

THE BALKANS 2020

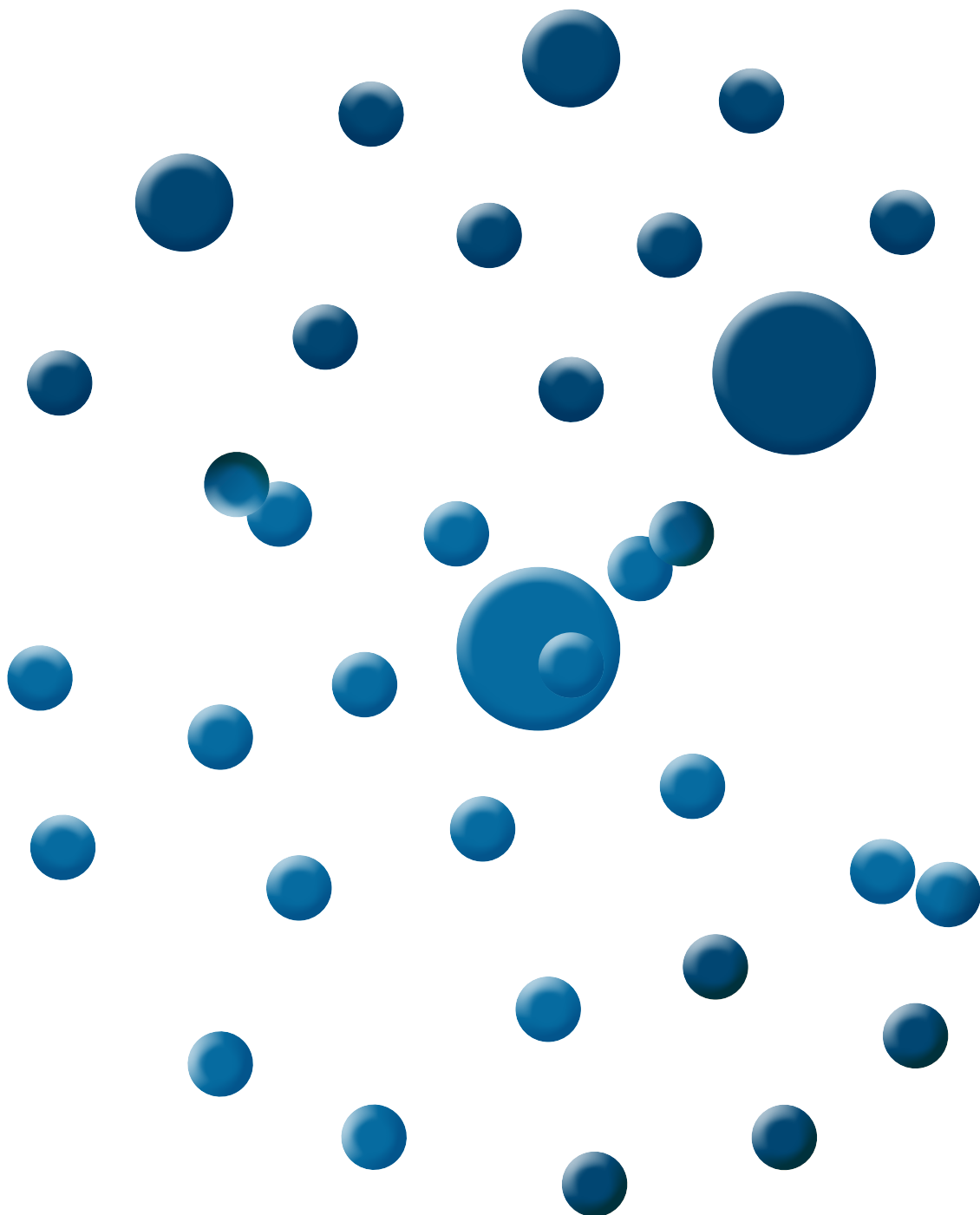
# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

## ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES



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**EDITED BY**

Denis Suljić  
Galen Lamphere-Englund  
Farangiz Atamuradova  
Sofija El Chami

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This series of reports use ideological or ideologically motivated extremism to refer to forms that are religiously, politically, and/or nationalistically inspired. Recognizing that typologies of extremism are fluid and lacking a global standard definition, we have elected to use this larger catch-all term to cover groups ranging from nationalist radical right actors to religiously-based fundamentalists. This includes racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE), as well as religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE).

Whenever possible, we eschew umbrella terms and refer directly to the extremist or violent extremist organization by name and, where discernible, the specific ideology advanced by the group.

We also refer to the radical right as a catch-all for hateful or violent far-right extremists and organizations when no specific organizational affiliation is noted.

Across these reports, we refer to Daesh instead of ISIS, ISIL, or IS.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic and surrounding social commentary had a significant impact on the nature and trends of violent extremist (VE) activities across the Balkans throughout 2020. The radical right, conspiratorial groups, and, to a lesser extent, Daesh-inspired and ideologically motivated actors capitalized on the pandemic to promote their ideologies and in the region. By disseminating COVID-19-related disinformation and conspiracies in their propaganda, extremist actors have muddled truths surrounding the health crisis in their attempts to radicalize and recruit new followers. Nonetheless, despite the evidence of high-mobilization levels online and offline, terrorist incidents remained rare. Exceptions mainly included individual attacks, arrests, and foiled plots. A potentially ideologically motivated 2020 shooting in Zagreb, the Republic of Croatia,<sup>1</sup> and a separate, larger plot in the Republic of North Macedonia involving an 11-member cell – with one member reportedly having fought for Daesh in the Syrian Arab Republic – were the most notable incidents.<sup>2</sup>

The Balkan region has witnessed other types of extremist activities in 2020, notably political demonstrations involving a wide range of different conspiracy theorists and extremist actors. In some circumstances, extremists leveraged popular political demonstrations, creating an environment where extremist ideologies intersected with ideas across the political spectrum. This has resulted in extremist narratives around COVID-19 that include Daesh-inspired, ultra-nationalist and radical right groups and actors. This report, therefore, identifies broader trends in narratives that span all of these groups.

Most notably, the pandemic has bolstered the radical right and conspiracy theorist actors in the Balkans more than other ideologically motivated extremist actors. This might be related to the downward trend of distinct ideologically inspired groups and individuals, particularly after the demise of Daesh in Syria and the Republic of Iraq and the globally rising trend of radical right extremism. The repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration efforts of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) and returnees from Daesh-occupied territories continued, especially in the Western Balkan countries. Within this ideological spectrum, VE activities, terrorism, and new cases of radicalization and recruitment are rare, albeit it is noteworthy that a few arrests were made in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

The radical right, ultra-nationalist, and conspiracy theorist groups have rapidly expanded over the past few years, and their extremist activities often linked to COVID-19

<sup>1</sup> **Note:** Information as to the motivations of Danijel Bezuk, the perpetrator of the Zagreb shooting, remains unclear. Although the State Attorney's Office of the Republic of Croatia evaluated the attack as terrorism, criminal charges were rejected due to the shooter's death. Vecernji, "Prošlo je godinu dana od napada Danijela Bezuka na Vladu: 'to je bio terorizam,'" *Vecernji.hr*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/proslo-je-godinu-dana-od-napada-danijela-bezuka-na-vladu-to-je-bio-terorizam-1530320>.

<sup>2</sup> EUROPOL, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Publications Office of the European Union," *EUROPOL*, Luxembourg, 2021, p. 65, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2021-tesat>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>3</sup> GCERF, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans," *GCERF*, <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

conspiracies and narratives, continued to grow in 2020. At times, these organizations and individuals appear to intersect and overlap with mainstream social and political discussions in the region. Such groups and actors have therefore been very successful in instrumentalizing the pandemic circumstances to increase their visibility and reach through online spaces and social media platforms; this has been particularly effective due to an uptick in online activity in the region as a result of strict curfew enforcements leading citizens to spend more time browsing the Internet.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, an increase in online radicalization and recruitment during 2020 has led to several serious incidents on the ground.

Disinformation and conspiracy theory campaigns have permeated the region, many of which originate from adherents of the QAnon offshoot known as “QAnon Balkan.”<sup>5</sup> Such stories are picked up in the uncritical, or perhaps deliberate, dissemination of disinformation and fake news in mainstream media. Radicalized and VE actors have seemingly not decamped to new alternative social media. Disinformation campaigns often run on mainstream platforms. Attempts to counter fake news, when made by governments, may run afoul of a lack of confidence and trust in governments and politicians. Simultaneously, an aversion to COVID-19 restrictions created a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and anti-establishment propaganda that was often synchronized with ideas that existed before the spread of the virus.<sup>6</sup>

While extremist and violent narratives vary from country to country in their interpretation of the pandemic, there are collectively shared trends among different groups and individuals, distilled into five core elements below:

- A robust online presence of QAnon groups and followers who disseminate misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories on social media, mainly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Viber, and Telegram. The most common false theories include shared themes, including collective depictions of the detrimental nature of 5G technology, face masks, and vaccination (the latter often tied to Bill Gates); shared ideas about a secret society controlling the world and the virus, and governments’ attempts to accentuate dictatorship via lockdown measures; and theories about the location and purpose of the emergence of the virus;<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Matteo Mastracci, “Online Intimidation: Controlling the Narrative in the Balkans,” *Balkan Insight*, 16 December 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/16/online-intimidation-controlling-the-narrative-in-the-balkans/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., “State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021,” *Hope not Hate*, p. 41. *Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung*, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-report-2020-12-v210ct.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Florian Bieber et al, “The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans”, *BiEPAG*, <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Conspiracies-and-COVID19-in-the-Balkan-English-2.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. and; Buletin, “QAnon, o mișcare din SUA care a convins mii de români că Donald Trump e salvatorul lumii. Își trimit copii cu măști false la școală și se pregătesc de distrugerea ocului mondiale satanice,” *Buletin de București*, 21 October 2020, <https://buletin.de/bucuresti/qanon-o-miscare-din-sua-care-a-convins-mii-de-romani-ca-donald-trump-e-salvatorul-lumii-isi-trimit-copiii-cu-masti-false-la-scoala-si-se-pregatesc-de-distrugerea-ocului-mondiale-satanice>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

- The propagation of conspiracies by religious and esoteric actors and leaders, including orthodox clerics and followers of various categories of alternative spiritual practices in the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Moldova;<sup>8</sup>
- Notable ideological overlaps between the broader radical right, including ultra-nationalist adherents, QAnon followers, esoteric groups, and lone actor narratives that are at times related to conspiracy theories;
- The active circulation of religious interpretations of the pandemic being a divine punishment in the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Kosovo;<sup>9</sup> and,
- A rise in radical right in form of ultra-nationalist VE narratives and incidents in the Republic of Slovenia, the Republic of Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina with historically deep roots linked to previous regional conflicts.

<sup>8</sup> DW, "Korona ne poznaje Boga," *DW*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.dw.com/sr/korona-ne-poznaje-boga/a-55691345> and Europa Liberă, 'Mitropolia Ortodoxă a Moldovei, supusă Moscovei, împrăştie teorii ale conspiraţiei,' *Europa Liberă Romaniă*, 20 May 2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/biserica-ortodoxa-din-rep-moldova-imprastie-teorii-ale-conspiratiei-/30622281.html>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Armand Ali, *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/imam.Armand.Ali>.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research and insights gathered in the development of this report focusing on the year 2020, several recommendations are provided below for governments and policymakers in the region:

**1** With the evident widespread of disinformation and misinformation campaigns, conspiracy theories, and VE narratives online – including through mainstream media outlets – governments are advised to:

- 1.1 Collaborate with technology and social media companies through partnering with credible organizations such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and Tech Against Terrorism (TaT), but also independently with other high-tech companies.** Such partnerships can support the collaborative development of legislation between governments and social media companies dealing with terrorist narratives. These partnerships can also lead to developing streamlined communication mechanisms between governments and the tech sector on how to monitor and remove harmful content online.
- 1.2 Fund training for journalists to increase their awareness, knowledge, and practical skills to accurately and unbiasedly report on issues related to radicalization, VE, terrorism, or inter-ethnic and inter-religious regional clashes.** Partnerships with international organizations that focus on countering violent extremism (CVE) should be further developed; and,
- 1.3 Launch public awareness campaigns to inform and educate citizens about the dangers of the rampant spread of disinformation and misinformation online inside a more comprehensive program of digital literacy education.**

**2** Increased regional collaboration and government funding are needed to investigate and prevent the alarming rise of the radical right, ultra-nationalist, and conspiracy theory movements, groups and actors, and related trends. Informed and evidence-based policymaking, and CVE National Action Plans (NAPs), especially in countries where implementation is nonexistent or slow, are required to prevent the spread of this form of VE and terrorism.

**3** There is a need to intensify efforts on collaboration between the government and official religious clerics and moderates within the countries and involve them in the CVE efforts. Although ideologically motivated extremist groups and individuals, mainly those inspired by organizations such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda, were less active in 2020 – narratives by adherents of such ideologies still produced and spread harmful content online during the pandemic. Among other activities, this effort can involve training religious leaders and active community members on identifying and handling radicalization that can lead to VE.




# METHODOLOGY

This report outlines data collection, analysis, and results from 11 Balkan countries<sup>10</sup> for 2020 to address important research questions regarding the putative relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and VE activities and trends. The main questions that guided this research include:

- Is there an observed rise or change in VE incidents, narratives, misinformation, and disinformation trends and campaigns propagated by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and radical individuals?
- Are there new trends in the use of online and offline communication channels (including social media platforms) by VEOs or extremist individuals more broadly? Did certain online spaces of communication gain more popularity over others? If so, what variables account for an explanation of this potential change?
- What have been the main activities utilized by VEOs and individual actors to exploit the pandemic?
- Was there a rise in radicalization leading to VE? What are the changes (if any) in radicalization and recruitment trends? What have been the most common enabling environments of radicalization?
- To what extent did the broader VE and terrorist trends change at the country level? Did any observed change impact the general regional trends?
- Which Balkan countries (if any) have experienced the most significant impact of COVID-19 on VE and terrorism incidents, narratives, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, radicalization and recruitment, and FTF activity? What is the nature of this occurrence, and how can it be explained through the lens of assumed pandemic influence?

<sup>10</sup> Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.

This report relied on primary and secondary data sources, often in original languages. For each data category, the content analysis focused on information and trends related to the main themes of the research – each outlined succinctly in the next section – which includes VEnarratives, disinformation, and misinformation campaigns; communications platforms; radicalization and recruitment trends; and regional FTF developments. The primary sources of data included content scraped from publicly available and accessible social media platforms. The open-source analysis included coding of specific artifacts (memes, GIFs, videos, and social media posts) based on actors, geography, and narrative themes. Secondary sources included open-access intelligence reports from the region (including press reports), online articles, and websites of official institutions and VE organizations if they were existent and accessible. It is important to mention that while this report focuses on 2020 VE and terrorist trends, for contextual purposes, certain historical events or explanations are provided to understand the present developments.



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## NARRATIVES



In the Balkans, the primary sources of disinformation during 2020 were followers of the QAnon movement and conspiracies related to esotericism (alternative spiritual practices). The outputs of these groups were occasionally picked up by mass media outlets, and therefore their reach was expanded. The individual and group narratives vary in spread and composition, while the rise of conspiracy theories is a perennially popular and growing phenomenon in the region. Radical right groups, in particular, have mostly capitalized on such theories and narratives and at times included them in their existing extremist views and propaganda.



Similarly, in the case of local conspiracy theorists and esotericists, many theories have grown organically and are fundamentally based on previous ideological beliefs and worldviews. In this regard, one worrying finding is the increasing embrace of conspiracy theories by religious groups and their leaders. Furthermore, radical right and ultra-ethnonationalist narratives continued to grow despite the pandemic, and at times capitalized on the latter to agitate against perceived enemy (minority) groups in respective societies and particular contexts. Other ideologically motivated organizations and individual actors, including those adhering to the ideologies of Daesh and Al-Qaeda, have instrumentalized the pandemic to a lesser extent. Still, there was a notable spread of religious narratives and propaganda.

The extremist narratives in the region vary in terms of composition, depending on the country, group, or timeline. However, certain narratives are seemingly more mainstream in the Balkans than others. For instance, one of the central regional conspiracies relates to the idea of a small group of powerful elites controlling the world, often quoted as *the few who control the world*.<sup>11</sup> Regularly propagated in similar contexts, a shared narrative about the COVID-19 virus being deliberately created negative attitudes towards public health measures and vaccines. However, the details of who, where, and why it was created and how people should react to it vary, even in the same country or within the same group. Ideas also cross-pollinate between different ideological orientations. In some cases, religious leaders have depicted the pandemic as a divine punishment,<sup>12</sup> while radical right groups have consistently drawn on conspiratorial content from diverse sources. It is important to note that although some of the mentioned narratives may not at first glance appear extreme, their re-purposing and use by popular VEOs or designated terrorist organizations in the region and elsewhere provides a nexus through which they should be viewed as potentially harmful or dangerous.

Finally, it was not possible to establish a life cycle of narratives, as various elements appear and disappear at points in time and combinations. Perhaps specific to this region is the observed synthesis of COVID-19 conspiracy theories within the context of existing local grievances, ideologies, and conspiracies. An important role seems to be played by seemingly low levels of trust in the governments, which, on the reverse, help legitimize messages which are alternative to the official government narrative. The below COVID-19-linked narratives achieved popularity in 2020 across the region, often in relationship with extremist or violent extremist actors.

- The conviction that the 5G technology and pharmaceutical companies are spreading the virus to profit from it;
- The claim that the virus does not exist;
- The view that masks and vaccines are damaging people's health;
- The belief that vaccines are deadly and/or are aimed at controlling the population;
- The idea that governments impose measures to maintain or accentuate dictatorship;
- The theological argument by religious actors that the virus is divine punishment; and,
- The proclamation that the virus was a creation of foreign powers, namely the American army and the Chinese government.

<sup>11</sup> Kurir, "TEORIJE ZAVERE SVE POPULARNIJE U REGIONU: QAnon ima dosta sledbenika u Crnoj Gori i na Balkanu," *Kurir*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.kurir.rs/region/crna-gora/3557233/terorije-zavere-sve-popularnije-u-regionu-qanon-ima-dosta-sledbenika-u-crnoj-gori-i-na-balkanu-video>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Armand Ali, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/imam.Armand.Ali>.

# COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS

In the Balkans, traditional social media platforms remained popular among radical actors. These include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Gab, and to a lesser degree, Telegram. In Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, the Republic of Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Facebook and Twitter remained the most commonly used platforms by conspiracy theorists, disinformation campaigners, and extremists more broadly. At the same time, individuals who expressed radicalizing narratives on these platforms have been banned by the company due to violating their community guidelines, shut down by governments, or have removed their own accounts.<sup>13</sup> This was also in part due to the unexpected sweeping rise of the QAnon movement and conspiracy theories on Facebook and other channels, leading many technology companies to ban content and accounts associated with this group and trend in particular.<sup>14</sup> For example, Meta achieved some success in eliminating QAnon-affiliated individuals, groups and pages across both Facebook and Instagram that were spreading disinformation around COVID-19 regulations and other dangerous conspiracy theories that threatened public safety.<sup>15</sup>

However, the aforementioned developments led to QAnon followers being pushed to other, smaller platforms with different community guidelines and less manpower to enforce against small-volume threats. For instance, based on the data collection of narratives in the Balkans, strong evidence of extremist narratives were found to use platforms like Gab, VK and Mastodon throughout Moldova, Romania and Slovenia. It should also be noted that Instagram gained popularity among online extremists, mainly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro. In Montenegro, Viber was used in part by extremist groups, but despite its popularity in the region, there is little evidence to suggest that Viber was leveraged by extremist voices from other Balkan countries. Some regional conspiracists were also active on VK, and Gab, particularly in Romania; both networks are globally popular with the radical right groups, but this phenomenon was harder to investigate due to limited available information. There were also reports of other, less popular platforms, such as Mastodon, among Slovenians. Websites that seem more private are also popular, particularly among the Croatian, Slovenian, and Bosnian radical right actors. In general, while there is evidence of a shift from mainstream social media platforms and communication-based companies, Facebook and Twitter continued to be the primary mediums used by extremists to spread VE narratives, propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and other dangerous content in the Balkan region.

<sup>13</sup> Mladen Obrenovic, "QAnon Gets Foothold in Balkans, Claiming COVID-19 'Does Not Exist,'" *Balkan Insight*, 7 September 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/07/qanon-gets-foothold-in-balkans-claiming-covid-19-does-not-exist/>, and; Judit Bayer et al, "Disinformation and Propaganda -impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States," *European Parliament*, February 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL\\_STU\(2019\)608864\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2022), and; Alicia Wanless, "Cut Loose by Tech Giants, Will Far-Right Extremists be Adrift?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 January 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/01/19/cut-loose-by-tech-giants-will-far-right-extremists-be-adrift-pub-83683> (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Julia Carrie Wong, "Facebook to ban QAnon-themed groups, pages and accounts in crackdown," *The Guardian*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/06/qanon-facebook-ban-conspiracy-theory-groups> (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Marianna Spring, "Facebook bans QAnon conspiracy theory accounts across all platforms," *BBC News*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54443878> (accessed 20 January 2022).

# RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT TACTICS

This report has mainly covered right-wing and conspiracy narratives to this point, but it is worth noting that the Balkans have also historically been a source of recruitment for religiously-inspired groups like Daesh. However, support for ideologies and groups like Daesh has declined in Western Balkans since the beginning of the pandemic. The Balkans countries have generally recorded high numbers of foreign terrorist fighters joining armed conflicts in the past decade, especially when it comes to Balkans residents and citizens joining Daesh in Iraq and Syria. However, the downtrend in support of such groups and ideologies started roughly in 2015 when the last departures by citizens from the region to Syria and Iraq were recorded.<sup>16</sup> Expectedly, there were no significant and systematic efforts at recruitment or reported cases in the countries mentioned above in 2020. This progress is due to several factors, including the territorial losses of Daesh in Syria in 2019. Additionally, the intensified activities of regional security bodies, incarceration of returning adult offenders and local recruiters, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, and amendments to national laws that increased criminal penalties for involvement in terrorist activities have impacted this trend. Many adult male returnees and recruiters remain in prison, while terrorist networks they once may have been a part of have weakened or dissolved. Singular cases of recruitment and mobilization to Daesh-linked ideological groups have been noted in Romania<sup>17</sup> and Bulgaria,<sup>18</sup> though these did not constitute a broader trend in these countries.

In the last several years, the fast and global rise of radical right extremist ideologies has also transpired in the Balkans across Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Historical ethnonationalist narratives have been leveraged alongside Neo-Nazi, Islamophobic, anti-Roma, anti-Semitic, anti-immigration, and, recently, anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments. The surge in the radical right movement in Western Balkans is troubling as radical right terrorists including the perpetrators of the 2011 Kingdom of Norway and 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand, attacks, both of whom openly expressed their support for Serbian ultra-nationalist ideology while finding inspiration in convicted war criminals such as Radovan Karadžić.<sup>19</sup> This raises further questions about the transnational exporting of radical right ideas from the Western Balkans worldwide. Notable recruitment activities in this area were recorded in Belgrade in 2020 when music bands associated with Neo-Nazi organized concerts and events to celebrate famous European-based Neo-Nazi figures. These include Ian Stuart Donaldson, who in 1987 founded the UK-based radical right group Blood & Honour.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Shtuni, "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/western-balkans-foreign-fighters-homegrown-jihadis-trends-implications/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Filon Stan, "Cum erau să ajungă teroriștii ISIS în județul Arad și cine e femeia care încerca să îi aducă," *Playtech Impact*, 15 May 2020, <https://playtech.ro/stiri/cum-erai-sa-ajunga-teroristii-isis-in-judetul-arad-si-cine-e-femeia-care-incerca-sa-i-aduca-126163>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Bulgarian News Agency, "Bulgarian National of Syrian Descent Detained for Suspected Terrorism in Raid in Seaside City of Bourgas," *Bulgarian News Agency*, 1 July 2020, <http://www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/2239060>.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Pidd, "Anders Behring Breivik attacks inspired by Serbian nationalists, court hears," *The Guardian*, 18 April 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/18/anders-behring-breivik-serb-nationalists>, and; Robert Coalson, "Christchurch Attacks: Suspect Took Inspiration From Former Yugoslavia's Ethnically Fueled Wars," *Radio Free Europe*, 15 March 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/christchurch-attacks-yugoslavia-tarrant-inspiration-suspect-new-zealand/29823655.html>, (accessed 20 January 2022), and; Faruk Vele, "Breivik i Tarrant/Karadzic – zlo koje povezuje teroriste, masovne ubice i islamofobe," *Radio Sarajevo*, 15 March 2019, <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala teme/karadzic-zlo-koje-je-povezuje-teroriste-masovne-ubice-i-islamofobe/329983>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Nevena Bogdanović, "Grupe i Organizacije iza zabranjenog koncerta u Beogradu," *Slobodna Evropa*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ko-su-grupe-i-organizacije-iza-zabranjenog-koncerta-u-beogradu-/30889077.html>, (accessed 25 December 2021).

A related trend was the morphing of previously unpolitical esoteric groups, which included elements of a conspiracy seeking to radicalize and recruit new members. Many have incorporated radical right ideas or groups more formally – even participating in shared demonstrations against COVID-19 measures. In this regard, an evident increase in conspiracy theories, and the number of sympathizers and mobilization for radical right ideologies and groups spreading exponentially, has been observed across the region.

Significant terrorist and VE activities, excluding the Zagreb shooting and the North Macedonia plot, remained rare during 2020 in the region. However, other events transpired on the ground correlated with the dissemination of hate content, radicalization and recruitment. For instance, the wave of demonstrations involving extremist groups was notable across the spectrum, which partly intersected with non-extremist or non-COVID-19-related protests. These events constituted an opportunity for groups and individuals belonging to different ideological orientations to meet and march together, thus increasing the chances of cross-pollination among radical right ideologies. Mobilization for demonstrations is also seen on social media and constitutes an opportunity to spread and consolidate extremist and conspiracy narratives.



# FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS (FTFS)

## RECRUITMENT, TRAVEL, AND DESTINATIONS

Since 2015/2016, there have been no confirmed cases of foreign terrorist fighters departing from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, and Montenegro to join violent extremist organizations in Syria or Iraq.<sup>21</sup> However, some arrests did occur in other Balkan countries. For instance, in Romania, a woman was arrested in 2020 for sympathizing with Daesh and allegedly bringing FTFs to Romania.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, a Bulgarian foreign terrorist fighter of Syrian descent, traveling back and forth to Syria, was arrested in 2020.<sup>23</sup> In the same manner, in Moldova, two fighters were arrested in 2020, one of whom was a foreign national.<sup>24</sup>

To understand the phenomenon of the downward FTF trend in the Balkans, it is essential to note that this progress may partially be attributed to the repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returnees from Syria and Iraq in recent years. Western Balkan countries have successfully repatriated hundreds of their citizens in the last several years. Kosovo successfully repatriated about 110 individuals;<sup>25</sup> North Macedonia repatriated around 76 nationals;<sup>26</sup> Albania repatriated 45 citizens; and Bosnia and Herzegovina repatriated more than 80 of its residents.<sup>27</sup> Notably, most returnees have been women and children.

In 2020, repatriations mostly stalled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some countries nonetheless continued efforts. For instance, Albania managed to undertake one repatriation in October, involving a woman and four children from the Al-Hol camp in Syria. Similarly, with the support of the Turkish Government, Moldova repatriated one woman and four children. In March of that year, North Macedonia repatriated one woman and two children.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Adrian Shtuni, "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/western-balkans-foreign-fighters-homegrown-jihadis-trends-implications/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Filon stan, "Cum erau să ajungă teroriștii ISIS în județul Arad și cine e femeia care încerca să îi aducă," *Playtech Impact*, 15 May 2020, <https://playtech.ro/stiri/cum-erai-sa-ajunga-teroristii-isis-in-judetul-arad-si-cine-e-femeia-care-incerca-sa-ii-aduca-126163>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Bulgarian News Agency, "Bulgarian National of Syrian Descent Detained for Suspected Terrorism in Raid in Seaside City of Bourgas," *Bulgarian News Agency*, 1 July 2020, <http://www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/2239060>.

<sup>24</sup> TVR Moldova, "Membru al organizației extremist-teroriste ISIS, arestat la Aeroportul Chișinău în timp ce încerca să iasă din Republica Moldova cu un pașaport fals," *TVR Moldova*, 20 January 2020, <http://tvrmdova.md/actualitate/membru-al-organizatiei-extremist-teroriste-isis-arestat-la-aeroportul-chisinau-in-timp-ce-incerca-sa-iasa-din-republica-moldova-cu-un-pasaport-fals/>, and; "Un fost luptător de partea teroriștilor din Statul Islamic, reținut în Moldova," *Click*, 9 July 2019, <http://news.click.md/story/un-fost-luptator-de-partea-teroristilor-din-statul-islamic-r-3fd54af2190709mdro>.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Shtuni, "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/western-balkans-foreign-fighters-homegrown-jihadis-trends-implications/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Commission Staff, "North Macedonia 2020 Report," *European Commission*, 6 November 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>27</sup> GCERF, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans," GCERF, <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf>, and; Armin Krzalic et al, "Travelers to Syria = A Criminological and Security Analysis with Special Focus on Returnees from Syrian Battlefronts," *Hedayah*, 2020, <https://hedayahcenter.org/resources/travelers-to-syria-a-criminological-and-security-analysis-with-special-focus-on-returnees-from-syrian-battlefronts/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>28</sup> European Commission, "North Macedonia 2020 Report," *Europa.eu*, Brussels, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

# COUNTRY SUMMARIES

## ALBANIA

The ideology of groups like Daesh has undoubtedly been the most popular form of extremism in Albania in recent history. A relatively high number of Albanian citizens joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq. In 2020, the government began a successful campaign for repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration, initially repatriating one woman and four children. In the same year, several other P/CVE initiatives were also implemented. COVID-19 related disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories were typically spread via individual conspiracy theorists on their social media accounts, from where they were identified by the mainstream media.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

In Albania, ideologically-inspired groups such as Daesh are the most prevalent. The radical right, often identified as Christian radicals in the country, were mostly conspiracy theorists. The subscribers of both radical right and ideologically motivated groups and individuals, operate mainly online on social media sites. Disinformation spread by such groups during the pandemic period has included conspiratorial narratives, localized versions of QAnon content, and political disinformation.

Social media sites and platforms used to express anger and resentment and even hatred against the government have either shut down or were barely active. This did not exclude the possibility of such conversations being taken into more private chatting networks but also on platforms that are not under the control of the local government – a trend widely noticed in other countries. For instance, Telegram became a popular network, but since many such networks were tracked down, they also decreased in popularity; thus, the primary medium for delivering radical messages was Facebook and Twitter, while accounts were either from private individuals or community groups. Some still active in 2020 included the page of Armand Ali (Imam) whose house was previously reportedly raided by the anti-terror police.<sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup> The profiles of Christian radical right extremists popular online, for instance, Anton Zefi and Luigji Marku – have at times been removed. A monitoring report of January 2020, commissioned by the CVE Center, on online radical information in Albania also concluded that Facebook, followed by YouTube and Twitter, accounts for several dozen channels which disseminate radical propaganda or hate speech. Websites and online gaming environments are also popular mediums for radicalization in Albania.<sup>31</sup> Most of these online spaces were to some capacity of religious nature, followed by the extremism of political and ethnic nature.<sup>32</sup> Yet, this propaganda was not deemed threatening enough to shut down the pages or charge the individuals on “inciting violence” and “spreading extremist propaganda.” In 2020, the General Prosecutor’s office registered 12 penal cases related to terrorism: six for distributing terrorist propaganda, three for terrorism financing, one for an attempt to

<sup>29</sup> Armand Ali is a controversial religious figure in Albania as he is one of the few Imams who did not distance himself from the actions of „the 9 Imams” who were arrested and imprisoned on terrorism charges in Albania in 2016. Armand Ali took over the mosque where the 9 Imams operated right after they were imprisoned. He has also received religious education from the university of Medina, like the two other main imams in the group of “the 9 Imams.”

<sup>30</sup> Olsi Jazexhi, “What does US legal aid mean for Balkan Muslims?” *Daily Sabah*, 19 November 2014, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/2014/11/19/what-does-us-legal-aid-mean-for-balkan-muslims>, (accessed 7 March 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Edlira Gjollëshi, and E. Buci, “The Violent Extremism Propaganda Circulating on Online Platforms in Albania,” *CVE Center*, [http://www.asp.al/pdf/Monitoring\\_report\\_CVE\\_ENG-converted\\_11.pdf?fbclid=IwAR24acmJAU4zleq2YXTZ7a1U5MJ9MM5BiNsdXAemsrCPCxxP5\\_FGhft8bY](http://www.asp.al/pdf/Monitoring_report_CVE_ENG-converted_11.pdf?fbclid=IwAR24acmJAU4zleq2YXTZ7a1U5MJ9MM5BiNsdXAemsrCPCxxP5_FGhft8bY), (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

recruit individuals for terrorist actions, and two for terrorism financing.<sup>33</sup> Proving a direct link between COVID-19 and these instances is challenging: though as the next few paragraphs demonstrate, online propaganda in particular has certainly included elements linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disinformation campaigns were typically spread via conspiracy theorists on their social media accounts, where they were frequently picked up by mainstream media. One example of this was a conspiracy theorist fond of re-posting and localizing QAnon content: Alfred Cako.<sup>34</sup> His posts consisted of political disinformation campaigns to smear political opponents, COVID-19-related, and circulated to attract attention and increase revenues. Due to the pervasiveness of such disinformation, even well-established news agencies were observed disseminating such content.

COVID-19-related extremist narratives changed from denying the effectiveness of the vaccine to claiming that it was intended to control the population and that it would be used as, as part of a “plandemy,” and as a “weapon” to deny citizens’ rights and freedoms. Bill Gates was often associated with this type of narrative (*see image 1*). Yet, others claimed that the “Covid vaccine is like self-euthanasia – those who have it will die within a year.” Some claimed that it would transform our genes, or that they are only being given to ordinary citizens whilst the elites avoid it because they want to avoid being controlled.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Muslim leaders like Armand Ali have used the case of religious gathering restrictions to incite discontent about religious freedoms being taken away.<sup>36</sup> He is also known to have spoken about the pandemic along the lines of what Daesh or Boko Haram described as “Allah’s punishment for mankind.” On the other hand, some radicalized individuals active on social media claimed that the government was infringing on religious freedom by limiting prayer gatherings under the pretext of COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>37</sup>

Other disinformation circulated around the vaccine and origins of the virus, claiming that they were fake and that most likely were going to negatively affect health. The most popular COVID-19-related extremist narratives included: the belief that the Chinese government created the virus; the conspiracy of pharmaceutical companies helping spread the virus;<sup>38</sup> the claim that the 5G project helped spread the virus; the alleged creation of the virus by the US Army how the vaccine will install micro-chips into our bodies; the claim that the COVID-19 originated from a laboratory in Wuhan; and finally, that the vaccine is a tool to exterminate people. The most common incidents related to the above narratives were protests and disinformation campaigns.<sup>39</sup> Citizens had organized several protests against the restrictions, however, they quickly died out amid police pressure.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> General Prosecutor of Albania, “Yearly Report to the National Assembly: 2020,” April 2021, p. 11. [https://www.pp.gov.al/rc/doc/Raporti\\_Vjeter\\_2020\\_Kuvendit\\_Kriminaliteti\\_PP\\_5290.pdf](https://www.pp.gov.al/rc/doc/Raporti_Vjeter_2020_Kuvendit_Kriminaliteti_PP_5290.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Cako, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/alfred.cako>, (accessed 23 September 2021); and M. Obrenovic, “QAnon gets foothold in WB claiming that COVID-19 ‘does not exist,’” *BIRN*, 7 September 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/07/qanon-gets-foothold-in-balkans-claiming-covid-19-does-not-exist/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Top Channel Albania, YouTube, “Alfred Cako speaks on the pandemic agenda,” September 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a49JAZskiVKS&ab\\_channel=TopChannelAlbania](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a49JAZskiVKS&ab_channel=TopChannelAlbania), (accessed 3 December 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Armand Ali, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/imam.Armand.Ali>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Florian Bieber, T. Prelec, Z. Nechev and D. Jovic, “The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and Covid-19 in the WB,” *BiEPAG*, 1 December 2020, <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Conspiracy-and-Covid19-in-the-Balkans-ALBANIAN.pdf>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Florian Bieber et al, “The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and Covid-19 in the WB,” *BiEPAG*, 1 December 2020, <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Conspiracies-and-COVID19-in-the-Balkan-English-2.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Kreizia Velija, “Protests against COVID-19 restrictions return to Tirana,” *Top Albania Radio*, 9 May 2020, <https://www.topalbaniaradio.com/v7/rikthehen-ne-tirane-protestat-kunder-masave-te-covid-19/>, (accessed 13 October 2021).



