

VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SERBIA: ISLAMIST AND FAR-RIGHT

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Summary

Islamist extremism in Serbia is declining despite receiving significant attention, however, its non-violent forms have gained some traction in areas like Sanjak. On the other hand, political divisions signal a growing potential for political extremism in the region. In contrast, right-wing extremism is experiencing an upward trend, largely due to the Government's inaction and favourable media reporting. Upon conducting extensive research during five years, the research team aims to give an overview of the two major forms of extremism in Serbia. The first part focuses on the roots, occurrence and ideological basis of both the Islamist and right-wing extremism in the country. The next chapter aims to explain the international ties of extremist groups, including foreign fighters and other types of links and cooperation mechanisms with foreign extremist networks. The paper further focuses on drivers or "push" factors contributing to radicalization and the state response and treatment of Islamist and right-wing extremism. It also explores the phenomenon of reciprocal radicalization – if one form of extremism reinforces another. Finally, the authors provide an overview of the most pervasive and concerning consequences of the right-wing extremism expansion and state reaction (and lack thereof) to it.

Contents:

Introduction	6
Islamist extremism	7
Salafi and Takfiri ideology	8
Political upheavals in Sanjak	8
Serbian nationalism	9
Ideology of the Serbian far-right	10
Ad hoc topics of the far-right	11
Differences among far-righters	12
Fake and genuine far right	13
Football hooligans	13
Extremists' international ties	14
Foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine	14
International networking of extremists	15
Drivers of the extremism in Serbia	18
Socio-Economic Factors	18
Corruption perception and collapse of democracy	19
The flawed educational system	20
Unprincipled state's stance towards the extremism	20
COVID 19 pandemics	21
Drivers of extremism pertinent to Sanjak region	22
The Russian invasion and Serbian far-right	23
State response to extremism	25
The relationship between authorities and far-righters	25
Different treatment of foreign fighters	26
Consequences	27
Spreading fear and the reciprocal radicalization	27
Normalization of far-right stances	28
Concluding remarks	31
Sources and Notes	32
List of abbreviations	38
List of graphs	38
About the Authors	39
About the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy	40
Impressum	41

There are two prevalent manifestations of extremism present in Serbia – Islamist and right-wing extremism. While the former has seen a notable decline in recent years, primarily attributed to the dissolution of external pull factors, the latter has experienced a rise. The fall of the Islamic State and shifting dynamics on Middle Eastern battlegrounds have substantially curtailed the outflow of foreign fighters globally, but also from Serbia. However, despite these changes, internal, push factors that encourage extremism persist. Therefore, Serbia is faced with a significant number of *not-now-violent* Islamist extremists that deserve further attention.¹

On the other hand, right-wing extremism has been gaining ground in recent times. Its presence has become increasingly noticeable in Serbia's mainstream political arena and traditional media, expanding further into the digital realm, and is associated with both violent and non-violent incidents. The far-right element appears in various guises, and it is being tolerated or even supported by political actors, while extreme nationalist groups are not perceived or portrayed as a threat in the official discourse and media. These extremist groups adhere to varying agendas, but some of the common themes are the dichotomous illustration of ethnic relationships, idolization of war criminals, advocacy of patriarchal values, homophobia and promotion of anti-feminist, anti-Western, anti-Muslim, or anti-immigrant sentiments.²

This paper aims to give an overview of the major forms of extremism in Serbia, their roots and ideology, and to analyze how they reinforce one another, what drives individuals towards extremism and how extremist ideas are becoming normalized. Hence, this report is based on extensive field research in Belgrade, Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Novi Sad and Sombor in the past 5 years, during which more than 50 interviews were conducted. Interviewees included civil society representatives, journalists, local political parties' representatives, academics, individuals who could be considered extremists, and ordinary citizens. The research team has also conducted many informal conversations with interlocutors, including random respondents-common people. Besides fieldwork, the team has reviewed the most relevant public sources through desk research, such as official documents, media reports, and research studies.

Islamist extremism

In recent years Islamist extremism has attracted considerably more attention in Serbia (but also globally) than the far-right. Islamist extremism in Serbia is geographically linked to the Sanjak region, the region in southwest Serbia with its dominant Muslim population. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Islamist extremists seek to spread their influence outside this region by targeting the Muslim population in other parts of Serbia. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) report on Sanjak from 2005, Islamist extremists with Takfiri ideology first came to Novi Pazar (the biggest town in Sanjak) in 1997, when a new imam in a local mosque requested the believers to pray in Salafi way, although soon after that he was rejected by the local community and expelled from the mosque.³ In the very beginning, Salafis in Novi Pazar kept their activities low-key, their influence was marginal, and the attention that this new phenomenon received was insignificant – as Salafis were not connected to any violent activities. However, since 2000, Salafis in Novi Pazar have gradually become more visible and influential.

In 2006/7, fifteen Salafis from Novi Pazar were arrested; in 2009, twelve of them were convicted of crimes related to terrorism. It is important to note that the convicted Salafis did not commit terrorist acts but were convicted of planning terrorist acts (on the territory of the Republic of Serbia), including an attempt to assassinate Mufti.⁴ This event gained certain public attention, although still at a relatively low level. Kladnicanin points out that since the beginning of the 2010s, Salafis in Sanjak have become more active and better organized and have been receiving more financial support.⁵ Besides, the split in the Islamic Community (IC) in Serbia that occurred in 2007 and resulted in the weakening of the IC, opened a space for external (fundamentalist) influences to enter the Sanjak region.⁶

The phenomenon of Islamist extremism got into the spotlight with the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the emergence of ISIS, and the consequent recruitment of Islamic fundamentalists from all over the world going to Syria as foreign fighters. In the same way as Serbian far-right extremists who go to fight at the Ukrainian battlefields, Islamist extremists from the Sanjak region (but also from other parts of Serbia) travel to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside different terrorist groups, such as ISIS and Al-Nusra. According to police estimates, 49 people from the Sanjak region have so far gone to Syria.⁷ Seven of them have been convicted in the Serbian Court, again – for crimes related to terrorism.

Research also shows that there are fewer than 100 individuals in the Sanjak region who could be categorized as violent extremists. Compared to other Western Balkan and the rest of Europe, these numbers are low and indicate that the threat of violent Islamist extremism and terrorism in Serbia is not great. However, the fact that research shows growth in non-violent extremism – individuals and groups that promote extreme ideas without openly inciting violence (est. up to 2000 individuals), who could, as a result of changing global and local economic and political situations, be (rapidly) radicalized and become violent is cause for concern. Behind this negative trend lies the fact that Serbia has done little to prevent extremism – i.e. to eliminate the conditions favourable to its proliferation.

| Salafi and Takfiri ideology

Sanjak has been the centre for spreading ultra-conservative Salafism and its militant branch, Takfirim, in Serbia, which caused many conflicts within the local community, including armed clashes and terrorist attacks plotting. Salafism is an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam that seeks to restore the original faith practised by the prophet Mohammad. It presumes a conservative and literal interpretation of religious texts and adopts a black-and-white value system. Salafis seek to restore the “one true version of Islam” and reject any religious “innovations”, i.e. any currents in Islam that differ from the faith exercised by the first three generations of Muslims. It adheres to the Hanbali school of legal Islam, which is quite conservative compared to the other existing ones. Salafism was also highly influenced by the ultra-conservative stream of Wahhabism, which became prominent in Saudi Arabia.⁸ However, most Salafism adherents neither promote armed struggle against the system nor exercise political violence. Salafism is nevertheless most often connected with violent extremism and jihadism since it provides their theological underpinnings, which created an ongoing global conceptual debate regarding the nature of Salafism.⁹

Takfirim, on the other hand, is a violent current of Salafism that promotes excommunication of “bad” Muslims, Muslims who they consider to be infidels, and as such is quite radical and potentially militant and violent in nature. Takfiris regard violent acts as legitimate methods for achieving religious and political goals, such as recreating the Caliphate following the puritanical and literal interpretation of the Quran.¹⁰

| Political upheavals in Sanjak

Even though the threat of religious extremism in Sanjak has been significantly reduced in the past years, the potential for the rise of a new type of extremism has hovered in the air during the field research and talks with members of the local community – political extremism. Political divisions have a massive effect on all spheres of citizens’ lives in Sanjak, divided among three main parties and leaders who have been swapping power locally and in central institutions in the past 30 years. Party affiliations are reflected in business, economy, media, religion, and everyday life. Some interlocutors have highlighted that some family members do not communicate with each other due to political disagreements.

