

CHARTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM RESEARCH PRIORITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS | 2019



FAST FACTS

- Amidst the evolving threat of violent extremism (VE) worldwide, the Western Balkans face substantial challenges to social cohesion and stability.
- There is a need for greater understanding of far-right and ethnonationalist groups, their connection to previous conflicts and social dynamics, their impact on local dynamics, and their connections to regional and international actors.
- With an increased focus on individual-level violent extremist dynamics, corruption may be an unexpected and underexplored factor contributing to violent extremism and broader state and social insecurity.
- Policymakers and practitioners in the Western Balkans are keen to better understand how violent extremist groups attract young people.
- A deeper understanding of the ecosystems of social and political capital within communities that increase their resilience or susceptibility to violent extremism is vital for policymakers and practitioners working on prevention at the community level.
- More research is needed on Western Balkans countries that have repatriated or prosecuted citizens who have returned from violent extremist conflicts abroad, to better understand the efficacy of their responses and inform future shared repatriation and reintegration efforts.

Context

Amidst the evolving threat of violent extremism (VE) worldwide, the Western Balkans face substantial challenges to social cohesion and stability. As elsewhere, narratives of religious, far right, and nationalist militancy resonate with vulnerable youth populations in Western Balkan countries where a history of ethnic, religious, and civil strife created a situation vulnerable to terrorist recruitment at home and abroad. Individuals who traveled to fight alongside violent extremist organizations abroad are returning to their home countries following the territorial losses of extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, ethno-nationalist extremism continues to gain traction and expand across the region.¹

While some of these topics have received increased attention in the current body of literature,² others remain under-researched. Existing research topics also require more field research and deeper conceptual foundation. The resulting gaps in our collective understanding point to the need for further research on evolving social and VE dynamics in the Western Balkans. More rigorous and grounded research, in this regard, can help inform and improve efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) in the region.

In 2019, the RESOLVE Network convened local and international experts to discuss research gaps and develop a preliminary list of research priorities for P/CVE moving forward in the Western Balkans.³ The topics identified below reflect their collective expertise, in-depth understanding, and commitment to continued analysis of VE trends and dynamics in the region.

Far-Right Extremist Groups in the Western Balkans

How do far-right extremist and ethno-nationalist dynamics play out in the Western Balkans and how do they relate to international networks?

In a response to increasing policy and programmatic attention to individuals from the Western Balkans who traveled to Iraq and Syria, literature on radicalization and violent extremism in the region has been predominantly focused on Islamic radicalization and violent extremism.⁴ While some research and analysis has been published on other types of extremism present in the region,⁵ a significant gap remains in understanding the dynamics of far-right extremism and

1 Leonie Vrugtman, "Future Challenges of Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," *Institute for Democracy and Mediation*, 2019, <https://idmalbania.org/future-challenges-of-violent-extremism-in-the-western-balkans-february-2019/>

2 Shpend Kursani, "Extremism Research Forum. Literature Review 2017-2018: Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," *British Council*, February 2019, https://www.britishcouncil.al/sites/default/files/20fnl20kursani_literature20review20ii20-20erf.pdf.

3 The first of two convenings was co-hosted with Forum MNE and the Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS) in Podgorica, Montenegro in April 2019. The second session was held during the International Republican Institute's Western Balkans Resilience Forum in Sofia, Bulgaria in December 2019. The two groups of participants included researchers, policy experts, and practitioners based in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Additional participants based in Bulgaria participated in the discussions during the Sofia Forum.

