

# RESILIENCE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SERBIA: THE CASE OF SANJAK

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## Summary

Many experts had gloomy forecasts about violent Islamist extremism and terrorism in Serbia. Sanjak - the southwest region in Serbia populated by Muslim majority - was even dubbed Jihadist hotbed, as it was the center for further spreading ultra-conservative Salafism from the neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina into Serbia, and a region where the recruitment of Syrian foreign fighters took place. Among the most influential militant Salafi leaders in Vienna who maintained contacts with ISIS there were individuals from Sanjak. However, despite these forecasts and the presence of both push and pull factors of violent extremism, Sanjak has proved to be very resilient to violent Islamist extremism. Compared to other countries in the Western Balkans, a relatively small number of people from Serbia (49 of them including women and children) joined militant Islamist groups in Syria. Only a few incidents involving militant Salafis and failed terrorist plots happened. People in Sanjak showed both resilience to violent extremism and to the spread of the ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam. In this paper, we first identify the cases of violent extremism and then map and analyze factors that make Sanjak enabling environment for extremism. The second part of the paper is dedicated to understanding key resilience factors to violent extremism showcased in Sanjak. Ethno-nationalism and far-right extremism are only analyzed as possible drivers of Islamist radicalization. This report is based on extensive field research in Belgrade, Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin between July and September 2021, during which a total of 25 interviews were conducted.

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## Introduction

Terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in the USA and throughout Europe, as well as armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq when the Islamic State emerged and expanded across these two countries, made the fight against Islamist terrorism and (violent) extremism a top priority of many governments in the world.<sup>1</sup> Serbia wasn't an exception, even though the far-right has a much longer and violent tradition in this country. Greater focus on Islamist extremism in Serbia came with the acknowledgment that almost 1000 citizens of the Western Balkans countries had joined militants in Syria and Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

In Serbia, the departures to Syria and Islamist radicalization, in general, are primarily tied to the South-Western region of Sanjak, with dominant Muslim population. Radical ideas have been spotted in other parts of Serbia, i.e, its Southern part (Preševo and Bujanovac) and specific neighborhoods in Belgrade or Smederevo. Still, these are rather scattered and individual cases.<sup>3</sup> Islamist radicalization was paid much greater attention in other countries, and experts had gloomy projections for Sanjak and have observed it as an extremists' hotbed.<sup>4</sup> However, this challenge has not been realized. Hence, Sanjak, and Novi Pazar, as a most salient example, will be examined as an enabling environment that has proved to have a significant level of resilience to extremism. The Far-right will only be observed as a possible driver of Islamist radicalization.

## The research methodology

This report is based on extensive field research in Belgrade, Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin between July and September 2021, during which a total of 25 interviews were conducted. The interviewees included civil society representatives, journalists, all local political parties' representatives, academics, individuals who could be considered extremists, and ordinary citizens. The research team also conducted many informal conversations with interlocutors, including random respondents - common people. Other than Bosniaks of the Muslim religion, Orthodox Serbs were interviewed as well. Among the respondents, men were more represented than women. Besides the fieldwork, the BCSP team reviewed the most relevant public sources through desk research, such as official documents, media reports, and research studies.

## The cases of occurrence

Sanjak's Bosniaks have traditionally practised a moderate Hanafi interpretation of Islam, inherent to the entire region of the Western Balkans. After the war in the 1990s, charitable organizations funding mosques and educational institutions from the Gulf states, started booming in the Balkans. Through those channels, dissemination of the conservative, Salafi interpretation of Islam, started sowing its seeds in Sanjak as well.<sup>5</sup>

Later on, after the regime change in 2000, several incidents happened, involving radical Wahhabi individuals or groups advocating the restoration of Islam in its pure and original form. They first became visible in Novi Pazar in 2002, when they handed out leaflets about pure Islam and urged Muslims not to celebrate Christian holidays.<sup>6</sup> In the forthcoming years, these groups on several occasions intruded mosques and attacked believers during the service due to differences in rituals or habits or attacked those who do not show faith through adequate clothes or appropriate public behavior. In 2006, a group of Wahhabis interrupted a concert by a Belgrade-based band "Balkanika".<sup>7</sup> Later in the same year, there was an incident involving shooting between a local mufti supporter and a Wahhabi movement representative in the Arap Mosque in Novi Pazar.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in 2007, a group of Wahhabis was arrested in a village near Novi Pazar under the suspicion of planning terrorist activities. A few weeks before that, the police discovered a sort of a Wahhabi training facility in a mountain cave near Novi Pazar, full of weapons, ammunition, explosives, propaganda materials etc.<sup>9</sup> The group was tried and sentenced to a total of 60 years in prison.<sup>10</sup> In the forthcoming years, upon marginalization and condemnation from the rest of the community and harsh response by the state, these groups continued to keep a low profile.

The Islamic communities' division is certainly an important event that enabled extremist ideas to thrive, since it created a rift within the Muslim public. Since 2007, there have been the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) based in Novi Pazar, more inclined towards Sarajevo and, on the other hand, the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) based in Belgrade. The parallel existence and activities of two different official religious institutions make it difficult to reunite the Islamic public, but it also additionally hampers efforts to tackle radicalization. All interlocutors agreed that the absence of a united Islamic community created a vacuum suitable for exploitation by alternative religious groups.

Since the early 2000s, a web of charity organizations coming from the Gulf States or supported by them, most prominent being Saudi Arabia, started spreading across the Balkans and Serbia was not an exception. These organizations provided funds to mosques and educational facilities, but also often granted scholarships for Bosniaks to study in the Middle East. Controversial organizations have also started disseminating the hard-line version of Islam through multiple channels. Over the years, several paramajaats or underground mosques have been established in Sanjak. For instance, Furkan was established as a youth organization and, under that cover, it has attracted a great number of disillusioned youth.<sup>11</sup> Out of the reach of official Islamic Communities, these places have become meeting points for radical indoctrination and recruitment of potential foreign fighters.

