



Meso approaches to the study of radicalisation and violent extremism: a view from the Balkans region

Damir Kapidžić, Muamer Hirkić, Sarina Bakić, Anida Dudić-Sijamija



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D7.2 MESO APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MENA AND THE BALKANS

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Damir Kapidžić, University of Sarajevo
Muamer Hirkić, University of Sarajevo
Sarina Bakić, University of Sarajevo
Anida Dudić-Sijamija, University of Sarajevo

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INTRODUCTION

The CONNEKT project is a research and action initiative that aims to understand the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) among youth in the Balkans region. By analysing seven potential factors – religion, digital socialisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, political issues, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities – on a community level, the project seeks to establish a multi-dimensional map of the drivers of extremism among young people in the Balkans and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Additionally, the project aims to identify the interplay between these drivers in order to recommend tools and measures for the prevention of VE from a community perspective.

The CONNEKT research teams focused on four countries in the Balkans region: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia. The study aims to identify the main drivers of radicalisation at the community level and the ways in which they interact with each other in order to understand how radicalisation occurs among youth in the Western Balkans. The research teams in each country collected data through focus groups, in-depth interviews, online observations, and content analysis. Nonetheless, the report presents the findings from nine case studies conducted across the Balkans, with three case studies for each country – with the exception of one confidential case study from Bulgaria, where the project team determined that revealing all data could lead to further marginalisation of the community under study.

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In summary, the study found that economic and political factors, religion, digital socialisation, lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities, nationalism, hate speech, and lack of trust in institutions and the unresolved status of individual countries are the main drivers of radicalisation among youth in the Balkans. The CONNEKT project found that economic deprivation, political grievances and nationalist ideologies are common drivers of radicalisation among youth in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia. However, there are also differences in how these drivers manifest in each country, with religion, digital socialisation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics and political issues playing a larger role in certain countries. These findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to preventing radicalisation will not be effective, and that tailored strategies must be developed for each country and community.

The paper is structured in a systematic manner to present the research findings and conclusions of the regional outlook on the meso-level drivers of radicalisation. The methodology section provides an overview of the research methods used, including the number of case studies conducted, as well as the number of interviews and focus groups in each country. The next section also includes an explanatory statement on the methodological limitations for each of the cases. The social context of each country is discussed afterwards, along with the selection of case studies, providing the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the research setting. The drivers of radicalisation are then analysed in depth in each country, highlighting the main findings and their relevance for the context of each country. The points of convergence and divergence are also presented, allowing insights into the similarities and differences in the drivers of radicalisation across the countries under study. The paper concludes by presenting the lessons learned on the interactions between macro- and meso-level drivers and providing policy directions for future research and policy-making.

METHODOLOGY

A joint methodology for the meso-level research was identified and agreed on between the research coordinators and the individual teams before commencing fieldwork. The research focus is on the community level, conceptualised as spaces of personal social interaction that have specific identities and repertoires of communication and action, both with each other and towards other groups. Some of these communities are strongly institutionalised (such as schools), while others are highly informal (groups on social media). For the purposes of the research, individual communities were specifically selected according to previously identified drivers at the macro level. The case studies selection was also based on the following principles: relevance with respect to each national context, cross-country and cross-regional comparability, relevance for further research on prevention, capacity to use qualitative methodologies, and ability to obtain primary data. The research is qualitative in its nature and largely relies on data from focus groups and individual interviews. Additionally, content analysis and other tools were used, such as CrowdTangle. Ethics guidelines, integral to the CONNEKT Project, were followed, and informed consent or assent (in the case of minors) was obtained from each research participant.

CASE STUDIES

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** research was conducted on three cases: *Two schools under one roof*; *Organised groups of football fans*; and *Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers*. In the first case, interlocutors were second- and third-grade students in two schools of the Central Bosnian Canton that operate within the “two schools under one roof” system. The methods used included interviews and focus groups with students. Two focus groups (one in each school) were organised, with five participants in each, as well as five interviews (three with students attending classes in the Bosnian language and two with students attending classes in the Croatian language). For the second case study, two focus groups were conducted with football fans (four participants in Banja Luka and five in Mostar), as well as three interviews in Banja Luka and two in Mostar with all male interviewees. In the third case, the research team selected the two Salafi influencers with the most significant following on social networks. Then, their posts were observed for a period of one year, and the subsequent coding of the seven CONNEKT project drivers was performed. Additionally, the supporters’ reactions to the comments and their approval/agreement with the views expressed were monitored and analysed. Although contact was established with associations and communities that support the work of Salafi preachers, the planned interviews and focus groups, which were supposed to represent the second phase of the research, were ultimately not completed, as there was no willingness from the community to interact with researchers. Finally, for all three cases, all participants had to be between 15 and 30 years old.

In **Bulgaria**, two case studies were published: *Online conservative communities*; and *Football supporters*, while the third one was not published for reasons of confidentiality, for which data that could lead to identifying a specific community will not be highlighted. As part of the confidential case

study, six young members from two marginalised communities were interviewed individually, and an additional five expert interlocutors were also consulted. Looking at the two published studies, the focus was on young people, so all the respondents for the first study were between the ages of 12 and 30, while, for the second, the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 30. In the first case, three respondents were over the age of 30, but their answers were included due to their relevance to the topic and additional data triangulation. Nevertheless, a total of eight interviews were conducted, as well as the content analysis of online groups. In the second case, a total of four interviews were conducted, as well as observation of public Facebook groups of football fans. The CrowdTangle instrument was used in both cases to identify relevant online communities.

In **Kosovo**, research was conducted for the following three cases: *Political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South*; *Transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan*; and *Religious interpretations in the municipality of Gjakova*. During the selection of respondents for all three cases, the parameters of age (from 12 to 30 years), gender, religion, and balance between urban and rural areas were considered. In the first case study, there were 27 respondents; in the second 19 respondents, while in the third there were 24 respondents. For all cases, during the implementation of the focus groups, a schedule was made according to age, meaning that the first focus group was for young people aged 12-15 years, the second for young people aged 15-18 years, and the third for young people aged 18-30 years. In total, three focus groups were organised for all three cases with the addition of expert interviews (three for the first case, two for the second, and three for the third).

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In **North Macedonia**, research was conducted for the following three case studies: *Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo*; *Football fan groups in Tetovo*; and *Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility*. In the first case study, the research team organised focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and media content analysis concerning the 2001 conflict in Tetovo. A total of 10 respondents participated in the focus groups, while five respondents took part in the interviews. For the second case study, two focus groups were conducted with the *Vojvodi* and *Ballistët* fan groups and four interviews were conducted with experts. The youngest respondent in the focus group was born in 2002, while the oldest was born in 1996. In the third case study, two focus groups were conducted – one with members of the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency – and the other with children who are part of CEF Volkovija Tetovo as children-protégés. A total of eight respondents participated in the first focus group, while 15 children participated in the second. In addition, three in-depth interviews were also organised with selected participants.

