text "We discovered two new places where the Polar Bears from Pakistan are located. Every night we go in two shifts around Belgrade, 22–01 and from 01–05, and we do not use force, but we instruct them to return to their centers, where they belong, and not on the streets of our White City. Leviathan National Defense"¹⁶⁷.

167 <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/video-levijatan-patrolira-beogradom-i-maltretira-migrante/>.

ATTACKS BY FAR-RIGHT ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS ON ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS AND JOURNALISTS

During 2020 and 2021, a number of incidents were recorded, which were caused by extreme right-wing organizations and groups at cultural and public events.

The President of the Serbian Right, Miša Vacić, entered the exhibition “Kapija – even when it hurts, the truth is the cure” at the Center for Cultural Decontamination (9 October, 2020). On that occasion, he stole the microphone from the organizers, addressed the media and stated the alleged claims of court experts from Israel, France and the Czech Republic “that no shelling took place in Tuzla on 25 May, 1995, but that explosives were planted on the square by terrorists”. The media reported that Vacić came to the event accompanied by several politically like-minded individuals who, despite the opposition of the organizers, tried to record everything that happened at the Center for Cultural Decontamination¹⁶⁸.

A few days later, on October 13, 2020, a group of masked young men burst into the exhibition of comic drawings by a group of authors at the Stara kapetanija (Old Captaincy) gallery in Zemun. The attackers threw tear gas into the gallery space, smashed the exhibition and tore up the art exhibits. The attack was preceded by death threats against the authors of the drawings. One of them, Goran Rajšić, said after the exhibition was broken up: “This is a basic misunderstanding of dark humor that was taken out of context and presented as Satanism, anti-Serbism. It is unbelievable that we had more freedom in the 1990s when lawlessness reigned. It is obvious that this attack was organized, but we have no evidence for that. The attack came when hooligans received support on social media to spread fear and nationalism. It is ironic that someone supported violence against the authors because of some alleged violence that they were propagating.” He reminded everyone that the authors reported the death

168 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/misa-vacic-upao-na-izlozbu-kapija-i-kad-boli-istina-je-lijek-u-czkd-video/>.

threats they received in the previous days to the police, but that they did not receive any protection.¹⁶⁹

After the attack on the exhibition, the Ministry of Culture and Information issued a statement, equating artists and vandals in the text. The statement said that “the affirmation of disgusting and immoral contents, wrapped in a cloak of alleged creative activity, rightly provokes negative reactions from the majority of the public”, and that “the exhibition with such horrifying individual works should not have been opened”.¹⁷⁰ The Association Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia, associations of artists, NGOs and eminent personalities reacted, defending artists and their work, and condemning the statement of the Ministry and the speeches of the then outgoing Minister of Culture and his associates, demanding that “when choosing the new Minister of Culture, and while forming the new cabinet of the Minister in the new composition of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, the competence of the candidates and their expertise in the field of culture must be taken into account”¹⁷¹.

Several days later, the police identified and arrested a group of young men who were reasonably suspected of destroying the exhibition in the Stara kapetanija gallery¹⁷². Most of those detained were minors, about 15 years old. Two adult attackers, M.Ž. (35) and A.D. (19), entered into a plea agreement with the prosecution and were sentenced to three months in prison, with a probation period of one year¹⁷³.

169 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/nasilje-na-izlozbi-u-zemunu-nastavak-serije-nesankcionisanih-ekstremistickih-ispada/>.

170 <https://www.blic.rs/kultura/skandalozno-saopstenje-ministarstva-kulture-povodom-upada-na-izlozbu-za-njih-su/7n6j964>.

171 <https://nezavisnakultura.net/2020/10/17/saopstenje-povodom-reakcije-ministarstva-kulture-i-informisanja/>.

172 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/n1-policija-uhapsila-sestoro-osumnjicjenih-za-upad-na-izlozbu-stripa-u-zemunu/>.

173 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/huligani-koji-su-upali-na-izlozbu-u-u-zemunu-bacili-suzavac-i-pocepali-radove/bc3n8s1>.

The author and actors of the play “Srebrenica. When We, the Killed, Rise Up”, directed by Zlatko Paković, and produced by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, experienced a series of attacks after the premiere on 24 September, 2020, at the Center for Cultural Decontamination. The public and media lynching experienced by the director and author of the play, Zlatko Paković, as well as the acting ensemble, once again pointed out the high degree of threat to the freedom of creation. Insults and threats addressed to the actors first appeared on social networks. Various qualifications were used for the author and the cast: “foreign mercenaries”, “enemies of the Serbian people”¹⁷⁴, “haters of the Serbian Orthodox Church”¹⁷⁵ or “ordinary scum”.¹⁷⁶ In many comments, they were called “sold out souls”, “degenerates” and “traitors”.¹⁷⁷

The actor Ivan Jevtović received, relatively speaking, the most insults, attacks and threats. Insults, attacks and threats were below every post on Jevtović’s Instagram profile, which forced the actor to take the “radical” step of banning commentaries. The Helsinki Committee informed the police about these and other threats. There was no reaction¹⁷⁸.

Threats and insults against the play’s authors, actors and the Helsinki Committee were transferred from social networks to regime-controlled media. The author and director of the play, Zlatko Paković, was accused in the pro-government media of directing

174 https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=365647261287184&id=100035257387912&refsrc=https%3A%2F%2Fm.fac.ebook.com%2Flogin%2Fdevice-based%2Fpassword%2F&_rdr.

175 https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=365647261287184&id=100035257387912#=_

176 <https://mobile.twitter.com/AjteMa/status/1311492192171679744>.

177 https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=365647261287184&id=100035257387912#=_

178 A person who uses a profile called *srb.diego* on Instagram, wrote a clear threat addressed to the actor. He wrote that Belgrade was a small city and that they were bound to meet somewhere someday. A few days later, another similar comment arrived from the same profile.

an “anti-Serbian pamphlet”¹⁷⁹ in Belgrade. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia was described as “a lobbying organization that serves to promote Croat, Albanian and Bosniak interests, and to conduct a smear campaign against Serbs”.¹⁸⁰ On the Prismotra (Surveillance) web portal, which labelled public figures and critics of political and social life in Serbia as enemies of the state or spies working in the interests of another country or countries,¹⁸¹ Zlatko Paković was called a “morbid artist”,¹⁸² it was written that actor Vahid Džanković had been conducting anti-Serbian propaganda for years, and that Ivan Jevtović was “a failed actor” who “accepted the role for money”. Insults were also directed at actors Boris Milivojević and opera singer Katarina Jovanović.

