

# MIGRANTS ARE LEAVING, BUT HATRED REMAINS

THE ANTI-MIGRANT EXTREME  
RIGHT IN SERBIA

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## Summary

The extreme right has been present in Serbia since the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated during the war of the 1990s. Its thematic backbone is based on Serbian nationalism and chauvinism, preserving the patriarchal family and opposing same-sex marriage, anti-globalism and strengthening ties with Russia. Migrants were not the topic of extreme right-wingers even during the “migrant crisis” of 2015 and 2016, when about a million refugees passed through Serbia. This changed three years ago, when the right-wing political parties *Dveri* and *Dosta je bilo* [*Enough is enough*] started to scare citizens by telling them that they would become a minority as a result of the mass settlement of migrants in Serbia. A number of extreme right-wing groups accepted this rhetoric, which soon grew into ‘civil arrests’, interception and intimidation of “illegal” migrants. Apart from the immediate consequences, such as harassment and intimidation of migrants, such activities of the extreme right have long-term, less visible consequences for society in Serbia, such as influencing the spread of views and values that are contrary to the democratic order. That is why it is so important to explore who the main actors who create and spread anti-immigrant narratives today are, why they (suddenly) started doing it, and what makes people susceptible to those narratives. It is also important to identify the main anti-immigrant narratives and messages, as well as the mechanisms and channels used by extreme right-wingers to attract attention and spread their influence to a wider audience. To answer these questions, we have conducted 42 interviews and analysed messages the most active far-right groups and individuals posted on social networks in 2021.

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## Introduction

The rapid growth of populism and the extreme right is a global trend, which has come to full expression in the last five years. Thus, extreme right-wing groups, movements and political parties, as well as individuals, are gaining increasing support from citizens in Europe and the United States, but also in South America, Australia and New Zealand, calling into question the democratic order.<sup>1</sup> With the (extreme) right present since the break-up of the SFRY in the 1990s and unfettered after the fall of the autocratic regime in 2000,<sup>2</sup> Serbia was unable to avoid this global trend. The old extreme right-wing groups came back to life and started growing stronger, and new ones are emerging.

The ideological and thematic backbone of the Serbian extreme right is traditionally Serbian nationalism and chauvinism, the return of Kosovo to the *de facto* sovereignty of Serbia, preservation of traditional (and patriarchal) family values, opposition to same-sex marriage, anti-globalism and strengthening ties with Russia.<sup>3</sup>

Migrants, however, were not the topic, not even at the time of the so-called “Migrant crisis” (2015-2016), when more than a million refugees from the war-torn Middle East and North Africa crossed the Balkans on their way to the European Union (EU).<sup>4</sup> The messages sent by state authorities, opposition political parties and movements of various ideological orientations at the time were full of understanding and compassion for migrants and refugees, because throughout history Serbs themselves has been forced to flee their homesteads. They criticised the inhumane treatment of refugees by neighboring countries, primarily Croatia. The sudden turnaround happened three years ago, when the opposition political parties (also parliamentary at the time) - *Enough is enough* and *Dveri* - started sending anti-immigrant messages.<sup>5</sup>

The most drastic change, however, was caused by the extreme right-wing movements *Leviathan* and *People's Patrol*, which not only adopted the anti-migrant rhetoric, but also began to carry out actions directed against migrants. Members of these groups are now patrolling the streets and intercepting migrants, threatening and warning them to “respect the laws of Serbia”, expelling them from public transport, arresting them and taking them to asylum and reception centres. They are also getting in conflict with those who think differently.<sup>6</sup> The backbone of the *People's Patrol* movement is precisely their anti-immigrant activities, and for this purpose they have formed branches in Sombor, Bačka Palanka and Šid, i.e. in border towns on the path of a large number of migrants. Moreover, for members of certain extreme right-wing groups migrants have become such an important topic that they almost forgot about Kosovo. For example, members of the initiative “No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija” have established a *People's Patrol* and focused their actions on defending Serbia from migrants.<sup>7</sup>

However, more important than the fact that some right-wing organisations and political parties have changed their topic is the fact that the state does not sanction their actions, or does it weakly,<sup>8</sup> causing the citizens of Serbia to accept their activities and ideas as normal occurrences. Public opinion polls in recent years show that anti-immigrant views enjoy significant support from Serbian citizens, and that migrants have appeared on the list of greatest external and internal threats to Serbia's security. In addition, three-quarters of respondents are concerned about "the free movement of migrants in towns and villages". Surveys also show that as many as one in four respondents support the actions of one extreme right-wing organisation or another.<sup>9</sup>

That is why it is important to investigate in greater detail the growth of the activities of the extreme right directed against the migrant population in Serbia. In this study, we tried to identify the main factors - both global and specific to Serbia - that contribute to the fact that members of the extreme right and its followers are accepting anti-migrant policies. We also investigated who the main protagonists of anti-immigrant narratives among the extreme right are, which anti-immigrant narratives and messages they use the most, and which mechanisms and channels they use to spread them. We also investigated how these activities of the extreme right affect the citizens of Serbia, especially those of the Muslim faith. The report also covered the gender dimension of the anti-migrant far right, their attitudes towards women, as well as ways in which extremist groups abuse the gender equality discourse to achieve their anti-migrant and Islamophobic goals. Based on the findings from our investigation, we offered recommendations for the prevention and fight against anti-migrant/such actions of the extreme right.



## Methodology

This study is based on extensive field work, in the course of which we conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with interlocutors engaged in providing humanitarian assistance to migrants, representatives of organisations dealing with migration, researchers and journalists reporting on migration and extremism, as well as citizens who are concerned about migrants and live in cities/towns that host reception and asylum centres. We also interviewed representatives of right-wing political parties and movements. To establish that there is reciprocal radicalisation, we talked to the people of Muslim faith, including those who profess “original Islam”, widely known to the public as “Wahhabism”. We also interviewed representatives of the non-governmental sector, Bosniak political parties, researchers, journalists and employees of educational and religious institutions, as well as Imams. Interviews were conducted in Belgrade, Valjevo (Bogovadja), Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Šid, Sombor and Subotica.

In our research, we also used the findings of the public opinion poll conducted in September and October 2021 on the territory of the Republic of Serbia (excluding Kosovo), on a nationally representative sample of 1,000 respondents using face-to-face interviews. We also conducted a qualitative focus group survey. An integral part of the public opinion poll and the focus group were questions on citizens’ views of migrants and migrant policies.

Since extreme right-wingers use social networks and the Telegram application as their main channels of communication, we followed the announcements of the *People’s Patrol*, *Leviathan* and *Youth of Šid* movements on their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts in the previous year, i.e. in 2021. Our goal was to identify the main anti-migrant narratives and their main messages, as well as the way in which they mobilise the audience. These groups were selected because in the first phase of the research it was determined that they had the most anti-migrant activities in the previous year. In order to determine how the government in Serbia and the media close to the authorities talk about and report on migrants, and to compare them with extreme right-wing groups, we monitored the articles that appeared on the websites of “Radio Television Serbia”, “Pink” and “Informer” in 2021.

In our research, we also used the existing findings of domestic and foreign research, as well as journalists’ reports on migration and extremism, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this topic and to better define questions to be used in interviews. Since most of the interviewees wished to remain anonymous, in the study we mostly quoted and referred to public and media sources, whose findings we verified with the people we talked with. For this reason, this study contains a significantly smaller number of quoted statements of (anonymous) interlocutors compared to the total number of interviewees.

# Reasons for Growth of the Anti-Migrant Far Right

## Global Growth Factors of the Anti-Migrant Far Right

The growth of the extreme right and the spread of anti-migrant attitudes are not a special characteristic of Serbia. This phenomenon is part of a global trend, which has emerged and spread in Western countries. That is why it is important to first explain the global factors that influenced the growth and strengthening of the extreme right by use of anti-migrant views, and only then to proceed and analyse the factors that are specific to Serbia.

## Shocks and Crises as an Incentive for the Far Right

Anti-migrant attitudes have become an integral part of the political mainstream of most Western countries in the past few years, having been influenced by several interrelated factors, i.e. shocks that these countries experienced. First, the EU underwent a major enlargement in 2004 and 2007, when 10 Eastern and Central European countries joined the Union (together with Cyprus and Malta, a total of 12 countries). This started a big wave of migration of the inhabitants of these countries to the older and richer members of the EU, which in turn caused an economic burden to these countries. The outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, when the world was hit by another shock, caused an additional pressure on their economies. Citizens began to fear that their security would be endangered, not only because of the economic crisis, but also because of the cheaper migrant labour force that also included a number of highly educated people.<sup>10</sup> The massive influx of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe in 2015 only made those fears worse. Finally, due to a series of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamist groups and individuals, starting with the attack on the Twin Towers in the United States, strong Islamophobia began to spread in many Western countries. This only exacerbated the migrant crisis, causing the merger of Islamophobic and anti-migrant views.<sup>11</sup>

Right-wing parties across Europe exploited the political, economic and migrant crisis, as well as the citizens' fears fuelled by the situation. With provocative statements and actions, these political parties managed to attract the attention of large media outlets, and to put the topics of migration and security on the agenda of mainstream politics. There is almost no country in Europe in which far-right parties have not seen enormous growth in popularity, and good results in general elections, as well as in elections to the EU Parliament.<sup>12</sup>

That the extreme right has grown and penetrated the mainstream political scene in Europe is best shown by the fact that far-right political parties won twice as many seats in the EU Parliament elections in 2019 than they did five years prior.<sup>13</sup> The growth of the extreme right in the United States was also largely based on campaigns that focused on protecting the culture and identity of the American nation from migrants and Muslims. For example, anti-immigrant measures were an integral part of Donald Trump's campaign for the US presidential election in 2017 (building a wall at the border with Mexico and deporting illegal migrants), and so was the Islamophobic attitude (banning Muslims from entering the United States, supervision of mosques, etc.). The success the extreme right achieved with the voters because it dealt with the topic of migration could not be ignored by political parties of different ideological profiles, so they too corrected their attitudes towards migrants.<sup>14</sup>

The great success of far-right political parties in countries with large migrant populations, such as Italy, Germany and France, prompted the far right in other countries - those that were not affected by the migrant crisis (Slovenia, Finland and Estonia) to improve their success using the same theme. Serbia was no exception, and certain parliamentary political parties (*Dveri* and *Enough is enough*) suddenly started sending anti-migrant messages to voters and frightening Serbian citizens saying that they will become a minority in their own country due to a secret plan to settle migrants in Serbia.<sup>15</sup> Research shows that voters in Serbia, when selecting a political party to vote for in the elections, are now interested in its position about migrants.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the efforts of far-right political parties to succeed by simply copying the messages of the extreme right parties from other countries, the acceptance of anti-immigrant and Islamophobic policies was influenced also by improved cooperation and better connections between right-wing political parties across Europe. Better results in the elections bring these parties more funds, i.e. more money for improving cooperation with right-wingers from other countries. The most visible example is the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), which, after good results in the last five years, established its own foundation (Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung), through which it funds the extreme right in the Balkans.<sup>17</sup> Taught by the success of right-wing political parties across Europe, many far-right movements thus also put the anti-migrant policy on their agenda.