TABLE 1. Research methods and total number of focus groups and interviews

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	BULGARIA	KOSOVO	NORTH MACEDONIA
CS1: Two schools under one roof	CS1: Online conservative communities	CS1: Political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South	CS1: Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo
· Two focus groups (five participants in	· Eight interviews · Content analysis of	· Three focus groups (24 participants, 8 in each)	· Two focus groups (five participants in each)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> each school; 10 in total) · Five interviews (three in one school, two in another) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> online groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Three interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Five interviews · Media and text analysis
CS2: Organised groups of football fans	CS2: Football supporters	CS2: Transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan	CS2: Football fan groups in Tetovo
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Two focus groups (four participants in Banja Luka, five in Mostar) · Five interviews (three in Banja Luka, two in Mostar) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Four interviews · Observation of public Facebook groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Three focus groups (19 participants, six in first, six in second, and five in third) · Two interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Two focus groups (four participants in each) · Four interviews
CS3: Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers	CS3: [confidential]	CS3: Religious interpretations in the municipality of Gjakova	CS3: Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Content analysis of social media profiles 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Three focus groups (21 participants, eight in first, six in second and seven in third) · Three interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Two focus groups (8 participants in first, and 15 in second) · Three interviews

The tables below outline a brief overview of the case studies in each country, including selection criteria and drivers:

TABLE 2. Case selection and drivers for Bosnia and Herzegovina

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	Justification for the selection	Drivers
CS1: Two schools under one roof	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The political context of the case. · Influence on potential radicalisation and existing segregation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Political issues (claims and grievances)
CS2: Organised groups of football fans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A history of public displays of violence. · A strong sense of identity or belonging to the group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities · Political issues

<p>CS3: Youth supporters of online Salafi influencers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Higher visibility in comparison to the official religious institution. · Online/virtual gathering places became places of socialisation. · Lecturers have the rank of superstars within their online communities on Facebook and YouTube. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Digital socialisation · Religion
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TABLE 3. Case selection and drivers for Bulgaria

BULGARIA	Justification for the selection	Drivers
<p>CS1: Online conservative communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Far-right actors are rallying popular support through spreading propaganda and misinformation. · Influence on policy-making through alliances with other actors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Political issues · Transnational dynamics · Digital socialisation
<p>CS2: Football supporters</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Hooligans are often used by political parties for political goals. · Dynamic far right, with rhetoric and tactics that moved away from violence and towards more veiled influence tactics, such as proliferation of online disinformation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Digital socialisation · Political issues · Territorial inequalities · Transnational dynamics
<p>CS3: [confidential]</p>		

TABLE 4. Case selection and drivers for Kosovo

KOSOVO	Justification for the selection	Drivers
<p>CS1: Political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Divisions in the city and varying levels of ethnonational political tensions. · Mono-ethnic and mono-religious character of the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Political issues
<p>CS2: Transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Geographic location – close to Kosovo-North Macedonia-Serbia border triangle. · Additionally, there is a significant diaspora in Switzerland and Germany. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Transnational dynamics
<p>CS3: Religious interpretations in the municipality of Gjakova</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Unique case for Kosovo due to plurality of religious practices and beliefs (Sunni, Bektashi, as well as different Tariqats within Islam, Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Religion

TABLE 5. Case selection and drivers for North Macedonia

NORTH MACEDONIA	Justification for the selection	Drivers
CS1: Commemorations of the 2001 Macedonian conflict in Tetovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 2001 conflict is an important memory-related topic in the domestic public discourse. · Most contested issue from the history of Macedonian-Albanian interethnic relations in North Macedonia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Political issues, mainly ethnonationalism · Economic deprivation
CS2: Football fan groups in Tetovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Possibly critical social milieus that facilitate radicalisation of Macedonian youth. · Ethnic divisions in the local football fan scene. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities · Political issues, mainly ethnonationalism · Religion · Territorial inequalities · Economic deprivation
CS3: Prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The danger of radicalisation in prison. · Children are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation, both online and offline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Political issues, mainly nationalism · Religion

TABLE 6. Intersection of drivers

	Religion	Digital socialisation	Economic deprivation	Territorial inequalities	Transnational dynamics	Political issues	Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities
Bosnia and Herzegovina CS1						X	
Bosnia and Herzegovina CS2						X	X
Bosnia and Herzegovina CS2	X	X					
Bulgaria CS1		X			X	X	
Bulgaria CS2		X		X	X	X	
Bulgaria CS3							
Kosovo CS1						X	
Kosovo CS2					X		
Kosovo CS3	X						
North Macedonia CS1			X			X	
North Macedonia CS2	X		X	X		X	X
North Macedonia CS3	X					X	

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT ON METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina's** first case study, the selection of participants was done by the principal of "two schools under one roof", which could limit the generalisability of the findings to other groups of young people. Additionally, the trust between the participants and researchers may have led to a social desirability bias in the responses – in the sense of saying what they thought researchers would "want" to hear. In the second case study, the researchers faced challenges in establishing trust and confidence with the participants, particularly in relation to the anonymity of football supporters and handling sensitive information. The researchers also had to navigate the heightened political and social tensions present in BiH society and distance themselves from any media or investigative reporting. In the third case study, the research team faced difficulty in gaining access to several target associations and individuals in Tuzla, Mostar and Sarajevo. This was due to prevailing mistrust of the target communities, but timing also proved to be a major obstacle as research was repeatedly delayed due to COVID-19 infections among researchers and community members. Interviews and focus groups for this case study could not be arranged, and the research plan and methodology had to be adapted accordingly. As a result, the research team focused on the online behaviour and experiences of the respondents or target audiences.

In the case of **Kosovo**, all three case studies focus on specific municipalities within larger districts. In the first case study, the research was initially planned to cover the entire region of Mitrovica but was later limited to only the municipality of Mitrovica South because of the high political grievances present in that area. In the second case study, the research was limited to the municipality of Gjilan because of its high per-capita number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). In the third case study, the research was limited to the municipality of Gjakova because of diverse religions and religious interpretations present in the area. These limitations may affect the generalisability of the findings to other municipalities or districts in Kosovo.

In **North Macedonia's** third case study, there were limitations in conducting direct meetings with the State Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency. Hence, the research was conducted online, and a written questionnaire was sent to them at their request. In **Bulgaria's** first and second case study, researchers faced several challenges when conducting non-participant online observations. One challenge was that Facebook's tool CrowdTangle was not able to scrape content from comments under posts, which is where the main source of data would come from. Therefore, researchers had to manually observe posts and comments. A second challenge was that the selected group and page generated a large amount of content, making it technically impossible to track interactions for a longer period because of page crashing, so the team had to shorten the period of observation. Additionally, the team encountered challenges in their initially planned methodology involving two coders coding a sample of 10% of the data, but ultimately had to proceed with two coders going over the same data for the same period to ensure comprehensiveness of the data collected and avoid coder bias. Other challenges included delays in data collection due to the Bulgarian parliamentary elections and COVID-19, and some interviews were cancelled due to participants' unwillingness to be associated with the labels "extremism" and "radicalisation". In the third case study, the research team had to ensure that the report was confidential because respondents were from a marginalised community in the country, meaning that results could lead to an increase in the exclusion of individuals or groups.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Balkans region occupies a peripheral position in Europe and faces significant socioeconomic challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the constant outflow of young people due to socio-demographic pressures, such as high unemployment rates and low wages. Furthermore, there is a rise of right-wing narratives, which threaten the fragile inter-ethnic and inter-state relations. The unresolved issue of nation and state further complicates matters and produces a precarious living situation for young people who need to build their future there. The wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which took place in the 1990s, have left deep wounds and continue to impact the region. Additionally, weak institutions associated with state-capture and corruption remain a significant challenge for the future.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In the post-Dayton BiH, the ethnonational narrative is ever present in all segments of society. Spreading the divisive narrative does not contribute to the preservation of peace and stability but rather contributes to fuelling ethnonational tensions and divisions. One of the most visible examples of division is the education system, which is based on ethnocentrism (Trkulja, 2017). The segregated education is most present in schools referred to as “two schools under one roof”.¹ This phenomenon represents “a part of a wider ethnonationalist politics of divisions in BiH, and the education system is a place where this is strongly manifested” (OSCE, 2018). Given that ethnonational divisions are present in these specific schools, **“two schools under one roof”** represents the first case study in which the possible drivers of radicalisation among young people were assessed. The research team presented the experiences of “two schools under one roof” in the Central Bosnia Canton,² which became a polarised area after the war (1992-1995) and where there is the highest number of these cases as well as attempts to establish new parallel schools where children are segregated along ethnonational lines. The practice of “two schools under one roof” is a violation of international conventions as well as of domestic laws and has been characterised in many court rulings³ as discriminatory and damaging both for children and for society as a whole.