During that period, two criminal charges were also filed. One was initiated by the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS) for desecrating the state flag during the play, according to the movement’s website.¹⁸³ The second charge was submitted by the delegation of the Serbian Right, led by President Miša Vacić. They filed a criminal complaint with the First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade against self-chauvinists, the director and actors of the shameful play “When We, the Killed, Rise Up”, because they “committed the crime of *Violating the Reputation of Serbia* by trampling on the flag of the Republic of Serbia, on which were written the names of those for whom they claim to have perished.”¹⁸⁴

Radio host and activist of the Antifascist Front “23 October” Daško Milinović was physically attacked on 16 April, 2021, near the

179 Srpski telegraf, 2 October, 2020.

180 Ibid.

181 The account of the Prismotra portal was suspended at the end of 2020 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/prismotra-suspenzija-internet-portal/5718639.html>.

182 <https://prismotra.net/2020/09/28/ovi-glumci-rade-protiv-drzave/> (**Nalog je suspendovan**).

183 <http://poks.rs/2020/10/07/krivicne-prijave-zbog-skrnavljenja-srpske-zastave-u-predstavi/>.

184 <https://embargo.rs/desnicari-podneli-krivicnu-prijavu-zbog-gazenja-zastave-srbije-u-sramnoj-predstavi-foto/>.

building where he lives. During the show “Alarm with Daško and Mlađa”, on the same day, Milinović explained that the attack took place near the elementary school “Vasa Stajić”, that he was first sprayed with tear gas and that two young men attacked him with a metal rod: “I was attacked by pathetic people, two young untrained fascists who were waiting for me. One of them sprayed me with tear gas, I would recommend them to buy better tear gas next time. I’m bleeding from my arm, the bar they used was not of poor quality.”¹⁸⁵ He stated that he had noticed earlier that the same two men were waiting for him, adding that he could recognize them. Milinović gave a statement to the prosecutor, and the police acted quickly and soon identified and arrested the attackers. The Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office in Novi Sad announced on 18 April that it was conducting proceedings against three people suspected of attacking Milinović, including two attackers and one person suspected of incitement.

The attack on Daško Milinović provoked a strong reaction from the public, journalists’ associations in the country and across the region, antifa activists and several political parties. Unlike earlier similar situations, the reaction and condemnation of the attack came from officials as well.¹⁸⁶

The attack on Milinović even had a court epilogue at the beginning of December 2021. The primary suspect in the attack was sentenced to one year and two months in prison, the second accused to ten months in prison, and the one who incited them to attack, to one year and four months.¹⁸⁷

More attacks of the extreme right during 2021 were experienced by activists of Women in Black (ŽuC). On the night between 24 and 25 October, unknown perpetrators spray-painted “whores in

185 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/napadnut-radijski-voditelj-dasko-milinovic-u-novom-sadu/>.

186 *Ibid.*

187 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/zamenik-tuzioca-napadaci-na-daska-milinovica-osudjeni-na-zatvorske-kazne/>.

black”, “Ratko Mladić” and five “Only Unity Saves the Serbs” symbols in black spray on the front door of the ŽuC premises in Belgrade.

A statement issued by the organization regarding the attack said: “During 30 years of work, Women in Black have been exposed to both verbal and physical attacks. The Women in Black activists, as well as the Women in Black premises, were often the target of physical attacks by various fascist groups and individuals, which always ended with impunity. These attacks, which were mostly backed by so-called non-state actors, who have always been and continue to be under the control of parts of the non-disbanded secret services, which remained as the legacy of Milošević’s criminal regime, have always taken place with the tacit consent of the ruling political establishment.”

Civil society organizations have called on institutions to identify and prosecute the perpetrators, but also to publicly condemn the perpetrators of this and other similar attacks.¹⁸⁸

The reactions of the institutions were absent, and similar attacks on the premises of ŽuC were repeated two more times by the end of 2021. On that occasion, ŽuC announced: “This attack is a continuation of an organized, systematic, continuous campaign of intimidation, calls for lynching and campaign against Women in Black.” It was emphasized that this was not an incident but a policy backed by the state, as nothing had been done to find the perpetrators of the previous attacks.¹⁸⁹

A series of incidents caused by far-right organizations and groups in Belgrade continued in November 2021, after the Youth Initiative for Human Rights scheduled a rally for 9 November, the International Day Against Fascism and Antisemitism, to remove graffiti depicting the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić on one of the

188 https://www.yihr.rs/bhs/zajednicko-saopstenje-organizacija-civilnog-drustva-u-srbiji-solidarnom-podrskom-protiv-napadana-zene-u-crnom/?fbclid=IwAR2onVjyureSBt_HOTjE1zjAhH-ztD3pmx8O2ZRCU7u3LiFUPNN0j3bp3Zl.

189 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/grafiti-mrznje-prostorije-zene-u-crnom-ratko-mladic/31584979.html>.

facades in Njegoševa Street. However, the event was canceled and the Ministry of Internal Affairs banned public gatherings.

Regarding the decision to ban the rally, Minister of Police Aleksandar Vulin said: “Neither those who would like to paint over the mural of General Mladić, nor those who would like to keep it will get permission to gather. To invite NGOs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Women in Black and something that was announced as “Kosovo”, and to come to Belgrade to paint the facades is hypocritical, vile and driven by evil intent.”

From the early morning of 9 November, the neighborhood and the building on which the mural was painted were secured by the police. Peace activists Aida Ćorović and Jelena Jaćimović threw a few eggs on the facade with Mladić’s face on the same day, around 4 p.m., in protest of the ban on gatherings. The video, which was broadcast on social networks in *real time*, clearly shows the activists being approached by a group of a dozen non-uniformed young men – Aida being squeezed and dragged, Jelena’s hands being twisted. Both were taken to the police station after the intervention, where they were detained until the evening hours. Aida Ćorović said about the men who attacked them: “The two young men who jumped on me are not police officers, they looked at me with undisguised hatred, Mladić is a symbol to them, if they could, they would have killed me. I asked them to identify themselves, it can be heard on the recordings, and they just put hats on their heads...”¹⁹⁰

The inappropriate use of force and the arrest of peace activists caused the mobilization of non-governmental organizations, and then the spontaneous gathering of activists and citizens of Belgrade. The rally and the protest march were secured by units for breaking up demonstrations. That evening, it was not possible to approach the building with the mural, and the police cordon separated civic activists and journalist teams from members of right-wing organizations who appeared at the same place at the very end of the protest, praised

¹⁹⁰ <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/corovic-gledali-me-sa-neskrivenom-mrznjom-vise-se-boje-oni-mene-nego-ja-njih/>.

Ratko Mladić and sent hate messages. The two groups did not come into contact, and the protest ended with the message “The mural must fall!”