## | The great migrant crisis

The migrant crisis in Europe reached its peak in 2015, when more than 1.3 million people sought asylum in European countries.<sup>18</sup> According to the estimates, about a million people<sup>19</sup> passed through Serbia in that period. In the course of the two following years, there was a sharp decline in the influx of migrants to European countries, as a consequence - among other things - of a series of measures many governments introduced in order to close illegal migrant routes and better manage migration flows. However, illegal migrant channels were never completely closed. Movement became difficult and slow, causing migrants to stay longer in the countries through which they pass.<sup>20</sup> In 2015, they stayed only a few days, while at the end of 2016 that period lasted between four and six weeks. Today, there are migrants who remain in Serbia for more than a year.<sup>21</sup>

The continuous influx of migrants and their longer stay revived rumours that Serbia is not in fact a transit country, but will instead become a “parking lot for migrants”. The spread of such unfounded opinions was supported also by the differences between the EU countries regarding the redistribution of the burden of the migrant crisis, which occurred during the disputes over quotas for the reception of migrants. Thus, the story began to spread that the EU does not know what to do with migrants, and that it will refer them to other countries in exchange for financial compensation. Therefore, the EU and the authorities in Serbia must have concluded a secret agreement to settle migrants in Serbia, for which the authorities in Serbia will receive financial compensation.<sup>22</sup> This conspiracy theory was encouraged by the fact that the principle of mandatory quotas for taking care of migrants in the EU had failed, and by the initiative to pay EU members EUR 10,000 for each received migrant as an incentive to accept them and care for them.<sup>23</sup>

## | The COVID-19, fear and anxiety pandemic

Before the above shocks had a chance to subside, in 2020 the world was hit by a major (and still ongoing) Covid-19 pandemic, causing another crisis in many countries. History teaches us that major crises often serve as a stimulus for strengthening far-right movements. The most famous and recent example is certainly the Great Depression, i.e. the economic crisis that gripped the world in the 1930s, contributing to the growth of the Nazi movement in Germany. In this respect, the Covid-19 pandemic is no exception. The speed with which the virus spread and its high mortality rate forced governments around the world to introduce very restrictive epidemiological measures, which included, among other things, physical distancing and restricting human movement, with

numerous negative social and economic consequences. As a result of the global slowdown in the economy many people lost their jobs, while numerous others faced the uncertainty of preserving the one they still had. To mitigate this problem, many governments alternately released and tightened their epidemiological measures, i.e. introduced new ones, making many mistakes along the way. To some citizens, it seemed that the authorities did not know how to adequately manage the pandemic, and that *they* were the ones who were unnecessarily suffering. This influenced the creation of a strong anti-government anti-system mood, as well as the polarisation of citizens into “us” and “them”, i.e. into those who were in favour of the epidemiological measures, and those who were against them.

Restrictive measures drastically reduced the frequency of social contacts, which led to people’s greater isolation and loneliness. Concern for their health and employment, social isolation, and not knowing when the crisis would end drastically increased people’s fears, depression and anxiety.<sup>24</sup> The combination of dissatisfaction, polarisation among people, uncertainty and fear is always a fertile ground for spreading the influence of extremist groups, which, as a rule, offer simple solutions to complex problems. Stigmatisation of others, “witch-hunts” and production of enemies are commonly integral parts of these quick fixes.<sup>25</sup> The fact that people were more focused on the online space during the pandemic was just an additional benefit for the activities of extremist groups, because they could now spread their ideas with much less effort and resources, reaching more people. Research shows that the far right, which had already risen in Europe and the United States, but also in other parts of the world, used the pandemic to incite citizen dissatisfaction and divisions in society in order to further expand its influence.<sup>26</sup>

## Internet and the social networks

In the last ten years the Internet has become accessible to a large number of people. The number of its users has quadrupled compared to 2005, and today more than half of the world’s population uses the Internet on a daily basis.<sup>27</sup> People are spending more and more time online.<sup>28</sup> It is similar with social networks and other digital platforms and applications. The large increase in the use of the Internet was influenced also by the restrictive measures introduced to combat the pandemic.<sup>29</sup> Due to all this, the digital sphere became a very important space for the activities of extremist groups. Research found that between 2005 and 2010, 27 percent of extremists in the United States were radicalised through the Internet, while this percentage increased to 73 in the period from 2011 to 2016. Today, it can only be higher. In addition to the increase in the number of radicalised people, the efficiency of the process has also increased, while the time required for radicalisation has decreased.<sup>30</sup>

Thanks to the Internet, people's better and faster connection influences the creation of virtual communities of like-minded people (the so-called echo-chambers) who exchange information amongst themselves and encourage each other without the need to ever physically meet. This has contributed to the rise of "self-radicalisation" and the related phenomenon of "lone wolves",<sup>31</sup> which has been particularly prevalent among extreme right-wingers in the past few years.<sup>32</sup> However, not only the widespread use of the Internet has influenced the spread of extremism, there were other factors as well. Free digital tools for creating and managing various content, as well as the simplification of their use coupled with their integration with mobile devices, have made it possible for people with basic knowledge of digital technologies to manipulate content on the Internet, and to do it very quickly and in real time. Also, secure communication applications, such as "Telegram" and "Signal", enable secure communication among the users, and – consequently - freer sharing of extremist content.

The peculiarities of certain networks and tools also contribute to the spread of extremism. Namely, people use the Internet for communication and entertainment, but also to obtain information. The problem is that people think that social networks are a source of reliable information, while they are actually just advertising platforms that follow the logic of profit. The algorithms they contain support the choices people make. The idea is to make users happy so that they would return to these specific platforms. For example, if we become interested in one of the conspiracy theories, and search for it on Google or YouTube, the algorithms will offer us same or similar content in the future.<sup>33</sup>

The Internet is also a very fragmented and decentralised network, which provides great flexibility and makes it difficult to fight extremism. Thus, banning and cancelling an account on a platform does not necessarily mean that the actions of the individual or group behind the account will completely disappear. In these situations, they open new accounts on the same platforms or move to social networks that do not sanction extremist content under the pretext of protecting freedom of speech. This was the case with many extreme right-wingers, who have exchanged Facebook and Twitter for Gab and Parler, that is, the MeWe network, and are now using BitChute<sup>34</sup> instead of YouTube. They also have the so-called chenosphere at their disposal, which consists of Internet sites that share photo messages, the most famous among them being "4chan" and "8chan".<sup>35</sup>

## Drivers of the Anti-Migrant Right in Serbia

The reasons for growth of the anti-migrant right in Serbia can be found in a combination of factors that have contributed to citizens becoming vulnerable to radical and xenophobic ideas. Dissatisfied with the general situation in the country, they easily accepted the narrative about the external culprit for their own misfortunes. The frustration-aggression hypothesis explains that the reason behind all aggressive behaviour is frustration, and many social psychologists have shown that accumulated frustrations are often the cause of prejudice against other social groups.<sup>36</sup> The theory of displaced aggression explains that intolerance towards another group can be interpreted as a defence mechanism through which accumulated frustrations are directed towards another target, i.e. the scapegoat.<sup>37</sup> The frustrations caused by state capture and the systemic problems that afflict the citizens of Serbia, such as the bad socio-economic situation and insufficient trust in institutions, cannot be easily directed towards the real source of frustration. Therefore, the dissatisfaction accumulated as a result of betrayed expectations, which should have been fulfilled by the state and society, is redirected to “easy targets” and external enemies. These are most often vulnerable and least protected groups, such as migrants, minority groups, the homeless and so on. The anti-migrant right, therefore, plays a useful role and “helps” the authorities in Serbia, because it redirects the dissatisfaction and frustrations of the citizens from the regime to external enemies, that is, migrants. There are several important factors that have contributed to citizens becoming vulnerable to anti-migrant narratives in Serbia, which right-wing organisations have used to their advantage. These are the bad socio-economic situation, insufficient trust in institutions due to the collapse of democracy, but also the benevolent and inconsistent attitude of the state towards the far right.

### Young people in a bad socio-economic situation are more susceptible to extreme ideas

Some of the most visible factors that make citizens more susceptible to radical ideas are economic exclusion and limited opportunities for social mobility.<sup>38</sup> Serbia has sufficient research on Islamist extremism, but lacks studies on the profile of extreme right-wingers, i.e. the basic causes of the radicalisation of right-wing ideas. Several interlocutors pointed out that members of extreme right-wing organisations and those who support them often come from poorer strata of society.

Serbia is characterised by a very bad socio-economic situation, which has been deteriorating in recent years and is reflected in the lack of employment opportunities, poverty, and the exodus of skilled and experienced labour (the so-called “brain drain”). Therefore, the low standard of living and inability to find employment have certainly affected the susceptibility of citizens to anti-migrant narratives. A special problem is youth unemployment, which in 2020 was 26.6%.<sup>39</sup> Public opinion polls show that young people have a very strong desire to leave the country, stating the economic situation as the main reason.<sup>40</sup> Given the current economic situation, it was easy for right-wingers to profit from the issue of migrants. Feelings of humiliation, hopelessness, as well as injustice caused by great economic difficulties create fertile ground for accepting extreme views, which can then lead to violent behaviour. Research on Islamist extremists in Serbia has shown that one of the main factors of extremism among young people is precisely poverty and lack of opportunities to advance on the social ladder.

Also, people tend to look for culprits to explain the problems that plague them. The scapegoat theory explains this phenomenon by the tendency of people to find culprits for their own difficulties, caused by systemic problems, which is especially pronounced in periods of great crises.<sup>41</sup> Analyses conducted in European countries have shown that citizens’ attitudes towards migrants are greatly influenced by the country’s level of general economic development. Countries with a high level of GDP per capita and a low unemployment rate are generally more inclined towards migrants and do not perceive immigration as a threat.<sup>42</sup>

Although in Serbia, unlike in European countries, the narrative about migrants who came to take away jobs from the citizens of Serbia did not prevail, certain elements of this sentiment are still present. For example, one can often hear the argument that these are in fact “economic” migrants, which on the one hand reduces solidarity and compassion, while on the other hand causes the perception of economic vulnerability and victimhood. An illustrative example is the reaction of the local population to the fact that an Afghan citizen had opened a carpet shop. The population reacted negatively, complaining that migrants are in a better position and that the state helps them more than it does its own citizens.<sup>43</sup> Also, it was noted that people believe that migrants have a kind of privileged status in relation to the citizens of Serbia. Anti-migrant right-wing accounts on social media often contain posts and comments that reflect the view that migrants are “protected like polar bears”, and that they “have a special status and are not held responsible for the same acts as the local population”. There are also questions such as “How long will we be treated as second-class citizens?”



## Low level of trust in institutions as a consequence of the collapse of democracy

In addition to economic factors, the very low level of citizens' trust in institutions also contributed to their susceptibility to xenophobic narratives and helped strengthen the right-wing. According to a survey the BCSP conducted in 2020, the majority of citizens trust the judiciary and the police the least.<sup>44</sup> Also, they have very little trust in political institutions, especially in the National Assembly and the local authorities. More than half of the population believes that the police do not protect citizens, but rather criminals who are in alliance with politicians and the state (23%), politicians who misuse state resources (19%) and financially powerful people (15%).<sup>45</sup> Distrust in institutions is even more pronounced among young people. According to the latest report from the National Youth Council of Serbia, young people do not trust any institution, and are especially distrustful of political institutions such as the National Assembly, the Government, the President of the Republic and the local authorities. The trust of young people in the police has also been declining in the last few years.<sup>46</sup> Distrust in institutions can be linked to the constant trend of democracy collapsing, capturing the state, and violating human rights. Many international institutions and organisations have noted a decline in democracy and the rule of law in Serbia in recent years.<sup>47</sup>

The *People's Patrol* organisation used the lack of trust in state authorities in charge of law enforcement to justify and promote its actions of patrolling and making civilian arrests of migrants. On its social networks pages, *People's Patrol* often shares posts in which it criticises the police and explains that they were forced to "take the law into their own hands" because of their passivity and lack of reaction. People's dissatisfaction with the work of the police can also be noticed in the comments below such posts, which contain many negative reactions, such as that "the police are not doing their job", that "the police are not the service of the people", that "we pay them to ensure order and peace, but they don't do any of that", and that "the people started organising to protect themselves and their families, while the police arrest those that pay for their salaries. The police are incapable".<sup>48</sup>

The results of the analyses of citizens' views in European countries show that countries with a higher level of trust in institutions view immigrants in a more positive light.<sup>49</sup> Other research has shown that weaker states - those with a high level of tolerance for corruption, high perceptions of corruption and low trust in institutions - also have more pronounced anti-immigrant attitudes.<sup>50</sup>

## Favourable attitude of the state towards the extreme right

The extreme right in Serbia has been operating, in various forms, for several decades now, tolerated or even supported by certain political actors. Extreme nationalist groups are not perceived as a threat, and are not prosecuted or condemned in the official discourse and media. No government has radically rejected the right or unequivocally distanced itself from them.<sup>51</sup> The extreme right in Serbia is primarily based on nationalism that emerged in the mid-1980s and whose path was cleared during the rule of Slobodan Milosevic in the 1990s. In that period, Serbian nationalism was legitimised and imposed as an official ideology and discourse.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to nationalism, the extreme right in Serbia has a hatred of the “other”, which changes when there is a need for it and is always presented as a threat to national identity. In the 1990s, these were the other Yugoslav peoples. However, after the democratic changes of 2000, Serbian far-right groups continued to exist, but have changed their *modus operandi* and turned towards internal “enemies” - minorities and vulnerable groups (LGBT+, Roma, refugees, etc.).<sup>53</sup> That is how migrants got on their agenda in the second half of 2019. The anti-migrant extreme right emerged on the streets and on social networks. In that period, there was an increase in xenophobic protests and incidents, accompanied by hate speech, primarily on Facebook.