Political disputes are increasingly being settled in street clashes, which brings out the risk of political extremism. For instance, a Justice and Reconciliation party member was killed in Sjenica due to some political posts published on a Facebook page he led. It is speculated that the attacker is very close to the Sanjak Democratic Party.¹¹ Physical confrontations on a political basis are not an unusual occurrence in Sanjak. The time after 2000 was marked with numerous clashes between the then most popular

and intensely opposed parties, SDA and SDP.¹² Amid political turmoil, fights over limited resources in a deprived and disregarded region, coupled with individual and community grievances, can easily create space for political extremism. Along the way, it can also re-revitalize religious extremism as it would provide good arguments for delegitimizing both political and official religious institutions and offering alternative and “pure” views, practices and institutions.

Serbian nationalism

The emergence of Serbian nationalism took root in the late 1980s as a response from the political elites to the mounting pressure for democratization and liberalization within the former Yugoslavia’s economic and political system. Specifically, it served as an attempt by these elites to safeguard their positions of power.¹³ In 1986, conservative Serbian intellectuals, primarily members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), authored a document known as the ‘Memorandum.’ This memorandum was fueled by a deep-seated Serbian ‘ressentiment,’ portraying ethnic Serbs as despised, threatened, and exploited by other Yugoslav nations during the socialist era.¹⁴ The primary critique put forth by these nationalist intellectuals did not solely focus on the economic inefficiencies or authoritarian tendencies of Yugoslav socialism but rather emphasized socialism’s responsibility for the perceived ‘destruction’ of the Serbian nation. Consequently, the new official narrative replaced social class as the unifying principle with the concept of nation understood not merely as a political entity but as a biological one.¹⁵ This rapid ascent of Serbian nationalism facilitated the emergence of right-wing extremism.

With the ascent of Slobodan Milošević to power, the nationalist agenda became entrenched as the governing policy, resulting in the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and a series of ethnic conflicts throughout the 1990s. Numerous atrocities, including ethnic cleansing and genocide, marked these conflicts. During this period, Milošević’s regime effectively imposed Serbian nationalism as the official ideology and prevailing narrative, while opposition to the regime only partially rejected nationalism. Following Milošević’s downfall, Serbia embarked on a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system through a series of reforms. Throughout this process, various new discourses emerged, such as Europeanization, human rights, transitional justice, and neoliberalism, each vying for dominance in shaping the collective understanding. Despite the challenge to the hegemony of nationalist discourse, the new political and intellectual elites never completely severed ties with nationalism, allowing it not only to persist but also to maintain its dominance as the de facto official narrative.¹⁶

When Serbian Progressive Party came to power in 2012, far right got additional space for strengthening and spreading their ideology. Thus, the old extreme right-wing groups came back to life and started growing stronger, and new ones are emerging. As during Milosevic regime, extreme right groups became instrumental for SNS rule. This could

be explained with the fact that SNS was set up by former high ranking officials of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the ultra-nationalist party which was a close ally to Slobodan Milosevic and strong proponent of the unification of all Serbs from former Yugoslavia into the Greater Serbia, an unitary ethno-national state. SNS rebrended this concept as a "Serbian World" which aims to unite Serbs politically, culturally, and in the media sphere. Many experts see this concept as a washed out version of the Greater Serbia, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its effort to create "Russian World."

| Ideology of the Serbian far-right

Contemporary Serbian nationalism rests mainly on Saint Sava nationalism.¹⁷ This ideology was created in the 1930s and its founder is seen to be Nikolaj Velimirović, bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Its essence is in the combination of Serbian nationalism and Orthodox clericalism: in the "sacralization of the nation" and the "nationalization of religion", with the Serbian nation rising to the status of a saint, while Orthodoxy becomes a national instead of universal religion.¹⁸ From this comes the Serbian nationalist expression, "Serbs are a heavenly people". Saint Sava nationalism advocates for returning to traditional (medieval) values such as piety, chivalry and catholicity and establishing an Orthodox monarchy within historical Serbian borders. 'Orthodox 'autocracy' is the indirect rule of God in politics through a Monarch who God delegates, thus achieving a "symphony of state and church". The king is an autocrat; that is, he is an inviolable and unlimited ruler, and political parties, the constitution and parliament do not only represent the complete opposite of this form of Government, they are the 'monarch's mortal enemies. As such, supporters of this ideology resolutely reject Western culture, globalization, democracy, liberalism, human rights, republican values, antifascist tradition, and also ecumenism.¹⁹ Even though that not all far-right political parties and movements support the monarchy, most of them favour "firm hand" rule and close ties with the Orthodox Church.

There are also other important features of contemporary Serbian nationalism distinctive of specific historical circumstances. The first characteristic is the strong symbolic power of the Kosovo myth, which says that Kosovo is the secular and spiritual "cradle of Serbia" and the 'nation's most holy place as medieval Serbia sacrificed its whole army to stop Ottoman and consequently Muslim invasion of Europe.²⁰ Later, Serbs would regularly rebel against Ottoman rule and ally with European rulers in their attempt to drive out Ottomans from Europe. Because of that, many Serbs had to find refuge in Austria and Hungary, where they settled, leaving Kosovo to Muslims. The Habsburg monarchy formed in its southern provinces *cordon sanitaire* against Ottoman incursions where Serbs were most of the force.²¹ Secondly, during two world wars, the Serbs were on the victory side while the other nations from former Yugoslavia didn't, making the Serbs superior.

The third feature is the historical revisionism of WWII, where it is denied that the nationalist Chetnik movement collaborated with the occupiers, or if collaboration is acknowledged, it is only perceived as a necessary evil, as a means of protecting Serbs from another pogrom. In the nationalist narrative, Serbs have always been on “the right side of history” because they suffered enormous casualties and genocide victims.²² Therefore, Serbs have the full right to unite all “Serbian historical lands” in one (national) state. As the Serbs have always been victims, Serbian nationalists deny that Serb forces committed war atrocities and genocide during the violent breakup of Yugoslavia (1990-1999). With that comes the glorification of civilian and military leaders convicted for war crimes.

The fourth feature is the close alignment of Serbian nationalists with Russia and the Russian political regime based on the actual and, more often alleged, historical and cultural ties and the shared religion. Russia is also providing strong political support in the international arena for Serbia’s position regarding Kosovo issue, where it opposes Kosovo’s independence and ‘the country’s membership in international organizations, and it persuades countries to withdraw ‘Kosovo’s recognition. In this way, Russia has built a picture of itself as a strong defender of the “Serbian sacred holy land”.