Image I: Bill Gates on Facebook portrayed as the mastermind who is controlling the COVID-19 agenda to spread fear and control to the global population.<sup>41</sup>  
22 August 2020

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

Approximately 144 people had left Albania to travel to the war zones in Syria and Iraq. Of those around 45 who had returned immediately after their travels, 26 had died.<sup>42</sup> At the time, it was not illegal for citizens to travel as these travels occurred mainly in 2013 (law amended on February 2014). It was estimated that by the end of 2020, between 65-70 FTFs and families remained in Syria (different sources reported varying numbers).<sup>43</sup> In 2020, one woman and four children were repatriated.<sup>44</sup> There have been no attacks involving foreign terrorist fighters in 2020.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> A. Cako, Facebook, 22 August 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3559845047381531&set=pb.100000682123850.-2207520000>, (accessed 14 October 2021).

<sup>42</sup> GCERF, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans," *The Atlantic Initiative*, p. 6-7, <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>43</sup> Marjo Brakaj, "Repatriation of Albanian citizens in Syria is at a standstill," *Faktoje*, 23 June 2020, <https://faktoje.al/riatdhesimi-i-shtetasve-shqiptare-nga-siria-ende-ne-vendnumero/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Khazan Jangiz, "Albania repatriates 19 ISIS-linked women, children from Rojava", *Rudaw*, 31 July 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/31072021#:~:text=%22The%20Albanian%20government%20seeks%20not,children%20homeless%20outside%20their%20country.&text=This%20is%20the%20third%20repatriation,a%20constant%20cause%20of%20concern>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>45</sup> US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Albania," *State*, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/albania>.

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

A relatively high number of individuals left Bosnia and Herzegovina to join Daesh during the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Some have returned, with male fighters facing prosecution and women and children subject to psychological monitoring. Many Bosnian nationals still remain in Syria because repatriation efforts were stymied by the pandemic. Rising extremist actors in this country today include radical right linked groups and individuals along with conspiracy theorists, and to a lesser degree, ideologically inspired actors, given the decline of Daesh and support for the group in the region. There has been noted growth in the online and offline activities of radical right groups and individuals, primarily on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and websites during the COVID-19 crisis; graffiti was also a common extremist expression. Moreover, the COVID-19 disinformation campaigns and narratives have been interwoven with and tailored to previously existing conspiracy theories. The government initiated P/CVE efforts in 2020 with the appointment of an Interdepartmental Working Group for the preparation and implementation of the Action Plan for Preventing and Combating Terrorism.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

Due to the existence of the three main ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosniaks (Muslims) and those identifying as ethnic Serbs and ethnic Croats, extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina has often hewn to ethnic lines, two of which often intersect with radical right ideologies. Following the fall of Daesh, along with the recent growing emergence of radical right movements in Europe and North America, Serb-inspired radical right groups have been reenergized after their zenith during the 1990s Bosnian War. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this form of the radical right draws on anti-Bosniak and Islamophobic sentiments including the glorification of war criminals and genocide denial, secessionism of the Republika Srpska (RS) entity, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. Offshoots of the European radical right movements also exist and integrate these already established extremist ideas. In the Bosnian city of Prijedor, members of Blood & Honour and Combat 18 have demonstrated this by holding banners condemning the LGBTIQIA+ community, as well as some reading “Islam out of Europe.”<sup>46</sup> The vitriol of these groups is on social media and other online spaces, where they aim at everyone from Bosnian Muslims to refugees and abortion advocates,<sup>47</sup> among others. In 2020, several extremist activities took place by the Members of the Neo-Nazi bikers club “MC Srbi” who are also present in the city of Šamac (*see image II*). Symbols of two globally noted radical right organizations, Blood and Honour and its affiliate, Combat 18, began appearing throughout Prijedor (*see image III*).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., “State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021,” Hope not Hate, p. 65. *Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung*, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-report-2020-12-v210ct.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Nermina Kuloglija, “Ultra-Right Groups Show Their Face in Bosnian Town” *Balkan Insight*, 12 May 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/12/ultra-right-groups-show-their-face-in-bosnian-town/>, (accessed 14 January 2022).





Image III: MC Srbi at the celebration of the Orthodox Christian Feast of the Holy Cross Event in Prijedor.<sup>49</sup>  
12 May 2020



Image II: Symbols of "Blood and Honor" and "Combat 18" groups are written in the center of Prijedor.<sup>50</sup>  
12 May 2020

Individuals subscribing to extremist ideologies of Al-Qaeda and Daesh have reportedly generally been radicalized in certain isolated villages and settlements, from where the highest numbers of FTF departures to Syria and Iraq were recorded over the last decade.<sup>51</sup> The most well-known of these is a region called Gornja Maoča. Flags of Daesh were in the previous years have been seen in the village, and support for the group was not a secret. Still, in recent years these communities have kept to themselves and have posed no serious threat.

A novel radical right movement – Bosanski Pokret Nacionalnog Ponosa (the Bosnian Movement of National Pride, or BPNP) – has gained an unknown number of followers (see image IV). The BPNP mainly operates on its website, where the group states that it "fights for Bosniaks irrespective of their religion and subrace." On the website, the BPNP directly state whom they consider a 'Bosniak':

"Every individual belonging to the European genetic and cultural heritage, who is loyal to the state of Bosnia, speaks the Bosnian language and who identifies with the history of Bosnia, regardless of religious and ethnic affiliation, to be a member of the only state-building Bosniak people."<sup>52</sup>

This ultra-nationalist group seems to promote a territorial expansion of Bosnia with a homogenous Bosniak population.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Asya Metodieva, "The Radical Milieu and Radical Influencers of Bosnian Foreign Fighters," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2021, p. 5. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1868097?needAccess=true> (accessed 5 January 2021).

<sup>52</sup> Bosanski Pokret Nacionalnog Ponosa, <http://bosanskinacionalisti.org/pokret/stavovi/>. (accessed 25 December 2021).



**Image IV:** The image taken from the organization's website was published as the "new pamphlet." It states: "The Bosnian National Pride Movement is a radical nationalist organization that believes in the fanatical struggle and will of Bosniaks."<sup>53</sup> 24 May 2020

Croatian radical right extremism associated with ethnonationalism or Neo-Nazi ideology has also been established and is active in several Bosnian cities, using graffiti with Ustasha symbols as one of the expressions of their VE (see image V). These groups include Blood & Honour, Combat 18, and Skinheads Mostar, which all espouse Neo-Nazism. The development of these groups has been evident in online spaces, even though they actively avoid interacting with society in many ways and are not active in traditional politics.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., "State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021," *Hope not Hate*, p. 65. Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-report-2020-12-v210ct.pdf>, (accessed 25 December 2021).



**Image V:** Nazi symbols and words stating that the fascist WWII-era Independent State of Croatia, NDH, “shall return again,” signed by Zrinjski supporters on 14/88. Hate graffiti may also be seen in Mostar’s Partisan Cemetery, which is home to Communist partisans who fought the Nazis during WWII.<sup>55</sup>  
6 November 2020

The social media platforms generally used by extremist groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2020 were Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other less known or popular websites. However, leading figures mostly use private profiles to share their activities. Following investigations by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) into these groups, several of these profiles were removed in active monitoring and removal of such content by social media platforms.<sup>56</sup>

Online activities, predominantly by conspiracy theorists were relatively popular in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Image VI). COVID-19 related posts in this regard generally focused on the idea that the pandemic is a project aiming to destroy populations. In 2020, “QAnon Balkan”<sup>57</sup> was still in its infancy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite marking some of the content shared by the group as fake, Facebook did not ban it at the time, and it attracted more than 460 members.<sup>58</sup> Another group, “Q-ANON Bosnia and Herzegovina,” which adheres to global QAnon themes and uses the “Where we go one, we go all” motto, has existed since May 2020. Its members used to publish about a dozen posts a day, and the group invited its audience to “personally investigate any information published in this group.”<sup>59</sup> One of their administrators has stated that the group has no long-term goals, considers itself apolitical, and has no intention of expanding its activities beyond social media; but there, they disseminated the view that Bill Gates is the most sinister person on the planet and that Donald Trump will be re-elected and will then wrest control of the US and the entire world from the deep state and a network of pedophiles.<sup>60</sup> They also spread the narratives that COVID-19 was “created in a laboratory” and that parents are “obliged to protect their child from forced vaccination” and oppose the introduction of 5G technology.<sup>61</sup> Members of “Q-ANON Bosnia and Herzegovina” have posted stories to the group claiming the vaccination is deadly, detailing what they claim is proof of links between top American politicians and pedophiles and calling the COVID-19 crisis “a show.”<sup>62</sup> This last post encouraged members to “Spread the truth!” and contended that “a great battle is going on between good and

<sup>55</sup> Nermina Kulogija, “In Bosnian River Town, Far-right symbols and a link to Ukraine,” *Balkan Insight*, 6 November 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/06/in-bosnian-river-town-far-right-symbols-and-a-link-to-ukraine/>, (accessed 26 December 2021).

<sup>56</sup> BIRN, “QAnon u BiH: Teorije zavjere pod plaštom slobode govora,” *VOA News*, 4 September 2020, <https://ba.voanews.com/a/qanon-u-bih-teorije-zavjere-pod-plastom-slobode-govora/5570780.html>, (accessed 1 August 2021)..

<sup>57</sup> BIRN, “QAnon u BiH: Teorije zavjere pod plaštom slobode govora,” *VOA News*, 4 September 2020, <https://ba.voanews.com/a/qanon-u-bih-teorije-zavjere-pod-plastom-slobode-govora/5570780.html>, (accessed 1 August 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



evil under the cover of this virus.”<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, QAnon associated pages in Bosnia and Herzegovina have also been banned by Facebook on its platforms. Like in other countries, the adherents of the movement are likely active on other smaller platforms.<sup>64</sup> The extremist narratives and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 in Bosnia and Herzegovina were

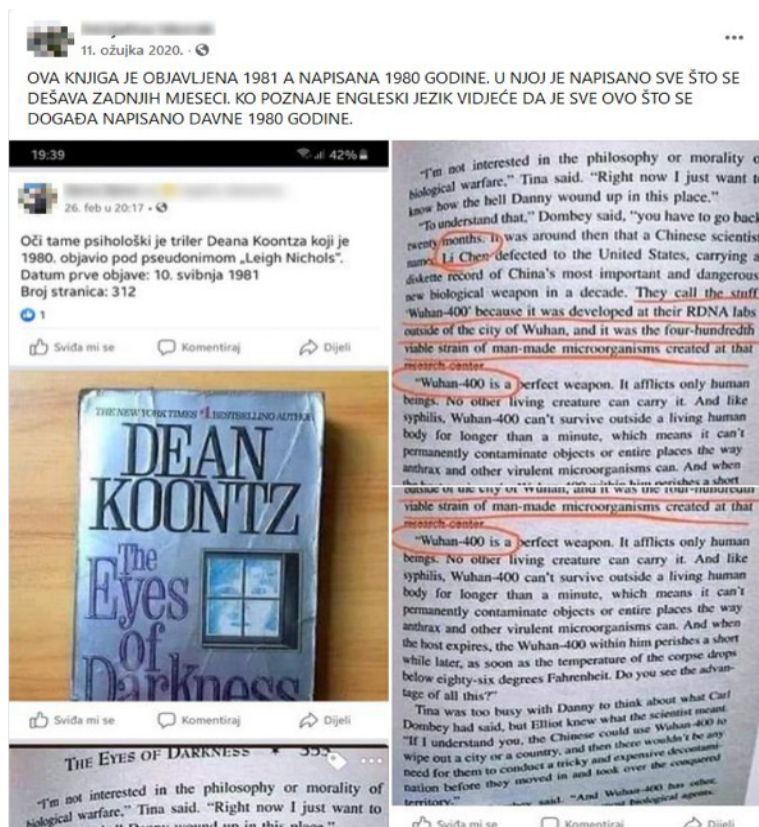


Image VI: According to this October 2020 Facebook post (from a page called Inicijativa Iskorak) by a conspiracy theorist, “Everything that is happening now was written back in 1980.”<sup>65</sup>

observed online and are mainly associated with the violent QAnon movement. Still, the content constitutes a significant threat online and could translate to extremism offline, especially considering that QAnon conspirators have become violent in the US.

On the other hand, offline extremist incidents in Bosnia and Herzegovina appeared to be less related to COVID-19 pandemic, hewing more to ethnonationalist extremism.

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

In October 2020, Bosnian authorities arrested a suspected Daesh fighter extradited from Turkey; a 21-year old who was arrested on terrorism charges at Sarajevo airport.<sup>66</sup> About 300 Bosnian nationals traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the conflict there, of whom around 153 are believed to have been killed or died in Syria.<sup>67</sup> By January 2020, 80 individuals had returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina, consisting of 51 men, 19 children (below 14 years old),

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Inicijativa Iskorak (@iskoraknet), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/IskorakNet/posts/2546018048973336>, (accessed October 20, 2021).

<sup>66</sup> Danijel Kovacevic, “Bosnia Arrests Suspected ISIS Fighter Extradited from Turkey,” *Balkan Insight*, 23 October, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/23/bosnia-arrests-suspected-isis-fighter-extradited-from-turkey/>, (accessed 20 December 2021).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. and GCERF, “Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans,” GCERF, <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GCERF-RNA-Western-Balkans-final.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

and ten women.<sup>68</sup> Some of these individuals returned in December 2019, when a group of 25 Bosnian nationals (7 men, 6 women, and 12 children) was repatriated from the conflict zone as part of a controlled government-organized operation.<sup>69</sup> No repatriations took place in 2020 due to the pandemic challenges.<sup>70</sup> According to estimates, of the 87 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina who remain in Syria, the majority are children.<sup>71</sup> There were no attacks involving FTFs in 2020, and repatriated men have all faced imprisonment.<sup>72</sup>

## BULGARIA

Radical right-inspired extremism in Bulgaria has increased in the last decade and accelerated more intensively during the COVID-19 restrictions in 2020. In 2020, extremist and conspiratorial actors focused on disseminating conspiracy-based, anti-COVID-19 measures narratives and stirring demonstrations in Bulgaria that pushed radical right actors to engage and share more propaganda and dangerous content online. Such actors also targeted minorities in the country, mainly Roma communities. Telegram in the past has been a popular online platform of Neo-Nazi groups, though there was seemingly an increase in extremist use of Facebook, YouTube, and Skype in 2020. Ideologically inspired extremism was mainly present in the form of support for Daesh: there have been only a few foreign terrorist fighters to leave Bulgaria for conflict zones over the past years, yet there is still evidence of links with the group in the country, exemplified with one arrest made in 2020. Nonetheless, no significant violent extremist incidents or terrorist attacks occurred in 2020.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

The radical right support for extremist ideologies and groups in Bulgaria has been growing, as in many other Balkan countries in the last decade. In general, in this country, the radical right organizations espouse extreme forms of traditional conservatism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and racism, mainly targeting the Roma and ethnic-Turkish minorities.<sup>73</sup> The main organizations include a Neo-Nazi group – the Bulgarian National Union (BNS) – that reportedly collaborates also with the Bulgarian branch of the global Neo-Nazi network Blood & Honour and the “White Front” with which BNS also cooperates closely and which has connections with the Neo-Nazi American gang known as “Vorherrschaft Division.”<sup>74</sup> There seemed to be several radical right, nationalist parties that advocated an anti-Roma ideology such as Ataka, Vazrazhdane (Revival), Bulgarian National Movement, thus giving strength and inspiration to local radical right groups and individuals.<sup>75</sup> For instance, radical

<sup>68</sup> Armin Krzalic et al, “Travelers to Syria = A Criminological and Security Analysis with Special Focus on Returnees from Syrian Battlefronts,” *Hedayah*, 2020, [https://hedayahcenter.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TRAVELERS\\_TO\\_SYRIA\\_A-Criminological-and-Security-Analysis-with-Special-Focus-on-Returnees-from-Syrian-Battlefronts\\_za-web.pdf](https://hedayahcenter.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TRAVELERS_TO_SYRIA_A-Criminological-and-Security-Analysis-with-Special-Focus-on-Returnees-from-Syrian-Battlefronts_za-web.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>69</sup> AFP Sarajevo, “Bosnia repatriates ISIS-linked men, women and children from Syria,” *Al Arabiya*, 20 May 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2019/12/20/Bosnia-repatriates-ISIS-linked-men-women-and-children-from-Syria>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>70</sup> Lamiya Grebo, “Virus Keeps Bosnian Families of ISIS Fighters in Syrian Camps,” *Balkan Insight*, 28 April 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/28/virus-keeps-bosnian-families-of-isis-fighters-in-syrian-camps/>.