The emergence of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) once again spun the wheel of extremism in Sanjak, when a group of citizens rushed to the battlefields in Syria.<sup>12</sup> Among the 49 Serbian citizens that left for Syria, around 9 have returned to Europe but only 4 to Serbia. It is considered that 12 were killed in the conflict zone whereas the rest are still in the Syria or on the run. Among them, around 20 are women while the number of children is unknown.<sup>13</sup> In 2014, amendments to the Criminal Code introduced the criminalization of foreign fighting in Serbia. Prison sentence of 6 months to 5 years is envisaged for participation of Serbian citizens in foreign battlefields, while organizing participation in a war or armed conflict in a foreign country, is liable to a prison sentence of 2 up to 10 years.<sup>14</sup>

Four returnees and three persons who were tried *in absentia*, were convicted of various terrorism-related crimes in 2018.<sup>15</sup> They were found guilty of participating in the battlefield in Syria, financing terrorism, recruiting new warriors, and public instigation – all acts related to terrorism, according to the Criminal Code. Each of them will be included in the central terrorism database, planned to be launched soon.<sup>16</sup>

The threat of violent Islamist extremism has been significantly reduced in the past few years, primarily due to the weakening of pull factors. The developments in battlefields in the Middle East, fall of the Islamic state and fading of its appeal has stopped the outflow of foreign fighters globally, but also in Serbia. The latest case of occurrence recorded in Serbia was the arrest of Armin Alibašić, member of Salafi organization “Da’va team”<sup>17</sup>, under the accusation of plotting a terrorist attack. However, since his concerned fellows from the organization reported him according to media reports, he could rather be considered a lone wolf actor.<sup>18</sup>



# Sanjak as an enabling environment

## Poor economic situation

Sanjak can be perceived as an enabling environment due to a web of interlinked socioeconomic, political and cultural factors that create a specific context prone to radicalization. One of the most palpable factors that makes the local population more susceptible to radical ideas is the poor economic situation, reflected in the lack of job opportunities, poverty and brain drain. The unemployment rate is particularly high in the Sanjak region (Novi Pazar 54%, Tutin 58%), compared to the Serbian average (around 11%).<sup>19</sup> Youth unemployment is even higher than the general average in Serbia.<sup>20</sup> However, observing the atmosphere in the town of Novi Pazar and surrounding places, such as Sjenica and Tutin, one would not notice the gravity of economic challenges. The city has a particularly vibrant atmosphere and is full of young people circulating around in cafes and restaurants. The main explanation behind this contradiction is the help provided to the local population by the diaspora. The diaspora contributes in three ways: by directly helping family members or local charity organizations, institutions or hospitals; by starting small businesses, such as cafes or small enterprises, thus creating at least temporary job opportunities; and by investing in real estate development and construction. According to the interlocutors, another reason behind this illusion is the fact that Sanjak's youth often go to the EU countries for three months to work (visa-free period) and then return with enough resources to sustain them for the next few months.

Young people also leave the Sanjak region in great numbers for good, in search for better living conditions and job opportunities, predominantly in Western European countries. According to the data journalists received from travel agencies, in the months of late 2019 and early 2020, several hundreds, predominantly young people, left Novi Pazar almost every day.<sup>21</sup>

According to the interviewees, the pandemic has slowed down youth outflow, however, they still plan their leave as soon as possible, due to the aggravating economic and political situation. This outflow contributes to the spiral of frustration and corruption where the most educated and capable leave the country, while the incompetent use political or personal connections to occupy available jobs.

## Perception of intentional neglect

All the interlocutors highlighted that the region is infrastructurally and economically deserted and isolated. What is noticeable is the perception and feeling that this neglect is intentional and directed against Bosniaks in the Sanjak region, even though many regions and towns in Serbia suffer from a similar destiny. Other towns in Southern Serbia also have very high unemployment rates - Vranje 30%, Leskovac 43%, Niš 36%.

This perception is tightly connected with the legacy of the crimes the community suffered during the 1990s. Even though the conflict formally had a low direct impact on the region, the 1990s were marked as a decade of terror and discrimination by the state authorities in Sanjak.<sup>22</sup> In the beginning, armed forces surrounding the town, paramilitaries circulating through the region and an intensive anti-Bosniak media campaign firstly contributed to the mass exodus of Bosniaks from the country. During the following years ensued the period of violence, police repression and intimidation.<sup>23</sup> Many well-documented incidents and crimes have never been investigated or prosecuted, and the Serbian authorities continue to ignore them.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the very same people who are responsible for crimes and wrongdoings to Bosniaks still work in the Sanjak state institutions. On the other hand, Bosniaks in Sanjak still have very vivid memories of these events prepared for them by the state.

The interlocutors have used very illustrative and emotionally charged expressions to explain their perception of the neglect by the state, such as ghettoization or latent segregation. Hence, a part of the local population still perceives the current events involving state security institutions as menacing and intimidating. Most recently, during the summer of 2021, the Serbian Armed Forces organized a military exercise on the Pešter plateau near Novi Pazar. On that occasion, the local population was moved due to security reasons, parts of the exercise were realized on private property<sup>25</sup> and stray projectiles were found on pastures and near the populated areas.<sup>26</sup> Besides practical difficulties for citizens in the area, even though such exercises of different scale happen in the same location for years, they bring unrest to a part of the local population precisely due to perception of the state force apparatus that reminds them of the dark decade of “war without a war”. Similarly, in the end of 2020, the Ministry of the Interior deployed a gendarmerie unit to the city of Novi Pazar due to the increase in violent criminal incidents.<sup>27</sup> The presence of a heavily armed unit establishing order was perceived differently, some people felt safer, whereas others saw it as an act of intimidation, too reminiscent of the 1990s.

The state’s response to the issue of foreign fighters and different treatment of those who went to Syria and Ukraine, further boosted the perception of discrimination and the feeling of injustice. Unlike the people who fled to Syria, who were tried as terrorists,

the Ukrainian fighters were regarded as regular foreign fighters and all got away with mild, mostly parole sentences.<sup>28</sup> The unequal treatment of foreign fighters once again provoked the feelings of discrimination and created the impression among many Muslims in Serbia that the Serbian authorities were anti-Muslim.

Moreover, the Sanjak region and Novi Pazar are predominantly negatively presented in mainstream media, which can exacerbate the feeling of isolation. As most of the interviewees highlighted, media tend to publish only sensationalist reports about tensions or criminal incidents to divert attention from greater problems, since it all looks much worse from the capital, Belgrade, than in reality. Media reporting that contributes to stigmatization of Muslims can be a significant radicalization factor.

Another phenomenon that contributes to this self-perception is disproportionate representation in state institutions, especially in law enforcement institutions. The interlocutors have highlighted employment as selective and that while Bosniaks represent the majority of the local population, they are scarcely represented in these institutions. Politicization and centralization of employment, resulting in inequitable representation in the judiciary and police, with which citizens are in the most frequent contact, undermine their trust.

