

THE BALKANS 2021

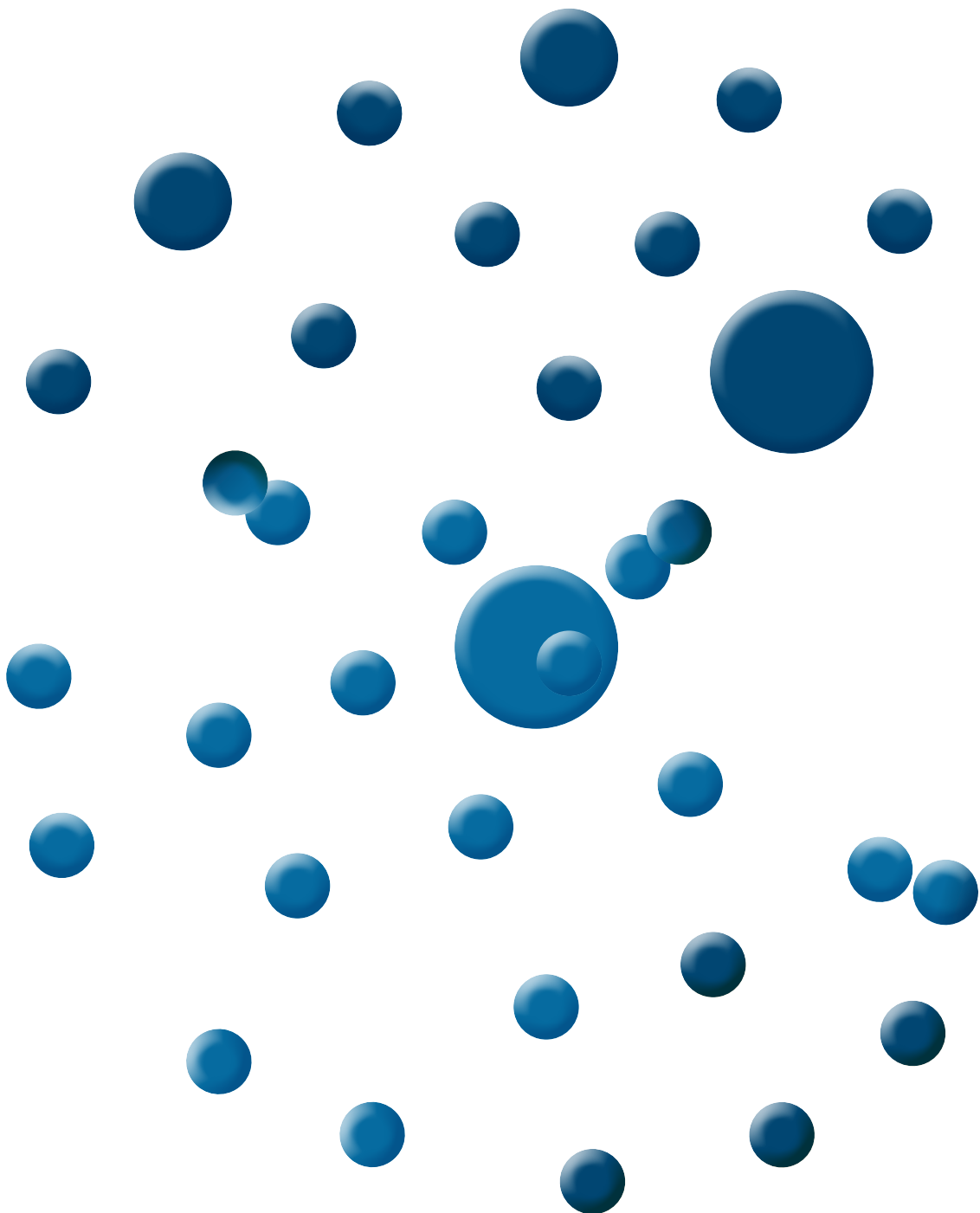
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES



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Note on ideologically motivated extremism: 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

This report analyzes violent extremism trends in the Balkans from January to December 2021, during a time when COVID-19 was still significantly present in the region. During this period, research findings demonstrate a general continuation of violent extremism trends from 2020, including intensified radical right activity and violent protests across the region,¹ new COVID-19 conspiracy theories often leveraged by extremist organizations, and the continued spread of mis- and disinformation. Recent trends in 2021 highlighted an increase in vaccine-related conspiracy theories, included those espoused by violent extremist organizations, as opposed to those more common in 2020 that denied the existence of the virus altogether. Terrorist activities, while rare, nevertheless continued, culminating in foiled plots and arrests in Kosovo and Croatia.

Violent extremist organizations and extremist actors continued to proliferate anti-immigration and Islamophobic narratives and sentiments, agitate against gender equality, promote conspiracy theories, and exploit the COVID-19 crisis.² New xenophobic radical right initiatives presented themselves as “purifiers of society” and “correctives of government,” and often engaged in attacks against the LGBT+ communities and anti-fascist activists. This trend was noted in multiple countries. Evidence also suggests that radical right extremists managed to capitalize on the situation better than other extremist movements. Further continuing trends have been:

- the continuous presence of COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation campaigns in extremist organizations’ propaganda, including indigenous narratives and those imported from foreign outlets;
- accelerated protest movements and hate speech directed against migrant and LGBT+ communities by radical right actors, many of which included violent and anti-government acts; and
- the continued importance of communication channels and platforms for extremist actors and groups, namely Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, and TamTam, as well as websites and blogs. Platform-led content removal, takedowns, and societally initiated de-platforming³ remained limited in scope and impact.

As in 2020, public debates in 2021 were strongly defined and framed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Extremist narratives fed into public discourse involving conspiracy theories, hateful language, and disinformation around concerns about vaccination, along with protests against the governments’ rule of law, democratic principles,

1 Countries of focus for this study include Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.

2 M. Halilović and N. Veljan, *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Atlantic Initiative, 2021.

3 Note: For example, to prevent someone holding views regarded as unacceptable or offensive from contributing to a forum or debate, especially by individuals blocking them on particular social media platforms or other websites.

and specific communities, including migrants, Roma/Romany, LGBT+, and journalists. Social media remained critical for spreading extremist content, often in the form of narratives. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, along with less discussed platforms like TamTam, Viber, and Telegram continued to be the most used platforms for spreading fake news and disinformation about COVID-19 and vaccination. Stand-alone blogs for mis- and disinformation continued to be hosted online. Finally, a sweeping metanarrative also focused on falsehoods about the adverse side effects of vaccines and alleged inconsistent or excessive measures taken by the governments.

Despite challenges posed to institutions, societies and industries by COVID-19, several countries (notably Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia) repatriated former foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families from Iraq and Syria in 2021. During July 2021, Kosovo repatriated 11 foreign terrorist fighters or related returnees from Syria and Iraq (six men, one woman, and four children). In the same month, North Macedonia repatriated 23 of its citizens (four men, five women and 14 children) from Syria and Iraq.⁴ These states are now implementing programs for their rehabilitation and reintegration. For example, in March 2021, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) adopted the Decision on the formation of the Coordination Team for the process of repatriation of BiH citizens from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.⁵ Relatedly, as illustrated by the Balkan Investigative Research Network (BIRN) Terrorism Database, 28 BiH citizens have been convicted by Bosnian courts for their involvement in the war in Syria, and 16 for domestic terrorism-related crimes.⁶ Repatriation and prosecutorial efforts elsewhere in the region vary.

In the other countries of the region, only sporadic violent extremist-related activity could be observed. In North Macedonia, two extremist affinities stood out, namely among long-term supporters of the imprisoned imams Shukri Aliu and Rexhep Memishi, as previously flagged in the 2020 findings of this report series.⁷ In Kosovo, the authorities arrested five people suspected of plotting terrorist attacks, allegedly preparing to use explosives in multiple locations throughout the country.⁸

4 I. Kadriu, "North Macedonia repatriates 23 citizens from Syria", *Radio Free Europe*, 18 July 2021, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/magedoni-e-veriut-ri-atdhesim-nga-siria-dhe-iraku-31364877.html>, (accessed 9 October 2021).

5 The Council of Ministers of BiH, Decision on the formation of the Coordination Team for the process of repatriation of BiH citizens from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq', *Službeni list BiH br. 63/21*, 4 March 2021, <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/LrdFKe9IBV4=> (accessed 15 March 2021).

6 See: BIRN, 'Regional Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database,' <https://terorizam.detektor.ba/> (accessed 8 October 2021).

7 Shembulli, 'Large police action in Skopje, Imam Rexhep Memishi and 8 other people are arrested', 6 August 2015, *Shembulli*, <http://www.shembulli.com/lajm/7163-aksion-i-madh-polikor-ne-shkup-arrestohet-imami-rexhep-memishi-dhe-8-persona-te-tjere-video>, (accessed 08 October 2021).

8 P. Isufi, 'Kosovo Arrests Five Suspects for Plotting Terrorist Attacks', *BIRN / Balkan Insight*, 11 October 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/11/kosovo-arrests-five-suspects-for-plotting-terrorist-attacks/>, (accessed 15 October 2021).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the collected data, we can outline the following recommendations:

1

Focus campaigns on countering conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19 from the radical right. The findings of this report indicated an increase in the activities of conspiracy theorists, anti-COVID-19 believers, and anti-government activists. Some of this material is repurposed by the radical right and other extremist organizations. A more consolidated effort is consequently needed from national governments in the region to effectively counter widespread misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines. Suggestions include launching social media campaigns targeting dis- and misinformation, and responding with science-based counter-narratives (for example, by engaging relevant scientists as credible messengers to relay scientific data).

2

Provide training and support that enhances digital literacy in the education system. Disinformation campaigns can severely impact the general population as they may not have the digital literacy training or skills to distinguish between factual information and false or fake news. Establishing media and digital literacy modules incorporated in national educational curricula and having programs available for the broader population will help diminish this threat.

3

Establish working relationships and monitoring protocols between the security sector and the private sector to better track terrorist groups online. Ideologically motivated extremists and the radical right have not fully been countered by authorities during the reporting period. These groups and individuals have limited their offline activities while continuing to maintain an online presence. National governments in the region need to continue to improve monitoring capabilities of online extremism to ensure they are informed on developing security threats at an early stage. Additionally, they need to develop or adapt protocols and enable transnational structures, including cooperation on law enforcement in virtual environments, to effectively counter the use of the internet to spread terrorism and extremism. Partnerships with entities like the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and Tech Against Terrorism (TaT) can help.

4

Adapt counter-narratives to the local context of the Balkans. The development and dissemination of country-specific counter-narratives addressing terrorist and extremist propaganda is crucial in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts in the region. Apart from developing online counter-narrative and inclusion campaigns, a whole-of-society approach should be taken. For example, supplying corresponding educational material to schools and similar institutions to promote inter-group trust, social cohesion, and common values (such as inclusive social norms) should be prioritized.