<sup>71</sup> Armin Krzalic et al, “Travelers to Syria = A Criminological and Security Analysis with Special Focus on Returnees from Syrian Battlefronts,” *Hedayah*, 2020, [https://hedayahcenter.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TRAVELERS\\_TO\\_SYRIA\\_A-Criminological-and-Security-Analysis-with-Special-Focus-on-Returnees-from-Syrian-Battlefronts\\_za-web.pdf](https://hedayahcenter.org/app/uploads/2021/09/TRAVELERS_TO_SYRIA_A-Criminological-and-Security-Analysis-with-Special-Focus-on-Returnees-from-Syrian-Battlefronts_za-web.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>72</sup> US Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *State*, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>73</sup> Antonina Zhelyazkova, “Part III: Countries in Transition,” *Capitolo*, [https://www.cidob.org/es/content/download/59100/1541467/version/1/file/295-316\\_CAPITULO%2012%20Bulgaria.pdf](https://www.cidob.org/es/content/download/59100/1541467/version/1/file/295-316_CAPITULO%2012%20Bulgaria.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>74</sup> Michael Colborne, “Football fandom and fascist generals: Bulgaria’s radical right”, *Open Democracy Net*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/football-fandom-and-fascist-generals-bulgarias-radical-right/>, (accessed 26 December 2021).

<sup>75</sup> Ataka, [ataka.bg](http://ataka.bg); Vazrazhdane, <https://vazrazhdane.bg/>; and Bulgarian National Movement, [vmro.bg](http://vmro.bg).

right actors instrumentalized the pandemic to increase their agitation against the Roma community by arguing that their settlements were “hotbeds of infection.”<sup>76</sup>

Disinformation campaigns about COVID-19 also gained some traction in Bulgaria throughout 2020. A common extremist narrative in 2020 referred to the virus being artificially created for the profit of the pharma industry, tied to the narratives of the same actors who attempted to discredit public health measures in Bulgaria by denying the danger posed by the pandemic to citizens. According to a poll in June 2020, 23% of people believed that COVID-19 does not exist; 43% that it is an artificial disease created by pharmaceutical companies to make money; and 40% believed it was a biological weapon.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, 21% of people agreed with the statement that Bill Gates was the source of the pandemic and intended to control the population through microchips placed in the vaccine.<sup>78</sup> In sum, the pandemic has given strong momentum to conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns. Given the ongoing broader demonstrations against the government, minimal protests were aimed specifically at COVID-19. However, one protest in May 2020 specifically targeted the pandemic response though it was organized at the same time as another protest in Romania (see image VII).<sup>79</sup>



Image VII: Protesters against the vaccines and 5g technologies.<sup>80</sup>  
14 May 2020

<sup>76</sup> IBAHRI, “Covid-19 Human Rights Monitor,” *Ibanet*, 10 July 2020, [https://www.ibanet.org/Human\\_Rights\\_Institute/Bulletins/12](https://www.ibanet.org/Human_Rights_Institute/Bulletins/12), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>77</sup> КНиколай Киров, “Тренд”: За 23% от българите коронавирусът не съществува,” *VESTI*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/trend-za-23-ot-bylgarite-koronavirusyt-ne-syshtestvuva-6110791>, (accessed 23 September 2021); and; Philip Dandolov, “Coronavirus in Bulgaria: Conspiracy Theories and Mass Indifference” *Geopolitical Monitor*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/coronavirus-in-bulgaria-conspiracies-theories-and-mass-indifference/>, (accessed 23 September 2021); “Bulgaria: 1 in 5 Bulgarians believe Gates is behind COVID-19 – survey,” *Newsroom*, 11 June 2020, <https://balkan.eu.com/bulgaria-1-in-5-bulgarians-believe-gates-is-behind-covid-19-survey/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> RFE/RL’s Bulgarian Service, “Bulgarian Ultrnationalists Protest Government’s Coronavirus Measures”, *rferl.org*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/coronavirus-bulgaria-vaccines-/30612752.html>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



In Bulgaria, limited support for Daesh-associated ideologies in the last 7 years were noted in a few Roma communities in the South of the country. Decades of structural inattention and neglect by Bulgarian institutions have marginalized many Roma communities, providing legitimate grievances that have been seemingly manipulated in limited cases by recruiters and sympathizers of Daesh. This should not be overstated as a trend, as this threat has slowly disappeared with Daesh losing popularity and battle in Syria and Iraq. Yet, there was some evidence of significant activity in 2020 in this regard that included individuals of foreign origin (especially Syria) travelling through Bulgaria and receiving support from some of the local Muslim communities.<sup>81</sup>

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

Only a few foreign terrorist fighters left Bulgaria to conflict zones and returned. The numbers of Daesh FTFs are classified and not publicly disclosed. Between 2014 and 2017, 17 individuals were arrested on terrorism charges, five with foreign backgrounds, 13 from the Salafi Roma community, and 12 with Bulgarian citizenship.<sup>82</sup> Five out of 17 have FTF experience, e.g. the case of Ahmed Musto, who returned and started a tobacco business and continued to support Daesh financially.<sup>83</sup> One Bulgarian national was arrested on 1 July 2020: Mohammed Abdulkader, 21 years old and a national Greco-Roman wrestling champion. He is of Syrian descent and Bulgarian and Syrian national.<sup>84</sup> Reports mention five foreign fighters departing for Ukraine before 2020, but not information on returnees.<sup>85</sup> FTFs have not been involved in attacks or threats in 2020.<sup>86</sup> Bulgaria co-sponsored the UN Security Council resolution 2396 on returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters.<sup>87</sup>

## CROATIA

Croatia noted instances of radical right extremism in 2020. Apart from groups drawing on aspects of ethnonationalism and football hooliganism, there is evidence of Neo-Nazi and white supremacist organizations drawing on networks across Western Europe. A few significant incidents occurred in 2020 that point to the broader activity of the radical right: an organized event in Zagreb in June 2020 by Bad Blue Boys (BBB) football hooligans calling on violence against Serbs, and an attack by a lone-wolf shooter in October. The latter incident by a 22-year old national assaulted a government building in Zagreb at St. Mark's Square with a rifle, wounding a police officer and eventually committing suicide. The attacker's specific motivations remain unclear, and although the State Attorney's Office of the Republic of Croatia assessed the assault as terrorism, there were no charges lodged due to his death.<sup>88</sup> Bezuk's

<sup>81</sup> Zornica Stojlova, "The Roma and the Radicals: Bulgaria's alleged ISIS support base," *Balkan Insight*, 11 January 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/11/the-roma-and-the-radicals-bulgaria-s-alleged-isis-support-base-01-10-2016-1/>, (accessed 25 December 2021).

<sup>82</sup> Rositsa Dzhekova, "National Approaches to Extremism Bulgaria," December 2020, [https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bulgaria\\_CONNEKT\\_Approaches\\_to\\_extremism.pdf](https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bulgaria_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Georgi Kantchev, "Terrorism Case Highlights Risk of Returning Fighters Funding ISIS," *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 March 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/terrorism-case-highlights-risk-of-returning-fighters-funding-isis-1521624600>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>84</sup> Bulgarian News Agency, "Bulgarian National of Syrian Descent Detained for Suspected Terrorism in Raid in Seaside City of Bourgas," *Bulgarian News Agency*, 1 July 2020, <http://www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/2239060>.

<sup>85</sup> Rositsa Dzhekova, "National Approaches to Extremism Bulgaria," December 2020, [https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bulgaria\\_CONNEKT\\_Approaches\\_to\\_extremism.pdf](https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bulgaria_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>86</sup> United States Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Bulgaria," *State*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/bulgaria/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>87</sup> United States Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2017: Bulgaria," *State*, 19 September 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcb1fb3a.html>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>88</sup> Katarina Knežević, "DORH: napad na Markovom trgu bio je terorizam, Bezuk nije imao pomagače," *Telegram*, <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/dorh-napad-na-markovom-trgu-bio-je-terorizam-bezuk-nije-imao-pomagace/>, (accessed 21 December 2021).

<sup>89</sup> Vedran Obućina, "Right-Wing Extremism in Croatia," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/09346.pdf>, (accessed 24 December 2021).

social media posts, however, demonstrate a leaning toward radical right views. In 2020, a rise was also observed in groups and individuals promoting COVID-19 related conspiracy theories – mostly through social media activities, the bulk of which took place on Facebook. Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria in 2012, seven people (two men and five women) with Croatian citizenship departed for Daesh to join the battlefield there, but none have returned.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

Radical right extremism in Croatia has historic roots dating back to the World War II Ustasha movement, which sought the creation of a strong authoritarian state seeking territorial expansion of the country, alongside a zealous mission to protect Catholic Christianity.<sup>90</sup> Currently, popular radical right organizations include the Croatian National Front (HNF) – a nationalist and radical right organization, and the Croatian National Resistance (HNO). The HNF is now an ultraconservative, nationalistic organization that promotes favorable views on the Ustasha movement's history; members of the Ustasha promote insignia and phrases such as "Ready for Home" and "God and Croats," and believe that the concept of an independent Croatian state (NDH) has been unnecessarily discarded.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the HNO is a separate nationalistic movement and a clone of similar organizations that originally formed in the Federal Republic of Germany in the early 2000s, particularly near Berlin and the former German Democratic Republic.<sup>91</sup> Other offshoots from European radical right movements are also present in the country, along with other Neo-Nazi groups.<sup>92</sup>

No known terrorist organizations are presently operating in Croatia, but radical right groups and individuals have been more active, as well as members of the New Right and conspiracy theorists. There were a few radical right incidents in Croatia in 2020, individual but also organized in groups. On June 11, an escalation in the Zagreb city center was a notable incident. A radical right group of young men from the football ultras organization Bad Blue Boys (BBB) congregated in Zagreb's streets, holding a banner that said "We'll f\*\*\* Serbian women and children" (*see image VIII*) and screaming "Murder, kill."<sup>93</sup> The banner featured emblems from the Ustasha movement, as well as flags from the Croatian Defence Forces (HOS), a paramilitary outfit that employed certain Ustasa symbols in the 1990s.<sup>94</sup> Following the incident, which resulted in arrests of those bearing the flag in question, several graffiti in Zagreb against the Serbs appeared in the next few days. One particularly disturbing graffiti in the English language depicts a "Serbian family tree" with painted icons of individuals hung on a tree (*see image VIII*). The above incidents, drawing on ethnonationalist extremist sentiments, may well have been amplified by the pandemic and related anxieties. However, a causal link is difficult to assess via secondary sources.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>92</sup> Michael Colborne, "Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far-Right's International Ambitions," *BIRN*, 18 July 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/18/croatia-key-to-ukrainian-far-rights-international-ambitions/>, [accessed 23 December 2021].

<sup>93</sup> Marin Desković, "Nova praksa ĐORH-a? Huligani iz Kustosije osumnjiceni i za 'ZDS' na HOS-ovoj zastavi," *Jutarnji List*, 14 June 2020, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/crna-kronika/nova-praksa-dorh-a-huligani-iz-kustosije-osumnjiceni-i-za-zds-na-hos-ovoj-zastavi-15002511>, [accessed 24 December 2021].

<sup>94</sup> Sven Milekić, "Croatia's extremists: hen life gives you no future, make scapegoats," *Osservatorio Balkani e caucaso transeuropa*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Croatia/Croatia-s-extremists-when-life-gives-you-no-future-make-scapegoats-203732>, [accessed 24 December 2021].



**Image VII:** The hooligans from Zagreb spreading hate speech with flags of Croatian Defence Forces and a banner that translates: "We'll f\*\*\* Serbian women and children,"<sup>95</sup> 14 June 2020.



**Image VIII:** A graffiti that emerged a few days following the Zagreb incident caused by the Dinamo Zagreb football fans. The graffiti implies a famous radical right saying "Srbe na Vrbe" that translates "Hang Serbs from the willow trees!"<sup>96</sup> 14 June 2020

<sup>95</sup> Marin Desković, "Nova praksa DORH-a? Hulgani iz Kustosije osumnjiceni i za 'ZDS' na HOS-ovoj zastavi," *Jutarnji List*, 14 June 2020.

<sup>96</sup> Vesti, "SRBE NA VRBE": 3. Grafit mrznje, obesili sve srbe," *Nasa Borba*, 14 June 2020, <https://nasaborba.com/srbe-na-vrbe-novi-grafit-mrznje/>, (accessed 24 December 2021)

A few months after the riot by the Bad Blue Boys, in October 2020, 22-year old Danijel Bezuk opened fire in Zagreb on *Banski dvori*, a government institution housing the Prime Minister's office.<sup>97</sup> Although the clear drivers of Bezuk's assault are not fully known, and he has not been linked with a particular group, Croatian media shared his social media posts in an attempt to understand his motivations. A Croatian news and lifestyle portal (*net.hr*) published Bezuk's Facebook posts and images, one of which shows him in a shirt with symbols of the paramilitary Croatian Defence Forces group (HOS).<sup>98</sup> The same article shared images of his online posts in which Bezuk expressed disdain toward the Croatian government and indirectly praised Ante Gotovina – a Croat ultra-nationalist whom the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) indicted on war crimes and crimes against humanity. The news analysis noted that he wrote hateful comments against other ethnic groups, including a remark on a recording video of the sniper rifle test, where he wrote: "If only I was one of them, to take down the Serbs."<sup>99</sup> Another incident occurred in Croatia at the end of 2020, in which a mentally ill self-radicalized individual fleeing a psychiatric hospital attacked passers-by and police officers with scissors.<sup>100</sup>

According to the *State of Hate – Far-right Extremism in Europe Report 2021*, Croatia saw "a spike in nationalist violence and hate crimes" in 2019 and 2020. This was forecasted in a European Commission report that forewarned of escalating "racist and intolerant hate speech in public discourse" directed at ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups.<sup>101</sup> This indeed could explain in part the rise of incidents in 2020. Moreover, during the pandemic, social isolation and more time spent online only increased people's access to extremist content, whether intentional or not. In addition, the pandemic led to a secondary crisis of mental instability, which can be a risk factor for radicalization in itself.<sup>102</sup>

Because the COVID-19 pandemic led to new regulations, including restrictions on freedom of movement, radical right groups often overlap with conspiracy theorists speculating on the pandemic. In Croatia, Neo-Nazi groups such as Feuerkrieg Division (FKD) have taken on much of this rhetoric.<sup>103</sup> A worrying trend is their targeted recruitment of teenagers and wider mobilization of groups like these that could include cross-pollination of their ideas, thereby further fueling extremism.

In Croatia, Facebook is the most used social media platform for spreading extremist views and fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly evident where individuals and groups that spread propaganda expressing opposition to COVID, vaccines, and immigrants are most active, and where they share information about future gatherings, pictures from previous events, and articles or statements (including fake news from international platforms regarding COVID-19 and vaccination).<sup>104</sup> An overwhelming 87% of Croatian social media users prefer Facebook, whereas only 4% prefer Twitter.<sup>105</sup> This potentially makes Facebook a key tool of actors in Croatia who seek to disseminate disinformation and extremist content online.

<sup>97</sup> Vecernji, 'Prošlo je godinu dana od napada Danijela Bezuka na Vladu: "to je bio terorizam"', *Vecernji.Hr*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/proslo-je-godinu-dana-od-napada-danijela-bezuka-na-vladu-to-je-bio-terorizam-1530320>.

<sup>98</sup> "ŠTO JE NAPADAC S MARKOVOG TRGA OBJAVLJIVAO NA SVOM FEJSU? 'Da sam barem jedan od njih, da skidam Srbe'... pisao I o nepravdi u Haag," *Net.Hr*, <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/sto-napadac-s-markovog-trga-objavljuje-na-svom-fejsu-da-sam-barem-jedan-od-njih-da-skidam-srbe-pisao-i-o-nepravdi-u-haagu-03488470-b1c6-11eb-b92e-0242ac140014>, (accessed 23 December 2021).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., "State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021," *Hope not Hate*, p. 70. Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-report-2020-12-v210ct.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> Republic of Croatia, Security and Intelligence Agency, "Javno Izvješće" 2019/20 [Annual Report 2019/20]. Available (in local language) at: <https://www.soa.hr/files/file/Javno-izvjesce-2019.pdf>

<sup>103</sup> "Feuerkrieg Division," *Counter Extremism Project*, n.d., <https://www.counterextremism.com/supremacy/feuerkrieg-division> (accessed 8 January 2022); "Feuerkrieg Division Exposed: International Neo-Nazi Terrorist Network," 24 February 2020, *Eugene Antifa*, <https://eugeneantifa.noblogs.org/post/2020/02/24/feuerkrieg-division/>

<sup>104</sup> As per GlobalStats at Statcounter on 21 July 2021, <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/croatia>, (accessed 15 December 2021).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

Conspiracy theories in Croatia were particularly popularized on two popular websites, spaces that are enabling and promoting the dissemination of anti-COVID-19 views and materials (consisting mostly of articles from foreign websites or newspapers). These websites, which claim to publish only “real facts” and “true information” about COVID-19, contain posts such as those asserting that the pandemic is the product of Jews; depicting the vaccine as a poison still in early testing phases; alleging that thousands of people have died or suffered illnesses such as multiple sclerosis as a result of being vaccinated, and that vaccination is a form of organized genocide.<sup>106</sup> The admins on these platforms spread fake news and conspiracy theories, such as that COVID-19 is a hoax and that vaccinated people are fated to die within two years.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, the “Rights and Freedom Initiative” – a Facebook group – maintains that it was established to provide people with “the truth about COVID,” and organizes anti-COVID-19 Freedom Festival protests across Croatia in response to public health measures imposed to contain the virus.<sup>108</sup> The group calls on people to reject face masks, with slogans such as, “Take off the mask, turn off the TV, live life to the fullest;” “Better the grave than to be a slave,” and “A free life is our power.”<sup>109</sup>

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

There were no noteworthy events related to FTFs in Croatia in 2020. In the past, seven people departed to Syria after the armed conflict began in 2012 – two men and five women – to join the war effort. Two men and one woman were killed in 2017 and 2018, and another four women remain in detention in Syrian camps.<sup>110</sup> Thus far, no Croatian national has returned from the conflict zone, and there have been no organized repatriations.