The next morning, 10 December, lime was thrown across the mural. The action was carried out by the activist of the Social Democratic Party of Serbia, Đorđo Žujović, and he explained his act with the words: “I have no understanding for those who defend this mural and those who are trying today to place Ratko Mladić as a symbol of value and something good. Evil is evil and it should be said that it is evil...”¹⁹¹

In the afternoon of the same day, however, a group of unknown young men cleaned the mural unhindered, and the leader of the Serbian Right Miša Vacic, who appeared on the scene, stated that *murals with Mladić's face would adorn many walls throughout Serbia and that Mladić deserved a monument and that the streets should be named after him, not just a mural.*¹⁹²

Answering journalists' questions, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said that the police had protected citizens from mutual conflict: “If the police had not done that, today you would have said why the police did not protect everyone when everyone knew that both groups would appear in front of that mural and that there would be a physical showdown.” He asked why those who intended to paint over the mural on 9 November, the International Day Against Fascism and Antisemitism, did not do so a day earlier or a day later: “Why did you make a 'show' out of this wanting to harm Serbia?”¹⁹³

In the meantime, nine members of the European Parliament in a joint statement condemned the government in Serbia and President Aleksandar Vučić, stating that it is *unacceptable for the police to guard a mural of a convicted war criminal in the country that is a*

191 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/11/10/unisten-mural-posvecen-ratku-mladicu-u-beogradu>.

192 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/misa-vacic-o-muralu-ratku-mladicu/>.

193 <https://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-srbija/154870-vucic-o-uklanjanju-murala-neko-hteo-da-napravi-cirkus-kako-bi-naneo-stetu-srbiji>.

candidate for EU membership. The statement points out states that murals with the image of Ratko Mladić and people similar to him are located throughout Serbia.¹⁹⁴ Regarding the incident and the arrest of the activists who threw items at the mural, the Embassy of the United States of America in Serbia assessed: “Ratko Mladić should not be the face that Belgrade shows to the world.”¹⁹⁵

A few days later, on 13 November, in Belgrade, on Cvetni trg (Flower Square), another protest rally was organized demanding that the authorities withdraw misdemeanor charges against activists Aida Ćorović and Jelena Jaćimović, and remove the mural with the image of a convicted war criminal from the wall of the building in Njegoševa Street.

On that day, a police cordon was formed in the immediate vicinity of the place where the protest was scheduled, which separated young men in black T-shirts led by Pavle Bihali from the Leviathan Movement and citizens gathered at the invitation of the Koraci (Steps) Association, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights and other NGOs. At the same time, the police also secured the site in Njegoševa Street next to the Third Belgrade Gymnasium (not far from Cvetni trg), with another group of about a hundred members of right-wing organizations.

Activists Aida Ćorović and Jelena Jaćimović, Ivan Đurić, Branjan Brković, Rade Radovanović and Stevan Filipović spoke at the gathering.¹⁹⁶ An invitation to the gathering for a better society was sent: “We call on organizations and free-thinking citizens to unite in the fight for a better society: one that is ready to face the facts of our difficult war past, a society that will have a strong voice against fascism, war and any form of violence. A society that will put freedom

194 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/poslanici-ep-osudili-vlast-u-srbiji-zbog-murala-ratka-mladica/>.

195 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ambasada-sad-ratko-mladic-ne-treba-dabude-lice-koje-beograd-pokazuje-svetu/>.

196 <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/uzivo-protest-na-cvetnom-trgu-policija-razdvaja-pripadnike-pavla-bihalija/>.

and human rights on the highest pedestal and protect them without compromise.”

Although there was tension between the participants and the right-wing group during the protest, the police managed to prevent mutual contact and maintain order. After the rally, however, Women in Black activists were attacked, and a banner with the message “We will never forget the Srebrenica genocide” was stolen from them and set on fire.¹⁹⁷ On the same evening, right-wing groups published a video on social networks showing the banner burning.

This, as well as other requests sent from different sides, did not lead to the permanent removal of the face of Ratko Mladić from the facade in Njegoševa Street in Belgrade. The complete repainting of the facade with Mladić’s face, organized by the municipality of Vračar, also did not last. Namely, from 9 November, when the mural was pelted with eggs, until the time that this text was completed, right-wing groups are organizing sentries at the building in Njegoševa Street (mostly underage young men), and the mural quickly returns to its “original state” after each removal attempt.¹⁹⁸

This situation shows that the authorities are not ready to react and prevent right-wing groups from “ruling over” public spaces. That this is so is evidenced by the fact that after 9 November, graffiti with the image of Mladić were drawn on the facades of several other cities. In Novi Sad, in the settlement of Liman, stickers with the inscription “Ratko Mladić Boulevard” appeared, pasted over boards with authentic street names, while graffiti in support of Mladić were removed at several locations in Novi Sad.¹⁹⁹

197 <https://x.facebook.com/womeninblackserbia/photos/a.724033717675748/4569211333157948/?type=3&source=57>.

198 <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/28354/mural-ratku-mladicu-bio-prekrecen-ali-je-nekoliko-mladica-skinulo-svezu-farbu/vest>.

199 <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/28461/poplava-grafita-posvecenih-ratku-mladicu-sukob-koji-se-preselio-na-fasade-sirom-srbije/vest>.

The events of 25 November in Belgrade should be added to all of these, when activists of non-governmental organizations gathered in front of the Dom Omladine (Youth Center) to protest against the graffiti “Ratko Mladić, Serbian hero”, which stood on the facade of that institution. The graffiti was removed while the action was secured by a police cordon. Journalist teams were denied access on that occasion, and the police arrested several right-wingers who opposed the removal of graffiti. One of them, who was later determined to be a member of the Leviathan movement, physically attacked Danas journalist Snežana Čongradin.²⁰⁰ The graffiti with the message “Ratko Mladić, Serbian hero” was “fixed” on the same day.²⁰¹

SUPPORT FOR THE WORK OF THE EXTREME RIGHT

That the government and institutions in Serbia show tolerance and “sympathy” for the actions of the extreme right was shown in the case of the *petition for the pardon of Zvezdan Jovanović*, convicted murderer of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, backed by the “Captain Dragan” Foundation, founded by war criminal and former leader of the paramilitary formation “Knindže” Dragan Vasiljković.

Vasiljković has been present in public since March 2020, when he returned to Serbia after serving a prison sentence in Croatia (for torturing, abusing and killing prisoners in Knin and Glina in 1991) and being expelled. Since then, he has been present in public life and has received significant attention by the media under the control of the government (such as Happy and Pink television channels). In 2021, the “Captain Dragan” Foundation received the usage rights for business premises in the center of Subotica, with the explanation of the City Administration “that all conditions have been met for that”.

200 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/desnicar-udario-novinarku-danasa-snezanu-congradin-na-protestu-kod-doma-omladine/>.