## Political corruption and divisions

Sanjak is politically divided among three main parties and leaders who rotate in power both locally and in central institutions in the past 30 years. The three main parties are the Party of Democratic Action (PDA), led by Sulejman Ugljanin, Sanjak Democratic Party (SDP) by Rasim Ljajić and Justice and Reconciliation Party (JRP) run by former Chief Mufti of the Islamic Community in Serbia, Muamer Zukorlić.<sup>29</sup> Ugljanin's party has gradually lost its former glow and formally holds only the Bosniak national minority council, however still maintains a significant portion of the electorate through its strong national rhetorics. Part of its voters were taken over by the youngest party of the three, JRP, which is currently on the rise, predominantly on the basis of former mufti's popularity among believers, but also gained levers of power. SDP was the strongest party for years and still holds most of the institutional positions. All of the three parties flirt with the central government as needed, even though they all publicly try to pass themselves off solely as pursuers of Bosniak interests and distance from Belgrade.

Political divisions and party affiliations have immense influence on all spheres of citizens' lives. Political splits are reflected in business and economy, media, religion and even everyday life. Some interlocutors highlighted that there are family members who do not communicate with each other due to political divergence.

All interlocutors have highlighted that corruption completely corroded all institutions, which contributes to a great extent to citizens' grievance and consequently, makes them more susceptible to extreme ideas. For instance, a job is impossible to get without connections or party membership, which makes people go abroad in quest of a better life or makes them slip in a wrong direction, which can include radical ideas and extreme behavior. As the interlocutors highlighted, another concerning trend is that politicians are inclined to conservative interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism, in order to enforce discipline, enhance easier mobilization and obedient voting.

Political disputes are increasingly being resolved in street clashes, which brings out the risk of political extremism. Most recently, a member of JRP was killed in Sjenica, due to some political writing posted on a Facebook page he led. It is speculated that the attacker is very close to the SDP party.<sup>30</sup> Physical confrontations on a political basis are not a new or uncommon phenomenon in Sanjak. The period after 2000 was marked with frequent clashes between the then strongest and vehemently opposed parties, PDA and SDP. The most visible event was the local elections in 2006, which ended with a murder and several injured.<sup>31</sup>

In the cracks of political upheavals, fierce struggles over scarce resources in an impoverished and marginalized region, coupled with individual and community grievances opens up a lot of space for political extremism. This may also fuel religious extremism as they now have good arguments for delegitimizing both political and official religious institutions and offering alternative and "pure" views, practices and institutions.

## Low trust in institutions

Trust in institutions is very low in the Sanjak region. Confidence in the armed forces, police and intelligence service is significantly lower among the minorities than among the Serbian population.<sup>32</sup> Previous research has demonstrated that ethnic Bosniaks and Albanians tend to have lower than average confidence in institutions.<sup>33</sup> These percentages are particularly low for the youth in Sanjak, according to a public opinion poll conducted back in 2016.<sup>34</sup> Only 5% of the Sanjak youth trust the police, whereas only 2% trust the judiciary. According to a public opinion survey conducted by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy in September 2020, more than a third of citizens of Serbia see organized crime (25%) and corruption (15%) as the main internal security threats, while many perceive institutions to be highly corrupt, especially judiciary and the police, and serve only the interest of politicians, business magnates and criminals.<sup>35</sup> Previous research has shown that almost nine out of 10 Bosniaks (87%) think that the risk of corruption is high, which is a larger percentage than within other ethnic groups.

These findings suggest that the population of Sanjak experience even more problems with corrupt politicians, civil servants, law enforcement officers, and so on, than the rest of the population of Serbia.

The coronavirus pandemic has further jolted already fragile trust in state institutions. Namely, the Sanjak region and especially Novi Pazar was severely struck by COVID-19 in the summer of 2020, when the overburdened health system completely broke down.<sup>36</sup> The citizens experienced this as another type of abandonment by the central government and inability of local institutions. When the Prime Minister and Health Minister came to visit Novi Pazar, a group of doctors and medical workers turned their back on them as a sign of protest against an untimely reaction in aiding the region and for manipulating with information regarding the numbers of the infected and deceased. After the photos of the difficult situation in the hospital swamped social media citizens and non-governmental organizations from all over Serbia, but also the surrounding countries, and the huge Sanjak diaspora organized and collected help for Novi Pazar.<sup>37</sup> Hence, majority of local population highlight that the diaspora, citizens' associations and individuals responded the best during the pandemic (84%) and blame politicians, health facility management and local authorities for high mortality.<sup>38</sup>

The lack of trust in government institutions which do not provide basic services for all its citizens, certainly contributes to increased religiosity and might serve as a driver of radicalization. When citizens are disappointed with everyday life within a community and the sense that institutions do not provide for their existential needs, they are more likely to search for a purpose and identity in religion.<sup>39</sup> Previous research has shown that youth in Sanjak tend to be highly religious.<sup>40</sup>

The pandemic has not only shaken trust in institutions, but has also demonstrated how organized and agile some of the Salafi organizations in the region are. They have been among the most successful in coordinating and distributing help to those in need during the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has shown that they are very well connected and can quickly mobilize volunteers and react in solidarity with citizens. The interlocutors have drawn attention that the Salafi organizations tend to spread ultra-conservative views (although not violent), alongside many positive actions and initiatives they do for the community. For instance, it was highlighted that the humanitarian organization "Put Sredine" (Middle Way),<sup>41</sup> while distributing help, persuades women to cover themselves.

## The flawed educational system

The flawed educational system in Serbia usually comes up among the principal drivers of radicalization in Serbia. The lack of critical thinking and lack of options to gain practical skills through education and extracurricular activities make young people less adequate for the job market and more likely to turn to radical ideas. The educational system is seen as inert and difficult to reform, thus it is not following the current needs of society. Religious education in schools is also of poor quality, and, what is most concerning, it is organized separately for Bosniak and Serbian children. Several interlocutors have highlighted that this contributes to deepening the gap between the two communities and that learning about different religions at a young age would be very important in preventing later religious radicalization. The majority of interviewees from Novi Pazar agree that persons who turn to religion “overnight” are at greater risk of becoming violent extremists than those who practised religion over a longer period and has solid religious education. Some conservative religious organizations or individuals tend to distribute problematic literature, which is much easier to accept by poorly educated citizens. Many young people from Sanjak go to study abroad in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and, upon return, become more religious, with greater potential for radicalization as agreed by a majority of interlocutors.