The reaction of the state to such activities is usually absent or very mild. The leader of the group or some of the participants are brought in for a couple of hours, or for an informative interview, and are then released without any sanctions, to continue to organise similar actions. When the first *people's patrols* were organised, the leader of the group Damjan Knežević was summoned to the police for questioning under Article 317 of the Criminal Code for inciting national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance.<sup>54</sup> The police informed the prosecution about this case, but there was never any epilogue. Months later, journalists received a response from the prosecution that the pre-investigation procedure was still under way.<sup>55</sup> Since the footage of patrolling was published on social networks, without hiding the identity of the protagonists, one gets the impression that there is no will to prosecute this case. Another case that got “stuck” in the prosecutor’s office is the prosecution of those responsible for the posters in Sombor, in which citizens are called to lynch their fellow citizens who rented out accommodation to migrants. The police handed over all the information necessary for the prosecutor’s office to file criminal charges, but the prosecutor did nothing.<sup>56</sup>

Arrests that are short lived and without any serious sanctions on the perpetrators, have a dual role - the state uses them to simulate the fight against the extreme right, while the right uses them to present themselves as victims of the system, collect extra points and

attract anti-regime oriented citizens. On the Facebook page of the *People's Patrol* organisation, there are many posts in which they protest against alleged police repression:

“How long will migrants roam freely in Serbia, commit crimes and carry knives, while the police constantly intercept, detain and search our guys? The *People's Patrol* is not a whim, it is the result of our need to defend ourselves from the plague that threatens to rob us of our peaceful lives!”

“We are all familiar with the terrible tyranny of migrants in Sombor, but now the police are questioning our guys. We are not doing anything that could harm Serbia, we are doing everything according to the law. Stop the repression of patriots!”

“Why are there so many police on Kalemegdan when the *People's Patrol* is out? Where are the police when there is a need to protect citizens from migrants? Serbia is a deeply occupied country because we, as its citizens, cannot walk freely! Why did you bring out the gendarmerie against us? What are you afraid of? You are afraid of the people! We are all the *People's Patrol*!!!!”

“Repression against the *People's Patrol* is getting stronger every day. The last act of intimidation and harassment of our brothers who are defending their fellow citizens occurred in Sombor. The other day, the police first arrested the guys who were walking around the city, and threatened them; today, one of them was asked to come to the station. How long will this last? How long will the police serve as the private repressive apparatus of the SNS, despite the fact that it is we who pay their salaries?”<sup>57</sup>

The anti-migrant rally “Let’s clean out the park next to the Faculty of Economics”<sup>58</sup> is another illustrative example of the lack of political will to stand in the way of right-wing xenophobic currents. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, as well as the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination<sup>59</sup> and the Law on Public Assembly,<sup>60</sup> provides the basis for state bodies to ban such gatherings for inciting and causing racial, religious or national hatred and intolerance.<sup>61</sup> Despite this, the rally was held in the presence of a police cordon.

Officials react mildly to right-wing activities, relativising them, and there is often no reaction at all. In the fall of 2020, presenting the programme of the new Government, the President of the Republic even singled out the dialogue with (extreme) right-wing groups, which have anti-vaccination and anti-migrant beliefs, in order to simulate political pluralism since most opposition parties boycotted the June elections. Also, despite the fact that the *People's Patrol* has been operating without problems for two years, and the fact that the public’s attention has been drawn to the incidents they caused on several occasions, the President – who had also spoken about them – recently said that he had never heard of this group.<sup>62</sup>

Leaders of far-right organisations do not call for violence directly, but their narratives and activities contribute to radicalising the views of their supporters and citizens in general. A multitude of comments directly calling for violence can be found on the social networks of these groups.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, the police and the prosecution do not deal with these cases, or with daily violent comments and the spread of hatred. Although the MoI Department for the Suppression of High-Tech Crime is mostly engaged in detecting criminal acts that endanger security, it primarily focuses on negative comments about politicians, that is, public officials.<sup>64</sup> The constant placement of anti-migrant narratives and feelings of mass agreement, which are achieved on social networks, can give justification to citizens and encourage them to transfer their social network activities into the real world.<sup>65</sup> For this reason, the police and the prosecution should pay more attention to the pages and individuals involved.

Inconsistent and lukewarm reactions of the state to the activities of extreme right-wingers contribute to the normalisation of their narratives and activities, which certainly makes it easier for citizens to accept their extreme views. The mild reaction of the state contributes to the fact that extreme activities of the right are gradually moving from being “illegal” to public space. As one interlocutor noted, right-wing organisations no longer have the need for underground work:

“The activities of the right are becoming more and more visible; they film themselves when they go on patrols, they announce that they will be cleaning the park of migrants... These are no longer activities that are done in the middle of the night wearing a hood.”<sup>66</sup>

## | Topics that are profitable for right-wing groups

Most of our interlocutors agreed that right-wing currents focus on certain topics because they estimate that these will bring them points and attract supporters at some specific moment. Thus, the traditional generators of the right-wing in Serbia, which are based on the post-conflict heritage, have been supplemented with current topics in order to attract as many citizens as possible. This could explain why various right-wing actors operating in the public space became more interested in migrants in 2019. At that time, some of the right-wing political parties, such as *Dveri* and *Dosta je bilo* (*Enough is enough*), swiftly reoriented themselves from previously central topics such as Kosovo and partocracy, to migrants.

It is similar with extreme right-wing organisations, of which the *People’s Patrol* is certainly the most prominent. The leader of this organisation, which completely tailored its programme and activities to the anti-immigrant agenda, previously led the “Initiative

- No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija”, which focused on the topic of Kosovo, viewed through an ethno-nationalist prism. Several interlocutors pointed out that the topic of Kosovo, although undoubtedly important and filled with emotions, had become too distant and abstract for citizens, and that it was therefore necessary to find a more visible and physically closer topic. The interlocutors also agree that right-wingers began to use the topic of the migrant crisis in the period when citizens of Serbia became more susceptible to anti-migrant attitudes for several reasons, that is, when they assessed that they would be able to profit politically from the topic. As one of our interlocutors said:

“After six years, the topic has matured. At the beginning of the crisis, people felt solidarity and understanding, but there is a lack of transparency in official policy and only the most problematic groups of migrants can be seen in the streets”.<sup>67</sup>

First, the dissatisfaction of the citizens caused by the long duration of the crisis led to the growing rejection of the argument that Serbia is, to migrants, only a transit country on their way to Western European destinations, which largely used to prevent the negative attitude. Second, although the official discourse is still moderate and neutral, and the topic is very low on the political agenda, there has been a noticeable change in the actions and behaviour of the authorities towards migrants. Over time, the migrant crisis has moved in the official discourse from the issue of humanity and solidarity to the issue of security. The change has become especially noticeable after the arrival of Aleksandar Vulin as the head of the Mol. He often announces and attends actions involving search for and arrest of migrants, accompanied by statements such as “Serbia will not be a parking lot for migrants”.<sup>68</sup> Also, immediately after the lifting of the state of emergency, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, made a decision to engage members of the Serbian Armed Forces to secure three reception centres in the municipality of Šid due to the locals’ alleged security concerns.<sup>69</sup> In the absence of transparent official information on the migrant population in Serbia, and on the state migrant policy, this topic is subject to manipulation and dissemination of misinformation, which further affects the views of citizens.

Finally, the structure of migrants passing through Serbia has changed, and those that are now most visible to citizens are irregular migrants who circulate in the cities. At the end of 2019, migrants were one of the main topics of the right-wing organisations and parties, which further escalated at the beginning of the pandemic of the Covid-19. Before right-wing organisations moved on to the next cost-effective topic (the virus and vaccines), the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty at the start of the pandemic served as fertile ground for spreading misinformation about migrants. Thus, conspiracy theories about the secret plan to settle migrants during the lockdown curfew spread on social networks.<sup>70</sup>

## Main Actors and Ways of Spreading Anti-Migrant Narratives

The number of actors dealing with the topic of the migrant crisis in Serbia has dropped significantly in the previous period. Namely, there are currently only a few right-wing groups, Facebook pages and related internet portals that focus primarily on migrants. To remain relevant and to reach a wider audience, most right-wing movements and parties have eventually switched to other topics - mostly the pandemic, vaccines and the vaccination certificates. At the end of 2019 and in the first half of 2020, political parties also seized the moment to attract voters using the anti-immigrant rhetoric, while in that period many right-wing organisations redirected their activities towards migrants. Today's activity of the anti-migrant right is certainly not insignificant, considering that they are highly present and followed on social networks. Numerous right-wing movements or accounts are connected on social networks; they share content with each other, contributing to creating the impression of massive and widespread support. Due to the absence of a decisive and consistent reaction of the state, the continuous action of the anti-migrant right and the impression of the number of their supporters makes it easier for citizens to accept xenophobic and authoritarian views.

### Xenophobic political parties during the election campaign

The topic of migrants found itself on the agenda of right-wing organisations and parties at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. Far-right parties used this topic to win points with voters, but also to criticise the government or simulate opposition actions. At the end of 2019, *Dveri* launched a petition against the government's migrant policy, stating that the government has committed itself, by signing international agreements, to accepting migrants returned by European Union countries.<sup>71</sup> At the beginning of 2020, the leader of *Dveri*, Boško Obradović, published a video with claims about the settlement of migrants in Serbia, which exploded on social networks and in the media.<sup>72</sup> In that period, the leader of *Dosta je bilo* (*Enough is enough*), Saša Radulović, also promoted - on social networks and in the media - the story about the alleged secret plan to settle millions of migrants in Serbia<sup>73</sup>. All extreme right-wing parties included this topic in their 2020 election programmes. For example, the political party *Zavetnici* talked about the plan to make Serbia a reception centre for migrants expelled from the European Union.<sup>74</sup> In 2021, migrant policies were not a priority for any of these parties, and they gradually moved from this topic to other politically opportune topics - Covid-19 and vaccines.