201 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/grafit-posvecen-mladicu-na-fasadi-doma-omladine-popravljen/>.

After Vasiljković's media announcements, in September 2021, the Foundation launched a campaign of collecting signatures in support of the pardon of Zvezdan Jovanović, organizing stands in Belgrade and other major cities in Serbia. Despite the reactions in the public and the requests that came from opposition parties to ban the Petition and the work of the Foundation, the government remained silent, and the institutions did not react.

During those days, a spokesman for the US Embassy in Belgrade told DW that "it is difficult to understand why a convicted war criminal has a public space in which he promotes the release of the man convicted for the assassination of Serbia's first democratically elected prime minister."²⁰²

The editor of the weekly *Vreme* (Time), Filip Švarn, called the Captain Dragan Foundation "the semi-paramilitary wing of the Serbian Progressive Party" in a statement for TV N1, emphasizing that Aleksandar Vučić uses the well-known matrix practiced by Serbian President Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s: *if it weren't for me, who knows what would be happening in Serbia!* pointing out the regularity that "practically every election year or six months before the elections, ultranationalist parties begin to appear, which, for example, demand the release of Zvezdan Jovanović or something similar, and then the SNS actually uses it to disperse as many votes at the elections as possible, so that they could profit from it, thanks to that system."²⁰³

The television appearances of the director and president of the Institute for National Strategy, Dragoslav Bokan²⁰⁴, a former member of the notorious White Eagles paramilitary unit²⁰⁵, also testify to the fact that members of the extreme right operate unhindered in public space. At the end of November 2021, he made accusations

202 <https://www.dw.com/sr/peticija-kapetana-dragana-uz-pre%C4%87utnu-podr%C5%A1ku-vlasti/a-59534199>.

203 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/peticija-za-oslobadjanje-ubice-djindjica-skandal-uz-precutni-blagoslov-vlasti/>.

204 <https://www.istinomer.rs/akter/dragoslav-bokan/>.

205 https://sh.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beli_orlovi.

and insulted the nationality of opposition politician Marinika Tepić on Pink TV, saying, among other things: “Marinika Tepić is a member of a national minority that hates Serbia and the Serbian people, who joined Čanak at his anti-Serbian organization when she was a young girl and studying what? Romanian language! From a Romanian family! Romanian mom, Romanian dad, worked in a Romanian organization, and she is our enemy! She is a national enemy, not just ideological and political enemy.”²⁰⁶

The Embassy of the Republic of Romania, the National Council of Romania and the Coordination of National Councils reacted to this and similar Bokan’s appearances, as did the institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, the Provincial Secretariat for National Minorities, opposition political parties, civil society organizations, women’s networks and many individuals, demanding an urgent response from the Prosecutor’s Office, but also other institutions competent in this case, such as the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media.

Although criminal charges²⁰⁷ were filed against Bokan for hate speech, it was not known until the submission of this text whether the Prosecutor’s Office acted upon the charges, nor whether the Pink TV program was the subject of analysis by the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media.

206 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIGlaWJqI3g>.

207 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/romska-partija-prijavila-tuzilastvu-dragoslava-bokana/>

CONCLUSIONS

During 2020 and 2021, the activities of the extreme right in Serbia were characterized by:

- The approach of right-wing parties – the Democratic Party of Serbia and the Serbian Movement Dveri – closer to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.
- Strong activity of the extreme right on social networks, with the aim of gaining supporters and new activists.
- Creation of a network of interconnected parapolic organizations in the civil security sector, affiliated with the Serbian Progressive Party.
- Formation of new, paramilitary groups, which direct violent actions against migrants, refugees and other minority groups.
- Coordinated verbal and frequent physical attacks by extreme right-wingers on civil society organizations, their activists, artists and intellectuals, as well as on independent media and journalists.
- There is no institutional response (by the police, the public prosecutor's office and the courts) to the described phenomena and violent right-wing extremism. The ruling structures, the representatives of the executive and the legislature, are more and more openly advocating the ideas of the extreme right, thus making them a legitimate and legal part of the mainstream political space.

MEDIA: “PATRIOTISM” BACK IN STYLE (AGAIN)

Domestic media have ceased long ago to treat hate speech, inciting inter-ethnic prejudice and incendiary reporting on war crimes as burning issues. Moreover, they are treated as a chronic condition that is closely related to state policy. During 2021, we could say that the condition has, metaphorically speaking, metastasized: on one hand, the government no longer hides its intolerance towards neighbors and members of minority ethnic groups; on the other hand, the pro-regime media not only nurture this intolerance, but also uses it extensively in campaigns to persecute opposition – or criticism-oriented public figures.

The phrase “domestic traitor” was defined during the 1990s, therefore, in the context of anti-Serbian sentiment, every word, every gesture, even every branch of one’s family tree was scrutinized. The terms “Ustashe” and “Shiptar” were used to label political opponents, and even a new term was created – supporters of Milo Đukanović, the President of Montenegro, and generally of Montenegrin national independence were called “Milogorci” (Milonegrins). The weirdness of new trends and a peculiar verbal schizophrenia – where historical terms are misinterpreted and logical reasoning is bypassed – are perhaps best depicted by the headline “*Montenegrin Ustashe call for riots during the enthronement of the Metropolitan Joanikije at the Cetinje Monastery: Inciting a war!*” (Alo, 17 August 2021).

MIXED-UP CONCEPTS

One of the biggest media scandals, something practically unthinkable since the public incitement to war in the early 1990s, was the attack by film director Dragoslav Bokan²⁰⁸ on the vice president of the Party of Freedom and Justice Marinika Tepić. He claimed, on 29 November 2021 on *TV Pink*, a TV channel with national coverage, that Tepić "is a member of the national minority that hates Serbia and Serbian people". At the same time, Bokan emphasized that as a young woman, Tepić joined "Čanak and his anti-Serbian organization" and that she "studied, what? Romanian language! From a Romanian family!". Finally, to make things perfectly clear, he stated: "Romanian mother, Romanian father, worked in a Romanian organization, thus she is our enemy! She is the enemy of the nation, not just an ideological one, but also political one."

Unlike other cases, when there was a striking silence from the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), it did initiate proceedings against *TV Pink* on this occasion. The President of the Council of this authority, Olivera Zekić – usually prone to uncritically justify the behavior of TV stations – declared that she was personally horrified with the extent of Bokan's hatred. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that, even before this attack, Marinika Tepić was attacked in various ways, and that Bokan's appearance was used for the same purpose: the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, while explaining how he "loves Romanians" more than anything in the world, accused Tepić of lying about the affairs she is investigating. The hate speech was thus pushed into the background and the matter closed.