4 Shpend Kursani, "Extremism Research Forum."

5 Luke Kelly, "Overview of research on far right extremism in the Western Balkans," *K4D Helpdesk Report*, 2019, Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d309f7aed915d2fe9ea6aec/620_Western_Balkans_far_Right.pdf. Examples of literature on other types of extremism present in the region

ethnonationalism. Working group participants discussed the need for greater understanding of far-right and ethnonationalist groups; their connection to previous conflicts and social dynamics, particularly in the 1990's; their impact on local dynamics, democratic institutions, and politics; and their connections to regional and international actors. The following questions emerged as key areas for further considerations for research to inform policy and practice:

- What is the current landscape of far-right and ethnonationalist groups in the Western Balkans? To what extent are these groups connected to one another and to what extent are they influential in Western Balkans societies?
- What discourse and narratives do far-right extremist groups employ in the Western Balkans?
 - To what extent does the legacy of conflict in the region feed into far-right narratives and fuel xenophobia?
 - To what extent have far-right narratives in the region used international dynamics—including immigration from the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere and European Union accession processes and discussions—and how?
- How do other types of extremist groups and narratives respond to far-right extremist groups and discourse and vice versa?
- How do far-right extremist groups in the Western Balkans interact with each other?
- How have far-right narratives and groups impacted views on and trust in democratic values?
- Are far-right extremist groups in the Western Balkans linked to existing power structures or political parties?
- How does far-right extremist ideology influence official state policies?
- How have governments responded to far-right extremism in the region? What impact has that had on its spread or continuation?
- How do foreign powers influence far-right extremist groups in the Western Balkans?

include: Marina Lažetić, "'Migration Crisis' and the Far Right Networks in Europe: A Case Study of Serbia," *Journal of Regional Security* 13, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs13-19429>; Marija Đorić, *Ekstremna desnica: međunarodni aspekti desničarskog ekstremizma* (Right Wing Extremism: International Aspects of Right Wing Extremism) (Belgrade: Udruženje Nauka i društvo Srbije, 2014); Valery Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of Historical Challenge*, (Ibidem, 2019); Marija Đorić, *Hooliganism: Extremism, Violence and Sports* (Serbia: Society of Science, 2012); Aleksandar R. Ivanovic, "Traditional Forms of Radicalism and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans as the Main Challenge to Stability," *Securitologia* 1, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/38249643/Traditional_Forms_of_Radicalism_and_Violent_Extremism_in_the_Western_Balkans_as_the_Main_Challenge_to_Stability

Youth Recruitment

Are youth a vulnerable population to violent extremist recruitment in the Western Balkans?

Policymakers and practitioners in the Western Balkans are keen to better understand how violent extremist groups attract young people. Youth engagement is a cornerstone of many of the prevention-focused projects in the region that aim to empower youth or to raise awareness among youth on the signs of radicalization.⁶ Existing research on this topic examines radicalization and recruitment of Western Balkans youth country by country. However, more detailed understandings of youth as a multifaceted demographic and the ways in which violent extremist groups seek to exploit or engage different youth populations are necessary to inform effective prevention program design and implementation. A holistic gender lens encompassing analysis of masculinities and femininities as well as gender and age disaggregated data will be important to comprehend the nuances of youth recruitment across the region.

Participants suggested conducting baseline studies to gain a comprehensive understanding of youth and radicalization across Western Balkans countries. The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- How do different types of violent extremist groups attract, radicalize, recruit, and mobilize youth in the Western Balkans? Does this vary by country?
 - Who are the groups' target audiences among youth populations?
 - What narratives do they employ that resonate among youth?
 - What methods or tools do they use to target youth?
- What is the demographic breakdown—gender, age, etc.—of youth joining different types of violent extremist groups?
- What is the role of gender in youth recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization?
- To what extent does the availability and type of education, employment, and opportunities for upward social mobility in the region make youth in the region more vulnerable or less vulnerable for recruitment?
- To what extent do the legacies of ethnic conflict in the region impact youth today? Do ethnonationalist and victimization narratives from previous conflicts still resonate among youth in Western Balkans countries today?
- To what extent do youth emigration and “brain drain” (the emigration of talented and educated individuals to other countries in search of more favorable employment opportunities and livelihoods) impact social and violent extremist dynamics in the Balkans?
- How do youths understand and view violent extremist groups and narratives in the region?