According to Alexandar Dugin, ‘Putin’s main ideologist, a complete turn by Serbia to the West would mean the end of it because it could not regain Kosovo, nor would it even preserve its territorial integrity within the existing borders.²³ That would be possible only in the multipolar world that Dugin advocates for and that Putin is trying to achieve in practice. Dugin believes that Russia will not leave the Balkans to the West, nor will it abandon other Russian friends in Bosnia, Montenegro and Macedonia, especially since the West is close to collapse. In his opinion, Serbia should take responsibility for the Balkans – for the entire South Slavic (and partly Albanian) region! But that presumes two fundamental conditions: preserving neutrality and strengthening ‘Serbia’s defence capabilities.²⁴

| Ad hoc topics of the far-right

Even though they are part of the regular far-right agenda, some topics are taken out of the sleeve and intensively used in certain periods, when these groups evaluate them as attractive and profitable. It is usually directed against different minority groups, which is quite common in the right-wing portfolio generally, especially in weak states where citizens experience many grievances. The frustrations caused by state capture and the systemic problems that burden the citizens of Serbia, such as the bad socio-economic situation and low trust in institutions, cannot be easily directed towards the real source of frustration. Hence, the dissatisfaction accumulated due to historical grievances and betrayed expectations, which the state and society should have fulfilled, is redirected to “easy targets” and different enemies.²⁵

In that way, far-righters have complemented the traditional generators based on post-conflict legacy and collected points from different topics in the preceding period. For a brief period, many far-right groups and parties had diverted their attention from Kosovo to the topic of migrants when it was deemed profitable. The interlocutors agreed that the right-wing started exploiting the topic of the migrant crisis in a period when the citizens of Serbia became more susceptible to anti-migrant attitudes for several reasons – longevity of the crisis with no visible solution on the horizon, shift in the official treatment of migrant passing through Serbia, as well as the changed structure of the migrant population.²⁶ The next topic the very same right-wingers hopped on was the coronavirus and especially, vaccines. Riding the wave of fear, uncertainty and citizens' dissatisfaction with the state response to the pandemic, they have heavily exploited the topic and attracted new followers through daily disinformation campaigns, conspiracy theories, and street actions.²⁷

Most recently, far-right groups have put back the topic of LGBTQI+ rights on their agenda in September 2022 on the eve of organizing the EuroPride in Belgrade.²⁸ Far-righters' vocal opposition to the EuroPride, coupled with ambiguous messages that came from government officials, have indeed inflicted great harm to the rights of this already threatened group. Nevertheless, the far-right groups, as well as the extreme-right political parties have diverted their attention back to Kosovo in the fall of 2022, focusing their activities on undermining President Vučić's acceptance of the Franco-German framework for normalizing the relations between Belgrade and Prishtina.

Differences among far-righters

Despite these similarities, there is also an important ideological dividing line among the Serbian extreme right organizations placing those who are openly Neo-Nazi on one side and those who declaratively reject Nazism and fascism (although their political programs contain many elements characteristics of fascism) on the other. The former group includes Neo-Nazi organizations, Nacionalni stroj (National Alignment), Srbska akcija (Serbian Action), Krv i čast (Blood and Honor), as well as parts of football supporters groups. These organizations openly promote the racial superiority of the white race and believe in the Aryan roots of the Serbian nation; they advocate for ethnically and racially 'pure' Serbia in which racial inequality would be proscribed by law. The other group is much bigger and ranges from extreme right (parliamentary) political parties (Dveri, Srpska radikalna stranka, Srpska desnica), to far-right movements (Narodna patrola, Četnički pokret, Levijatan) and small fringe groups (Kormilo, Bunt, Zentropa).

Somewhere in between those two categories are the far-right organizations that don't openly embrace fascism, although they derive their agenda from the political program of the Serbian fascist movement Zbor from the 1930s and 1940s. These are, for example, Obraz and Monarchist Club Carostavnik which are pronouncedly clerical and advocate for establishing Serbia as an Orthodox theocracy.

| Fake and genuine far right

Serbian far right could also be classified into two large groups according to their ties to the Government. The first group of organizations are those under direct Government's control serving different purposes - diverting support and votes from genuine far righters, conducting smear campaigns and violent actions instead of government officials, and liaising with the extreme right in other countries. These are Srpska desnica, Levijatan, Srpska čast. The second group could be labelled as genuine extreme right as they are not under direct Government control. However, authorities tolerate their (violent) actions, even those directed against the Government, as they are also instrumental in the SNS rule. Both groups contribute to the spread of values and ideas that fit well into the Government concept of the Serbian world, securitize specific topics (migrants, minorities), redirect voters' attention from real problems, and serve as an example of strong Russian influence in Serbia creating additional manoeuvring space for the Government for not imposing sanctions to Russia.

| Football hooligans

Hooligan groups can also be classified as extreme right because they often express nationalist and chauvinistic attitudes at matches and do not shy away from the use of excessive violence. Due to the chauvinistic and racist outbursts of hooligans at games, UEFA fined clubs in Serbia over 700,000 euros between 2013 and 2015.²⁹ Several interlocutors have highlighted that membership and support for the hooligan and far-right groups greatly overlap. A very illustrative example is the *Omladinski klub Srpska čast* (Serbian Honor Youth Club), which debuted publicly as an organized group of football fans in a 2014 Serbia-Albania match.³⁰

In fact, certain hooligan groups are at the intersection between extreme right-wing and criminal groups. For this reason, Slobodan Radovanović, the then public prosecutor, launched an initiative to ban 14 fan groups in 2009, and the Constitutional Court later decided that it was not competent to decide on the ban of unregistered subgroups.³¹ According to the Ministry of Interior, about 40 fan groups and their subgroups are in Serbia. The authorities' attitude in Serbia towards hooligan groups is similarly ambiguous and soft as that towards extreme right organizations. The case of Aleksandar Stanković, the leader of the Janjičari hooligan group, whose execution of the prison sentence was postponed 12 times by the Court until he was killed, is very illustrative of their treatment by the state.³²

Extremists' international ties

Foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine

The most palpable manifestation of extremist international ties is most certainly the phenomenon of foreign fighters, Serbian citizens who went to fight in the Syrian and Ukrainian battlefields. The emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) has once again sparked extremist beliefs and behaviour in Sanjak and other scattered areas in Serbia when a group of citizens joined the battlefields in Syria.³³ Around nine of the 49 Serbian citizens that left for Syria 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 Syria or on the run. Among them, more than 20 are women, while the number of children is unknown.³⁴ They are primarily young people, typically between 20 and 35 years of age, usually poor or unemployed, without much work experience or skills to offer in the market.³⁵ Some of them had criminal pasts, but it assumed them being involved in petty criminal (unlawful keeping of narcotics, smuggling and tax evasion).³⁶

Recruitment predominantly ensued in person - in underground mosques disguised as youth organizations, educational facilities etc.³⁷ Social media platforms have certainly played an important role in radicalization and, to some extent, recruitment, especially via the accounts of influential religious figures both from Serbia and abroad. Foreign fighters and their respective families have travelled via Turkey by plane or bus and would be further transferred over the border with the help of the Islamist network. What distinguishes this wave of travelling to Syria from the one to Ukraine is certainly the number of women and children that followed men to the better life and purer faith in the Islamic Caliphate – be them wives of Serbian foreign fighters or women indoctrinated and attracted by men via the Internet. More than 20 are still captured in Syrian refugee camps with their children, in terrifying conditions, while the state ignores their families' cries for help and calls from different international organizations.³⁸ The threat of Islamist foreign fighters 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, the fall of the Islamic state, and the fading of its appeal have stopped the outflow of foreign fighters globally, but also in Serbia.