The divisive narrative is firmly transmitted to all segments of BiH society and is closely connected with subcultures in BiH as well. The subcultural groups of football fans in BiH are often driven by ethnonational political ideas, and stadiums become and remain training grounds of various political centres of power. Thus, football stadiums in BiH have become widely used for expressing nationalist passions where hate speech is present in a wide range, from direct call for violence and hate towards

¹ More information available at: <https://ndcmostar.org/bs/dijalog-o-obrazovnim-politikama/>, accessed on 5 January 2023.

² The Central Bosnia Canton (SBK) is one of ten Cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

³ In August 2021, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina found discrimination against children in all schools that are organised according to the principle of “two schools under one roof”.

people of a different ethnonational origin. In this regard, many media reports⁴ confirm that violence based on nationalism is often present at matches in BiH, and some conflicts have had tragic/deadly outcomes. Based on the above, it was important to examine the drivers of radicalisation through the second case study on a sample of a **subcultural group of football fans in BiH**, given that they advocate nationalism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and homophobia in many cases.

The third case study consisted of examining the use of social media in spreading potentially radical ideas among youth in BiH with special focus on the role of Salafi religious lecturers. Namely, with the increase in popularity of different social media platforms, the number of online groups and websites whose contents are offered by Salafi influencers as well as the number of **supporters of online Salafi influencers (especially among young people)** is increasing in BiH. The popularity of Salafi influencers in BiH has the potential to negatively influence young people through increasing exclusivity and building uncritical thinking.⁵ Thus, in the third case study it was important to identify and map the main drivers of radicalisation within a digital environment through active monitoring of online lectures of the most popular Bosnian Salafi influencers.

Historical events in BiH (especially pertaining to the war from 1992 to 1995) are interpreted in distinct ways in different parts of the country in relation to the three largest ethnonational groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats). Different interpretations of events are woven into all levels of society, both in the private and public sphere. Therefore, it can be said that in BiH society a general focus on political tensions and relations among the three largest nationalities results in ethnonational and religious discrimination, as well as segregation. They are often the result of nationalist policies pursued by national political parties. Such problems complicate the position of certain groups within the society, which suffer the consequences of very difficult post-war socioeconomic conditions. Problems of direct and indirect discrimination and segregation prevail practically in all areas of life but especially in the areas of education, employment, solving housing issues, and access to health services and social protection. The connection between (non)exercising rights and ethnicity makes it difficult for those who do not belong to ethnic groups that prevail locally or nationally to have access to rights and opportunities in many of these areas.⁶

Political system

The efforts of the international community in stopping the war in BiH (1992-1995), establishing peace and stability through the Dayton Agreement, were based on the systemic use of ethnicity as well as on creating institutional solutions that needed to satisfy demands of parties claiming to represent the three main constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats). It is the emphasis on ethnicity and on the provision of rights to constituent peoples that strengthens political parties that rely on ethnicity and exploit national identity as a means to promote division and delay the integration of BiH society. National political parties represent the rights and interests of exclusively one constituent people, while

⁴ More information available at: [Koji su uzroci navijačkog nasilja? \(slobodnaevropa.org\)](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org), accessed on 16 January 2023.

⁵ All Salafi influencers offer daily advice and instant solutions in all spheres of life.

⁶ More information available at: [CRI \(2005\) 2 \(coe.int\)](https://www.coe.int), accessed on 16 January 2023.

accusing other constituent peoples of the overall poor situation in the country. It can be said that the paradigm of divisions is woven into the very organisation of the country, which is deepened by political parties in order to remain on the BiH scene and achieve their agenda.

Economic and social opportunities

Difficult socioeconomic conditions that prevail in society reduce the possibility for people to exercise their rights equally and fully. Half of the population in BiH lives in some sort of social exclusion, is exposed to the risk of poverty, and does not have the opportunity to completely participate in the economic, social and cultural life – implying that they do not enjoy the social prosperity because they do not have access to basic rights. Socioeconomic problems especially affect various vulnerable groups, youth and elderly. Their difficulties relate to problems of access to employment, health services, pensions, and adequate education. Ethnonational divisions affect the economic and social conditions of citizens, and ethnic minorities often experience hostility from the local population. Such intolerance is often prompted by statements and actions of local political leadership. Also, all those who are labelled as “Others” (e.g., migrants and Roma) are in an unfavourable socioeconomic position, which is characterised by extreme poverty and marginalisation. Even though their position is partially related to difficult economic conditions that prevail in the country, the position of “Others” is additionally worsened by the prejudice and discrimination they suffer at the level of the whole society.⁷

BULGARIA

Populism and radical right policies have become an inextricable part of the political landscape in Bulgaria. Even though it can often be read in the media that Bulgaria has been affected by violent manifestations of Islamic radicalisation and extremism, in the last couple of years political unrest and protests, as well as the migrant/refugee crisis, have provided a favourable environment for the revival of far-right organisations. As expressed by Dzhekova (2020), many reports warn that far-right radicalisation and extremism are more widespread and result in greater violence compared to so-called Islamic radicalisation, but they are not in the focus of the public. Similarly, the findings of the third (confidential) case study in Bulgaria indicate that most of the factors that contributed to the spread of Salafism in the early 2000s are no longer relevant to the current reality of these communities, or at least do not appear to contribute to similar processes. Nonetheless, the current challenges faced by these communities are related to ongoing political issues and economic deprivation. Hate speech, hate crimes and incidents against ethnic, religious and sexual minorities are associated with various far-right organisations. However, the lack of political will to tackle right-wing radicalisation is noticeable. Therefore, far-right supporters are increasingly united in the online sphere through conservative communities spreading political discontent, and calling for demonstrations and protests. Online far-right communities bring together traditionalists and

⁷ More information available at: CRI (2005) 2 (coe.int), accessed on 16 January 2023.

conservatives and are often a training platform for false information and propaganda (especially those referring to opposition to liberal values). Therefore, it was necessary for the researchers to identify drivers of radicalisation/extremism in **online far-right communities** whose activities are mostly directed towards national and ethnic minorities (such as Roma and Turks) through the rhetoric of exclusion of “Others”, even though they share joint citizenship, rights and even history with the dominant majority.

Nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia and racial resentment are present among sport fans. Football supporters are often described in the media as “violent football hooligans who are openly homophobic and often attack homosexuals...”⁸ A popular case that was covered by the media in 2019 involved an incident during a qualifying match for the European championship at the stadium in Sofia where the English national team suffered racist insults from the Bulgarian radical right, which caused the match to be stopped.⁹ Open violence toward minorities, Nazi salutes, and homophobia are only some of the problems that connect the most popular Bulgarian football clubs, which is why the second case study involved **young football supporters** (football fans of Levski Sofia and CSKA Sofia, which are the most popular nationwide, and football fans of Beroe Stara Zagora, which is one of the most popular clubs outside the capital Sofia). The third case study involved **two socially-stigmatised communities** that are among the most marginalised and neglected areas in Bulgaria. What is characteristic of the third research case study (marked as confidential), which included members of minorities in neighbourhoods of towns, is that on the one hand they are considered to be in danger of (Islamic) radicalisation while, on the other, this minority goes through a high level of stigmatisation and marginalisation and is often a target of far-right groups. Therefore, the case study analysed how social context predisposes a part of the members of the socially-marginalised community to certain manifestations of Salafist ideas.