Civic instruction is not organized, which is an additional problem, since the rare ones who do want to attend those classes cannot, due to the lack of interest. Separate religious classes in schools are just one of the indicators of what several interlocutors titled as peaceful coexistence of Bosniaks and Serbs in Sanjak. They explained that incidents along the ethnic or religious seams practically do not exist, however, there is no communal life and essential mixing of the two communities. For instance, inter-religious marriages are still a taboo and some neighbourhoods are ethnically homogenous. This type of living in parallel worlds next to each other is also one of the drivers of radicalization.

Socio-economic problems, recent trauma for the entire community and political and religious divisions, all contribute to a self-perception of isolation and marginalization which can result in violence driven by extremist ideas. The feeling of humiliation and hopelessness and the sense of injustice caused by great economic disparities represent a very fertile ground for extremist beliefs and behaviors. Many experts have had dark predictions for the region of Sanjak which have not come true, hence, it represents an excellent case for the study of resilience to extremism.

## Competing authorities in Sanjak

The Sanjak region has competing authorities on several levels: between central and local government, different local political actors and two official religious institutions. Bosniaks in Sanjak have low trust in central institutions when compared to other regions in Serbia.<sup>42</sup> Previous research has demonstrated low trust in local institutions and politicians as well.<sup>43</sup> Bosniaks are aware of and frustrated with the local networks of impunity and corruption knitted by politicians. Coupled with perception that all three political currents cooperate with the central government when politically opportunistic, this situation deepens the grievance and opens space for extreme political alternatives. Besides the vacuum left by low trust in both central and local authorities, divisions among three main local political parties also contribute to perpetuating an enabling environment in Sanjak. In the cracks of different political commotions, fierce struggles over scarce resources, in an impoverished and marginalized region leave a lot of room for political extremism. Finally, simultaneous functioning of two different official religious institutions since 2007 corrodes trust in both, makes way to extreme religious ideas and additionally hampers efforts to prevent and tackle radicalization.<sup>44</sup>

Another trend of competing powers that can be observed in Sanjak is the competition between the local government and diaspora. Although it does not have formal authority, the Sanjak diaspora has great informal influence over the region's population. Sanjak has a large diaspora which supports local population in different ways, that can be a great contributor of resilience to extreme ideas since it alleviates frustrations among the local population, preventing grievance from turning into (violent) extremism. However, putting too much confidence in diaspora also influences the already fragile trust in official institutions.<sup>45</sup>

All these competing currents contribute to distrust in official authorities, be them secular or religious, and create voids which can be easily filled by alternative, unconventional or extremist authorities or actors.

## Local-global connections

Islamist extremists in Serbia are not acting in isolation; instead, they are well connected in the Western Balkans and with like-minded groups from the Gulf countries. The ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam first came in Bosnia with the mujahideen – veteran fighters mainly from MENA - who stayed in this country after the armed conflict had ended in 1995 with a mission of spreading the genuine Islam, which will, according to their interpretation, prevent the repetition of genocide against the Muslims. Soon, numerous Islamic humanitarian organizations from Arab countries, mainly from Saudi Arabia, had come to Bosnia, many of which served as a tool for financing extremists. Since Muslim Bosniaks are large minority groups in the neighbouring Serbia and Montenegro, extremist ideas spread fast into these countries as well. Bosnia has thus become the center of Takfiri ideology for Muslim Bosniaks in the Western Balkans.

Many individuals who joined militants in Syria had previously stayed in Bosnian villages (e.g., Gornja Maoča, Ovše, Bočinja) where ultra-conservative Salafis live, wherefore these villages have been dubbed “Jihadis’ hotbeds.”<sup>46</sup> It is reported that leaders and individuals from these settlements were well connected with several groups of extremists operating in masjids in Vienna. The main point of contact in Vienna was Muhamed Porca originating from Bosnia. Vienna had become a center for indoctrination and recruitment of foreign fighters, as well as for collecting money from the diaspora and funneling Saudi’s funds to the Western Balkans. That is why the Austrian authorities had conducted several law enforcement operations, including the arrests of the preachers and members of these masjids until many of the groups were crushed. Among the most prominent and radical groups leaders were individuals from Sanjak - Mirsad Omerovic, Adem Demirovic, and Nedzad Balkan.<sup>47</sup> All of them were arrested and prosecuted for recruiting and organizing departures of people to Syria, as well as for financing violent extremism and terrorism.<sup>48</sup> They had direct ties with ISIS and Al-Nusra, as well as with extremists in Bosnia and Serbia. According to the Austrian authorities, Omerovic maintained a direct line of communication with ISIS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>49</sup>

A very important tool for disseminating the ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam in the Balkans have been the Islamic universities in Arab countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, where many new imams and preachers from Sanjak completed their studies. The attractiveness of these universities to young people lies mainly in the fact that the education there is entirely free - tuition, accommodation, and meals are fully covered. Studies in the Western Balkan countries tend to be expensive relative to the standard of living, which is even more pronounced in the regions where poverty and economic deprivation are above average, as in Sanjak.<sup>50</sup> The most important Sanjaks’ Imams and da’ias, from peaceful Salafis to violent Takfiris, studied at the Islamic universities, mainly in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Mirsad Omerovic and Nedzad Balkan, prominent figures in Vienna Takfiri network, studied in Saudi Arabia.<sup>51</sup>



There are no official publicly available data on the number of graduates and students from Sanjak in Saudi Arabia. Still, it can be assumed that the figures are not low as there is an association of Bosniak alumni of Saudi Islamic universities.<sup>52</sup> Upon their return to Sanjak, they maintain contacts with Saudi clerics who visit Sanjak and hold lectures. Maintaining connections enables them to raise humanitarian aid from Saudi Arabia and support building new and renovating old mosques. The influence of Saudis on the Islamic communities in Serbia is such that many experts on Islamic culture claim that through renovations of mosques, the Saudis are erasing the traditional Islamic culture of Sanjak represented in Ottoman heritage and the local specifics featuring colourful and picturesque mosque's interiors. However, this heritage is being destroyed as many mosques have been renovated on the Saudi principles of simplicity. As the head of office for strategic planning of the Islamic Community of Bosnia explained, Salafi Imams in Sanjak don't care about art, culture, and history. They only want to have a simplest place for prayer, and in that way, they destroy Bosniak's Islamic cultural heritage.<sup>53</sup>

The integration of Salafi imams and believers in the Islamic community has contributed to their pacification and moderation. It could also be assumed that ongoing comprehensive modernizing reforms in Saudi Arabia have been beneficial for this process.<sup>54</sup> According to the estimates of a radical Salafi, only 100 families in Sanjak practice true Islam outside official Islamic communities' structures, and there are around four masjids where the violent extremists gather. Even though peaceful Salafi believers are integrated and dominant over the violent ones, Salafi influence could represent a big challenge for the Muslims in Serbia. It could further divide the Islamic community and encourage power struggle, resulting in violence.