Regarding Ukraine, combatants from Serbia have started joining the battlefield in Eastern Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict in 2014, supporting the pro-Russian separatist groups, and have continued doing so to this day. The exact number of Ukrainian foreign fighters from Serbia has never been disclosed to the public. Neither has the details from the verdicts and plea deals, making it challenging to identify the profile of this group. Nevertheless, media and civil society report provide a solid basis for pinpointing some characteristics, background and motivational factors of persons who decided to support the Russian side in the conflict. Media reports and Ukrainian official sources indicate that the number of Ukrainian combatants was much higher than the Syrian ones; however, the estimates differ from around 100 to more than 300 people.³⁹ The age range seems to

be a bit wider compared to Syrian foreign fighters, considering that in addition to young people it includes a number of war veterans who served either in paramilitary groups, police or special forces during the 1990s wars. Besides, they are often part of football hooligan groups and far-right organizations and sometimes have a criminal record.⁴⁰

Ukrainian foreign fighters were usually recruited via social media (Telegram, Facebook etc), where different organizations coordinated their trips and training before going into the battlefields in Eastern Ukraine. From the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, Serbian fighters would join different units or organizations in the war zone, from the notorious Russian private military company Wagner⁴¹ to the French-Serbian-Spanish-Brazilian brigade Unité Continentale⁴². These units usually have individuals from the region who would recruit and vouch for the people they bring in to the war zones. The future combatants would travel to Moscow and later be transferred to Donetsk or Lugansk. Some prominent faces, which took the role of coordinators and recruiters, used social media to invite people to join them and collect funds. Most recently, it was disclosed that one of the coordinators used cryptocurrencies and accepted donations via those platforms in order to fund their activities.⁴³ Nonetheless, what differentiates the fighters who went to Ukraine from those in Syria the most is precisely of a financial nature. Namely, Ukrainian fighters receive reimbursement for their activities supporting the Russian forces (and pro-Russian separatists before February 2022), whereas that was not the case with those who fled to Syria. Shared religion, ideology or helping the Russian brothers seem to be the additional benefits of the financial motive that drives them to the battlefield.

There is no systematized data on departures to Ukraine since the outbreak of the war in February 2022. Some of the fighters remained in the area and continued the fighting after the Russian aggression began, while some returned to the battlefield even after the prosecution in Serbia.⁴⁴ There are also scattered media reports on some alleged cases of departures to Ukraine and joining Russian forces after February 2022.⁴⁵ The Serbian contingent certainly does not weigh as much in the current scope of troops and cannot play a decisive role on the ground, as it might have in the first couple of years of the conflict.⁴⁶

International networking of extremists

Islamist extremists in Serbia are not isolated; on the contrary, they are well connected in the Western Balkans, with the diaspora in some European countries and with like-minded groups from Gulf countries. 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. Given the substantial presence of Muslim Bosniaks as a minority population in Serbia and Montenegro, extremist ideologies have been quickly disseminated within these neighbouring nations. Consequently, Bosnia has emerged as the central node for the proliferation of extremist ideology among Muslim

Bosniaks living in the Western Balkans. A considerable number of individuals who joined the ranks of fighters in Syria had previously resided in Bosnian villages, such as Gornja Maoča, Ovše, and Bočinja, which have been characterized as “Jihadi hotbeds” due to the presence of ultra-conservative Salafis who have utilized them as centres for recruitment and training.⁴⁷ According to reports, leaders and individuals affiliated with these settlements had established strong ties with various extremist factions active within masjids in Vienna, which typically accommodate significant diaspora populations from Western Balkan nations. Vienna has increasingly assumed a pivotal role as a hub for indoctrination, recruitment of foreign fighters, and the facilitation of financial transactions, including collecting funds from the diaspora and channeling financial support from Saudi Arabia to the Western Balkans.⁴⁸

Islamic universities in Arab countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia, have emerged as a significant medium for disseminating an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam in the Balkans. A notable proportion of newly appointed imams and preachers from Sanjak have pursued their studies at these institutions, further contributing to the propagation of such religious views. The allure of these studies was particularly strong among the youth in the impoverished region, as they were offered free of charge. Students were provided stipends that encompassed tuition fees, meals, accommodation, and other related expenses, making these educational opportunities highly attractive. Even though the number of graduates and students from Sanjak in Saudi Arabia is not publicly available, it can be assumed that figures are not low since there is an association of Bosniak students in Saudi Islamic universities.⁴⁹ After coming back to Sanjak, they would maintain connections with Saudi clerics who would visit Sanjak and hold lectures.

Regarding right-wingers, they are also very well-connected and traditionally maintain relations with Russia and extremists in Europe and the United States. Ties of the far-right groups and their counterparts in Russia have intensified since the aggression in Ukraine started. Several visits were arranged, the most recent being Damjan Knežević, leader of the People’s Patrols, who visited the infamous Russian paramilitary group Wagner in the fall of 2022.⁵⁰ Besides him, members of an ultranationalist organization Srbska Akcija (Serbian Action) posted a video on their YouTube channel presenting their visit to the Imperial Legion, the militant wing of the Russian Imperialistic Movement (RIM), the ultranationalist organization identified by the State Department as a global terrorist threat in 2020.⁵¹

However, Serbian far-righters, both political parties and extremist groups, have also maintained relations with Western extremists. For example, the Serbian Right joined the Alliance for Peace and Freedom, a European political umbrella of far-righters.⁵² Not only have they joined and participated in certain events and activities, but they have also hosted a conference in Belgrade, where one of the topics was the issue of Kosovo.⁵³ Such ties are useful for showing off different allies and framing this issue as a broader question of the identity of Serbia and Europe, not just an issue of Serbia’s traditional supporters in the matter, Russia and China. Furthermore, the German far-right Alternative for Deutschland has supported Boško Obradović, leader of Dveri, in the 2017

presidential run and since then, mutual visits and support have ensued.⁵⁴ There are many other examples, such as the Blood and Honour chapter in Serbia, Junak foundation and Kormilo (Helm) ties with Robert Rundo and similar. Many prominent Western extremists found Serbia inspirational and have visited it over the years – British far-righters Nicholas John Griffin and Jim Dawson, US neo-Nazi Robert Rundo or member of the French Generation Identity Arnaud Gouillon.⁵⁵ Joint activities and types of support include mutual visits, event organization, humanitarian aid, social media promotion and support. Some activities, especially humanitarian aid related, often include more, such as know-how transfers, training, logistics, etc.

Besides the practical benefits, the ideological cornerstone in both Serbian and European far-right agendas is the Kosovo story. While Serbia aims to gain greater leverage with diverse allies on the issue, the transnational far-right groups look at Kosovo as an embodiment of the “great replacement” scheme - a country on European borders where alien Muslims eliminated Christians from their land and made them a minority in their motherland.⁵⁶ The Kosovo example is misused to echo their claims of migrants and Muslims aiming to replace the white and Christian European “indigenous” population.

Drivers of Extremism in Serbia

Several important factors have contributed to citizens becoming vulnerable to extremism in Serbia. These are the terrible socio-economic situation and high unemployment, insufficient trust in institutions due to the collapse of democracy and high level of (political) corruption, but also the benevolent and inconsistent attitude of the state towards the (violent) extremism. These risk factors are more prominent in the Sanjak region. However, despite the existence of interconnected drivers of extremism, previous research has shown a high level of resilience of the region to Islamist extremism due to internal and external factors.⁵⁷

Socio-Economic Factors

One of the most important and most noticeable factors contributing to the emergence, persistence and expansion of (violent) extremism is the low socio-economic standing of Serbia, which is even more accentuated in the Sanjak region. The most evident factors contributing to the heightened vulnerability of the Serbian population to radical ideologies are the dire economic conditions characterized by limited job prospects, poverty, and a significant brain drain. Within such circumstances, violent extremist organizations, whether of Islamist or far-right orientation, can assume an appeal not only as a source of comfort but also as a source of financial means.

Even though some economic figures show progress in the past decade, when put into an adequate context, they paint a bleak picture of the economic situation of Serbian citizens. For instance, the freshest data show that the unemployment rate in Serbia amounted to roughly 9% at the national level in 2022, which is a significant decrease when compared to the previous decade. However, this decrease is accompanied by mass “brain drain” and galloping emigration of the young population⁵⁸, which shrinks the work force contingent (especially the young contingent) and influences the employment rate. Moreover, the at-risk-of-poverty rate was as high as 21.2% in 2021, while the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate amounted to 28.5%.⁵⁹ All of the economic indicators are way gloomier among young people. The unemployment rate is around 24%, while every fourth young person in Serbia is at risk of poverty.⁶⁰ Existential and social problems are among the principal factors that can push vulnerable young people into different types of extremist waters that promise a certain type of income and comfort.