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Recent media reports,¹⁰ and especially reports from international organisations, warn about an increased trend of nationalism, xenophobia and homophobia in Bulgaria. Hate crimes are not a new phenomenon in Bulgaria and reflect a wider increase in discrimination. However, the way in which Bulgarian authorities, encouraged by radical right parties, treat the wave of hate crimes (especially against migrants, ethnic and sexual minorities) disempowers all citizens to equally exercise human rights. Hate crimes are usually not investigated as crimes against victims due to their ethnic origin, migrant status or sexual orientation; instead they are often described as criminal offences motivated by “hooliganism” (Amnesty International, 2015). Failure of the state to secure justice for hate crime victims favours the creation of an atmosphere in which nationalism, xenophobia and homophobia spread in all segments of society (especially in far-right communities that nurture “traditional values” and are closed to “Others” and “Different”, as well as among football fans who through cheering, banners and chanting publicly spread hate speech and violence). Discriminatory violence has long-lasting effects on individuals who are targeted directly, on their communities (e.g., Roma), and on wider society.

⁸ More information available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgarians-turn-to-right-and-left-wing-parties/a-16770894>, accessed on 16 January 2023.

⁹ More information available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/football-fandom-and-fascist-generals-bulgarias-radical-right/>, accessed on 16 January 2023.

¹⁰ More information available at: Youth’s vulnerability and resilience to far-right narratives - Blog - Center for the Study of Democracy (csd.bg), accessed on 16 January 2023.

Political system

Since 2015, there have been two far-right parties in the Bulgarian parliament, whose characteristics Smrčkova (2015) defines as follows: a fundamental rejection of democracy, of individual liberty, and of the principle of equality and equal rights, and their replacement by an authoritarian system based on race, ethnicity or religion. The ideology of the radical right adopts a strong nationalist ideology built on anti-Roma, anti-Turkish, anti-immigrant, and anti-Islamic rhetoric. Minorities, foreigners, and Islam are predominantly spoken about as threats to the Bulgarian nation and state, and it is precisely the radical right that positions itself as an advocate of a stronger state and protector of national rights (Dzhekova et al., 2016). Between 2013 and 2015, Bulgaria experienced political turmoil and widespread protests, which, combined with the migrant crisis, created favourable conditions for the re-emergence of far-right organisations. These groups have formed paramilitary formations that patrol near the Bulgarian border with Turkey. In 2017, the far-right coalition Patriotic Front (PF) entered government, resulting in a lack of political will to address right-wing radicalisation and an increase in hate speech. The recent parliamentary elections in 2021 saw another far-right party, Vazrazhdane (Revival), gain a seat in parliament. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that normalisation of the far-right's discourse in public and everyday life contributes to social problems. It is most clearly visible in a contrast between reactions of international institutions on one side and events in Bulgaria on the other. The European Commission (EC) has warned that it had started a procedure due to systemic weaknesses in the fight against racism and xenophobia and systemic violation of European Union (EU) law (European Economic and Social Committee, 2015).

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Economic and social opportunities

The social dialogue in Bulgaria is developing in an unfavourable environment. The low level of economic development and accompanying unemployment, poverty, high level of corruption and political crises contribute to the increase in violence in society as a whole. At the same time, the decrease in social security contributions and the absence of social services (especially for ethnic minorities and refugees), decreased economic prosperity, inadequate employment, and poor living standards have deepened inequality in society. While socioeconomic issues should not be disregarded, they are only additional factors that contribute to the rise of violence in society as a whole. For instance, the Roma communities are believed to turn to religious radicalisation as a means of obtaining financial or material assistance and a sense of belonging in a society that generally alienates them. Therefore, when examining the effects of poverty on institutional responses to radicalisation, it cannot be separated from ethnic vulnerabilities.

KOSOVO

It has been clearly identified that religious contexts can be the major driver of violent radicalisation at the national level. It was also highlighted in the research that political grievances have a marginal effect and power but are still important. The case of **political grievances in the municipality of Mitrovica South** has been selected due to the legacy of armed conflicts and Kosovo's transition to an

independent country together with ongoing ethnonational tensions in this municipality. These ethnonational tensions reflect on the entire country as well. Due to the division of the city (June 1999), both the municipality of Mitrovica South and the municipality of Mitrovica North are mostly monophonic in ethnic and religious aspects (the South consists of a majority of Albanians and Muslims and the North consists of a majority of Serbs and Christian Orthodox). This political status caused economic deficiency and poverty, a high level of unemployment, and ethnonational anxieties and fears. What is important to underline is that these tensions have no characteristics of local religious conflicts. According to the researchers in this case study, radicalisation and VE in Mitrovica South, and also in the whole of Kosovo, is mostly part of a global extremist political Islam that has not emerged from the local environment or local religious traditions. Instead, local grievances have been exploited by some organisations from the Gulf region and some local radical religious leaders that are preaching radical interpretations of Islam.

The second case study on **transnational dynamics in the municipality of Gjilan** has been chosen to analyse transnational dynamics because of its specific social context. This municipality is situated in the cross-border territory between Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia and has an enormous diaspora in Germany and Switzerland. Gjilan's population is mostly Albanians declaring themselves largely as Muslims. The municipality of Gjilan represents one of the focal points regarding the transnational dynamics in the whole of Kosovo. Many inhabitants have their families in North Macedonia and Serbia. In this case, religion plays an important role related to radicalisation and VE, linked to transnational dynamics and digital socialisation. This specific social context is a very good basis for scrutinising radicalisation and VE. It is important to underline that there are significant influences of people from the Middle East changing the cultural landscape of this municipality and influencing already existing religious beliefs and traditions, especially in the context of political linkage with religion.

The third case study on **religious interpretation in the municipality of Gjakova** involves a social context defined by a plurality of religious practices and beliefs. Among the Muslim inhabitants, there are two main traditions of Islam, namely the Bektashi order and Sunni Islam. The Christian community is Catholic, but there is also a small community of Protestants and a few people who belong to the Serbian Orthodox group. The observed social context related to multi-religiosity is generally characterised by a high level of common living, but with some issues related to social and religious gaps. The religious gap is exemplified by the misinterpretation of Islam, which also represents the major factors of radicalisation and VE in the municipality of Gjakova. The low level of education and unemployment in all three municipalities are important social factors that threaten the social resilience of these communities and their developments in general.

Political system

After the dissolution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and a war that resulted in the establishment of an international protectorate, Kosovo became an independent country in 2008. In Kosovo, the police, military and paramilitary forces made by Orthodox ethnic Serbs fought against predominantly Muslim ethnic Albanians. Kosovo is a mostly homogenous country with Albanians constituting around 92 percent of its population. Still, Kosovo is diverse in the context of the ethnic and

religious affiliation of its population. Although a majority of Albanians in Kosovo are Muslims, there are also Catholic and Protestant Albanians, together with Orthodox and other religions. In this context, it is important to underline that most Albanians overcame religious differences and divisions by establishing a secular Albanian national identity based on linguistic unity.

Others who live in Kosovo include the Serbian, Bosnian, Croat, Turkish, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. The contemporary politics of Kosovo is created in a framework of a multi-party parliamentary representative democratic republic, whereby the President is the head of state, and the Prime Minister is the head of government. Parliamentary elections are held every four years, with the most recent elections being in 2021. Regarding the political context, Kosovo, as well as other countries in the Balkans, is a relatively young democracy going through a long transitional period from building systems of the rule of law, human rights to the free market economy. In the last few years, the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, a set of talks facilitated by the EU between the governments of Serbia and Kosovo, has generated an overall sense of uncertainty due to contestations to Kosovo's statehood. These negotiations started in 2011, three years after Kosovo's declaration of independence, and mark the first discussions between the two sides since the declaration.