METHODOLOGY

This report outlines the results of data collection in the 11 Balkan countries throughout 2021 to address the focus of the project and the respective research questions:

- How have narratives advanced by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and relevant non-state armed groups (NSGs), both through formal communication channels and informal platforms, changed during the pandemic period?
- Have communication platforms and channels used by VEOs and NSAGs changed during the pandemic? If so, why?
- Has the use of mis- and disinformation by VEOs and NSAGs decreased or increased, shifted, or changed during the pandemic?
- What have been the trends regarding the provision of public services by VEOs and NSAGs since the pandemic?
- To what extent have recruitment and radicalization patterns, including domestic actors and foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) changed during the pandemic?
- To what extent have country-level changes been reflected in regional trends during the pandemic and which countries have seen the most significant impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism and terrorism?

Data has been collected from sources in original languages spoken in the region and, to a lesser extent, from other analyses. Sources included: a collection of extremist content (including material shared by VEOs and their supporters) from the internet and social media extremist and terrorist organizations and individuals; press reports; websites of official institutions; publicly available intelligence reports; other types of reports and investigations concerned with the regional extremist and terrorist trends in the context of COVID-19. Other analyses consulted included publicly available academic and grey sector reports from the region.



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NARRATIVES



The dominant extremist narratives identified in the 2020 report remained prominent in 2021. These include a mixture of QAnon-related and radical right conspiracy theories about the pandemic, ideologically-based narratives and propaganda drawing on Daesh motifs, and the intermixing of religious, often Orthodox, iconography and ideas with anti-government, anti-public health narratives. Notably, there was a significantly higher number of anti-vaccination campaigns amid mis- and disinformation regarding wearing masks and the safety of the vaccines.

In all countries studied, there was evidence of both a rise in the number of individuals who supported radical right extremist narratives (for instance, anti-immigration, anti-LGBT+, and anti-abortion narratives), and the development of radical right groups that claimed, for example, that they were 'purifiers of society' and out to correct governments.⁹ The mass migration since 2015 and the inconsistent government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic increased societal polarization, which in turn further strengthened radical right sentiments and recruitment efforts.

Weaponized Conspiracies

Violent extremist organizations groups using narratives at the beginning of the pandemic remained active on social networks in 2021 and were responsible for promoting mis- and disinformation about COVID-19, calling for the rejection of the government's anti-COVID measures, and encouraging active participation in demonstrations. In this environment, social media platforms became an enabling environment for the spread of fake news.

In Bulgaria, for example, there were several types of conspiracy theories circulating in 2021,¹⁰ including: "COVID-19 is a man-made virus spread by global movements, transnational corporations, aliens or the Illuminati"; "the virus does not exist, and the measures are in place to control the population by fear"; "the virus is real but not as deadly, which make measures unnecessary"; and that "Bill Gates [and] 56...[are] efforts to control the world population."¹¹ Radical right conspiracy theorists and anti-COVID-19 protesters have generally been the most active groups. While some structures emerged autonomously, others hold connections to organized left and radical right extremist groups. For example, banners used at the 2021 protests in Croatia called for greater participation by sympathizers of radical right political parties. Many of the main narratives remained anti-government themed and conspiratorial. They criticize government policy on immigration and COVID-19 vaccination, equating vaccination with the Holocaust, and promote their interpretation of Christian values.¹²

Bunt Crna Gora, founded in 2020 in response to Montenegro's new law on religious freedom, continued to expand its political activism in 2021 by disseminating COVID-19 disinformation and propaganda focused on a loss of freedoms: "We expect yellow stripes around the arm, and next, an attack on children".¹³ Before their Facebook and Instagram profiles were suspended sometime in the last quarter of 2021, they used these platforms to organize against COVID-19-related restrictions and join "protests for freedom of choice," calling for citizens to "Move! Wake up!... For a free society without discrimination: Stop covid dictatorships!"¹⁴ Meanwhile, an increase in the number of recorded hate speech incidents and threats on social networks as well as physical attacks against members of the LGBT+ community¹⁵ and journalists¹⁶ were reported.

In Romania, the leading role in demonstrations and the spread concerning conspiracies over COVID-19 was mainly

9 See, for example, continued trends from Joe Mulhall and Safiya 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-v21Oct.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2022); M. Halilović and N. Veljan, *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Atlantic Initiative, 2021; P. Stošić, 'Covid-prosvjedi dali su ekstremnoj desnici priliku života', *Index.hr*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/covidprosvjedi-dali-su-ekstremnoj-desnici-priliku-zivota/2322656.aspx> (accessed 15 January 2022);

10 K. Tsabala, 'Mistrust and Disinformation: Covid-19 conspiracies in Bulgaria', *Lossi36.com*, 26 May 2021, <https://lossi36.com/2021/05/26/mis-trust-and-disinformation-covid-19-conspiracies-in-bulgaria/>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Post on the Facebook Page of Bunt Crna Gora, 24 September 2021, no longer available.

14 Ibid.

15 'Stravičan napad u Crnoj Gori: LGBT osobi urezali križ na grudima, ozlijedili mu i genitalije', *HINA*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/stravican-napad-u-crnoj-gori-lgbt-osobi-urezali-kriz-na-grudima-ozlijedili-mu-i-genitalije-15055355> (accessed 15 November 2021).

16 L. Šćepanović, 'Uvećan broj napada na novinare u Crnoj Gori', *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-napadi-novinari/31614371.html> (accessed 15 January 2021).

taken over by the populist right party “Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor” (AUR – Alliance for a United Romania) and several affiliated individuals.¹⁷ Protests led by AUR in October with slogans such as “Freedom, freedom without certificates,” “Down with the government,” and signs such as “Green certificates = dictatorship.”¹⁸ Besides conspiracy theories already introduced in 2020, an additional conspiratorial narrative not associated with AUR emerged in 2021 claiming there are worms or nanotechnologies in the masks.¹⁹ The activities and rhetoric of the radical right extremists became more extreme towards the end of 2021. For instance, during a demonstration supposed to commemorate the revolution of Dec. 22 1989, AUR sympathizers attempted to storm the Parliament building.²⁰

Ethnonationalism Bolstered by Pandemic

Ethno-nationalism also shaped COVID-19 narratives in the region. For example, the Atlantic Initiative research report, “Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” determined that popular radical right narratives in 2021 mirrored ethno-nationalist ideas and political ideologies.²¹ According to the same analysis, nationalist political parties were promoting an ethno-nationalist agenda while propagating radical right rhetoric daily.

Meanwhile, in Romania, protests against the democratically elected government claimed to be fighting a dictatorship. They held, among others, banners displaying the Dacian (the people preceding Romans in the region) god Zamolxis as “teacher of Europe,” a motif which has been used in longstanding Romanian exceptionalism mythology.²²

Facebook groups and initiatives in Serbia (such as ‘I live for Serbia’) appealed to audiences with radical right views. Several of the most active groups in this space included “People’s Patrol,” “Stop Censorship,” and “I live for Serbia” which actively participated in anti-government protests and were visibly engaged online. They promoted anti-immigration, anti-vaccine, and anti-government narratives while arguing against the EU and the succession of Kosovo. This rejection of any ‘territorial division’ of Kosovo is coupled with pandemic-specific twists accusing the government of using the lockdown as a cover to settle migrants in Serbia secretly. The historic inter-ethnic conflict has been a theme in North Macedonia since its independence with occasional spates of violence flaring up since the ‘90s. A recent example of ethno-nationalist extremism dates back to 2017 when a radical right mob almost killed the leader of an Albanian political party in North Macedonia.²³ Their supporters were still active online in this reporting period. A Facebook page “Слобода за Кире Ѓорѓиевски”²⁴

17 N.A., ‘Proteste în București împotriva restricțiilor anti-COVID. Liderii AUR și senatoarea Șoșoacă, printre manifestanți’, *Turnul Sfatului*, 2 October 2021, <https://www.turnulsfatului.ro/2021/10/02/proteste-in-bucuresti-impotriva-restrictiilor-anti-covid-liderii-aur-si-senatoarea-sosocaca-printre-manifestanti-185395>, (accessed 5 January 2022).

18 VOA News (2021) ‘Thousands Protest COVID-19 Restrictions in Romania’, *VOA News*, 2 October 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/thousands-protest-covid-19-restrictions-in-romania/6254835.html>, (accessed 5 January 2022).

19 P. Dobrescu, ‘Mitul „viermilor din măștile de protecție”, demontat printr-o demonstrație de fizicianul Cristian Presură’, *Libertatea.ro*, 2 April 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/19/one-third-of-romanians-would-refuse-covid-19-vaccine-survey/>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

20 E. Isaila, ‘La AUR, nu demonstrațiile împotriva măștii și vaccinului sunt problema, ci extremismul și violența’, *Spotmedia.ro*, 22 December 2021, <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/opinii-si-analize/la-aur-nu-demonstratiile-impotriva-mastii-si-vaccinului-sunt-problema-ci-extremismul-si-violenta>, (accessed 5 January 2022).

21 M. Halilović and N. Veljan, ‘Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Atlantska Inicijativa*, Sarajevo, 2021

22 E. Isaila, ‘La AUR, nu demonstrațiile împotriva măștii și vaccinului sunt problema, ci extremismul și violența’, *Spotmedia.ro*, 22 December 2021, <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/opinii-si-analize/la-aur-nu-demonstratiile-impotriva-mastii-si-vaccinului-sunt-problema-ci-extremismul-si-violenta>, (accessed 5 January 2022).

23 S. J. Marusic, ‘Macedonia court jails seven for MP’s attempted murder’, *BIRN / Balkan Insight*, 5 July 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/05/macedonia-sends-mp-attackers-to-jail-07-05-2018/>, (accessed 20 October 2021).

24 Слобода за Кире Ѓорѓиевски, *Facebook* [personal blog], URL redacted, (accessed 20 October 2021).

(Freedom for Kire Gjorgjievski) was dedicated to the promotion of Kire Gjorgjievski, the main activist of the radical right mob that almost killed the above-mentioned political party leader.

Ideological and Religious Opposition to Pandemic Measures

In Moldova and Romania, demonstrators claimed they opposed compulsory vaccination and demanded liberty; some also claimed the vaccine was a biological weapon to reduce the world's population through microchips, or that certain religious psalms protect against the pandemic.²⁵

Meanwhile, in N. Macedonia, Facebook groups promoted similar radical right and religious narratives such as “Христијанско Братство Македонија” (Christian Brotherhood Macedonia): a group with almost 1,700 members.²⁶ The group also has a YouTube channel called “Hristijansko Bratstvo” (Christian Brotherhood) with 431 subscribers.²⁷

25 Radio Europa Libera, ‘Protest al preoților și enoriașilor în centrul Chișinăului: „Nu trebuie să fim vaccinați cu sila. Dați-ne libertate!”’, *Facebook*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/europalibera.org/videos/protest-al-preoților-și-enoriașilor-în-centrul-chișinăului-nu-trebuie-să-fim-vac/539237947388788/>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

26 Христијанско Братство Македонија, *Facebook*, URL redacted, (accessed 28 October 2021).

27 Hristijansko Bratstvo, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr2YgyH7XKiTrS_-oX_bzvg, (accessed 20 October 2021).

COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS

Social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TamTam, Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram, in addition to some newly established websites and blogs (such as the Croatian website “Truth against Lies”)²⁸ remained critical platforms for spreading mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 and the discourse focusing on the efficacy and dangers of vaccination. Similar platforms remained key for members of extremist organizations, such as neo-Nazi groups in Slovenia where were reported to remain primarily active solely on social media.²⁹

This study also identified an increase in the transmission of extremist narratives and messages through common communication channels, specifically WhatsApp and Viber. Some accounts were aggressively taken down by major social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, by their respective policies. Accounts linked to QAnon Serbia, for example, were subject to such de-platforming efforts.³⁰ Other accounts remained active despite constantly testing the limits of free speech on Facebook (allowed by Facebook platform policy), such as the Serbian group “Stop Censorship.”

Some media outlets continued to play a role in spreading mis- and disinformation in the region. In Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, mis- and disinformation was found to be circulated first on large platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, and then further distributed by both smaller online platforms, which used the information as clickbait, and as well as often by established news outlets (see case studies below).³¹ Given the use of weaponized conspiracy theories by violent extremist groups illustrated previously, this uncritical reporting risks lending credibility to extremist groups and their narratives.

28 „Istinom protiv laži“, website, URL redacted (accessed 15 September 2021).

29 Erik Valenčič, „Koalicija sovraštva II,“ *Mladina*, 23 July 2021, <https://www.mladina.si/209276/koalicija-sovrastva-ii/> (accessed 11 May 2022).

30 M. Vucic, ‘Hate, Lies and Vigilantes: Serbian ‘Anti-Vaxxer’ Brigade Plays With Fire’, *Balkan Insight*, 21 September 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/21/hate-lies-and-vigilantes-serbian-anti-vaxxer-brigade-plays-with-fire/>, (accessed 10 October 2021).

31 State Intelligence Service (Albania), ‘Yearly Public Report’, <https://www.shish.gov.al/files/Raporti%20Publik%202020.pdf>, (accessed 06 October 2021).

RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT TACTICS

Compared to the previous year, recruitment strategies in 2021 were more covert. Groups who traditionally operated on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter migrated to less mainstream channels such as TamTam (a Russia-based messenger application developed by the Mail.ru Group) or Telegram to deliver extremist propaganda and maintain communications (see, for example, the country sections for Albania and Kosovo). Data collection did not facilitate analysis of new or novel radicalization or recruitment tactics beyond the continued presence of radical right actors at protests events that were also attended by a wider range of demonstrators, potentially leaving room to radicalize more centrist and politically-engaged individuals.

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS (FTFS)

During the reporting period of 2021, no travel to or repatriation from Syria or Iraq was recorded across Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Additionally, there were no threats or attacks recorded in these countries by the returnees.

BiH and Kosovo positively enhanced efforts toward rehabilitating and reintegrating women and children who were repatriated in 2020 while male returnees were still in prison.³² Similar efforts were not prioritized in Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, and Montenegro, although this could be attributed to these countries having a comparatively small number of foreign terrorist fighters and returnees. Although no travel to or repatriation from Syria or Iraq was recorded in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, repatriation of former foreign fighters and their families occurred in each of these three countries. This is detailed in the country-level profiles.

32 A. Peresin, M. Hasanović and K. Bytyki, 'Female Returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans: Between Regret and 'Caliphate Nostalgia'', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 15 Issue 5, October 2021, pp 29-45.

COUNTRY SUMMARIES

ALBANIA

Violent extremist narratives in Albania have mainly remained the same throughout the pandemic, although in 2021 they also targeted aspects of civic freedom, whereas before they focused on attributing blame for the pandemic. 2021 has seen the rise of occult Satanic radical sects in Albania, which have raised concerns as they have been connected with the death of three people.³³ On Jul. 31 2021, Albania repatriated 19 citizens from Syria and Iraq, including five women and 14 children (see Image I).³⁴ There were no reported terrorist attacks or threats in Albania during the reporting period.



Image I: Albania repatriated five women and 14 children in 2021. In photo, family members of Daesh fighters in Syria are pictured.³⁵

COVID-19 and the conspiracy theories that accompanied it continued to be utilized by populist agendas and the amplification of other forms of extremism such as homophobia and anti-democratic sentiment.³⁶ Notably, the

33 ABC News Albania, "Satanic sects ravage Albania: the 3 mysterious deaths in the past year that shocked the country," *ABC News Albania*, 2 June 2021, <https://abcnews.al/sektet-satanike-bejne-kerdine-ne-shqiperi-3-vdekjet-e-mistershme-brenda-vitit-qe-tronditen-vendin/>, (accessed 6 October 2021); A2 News, "The rise of satanic rituals in Albania," *A2 News*, 3 January 2022. <https://english.a2news.com/2022/01/03/the-rise-of-satanic-rituals-in-albania/>, (accessed 11 May 2022).

34 Voice of America, 'Albania repatriates 5 women and 14 children', *Voice of America* 31 July 2021, <https://www.zeramerikes.com/a/5986153.html>, (accessed 30 September 2021)

35 Fjori Sinoruka, Xhorxhina Bami and Sinisa Jakov Marusic. "Welcome Home? ISIS Returnees Test Balkan Countries' Ability to Reintegrate," *BIRN*, 20 August, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/20/welcome-home-isis-returnees-test-balkan-countries-ability-to-reintegrate/> (accessed 11 May 2022).

36 Top Channel Albania, 'Wake-up: Does the vaccine protect against Covid-19: The debate between the two doctors in the studio', *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ry1mawpMDas>, (accessed 06 October 2021).

suspicious deaths of at least three young people in circumstances linked to radical Satanic occult groups also reportedly gave cause for the Albanian Ministry of the Interior to identify strategies to prevent “occult crimes.”³⁷ Extremist propaganda often influenced acts of violence against police forces, refugee camps and immigrants. On several occasions, these conspiracy theories have proliferated through mainstream media outlets, including cases of hate speech toward the LGBT+ community.³⁸

Online media acted as the main instrument for spreading extremist ideology in 2021 in the Albanian-speaking community in the Western Balkans. Unfortunately, the exact origin of the propaganda and ideology is difficult to attribute to a particular Albanian-speaking country.³⁹ Actors associated with other extremist ideologically-motivated groups claimed the virus to be “God’s punishment of the West,” however, this messaging is not necessarily related to violent extremism or terrorism.⁴⁰ Internet propaganda remained a primary source of encouragement and inspiration for radicalizing individuals.

Violent extremist narratives displayed consistency throughout the pandemic, although narratives in 2021 expanded to target aspects of civic freedoms, whereas in 2020, they were more focused on identifying blame for the pandemic and spreading health-related fears. Early pandemic narratives accused governments of creating the virus; 5G supposedly being an instrument that aids the spread of the virus; or the virus being a way for global elites to control – even exterminate – people.⁴¹ Most recently, narratives focused on how the government will continuously scale back citizens’ rights and freedoms until they conform to taking the vaccine – which allegedly kills people slowly.⁴²

On Jul. 31 2021, Albania repatriated 19 citizens from Syria and Iraq, including five women and 14 children (see Image I).⁴³ Another 30 women and children were still thought to be stranded in Syria, although the number is likely to be higher as reports were not consistent.⁴⁴ According to the BIRN Terrorism Database, nine individuals have been convicted by Albanian courts for their involvement in Syria, and three for domestic terrorism-related crimes.⁴⁵

37 A2 News, “The rise of satanic rituals in Albania,” *A2 News*, 3 January 2022, <https://english.a2news.com/2022/01/03/the-rise-of-satanic-rituals-in-albania/>. (accessed 11 May 2022).

38 Top News, “Ultra-Orthodox priest shocks all: anti-covid vaccine turn people gay”, *Top Channel*, 18 January 2021, <https://top-channel.tv/video/top-news-habit-prifti-ultra-ortodoks-vaksina-anti-covid-i-ben-njerezit-gay/>. (accessed 07 October 2020).

39 State Intelligence Service, “Yearly Public Report”, <https://www.shish.gov.al/files/Raporti%20Publik%202020.pdf>. (accessed 06 October 2021)

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

41 F. Bieber, T. Prelec, Z. Nechev, ‘Policy Brief: The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans’, *BiEPAG*, 2020, <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Conspiracy-and-Covid19-in-the-Balkans-ALBANIAN.pdf>. (accessed 23 September 2021).

42 Klan TV, ‘Opinion: forced vaccination or not?’, *YouTube*, 8 September 2021, minutes 38 – 45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJOP0ryTS9o>. (accessed 06 October 2021).

43 Voice of America, ‘Albania repatriates 5 women and 14 children’, *Voice of America* 31 July 2021, <https://www.zeramerikes.com/a/5986153.html>. (accessed 30 September 2021).

44 Ibid.

45 See: BIRN, ‘Regional Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database,’ <https://terorizam.detektor.ba/> (accessed 8 October 2021).



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Radical right organizations and extremist actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to exploit anti-immigrant narratives and sentiment, promote conspiracy theories, and utilize the COVID-19 crisis in 2021. The repatriation process for foreign terrorist fighters, mainly from Iraq and Syria, was paused in 2021, primarily due to COVID-19 restrictions.⁴⁶

Research by the Atlantic Initiative exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina determined that, in 2021, narratives of the radical right mirrored the ethno-nationalism of more mainstream political parties.⁴⁷ These included repetitions of messages of “misrepresented and threatened Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks... [and how] attempts to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, or to prosecute corruption related to Covid-19, were immediately manipulated as an attack on ethnicity.”⁴⁸ Both the offline and online activities of radical right actors have taken on these narratives, developing them through a language of othering, xenophobia, and affective, social distance. These actors are actively undermining efforts to ensure women’s rights and build peace in the country. Additionally, in online spaces, radical right groups tend to promote conspiracy theories about the alleged radicalization or criminality of migrants in exaggerated or fake news stories.⁴⁹ Several incidents, including stabbings,⁵⁰ were reported as being perpetrated by migrants and likely further reinforced such attitudes. This has contributed to the stigmatization of migrants, framing them by supporters of ethno-nationalist and radical right views as unworthy of support, unable to fit into society, and inherently troublemakers.⁵¹ Some political actors continue to promote ethno-nationalist agendas that are integral to their existence, which in turn can further the narratives of the radical right. Political messaging that depicts each ethnic group as misrepresented and threatened is common within Bosnian political discourse and is repeated ad nauseum. As a result, attempts to address the pandemic, or to prosecute corrupt acts stemming from the COVID-19 response, are often framed as an attack on a particular ethnic group. Analysis also reveals that most radical right groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina use religious symbols, and some include clergy among their ranks, adding an additional religious layer to the ethno-nationalist identity developed among the radical right.⁵²

Meanwhile, as in 2020, conspiracy theorists in Bosnia and Herzegovina continued online activities in 2021, spreading fake news and conspiracies about COVID-19. According to polling by the Atlantic Institute, these frequently framed attempts to cope with the pandemic as attacks on a given ethnic group.⁵³ Anti-vaccine campaigns included misinformation such as: “There is pork gelatin in COVID vaccines;”⁵⁴ “If the vaccine was life-saving...it would cost at least 1000 E(uros)!”⁵⁵

46 A. Peresin, M. Hasanović and K. Bytyki, ‘Female Returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans: Between Regret and ‘Caliphate Nostalgia’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 15 Issue 5, October 2021, p. 29.