COVID-19 pandemics and war in Ukraine have additionally worsened the grim socio-economic situation. According to official data, the average inflation rate in December 2022 was 15%, while prices for important goods and services (e.g., milk, cheese, eggs, house rents) increased from 30% to 50%.⁶¹ Consumer basket went up by 25%, and a 1.5-month salary is needed to cover it.⁶² Nonetheless, these economic difficulties disproportionately hit the Sanjak region, making it particularly vulnerable to extremism. For instance, the

region has the country's highest unemployment rate (around 17%), while some specific places, such as Tutin or Sjenica, record even higher rates. The economic hardship has been soothed to a certain extent by the region's quite big and involved diaspora, which heavily invests in the region as well as some external players. Nevertheless, the region's underdevelopment, coupled with a perception of intentional neglect and isolation by the state, creates a solid base for different types of extremist ideas to take root (more details in the chapter - *Drivers of extremism pertinent to Sanjak region*).

Corruption perception and collapse of democracy

Economic circumstances are further intensified by high levels of corruption and declining of democracy present in Serbia. The latest Freedom House report places Serbia among the top 16 countries in the world with a dramatic freedom decline in the past decade.⁶³ Serbian citizens also recognize these trends, as it was confirmed in the latest BCSP public opinion poll conducted in October of 2022.⁶⁴ Firstly, results show that 67% consider corruption a security risk, with an additional 18,3% rendering it somewhat threatening. 63% would not report corruption either because they fear repercussions or do not think it would be properly processed, which indicates apathy and lack of trust in the system.

The poll results have demonstrated that almost half of the respondents in Serbia do not believe politicians work in the public interest and that they are instead organized into interest groups (72%), influenced by domestic (70%) and foreign tycoons (70%) who misuse power for their own gain. They consider the judiciary and the police - institutions that should be on the frontline in tackling corruption - to be the main tools for realizing politicians' goals, alongside media and the National Assembly. Widespread corruption and overall democracy decline have further diminished citizens' trust in institutions, rendering them more susceptible to propaganda and extremist beliefs. More than half of the respondents stated that the police do not serve the public and instead serve the interests of criminals, politicians and the financially powerful. These attitudes were reflected in perceptions of corruption, where people see political parties, the judiciary and the police as the most corrupt institutions. Finally, more than half of people believe that there is either no democracy in Serbia at all or that it faces serious problems. More importantly, almost 40% of citizens wouldn't mind if Serbia had some type of autocratic rule and think that only a "firm hand" rule can rescue Serbia from this dire situation.

As in other areas, previous research has shown that compared with other groups, Bosniaks were significantly more concerned about corruption and criminality (41%). At the same time, their second-ranked internal security threat was also poor misconduct by politicians. Almost nine out of ten Bosniaks questioned (87%) see the risk of corruption as high, which was significantly higher than among Serbs or Hungarians.⁶⁵ Political corruption impacts the unequal and unfair distribution of already scarce social, material and financial resources, which also increases inequality and a sense of injustice in the community.

| The flawed educational system

The deficient educational system in Serbia consistently emerges as one of the primary factors contributing to radicalization within the country. Insufficient emphasis on critical thinking and the limited opportunities to acquire practical skills through education and extracurricular activities leave young people ill-equipped for the job market and more susceptible to embracing radical ideologies. The educational system is perceived as stagnant and resistant to reform, thereby failing to align with the evolving societal needs of the present time.

The quality of religious education in schools is also inadequate, and, even more worrying, in multiethnic communities such as Sanjak, it is organized separately for Bosniak and Serbian children. This division has been underscored by several interlocutors as exacerbating the divide between the two communities, emphasizing the significance of early exposure to diverse religious teachings as a preventive measure against future radicalization. Currently, religious education primarily focuses on fostering loyalty to a specific religious denomination rather than offering comprehensive knowledge about different religions from historical, sociological, and political perspectives.⁶⁶

| Unprincipled state's stance towards the extremism

In Serbian public discourse, violent extremism most commonly refers to the Islamist one, even though there are two dominant forms of extremism in Serbia. Islamist extremism is securitized in Serbia, especially in the case of ultra-conservative Islamic groups that adhere to non-traditional interpretations of Islam in the Balkans, such as Salafis. Such narrative is particularly promoted and reinforced by right-wing groups and political parties, but also in the tabloid media close to the regime. Moreover, Serbian authorities further enhance this narrative in public speeches, official documents and through the treatment of extremists. Most of the interlocutors agreed that the dominant narrative presents only Bosniaks and Muslims as extremists and highlights different moments when such a narrative was conceived. Such a narrative climbed up on the political agenda and gained attention with the war in Syria and a number of individuals who fled the country to join the battlefield.

On the other hand, 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.⁶⁷ For instance, Goran Davidović, the leader of the prohibited neo-Nazi group National Alignment (Nacionalni Stroj) and known as the Führer, re-emerged in the public sphere after being acquitted by the Court of Appeal for his involvement in the attack on participants of the antifascist event known as the

“Stop Fascism” march, which occurred in 2007.⁶⁸ That further enabled him to return to Serbia after 11 years of exile, contribute to the election efforts of some far-right figures, and spread extreme ideas via mainstream and social media.⁶⁹

Most recently, police arrested and detained the leader of the far-right group People’s Patrol, Damjan Knežević and Srbinfo editor Dejan Petar Zlatanović, after the protest of citizens in front of the Presidency of Serbia, due to the suspicion that they called for a violent change of the constitutional arrangement. Previously, there was no reaction to many incidents made by the People’s Patrols – maltreating migrants and performing citizens’ arrests, the smear campaign against people who hosted migrants in Sombor,⁷⁰ insulting and interfering with journalists during reporting⁷¹ or, most recently, attacking peaceful protesters.⁷² Moreover, activists affiliated with the ruling party have put up posters and stencils across various cities in Serbia containing offensive messages targeting the leaders of parliamentary political parties on the extreme right who organized the protest. This sudden firmer response of the Serbian Government towards the far-right can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, the ruling party’s voter base holds conservative and nationalist positions (reinforced by the party’s nationalistic and pro-Russian messaging), and the base has been impaired by the rise of popularity of extreme-right parliamentary political parties. Secondly, the Government aims to use far-righters as a “bogeyman” for the West and to showcase preparedness to implement stricter measures against such groups.

No government has radically rejected the right or unequivocally distanced itself from the right-wing groups.⁷³ This unprincipled stance of state institutions in Serbia is also reflected in the National Strategy for the fight against terrorism, where only Islamist terrorism is recognized as a security threat, and in different treatment of foreign fighters who fought in Syria against the Assad regime and in Ukraine on the pro-Russian side. The former were tried and convicted as terrorists, while the latter was prosecuted as foreign fighters enabling them to get mild verdicts.⁷⁴ The benevolent relationship of state authorities to far-right groups contributes to the spread of extreme rights and values incompatible with democracy on the one side and to the strengthening of grievances among the non-Serb population, mainly of the Muslim religion.