208 In early 1990s, Dragoslav Bokan was headed the paramilitary formation "Beli orlovi" (White Eagles), active during the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The formation participated in the intimidation, robberies, murders, tortures, expulsion and ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Lovas, Voćin, Zvornik, Sarajevo, Bijeljina, Bratunac, Brčko, Prijedor, Višegrad... Bokan appears on regime-controlled media and has staged several events organized by the state, such as the anniversary of the "Storm" (2020 and 2021) or the celebration of the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and National Flag (15 September, 2021).

When it comes to the political scene, it was marked by the media's obvious fixation on the views of opposition politicians on genocide and war crimes. On 12 July 2021, *Informer* published that "Đilas supporters admit there was genocide in Srebrenica" and put it more bluntly in the headline "They are openly acting against their own country." A few days later, *Objektiv* condemned Marinika Tepić's alleged statement that "Serbia held Croats in concentration camps" and in another headline, that "Serbs held Croats in concentration camps."

These media, of course, did not consider the proven facts – court verdicts, testimonies, documentaries, footages from the scene: thus continuing the mantra that Serbian military and paramilitary structures did not commit any crimes on battlefields, and disqualifying the suffering of victims.

A special part in this context was played by the events involving Serbia's state and national symbols. Since it was decided to mark the beginning of the school year by singing the national anthem "God of Justice" in all schools, it turned out that anyone who dared to criticize this decision would be dragged through the mud and accused of treason by the media. At the beginning of September, one could hear and read: "Đilas bothered even by 'God of Justice'", "Could he be more pathetic? Šolak spits on Serbian anthem!", "Serbian tricolor is kitsch for them! Đilas' TV insults Serbian tricolor", "Those who respect the anthem are low-lives for them?!", "Đilas followers and Ustashe spit on the Serbian flag".

I AM THE STATE

There is another highly dangerous "detail", known from before, but which gained momentum during 2021.

In one of the headlines about concentration camps, perpetrators are identified as Serbs or Serbia. Neither is true; what we are dealing with here is a rough and incendiary generalization: crimes were not neither committed by ALL Serbs, nor by ALL of Serbia, but readers were led to believe that Tepić, Đilas or some other opponent of the

current regime are pointing their fingers not at criminals and criminal state-owned structures, but at the READERS THEMSELVES. This additionally "turns up the heat" in a region where there are still mass graves and constant inter-ethnic tension.

A much better example of this hostile mood is the case of Zoran Kesić, who was a guest on Croatian Radiotelevision (HRT) on 12 December 2021. He criticized – as he usually does on his "home ground" – the government of Aleksandar Vučić. On the front pages published on 14 December 2021, everything seemed quite different: "Incredible low-life: Kesić bad-mouths Serbia and glorifies Croatia" (*Srpski telegraf*), "Speaks ill of Serbia in Zagreb of all places – Kesić licking Croatian boots (Alo)", "Scumbag – TV host Zoran Kesić bad-mouths Serbia in Zagreb and praises Croatia" (*Objektiv*). Thus, Vučić was presented as the equivalent to Serbia; one man equivalent to the whole state, and the regime equivalent to the people.

Of course, generalizations didn't end there, so on 7 August 2021, *Informer* violated all professional standards by asking the question "Croats, is there anyone who is not an Ustasha?" This and similar cases were not publically condemned either by the Ministry of Culture and Information, authorized to implement the Law on Public Information, or by the Government. On the contrary, the Editor in Chief of that gossip magazine, Dragan J. Vučićević, is still a favorite guest of *TV Pink*. During his almost daily appearances, he uses the opportunity to repeat what was written in the press on a TV channel with national coverage.

Generalizations and media incitement on the basis of ethnicity occurred due to a number of reasons, including Serbia's continuous arms deals. Although the state leadership repeatedly claimed that Serbia was buying military equipment for purely preventive and defense reasons, for the media this was an opportunity to develop a theory of OTHERS envying US. Envy was also based on the alleged economic boom, which was also repeatedly claimed: "Ustasha madness: Vučić's Serbia is Croatia's nightmare", "Croats can't forgive Vučić for Serbia's progress, media war led by the Croats against Vučić"; "Ustasha

brain disease: As many as 122 texts against Vučić in one day"; "Malice and complexes – Milanović completely obsessed with Vučić"; "Croats admit with heavy heart that we have more powerful weapons", "Croats in panic after the display of weapons in Belgrade – we will be overrun by the Serbian army."

BETRAYAL, BAZOOKAS AND OTHER FALLS FROM GRACE

The usual media discrimination against Montenegrins and hate speech directed towards official Podgorica escalated after the adoption of the Resolution on Srebrenica on 17 June 2021 and the dramatic enthronement of the new Metropolitan Joanikije on 5 September 2021. It was formally confirmed that genocide happened in Srebrenica, yet only three of nine national daily newspapers that existed at the time were professional in their reporting. The others took part in verbal mockery and gossiping, which – quite expectedly – was dominated by tabloids.

The focus was on theories of betrayal: "Krivokapić and Bečić label Serbs as genocidal" (*Večernje novosti*), "Fall from grace! Montenegro not big enough for Krivokapić's betrayal" (*Alo*), "Traitor Zdravko" (*Objektiv*). It is interesting that the citizens of Serbia could not read the text of the Resolution anywhere in the media, and to do so – if not already overwhelmed by this wave of "patriotism" – they had to reach out for Montenegrin media. Other media were not spectacular either. *Politika*, the daily newspaper with a long-standing tradition and, as always, loyal to the government, published in its section "Views" an op-ed article by Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) MP Nebojša Baka-rec, in which he attempts to trivialize genocide and attacks political opponents.

A similar thing happened after the enthronement of the Metropolitan, although the main theory at the time was an alleged attempt to destroy Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church: "Milo's Satanists tried to burn Serbs", "Attack was being prepared on Patriarch Joanikije", "Patriarch aimed at with bazooka, Security Intelligence Agency

prevented tragedy", "Čanak and Milo incited people to blood and violence while drinking Chivas whiskey", "Russians expose conspiracy: NATO attacking Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro!".

In addition, various "analysts" paraded through TV studios repeating in detail the aforementioned tabloid theories, undisturbed by journalists and TV hosts, who have a duty to distance themselves from any kind of discrimination. The President of United Serbia and the man in charge of the city of Jagodina, Dragan Marković Palma, spoke out during his stay in a summer resort in Greece, advising citizens not to spend their holidays where they are not welcome, including Montenegro: "The citizens of Serbia should decide themselves where to go on vacation, but Montenegro was the first to recognize the independence of Kosovo, voted for Kosovo to join UNESCO and Interpol and voted that there was genocide in Srebrenica."