47 Majda Halilović and Nejra Veljan, *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2021), p. 8.

48 Ibid., p. 31.

49 Ibid.

50 ‘Man stabbed in Bosnian town of Bihac, perpetrators believed to be migrants’, *N1 Sarajevo*, 4 January 2021, <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/man-stabbed-in-bosnian-town-of-bihac-perpetrators-believed-to-be-migrants/> (accessed 15 September 2021).

51 Majda Halilović and Nejra Veljan, *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2021), p. 30.

52 Ibid., p. 31.

53 Ibid.

54 Posted on the Facebook page of ‘Put vjernika, mira i tolerancije,’ 20 April 2021, URL redacted, (accessed 26 October 2021).

55 Posted on the Facebook page of ‘Mojih 5 minuta,’ 16 September 2021, URL redacted, (accessed 25 December 2021).



Image II: Members of the Bosnian Federal Ministry of Interior Special Service Unit (FMUP SSU) in a simulated joint counter violent extremist organization exercise in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina on Nov. 4, 2021.⁵⁶

Since December 2019, when a group of 25 Bosnian citizens – 7 former Daesh fighters, along with 6 women and 12 children – were repatriated from Syria, the repatriation process has been paused by officials, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁷ However, in March 2021, BiH adopted the Decision on the formation of the Coordination Team for the process of repatriation of BiH citizens from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.⁵⁸ According to the BIRN Terrorism Database, 28 individuals have been convicted by Bosnian courts for their involvement in the war in Syria, and 16 for domestic terrorism-related crimes.⁵⁹ The post-prison reintegration and deradicalization of terrorist and violent extremist offenders will remain be a long-lasting challenge, especially given delays in repatriation during the pandemic. Meanwhile, domestic prevention training across counter-terrorism and violent extremism response forces from the BiH Federation and Republika Srpska entities continued during the pandemic (see Image II above).

In May 2021, at the airport in Tuzla, a Bosnian woman whose husband is a member of Daesh in Syria was arrested and charged with financing terrorist activities and organizing a terrorist group. A statement from the prosecutor's office alleged the woman had been sending money to Syria and Iraq since 2013 and had supported Bosnian citizens in joining Daesh.⁶⁰

56 Sgt. Antony Whipple, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina Counter-Terrorism Culmination Exercises [Image 8 of 8]', *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, 4 November 2021, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/6960565/bosnia-and-herzegovina-counter-terrorism-culmination-exercises> (accessed 6 April 2022).

57 A. Peresin, M. Hasanović and K. Bytyki, 'Female Returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans: Between Regret and 'Caliphate Nostalgia'', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 15 Issue 5, October 2021, p. 29.

58 The Council of Ministers of BiH, 'Decision on the formation of the Coordination Team for the process of repatriation of BiH citizens from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq', *Službeni list BiH br. 63/21*, 4 March 2021, <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/LrdFKe9IBV4=> (accessed 15 March 2021)

59 See: BIRN, 'Regional Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database,' <https://terorizam.detektor.ba/> (accessed 8 October 2021).

60 'Tužiteljstvo BiH: Zbog financiranja i organiziranja terorističke skupine uhićena žena čiji je suprug pripadnik Islamske države,' *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 May 2021, <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/regija/tuziteljstvo-bih-zbog-financiranja-i-organiziranja-teroristicke-skupine-uhicena-zena-ci-ji-je-suprug-pripadnik-islamske-drzave-1098169> (accessed 17 September 2021).

BULGARIA

In Bulgaria, conspiracy theories were widespread during 2021, which was reflected in the limited willingness of large parts of the population to get vaccinated. Similar to Romania, some popular media outlets also featured controversial figures who spread misinformation. There was no noticeable new foreign terrorist fighter activity in 2021. Notably, however, Bulgarian authorities arrested a man convicted in Belgium and Turkey on counts of terrorism; he is allegedly also connected to the ringleader of the November 2015 attacks in Paris.⁶¹

In Bulgaria, high vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccination attitudes were influenced by a range of factors, including widespread conspiracy theories, the platforming provided by some media outlets for vaccine-sceptical doctors, limited confidence in politics, and the government, and inefficient vaccination campaigns.⁶² There were several types of conspiracy theories circulating in Bulgaria in 2021,⁶³ including that: “COVID-19 is a man-made virus spread by global movements, transnational corporations, aliens or the Illuminati”; “the virus does not exist and the measures are in place to control the population by fear”; “the virus is real but not as deadly, which make measures unnecessary”; and that “Bill Gates [and] 5G...[are] efforts to control the world population.”⁶⁴

Notably, the context in Bulgaria remains strikingly anti-Roma, a sentiment popular with wide swaths of the radical right, with the European Roma Rights Center commenting that “racist hate speech and incitement against Roma” continued in 2021.⁶⁵ On Oct. 30, a mob of approximately ten radical right individuals vandalized an LGBT+ center. Protests against restrictions, the COVID-19-related green pass, and school testing took place all through autumn and winter of 2021.⁶⁶ The claims were described as a “complex and confusing mix of misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, social discontent and political defiance.”⁶⁷

61 AFP (2021) ‘Convicted terrorist with links to Paris attacks mastermind arrested at Bulgarian border’, *Euronews*, 12 November 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/11/12/convicted-terrorist-with-links-to-paris-attacks-mastermind-arrested-at-bulgarian-border>. (accessed 5 January 2022).

62 AP, ‘Bulgaria battles surge in COVID-19 cases amid vaccine opposition’, *Euronews.com*, 8 September 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/09/08/bulgaria-battles-surge-in-covid-19-cases-amid-vaccine-opposition> (accessed 28 October 2021).

63 K. Tsabala, ‘Mistrust and Disinformation: Covid-19 conspiracies in Bulgaria’, *Lossi36.com*, 26 May 2021, <https://lossi36.com/2021/05/26/mis-trust-and-disinformation-covid-19-conspiracies-in-bulgaria/>. (accessed 28 October 2021).

64 Ibid.

65 Benard Rorke. (2021), ‘Bulgaria’s litany of hate: five things leading politicians said about Roma’, *European Roma Rights Center*, <http://www.errc.org/news/bulgarias-litany-of-hate-five-things-leading-politicians-said-about-roma> (accessed 11 May 2022).

66 L. Cojan (2021) ‘Protest în Bulgaria împotriva restricțiilor: Reprezentanți din turism și alimentație publică au blocat traficul în Sofia’, *Digi24*, 28 October 2021, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/protest-in-bulgaria-impotriva-restrictiilor-reprezentanti-din-turism-si-alimentatie-publica-au-blocat-traficul-in-sofia-1716759>. (accessed 5 January 2022); N.A. (2021) Teachers and parents in Bulgaria protest against Covid-19 testing of children at school. *Radio Bulgaria*, 1 November 2021. <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101550173/teachers-and-parents-in-bulgaria-protest-against-covid-19-testing-of-children-at-school>. (accessed 5 January 2022).

67 J. Gomez (2021) ‘Bulgaria’s vaccine battle: the mistrust driving COVID’s surge’, *Euronews*, 10 December 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/12/10/bulgaria-s-vaccine-battle-the-mistrust-driving-covid-s-surge>. (accessed 5 January 2022).



Image III: Far-right Revival political party members protest outside a court in Bulgaria.⁶⁸

CROATIA

In the reporting period, conspiracy and anti-COVID-19 theorists, radical right actors, and anti-government activists, increased their activities. New trends emerged regarding the political profile of activists and protesters, the channels for spreading anti-COVID-19 narratives, and how extremist actors organized protests. Public figures from the political scene who were present at such protests were exclusively members of radical right political parties.⁶⁹ In 2021, several violent extremist activities were recorded. Two people were arrested at a protest in November 2021, opposing the introduction of orders by the National Civil Protection Headquarters meant to combat the pandemic.⁷⁰ These individuals were charged with public incitement to terrorism after allegedly encouraging citizens in Croatia and abroad to engage in physical attacks and to occupy national radio and television facilities and other public infrastructure.⁷¹ No Croatian nationals returned from a conflict zone in 2021, and none were repatriated. Further, there were no successful terrorist attacks or recorded attempts.

The number of individuals in Croatia who support radical right extremist narratives appears to have increased during the reporting period. In contrast to 2020, the symbols used at protests and online demonstrations in 2021 suggest greater participation by political parties on the right and radical right sympathizers, though profiles could not be determined unambiguously. Moreover, the political figures present at these protests were exclusively members of right-wing parties, while the use of Ustasha (an historical fascist party) salutes and marches by

68 P. Paunova and T. Wesolowsky (2021) 'It Denies COVID And Wants Out Of NATO And The EU. Now Bulgaria's Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right Revival Party Is In Parliament.', *Radio Free Europe*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-revival-party-parliament-eu/31572826.html>. (accessed 5 January 2022).

69 P. Stošić, 'Covid-prosvjedi dali su ekstremnoj desnici priliku života', *Index.hr*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/covidprosvjedi-dali-su-ekstremnoj-desnici-priliku-zivota/2322656.aspx> (accessed 15 January 2022).

70 'Francisković i Kovačević ostaju u pritvoru, ostali jučer uhićeni pušteni', *Index.hr*, 4 December 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/franciskovic-i-kovacevic-ostaju-u-pritvoru-ostali-jučer-uhiceni-pusteni/2323162.aspx>, (accessed 15 December 2021).

71 Ibid.

linked military-styled battalions took place during the year.⁷² In 2021, protesters in this space seemed more organized and more thorough in their preparation than in 2020. They launched campaigns (modelled on election campaigns), distributed flyers, and spoke ahead of planned protests to inspire participation and turnout. Many of the main narratives remained anti-government themed. They criticize government policy on immigration and COVID-19 vaccination, equating vaccination with the Holocaust, and promote their interpretation of Christian values.⁷³ The first violence among these protesters occurred in Krapinske Toplice in September 2021, when protesters forcibly stormed a school there.⁷⁴

As previously mentioned, two people were arrested at a protest in November 2021 to oppose the introduction of orders by the National Civil Protection Headquarters meant to combat the pandemic. They were charged with public incitement to terrorism after allegedly encouraging citizens in Croatia and abroad to engage in physical attacks and to occupy national radio and television facilities and other public infrastructure.⁷⁵



Image IV: Marko Francisković at the protest in Zagreb in November 2021⁷⁶

One radical right group that continued to operate in 2021 is aptly known as “The Rightists in the Pub,” as they gather twice monthly in a Zagreb pub. They are open about their views in public Facebook groups, where they promote fascist views, condemn the LGBT+ community, left-wing political parties, and the SDSS specifically (a pro-European center-left political party representing Croatian Serbs in parliament).⁷⁷

72 P. Stošić, 'Covid-prosvjedi dali su ekstremnoj desnici priliku života', *Index.hr*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/covidprosvjedi-dali-su-ekstremnoj-desnici-priliku-zivota/2322656.aspx> (accessed 15 January 2022);

73 Ibid.

74 M. Gelenčir, 'Prosvjednici nasilno upali u školu u Zagorju: 'Djeca su prestrašena, spremačica od šoka završila u bolnici'', *srednja.hr*, 10 September 2021, <https://www.srednja.hr/novosti/prosvjednici-nasilno-upali-u-skolu-u-zagorju-djeca-su-prestrasena-spremacica-od-soka-zavrсила-u-bolnici/> (accessed 11 September 2021).