Economic and social opportunities

Although there is a correlation between social unrest and poverty, poverty alone is not a significant factor in embracing VE in Kosovo. Many individuals who became radicalised or went to Syria to join violent extremist groups were not from economically deprived backgrounds. However, a lack of job prospects, equal employment opportunities, and adequate education can drive some youth to seek spiritual comfort within extremist groups. For instance, unemployment and social immobility were particularly significant in the case of foreign fighters. The relationship between religion and socioeconomic factors such as education and unemployment shows that employment and education are crucial in building social resilience against radicalisation and VE. In Kosovo's context, low education levels make individuals vulnerable to manipulation by radical imams who preach fundamentalist Islamist beliefs. Similarly, high levels of unemployment limit access to decent social welfare and have led to the recruitment of youth by radical imams to join the wars in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the misuse of bad economic conditions by certain Middle East charity organisations has also led to the recruitment of youth for the Syrian war.

NORTH MACEDONIA

The social context of North Macedonia is coloured by the inter-ethnic relations, particularly between two communities, the majority ethnic Macedonians, and the largest non-majority community in the country, ethnic Albanians. The fragile relations have influenced not only public discourse, but personal discourse as well, regarding issues of ethnic identities, cultures and historical matters. These issues are not only present within Macedonian society but also affect its neighbouring societies; in other words, the main conflict between Macedonians and Albanians since 2001 remains a divisive issue for the whole of Macedonian society, which is proven by the case study on **commemorations of the 2001**

Macedonian conflict in Tetovo. According to Trajanovski (2021), violence at and after commemorative events in Macedonian contemporary society is not a novelty per se. In the past years there have been controversies along religious, ethnic and national lines, and the legacy of the 2001 conflict presents one of the most heated memory-related issues in the domestic public discourse and the most contested issue in the history of ethnic relations between Macedonians and Albanians in North Macedonia. The conflict resulted in over 200 casualties and 100,000 internally displaced persons, and was resolved with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which led to a major institutional restructuring of the Macedonian state. Nonetheless, understanding the social and political developments related to this conflict can help to understand current drivers of radicalisation in the country.

The issue of violence is also contextualised within the second case study on **Tetovo's football fan groups**. The social context of North Macedonia can be considered as unique, particularly when speaking about inter-ethnic relations in the town of Tetovo. Football fandom in the post-conflict region of former Yugoslavia is linked to nation-building processes and the establishment of symbolic and physical borders between nations. In North Macedonia, inter- and intra-ethnic animosity and violence between football fan groups have been documented since the early 1990s, with some fan groups identified as promoting hate speech, political and religious extremism, and having former members who became foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine. In the social and cultural context, these specific subcultures are rich fields for researching VE and radicalisation within society in general. There is also an implied link with political actors, which is specific within societies in the Western Balkans.

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In the context of institutional dynamics in North Macedonia, it is important to underline the case study on **prisons and the Volkovija correctional and educational facility**. It represents an important study related to radicalisation's potential in Macedonian society within the prison system. The State Directorate for Execution of Sanctions in North Macedonia is working to prevent radicalisation in prisons by training staff and reaching out to potentially radicalised inmates. The National Strategy for Penitentiary System Development aims to ensure a professional approach to the supervision of penal and correctional institutions and to establish a probation system. The new National Strategy for the Development of the Penitentiary System continues to promote and upgrade the penitentiary system to ensure a safe environment with proper education and professional training, support for personal development, and constructive use of free time. These efforts are aimed at preventing radicalisation leading to forced extremism in prisons. There are two types of penitentiary institutions in Macedonia – penitentiary institutions and correctional-educational institutions. In total, there are 11 penitentiary institutions in Macedonia, including 4 penitentiaries and 7 prisons. The only ward for women offenders is located in Idrizovo Penitentiary in Skopje, and there is currently only one correctional-educational facility for juveniles in Volkovija, Tetovo.

Political system

The Republic of North Macedonia has a complex ethnic structure and is in a strategically important geopolitical location in the Balkans. Recent events, such as the Prespa Agreement signed between Greece and North Macedonia and the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria, mark significant milestones in the country's EU integration process. Ethnicity is still the

main political cleavage and remains important for political mobilisation. The population in North Macedonia is quite diverse, but Macedonians and Albanians represent the two major groups. Nonetheless, the country's ethnic composition and balance has changed since its dissolution from former Yugoslavia. The Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed to end the 2001 conflict, and constitutional changes were made to improve the status and rights of Albanians living in Macedonia. While ethnic relations have improved since 2001, there is still potential for radicalisation and extremist groups to gain followers on both sides.

Economic and social opportunities

The high unemployment rate and unfavourable economic circumstances for youth in North Macedonia contribute to the process of radicalisation. When individuals perceive a lack of opportunities to achieve a better future, they may become more vulnerable to manipulation by extremist groups. As a result, these conditions increase the likelihood of radicalisation among the youth. This highlights the importance of addressing economic and social issues to prevent radicalisation and promote stability in the country. In some cases, families of convicted foreign fighters have received financial assistance from the government, such as welfare assistance and child allowance. However, one of the past incidents involving the prosecution of three individuals with ties to terrorism, including the son of a prominent doctor and hospital owner, showed that economic deprivation is not always a factor in radicalisation at the individual level.

THE DRIVERS OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM AT THE MESO LEVEL

Religion

Religion is a potentially relevant mechanism for the spread of radical ideas in the third case study in BiH – (young) supporters of online Salafi influencers. Namely, the main topic of all social media posts of Salafi influencers refers directly or indirectly to Islam and the interpretation of Islamic rules in a way that is understandable to all followers. In their posts, videos and comments, Salafi influencers often use sources that are unverified works of other scholars in interpreting religious ceremonies and performing prayers (mostly from similar Salafi circles), which can be problematic and present an “introduction to radicalism”. A frequent topic in their speeches relates to the way Islam addresses temptation or punishment. Their followers support Salafi influencers as religious leaders who enjoy the respect and authority of like-minded people. The content that Salafi influencers publish on social media uses religion as a guiding theme. In addition, the driver of religion has strong links with other drivers (such as the cultural one), primarily due to validation of certain lifestyles through religious texts, which can be at odds with established, mainstream social practices in BiH society. For example, many posts include information and/or guidance on aspects or practices of everyday life, such as dressing, rules of interaction for women and towards women, as well as the use of facilities, such as restaurants, hotels and sports centres.

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In the case of Bulgaria, religion interconnects to the status of being a marginalised community. Due to discriminatory stances of the Bulgarian majority population towards socially-marginalised communities, the members of these communities tend to put their trust in various religious denominations that offer socialisation, spiritual leadership and a value system. This role was previously played by Protestantism or evangelicalism, and more recently by radical interpretations of Islam. Salafism and followers of Salafism are particularly attractive to members of socially-marginalised communities in Bulgaria because they show them respect through religion, and provide them with a feeling of belonging and proactive communication (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017), unlike the rest of Bulgarian society, which excludes them on every basis. Due to insufficient integration policies and targeted social programmes, which would facilitate their integration, religion is the point of gathering for those members and it is even more pronounced than among the rest of Bulgarians. Members of socially-marginalised communities who are followers of Salafism respect religious rituals and dogmas, regularly visiting places of worship/mosques, which symbolises an active social connection and a relationship of mutual assistance. Given the aforementioned, it can be said that members of socially-marginalised communities brought together by Salafist ideas tend to lead an active religious life, and have their own ritual rhythm motivated by a conviction of belonging to a “purer” Islam.

In Kosovo, religion is the main driver of radicalisation, as all three case studies clearly show that religion, in particular misconceptions of religion, is the driver that not only impacts VE and radicalisation but also influences social and political processes. It is important to underline that the historical shift of Kosovo as an independent country and change of political and other systems (just as in other countries of the Western

Balkans) created serious identity crisis among many citizens. This crisis is 'used' by various religious leaders to promote radical Islam in order to gain as many followers as possible. In most cases, religion as the major driver is linked to globally radical Islamist ideologies and groups planting the seeds of religious hatred, inter-religious animosities and radicalism. Various misinterpretations of Islam are directed at young people, who lack knowledge about other religions and cultures as well. Kosovo has a high level of religiosity among inhabitants practising traditional Islam, but there are mosques in which radical Islam is preached, and radical Islamist preachers are quite influential. Hence, some youth identify with them and the concepts they are preaching. Religion is also a significant aspect of life for many people in North Macedonia. Case studies suggest that while religion can be a catalyst for radicalisation and VE, it is only one factor in the complex web of ethnonational tensions between the two largest communities in the country, namely Macedonians and Albanians.