Fostering intolerance was not limited only to politics; a report from the Podgorica airport was published stating that Montenegrins "kept Serbs in the airport building for six hours without air conditioning" – as if this was done on purpose, and as if the passengers were only Serbs.

HATRED – SHOWBIZ-STYLE

One of the most interesting phenomena in the methodology of inciting inter-ethnic intolerance is certainly the fact that this topic has already become a part of the pages reserved for show business. It has happened before, but during 2021, this methodology prevailed completely and the media started using it in abundance, and not "scarcely" as they used to.

There were already several cases of media campaigns against singers who dared to sing "on the other side of the border", and many related headlines were used: "Feed the singer so that he can bite you – Rajović praises Ustashe", "Sadik sings about massacre of Serbs, Grand earns money", or "They built a house from songs about massacre of Serbs." The real "star", however, was the Croatian singer Severina Vučković, whose court battle with Serbian businessman Milan

Popović, over the custody of their child, has been attracting almost pathological attention of the media for years.

After the correspondence between the singer and the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Porfirije was revealed, and after she openly accused him of being involved in her conflict with Popović, a multi-day campaign followed, targeting not only her as an individual (with continuous attacks), but an entire nation: "Severina, get out of Serbia!", "Why Severina hates the Serbian Orthodox Church", "Severina thinks Mladić is Hitler, but Serbs pay her ahead of Storm anniversary"...

As a one-time event, this might not have been very significant, but in the context of ubiquitous nationalism in the media, it certainly increases in force and effect, because in this way, it "covers" all sections in the press as well as those segments on television and portals, which usually don't deal with such issues. Therefore, it is interesting to see that comments of readers and viewers unanimously advocated mono-ethnic relationships with a warning that "people should be careful who they have children with" (?!), unlike other topics (which involved a variety of comments).

During 2021, conspiracy theories had their renaissance period, leading to plenty of articles about political trade ("If we don't give Kosovo, they will take the Republika Srpska and Vojvodina from us"), Vatican's evil intention ("Vatican's Secret Letter – Serbian Church must disappear"), and, inevitably, catastrophic prophecies about the fate of the nation ("Extermination of Serbs in five steps; five attacks until the New Year"). The culmination of this trend, however, was the front page of *Srpski telegraf*, on 14 July, stating the following: "They're taking our blood to inject the virus; They're taking the blood of our pregnant women and making a virus against Serbs!"

CONCLUSION

In all of this, the most important thing is the silence of the institutions responsible for the implementation of media laws, which very clearly prohibit discrimination (on any grounds) and hate

speech. On the other hand, the heads of the highest state institutions not only fail to condemn what is published in pro-regime media, but additionally encourage this behavior in their statements. At the same time, if we keep in mind that media content is now spreading not only through traditional media, but also through social networks, and that popular morning shows go through the daily press in detail, providing TV audiences with access to such content, it is clear that the reach and influence of any article with nationalist sentiment is far greater than it was few years ago.

The situation is perhaps best described by *Srpski Telegraf's* headline from 4 July 2021: "Other Serbia in disbelief – patriotism is back in style". The only question is how one defines patriotism and whether it was ever not in style.

MEDIA STIGMATIZATION OF MUSLIMS

In his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, sociologist Erving Goffman defines stigma as something “unusual or bad about the moral status of the signifier”.²⁰⁹ Goffman also points out that society plays a pivotal role when it comes to determining characteristics that are considered usual and natural, and that not all undesirable characteristics are contentious, but just the ones opposing the accepted stereotype about “what a certain type of person ought to be.” Therefore, a person who doesn’t fit in the categories previously mandated by the majority becomes defined as a “less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak”.²¹⁰ In that way, society creates an ideology to explain the different forms of the inferiority of a person (or a group), whereby it tends to rationalize its hostile attitude based on existing differences, which include the following of different religious teachings.²¹¹

In the context of the Goffman quotes and media coverage in Serbia, it should be noted that one of the main pillars of the Serbian nationalist idea is the figure of the archetypal enemy – the Turk, and the only people “worse” than him are Southern Slavs who accepted Islam during the reign of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in the nationalist discourse of the last century, South Slavic Muslims were depicted as a legacy of a foreign and antagonistic element representing a constant obstacle to the realization of Serbian nationalist aspirations. At

209 Goffman, Erving (1963), *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, p. 1.

210 Ibid: 2.

211 Ibid: 3.

the same time, they were seen as both morally and ethically weak due to their betrayal of ancestral religious convictions.²¹²

Today, for the sake of affirming and popularizing different negative stereotypes and stigmatizing Muslim Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians, the mass media are playing an exceptionally significant role, primarily because they represent the main source of information for the average person. In addition, the media possess the resources and power to shape public opinion by creating a specific value system, and in certain cases also to affirm and construct a certain identity, by which they exert a strong influence on power dynamics in society.²¹³

Thus, since the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka) came to power in 2012, there has been a systemic reaffirmation of nationalist and expansionist politics, at the center of which is the idea of a union/alliance of all Serbs in the region, which represents a source of constant instability. A crucial role in the promotion of nationalist and expansionist ideas is played by pro-regime tabloids such as *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf*, *Kurir*, *Alo*, as well as the right-wing-oriented daily newspaper *Večernje novosti*, whose editor Milorad Vučelić used to be the chief media advisor to Slobodan Milošević.²¹⁴ In a more subtle, but also more malignant and dangerous way, the oldest daily newspaper in Serbia *Politika* is advocating victimological and nationalist narratives, and by way of historical revisionism and “the

212 For more about the construction of “the Turk” as an archetypal enemy and South Slavic Muslims as “traitors” see: Sells, Michael (2002), “Islam in Serbian Religious Mythology”, in Maya Shaztmiller, *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, p. 56–85 and Suljagić, Emir (2021), “Genocide by Plebiscite: The Bosnian Serb Assembly and Social Construction of “Turks” in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2021.1885570.

213 Karčić, Harun and Kostić, Ivan Ejub (2020), *Media Discourse on Islam in the Western Balkans*, Sarajevo, Center for Advanced Studies, p. 9.