75 'Francisković i Kovačević ostaju u pritvoru, ostali jučer uhićeni pušteni', *Index.hr*, 4 December 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/franciskovic-i-kovacevic-ostaju-u-pritvoru-ostali-jučer-uhiceni-pusteni/2323162.aspx> (accessed 15 December 2021).

76 D. Tolj, 'Tko je Marko Francisković, glavna zvijezda zagrebačkog prosvjeda? Bio je u zatvoru, prešao na islam i želi vjersku državu, zalaže se za uvođenje šerijatskog prava u Hrvatskoj!', *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 21 November 2021, <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/tko-je-marko-franciskovic-glavna-zvijezda-zagrebackog-prosvjeda-bio-je-u-zatvoru-presao-na-islam-i-zeli-vjersku-drzavu-zalaze-se-uvodenje-serijatskog-prava-u-hrvatskoj-1144758> (accessed 25 November 2021).

77 Desnicariupubu, *Facebook*, URL redacted, (accessed 27 December 2021); 'Pub koji je organizirao druženje desničara na žestokom udaru: 'Nadam se da ćete propasti'', *Jutarnji HR*, 8 July 2021, https://www.jutarnji-hr.translate.goog/vijesti/hrvatska/pub-koji-je-organizirao-druzenje-desnicara-na-zestokom-udaru-nadam-se-da-cete-propasti-15086731?_x_tr_sl=auto&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp (accessed 5 June 2022).

While in 2020, the narrative of extremist actors was focused on denying the existence of COVID-19, and their 2021 pandemic narratives concentrated more on anti-mask and anti-vaccination themes, especially through the dissemination of disinformation regarding vaccine safety, including claims that the vaccine causes severe and long-lasting side effects. For example, misleading messages included “17,503 dead after Covid vaccine, 1,7 million damaged!”⁷⁸

Apart from Facebook, local researchers have broadly observed fake news about COVID-19 and government measures transmitted at an increased rate among peers through widely used platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber. These may represent an attempt to reach a wider number of people in a shorter time period while helping to conceal the often-dubious sources of self-proclaimed news.

Increasingly, a pronounced polarization can be observed in Croatian society, demarcated by the line between so-called anti-vaxxers and pro-vaxxers. A strong anti-vaxxer campaign was intensified with networking among similar international initiatives, such as the World Freedom Alliance, a group that describes themselves as “free-thinking intellectuals from around the world who have risen up against fraud, unprecedented censorship, and human rights violations.”⁷⁹

KOSOVO

Terrorist threats, violent extremism, and misinformation remained present in Kosovo throughout 2021. Extremist groups continued to propagate religious propaganda and fake news about COVID-19 through social media channels. Anti-democratic propaganda was spread via social and mainstream media – contributing to almost a third of Kosovars believing that COVID-19 does not exist.⁸⁰ On Jul. 19 2021, Kosovo repatriated another 11 foreign terrorist fighters or related returnees from Syria and Iraq (six men, one woman, and four children). In 2021, in continuance to a trend since 2016, no Kosovo citizens were reported to have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the conflict.⁸¹

78 ‘Podaci o broju mrtvih i ozlijeđenih od Covid cjepiva: 17.503 MRTVIH, 1,7 milijuna ozlijeđenih (50% ozbiljno)!’ *Istinom protiv laži* [website], <http://istinomprotivlazi.info/component/k2/972-moramo-zaustaviti-sva-covid-cjepiva> (accessed 15 September 2021).

79 Mirsad Dubravić, ‘Hrvatska se odnedavno priključila Svjetskom savezu za slobodu – World Freedom Alliance’, *Dokumentarac*, 15 March 2021, <https://dokumentarac.hr/novosti/hrvatska-se-odnedavno-prikljucila-svjetskom-savezu-za-slobodu-world-freedom-alliance/> (accessed 15 September 2021).

80 P. Avdiu, ‘Between Denial and Respond: Citizens’ Perceptions on Kosovo Institutions Dealing with COVID-19’, *Kosovo Center for Security Studies*, June 2021, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Covid19_Eng_460485.pdf, (accessed 06 October 2021).

81 S. Perteshi, Kosovo Center for Security Studies, ‘Beyond the Triggers: New Threats of Violent Extremism in Kosovo’, August 2018, p. 8, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violent-extremism-eng_611603.pdf, (accessed 8 October 2021).

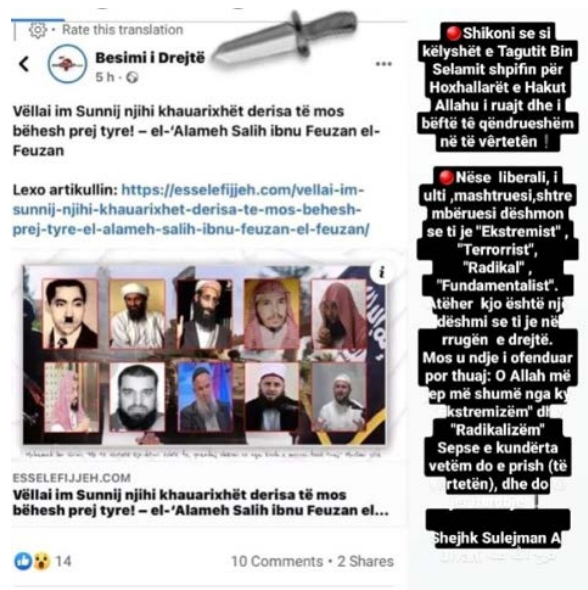


Image V: Ideologically motivated propaganda in Albanian calling for “Sunni brothers to know the righteous” men in Islam. Osama bin Laden is pictured along with Genci Balla, one Balkan of the nine Imams accused of Daesh recruitment in Albania. On the right, the text encourages followers to not fear if they are being called “terrorist,” “radical,” or “fundamentalist,” because that is a sign they are on the right path.⁸²

Some religiously and ideologically motivated groups, such as “Mbroje Umetin” (Protect the Ummah), continued to spread violent extremism propaganda in support of both Daesh and infusing society with Sharia law through social media accounts (see Image V).⁸³ The website page was transitioned from Facebook to another messaging and social media platform called TamTam. Separately, a Leopold Weiss Institute report, based on 2020 data but published at the end of 2021, indicated an increase in Islamophobia and anti-Albanian racism in Kosovo.⁸⁴

On Oct. 10 2021, Kosovo arrested five people suspected of plotting terrorist attacks affiliated with an Daesh-linked ideologically motivated group including an individual who had previously travelled to join Daesh;⁸⁵ they had reportedly planned to carry out bombings in various locations throughout Kosovo. Although investigations are still ongoing, there has not been evidence to suggest that they had a connection with the extremist social media sites mentioned above. As of mid-2021, more than 260 Kosovo Albanians, including fighters and their family members, have been repatriated from the conflict zones of the Middle East since 2019, including at least 11 foreign terrorist fighters or related returnees from Syria and Iraq in 2021. During 2021, at least nine repatriated individuals were released from correctional facilities, though concerns on their labor market and societal reintegration remain.⁸⁶

⁸² TamTam, 03 January 2021, [URL redacted. \(accessed 05 October 2021\).](#)

⁸³ TamTam, URL redacted, (accessed 04 October 2021) .

⁸⁴ Adem Ferizaj: Islamophobia in Kosovo: National Report 2020, in: Enes Bayraklı & Farid Hafez, European Islamophobia Report 2020, Vienna, Leopold Weiss Institute, 2021, <https://islamophobiareport.com/islamophobiareport.pdf> (accessed 2 January 2022).

⁸⁵ P. Isufi, ‘Kosovo Arrests Five Suspects for Plotting Terrorist Attacks’, *BIRN / Balkan Insight*, 11 October 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/11/kosovo-arrests-five-suspects-for-plotting-terrorist-attacks/>. (accessed 15 October 2021)

⁸⁶ “Employment: A challenge in reintegration and resocialization,” Balkan Investigative Reporting Network: Kosovo. 2022. <https://kallxo.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/EMPLOYMENT-%E2%80%93-A-CHALLENGE-IN-REINTEGRATION-AND-RESOCIALISATION-New-Cover.pdf>. (Accessed 11 May 2022).

MOLDOVA

Disinformation campaigns regarding COVID-19 continued in Moldova and manifested in 2021 through demonstrations. Observable conspiracy theories tended to entail a strong religious component. No new foreign terrorist fighter activity was noted in 2021. However, in March 2021, two bomb threats were directed at the presidency building⁸⁷ and the main court building in Chisinau.⁸⁸



Image VI: A group of priests affiliated with the Metropolitan Church of Moldova gathered on Aug. 3 2021 in central Chisinau for a protest against vaccination against COVID-19⁸⁹

87 ProTV, 'ULTIMA ORA. Alerta cu bomba la Presedintia Republicii Moldova. Un barbat in stare de ebrietate a sunat si a anuntat ca intentioneaza sa explodeze institutia', *ProTV.md*, 2 March 2021, <https://protv.md/actualitate/ultima-ora-alerta-cu-bomba-la-presedintia-republicii-moldova-un-barbat-in-stare-de-ebrietate-a-sunat-si-a-anuntat-ca-intentioneaza-sa-explodeze-institutia---2559329.html>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

88 S. Untila, Update: Alerta cu bomba la Judecatoria Chisinau, sediul Buiucani (FOTO), *Newsmaker.md*, 11 March 2021, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/alerta-cu-bomba-la-judecatoria-chisinau-sediul-buiucani/>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

89 Digi24, 'Preoți ai bisericii subordonate Rusiei au organizat un protest anti-vaccinare la Chișinău', *Digi24*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/preoti-ai-bisericii-subordonate-rusiei-au-organizat-un-protest-anti-vaccinare-la-chisinau-1621133>, (accessed 25 October 2021).



MONTENEGRO

Violent extremist-related incidents in Montenegro during 2021 included hate speech and physical attacks directed at members of the LGBT+ community and journalists. Protests against the government and COVID-19 measures linked to radical right groups continued to be organized during the year, but fewer people turned out than in the previous year and no acts of violence at the protests were recorded. No foreign terrorist fighter or related returnees from conflict areas to Montenegro were observed in 2021.