⁶ Eric Rosand, “Civil Society Organizations in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans—Mapping Report,” *Forum MNE*, December 2018, https://organizingagainstve.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/regional_report.pdf.

State Capture, Corruption, and Radicalization

What is the relationship between corruption and radicalization to violent extremism?

With an increased focus on individual-level violent extremist dynamics, corruption may be an unexpected and underexplored factor contributing to violent extremism and broader state and social insecurity. Some theories explore corruption as a threat to security and global stability, showcasing how government corruption and kleptocracy can drive aggrieved populations to extremes.⁷ Participants noted the importance of looking at state capture—corruption involving a partnership between political actors and individuals from the business sector, who use political processes to manipulate the distribution of state resources and the media to advance their own agendas—to better understand ongoing dynamics related to violence and instability within the Western Balkans.

Participants identified that state capture inevitably creates grievances and vulnerabilities. In the post-conflict Western Balkans, where rights-based approaches to politics and jurisdiction remain feeble and the distribution of resources is seen as largely political, participants theorized that state capture practices may very well impact radicalization dynamics and trends. The link between state capture and radicalization in the region, however, remains unexplored. This remains particularly troubling given emerging discussions in the region that suggest potential links between political elites and extremist actors.

Participants suggested cross comparative case study research to further interrogate the extent of state capture and its linkages to violent extremism in the region be conducted to fill this research gap. The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- What is the relationship between corruption and radicalization and violent extremism in Western Balkans countries?
- How has corruption impacted citizens perceptions of their governments and their government's ability to govern and provide services? Has this impacted views or the manifestation of alternative forms of government?
- What is the effect of broken and politicized justice sectors in cultivating sense of grievance?
- What is the relationship between political elites, religious institutions, and violent extremist groups in the Western Balkans?
 - How do those relationships manifest (e.g. systems of patronage, security and policing arrangements, etc.)?
 - How are these connections encouraged, supported, and fostered?
- How do perceived connections between political and extremist actors and narratives affect the status quo and practices of ethnic, racial, and/or religious othering in Western Balkans societies?

⁷ Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: Norton, 2015)

- What is the relationship between corruption and radicalization and violent extremism? How does corruption contribute to radicalization and how do politicians use radicalization to justify corruption?
- How do politicians use radicalization in justifying their activities? Does that impact or coincide with selective distribution of resources and access to governing structures within Western Balkans societies?

Community Resilience

What aspects within Western Balkan communities make them more resilient, less resilient, or susceptible to drivers of violent extremism?

Economic and social fragility in post-conflict Western Balkans countries—as in countries outside of the region—have left states and communities vulnerable to external drivers of instability and insecurity.⁸ Existing research, though limited, examines resilience to violent extremism at the regional and country level, tracking relationships between support for ethno-nationalist or Iraq/Syria-based violent extremism and different drivers of vulnerability and resilience. This research includes analysis of perceptions of marginalization, longing for stability and agency, urbanization, online presence, women’s empowerment, education, marital status, employment, religious and ethnic identity, and past trauma from VE.⁹ Despite this abundant existing knowledge, participants noted a remaining gap in understanding these dynamics at the hyperlocal level.

Working group participants suggested that a deeper understanding of the ecosystems of social and political capital within communities that increase their resilience or susceptibility to violent extremism is vital for policymakers and practitioners working on prevention at the community level. Participants emphasized that definitions of “resilient” and “vulnerable” should not be applied to describe communities as a whole—communities can and do exhibit both vulnerabilities and resiliencies simultaneously.

They further noted that online violent extremist propaganda is over-studied in the region and often disregards or overlooks the role of offline communications and activities in spreading violent extremist propaganda and narratives at the community level. They also called for further research on the engagement of religious actors in P/CVE efforts, noting that while religious actors may be helpful in facilitating discussions with certain populations within a community, they are not always viewed with the same legitimacy and credibility among others (youth, most notably). Participants called for further research interrogating the impact of the family, education, and afterschool activities in fostering community-level resilience to violent extremist actors and rhetoric. Other participants cited emigration trends as potentially marking or impacting levels of community resilience or vulnerability to violent extremist influence.

