



CONNEKT

COUNTRY PAPER
ON MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism
in the light of state dynamics in MENA and the Balkans

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Damir Kapidžić, Muamer Hirkić, Anida Dudić,
Sead Turčalo, Sanela Bašić, Sarina Bakić



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INTRODUCTION

The institutional perspectives offer a significant input to the current countering/preventing terrorism (C/PVE) studies and represent an important link in the three stages of the CONNEKT project, especially within the macro level. First, this research relies on the New Institutionalism as a theoretical approach, therefore placing an emphasis on institutional norms, rules and practices. Second, the previously published Country Report on National Approaches to Extremism (D3.2.) serves as a practical overview of what has been done so far and maps the past and current institution-led C/PVE strategies, initiatives and programmes. Third, in order to establish a cartography of contexts of radicalisation and violent extremism, the CONNEKT project links institutions to the meso and micro levels and provides a structural understanding for further research at the community and individual levels.

The principal question that this research attempts to answer is: “Do institutions view radicalisation differently, and are some drivers more relevant than others?” Moreover, by looking into practices of different types of institutions, the research seeks to distinguish the specific roles of institutions in the process of C/PVE, as well as the ways in which they cooperate and communicate individually. This is particularly significant in order to better understand institutional policy choices, and to shape future strategic initiatives of actors directly involved in C/PVE. Additionally, a country-specific contextualisation and analysis of drivers could improve institutional responses and enhance understanding of the processes of radicalisation.

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A macro-level context analysis required a cross-regional approach, which is reflected in the use of the same or only slightly adapted questions in two different regions: the Balkans and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Selection and ranking of institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) were done in accordance with the relevance of C/PVE in their work, with the categories being formed in line with the type of institution. A total of 16 online and in-person interviews were conducted in Sarajevo in the period from the end of December 2020 to mid-February 2021. Conforming to the CONNEKT project’s regulations, this qualitative research was conducted in line with the European Union (EU) General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the legislation of BiH – additionally guided by the principle of confidentiality, meaning that the identity of respondents is protected through pseudonymisation of personal data.

Throughout the research, several important points and findings have been identified. The study revealed different institutional understandings of radicalisation, clarified collaboration patterns among institutions from different sectors, presented the complexity of relationships within institutions and ways of cooperation, and confirmed the roles of formal and informal relationships in communication channels. Moreover, it revealed institutional practices and types of support that institutions receive from the state and abroad. In contrast, although there is no full agreement on this, the research has shown divergences in the relevance of different drivers of radicalisation in BiH, where some are deemed as more important than others. Additionally, some of the drivers are solely perceived as underlying drivers, which could become relevant only when paired with another.

The following section will give an overview of the relevant institutions in BiH that deal with issues of radicalisation and violent extremism, especially prevention programmes. The third section will provide a detailed analysis of the macro-level context in BiH, with special focus on the institutional perceptions of C/PVE and examples from institutional practice, recent changes in norms and behaviours of institutions toward C/PVE, as well as the cooperation of institutions from the state and abroad and communication-related actions. The fourth section provides an overview of seven previously identified drivers of violent extremism (territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics), explores the perception of these drivers within institutional practice and analyses their relevance for the BiH context. The final section provides an overview of the most significant conclusions that emerged from the study, concerning institutional perceptions, practices, norms and behaviours, as well as the contextualisation of seven possible drivers of violent extremism.

INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

STATE INSTITUTIONS

A state-run C/PVE nexus includes a wide range of institutions, with the **Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina** being a pivotal state-level institution working on C/PVE initiatives. From 2015 to 2020, the Ministry has been implementing the *Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism*, and currently remains the principal actor responsible for the development of the new strategic document. Other security sector institutions – ranging from those concerned with the early detection of the phenomenon to those concerned with causal effects – include the **Intelligence and Security Agency, State Investigation and Protection Agency, ministries of the interior at entity levels and the Prosecutor’s Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina**. On the other hand, **ministries of education**, as well as the **centres for social work**, play an important role, particularly within the prevention and repatriation processes.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

International engagement in BiH is strong in terms of funding C/PVE activities, and thus provides a lifeline for the majority of research or prevention-based projects. In addition to traditional partners in a worldwide C/PVE arena, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) Mission, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the largest support for the projects in BiH was provided by the **Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Embassy of Norway, Embassy of the United States, Embassy of the United Kingdom, Embassy of the Netherlands and Embassy of Italy**. As an organisation that has been engaged in BiH since the war, the OSCE’s support includes a wide range of political-military, economic and human dimension efforts (Perry, 2016). Moreover, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) oversees small grant pilots and research, with the aim of understanding radicalisation and supporting positive voices, such as youth activists. On the other hand, the IOM emphasises prevention of violent extremism through cooperation with state institutions, focusing on the returnees from Syria and the repatriation process.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society organisations (CSOs) dealing with radicalisation and violent extremism can generally be divided into two groups – those dealing with prevention and those dealing with research. Among the first group of organisations, the most prominent include **PRONI Center for Youth Development, Transkulturalna psihosocijalna obrazovna fondacija (TPO Foundation), Global Analitika, Youth Resource Center (YRC) Tuzla, Humanity in Action, and Hope and Homes for Children**. For instance, PRONI emphasises working with young people as a factor of prevention and resilience in larger and smaller communities in BiH, while TPO Foundation’s aim is to encourage critical thinking and understanding within wider topics of peace-building, and intercultural and interreligious dialogue. As for the second group, or those primarily dealing with research, the work of the **Atlantic Initiative, the Democratization Policy Council (DPC), the International Republican Institute (IRI), GEA - Centar za istraživanja i studije**