## Migrants under attack by extreme far-right groups

When it comes to extreme right-wing organisations, the *People's Patrol* and (occasionally) *Leviathan* paid special attention to this topic, as did some local groups formed in towns near migrant camps, such as *The Youth of Šid*. As one of our interlocutors who worked in a migrant camp pointed out:

“Before, there were individuals who were intolerant of migrants, but now hatred is organised, there are entire groups that spread hatred. They saw the potential for intolerance and they instrumentalised it”.<sup>75</sup>

According to most of our interlocutors, the membership of right-wing organisations is highly fluid. People with right-wing beliefs most often support several different organisations, and some people gather at rallies and actions related to various topics - from migrants to vaccine passes. The structure of these organisations is informal. Usually there is an individual that is visible and prominent as a leader, while others are ordinary members, i.e. “foot soldiers”. Although the same people are often the most active members, anti-immigrant organisations, websites and internet portals are interconnected and share each others' content on a daily basis. This sort of connectivity helps create the illusion of massivity and numbers, which gives them legitimacy in the eyes of citizens and affects their willingness to support them, at least on social networks.

### Profile of members of the group *People's Patrol*

Based on the data contained in the request for initiating misdemeanour proceedings against 18 members of the group *People's Patrol*, which were published on the group's Facebook page, we can get a basic picture of the profile of members of this group. These are younger and middle-aged men, with a secondary vocational education and manual jobs.<sup>76</sup>

## | Hunting migrants

*People's Patrol* is the most prominent anti-migrant group, which has remained consistent with anti-immigrant rhetoric and action to this day. They started intercepting and harassing migrants in the streets of Belgrade at the beginning of 2020. At that time, they were still called "Initiative - No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija".<sup>77</sup> Since then, they have acted using two channels: in the streets and on social networks. As for their street work, members of the group organise gatherings and protests, but also the so-called "patrols" to intercept migrants, intimidate them and make "civil arrests". As an explanation for what they are doing, they offer the narrative that the government's migrant policy inadequately addresses the problem, and that they are therefore forced to "take matters into their own hands". The informal leader of the group, Damjan Knežević, presents himself as an ordinary activist, "one of them" and "one of the regular citizens". In order to attract as much of the resigned and apathetic population as possible, it is often pointed out that members of the *People's Patrol* and their activities have nothing to do with politics and politicians.

The *Leviathan* movement also deals with the topic of migrants from time to time. They patrolled the streets of Belgrade and other cities on several occasions, intercepting migrants and threatening them, and later publishing video clips of these actions on social networks. In addition to street activities, the leader of *Leviathan*, Pavle Bihali, often shares unverifiable information about migrants' attacks on his social media accounts, spreads misinformation and indulges in anti-migrant narratives. Although migrants are not a priority topic of this extreme right-wing movement, which operates under the guise of an organisation that protects animals, the group has taken advantage of the interest of citizens in this topic during the election campaign in the spring of 2020.<sup>78</sup>

Both groups regularly video-record their actions and share them on social networks, which contributes to creating the effect of authenticity and convincing the audience of the credibility of their actions. The footage usually contains only an epilogue, i.e. they show - out of context - members dealing with a migrant, whom they present as the perpetrator of a crime, while waiting for a regular police patrol. Regardless, footage of concrete actions promoted as "prevention of attacks" or "solving the case" provokes many positive reactions from citizens, who praise the members in their comments.



## Anti-migrant protests

When it comes to protests, the *People's Patrol* participated in the organisation of a series of rallies, larger or smaller, in Belgrade and other cities/towns. The first series of anti-migrant protests in Serbia took place in March 2020 in Požarevac, Subotica, Šid and other cities, culminating in a large protest held in Belgrade and attended by members of the *People's Patrol* (at the time, they were still called "Initiative - No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija"). The protest was called "Massive People's Patrol", and the organisers expressed concern over the possible settlement of migrants in Serbia and the return of those who had already passed through it.<sup>79</sup> Participants shouted slogans and carried banners with the following messages: "We don't want migrants", "Serbia to Serbs", "Fences for migrants, freedom to citizens", as well as slogans "No division of Kosovo, Kosovo is the heart of Serbia" and "We will not give up our sacred ground".<sup>80</sup>

The largest gathering, organised by the *People's Patrol* at the end of October 2020, was an anti-migrant protest called "Let's clean out the park".<sup>81</sup> The name of the gathering referred to a Belgrade park in which migrants have been staying since the beginning of the crisis, primarily due to the proximity of the bus and train stations. Damjan Knežević, the leader of the *People's Patrol*, spoke at the gathering, where he announced a more massive patrolling activity and the expansion of the field of action to other cities in Serbia. Left-wing organisations also attended the protest, in support of migrants. A police cordon kept the two sides away from one another.

Representatives of the *People's Patrol* also appeared among right-wing groups during the protest in Belgrade caused by the announcement of the reintroduction of quarantine after the June 2020 parliamentary elections. On that occasion, right-wing groups raised suspicions that "state hooligans" have committed violent incidents and clashed with police to discredit the initially peaceful protest.<sup>82</sup> Although their primary activity is the fight against migrants, the *People's Patrol* group and its supporters also take part in other protests, such as those in support of the mural depicting the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić, or anti-vaccination rallies, in order to maintain relevance and expand audiences among the right-oriented citizens.

## Local actions of the far right

What is characteristic of the *People's Patrol* is that they expanded their activities outside Belgrade. The local branches of this group coordinate their activities through individual accounts on social networks, primarily on Facebook and Telegram.<sup>83</sup> The groups share information about actions and protests, report the locations of migrants, spread misinformation, run smear campaigns, and so on. As our interlocutors pointed out, local branches are not numerous, but the group from Belgrade often joins them in actions and at gatherings.

The Sombor branch of the *People's Patrol* is especially active, due to the large number of migrants located there because of the proximity of borders with Croatia or Hungary. According to our interlocutors, the influx of migrants to this city has been somewhat greater in the last two years, and the Sombor branch of the *People's Patrol* began to actively operate in the spring of 2021. Several rallies and protests were organised in the centre of the city or near the migrant camp. Members of the group regularly intercepted migrants, and Damjan Knežević became a regular guest in the city. In addition to rallies, the group also “detained” migrants in Sombor or took them back to the reception centre.<sup>84</sup> After one such case, Knežević was briefly detained himself, but was released sufficiently quickly to return to the protest organised in his support.

In October 2021, posters appeared in Sombor targeting citizens who had rented private accommodation to migrants. Namely, the accommodation capacities of the reception centre in Šikara, on the outskirts of Sombor, are not sufficient to receive all the migrants who come to this city due to its proximity of the borders with Croatia and Hungary.<sup>85</sup> Such a development led the citizens of Sombor, primarily those involved in hospitality, to rent private accommodation to them. Criminal charges were filed against some of the owners for smuggling people, after which many hostels were closed. Some stopped providing these accommodations after members of the *People's Patrol* targeted them.<sup>86</sup> According to our interlocutors, politically unsuitable accommodation owners found themselves on “arrest warrants”.

In addition to the *People's Patrol*, a group called *Serbian Tricolor* also appeared in Sombor. Among other things, it spreads misinformation about migrants. Most of their members are also members of the local *People's Patrol*, and most of them often join their actions. Besides Sombor, supporters of the *People's Patrol* were active and noticed in Apatin and Bačka Palanka as well.

Another local organisation that was noticed after a protest organised in Šid in November 2020 was *The Youth of Šid*. This organisation held protests in Šid, demanding that the number of migrants in the city be reduced, that the Serbian Armed Forces return to Šid, and that the international organisation *No name kitchen* leave Serbia.

The mayor supported these protests in an official statement that appeared on the website of the municipality of Šid, where he stated that he demanded the same form of reaction of the central government as the protest organisers.<sup>87</sup> After the above gatherings, the group *Youth of Šid* continued to spread anti-migrant narratives through social networks; however, it also deals with local communal problems and informs citizens about local topics.

Working locally and creating more organisations contributes to the impression of massiveness. Although there are not many active members elsewhere, footage of actions or rallies paints a picture of a rich network of branches spread across the country. In this way, the *People's Patrol* gains greater legitimacy with the audience on social networks and animates citizens from all over Serbia. In addition, actions organised outside Belgrade affect how people perceive the scale of the problem, and thus contribute to the spread of panic and the support of the narrative of Serbia entirely inhabited by migrants:

“Residents of Šid and the surrounding villages have serious problems with migrants. Their problem, Šid is far away! Residents of Obrenovac and its surroundings have problems with migrants - Obrenovac is far from here! Pirot, Banja Koviljača and Sombor have problems with illegal immigrants, the centre of Belgrade is flooded with Arabs. That's not our problem, let the locals solve it! You think that Šid, Obrenovac and Pirot are far away, but as early as tomorrow Šid will be in Pančevo, in Kragujevac, in Kruševac... So far, there have been no such unwanted newcomers in Pančevo, but things are changing rapidly. Get a grip, people, or we will wake up in a homeland that is no longer yours”.<sup>88</sup>

## Anti-migrant Facebook groups

A Facebook group that was one of the most deserving for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about migrants in Serbia appeared in the period when right-wing organisations and parties placed the topic of migrants on their agendas. It is a group that was formed in March 2020 under the name “STOP the Settlement of Migrants”. It attracted more than 300,000 followers in less than two months. It was formed as a group for the discussion of migrants, where completely fictional news, semi-information, manipulative and old information was shared on a daily basis in order to present migrants in the most negative light. It was initially based on the narrative that was also used by right-wingers - that the authorities in Serbia secretly signed the Dublin Agreement, which obliged them to settle a large number of migrants in the country.<sup>89</sup> At the beginning, it also served to present a conspiracy theory about the settlement of migrants in Serbia during the curfew, which was introduced in March 2020 to suppress

Covid-19. At the very beginning of the pandemic, when people were more susceptible to conspiracy theories and radical ideas due to uncertainty and fear, this group used the anti-migrant rhetoric to efficiently introduce a “common enemy”. Gradually, it began to deal with other topics as well, i.e. various conspiracy theories, following the example of global right-wing movements, including theories on the virus and vaccines.

Due to the Facebook’s campaign aimed at suppressing misinformation and hate speech on the platform, the group began to cover other topics as well, and at the beginning of 2021 it changed its name to “STOP censorship” to avoid potential sanctions. This group currently has more than 320,000 members. It shares anti-vaccine and anti-system content on a daily basis, but migrants are still the central topic that brings the members together. It is currently one of the largest and most popular groups on Serbian Facebook. According to estimates, there are about 3 million Facebook accounts in Serbia, which means that approximately every tenth Facebook user is a member of this group.<sup>90</sup> The group promotes the work of the *People’s Patrol* and often shares content from right-wing portals close to it, such as “Srbin.info” or “Slavija.info”. The portal “Srbin.info” regularly reports on the activities of the *People’s Patrol*; its editor often goes with them and films their activities.<sup>91</sup> The other portals later turn actions of the *People’s Patrol* and the posts from the anti-migrant pages on Facebook into news, achieving the effect of credibility and seriousness of the content. By sharing articles from the above mentioned internet portals, they strive for greater persuasiveness of presented information and narratives. The “STOP censorship” group is not alone on Facebook. Other highly visited pages or groups, such as the “Movement for Freedom and Independence”, followed by 47,000 people,<sup>92</sup> operate on a similar principle.

## “Taking justice into one’s own hands” under the influence of anti-migrant narratives

Incidents and attacks on migrants have become more frequent since 2020, as a direct consequence of the message that citizens must act and solve the problem with migrants themselves, and the lack of government reaction to right-wing outbursts. Encouraged by the experiences of prominent right-wing actors and the narratives they present on social media, ordinary citizens or “foot soldiers” of right-wing groups began to take justice into their own hands and provoke incidents with migrants.

Thus, in April 2020, one of the members of the *Leviathan* movement drove his car into the reception centre for migrants in Obrenovac, shouting numerous racist slurs. He recorded the entire event and posted it on social networks. Following a plea agreement, he was sentenced to 8 months in prison for violent behaviour.<sup>93</sup> Although the required elements were definitely present, the young man was never prosecuted for the crime of inciting national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance.