## KOSOVO

Kosovo was one of the Western Balkan countries with the highest recruitment of Daesh foreign terrorist fighters. Relative to its population and when compared to other countries, a significant number of citizens joined Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Kosovo has made an exceptional effort to repatriate, rehabilitate and reintegrate its returnees. In 2020, several people were prosecuted after their repatriation in 2019. However, the support for Daesh’s ideology in this country has waned.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

The main extremist actors in Kosovo’s recent history have been individuals associated with Daesh. Upon Daesh’s fall in Syria, supporters began to fade as the Government of Kosovo began to take measures against many suspicious online religious activities which appeared to promote violence, hatred, and division. Other extremist actors were ethnonationalist groups. Since approximately 2018, most of the online activity attributed to extremists in

<sup>106</sup> Anon., “Ovo je rat! Tajni document Pfizera o njihovom smrtonosnom cjepivu protiv COVID-a”, *Istinom Protiv Lazi*, 3 January 2022, website (accessed 20 January 2022); and Anon., “Za genocid nad čovječanstvom optuženi Bil Gates, Melinda Gates, Anthoni Fauci, Christina Gradi, Tedros Adhanom, obitelj Rothschild.../video zapisi sa saslušanja”, *Istinom Protiv Lazi*, 20 May 2021, website redacted, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>107</sup> Michel Chossudovsky, “Cjepiva na bazi gena ubijaju ljude! Vlade diljem svijeta lažu, a navodno nam služe. Cjepivo protiv Covida-19 treba odmah ukinuti u cijelom svijetu!”, *Istinom Protiv Lazi*, 11 August 2021, <http://istinomprotivlazi.info/novosti/1662-cjepiva-na-bazi-gena-ubijaju-ljude-vlade-diljem-svijeta-lazu-a-navodno-nam-sluze-cjepivo-protiv-covida-19-treba-odmah-ukinuti-u-cijelom-svijetu>.

<sup>108</sup> Inicijativa Prava i slobode (@festival.slobode.hrvatska), *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/festival.slobode.hrvatska/> and <https://inicijativa.hr/category/festival-slobode/>, (accessed 15 July 2021).

<sup>109</sup> HINA, “Hundreds protest against coronavirus measures in Zagreb”, *N1*, 5 September 2020, <https://hr.n1info.com/english/news/a541747-hundreds-protest-against-coronavirus-measures-in-zagreb/>, (accessed 6 September 2020).

<sup>110</sup> Republic of Croatia, Security and Intelligence Agency, “Javno Izvješće”, 2019/20 [Annual Report 2019/20]. Available (in local language) at: <https://www.soa.hr/files/file/Javno-izvjesce-2019.pdf>.



Kosovo went silent though isolated cases of individuals arise occasionally. This restraint can be attributed to various factors such as the efforts of the government to manage this threat, the general defeat of Daesh, the disappointment of supporters about a misplaced belief, the fear of persecution by security forces, and ultimately, the lack of popular support for the cause. Groups which used to be active in the past, such as “Shpata e Meshiruesit” (the sword of the merciful) or “Minareja e Bardhe” (the White Minaret), have taken down all videos on the web – the latter even shutting its Facebook account which, at one point, had over 3,400 followers.<sup>111</sup> However, Facebook sites like “Eja ne Islam” (Come to Islam) were imitating popular groups with the same name and were run by moderate Imams, using the imitation as a cover for their operations. The Eja ne Islam site is still online as of writing, but extremist propaganda appears to have diminished drastically.<sup>112</sup> Other Facebook and YouTube social media accounts that used to be more active in criticizing Western governments for their interventions in the Middle East are Mektebi Hasanbeg<sup>113</sup> and “Rruga e Kuranit” (Path of the Koran).<sup>114</sup>

There were various extremist narratives related to COVID-19, but there is no evidence that any of these narratives were translated to VE and terrorism. Most radical positions fell in the category of conspiracy theories. Such narratives included the belief that vaccines will make a person infertile or that it will change the composition of the blood.<sup>115</sup> About 75% of people who answered one survey believed in conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 that led them to think that vaccination is a bad idea.<sup>116</sup> Some disinformation campaigns have also tried to instigate inter-ethnic tensions in Kosovo. Some of the most notorious ones were:<sup>117</sup> “Kosovo to secede from ‘Electric Network of Serbia’ as of Monday;” “In times of crisis, the EU proclaims that Kosovo is Serbia’s responsibility” (this report was a misrepresentation of a report in the EU Observer in which Serbian civil society organizations called for cooperation with Kosovo in combating COVID-19); or “Kosovar Albanians were planning to kidnap Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic in retribution for statements he made on Kosovo.”<sup>118</sup> Religious leaders also played a role. Shefqet Krasniqi, for instance, propagated through his Facebook page that COVID-19 is God’s punishment (*see image X*).<sup>119</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Adrian Shtuni, “Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo,” *United States Institute of Peace*, December 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022)

<sup>112</sup> EJA NE ISLAM, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/165456171598170>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>113</sup> Mektebi Hasanbeg, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/DavetHasanbeg/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>114</sup> Rruga Kuranit, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/rrugaeKuranit>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>115</sup> Mimoza Sadiku, “Conspiracy theories of the WB,” *Radio Free Europe*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/teorite-konspirative-balkani-perendimor-/30994283.html>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Directorate-General for External Relations: Policy Department, “Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them”, *European Parliament*, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)653621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Dr. Shefqet Krasniqi, “A mendoni se Koronavirusi është dënim nga Allahu?” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1099129223754510>, (accessed 23 September 2021).



Image X: Popular Imam answering the question of whether he believes that COVID-19 is a punishment from Allah. In most of his answers, he is supportive of this thesis.<sup>120</sup>  
18 March 2020

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

From 2012 to 2016, an estimated 359 Kosovars (257 men, 52 women, and 50 children) left for the conflict zones in the Middle East, mostly as FTFs. 81 children were born there.<sup>121</sup> 242 Kosovo citizens have returned (124 men, 38 women, and 80 children), 96 died, and 102 remain in theatre (47 men, nine women, and 46 children). Out of the 242 returnees, 110 (4 men, 32 women, and 74 children) were returned in April 2019 from the conflict zones as part of a controlled government-organized operation. Police initiated 16 new cases related to terrorism and arrested 43 suspects, including 36 adults (32 female, four males). In 2020, prosecution offices received 16 new cases involving 25 people. Kosovar courts found nine people guilty and acquitted 3 of them.<sup>122</sup> The pandemic put a halt to all operations for the repatriation of Kosovo citizens from Iraq and Syria. There have been no attacks in 2020 involving FTFs.

By August 2020, some 242 FTFs had returned to the country.<sup>123</sup> They were immediately processed and sent to the appropriate institutions and support mechanisms. Men and some women were held for further investigation. Children were sent to special schools to attend language classes and were observed by social workers.<sup>124</sup> Many organizations (civil service organizations dealing with women and children's issues) were also involved in providing support. This included counseling and legal support for women and children who suffered trauma. It is reported that they have been sent back to their original communities and were gradually reintegrating into society. At least by August 2020, those who returned received a mixture of convictions, of which 27 out of 32 repatriated women received suspended prison sentences.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Adrian Shtuni, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration Path of Kosovar Minors and Women Repatriated from Syria," *International Republican Institute*, 2021.

<sup>122</sup> European Commission, "Kosovo 2020 Report," Brussels, *European Commission*, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/kosovo\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/kosovo_report_2020.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>123</sup> Adrian Shtuni, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration Path of Kosovar Minors and Women Repatriated from Syria," *International Republican Institute*, 2021.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid; Shkëlqim Hysenaj, "Kosovars left in Syria won't return without verification," *Radio Free Europe*, 6 March 2020 <https://www.evropaetire.org/a/kosovare-siri-kthim-verifikim-/30472382.html>, (accessed 23 September 2021).



## MOLDOVA

Violent extremist activities in Moldova have been minimal. In the recent past, the foreign fighter trend has perhaps been the most common form of extremism, including Daesh supporters traveling to Syria and Iraq. In 2020, there were few notable foreign fighter activities, particularly involving arrests of Daesh supporters in the country. There has been no major shifts in trends related to the use of online platforms, and the main mediums of communications for extremist groups and individuals continue to be Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. Disinformation campaigns were frequent and grew in 2020, while the COVID-19 pandemic was molded to fit and adapt to already existing conspiracy theories.

### ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

The main extremist actors in Moldova were Daesh sympathizers and mercenaries and subordinated institutions and individuals. The radical right in Moldova, although quiet, does exist but has not been engaged in any serious violent extremist incidents that gained attention.

There has been no known or recorded major shift in trends related to the use of social media platforms and online communication channels; the main mediums continue to be Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. The government banned 52 fake news websites already in March 2020, some of which went online again later.<sup>126</sup> Disinformation campaigns in Moldova were substantial, while the COVID-19 pandemic was added within the framework of existing conspiracy theories, arguably as a further means to strengthen the causes of existing groups and their narratives. There was a prevalence of conspiracy theories taken over from disinformation campaigns.

Popular conspiracy theories concerning the pandemic – some of which have been propagated by VEOs elsewhere in the world like Al-Shabaab in Somalia – included the general notion that the pandemic does not exist and vaccines are unnecessary; the conviction that the COVID-19 was created in US labs and/or that Americans want to poison the world through the virus; the virus was artificially created in labs; and Bill Gates related theories claiming that he created the technology to microchip the population through the vaccine and/or aims to reduce world population but has also killed half a million vaccinated children in India.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>126</sup> US Department of State, “2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Moldova,” State, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/moldova/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>127</sup> Digi24, “Biserica din Republica Moldova se opune vaccinării împotriva COVID-19 și citează conspirația cu 5G și Bill Gates,” Digi24, 19 May 2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/moldova/biserica-din-republica-moldova-se-opune-vaccinarii-si-citeaza-conspiratii-cu-5g-si-bill-gates-1309826>, (accessed 23 September 2021); Europa Libera, “Mitropolia Ortodoxă a Moldovei, supusă Moscovei, împrăștie teorii ale conspirației” Europa Liberă România, 20 May 2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/biserica-ortodoxa-din-rep-moldova-imprastie-teorii-ale-conspiratiei-/30622281.html>, (accessed 23 September 2021).



Image XI: The Synod of the Metropolitan Church of the Republic of Moldova adopting a statement that includes conspiracy theories.<sup>128</sup>  
19 May 2020

## FOREIGN FIGHTER TRENDS

The number of Moldovans who have fought in Syria is not known. Otherwise, Moldova has been used as a transit route<sup>129</sup> by individual supporters of Daesh.<sup>130</sup> A woman and two children were repatriated in 2019<sup>131</sup>, and a woman and four children were repatriated in 2020 – in both cases with the help of Turkey.<sup>132</sup> Two FTFs were arrested in 2020, including one foreign national.<sup>133</sup> In previous years, Daesh foreign nationals have been intercepted and extradited.<sup>134</sup> FTFs have not been involved in attacks or threats.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Nicu Calcea, "Direcția Operațiuni Speciale a depistat și reținut un moldovean de 22 de ani din Căușeni [...]", *Moldova.org*, 28 May 2015, <https://www.moldova.org/politia-a-identificat-moldoveanul-care-gazduia-luptatori-ai-statului-islamic/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>131</sup> Republica Moldova, "Datorită eforturilor Președintelui țării, din Siria în Moldova a fost repatriată familia Zabun," *Republica Moldova Pagina Oficiala*, 26 December 2019, <https://moldova.md/ro/content/datorita-eforturilor-presedintelui-tarii-din-siria-moldova-fost-repatriata-familia-zabun>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>132</sup> SIS, "Încă o familie din Republica Moldova a fost repatriată din Siria," *Serviciul de Informații și Securitate*, <https://www.sis.md/ro/content/inca-o-familie-din-republica-moldova-fost-repatriata-din-siria?status=1>, <https://www.sis.md/ro/content/%C3%AEenc%C4%83-o-familie-din-republica-moldova-fost-repatriat%C4%83-din-siria?status=1>, (accessed 23 September 2021); Multimedia, "O moldoveancă și cei 4 copii ai săi, repatriați din Siria după ce au fost deținuți mai bine de un an în tabăra 'Al Hawl' " *Redacția Unimedia*, 16 July 2020, <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/ca5e5a47cc6488d9/o-moldoveanca-si-cei-4-copii-ai-sai-repatriati-din-siria-dupa-ce-au-fost-detinuti-mai-bine-de-un-an-in-tabara-al-hawl.html> <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/ca5e5a47cc6488d9/o-moldoveanca-si-cei-4-copii-ai-sai-repatriati-din-siria-dupa-ce-au-fost-detinuti-mai-bine-de-un-an-in-tabara-al-hawl.html>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>133</sup> TVR Moldova, "Membru al organizației extremist-teroriste ISIS, arestat la Aeroportul Chișinău în timp ce încerca să iasă din Republica Moldova cu un pașaport fals", *TVR Moldova*, 20 January 2020, <http://tvrmdova.md/actualitate/membru-al-organizatiei-extremist-teroriste-isis-arestat-la-aeroportul-chisinau-in-timp-ce-incerca-sa-iasa-din-republica-moldova-cu-un-pasaport-fals/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>134</sup> "Un fost luptător de partea teroriștilor din Statul Islamic, reținut în Moldova," *Click.md*, 9 July 2019, <http://news.click.md/story/un-fost-luptator-de-partea-teroristilor-din-statul-islamic-r-3fd54af2190709mdro>, (accessed 23 September 2021); "Cine este teroristul ISIS extrădat din R. Moldova în Rusia," *Stiri.md*, 29 December 2018, <https://stiri.md/articole/international/cine-este-teroristul-isis-extradat-din-r-moldova-in-rusia>, (accessed 23 September 2021); "Luptător ISIS, capturat în Moldova," *Cotidianul.ro*, 9 July 2019, <https://antiteror.sis.md/content/video-luptator-isis-capturat-moldova>, (accessed 23 September 2021).



## MONTENEGRO

While Montenegro is a Western Balkan country where support for Daesh ideology gained momentum during the group's peak in the last decade, more recently, radical right extremism has been on the rise, with worrying evidence of the formation of new groups. Incidents and the rise of groups motivated by this type of ideologies in Montenegro have been observed offline, as well as online via Facebook and blogs. In 2020, besides Islamophobic hate speech, radical right extremist activities included anti-government protests and disinformation campaigns. The government also formally adopted a strategy to suppress violent extremism in February 2020.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

Primary VE ideologies, groups, and individuals operating in Montenegro have mainly been Daesh adherents and radical right – the latter including both Serbian and Montenegrin radical right extremists. The radical right movements and individuals, which have recently become prominent in the country, are primarily using Facebook, Instagram, and online blogs to communicate and recruit new followers. According to a Europol report, in 2020, there was an increase in the number of supporters of extremist groups; individuals are typically between 20 and 40 years of age and of a lower social status.<sup>135</sup> Besides radical right-inspired VE incidents throughout 2020, Montenegrin officials have noted an increase in radicalization among Roma in the country, especially among refugees and displaced persons from Kosovo, as well as their family members born in Montenegro after arriving from Kosovo.<sup>136</sup>

Ideologically motivated extremism in the country is concentrated in a handful of municipalities along the country's eastern and northern borders. For instance, in the town of Plav, near the border with Albania and Kosovo, the extremist group El-Bejan has been particularly linked to all of the foreign terrorist fighters who left this part of the country for Syria and Iraq.<sup>137</sup> Still, Montenegrin security officials emphasized in 2018 that they no longer have significant concerns about radicalization into VE of this nature and are focused instead on preventing non-violent radicalization.<sup>138</sup>

Radical right movements and individuals were recently triggered when the government passed a law on religious freedom in December 2019 that threatened to dispossess the Serbian Orthodox Church of its properties. It primarily led to a surge of activities by ethnonationalist, and religious (Orthodox) extremist circles as it has accentuated tensions between the two main threads of nationalism associated with the radical right present in Montenegro in 2020: one that advocates the belonging of Montenegrins to Serbian national identity, and the other that promotes a Montenegrin national identity as distinct.<sup>139</sup> The radical right group Bunt Crna Gora, (Rebellion Montenegro), which launched Instagram and Facebook accounts and a blog, was founded in 2020 as a reaction to the new law on religious freedom.

<sup>135</sup> EUROPOL, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021," p. 77. [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat\\_2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat_2021_0.pdf), (accessed 25 December 2021).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> BIRN, "QAnon u BiH: Teorije zavjere pod plaštom slobode govora," *VOA News*, 4 September 2020, <https://ba.voanews.com/a/qanon-u-bih-teorije-zavjere-pod-plastom-slobode-govora/5570780.html>, (accessed 1 August 2021).

<sup>138</sup> Edina Bećirević, T. Šuković, and A. Zuković, "Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum: Montenegro Report," *Academia*, [https://www.academia.edu/40429321/WesternBalkansExtremismResearchForum\\_Montenegro\\_Report](https://www.academia.edu/40429321/WesternBalkansExtremismResearchForum_Montenegro_Report), (British Council, 2018).

<sup>139</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., "State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021," *Hope not Hate*, p. 65. *Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung*, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-report-2020-12-v210ct.pdf>.



Serbian ethnonationalism is present in the country, though it is opposed by many associated with the Montenegrin radical right, Christian and even Daesh-related groups and individuals in Montenegro. While Albanian nationalism has never been particularly prominent in the country and has not been linked to violence, there has been evidence of revisionist trends regarding the history of Albanians in Montenegro. For instance, figures who fought against the annexation of allegedly “Albanian” territories by Montenegro when they were still part of the Ottoman Empire are glorified on the Facebook page “Albanians in Montenegro.”<sup>140</sup> Montenegrin radical right groups such as Rebellion Montenegro stigmatize this form of nationalism to present the Albanian minority as a threat. Furthermore, groups motivated by this form of radical right extremism have also engaged in violent extremist and Islamophobic hate speech in 2020. This was highlighted in a series of incidents mainly involving the painting of graffiti associated with Serb nationalism and images of Serb war criminals. Graffiti was discovered on several Muslim houses, which interestingly appeared during the run-up parliamentary elections in the country during August, 2020 (*see image XII*).<sup>141</sup>



**Image XII:** In August 2020, images of Serb war criminals were spotted on Muslim homes. Pavle Djurisić and Draža Mihailović, both members of the Chetniks, a Serb nationalist force during World War II, had their images emerge in Berane overnight. There is a sizable Muslim community there.<sup>142</sup>

12 August 2020

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. Also see: <https://www.facebook.com/vendeshqiptare/>; and <https://www.instagram.com/p/CILMEsuAAqo/>.