and **ProEduca** stands out as the most notable. For instance, the IRI makes its contribution through research work, as well as regional projects related to the phenomenon of violent extremism and the resilience of local communities, while the DPC, composed of domestic and foreign experts, primarily deals with the analysis and research of various aspects of security risks, including hate speech, social unrest and Islamist extremism.

MEDIA

Some of the more renowned media outlets engaged in C/PVE topics include the **Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)** with its websites **Balkan Insight** and **Detektor.ba**, **Al Jazeera Balkans** and **Preporod**. BIRN is the most active media outlet dealing with the phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism through investigative journalism, focusing on reports about the criminal trials of returnees accused of terrorism, violent fan groups, and the way in which the *Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism* is implemented.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Four legally recognised religious communities in BiH include the **Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IC)**, the **Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BC)**, the **Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SOC)** and the **Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina** – all working together through the mechanisms of the **Interreligious Council**, which has been organised as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) since 1997. The Islamic Community is a constitutionally confirmed authoritative body that regulates questions of religious life and is independent of the government in its management and decision-making. Since 2016, the IC has adopted a strategy concerning C/PVE and organised a significant number of activities aimed at combating all forms of violent interpretations of religion. The Bishops' Conference (BC) is an institution of the Catholic Church in BiH, established in 1994. In addition to religious education, the BC was able to organise humanitarian and educational institutions, but its engagements lacked noteworthy programmes dealing with the topics of violent extremism. Likewise, the Serbian Orthodox Church, as an institution of Orthodox believers in BiH, did not conduct any C/PVE-related activities.

MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTION OF C/PVE

A macro-level of analysis, covered by this report, comprises institutions in a broader sense, or more precisely, any form of organised agency such as state institutions, international organisations, CSOs, religious institutions, and the media. In a number of institutions, separate departments, teams, or trained individuals, who deal specifically with C/PVE topics, have been organised, as well as various action plans, informal networks and working groups. One example of institutional C/PVE practice is the opening of the NGO Relations Department within the Islamic Community in 2015, showing the relevance of the civil society sector in promoting the ideas of pluralism, which can hamper the institutional practice and normative values of the Islamic Community. Generally, the research shows that the intensified work on C/PVE actions is one common aspect of all institutions.

Although the *Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Prevention and Combating Terrorism 2015-2020* is the central document guiding state institutions' work, there are several shortcomings, primarily concerning the fact that preventive and security sections are not separated. Therefore, it is expected that an adoption of a newly-developed *Strategy* will occur in 2021, which will consider diverse stakeholders with specified tasks – particularly in the prevention segment – and that it will be followed by an analysis of the previous *Strategy* report. For instance, one interviewee confirms the previously mentioned focus, noting that lately his institution has been putting a lot more effort into the prevention-related strategic tasks and actions, while another interviewee revealed that her organisation has lobbied to have a non-security sector included in the new *Strategy* of the Ministry of Security.¹

On the other hand, CSOs are trying to fill the vacuum generated by the work of government institutions. As seen in the previous research conducted by Hamidičević and Plevljak (2018), the activities of CSOs range from research and studies, assistance to state and lower governance level institutions to working directly with youth, media and religious communities in raising awareness (Hamidičević and Plevljak, 2018). One such is a CSO of a respondent that tries to bridge the gap between academic and activist worlds by connecting different institutions, but also improving the skills of teachers within public schools.² Others, as seen in the example of a different respondent, attempt to conduct the projects that allow them to network regional actors engaged in C/PVE.³

Although most media deal with already manifested forms of violent extremism, or the behavioural part of the issue, recently some outlets started to explore causes of the phenomenon. For instance, an

¹ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, and online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

² Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

³ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

interviewee asserts that his media outlet provides a space for critical analysis of professors or theologians regarding the subject of violent extremism.⁴

International organisations' involvement is manifested through multi-sectoral work with academics, individuals, informal community groups, social work centres, and other actors that can be linked to C/PVE, but also through the designation of specific departments and teams that deal exclusively with this phenomenon. The diversity of sector coverage within C/PVE is also confirmed by the statements of several interviewees, all employed in the international organisations, where the first organisation is involved in the assistance in a process of repatriation of citizens from Syria, the second one provides support in the implementation and design of the Strategy, while the third is focused on small grant pilots and research.⁵