The radical right group Bunt Crna Gora, founded in 2020 in response to Montenegro's new law on religious freedom, continued to expand its political activism in 2021 by disseminating COVID-19 disinformation and propaganda focused on a loss of freedoms: "We expect yellow stripes around the arm, and next, an attack on children".⁹⁰ Before their Facebook and Instagram profiles were suspended sometime in the last quarter of 2021, they used these platforms to organize against COVID-19-related restrictions and join "protests for freedom of choice," calling for citizens to "Move! Wake up!... For a free society without discrimination: Stop covid dictatorships!"⁹¹ Meanwhile, an increase in the number of recorded hate speech incidents and threats on social networks as well as physical attacks against members of the LGBT+ community⁹² and journalists⁹³ were reported.

Activists, grassroot initiatives, and Facebook groups protesting COVID-19 measures ("KontraTimCetinje", "Buđenje Naroda Inicijative", "Protiv KoVid Diktature" Initiative) that emerged at the beginning of the pandemic continued to be highly active on social networks. Members promoted fake news about COVID-19 and calling for disobedience and disrespect for the government's anti-COVID-19 measures, and some actively participated in protests and demonstrations (see Image VII). Some of these alluded to fascism and Nazism (calling the measures "fascist methods of enslavement" and referencing Auschwitz, for example).⁹⁴ Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and blogs continued to be the most widely used platforms.

Narratives focusing on global conspiracies and vaccine misinformation were dominant in anti-government protests and in online disinformation campaigns – for example: "Global processes are led by psychopaths and destructive people who have imagined themselves to be gods and to play with human lives. No, it's not a conspiracy theory - we've seen that in the past 19 months of the pandemic," and "Any death within 28 days after vaccination must be considered a death from vaccination."⁹⁵

90 Post on the Facebook Page of 'Bunt Crna Gora,' 24 September 2021, no longer available.

91 Ibid.

92 'Stravičan napad u Crnoj Gori: LGBT osobi urezali križ na grudima, ozlijedili mu i genitalije', *HINA*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/stravican-napad-u-crnoj-gori-lgbt-osobi-urezali-kriz-na-grudima-ozlijedili-mu-i-genitalije-15055355> (accessed 15 November 2021)

93 L. Šćepanović, 'Uvećan broj napada na novinare u Crnoj Gori', *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-napadi-novinari/31614371.html> (accessed 15 January 2021).

94 "'Mic po mic Aušvic' Građani na društvenim mrežama udarili po novim mjerama, traže logiku i najavljuju inat,' *VoP*, 25 September 2021, <https://volimpodgoricu.me/novosti/mic-po-mic-ausvic-gradjani-na-drustvenim-mrezama-udarili-po-novim-mjerama-traze-logiku-i-najavljuju-inat> (accessed 23 October 2021).

95 'Buđenje Naroda' Initiative, *Facebook*, 18 May 2021, URL redacted, (accessed 23 October 2021).



Image VII: A meme shared on the Facebook page of the Buđenje Naroda Initiative⁹⁶ reads: ‘Double Standard: Anti-COVID measures for politicians vs. for children in educational institutions.’⁹⁶

No returns of foreign terrorist fighters or other returnees from conflict areas to Montenegro were observed in 2021. Authorities also stated that they did not receive any requests for repatriation from Montenegrin women and children who joined Daesh in Syria and Iraq, of which at least three women and three children remain in camps in Syria.⁹⁷ Montenegro did not charge the majority of ten previous returnees from Syria and Iraq.⁹⁸ Only one individual faced legal sanctions, and was sentenced to six months imprisonment.⁹⁹

NORTH MACEDONIA

In 2021, violent extremism continued to stagnate in North Macedonia though ethno-nationalist and radical right varieties of extremism, especially inter-ethnic hate speech, remained a persistent concern. On Jul. 18 2021, North Macedonia repatriated 23 of its citizens (four men, five women and fourteen children) from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.¹⁰⁰ There appeared to be evidence that the four men took part in the fight alongside Daesh.¹⁰¹ No new individuals left to conflict zones in 2021.

Hate speech between the largest ethnic groups (Albanians and Macedonians) is the predominant form of online

⁹⁶ Post on the Facebook page of ‘Buđenje Naroda,’ 24 August 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/budjenjenarodacg> (accessed 26 December 2021).

⁹⁷ Samir Kajosevic, ‘Montenegro Not Actively Seeking Return of Fighters’ Families in Syria,’ *Balkan Insight*, 18 May 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/18/montenegro-not-actively-seeking-return-of-fighters-families-in-syria/> (accessed 17 October 2021).

⁹⁸ ‘Western Balkan ISIS Fighters and U.S. Foreign Assistance: Comparing Foreign Fighter flows to U.S. Peace and Security Foreign Assistance,’ Storymaps, 10 May 2021, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/139806cedd72420aafecd3a5d1e40d75> (accessed 17 October 2021).

⁹⁹ BIRN, ‘Regional Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database.’

¹⁰⁰ I. Kadriu, ‘North Macedonia repatriates 23 citizens from Syria’, *Radio Free Europe*, 18 July 2021, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/makedoni-e-ve-riut-riatdhesim-nga-siria-dhe-iraku-31364877.html> (accessed 9 October 2021).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

extremism in North Macedonia, yet there has been no recent in-depth research into hateful and extremist content.¹⁰² Historic inter-ethnic conflict has been a theme in N. Macedonia since its impendence, with occasion spates of violence flaring up since the '90s. A recent example of ethno-nationalist extremism dates back to 2017 when a radical right mob almost killed the leader of an Albanian political party in North Macedonia.¹⁰³ The Macedonian court sentenced seven men for their actions. Nevertheless, their supporters were still active online in this reporting period. A Facebook page “Слобода за Кире Ѓорѓиевски”¹⁰⁴ (Freedom for Kire Gjorgjievski) was dedicated to the promotion of Kire Gjorgjievski, the main activist of the radical right mob that almost killed the above-mentioned political party leader.

Another Facebook group which promoted similar radical right narratives was “Христијанско Братство Македонија” (Christian Brotherhood Macedonia) with almost 1,700 members.¹⁰⁵ The group also has a YouTube channel called “Hristijansko Bratstvo” (Christian Brotherhood) with 431 subscribers.¹⁰⁶ A recent BIRN report also noted additional radical right activity in 2021: “Other acts include drawing swastikas and Celtic crosses in public places... swastikas were scrawled on three billboards in the southwestern town of Bitola promoting an LGBT acceptance campaign.¹⁰⁷ As is the case in most Western Balkans countries, North Macedonian citizens are susceptible to COVID-19 conspiracy theories: polling by the Societas Civilis Institute for Democracy (IDSCS) at the end of 2021 indicated that nearly two-thirds of citizens felt COVID-19 was a virus created in a lab or to control humans.¹⁰⁸

This report identified a noticeable presence of other types of ideologically-motivated violent extremism in the reporting period. However, specific narratives related to COVID-19 were not observed. The main radical groups in recent North Macedonian history were followers of two influential imams, Rexhep Memishi and Shukri Aliu. Both imams were imprisoned: Shukri Aliu was arrested in 2012,¹⁰⁹ while Rexhep Memishi was arrested in 2015, alongside eight other individuals, all on the suspicion of having recruited people from North Macedonia to fight in Iraq and Syria.¹¹⁰ According to radicalization experts, “the two imams had embraced a violent form of fundamentalist Islamic ideology and spearheaded the creation of youth group... many of the men active in those networks traveled to Syria and Iraq, while other sympathizers continued to spread the fundamentalist ideology through online content” at least until 2018.¹¹¹ It is believed that sympathizers to the network continue to operate other social media pages through which they share radical content.¹¹² This context is important as a number

102 Institute for Strategic Dialogue, *Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities and Religion*, 2021, pg. 4-5, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Online-Extremism-Mapping-North-Macedonia.pdf> (accessed 15 February 2022).

103 S. J. Marusic, “Macedonia court jails seven for MP’s attempted murder”, *BIRN / Balkan Insight*, 5 July 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/05/macedonia-sends-mp-attackers-to-jail-07-05-2018/>, (accessed 20 October 2021).

104 Слобода за Кире Ѓорѓиевски, *Facebook* [personal blog], URL redacted, (accessed 20 October 2021).

105 Христијанско Братство Македонија, *Facebook*, URL redacted, (accessed 28 October 2021).

106 Hristijansko Bratstvo, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr2YgyH7XKiTrS_-oX_bzvg, (accessed 20 October 2021).

107 B. Stojkovski “North Macedonia Urged to Address Far-Right Threat”, *BIRN / Balkan Insight*, 22 December 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/22/north-macedonia-urged-to-address-far-right-threat/>, (accessed 11 May 2022).

108 J. Blizankovski, V. Rechica, M. Popovikj and T. Zafirov, “Man of the People: Public Opinion Analysis of Citizen’s Political Demands,” Societas Civilis Institute for Democracy (IDSCS), 29 November, 2021, <https://idscs.org.mk/en/2021/11/29/man-of-the-people-man-public-opinion-analysis-of-citizens-political-demands-2/>, (accessed 6 April 2022).

109 Besimtari, ‘The imam Shukri Aliu is arrested in Kosovo and handed over to the Macedonians’, *Besimtari*, <https://besimtari.com/arresto-het-ne-kosovo-hoxhe-shukri-aliu-dhe-ju-dorzohet-magedonasve-video/>, (accessed 08 October 2021).

110 Shembulli, ‘Large police action in Skopje, Imam Rexhep Memishi and 8 other people are arrested’, 6 August 2015, *Shembulli*, <http://www.shembulli.com/lajm/7163-aksion-i-madh-policor-ne-shkup-arrestohet-imami-rexhep-memishi-dhe-8-persona-te-tjere-video>, (accessed 08 October 2021)

111 V. Kambovski, L. Georgieva and N. Trajnovski, ‘Drivers of radicalization and violent extremism in the light of state dynamics in MENA and the Balkans’, *CONNEXT: Country Paper on Macro-Level Drivers*, July 2021, pg. 4, <https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/North-Macedonia-CONNEXT-Macro-Drivers.pdf>, (accessed 3 April 2022).

112 F. Qehaja and S. Perteshi, ‘The Unexplored Nexus: Issues of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Macedonia’, *Pristina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies*, March 2018, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Extremism_in_macedonia_402663.pdf, (accessed 08 October 2021).

of online ideologically-motivated extremism and Daesh-like promotional pages were found to still be active in 2021,¹¹³ typically on less popular social media apps (in Albania) like TamTam (see Image VIII) or Telegram, or in closed groups on popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. They targeted the Albanian-speaking audience in general without focusing on a specific country.



Image VIII: Waving the Daesh flag and calling for the Sharia law in “our lands” (referring to Albanian speaking territories)¹¹⁴

ROMANIA

In 2021 in Romania, as in the previous year, radical right actors continued to proliferate conspiracy theories, while occasionally violent protests continued. These radical right actors (in particular the party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and individual activists) became dominant in the spread of these theories, with the addition of new narratives claiming there to be worms or nanotechnologies in masks. No foreign terrorist fighter-related activity was observed in 2021. A woman was sentenced on counts of accessing and spreading Daesh propaganda.¹¹⁵ Two individuals without citizenship and one Turkish citizen were declared persona non grata for ten years on counts of supporting terrorist groups and spreading terrorist propaganda,¹¹⁶ along with one Turkish citizen for connections to a terrorist attack in London in 2017.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Such as <https://tamtam.chat/tehujtt>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

¹¹⁴ TamTam, 25 September 2021, URL redacted, (accessed 5 October 2021).