In the fall of 2020, in Apatin, a citizen connected with the *People’s Patrol* intercepted taxi drivers who were transporting migrants, threatened them, blocked their path and forced them to change direction. After the video clip was widely shared on social networks, he was arrested and questioned, and the prosecution initiated the procedure.<sup>94</sup> The most recent incident involved a passenger on the bus to Obrenovac who kicked out a group of migrants at one of the stops, all the while insulting and openly threatening them.<sup>95</sup> He too recorded the entire incident, and the recording quickly spread on social networks.

The absence of reaction of state bodies to the spread of misinformation and hatred towards migrants on social networks, as well as right-wing actions on the street, encourage intolerance among ordinary citizens and – consequently – lead to incidents and attacks on migrants. Posts on the pages of right-wing organisations and anti-migrant groups on social networks are full of negative reactions and highly violent comments from followers.<sup>96</sup> Once right-wing oriented citizens or supporters of these groups see members of the *People’s Patrol* or *Leviathan* repeatedly go unpunished, or receive very mild, make-believe punishment, they too are encouraged to act in a similar way.

## Narratives and Messages of the Anti-Migrant Far Right

“What you see in the streets all over Serbia are not poor migrants, but real fighters, ready for any type of battle...”<sup>97</sup>

“This is a Christian Orthodox country, not a sharia. Get away from us, heathen.”<sup>98</sup>

Analysing the posts of extreme right-wing organisations on social networks and communication applications, we identified six most common narratives that extreme right-wingers use to stigmatise the migrant population and gain legitimacy for their activities. These are: migrants are criminals, migrants attack and rape women, migrants are being settled in Serbia, migrants are Islamising Serbia, migrants are terrorists, and migrants are protected as if they were “polar bears”. We will explain each of these narratives in more detail below.

### Migrants are criminals

The narrative that criminalises migrants is highly present in anti-migrant posts. The criminalisation of the entire migrant population occurs, to begin with, because the extreme right-wingers call them “illegal” migrants. International organisations have asked that these terms be dropped and have called for the use of terms “undocumented” and “irregular” migrants instead, to avoid stigmatisation. Because a person cannot be illegal, s/he can only commit an illegal act.<sup>99</sup> Even more important than the above is the fact that extreme right-wingers point out in their posts on social networks that migrants are committing numerous crimes: breaking into houses and weekend houses, stealing, attacking and raping women, even burning houses and killing people. Such posts are often accompanied by explanations that the threat is becoming more and more serious, and by a call for people to self-organise. For example, the post of the *People’s Patrol*, which conveyed the news that migrants have attacked the daughter of a well-known attorney, states the following:

“Migrants are not an unreal threat that happens somewhere else, attacks are happening every day. And they are becoming more and more frequent. Migrants are becoming more aggressive. Don’t let us wake up tomorrow in someone else’s country. Serbia is ours!”<sup>100</sup>

In another post, the same organisation stated that migrants have allegedly strangled a woman in Sombor. This was re-reported by right-wing portals and certain tabloids, causing a storm of anti-migrant comments. In the end, it turned out that the story was

not true,<sup>101</sup> but by then it was too late to repair the damage as bad and sensationalist news spread much faster than those that are positive. Such news are mostly fake, or several years old, but they are presented as new.<sup>102</sup>

The reality, however, is completely different from these narratives. Official data from previous years indicate that crimes committed by migrants do not exceed 1 percent of the total number of crimes committed in Serbia. The percentage was not higher even in 2015 and 2016, when more than one million migrants passed through the country. The data also indicate that most of these were petty crimes, and that a number of them were in fact committed amongst the migrant population itself. However, extreme right-wingers try to fit even these cases into their narratives. For example, one post spoke about the clash between three migrants, with the comment:

“Peaceful’ migrants in conflict with each other... Banatsko Arandjelovo ... Here is what our people are dealing with there. If they are slaughtering each other in the streets, can you imagine what they are doing and how terribly they are harassing the locals??? Join our Telegram group so you can be informed on time”.<sup>103</sup>

Following such posts, one can easily get the impression that Serbia is a country that is full of criminal groups of migrants.

## Migrants attack and rape women

The narrative of how migrants endanger the safety of women by robbing, abusing and raping them fits well into the image of migrants as criminals. According to the extreme right-wingers, women are victims of migrants because, as the weaker sex, they are easy targets for attacks. For example, the *People’s Patrol* group posted a video on Facebook of its members allegedly preventing an attack on a young woman, with a comment, i.e. a call: “Brothers, get involved in the defense of our women and children!”<sup>104</sup> In its posts, the *Leviathan* movement also indicated that migrants were attacking girls. According to one of the interviewed members of the *People’s Patrol*, such behaviour of migrants towards women in Serbia is a consequence of the fact that they come from another culture, and that “girls living in this region are sooo much better looking than what they are used to over there”.<sup>105</sup>

The posts regularly provoke avalanches of comments calling for self-organisation and violence against migrants. Female members of social networks react to these posts with congratulations and gratitude to members of extreme right-wing organisations, who allegedly save women from migrants’ attacks. In most of the comments, they confirm that they are in a subordinate position in relation to men. There are comments

such as this one, for example: “Until men - if there are any left in Serbia - stand up and show both the migrants and these servants of the West whose country this is...” or “Guys, we are with you... You are the only bright light in this sea of numbness and disinterest...”<sup>106</sup>

## Migrants are settling in Serbia

The narrative that migrants are settling in Serbia, and that Serbs will eventually become a minority in their own country is very common in anti-migrant posts of extreme right-wingers. In those narratives, they refer to the existence of various agreements and plans, including those that are secret, in which the authorities in Serbia have committed themselves to bringing in migrants. Allegedly, a few years ago, the Prime Minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, signed the Dublin Agreement, according to which 1.2 million migrants are to be settled in Serbia. The narrative about the settlement of migrants reached its peak at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Facebook page “STOP the settlement of migrants” was founded. It attracted more than 300,000 followers. It was possible to read on the page that the authorities in Serbia were using the state of emergency and restriction of movement to secretly bring migrants to Serbia.

By manipulating video content, extreme right-wingers create an image in the public that migrants have flooded Belgrade and the entire country. They achieve this by filming migrants in groups, and in different parts of the city, which leaves the impression that they are present in enormous numbers. For them, an additional confirmation of the claim that migrants are settling in Serbia is the fact that they started working for “Glovo”, a food delivery application. Thus, for example, the *People’s Patrol* posted a video clip issuing the following warning:

“According to the latest reports from the field, the activities of migrants have spread throughout Belgrade. From Borča, through the centre, to Petlovo brdo, Block 45 and the entire New Belgrade, Zemun, Mirijevo and Banjica ... Slowly but surely, they are occupying the territory. They also work for the “Glovo” delivery service. Be careful when ordering using this application, as you never know who will be bringing you the ordered goods. Let’s be careful! Let’s boycott Glovo!”<sup>107</sup>

In addition, they would emphasise that migrants are now being spotted in places where they were never seen before, which supported the thesis about the “invasion”. At the same time, the fact that migrants change their routes, often at the urging of their smugglers, was ignored.<sup>108</sup>

The far right finds the arguments in favour of the settlement of migrants in Serbia in the fact that many municipalities have adopted local action plans (LAPs) to improve



the status of refugees and migrants, ignoring the fact that the terms “migrants” and “refugees” are used much more widely in these documents.<sup>109</sup> The truth is that LAPs have been passed since 2012, i.e. the adoption of the Law on Migration Management. One of the important goals of this Law is to enable efficient local integration of displaced persons from former Yugoslavia, and it is to them that these plans provide permanent housing solutions. Therefore, that document does not apply to migrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>110</sup>

## Migrants are Islamising Serbia

The narrative according to which migrants endanger Serbian culture and identity, and that their goal is actually to Islamise Serbia, is a good addition to the claims about the mass settlement of migrants. The extreme right therefore does not miss any opportunity to film migrants praying according to Muslim customs, and to share those videos on social networks as proof that Serbia is threatened by Islamisation. The most famous example is from a few years ago, when migrants worshiped in a group at the Belgrade Fortress. The right-wing media covered this, with the headline “One can hear Allah Akbar from Kalemegdan as dozens of Muslims pray and bow”.<sup>111</sup> The cry “Allah Akbar” can upset the citizens because the public often identifies it with terrorism. Giving such a title to media content was therefore aimed at causing a sensation, frightening the readers and encouraging them to further share the article. A recent example is also very illustrative. The *People’s Patrol* published a video showing a migrant worshipping, with the comment:

“The ‘Open Balkans Initiative (...) helps bring in a new workforce from the Middle East... New groups have come and have immediately begun to worship. Now that he has signed the open border agreements, there will be a tsunami”.<sup>112</sup>

At the protests and in the posts of extreme right-wingers, one can clearly hear hate speech addressed to migrants of the Muslim faith, such as: “Things have gone to hell, the soils stinks of Mohammad”, “Srbia to Serbs”, “Fences for migrants, freedom to citizens” and so on.<sup>113</sup>

The fact that, according to UNHCR periodic data, the number of migrants in Serbia has ranged from 3,000 to 7,000 in the last three years does not help to weaken theories on the settlement of migrants and the Islamisation of Serbia. Data from November 2021 show that there were a total of 5,065 asylum seekers and migrants in Serbia.<sup>114</sup> Other data also indicate that migrants see Serbia as a transit country, not as destination. In the period from 2008 to the end of September 2021, 650,829 people expressed intention to seek asylum in Serbia, but the number of those who actually did apply for asylum is much, much smaller. In the same period, only 205 people received asylum status.<sup>115</sup>

## Migrants are terrorists

The narrative that migrants are terrorists is highly present among extreme right-wing organisations and their followers. This is supported by claims that the majority of migrants are younger men capable of military service, and that there are very few women and children among the migrant population. From this, right-wing groups conclude that they are in fact soldiers who were deliberately sent to Islamise Europe and that, at some point, when someone gives them a signal, they will become massively violent towards the non-Muslim population. For example, the *People's Patrol* published a video explaining that 150 able-bodied men, aged 18 to 40, arrived at the "Nikola Tesla" airport hidden under the veil of night. They asked: "Do you, citizens of Serbia, feel safe in your country?"<sup>116</sup> The post had 46,000 views and more than 180 comments. The comment that received the most positive reactions, the so-called 'likes', reads as follows:

"I've been watching footage of them fleeing Afghanistan for days now – they are all men. Where are the women and children? I would be the last to leave my town of Mionica; my wife and children would have to be safe first. All the people who are coming have been trained for war. Quietly and certainly, they are flooding Europe".

The fact that younger men, compared to older ones, as well as those without wives and children, will more easily endure all the hardships faced on migrant routes, is ignored.

The far-right argument that migrants are terrorists is reinforced by occasional posts containing concrete information of migrants being arrested by the police for belonging to terrorist organisations. For example, Pavle Bihali, the leader of the *Leviathan* movement, posted on his Twitter account that seven days after entering Serbia, migrant A.E. was detained for being connected with terrorist cells. The police had found footage of beheadings in his phone.<sup>117</sup> The comments on the post also mentioned other alleged arrests, i.e. information that in 2018, the Serbian police, together with the German secret service BND, had dismantled a Syrian/Sudanese terrorist cell. There are video testimonies as well; in one of them, for example, a man tells that he had to defend himself from 20-25 Wahhabis armed with large knives and sabers used to slit people's throats. As a rule, these allegations are impossible to verify. People however accept them relatively easily because they commonly believe that the Muslim faith is conducive to terrorism, as a consequence of decades of focus of many governments around the world on (armed) fight against Islamist terrorism. Its final outcome was the rise of Islamophobia, but also – paradoxically - terrorism.<sup>118</sup>

## Migrants are “as protected as polar bears”

Most of the narratives contain the message that migrants are protected as “polar bears”, i.e. that the police do nothing about the fact that many of them are not registered, i.e. that they are “illegal” migrants who move freely through Serbia, that many of them steal, kill, rape, desecrate Serbian holy places, pollute the environment in which they reside, etc. Allegedly, migrants are aware of the fact that they will not be held accountable for their actions like other citizens of Serbia, so they are becoming more and more bullyish.<sup>119</sup> A large number of such announcements also include a call for action, self-organisation and joining extreme right-wing organisations that protect Serbia from migrants.