CHANGES IN NORMS AND BEHAVIOURS OF INSTITUTIONS TOWARD C/PVE

Recently, there have been several important changes in attitudes and work of the state institutions toward C/PVE. First, global occurrences such as the foreign fighters phenomenon, new actions of far-right groups, or the international partners' perception of a threat, also dictate the design of practices within institutions. Second, the emergence of new, radicalised milieus leads to a change in behaviour and subsequent adaptations, such as the implementation of analysis, or transition from the state to the local level. Third, changes in the approach to violent extremism are a product and direct consequence of open discussion between the actors involved in C/PVE. For instance, one of the interviewees reveals how his institution attempts to connect communities and stakeholders both horizontally and vertically, while trying to clarify that violent extremism is not something foreign that happens exclusively to others.⁶

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Furthermore, some actors such as donors sought to adapt their practices over time, but also their common stance on C/PVE was strengthened because of the cohesive views on the issue. One interviewee from an international organisation reveals that the initial interest for the topic ensued because of the phenomenon of foreign fighters, but also because the focus and strategy of his organisation have been changing accordingly in the last three years.⁷ Nonetheless, several other interviewees from international organisations stated that, in the last three years, the approach of security institutions has changed, since they take the issue more seriously, and understand the importance of other sectors. Additionally, some organisations tried to move the debate away from Islamist extremism and elucidate the sphere of hate crimes.⁸

In CSOs' C/PVE actions, there has been a change in the perception of what extremism is and who is responsible for it, meaning that it is now seldom presented as exclusively Islamic. An interviewee argues

⁴ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

⁵ Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020, online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021, and online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

⁶ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

⁷ Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

⁸ Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December, and online interview with female representative 2 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

that, for instance, recent extremism in the United States (US) has also opened the floor for talking about extremism that is not exclusively Islamic, meaning that people will not be able to ignore it any longer.⁹ Additionally, another interviewee also stresses the importance of the shift from offline to online communication, affirming her organisation's attempts to engage in more online-related C/PVE initiatives.¹⁰

One of the participants from the media believes that access to information has changed: while previously most of the information was obtained through conversations with people, presently those pieces of information could be available online.¹¹ He also adds that the media now wants to know some of the factors that lead to violent extremism, which was not the case before. Besides, a different participant argues that there are four factors that led to the change in the way the issue of violent extremism is perceived: i) a defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and consequent disappointment within circles that supported this ideology; ii) BiH institutions' increased interest in the topic; iii) a change in the perception of the Islamic Community – from the initial disregard to a public call to close *parajamaats*¹² and reintegrate communities; and iv) a change in the way the international public perceived the issue.¹³

C/PVE EXAMPLES FROM INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

Instances from the state institutions' practice are permeated by collectivisation of norms, where employees are influenced by formal rules that are contained in strategic documents, or other formal arrangements between institutions. One interviewee from the state institution that deals with both preventive and causal actions reveals that the way in which experts are engaged in her institution highlights a significant degree of systematisation.¹⁴ For instance, after studying the case at hand, there is the process of selection of the relevant institution, where the police, health care services, psychological counselling, educational centres, and others may be involved. Another interviewee reveals that her institution has made significant progress, particularly in prevention, where they have planned a whole set of activities around C/PVE.¹⁵ Moreover, an interviewee from a religious institution speaks in a similar way about her institution, citing extensive education for their own employees, aimed at prevention.¹⁶

The CSOs use different tactics during the implementation of the programme, meaning that the final aim, as well as the target group, is different for each organisation individually. Some of these programmes focus on peace-building, good governance, human rights, women's rights, interfaith dialogue, conflict transformation, youth engagement, and other topics (OSCE, 2019b). For instance, one respondent cites an attempt to use ethical and normative values in educational institutions, in

⁹ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

¹⁰ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 23 December 2020.

¹¹ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

¹² *Parajamaats* is a colloquial term for *jamaa'ts* that did not accept full authority of the BiH Islamic Community.

¹³ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

¹⁴ Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 9 February 2021.

¹⁵ Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

¹⁶ In-person interview with female representative from a religious institution, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

a wide range of subjects, thus also influencing the C/PVE.¹⁷ Another respondent reveals the attempt of her organisation to influence the established routines of local leaders through financial support and grants, but also through networking at the national and international levels.¹⁸

The OSCE's *Guide on Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism* pays special attention to the media's reporting practices regarding violent extremism, particularly the accuracy of information, impartiality, accountability and transparency (OSCE, 2019a). One of the interviewed media outlets confirmed active engagement with young journalists through organisation of training, and instruction on how to correctly report on the topic of C/PVE. On the other, when doing their own research and trying to get the verified information, an interviewee reveals that she has to go first to the police, municipality, or social work centres, and then move up toward the state level.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the majority of state institutions she contacts still refer her to the Ministry of Security.