COVID 19 pandemics

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up significant space for both streams of extremism in Serbia. Regarding Islamist extremism, as highlighted by one of the interlocutors, certain radical religious organizations from Novi Pazar have gained legitimacy and popularity through their involvement in humanitarian activities. Namely, since the virus severely struck the Sanjak region in the spring of 2020, various religious and civil society organizations and individuals have gathered to help the community through volunteer work and donations. In the diverse network, organizations promoting ultraconservative

interpretations of Islam, alien to Balkan Islam, have turned out to be rather efficient and able to gather many volunteers.⁷⁵ As the interlocutor noticed: “The network brought these organizations closer to the civil society mainstream, brought them to the forefront, through a positive image of volunteers.” Also, Islamist groups developed and shared specially designed narratives about the coronavirus. They saw pandemics as divine punishment for the sinful lives led by humankind. The pandemic has also shown that the ‘Muslim way of life’ is not wrong. Life is possible without nightclubs, pubs and casinos, and an economy without high-interest rates.⁷⁶

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a trigger for different right-wing ideas and conspiracy theories in Serbia, as it has all around the globe. Interlocutors have noticed that the disputed Government’s handling of the crisis has undermined trust in institutions, expertise and science, which has created fruitful ground for different right-wing groups to promote their beliefs. The anti-vaccination movement gained significant visibility following the onset of the pandemic, leading to numerous protests and online campaigns.⁷⁷ Moreover, far-right groups have exploited the pandemic to spread anti-migrant and anti-Muslim sentiments.⁷⁸

Drivers of extremism pertinent to the Sanjak region

One of the most striking drivers of extremism in Sanjak is the widespread feeling of intentional neglect of the region by central institutions and the rest of the country. All the interlocutors have highlighted that the region is infrastructurally and economically abandoned and detached. A noteworthy aspect is a perception and sentiment that the neglect experienced by the Bosniaks in the Sanjak region appears intentional and targeted, even though numerous other regions and cities in Serbia face similar circumstances. This perception is intrinsically linked with the harrowing experiences of the community during the atrocities committed in the 1990s. A multitude of incidents and crimes, substantiated by credible evidence, have yet to be thoroughly investigated or brought to justice, and the Serbian authorities have consistently failed to address them.⁷⁹ Adding to the issue, the same people responsible for the Bosniaks’ wrongdoings continue to hold positions in the Sanjak state institutions. On the other hand, Bosniaks in Sanjak still have very vivid recollections of these events prepared for them by the state.⁸⁰

Another issue specific to Sanjak and Serbia regarding the drivers of Islamist radicalization is the split between the two Islamic communities. Namely, since 2007, there is the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) based in Novi Pazar and more inclined towards Sarajevo. On the other hand, the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) is based in Belgrade. The parallel functioning of two different official religious institutions make it difficult to bring the Islamic public back together, but it also hampers efforts to tackle radicalization. All interlocutors agreed that the absence of a united Islamic community created a vacuum suitable for alternative religious groups to benefit.⁸¹

Finally, Sanjak has a large body of diaspora in European countries and Turkey. Diaspora has a relevant but dual role in the region. On the one hand, it can be seen as a source of resilience to extremism since it eases economic hardships by investing and donating funds. Conversely, a wealthy diaspora that shows off with its successes can deepen the same economic grievances. Finally, while the Sanjak diaspora may not wield formal authority, it exerts considerable informal sway over the region's population. An overreliance on the diaspora can also destabilize the already fragile trust in official institutions.⁸²

| The Russian invasion and Serbian far-right

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has given a strong tailwind to Serbian extreme-right groups and political parties, which welcomed and celebrated this Russian move through rallies and social networks, seeing the invasion as the beginning of the liberation of Serbian historical territories that the enemies currently occupy. The first rally in support of Russia was held in Belgrade on March 4 and, to the surprise of those unfamiliar with current trends in the Western Balkans, gathered several thousand people. Messages that could be heard at the rally included: "Serbs and Russians are brothers forever," "Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia," and "Serbia, Russia, we do not need [the European] Union." The rallies were held in other cities throughout Serbia but also in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁸³

The People's Patrol was the main initiator of the pro-Russia rallies in Serbia. Also present were Mladen Obradović, the leader of Obraz (whose activities were banned by the Constitutional Court in 2012), as well as Mlađan Đorđević, leader of the pro-Russian 'Liberation Movement party. It should be noted that Denis Gariyev, leader of the Russian Imperial Movement, published a video message calling on Serbians to support "the renewal of Russia within its historical borders," which was then distributed through far-right accounts and profiles.⁸⁴ The movement is known for its paramilitary Imperial Legion wing, which has conducted training in urban warfare for extreme right-wingers in Russia and throughout Europe, and some of whose members have been convicted of terrorism. The US administration marked the movement as a global terrorist threat in mid-2020.⁸⁵

Numerous comments and messages on extreme right-wing channels and profiles declare that the Russian Army will not stop at the western borders of Ukraine but will continue further to the West and the Balkans. On social media, you can even see maps that show, for example, how it is the same distance in kilometres from Luhansk to Odesa by air as from Belgrade to Odesa (interpreted by extremists as demonstrating that Russia is not so far from Serbia).

With the war in Ukraine, Serbian far-righters have been trying to establish better ties with the Russian paramilitary and extreme right and to communicate this clearly to the public. Members of the People's Patrol and their leader Damnjan Knežević spent some time in Moscow at the end of April and the beginning of May as guests of some of the largest Russian media, e.g. the Russia Today. One of the hosts of the visit was Aleksandar Lisov, leader of the Russian-Serbian Centre – The Eagles. Knežević's activities in Russia were reported in detail via the internet portal Sbin.info and various extreme right-wing channels on the Telegram social network.⁸⁶

The Serbian Action" also visited Russia. Their delegation met with representatives of the "Imperial Legion", the paramilitary wing of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM). On that occasion, the Serbian Action recorded video clips about the Legion and RIM, which are now available on their YouTube channel. Peoples Patrol visited the Russian paramilitary Wagner group in St. Petersburg, after which this group announced that it was opening an office in Serbia. People wearing Wagner's patches were spotted on the road blockades in north Kosovo, raising concerns that Russia has tools for an escalating situation on the ground to disrupt Western focus to Ukraine.

Serbian and Russian extreme right-wingers have also become well-connected on the Telegram social network, where they quickly transmit and spread propaganda messages and disinformation.⁸⁷ For example, during the heightened tensions in Kosovo at the end of July and beginning of August, the network of these channels transmitted coordinated disinformation that an armed conflict had occurred between Serbs and Albanians, that one Serb was wounded, and that the Serbian Army was ready to intervene on the border between Serbia and Kosovo. This misinformation also attracted the attention of the mainstream media, which could have led to an escalation of the conflict in a situation of heightened tensions.⁸⁸

State response to extremism

The very existence of extremist groups in Serbia isn't explicitly forbidden by law. However, many activities that are (usually) practised by extremists are indeed prohibited. Serbian Constitution prescribes that any inciting of racial, ethnic, religious or other inequality or hatred shall be prohibited and punishable. Serbia is also a signatory of many international conventions prohibiting discrimination, which are transposed into the Serbian legal system (Constitution, Public Information Law and Ant-Discrimination Law). Criminal code sanctions many criminal offences that are usually committed by extremists, such as inciting hatred, discrimination or violence based on racial, ethnic and religious grounds, or violence in sports and public gatherings. There are also a group of terrorist and foreign fighters related to criminal offences. Finally, Serbia has adopted strategic documents regarding fighting and preventing terrorism and its financing. Experts agree that the current legal framework is sufficient for addressing (violent) extremism but that the problem is unprincipled and unequal treatment of Islamist and far-right extremism by the Serbian authorities, which is best exemplified by the foreign fighters phenomenon and the state's mild response to far-right.