## Reciprocal Radicalization

In the past several years, there has been a trend of rising far-right extremism globally. With strong presence of extreme right since the break-up of Yugoslavia, Serbia couldn't escape this trend. Old far-right groups are resurrecting, and brand-new ones are emerging. Both are very political, active, and even aggressive in promoting their ideologies and goals. Of particular concern is that far-right groups have started exploiting prolonged migration crises to gain popularity and support, which wasn't the case in 2015 when there was a much higher number of migrants. Far-right groups are even acting like parapolice - they are patrolling equipped with batons and dogs, stopping migrants, restricting their freedom of movement, and apprehending citizens.<sup>55</sup> All these activities are filmed and distributed through their social media channels and communication applications (i.e., Telegram), accompanied by messages such as: "Stop shipping in migrants," "Make streets safe again," "When injustice becomes a law, resistance becomes a duty," etc. Identity-related messages are communicated within the anti-migrant narrative as well – that migrants will settle down in Serbia and thus, with a high birth rate become majority Islamizing Serbia, which is only one step towards Islamization of the whole Europe.

However, far-right extremism is not perceived as a security concern and has been predominantly tolerated or supported by the current government. Officials refrain from unambiguous condemnation of far-right outbursts and incidents, let alone prosecute them, thus contributing to the normalization and transferring of far-right trends from the political underground into the mainstream. The latest BCSP's public opinion polls have shown that citizens believe that the migrants' issue constitutes the highest external threat to Serbia's national security. At the same time, it is among the top three internal security threats. Also, around 75% respondents are concerned about the "free movement of migrants in towns and countryside."<sup>56</sup> Other researches show that Serbian citizens have many negative attitudes towards migrants, fraught with fear of them.<sup>57</sup> There is also strong support for the far-right irrespective of migration issues. Every fourth Serbian citizen supports the far-right groups' work, such as "1389" and "Naši ("Ours"), or the forbidden "National Alignment" and "Honor".<sup>58</sup>

Since part of the southwest Serbia is populated by the Muslim majority, exploring how the rising far-right trend influences Muslims and contributes to Islamist radicalization was important. Therefore, each interview conducted within this research has a featured section addressing this issue.

To the researchers' surprise, the respondents from Sanjak are indifferent to the rise of the far-right, even though they are well aware of this trend. Even the interviewees that could be labeled as Islamist extremists, both violent and non-violent, are not concerned with more active Serbian extreme-right. They don't perceive that their life could be endangered in any way. This could be explained by the fact that local authorities have been striving for greater autonomy and self-sufficiency for this region since 2000. With two universities and many local media, this goal has been achieved to a certain extent. However, this process hasn't been followed by better integration of the region; instead, it has resulted in greater isolation of Sanjak. In this respect, the local population perceives the events and processes happening in other parts of Serbia as very distant as if they were occurring in other countries. The "bubble mentality" prevents this region from being influenced by negative trends. On the other hand, it contributes to the frustrations of the local population as it maintains a false image of (self-)sufficiency.

However, when this bubble is penetrated by the events occurring in the region itself, the locals' perception changes dramatically. This was evident at the beginning of August during the soccer match between Novi Pazar and visiting Partizan when hooligans from Belgrade started chanting to war criminals convicted of genocide against Bosniaks, which caused tumultuous and even violent reaction of domestic hooligans.<sup>59</sup> The incident disturbed the broader local population as well. In comparison, a month before, the far-right and neo-Nazis were rallying in Belgrade against "the Soul of Srebrenica" exhibition dedicated to the Bosniak genocide victims,<sup>60</sup> which didn't attract significant attention of population in Sanjak. Our interlocutors stressed that it is very important that there is no Serbian far-right group operating in Sanjak or in neighbouring towns so there are no regular incidents that might endanger the good ethnic and religious relations between Bosniak and Serbs.

Another reason why the Muslims in Sanjak are indifferent to the rise of the far-right is that right-wing politics have long been present in Serbia either as an integral part of mainstream politics or tolerated by the government. Therefore, they relate far-right groups to the Serbian government, deeming them a long arm of the Serbian nationalistic politics. This means that the real problem is political extremism and ethno-nationalism that dominate over the Serbian mainstream politics. The rise of far-right groups and incidents caused by them are only the indicators of the previously stated assertion. Also, deadly terrorist attacks in Europe have caused many governments to focus their security policies on Islamist extremism, which has resulted in the rise of Islamophobia. Consequently, the Muslims in Serbia got accustomed to right-wing and Islamophobic stances and activities, reacting to right-wing outbursts mainly when they occur directly in the community they live in.

In contrast to Sanjak, Muslims living in Belgrade are very concerned with the rise of the far-right and their activities in Serbia. This is especially true for the Arab population in Belgrade, who fear that they might be confused with migrants and refugees from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as they are of similar skin color and, thus, become targets of the right-wingers. According to our interlocutor, more than 10,000 Arabs living in Belgrade came from Syria, Jordan, and Iraq during the '70s and '80s. Some of them have indeed experienced unpleasant encounters with far-righters that hardly stopped short of physical violence.

## Resilience to extremism

Sanjak has been the center for spreading ultra-conservative Salafism and its militant branch, Takfirism, which caused many conflicts within the local community, including armed skirmishes and planning of terrorist attacks. It had also contributed to foreign fighters' mobilization and departures to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, this trend has been faced with strong resistance from the local community resulting in its containment and later retraction of this negative trend. Therefore, Sanjak could be observed both as an enabling environment and a region where the community showcased resilience and even resistance to violent extremism. The latter is very important since Sanjak had experienced repression from the central state institutions during 1990's when armed conflicts had been raging in the neighboring countries where "Muslim forces" were one of the enemies of the Serbian militaries resulting in the accumulation of grievance among the Sanjak Bosniaks. Yet, the piled-up grievance didn't manifest in violent ideologies or activities. The most critical factors that prevented a larger spread of violent extremists' ideas and their violent manifestation will be presented and analyzed in the following pages.