In international organisations' approaches there has been a degree of standardisation regarding the target groups. For instance, there was a noticeable shift in focus to young community leaders and positive youth voices. According to one of the respondents, in addition to working with young people, the focus remains quite wide and includes training for trainers within the repatriation process, research and initiatives with religious communities.²⁰ Nonetheless, another respondent added that her organisation has sought to improve inter-institutional cooperation in BiH through a specifically designed programme.²¹

FORMS OF SUPPORT FOR INSTITUTIONS FROM THE STATE AND ABROAD

State institutions have a developed communication spectrum, which includes all relevant international actors such as the OSCE, IOM, Council of Europe, RCC and others – providing all kinds of assistance in C/PVE efforts. This goes to the extent that a significant portion of government regulations is heavily influenced by expertise from abroad (Kapidžić et al., 2020). For instance, one interviewee from an international organisation claims that his organisation was active in developing a communication strategy for the Ministry of Security, but its implementation did not materialise.²² In addition to foreign organisations, state institutions have developed a system of cooperation between its own sectors, involved in C/PVE. An interviewee from a state institution reveals that several actions initiated by her institution included various departments such as education, health, security and the police.²³

CSOs receive the most assistance from foreign governments and organisations, primarily the US government, the OSCE, IOM, the United Nations (UN), and others. For instance, the previous research indicates that a careful look at these programmes and projects reveals that many CSOs have relied on

¹⁷ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

¹⁸ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

¹⁹ In-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

²⁰ Online interview with female representative 2 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

²¹ Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

²² Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

²³ Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

international partners in order to carry out C/PVE work within the country (The Soufan Center, 2020). In addition to “traditional” partners, one of the interviewees asserts that there is also a developed cooperation between her organisation and foreign universities and foreign CSOs.²⁴

The central partner in international organisations’ work is the Ministry of Security, with which, according to an interviewee from one international organisation, they sometimes have a “difficult relationship, for a number of reasons.”²⁵ For instance, one reason for slow changes in routines of the state institutions and the lack of personal connections can be linked with frequent institutional changes of leaders or entire teams, which then makes the adoption of an initiative more difficult. In addition to the Ministry, international organisations cooperate with social work centres, municipalities and CSOs.

The normative framework, represented by the religious institution, is adhered to within the cooperation mechanisms between religious institutions and foreign donors, without attempting to influence the so-called “appropriateness” of existing rules and practices. For instance, one of the participants regards the Islamic Community as a positive example of C/PVE-related practices, where her organisation and the Islamic Community have successfully formalised their cooperation since 2015. Religious institutions, on the other hand, refuse to cooperate with NGOs on issues related to interpretation of religion that are seen as the sole purview of officially recognised religious institutions, in addition to keeping up the “appropriateness” of traditional rules and practices.

COMMUNICATION ASPECT OF INSTITUTIONAL WORK ON C/PVE

An interviewee from a state institution argues that communication between state institutions is efficient when occurring both online and in person, while another interviewee believes that communication between her colleagues and other institutions takes place continuously, but mostly after the problem arises.²⁶ According to one of the respondents, the Ministry of Security is the focal point for most of the stakeholders involved in C/PVE and is a pivotal partner, while another asserts that communication with the Ministry is much more formal compared to CSOs.²⁷ They also add that mutual communication between foreign actors is easier, primarily because they try to synchronise their ideas and standings in order to make it easier for the Ministry, noting at the same time that the current communication between international partners is much better than it was between 2015 and 2018. On the other hand, several interviewees from the media believe that there is poor communication with the Ministry, which fails to provide quick and easy access to its reports and information, and forwards them to request information from other security institutions.²⁸ Furthermore, they stress that communication with religious institutions is also not fruitful, and that some topics are, as they describe them, “a washed-up subject.” Although present, an informal relationship only enhances communication but is not a substitute for a

²⁴ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

²⁵ Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

²⁶ Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, and online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 9 February 2021.

²⁷ Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021, and online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

²⁸ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020, and in-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

formal relationship. This is evident through a systematised way of sharing information by, for instance, signing a memorandum or some other formal document. One interviewee believes that communication and initiatives is a two-way street, where it is important to know the needs of the partner on a project, which essentially becomes a mixture of formal and informal networking, coupled with personal connections.²⁹ Another interviewee asserts that, by looking into his own case of having a connection with representatives of religious institutions, he can confirm that personal acquaintances could play an important role in institutional cooperation.³⁰

All this shows a complex and developing relationship between institutions in BiH that deal with C/PVE. While all institutions are aware of the other actors in the field, openness is not always the preferred option. There is some positioning either towards, for example, media, or on select topics. There is often a need to complement this with less formal and official approaches, especially when it comes to formal communication. On sensitive topics such as foreign fighters or radical interpretations of religion, we notice one institution often taking the lead and others having a supportive role. Nevertheless, the general impression is one of cooperation while retaining a sense of institutional distinctiveness, both in terms of aims and working culture.