214 All mentioned newspapers have their online platforms as well by which the news published in the print version are becoming available in cyberspace, the consequence of which is that they are available (for free) to a significant number of people. For more about Islamophobia in the digital world see: Awan, Imran i Zempi, Irene (2020), *Islamophobic Hate Crime: A Student Textbook*, New York, Routledge, p. 29–42.

rationalization of hostile attitudes” towards the essential Others (generally Muslim Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians), aims to again offer legitimacy to the politics of unification of all Serbs, which during the wars of the 1990s resulted in genocide and ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, as well as strong repression of the Muslim population in the Sandžak region. Apart from print media, other media act in a similar manner. TV channels with national coverage, such as *Happy* and *Pink*, broadcast programs whose regular guests are convicted war criminals and extreme nationalists who propagate exclusivist and chauvinistic viewpoints.²¹⁵ Although it might seem that insisting on nationalist politics in the media and public sphere does not *directly* correlate with Islamophobia, such an assumption cannot be considered correct, because through the affirmation of (ultra)nationalist politics in the public space, a social atmosphere is created which gives a strong incentive to radical right-wing and nationalist movements to act in Serbia, and they are, without exception, profoundly Islamophobic.²¹⁶

215 The program which most often has convicted war criminals and extreme nationalists as guests is *Cyrilic* (Ćirilica) whose editor Milomir Marić is also the editor-in-chief of the national TV channel Happy. Apart from *Cyrilic* (Ćirilica), the shows *Good Morning Serbia* (Dobro jutro Srbijo), which is also airing on TV channel Happy, shares a similar editorial policy, as well as *The New Morning* (Novo jutro) show on the TV channel Pink. Besides TV channels, it should be pointed out that there is a significant number of YouTube channels with an high number of subscribers and whose videos are seen by dozens of thousands of people, and whose content very often contains hate speech, among which the most common hate speech is the one based on ethnicity. However, due to the fact that in the case of Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians, ethnicity and religion are strongly intertwined, narratives involving religious affiliation can often be heard. The most popular YouTube channels with a strong nationalistic (and very often chauvinistic and racist) rhetoric include: *BalkanInfo*, *HelmCast*, *In4snet*, *Glas Javnosti*, *Ras Televizija*, *Srbin.info* and many others.

216 Regarding the increase of activities and impunity of (ultra) right-wing movements, it is important to note the activities which were carried out in 2019 and 2020 by the movements Leviathan (Levijatan), Serbian Action (Srpska akcija), People’s Patrol (Narodna patrola) and many others, and which have predominantly been directed against (Muslim) migrants from the Middle East. During these activities, the most vulgar Islamophobic narratives were used. A graphic example of that is the huge banner carried on the anti-migrant protest held on May 8, 2020

In addition to the repeated reaffirmation of expansionist and nationalist politics in the media, there is an insistence upon historical revisionism regarding the 1990s and relativization, or better yet a complete negation of crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.²¹⁷ Thus, even though criminals responsible for atrocities committed during the wars of the 1990s have in total been convicted to hundreds of years in prison, they are glorified in Serbian mass media and are proclaimed to be “Serbian heroes” and “martyrs”, while civilian victims are negated, and the sentences of these “heroes” are represented as “an international conspiracy” directed against Serbian national interests.²¹⁸ In the paper *Globalization and Genocide*, Hariz

in the center of Belgrade on the Republic Square which said: “All has gone to stinking hell, but here Muhammad shall not dwell” About the activities of right-wing organizations and the rise of Islamophobia see: Kostić, Ivan Ejub (2021), “Islamophobia in Serbia: National Report 2020”, in Enes Bayrakli & Farid Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report 2020*, Vienna, Leopold Weiss Institute, pp. 693–721.

- 217 Not only are crimes committed against Muslims in the 1990s being relativized, but also the crimes committed by the Chetnik movement during World War II in eastern Bosnia and in today’s Sandžak. The most vocal revisionists of the Chetnik Movement, which is responsible for the murder of thousands of Muslims during World War II, are historians Miloš Ković, and Bojan Dimitrijević. Both of them have affirmative views toward convicted war criminals Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, who they often glorify in the public sphere.
- 218 Some of the texts from *Večernje novosti*, *Informer*, and *Kurir* about the sentencing of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić stating “injustice” and “international conspiracy” against Serbia: “Radovan Karadžić: Ovo nema nikakve veze sa pravom!”, dostupno na: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/dosije/aktuelno.292.html:784090-Radovan-Karadzic-Ovo-nema-nikakve-veze-sa-pravom>; “PRESUDA KARADŽIĆU! SLEDE POJEDINAČNE TUŽBE PROTIV SRBIJE I SRPSKE?! Hag čini sve da nam napakosti!” dostupno na: <https://informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/426744/presuda-karadzicu-slede-pojedinacne-tuzbe-protiv-srbije-srpske-hag-cini-sve-dam-napakosti>; “UŽASNA NEPRAVDA! DOŽIVOTNA ROBIJA ZA RADOVANA KARADŽIĆA: Ovo je presuda celoj naciji!”, dostupno na: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3224035/uzasna-nepravda-dozivotna-robija-za-radovana-karadzica-ovo-je-presuda-celoj-naciji>; “DARKO MLADIĆ ZA “NOVOSTI”: Igrali smo u nefer utakmici protiv jačeg protivnika koji je menjao pravila igre, ali smo dali bar jedan gol”, dostupno na: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1005056/darko-mladic-novosti-igrali-smo-nefer-utakmici-protiv-jaceg-protivnika-koji-menjao-pravila-igre-ali-smo-dali-bar-jedan-gol>; “JA NISAM BITAN, VEĆ OPSTANAK REPUBLIKE SRPSKE?! Ovo su prve reči Ratka Mladića nakon presude!”, dostupno

Halilovich defines this state of “triumphalism”, among other things, as that which produces “the culture of triumphalism” by which “perpetrators (of genocide) and their accomplices, but also the policies and ideologies behind them, are no longer trying to negate the crimes, but the crimes are instead extolled and glorified, thereby humiliating all survivors”.²¹⁹ Apart from the humiliation of all survivors, “the culture of triumphalism” constantly perpetuates insecurity and existential fear among Muslims living in Serbia, and constantly reproduces racist views of inferiority and inadequacy of Bosniak Muslims and Kosovo Albanians.

Together with the genocidal “culture of triumphalism”, media in Serbia very often link Muslim Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians with “the Islamic threat”. One of the most glaring examples of that is the Sunday supplement published in the newspaper *Politika* in 2019 with the headline “*The Green Transversal: The Balkan Instability Corridor*”. The supplement was printed in the week when the commemoration of the genocide committed against Bosniak Muslims in Srebrenica in 1995 is held at the Memorial Center in Potočari – on 11 July each year.²²⁰ The supplement contained texts of the most vocal Islamophobes from previous decades such as Dževad Galijašević and Srđa Trifković. In their texts, Galijašević and Trifković repeated the well-worn 1990’s thesis about the omnipresent threat of an “Islamic caliphate”, which will connect Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo with Turkey and the predominantly Muslim states in the Middle

na: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/614078/ratko-mladic-general-opstanak-republika-srpska-presuda-darko-mladic-hag>; “EPILOG U HAGU: Presuda Ratku Mladiću ne satanizuje sve Srbe, ali će svet pokušati da nas etiketira kao genocidan narod!”, dostupno na: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3704407/presuda-mladicu-ne-satanizuje-sve-srbe>.

