WESTERN BALKANS
EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS, 2018

BACKGROUND

The research examined the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism across the Western Balkans. In-depth studies were produced in each of the Western Balkans Six, tasked with 1) mapping forms of extremism; 2) examining drivers and contributing factors of radicalisation (global, regional, national and local drivers, political and socio-economic); 3) developing a profile of at-risk communities; 4) identifying any potential links with organised crime, money laundering, and terrorism; and 5) analysing trans-national co-operation of violent extremist groups. These issues were explored with key stakeholders within communities, civil society and government, in order to build a picture of the specific situation in each country.

This research seeks to inform and assist the development of countering violent extremism (CVE) policies and programming, offering findings of relevance to practitioners and policymakers. This document is a summary of discussion points from the research.

The project was delivered by the British Council through UK funding. The findings and policy recommendations do not necessarily reflect the position of the UK Government.

THE REGION

Limited employment opportunities, marginalisation, limited state presence, lack of access to services and education were common features across the Western Balkans (WB). The breadth of factors demonstrates the need for a truly cross-government and whole-of-society approach to tackling violent extremism.

Across the region, media and political coverage of the problem is focused on Islamist extremism and Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) – despite a lack of acute threat.

Recent changes in legislation across the region have prevented travel to the conflict in Syria, while criminalising returning FTFs. Similar to elsewhere in Europe, the region now faces the challenge of deradicalising, rehabilitating and reintegrating these individuals into society. Radicalisation in prisons is a problem across the region.

ALBANIA

The threat of violent extremism to Albania has diminished in recent years thanks to central government institutions' appreciation of the threat, along with a whole-of-society CVE strategy and widespread stakeholder engagement.

However, concerns remain. The potential for peer-to-peer radicalisation remains and action is necessary to counter extremist influences at a local level. Weak state presence, the return and reintegration of FTFs and prison radicalisation present challenges to Albania's fight against violent extremism.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Political, religious and interethnic dynamics within Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) reveal a complex web of relationships between various forms of violent extremism, presenting challenges for policymakers. The presentation of Salafism and returning FTFs as a violent threat is exaggerated, distracting from other forms of extremism that pose a threat to BiH. Identity and belonging have been key factors in radicalisation, in a society where religion and ethnicity play a central role in self-perception. Unemployment, reintegration of FTFs, and diaspora activity pose challenges to BiH's fight against violent extremism.

KOSOVO

Kosovo's public discourse on violent extremism has been dominated by issues associated with FTFs. Ethnic-based violent extremism also manifests itself. The threat posed by returning and imprisoned FTFs is considered limited. Kosovan FTFs are typically under 30 and earn less than the national average. But with a higher than national average education level, they tend to have less access to opportunities: the unemployment rate amongst Kosovan FTFs is double the national average. Societal disengagement, rather than education, appears to be a significant radicalising driver to becoming an FTF or embracing violent extremist ideology. Similar to other countries in the region, identity and close intra-family ties, especially among siblings, provide both radicalisation and resilience opportunities.

MACEDONIA

Islamist extremism currently presents a more significant threat to Macedonia than other forms of extremism, although these too are present. Violent extremism is more overt among ethnic Albanians and/or Muslims. Further research requirements here include greater understanding of the role ethnicity plays in fostering vulnerability to extremism. Policy recommendations include greater access to education and comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, delivered in a whole-of-society approach, rather than solely governmental.

MONTENEGRO

Three forms of extremism have been identified within Montenegro: violent Takfirism, non-violent Salafism, and pan-slavism and Orthodox Christian extremism. Following the development of a national CVE strategy, and a national action plan, Montenegro is addressing the issue of violent extremism. However, responsibilities for implementation of the strategy are unclear. A strong whole-of-society approach is required, with state and civil society working in partnership.

An understanding of the differences between non-violent and violent extremism is required. Returning FTFs are deemed to pose little threat to Montenegro, and unofficial *parajamats,* while outside the authority of the Islamic Community of Montenegro, are not assessed to have links to extremist groups or cells. Montenegrin Salafism appears to be more moderate than in neighbouring countries, presenting a model for potential de-radicalisation and an opportunity for further study of the influence of key actors in proselytisation and broader political aims.

SERBIA

Violent extremism is not a serious problem in Serbia, but concerns remain regarding extremist individuals who do not yet accept violent ideologies but possess the potential to take up violence in the future. This appears to be part of a wider trend where young people are becoming more accepting of (non-violent) extremism and radical beliefs. Corruption and a worsening economic situation foster a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness; identitarian and cultural factors are strong features in Serbian violent extremism and exacerbated by a lack of critical thinking. Division in the Islamic Community of Serbia damages its legitimacy, leaving room for extremists to attract dissatisfied

believers. The issue of returning FTFs supporting pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, who face less punishment compared to FTFs returning from Syria facing terrorism charges, plays into the grievance narrative, potentially driving future radicalisation.

RESEARCH REPORTS AND POLICY BRIEFS

All research reports and policy briefs are available on the following links below.

REPORTS

Report Albania	bit.ly/erfreport_alb
Report Bosnia and Herzegovina	bit.ly/erfreport_bih
Report Kosovo	bit.ly/erfreport_kos
Report Macedonia	bit.ly/erfreport_mkd
Report Montenegro	bit.ly/erfreport_mne
Report Serbia	bit.ly/erfreport_srb
Western Balkans Report	bit.ly/erfreport_wb
Literature Review	bit.ly/erf_litreview

BRIEFS

Policy brief Albania	bit.ly/erfbrief_alb
Policy brief Bosnia and Herzegovina	bit.ly/erfbrief_bih
Policy brief Kosovo	bit.ly/erfbrief_kos
Policy brief Macedonia	bit.ly/erfbrief_mkd
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