²⁹ Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

³⁰ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

DRIVERS

TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Although radicalisation in post-Dayton BiH was primarily associated with isolated and often rural communities, which in the context of territorial inequalities could be observed as a potential factor of radicalisation, the research suggests there has been a change in this trend in recent years. While some radical milieus may still be looking for a more specific and closed-off community, many da'is or preachers choose to be present in urban centres, no longer seeking isolation. One interviewee believes that there is an evident trend of shifting from rural to suburban areas within these groups.³¹

A respondent from a CSO believes that, if the territorial inequalities were relevant for BiH's context, she would have to mark mono-national spaces as more susceptible to radicalisation. In contrast, a different respondent from a state institution highlights multiethnic environments as potential hotspots, primarily because of prejudices.³² Moreover, a respondent from an international organisation attempts to make a cause-and-effect relationship, marking the returnee space as a potentially fertile ground for radicalisation, where war legacy and isolation became striking issues in the so-called "backwater areas" such as Prijedor, parts of Herzegovina and the eastern parts of Republika Srpska entity. The post-war frustration, which particularly affects the youth, has also been mentioned in the previously-conducted research by Perry, who writes that although without prior experience of the war, young people are often dissatisfied with the slow pace of post-war change (Perry, 2016). Within such communities there is a mindset of exclusion, coupled with the perception of neglect, marginalisation, and injustice – both of a person and a space. One of the interviewees believes that, in some cases, it does not have to be actual deprivation but rather individually perceived deprivation.³³ Therefore, rather than territory-exclusive inequality, the context of BiH shows that the more suitable driver is an individual perception of marginalisation, injustice and disenfranchisement of a particular territorial area.

ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

As Oruč and Obradović argue in their study, the radicalisation among youth in BiH is the result of a complex interplay of various factors and should not necessarily be simplified to any of them (Oruč and Obradović, 2020). This statement complements research findings, where the majority of interviewees emphasised that poverty could be observed as an indirect trigger, working in combination with other drivers. One of the prominent factors that coincides with poverty is education – both representing the blend that could lead to an easier indoctrination and manipulation. One of the interviewees believes that there is a direct link between poverty and education, while another argues that the lack of dignity and lower education are a double package, either potentiating or exacerbating one another.³⁴ Several interviewees from the media, a state institution, a CSO and an international organisation all

³¹ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

³² Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 23 December 2020, and in-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

³³ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

³⁴ Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, and online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

agree that marginalisation and hopelessness act as a significant sub-driver of poverty.³⁵ Dissatisfaction resulting from economic exclusion provides a strong instrument that could be used for easier mobilisation of people. Although poverty manifests itself more as an individual rather than a group phenomenon, it is necessary to consider personal perception of poverty. Additionally, there is an individual perception of the lack of upward mobility, professional achievements, perspective and dignity, with the radicalised groups acting as a benefactor, or the only alternative within a dysfunctional system. The OSCE-supported *Guide for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism through the Educational Process* highlights aloofness, low self-esteem, and self-doubt as some of the personality traits that can favour radicalisation (OSCE, 2019c). Moreover, a recent study conducted by the Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality (DARE) project shows that the connection between inequality and radicalisation is case-by-case dependent, where perceived injustice as a driver can be a subjective reality of individuals and groups (Poli and Arun, 2019).

In contrast, Atlantic Initiative's 2018 research findings show that, in many cases, those most sympathetic to violent extremism are economically comfortable (Atlantic Initiative, 2018). An interviewee believes that elites within radicalised communities are well-situated, even if their peers are struggling.³⁶ Azinović and Jusić confirm this assertion by describing it as a dual morality – while leaders preach to their followers about the absurdity of this secular, material life, they enjoy lives of luxury (Azinović and Jusić, 2016). These conflicting views indicate that while economic deprivation is a driver of radicalisation, its effects are manifested at the individual rather than societal level. Relative and perceived deprivation is considered to have an effect on radicalisation, but at the same time wealth (lack of perceived deprivation) does not protect individuals from expressing violent extremism.