The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

8 Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev, and Florian Trauner, “Resilience in the Western Balkans,” *EU Institute for Security Studies*, 2017, https://www.ies.be/files/Report_36_Resilience%20in%20the%20Western%20Balkans_0.pdf.

9 Atlantic Initiative, “Countering Violent Extremism Baseline Program Research Findings—Bosnia & Herzegovina,” December 2018, <http://atlantskainicijativa.org/wp-content/uploads/CVE-Baseline-Research-Findings-December-2018.pdf>.

- Do civil society organizations have available tools and resources to facilitate discussions and awareness about radicalization with parents, educators, and other influential members of the community engaging with youth?
- What social structures may preclude discussions about or further understanding of violent extremism within different Balkans communities? How do these social structures coupled with longstanding legacies of mistrust and identity-based social divides impact communal resilience and vulnerability locally and on a regional or country scale?
- Are there links (positive or negative) between government decentralization and community resilience to violent extremism? What are the tradeoffs between centralized government P/CVE efforts and community-led responses to violent extremism?
- How can and how should P/CVE programs engage religious leaders in building community resilience to violent extremism?
- Will civic activism around issues related to violent extremism on the community level be able to stay sustainable, particularly in light of issues surrounding funding and their perceived legitimacy?
- To what extent do P/CVE programs address underlying social divisions? Is there a role for other programs geared towards peacebuilding and strengthening civil society outside of the P/CVE space?
- How does international funding impact the nature and perceptions of civil society in the Western Balkans?

Trauma and Psychosocial Services

What is the role of previous trauma in the radicalization process and how can the provision of psychological services addressing post-conflict trauma help prevent radicalization?

Participants noted growing interest in researching the intersection of trauma and violent extremism. Some research suggests that there are possible connections between radicalization and prior trauma.¹⁰ However, more research is needed to better understand the role of trauma—personal and collective—in radicalization, recruitment, disengagement, and reintegration. This is of particular importance in the Western Balkans, a region that experienced violent conflict and wars in recent memory, witnessed nationals from the region travel to live and fight in territories controlled by terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria and to fight in Ukraine, and facilitated the return of hundreds of these individuals back to the region.

10 Pete Simi, Bryan Bubolz, Hillary McNeel, Karyn Sporer, and Steven Windisch, “Trauma as a Precursor to Violent Extremism: How non-ideological factors can influence joining an extremist group,” *START*, April 2015, https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_CSTAB_TraumaAsPrecursortoViolentExtremism_April2015.pdf; Radicalisation Awareness Network, “A mental health approach to understanding violent extremism,” RAC EX Post Paper, June 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-h-and-sc/docs/ran_hsc_prac_mental_health_03062019_en.pdf.

Participants highlighted that across the Western Balkans there remains widespread but unaddressed trauma, stigma, and grievances stemming from the region’s history of conflict.¹¹ Widespread gaps in psychosocial assistance to address trauma, past and present, persist. Participants noted that further research is needed to understand how longstanding and pervasive mental health and conflict-related trauma in post-conflict Western Balkans societies—in the absences of services, support, and mechanisms to address them—may lead to destructive and violent behaviors, including but not limited to violent extremism. Further research on the levels and impact of trauma in the Western Balkans would assist practitioners to design more targeted and trauma-informed prevention, intervention, and reintegration programs that address necessary psychological and social factors.¹² Participants noted, however, that there remains little interest, both in the region and among international donors, in funding psychosocial and trauma-informed programs, especially beyond a donor’s twelve-month period of performance.