<sup>141</sup> TRT World, “Bosnians in Montenegro wake up to anti-Muslim graffiti,” *TRT World*, 12 August 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/bosnians-in-montenegro-wake-up-to-anti-muslim-graffiti-38844>.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

As illustrated with a few examples, the online extremist channels for all different types of groups and movements have mainly involved Facebook, Instagram, and blogs. The rise of espousing conspiracy theories, especially anti-COVID-19 propaganda, was mostly disseminated on Facebook. The group Kontra Tim Cetinje (Contra Group Cetinje) has argued, for example, that government health experts are fascists who have lied to the population about the effectiveness of vaccines.<sup>143</sup>

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

In general, threats of terrorism and VE-related to FTFs are relatively low. The Montenegrin Ministry of Interior has identified 26 citizens (18 men, 5 women, and 3 children) who departed to Syria since 2012. Six are believed to have died abroad, while ten returned. There were no returns recorded in 2020.<sup>144</sup> According to the coordinator for combating extremism in Montenegro, Dragan Pejanovic, there is no record of any citizens leaving for Syria after 2015.<sup>145</sup> Despite the departure of some individuals to fight in Syria and Iraq for various ideologically motivated extremist groups, including Daesh, there is no indication that these individuals intend to carry out violence on Montenegrin soil.<sup>146</sup> Rather, the Crisis24 Montenegro Country Report points to the coup attempt that was foiled by Montenegrin authorities in October 2016 as a sign of the risk posed by the radical right, especially transnationally linked or sponsored groups.<sup>147</sup> In 2020, Montenegro conducted seven investigations into terrorism-related offenses, including terrorist financing from abroad.<sup>148</sup>

Reportedly, there have been five Serbian nationalists identifying as part of broader radical right circles who departed from Montenegro to Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict there.<sup>149</sup> All of these individuals have returned: exact return dates are not publicly available. However, two returnees who came back after the passing of a 2016 law criminalizing participation in foreign armed conflicts were charged and sentenced, while the rest of the returnees have been integrated into their communities and are being monitored.

<sup>143</sup> Kontra Tim Cetinje (@Kontratimcetinje), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/kontratimcetinje/>, (accessed 25 July 2021).

<sup>144</sup> Samir Kajosević, "Montenegro Reveals 31 Citizens Have Fought in Foreign Wars," *Balkan Insight*, 9 November 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/09/montenegro-reveals-31-citizens-have-fought-in-foreign-wars/>, (accessed 5 August 2021); and EUROPOL, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021," [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat\\_2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat_2021_0.pdf).

<sup>145</sup> EUROPOL, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021," [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat\\_2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat_2021_0.pdf).

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis24, "Montenegro Country Report," *Crisis24*, 2020, <https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/montenegro>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>148</sup> Samir Kajosević, "Montenegro Reveals 31 Citizens Have Fought in Foreign Wars," *Balkan Insight*, 9 November 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/09/montenegro-reveals-31-citizens-have-fought-in-foreign-wars/> and EUROPOL, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021," [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat\\_2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat_2021_0.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>149</sup> Samir Kajosević, "Montenegro Reveals 31 Citizens Have Fought in Foreign Wars," *Balkan Insight*, 9 November 2020.

## NORTH MACEDONIA

Daesh-inspired ideology has been the most prominent violent extremist threat in recent years in North Macedonia. An estimated 156 of North Macedonia's citizens left for conflict zones in Syria and Iraq; of these, 76 have returned and 37 were killed.<sup>150</sup> In February 2020, one foreign terrorist fighter was deported from Turkey and charged with participation in a "foreign army." In 2020, authorities disrupted a terrorist plot by an 11-member cell. Repatriation efforts included in March 2020 when one woman, her daughter, and her nephew were repatriated from a refugee camp in Turkey. Meanwhile, the radical right and disinformation campaigns generally aimed at polarizing internal conflicts and North Macedonia's international relations while also distorting electoral processes.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

In 2020, the impact of terrorist and extremist actors in North Macedonia declined, as reported by the Institute for Economics and Peace.<sup>151</sup> This is most likely due to the general decline of popularity for groups like Daesh in the Western Balkans but also in part because the typical supporters of Daesh have drastically gone under the radar by using less-popular communications channels. One new group that originated in North Macedonia calls itself the "Lions of the Balkans." Very little is known about the group, and they have never been identified online or expressed any of their violent narratives openly. However, security agencies have intercepted communications where they were mentioned as a group and were suspected to be a network of individuals who supported Daesh-inspired terrorist attacks abroad – such a case was the attack in Vienna in November 2020.<sup>152</sup> In 2020, there was one notable instance of the authorities disrupting a terrorist plot by ideologically motivated extremism of this nature that included an 11-member cell, discussed in more detail later in this section. Other than this explicit case, there have not been any recorded VE or terrorist incidents.<sup>153</sup>

YouTube used to be a prominent platform for ideologically motivated individuals (imams mainly) to preach their beliefs. "Al-Hak Media" was such a platform but the channel was shut down. Furthermore, Facebook pages have drastically lost popularity or have entirely stopped producing extremist ideology though some were shut down, whether through individual choice or platform moderation policy. For example, "Hilafeti," which used to be a very active page, has lost much following but also has become very restrictive for the use.<sup>154</sup> It identified itself as a public newspaper; however, access to its content was granted only to members. "Al-Muwahhidun Shqip" was another site that, amongst regular religious teachings, sometimes covered more radical ideas. The page has been removed. Another social media site on Facebook was "Islami eshte Hak" (Islam is debt). One Facebook page with a large following of over 4,500, "Thirrja ne Teuhid"<sup>155</sup> (Call to Teuhid, *see image XIII*), has changed its content significantly after the territorial losses of Daesh. Postings became

<sup>150</sup> European Commission, *Report on Montenegro 2020* (Brussels, 2020).

<sup>151</sup> Commission Staff, "North Macedonia 2020 Report," *European Commission*, 6 November 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>152</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism," *Institute for Economics and Peace*, November 2020, p. 9. <https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>, (accessed 15 December 2021).

<sup>153</sup> Balkanweb, "Lions of the Balkans - it does not appear to be a prominent group, the weapons used in the Vienna attack may have come from..." *Balkan Web*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.balkanweb.com/luanet-e-balkanit-dymishi-nuk-me-rezulton-i-njohur-si-grup-armet-e-perdorura-ne-sulmin-e-vjenes-mund-te-kene-ardhur-nga/>, (accessed, 23 September 2021).

<sup>154</sup> EUROPOL, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2021," 2021, p. 76 *EUROPOL*, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2021-tesat>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>155</sup> Hilafeti, (@hilafeti), *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/hilafeti/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>156</sup> Thirrja ne Teuhid, (@thirrjaneteuhid.official), *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/thirrjaneteuhid.official>, (accessed 23 September 2021).



more moderate – though, before that, many posts were intended as information about “the holy war.” Two of the most prominent Facebook pages in the past were: “Come to Islam” and “Islamic World” (original: “Eja ne Islam” and “Bota Islame”).<sup>157</sup>



Image XII (left): “Our belief about democracy, participation in elections, and those who invite people into democracy”  
On the right, a part of the text states: “Those ‘imams’ who call for laic parties and glorify democracy are criminals and enemies of Allah”<sup>158</sup>

Some profiles were kept active, surprisingly by people in North Macedonia, although they addressed people in Albania. One such case is Imam Abdurrahim Balla, one of the nine imams who were imprisoned in Albania on charges of recruitment. The Facebook page was still active as of this report writing.<sup>159</sup> Along similar lines is the page of Rexhep Memishi, who had many preaching videos on YouTube.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, “Minberi i Teuhidit” is another example of a Facebook page that had a large following and moderated its stance on radical preaching significantly. However, at times they did show support for individuals such as like Rexhep Memishi and Gjithnje me Hoxhallaret.<sup>161</sup> Another popular social media site is known as “Gjithnje me Hoxhallaret” (Always with the Imams).<sup>162</sup>

Radical right content dissemination, connected to COVID-19 conspiracy theories, appeared to be a common 2020 occurrence in North Macedonia. They have focused mainly on internal issues. Unlike in Albania and (to some extent) Kosovo, radical right narratives in North Macedonia appear to fuel internal conflict along the lines of ethnonationalism. Some of the most prominent disinformation campaigns have centered around the following:<sup>163</sup> campaigns undermining support for the name-change referendum; polarizing narratives that involve imagined threats to Macedonian identity; disinformation campaigns mixing anti-Bulgarian, anti-Greek, and anti-Albanian sentiment with fears that Macedonian youth would become “cannon fodder” for NATO wars; stoked fears of “Greater Albania,” as well as alleged EU and

<sup>157</sup> Facebook, Eja ne Islam, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/165456171598170>.

<sup>158</sup> Thirrja ne Teuhid (‘Call to Teuhid’), Facebook, 7 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/thirrjaneteuhid.official/photos/1362677297419148>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>159</sup> Hoxhe Abdurrahim Balla, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/abdurrahimballa>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Minberi i Teuhidit, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/minbermedia>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>162</sup> GJITHNJE ME HOXHALLARET (public group), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/436843496442662/>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>163</sup> Directorate-General for External Relations: Policy Department, “Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them,” European Parliament, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)653621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

NATO backing for the supposed project; accusations of the “weaponization” of COVID-19 by neighboring countries, including Albania and Greece.<sup>164</sup> COVID-19-related disinformation included “stories” that hydroxychloroquine can cure COVID-19, that Bill Gates has plans to control citizens through the use of the vaccine, that the vaccine is spread through 5G and that pharmaceutical companies are spreading COVID-19 due to economic interests.<sup>165</sup> While these are not extremist narratives calling on direct violence, there is a chance that they could lead toward radicalization or translate to support for VEOs that propagate similar narratives in other regions.

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

Since 2012, an estimated 156 of North Macedonia’s citizens left for conflict zones in Syria and Iraq: of these, 76 have returned, and 37 were killed. In February 2020, one foreign terrorist fighter was deported from the Republic of Turkey and charged with participation in a foreign army, police, or paramilitary formation.<sup>166</sup> Of the 23 people who have been charged with terrorism and participating in foreign conflicts in the past, 16 were imprisoned on charges of being FTF or facilitators, and 13 were serving their sentence until 2020.<sup>167</sup> In 2020, authorities disrupted a terrorist plot by an 11-member cell; one of the members had actively fought for Daesh in Syria over the previous four years.<sup>168</sup> North Macedonia, like Albania, has limited experience with the reintegration of returnees, but the country has been working on efforts to develop effective rehabilitation and reintegration centers. Repatriation efforts included a North Macedonian “widow of a [Daesh] fighter” along with her daughter and nephew repatriated from a refugee camp in Turkey.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Florian Bieber, T. Prelec, Z. Nechev and D. Jovic, “The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and Covid-19 in the WB,” *BiEPAG*, 1 December 2020, <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Conspiracy-and-Covid19-in-the-Balkans-ALBANIAN.pdf>, (accessed 15 December 2021).

<sup>166</sup> Commission Staff, “North Macedonia 2020 Report,” European Commission, 6 November 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>167</sup> Aleksandar Vanchoski, N. Shikova and A. Musliu, “Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF): Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia,” *Hedayah*, June 2020, p. 40 [https://kbb9z40cmb2apwafcho9v3j-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/nexus\\_ftf\\_rrr\\_eng.pdf](https://kbb9z40cmb2apwafcho9v3j-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/nexus_ftf_rrr_eng.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>168</sup> EUROPOL, “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2021,” *EUROPOL*, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2021-tesat>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>169</sup> European Commission, “North Macedonia 2020 Report,” European Commission, Brussels, 2020, p. 76, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf), (accessed 23 September 2021).

## ROMANIA

The main threat of VE and terrorism in Romania arises from radical right movements and individuals that have gained prominence in recent years. These types of extremist actors – but also esotericists/conspiracists and QAnon followers that may associate themselves with the broader radical right Romanian ideologies – were the most active in 2020. Narratives held together by the idea of a conspiracy, lack of trust in the government, religiosity or spirituality, and patriotism. A comparatively high number of demonstrations occurred, in its majority reuniting various kinds of ideological orientations and including “career protesters” as well as regular citizens. Support for groups like Daesh has slowly reduced; there were no known cases of FTFs originating from Romania in 2020, and only some cases of Daesh sympathizers were noticed. Concerning online activities, including on social media, there is evidence of banning conspiracy groups and individuals on Facebook and YouTube.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

The main extremist actors were radical right, esotericists/conspiracists, and QAnon. In 2020, the main manifestations were seemingly online activities and demonstrations, often in combination, with nationalism as a link. The pandemic has been a boost for radical right and conspiracy theory groups and individuals. Interestingly, however, the esoteric community COVID-19 conspiracies and in part also QAnon builds on existing conspiratorial thinking about a global secret society, programming, and extraterrestrial life forms.<sup>170</sup> Concerning social media and online activities, there is evidence of conspiracy groups and individuals being banned on Facebook and YouTube. QAnon branch in the country, for instance, was banned on Facebook in July 2020.<sup>171</sup> The group made a return in October 2020 for a few days but was banned again. The Romanian leader of QAnon Cornel Sabou was nonetheless active on Twitter and YouTube, but his Twitter posts ended at the end of 2020, demonstrating successful moderation of QAnon associated activities online. On YouTube, at the time of writing, several videos were banned. Some conspiracists were also active on VK and Gab. The adaptation strategy by these extremists, however, seemed to be to create new profiles on Facebook and write blogs. There was a variety of narratives held together by the idea of a conspiracy, lack of trust in the government, religiosity or spirituality, and patriotism. The narratives generally propagated included beliefs that the virus did not exist or is not as dangerous; the pandemic is a global conspiracy and/or a means for the government to cut freedoms and enforce dictatorship; Trump was a hero who fought against conspiracies and the pharma industry; faith is a means to fight the virus; there is an apocalyptic scenario aiming to destroy Romania and other countries as a sign of new age; and the 5G technology conspiracies as propagated widely in the Western Balkans.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Amar Diwakar, “Why the far-right conspiracy theory QAnon is going global?,” *TRT World*, 27 August 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-the-far-right-conspiracy-theory-qanon-is-going-global-39230>, (accessed 20 January 2022); and, Raluca Buturoiu, “Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories about the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania? An Analysis of Conspiracy Theories Believers’ Profiles,” *MDPI*, 3 November 2021, <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/11/4/138/pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>171</sup> Quote from Facebook: “We removed 35 Facebook accounts, 3 Pages and 88 Instagram accounts. This activity originated in Romania and focused on the US. We found this network as part of our investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior ahead of the 2020 election in the US,” and; Facebook, “Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report,” *Facebook*, July 2020, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/July-2020-CIB-Report.pdf>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>172</sup> Buletin.de Bucuresti, “QAnon, o mișcare din SUA care a convins mii de români că Donald Trump e salvatorul lumii. Își trimit copii cu măști false la școală și se pregătesc de distrugerea oculte mondiale satanice *buletin.de*,” <https://buletin.de/bucuresti/qanon-o-miscare-din-sua-care-a-convins-mii-de-romani-ca-donald-trump-e-salvatorul-lumii-isi-trimit-copii-cu-masti-false-la-scoala-si-se-pregatesc-de-distrugerea-oculte-mondiale-satanice/>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

A comparatively high number of demonstrations occurred, in its majority reuniting various kinds of ideological orientations and including “career protesters” as well as regular citizens. A correlation between social media narratives and mobilization for demonstrations was observed in the case of the radical right and QAnon (see *image XIV*). For instance, some social media groups only emerged to mobilize for demonstrations, after which they disappeared again.



Image XIV: QAnon protesters against restrictions.<sup>173</sup>  
21 October 2020

On narratives: from the one side, there was an initial surge of citizens’ protests against COVID-19 restrictions, highlighting that the public perceived the government measures as drastic. This took place against the background of historical sensitivities to dictatorial tendencies and state abuse. The main topics were: protesting against the vaccine given that mortality is lower than with the flu; the argument that it is a common illness and prayers should help; the interests of the pharma industry; and contesting the security of vaccination. Indeed, QAnon and, in particular, its local affiliated leader, Sabou, were quick to integrate COVID-19 from the beginning into their broader conspiracy theory. Thus, the latter argued, for example, in March 2020, that the COVID-19 crisis is a pretext “for Trump to fight the global occult.”<sup>174</sup>

In May 2022, a disinformation campaign came to the fore, resulting in a relatively large demonstration<sup>175</sup> at which also conspiracy theory individuals labeled “propagandists” participated, along with the leader of the radical right party AUR (Alliance for the Unification of the Romanians), George Simion. In this case, the narratives included that COVID-19 does not exist, the government is dictatorial and criminal, and aims to restrict freedoms. In July 2020, there were further protests organized via Facebook events;<sup>176</sup> the slogans included “we are not a nation of slaves,” which were apparently anti-government and anti-dictatorship.<sup>177</sup> Later in the year, in September, a surge of the radical right was observed, a New Right type

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Dora Vulcan, Piața Victoriei, protest care contestă existența cazurilor de coronavirus. Se cere pedepsirea celor care au instituit starea de urgență, *Europa Liberă România*, 15 May 2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/protest-care-neagă-existența-coronavirusului-in-piața-victoriei/30614463.html>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>176</sup> N.A., “Protest în Piața Victoriei al celor care contestă legea carantinei,” *Europa Liberă România*, 12 iulie 2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/protest-%C3%AEn-pia%C8%9Ba-victoriei-al-ceilor-care-contest%C4%83-legea-carantinei/30722227.html>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.



of movement, largely run via social media channels, principally Facebook, with a religious undertone and often visited by propagandist individuals. Some of the slogans called on protest against wearing protective face-masks; others claimed that people and especially children are being massacred, the measures were disproportionate, and that the virus is not worse than other viruses. Some of the slogans even included accusations of slavery and religious slogans.<sup>178</sup> Parallel to this, there has been intense online activity on blogs of esoteric individuals and groups who already believed in conspiracy theories about the universe and subsequently added COVID-19 and QAnon themes, including the allegations that the US election had been manipulated.<sup>179</sup>

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

There were no known cases of FTFs originating from Romania. An individual condemned for planning a terrorist attack was released and is believed by authorities not to be radical anymore. He is under surveillance and had radicalized in a French prison.<sup>180</sup> A woman was arrested in 2020 for sympathizing with Daesh and allegedly attempted to bring FTFs to Romania. Unsurprisingly, she was communicating with these individuals online.<sup>181</sup>

## SERBIA

Currently, the threat of radical right is the form of extremism most broadly present in Serbia- one that appeared to grow in 2020. The radical right includes ultra-nationalist groups, often with a "Nazi" prefix that are part of a broader European network (sometimes tied to music bands), and other organizations with a "Serb" prefix that includes ethnic extremism (mainly against ethnic Albanians, Kosovars, Bosniaks, and Croats), and football hooliganism. There is also an evident overlap of shared ideas among various radical right groups. In the past, there has been a degree of support for Daesh ideology in the Sandžak region. In previous years, Daesh-inspired individuals from the Sandžak region also joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq. In this context, the country has put measures in place to address the reintegration of FTFs and their families. In general, the pandemic has become an opportunity for many radical right actors to emerge and has also been an enabling environment for populist organizations run by anti-vaccine crusaders to gain more attention.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

There were 30 known radical right groups in Serbia in 2020, accounting for more than 5,000 members, including ultra-nationalists, football hooligans, music bands, and links to organized criminal groups.<sup>182</sup> The radical right groups and adherents in the country mainly

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Facebook source in report database, link redacted (2020); Isaac Stanley-Becker, "Facebook disables Romanian network masquerading as pro-Trump Americans," *Washington Post*, August 6 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/08/06/facebook-election-romanians/>, (accessed 20 January 2022); and, Marcel Gascón Barberá, "Facebook Pulls Pro-Trump Network Operating From Romania," *Balkan Insight*, 7 August 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/07/facebook-pulls-pro-trump-network-operating-from-romania/>, and Buletin, "QAnon, o mișcare din SUA care a convins mii de români că Donald Trump e salvatorul lumii. Își trimit copiii cu măști false la școală și se pregătesc de distrugerea oculte mondiale satanice," *Buletin de București*, 21 October 2020, <https://buletin.de/bucuresti/qanon-o-miscare-din-sua-care-a-convins-mii-de-romani-ca-donald-trump-e-salvatorul-lumii-isi-trimit-copiii-cu-masti-false-la-scoala-si-se-pregatesc-de-distrugerea-oculte-mondiale-satanice>.