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POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

In the context of BiH, political ideas and grievances are primarily expressed in terms of ethnic politics and narratives propagated by ethnic entrepreneurial elites. One of the interviewees believes that the perception of the conflict between the three ruling streams in BiH could facilitate the “us against them” mentality. Rhetoric that leads to polarisation, political incentives and political goals manifested through political opportunity structures are, as one of the participants states, prevalent occurrences in the context of the Balkans.³⁷ Another participant adds that this, in turn, produces a space where everything is allowed.³⁸ Moreover, political ideas can propagate a narrative of vulnerability, thus leading to a state of fear or caution. Within the political arena, there could be an instrumentalist understanding of the issue of violent extremism, where narratives could be used for specific means – more precisely, as an instrument for the purpose of staying in power, rather than out of conviction. An interviewee reveals that even some humanitarian organisations, with attractive characteristics such as uniforms or symbols, are placed in the service of politics.³⁹

³⁵ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021, online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020, online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021, and online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

³⁶ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

³⁷ Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

³⁸ In-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

³⁹ Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

At the same time, radical groups represent interest groups that do not seek to be in power but strive to incorporate their values and ideas into policies. One of the interviewees believes there might be support in the future for political projects that show understanding for such beliefs and ideas, while another adds that such groups are apolitical, meaning that their interest lies in destroying the system, not changing it.⁴⁰

CULTURAL FACTORS

Through depiction of the cultural driver as a “way of life”, an interviewee argues that this driver is more of a form of perception than a factor of radicalisation in the context of BiH. It is primarily manifested through sub-cultures and means of identification such as uniforms, insignia, iconography, vocations within structures, and other forms of expression. These are mostly closed, social groups in which the omnipresent “us against them” narrative could exist but, as one of the respondents states, without a clear perception about whether radicalisation occurred prior to joining a group or after.⁴¹ An interviewee from a state institution believes that contemporary society is dominated by the “Al Capone matrix of success”, where young people are “excluded from social occurrences and often faced with a sense of hopelessness” and this could lead them toward radicalised groups.⁴²

One of the interviewees connects the issues of radicalisation and violent extremism with the patriarchal society and the so-called “toxic masculinity”, believing that such behaviour can harm both individuals and families.⁴³ Nikola Vučić, N1 television journalist, argues that “toxic masculinity, in its various nuances, is what conservative thought protects and the far right glorifies” (Buka, 2021).

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A respondent from the media believes that there is still a palpable fear of change and “otherness” in BiH society. For instance, a specific way of life in Salafi circles such as separate cultural and sports facilities, agricultural holdings, patterns of behaviour or eating habits, worries an interviewee from a CSO, who would not want to see a change in the social fabric of BiH.⁴⁴ Speaking about such circles in their previous research, Azinović and Jusić note that adherence to form can be one of the characteristics of the newly faithful, dedicated to physical appearances, symbols and customs (Azinović and Jusić, 2016).

RELIGION

Although Islam is thought to be a dominant factor of radicalisation in BiH, interviews conducted have not confirmed this assumption. One of the interviewees states that, in many cases, radicalised individuals were not practitioners, and their first knowledge of religion occurred within radicalised groups, where they sought a sense of belonging, which correlates with the previously conducted studies (see: Richardson et al., 2017). Moreover, another interviewee believes that the majority of extremists went “from nothing to extreme.”

Interpretations of a legally recognised religious institution may significantly differ from individual

⁴⁰ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021, and in-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

⁴¹ In-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

⁴² Online interview with female representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

⁴³ Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

⁴⁴ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

interpretations. While official institutions and religions do not justify violence, individual abuse or misinterpretation could occur. In her study, Bećirević (2018) also reveals that a lack of institutional religious education may limit the ability of individuals to think critically about extremist rhetoric or place it within an ideological context (Bećirević, 2018). For instance, one of the interviewees mentions her organisation's attempts to even work with some institutionally educated teachers of religious studies, who have shown radical worldviews.⁴⁵ On the other hand, another interviewee believes it is problematic to impose an accurate interpretation of religion – representing a tactic often employed by the C/PVE educational programmes.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, a respondent from an international organisation asserts that her organisation does not attempt to link violent extremism to any religion, when working on prevention.

In most radicalised groups, the existing knowledge is challenged in order to impose one's own worldview. The leaders themselves may have questionable knowledge but also a strong desire for attaining religious charisma. Several interviewees highlight the fact that religion is also used to legitimise one's own opinion through, for instance, declaring another person an infidel, or through the process of "othering". Moreover, leaders have a sense of superiority and use religion as a powerful lever to give themselves legitimacy through reference to supreme authority, which essentially represents a resource to play on people's emotions. An interviewee argues that places of worship that are turned into places of socialisation could serve as the main points for absorption of the aforementioned narratives.⁴⁷

DIGITAL LITERACY

Cyberspace is the dominant factor in spreading radical ideas because of its effectiveness, and, at the present time, there are virtual variants of gathering places and communities that could be considered as potential sites of radicalisation. One of the interviewees from a religious institution believes that there is no need to wait for permission to build a TV or radio network for sending a message, meaning that this type of organisation and mobilisation is cheaper and more efficient.⁴⁸ Bećirević (2017) confirms the importance of peer-to-peer contact, but also considers the importance of online interaction, suggesting that it remains unclear whether cases of radicalisation have been driven purely by online interactions (Bećirević et al., 2017). Moreover, Paton believes that the Internet and social media are implicated in both ideological radicalisation and recruitment through what is termed "self-radicalisation" (Paton, 2020). One of the interviewees confirms this idea by arguing that access itself is not an issue but rather how we consume the content.⁴⁹