The relationship between authorities and far-righters

The relationship between Serbian authorities to nationalism and far-right groups has always been pragmatic and tolerant. Even during the rule of democratic governments (2000-2012) no real effort to address extreme rights was made. The Constitutional Court banned two far right groups, Nacionalni stroj and Obraz but declined to do the same for SNP 1389 and SNP Naši. The same Court had earlier rejected the Chief Public Prosecutor's initiative to ban dozens of football hooligan groups as they acted more as a hate and crime group than football fans.⁸⁹ With the SNS in power in 2012, nationalism has been resurrecting, and far-right groups have become political instruments in the hands of the ruling party. Their purpose is many folded. Firstly, they spread ultraconservative values and the idea of unification of all Serbs in the Western Balkans which fits into the SNS conception of the "Serbian world." Secondly, in this way, SNS is attracting ultraconservative voters. Thirdly, extreme right groups serve the ruling party as an excuse for not distancing Serbia from Russia, as the Serbian Government can argue to the West that it is under strong Russian pressure, which uses far righters as its proxies.

No wonder that in 2019 the Courts of Appeal annulled the verdict to the leader of the banned neo-Nazi group Nacionalni stroj for violence against participants of the antifascist gathering. Serbian authorities do little to prevent and punish hate speech and violent activities of far-righters.⁹⁰ Even if the perpetrators are arrested, they are soon freed, continuing their actions. Legal proceedings against far-righters rarely end with verdicts. Furthermore, Serbian officials rarely publicly condemn the activities of the extreme right groups, and pro-government private media give space to far-right activists and war crime convicts.⁹¹

Different treatment of foreign fighters

Prosecution of foreign fighters in Serbia has dramatically differed depending on the destination – Ukraine or Syria. The group of seven foreign fighters who fled to Syria were prosecuted within the legal framework for terrorism in a seven-year-long process.⁹² Namely, they were found guilty of terrorist association, terrorism financing, recruitment and training and public incitement to commit terrorist acts.⁹³ The defendants were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 7 to 11 years. Each of them will be included in the central terrorism database, which is planned to be launched soon.⁹⁴

On the other hand, 31 court proceedings were concluded concerning the people who went to the Ukrainian battlefield since 2014.⁹⁵ They were convicted under the Criminal Code either for participation in a war or armed conflict in a foreign country individually or as part of a group – i.e. under the umbrella of foreign fighting, not terrorism. Almost all the defendants entered plea deals and have received mild suspended sentences. Only two of them received the sentence of house arrest.⁹⁶ Some of them violated their probation shortly afterwards and managed to return to the war zones in Eastern Ukraine.⁹⁷ The only difference between the fighters from Syria and Ukraine is that the former are convicted of being connected with organizations that are internationally recognized as terrorists, such as Al Nusra and ISIS, which is not the case in Ukraine. However, mere membership in organizations is not highlighted as a criminal offence in the Criminal Code, but other acts related to terrorism.

Criminal prosecution regards Islamist foreign fighters as terrorists and Ukrainian ones as foreign fighters. Such different treatments can have counterproductive consequences, including reciprocal radicalization caused by the boosted perception of discrimination by the authorities. Moreover, criminal prosecution offers quite a good illustration of the official stance towards different streams of extremism, not only its final violent outcome embodied in foreign fighting. Firstly, it is predominantly reactive, without much attention devoted to prevention. Secondly, it regards Islamist extremists as terrorists, while right-wing nationalists are deemed “regular” extremists who can be cut slack. Such a response contributes to the overall normalization of the right-wing extremist ideas ensuing since the 1990s in Serbia.

Consequences

Spreading fear and the reciprocal radicalization

It is reasonable to assume that the far-rights' anti-Muslim activities contribute to the spread of fear among Bosniaks and other Muslims in Serbia. In the end, this affects the emergence of reciprocal radicalization, that is, the spread and strengthening of radicalization of Muslims in Serbia. However, we received mixed results during the series of interviews with Muslims in Sanjak and Belgrade. The interviews also included individuals who profess the original Islam, popularly called Wahhabism in Serbia. The Muslims of Sanjak 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 this phenomenon threatens them or could threaten them in the future. They see it as something 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 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 organizations have protested for several days against the exhibition "The Soul of Srebrenica" dedicated to the victims of the Srebrenica genocide.⁹⁸ 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 the genocide that was committed against Bosniaks in the 1990s under the command of Ratko Mladić.⁹⁹ 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 game was inadequate as well.¹⁰⁰

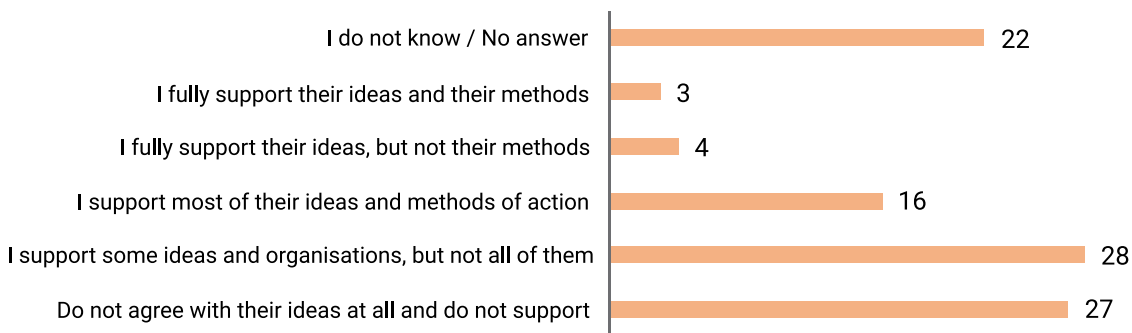
The second part of the explanation for such an attitude of Sanjak Muslims towards the extreme right can be found in the fact that (extreme) right and right-wing politics have long been present in the political and social life of Serbia and that Muslims have learned to live with them. As one of our interlocutors 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".¹⁰¹ 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 United States of America.

Muslims in Belgrade, however, have a different attitude towards the growth and increased activity of the extreme right. This trend worries them very much. 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 served as places for recruiting and deploying extremists to Syria, and some members were convicted of terrorism, there is no new evidence that such places still exist or that the activities of far-right organizations are further radicalizing 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.

Normalization of far-right stances

The latest BCSP public opinion survey has shown that opinions about right-wing organizations differ - slightly more than a quarter of the respondents do not support the ideas and methods of action of these organizations (27%), more than a fifth of the respondents do not know or refuse to answer the question, and as many as 41% support at least one of the ideas and methods of operation (Graph 1).

What is your opinion about right/wing organisations such as Leviathan, Serbian Right, National Patrols, Serbian honor, et.?



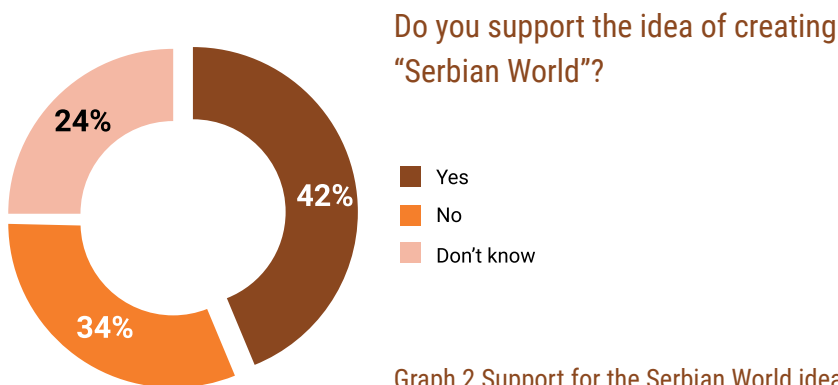
Graph 1 Public opinion about right-wing organizations

This does not mean that all those who support the work of these organizations would be involved in their activities or would vote for them in the elections should they run. However, 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 organizations is not that they might attract more members or sympathizers

but that they contribute to making undemocratic attitudes and values acceptable to the citizens of Serbia. The BCSP survey has shown that while 40% of the respondents think that democracy is desirable, more than a quarter think that in the current conditions we need a “firm hand”, while 15% of them think that all regimes are the same.