Digital socialisation

Social media represents a relevant mechanism for spreading radical ideas in the third researched community in BiH – (young) supporters of online Salafi influencers. Social networks can serve as a tool for socialisation of individuals with radical or extremist ideas and as an echo chamber where such ideas are amplified. The popularity that Salafi influencers have among (young) followers is a result of the ability of influencers to incorporate the latest audiovisual trends into the produced content. Furthermore, this content is produced in an innovative way to grab attention and engage a greater number of followers. Visual appeal, the language – which is adapted to the targeted population –, the translation of extracts from religious works (most commonly from Arabic into Bosnian), attractive topics, control of comments (only affirmative comments are approved), and the charisma of the lecturer who exudes authority – leave an impression of a serious media content that is only a click or like/comment away from young people. Due to their popularity, online Salafi influencers build up a large number of followers, and media attention is given to them. In this sense, online profiles of Salafi lecturers have become virtual gathering places, offering optimised audio-video content and thus ideal conditions for socialisation, while also replacing physical locations, such as mosques or masjids.

Social networks also serve as a strong platform for organising online far-right communities in Bulgaria, motivating new members via sharing videos and other content. Lately, the agenda used by online conservative communities in Bulgaria is focused on two significant topics: opposition to the promotion of liberal family values as well as opposition to COVID-19 measures. By publishing content with very often unverified information even when they do not call for violence, online conservative communities damage Bulgarian society because their actions cause intolerance and polarisation. The spread of misinformation and the blind belief of followers in the content that, promoted by ultra-conservative communities on social media, speaks of insufficiently developed critical thinking and lack of media and information skills to recognise such content as biased. What is clear is that ultra-conservative communities use social media to call for participation in protest actions in the streets, and they do not use Facebook only as a platform but also as a starting point of ideas they implement in the real world.

Additionally, digital socialisation is the most important driver of potential radicalisation of football fans in Bulgaria. The online environment is attractive because it tends to increase the extreme feelings of football

fans, allowing them greater anonymity and freedom, which is why respondents consider social media to be very influential (especially in fan circles where everyone wants to prove themselves). Fan groups use online groups and pages to mobilise new fans, glorify their clubs but also to spread political messages and express their dissatisfaction with political parties. Moreover, they also usually express hatred towards fans of other football clubs. Observation of the Facebook groups and pages revealed that football fans mostly express themselves through offensive messages and comments at the expense of rival football clubs and their supporters. In that way, the posts on social media become an important driver in the assessment of potential radicalisation, because explicit online visual content can be a trigger for conflicts at matches. Additionally, it is important to note that the narratives, ideologies and methods that hooligans use outside football stadiums could also be seen as pivotal for the radicalisation processes.

Economic deprivation

Socioeconomic problems, coupled with prejudice, stereotypes, hate speech and violence, which most of the population in Bulgaria manifests towards socially-marginalised communities – particularly the Roma community –, are some of the leading causes of accepting Salafism by some of the members of these communities. They find a way out of difficult social conditions and an escape from a marginalised position in Salafi circles that offer them respect and a feeling of togetherness, i.e., everything that members of socially-marginalised communities are not offered by the social majority in their own country. Unemployment and economic deprivation in general are very significant in the context of building the social resilience of the entire society towards radicalisation and VE. In all cases, it reduces access to a decent life and therefore many radical groups manage to recruit some unemployed and poor youth to fight in wars, for example in Iraq and Syria, or join and socialise with certain radical groups. Similarly, problems of poverty and social exclusion present the most serious obstacle for the social resilience of youth in North Macedonia. In this respect, economic deprivation is one of the drivers that deeply influences young people to join radical social movements or subcultures that are very much affected by individuals' or their families' economic deprivation.

Territorial inequalities

The project team in Bulgaria singled out territorial inequalities as possible triggers of radicalism among young football fans. A typical characteristic of football clubs and their fans in Bulgaria is that they tend to create a big rivalry with other clubs and fan groups. Often, the rivalry is caused by regional differences because, for young people in Bulgaria, the neighbourhood is the most decisive factor that determines their club allegiance (Dzhekova et al., 2015). Hence, the fan groups in Bulgaria try to affirm their identity through confrontation with other fan groups. Based on the above, it can be concluded that territorial differences arise from perceptions of rivalry with the opposing fans and factions or towns, as own groups are viewed as "unique". Accession and a "loyalty test" to a fan group are reflected in causing damage to the opposing club, physical attacks on opposing fans or on minority groups. When young people pass this "test", which is a rite of passage, they become a part of the faction, of a fan group with whom they deeply identify and share a feeling of togetherness. By joining, the fan faction becomes a point of unity, mutual support and loyalty to the club, i.e., it plays a vital role in shaping the individual ideological system of (young) supporters.

Researchers have also considered the link between territorial inequalities and radicalisation in North Macedonia to be significant. Specifically, the focus has been on the societal, political and media attention given to several municipalities based in Skopje and Macedonian towns, which are deemed to form the most significant predispositions in this regard. Other cities, particularly those with an Albanian majority, such as Tetovo, are neglected in many social, economic and cultural aspects – precisely because of the ethnic component.

Transnational dynamics

In the case of Bulgaria, transnational dynamics represent one of the drivers of radicalisation in the case study of online conservative communities. Namely, online conservative communities often use foreign propaganda and fake news (from the Russian state, Christian organisations, far-right political parties, non-partisan organisations, etc.) in their social media posts to oppose liberal values or measures against COVID-19. Such content contains inaccurate, unverified and untrue information, but supporters consider it to be true, verified and accurate. Even though football fans express rivalry towards other clubs in Bulgaria, transnational influences are seen in friendly relations of Bulgarian football fans with certain Western European football supporters' groups and in the access to foreign far-right videos and materials on social networks. Also, the project team in Bulgaria identified transnational dynamics as one of the drivers of radicalisation in a case study (marked as confidential) involving two socially-marginalised communities. Influences of the Salafi interpretation of Islam were "imported" in Bulgaria from Western Europe. Some members of socially-marginalised communities who accept the Salafi interpretation of Islam even identify as members of another nation and speak other languages instead of Bulgarian (Mancheva and Dzhekova, 2017). The acceptance of Salafism by some members of socially-marginalised communities enables the de-stigmatisation and re-stigmatisation of members of these communities and the joining to a wider community that is transnational and provides an identity beyond the marginal status and the discriminatory attitude they experience in the local community.

In Kosovo, too, transnational dynamics influence radicalisation and VE, and represent one of the major drivers of VE and radicalisation of Kosovar society, especially bearing in mind that many extremist ideological groups and individuals entered the country from abroad. Many organisations with a humanitarian and religious background entered this country and produced a significant influence on inhabitants through a variety of literature, religious courses, building religion symbols, and so on. As stated in the national report, the municipality of Gjilan is characterised as one of the focal points of the transnational dynamics because it is situated close to the triangle of borders between Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia, which is the "perfect field" for the movement of various extremists. This driver, as indicated in the study of the municipality of Gjilan, presents a fundamental factor of radicalisation and VE among youth. Global extremists' movements and groups, as well as radical imams from abroad, have actively advocated fundamentalist interpretations of Islam that are in most cases the very opposite of what is traditional Islam in Kosovo.