¹¹⁵ TVR, ‘O femeie din Arad, condamnată pentru propagandă teroristă’, TVR.ro, 7 January 2021, http://stiri.tvr.ro/o-femeie-din-arad--condamnata-pentru-propaganda-terorista_876911.html#view, (accessed 28 October 2021).

¹¹⁶ Digi24, ‘Doi straini apatrizi care promovau propaganda terorista in Romania au fost declarati indezirabili si vor fi expulzati’, Digi24, 9 July 2021, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/justitie/doi-straini-apatrizi-care-promovau-propaganda-terorista-in-romania-au-fost-declarati-indezirabili-si-vor-fi-expulzati-1592043> ; <https://stirileprotv.ro/justitie/om-de-afaceri-turc-expulzat-din-romania-judecatorii-l-au-declarat-indezirabil-din-ratiuni-de-securitate-nationala.html>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

¹¹⁷ C. Lupasteanu, ‘SURSE Posibil IMPLICAT în ATENTATUL TERORIST de la metroul londonez GĂSIT de SRI în România - Bărbatul a fost declarat INDEZIRABIL timp de 10 ani de CAB’, Stiripesurse.ro, 17 June 2021, https://www.stiripesurse.ro/surse-posibil-implicat-in-atentatul-terorist-de-la-metroul-londonez-gasit-de-sri-in-romania-barbatul-a-fost-declarat-indezirabil-timp-de-10-ani-de-cab_1848789.html, (accessed 28 October 2021)

Some popular media outlets have continued to spread disinformation and sensationalist reporting and even offered a platform to various controversial individuals, including medical doctors who articulated statements proven to be false. While not inherently linked to violent extremism, these forms of misinformation have been repurposed by extremist actors in countries across the region, leading to concern that the same could occur in Romania. These included that vaccinated people were more likely to spread the infection than unvaccinated people, along with politicians claiming that people who received the vaccine were “guinea pigs”.¹¹⁸ In March, after pandemic restrictions were tightened due to the rising numbers of infections, the attendance was generally low at demonstrations in several cities; however, one protest at the beginning of March attracted an estimated 10,000 protesters.¹¹⁹ Individual religious icons and clergy were also present at some of the protests, despite the official position of the Romanian Orthodox church supporting government measures.¹²⁰ Besides conspiracy theories already introduced in 2020, an additional conspiratorial narrative emerged in 2021, claiming there are worms or nanotechnologies in the masks.¹²¹



Image IX: Screenshot of AUR protests against government restrictions¹²²

Protests led by AUR (see Image IX above) continued in October with slogans such as “Freedom, freedom without certificates,” and “Down with the government,” and signs such as “Green certificates = dictatorship.”¹²³ The activities and rhetoric of radical right extremists became more extreme towards the end of 2021. For instance, in a demonstration supposed to commemorate the revolution of Dec. 22 1989, AUR sympathizers attempted to

118 C. Selaru, ‘Traian Băsescu recunoaște că suntem cobai și abia acum se testează vaccinurile: ‘Actualele vaccinuri nu acoperă tulpinile din Brazilia și Africa de Sud’, *stiripesurse.ro*, https://www.stiripesurse.ro/traian-basescu-recunoaste-ca-suntem-cobai-si-abia-acum-se-testeaza-vaccinurile-actualele-vaccinuri_1666505.html, (accessed 28 October 2021).

119 A. Costache, ‘Românii au organizat cel mai amplu protest din pandemie. Liderii AUR și Diana Șoșoacă cheamă la răscoală. Val de proteste în toată lumea’, *Romaniatv.net*, 7 March 2021, https://www.romaniatv.net/romanii-ies-in-strada-diana-sosoaca-cheama-la-rascoal-a-val-de-proteste-in-toata-lumea-video_5325998.html, (accessed 28 October 2021).

120 Digi24, ‘Purtătorul de cuvânt al Patriarhiei s-a vaccinat împotriva Covid-19. Bănescu: Pledez pentru informarea credincioșilor de către preoți’, 5 April 2021, *Digi24*, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/purtatorul-de-cuvant-al-patriarhiei-s-a-vaccinat-impotriva-covid-19-banescu-pledez-pentru-informarea-credinciosilor-de-catre-preoti-1485135>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

121 P. Dobrescu, ‘Mitul „viersilor din măștile de protecție”, demontat printr-o demonstrație de fizicianul Cristian Presură’, *Libertatea.ro*, 2 April 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/19/one-third-of-romanians-would-refuse-covid-19-vaccine-survey/>, (accessed 28 October 2021).

122 A. Costache, ‘Românii au organizat cel mai amplu protest din pandemie. Liderii AUR și Diana Șoșoacă cheamă la răscoală. Val de proteste în toată lumea’, *Romaniatv.net*, 7 March 2021, https://www.romaniatv.net/romanii-ies-in-strada-diana-sosoaca-cheama-la-rascoal-a-val-de-proteste-in-toata-lumea-video_5325998.html, (accessed 28 October 2021).

123 VOA News (2021) ‘Thousands Protest COVID-19 Restrictions in Romania’, VOA News, 2 October 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/thousands-protest-covid-19-restrictions-in-romania/6254835.html>, (accessed 5 January 2022).

storm the Parliament building.¹²⁴ They managed to enter the yard and vandalized a number of cars. The leader stated that he did not feel responsible for the ones who got sick and died of COVID-19. Participants claimed to protest against dictatorship and held, among others, banners displaying the pre-Roman era Dacian god Zamolxis as “teacher of Europe,” a motif used in longstanding Romanian exceptionalist mythology.¹²⁵ Participants in the protests included the newly-formed nationalist party Alliance for the Fatherland, the former AUR member MP Sosoaca, and the organization “Legion of the wolves.”¹²⁶ The leader of this latter organization, Dorin Lazar Maior, was convicted in 2013 and sentenced to seven years in prison for blackmail.¹²⁷ Interestingly, their narratives have since largely changed from denying the pandemic to criticizing the government for allegedly failing to stop it, though medical mask burning continued in 2021.¹²⁸ Participants detailed their motivations to participate, including fighting for freedom and against discrimination; seeing the government as using the disease to curb liberties; viewing the measures as a disguise and the government as traitors; and seeing the vaccine as deadly and that many people died because of it.¹²⁹

SERBIA

In 2021 in Serbia, an increase in the number of new xenophobic radical right initiatives, including calls for violence against migrants and public health officials, was observed amid a complementary spread of anti-COVID-19 propaganda and activities. Several of the most active groups in this space included “People’s Patrol,” “Stop Censorship,” and “I live for Serbia” which actively participated in anti-government protests and were visibly engaged online. They promoted the various goals of their anti-immigration, anti-vaccine, and anti-government activities while arguing against the EU and the succession of Kosovo. At the same time, anti-Semitic calls for violence against public health workers and attacks on anti-fascist activists have been recorded. Meanwhile, in 2021, there were no repatriations of Serbian citizens from Syria and Iraq. It is estimated that at least 20 women and children, mostly family members of men suspected of being Daesh militants, are still detained in Syrian camps.¹³⁰ There were no reported terrorist incidents in Serbia in 2021¹³¹, and, according to the BIRN Terrorism Database, a total of 23 individuals have been convicted by courts for their involvement in terrorism: seven for acts in Syria and 16 in Ukraine.¹³²

- 124 E. Isaila, La AUR, nu demonstrațiile împotriva măștii și vaccinului sunt problema, ci extremismul și violența’, *Spotmedia.ro*, 22 December 2021, <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/opinii-si-analize/la-aur-nu-demonstratiile-impotriva-mastii-si-vaccinului-sunt-problema-ci-extremismul-si-violenta>, (accessed 5 January 2022).
- 125 E. Isaila, La AUR, nu demonstrațiile împotriva măștii și vaccinului sunt problema, ci extremismul și violența’, *Spotmedia.ro*, 22 December 2021, <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/opinii-si-analize/la-aur-nu-demonstratiile-impotriva-mastii-si-vaccinului-sunt-problema-ci-extremismul-si-violenta>, (accessed 5 January 2022).
- 126 N.A., ‘Proteste în București împotriva restricțiilor anti-COVID. Liderii AUR și senatoarea Șoșoacă, printre manifestanți’, *Turnul Sfatului*, 2 October 2021, <https://www.turnulsfatului.ro/2021/10/02/proteste-in-bucuresti-impotriva-restrictiilor-anti-covid-liderii-aur-si-senatoarea-sosoaca-printre-manifestanti-185395>, (accessed 5 January 2022).
- 127 G. Aldea, ‘Furia nevaccinaților: Brașovul și-a făcut protest la București, cu „Legiunea lupilor” condusă de Dorin Lazăr Maior’, *Buna ziua Brasov*, 4 October 2021, <https://bzb.ro/stire/furia-nevaccinatilor-brasovul-si-a-facut-protest-la-bucuresti-cu-legiunea-lupilor-condusa-de-dorin-lazar-maior-a167644>, (accessed 5 January 2022).
- 128 Ibid.
- 129 L. Diacu, “Vaccinul e moarte curată” – Protest anti-restricții și anti-vaccinare / George Simion, Șoșoacă, Ninel Peia, în fruntea mulțimii’, *The Epoch Times Romania*, 2021 <https://epochtimes-romania.com/news/aur-a-scos-oamenii-in-strada-protest-la-piata-universitatii-nume-controvesate-invitate-la-eveniment---319362>, (accessed 5 January 2022).
- 130 G. Ćosić, ‘Serbian Red Cross in contact with several citizens from camps in Syria’, *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 26 December 2021).
- 131 BIRN, ‘Regional Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database.’
- 132 See: BIRN, ‘Regional Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database,’ <https://terorizam.detektor.ba/> (accessed 8 October 2021).

The rise in xenophobic radical right initiatives during 2021 was mainly organized by activists on social media, primarily on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as through blogs and web forums that promote the supposed need to purify society and correct the ills of government. As one journalist put it, these groups “like patriotic rallies and patrolling the streets. They dislike vaccines, migrants and ‘the system.’”¹³³ Members of these groups actively participated in anti-government protests in online spaces in 2021, and framed themselves as defenders of Serbia against migrants, engaging in nationalist and misogynistic narratives including: “Don’t mess with our women...We will be on these streets every night.” Other online narratives from radical right groups focused on contending that “We are not the police; we are not the government. We are the people who must carry out certain actions ‘when the government fails...We clean up our backyard.”¹³⁴ The increasingly vocal presence of right-wing groups, most recently as part of the anti-vaccination movement, was also reported.¹³⁵

To that end, a group that calls itself the People’s Patrols has posted footage on YouTube showing fights in Belgrade between its members and reported migrants. This group is a recent phenomenon in Serbia, appearing in February 2020 and increasing its activities in 2021. Members operate volunteer patrols of the streets, mostly at night, to reportedly monitor the behavior of migrants. While the group has only managed to gather around 1,000 sympathizers in the physical world, they have over 65,000 followers on Facebook. Many of their followers are also members of the public Facebook Group “Stop Censorship” (see Image X below).