Online space provides an opportunity to build a sense of community and gives an illusion of personal contact with charismatic leaders. For instance, a participant points out the expertise in producing online content and using the most modern marketing methods.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the existence of closed

⁴⁵ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

⁴⁶ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

⁴⁷ Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

⁴⁸ In-person interview with female representative from a religious institution, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

⁴⁹ Online interview with female representative 1 from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

⁵⁰ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

communication tools protected by encryption, but also the availability of online content that has not been removed, allows access even when individuals accused of violent extremism are imprisoned. For instance, even when ISIS was beaten, it was not possible to put an end to the dissemination of online content through social media (Balkan Insight, 2019a). Anonymity could, in some cases, play an important role due to the dose of secrecy and distance, but more in right-wing groups that tend to use forums and gaming platforms. On the other hand, “superstar” *da’is* from Salafi circles have a much greater influence than the media or academia, notes an interviewee from the media. Their online profiles allow them much higher visibility in comparison to the official religious institution, which overall represents an important sociological phenomenon, especially due to susceptibility of youths to online content. Such informal groups, although mostly operating independently, are often seen as part of one network, within which the religious exclusivity could be promoted.

While some state institutions are working on early detection in the online space, one of the participants states that it is still a largely unregulated field in BiH, with the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA) being in charge.⁵¹ However, in previous years, the CRA made it clear it was up to the police and judiciary to tackle violent and terrorism-related content (Balkan Insight, 2019b). Previous research has shown that many online contributions fall under the radar of law enforcement or social media’s own standards to remove hateful content from their platforms. Although hate speech and violent speech occur on a daily basis in BiH’s online space, there is still no institutional solution for “blacklisting” websites with inappropriate content, questioning the functionality of established channels of communication with the largest social networks.

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Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees stressed the importance of initiatives and educational programmes that encourage critical thinking and media literacy. An interviewee from a CSO states that for this reason her organisation decided to work on media pedagogy, in order to educate teachers, who in many cases are less advanced in media literacy than students.⁵² On the other hand, an interviewee from a religious institution pointed out that her institution recognised media literacy as an important step forward, providing educational programmes for their own employees.⁵³

TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS

One of the interviewees argues that external extremism is primarily fostered through social identification and the narrative of “us against them.”⁵⁴ Calls from the region, primarily Croatia and Serbia, could mobilise BiH citizens to go to foreign battlefields such as Ukraine and Syria – in many cases, even with the soft power instruments such as lectures and texts. Several interviewees suggest there are groups actively working together and maintaining communication, as in the case of groups from the entity Republika Srpska and Serbia, but the system hardly recognises such groups as potentially dangerous.⁵⁵ A participant from the media believes there is a direct connection between fan

⁵¹ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

⁵² Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

⁵³ In-person interview with female representative from a religious institution, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

⁵⁴ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

⁵⁵ Online interview with female representative from a CSO, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020, in-person interview with female representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020, and in-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

groups, as well as Chetnik associations in Serbia and Russia, with Russia showing a clear support for these ideas.⁵⁶ In that respect, formal groups enable the environment for informal groups to act, which is visible through both religious and far-right extremism. Therefore, one interviewee adds that official foreign influences do not forward radicalisation but use more of a divide and conquer strategy.⁵⁷ In some cases, assistance might be conditioned in different aspects, particularly in an investment-dependent society, where the process of getting into people's minds occurs straightforwardly. A respondent from an international organisation considers that the influence of the diaspora should also not be ruled out in the aforementioned context.⁵⁸

One of the interviewees believes that there must be a personal identification with global threats or occurrences in order to see their repercussions in BiH, with only the Russian and ISIS channels currently being relevant.⁵⁹ In his work, Jusić states that a silent battle for the "spirit of Islam" in BiH began in the 1990s, during the war (Jusić, 2017). Bećirević writes that, even today, students from the Balkans leave for the Gulf States, where they are being educated in the more conservative way and, upon return, they call for the "purification" of Islam (Bećirević et al., 2017). A respondent from the media argues that influences of Gulf States such as Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Jordan are visible through scholarships schemes and training of a large number of contemporary lecturers, but at the same time, adds that the current Salafi system in BiH is self-sustainable and does not have to rely so much on external financial support.⁶⁰ According to a BIRN investigation from 2019, some Salafi preachers were not receiving political and financial support from abroad but rather from local authorities (Balkan Insight, 2019c).

⁵⁶ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 24 December 2020.