Political issues (claims, demands and grievances)

The education system in BiH advocates an ideology of division, based on the politics of cultural differences led by the ruling ethnonational groups. "Two schools under one roof" is a symptom of

ethnonational divisions in which pervasive discrimination, inequality and segregation of children based on their ethnicity and nationality are practised. Findings from the research reveal that the divisions built on politicised nationalism serve as the basis for establishing a divided community of “two schools under one roof”. The political ideas behind this institutionalised form of division can be clearly identified as drivers of potential radicalisation among young people in BiH. Moreover, many researchers warn that ethnonationalism and hooliganism go hand in hand with sport in BiH society. Football fans use ethnicity to justify their existence while their fandom groups serve as a catalyst for belonging to a politically-fragmented country. They use ethnic origin as a narrative for division and legitimising provocations and violence towards opposing fans.

Based on the data of the research, political ideologies proved to be a significant driver of radicalisation in organised groups of football fans. Deeply-rooted nationalism, divisive narratives and mutual hate are articulated in stadiums in BiH, and conflicts between fans often require police intervention. Because of such violent episodes, football matches are often played “behind closed doors” in stadiums. The violence seen at football matches highlights the fragility of tolerance between the country’s three ethnic groups and how easily intolerance can escalate into violence, often fuelled by far-right and nationalist groups. Data showed that organised groups of football clubs’ supporters remain a potential arena for radical and divisive political attitudes, ethnonational polarisation, and political instrumentalisation.

In the case of Bulgaria, far-right ideology is also built on nationalist rhetoric. Specifically, this rhetoric is aimed at preserving the Bulgarian identity, believing that socially-marginalised communities are a threat to the country. In this regard, the number of incidents involving right-wing nationalists has been increasing in Bulgaria in recent years. As police and investigative institutions avoid working against right-wing radicalism, such decisions favour the intensification or the normalisation of violence and hate speech in the public domain, especially towards socially-marginalised communities. Therefore, political problems are one of the fundamental drivers of potential radicalisation in the case study on “**socially-marginalised communities**”, which is related to another investigated case study on “**online conservative communities**”. Violence against minority groups is often brought into relation with informal right-wing extremists who gather in online conservative communities. They are also proactive organisers of demonstrative violence of everything that is not in accordance with their agenda. The research shows that, in online conservative communities, the focus is on protecting traditional family values, opposing measures related to COVID-19, and so on, through posts, videos and comments, and so on. That is, in the online sphere, members of conservative communities led by the far-right ideology are against all liberal values and everything that is marked as “harmful” to the Bulgarian identity.

When analysing the data, political grievances appear to be one of the identified drivers of radicalisation of young football fans in Bulgaria. Football fans expressed political dissatisfaction, which manifested itself as a factor of radicalisation at the meso level. Negative perceptions of the current leadership of football authorities, which are mostly connected to the political establishment of the country, and general indignation against the corrupt government and political parties were the basis of their political dissatisfaction. In the online sphere, football fans openly and intensively criticise authorities and ruling

political parties, considering them to be the main culprits for inadequate social conditions. There were also calls on other supporters to “demolish” such a system, which ultimately often ends in violence and hatred in their arena in the real world, i.e., in stadiums.

Political demands are strictly connected to VE and radicalisation in the context of the legacy of armed conflict and Kosovo’s post-war political situation. In the ethnically-divided city of Mitrovica, political demands are significantly higher than in other towns in Kosovo and this division creates many obstacles with serious consequences for the citizens in this community. The city of Mitrovica has ethnonational political tensions due to its division into two parts, which occurred after the war in Kosovo in 1999. The division was officially recognised in 2008, with the adoption of the Law on Local Self-Government. Mitrovica South is now predominantly Albanian and Muslim, while Mitrovica North is predominantly Serbian and Christian Orthodox. The local political context produces anxieties, which have contributed to a very complex social environment mostly regarding unemployment and poverty among many people in Mitrovica South, which can, in turn, increase some individuals’ vulnerability towards radicalism and VE.

In the case of North Macedonia, socio-political demands are the most potent means for radicalisation and VE. While the issue of political grievances does have a long history in North Macedonia, recent years have shown that the legacies of the 2001 conflict continue to influence the public discourse in the country, especially in the context of ethnic relations. This context, when used in a public political sphere, is a very influential factor of radicalisation and VE. Political parties, organisations of war veterans, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are deeply involved in commemorative segments that are connected to the 2001 conflict for both ethnic groups, Macedonians and Albanians, often being instrumentalised by political parties. This is achieved through the participation of high-ranking party officials in commemorative events, which serve as a tool to mobilise the party base, while lower party echelons utilise such events to demonstrate their allegiance to the party. On the other side, football fans’ groups might also represent social and cultural spots where radicalisation and extreme violence are present, especially among young people. This occurs due to the fact that these subcultures are very often linked to the political actors, political ideologies and political agendas, feeding the rivalry in the inter-ethnic context.

Educational, cultural and leisure opportunities

The lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities are potential drivers of radicalisation of football fans in BiH. Disenfranchised youth join fan groups because belonging to a group enables them to feel a sense of togetherness, gain power, get rid of boredom, and overcome everyday frustrations. In a country of divisions, love for football, love for the city, excitement for victory, and the togetherness nurtured by fans give a sense of a collective identity. Apart from group values, history and ethnic nationalism are the basis of values of some fan groups, which are no strangers to hooliganism, crime, aggression and violence.

It is crucial to emphasise that this driver holds significant importance within the subculture of football fans. According to the research, it is related to the need to belong to a group and the capacity of an

individual to socialise and spend time with their friends and fellow members. Football fan subcultures in North Macedonia dominantly view the importance of their ethnic, cultural and religious identities and it is a way for them to manifest it. Enormous influence of “trash culture” (low-quality and culturally-impooverished content that often includes vulgarity) supported by social networks and various indoctrinations in the education system, not only in North Macedonia but in the other Western Balkan countries as well, do not create enough innovative and interesting spaces for a majority of young people to spend their leisure time, and meet with other cultures and cultural identities. That is why the lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities, linked to poverty and deprivation, is a very significant driver of radicalisation and VE.

Specific socio-political drivers: nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech in Bulgaria

Although it was not primarily examined through the study, the research team identified one specific factor that exists in all countries, but is mostly highlighted in the case of football supporters in Bulgaria: the driver of nationalism, very often degrading to xenophobia and hate speech in online groups. It is closely connected to the driver of political issues, and has similar manifestations in several other cases, but is more extreme in the Bulgarian case. For example, in Facebook posts, in addition to information about football results and victories, there are frequent posts and comments on national holidays or posts about controversial historical figures, which gather positive reactions. At the same time, there are frequent negative announcements about events from everyday life that can cause fierce reactions from football fans, uniting them along ethnic Bulgarian lines against other ethnic groups. The research team concluded that xenophobia, racism and hate speech are visible in the observed Facebook groups and pages. Most often, pejorative terms and slurs are used for Roma communities, Muslims, Jews, or homosexuals. A particular way that football fans understand nationalism involves the idea of a “Greater Bulgaria”, i.e., that the Bulgarian nation needs to have a bigger role from the one it currently has on the international level, which represents a Bulgarian irredentism in relation to the territorial claims in its neighbourhood. Despite territorial differences within the country and hatred among fan groups, nationalism is a topic that unites fans. Under the disguise of “true patriots”, fan groups nurture nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech, considering “Others” a burden to Bulgarian society.

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE (SIMILAR CASES) AND POINTS OF DIVERGENCE (DIFFERENT CASES)

When looking at the drivers of radicalisation in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia, there are some points of convergence and some points of divergence.

Points of convergence in the report include:

- Religion being a driver of radicalisation and extremism in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia.
- Social media being a tool for the spread of radical ideas and for organising among young followers/supporters in BiH and Bulgaria.
- Economic deprivation being a major driver of radicalisation and VE in Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

- Football fan clubs and stadiums in all four countries being potential venues for radicalisation and extreme violence.
- Nationalism and xenophobia, which are present in all countries.
- In BiH, the lack of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities is identified as a potential driver of radicalisation among football fans, while in North Macedonia a lack of alternative opportunities for leisure and cultural engagement is identified as an important driver of radicalisation among football fans. In Bulgaria, an additional driver of radicalisation among football supporters was identified as nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech, which could also be seen as a potential driver in other countries under study.