The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- What is the extent of trauma in Western Balkans communities and how do varying levels of trauma impact social cohesion and well-being at the family and community levels?
- How does trauma from previous wars, violence, resettlements, migration, etc. impact levels of vulnerability to violence and radicalization at an individual level?
- How does availability and provision of professional support affect the vulnerability and resiliency of communities to violent extremist narratives and actors?
- What are helpful psychosocial practices and provisions to support vulnerable individuals?
- What can be learned from other countries that have experienced similar types of violent social conflict—for example, Lebanon and Northern Ireland—that could inform experiences and programming related to trauma and psychosocial support in the Western Balkans?

Returnees & Reintegration

How does the specific individual, community, or country context impact the efficiency of violent extremist disengagement and reconciliation initiatives?

The issue of foreign fighters has been a policy interest in the Western Balkans since 2012. More than 1,000 Western Balkans nationals traveled to Iraq and Syria to live and fight in terrorist-controlled territories. Less information is publicly available about the number of individuals who traveled from the Western Balkans to fight in Ukraine.

11 Maya E. Lee, “Practices and Perspectives on Mental Health in the Balkan Countries: A Narrative Review,” *Indiana University Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 5 no. 1 (September 2019) <https://doi.org/10.14434/iujur.v5i1.26876>.

12 Valerie De Marinis and Eolene Boyd-MacMillan, “A mental health approach to understanding violent extremism,” *RAN Centre of Excellence*, June 3, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-h-and-sc/docs/ran_hsc_prac_mental_health_03062019_en.pdf.

Today, Western Balkans countries continue to grapple with how to deal with those that have or would like to return from these conflict zones. Some countries in the region have yet to take any concrete steps toward reintegrating or accepting the return of foreign fighters and their families. In other countries with similar experiences, early and existing reintegration support structures remain at the mercy of funding availability, resources, and evolving dynamics related to violent extremist conflicts abroad. While several resources are available for policymakers and practitioners to assist with the design and implementation of reintegration programs and criminal justice responses, participants noted that further research should target best practices for specific individual, community, and country contexts in the region. Additionally, participants expressed that more research is needed on Western Balkans countries that have repatriated or prosecuted citizens who have returned from violent extremist conflicts abroad, to better understand the efficacy of their responses and inform future repatriation and reintegration efforts. Other participants expressed that, of all the issues related to violent extremism, the often highly localized repatriation and reintegration of foreign fighters is of the least consequence to the majority of the region's citizens.

The following questions emerged as key areas for further research to inform policy and practice:

- What disengagement strategies are currently in practice? Have they proven effective?
- What are the necessary conditions to elicit behavioral and/or cognitive change amongst radicalized and violent populations returning from violent extremist conflicts abroad?
- What do we know about deradicalization?
- What are specific dynamics, legal codes, and experiences that should be taken into account when repatriating young returnees?
- What are specific considerations that should be taken into account regarding returnees who are prosecuted and imprisoned after their return? What measures should be taken to mitigate the potential of radicalization or further radicalization among returnees who are placed in the prison system?
- How effective and sustainable are criminal justice disengagement and deradicalization approaches?
- How do criminal justice responses in the Western Balkans countries differ for those returning from Iraq and Syria and those returning from Ukraine?

About the RESOLVE Charting Research Priorities Working Group Series

RESOLVE Charting Research Priorities Working Groups aim to facilitate the development of topic or geographic-specific priorities for research on violent extremism based on the knowledge and expertise of regionally-based P/CVE experts, researchers, and practitioners.

RESOLVE would like to thank the working group participants as well as Forum MNE, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS), and the International Republican Institute (IRI) for their participation, expertise, review, and support. RESOLVE would also like to thank the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations for their generous funding for this Priorities Snapshot, the working groups that informed it, and RESOLVE's Western Balkans Research Initiative.

RESOLVE Research Priority Snapshots are informed by working group participants and reflect the insights, expertise, and views of the participants themselves. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the RESOLVE Network, the U.S. Institute of Peace, or any entity of the U.S. government.

Published October 2020.

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