According to our interlocutors who were engaged in providing assistance to migrants, extreme right-wingers keep forgetting that strict police treatment of irregular migrants would actually create more problems than benefits, because this issue is not only a matter of applicable laws and procedures, but (geo)politics as well. For example, the return of irregular migrants to the countries they came from is not possible in the current circumstances, and Serbia does not have enough resources to accommodate them within the country. Experiences so far show that most problems and incidents are occurring amongst the migrants themselves, but also with the local population, when the centres are overcrowded and when there are no conditions for migrants’s proper accommodation. Strict police treatment would in fact prolong their stay, really making Serbia a “parking lot for migrants”, which is what the extreme right does not want to happen.

### Pro-government media are neutral when it comes to migrants

The analysis of articles about migrants found on the pages of pro-government media outlets “RTS”, “PINK” and “Informer” shows that they report mostly neutrally on this topic. These media outlets factographically report on migrants and the incidents in which they participated, as well as on the problems they face. Articles about migrants still contain a narrative that Serbia treats them quite humanely, while Croatia is criticised for its violent attitude towards them. Also, it can be noticed that there are a many articles about police detecting irregular migrants, or cutting the channels of smuggling, for which the police is highly praised. Minister of Internal Affairs of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin, is often presented as the main character. There are positive stories about migrants, but they are few and far between.<sup>120</sup>

## Manipulation Used to Gain Wider Support

“The *People’s Patrols* are not a whim; they represent our need to defend ourselves from the plague that threatens to take away our peaceful lives!”<sup>121</sup>

The analysis of anti-migrant narratives in this study, as well as in others, shows that the far right uses manipulation as the main mechanism for attracting attention, and then for gaining and spreading support. Manipulation is also present in the placement of photo and video content; it most often includes “manipulation packages”, where the narrative is supported by photo/video material as “evidence” for the story that accompanies them. Such packaged content often contains inaccurate data and semi-information, i.e. information that has been taken out of its context. For example, filming migrants in groups, in places where they gather, and frequently broadcasting such content, can create the impression that Serbia is flooded with migrants, although this is far from the truth. However, the goal of extreme right-wingers is not to objectively inform their followers, but to provoke emotional reaction, which will influence the followers to share such content easier and faster. That way, it will reach a wider audience, i.e. people who are not yet followers. The best way to do this is to present unusual, strange and incredible information, which causes audiences to feel anger, despair or fear.<sup>122</sup> Research has found that false information spreads much faster on social networks than information that is true.<sup>123</sup> Although most such content can be easily deconstructed with a simple Internet search, this does not happen because it represents the so-called “pleasant lies”, i.e. lies that confirm previous stereotypes and prejudices, and strengthen them even further.<sup>124</sup> For example, reporting on a traffic accident, Sara Mikić, a journalist from Sombor, said that migrants who were in the vicinity of the accident came to assist the injured. This bothered the extreme right-wingers, who showered the journalist with numerous and vulgar insults in their Telegram group.<sup>125</sup>

The fact that right-wingers record and publish all their activities on social networks also creates an illusion that their posts are truthful, regardless of whether they are intercepting migrants, making “civil arrests”, organising actions against migrants, testifying about the migrants’ violence against Serbian citizens, or showing police arresting their own members and supporters. In that way, they are sending the message that they are constantly present on the ground, that they have first-hand information, but also that they are at the service of the citizens at all times. In other words, they are saying that the content they are publishing is authentic, and that they can always be trusted.

In anti-migrant narratives of the extreme right in Serbia, we can see that they most often manipulate the size and structure of the migrant population, the theories about migrants settling in Serbia, the use of terms “refugees” and “migrants” and the number and allegations of incidents caused by migrants, as well as presenting themselves as heroes who sacrifice themselves to save the country.

Extreme right-wing organisations most often manipulate numbers because simply presenting (inaccurate) data on the enormous number of migrants in Serbia, or how many of them should be returned from European countries to Serbia, creates revolt among the followers almost instantly, causing them share the content further. Research has found that groups one does not feel close to, or treats as dangerous, are perceived as bigger and more dangerous than they really are.<sup>126</sup> Manipulating the number of migrants is complemented by the fact that the migrant population has changed, and that, unlike in the initial period of the migrant crisis, it is now made up of younger men capable of military service. This helps create the image of “mass invasion” and “Islamisation of Serbia” much more easily.

Manipulating the facts about the plans for (secret) settlement of migrants fits in well into the story, which in turn relies on manipulating the terms “refugees” and “migrants”, and on equating the intent to seek asylum with the submission of the asylum application. Extreme right-wingers view only people from the Middle East and North Africa as migrants, although the term is actually much broader and includes any permanent change of residence of an individual or social group.<sup>127</sup> Local action plans for the integration of migrants, used by extreme right-wingers to prove that migrants are settling in Serbia, relate primarily to refugees and internally displaced persons from Yugoslavia during the 1990s wars, and to returnees coming back because they have lost or failed to acquire the right to reside in the EU. The second form of manipulation is very suitable for extreme right-wingers, because by equating the expression of intention to seek asylum with a real asylum application they are reaching the sensational number of more than 600,000 migrants/asylum seekers that Serbia will have to accept even if they do manage to proceed to EU countries.

To criminalise the migrants, extreme right-wingers are manipulating alleged incidents in which migrants have committed various crimes. The crimes they point to have often indeed happened, but migrants were not really responsible for them. Such was the case with the Sombor murder, for example. Posts about committed crimes are difficult to verify because one would have to speak to the police, which is obliged to protect the persons’ presumption of innocence and are not allowed to disclose information that could serve to prove the initial news incorrect.<sup>128</sup> Sometimes, migrants did in fact take part in the incident, but the event happened several years ago and in another country. With frequent posts on social networks about the crimes of migrants, extreme right-wingers create an image among their followers that such crimes are numerous, and that most migrants are violent and dangerous.

Manipulation in which extreme right-wingers present themselves as double victims is also very important. First of all, due to the alleged inaction of the police, they are forced to “take the law into their own hands” and protect the citizens of Serbia from migrants

who steal, rape, kill, spread disease, etc., which makes it sound like they are exposing themselves to numerous risks. They are also sending a message that they are victims of repression by the current government because they are almost regularly detained by the police. One of the posts of the *People's Patrol* reads as follows:

“We are all familiar with the terrible tyranny of migrants in Sombor, and now the police are questioning our guys. We are not doing anything that could harm Serbia, we are doing everything according to the law. Stop the repression of patriots!”<sup>129</sup>

At the same time, of course, they do not publish information on the outcomes of these arrests, i.e. that they are continuing to operate. In this way, extreme right-wingers create an image in the public that they are doing important and dangerous work, and that citizens need them to protect them from dangerous migrants since state institutions do not want to do anything about it.

## The Gender Dimension of the Anti-Migrant Right

Extreme right-wing groups and political parties often use narratives about gender and family, using women's rights and gender equality at the same time as a means of spreading anti-immigrant and Islamophobic views. They also present themselves as great protectors of women who shield them from migrants, while simultaneously targeting female journalists and activists who challenge their anti-migrant views. In this part of the paper, we will explain in more detail the above aspects of the actions of the extreme right.

### Exploiting women's rights to spread the anti-migrant agenda

Along with the global growth of the (extreme) right, intolerance towards the ideas of gender equality and feminism has also increased in the last few years. Extreme right-wing organisations most often present themselves as protectors of traditional family values and hierarchical gender roles. However, they are often fierce opponents of measures that enable the empowerment of women, which they support by their anti-feminist and misogynistic attitudes. But antifeminism is not exclusively related to extreme right-wing currents. On the contrary, it is widespread also among other actors on the political scene, as well as the society at large. For this reason, extreme right-wingers use anti-feminist ideas to make their thinking more acceptable to broader social circles and to allow sections of society to move to the right without appearing to be extreme right-wingers.<sup>130</sup>

Right-wingers, among other things, blame feminism and women's empowerment for falling birth rate and the destruction of the traditional family, and indirectly also for the influx of migrants. They fit all this into the main racist conspiracy theory about the "great replacement", according to which white women do not bear enough children, which will cause the extinction of the white race.<sup>131</sup> In this view of the world, migrants are presented as attackers, that is, as a demographic threat that will gradually replace the white race and populate the rest of the world.<sup>132</sup>

On the other hand, one of the central points of the right-wingers' anti-migrant narrative is that they protect women from violent migrants and repressive Islamic culture. In this narrative, one can see the first contradiction of the right in relation to attitudes towards women and the migrant crisis. Namely, otherwise misogynist and anti-feminist currents exploit women's rights using the discourse that they must be protected from "foreign and backward culture that subjugates women". In European countries, radical right-wing parties have adopted the feminist rhetoric, but most often in connection with immigration. They abused certain feminist values to deepen the gap with Muslim communities in Europe, as well as to criticise multiculturalism.<sup>133</sup>

Also, with the narrative about violent migrants, right-wingers focus on the physical insecurity of women, contribute to fear, and further exploit and distort the narrative related to women's real worries about their own security. In such a narrative, right-wingers protect women from migrants who are portrayed as bullies, rapists, and people who are generally prone to abusing women.<sup>134</sup> The case from Germany, which greatly helped the far right profit from the use of narratives about violent migrants, refers to mass attacks on women that took place at the train station in Cologne and other cities on the New Year's Eve of 2015. This case encouraged the creation of generalisations and misconceptions about the nature of migrants and enabled right-wingers to further exploit the narrative of sexually deviant migrants. They used this case as evidence that migrants endanger the safety of women in public.

The case in Cologne illustrates the mixing of racism and anti-feminism under the guise of respect for women's rights. After this case, calls for migrants to be taught "European values" of gender and sexual equality started becoming louder and louder.<sup>135</sup> Instead of dealing with inadequate laws that regulate sexual offences, the debate focused on migrant policies viewed through the prism of cultural differences and women's rights. Moreover, the legislation on sexual violence has since been changed and tightened, but it was also linked with changes to immigration regulations in Germany.<sup>136</sup> Otherwise completely indifferent when it comes to violence against women, many right-wing parties, such as the far-right "Alternative for Germany" (AfD), used this case to strengthen their anti-migrant rhetoric. The far-right "Pegida" movement also benefited from the case. The New Year's Eve in Cologne was also used in Donald Trump's election campaign to point out the shortcomings of Germany's "open door" migrant policy.<sup>137</sup>

## | Men protect women from migrants' attacks

Extreme right-wing organisations and some media outlets in Serbia often present women as potential victims of migrant attacks. Thus, even the loudest right-wingers, and the portals that broadcast their views, often talk about incidents involving women. Portals such as "Srbin.info" or "Slavija.info" most often publish false news or semi-information about migrants, as well as about the activities of right-wing organisations. On these portals and accompanying channels, migrants are often presented as sexually deviant and dangerous, using unverifiable or false information about attacks on women and girls in Serbia and the world. The *People's Patrol* found the reason for its first actions precisely in "frequent attacks on Serbian women and girls".<sup>138</sup>

Social networks are full of *People's Patrol's* news posts shared from unreliable internet portals or other right-wing pages, as well as videos in which they are confronting migrants or making civil arrests caused by attacks on women. As a rule, the recordings



do not show the context, but only the epilogue, where members of the *People's Patrol* are "arresting" and mistreating a migrant while waiting for the police patrol to take him over. The recordings are always accompanied by a description which explains that the person in question committed a crime, and these crimes are very often attacks on women. "We defend our mothers, sisters, daughters and fellow citizens, not only in words but also with our deeds".<sup>139</sup>

In the same manner, the *People's Patrol* shares photos of migrants, marking them as attackers or rapists without evidence and out of context. Sometimes they post a photo of the same man, with different accusations. To disseminate anti-immigrant narratives, the *People's Patrol* also abuses anonymous testimonies of women about attacks.