⁵⁷ Online interview with male representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

⁵⁸ Online interview with female representative from an international organisation, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

⁵⁹ In-person interview with male representative from a BiH state institution, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

⁶⁰ Online interview with male representative from the media, Sarajevo, 18 January 2021.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to present a comprehensive overview of institutional (macro) drivers of violent extremism, as well as the complexity of C/PVE cooperation between different types of institutions, patterns of support from domestic and foreign actors, and the dynamics of establishing formal and informal communication channels. Furthermore, the goal was to map the drivers of violent extremism through qualitative research methods that are recognised by institutions as relevant for the BiH context. The research covered state institutions, international organisations, CSOs, religious institutions and the media, looking into drivers based on territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy and transnational dynamics.

The research primarily focused on two points – institutional interrelations and macro-level drivers. In regard to the first point, the study primarily explored norms and practices within institutions that emphasise C/PVE in their work, and especially focused on examples from practice, institutional perception of C/PVE, the main causes of changes in behaviour towards C/PVE in past years, cooperation between relevant domestic and foreign actors, and mutual communications. The research on possible drivers of violent extremism in BiH looked at the institutional point of view in the analysis of macro-level drivers.

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Most institutions show clear and specific forms of institutional practice. Furthermore, they place special focus on the necessity of preventive C/PVE action, and some have separate departments that specifically deal with this topic. CSOs try to fill the gaps created by the work of state institutions, the media provides space for critical analysis of consequences and causes of radicalisation, and foreign organisations usually adopt a multi-sectoral approach with a special focus on young leaders. Perceptions of threats by international organisations strongly affect behaviours and institutional practices. Several changes in the last couple of years, such as the focus on the returning foreign fighters phenomenon, new activities of right-wing groups, emerging radical milieus, engaging local levels in C/PVE, and perception of extremism beyond religion (Mainly Islam) have found their way in programmes and activities of most institutions. The Ministry of Security stands out as the central partner of most institutions, and the institutional cooperation nexus in BiH has its own dynamics where most financial and knowledge support comes from foreign partners. Lastly, the communication aspect of the collaboration proved to be complex, with pronounced limitations towards certain actors, such as the media, and on particular issues.

In regard to the drivers of violent extremism, the research has shown that not all are considered as equally relevant, but there is no full agreement on this. The first driver (territorial inequalities) is largely seen to go hand-in-hand with individual perceptions of marginalisation and injustice and is no longer linked to a rural-urban divide. It is not seen as an independent driver in its own right. Likewise, the second driver (economic deprivation) has been described as an indirect driver manifested on the individual level, functioning in combination with other drivers, such as education. As with territorial inequalities, individual perception, lack of perspective, professional success and low self-esteem play an important role. The third driver (political ideas) is primarily reflected through political polarisation

based on ethnic narratives and vulnerability. Research has shown that radical groups and organisations in most cases do not engage with politics, they do not aim to incorporate their values into the system or produce change but rather seek to replace it. The fourth driver (cultural factors) primarily relates to the “way of life”, which in the context of BiH can be seen through the prism of sub-cultures and ways of identification, but also through the issue of toxic masculinity. Speaking of the fifth possible driver (religion), the research has shown that there is significant misuse of religion in order to legitimise particular opinions and worldviews, foremost the assumption of Islam as the dominant factor of radicalisation. Research has repeatedly found this to be a false narrative in BiH, where Islam can even act as a protective factor against radicalisation. The sixth factor (digital literacy) is mostly used to spread radical ideas simply and effectively. It represents a significant challenge to analyse and affect because of the different ways individuals consume online content, as well as the inability to find an institutional solution to remove unwanted content from social networks. Finally, the last driver of radicalisation (transnational dynamics) is viewed as significant and is manifested both through actions from the immediate neighbourhood and from the wider region.

The CONNEKT project is methodologically envisioned in a way that each phase is based on key data and findings of previous phases; each of the project steps builds on the previous one, and each level maximises the use of a cross-regional approach. Therefore, when moving forward with meso- and micro-level research, the results obtained in this study will help to identify relevant communities and individuals. Institutions, together with the policies they make, are pivotal for any planned action at the community and individual levels – starting from the Ministry of Security that adopts the Strategy, international organisations or CSOs that carry out activities in vulnerable communities, or social work centres that deal with individuals.

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INTERVIEWS

Representatives of state institutions

In-person interview with male representative, Sarajevo, 4 January 2021.

In-person interview with male representative, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 21 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 9 February 2021.

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Representatives of international organisations

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 28 December 2020.

Online interview with male representative, Sarajevo, 6 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative 1, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

Online interview with female representative 2, Sarajevo, 4 February 2021.

Representatives of civil society organisations

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 21 December 2020.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 23 December 2020.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 20 January 2021.

Online interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 26 January 2021.

Representatives of the media

Online interview with male representative, 24 December 2020.

In-person interview with female representative, 24 December 2020.

Online interview with male representative, 18 January 2021.

Representatives of religious institutions

In-person interview with female representative, Sarajevo, 27 January 2021.

*All interviewees were based in Sarajevo.



What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being “the problem” into “the key” for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.



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