<sup>180</sup> Alex Cazacu, "Ce face Ibrahim acum, românul acuzat că ar fi plănuțit un atentat terorist în România *Playtech Impact*, 3 November 2020, <https://playtech.ro/stiri/ce-face-ibrahim-acum-romanul-acuzat-ca-ar-fi-planuit-un-atentat-terorist-in-romania-227031>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>181</sup> Filon Stan, "Cum erau să ajungă teroristii ISIS în județul Arad și cine e femeia care încerca să îi aducă," *Playtech Impact*, 15 May 2020, <https://playtech.ro/stiri/cum-erai-sa-ajunga-teroristii-isis-in-judetul-arad-si-cine-e-femeia-care-incerca-sa-i-aduca-126163>, (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>182</sup> Nemanja Stevanović, "Istrazivanje pokazalo zblizavanje ekstremne desnice i antivaksera u Srbiji," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-pandemija-ekstremna-desnica-antivakseri/31311122.html>.



draw on Serbian nationalism – the idea of creating an ethnically pure “Greater Serbia”<sup>183</sup> – but also the refusal to acknowledge Kosovo’s independence, resistance to LGBTQIA+ rights, racism against Jewish and Roma people, islamophobia, ethnic hatred against Bosniaks and Albanians, and the promotion of traditional values such as Orthodox Christianity.<sup>184</sup> The radical right often perceives Europe and Euro-Atlantic integration as a threat, and opposes Serbia’s accession to the EU. Some groups present themselves as humanitarians and fighters for vulnerable groups (the poor, elderly, children, or abandoned and sick animals) while depicting themselves as patriotic defenders of national values and justifying violence in a fight for sacred goals.<sup>186</sup> One such group is Levijatan (Leviathan) (*see image XV*). This group has been quite active in 2020 in its VE activities. In May 2020, Filip Radovanović, a group member, drove into a reception center for refugees in Obrenovac, a remote municipality in the capital of Belgrade.<sup>187</sup> After the arrest, Levijatan organized a protest in front of the center under the slogan “Stop illegal immigrants.”<sup>188</sup> Levijatan members have also initiated violent attacks against the LGBTQIA+ and Roma communities and groups standing against glorifying convicted war criminals such as Ratko Mladić, whom they consider a national hero.<sup>189</sup> For instance, in April 2020, a dozen members of the Levijatan entered the home of a Roma family, harassed, abused, and confiscated their dog.<sup>190</sup>

<sup>183</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., “State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021,” *Hope not Hate*, p. 107. *Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung*, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-report-2020-12-v210ct.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>184</sup> Jovo Bakic, “Right-wing extremism in Serbia,” *International Policy Analysis*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2013), p.1-5. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/09659.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2022).

<sup>185</sup> Aleks Eror, “In Serbia, A Toxic Mix Of Nationalism And Animal Rights,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-levijatan-nationalism-animal-rights/31694612.html>, (accessed 10 February 2022).

<sup>186</sup> Vladan Djukanović et al., “U ‘ekstremnom desnom ekologizmu,’ evropski ekstremisti traze siru podrsku,” *Balkan Insight*, 23 October 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/23/in-far-right-ecologism-european-extremists-pursue-broader-appeal/?lang=sr>.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Michael Colborne, “Levijatan: Serbian Animal Rights Vigilantes Go To The Polls,” *Bellingcat*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/06/18/levijatan-serbian-animal-rights-vigilantes-go-to-the-polls/>, (accessed 13 January 2021); and, Aleks Eror, “In Serbia, A Toxic Mix Of Nationalism And Animal Rights,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-levijatan-nationalism-animal-rights/31694612.html>, (accessed 10 February 2022).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.



Image XV: Masked members of Levijatan<sup>191</sup>

Besides wider European Neo-Nazi and radical right groups having ties in Serbia, music bands have similarly been linked to Neo-Nazis in this regard. A Neo-Nazi concert titled “Ian Stuart Memorial” in honor of the founder of Blood & Honour in the UK was supposed to occur in October 2020, but due to public pressure, it was canceled. Several groups tied to the European networks with the white supremacist Blood & Honor organization, including “Kristalna noć” (Crystal Night), “Iz Revolta” (From the Revolt), and “Providenje” (Providence), were supposed to play at the concert.<sup>192</sup> The band “Crystal Night” is named after the pre-World War II incident that signaled the escalation of the persecution of Jews in Germany and Austria, with the destruction or burning of hundreds of synagogues, Jewish houses and stores, and the deaths of 91 individuals.<sup>193</sup> One of the most well-known songs of the band “Crystal Night” is a tribute to Rudolf Hess, Adolf Hitler’s secretary, a convicted war criminal.<sup>194</sup> The songs, in general, glorify Nazi and fascist ideologies in their songs and praise war criminals, including those from the Yugoslav War in the 1990s; their songs also speak of the world conspiracy of the Jews and glorify the white race, primarily the Slavs.<sup>195</sup> While pandemic restrictions have undoubtedly led to mass frustration worldwide, including the Balkans, there is a possibility that the circumstances led extremist groups to be further agitated, and could also lead to heightened extremist activities.

Serbia has also seen instances of ethnically motivated extremism and football hooliganism. In southern Serbia (Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa), this is intertwined with the “Albanian community and respect for their human and minority rights, on the one hand, and control of this border region, on the other.”<sup>196</sup> In this context, one major hate protest occurred in October

<sup>191</sup> Michael Colborne, “Levijatan: Serbian Animal Rights Vigilantes Go To The Polls,” *Bellingcat*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/06/18/levijatan-serbian-animal-rights-vigilantes-go-to-the-polls/>, (accessed 13 January 2021).

<sup>192</sup> Nevena Bogdanović, “Grupe i Organizacije iza zabranjenog koncerta u Beogradu,” *Slobodna Evropa*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ko-su-grupe-i-organizacije-iza-zabranjenog-koncerta-u-beogradu-/30889077.html>, (accessed 25 December 2021).

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> Bojan Klačar, et al., “Assessment of Violent Extremism in Serbia,” *USAID*, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00TH7V.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TH7V.pdf) (USAID, 2018). (accessed 12 January 2022).

2020 in Belgrade against the annual human rights and peacebuilding event – “Mirëdita, dobar dan” festival<sup>197</sup> organized by Albanian youth. A large number of the Serbian general public in Belgrade, and radical right extremist groups and members joined to protest against the event and any Albanian presence in the country more generally (see image XVI).<sup>198</sup>



Image XVI: Protest in front of the Center for Cultural Decontamination due to the festival “Mirëdita, good day.” The slogan on the flag (on the right-hand side) says, “No Surrender.”<sup>199</sup>  
25 August 2020

QAnon groups were also active in 2020, the largest of which, “QAnon Balkan,” claims to want to unite people in the region: “We do not divide people by religion and nation, because we are all hostages of a handful of globalists, dangerous psychopaths, who have placed their puppets at the head of our states and institutions.”<sup>200</sup>

In general, Twitter and Facebook remain the main social media platforms of Serbian extremists though Instagram also seems to gain popularity with groups like “Srpska Čast” (Serbian Honor), being active there.<sup>201</sup>

A recent study conducted by the International Republican Institute examined the state of radical right extremism amid the social crisis caused by the pandemic and confirmed that the activity of radical right groups in Serbia has not only increased during the crisis but that these groups have embraced an association with anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists.<sup>202</sup> Radical right extremists in Serbia have used the emergency created by COVID-19 to highlight the need for their community-level humanitarian activities. Soon after the pandemic emerged, for example, several radical right leaders posted pictures portraying their involvement in delivering food, medicines, and other basic commodities to people in need.<sup>203</sup> The pandemic also became an opportunity for populist organizations like Živim Za Srbiju (I live for Serbia), which is run by anti-vaccine crusader Jovana Stojković who is a famous doctor in Serbia. Most

<sup>197</sup> Since 2014, the “Mirëdita, dobar dan” festival has taken place every year. It is a festival that aims to bring together art, culture, activism, and public discourse on one platform. The festival expands regional views and supports collaboration and peacebuilding by bringing together artists, human rights and peace advocates, and opinion leaders from Kosovo and Serbia.

<sup>198</sup> Lola Borđević, “Protest zbog održavanja festivala ‘Mirdita dobar dan’: Prisutne jake policijske snage,” 22 October 2020, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/20201022/protest-zbog-odrzavanja-festivala-mirdita-dobar-dan-prisutne-jake-policijske-snage-foto-1123646397.html>, (accessed 13 January 2021).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., “State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021,” *Hope not Hate*, p. 41. Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-report-2020-12-v210ct.pdf>.

<sup>201</sup> Stefan Janjic, “Govor mrznje na portalima i društvenim mrežama u Srbiji,” *Odgovor*, 2020, <https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Govor-mrznje-na-internetu.pdf>, and Srpska Cast Official, *Instagram*, [https://www.instagram.com/srpska\\_cast\\_official/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/srpska_cast_official/?hl=en).

<sup>202</sup> Nemanja Stevanović, “Istraživanje pokazalo zbližavanje ekstremne desnice i antivaksera u Srbiji,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-pandemija-ekstremna-desnica-antivakseri/31311122.html>, (accessed 28 July 2021); National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Activities, “Sastanak Odbora za Kosovo i Metohiju i konsultanata IRI,” 26 May 2021, [http://212.200.189.36/Sastanak\\_Odbora\\_za\\_Kosovo\\_i\\_Metohiju\\_i\\_konsultanata\\_IRI.41600.941.html](http://212.200.189.36/Sastanak_Odbora_za_Kosovo_i_Metohiju_i_konsultanata_IRI.41600.941.html), (accessed 14 December 2021).

<sup>203</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., “State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021,” *Hope not Hate*. Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung.



radical right groups and activists have also criticized the government in its approach to the pandemic, and some groups have shared materials designed to generate panic or rage about the protocols that have been adopted, including Živim Za Srbiju movement. Subsequently, several VE protests occurred in Belgrade in 2020 (see *image XVII*). The organization has posted content alleging that the use of masks on children is harmful and that the vaccine contains a nanochip.<sup>204</sup> However, within the Serbian radical right, perspectives on COVID-19 have been inconsistent. For example, Srpska Čast (Serbian Honor), Srpski Narodni Pokret 1389 (Serbian National Movement 1389), and Srpska Desnica (Serbian Right) have all recommended that people follow the dispositions of the government.<sup>205</sup> Nonetheless, the narratives of radical right actors in Serbia target both the government and the media. The Živim Za Srbiju Movement blames the media for creating a hostile social atmosphere, arguing that “The media intimidate [and] spread panic” by reporting that “We will die if we do not get vaccinated.”<sup>206</sup> One group associated with Živim Za Srbiju Movement that reportedly was active and administered from Serbia in November 2020 is called “BalkAnon” and has a red-letter “Q” in its logo.<sup>207</sup> The group reportedly had administrators from most Western Balkan countries, which explains why similar conspiracy theories were found in those countries. A post published in October 2020 states that “BalkAnon” is, among other things, against “compulsory vaccination, migrant invasion, globalism, chipping, pedophilia, SHPP, and 5G.”<sup>208</sup> Popular narratives disseminated included QAnon slogans such as: “Storm is coming,” “Where one goes, we all go,” and “Great Awakening.”<sup>209</sup> Reportedly, Facebook removed more than 2000 accounts associated with the group.<sup>210</sup> They also disseminate the COVID-19 conspiracies. Several groups in Serbia have spread QAnon-like stories, including Srpska Akcija, (Serbian Action), which published an article on its website in May 2020 entitled “American Satanism and Vučić’s government.”<sup>211</sup>



*Image XVII: Protesters clash with police in front of Serbia’s National Assembly building in Belgrade<sup>212</sup>  
8 July 2020*

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>205</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., “State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021,” Hope not Hate. Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. podrške za privedenu predsednicu pokreta “Živim za Srbiju,” *Danas*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/policija-pretresla-stan-predsednice-pokreta-zivim-za-srbiju-video/>, (accessed 28 July 2021).

<sup>207</sup> Dušan Komarčević and Una Čilić, “RSE istraga: QAnon javno širi ‘tajanstvene priče’ na Zapadnom Balkanu,” *Slobodna Evropa*, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/uprkos-blokiranjima-qanon-prisutan-na-zapadnom-balkanu/30972128.html>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> “Амерички сатанизам и Вучићева власт,” *Akcija.org*, 27 May 2020, <https://akcija.org/americki-satanizam-i-vuciceva-vlast/>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>212</sup> “Serbian president backtracks on COVID-19 curfew as protests enter second day,” Euronews, 9 July 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/08/coronavirus-protesters-attempt-to-storm-parliament-in-serbia-as-lockdown-measures-are-rein>, (accessed 13 January 2022).

Similar conspiracy theorists and anti-vaccine advocates with radical right leanings, such as Živim Za Srbiju founder, Stojković, have thousands of followers on social media.<sup>213</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has only helped these personalities become more popular. However, the primary narratives of the broader Serbian radical right still focus on threats to Serbian “tradition” and territorial integrity and expansion and reject the rights of the ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ community – the latter which they see as a threat to moral integrity.

One change in the COVID-19 narrative promoted by the radical right emerged from the death of two key Orthodox leaders. In October 2020, Bishop of Montenegro Amfilohije, one of the bearers of radical Serbian ideology in that country, died from complications of COVID-19; and a few weeks later, Serbian Patriarch Irinej, who had attended the funeral of Amfilohije in Montenegro, also died from COVID-19. Their deaths led to an uptick in the religious character of nationalist propaganda promoted by the radical right on social media.<sup>214</sup>

In southwestern and southern Serbia – in Sandžak, Preševo, and Bujanovac, respectively – there appear to be some cases of ideologically motivated extremism. These parts of the country are inhabited largely by Muslims, many of whom may identify with ethnic communities in countries that border Serbia or are situated in the broader region. In some cases, this can make it difficult to distinguish between ideologically motivated extremism and ethnically motivated extremism that advocates autonomy for border areas or their separation from Serbia. Al-Furqan and al-Tawhid are the two operating extremist groups in this area; however, it is important to note that no VE incidents have been inspired or conducted by these groups or others who share their ideology.<sup>215</sup>

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

In the past, Serbia had a contingent of Daesh fighters.<sup>216</sup> According to the Ministry of Interior, 49 individuals joined Daesh, most of whom were from Novi Pazar, a Muslim majority city in the Sandžak region. BIRN has found that 20 Serbian women remain in Syrian camps. Six returnees from Syria to Serbia have been criminally charged and were sentenced to 7-11 years in prison.<sup>217</sup> In mid-2019, Serbia set in motion efforts to reintegrate FTFs, when the National Coordination Body for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism (NKT) formed a working group to develop an action plan for the return of FTFs and their families to Serbia. In dealing with violent extremist prisoners, Serbia has broadened some of its previous practices outside by providing educational awareness brochures to schools and other state institutions.<sup>218</sup> A training program for police has also been developed, which could be extended to other state agencies. In addition, measures have been taken to engage with the families of offenders before their release from prison, which has led to an increased understanding of the motivation behind the actions of these offenders. To help offenders upon release, a Team for Support and Protection exists for all offenders and can be tailored to their particular needs through cooperation with NGOs and civil society. Despite the development of these mechanisms, repatriation efforts were not initiated. One reason for this is the fact that foreign fighters who left for Iraq or Syria tend to belong to the Muslim minority inside Serbia, a sub-community that is generally marginalized. Repatriation would most likely provoke negative reactions from wider Serbian society.<sup>219</sup>

<sup>213</sup> Joe Mulhall and Safya Khan-Ruf, eds., “State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe 2021,” Hope not Hate. *Charitable Trust and the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung*.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>215</sup> Bojan Klacar et al, “Assessment of violent extremism in Serbia,” USAID, 17 December 2018, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00TH7V.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TH7V.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2021).