### The Role of the local community

Muslim communities in the Balkans are traditionally oriented towards the Hanafi school of thought of Sunni Islam, meaning that radical interpretations of Islam are somewhat alien to them. Furthermore, 50 years of communist rule in the region instilled a sense of secularism in the Balkan Muslim communities and gave rise to an Islamic tradition that is evidently different in its interpretations and practices to its more conservative counterparts in the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, many refer to Muslims in the Balkans as "Progressive Muslims" and "Cultural Muslims."<sup>61</sup>

The Muslims in Serbia are no exception, and Salafism was alien to their religious practices. At first, the local community reacted with curiosity to new religious practice, which soon became rejection and even resistance. The first generation of Salafis, or Wahabis as they were called in Serbia, knew Islam superficially, but that didn't prevent them from imposing their understanding and religious practices to other believers and even Imams, often in a very aggressive way. They have also insisted on the lifestyle characteristic of the Gulf states, but it is inappropriate to local conditions. Wearing sandals and short pants is suitable for the hot climate of the Arab Peninsula, but it's not appropriate for winters in Sanjak. The intrusiveness of the first generation of Salafis even resulted in physical violence between them and traditional Muslims.

One group of militant Salafis was sentenced for terrorism-related offenses, including planning the assassination of the then Mufti Muamer Zukorlic.

According to our interlocutor, an Islamic scholar, the local population isolated the aggressive and most obtrusive Salafis. They boycotted their shops and products and didn't want to socialize and even talk with them. The Salafis counteracted with withdrawal into their own circle, which further distanced them from the local community. However, this might contribute to the accumulation of frustration among the Salafis, who were now isolated from the local community and looked for another one emerging in the war-torn Syria. According to a Salafi, a prominent Salafi leader in Bosnia Nusret Imamovic, left for Syria when he couldn't bear the constant pressure and accusations that he was a terrorist.

It seems that the departures of young men from Sanjak to Syria and their deaths had been one of the important turning points that struck the balance between Salafis and traditional believers. Since then, Salafis, and especially their leaders, have been trying to moderate their views and practices so that Salafism can co-exist with traditional interpretation of Islam. There is no need to impose the Salafi approach on other believers. The focus is also on the importance of solving the issues in the local community together with others and not allowing Salafi followers to be involved in distant conflicts. The interviewees claim that the change is visible as Salafis, for instance, now want to speak with uncovered women who enter their shops or shake hands. The moderation of the Salafis has contributed to their better (re)integration into the local community and official structures of the Islamic Community in Serbia. Today, they are entirely accepted, and there are no conflicts with adherents of traditional Islam. The downside of the Salafi integration is that now they have official channels for spreading their interpretation of Islam, and they are known to have good leaders and dedicated followers who are committed to humanitarian work.

However, it should be noted that there is still one group of Salafis, or adherents of authentic Islam as they like to refer to themselves, who are not fully integrated into the official Islamic Community in Serbia as they don't recognize it. They use private places for practicing religious duties. It is estimated that there are around 100 families that form this group. There are also several small masjids where the most problematic Salafis gather, still causing some troubles in the local community and even occasionally sending threats to other Salafis. The local community is well aware of them.

## | The Role of Imams

From the beginning of the expansion of ultra-conservative Salafism in Sanjak, Imams that belonged to these groups and actively contributed to the spread of Salafism, as well as those who didn't belong to this branch of Islam but haven't opposed to their spread, also played an important role in their pacification. This was the case with longtime Mufti Muamer Zukorlic, who had come into conflict with a group of militant Salafis in 2006, which involved even armed confrontation. Later, 15 Salafis from Novi Pazar were arrested, and in 2009, 12 of them were convicted of planning terrorist acts in Serbia, including an attempt of assassination of Mufti Zukorlic. Since then, Zukorlic has been teaching that there is a big difference between Takfirs and Salafis, where the latter group has been doing many positive activities for the local community. At the same time, the former is preoccupied with hatred, mainly toward other Muslims.<sup>62</sup>

When the civil war in Syria broke out, some Imams in Novi Pazar were very active and vocal in presenting atrocities committed by Assad's forces to believers in Sanjak. Since most of the regime forces have been under the control of Shiites,<sup>63</sup> hated among Salafis,<sup>64</sup> the conflict had a strong religious dimension and strong emotional charge. In this context, just presenting horrible atrocities was actually a call to action, as our interviewee stressed out. It was reported that one of these Imams was Sead Islamovic, who studied Islamic Faculty in Medina, Saudi Arabia. He was disseminating contents related to the Syrian conflict through his personal Facebook account. In these posts, Islamovic would also analyze the situation in Syria. He was allegedly connected to "Put sredine" (Eng. "The Middle Way"), a non-governmental organization from Novi Pazar, suspected by media and some researchers of recruiting foreign fighters.<sup>65</sup> Even some high-ranking clerics from the Islamic Community in Serbia singled out Islamovic as one of the most responsible for Serbian Muslims' departures into Syria.<sup>66</sup>

However, today it is impossible to find such contents on Islamovic's Facebook page.<sup>67</sup> His sermons are non-political, entirely dedicated to faith. Islamovic explains Hadis to help his congregation become better believers and avoid different and problematic interpretations of Islam. Speeches are also aimed at assisting believers in solving real-life problems by using religion. According to our interlocutor, Islamovic insists on recording addresses and later sharing them on social networks to avoid speculations that they contain a political, militant, or wrong interpretation of Islamic writings. If the findings of Islamovic's early work regarding Syrian conflict are true, then his U-turn is significant as Islamovic is very influential among the Salafi believers that gather in Hadzi-Meho Mosque, where he is the Imam. The Mosque is one of the largest in Sanjak, and it can receive as many as 1400 believers.<sup>68</sup> It is also attended by Esad Kundakovic, a very important figure in this community which will be explained further in the text.

According to our interviewees, “Put sredine” has also changed. The local community now recognizes it as a purely humanitarian organization that helps people in need, whoever they are, both Muslims and Christians. During the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sanjak, “Put sredine” worked closely with other, very diverse Sanjak NGOs (religious, but close to Turkey, civic, sport, etc.) and with municipal institutions.

Another influential Imam in the part of the Sanjak Islamic community and diaspora is Bekir Makić, who was Islamovic’s mentor. Makic has been vocally advocating that Muslims first must solve their personal, family, and community problems and issues. In his opinion, people in Sanjak shouldn’t worry too much about global issues and world politics, as there are more urgent issues in Sanjak which their involvement can solve, while that’s not the case with the former. The duty of Muslims is to become the better version of themselves, to be better believers. The conflict in Syria is too complex as it features a struggle among global and local powers, and one can’t be sure whose interests ISIS serves in the end. Actually, the greatest evil that befell the Muslims in Syria and Iraq, and globally is ISIS.<sup>69</sup>

Makic was stressing that radicalism and extremism were brought to Sanjak by nescients. In his words, Prophet Muhammed was saying “God save me from a pious man who is ignorant”. Because the ignorant talk the most about faith. Muhammed has forbidden to exaggerate in obedience to Allah because any exaggeration in Islam is not allowed.<sup>70</sup> Most of Bekic’s messages have been mirrored by other very active individuals in Sanjak public space.