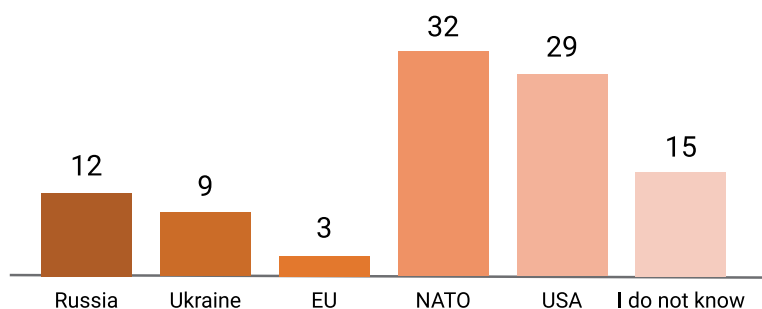
Intensified activities of far-right groups, coupled with media discourse and lack of state response, are easing their transfer from the underground into the mainstream arena and contributing to the normalization of right-wing stances among the population. The latest BCSP public opinion survey has shown that far-right and pro-Russian stances are widespread among Serbian citizens, especially among youth, resulting from nationalistic and pro-Russian rhetoric consistently conducted by the ruling party for more than ten years. Almost half of the respondents (49%) support “Litije za spas Srbije”, right-wing protests that started off as a reaction to the organization of Europride in Serbia, but has later widened its portfolio to include opposition to Kosovo independence, imposing sanction to Russia etc. When asked to evaluate certain groups or institutions based on how threatened they personally feel by them, minorities who want to secede from Serbia (53%), globalist elites (52%) and migrants (47%) were singled out as the top three groups.

Worrisome attitudes towards the use of violence can also be observed – 42% of citizens see violence as a legitimate solution to protect traditional values and ways of life. A similar percentage of citizens support the creation of the “Serbian world” – a notion introduced by Aleksandar Vulin, the former Minister of Defence and current Director of the Security Intelligence Agency, who defined it as a long-term strategic aspiration for a peaceful consolidation of all Serbs into a single state - a propaganda tool lacking a substantial strategic foundation, with a primary aim to garner nationalist favour within Serbia and amongst Serbs in the region.¹⁰² Namely, over 40% of Serbian citizens support this concept, a third oppose it, and only a third consider it a feasible policy. Moreover, the “Serbian world” is most accepted among the youngest, oldest, and government-supporting citizens.¹⁰³



Graph 2 Support for the Serbian World idea

In your opinion, who is the main culprit for the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine?



Graph 3 Public opinion about main culprit for the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine

The survey results demonstrate that citizens still see Russia as a major element of Serbian foreign policy. The pro-Russian narrative pushed for years in the pro-regime media certainly contributed to the Serbian people's very positive views of Russia. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, the majority point the finger at NATO (32%) and the US (29%) as the main culprits for its start (Graph 2). Around 80% of Serbian people oppose introducing sanctions against Russia, while most think that Serbia should not take sides and should stay neutral regarding this war.¹⁰⁴

Extensive media reporting of the war following its outbreak, which was full of manipulations and disinformation, has certainly contributed to shaping strong attitudes towards the Ukrainian war. The general pro-Russian sentiment was turned up on maximum and has manifested in citizens' views. At the end of February, Informer opened Pandora's box of war disinformation with a cover headline stating that "Ukraine attacked Russia" and has continued to cover the war in the same manner in the following months. All of the pro-government tabloids worked full-time on keeping anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment through manipulations in the first months, which were undoubtedly reflected in public opinion.¹⁰⁵ In the early days of war tabloids were filled with titles of Russian military successes such as "Putin reached Kyiv in a day" or "Russians trample Ukraine like a shallow stream"¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, they spread strong anti-Western narrative, presenting the West as a force that threatens the security of Russia, wants to destroy it and has caused the war and prolong it by arming Ukraine.¹⁰⁷

Concluding remarks

Even though it was given much more attention, Islamist extremism is on a downward trajectory in Serbia. Once characterized as a potential hotbed of extremists, Sanjak region has showcased great resilience to violent and extreme currents. However, a non-violent version of extremism has gained momentum and established a significant presence in Sanjak. Over time, it has permeated various aspects of society, influencing local attitudes, social dynamics, and certain practices, but it appears to have reached its peak. On the other hand, there are warning signs in the region that point out the potential for political extremism to evolve and escalate. Deep-rooted political divisions that pervade every aspect of citizens' lives are escalating into physical disputes, marking the rise of political extremism in Sanjak. Amidst these political upheavals, competition for limited resources in this neglected region, paired with widespread discontent, there is potential not only to intensify political extremism but also reinvigorate religious extremism by undermining existing political and religious institutions.

Right-wing extremism has, on the other hand, experienced a rise in the preceding period. This surge can be attributed to a combination of external catalysts that have inflamed right-wing sentiments, including the migrant crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, internal dynamics, most notably an unprincipled government response and regime-affiliated media reporting, have significantly enabled the proliferation of right-wing ideas. The mild reaction from the authorities contributed to the gradual shift of right-wing extremist activities from the underground to the mainstream political arena. Moreover, these groups have constantly been repurposed as political tools for promoting ultraconservative values, attracting voters, and serving as a justification for the Government's reluctance to distance Serbia from Russia by suggesting considerable Russian influence over these far-right entities.

Among the most concerning costs of the mild response from the state towards the actions of the extreme right, coupled with media reporting, is the normalization of their narratives and activities, which ultimately smooths the acceptance of their extreme viewpoints by citizens. Public opinion on right-wing organizations in Serbia is divided, but a significant portion of the population supports their ideologies. This support is alarming as it also comes along with anti-democratic views - a substantial part of the population leans towards autocratic leadership styles and strongman politics.

Besides the normalization of extreme views, the rise of the extreme right and mild state response also contributes to spreading fear and reciprocal radicalization. Different treatment of right-wing and Islamist extremism can also bring about a set of negative consequences and reciprocal radicalization, fuelled by the amplified perception of discrimination or unjust treatment by the state authorities. For Muslims in the Sanjak region, the rise of right-wing extremism feels distant due to their relative isolation and concern with local issues. On the other hand, Muslims in Belgrade, more exposed to right-wing extremism, express significant concern, with some altering their public behaviour to avoid attracting attention.

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List of abbreviations

BCSP – Belgrade Centre for Security Policy
ICG – International Crisis Group
ICiS – Islamic Community in Serbia
ICoS – Islamic Community of Serbia
ISIS – Islamic State in Syria and Iraq
RIM – Russian Imperialistic Movement
SANU – Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
SDA – Stranka demokratske akcije Sanjaka (Sanjak Party of Democratic Action)
SDP – Sandžačka demokratska partija (Sanjak Democratic Party)
SPP – Stranka pravde i pomirenja (Justice and Reconciliation Party)

List of graphs

Graph 1 Public opinion about right-wing organizations	26
Graph 2 Support for the Serbian World idea	27
Graph 3 Public opinion about main culprit for the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine	28

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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 of the Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR). Since 2012, 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, on the list of most famous research centers (Global Go To Think Tank IndexReport)

The BCSP research team has developed a unique methodology for monitoring the course 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.

It is the founder of the Belgrade School of Security Studies and specialist postgraduate studies, which have grown into a successful master's program at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade titled "International Security". It is one of the founders of the National Convention on the European Union and coordinator of the Working Group for Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), as well as the founder and coordinator of the *prEUgovor* coalition, which monitors reforms under Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom, Security) in the accession negotiations between Serbia and the European Union. It is one of the organizers of the international conference "Belgrade Security Forum", which has been gathering renowned security experts for more than ten years now.

Some of the strategic goals of the BCSP are: support for the development of civil society organizations and drivers of change to create an environment that is favorable 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 the society as a whole.

BCSP website: www.bezbednost.org

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