Image X: The “Stop Censorship” Facebook Group is one of the most influential of its kind in Serbia (The banner text reads: “Stop Censorship: If you don’t want migrants in Serbia, invite friends to the group”)¹³⁶

The highly influential ‘Stop Censorship’ Facebook Group was founded in March 2020 as a forum to discuss criminal acts allegedly committed by migrants and refugees. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, the group’s content pivoted towards highlighting the stories of ‘anti-vaxxers’ and expressing hostility about lockdown and vaccination measures. Content posted on the page purported to reveal what governments and media were choosing to hide, but its sources were not reputable, and its claims tended to be unverified and unverifiable. Still, this unreliable content served the powerful ideological function of unifying group members, and their

133 M. Vucic, ‘Hate, Lies and Vigilantes: Serbian ‘Anti-Vaxxer’ Brigade Plays With Fire’, *Balkan Insight*, 21 September 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/21/hate-lies-and-vigilantes-serbian-anti-vaxxer-brigade-plays-with-fire/>, (accessed 10 October 2021).

134 Ibid.

135 N. Stevanović, ‘Experts Urge Improved Anti-Terrorism Strategy in Serbia’, *Balkan Insight*, 23 November 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/23/experts-urge-improved-anti-terrorism-strategy-in-serbia/> (accessed 25 November 2021).

136 Screenshot from Vucic, ‘Hate, Lies and Vigilantes’.

comments suggest that they largely view the migrants and refugees passing through Serbia as evidence of “a plan to destabilize the country and destroy its cultural fabric, echoing the Great Replacement conspiracy theory of the European far-right.”¹³⁷

Posts on the page by members of the group advocate violence against migrants, including comments to “slaughter them” and “cut off their hands.”¹³⁸ They also claim that a common nefarious agenda lies behind the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent vaccination campaigns, directed by a shadowy cabal of “globalists” and their allies inside Serbia.¹³⁹ Calls for violence and anti-Semitic slurs are sometimes made against leading epidemiologists involved in the official pandemic response, such as Dr. Predrag Kon (see Image XI), whom some members of the group have accosted as ‘Jewish scum’ and compared to the Nazi doctor Mengele, while others have threatened to “put that vaccine in both [his] eyes.”¹⁴⁰ An increase in the number of radical right attacks was also reported against journalists in 2021. Such was a politically motivated April attack on radio host and anti-fascist activist Dasko Milinovic who was attacked with pepper spray and metal bars in the northern city of Novi Sad.¹⁴¹



Image XI: Graffiti reading “Kon=Mengele” in Serbian is written on the building of epidemiologist Dr. Kon.¹⁴²

Other similar Facebook groups and initiatives (such as ‘I live for Serbia’) appeal to audiences with fringe right-wing views. Alongside COVID-19-related propaganda in a similar vein to the above Stop Censorship group, they also promote anti-EU views and reject any ‘territorial division’ of Kosovo, while accusing the government of using the lockdown as a cover to secretly settle migrants in Serbia. Some of these accounts, many linked to QAnon, have been the focus of content moderation by major platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for spreading misinformation and hate speech that violates their policies.¹⁴³ But others, such as “Stop Censorship,” remain active, though they constantly test the limits of free speech on Facebook. Meanwhile, “People’s Patrol” faced a sufficient degree of content moderation on Facebook, termed as censorship by the users, that the group invited

137 Vucic, ‘Hate, Lies and Vigilantes.’

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

140 ‘Doktor Kon uznemiren! Sramota - Na zgradi u kojoj živi epidemiolog ispisan grafit “Kon=Mengele”,’ *Novosti*, 4 November 2021, <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/1051572/doktor-kon-uznemiren-sramota-zgradi-kojoj-zivi-epidemiolog-ispisan-grafit-kon-mengele/komentari/svi> (accessed 25 December 2021).

141 ‘Daško Milinović: Obojica me pratila ranije, ovo je napad fašista na antifašistu’, *N1 Beograd*, 16 April 2021, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/dasko-milinovic-obojica-me-pratila-ranije-ovo-je-napad-fasista-na-antifasistu/> (accessed 25 September 2021)

142 Ibid.

143 Vucic, ‘Hate, Lies and Vigilantes.’

its members to follow them on Telegram in November 2021, noting (in a Facebook post, ironically) that this would allow them to “share uncensored content.”¹⁴⁴

SLOVENIA

Radicalized factions of conspiracy theorists and anti-COVID-19 protesters were the most active radical actors in Slovenia in 2021, although some links between protesters and members of organized left¹⁴⁵ and radical right¹⁴⁶ extremist groups were reported in the media. Twitter and Facebook remained the critical platforms for spreading anti-COVID-19 propaganda and organizing protests, and, according to a 2021 investigation by Mladina, a local media organization, remain the primary sites for radical right and neo-Nazi individuals to agitate their views.¹⁴⁷ Widely distributed narratives contained fake news about the negative side effects of vaccination and the supposedly inconsistent or excessive measures taken by the government (See Image I). There were no instances of travel to or repatriation of FTFs from Syria and Iraq recorded in the reporting period, nor were there any terrorist threats or attacks.

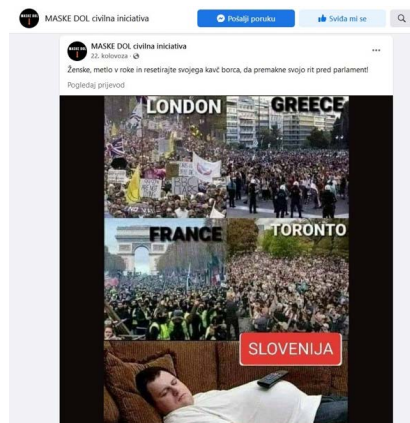


Image XI: On Facebook, the “MASKS DOWN civil initiative” called citizens to protest: “Women, take a broom and force your lazy husbands to get off the couch and join the protesters in front of Parliament”¹⁴⁸

The political climate in Slovenia during 2021 marked continued anti-government protests against Prime Minister Janez Janša’s policies and COVID-19-related measures (see Image XI). It is important to differentiate between two groups of protesters: the first, who engaged in the so-called Friday Protests, appeared in the spring of 2020 when P.M. Janša came to power, were made up of his opponents, and were largely peaceful.

The second largely originated in a Facebook Group organized by Zoran Stevanovič, a former member of an ultranationalist party,¹⁴⁹ that initially articulated opposition to vaccination but later registered as the political

144 See Facebook post from 27 November 2021 at: (link redacted) (accessed 25 December 2021).

145 Twitter post by Anonymous Slovenia, 23 May 2021, <https://twitter.com/anonslo/status/1396462060943335427> (accessed 26 October 2021).

146 Gordan Duhaček, ‘U Sloveniji tjeđnima traju nasilni prosvjedi. Analitičar objasnio pozadinu,’ *Index.hr*, 6 October 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/u-sloveniji-dugo-traju-nasilni-prosvjedi-protiv-mjera-analiticar-objasnio-pozadinu/2309015.aspx> (accessed 7 October 2021).

147 Erik Valenčič, ‘Koalicija sovrastva II,’ *Mladina*, 23 July 2021, <https://www.mladina.si/209276/koalicija-sovrastva-ii/> (accessed 11 May 2022).

148 Masks Down Initiative, *Facebook*, 22 August 2021, URL redacted, (accessed 22 October 2021).

149 Gordan Duhaček, ‘U Sloveniji tjeđnima traju nasilni prosvjedi. Analitičar objasnio pozadinu,’ *Index.hr*, 6 October 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/u-sloveniji-dugo-traju-nasilni-prosvjedi-protiv-mjera-analiticar-objasnio-pozadinu/2309015.aspx> (accessed 7 October 2021).

party *Resnica* (Truth) and organized protests against COVID-19 ‘passports.’ Additionally, according to reporting from Mladina, radical right-linked groups continued to participate in protests during the course of the year as the “neo-Nazi groups Blood & Honor Slovenia and the National Bloc actively participated to counterbalance anti-government protests.”¹⁵⁰

Subsequent protests involved violent clashes between police and protestors.¹⁵¹ Responding to radical right extremism, in November 2020, the Slovenian parliament banned the paramilitary groups Neighborhood Watch and Styrian Guard after they were found to be patrolling national borders and obstructing police work. The founder of the Styrian Guard was sentenced to eight months in prison for “undermining the constitutional order,” and the activities of these groups subsequently ceased in 2021.¹⁵²

The media has also faced sustained campaigns of protest and public intimidation by conspiracy theorists belonging to “Aware People of Slovenia,” a fringe group that split with other anti-governmental protestors in 2020.¹⁵³ In 2021, the group spent a month outside the headquarters of Slovenian public broadcast network RTV, until Sept. 3, when a group of protestors finally stormed the RTV building.¹⁵⁴ RTV employees were accosted and accused of being “killers.”¹⁵⁵ The physical demonstration at the RTV location seemed to tap into COVID-19 denial and disinformation observed at protests and on blogs or social media, including fears of the vaccinations and medical interventions: “All you who are vaccinated are victims of a Mengele-style medical experiment;”¹⁵⁶ “Masks are poison, and 90% of the tests are false positives!”¹⁵⁷ Other misleading arguments focused on government restrictions and including freedom-evoking sentiments continued across the year.

150 Erik Valenčič, ‘Koalicija sovraštva II,’ *Mladina*, 23 July 2021, <https://www.mladina.si/209276/koalicija-sovrastva-ii/> (accessed 11 May 2022).

151 ‘Rezime kaosa u Ljubljani: Policija koristila gumene metke, suzavac, konje, pse...,’ *Index.hr*, 6 October 2021, https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/rezime-kaosa-u-ljubljani-policija-koristila-gumene-metke-suzavac-konje-pse/2308883.aspx?index_ref=naslovnica_vijesti_prva_d (accessed 27 December 2021).

152 Freedom House, ‘Nations In Transit 2021: Slovenia – Score changes in 2021,’ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/slovenia/nations-transit/2021> (accessed 12 October 2021).

153 Wikipedia contributors, ‘2020–2021 Slovenian protests,’ *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2020%E2%80%932021_Slovenian_protests&oldid=1083011497 (accessed May 11, 2022).

154 K. Panić, ‘Conspiracy theorists protest COVID measures in Slovenia,’ *Fair Planet*, 9 September 2021, <https://www.fairplanet.org/editors-pick/conspiracy-theorists-protest-covid-measures-in-slovenia/> (accessed 15 September 2021)

155 Ibid.

156 Facebook post by ‘Gibanje OPS Slovenia Movement,’ 12 September 2021, https://m.facebook.com/gibanjeops/posts/4390289897683459?_rdr (accessed 15 October 2021).

157 ‘Slovenci opet prosvjeduju protiv mjera: Maska je otrov, 90% testova je lažno pozitivno!,’ *24Sata.hr*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/novi-prosvjedi-u-ljubljani-protiv-covid-potvrda-i-cijepljenja-785819> (accessed 28 December 2021).



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