Posts about attacks on women provoke the strongest reactions and the most aggressive comments. The recordings of specific actions, which the group *People's Patrol* presents as "preventing attacks" or "solving cases", provoke numerous positive reactions from citizens and comments involving praise. Also, such posts attract a large number of women, creating a sentiment about members of the members of the *People's Patrol* as protectors of the powerless and "real" men:

"Support for our brothers! We want people's patrols in all cities across Serbia! As a woman, I no longer wish to be afraid every time I go out and watch for migrants to attack me".

"Well done guys, you are the pride of this country".

"Well done guys, that's how things are done!!! Mothers who gave birth to you and raised you honourably should be happy".<sup>140</sup>

Through the promotion of civil arrests of alleged attackers on women, the *People's Patrol* presents one of its main narratives: that institutions are not doing their job, and that instead of prosecuting migrants for harassing women, they are arresting and harassing members of their group. In this way, they additionally animate citizens who are against the system. Thus, the following comments can often be found among the reactions:

"Respect for these guys, heroes of today!!! The police should be ashamed of the uniform they wear and the oath they took!"

"Well done guys. You need to be given a medal. You are our pride, unlike the local police".

"Thank you. When institutions don't do their job, we have brave guys like you to do it".<sup>141</sup>

Directly and between the lines of the patriarchal narrative of “real” men, as well as the anti-systemic one about the police that do not protect citizens from migrants, there are also calls to join the *People’s Patrol*, which can often be found in comments: “Brothers, join us in defending our powerless people”.

Also, the premise that migrants are a threat to women and children in Serbia is one of the main anti-immigrant narratives, and it can be found every day on pages that bring together people with anti-immigrant sentiment. Thus, one Facebook page published a collage of 12 photos, allegedly showing women from Europe, victims of migrant violence. Shortly afterwards, the portal “FakeNews Tragač”, which deals with data verification in the media, discredited the post, stating that a Google search shows the collage to be completely untrue. Namely, all the photos were taken before the migrant crisis started, and they show women victims of domestic violence, police violence or traffic accidents.<sup>142</sup> The news of the murder of a woman in Sombor was similarly misused in the summer of 2021. This news was shared on the Facebook page of the *People’s Patrol* group, as well as on the “Srbinfo” portal and the “STOP censorship” group, with the explanation that the crime was committed by migrants.<sup>143</sup> Soon after, the Ministry of the Interior denied that migrants were the perpetrators of this crime, but it was too late considering that the disinformation had already gone on the air and resonated on social networks.

The photo of female teachers from Šid, wearing headscarves on their heads, also attracted a lot of attention on social networks. It was published with the comment that women in the photo are wearing a hijab, the symbol of repression against women. The photo was accompanied by false information that teachers are being forced to wear the hijab because of migrant children enrolled in schools in Serbia. The portal “Raskrikavanje” soon revealed that the photo was three years old, and that it was taken at a workshop for the inclusion of migrant children in the school system. Teachers were wearing headscarves to show them Christian Orthodox customs.<sup>144</sup> Attempts to spread misinformation in this way and reactions on social networks have shown that women’s rights in Serbia can easily be abused to spread Islamophobic and anti-immigrant messages.

## | Targeting female journalists and activists who help migrants

Another inconsistency that stands out when it comes to the gender dimension of right-wing narratives about migrants relates to their treatment of women. Namely, according to our interlocutors, female journalists and activists who deal with migrants are exposed to insults on social networks, but also to organised smear campaigns and threats directed at them

by supporters of right-wing organisations. Thus, the journalist of the portal “SO.info” from Sombor was exposed to various insults and a smear campaign on the *People’s Patrol’s* Telegram group after she reported that migrants helped the driver after a traffic accident.<sup>145</sup>

According to our interlocutors who live outside of Belgrade, a woman who helped the migrants was targeted in a similar way. Her personal data were published in the local Telegram group of the *People’s Patrol*, endangering her safety. One of our interlocutors who worked in a migrant camp was faced with various insults on social networks because of her engagement and attempts to encourage a counter-narrative on her private profile in reaction to right-wing posts about migrants. Also, on Facebook pages that predominantly publish information about about migrants one can find posts that target more prominent female activists fighting for human rights. For example, “Women in Black” found themselves in a post of the “STOP censorship” group because of their banners against racist attitudes towards migrants.<sup>146</sup> The post caused negative reactions from followers and a large number of aggressive and violent comments.

Reactions to the 2016 post, which attracted attention in the “STOP censorship” group, illustrate very well the contradictions in the right-wing rhetoric about migrants in the context of violence against women. It was a post that shared an article from an obscure portal about the alleged rape of a female journalist in a migrant camp in France. The reactions of the followers ranged from negative and aggressive comments directed against migrants, to insults against the journalist because she had reported on the topic at all, with comments that “she should be raped again, and that that’s exactly what she deserved”.<sup>147</sup>

Two types of contradictions can be noted among right-wing organisations and their supporters. First, although they are generally strongly anti-feminist and patriarchal, right-wing organisations often adopt feminist rhetoric and advocate for women’s rights, but only in relation to migrants. They achieve this by using simplistic, black-and-white narratives and by presenting misinformation in which migrants are shown as attackers coming from a barbaric culture to enslave helpless women. On the other hand, although they present themselves as protectors of women, they organise smear campaigns, and target and threaten female activists, journalists and other women who deal with or help migrants.

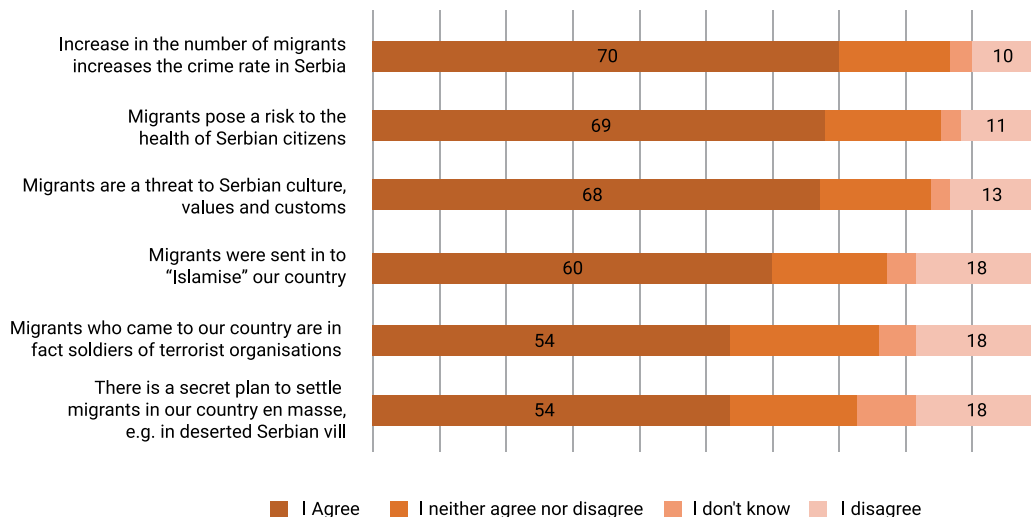
## Consequences of the Actions of the Anti-Migrant Far Right

“As far as migrants and security are concerned, I don’t think anyone is comfortable - not just women, but that everyone is worried when they pass through groups of migrants who come too close, wave knives or do things like that”.<sup>148</sup>

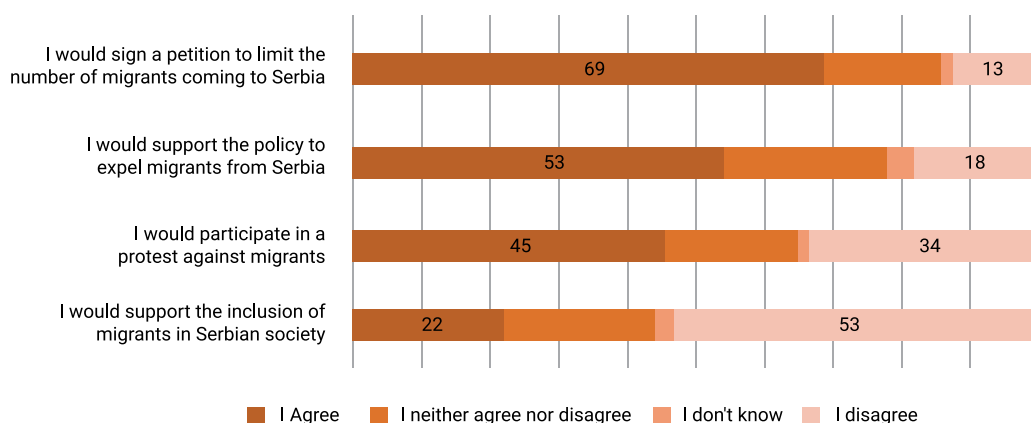
The immediate consequences of the actions of the anti-immigrant extreme right are harassment and intimidation of migrants. However, there are also less visible, but much more dangerous consequences of their actions, because they run deeper, last longer, and will be present even when migrants are no longer a topic. We will explain them in more detail below.

### Normalisation of hatred

Most of our interlocutors pointed out that, with their anti-immigrant activities, extreme right-wing organisations have not managed to attract a significant number of new members and supporters outside the Internet, and that their expansion in this regard is very limited. However, they claim that these groups have a bad influence on a wider circle of people because they affect the spread of hatred, as well as views and values that are incompatible with the democratic order. Public opinion polls conducted in the last few years indicate widespread and growing anti-immigrant views of Serbian citizens. The BCSP survey from 2020 shows that citizens view migrants as the greatest external threat to Serbia’s security, and that they also consider them one of the three main threats to internal security.<sup>149</sup> In addition, about 75% of the respondents are concerned about “free movement of migrants in cities and villages”.<sup>150</sup> For the sake of comparison, in the BCSP survey from 2017, migrants were fifth on the list of external threats, and eighth on the list of internal threats to the security of Serbia. The percentages were very small, as well.<sup>151</sup> Also, the BCSP survey from 2021 shows that a significant percentage of citizens believe that migrants increase crime, pose a health risk, endanger Serbian values and customs, are terrorists, and were actually sent in to Islamise Serbia. Also, in the spontaneous responses of citizens about the biggest security threat in the community, migrants are second on the list, immediately after the security of one’s home. Consequently, the number of respondents who would support anti-migrant protests and measures, such as limiting the number of migrants and expelling them from the country, has increased. Looking at last year’s results of other surveys with similar questions, one can notice an increase in anti-migrant views among Serbian citizens.<sup>152</sup>



**Chart 1.** Anti-migrant views of Serbian citizens



**Chart 2.** Views of the citizens of Serbia toward migration policy

Other surveys indicate that as many as one in four respondents support the actions of one extreme right-wing organisation or another, such as *Leviathan* or *People's Patrol*.<sup>153</sup> This does not mean that all those who support the work of these organisations will be involved in their activities, or would vote for them in the elections if they should run, but it is still very worrying because it indicates that a significant number of citizens support the values inherent to an autocratic order. In fact, the worst consequence of the work of these organisations is not that they might attract more members or sympathisers, but that they contribute to making undemocratic attitudes and values acceptable to the citizens of Serbia. The BCSP survey showed that almost a quarter of the respondents think that democracy is desirable, but that in the current conditions we need a "firm hand", while one fifth of them think that all regimes are the same. Among those who believe that all regimes are the same are most often young people, residents of Central and Western Serbia, and citizens with incomplete primary education.