<sup>216</sup> Mladen Obrenović, “As Ukraine Conflict Intensifies, Serb Volunteers Prepare for Battle,” *Balkan Insight*, 16 April 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/16/as-ukraine-conflict-intensifies-serb-volunteers-prepare-for-battle/> (accessed 13 January 2021).

<sup>217</sup> Izabela Kisić, ed., “Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji”, *Helsinski odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji*, 2020. <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/desni%20ekstremizam.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2021).

<sup>218</sup> Gordana Čosić, “Crveni krst Srbije u kontaktu sa nekoliko građana iz kampova u Siriji,” *Slobodna Evropa*, 6 April, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crveni-krst-srbije-u-kontaktu-sa-nekoliko-gra%C4%91ana-iz-kampova-u-siriji/31187515.html> (accessed 25 December 2021)

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.



## SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, radical right extremist ideologies and groups have been growing over the past few years. The diverse landscape of radical right extremist adherents generally include members of Neo-Nazi groups, who primarily promote anti-migrant narratives and islamophobia. Slovenian radical right individuals and groups such as Štajerska garda (Styrian Guard) being particularly prominent) have openly engaged in extremist acts against migrants. Anti-COVID-19 rhetoric and activities, from both the right- and left-wing, have been focused on criticizing government measures and restrictions. On the other hand, Daesh-inspired ideologically motivated extremism minimally affected Slovenia. Ten nationals from Slovenia are believed to have fought for Daesh since the group was founded.<sup>220</sup> In 2020, there have been no returns of Slovenian nationals, and activities supporting Daesh or associated ideologies have decreased.

## ACTIVITIES BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AND EXTREMIST ACTORS

In 2020, Slovenia experienced a drop in the online activities of groups inspired by Daesh or similar organizations.<sup>221</sup> Since November 2019, when Telegram sought to remove Daesh and other terrorist organizations from its service, both official Daesh mouthpieces and Daesh-supporting online media outlets have struggled to rebuild their networks.<sup>222</sup> Combined with heightened efforts by other major social media companies to remove extremist content from their platforms, this has forced Daesh messaging and supporter networks to disperse across multiple, often smaller online platforms<sup>223</sup> that are harder to track.

However, this is not the case for the Slovenian radical right in its various forms, especially Neo-Nazi groups, many of which have become increasingly militarized. In the last several years, some 20 radical right extremists engaged with paramilitary training across Eastern Europe.<sup>224</sup> While there have not been VE or terrorist attacks, if ignored, this uptick in radical right activity could grow and inspire violence. Furthermore, increased illegal border crossings have prompted radical right actors to create neighborhood watches. These encourage citizens to unite to “guarantee safety for the Slovenian people.” At the same time, members of these paramilitary-esque hierarchical groups attempt to perform state-based tasks, including border surveillance and defense.<sup>225</sup> In 2017, the ultra-right extremist Slovenian Andrej Šiško, a radical right politician and convicted criminal, founded a paramilitary unit known as the *Štajerska garda* for the exclusive purpose of patrolling the Croatian-Slovenian border. This radical right group of approximately 200 members set up camp on the weekends and conducted exercises to defend Slovenia from, in their words, “migrants and Islam,” equipped with air pistols, rifles, and knives.<sup>226</sup> Following the incident, in an interview for Croatian media, Šiško remarked: “We teach people here the basics of gun handling. This is not a weapon; these are toys.” Furthermore, he added, “you Croats and we Slovenes have had 500 years of fighting the Turks. We have been protecting Europe from the Turks for 500 years

<sup>220</sup> Iztok Prezelj & Klemen Kocjancic, “A Broad Spectrum of Signs of Islamist Radicalisation and Extremism in a Country without a Single Terrorist Attack: The Case of Slovenia,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2020): p. 34. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2020/issue-3/prezelj-and-kocjancic.pdf>, (accessed 29 December 2021).

<sup>221</sup> EUROPOL, “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021,” *EUROPOL*, (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021) p. 57. [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat\\_2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/tesat_2021_0.pdf), (accessed 20 December 2021).

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> See (in local language): “Hrvatski novinar upao u kamp naoružane paravojne postrojbe na granici s Hrvatskom: / ‘Što je nama? Problem je islam!’” *net.hr*, 26 November 2019, <https://net.hr/danas/svijet/hrvatski-novinar-upao-u-kamp-naoružane-paravojne-postrojbe-na-granici-s-hrvatskom-sto-je-nama-problem-je-islam-d6f44036-b1c4-11eb-a27d-0242ac13004f>, (accessed 15 July 2021).

and now to allow people from Arab countries to come and spread Islam here? What about us? The problem is Islam.”<sup>227</sup> By demonizing Islam and migrants, this group has also intended to spread fear among Slovenians. This campaign was expressed by one of the members who, at the time of the incident, added: “Illegal migrants are arriving, and I am afraid for my family and for all of Slovenia, [for] we see what these illegals are doing in Europe.”<sup>228</sup>

Members of the group also oppose COVID-19-related measures and believe the virus to be a hoax.<sup>229</sup> They oppose mask-wearing, vaccination, and testing and claim that wearing masks has been a source of bacterial infections, including “a lot of bacterial pneumonia,” that they say have been falsely attributed to COVID-19 because medical professionals have “received a policy order that everything is considered COVID-19.”<sup>230</sup> Styrian Guard members firmly believe the epidemic is an orchestrated lie and have filed lawsuits alleging that government leaders have acted criminally by perpetuating it and for “failing to report a crime.” The unit was disarmed in November 2019 in a police raid. As of September 2020, an amendment to the State Border Control Act forbids individuals and groups from patrolling the border and acting as police. The amendment also prohibits the obstruction of police in border control actions.<sup>231</sup>

Among Neo-Nazi groups in Slovenia, the Blood & Honour Slovenia and Headhunters Domžale groups have been particularly active. Headhunters Domžale is essentially the Slovenian version of the UK-based group Combat 18, considered a “militant wing” of Blood & Honour. Both groups have attended anti-government protests and have displayed their typical slogans. Neo-Nazi groups also joined the Yellow Vests movement, which was formed to counter-protesters against the government and made its first public appearance in June 2020.<sup>232</sup> This is notable because, in 2014, most Neo-Nazis in Slovenia went underground, and some even deactivated their Facebook profiles to avoid being detected.<sup>233</sup> The 2015 migrant crisis inspired an increase in their visible activities, but these have been further invigorated by the pandemic in 2020, especially through anti-government protests, which have taken place every Friday since March 2020. According to the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency, Blood & Honour Slovenia joined forces with the National Bloc (another Neo-Nazi group) to organize themselves as yellow vests (*see image XVIII*).<sup>234</sup> Members of these groups no longer emphasize the importance of Slovenian ethnicity, as they now view themselves primarily as defenders of a “White Europe.” These Neo-Nazi groups wear clothing, emblazoned with a Kalashnikov and the slogan “Defend Europe,” and swear on the “14 words” – a popular white supremacist slogan coined by convicted American Neo-Nazi David Lane, asserting that “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”<sup>235</sup>

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Špela Plešnik, “Ne verjame v virus, verjame pa v teorije zarote,” *Siol.net*, 14 January 2021, <https://siol.net/novice/slovenija/ne-verjame-v-virus-verjame-pa-v-teorije-zarote-video-543443>, (accessed 15 July 2021).

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> “Poslanci proti vardam: Zakonsko omejili delovanje vard, za kršitelje visoke kazni,” *Mariborinfo.com*, 25 September 2020, <https://mariborinfo.com/novica/politika-in-gospodarstvo/poslanci-proti-vardam-zakonsko-omejili-delovanje-var-d-za-krsitelje>, (accessed 15 July 2021).

<sup>232</sup> Erik Valenčič, “The coalition of hate,” *Mladina*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.mladina.si/210145/the-coalition-of-hate/>, (accessed 28 July 2021).

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

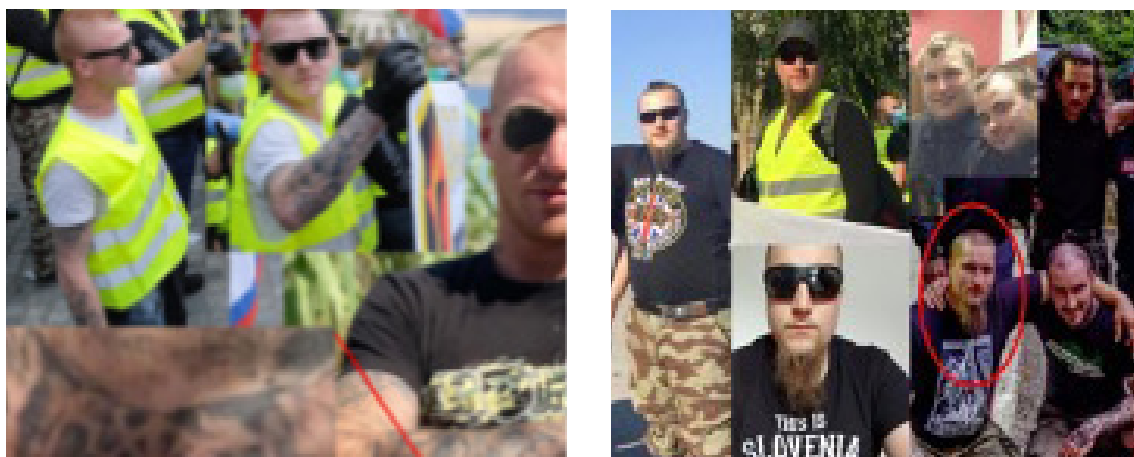


Image XVIII: The Slovenian Neo-Nazi “Yellow Vests”<sup>236</sup>  
7 July 2020

Neo-Nazi groups in Slovenia are also known for often threatening “young activists, high school and university students, artists, intellectuals, journalists, anti-government protesters, and anyone else” they consider an object of hate.<sup>237</sup> They propagate the radical right views of certain Slovenian radical right-leaning political parties and glorify Adolf Hitler. Their street activities are intertwined with self-promotion on social media platforms, and they have created two web portals designed to recruit new members into their ranks in more subtle ways. The first of these, the National Bloc (*Narodni blok*), which advocates fighting “rampant globalism and the destruction of our ethno-cultural identity.”<sup>238</sup> The second, Tradition Against Tyranny (*Tradicija proti tiraniji*), promotes “the preservation of our racial and cultural identity and... the ideas of European nationalism and the identarian right” alongside racist and Neo-Nazi themes.<sup>239</sup>

The radical sphere in Slovenia also includes groups such as the Slovenian Anarchist Initiative Ljubljana (a leftist radical anti-capitalist group offering revolt for capitalist giant high-tech corporations).<sup>240</sup> It also includes Anonymous Slovenia, both of which have, however, been active online in denouncing conspiracy theories about COVID-19 while opposing government restrictions. These groups were banned by Facebook and neither operate on Twitter nor other corporate social media but instead have migrated to smaller platforms. They do, however, appear to maintain a Twitter presence. The Slovenian Anarchists Initiative Ljubljana transferred to Mastodon (todon.nl) – as an alternative and decentralized (non-commercial provider) version of Twitter. The group openly stated that “todon.nl is a leftist and anti-authoritarian Mastodon server for progressives, socialists, anarchists, activists, environmentalists, vegans, anti-racists, anti-fascists, anti-capitalists, pirates, LGBTQIA+, human rights activists, etc.”<sup>241</sup>

A significant number of the Slovenian broader public (including members of extremist groups) has also engaged in online propagation and dissemination of conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been mainly on Facebook. For instance, a popular group on Facebook was established that seemingly remains active is called “Corona – the Greatest deception of the century.” The posts continue to mock the pandemic, spread misinformation and disinformation, and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 (see Image XIX).

<sup>236</sup> Borut Mekina, “Razkriti neonacisti v rumenih jopičih,” *Mladina*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.mladina.si/199506/razkriti-neonacisti-v-rumenih-jopicih/>, (accessed 23 December 2021).

<sup>237</sup> Erik Valenčič, “The coalition of hate,” *Mladina*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.mladina.si/210145/the-coalition-of-hate/>, (accessed 28 July 2021).

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Infoshop, “Izjava Anarhistične pobude Ljubljana ob prvi obletnici nasilne deložacije Avtonomne tovarne Ro,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/a.infoshop/photos/a.310717539968/10151658183129969/>, (accessed 20 January 2022).

<sup>241</sup> See: todon.nl, “Enough 14,” <https://todon.nl/@enough14GNU> (accessed 14 January 2022).

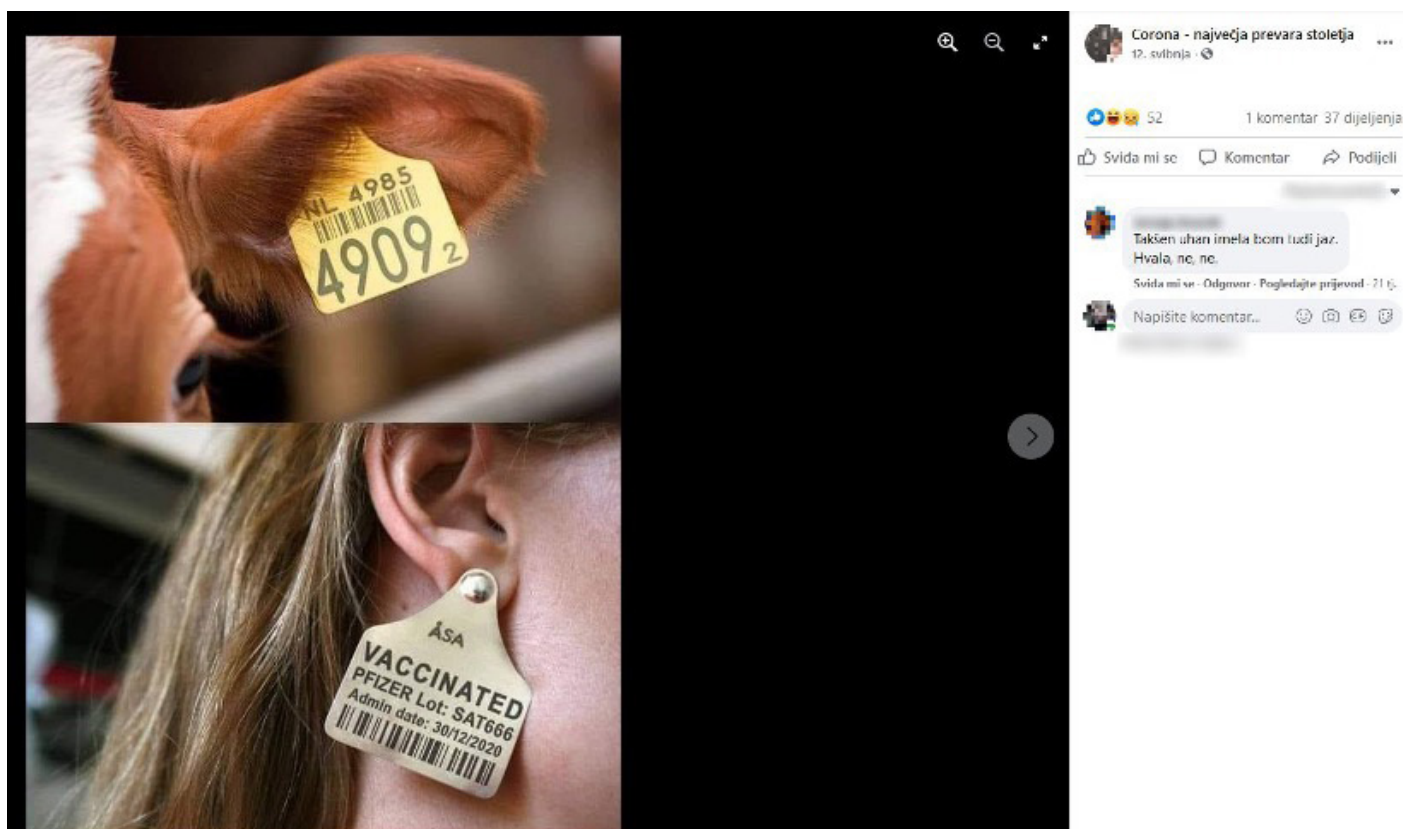


Image XIX: Post on the Facebook Page, "Corona – Največja prevara stoletja" ("Corona – The greatest deception of the century"), 15 May 2021.<sup>242</sup>

## FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER TRENDS

Approximately ten individuals from Slovenia have left to join and fight for Daesh since its emergence: these foreign fighters were largely linked via a recruitment wing originating in Bosnia and Herzegovina, allegedly associated with Bilal Bosnić.<sup>243</sup> As there have been no attacks in Slovenia involving FTFs, and the number of individuals who departed and could return is small, there are no reintegration programs in place.<sup>244</sup> In Slovenia to date, returning FTFs from the region – including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia – have not committed any terrorist attacks or posed a publicly known threat. Nonetheless, nationals of the Western Balkans constitute a sizable proportion of the foreign workforce in Slovenia, and many more try to reach other EU member states in the context of regular or irregular migration. As such, security services assess that returnees from conflict zones to the Western Balkans could pose a risk to the EU, either after serving prison sentences for terrorism and foreign fighting-related charges or after they are released from custody due to lack of evidence.<sup>245</sup>

<sup>242</sup> Corona – največja prevara stoletja (@svetovnezarote), Facebook, 15 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/svetovnezarote/photos/306958294268461>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>243</sup> Iztok Prezelj & Klemen Kocjancic, "A Broad Spectrum of Signs of Islamist Radicalisation and Extremism in a Country without a Single Terrorist Attack: The Case of Slovenia," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2020): p. 34. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2020/issue-3/prezelj-and-kocjancic.pdf>, (accessed 29 December 2021).

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Jihadist Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Western Europe: A Low-Probability, High-Impact Threat," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, October 2015, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep29401.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad0edde0a764d7e23a3942497572256998ab\\_segments=8origin=](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep29401.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad0edde0a764d7e23a3942497572256998ab_segments=8origin=), and; Bérénice Boutin et al, "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union," ICCT, April 2016, [https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report\\_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU\\_1-April-2016\\_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf](https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf), (accessed 20 January 2022).











Hedayah  
countering violent extremism