However, why have the (Salafi) Imams started to send these messages is differently interpreted by our interlocutors. One group stresses the importance of external factors, such as political and religious reforms in Saudi Arabia or pressure by the USA and other powerful countries that prioritized the fight against terrorism and (violent) extremism. There is also an interpretation that when Imams have become influential and radical, they have been targeted and pressured by security services from and outside Serbia. Finally, a group of interviewees thinks that these Imam understood at some point that they have to change their approach as otherwise, they would do more harm than good to Muslims.



## The Role of individuals

All our interlocutors agree that Esad Kundakovic played a decisive role in preventing more people from joining the militants in Syria and Iraq. Kundakovic is the father of Eldar Kundakovic, who was killed in Aleppo in May 2013 while trying to storm a prison where the enemies of Bashar al-Assad's regime had been kept. Following the death of his son, Esad embarked on a personal mission to save other people from making the same mistake because he couldn't allow that anybody else suffers and perish. He doesn't want any single parent to feel the pain he has been suffering.<sup>71</sup> According to the interviewees close to the Salafi community, Kundakovic has prevented dozens of young people from going to Syria.

From the interview with Kundakovic and from his media appearances, it could be concluded that he primarily blames himself for losing his son as he didn't have time to listen to him and understand why he was feeling intensely for civilians being killed by Assad's forces. For him, discussing these issues had been a total waste of time since he had to provide for his family. Many parents say that they listen and talk to their kids, but they don't. The next to blame are Islamic communities and their Imams, as they are not dedicated enough to young people. They transformed mosques into museums where Imams just read Hadis without any desire to explain their meaning.<sup>72</sup>

According to Kundakovic, people of authority need to be gathered to sincerely discuss important issues with youth so that young people see that they understand their needs. That is why Esad has frequently participated at public and closed events and gatherings, and he has never denied anybody a conversation with him. Very often, young men would come to his tailor shop asking for advice which would turn into a lengthy discussion. Kundakovic had patience for everybody.<sup>73</sup>

But in order to be able to understand youth, to answer to their curiosity, and to dissuade them from going to Syria, he had to improve himself, to learn constantly, especially about religion. Even though Esad has always been a believer, after his son's death, he had to further get acquainted with other interpretations of Islam in order to better understand the challenges young people face when they (suddenly) become dedicated believers, and when they are practically abandoned to the problematic interpretation of faith available on the internet. Kundakovic has been repeating that he has gone through everything that his son went through, read the literature he read, watched videos he watched, socialized with his son's friends because he wants to know everything; he wants to understand. He has never accused his son's fellows of his son's death, nor did he say that his son was wrong. He understood and sympathized with them. As Kundakovic explains, to make the fight against radical and violent extremism successful, you have to include these groups in discussions to tell their stories.<sup>74</sup>

Our interlocutors stressed that a very important factor contributing to Kundakovic's success in preventing youth radicalization was that the local community recognized his family as respectable. Even though his killed son was known in Novi Pazar as a Wahabi, he was also recognized as a decent and honorable person. Nobody in town has a single bad word for him. As some interviewees pointed out, Eldar wasn't carried away by the new mujahedin lifestyle in Syria, so he didn't send threats and aggressive messages via social networks as some of his fellows from Sanjak did, because he wasn't that kind of person and he was on a personal mission of saving innocents from being killed by Assad's forces.

To sum up, it wasn't Kundakovic's son's death in Syria that made him influential in the Salafi community. Other families from Sanjak lost their members in Syria as well. It was a confluence of factors: the Kundakovic family is respected in the local community; both Esad and Eldar are known as decent and moral persons; Eldar died in Syria as a shahid by liberating innocent prisoners; Esad understood his son and son's fellows; he dedicated the rest of his life to prevent youth from fighting the wars of others; he constantly educated himself and became Salafi trying to fully understand his son's world; he has never blamed or shamed people for joining militants even though he thinks that they made mistakes.

## The Role of the Sanjak Diaspora

The previous BCSP research identified that the Sanjak diaspora in the EU and Turkey plays an important but dual role in Sanjak. First, the diaspora tends to show off with new cars, clothes, and lifestyle in general, bragging about the successes they have made abroad, which further frustrates the population in the region, especially youth affected by above-average unemployment and poverty. Being unable to achieve the same Western lifestyle, people tend to run away into the ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam. On the other hand, as many interviewees said, the diaspora supports the entire region with remittances and investments and assists many people from Sanjak to emigrate, thus helping the local population survive despite many hardships.<sup>75</sup>

Novi Pazar and Tutin are places of massive real estate development and construction to the extent that this could be noticed by laymen who have never been in these two towns. Many real estate investors come from the diaspora<sup>76</sup> and invest in public spaces, roads, and mosques in remote villages. In this way, the diaspora keeps social security in Sanjak and alleviates frustrations among the local population, preventing grievance from turning into (violent) extremism. There is no official data on the volume of the Sanjak diaspora assistance, but we can assume that it is significant, as it is estimated that there are almost 2.5 million people from Sanjak living in Europe and Turkey, compared to around 135 thousand Bosniaks living in this region.

The importance of diaspora's assistance to Sanjak was evident during the pandemics which caught local health care institutions unprepared, lacking even basic medical equipment. This caused a dire health situation in the early days of the pandemic in Novi Pazar, which was therefore nicknamed by the local population as "the Balkan Wuhan." The situation improved when citizens started organizing themselves, calling upon the diaspora to help. Only thanks to the diaspora a catastrophe was prevented.<sup>77</sup> A recent public opinion poll conducted by the local organization of "Svetionik" (eng. "Lighthouse") shows that the actors who did the most during the pandemic are the diaspora (53%), local organizations (20%), and individuals (11%). Both central state and local institutions are assessed as the worst.<sup>78</sup>

Mufti Mevlud Dudic, leader of the Islamic Community in Serbia, has claimed that the Islamic Community in B&H, Islamic Community in Serbia, and Sanjak diaspora were the only actors that had been with Sanjak people during the pandemic. At the same time, other institutions either didn't help or they withdrew, leaving the local population to fend for themselves. The diaspora did more for 20 days than the state institutions for 20 years.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the downside of the massive Sanjak diaspora help is that it also contributes to grievance and distrust of Bosniaks towards the central institutions. In other words, it is also an important element of the enabling environment.

