

ONLINE EXTREMISM

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Western Balkans faces a double challenge from online extremism. Online platforms are facilitating the specific targeting of the region by diverse international extremist narratives. Meanwhile regional histories and geopolitics are being appropriated to justify extremist actions and narratives around the world. This dynamic was particularly clear in March 2019, when Brenton Tarrant carried out a devastating terrorist attack on Muslim places of worship in Christchurch, New Zealand. As Tarrant Facebook livestreamed the lead up to the attack, a Serb nationalist song with roots in the Yugoslav Wars—and more recently appropriated as an anthem among the international alt-right—could be heard playing in the background. His guns also referenced the region, daubed with the names of historical figures from the Balkans who had resisted Ottoman invasion, and framing his actions as part of a parallel resistance against “Islamization.”

The Western Balkans’ presence in a global far-right online subculture tied to the radicalization of the Australian Tarrant may seem incongruous. However, this phenomenon is part of a wider trend that underscores the growing challenge posed by the proliferation of transnational extremist ideologies on online platforms, both violent jihadist and extreme right wing. In the Western Balkans, this poses a number of specific risks.

For more, see: Milo Comerford and Simeon Dukic, [*Online Extremism: Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans*](#). RESOLVE Network, 2022.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Build our understanding of the dynamic threat landscape.

An improved data picture will allow governments to better understand the online harms associated with extremist narratives, disinformation and hate speech, and to identify the networks key to disseminating them, all the while ensuring that human rights and privacy are respected.



Invest in regional expertise to address language blind spots.

While global technology firms purport to deliver a consistent and standardized experience to users globally, effective platform governance requires a localized understanding of language and culture.



Move beyond content moderation.

Considerations around the regulation of technology platforms must move beyond just content moderation to addressing the algorithmic amplification of extremist messaging and the wider ecosystem of online extremism, including how search and recommendation algorithms may be guiding people towards extremist content online.



Develop a regional response to a regional challenge.

Establishing a regional task force that brings together relevant government departments, including law enforcement and electronic communications agencies, to identify regional threats, share experiences, and develop coordinated responses would enhance efforts to fight exploitation of the internet by extremist and terrorist actors.



Partner with broader civil society and local communities.

Countering violent extremism efforts should employ a whole of society approach, to ensure there is community buy-in and empowerment of civil society efforts to tackle violent extremism, which can bring unique resource, resonance, and credibility to such initiatives.



Promote digital citizenship skills through civic education.

Through the active development of curricula, teacher training programs, and learning resources that deliver the knowledge and skills to develop critical thinking, promote open-minded attitudes, civic engagement, and inter-cultural co-existence, governments can build greater resilience to extremist narratives, malign influence campaigns, and other online harms.

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