Points of divergence in the report include:

- In BiH, religion is primarily a driver of radicalisation among young supporters of online Salafi influencers, while in Bulgaria members of socially-marginalised communities tend to turn to Salafism for socialisation, spiritual leadership, and a value system. In Kosovo, religion is linked to global radical Islamist ideologies and groups, while in North Macedonia religion is closely tied to ethnic identity.
- Economic deprivation is a major driver of radicalisation and VE in Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia, but the specific ways in which it contributes to radicalisation may differ.
- The role of social media as a tool for the spread of radical ideas also varies between the countries. In BiH, Salafi influencers use social networks to attract followers and have become virtual gathering places for the sharing of ideas, while in Bulgaria online conservative communities use social media to organise and disseminate their agenda, often spreading misinformation, and causing social divisions.
- The role of territorial inequalities as a driver of radicalisation also varies between the countries. In Bulgaria, territorial differences and perceptions of rivalry with opposing fans and factions can lead to physical attacks and damage to opposing clubs, while in North Macedonia territorial inequalities and a focus on certain municipalities can lead to neglect in other towns, which can influence community resilience towards radicalism and extremism.

It is important to note that each of the drivers of radicalisation may interact with each other in complex ways, and the relevance of each driver may vary depending on the context and the community under study.

LESSONS ON INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MACRO- AND MESO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Both the macro and meso levels of analysis examine the drivers of radicalisation in the Balkans. Both levels identify religion, digital socialisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, and political issues as drivers of radicalisation. At the macro level, the focus is on institutional perceptions of factors that contribute to radicalisation, such as grievances, experiences of exclusion or marginalisation, and lack of knowledge about other religions and cultures. At the meso level, the focus is on group-level factors that contribute to radicalisation, such as online Salafi influencers, socially-marginalised communities, inter-ethnic relations and animosities, and football fans. The meso level also highlights the role of social media in organising and spreading extremist ideas and amplifying extreme emotions.

In terms of similarities, both levels identify religion as a driver of radicalisation, particularly Salafism, which is often seen as a source of socialisation, spiritual leadership, and a value system for marginalised communities. Both levels also identify economic deprivation as a major driver of radicalisation, particularly among young people. Social media is also identified as a key driver of radicalisation in both levels, being used as a tool for the spread of extremist ideas and to organise and mobilise groups. In terms of differences, the macro level also highlights the role of personal characteristics, such as lack of knowledge about other religions and cultures, in driving radicalisation, while the meso level highlights the role of structural factors, such as socioeconomic problems, territorial inequalities, and political grievances, in driving radicalisation. Overall, both levels of analysis provide important insights into the drivers of radicalisation in the Western Balkans, highlighting the complex interplay between individual and group-level factors, as well as the role of social, economic, political and cultural factors in driving radicalisation.

CONCLUSIONS

The report explored the drivers of radicalisation among youth in the Balkans and presents recommendations for preventing VE from a community perspective. The study focused on four countries in the region: BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, with nine case studies conducted across the Balkans (three case studies per country).

Religion was identified as a driver of radicalisation among youth in BiH, Bulgaria, and Kosovo. In BiH, young supporters of online Salafi influencers interpret religious ceremonies and perform prayers using unverified works of other scholars, leading to an “introduction to radicalism”. In Bulgaria, members of socially-marginalised communities turn to Salafism as a source of socialisation, spiritual leadership, and a value system. In Kosovo, religion is linked to globally radical Islamist ideologies and groups and is directed towards young people who lack knowledge about other religions and cultures.

Social media plays a significant role in the spread of radical ideas among youth in the Balkans. In BiH, Salafi influencers use social networks to attract followers and have become virtual gathering places for sharing radical ideas. In Bulgaria, online far-right communities use social media to spread their agenda, often disseminating misinformation and causing social divisions. Social media also contributes to the potential radicalisation of football fans in Bulgaria, amplifying extreme emotions and allowing for the spread of hate speech against rival teams.

Economic deprivation was identified as a major driver of radicalisation and VE in Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia. In Bulgaria, socioeconomic problems and prejudice towards marginalised communities lead some members of these communities to find solace in Salafi circles. In Kosovo, economic deprivation and unemployment can drive people towards radicalism and VE, particularly among youth. In North Macedonia, poverty and social exclusion are major obstacles impacting society’s resilience towards radicalisation and VE, and can lead young people to join radical movements.

Territorial inequalities and transnational dynamics can also play a significant role in driving radicalisation in the Balkans. In Bulgaria and North Macedonia, territorial differences and perceptions of rivalry with opposing fans and factions can lead to physical attacks and damage to opposing clubs. Transnational dynamics, including foreign propaganda and fake news, can contribute to radicalisation in Bulgaria, where online conservative communities oppose liberal values and measures against COVID-19. However, the acceptance of Salafism by members of socially-marginalised communities in Bulgaria enables them to de-stigmatise and join a wider, transnational community that provides an identity beyond their marginal status in the local community.

Lastly, political claims and grievances play an important role in the Balkan context. In BiH, the education system is said to advocate an ideology of division based on the politics of cultural differences led by the ruling ethnonational groups, which serves as a basis for potential radicalisation among young people. Far-right ideology is a major issue in Bulgaria and attempts to preserve Bulgarian identity,

leading to incidents involving right-wing nationalists, violence and hate speech towards marginalised communities in the public domain. In Kosovo, socio-political demands are strictly connected to VE and radicalisation in the context of the legacy of armed conflict and post-war political situation. In North Macedonia, the ongoing issues surrounding ethnic relations and political history contribute to potential radicalisation.

POLICY DIRECTIONS

Based on the findings of the CONNEKT project, which aimed to understand the drivers of radicalisation and VE among youth in the Balkan region, the following policy directions to tackle the issue on the community level in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have been identified:

- Address the socioeconomic issues that contribute to radicalisation, such as poverty and unemployment. This can be done through targeted policies and programmes that provide education that leads to employment, or specific education that is aimed towards recognising employment opportunities. Additionally, strengthen the linkages between schools and local employers in all countries.
- Increase access to educational and cultural opportunities for young people, particularly in disadvantaged communities, to provide them with alternatives to joining extremist groups. This can be done through continuous financial support for local organisations and NGOs, as well as through investment in community centres.
- Address the issue of territorial inequalities that contribute to radicalisation by implementing policies and programmes that promote greater equality and inclusion. These can be programmes of affirmative action and community development or programmes that encourage mutual exchange between different territorial parts, e.g., between poorer areas and richer parts, and parts with different ethnonational composure.
- Counter the spread of extremist ideologies online by investing in digital literacy programmes of youth in secondary education (for instance, similar to media literacy programmes offered by UNESCO).
- Address the issue of nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hate speech in all countries by promoting education and awareness-raising on the dangers of these ideologies. This could be done by providing youth with the necessary resources to implement their own thematic projects.
- Develop programmes and initiatives that promote dialogue and understanding between different ethnonational and religious groups in BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia, in order to reduce the risk of radicalisation. The dialogue should also be facilitated among participants from the same ethnonational groups in order to detect and determine behavioural patterns that should not be encouraged (towards “Others”).
- Consider the implementation of early intervention and prevention programmes (e.g., together with football clubs and football fan associations) that target young people at risk of radicalisation and provide them with alternatives to joining extremist groups.

- Encourage transnational cooperation and information sharing among governments, civil society and the private sector through the establishment of professional networks. These networks could focus on specific issues, such as the role of social media in radicalisation.

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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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