219 Halilovich, Hariz (2017), “Globalization and Genocide”, in Ali Farazmand (ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, Springer International Publishing AG, p. 7.

220 It is important to mention that on the day of commemoration of the genocide in Srebrenica on 11 July, only one short piece of news was dedicated to it, while the “Islamic threat” through the supplement “The Green Transversal: The Balkan Instability Corridor” was given four pages, including the front page.

East. Apart from the narrative about the establishment of the “Islamic caliphate”, the supplement emphatically insisted that Bosniak Muslims and Kosovo Albanians today provide safe houses for “Islamic Jihadists” from Syria, Afghanistan, and other Muslim states, which is why Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Kosovo are represented as security threats, not only for Serbia but for all of (Christian) Europe.

The abovementioned example from *Politika*'s supplement is by no means an isolated “incident”, but represents an excellent example of different narratives published in the same place, and which are used by the media in moments of political disagreements between Bosniaks / Kosovo Albanians and the government in Belgrade to represent them as a “foreign element” and a threat to Serbia and link them to paramilitary Jihadist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as with perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the West.²²¹

221 For the purpose of this report only some of the multitude of texts published in the daily newspapers in Serbia will be mentioned: “IZETBEGOVIĆ MOBILIŠE ISIS U BiH, META JE SRPSKA! SDA i Sarajevo namislili da “proliju krv” i izazovu intervenciju Zapada! TO NEĆE PROĆI!”, dostupno na: <https://informer.rs/svet/balkan/602529/republika-srpska-bakir-izetbegovic-pretnja-isis-krv-opasno-zapad>; “Isilovci sa Kosova spremni da izvrše terorističke napade – opasnost za region”, dostupno na: <https://www.alo.rs/kim/aktuelnosti/504900/isilovci-sa-kosova-spremni-da-izvrse-teroristicke-napade-opasnost-za-region/vest>; “I DECA KLIČU “ALAHU EKBER”: Skandalozan snimak iz Bužima opet pokazao da rat u glavi mnogih Bošnjaka još traje”, dostupno na: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/956021/deca-klicu-alahu-ekber-skandalozan-snimak-buzima-opet-pokazao-rat-glavi-mnogih-bosnjaka-jos-traje>; “U Bosnu ušlo na desetine hiljada Talibana!? Dramatično upozorenje stručnjaka, za sve su krive lažne turističke vize”, dostupno na: <https://informer.rs/svet/balkan/521227/bosnu-uslo-desetine-hiljada-talibana-dramaticno-upozorenje-strucnjaka-sve-krive-lazne-turisticke-vize>; “Tempirana bomba! Na Balkanu 1200 povratnika Islamske države!”, dostupno na: <https://informer.rs/svet/balkan/492875/tempirana-bomba-balkanu-200-povratnika-islamske-drzave>; „Albanci na Božić spremaju nered! U celu akciju uključene islamističke grupe sa Kosova i Metohije”, štampano izdanje dnevnog lista *Alo*, 20. decembar, 2020; „Terorista iz Beča obučavan u kampu OVK”, štampano izdanje dnevnog lista *Alo*, 4. novembar, 2020; „Opasno! Džihadisti opet vrbuju po Srbiji i regionu”, štampano izdanje dnevnog lista *Blic* 8. oktobar, 2020.

In a similar vein, Prof. Dr. Darko Tanasković wrote at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic a text stating that “the pandemic will pass, but the Pan-Islamic Serbophobia won’t”. According to Tanasković, the main ideological basis of “Pan-Islamic Serbophobia”, which he attributes to Muslim Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandžak, is the book *The Islamic Declaration* by the late president of Bosnia and Herzegovina Alija Izetbegović. Also, according to Tanasković, the “Pan-Islamic disease” present in (a part of) Muslim Bosniaks represents “an incurable... pathological illness” more dangerous for Serbs than COVID-19.²²² Although Tanasković is trying to sugarcoat this intentionally devised securitization narrative, this text is in essence no different than the most ignoble Islamophobic tropes which tabloids such as *Informer*, *Kurir*, and *Alo* using to link the politics of Muslim Bosniaks to radical (Pan-)Islamic ideas.

In addition to intensifying animosity and inciting hatred against Muslim Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians, this type of media coverage powerfully securitizes other Muslims in Serbia, demonizing Islam in the eyes of the reader and representing this religion as mindless and violent. One of the most blatant examples of how Islam is linked in the public sphere to current political issues, such as the relations between Serbia and Kosovo, is the statement of professor Miroljub Jevtić of the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade, who in an interview regarding the status of Kosovo to the *Glas Javnosti* newspaper defined Islam as a religion which has the exclusive goal of “severing the heads of all those who do not follow Sharia”. Also, in the same conversation, Jevtić went on to say that Muslims are incompatible with Europe and that “they cannot live in it without being a subversive element” which is why “Europe must come to its senses”.²²³

222 See also: “Танасковић: Пандемија ће проћи, али панисламистичка србофобија – неће”, <https://sveosrpskoj.com/komentari/tanaskovic-pandemija-ce-proci-ali-panislamisticka-srbobobija-nece/>.

223 “KOSOVO JE PAR EKSELANS ISLAMSKO PITANJE: EVROPA MORA DA SE OPAMETI” dostupno na: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1bSvvUgWrU&list=PLbQahu_xq_UCuTy_u_Nb94Ghyhuokr_C2o&index=86&t=948s.

Finally, it should be added that apart from the negative representation of Bosniak Muslims and Kosovo Albanians, Serbian media report in a very similar way on predominantly Muslim states and Muslims from around the world, which, as a rule, appear in the news about committed terrorist attacks or regional conflicts taking place in the Middle East and North Africa.

The extreme right in Serbia has already been on a significant rise for two years, which is evidenced by the growing number of violent, ideologically motivated acts. The main radicalization factor in Serbia and the generator of extremism is the dominant political narrative about the past, that is, the wars of the 1990s and actualization of the nationalist matrix, as well as the maintenance of Serbia's aspirations in the region. The official narrative about the wars of the 1990s is also the basis for a basis for bringing up the new generation of young right wingers either directly or indirectly. Our research has shown that young people do not have a realistic idea of what was happening in the 1990s. Thus, in search of their identity, they spontaneously process the knowledge about the wars in a wrong way.

The special focus of this research is on fighters going to foreign battlefields, particularly to Syria and Ukraine. The risk of their going to Ukraine still exists, while their going to fight on the Syrian battlefields has not be recorded for a longer period of time. Overall, Islamic extremism is on a significant decline and there is currently no real danger of violent extremist actions. Registration for going to fight in Syria has also been stopped.

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