As one of our interlocutors said, “migrants are definitely leaving, but xenophobia and hatred will remain, and will certainly be redirected to fellow citizens who, in their opinion, are not sufficiently good Serbs”.<sup>154</sup> That is exactly what happened in Sombor, when members of the *People’s Patrol* put up posters with personal data of local citizens who were renting apartments to migrants. Our interlocutors also pointed out a number of verbal attacks on people who expressed opinions contrary to the opinion of extreme right-wingers.

The influence the extreme right can have on the views of citizens should not be underestimated; public opinion polls indicate that citizens inform themselves mostly through the Internet and the social networks, and that they trust Internet portals and websites the most. The surveys also show that traditional media are losing the citizens’ trust,<sup>155</sup> and that voters who follow the right on social networks have less trust in traditional media in particular.<sup>156</sup> The extreme right therefore directs its activities to the Internet and social networks, where - with very few resources and good networking - it can reach a large number of people.

## Spreading fear and the reciprocal radicalisation

One of the starting assumptions in the study is that the far-right spreads Islamophobia through anti-immigrant activities, which further contributes to the spread of fear among Bosniaks and other Muslims in Serbia. In the end, this affects the emergence of reciprocal radicalisation, that is, the spread and strengthening of radicalisation of Muslims in Serbia. However, during the series of interviews we conducted with Muslims in Sandžak and Belgrade, we received mixed results. The interviews also included individuals who profess the original Islam, popularly called Wahhabism in Serbia. The Muslims of Sandžak have noticed that the extreme right in Serbia has grown, and that a part of this group has turned to anti-immigrant activities through which they spread Islamophobia. Still, respondents do not believe that this phenomenon threatens them, or that it could threaten them in the future. They look at it as something that is happening far away, in another country. We received the same or similar answers when we asked our interlocutors about the growth and activities of the entire extreme right wing in Serbia.

Such an attitude of the interviewees from Sandzak towards the extreme right can be explained by the fact that citizens of this part of Serbia are quite isolated from the rest of the country, and that they are more interested in the developments in their immediate environment. This was confirmed by two events that took place in the course of our research. Namely, extreme right-wing organisations have protested for several days against the exhibition “The Soul of Srebrenica”, which was dedicated to the victims

of the Srebrenica genocide.<sup>157</sup> Although they were aware of this event, and Srebrenica is important to Bosniaks, it did not significantly upset them. However, another event did provoke their strong reaction. It was the incident that took place at a football match in Novi Pazar, where FC Partizan fans chanted to Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian Serb military commander who was convicted of war crimes against Bosniaks, shouting the slogan “Knife, wire, Srebrenica” - which is an allusion to genocide that was committed against Bosniaks in the 1990s under the command of Ratko Mladić.<sup>158</sup> The authorities knew that an incident could occur during this event, but they did nothing to prevent it (e.g. to have the match played without an audience). Their response during and after the match was inadequate as well.<sup>159</sup>

The second part of the explanation for such an attitude of Sandžak Muslims towards the extreme right can be found in the fact that (extreme) right and right-wing politics have long been present in the political and social life of Serbia, and that Muslims have learned to live with them. As one of our interlocutors explained, “When nationalism is an official policy or when right-wingers are tolerated, then the main problem lies with the government, and the growth of extremists is just an indicator of that”.<sup>160</sup> The “coexistence” of Muslims with the extreme right has been influenced by the enormous rise of Islamophobia in many Western countries, as a consequence of their excessive focus on preventing and combating Islamist extremism and terrorism after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in the US.

Muslims in Belgrade, however, have a different attitude towards the growth and increased activity of the extreme right. This trend worries them very much. Our interlocutors told us that Muslims of Arab origin are concerned the most, especially those of darker skin, because they fear that members of extreme right organisations could confuse them with migrants. Several of them have indeed experienced unpleasant situations, which thankfully did not involve more than verbal violence by right-wingers. The imam of one of the Belgrade mosques told us that he advises believers of Arab descent, especially those who wear traditional Arab clothes, not to gather in front of the mosque after prayers (which is common for them), so as not to catch the eye of extremists, and to remain indoors instead. For a similar reason, the nameplate is not displayed at the entrance to the mosque; thus, if viewed from the outside, it cannot be concluded what the premises are intended for. According to our interlocutors, Belgrade is home to about 100,000 Muslims. Several thousand are from Arab countries. They studied there, and later married and started families in Serbia. Although several masjids in Belgrade did serve as places for recruiting and deploying extremists to Syria, and some members thereof were convicted of terrorism, there is no new evidence that such places still exist, or that the activities of far-right organisations are further radicalising Muslims in Belgrade. Of course, the spread of fear among Belgrade Muslims due to the actions of the extreme right should be a sufficient reason for state institutions to work more seriously on the prevention and fight against the extreme right.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The number of right-wing political parties and extreme right-wing movements with a distinctly anti-immigrant policy has decreased in the past year. The most active group today are the *People's Patrol* and smaller groups connected to it. Political parties *Dveri* and *Enough is enough*, which were among the first to pursue anti-immigrant policies in Serbia, no longer problematise the topics of migration and migrants. Research has also shown that the anti-immigrant far right's ability to attract new members is very limited. Nevertheless, the influence of these groups on the wider population should not be underestimated, because their activities influence the normalisation of xenophobia, hatred and intolerance towards those with different opinions, and thus also the views and values that are incompatible with the democratic order. The extreme right achieves this by directing its activities to the Internet and social networks, which have become the main channels for citizens to obtain information, and where - with very few resources and good networking - they can reach a large number of people, many of whom are not really (extreme) right-wingers.

To the extreme right, anti-migrant messages actually serve as a means to attract the attention of a wider audience, and to be relevant and feel needed as saviours of the nation from the enemy. At the heart of anti-migrant messages lie intolerance and hatred of the "other", while manipulation is the main means of gaining and spreading attention. However, hatred and manipulation can very easily be redirected from migrants to other "dangerous" actors, as has already been the case with the citizens of Sombor. The swift thematic reorientation of the extreme right, and the addition of new topics (e.g. anti-vaccine), speak in favour of this thesis. In conditions when state institutions do not (adequately) react to extreme right-wing activities, some of their reactions (e.g. regular arrests of extreme right-wingers without any epilogue) actually benefit the extreme right-wingers, because they turn them into victims. The potential for spreading the influence of these movements is great, all the more so because the authorities in Serbia are also benefiting from their actions, as they serve to redirect the frustrations and dissatisfaction of citizens with the bad socio-economic and political situation from the authorities to migrants.

Because of all this, it is very important to make the fight against extreme right-wing organisations a priority, but also to work on preventing the spread of extreme right-wing beliefs, which happens to be a much more complex and lengthy process. Research on this problem is also an integral part of prevention, especially in the empirical sense, because, as we have shown, the extreme right of today is rapidly changing - thematically, organisationally and in the way it acts. Research of factors that make people in Serbia vulnerable and susceptible to extreme right-wing ideas, which is almost non-existent, is especially important, since it has become commonplace when it comes to researching Islamist extremism.



## Recommendations:

- State institutions must react quickly and consistently to the anti-immigrant activities of extreme right-wingers, both the institutions that are directly in charge of the safety of citizens - the Security Intelligence Agency, the police, and the prosecutor's office - and senior government officials in Serbia. Their list of priorities should also include the fight against right-wing extremism, and resources should be allocated for this purpose. Government officials should unequivocally publicly condemn incidents caused by extreme right-wingers.
- The Department for Combating High-Tech Crime of the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia should react to (obvious) cases of hate speech on social networks, instead of investigating critics of the government.
- Media literacy and encouraging critical thinking among young people should be among the most important priorities of educational policy in Serbia. Disinformation, hate speech and content full of violence will always be present on social networks, and no restrictive policy can completely prevent their spread without jeopardising respect for basic human rights and freedoms. That is why it is important that young people have enough knowledge and skills to recognise them, so that they can reject them.
- The extreme right is changing, requiring constant research of this phenomenon. Research on the factors that make people vulnerable and susceptible to extreme right-wing ideas is especially necessary, as it is almost non-existent.”
- The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the MoI and other competent state authorities should regularly and timely publish data on migrations, which could serve as the basis for reporting on this topic based on verified data.
- The media should regularly, and in detail, report on migrants in Serbia, make reports about them and talk to people who live in places that host asylum and reception centres. Media reports should not contain only good news about migrants, but should also point out the real problems faced by the migrants themselves, state institutions and citizens of towns in which they are located. Research has shown that citizens who have accurate information about problems with migrants (e.g. those who live in towns/cities that host both asylum and migrant centers) are less susceptible to misinformation and anti-migrant narratives. Although the followers of extreme right-wingers are highly closed to counter-narratives, which they label as disinformation and treacherous content, objective and regular information can prevent the spread of their influence on the wider public.

- Governmental and non-governmental organisations dealing with migration and security issues should organise trainings for media representatives to acquaint them with these topics, and to show them how to report on them responsibly and without sensationalism.
- Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) should hire a larger number of administrators and associates from our language area to sanction hate speech and misinformation in a timely manner. Due to the peculiarities of the Serbian language (e.g. a large number of lexeme), software solutions for recognising hate speech cannot be the only solution. Although the ban on groups that spread hatred on social networks has a limited scope, and can even cause counter-effects, it still undermines these groups' popularity and influence, making their work more difficult.

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## List of Abbreviations

|      |  |
|------|--|
| AfD  | Alternative für Deutschland              |
| BCBP | Belgrade Centre for Security Policy      |
| EiE  | Enough is Enough                         |
| EU   | European Union                           |
| UOSY | Umbrella Organisation of Serbian Youth   |
| LAP  | Local Action Plan                        |
| Mol  | Ministry of the Interior                 |
| NGO  | Non-government organisation              |
| USA  | United States of America                 |
| SFRY | Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia |
| HTC  | Hight-Tech Crime                         |

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## About the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) is an independent research center working to create a democratic society of accountable institutions, in which security is a public good and people are free, equal and living without fear. It contributes to improving the security of citizens in accordance with democratic principles and respect for human rights through research, public advocacy, community development and education.

From the time of its founding in 1997 until 2010, it operated under the name Centre for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR). Since 2012, on the list of most famous research centers (Global Go To Think Tank IndexReport), it has been regularly rated as the best think tank from the Western Balkans dealing with defence and national security, as well as foreign policy and international relations,

The BCSP research team has developed a unique methodology for monitoring flows and assessing the scope of security sector reform - the Security Sector Reform Index. It has published two almanacs on the security sector reform in Serbia, in 2008 and 2012, and the methodology was later applied in other Western Balkan countries. Since then, the BCSP has continuously monitored the work of the army, police, security services, the private security sector, as well as institutions responsible for the control and supervision of security bodies.

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Some of the strategic goals of the BCSP are: support for the development of civil society organisations and drivers of change to create an environment that is favourable for more transparent and accountable functioning of state institutions, development of analysis on security, rule of law, foreign and security policy of Serbia, and support for human rights activists, freedom fighters and whistleblowers to boost their mission and increase the democratic capacity of society as a whole.

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# MIGRANTS ARE LEAVING, BUT HATRED REMAINS ANTI-MIGRANT EXTREME RIGHT IN SERBIA

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