WESTERN BALKANS
EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

ADDRESSING MARGINALISATION AND RADICALISATION IN MONTENEGRO: A WHOLE OF SOCIETY APPROACH

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Introduction

Alongside their Western Balkan neighbours, Montenegrin officials have been forced to confront radicalisation and violent extremism in order to respond to the foreign fighter phenomenon that emerged after 2012, as some aspiring fighters from Montenegro departed to ISIS territory. While the problem of departing foreign fighters has not been as severe in Montenegro as in several other countries in the region, the Montenegrin government introduced a Countering Violent Extremism Strategy in 2015, followed by an associated National Action Plan.[1] During field research conducted as part of the Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum (ERF), respondents noted that the Strategy only loosely defined responsibilities for implementation, and some indicated that police agencies bear too much of the burden of prevention. Indeed, as was found across this study, participants in Montenegro consistently emphasised the need for a more interdisciplinary approach to P/CVE.

The context of extremism in Montenegro

The dynamics of extremism in Montenegro are more complicated than they may appear at first, due to the interplay between and among various radicalising forces, combined with rising political division; a subject that deserves more research. For this study, respondents mostly identified three main forms of extremism as posing a potential threat to the country: violent takfirism,[2] non-violent Salafism, and pan-Slavism/Orthodox extremism. However, like other respondents in the region, it is the subtler radicalising effects of non-violent extremism that worried many participants in Montenegro, especially the risk of youth radicalisation.

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[1] According to officials, a total of 23 adult Montenegrin citizens are known to have departed to Syria from 2012 to 2015 (18 men and 5 women), along with three minors. Six were killed in Syria, 10 have returned – 8 men, 1 woman, and 1 minor.

[2] Takfirism is an extreme interpretation of Islam, even within the radical context of Salafism. Takfirists view any non-Salafists as *kafir* (non-believers) and often view non-Salafist Muslims (such as traditional Balkan Muslims) as *most* heretical for practicing what they view as an "impure" version of Islam.

Economic marginalisation

One of the reasons young people are particularly at risk of radicalisation in Montenegro is a youth employment crisis, wherein 15 to 29-year olds are unemployed at a rate of 40%, which is more than twice the overall rate of 18%.[3] This can lead to **economic marginalisation**, and **creates a pool of idle young adults** who may be particularly targeted by extremist recruiters skilled at mechanising the grievances of disaffected youth.[4] Thus, addressing this and other structural factors is crucial in the context of preventing extremism. And in Montenegro, where economic and social marginalisation impacts the Roma community at especially high rates, research respondents expressed concern that **Roma citizens may face an increased risk of radicalisation**; and therefore, it may be wise to direct special attention to developing P/CVE programming to meet the specific needs of Roma communities, and above all, Roma youth. It should be noted that any such efforts would have to be underpinned by further research that examines this issue more specifically.

Salafi para-jamaats

Like many countries in the region, researchers identified a small network of Salafi para-*jamaats* in Montenegro, that have served as sites of radicalisation. These are concentrated in just five cities and towns, in Bar, Plav, Podgorica, Rožaje and Ulcinj. Still, overall, Montenegro has seen little of the Gulf-funded religious investment that neighbours like Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have experienced, which is a big reason it has far fewer para-*jamaats* with far fewer members.

Almost all para-*jamaats* appea*r* to have some connection to a single "rogue" cleric who was once an imam in the official Islamic Community of Montenegro (ICM) but is now described by research respondents as the head of a "rogue Islamic Community" and "dangerous for society." Indeed, current IC leaders have been particularly adamant that this rogue imam should be dealt with more aggressively by the government, concerned that his influence serves to erode their legitimate authority. They have especially condemned the madrassa he runs for young women in Rožaje, where one respondent from the ICM said, "radical ideas are being taught and radical ideas are being spread."

Interestingly, a number of religious leaders and experts in Montenegro noted the apparently moderating impact of Sufi preacher Sulejman Bugari. Bugari is a charismatic figure who preaches messages of tolerance and inclusivity; the ease and comfort he displays during media appearances and in online

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[3] International Labour Organisation. (29 April 2016) More needs to be done to create jobs for young people. Press release. Available from: http://www.ilo.org/budapest/information-resources/press-releases/WCMS_476060/lang--en/index.htm [Accessed 2 April 2018].

[4] Allen, H. et al. (2015) *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*. RUSI. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf [Accessed 6 January 2017].

interactions makes him very appealing to a younger audience. His popularity among Montenegrin Muslims, even garnering respect from some Salafists, may indicate a certain ideological flexibility that could represent an opening for de-radicalisation. And more generally, this reinforces how important it is that P/CVE efforts include support for charismatic leaders who serve as moderating voices and who help develop complementary counter-narratives of inclusivity and cohesion.

Government approach to P/CVE

Recognising the broad threat of radicalism and violent extremism the Montenegrin government developed its Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategy in December 2015. An associated Action Plan was subsequently developed in April 2016, however, during the research officials admitted that it has been difficult to implement the measures it envisions. Assessment of the Strategy's implementation conducted by the Centre for Democratic Transition in Podgorica conducted in 2017, was critical of the government's work.[5] According to the Centre, for instance, 27 law enforcement agencies were tasked with implementation measures but almost all failed to fulfil their obligations. These findings were compatible with the comments of some interviewees who noted that a key problem with the Strategy was how loosely it defined responsibilities for its implementation. A police respondent also stressed the importance of an interdisciplinary approach, saying that police agencies cannot be expected to bear the burden of prevention alone. "This is a problem for all of society, and a partnership between the state and civil society is crucial."

Recommendations for the development of research and policy

The remit for this study was focussed on Islamist extremism specifically, but the responses of participants led researchers to determine that further research is warranted in Montenegro to:

(1) determine how mutual extremisms feed and inspire each other in mutually reinforcing and reciprocal ways, how they interact with the state, and how microradicalisation occurring in identity groups contribute to this process; and examine the intersectionality of extremist movements, to determine the cross-ideological factors driving radicalisation;

(2) Explore the underlying drivers of radicalisation among Roma communities, understanding their specific needs, with particular focus on Roma youth; and

(3) analyse the dynamics of pan-Slavist extremism and identify any leading figures.

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[5] Koprivica, D./Kovačević, M. (2017) *Kako poboljšati sprovođenje strategija suzbijanja nasilnog ekstremizma.* Centar za Demokratsku Tranziciju and Regional Cooperation Council. Available from: https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/RCC-Policy_FINAL.pdf [Accessed March 30, 3018]

Further, because socioeconomic drivers play a clear role in radicalisation in Montenegro, it is important that policymakers are knowledgeable about the push-pull model and appreciate the role of structural factors as part of the matrix of drivers that may lead certain individuals toward extremism.

Research respondents in Montenegro echoed those in other Western Balkan countries by expressing the need for more cross-sectoral approaches to de-radicalisation and P/CVE that engage all elements of society.

Thus, we recommend that policymakers:

(1) confront unemployment and economic disparities not only in the context of economic policy but as part of broader de-radicalisation and P/CVE efforts;

(2) establish partnerships between the government and organisations that work with women and with Roma, in order to develop de-radicalisation initiatives targeting girls and young women and Roma communities;

(3) amplify moderate voices, particularly those of figures who appeal to youth and promote tolerance and inclusivity; and

(4) move toward a whole-of-society approach to P/CVE that relieves the burden on police and shifts the focus to community-led and community-specific prevention initiatives by engaging not only the security sector but healthcare and education professionals, religious leaders and families.