## Changes in Saudi Arabia

Several interlocutors who are experts on Islam and the Middle East are categorical that pacification and integration of extreme Salafis into the official Islamic community in Serbia and other Balkan countries are related to the ongoing reforms in Saudi Arabia. Gradual, but systemic reforms of the economy, politics, and religion in Saudi Arabia started in early 2016, but they were accelerated after Mohammed bin Salman had come to power, becoming the Crown Prince in 2017. Bin Salman pledged to return the country to "moderate Islam" and transform it into an open society attracting investors. According to Salman, the ultra-conservative state had been "not normal" for the past 30 years.<sup>80</sup>

Our interviewees observed that many Salafis had become less bellicose in promoting their way of practicing religion and less obtrusive to other Muslim believers after the reforms in Saudi Arabia started taking roots. They observed that many local Imams close to Salafis, as well as da'is, had stopped sharing new and deleting old addresses of the ultra-conservative Saudi clerics on social media after they fell into disfavor of bin Salman, and resumed sharing their sermons after some of them had regained the trust

of the Crown Prince. It is important to note that Muamer Zukorlic, former long-standing Mufti of the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) who played a decisive role in the ICiS even when no longer the ICiS' Mufti, has always had much better ties with the Gulf Countries than with Turkey, a traditional ally to the Balkan Muslims. Also, Imams, influential among Salafis, studied in Saudi Arabia. This all means that Saudi reforms could have substantial effects on the conservative Salafis in Serbia.

Our interlocutors agree that religious reforms in Saudi Arabia are important for moderating Islamist extremists in Serbia, but they stress that the Saudi political reforms are equally important. If the internal and, especially, foreign policy remains untouched, the Saudis won't give up on their influence over the Muslims in Serbia and the Balkans, meaning that in the future, extremism within the Muslim population can re-emerge either in the form of religious or political. The reason can be a power struggle with Turkey – an old Saudi rival. The political divisions in Sanjak are deep and also follow the logic of the rivalry between Turkey and the Gulf states. This rivalry is mirrored in the Islamic communities and organizations operating in Sanjak. Former Mufti Zukorlic has even accused Turkey's Diyanet of supporting the actors that work on divisions within the Islamic community.<sup>81</sup> Mr. Zukorlić, a very influential political and religious leader among the Serbian Muslims, died in November 2021. It is yet to be seen how this will reflect on the power struggle and relationship of ICiS to Gulf countries and Turkey.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The Sanjak region has showcased a high level of resilience and resistance to violent Islamist extremism in Serbia, due to which this region and Serbia haven't witnessed any terrorist attack and only a small number of people compared to other Western Balkan countries joined the militants in Syria and Iraq. Also, there is a relatively low number of violent extremists in Sanjak whom the local community is well aware of. It is proven that moderate Islam is dominant among the Muslims in Serbia which makes the local population reject an intrusive, violent, and tribal interpretation of Islam. Also, individuals of authority and influence over Salafi groups have played an essential role in their moderation and integration into the local community. Finally, the diaspora's support for and investment in the local community mitigates the consequences of the poor economic situation and unemployment.

However, the constantly worsening economic situation, huge unemployment, poor education, widespread (political) corruption, fierce conflicts among local political parties, and malfunctioning institutions make this region still an enabling environment for different forms of extremism. Even though Salafi groups have been mainly integrated into the local community and don't support violence, they spread ultra-conservative ideas when distributing humanitarian aid. Competition among local political parties is so fierce that it has amounted to violent and even armed confrontations among their followers, which brings these political actors to the verge of political extremism. Finally, some resilience factors (e.g., Imams close to the Gulf states) could become drivers of radicalization in worsened socio-economic and political conditions. That is why it is essential to address the underlying factors that constitute the extremism enabling environment.

## Long term

- Improving the economic situation and reducing poverty and (political) corruption would reduce inequality and improve equal opportunities, enabling people to meet their own needs better. This recommendation should be prioritized as the confluence of poor economy, poverty, and political corruption generates frustrations among citizens, exploited by extremists. If no attempt is made to address them, the success of other short-term and medium-term recommendations will be merely temporary. This is evidenced by the fact that two universities in Novi Pazar have been opened. Still, their effects are short-lived and even contradictory as graduates don't have opportunities to get any job in the local community without personal and political connections. Hence, they have to emigrate, which contributes to building up frustrations within the local community.

## Medium-term:

### *Social bonding*

- Overcome political and other cleavages by improving social bonding within the community through continuous dialogue and achieving common goals.
- Empower local community leaders by vesting them an important role in social bridging and opening more space for their activities. It is proven that individuals with actual authority in the local community have been important in building resistance and resilience to (violent) extremism and improving community cohesion.

### *Social bridging*

- Improve religious and civic instruction, training of educators, and updating the curricula they teach. The curricula should include learning about other religions (in historical and sociological context) and improve critical thinking skills to enable students to better assess the problematic contents they encounter, especially via social media.
- Provide better transport links between Sanjak, Belgrade, Sarajevo and Podgorica, as well as between the region's capital cities to enhance mobility, trade, and eventually the economy of the isolated region.
- Promote interculturalism instead of multiculturalism and designing modules for building bridges among communities in all aspects - from education to employment in the public or private sector.

### *Addressing the right-wing extremism*

- State institutions, international community, and civil society should pay more attention to the right-wing extremism in Serbia. Serbian authorities should respond more decidedly by both prosecuting the far-righters' hate crime activities and publicly condemning their actions. Reciprocal-radicalization hasn't been recorded in Sanjak mainly because this region is isolated from direct far-right activities, and there are no local extreme right groups. It also proved that the local community reacts intensely to far-right activities happening locally, showcasing that there is indeed a potential for reciprocal radicalization.

### **Short term:**

- Civil society should establish better communication with citizens and engage in local initiatives and direct contacts and communication with citizens as much as possible. Since civil society isn't deeply involved in local political and other cleavages, it could play mediating role in social bonding.
- improvement in mainstream media reporting about the Sanjak region and minority communities
- Serbian authorities should prosecute far-righters responsible for nationalist an-hate-crime incidents. Authorities should also publicly condemn such incidents.

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